



THE RECORD



Volume 105, No. 3

A Publication of the Historical Society of Charles County, Inc.

October 2011

Joyce Candland, President

Mary Ann Scott, Editor

Fall Dinner Meeting

*Please join us for a Joint Program
with The Historical Society of Charles County
and The Ella Virginia Houck Holloway Chapter,
U.S. Daughters of 1812*

For the Premier of

The War of 1812 in Charles County's Backyard *A Virtual Tour*



With Producer & Narrator Geoffrey Hammersley And the DVD Production Team

Saturday, October 22, 2011 – 5:30 p.m.

Christ Episcopal Church, Old Durham Parish

8685 Ironside Road • Nanjemoy, Maryland

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EDITOR'S NOTE

If you would like future newsletters sent to you by e-mail, please send us your e-mail address. Articles of historic interest on Southern Maryland are requested for publication in future issues of *The Record*. Please send your articles and photographs to: The Historical Society of Charles County, Publications, *The Record*, P.O. Box 2806, La Plata, Maryland 20646. Or you can email your articles and photographs to Joyce Candland at joyce.candland@gmail.com.

One of the largest expenses of our Society is the printing and mailing of our newsletter. In an effort to cut costs and keep our budget under control, we are asking those of you with email capability to consider receiving your copy of *The Record* by email. This would be of great benefit to the Society and you would receive your copy in color. If you can help us with this effort please notify Joyce Candland.

joyce.candland@gmail.com

Friendship House Committees

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Ernest Keller, Sr.

From Immigrant to Businessman

This article was written by Merle K. Turner upon the occasion of the retirement of Mr. Keller from the Board of Directors of Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative

Ernest Keller, Sr. – Immigrant, hard worker, farmer, bus driver/contractor, businessman, community leader, gentleman.

It all began for Ernest in a farmhouse near Aldendorf, Switzerland in February, 1902. Born into a farming family of five children, four boys and one girl, Ernest learned responsibility early in life milking the cows before and after school and transporting the milk to the cheese factory. After seven years of schooling, it was decided that work came first and jobs being very scarce, Ernest hired on as a farmhand for eight years earning less than \$1.00 a day.

In 1921 a brother, Leonard, came to the states and worked in the West Virginia coal mines for over a year. After a near fatal accident in the mines, he took the money he had saved and moved to Maryland buying a farm in Gallant Green, Maryland. He wrote to Ernest often telling him of the opportunities in this country and extended the offer to join him. At the age of 20, seeing no future where he was, Ernest accepted the offer, got his papers, his one suitcase, boarded a boat and in early January, 1923 arrived with thousands of other immigrants in New York City. According to Ernest “no one could leave the boat until you showed proof of your destination, your railroad ticket, and were medically declared in good health. Unable to speak English, I was helped by an immigrant organization that put me on the right train for D.C. At Union Station, I found a German speaking information attendant that placed me on the Southern Maryland train and told the conductor to put me off at Waldorf. I remember being awakened by the conductor and his pointing to the Waldorf sign lighted by the train lights in the night. I then climbed onto the loading platform, the train pulled away and disappeared, and I’ll never forget standing there in the darkness with my one suitcase, in a strange country, unable to speak the language and not knowing where to go next, I wondered to myself, Ernest – what have you done?”

“Moments later, the station operator appeared and spoke. He then realized the problem and we stood there looking at each other. Then we turned and watched as a lantern came up the tracks’ out of the darkness. As the man’s face appeared, the station man said something to him and the stranger looked up from the tracks and loudly spoke one word, “landsman.” I then smiled and felt very happy and relieved inside, this stranger recognizing I was from the Old Country had just called me “fellow countryman,” meaning he was, like me, an immigrant. His name was Mr. Schlagel, and I told him of my brother and my plans. He said the roads to Gallant Green were impassable being January and we had just had more than a week of rain. He said he would send word to my brother and until he could come for me, I was to stay with him and his wife at their house, just behind Ryon’s Store. It was a relief to meet such nice people, especially ones that I could talk with.”

