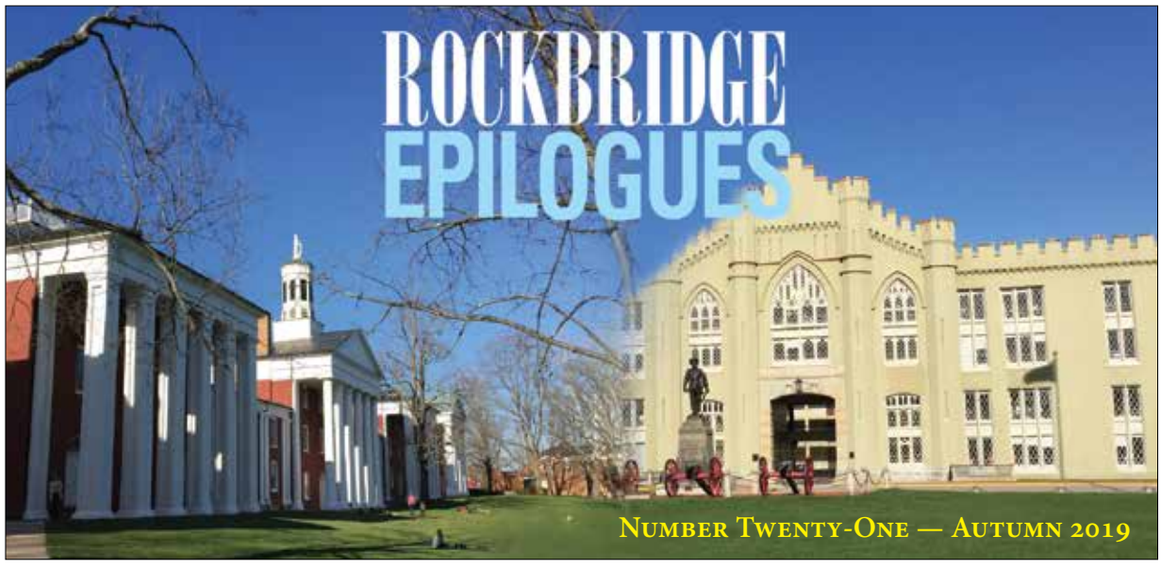

The Saga of Hamilton's School House

By George West Diehl

IN THIS "EPILOGUE"

George West Diehl (1887–1975) was a prominent local historian, preacher and civic leader. He was educated at Hampden-Sydney College, Washington and Lee University (1913) and Union Theological Seminaries in both Richmond and New York City. Before accepting a call in 1949 to be pastor at Oxford Presbyterian Church, he was president of Morris Harvey College in West Virginia. The main article here is excerpted from Dr. Diehl's much longer monograph, which contains extensive genealogical information about almost everyone he mentions; the separate, briefer article about the Hamilton family is taken from that genealogical material. Dr. Diehl's ornate literary style has been retained here.

PREFACE

The knowledge of the lack of written records gives any one who would write the story of a work, such as that done at old Hamilton's School House, an awareness of the difficulty before him. The story, educationally speaking, is the narrative of the development of the educational system of Virginia, from the old field school of a private nature to the public institution that provides every child with the way to an education. None of the records survive and the interpretation of the Minute Book of the School Commissioners, from Oct. 1, 1838, through Sept. 30, 1860, can be made only in the light of information from other sources.

The narrative of the religious activities centering around the old school house is even more complicated. No statistics are to be found, no records of the Hamilton Baptist Church have been located, Sunday School data is almost totally non-existent, and the records of Oxford Presbyterian Church mention the place and work incidentally. Nor is the telling of the place of the old cabin in the civic and social life of the community of detailed record in any place.

The compiling of the story was made possible by gathering fragments here and there, from an occasional item in the local press, and from old ledgers, letters, and related records. The telling of the history of the post-bellum days of the community has been made possible by the recollections of those who remembered the facts or who recalled the telling of the tales of war's aftermath and the reconstruction period. Many of the statements are based upon notes made by the author, jotted down in note-books, from many sources, but mainly from recounted memories.

One of the motivating influences for this work was the published statement of an effort being made in a neighboring State to find an old log school house and the effort was in vain. Hamilton's is the last of the "old field schools" in this section, if not in all Virginia. The citizens have saved it and restored it to the service of God and the people. May the telling of its story, full of fault as it may be, inspire other communities to save their historic buildings, making them into memorials.

George West Diehl
"Dundee Plantation" Lexington, Virginia
(The old Robert Hamilton farm) July 12, 1956

LIGHT FOR THE VALLEY

In 1787, a tide of evangelism broke on the red hills of Prince Edward County, Virginia, in the vicinity of old Hampden-Sydney College; it was directed to Rockbridge County by the Rev. William Graham and others of his ilk. This religious awakening came to Oxford Presbyterian Church, whose members were known to be "ardent and zealous, and fond of warm, pungent preaching."[1]

So a sense of deeper spiritual values was brought into the thinking of the people, resulting in many reconsecrations and a revitalized religion. Too, it was a time of increased membership in the churches of the countryside.

The Rev. Daniel Blain became pastor of Oxford and Timber Ridge Presbyterian Churches[i] on Nov. 18, 1800, continuing his service on the faculty of Washington College, in Lexington. Of him it was said:

> His sermons were characterized for plainness in the exhibition of truth, simplicity in style, and kindness in manner, and always pleasing in delivery. In prayer, he seemed to his people to lead them very near to God . . . He had tenderness of feeling, quickness of susceptibility, and liveliness of sympathy to make him modest, and natural powers of mind and acquired information, and strength of moral principle to make his modesty a crowning virtue.[2]

The influence of such a saintly character upon the mind and heart of Sarah Letcher in the Timber Ridge congregation and Robert Hamilton in Oxford Church must have been great. As their pastor, he united them in matrimony in 1808 and became a frequent visitor in their home on South Buffalo.[ii] However, on March 19, 1814, the beloved pastor died and, for two and one-half years, the pulpit of the little stone church on the knoll was filled only by supply-ministers. Then, in the summer of 1816, the Rev. Andrew Baker Davidson, a dynamic evangelist, became the pastor of Oxford Church and the Hamiltons were drawn to him by his dynamic fervor. In him, they found a new and an enthusiastic friend, one whose zeal in the things of Christ was unbounded.

