

**A HISTORY OF LEASBURG
WITH PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS
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1960**

Leasburg has been such a quiet, well behaved spot it is not surprising to find persons within a radius of fifty miles who say they never heard of the place. For generations the village has done little to come before the public eye. Even in the old days it never produced the founder of a great industry (like Yanceyville), never sent an ambassador to a foreign land (like Milton); but since it was first settled over two hundred years ago it has gone on doing a solid, substantial work, and from its midst has gone a steady stream of citizens, doctors, lawyers, and educators to become leaders in other communities. The life of the place has alternated between periods of glowing activities and continuous decades all too serene and still. For almost a hundred years now such peace has pervaded the atmosphere; it has been easy to fall under its enchantment and let the rest of the world go by. To confused and weary visitors from the outside world this peace has been one of Leasburg's greatest assets; to those who wish for progress or growth, it has no doubt seemed an insurmountable hindrance.

An outstanding fact about Leasburg is the great devotion its citizens feel for the peace. Old letters written through the years by young and old speak with tender affection of "Sweet Leasburg." So often any slight reference to the village is put in those words: "Sweet Leasburg." Persons whose forefathers moved away long ago come back and say, "This place is almost sacred to me," or "I want my children and grandchildren to know that their roots are in Leasburg." In 1933 John Lea, great-great-great-grandson of our first James Lea, came from his home in New York to visit this locality so cherished by his ancestors, and he purchased one acre of Leasburg land to keep in his family forever. Persons of experienced judgment have often remarked it would be hard to find in the state another place so small which has exerted an influence so great, especially in the moral and educational life of the state. No doubt it has been this silent, pervasive influence, together with its atmosphere of complete freedom plus the general conditions of life here, which has so endeared the village to all who have known it.

Throughout the greater part of its existence, Leasburg has been predominately a farm village - a cluster of comfortable homes, each home owner managing a farm within easy reach, some at the same time carrying on another business or profession in the village. Until the present generation every family had its own garden, fruit trees, horses, cows, pigs, and chickens; most of them had also books and music and access to abundant service. These basic assets suggest the simple comfort and prosperity of Leasburg life, where by standards of today nobody has ever been really rich, though none has lacked the essentials for health and well being. Though everybody in Leasburg worked, this work was in the home, unlike today when so many are employed outside. There was excellent housekeeping and home management, consequently considerable leisure and opportunity for cultural interests. There was genuine goodness. My generation like many before me grew up with the sure knowledge that people around us were high-toned, peace-loving, God-fearing, and contented. They were industrious and thrifty, kind and hospitable. A remarkable spirit of unity and mutual concern bound the whole village together as if it were one big family.

Leasburg stands at the headwaters of Dan River. To the south and east of the village numerous springs flow together to form Cobb Creek sailing on into Hyco, then into Dan, and on through the Roanoke into the sea. The village is surrounded by wooded hills with open cultivated fields broad enough to allow glorious views of sunrise and sunset.

For long years this location was practically cut off from the rest of the world by rocky roads, frequent high water, and deep mud; but visitors who found their way here declared the village was like a lily in a grotto, no less lovely the unseen. It is a pleasing, healthful location, remarkable in the number of its citizens who have lived to be nearly a hundred years old with

continued enjoyment of their faculties and a keen interest in life. It is significant that before Greensboro College of Women was built, this place was considered for the location of that college. The fact that no railroad came this way made the location impracticable. Though the college could not be located here, the Trustees did choose a Leasburg citizen, The Rev. Solomon Lea, for the first president of the institution.

To those first settlers here, the two stalwart brothers, James and William Lea, this particular spot seemed undoubtedly a good place to live. The Leas came from England by way of Virginia about 1750. They were men of strict moral caliber, intellectually and physically sound, robust and alert. Their industry and temperance established an ideal for the settlement which has been handed down these 200 years.

It is generally known that in 1777 while the Revolutionary War was at its height, the northern portion of Orange County was cut off to form a new county, named Caswell in honor of Richard Caswell who was governor of North Carolina at that time. The new county was an almost perfect rectangle about 50 miles from east to west and 25 miles from north to south. Twenty-five years before the new county was formed, the Leas had established their settlement in almost the exact center of this area, and so this location was chosen for the county seat of the new county. At the session of the General Assembly convened in Fayetteville, November 3, 1788, "An act to Establish the Town Already lain off at the Court House in Caswell County," says that "Whereas 100 acres of land, adjacent to and whereon Caswell Court House now stands, has been laid off into a town of square streets and sixty-two lots, by Nicholas Delone and William Lea," the Assembly constituted and named that town Leasburg in honor of William Lea. (cf. Vol. 24 pp. 992-3, Chap. L Laws of N. C.). When by this act the settlement was legally chartered, a Board of Trustees, William Lea, Gabriel Lea, Nicholas Delone, Thomas Neely, Lloyd Van Hook, Samuel Johnston, and John McFarlin were appointed to design, build, and develop the town. Miss Willie Lea, lineal descendant of this Trustee William Lea, told me that the plan for the town was kept at her house for generations. Finally, she, herself, in the frenzy of house-cleaning, decided the old paper was of no importance, and destroyed it. She realized too late the absorbing interest wrapped up in this 150 year old document.

