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Editor

Heather Riser

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Becky Howard

The Smart Money

By James Gelly

It is well known that James Loving donated a picturesque 30-acre hillside for the town of Lovingson. Less well known is George W. Varnum, who laid out the town's plan of streets and lots in 1809. Who was Varnum and what brought him to Virginia's newest County in the first decade of the 19th century?



George Washington Varnum (1779-1812) was a Massachusetts Yankee and far-sighted entrepreneur who died prematurely at age 33. Soon after drafting the Lovingson town plat, with its Courthouse and simple street grid, Varnum purchased the choicest and most expensive of the town lots. He chose Lots 1, 2 and 6, immediately south and west of the Courthouse, paying twice the price of the next most expensive lot.

Varnum constructed a tavern or 'ordinary' on Lot 1 and purchased a license permitting him to serve food and drink and provide lodging and stabling for travelers. At the time, his was the only tavern in town: weary passengers disembarking after a long day on the road had few other options. After Varnum's death, his tavern was advertised as *THE VALUABLE TAVERN, built by the late Capt. G. W. Varnum, with...a very valuable Stable, Smoke and Ice House, and many other conveniences ...Said Tavern, at present, is the only public house immediately in the vicinity of the Ct. House at Lovingson...and is, of course, in a situation eligible for a very great run of custom.*

During his four years in Nelson County, George Varnum somehow found the time to serve as Commandant of the County Artillery cadets. He also corresponded with former President Thomas Jefferson and President Madison.

Such boldness is readily explained by the fact that George's father was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, **Joseph Bradley Varnum** (1749-1821) of Massachusetts. As a young man he served in the Massachusetts House and Senate, and was later elected to the U.S. Senate, where he served as President *pro tempore* for a term. Varnum was the only U.S. Senator from Massachusetts belonging to Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party, the party being strong in the South and on western frontier but weak in New England.

Speaker Varnum was an ally of U.S. Postmaster General **Gideon Granger** (1767-1822), the longest serving Postmaster General in U.S. history. Granger was another staunch Jefferson supporter, and he bestowed clerkships on Varnum's two younger sons.

As a well-connected young man in the new Republic, George Varnum might have pursued any number of opportunities, but he found his way to old Amherst County by 1803. There he served

2026 Annual Meeting of the Nelson County Historical Society

The **2026 Annual Meeting of the Nelson County Historical Society** will occur at **2 p.m. on Sunday, March 15**, at the Nelson Center in Lovington, VA. The meeting will begin with a short business meeting where we will vote on the election of officers. A quorum of 25 members in good standing is required to hold a vote. The nominating committee, consisting of Chris Baker, Doris Delk and Heather Riser, propose the following:

President: Rachel Deddens

Vice-president: Woody Greenberg

Secretary: Jeannette Kinde

Treasurer: Becky Howard

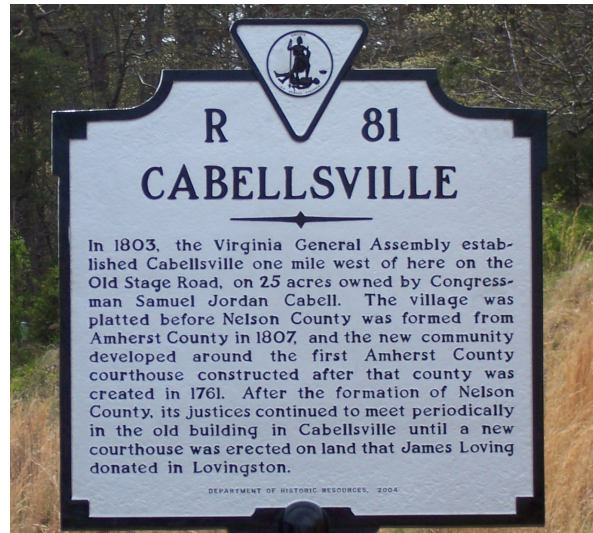
Board member, renewal: Chris Baker

Board member, renewal: Christian Giles

Board member, renewal: Bar Delk

Board member, renewal: Dick Whitehead

Board member, renewal: Rachel Deddens



For the meeting's program, Randy Lichtenberger and Jessica Gantzert will present "Archaeological Explorations at Cabellsville," discussing the results of a two-year archaeological survey directed by Mr. Lichtenberger and excavations at the jailhouse site directed by Ms. Gantzert for her master's thesis. Cabellsville is the historical name of the first Amherst County courthouse village founded in 1761, located near present day Colleen. An historical marker was erected at the site of Cabellsville in 2007.

