

In My Home Town

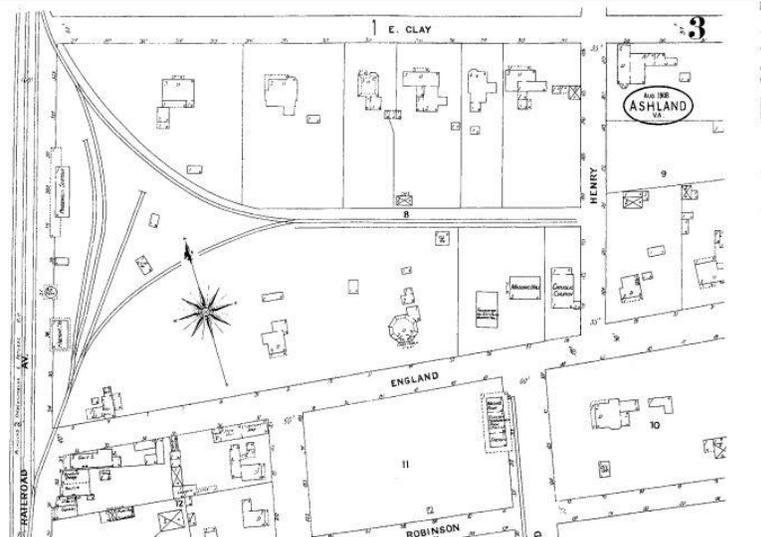
Ashland Museum Members Bulletin
Summer 2014



The Ashland Museum's exhibits, "Antebellum Resort to Civil War Town" and "Ashland Reborn" document Ashland, Virginia's growth, challenges, and changes from 1836 to 1900. Visit the Ashland Museum in person or via our website to learn more about how Ashland grew from a resort along the tracks called Slash Cottage to the town we know today. Watch for announcements of the Ashland Museum's new mini-exhibit on **Historic Homes of Ashland**. Come for a visit and learn what other stories the homes of Ashland have to tell.

The Octagon House

Many architectural styles grace Ashland's neighborhoods - Victorian, Italianate, Greek Revival, and so on. One unique home from Ashland's past, the Octagon House, exists only in the paper trail of those who lived there. The College Corner store now occupies 208 England St. where this house once stood. Deeds, census, obituary and grave records helps us piece together some of the house's history and may trigger memories among a few.



1908 Sanborn Insurance map. The uniquely shaped Octagon House is in the center, to the left of the Masonic Hall and the Catholic Church.



In My Home Town is a Bulletin for Members of the Ashland Museum. Our focus is interesting or notable people, places, events or things, and memories related to Ashland, Virginia.

We hope you will enjoy receiving this Bulletin, but if not, please call, write or send us an email to unsubscribe.

Editors: Nancy Kackley and Susan Tucker. This issue's article was written by Nancy Kackley. Thanks to Rosanne Groat Shalf and Hon. Frank D. Hargrove, Jr. for assistance in searching land and deed records. Thanks to Betsy Hodges for image scanning.

The earliest land and deed records for the property were lost in courthouse fires, but we can trace three prominent families through 80+ years of the house's history. Each of these families, the Houstons, the Waltons and the Bates, owned the house for over 20 years, leaving a lasting legacy on Ashland and Hanover.

First, we ask – why would someone build an eight-sided house? We know that architectural styles come and go. The octagon house rose as a mini-fad in the mid-1800s. Orson Squire Fowler is recognized as a proponent, having written and published a popular book on the advantages of this style in 1848 [1]. A man of many interests, prominent phrenologist, publisher and lecturer, Fowler spoke in Richmond in January, 1858 [2, 3]. The back pages of books published by Fowlers & Wells list of dozens of science and pseudoscience titles including some on “Hydropathy, or Water-Cure”[4]. Perhaps an Octagon House made perfect sense in a town where the main attraction was Slash Cottage mineral springs resort, which already had an octagonal gas house. Was someone in Ashland or at the Slash Cottage resort a believer in Fowler's teachings?

No clear record of when the Octagon House was built exists, but in 1862 the plot was owned by John S. James. Ashland's 1860 census tells us that Mr. James was a Master Carpenter with large land and real estate holdings [5]. If the house was built in the 1860s, an educated guess is that Mr. James was the builder.