Leasburg as County seat was becoming a thriving little town when it became evident that the Court House was too far from the borders of the County for satisfactory transaction of business. Twenty-five miles over such roads as there existed was a full day's journey or more. So after 14 years of struggle with the difficulties of transportation, the eastern half of the county was cut off in 1791 to form Person County. Caswell Court House was moved from Leasburg to the center of Caswell, to a point which eventually developed as Yanceyville. Leasburg was left on the extreme edge of Caswell - a fact which to this day has hindered the development of both Leasburg and the county.

Though the Court House had to go, the Leas remained. It was they, with other sturdy pioneers, who gave character and substance to the settlement. Being a cultured, Christian people they were keen to promote religion and education. Of pure English stock, the Leas adhered to the Church of England. Very early they built an Episcopal church which was called Lea's Chapel. This church, remodeled, still stands, three miles east of the village. It was probably during Bishop Asbury's periodic visit here that it passed into the hands of Methodists. Later it became an important church in Person County. Graves of early Leasburg citizens may be found in the old cemetery there.

There is scant record of Leasburg between 1791 and 1810. We know that a post office was established here in *1796; (Note: It was actually established by Oct. 1, 1794. JDW) that mail was brought by stage coach from Milton to Hillsborough, and that Lawrence Lea (Larry) served for thirteen years as first postmaster and was succeeded by Vincent Lea, then by Gabriel B. Lea 'til 1818.

We have Bartlett Yancey to thank for a picture of the village in 1810. In a sketch of the county written at that time he named Leasburg as one of the two "towns" in the county, the

other "town" being Milton. "Leasburgh," he said "has one store, a grocery shop, a saddler's shop, a cabinet maker's shop, and about 10 or 12 houses." The store was managed by Gabriel Lea's three sons who were prominent merchants in Leasburg for nearly half a century before moving to Petersburg, Norfolk, and New York. More than half the homes can be pointed out today; others of them, built of the best seasoned lumber, have been added to or rebuilt, and more or less modernized for present day living. The Gabriel Lea home, where Voss Stephens lives now, was the habitual resting place of Bishop Asbury (1745-1816) as he made his annual rounds through the country. The oak grove crowning the knoll where Rob Newman now lives sprang from acorns brought by the Leas from England. George Lea lived there.

Another home in the village in 1810, as well as the saddler's shop which Bartlett Yancey mentions, was owned by my grandfather Nicholas Thompson. Grandfather Nicholas had come to Leasburg as a very young man about 1800. He had acquired possession of the former Court House grounds, had built his home on the spot where the Court House had stood, and had established a flourishing tan yard on Cobb Creek. In the corner of his yard, opening out upon the street, was the shop where the leather he tanned was made into fine harness, saddles, knapsacks, etc. The house he lived in still stands. Since 1810 this dwelling has been occupied continuously by his descendants.

When Mrs. Lillie Lea Neal (Mrs. T. C.) was in her 90's, she drew at my request a sketch of Leasburg as she first knew it. This is our best source of information about the village in the middle 1850's. In addition to the homes mentioned, her sketch shows the home of Sidney Thompson, eldest son of Nicholas, the home of Dr. John Tillett, Presiding Elder of Hillsborough District, the parsonage, the home of a skilled dressmaker, and that of a carriage maker, also a carriage factory, a cotton gin, a hotel, and four stores. My father's diary in 1851 mentions Morgan's Tailor Shop where he was having a coat and satin vest made. (He was then a sophomore at U.N.C.). Leasburg has always had a wide trade for a place of its size. Supplies of every kind which could be needed in the home or on the farm were carried in stock. Very elegant silk and satin dress goods and handsome ribbons and laces were brought from Petersburg, Va., and found ready customers here. Old costumes still occasionally brought to light from old trunks or closets testify that Leasburg women had good taste and somehow had access to exquisite materials and styles.

The village was teeming with life and industry in the 1850's. While there were woodshops, blacksmith shops, a shoe shop, a saddler's shop, tailor's shop, cotton gin, carriage factory, most important of all there were two big schools and three tobacco factories.

We do not know what provision was made for education in Leasburg in the very earliest times. Bartlett Yancey makes no mention of a school in the village. We know, however, that these early settlers saw to it that their families had every educational advantage of that day. Chapel Hill records for the early decades of 1800 show a number of University graduates from Leasburg.

Sometime before 1825 a school house had been in use not far from Ebenezer Church, about a half mile east of the village. In my grandfather's account books there is record of a bill paid to Gregory Hightower, the master there, for tuition and singing lessons for his elder son. By 1835 arrangements had been completed for the operation of a larger and better school.

