

Times in Toano



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Fall 2024

Newsletter
of the
Toano
Historical
Society

A Letter from Jack Wray THS President



As THS gears up for the 6th Annual Christmas Tree Lighting we are pleased to present this year's Christmas ornament, Historic Mount Vernon Church!

Mt. Vernon Church was founded and built in 1791 on grounds where James City Chapel Cemetery is today in Norge. Two factions of the church split, and a portion of the sanctuary was moved by rail to its present location on

Church Lane in 1887. An 1888 news article dedication approved of the new location stating, "It was beautiful for situation, being located on a hill in view of the train station."

If you want to learn how Toano became a special place, built upon faith, family, and community, I encourage you to read *My Memories of Mount Vernon Church* by Miriam Fitchett Middleton, which can be purchased from THS at the Toano Open Air Market. It includes 20 fascinating short stories of her growing up in Toano in the 1930s and 1940s. She writes of triumphs and tragedies. One low point was the death of her father at age 44, a pillar of the church, when she was only 8 years old and attending Toano Elementary School. Their farm, Holly Springs on Forge Rd. where she and her sister Sally were born, had to be sold. Shortly after her father's passing, to make ends meet Mrs. Fitchett took on boarders at the farm, mostly teachers at Toano High School. Eventually Miriam's strong and resourceful mother bought and established a successful tourist home in Williamsburg. I have memories of my grandmother taking me to visit Mrs. Fitchett when I was a boy.



Mt Vernon Church

Miriam and her husband Jack Middleton were married at MVC in June of 1956. They lived in Charlottesville for a few years and eventually retired to Colorado where their two children lived. I had never met Miriam, but began corresponding with her in 2016, starting with a phone call that lasted for over an hour! I was amazed how much we had in common from growing up in Toano a generation apart. Many traditions established by her generation and prior were still going on in mine, especially at Mount Vernon Church. We talked about Easter egg hunts, Christmas pageants, Vacation Bible School, the Choir and especially the people and relatives we both remembered. It wasn't long before Bob and Carol Dishman, MVC historians and keepers of James City Chapel Cemetery, also connected with Miriam, Jack, and their two children Robin and Scott. They encouraged Miriam to write her memoirs, which Bob published in 2019.

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Sadly, Miriam passed away November 6, 2024, at the age of 93 and was preceded in death by her husband Jack one year prior. [Read her obituary](http://www.newcomerdenver.com/obituaries/miriam-middleton) (www.newcomerdenver.com/obituaries/miriam-middleton)

Neither Bob and Carol Dishman nor I ever met them in person. It was through Miriam's prolific beautiful handwritten correspondence that we became the best of friends.

Sometime in the Spring of 2025, Miriam and Jack Middleton will be brought home and laid to rest beside her parents and other family members at James City Chapel Cemetery.

A tradition established by Toano Historical Society is the ringing of the Mount Vernon Church bell just prior to switching on the lights! Come out December 7th and celebrate our vibrant little village and reminisce about the about the days of old!

Jack

**6th Annual
Toano Christmas Tree Lighting
Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024 - 3:00-7:00 pm**
Rain date: Saturday, Dec. 14 - 3-7pm



Photo by Erika Frances Photography 2023

Join us on the Toano Village Green for the 6th Annual Toano Christmas Tree Lighting! It will be a magical evening as we light up the holiday season.

Event highlights:

- Music, Food vendors, hot cocoa and other festive treats
- Family friendly activities including crafts, a campfire and s'mores, cart rides, and face painting.
- Photos with Santa and Mrs. Claus

Bring your friends and family to celebrate the spirit of the season. We can't wait to see you at this event that has become a community tradition!

**Toano Open Air Market
Toano Village Green
Saturdays, 9am-Noon**

Come out and support family farms and local agriculture and business at the Toano Open Air Market! Vendors provide a wide variety of items for sale. You can find seasonal produce, delicious baked goods, Tasha's Own products, fresh seafood, and much more! Most weeks feature live music and a food truck.

The Toano Historical Society will be there with new Toano merchandise and information on how it is working to preserve the history and character of our special town. Follow the market on Facebook to see what wonderful offerings will be provided!