Inspired by this new surge of the religious and the vision of the service that it presented, Robert Hamilton desired to made a definite contribution to the cause of Christ. He discussed it with his wife and found her in agreement with him that something ought to be done to express their gratitude to God for his blessings to them personally. They conferred with their pastor, and perhaps it was his idea that a place of worship for the people of the valley ought to be erected. Oxford Church was four or five miles down the valley and the Methodist meeting-house at Rapp's Mill [also shared by other denominations] was about the same distance up South Buffalo — no other place of worship was nearer.

The matter was pondered around the Hamilton fireside for some time — then the answer came. The Hamilton family was growing steadily and the Hamilton tradition of education was strong, as evidenced by the well-thumbed pages of the books brought from Ireland, which were on the shelves by the fireplace. Little Narcissa Bertonia was not at an age when formal school was imperative and, while Mary Houston was three years younger, it was evident that her bright mind demanded the atmosphere of a schoolroom. Too, there might be others — and there were. John Letcher was just an infant. In 1815, Owen William was born and Cynthia Ann followed three years later. Isaac Montgomery was added to the family roster in 1820 and James Forgison arrived in the Spring of 1822. The prolonged consideration and the idea of replacing tutoring, as it had been done in the home, by a school house service was now enforced by the need for more room in the home.

To the idea of erecting a school house was added the conception of the building as a place of worship, providing the community with a center of interest. The idea struck fire and there was immediate action.

On Feb. 3, 1823, the Hamiltons made the first move in a concrete way. An acre of land, more or less, was deeded to William Murphy and William Henderson as trustees. This action makes it evident that the whole idea had been discussed with these men and they were in harmony with the project. Perhaps Hamilton knew them as men of education and culture, as well as sturdy souls in their religion, and was convinced they would prove worthy of his trust in them to carry out his idea of a church and school operated under one roof.

William Henderson had come to America from Ireland about 1805 and acquired two large tracts of land on the headwaters of South Buffalo, above the place where Rapp's Mill was to come into being. William Murphy owned an extensive farm on the headwaters of Spring Branch of North Buffalo, at the foot of Camp Mountain. . . .

Hamilton School House, 2016.

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i The Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church, founded 1746, generally called the Old Stone Church, and Oxford Presbyterian Church near Effinger and founded 1758. The churches are about seventeen miles apart.

ii No pictures of Robert Hamilton or Sarah Letcher Hamilton are known to exist.

The tract of land, given for the site of the proposed building, was a small bottom on the east side of South Buffalo; it is described in the deed as being

> one acre and 20 poles, be the same more or less, lying in Rockbridge County on the South Fork of Buffaloe Creek, adjoining the lands of said Robert Hamilton and Frederick Frush, Beginning at two white oaks corner to Robert and James Hamilton's lands in a flat near the publick road, thence N 7 poles crossing sd. road to the center of Buffaloe Creek corner to Robert Hamilton and Frederick Frush on James Hamilton's line, thence down the center of Buffaloe with Robert Hamilton's and Frederick Frush's line 17 poles to oposit one large white oak and walnut marked on the south side of sd. creek, thence S 46½ E 6 poles to two dogwoods at the foot of the hill, thence S 25½ W 14 poles to one small white oak on the side of the hill thence N 50 W 11 poles down sd. hill to the beginning.[3]

Hamilton's School, no date. Courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections.

Embodied in the deed is the expressed desire of the donors that thereon "a house of publick worship is to be built and for the use of a school when not occupied by religious worship. This house, when built, is to be free for all preachers of the gospel, the oldest appointment to hold the preference." Also, it was required that no more than five trustees would be allowed.

Tradition has it that William H. Letcher, Mrs. Hamilton's brother, came and made his home with his sister during the time he supervised the work of construction [of the school/church]. He was considered a successful builder and had already erected several buildings in Lexington.

The logs came from the adjacent woodland of the donor and the creek was the source of the sand and water used in making the mortar to close the chinks between the logs. The floor was of puncheon[i] and the roof was made of hewn chestnut shingles. At the east end of the room, under a gable-window, was a raised platform which was adorned by a home-made pulpit which became the teacher's desk when the school was in session. Along the walls on either side were wide boards supported by strong hickory pegs in the wall — these were the common desks of the pupils. The seating was backless benches, crudely but substantially made — used by the pupils and the worshippers alike.

The construction was completed in the summer of 1823 and ready for service. As its use as a school was so much more extensive than as a meeting-house, the building became widely known as "Hamilton's School House," a name which clings to the building to this day. The names of the many ministers who served here, proclaiming the Gospel from the crude and plain pulpit, have never been recorded. Many of them were itinerants of the Methodist and Baptist denominations, some, were men of education and culture, some were unlettered and plain men. Pastors of Oxford Church have generally been active in the support of the religious work at Hamilton's, and the Session of the church showed their interest by sponsoring the Sunday School.

When the schools for this type of religious education spread to the rural areas, they were active only in the summer months, owing to the bad roads of winter and the demand for heated buildings. On May 17, 1908,[ii] a congregational meeting was held at Oxford Church for some certain business. During the course of the meeting, it was reported that many of the members living in the vicinity of Hamilton's School House were eager to have a Sunday School there. As a consequence, Elder J. Montgomery Johnston was directed to organize such a work and report to the Session. The mission was accomplished.

James T. Miller, a resident of the community and a former schoolmaster, was designated time and again to be the superintendent of the Sunday School and he always gave consecrated effort in carrying out the Session's desires. He was an experienced leader and had been for a decade or more superintendent at Rapp's Mill. His conception of the place of the Sunday School in the life of the community is seen in the picnic that was held in the late summer. His camera always caught the happy group — the ones taken in 1902 and 1908 are priceless.

