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Editor

Heather Riser

The Changing Face of Fruit Production in Nelson County

By J. Bennett Saunders

Becky Howard recently gave me a publication entitled Nelson County Geography Supplement, prepared under the supervision of Dr. Wilson Gee, in the School of Rural Economics and Rural Sociology, of the University of Virginia, and published in 1929 by the County School Board of Nelson County. It caught my eye that the authors were Mrs. Julian Bennett Massie, otherwise known as Stevie May Massie, along with four other teachers and administrators from high schools around the county. She was my great aunt and a teacher at Fleetwood High School. The publication pulled information from a 1925 Census to create a textbook that was used at the Nelson high schools to teach local geography. Of particular interest to me was the chapter on Nelson County Agriculture, as my family has been heavily involved in agriculture and fruit production for many generations.

The farm population has decreased drastically in the last 100 years. In 1929, there were 2,009 farms in Nelson whose average size was 105 acres with 57,527 acres in cultivation. The 2022 Census of Agriculture shows 399 farms in Nelson whose average size was 172 acres and “cropland” of 21,847 acres. Farm population in 1929 was listed as 17,277 which probably included children and perhaps even retirees. The entire population of Nelson County in 2024 was 14,766. The 2022 Census listed only 714 “farm producers” in Nelson County.

Beginning in the early 20th century, as railroads and trucks began moving fruit up and down the East Coast, Nelson County became a leading Virginia producer of apples and peaches.

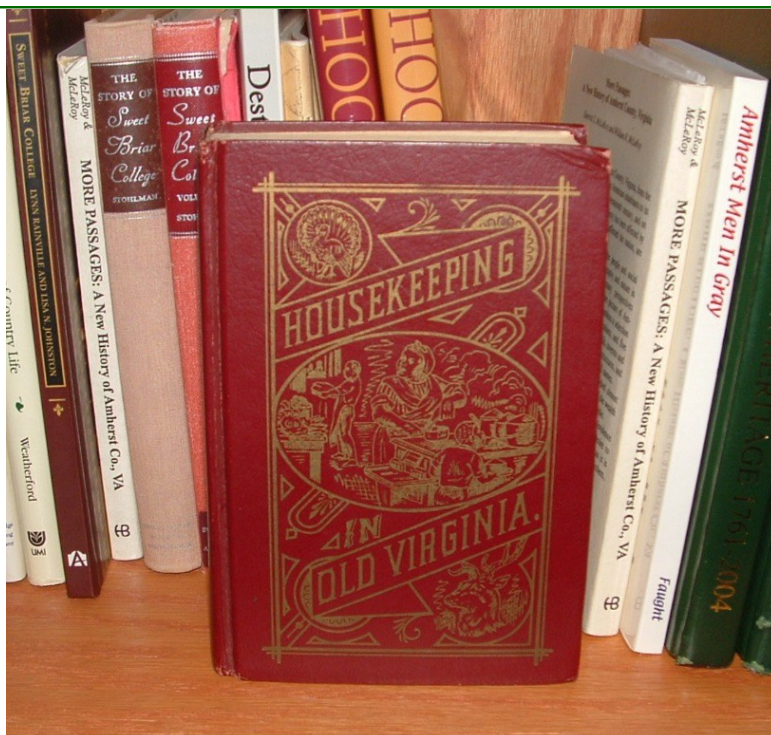
Apple production in 1919 reached 154,655 barrels or 463,965 bushels, of which 92% were shipped from the county. In 2022, the Census shows 633 acres of apples in Nelson County. If those 633 acres averaged 600 bushels per acre, then production would be around 379,800 bushels, slightly lower than 1919. A very large percentage of apples in Nelson County are still shipped out of the county.

The apple variety picture has changed significantly in the last century. The 1925 census shows the leading varieties as Winesaps and Albemarle Pippin, followed by York Imperial, Ben Davis, Black Twig, Delicious, Grimes Golden, Rome Beauty. Albemarle Pippin was a favorite of Queen Victoria of England, who exempted the apple from import tax due to its superior taste.



Figure 1 My Great Grandfather, John Shelton Saunders, with three unidentified passengers, riding on a horse-drawn orchard sprayer, ca. 1915.

Continued on page 4



A New Collection Item at Oakland Museum:

***Housekeeping in Old Virginia* by Marion Cabell Tyree (1879 reprint)**

Marion Cabell (Henry) Tyree (1824–1912), granddaughter of Patrick Henry, grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia. In 1843, she married Samuel Tyree, scion of a wealthy tobacco family.