**Our New 2024 THS Christmas Ornament
Mount Vernon Church**



The 2024 THS Christmas ornament is available to purchase at the THS table at the Toano Open Air Market. Stop by to pick up an ornament and check out all the other THS merchandise.

Toano History Spotlight: Let Me Entertain You Entertainment in Toano Over the Years

By Fred Boelt, THS Historian

We are social creatures! We enjoy gathering with family and friends. We thrive on comradery and being entertained. From the earliest of times in our village area, churches provided the gathering places for both spiritual gain and social interaction. In the seventeenth century, one of the three churches in Wilmington Parish was located where the Chickahominy Baptist Church is today. Even closer to the village area, the lower church of Blisland Parish (Hickory Neck) was commissioned in 1734. And by around 1791, the James City Chapel (Methodist) congregation was holding services a short two miles to the east of the village.

Forneau's Ordinary

While the churches offered gathering places, they were not conducive to the entertainment sought by the inhabitants. As early as 1726, Forneau's Ordinary was operating on the road leading toward New Kent (just north of the entrance to the Stonehouse development). Under different proprietors, the ordinary continued to operate well into the nineteenth century. In addition to offering meals and overnight accommodations for man and beast, business transactions were dealt with there. But more importantly, the locals found entertainment at the ordinary. There are references of the planters playing cards there, and undoubtedly, some betting ensued while they quaffed the proprietor's ales and local brews.

Burnt Ordinary

Even closer to our village, John Lewis was operating an ordinary by 1768, at the site of the present-day Farmers Market located across from the Fire Station on the corner of Richmond and Forge Roads. At some time during the next decade, the ordinary was acquired by Benjamin Fox, who continued to offer meals to travelers and entertainment for the locals. Mr. Fox had died by early 1779, when the property was offered for sale. It is unknown if the property had been purchased before the Virginia Gazette advised in early January 1780, that the ordinary "caught fire and in a short time was entirely consumed."

We, of course, know that thereafter, for the next hundred years, our village was known as Burnt Ordinary!

After the Revolution, the cash crops shifted from tobacco to timber and food products marketed by means of water transportation. Several local ministers, some self-proclaimed, held ecumenical services at the local churches, and while the ordinary in our village was not rebuilt after the fire, nearby ordinaries offered entertainment outlets. Families hosted dances and parties and medieval jousting tournaments became popular.

Changes Brought by the Railroad

And then in 1881, the railroad came to our village and opened up a whole new life style. As the village became a center for commerce and industry, entertainment also flourished. Dances were frequently held in the rooms above the Martin-Farinholt and the W. R. Branch stores. The Virginia Gazette and the Peninsula News brimmed with social notices of festive events hosted by the local residents at their homes and the local hotels. In January 1902, Dr. H. U. Stephenson host-



*The Hotel Felix,
site of Dr. Stephenson's fox hunters dinner*

ed a fox hunters dinner at the Hotel Felix. Attended by many lovers of the chase, the menu consisted of oysters, turkey, old Virginia ham, potato salad, Cole slaw, fruit, cake, coffee, cigars, and of course, a punch bowl of eggnog!

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The railroad also brought traveling tent shows and circuses, adding a new dimension to entertainment in the village. When Toano High School was built in 1908, the school library was open to the students as well as the local residents. This was soon followed in 1915 by the Toano Woman's Club's debut. In addition to their service projects, they provided entertainment for the villagers. They put on numerous dances, carnivals, and fairs, and they even bought a projector and showed silent films every Friday night in the school auditorium.

Gradually, after World War II, our village began to lose its prominence in the county as commerce and industry shifted toward Williamsburg. Two events, the closing of Toano High School in 1955, and widening of Route 60 to four lanes beginning in 1964, speeded the decline of the village.

Wedgewood Dinner Theatre

However, the entertainment piece de resistance arrived in our village in 1963, just as other events declined. Five young thespians, who had worked together at the Barksdale Theater in Hanover County, had relocated to the Williamsburg area in pursuit of employment in local schools. They soon banded together again to open the Wedgewood Dinner Theatre in the abandoned tomato and sweet potato canning factory close to Route 60 in Toano.