The property had 3 owners in the next 10 years. The “Octagon dwelling” is first mentioned on the deed when Dr. M.H. (Matthew Hale) Houston bought the house in 1872. Dr. Houston died in Ashland just 5 years later at age 70. Originally from Wheeling, WV, Houston was a Confederate Army surgeon who settled in Richmond with his wife, Eleanora (Gibson) after the war [6]. His 1877 obituary in the Staunton Spectator [7], tells us he was “resident physician at the Healing Springs”, a Civil War hospital based in a resort hotel south of Warm Springs, VA [8]. Isn't it curious that Dr. Houston chose such a unique house in a town founded on a mineral spring resort for his retirement home? Perhaps the Houston Family Papers archived at the Virginia Historical Society would reveal some clues in his letters or those of his descendants.

When Eleanora died in 1901, the Houston home was sold to W.B. and Annie Walton. As publisher of the Hanover Weekly Herald newspaper from 1894 until 1920, Mr. Walton was well-known in Ashland. At some point during this period, the newspaper was reportedly published in the rear of the Octagon House [9].

Upcoming Events

Woodland Cemetery Tours

Sat., Sept. 20, 4:30 pm

Walking Tours of Ashland

Sat., Sept. 6, 11 am

Sat., Oct. 4, 11 am

History Camp – Summer Sat.

Sat., July 26, 10 -11:30 am, *Civil War Spies*, kids 7-12

Sat., Aug. 23, 10 -11:30 am, *The Telegraph - Texting in the 19th Century*, kids 7-12

Docent Training

By appointment. Contact us.

Your continued support keeps the doors open and the lights on at the Ashland Museum and the Red Caboose. Please donate at our website or by US mail.

We always need volunteers to staff the Museum and for special projects. Contact us if you are interested in getting involved.

Ashland Museum
105 Hanover Ave.
P.O. Box 633
Ashland, VA 23005
804-368-7314
www.ashlandmuseum.org
info@ashlandmuseum.org

Museum Hours:

Saturdays: 10:00 am to 2:00 pm

Sundays: 12:30 to 2:30 pm

Walton also served in the House of Delegates in 1916. Imagine the hubbub in the Octagon House in that era!



Photo courtesy of Terry Shaw. Date unknown. The Octagon House was a rooming house at the time of this photo. Sign at the lower left says "Furnished Rooms By Day or Week".

The Bates family bought the Octagon House in 1923. A transfer of ownership within the family occurred in 1940 when Mary Bates sold the house to Clarice Bates, Mary B. Vaughan and Joan O. Bates. The 1940 US census tells us that Clarice and her daughters, along with son-in-law Ashton Vaughan, resided together in a house valued at \$12,000 on England St. Clarice and Ashton are listed as Proprietor and Merchant of General Merchandise [10].



From an ad for the Bates Store in Herald-Progress newspaper, (Aug. 1938, Sec. 2, p. 14.) The Octagon House is visible to the left of the store.

Does this photo of the “Bates Store” next to the Octagon House bring back memories?

By the early 1950’s, residential properties on England Street were rapidly disappearing. Hanover Ford Tractor had arrived next door to the Octagon House in 1951. The Bates family sold the property to Burley P. Loving, owner of Loving Motor Co. in 1953. The Octagon House had sadly fallen into disrepair and was torn down soon after this sale.

Notes

1. The Octagon House, Orson S Fowler: Dover Publications, Inc., first edition 1848, 1853 edition reprinted in 1973.
 2. Orson Squire Fowler. In Wikipedia. July 5, 2014.
 3. The Daily Dispatch [Richmond, VA]. 13 Jan. 1858, p. 2.
 4. For example, see the end pages (p. 818) of: The Hydropathic Family Physician, Joel Shew. *New York: Fowlers & Wells, 1857*. Retrieved from: <http://books.google.com/books?id=4HnUOqaQh1MC>
 5. Rosanne Groat Shalf, Ashland, Ashland: the story of a turn-of-the-century railroad town, (Lawrenceville: Brunswick Publishing, 1994), p. 36.
 6. Philip Alexander Bruce, Virginia: Rebirth of the Old Dominion, v. 3, (Chicago : Lewis Publishing Co., 1929), p. 403.
 7. Staunton Spectator [Staunton, VA] 6 Mar. 1877, p. 3.
 8. Margo Oxendine, Bath County, Virginia, (Arcadia Publishing, 2003), p. 67.
 9. Shalf, op. cit., p. 119-120.
 10. 1940 U.S. Census records for Ashland Town, Retrieved from: Heritage Quest Online at the Pamunkey Regional Library [Genealogy & History](#) website.
-