At Hurt & Profitt in Lynchburg, Mr. Lichtenberger leads the Archaeological management team, and Ms. Gantzert serves as the Laboratory Director.

The Annual Membership meeting will be recorded and will be posted to our Facebook page and our website by Tuesday, March 17. A live Zoom link will not be available.

2026 Calendar of Events

Stay current with events by visiting nelsonhistorical.org and our Facebook page.

Sunday, March 15: **NCHS Annual Membership Meeting**, The Nelson Center, 2pm, with program by Randy Lichtenberger and Jessica Gantzert on Cabellsville archaeology.

Wednesday, March 18: **Oakland Museum reopens for visitors**; regular hours are Wednesdays, 1pm to 4pm, and Saturdays, 10am to 4pm.

Saturday, March 21: **2026 Opening Exhibits at Oakland**: “A Tribute to Earl Hamner, Jr.,” “Early Education in Nelson County,” and “Early Documents and Cabellsville: A display of artifacts.”

Saturday, March 21: **Genealogy with AI** by Debbie Harvey, CG, Nelson Center, Lovington; 1pm. Ten-month course, meets every 3rd Saturday, FREE.

Saturday, April 18: **Soapstone and the Schuyler Soapstone Quarry** by Mark McQuarry, Oakland Museum, 2pm to 4pm.

Saturday, June 27: **The Natural History of Nelson County** by Susan McSwain, Oakland Museum, 2pm to 4pm.

Nelson County Historical Society Historical Homes and Properties Tour

Join us for the Spring Homes Tour on Saturday, May 2, from 10am to 4pm. Tickets are \$25.

The featured locations are in the Roseland and Massies Mill communities in the beautiful Tye River Valley. The properties that are welcoming guests for the day are:

Tye Brook - Pat and Robert Saunders

a Bryant Family Farm - Becky and Bruce Moyer

Pharsalia - Foxy and Dick Morgan

Flat Farm - Debbie and Carl Coffey

Oak Hill Baptist Church (Massies Mill)

Check the Society website at nelsonhistorical.org for more details in a few weeks.



as County jailor in the now-vanished county seat of Cabellsville and operated a store, purchasing merchant licenses from 1803 to 1806.

But by 1807 George Varnum was among the group of influential local men who founded Nelson County; he was appointed Justice of the Peace by Governor William H. Cabell in June 1808 and was one of eight Trustees of the new county seat, Lovington. Of the original Justices of the Peace, at least fifteen were store- or tavern-keepers, including members of the Cabell family, Robert Rives, James Loving, and Shelton Crosthwait, architect and builder of the Lovington County courthouse.

What induced George Varnum of Massachusetts to invest so much of himself and his capital in Lovings-ton, Virginia? The answer probably involved his family's close relationship with Postmaster General Granger. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson's administration signed the Louisiana Purchase Treaty with France, doubling the size of the U.S. The new territory was a vast wilderness of trackless forest, far removed from the older portions of the nation.

Gideon Granger recognized that mail service would be vital to the growth of the rapidly expanding nation, establishing a network of mail routes throughout the country. Granger wrote to President Jefferson in 1803 that *when these lines go into operation all the States will be knit together by lines of public carriages*. Granger contracted with private stagecoach operators to carry the mail, resulting in great convenience to travellers and immense savings to the Post Office.

Granger recommended a new mail route through the *back parts* of Virginia, to North and South Carolina, and on to Jackson Court House in Georgia. Lovington happened to be located on the shortest route from Washington to New Orleans, the largest and most important city of the newly acquired territories. Varnum's town plan straddled the Stage Road, today's Front Street. The earliest newspaper references to Lovington are advertisements soliciting contractors to carry mail to and from Lovington.

In addition to its picturesque location below Loving's Gap, Lovings-ton happened to lie half-way between Lynchburg and Charlottesville, two rapidly growing cities. It was an ideal place for a stage stop, where fresh teams of horses, meals and beds could be provided.