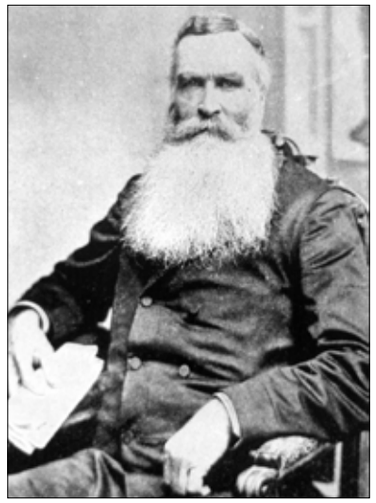
That the work of faithful, consecrated ministers was fruitful is evidenced by the fact that the Session of Oxford Church met at Hamilton's Schoolhouse, August 15, 1894, with the Rev. W. L. Bailey as the moderator. Elders J. S. Saville, J. M. Johnston, and Wm. F. Johnston were present. Eleven people presented themselves for membership in the church upon their profession of faith, viz.: Misses Myra Allison, Maude Mays, Theodosia Allison, Vada Lillian Allison, Nettie Deacon and Barbara Saville, Mrs. Rachel

Sunday school picnic, 1908. Photo by James Miller, Sunday school superintendent; in the Special Collections of the Leyburn Library at Washington and Lee University.

i Split logs or heavy slab timbers with one face smoothed.

ii Clearly a typing error, but the correct date isn't easily inferred.

Elvira Saville, Jacob O. Saville, and Joseph Saville. The next day the Session reconvened and received Robert Wilson, Walter Wilson, Robert McCorkle, Charles Swink, Sidney Swink, and Mrs. Emma Painter. These additions to the church resulted from a "protracted meeting" which was conducted by Mr. Bailey in the old log cabin by the road-side.



Bishop William Taylor.
Courtesy of Taylor University.

Under the leadership of one of the teachers, here was born a church which flourished for some years and then, due to internal conflict, passed into history. From this platform, a young man, recently "set apart" for the Gospel ministry, preached one of his virgin sermons. His fervor and zeal marked him as a man of destiny. Years passed and he was back among his own people after achieving world renown. He again preached at "Hamilton's" to a large group of people, his sermon being long remembered by those who heard him. He was Bishop William Taylor.

But, as a school house, "Hamilton's" was more widely known. In 1810, the Virginia Legislature had set up the famed "Literary Fund," supplying the finances by the allocation of escheats, forfeitures, and "all rights accruing to the State as derelict." It was directed by law that the money so accumulated should be used in aiding poor children, those whose parents or guardians were unable to pay the cost of an education without great inconvenience. The commissioners of the militia districts of the counties placed the funds in action, paying the school teachers upon the presentation of an account. It was not until Oct. 31, 1842, that school districts were formed and designated as such.

John Steele Leech was commissioner of District No. 4, in which Hamilton's School House was located, and, in February, 1838, he ordered James Johnston to be paid for his teaching services in the last quarter of 1837. The school-master had reported that he had 16 "poor children" enrolled and that he was due $21.20 for the 530 days they had attended school — this was at the rate of the set fee, 4¢ per day per pupil. This does not mean that the only children taught by Johnston were "poor children." Undoubtedly he had "pay pupils," children from homes that could afford to pay the tuition fee charged by the teacher.

Hamilton's School House was an "old field school," one of those early educational plants erected by the co-operative efforts of the people in an abandoned field, on land donated for the purpose, or on land not desired for farming because of untillable terrain. Such were completely under the control of the community. Too, there were no such things as standards of qualification or licenses for teachers, the community determining the fitness of the teacher, educationally and morally.

Men and women of high mental acumen and positive character were teachers at Hamilton's during the years. Some of them were products of the community, such as James Johnston, Narcissa Bertonia Hamilton, Jane E. Johnston, and Seaton B. Rowsey — to mention a few. Some were from a distance, such as Joel F. Cooley, of New York, and Charles L. Tidd, of Connecticut.

Perhaps Narcissa Bertonia Hamilton was one of the most distinguished women of ante-bellum Rockbridge. Educated in Hamilton's School House, she advanced through private study, continued at a great disadvantage. She was known and esteemed as a woman of splendid personal qualities, brilliant of mind, and a gentlewoman of pronounced culture. Besides winning recognition as a wonderful Sunday School teacher, she was long remembered for the inspiration she gave to those who sat under her instruction in the school-room. About 1848, she became greatly interested in Buckingham Female Institute, operated by the Rev. Mr. [John Chapman] Blackwell, her cousin by marriage. The school[i] was in dire need of funds to carry on the work. Miss Hamilton made a trip to Richmond, appeared before the legislature, and pled with success for finances to maintain the service of the Institute. Undoubtedly this was the first time that a woman appeared before the legislative body with such a plea.

Until late in 1846, the textbooks of the schools consisted of such works as *Burnham's* and *Webster's Spelling Books, Walker's Dictionary, the New York Reader, Pike's, Smith's, Goodwick's,* and *Parley's Arithmetics, Murray's Grammar, Smith's Grammar, Parley's History,* and *Grimshaw's History of Greece and Rome.* Of course, the Bible was vital as a textbook for all pupils. In 1847, *McGuffey's Eclectic Series of Readers,* a wonderful asset to the intellectual and moral life of the pupils, made their appearance at Hamilton's School House.

When the public school system became mandatory in the days after the War Between The States, Hamilton's became a member of the state system of education and, from that time until it was closed in 1928, it was an elementary school, fitting boys and girls for high school or for the demands of active community life — just a school of one room with one teacher for all grades taught.

The matter of trusteeship of the property had been overlooked in the passing of the years. Although the building was used as a public school, it never became the property of the County Board of Education. Trustees were necessary. Of course, William Henderson and William Murphy, the original trustees, were now dead and their successors had never been appointed. So, on Sept. 8, 1900, W. B. F. Leech, J. Montgomery Johnston, and James T. Miller were made the new Board of Trustees.

