Greenbrier Pioneers *and* Their Homes

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The Tavern at the Bridge (Elmhurst)

THREE miles east of Lewisburg, on the banks of the Greenbrier River, is the large brick house now known as "Elmhurst Farm." Located on part of the Anderson lands, the tavern was built in 1824 by Henry B. Hunter, son-in-law of Captain John Anderson, whose home, The Anderson Mansion, was within sight on the opposite side of the river. It was operated for years as a stage stop, being only a few yards from the toll bridge over which passed the east and west stage and wagon road. This bridge was erected in 1821, and the road improved and reconstructed shortly afterwards. The tavern, with its extensive acreage, was sold in 1848 at auction, together with a second tract of land, including a gristmill, in the court proceeding of Allen T. Caperton, Executor of Henry Erskine Estate v. Henry B. Hunter Heirs. It was bought by John A. North, who, in 1851, presented the tavern property as a wedding present to his daughter, Isabelle (Mrs. James R. Caldwell). The Caldwells took up their residence there about two years later.

The tavern had been a favorite stopping place in the earlier days. It was especially convenient as an attractive spot for the so-called "picnic parties" from the Old White, six miles away, though they were anything but rustic affairs. Dozens of people drove into the grounds in their fashionable equipages, and impressive names among those present were the rule rather than the exception. Furbelows and frills, delicacies and champagne, topped off with a band to add to the general festivity, made them extremely gala occasions.

The early writer, Mark Pencil, describes such a party held on "a very dusty day," August 25, 1837, in which Mr. Van Buren, President of the United States, and his Secretary of War were the honored guests. Since Mr. Van Buren was a widower, this was strictly a masculine affair, much to the chagrin of the languishing belles at the White. They were truly bereft, for the hundred men who attended the party must certainly have been the most desirable of the beaux.

Served under "a myrtle leaved canopy overhead," the guests sat down to a lavish assortment of the finest foods obtainable and the choicest of Southern dishes, accompanied by the music of popping corks, all of which must have been most sustaining—as the party lasted from two until seven o'clock.

The tavern, now a few feet lower than the present highway, was originally on the same level as the turnpike. It was well placed to appeal to the weary traveler, who, pausing to pay toll at the picturesque and dusty old covered bridge,[1] could not fail to observe the charm of the tree-shaded inn by the river.

Mr. Hunter also offered other inducements by operating a large wagon and blacksmith shop near by, as well as a gristmill. He had even obtained exemptions from the six-and-a-quarter-cent bridge toll not only for himself and his family but for his customers as well. All this made the Hunter accommodations irresistible, and a failure to stop seemed almost unsocial.

The wooden floors of the old bridge resounded to the tramp of both Northern and Southern armies in the Civil War. Following the Battle of Lewisburg (1862), the retreating Confederates under General Heth burned

[1] Replaced in 1932 by a bridge of steel and concrete.

the bridge[2] to retard the enemy, perhaps not knowing that Anderson's Ford, the early Indian trail crossing, was near by. Indentations of breastworks thrown up by the Confederates may still be seen in the fields near the house, as well as the site where their artillery was mounted on steep Goat Hill across the road from the tavern. In the fighting, several shells struck the building, and one corner was badly damaged. Broken bricks in the kitchen walls still show the marks of glancing shots.

So favorably located for peacetime travel, the tavern, then the home of the Caldwell family, proved most dangerously situated in time of war. It remained occupied, however, because of a series of illnesses. In 1861 the Caldwells had suffered the crushing loss of three of their young daughters from diphtheria, and again in 1864 were concerned because of the serious illness of their mother, Mrs. James Caldwell. Owing to her condition the family had been unable to flee to safety when the news came of Hunter's approach in his retreat from Lynchburg, and all they could do was to conceal their most valued possessions as best they might. The silverware was buried under the floor of a poultry house, which still stands.