In January 1835, there appeared in THE STAR, a newspaper published in Raleigh, the announcement of a new preparatory school to be opened in Leasburg with a view to permanent location. In this new classical school would be taught all the branches of literature and all the sciences normally taught in the best of preparatory schools. The article stated that "more than ordinary attention would be given to the much neglected studies of composition and declamation." The Principal would consciously consider himself instructor not only of minds, but of manners and morals as well. The school was most fortunate in its location, the article said, because there were fewer temptations and distractions here than in most places where classical schools were generally located. Leasburg was a "neat rural village, in every

way eligible as a school location whether considered from the standpoint of healthiness, intelligence, and morality of the inhabitants, or the cheapness of board, which (including firewood, washing, candles, etc.) would vary from five to seven dollars a month." The Academy building was of brick, the notice said, situated in a beautiful oak grove; the school room comfortable and commodious. Tuition for language Greek, Latin, and French, \$15 per session; for higher English branches \$12.50; for lower English \$10. The notice was signed by William H. Owen, Principal.

Mr. Owen had been graduated from the University of N.C. in 1823 and was probably teaching in Leasburg when this new preparatory school was being built. An account dated July 2, 1835, shows that Owen was paid \$32.50 for William Thompson's tuition. Another item the same year shows \$12.50 for tuition paid to Lorenzo Lea. Lorenzo Lea had received his master's degree from the University in 1832 and apparently took over the new school at its opening, as Owen became a tutor at the University in 1835 and served there for the next eight years.

In regard to this Classical Academy for males John Herbert Claiborne, in his book "Seventy-five Years in Old Virginia," tells that in 1838 when he was in his tenth year his father selected for him a "Large boarding school in Leasburg, in Caswell County, taught by an excellent scholar and gentleman, the Rev. Lorenzo Lea's older brother. In later years Lorenzo moved to Corinth, Miss. and founded Jackson College there. Mr. Claiborne speaks of the 3-day journey to Leasburg, more than 100 miles, himself riding a thorough-bred Lusborough filly, his father in a gig, followed by his dining-room serving man on horseback, who was to lead the filly back home. He pictures the desolation he felt as he was conducted from the village tavern in Leasburg to the boarding department of the Academy; and how, though the smallest and meekest boy in school, he somehow survived the rough and tumble life in a dormitory full of "boys bright, busy, and bad." He gives a laughable description of the style hat and hair worn by the boys of the Academy in that day, the hair cut close behind and allowed to grow long in front, to come below the ears or even to the collar. This long hair was trained in position by means of a soapy kind of paste, and came to be called "soaplocks." These carefully arranged locks were on dress occasions proudly surmounted by a hat with very tall crown. Such was the appearance of a fashionable Leasburg Academy boy 120 years ago! Claiborne, then only ten years old, adopted the style himself - to the amusement and dismay of his Virginia mother when he returned home at close of school.

This old male Academy was located where the cemetery is now. All trace of it is gone, and nobody knows the exact location of the building or when or why the school ceased to be. We have always heard it referred to as the Old Brick Academy. Mr. A. R. Foushee of Roxboro in his Reminiscences says his last years at school were in the Old Brick Academy here in 1859, where he was 20 years old. Henry A. Rogers was in charge of the school at that time and seems to have been greatly admired by students and patrons. From all we can learn, Mr. Rogers was the last person to conduct his school.

When the lawn around this old school building began to be used for a burial ground nobody knows. The fact that it was more than 150 years ago is proved by dates on grave stones and by the way some of the earlier graves and family plots are protected by thick stone walls of huge native rocks fitted together, 3 or 4 feet high. The oldest grave stones are those of William Lea and Betsy Darby, both of whom died in 1806. The whole west side of the cemetery was used in early days for negroes, probably faithful family servants. Near the center of the cemetery is a stone honoring "Aunt Millie," who was the beloved Negro Midwife and Nurse for the whole community for 50 years or more when hospital care was next to impossible. The old cemetery is still a beautiful oak grove, a place of unspeakable peace, a heritage we fondly cherish and wish to be cherished always.

While the school for boys was flourishing, Mr. Solomon Lea, brother of Lorenzo Lea established Somerville Female Institute. Mr. Lea had been teaching with outstanding success in N.C. and Virginia. After having served for 2 years as the first President of Greensboro College he decided to come back to his home in Leasburg and found his own school here. By the late

1850's Somerville Female Institute was recognized as one of the best educational institutions of the country. Mrs. A. R. Foushee who was educated at this school owned copies of the catalog which it was my privilege to examine years ago. Recently I have studied copies on file at the University of N. C.