In the *Rockbridge County News,* Nov. 3, 1928, there appeared the notice that Hamilton's School was to be closed and the pupils who would normally attend it were to be transported to Palmer School, some four miles down the valley, The effort had been made, in view of the lack of pupils, to consolidate Hamilton's and Rapp's Schools, but it was impossible to find a suitable location. Says the article: "Hamilton's is probably one of the oldest in Rockbridge for many of the old schools have disappeared with the progress of time and change."

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i In Dillwyn, in central Virginia; opened in 1838 and considered a female counterpart to Randolph-Macon College in Ashland; ceased operations after the Civil War.

Again the ravages of time and the hands of despoilers played havoc with the old building — it stood isolated, deserted, and lone. The door had been replaced by a crude makeshift, the windows were missing, the floor had been patched in an unworkmanlike manner, the chinking was gone from some of the walls, and the semi-modern flue was most dilapidated. Then came the efforts of the Buffalo Community League to restore the place as a memorial to those who had studied and worshipped there through the years.

The complete restoration of this "old field school" is the aim of the League. Trustees were again necessary and, upon the League's recommendation, made on April 7, 1955, Charles S, Saville, Jacob O. Saville, and J. Coleman Hall were constituted the present Board of Trustees by the court. During all its public service, the property has had only eight trustees.

The restored log school house will be maintained and used again as it was through the years — a place of education and spiritual uplift. As the forefathers sought to bring the light of truth to the mind and heart of childhood, providing at the same time guidance for their own feet, so shall its service be in the community now.[i]

THEY MADE THE LIGHT SHINE

Through the years, Hamilton's School House was a community center and more. The activity of the people found this spot its throbbing heart. It was a place of worship, but not a sanctuary as a formal church; it was a school, but not an institution with restricted area of service. Here, the rich and the poor, the ignorant in letters and the wise in books, the humble and the proud — all found that which the heart desired.

FREED SLAVES BURIAL GROUND. Almost from the beginning, the grounds around the log school house were used as a burial ground for the "free" negroes — slaves now manumitted and their children for whom there was no room in the plantation slave cemeteries. The last such burial took place about 1900; the deceased was Ella Mackey. The number of these dead are unknown because none of the graves are marked in any way.

MILITARY PRACTICE FIELD. In the ante-bellum days, the local company of militia needed a drill-ground, but fields ideal for such a service were far more valuable for farming purposes. While the grounds at Hamilton's was limited in extent, it was level and publicly owned. Here Capt. John F. Wilson, aided by his capable lieutenant, Richard G. Manspile, drilled Company H, 8th Regiment of Virginia Militia, in the manual of arms. Capt. Jefferson Crawford Deacon, commander of the same company some years later, was able to secure the more spacious meadow of "Ingleside," on North Buffalo, as his drill-ground.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS. Naturally, the public interest in Hamilton's School House made it a great political center for the upper South Buffalo and North Buffalo valleys in the days when factional fireworks marked a tension at the rallies. Many an oratorical outburst lauded "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too" in the old log cabin during the heat of that presidential campaign [1840]. John Steele Leech was an eloquent and moving orator and the leader of his party in this section. He was ably supported by his close friend and colleague, Capt. James Montgomery, the two making a most effective team. Robert Hamilton was a pronounced Jeffersonian Democrat and his neighbors were largely of the Whig party. Since John Tyler, the running-mate of William Henry Harrison, was a Jeffersonian Democrat, Hamilton took great delight in swinging to the support of that party,

The "Whigs" were those who were in opposition to Democrat policies even as early as 1834. Harrison and Tyler were nominated to carry the party's national standard and, while the Whigs lacked that unity which is a prelude to victory, they set afoot a campaign of such high enthusiasm that effective work was done. Harrison was represented as wearing a coon-skin hat and drinking hard cider; Van Buren was said to have had English servants and to use golden spoons. So, the log cabin became the symbol of American liberty. Barbecues, with the air redolent with the aroma of cooking meats and hickory smoke, became the rallying places for crowds; to be present for such an occasion and to hear the explosions of political oratory made a horseback ride or a jaunt over rutty roads, even for many miles, a mere passing incident. Every such gathering had a colorful touch, given by the gay uniforms of the militia officers and the fluttering banners.

At the political rallies, held in Hamilton's, coon-skin hats were much in evidence. Those in attendance wore their hairy head-gear during the sessions, considering it a badge, a token of the side they supported, just as a lapel button or a convention tag would serve a convention of modern days. Robert Hamilton wore his coon-skin hat with great pride and continued to make his appearance at subsequent political meetings and elections with this symbol of his political faith. To emphasize his convictions further, at the presidential election, he carried a pole on which he had attached a stuffed coon.

About this time, some of the larger boys of the school killed a coon which they had found prowling along the creek and the skin was stretched on the outer wall of the school house. This grisly token and the presence of a large number of coon-skin hats caused Hamilton, with his name-giving proclivity, to name the building "Coon-Skin College."

ELECTION CENTER. Because of its central location, accessible by roads up and down the valley and across Saville hill to North Buffalo, the old log building became a voting place and gave its name to the precinct. Here the judges received the votes of the people, and those who came to vote found the joy of visiting with old acquaintances and kinsfolk. Some heated arguments would be caused by political differences which often resulted only in the easing of inner tensions at the expense of the less aggressive. There was always the possibility, too, that a more capable opponent might ride up at any time and change the trend of the argument.

TOWN SQUARE. The plain plank door, as well as the walls on either side of it, became the community bulletin-board. Here the sheriff posted the official court orders for public notice and many a passer-by would rein in his horse to read the very latest. When the notice of the Conscription Act of 1862 was tacked on the door — Virginia calling her sons to rally under the banner of the Confederacy — one eleven-year-old lad boasted to his companions that his older brother Sam would not be conscripted for he was already a veteran of Wise's Legion in the campaign in the mountains of western Virginia. Many of the children were able to make the same claim for their fathers or older kindred.

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i Though Dr. Diehl did not know it, of course, a community-led restoration of the school house began in the mid-2010s, spurred by a $10,000 grant from Historic Lexington Foundation's Lyle–Simpson Preservation Fund and relying substantially on other contributions from local businesses and volunteer craftspeople.