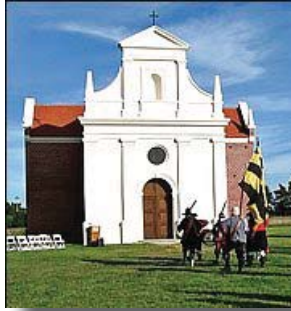
“The next evening after dark, my brother arrived in the buggy, and we started for Gallant Green. I remember I couldn’t see the road, and my brother said he couldn’t either, but not to worry, the horse knew the way and even in the black of the night, could get us home. As we left Waldorf, on what is now Rt. 5, the horse turned left (on his own) on what is now Rt. 382, my brother said, “Lift your feet or they will get wet.” To my surprise I suddenly realized that the United States, the land of opportunity, the land that has everything, didn’t even have bridges on its roads.”

Mr. Keller stayed with his brother on the farm and took a job as a farmhand near Hughesville. Walking 6 miles to work through the summer months he was promised \$1.00 per day when the crops came in. Well, the crops came in that fall and pay-day arrived but the farmer said he had no money, “but I will give you six beehives as payment for a full summer’s work, take it or leave it,” said the farmer. “I took them and I learned something the hard way on that deal!”

See Ernest Keller, continued on Page 4

President's Message

Our Spring meeting was held May 21, 2011, where we heard all about the rebuilding of the Brick Chapel at St. Mary's City. Our speaker, Peter Himmelheber, shared slides and stories of the rebuilding progress. The Chapel is part of the St. Mary's City tour and is a "must see." Mr. Himmelheber is a volunteer at the Chapel and you will be most fortunate if he is your guide.



Included in this edition of The Record is a story of the great American dream which occurred right here in Charles County – the success story of Ernest Keller, Sr. Now when you see many Keller buses around the County you'll know the rest of the story.

Welcome to new members Mary Beth Chandler, Elaine Clearwater, Raymond Kendrick, Diane Stultz and Mac Wheeler.

Your Society at Work

Our thanks to the Charles County Garden Club for the beautiful garden behind Friendship House. See page 9 for more about the dedication.

As stated in the above article, we have applied for a grant to design and display appropriate Friendship House period clothing. This is a matching grant, so your help is needed. We're excited about the designs Mike Mazzeo and his committee, Anne Boone and Madelyn Irish, have planned. Thank you to all.

A hardy thank you to the Southern Maryland Model Railroad Group (SMMRG) for replacing the office floor in the La Plata Train Station. Our "model" volunteers included Art Audley, Dave Beckstein, Bob Curran, Ellsworth Geib, Rick Rhode, Jim Rowland and Bill Walter.

Announcing: (drum roll please) The Historical Society of Charles County now has a website. Thank you, Mike Mazzeo for being the liaison from the Historical Society with the webmaster.

Please "log-on" and check it out:

www.charlescountyhistorical.org

Ernest Keller, continued from Page 3

"That fall I decided working for myself I would collect my own wages. I started cutting wood and selling it by the cord. My goal was to cut one cord a day and sell it for \$3.00, of course I had to cut it by myself with hand tools – try it sometime."

In one year he saved enough money to buy a piece of land beside his brother. The following year he started clearing the land and selling the lumber. He then met a young lady that had just moved to the area with her family from Minnesota. By 1926 he had saved his lumber money and decided to build a house and get married. His savings were short so he applied to the bank for a loan. "P.R. Wills, the bank president, came to tell me the loan had been refused because I had no collateral, but before the conversation ended he had approved a five-year loan and construction began." The house was finished in 1927 and Rosina Hartman became Mrs. Keller.

Shortly thereafter, a stranger asking directions to a neighbor's house but returned later in the day saying the neighbor had changed his mind on buying a school bus. Before the conversation ended, the salesman had convinced Mr. Keller to submit a bid on a route and if he got it, this man could sell him a bus. "I said, O.K., and together we worked up a bid on a route from Adams Corner (now Wilkerson Road) to Bryantown to Hughesville School. Jerimah Mudd, president of the school board, opened the bids, didn't like them, re-advertised again, everyone submitted the same figure and I won. By coincidence I was now in the bus business. The gentleman then sold me a Chevrolet chassis with a temporary body made up of curtains on the sides. It was the same as a laundry truck, in fact, it said White Wash on the sides. It carried 60 kids, all on bench seats."