The courses offered at Somerville Institute were "all that were necessary for young ladies" in that day. They laid a thorough foundation for a liberal education. Years of ground work in the 3 R's were followed by a 3-year "seminary" course largely scientific and classical, with such "ornamental branches" as music "on the piano" with singing, drawing, painting, wax work, leatherwork, and fine embroidery. The course in Latin included Virgil, Sallust, Cicero, and Horace; in Greek the New Testament, the Anabasis of Xenophon, and Euripides. The sciences, besides physiology and geography "with Atlas and Globe," included chemistry, astronomy, mental and moral philosophy, botany and mineralogy. The list of text books used is impressive.

Reading, spelling and writing continued to be required of every student every year. Writing included composition, letter writing, and penmanship. Special attention was given to English grammar. I remember hearing one who was graduated from this school in its latter years speak feelingly of efforts to analyse and parse Thompson's SEASONS and Milton's PARADISE LOST.

Mr. Lea was especially fond of physics and astronomy. He had named his school for a distinguished contemporary woman astronomer and physicist, Mrs. Mary Somerville of Scotland, whose work he greatly admired. I can recall a great cabinet that filled one side of the old school building (which was still being used when I was a child) and the strange looking apparatus that piqued our youthful curiosity, no doubt inspiring some of us to seek higher education ourselves in after years.

This school drew patronage from many parts of N.C. and Virginia, Georgia, and Mississippi. By present standards expenses seemed unbelievably reasonable, board and room with laundry, \$42.50 for a session of twenty-one weeks. Lights cost \$1.00 or pupils might "furnish their own candles." Extra cost for one of the "ornamental branches" was \$5.00 a session. Spring sessions opened the first Wednesday in February and closed the last Wednesday in June; fall sessions ran from the 2nd Wednesday in July to the 1st Wednesday in December. In this way a 5-week vacation was provided in mid-winter as well as in summer.

The catalog's general remarks give an insight into Leasburg life as well as the over-all sense of responsibility felt by the administration:

"The village is moral and free from many temptations that too often exist in other communities. While we have all the facilities of a large village in having access to the stores and post office (the stage passing six days a week), yet we have few or none of the inconveniences. The young ladies, after being confined in school can walk out and ramble in various directions without any inconvenience or fear of disturbance, and no doubt it is owing to this circumstance in part at least that the ladies have by a kind Providence enjoyed such fine health."

"The young ladies are not permitted to form accounts without the consent of their parents or the teacher. Nor are they permitted to visit the stores unless in company of a teacher or some member of the family where they board. We open school every morning with singing and prayer and close with singing. Once a week the young ladies are to repeat by heart some verses of the Bible."

One evening a week a kind of literary society met. It was devoted to criticism and general improvement under the supervision of the Principal. The programs consisted of reading and RECOLLECTIONS, By Miss Ella Graves Thompson, 1960

writing and conversation on chosen literary subjects. We may feel sure that manners and morals and a basic philosophy of life were duly emphasized.

The Lea home with a dormitory in the yard could provide room and board for upward of thirty students. Other young ladies boarded in other suitable homes in village and neighborhood. Needless to say their presence added much to the life of the village.

This period just prior to the Civil War was indeed Leasburg's heyday. After the war there were few boarders for Somerville Institute. Solomon Lea continued to teach - now a mixed school - in the old building 'til the early 1890's. He was assisted by his daughter, Miss Lillie, while the other unmarried daughter, Miss Willie gave private music lessons at the home. Their work was characterized by thoroughness, breadth of vision, and genuine love of learning and teaching. Under their inspiration a generation of young people went out from Leasburg to receive college educations and become themselves strong and efficient teachers. When Miss Lillie was married to Mr. T. C. Neal in 1894, her love for the school prompted her to have the whole student body, even the 7-year olds, serve as her attendants.

Not only her schools brought prominence to Leasburg during the mid-century. Before, and just after the Civil War, three tobacco factories were doing a flourishing business here. Miss Willie Lea and Mrs. Lillie Lea Neal could remember the bustle of industry when these factories were being built. At first, no licenses were required for the manufacturing business, and a fortune could be made by any man enterprising and capable enough to manage it. It is said that at one time 95% of the plug tobacco on the United States market came from Leasburg. Wilkerson and Fuller, E. W. Culbreth, William Paylor, and R. P. Hancock are names on record as operators here. In some way, R. L. Lockett was also associated with the business. One of the factories was located in the large lot back of the Connally home; another in the lot just west of the Joe Smith home; the third, operated by Paylor and Hancock stood far back directly across the street from the Connally store. The last mentioned factory registered as No. 98, 5th District, North Carolina, did the most extensive business and continued operation for the longest time. An interesting chapter in the history of tobacco as well as the history of Leasburg could be pieced together from a tour of this old factory which remained standing until 1940 - too strongly built to tear down, too dilapidated to repair. From stamps on the wall, it is clear that Leasburg was supplying chewing tobacco to large firms at distant points, notably Atlanta, Montgomery and New Orleans. William Paylor seems to have dropped from this firm soon after the Civil War, perhaps when a prohibitive tax was levied by the government in an effort to raise money to pay the war debt. Transportation was so difficult and labor so unpredictable that the tax finally was ruinous. An effort to evade this tax finally crushed Hancock financially and brought an end to this chapter of Leasburg history.