The couple maintained a distinguished Lynchburg home known for its hospitality. During the Civil War, Marion operated a small sanitarium for Confederate soldiers and helped establish one of the city's thirty hospitals.

She is best remembered for her 1877 cookbook *Housekeeping in Old Virginia*, compiled with contributions from 250 noted Virginia housewives. Her goal was “to bring within the reach of every American housekeeper... the domestic principles and practices of those famous Virginia homes.”

The book received widespread acclaim in newspapers and from prominent women across America.

This book has recently been acquired by the Nelson County Historical Society as a gift of the Friends of the Madison Heights Library.

—*Excerpted from an article by Richard Tim Jordan, Friend of the Madison Heights Library*

2025 Calendar of Events

- *Stay current with updated and new events on the NCHS website and our Facebook page*



- Saturday, December 13: **Oakland Museum Holiday Open House** at Oakland from 10am-4pm; with musical entertainment by Kim & Jimbo Cary; please join Nelson County Historical Society board members to ring in the holiday season and have refreshments. Music performed at 11am and again at 2pm.
- Oakland Museum will be closed for the winter following the open house and will reopen in March 2026.

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Figure 2 Apple harvest in high density Nelson orchard, ca. 2000. L to R- Santiago Guerrero, Jorge Cisneros, Carlos Cisneros, Jose Torres, Octavio Ibarra, and Balbino Mosqueda.

ton and Shipman Cold Storages created a site to store apples for many months and provided transportation by train to major metropolitan centers.

The primary mode of transportation of packed fruit today is tractor trailers. Beginning in the 1960's and 1970's, fruit growers in Nelson County have located their cold storages and packing houses close to their orchards to minimize transportation costs. The use of bulk 20-bushel bins has allowed growers to use forklifts in their orchards and packinghouses to reduce labor costs.

In 1925, apple trees were often planted 40' x 40', or only 25-30 trees per acre, and often did not bear fruit until they were 12-14 years old. In the early 2000's, most Nelson County orchards adopted more intensive orchard systems, which bear fruit by their 4th or 5th growing season. Trees are oftentimes planted as close as 15' x 5', or 580 trees per acre. The newer varieties are grafted onto rootstocks which genetically restricts the growth of the trees, allowing easier maintenance and harvest while reducing labor.

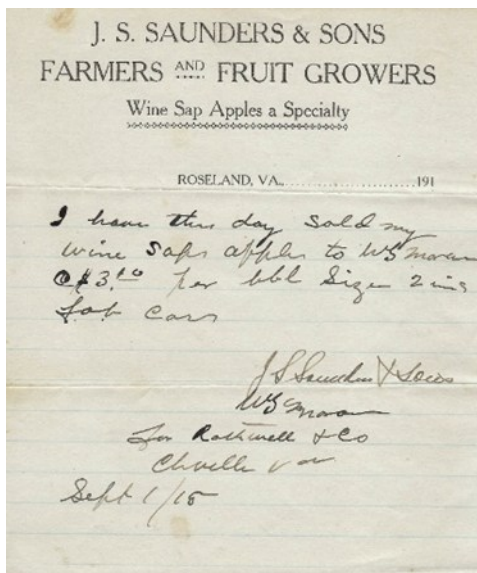


Figure 4 Receipt for Winesap apples

Today's Nelson County varieties include Ginger Gold, Gala, Honeycrisp, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Fuji, Goldrush, Granny Smith, and Pink Lady. Generally, these apples were chosen because they ship well to the predominant markets of the eastern United States.

In the early 20th century, labor was almost always local. During peach and apple harvest, the same trucks that hauled the fruit would make an early morning ride through the county to pick up workers. Many locals would work in the orchard during the day and work to pack the fruit into shipping containers in the evening. Today, mostly Hispanic labor prunes, thins, and harvests fruit in Nelson County.

One of the most important changes since 1925 has been the use of cold storages and central packing houses to ship better quality fruit. In 1925, there were no cold storages and minimal packing sheds available to sell a higher quality and more uniform product. The building of the Arrington



Figure 3 Pink Lady apples in plastic 20 bu bin in 2011. L to R- Willie Torres, Charlie Martin, Octavio Ibarra, J. Bennett Saunders, and Paul Saunders

Today, with strong competition from other apple producing states, Nelson County continues to sell fruit to large chain stores up and down the East Coast. However, there is a strong trend to sell more apples locally through farm markets and tailgate markets in other towns and cities. This trend is likely to continue as consumers become more removed from the farmer and yet want to visit the farm and connect with people who grow them.