Mr. Keller, very proudly still displays his first contract with the Board, dated September 27, 1927,

See Ernest Keller, continued on Page 5

and signed by the Superintendent of Schools, F.B. Gwynn. The contract's intent is not unlike today's version, but the wording has changed a little. Following are examples of the original contract.

“To drive or have driven all children, under his personal care, by competent motor vehicle operators, to begin at Adams Corner, about two miles east of Gallant Green School House, by way of Bryantown, to Hughesville School House, to and from school, subject to the carrying capacity of the truck to have control over all of the school children so conveyed, to keep order and discipline, and to treat all children in a gentlemanly and civil manner and to see that no child is imposed upon bus shall come to a full stop before crossing a steam railway and driver shall ascertain to the approval of any dangers driver agrees to abstain from alcoholic drinks on the days they are driving a driver is not required to wait for more than 5 minutes at a stop the vehicle shall be kept clean and sanitary the driver agrees to collect \$2.50 per month, in advance, from each student and pay the principal at Hughesville.

signed F.B. Gwynn, Superintendent.

“The following year I sold the Chevrolet and bought a Dodge Grayham chassis from Max Mitchell at Mitchell Motors in La Plata. I then drove it without a roof or seats to North Carolina, crossing the Potomac on a ferry boat at Morgantown. There I watched them mount an all wood body made of oak and ash and I returned home. It was a beautiful thing, all bench seats, no padding or springs, and one door on the back of the bus. That first winter I found out how good that bus was. Because of the bigger wheels and bigger motor (12 cylinders), I could get through on many roads that others wouldn't dare try. It also was the only one that could climb the hill to the Hughesville School in the snow and mud. Do

you realize that Dodge body is still in use today as a tobacco stripping shed? In bad weather I also carried a special passenger from Adams Corner to the school. A teacher named Miss Eva Turner, she said she just couldn't get her Model-T through the snow on her own and so she became a regular passenger in the winter. And I must add that my principal at the Hughesville School, a man by the name of T.C. Martin, was one of the finest men I have ever known. It was really a pleasure to work for him for years as principal and later as Superintendent of Schools. I remember Mr. Martin asking me one day if I could take kids on trips and I said “sure thing.” Thus I was the first school bus from Charles County to venture into Washington; I was also the sports bus at the school carrying the baseball team to all its games.”

“Something else very special happened to me that year. Something I have always been very proud of. In 1928 I received my final citizenship papers after the customary five-year wait. I am proud to say I voted that year and haven't missed an election since.”

In addition to driving, Mr. Keller worked steadily with the tobacco crops. “Trying to get tobacco to grow was quite a chore for me. After all, in Switzerland I had never seen tobacco. I didn't even know if the darn stuff grew on trees, needless to say my first few crops were very poor and they didn't get any better. So I asked the county agent, P. D. Brown,



to check my soil and explain to me the correct procedure. Well, the next year I did what they said and it worked, just like they said it would.”

The tobacco crops improved steadily after that rough beginning and within a few years the blue

See Ernest Keller, continued on Page 6

ribbons started coming in at the Southern Maryland Fair in Marlboro. The improvement continued and in the mid 40's through the 50's, the sweepstake ribbons continued, fifteen in a row, actually, with some of the award winning tobacco periodically displayed in Governor McKeldin's office in Annapolis. Hundreds of ribbons, awards and certificates are today still proud reminders of the years when the press called Mr. Keller the "King of Tobacco" in Southern Maryland.

In 1947, John F. Mudd introduced a bill in the house of delegates giving the Charles County Commissioners authorization to appropriate money for the transportation of parochial school children to parochial schools within the county. In the fall of '47 three routes were advertised for St. Mary's School in Bryantown. Mr. Keller submitted bids and was awarded all three routes, thus the beginning of the Keller bus fleet.

While the tobacco business and bus fleet took many hours out of the day, there still existed enough time to become involved in several community activities. One such activity involved doing whatever was necessary to bring electric power to the Gallant Green area.

