

KERNERSVILLE

A Short Sketch of the History of the Town, its People and their Occupations

Thomas E. Whitaker
Staff Cor. Of the *Durham Recorder*.
The News and Farm, Kernersville, January 13, 1888

Transcribed by Michael L. Marshall

In Forsyth county, on the Salem branch of the R. & D. R. R., twenty-one miles from Greensboro, and twelve miles from Winston-Salem, is Kernersville, a town of 1,000 inhabitants. The town is about seventy-five feet higher than Winston, and commands a fine view of the Pilot and Sauratown mountains, and stretching far away behind these ranges, like a veil, is the lofty Blue Ridge. The soil is gray and gravelly with slight micaceous indications.

Four miles south of Kernersville is a ledge of rock so closely resembling the glacial deposits of the Alps, it is claimed that during certain ages past this section of the State was covered with immense moving masses of ice, which in their progress from West to East, moved rocks, pulverizing clay from granite and gneiss, transforming barren rock into fertile soil.

The soil is well adapted to the growth of fine tobacco and grain, and fruits attain a rare perfection. We, of Durham, feast on apples grown there, and the shipping of peaches, cherries and dried fruits to the Northern markets, is one of the chief industries of the rural districts.

The timber is principally oak. Formerly, the chesnut grew here, but by an unaccountable law, [it] moves farther West, year after year. It has gone to keep company with the red man, on his journey into the setting sun.

The weather of Kernersville is pure and cold, and the air sharp and bracing. So cold is the water that a "down easter" is said to have asked why the people washed their faces in ice water.

Kernersville is one hundred and twenty years old. It was first settled about the year 1760 by Caleb Story, an Irishman. Tradition says that he bought the original tract of 400 acres, in which the town was built, for four gallons of rum. He sold to Dobson, and for many years the town was known by the unpretentious name, "Dobson's X Roads." Dobson sold to Shober, and Shober to Joseph Kerner, a native of Germany, in 1818, who bought additional tracts to the amount of 1,100 acres. Joseph Kerner died in 1830, leaving his entire possessions to his two sons, John F. and Phillip Kerner, and one daughter, Salome. The three heirs divided the property. Salome married Appolis [sic] Harmon, a native of Connecticut. He died in 1845, leaving his interest to his two sons, Rufus and Julius Harmon. Phillip Kerner sold his interest to W. P. Henley, in 1848. J. F. Kerner died in 1883, leaving his estate to his nine children, all of whom are living in Kernersville. The three estates have since been divided and sold, but we are told of the 1,000 inhabitants, more than 500 are direct descendants of Joseph Kerner. This is a pretty fair increase for three generations. Messrs. J. Gilmer Kerner, (Reuben Rink) and his brother, H. C. Kerner, reside in Durham. Reuben Rink is regarded by critics as the most talented painter in North Carolina. He has his excentricities [sic], and built a brick house

in Kernersville of such peculiar design, that it is known beyond the State lines as “Kerner’s Folly.” Stables, bath rooms, parlors, furnaces, kitchen, dining rooms, bedrooms and ball-room are under the same roof. It shows to us, rather the work of a genius.

There are two warehouses for the sale of leaf tobacco, and five factories for the manufacture of plug tobacco, to wit: Kerner & Greenfield, Brown, Sapp & Co., Beard, Roberts & Co., W. H. Leak & Co., and Lowrey & Stafford. The work of manufacturing is carried on only during the summer. The class of goods manufactured is equal to the best and finds a large market in the South. W. H. Leak & Co., and Kerner & Greenfield are “putting up” smoking tobacco this winter, thereby utilizing the scrap from the “plug.”

There are few mercantile houses in Kernersville. This is due, we think, to the fact that the farmers raise nearly all their provisions, and spin wool and weave the cloth for their clothes.

Kernersville has one newspaper, the News and Farm. It is an able exponent of the principles of democracy; is an upbuilder of the best interest of the town, and the cleverness of Mr. J. H. Lindsay, the editor, is only equaled by his ability.

The granite quarried near the town is capable of the highest finish, and is not excelled by that quarried in any State. Orders are received for the granite from many sections of North Carolina and the surrounding States. Its reputation is growing and its superiority acknowledged.

There are more brick dwelling houses and factories in Kernersville than in any other town its size in the State. This fact incited our interest and we were told that the clay from the cellar is burned into bricks on the spot, and then used in the construction of a house over the cellar. The cost is less than if the building were wood.