While Leasburg was booming industrially and educationally there were sports of various kinds. From old letters we gather that before 1825 a race track had been opened north of the village and racing was much engaged in. This diversion continued for years. Elijah Morton's fine Arabian stallion known as Morton's Bay won a wide reputation. A popular brand of tobacco manufactured here was stamped with a picture of this horse and the name Morton's Bay. As game was plentiful, hunting was a lively interest. The earliest settlers had all had their horn and pack of hounds. Old letters speak of feasting by day and dancing by night.

Meanwhile the church held an important place in the lives of the people. There was access to Lea's Chapel, Ebenezer, and Bethany, but no church building was in the immediate village. In early times regular services were held at Bethany, a Methodist church a mile and a half north of the village. Bethany was established in 1836 while John Wesley was in America. It was probably the first church of this faith to be built in this part of America. The first trustees of Bethany were George Jeffers, Lorenzo Lea, John Johnston, William Lea, George W. Lea, William Smith and Samuel Johnston. It was a large well-constructed brick building. Because it was often used for a great Methodist camp meeting of that early period it became widely known as the Old Camp Ground. It was the central church of the Leasburg Circuit, which was then composed of ten churches, the pastor living in the parsonage here. Large gatherings of various kinds were

held in this big one-room building at Camp Ground, among them commencement exercises for Somerville Institute. Crowds poured in from a long way off, in fine carriages, covered wagons, and on horseback, to see the young ladies take part in these so-called "exhibitions" and receive their diplomas.

As a matter of convenience, as years went by, Sunday School, then worship services began to be held in the old Brick Academy in the village. A few years before the Civil War, about 1857, it was decided to erect a church building here. About this time, the first Masonic Lodge in Caswell County was chartered here in Leasburg. The Masons united with the Methodists to put up a plain two-story meeting house, the first floor to be used for religious gatherings, the second for the Masons. This church building, twice remodeled, was in continuous use here until 1950, when the present building was erected on the same site.

It was at Ebenezer Church 3/4 miles east of Leasburg that one of the most celebrated events in North Carolina Church history took place in 1833. Ebenezer at that time was a member of Country Line Baptist Association. At the associational meeting that year, 1833, under pressure from reactionary members coming in from another state, a resolution was passed declaring "irreconcilable hostility to Bible societies, missionary societies, temperance societies, Baptist conventions and religious newspapers." Stephen Pleasant whose heart was aflame with missionary zeal and fervor for enlightenment, voted against this resolution. Because of his stand, Ebenezer withdrew fellowship from him. The next year Stephen Pleasant organized three small churches of those Baptists who had views similar to his. Thus came about that separation of Missionary Baptist from Primitive Baptists which has never since been bridged. By the time of Stephen Pleasant's death twenty years later, more than twenty churches had declared their independence of this deadening resolution of 1833, and had joined the Beulah Association which Stephen Pleasant had organized. Ebenezer has continued until now a bulwark of the Primitive Baptist Faith.

Meanwhile wars have come, and to every one Leasburg so far has sent a quota of soldiers. It has been impossible for me to piece together a list of those who took part in the early conflicts. We know that Gabriel and George Lea had been officers in the Revolution, William Archer Lea a Major in the War of 1812. Only a few names of those who served even in the War Between the States can be definitely determined - among these were Major John T. Hambrick, John Andy Stephens, Jim Winstead, James Nicholas Thompson, Major of the home guard George N. Thompson, and Dr. John Stephens. We have a fuller list of the soldiers who went from Leasburg in World War I and II. These lists will be preserved (though not given here) that the future may know for certain what men from our midst went to fight for their country. It will not soon be forgotten how the whole community threw itself into the effort to win; the meatless and wheatless days, war gardens, knitting for soldiers, rationing, and other activities, "making do, and doing without." Only one of our boys, Ralph Winstead, made the supreme sacrifice. Mrs. R. N. Whitlow won distinction as a war mother, having four sons and two daughters in service at the same time. Her daughter, Evelyn, an Army nurse was captured at Corregidor and could not be heard from for nearly three years.