STILL A SCHOOL-HOUSE. Before the coming of the public school era, there was no regular term for the privately operated schools. A teacher might "run" or "hold" the school for a few weeks, a quarter, or several quarters, according to the will and desire of the patrons. Thus, there could be several teachers in one year in the same school and the same teacher might teach in several schools during the twelve months.

J. Baxter McCorkle, graduate of Washington College in 1860 and a nephew of Mrs. Philip Shafer (née Catherine McCorkle), became the teacher at Hamilton's the autumn following his graduation. With the coming of Spring, he withdrew from his work in the schoolroom and enlisted in the Rockbridge Artillery. His military efficiency was soon recognized and he became a corporal, then a sergeant, and at last a lieutenant.

In the fall of 1862, ***M. L. Bobbitt*** became the teacher at Hamilton's School and he came with the distinction of being incapacitated for further military service by wounds received in battle. Not only did he teach the pupils the classroom subjects, but he also acted as a drill-master for the older boys who knew that military service lay before them. Wooden guns, patiently whittled from a pine or cedar board, or a straight stick provided the means of instruction in the manual of arms and the school-ground was ample for drilling. Several of the boys saw military service before Appomattox closed their careers as soldiers. Bobbitt, said to have been a graduate of Washington College, served the community as teacher for two years.

The patrons of Hamilton's School were alert for a good teacher in 1868 and their choice was a seventeen-year-old boy, born and reared in the community, ***J. Sidney Saville.*** He had studied at Hamilton's and John Ruley, one of the patrons, who took the lead "in making up a school," urged young Saville to accept the position. With some trepidation, he undertook the work and had a very successful year. Later he attended Washington and Lee University for several years and served as County Superintendent of Schools, 1886–1900, succeeding J. Lucian Hamilton and preceding A. Nash Johnston. He was one of the leading spirits in the creation of Palmer Academy which became Palmer High School and is now a part of Effinger High School.

Joel F. Cooley was born near Bath, N.Y., and is said to have received his education at Yale University. He came to Rockbridge in quest of a teaching position and he found it at Rapp's Mill. In the fall of 1854, he opened a school at Hamilton's. After two years of excellent service, he returned to the Rapp's Mill community, where he served as postmaster, schoolmaster, notary public, merchant, and tanner during the remaining years of his life.

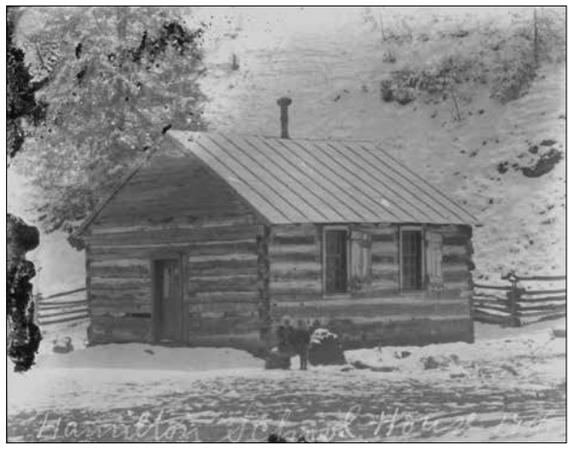
The catalog of Richmond College[i] for 1854–55 carried the name of ***Emmett T. Mason,*** Rockbridge County, as a student in Latin, Greek, and mathematics, and the Minutes of the General Association[ii] lists him among the Baptist pastors for the years 1857–1860 inclusive and gives his address as Rapp's Mill for those years. After his study at Richmond College, he returned to Rockbridge and began teaching at Hamilton's School House in July, 1856, a service he continued without any break until July, 1857. However, during that time, he took out time to be ordained as a Baptist minister for, on Jan. 5, 1857, with Vincent Turpin as his endorser, he gave bond as a minister.

On March 6, 1858, Mason married Nancy P., daughter of Vincent Turpin; she had been born Nov, 11, 1842, and was a few months more than fifteen years old at the time of her marriage. Serving the community as schoolmaster and as Baptist minister, he made quite a contribution in both fields of endeavor. Out of his ministerial work at Hamilton's grew the organization of the Hamilton Baptist Church which used the old log school house as its regular meeting place.

James T. Miller and his wife, Ione Braden Miller, 1909. Photo by Michael Miley; Washington and Lee University Library Special Collections.

Before the outbreak of the War Between The States, the Masons moved from the South Buffalo valley and made their home near Springwood, in Botetourt County. Here most of their family was born and here Mrs. Mason died, June 29, 1906, her husband surviving her only a few years. They are both buried in a cemetery of the Springwood community.

The longest tenure of the role of schoolmaster at Hamilton's was that of ***James Thompson Miller.*** He was born Aug. 6, 1856, the son of William Miller by his second wife, Margaret Lackey McKnight, whom he married, May 31, 1855. After marrying Miss Ione P. Braden, young Miller settled on a farm on South Buffalo; they became the parents of six children. Mr. Miller, a member of the Oxford Church, was a great aid to the pastor in maintaining religious work at both Hamilton's and Rapp's, especially in the field of the Sunday Schools.



Photographs by James Thmpson Miller: left, unidentified boy, undated; above, Hamilton's School, 1909. Courtesy of Washington and Lee University Library, Special Collections. See also Sunday School photo, page 3.

i University of Richmond since 1920.

ii The Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Miller's avocation, for such it was at first, became almost his vocation; it was photography. Many of his pictures, unfaded and very distinct, remain today as reminders of bygone days. Picnics, Sunday Schools, farm scenes, family gatherings, school groups, as well as photographs of individuals, found release for his talent. Many of his negatives have been preserved. Although he was self-taught in the art, he was considered very successful and his work attests the truth of the claim.

Among the ten children of James Johnston and his wife Jean Montgomery, was James, Jr., who began teaching in the local schools in the early thirties. Another teacher of those days was Eliza Love S. Finley, sister of the wife of John Steele Leech. On Jan. 28, 1841, Miss Finley became James Johnston's bride. To this marriage five children were born, one of whom being ***James Montgomery Johnston.*** He served in Company C, lst Virginia Cavalry, C.S.A., and was wounded in the hand in the battle of Spotsylvania Court House, in May, 1864. His military career being closed, he returned to South Buffalo and, during the two years, 1869-1871, he taught school at Hamilton's, a service in which he was eventually followed by his son ***Bolivar Finley Johnson*** for the session of 1896-1897.

