Historic Eppington

Friendship of Jefferson for Epes Family Recalled as History of Old Home Is Traced

By Craig Scots Romaine

LOOKING upon old Eppington and its magnificent surroundings, one can understand why Thomas Jefferson spent as much of his time there as he could manage to extract from his crowded life; because, to leave the main road and enter the three-mile lane that winds its way through the gentle hills, was almost like stepping into a different world, about which still clings a note of forgotten years.

Early in the eighteenth century, Francis Epes of Bermuda Hundred purchased from their Indian owner a tract of land of 4,000 acres, in which he himself already held an interest. This tract of land lay in the western part of what is now Chesterfield County, and formed a tiny peninsula, around three sides of which flowed the Appomattox River. Shortly after this transaction, Francis Epes began the construction of his home which from the day of its completion, to the present time, has borne the name Eppington.

Considering the difficulties under which the building of a house, and especially a house of a vast wilderness, was accomplished in those days, a great deal of time must have been spent in the planning and construction of the Epes home. An enlightening description of the place is contained in a letter written in 1805, by one of the builder, and addressed to Henry B. Randall, author of "The Life of Thomas Jefferson." Part of this letter is as follows:

"Tailleulaste, Florida, — 1805.

"Dear Sir:"

"You ask me for a description of Eppington, but such an impression as I can now give must be considered an imperfect sketch. The mansion-house itself, an old-fashioned, two-story building, with a hip-shaped roof, in the centre and wings on the sides, with a ball or passage in the center, as far as the appearances from one wing to the other and opening on the offices, and with piazzas in front, the roof reveals and rears the extreme side of a large law covered with green sward, extending to a considerable distance and rising and declining on the left side as you entered, and in the rear of the house, to the left hand, and being separated by a mile off. In front, and over the neighborhood road which skirted the lawn, was situated the long famous in the vicinity for its fine vegetables and fruit, and to the right of the lawn, as you entered, was an extensive orchard of the finest fruit, with the stables between, at the corner and on the road. The mansion, painted of a snowy white, with green blinds to the windows, and from the row of offices at the end, was almost imbedded in a beautiful double row of the tall Lombardy poplar—tree, the most admired of all trees in the palmy days of old Virginia—and this row reached to another double row of the same, which skirted one side of the lawn, dividing it from the orchard and stables.

"The plantation was an extensive one, and in the days of my grandfather, Francis Epes, sen, was remarkable for every description of architecture and horticulture: and I have heard Mr. Jefferson, who knew him intimately, say that he considered him not only 'the first horticulturist in America,' but the best judge of land and buildings between the two men even stronger.

"It was in 1801, after four happy years spent in the peaceful atmosphere of old Eppington, that the first child was born to Thomas and Mary Epes. He was named for his grandfather—Francis Epes—and was the only child of Mary and John to ever reach maturity. About three years later, they had another child—Maria—but here the note of tragedy was struck in the story of Eppington and its associates, for the young mother never recovered from the birth of her second child.

"This last child of Mary Jefferson Epes was born at Elkhill, the home built by her father for her sister, Martha, about four miles from Monticello. Here she remained for a short time, confined to her bed and anxiously attended by her sister. After a visit from her father, she was carried in a litter borne by several men to Monticello, where her health continued to rapidly decline, and where in 1804, between the hours of 8 and 9 on a morning tinged with the vibrant beauty of April, she passed away.

Tropic Note

In Letter

MR. JEFFERSON felt the pain of the death of his youngest daughter with the terrible keenness known only to those who are capable of deep feeling. The sad news was the first in a series of letters he ever penned was written in answer to a note of condolence from his old classmate and intimate friend, Governor Page. In it he expressed the utter despair of a bereaved heart, yet in it he also revealed the deep philosophy that enabled him to bear his sorrows with the quiet fortitude that was an ineradicable trait of his. In a letter written in 1856 by a niece of Mary Epes and grandchild of Thomas Jefferson, the "mother has told me that on the day of her sister's death, she left her father alone for some hours. He then sent a servant, who found him with the Bible in his hands. He who has been so often and so harshly accused of unbelief, he, in his hour of intense affliction, sought and found consolation in the sacred volume.

John Ways Epes returned to Eppington with a heavy heart. But after receiving encouraging words and sound advice from Mr. Jefferson, he resumed his political work and rose to great heights. Soon he was elected to the United States Senate.

Mr. Epes was the first man to defeat John Randolph of Roanoke in a political battle. It is doubtful whether this victory would have been won had it not been for the wise and experienced help of Mr. Jefferson, who, beside working diligently in other ways, went in his carriage from county to county, visiting his old friends, and at the same time electioneering for his son-in-law.

After the death of John Ways Epes, which occurred in 1855, Eppington passed into the hands of the Thawtes. It is now owned by the Hines family, who value its traditions, and who are aware of its unsurpassed beauty; for Francis Epes built it well, better, perhaps, than he knew.
Old Eppington, home of the Eppes family.