In 1939 the federal government made loans available to help get local electric co-ops started. One such co-op was the Southern Maryland Co-op, including Charles, St. Mary's and southern Prince George's Counties. Money was obtained and a generating plant was built at Popes Creek. (It still stands beside Robertsons). The plant went into operation and lines were strung across southern Charles County.

"But the Bryantown-Gallant Green area was still in the dark," Mr. Keller said. "I checked into it to find out what was required to get power in-our area. I found out that it cost \$7.50 per mile to bring the poles and line to our area and a minimum \$3.50 per month per customer. With this information in hand I started a door-to-door campaign to convince people they should spend their money on this very valuable service. I had very little luck with the Gallant Green-Bryantown area but in Hughesville, the people liked the idea and combining the three areas we reached the necessary quota. I then had to return to each

house and get right of way permission for the line to be strung. The southern line was then extended into Hughesville, along the Waldorf Road and then north on Gallant Green Road to the Prince George's line. I talked with a teacher at the Baden School, Bob Conick, who liked the idea and started where I left off. He started knocking on doors in Prince George's County, and eventually the line starting at Popes Creek extended to Hughesville, Gallant Green, Baden and into Brandywine."

"After we had electricity in Gallant Green, I attended the first annual meeting of the REA. At the meeting they announced a vacancy from Charles County on the board of directors, I was nominated – I refused. I was nominated again – I refused. The third time, I accepted and was elected. I then served continuously on the Board of Directors of the Southern Maryland Electric Co-op for 34 years - from 1941 to 1975."

Another activity Mr. Keller found time for was politics. He was active for years in the Democratic party and considered a 9th District Democratic leader for years. "I feel very proud to have taken an active part in the Democratic system of this country for a number of years, and of the opportunity to meet and talk with some very important people in my lifetime. My wife, daughter and myself had the honor of talking with Postmaster General Farley and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt when they came to Charles County to personally approve the sight location for the new Potomac River bridge at Morgantown. Years later, following an annual REA meeting in Burlington, Vermont, I cornered John F. Kennedy and invited him to visit Charles County sometime. Ironically, we had another REA meeting in Dallas, Texas the week after JFK was killed."

Other activities in the community that Mr. Keller took part in were: Board of Directors of Charles County Farm Bureau; Board of Directors of Waldorf Sanitation Commission; Government Committee to Appraise Farms for Tennant Farmer Loans; and Advisory Board of the Bank of Southern Maryland.

Mr. & Mrs. Keller's own family, two boys and a girl, still live nearby: Ernest, Jr. and Edwin and their families are neighbors in Gallant Green and Ellen Keller Heilmeier and family in Waldorf. Ernest, Jr.

See Ernest Keller, continued on Page 7

started driving a school bus in 1953 and became a bus contractor in 1963. Edwin started driving in 1963 and became a bus contractor in 1966. Both wives, Helen and Cathy, became bus contractors in the early 1970's.

When asked what he did with his spare time, Mr. Keller smiled and with that very familiar wooden match in the corner of his mouth, dropped his head and with a "I don't believe you asked me that" look in his eyes, he said, "I think you saw what I did with my spare time in the past. And today I haven't slowed down too much. The daily operation of the corporation still keeps me pretty busy. When I look at the fleet today and the ones next door it's hard to believe it all started 52 years ago by accident with one bus. I don't drive children anymore, but I still enjoy driving a bus and do every chance I get. With the boys next door and their operations so busy, I am glad to help out wherever I can. Of course my grandchildren, all nine of them, know this home as their second home and are in and out continuously. And you know what, Mama and I have been married for 52 years and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"In looking back, I have been pretty active in my lifetime and I have enjoyed everyday of it and don't

let anyone tell you hard work will hurt you. Having a limited education will not slow you down either, if you don't mind working. Just put your mind to it and get on with it. And know what is happening around you also – keep yourself informed. Working hard and keeping ourselves informed about what is going on in this country and then getting involved should be very important to all of us." Mr. Keller does just that by reading daily the Wall Street Journal, U. S. News and World Report, Financial World and the Washington papers in addition to the local papers.