George Varnum undoubtedly understood the strategic value of Lovingson's location. What he could not have foreseen, however, was a rev-



olution in stagecoach design. Travel over 18th century American roads was often an ordeal, passengers riding in stiff open *waggons* that offered only rough wooden benches for seating. By 1820, the familiar Concord-style stagecoach had appeared on U.S. roads. The Concord featured upholstered seats and shock absorbers made of thick ox hide, ushering in a Golden Age of stagecoach travel. Large numbers of people began to travel widely across the U.S. on newly established mail routes.

George Varnum positioned himself to capitalize on one of the greatest events in U.S. history. It is no coincidence that he appeared as a merchant and county officer in a stagecoach town soon after the Louisiana Purchase. A straight line drawn from Washington D.C. to New Orleans ran through James Loving's hillside, and Varnum was among the County Justices who chose the site. He personally platted the new town, served as town Trustee, purchased the best town lots, and built the first tavern and hotel. He was years ahead of the flood of travelers but died before the fruits of his vision and considerable labor could be gathered.

Don't Let Your Membership Expire

As we begin a new year, we want to thank you for your support of the Nelson County Historical Society. Your membership is important to our mission of preserving and sharing our county's history. Help us keep Nelson's history alive in 2026. Memberships expire at the end of the calendar year with a "grace period" of two months.

HOW TO RENEW

By Mail – Send a check to P.O. Box 474 Lovingston, VA 22949

Online at nelsonhistorical.org to pay via PayPal.

You do not need a PayPal account to pay; the system accepts most major credit cards and is safe and secure.

Publication announcement

Cooking At the Hearth: an interpretation of open-hearth cooking, management of early kitchen tools, pots, pans, and exploring related food history.

By Rachel Campbell Deddens, 2025. Endorsed by the VA250 Commission: Celebrating The 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution.

You can buy a copy of Rachel's book at Oakland Museum for \$25.

DAR Revolutionary America Historical Marker Dedication

A dedication ceremony will be held for a historical marker at the intersection of Rockfish Crossing and Howardsville Turnpike in Schuyler, VA. The unveiling will begin at 11am on Saturday, March 14.

The marker shows where Thomas Jefferson and his family forded the Rockfish River in their escape from the British.

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

Jan Berry – Monroe, VA

Jenny Cook – Faber, VA

Margaret Ann and Lindy White – Amherst, VA

Mary and Jack Bailey – Amherst, VA

In Memoriam

Andrew Gantt

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)

Heather Riser (2024-2027)

Website Committee Chairman

Bennett Saunders (2024-2027)

Debbie Truett Spielman (2025-2028)

Dick Whitehead (2023-2026)

Buildings & Grounds Committee Co-Chairman



Join us on Facebook

The Nelson County Historical Society
and Oakland Museum

Donations (November 2025-Present)

Society Level

Peter & Betsy Agelasto

Paulette Allbright

H.T. Brown

Nancy Brockman

In memory of Catherine & Bill Whitehead

V. Coleman Music

Marie Jose Derdeyn

Catherine L. Gantt

Elizabeth Jones

In memory of Wright and Seay Ancestors

Janice Kennedy

In memory of Elizabeth Wheeler Channel

Robert McSwain

Frances and Leo Ponton

Jane and Stephen Powell

Elizabeth Richardson

Heather Riser

Angela and Mark Seago

In memory of Phyllis Eloise Adams Schwab

Diana and Tony Seaman

In memory of Dr. Catherine Seaman

Cabell Smith

Mary Ann Stevens

Jacquelyne Tancyus

Ann Thomas

In memory of Robert and Sallie Whitehead

Natalie Tudor

In memory of Irma Roberts

Carroll & Jennifer Turner

Larry Wells

Donna Wooten

In memory of the Wooten/Forbes Families

Oakland Level

David Giles

In memory of Dorothy Giles

Bennett Saunders

Lt. Governor Level

Becky Howard

Barbara Kurek

Susan O'Hanlan

In memory of Mary Jane Hoffman

Ernie Reed

Governor Level

Mary and Russ Reid

Joe Richardson

Woody and Judy Greenberg

In honor of Heather Riser and Rachel Deddens

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

Website: nelsonhistorical.org
E-mail: nfo@nelsonhistorical.org

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

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