By the building of the C. F. & Y. R. R., from Greensboro to Walnut Cove, a bit of Kernersville’s back country was tapped. It is said that the building of this road by way of Kernersville, was at one time guaranteed, provided the town would subscribe \$5,000. Years ago, Forsyth County subscribed a large sum to the Salem road but its building was deferred for such an interminable length of time, that the good people shudder at the bare mention of subscriptions or taxation. The project fell through, but there is an occasional sigh over what might have been. The people, as a majority, evince great perseverance, and, as in Trollius and Cressida, says:

“Perseverance, dear my lord,
“Keep honor bright; to have none is to hang
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail in monumental mockery.”

The Bishop of the Southern Province of the Moravian church resides in Kernersville in the person of Rev. C. L. Rights. He is 67 years old, has a big brain, is beloved by all who know him, and is not in the least “stuck up.” He is generally known as “Uncle Rights,” and his good lady as “Aunt Rights.”

The mantle of Bishop fell upon his shoulders on the occasions of the death of Bishop DeSchweinitz eight or ten years ago.

Bishop Rights tells many amusing reminiscences [sic] of his early ministry, one of which is his John Gilpin ride on a thoroughbred horse from Salem to Kernersville. The animal was borrowed, and not knowing its training, at the time, the tighter he held the reins the faster the horse ran. People rushed to the doors and windows to see horse and

rider as they went by like an arrow shot from the bow. He reached Kernersville covered with mud, and his horse flecked with foam. One gentleman seeing him remarked, in his presence, "if he was the preacher, the Lord have mercy on the people."

The social gatherings divulged a truth that in expounding no meritorious aid is necessary, that there are more charming and beautiful young ladies in Kernersville than in any other town of 900 inhabitants in North Carolina.

Politics in Forsyth county is mixed. It is first Democratic and then Republican, but Kernersville has a Democratic majority. We hear no preferences expressed for Governor.

We might say something about an eight mile walk from Kernersville to Oak Ridge and back in one day, but fear the subject would be as painful to our readers as it was to us the next morning. Hereafter we favor jailing a man who owns a high-spirited horse.

T. E. W.

In the book Joseph of Kernersville, page 107, is the following:

"About 1888 a newspaper article by Prof. T. E. Whitaker of Oak Ridge gave a review of the town's activities as of that date and stated that of the 900 inhabitants of Kernersville more than 500 were direct descendants of Joseph Körner; that in addition to 5 plants manufacturing tobacco products there were 2 leaf tobacco warehouses; that "there are more brick dwelling houses, factories and stores in Kernersville than in any other town of its size in the State" and that "there are more beautiful and charming young ladies in Kernersville than in any other town of 900 inhabitants in North Carolina."

The footnote to his section reads as follows: "This newspaper story is contained in an old scrap book of the writer's father but the name of the newspaper is not identified. Prof. Whitaker was not content to generalize in respect of the beautiful and charming young ladies but proceeded to call them by name: Minnie Beard, Annie Fulchur, Mattie, Jessie and Jennie Jones, Addie Kerner, Flora Plunkett, Laura Dicks, Cora Lowrey, Eva Sapp and Tilla Harmon."

From this information, it would seem the T. E. W. who signed the article in the January 1888 sketch of Kernersville was the Professor T. E. Whitaker of Oak Ridge. He is probably the same man who resided at the house called OAKHURST (1897) described in a 2006 newsletter by the Oak Ridge Historical Society:

OAKHURST

1897

Oakhurst was built by the most prominent southern architect, Frank P. Milburn for Martin H. Holt, who was a co-principal with his brother J. Allen Holt, of Oak Ridge Institute (which is now the Oak Ridge Military Academy).

Oakhurst is the finest, most exuberant surviving Queen Ann style architecture in Guilford County. The house was originally built without a kitchen for it was said that Mrs. Holt did not care to cook. One of the most striking features is the three story tower that rises through the porch roof and is topped with an ogee roof line.

The Holt family pioneered in cotton manufacturing and were considered to have done more than any other to advance the textile industry in North Carolina, but the Holt brothers made Oak Ridge Institute one of the most flourished, first class schools in the state.

In 1914 Martin retired because of an illness and soon passed away. Thomas Early Whitaker took over as principal of the school. In 1917 he became the owner of Oakhurst.

T.E. Whitaker had such a wide circle of friends that it is said that more guests have been entertained here than any other home in the county. A lifelong friend said "He had the mind of a chancellor and the ability to adjust differences between friends that was given to few men."