The families of Charles County take great pride in thanking you, Sir, for the lifetime of service you have given to them, their children and their grandchildren. Not only in the safe and efficient transportation of several hundreds of thousands of school children in your career, but also for the dedicated service to your community and your country. Your enthusiasm and spirit, still very much in evidence today, reflect the positive way you have approached every endeavor you have undertaken in life.

Once again, Mr, Ernest Keller, Sr. "Thank you, Sir, for a lifetime well done!!!"

Mr. Keller died in 1984 and is buried at St. Mary's Catholic Church Cemetery, Bryantown.

We Need Your Help!

By Michael J. Mazzeo, Jr.

The Friendship House Foundation is applying for a matching grant to enhance the upstairs of Friendship House with a permanent Colonial Clothing Exhibit. Upstairs in the "head-knocker" rooms we would like to exhibit in



the larger room above the "hall" two adult mannequins with colonial clothing and in the smaller room above the "parlor" mannequins for a boy and a girl with colonial clothing. This would make Friendship House even more unique with this authentic display. We have formed a committee and have made preliminary plan for the exhibit. We are looking for donations in the amount totaling \$500.00. These are matching funds for the grant. If you could donate a small portion of this, we are confident we would be able to raise this money. We are also looking for anyone else who would like to help with this project. To send donations please make checks payable to the Friendship House Foundation c/o the Historical Society of Charles County, P.O. Box 2806, La Plata, MD 20646. If you would like to help with this project, please contact Mike Mazzeo: mjmazzeo@ccboe.com. Thanks!



Friendship House



The above picture is Friendship House on its Nanjemoy site before it was dismantled and moved to the college.

Friendship House has been open for many tours this summer. In July, over fifty people toured the house during the three nights the College of Southern Maryland hosted its annual Chautauqua Event. A tour was also given to a family from Texas who were retracing their Southern Maryland roots. On August 19th, tours were provided for over one hundred faculty members during the convocation of the College of Southern Maryland.

Dr. Bradley Gottfried, President of the College of Southern Maryland, received a grant from the Southern Maryland Heritage Area Consortium to fund two interpretive signs to be placed on the lawn outside of Friendship House. One sign will describe the history of the house and the other the dismantling and rebuilding of the house on the campus of the college. The sign committee was headed by Historical Society member Peggy Schaumburg and included society members Ron Brown, Madelyn Irish, Evie Merritt, Mike Mazzeo and the Southern Maryland Studies Center Coordinator, Amy Richmond. These signs should be in place by early fall.

In honor of our 50th Anniversary Celebration, our spring meeting and program will be *Friendship by Candlelight* to be held at Friendship House on the La Plata campus of the College of Southern Maryland.

New Books

Louise Turner

Interesting reading at the Southern Maryland Studies Center at the College of Southern Maryland.

- *Prince George's County Maryland Marriage References and Family Relationships 1695-1900.* Author Shirley Middleton Mohler. Published 2010
Colonial Roots
- *Written in Bone, Buried lines of Jamestown and Colonial Maryland.* Author Sally M. Walker. Published 2009
- *Changing Landscapes in Southern Maryland, 29 Oral histories.* Not for sale but available at the local library as a courtesy of the Southern Maryland Regional Library Association. Published 2009
- *The Sequel to Portals Through Time, The Brooke, Calvert and Mattingly Families.* Author, Dennis Hubscher (& others). Published 2010.

Friendship House Garden Dedication

On May 16th, the Friendship House Garden was dedicated with a ceremony and ribbon cutting ceremony by the Charles County Garden Club, the Historical Society of Charles County, the College of Southern Maryland and the Charles County Commissioners. The Friendship House garden project was led by Charles County Garden Club Pilgrimage Project Chairwoman Peggy Schaumburg, who is also member of the Historical Society.

The new Friendship House Garden includes new trees, shrubs, a brick walk-way, brick patio, fence, concrete table and benches. The concrete table and benches were partially funded from the Friendship House Foundation.



The Charles County Garden Club has continued to support Friendship House for over 30 years. It was through a large donation from the Garden Club that funded the period antique furnishings at Friendship House after it was rebuilt on the campus of the College of Southern Maryland in 1977.