At Hamilton's, pews (shown here in 2016) were also used as pupils' seats.

Sally M. Johnston, a sister of James, taught school at Hamilton's in the summer of 1850. That fall, in October, she became the wife of Samuel Addison Rapp and went West. Her brother Alexander succeeded Leech as commissioner for District No. 4, in 1842, holding the position for four years when Leech returned to office. Alexander Johnston married Ellen Wilson, Oct. 30, 1844, and to them were born three children, one of whom being ***Jane Ann Johnston***. After receiving the best she could get in the local schools, she entered Mary Baldwin Seminary, at Staunton. Later she returned home and taught school. Her work at Hamilton's was most successful and she greatly endeared herself to pupils and patrons alike.

. . . and house of worship. But the school teachers were not the only bringers of light to South Buffalo through Hamilton's School House — there were the many ministers who spoke from the pulpit. Sometimes they were itinerant, and came with the avowed purpose of routing the forces of evil and, listening to the conversations in the homes where they were guests, they heard things discussed which made the point of attack plain. Such was the case of one strolling preacher who created a very tense situation by preaching a sermon on the Gadarene demoniac,[i] using it as an avenue of attack against a local housewife who was said to possess occult powers which she used against the neighbors who had provoked her to anger. There is no record that the preacher ever returned to South Buffalo valley, perhaps due to the sorcery of the woman, perhaps due to better judgment.

Just across Short Hill is "Rural Valley," the home of the Rev. Samuel Houston.[ii] A graduate of Liberty Hall and a veteran of the Revolutionary War, he had been received by Lexington Presbytery, October, 1782, for ordination. After more than six years' service to churches in southwest Virginia and eastern Tennessee, he returned to Virginia and, in September, 1791, he became pastor of Falling Spring and High Bridge Presbyterian Churches, at the same time operating a classical school in his home. Years passed and, in 1820, he gave up the work at Falling Spring, continuing the High Bridge pastorate until 1831.

"Uncle Bob" — His Cronies and Neighbors

Robert Hamilton was known far and wide as a genial host and a great sportsman. While all guests were given a hearty welcome to the Hamilton home, that welcome was intensified if the guest were a devotee of the rod and gun. The surrounding hills were full of game, large and small, and the sparkling streams were teeming with trout. Many a fox-hunt or a night-hunt for coons was planned in the congenial atmosphere of the Hamilton home and, from that point, the hunters set out on their quest. This coterie of hunters and fishermen became an elite society of boon companions.

From Lexington, about a dozen miles away, came James Hubard Bowyer, of "Thorn Hill," one of the best wing-shots among the sportsmen of the countryside . . . . Too, there was John W. Houghawout, widely known as "Old Huck", who was Mayor of Lexington for years, . . . lovingly called "Father of the Town."

Also, there was Alexander Caruthers, a "beautiful flutist and ardent sportsman" . . . Col. John Thomas Lewis Preston, one of the leading figures in making the military arsenal at Lexington into Virginia Military Institute . . . .

Any list of intimate friends of "Uncle Bob" must include the name of John Clarkson who had come to Rockbridge County from Amherst. He gave to himself the name of "Old Bolivar" and, in the course of the years, "Bolivar's Mill" became a place of real industry, with the three-story grist mill furnishing the countryside with the finest meal and the well-equipped distillery giving the budding temperance societies the gravest of concern.

Another associate of Robert Hamilton was a tall, raw-boned man with sandy hair, high cheek-bones and a nasal twang in his speech. He was a native of Connecticut . . . . While he was unable to use good English in his speech, to spell correctly, or to write distinctly, he had ability "to cipher," as it was called. . . . Yet his strong point was discipline and it was this quality that won him the job as schoolmaster in the school on Randolph Street in Lexington. Erring boys were forced to stand on a table with a long stick or lath fastened to their noses . . . ; sometimes they were compelled to sit on a stool in the middle of the room with a gaudy and properly lettered dunce-cap

i Matthew 8:28-34

ii Uncle of the famed Texas statesman (and Rockbridge native).

on their heads; often they were rocked in an inverted bench by several lusty fellow-students who enjoyed their job.

Robert Hamilton had a local reputation as a skeptic, being considered in his later years as a severe critic of religion. . . . However, he never failed, weather and his physical condition permitting, to attend any service held in the old log cabin. It is told that, on one Sunday, a minister by the name of Lyon finished his sermon and announced that he would be back on the next Sunday morning at eleven o'clock and preach on a certain text. From the wording of the cited passage, "Uncle Bob" sensed that the sermon would be some polemic defending a peculiar doctrine the preacher held and which was irritating to him. Immediately he arose and announced that he himself would preach on the next Sunday morning at ten o'clock, the hour previous to the one announced by Lyon, adding that his text would be "When the Lyon roareth, the snakefeet tremble." It is not of record whether that minister ever preached in Hamilton's again.

Just down the creek from the school house was a deep pool which was used as a place of immersion of converts. On one occasion, a Baptist minister was engaged in the sacred rite of his church and just happened to look down the stream. There was "Uncle Bob" fishing. The minister was in the act of receiving a convert into the water and. "Uncle Bob" had just caught a fine trout. Holding the wiggling fish aloft, Hamilton spoke out in a loud voice, "Brother, you put 'em in and I'll pull 'em out." It may have been that such episodes as this added to the rumor that "Uncle Bob" was a terrible skeptic.