But we must go back for a moment to the War Between the States. When Miss Willie Lea and Mrs. Lillie Lea Neal were in their 90's, together they told me about the day the Leasburg Grays went off to war. It was a notable day, full of hope and promise in the eager young soldiers, fearful and sad for those left behind. There was a farewell program with presentation of Confederate flag. The people all assembled in Mr. Solomon Lea's yard. Miss Willie (reigning belle of Leasburg, her sister said) had been chosen to make the farewell speech to the boys. She stood on the porch of her home "dressed in a pretty new silk," surrounded by her family and friends, addressing the soldiers who stood before her in the walk. Relatives and friends thronged the yard. The company was going out under the command of Captain John T. Hambrick, who was soon to be promoted to Major. The flag had been made by Miss Lillie (16 years old) and Miss Willie, seventeen. "It was beautifully sewed, the pride of our hearts," Miss Lillie said; then with a merry little chuckle she added, "But Willie and I knew nothing in the world about cutting a star - so the Leasburg Grays marched off to war under the stars with six

good points!" When Miss Willie was asked who the young soldiers were, she said there were many, but she could not recall their names, she knew only that most of them never came back. Of the few who did come back one soon died of wounds incurred in battle, one continued to suffer all his life from injuries received, some lived a long life of usefulness in the community.

Naturally a slump followed the war. But by 1885 W.J. Pulliam and H.T. Connally had re-established the village as a trade center for a broad area. Both these merchants handled general merchandise. For succeeding decades they were community leaders of character and influence. The church and many other public interests benefited by their wisdom and willingness to serve.

In the early 1890's there were 18 homes in the village and four stores. Most of the homes were rather large two-story houses painted white with green blinds. The houses were well furnished. Pieces by Thomas Day, the Milton cabinet maker, found place among early American and imported furniture. White picket fences enclosed attractive lawns and broad box bordered walks led to the street. A row of majestic walnut trees 100 years old marked the eastern entrance to the village.

The householders at that time, going from east to west in the village were Sidney Thompson, George N. Thompson, Henry Lea, Dr. Jake Thompson, W.R. Hambrick, Mrs. Martha Hambrick, H.T. Connally, Solomon Lea, R.I. Newman, W.J. Pulliam, W.L. Thomas, J.T. Bradsher, Mrs. Barbara Baynes, John Johnston, Ben J. Stanfield II, and Vincent Morton. There were several vacant houses, those now occupied by Mrs. W. E. Connally, Ashley Briggs and Mrs. Lex Sally. The Rev. L. S. Massey was in the parsonage. On the outskirts of the village were the Winsteads, Fulchers, Jeremiah Dixons, Holsenbacks, Mrs. Nannie Fuller, the Pink Newmans, the Tom Featherstons, Mrs. Nannie Stephens, the Whitlows, Wades, Sawyers, Smiths, and Hamletts. Children from these families were in schools here. The four stores in the village were run by W.R. Hambrick, H.T. Connally, W.J. Pulliam, and W.L. Thomas. Mr. Hambrick's store was more distinctly a grocery and drug store. Mr. Hambrick was the postmaster from 1881 to 1898, when he moved to Roxboro to set up a leading drugstore there.

From one end of the village to the other, every dwelling, every store, every little shop or office had a history of its own. But most interesting of all were the people. Within my own recollection this locality has produced a number of individuals of most original and unique personality. Ulysses had his Homer, but there was no one, alas, to immortalize in song or story "Miss Willie," "Mr. Ed", "Miss Anabel," and others vivid and delightful. There was magic in their charm adding a spice and genuine worth to our daily life. There were Negroes, too, of unusual stamp, writing great originality to the special characteristics of their race. We could describe "Uncle" John Key, "Uncle" Haywood Garrett, "Uncle" Richard Elliott. For a long time practically all the Negroes around Leasburg were descendants of those who had been brought up in the best white homes in the community. They were capable of making in their own way a distinct contribution to the life of the village, and this they did, faithfully and well. An excellent spirit has always existed between the races here, each recognizing its dependence upon the other.

An impulse of new life was felt in the village by the mid-1890's. This may have begun when Dr. R. J. Teague came as resident physician. Certainly it was carried on by R.G. Cox, a singing master of real skill and very contagious enthusiasm, who brought along the little melodion and a new song book with shaped notes. Mr. Cox could do wonders with his melodion. Along with a keen sense of humor which could express itself in music, he had an amusing ability to play a different melody with each hand while at the same time singing or whistling a third tune. He established singing schools in several neighboring communities, with Leasburg as headquarters. The singing school here was a lively and delightful experience for both adults and children. There were good voices in the village with music lovers and piano students in nearly every home. After Mr. Cox's training, with Miss Bessie Thompson at the old reed organ and Mr. Ed Lea as song leader, the village church was widely recognized as outstanding for its fine congregational singing.

About this time the Reverend R. H. Broom became pastor of the church and Prof. M.C. Newbold Principal of the school. These also were men of energy, vision, and leadership. In a very effective way Mr. Broom combined genuine spirituality with excellent business acumen. His boundless vigor of mind and body was a stimulus to action. It was during his pastorate that the Durham District Conference was held here - an unusual occurrence for a place so small, and truly a great occasion. In preparation for this conference the church building was one of a number of things remodeled and completely renovated.