Nelson County Historical Society's Events of 2025



Scottish Heritage Day at Oakland April 5 - Jim Robertson performs music



Gov. Thomas Nelson with summer school students at Oakland June 11



Tye River Elementary School Fifth graders with Jimmy Fortune statue at Oakland Oct. 27



Little Mountain Boys Tribute with Jimmy Fortune, Calvary Baptist Church Sept. 5



Chris Baker with Nelson Chamber of Commerce Award to Oakland Oct. 23



Rachel Deddens on "Meals for a Revolution- Open Hearth Cooking" Nov 22

2025 Business Sponsors

The Nature Foundation at Wintergreen
Roseland, VA

Nelson Storage & Dumpster
Jamie Hale, owner
Arrington, VA

Robert C. Goad III & Associates P.C.
Amherst, VA

Robb and Sally Torgler
High Lonesome Cabin
Tyro, VA

Orchard House Bed & Breakfast
Lovingston, VA

Rapunzels Further Abo Foundation
Lovingston, VA

Welcome New Members

Jake Adams - Roseland, VA

Sarah and Tim Burnett - Arrington, VA

Allen Hard - Batesville, VA

Maggie and David Jones - Roseland, VA

Julie McCall - Lake Charles, LA

NCHS Officers

Elected on March 29, 2025

Heather Riser, President

Woody Greenberg, Vice-president *elected 7/15/25*

Jeannette Kinde, Secretary

Becky Howard, Treasurer

NCHS Board of Directors

And Committee Chairmen

Chris Baker (2023-2026)

Galen Creekmore (2024-2027)

Rachel Deddens (2023-2026)

Archivist, Exhibits & Collections Committee Chairman, Programs & Events Committee Chairman

Bar Delk (2023-2026)

Buildings & Grounds Committee Co-Chairman

Christian Giles (2023-2026)

David Giles (2024-2027)

Development & Planning Committee Co-Chairman

Woody Greenberg (2025-2028)

Becky Howard (2024-2027)

Finance Committee Chairman, Research Committee Chairman

Jeannette Kinde (2024-2027)

Robert McSwain (2024-2027)

Bylaws Committee Chairman

Heather Riser (2024-2027)

Website Committee Chairman

Bennett Saunders (2024-2027)

Debbie Truett Speilman (2025-2028)

Dick Whitehead (2023-2026)

Buildings & Grounds Committee Co-Chairman



Join us on Facebook

The Nelson County Historical Society
and Oakland Museum

Donations (August 2025-Present)

Society Level

Jacquelyne Tancys

Dick Whitehead

In memory of Ed Tinsley

Governor Level

Sarah and Tim Burnett

Rosemary and Russell North

A Heartfelt Thank You to Pat Wright!

The Nelson County Historical Society board extends its deepest gratitude to **Pat Wright** for her incredible volunteer work in updating our Historical Society website.

This project, which took more than a year to complete, reflects Pat's dedication, creativity, and technical expertise. She generously contributed her time, design talent, and technical skills to create a clean, user-friendly, and valuable resource for our community.

We invite you to explore the new site here: www.nelsonhistorical.org

Thank you, Pat, for your outstanding contribution and commitment to preserving and sharing Nelson County's history!



Heather Riser and Pat Wright at Oakland

We Appreciate our Volunteers

Lynn Coffey who contributes a new Backroads article each month for our website

Rachel Deddens who manages our collections

Collections volunteers

Margaret Hrabe

Rosemary North

Jane Raup

In Memoriam

Janice Hatton – Lynchburg, VA

Nelson County Historical Society
P.O. Box 474
Lovington, VA 22949

<http://www.nelsonhistorical.org>
E-mail:
info@nelsonhistorical.org

Oakland Museum
5365 Thomas Nelson Highway
Arrington, VA 22922
Phone: 434-263-8400

Oakland Museum
Wednesday 1 pm-4 pm
Saturday 10 am-4 pm

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Annual Membership to the Nelson County Historical Society

Name _____

Email _____

Address _____

_____ Individual @ \$25

_____ Family (spouses) @ \$40

_____ Business Sponsorship @ \$200

Life Memberships are no longer offered but current

Life Memberships will be honored.

Donations (in addition to Dues)

Society Level  \$100-\$249

Oakland Level  \$250-\$499

Lt. Governor Level  \$500-\$999

Governor Level  \$1000 and above

Make checks payable to:
Nelson County Historical Society
P.O. Box 474, Lovington, VA 22949

Consider a gift of membership to your family and friends