Hunter's men, separated from their food supplies, were foraging off of the country, leaving destruction and hardship in their wake. When the Federal troops arrived, their intention was to burn the house and other buildings. The officer in charge was told of the illness of Mrs. Caldwell, but, thinking it only a feigned excuse, he ordered his surgeon to examine her. Finding her

[2] A ferry was later established by Mr. Hunter, and a son, Henry F. Hunter, lost his life by drowning at this spot. The river was in flood, and, in an attempt to secure the ferry more firmly to the bank, the cable broke, and the son was struck and thrown into the swirling water.

condition as critical as it had been reported, the physician stated it would undoubtedly kill her to be moved. So Elmhurst escaped the torch. A short distance away, however, on Howard Creek, the Caldwell gristmill, built in 1853, did not fare so well; it and the barn were burned to the ground.[3]

The house, with its long, deep-set windows and very thick walls, is enormous, with at least twenty rooms and six chimneys. A large double porch, the first floor of which is barely one step above ground, is supported by four tall, square, wood columns extending to the roof. A step-down wood trim decorates the front of the roof. A particularly lovely doorway of reeded pilasters, with unusual circular glass side panels and glass overdoor design, opens into a very broad central hall, which extends the depth of the building. At the rear of the hall, a wide stairway leads to the second floor.

Great square rooms, one measuring twenty-two feet, open into this and a similar hall above. Hanging between the front windows in the first room to the left of the entrance is a long, narrow mirror extending almost from floor to ceiling, a mirror which once graced the parlor at the Old White. In this and other rooms there are also a number of fine pieces of antique furniture which belonged to earlier members of the North and Caldwell families—a sideboard, a secretary, a beauful circular pedestal table, and other heirlooms. On the stairlanding is the grandfather clock once owned by John A. North. The house contains several fine handcarved mantels, some with reeded half-columns and sunburst medallions. In later years all the woodwork has

[3] A second mill, erected in 1872, was sold twenty-five years later to a Mr. Mason.

been painted ivory, and none of the original color is now in evidence.

The room used now as the kitchen was originally the dining-room. It still has its low wainscoting around the walls and its carved mantel—behind the cooking stove! Beyond this room, on a lower level, is the original kitchen, with two rooms above it. This kitchen, unfortunately now used for storage, has a great arched fireplace, with dutch ovens on each side, a real Williamsburg kitchen. A partition divides it from a quaint stairway to the rooms above.

At one time this property was sold to Ashford M. Caldwell, who was unrelated to the family. This Mr. Caldwell appears to have done a number of grievous things to the house, including the removal of all the fine box locks from the large forty-two-inch doors and their replacement with "new" china knobs. One wonders if the old locks may yet be buried in the mud of the convenient near-by river bed. Another of his sins was the removal of all the small-paned window glass and the substitution of panes separated by one vertical division. Luckily, the former owners repented of the sale, and in a few years John North Caldwell bought back the house and about forty acres of the original holdings.

In one of the lower rooms is a pair of amusing wrought-iron andirons, figures of little Negro boys with caps on their heads. They were purchased by Mr. John A. North while in the city on one occasion. He wrote Mrs. North that he was bringing her a present of a "pair of little black boys." Assuming, of course, that he meant two slaves, she at once set about arranging quarters and making other preparations for their arrival. Imagine her surprise when they turned out to be about twelve inches high and of solid iron!

Recently, in the removal of several layers of old wallpaper in one of the rooms, a number of names were discovered written on the plaster. No record was kept of them, but the dates of 1831 and 1833 and the name ". . . . Montomgery from Augusta" are remembered.

This interesting building, with its wonderful spreading elm tree, which measures more than twenty feet in circumference and for which the place was named "Elmhurst" in later years, is yet in the possession of the descendants of John A. North, whose grandson, J. North Caldwell, died in 1940. Some of the latter's children now own and occupy the house, and the traveler may still secure lodging and good Southern cooking under its roof.