Guests were treated to a country style buffet in a candle lit dining room at 6:30. In addition to the chef's famous fried chicken, the menu also featured steamship rounds of beef, spoonbread, shrimp and pasta salad and deep dish apple pie. By 8:30, guests were relocated in the 295-seat auditorium. Chairs from the old Toano High School auditorium had been appropriated and the Kiwanis Club provided the stage curtains. The stage lights went up on opening night, April 27, 1963, and the play was "Drink To Me Only."

This was only the beginning of the success story. "Mary, Mary" was Wedgewood's biggest hit, running for six months with standing room only on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. "Spoon River Anthology," "The Owl and the Pussycat," and "Life With Father," were among the numerous plays offered. In 1964, the Wedgewood producers started a summer apprentice program for

young actors and stagehands. The participants were paid \$35.00 per week plus two meals per day, and they were housed in the closed Wayside Inn. The Wedgewood Theater relocated to Hampton in 1970, after a most successful run in Toano.



*Frank and Arden Staroba,
actors and later co-owners and co-producers of
the theatre.*



*An ad in the Virginia Gazette advertising the
Wedgewood Dinner Theatre*

Toano Historical Society invites you to be entertained at the 6th annual Christmas Tree Lighting on the Village Green on December 7th.

Come and make merry!



Photos by Erika Frances Photography 2023

Fall 2024 THS Members Event



On October 24, 2024, THS hosted its fall members event. We had an excellent turnout of 78 people at the historic Martin & Farenholt store on Richmond Road in Toano.

Attendees enjoyed socializing with hors d'oeuvres and beverages, followed by a short program featuring THS Board Member updates. Patte Martin shared THS's 2025 strategic plan, and Tom Connor spoke about our recent grant application with VA Museum of History & Culture Committee which would provide THS with funds to expand the Toano Historic District to include over twenty of the Toano founders' homes plus other historic buildings. We expect to hear the results of our application in late January or February 2025.

In addition, board members Deidre McAuley-Hayes shared the formation of a new committee, Local Business and Government Relations Committee, which she will chair in 2025, and Emmalyn Carter talked about our upcoming 6th annual Christmas Tree lighting event on December 7, 2024, and gave a call for volunteers.

THS plans to continue to hold a spring and fall members' event in 2025 and encourages those interested in preserving the history of Toano to join THS or renew your membership [online](#).

Our members' events are free to current members and is one of benefits of THS membership.



The 50/50 raffle at our members event was a big hit.

THS Membership

Please consider becoming a member of THS to help us preserve and promote the history of Toano.

Annual Membership Cost:

\$25 Individual, \$35 Family, \$50 Business

Go to the [Membership Page](#) of the THS website to sign up and pay online, or sign up at the THS table at the Toano Open Air Market.



More about entertainment in Toano...

An excerpt from

From Toano to Germany and Back

By Thomas G. Martin

Our home in Toano was located in the northeast corner of a three-acre lot, and during the early 1930s practically every summer there would be some kind of travelling tent show on our lot. The earliest one I remember was a movie show, and the projectionist actually turned the projector by a hand crank. The movie was an old western, and I am not sure whether or not it was a silent film. This old man either performed, or added to, the narrative, of this continuing movie, a separate part of which was shown each night. All of the Martin household had free tickets, and some kind of rent, pretty modest I reckon, was also paid to my father.

On at least one occasion we had a circus - only one, maybe two rings, but there were horses, ponies, dogs, and one elephant. There were the usual trapeze acts and a high wire, and of course, a number of clowns...

There was one repertory stage show which had a different stage play each night, and it had a company of a cast of a half dozen or more. I recall that one guy with a guitar was singing songs, with sort of crazy lyrics that he must have made up... Unfortunately this show was not hugely successful, as the plays really were good, but a little highbrow for me and probably most of the Toano audience. One drawback was the tent was pitched in the lower northwest corner of the lot, and a big rain came and half of the tent had water standing inside during the last several days.



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