Mr. Newbold during his two years as Principal of the school did a very distinctive work here. He was young and very much alive - fresh from Trinity College (now Duke), a born educator, teeming with new ideas. He went all over the countryside arousing interest in education and searching out students of high school age who had had no high school advantages. He introduced up-to-date textbooks, new and advanced courses of study, started a debating society, bought patent desks to replace the old hand made furnishings left over from Somerville Institute, and in other ways built up the school to the largest enrollment of many years.

After this resurgence of new life Leasburg for the next twenty years or more, around the turn of the century, again fell into a period of deep quiescence. The roads leading to the village, and even through it, were still narrow, rocky and muddy. Periodically the men in the community, shouldering their own axes and shovels went out in a group with appointed leader, and spent days working on the road. Three days of this work was required by law of all men of poll tax age. A respectable sidewalk, which the more public spirited citizens kept in very good order with sawdust, encouraged activity within the limited confines of the village with its easy hospitality, a delightful place to visit and visits were frequent, lasting for weeks, sometimes for months; consequently, few of the population railed against the halcyon calm, or seemed even aware of it. Though radios and television were undreamed of, and a telephone only a temporary blessing for a brief period about 1900, life was somehow full and interesting. There was important work to do, without too many distractions. There was important time a plenty for picnics, ball games, fishing. A croquet set was on nearly every lawn, and contests were frequently played. There were lawn parties, ice cream suppers, hayrides on moonlight nights in summer, innumerable indoor parties in winter, and skating on ice ponds in coldest weather. There was not so much "twosing" and "going steady" as today, but plenty of love-making and romance. Old fashioned games were relished by every age group, the whole village together apparently enjoying each other, and young people having a good chance to know each other under all kinds of conditions. Much of the necessary work - ice gathering, corn shucking, sorghum cooking, quilting - could be turned into play by all the neighbors working together.

As labor had become less abundant, farm and home affairs kept the eighteen families of the village healthfully employed and out of harmful mischief. Though there was little to boast of, there was less to be ashamed of. The church and school were doing good work, and the young people were going off to college.

With opportunity for advancement what it was, however, and life all over the nation stepping up, naturally the more ambitious youth left the village to seek employment. After having entered business, or married, too often they built homes and careers outside. Some of these who were left behind dreamed of a better day for Leasburg, but being for the most part older people or little children there was little power to initiate action.

In 1914 a handful of women in the community joined together in a Community Improvement League in line with the nation-wide Country Life Movement. With its emphasis on sanitation and health, home and school beautification and improvement, proper food, and wholesome recreation this was a forerunner of the Home Demonstration Club, which came in twenty-five years later. There was a nucleus of real vision in the League, and tremendous possibilities opened up for home and community improvement. In those horse-and-buggy days, however, nearly 50 years ago, the interests of women almost everywhere had been so confined to the home that the majority of the citizens of Leasburg, both men and women felt it was "not a

woman's place" to be concerned about matters of public interest. That was "the men's business" and our men were not much concerned. Hence, as the studies and activities of the League broadened out to include larger issues, this organization ceased to exist. Beyond a doubt Leasburg was too well content, too satisfied with its mellow peace.

There had been a gentle stirring, however, concerning the school. In the early 20's the county at last bought the school property, which up to that time had been privately owned and annually rented to the county. By 1925 State highway No. 158 running through the village was finally completed. Also the Carolina Power and Light line. This was a great day for Leasburg for thus at long last the place had ready access to the outside world. Only the older inhabitants realized what loss of safety and sociability was incurred when sidewalk and shade trees were sacrificed for these larger improvements. Soon a number of new residences began to build in and around the village, so that the boundaries were constantly being extended. About forty new families came in within the next twenty years.

Among the householders who have built here since the early 30's the following are named in order as their homes stand from east to west: Jack Warren Dixon, John Pleasant, W.D. Fulcher, Jr., Raymond Bradsher, Sr., Flint Bradsher, Gregory Holt, Mrs. McKinley Dunn, William Duncan, W.H. Duncan, Sr., Richard Foushee, Richard Duncan, Glenn Graves, Raymond Allen, Bob Fuller, Brandon Newman, Ernest Winstead, Curtis Briggs, Ray Knight, Clyde Arvin, John Fuller, Miss Sallie Newman, John Stephens, Jr., Leslie Yeatts, Mrs. J.A. Denny, Stanley Whitlow, Sr., Carson Watson, Reuben Knight, Tommy Carter, George Henderson, Alvis Briggs, Bill Brewer, Theodore Watson, Dorsey Denny, Fred Cox, Sr., Charlie Cox, Bob Coleman, Melvin Crabtree, Luther Delp and Leon Delp. With the few exceptions these families own their homes. They have cast their lots with Leasburg because they saw definite advantages and attractions here. Like the pioneer settlers, having found a good place to live they sought no further. Besides the dwellings mentioned, several nice ones have been built by Negroes who have lived here for many years.