THE TEACHERS

From old records, gathered from various sources, with some the data verified by the memory of the living, the following list of teachers in Hamilton's School House has been constructed:

1823–1837: no names have been found.
1838: Benjamin McNutt
1839: William B. Wilson
1840: William H. Anderson
1841: Benjamin McNutt
1842: William B. Wilson
1843: John A. Wilson
1844: John A. Wilson
1845: Seaton B. Rowsey (1st quarter)
Narcissa B. Hamilton (4th quarter)
1846: Narcissa B. Hamilton (2nd quarter)
Seaton B. Rowsey (4th quarter)
1847: Seaton B. Rowsey (1st & 3rd quarters)
1848: Seaton B. Rowsey (5 months)
Narcissa B. Hamilton (3 months)
1849: Charles L. Tidd (March–June)
Seaton B. Rowsey (4th quarter)
1850: Seaton B. Rowsey (1st quarter)
Sally M. Johnston (May–August); she married S. A. Rapp on Oct. 10, 1850, and went West.
1851: Charles L. Tidd (1st quarter)
R. A. Richardson (May–September)
1852: Seaton B. Rowsey
(Nov. 1851–April, 1852)
Jane A. Johnston (July–November)
1853: Seaton B. Rowsey
1854: Joel F. Cooley
1855: Joel F. Cooley (Nov. 1854–March, 1855)
Jane A. Johnston (July–November)
1856: Mr. Bemis
F. D. Sanders
1857: Emmett T. Mason
1858: Emmett T. Mason
1859: Emmett T. Mason
1860: J. Baxter McCorkle
1861: Jane A. Johnston
1862: M. L. Bobbitt
1863: M. L. Bobbitt
1864: C. A. McKean —
graduate of Center College, Ky.
1865: C. A. McKean
1866: Phoebe Wallace

UNDER THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

1867–68: Phoebe Wallace
1868–69: J. Sidney Saville
1869–70: J. Montgomery Johnston
1870–71: J. Montgomery Johnston
1871–72: Miss Fannie C. Saville
1872–73: William Saville
1873–74: William Saville
1874–91: James T. Miller
1891–94: Robert Wilson
1894–96: Miss Scott Wilson
1896–97: Bolivar Johnston
1897-98: Miss Mattie Ella Swink
1898–99: Miss Anna Brown
1899–00: Miss Ella Moore
1900–01: Miss Sallie Dixon
1901–02: Miss Jessie Reid
1902–03: Miss Mattie Reid
1903–04: Miss Bess Sinclair
1904–05: Miss Dalia Lam
1905–06: Miss Dalia Lam
1906–07: Miss Dalia Lam
1907–08: Miss Ethel Anderson
1908–09: Miss Carrie Hogue
1909–10: Miss Bess Clemmer
1910–11: Miss Dalia Lam
1911–12: Miss Eva Hartless
1912–13: Miss Elizabeth Saville
1913–14: Miss Dora M. Shafer
1914–15: Miss Mame Lam
1915–16: Miss Lucille Saville
1916–17: Miss Della Saville
1917–18: Miss Della Saville
1918–19: no school — influenza epidemic
1919–20: Miss Lorene Turpin
1920–21: Miss Ida Reid
1921–22:
1922–23: Miss Della Saville
1923–26: Mrs. J. Granville Johnston

(Errors may have been made in compiling this list, but it is the best that can be done.)

ENDNOTES

1 Rev. Robert Davidson, D.D., *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky, With a Preliminary Sketch of the Churches in the Valley of Virginia,* p. 36 [discussion of Oxford and other Rockbridge churches]. Robert Carter & Brothers, New York, 1847.

2 Rev. William Henry Foote, D.D., Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical, Chapter XXIV, "Rev. Daniel Blain," p. 297. J. B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1855.

3 Rockbridge Deed Book "N," pp. 348, 349

Hamilton Schoolhouse

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Hamilton schoolhouse is a single pen log structure situated on a small tract containing slightly more than one acre on the east bank of South Buffalo Creek and fronts on State Route 611, which bisects the property. The interior consists of whitewashed, exposed log walls, flush pine boards on the ceiling, and unfinished pine floorboards. The only furnishings are pews and a podium that have survived in good condition from the nineteenth century. The building is very well preserved and its historic setting is virtually undisturbed.

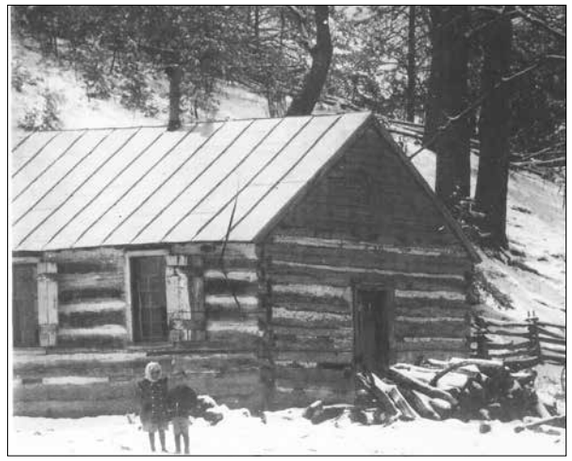
ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The schoolhouse consists of a one room. one-story log structure, 22' x 24', built in 1823 of hand-hewn, yellow-poplar, half-dovetail comer-notched logs from the adjacent woodland.[1] The logs are chinked with a lime and river sand mixture, coated with a heavy limewash. The log walls are original except for the bottom course on each elevation, which was replaced in 1950. A shallow foundation of field stone or river cobbles supports the walls. The original chestnut shingle roof was replaced with green-painted, hand-crimped, standing-seam galvanized steel in the late 19th or early 20th century. The roof looks brand new in an old photograph probably taken around the turn of the 20th century. The original metal roof has been regularly painted and thus has been preserved to this day. The gable ends are covered with beaded weatherboards that are of an early date, if not original. A small brick chimney in the center of the roof line was added in the early 20th century, replacing the former tin flue that served a wood stove that has since been removed.

Notched corner logs, Hamilton Schoolhouse.