The Historical Society of Charles County is fortunate to have such a committed partnership with the Garden Club and the College of Southern Maryland for the preservation of this unique historic site.



Charles County Garden Club President Sybil Alger, left, Charles County Commissioners' President Candice Quinn Kelly, commissioners' Vice President Reuben B. Collins II, Friendship House Foundation Chair Michael J. Mazzeo, Jr. and Charles County Garden Club Pilgrimage Project Chairwoman Peggy Schaumburg

Charles County's Last Surviving Grist Mill

Charles County's last surviving water-powered Grist Mill is located on Millbrook Farm in Nanjemoy. According to the Maryland Historic Trust list, the mill was constructed possibly as early as circa 1800 and was used by local farmers to grind corn and wheat.

The Grist Mill was placed on the 2010 endangered property list with the help of Cathy Thompson from the Charles County Planning and Growth Management Office. Ms. Thompson is the Community Planning Program Manager and was instrumental by nominating the Grist Mill to be placed on the list.

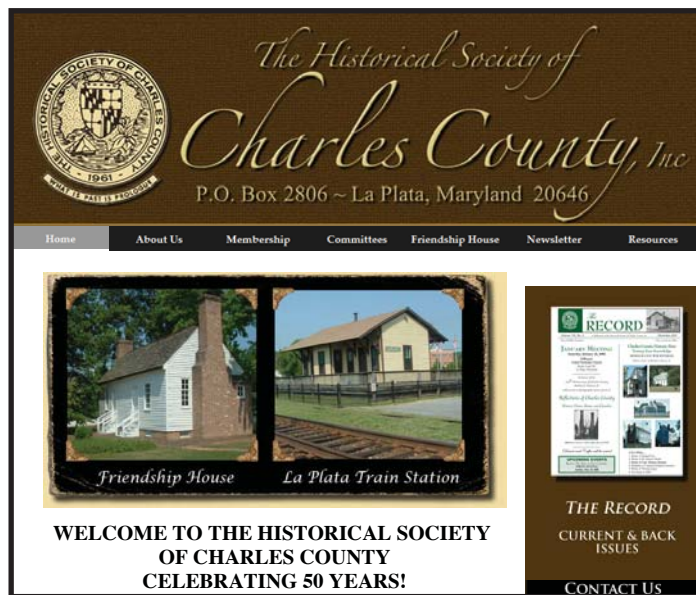
From the Maryland Historic Sites list we read: "The Millbrook Mill and dwelling property contains the last surviving gristmill in Charles County along with the site of the original Nanjemoy Store and

See Grist Mill, continued on Page 10

Your Historical Society Now on World-Wide Web

*In honor of its 50th Anniversary,
the Historical Society of Charles County
is proud to launch its own website!*

www.charlescountyhistorical.org



The screenshot shows the website's header with the society's name in a cursive font and its address: "The Historical Society of Charles County, Inc. P.O. Box 2806 ~ La Plata, Maryland 20646". A navigation menu includes links for Home, About Us, Membership, Committees, Friendship House, Newsletter, and Resources. Below the menu are two photo galleries: one for the Friendship House and another for the La Plata Train Station. A central banner reads "WELCOME TO THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHARLES COUNTY CELEBRATING 50 YEARS!". To the right, there is a section for "THE RECORD" newsletter, listing current and back issues, and a "CONTACT US" button.

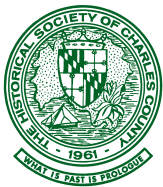
Grist Mill, continued from Page 9

Post Office, and a notable circa-1850 vernacular farmhouse. Possibly built as early as circa 1800, the mill presents a simple rectangular front gable box form of 2-stories in height.



The standing grist mill, remodeled in 1923, is the last remaining structure of its type in all of Charles County, and is in a remarkable state of preservation considering its antiquity. The mill and the former store and post office building once formed the nucleus of the town of Nanjemoy.”

Closing down in the late 1940’s, the mill has been damaged by time and weather. Efforts are being made to raise money to stabilize the foundation and perhaps restore it to working condition.



THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHARLES COUNTY, INC.

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