T.E. Whitaker died unexpectedly in 1929. Oakhurst stayed in the Whitaker family until 1981. The following obituary appeared in the 21 Mar 1929 edition of the *Danville Bee*.

Prof. Whitaker Dies Suddenly at His Oak Ridge Home

News received in Danville early this morning brought word of the sudden death of Professor Thomas Early Whitaker, president of Oak Ridge institute, who succumbed unexpectedly last night from an attack of acute indigestion. He had been ill for two or three days but it was believed that he was on the road to recovery when he had a sudden collapse death claiming him at 11.30 o'clock.

Professor Whitaker was known to many Danville people because of his visits to this city. His son, Z. L. Whitaker was married some years ago to Miss Mary Blair Maury, daughter of Mr and Mrs. Greenhow Maury of this city.

Reorganizing Oak Ridge institute after its fire in 1914, Professor Whitaker, as head of the institution since that time, had zealously worked for its welfare and had succeeded in a gratifying way of putting it in the forefront among preparatory and military schools in the south. He had been associated with this institution for more than 40 years, coming to it as a student first.

Mr. Whitaker was born in Person county 63 years ago. Before coming to Oak Ridge he lived at Durham. He was married in the nineties to Miss Ida Ogburn. To this union there was born six children, five of whom are now living. They are: Z. L. Whitaker, teacher in the Oak Ridge institute; Thomas Bascom Whitaker, of Oak Ridge; Richard Whitaker, a student at the University of North Carolina; R. R. Whitaker, student of Oak Ridge; and F. O. Whitaker of Benton, Tenn. He also leaves the following brothers: W. J. Whitaker, of Greensboro; Edward Whitaker, of Kernersville; C. Z. Whitaker, of Oak Ridge; Grover Whitaker, of Richmond, Va; two sisters, Mrs. L. J. Arnold, of Lake City, Fla., and Mrs. J. R. Blackwell, of Kernersville.

Besides being one of North Carolina's outstanding educators, Mr. Whitaker had occupied a prominent position as political leader. He went to the state legislature for the first time in 1901 and since that time has gone back as often as he has cared to be a candidate. He served his last term in 1925.

Danville Bee, 21 Mar 1929

The death record of Thomas Early Whitaker (5-16-1866 to 3-20-1929) of Guilford County, North Carolina shows he died of angina pectoris, and his death was reported by Jack L. Whitaker of Oak Ridge. He was born in Granville County, N. C. and was a son of David W. Whitaker (Wake County, NC) and Carrie Freeman (Granville County, N. C.). Was married to Ida Lee Ogburn, both of whom are buried at Oak Ridge Cemetery.

There's also a death record for the wife and a son of Thomas Early Whitaker. His wife, Ida Lee OGBURN, died of acute pancreatic hemorrhage in Winston-Salem, N. C. on 10-6-1958. She also had hypertension and arteriosclerosis. Her date of birth was 5-12-1871 and birthplace was NC. Parents listed were John Lee Ogburn and Rebecca Saunders. Death reported by Dr. R. H. Whitaker of Kernersville. Both of them are buried in Oak Ridge cemetery, Oak Ridge North Carolina.

His son, Thomas Bascom WHITAKER, died of pneumonia and Parkinson's disease at Forsyth Memorial Hospital in Winston-Salem, NC on 3-27-1975. Looks like his date of birth was about 1893. Wife was living at the time and her name was Bess Ogburn, same last name as his mother Ida Lee Ogburn. He was a farmer in the Oak Ridge community of Guilford County, NC and is buried in Oak Ridge cemetery. Pierce Funeral Service, Kernersville, N. C. handled the funeral.

Forsyth death records show Dr. Richard Harper Whitaker of Kernersville (born 4 Oct 1907) died July 1, 1999 and was the son of Thomas and Ida Ogburn Whitaker. He was therefore a son of Prof. T. E. Whitaker who wrote the Kernersville sketch in 1888. Dr. Whitaker was married to Martha Louise ("Marty") Whitaker who was born in Pennsylvania, the daughter of Thomas Hubbard and Margaret Clark. According to Nell Marshall of Kernersville, Marty was a nurse at a hospital in Pennsylvania and met Dr. Whitaker while he was a resident there. Martha (Hubbard) Whitaker was born 1 Aug 1913 and died in Kernersville 19 Jul 1990.