There are two windows each on the north and south walls. A fifth window at the rear of the building, directly behind a raised platform or pulpit, may have been added later than the other windows. The double-hung six-over-six sash windows have muntin profiles typical of the mid- to late nineteenth century, but in the old photograph taken around the turn of the century, there are different windows in place. The two-light wide sash shown in the photograph appear to have been awkwardly retrofitted into the openings. Prior to the first windows being installed, the single-leaf batten shutters alone probably sealed the openings. The present rough, circular-sawn batten door is said to have replaced a similar. earlier door in 1950.[2]

The logs are exposed in the interior and have received numerous coats of whitewash over the years. The ceiling consists of whitewashed flush ceiling boards nailed directly to the rafters and crossties. Plain wood trim adorns the entrance and windows. The machine-planed pine floorboards are uneven in places and appear to have been in place many years. There has never been any plumbing or wiring installed in the building.



Hamilton School, 1909 (top) and 2002 (DHR photo). Note that in the older photograph, the window has fifteen panes; in the newer photo, twelve.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Hamilton Schoolhouse is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the area of education because it represents old ways of life in the remote, mountainous region of southwestern Virginia. It also reflects the self-sustaining independence of the tiny South Buffalo Creek community, as well as the hardships of rural life and the difficulties that were once encountered in securing an education in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is also significant under Criterion C because it represents a method of log construction that is all but forgotten. It is the last of the old log field schools built before the Civil War in the area and perhaps in all of Virginia. It is a exceedingly rare surviving precursor of the many log schoolhouses that would be built throughout the south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, terribly few of the later examples have survived. The structure has survived the ravages of time with few alterations, in part because of its design and construction based on long-established traditions, and moreover, its important place in the community. Considering the extreme rarity of schoolhouses of this vintage and level of integrity, the Hamilton Schoolhouse is exceptionally worthy of recognition and preservation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Robert Hamilton, whose father, a migrant from the northern Shenandoah Valley, was one of the early settlers in the area inherited the farm on South Buffalo creek in 1807. In 1808 Robert married Sally Letcher from the Timber Ridge community, the daughter of Jon and Mary Houston Letcher. Mary was a cousin of General Sam Houston of Texas fame. The Hamiltons. after several years and the birth of seven children, recognized the need for a school and a place of worship. Citizens of the community began making detailed plans for a suitable

Hamilton School, undated

building and Robert Hamilton conveyed approximately one acre of land to William Murphy and William Henderson, as trustees, for the building to be used as a house of worship and a school. Construction began immediately and the plain log structure was completed in the summer of 1823. According to tradition. it was built by a William H. Letcher. [3]

The building was used more extensively as a school than a place of worship and it became known as the Hamilton Schoolhouse. Limited funds were provided by the Literary Fund set up by the Virginia legislature in 1810, supplementing local support. Schools of this type were designated as field schools for the benefit of rural children and were completely under the control of the community. A fairly complete list of teachers survives, naming some whom served for several years and others whom served at irregular intervals. The building was used as a house of worship periodically, but the names of the numerous ministers who served there were not recorded. Many of them were itinerants of the Baptist and Methodist denomination. [4]

When the public school system became mandatory in 1870 Hamilton Schoolhouse became a part of the Virginia education system and from that time, until it was closed in 1928, it was an elementary school with one teacher for all seven grades. [5]

Hamilton schoolhouse was a community center for many years and open to all citizens. It was also a voting precinct, and continued to be used as such long after the school was closed. Other functions reportedly included the use of the grounds by the local militia for drills in the early 1860s and later as a burial ground for poor white and black families. There are no gravestones presently visible. and it is assumed that temporary markers were used at the time of burial and have since disappeared. The Oxford Presbyterian Church began using the schoolhouse for its Sunday school in 1908. Nearby was a deep pool in the creek used as a place for baptismal immersion. [6]

The South Buffalo community is located twelve miles southwest of Lexington and the local roads in the 19th century were little more than trails. Consequently the people living in the area were unable to participate in the cultural and social activities located at the county seat of Lexington. Hamilton schoolhouse thus became the local cultural and political center. Political rallies were held there on a regular basis and the door and the surrounding walls of the schoolhouse were used as a community bulletin board, where the local sheriff posted official court orders for public notice. [7] Hundreds of nail and tack holes can be seen today in this location.

Stewardship of the property is presently in the hands of three trustees appointed by the Rockbridge County Court.

Michael J. Pulice, *Architectural Historian*
Virginia Department of Historical Resources, 2002

ENDNOTES

1 The date is based on a surviving 1823 deed stating that on the properly "a house of publick worship is to be built and for the use of a school when not occupied by religious worship . . ." to serve local residents. See also George West Diehl, *The Saga of Hamilton's School House.*

2 John W. Johnston, *Hamilton Schoolhouse Preliminary Information Form,* 2001.

3 Diehl, p. 19.

4 "Not until the end of the eighteenth century did Virginia begin to consider the creation of a public school system. All state acts promoting education, including one to provide schooling for the poor, were left to the justices of the counties to implement. During the next fifty years, the Virginia Assembly continued to strengthen the newly emerging public schools. The Literary Fund was created in 1810 and set up to distribute money to counties to educate poor white children. In 1819, the Literary Fund was made available to increase teachers' pay in public schools, and in 1829 to construct school buildings. There was much prejudice against the free school idea in the antebellum period, and there is little evidence that such schools were popular anywhere in the state. Instead, community schools, where parents from several households would hire a teacher, became the norm for elementary levels of schooling." [Worsham, Gibson, unpublished Grayson County Survey Report, Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2002, p. 17].

5 "Following Reconstruction, Virginia's Underwood Constitution required the establishment of public schools that were to open for the 1870–1871 school year. The plan called for schools within walking distance of every student in the state. Rural communities quickly adapted and built simple one-room, rectangular, gable-roofed structures, generally with a gable end entrance. The majority of one-room schools were of log construction during the 1870s; a few were built of brick. From 1880 to 1910 almost all one-room schools were of frame construction. Decorative elements were generally limited to eave brackets. Light came from sets of six-over-six or nine-over-nine windows on the side walls. Interiors were also plain, with painted blackboards across the gable end opposite the entrance. Heat came from wood or coal stoves vented by stove flues." [Kern, John, "Thematic Evaluation of County Public School Buildings in Southwest Virginia," unpublished report, Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2000].

6 Diehl, pp. 20, 36.

7 Diehl, p. 22.

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