Though there are still some excellent farmers here, Leasburg can no longer be called a farm village. Members from a number of these newer homes have found employment in the mills and stores of Roxboro and Danville; some are in road construction and other work for government; others carry on various occupations essential to community life, in filling stations, grocery stores, machine shops, etc.

It would seem that the time has come now for Leasburg to wake up again. However, if by waking up it meant developing into an industrial center, this will probably never be. Though situated on one of the state's main highways, with access to abundant electrical power and other attractions, such development is not necessary for the village is near enough to Danville and Durham, to say nothing of Roxboro, that ambitious young city only 10 miles away - for easy commuting; and besides, the ultimate purpose for her existence might in the great scheme of things be quite different. As time goes on there is more and more need for retreat from the strain and stress of the busy world, small places safe and sane which simultaneously offer all the potentialities for a satisfying life - an ideal resort for prosperous families who wish to be relieved of the bustle and rush of modern business yet within easy reach of selected activities. Once a tiny visitor playing on one of our spacious lawns was heard joyfully shouting, "This is a fine place to raise children!" and it is, a good place for young couples with growing families, a good place to end one's days in peace.

Those who live in Leasburg see the need for improvements in the village. They know its short-comings, and want to reduce them. They would have the village the most beautiful small stretch along this highway, so comfortably attractive in every way that, even passing through, people would experience a sense of delight and uplift. They have a basket of plans to that effect; but, unfortunately, plans do not complete themselves. Evidently, there is need for inspired, dedicated leadership plus what it takes to follow the leader.

One October as Dr. W.L. Poteat and his artist sister, Miss Ida, were enjoying a drive from Yanceyville to Leasburg, Miss Ida said, "Bud Louli, is it true that Caswell County is one of the most beautiful places in the world, or is it just that we love it so?" Dr. Poteat was silent for a moment, then in that well reasoned forceful way of his he answered, "Both, sister."

Well, that is how we feel about Leasburg - it is a good place to live and we love it. "Both, sister!"

Of course anyone with half an eye can see that, as Horse said of his Sabine Farm, "This corner of the earth smiles for me beyond all others."

THE END

NOTE: Miss Ella Graves Thompson, daughter of George Nicholas and Ella Williams Graves Thompson, was born September 27, 1886. She died January 18, 1970. "Miss Ella" was the last Thompson descendant to occupy the home built about 1800 by her Grandfather, Nicholas Thompson, on the site of the first Caswell County Courthouse at Leasburg, N.C. After her death the homeplace was sold to Mrs. C.R. Thomas, passed to Mrs. Thomas's son, James Upchurch, then to Guy and Margaret Hill, and is presently owned (1996) by Dwight and Susan Bellinger who live in Hillsborough, N.C. The house is unoccupied.

Miss Ella Thompson received her B.A. from Meredith College and her M.A. from the University of Chicago. She was an instructor in the English department at Meredith College for two years, then taught Latin at East Carolina Teachers College several years. She taught four years (1918-1922) in the two-room school at Leasburg which had been a part of the former Somerville Female Institute founded by Rev. Solomon Lea. The Solomon Lea Elementary School, built of brick, was constructed in the early 1920s on the former grounds of the two-room school. However, with the coming of school consolidation in the 1960s, the Solomon Lea Elementary School ceased to be a school and was sold. It was used as an antique shop for about ten years until 1975.

Most of Miss Ella's later life was spent in Leasburg where she taught piano students for a number of years. She was the "keeper of Leasburg's History" and was always willing to share her knowledge. In 1938 when she toured Europe, she sent postcards back from her tour. Even young children of the community were recipients of her gracious thoughtfulness. The card sent me from Venice is still a treasured keepsake.

The one acre of land bought in Leasburg in 1933 by John Lea, G-G-G-Grandson of James Lea, to be kept in the family "forever," was sold by his descendants October 30, 1979.

The exact location of the Male Brick Academy is not known to me, but when the grave for Mrs. Voss Stephens (nee Annie Dixon), was being dug, a brick wall was encountered which might have been part of the foundation of the school.

The old reed organ was bought in 1881 for the Leasburg Methodist Church. The first organist, Martha Pulliam Newman, served until her marriage in 1889 when she moved to Winston-Salem. Miss Bessie Thompson became organist, then and continued until about 1900 when a piano was bought. Facing the front of the church, the piano was to the left of the pulpit and the organ was to the right. The organ remained there until it was moved into "the hut," (the office building next to the old parsonage) in the 1940s where it provided music for the Methodist Youth Fellowship, the Womens' Missionary Society and other church meetings held there. When the little office building ceased to be used after the new brick church was built in 1953, the organ was sold. Rats and squirrels had stored acorns inside it and had cut the belt to the bellows, leaving it silent and forlorn looking. It has been refinished and restored insofar as possible without disturbing the carpeting on the pedals which shows the footprints of those who played it. It is presently owned by this writer, Jeannine D. Whitlow.