

STAFORD COUNTY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of JOHN FITZHUGH
by EILLEN CHARTTERS

April 12, 1986

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Signed -----
Date April 12, 1986
JOHN FITZHUGH

Q: This interview is being conducted with Mr. John Fitzhugh at his home in
Stafford County for the
Stafford County Oral History Project on April 12, 1986, by Eileen
Chartters.

Mr. Fitzhugh, when I last talked with you, you were telling me about the
Fitzhugh family and the
origins of Stafford County, and I wonder if you could give me some of that
information today.

A: Well, the Fitzhughs came to this country in the middle sixteen hundreds
and settled down near King George courthouse, which was then Stafford County. And
they named--William
Fitzhugh, an immigrant, named his place Eagle's Nest. And the original house is gone,
but there's
another old house there and the family cemetery is still there, but he built a lot of other
houses in
Stafford for his sons and so forth. Among them would be Marmion, and Sherwood
Forest, and-

Q: Ravensworth.

A: Bedford.

Q: Ravensworth.

A: No, Ravensworth, he built, but it was in Fairfax County. Uh, I was trying to think of some-- Belair, which is across from Fredericksburg and Boscobel. They are the only ones I can think of right now, but I'm sure there were some others.

Q: And Stafford County--what interest did he have in Stafford--what has come to be Stafford County?

A: Well, I guess he just wanted to come to the New World--he was a young man about 35 years old and a lawyer and from what I understand, he was a friend of the king's and the king owed him a big gambling debt--so the story goes and a good way to pay him off was to send him over here, and pay him with land that didn't cost him anything. And after he came to this country, he was, of course, single when he came over here. And he met a girl by the name of Sarah Tucker, whose father had just died and she had a sister, I don't know what her sister's name was, and a mother. And he married this eleven-year-old girl and sent her to England and had her educated. And when she was eighteen years old, she came back and lived with him as his wife. And they had five sons and one daughter and when he died, he had accumulated a lot of property. And he had in his will, he itemized every silver spoon and things that came from England. He would send his tobacco over there and have somebody in England that would do the shopping for him. And shipped the things back that he wanted and couldn't get in this country and in his will, he left the five sons 54,000 acres of land in Stafford County. And his will is recorded at King George Courthouse. And was dated, I think, 1790 something--6--I don't know--must have been 1690 something--'cause it was right around 1700 that he died. And some of that land stayed in the family until about 20 years ago--they'd never been owned by anybody but a Fitzhugh.

Q: Where was that land located?

A: That was in King George--down--Boscobel--not Boscobel--Bedford. And the last Fitzhugh that owned it was Horace Fitzhugh, who married Miss Washington.

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Q: And you said Mr. Fitzhugh and Giles Brent?

A: Yeah, they were both about the same age and both of them lawyers and friends. And they were partners in a lot of these land deals and from what I understand, they

bought some of this property--was granted to them with the understanding that whoever lived the longest got it all. Well, that that was bought in joint ownership went to Fitzhugh because he outlived Brent. And a lot of the land all up around Chapwomsic Creek, where Quantico is now and up Brentsville, is mentioned in that will. Anybody who wants to see it can see it at King George Courthouse.

Q: And, of course, it is recorded at King George Courthouse because Stafford County--

A: That was Stafford.

Q: Did not exist as a separate body at that time?

A: King George did not exist. It was all Stafford then.

Q: It was all Stafford--okay--all to Westmoreland was Stafford?

A: That's right.

Q: Now, some biographical information you--you were born here in Stafford County?

A: I was born right here on this farm--Poplar Grove Farm--right here in Stafford. My mother and my grandfather were born here.

Q: And the farm is Poplar Grove.

A: That's right--Poplar Grove.

Q: And the road--is this Poplar Road?

A: The main road that runs in front of this farm is named Poplar Road and it was named after this farm. Of course, it went through such a long section of it. So they called the road Poplar Road.

Q: Now, this property you have told me when I talked with you earlier was French property.

A: That's right--my mother's people.

Q: Family property and you had also talked about Quaker families that had--

A: Well, originally this country--this neighborhood 'round here was settled by a group of Quakers that moved in here and from what I've heard just by word of mouth, I don't think there's any records at the courthouse, they were destroyed in the Civil War. But I understand there was six families of Quakers that moved in here and they always picked sites by a good ever-running spring and they built stone houses and stone spring houses. And this was one of them and evidently one of, from what I understand, was the biggest house. There's one-house left standing where Milton Christy now lives. And these Quakers couldn't get enough in here to make a very strong organization, so they, from what I understand, they left around the latter part of 1700's or the early 1800's and went to Ohio.

(A: continued)

And formed a settlement and all of them have gone from around here, but the old Quaker burying ground is down here on, just to the right of Milton Christy's lane--up on the hill in the thicket there. There's no tombstones except just fieldstones, but there is no inscriptions on them. And I don't know the names of the--any of the names of those people. But I just heard that through my family and just the ones who lived around here a long time.

Sister: Tell her what you know about Poplar Grove--the name of this farm.

A: Well, this place was bought--Poplar Grove--was bought from those Quakers by George Curtis and he gave it to his daughter, Sarah, or Sally as she was sometimes called, who was my great-grandmother. And she raised her family and lived here until she died around 1870, I think, something like that. And it has been in my family ever since.

Sister: And Sarah Curtis is buried right here.

A: And Sarah Curtis and her husband, James French, are buried in the family cemetery here.

Q: And she was married to John?

A: James.

Sister: To James French and had a son, John I.

A: Who was my--had a son John I, who was my grandfather.

Q: The great -grandparents and then--and your grandparents are buried also here?

A: My grandparent John I French and Lula, his wife.

Sister: Shelkett French--she was a Shelkett and their daughter, Sally McNary-Fitzhugh--Lee Fitzhugh. Now 100 and still living. And John Fitzhugh, their son. And the Curtises and the Frenches have been in Stafford County for-

A: Forever.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know how long, but some of the early settlers.

Q: Right--and the Fitzhughs and the Curtises and the Frenches were among the earliest settlers in Stafford County?

A: That's right--that's right. F.F.V.'s--the first families of Virginia.

Q: That's right--that's right--okay. That's right--okay. Well, now had your family always farmed or-

A: Yes, on my mother's side they've all been farmers. And I'm the ninth generation on my father's side that has lived in Stafford.

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Q: The ninth?

A: That's right. And all of them have been professional men--my grandfathers have been professional men 'til they got to me and I'm a farmer. I don't know if you call that a profession or not.

Q: A profession? Yes, you're a professional farmer.

A: They were either doctors, lawyers, Episcopal preachers.

Sister: Can I interrupt to say something to lineage?

Q: Certainly.

Sister: Okay, the first immigrants that came here in the name of Fitzhugh was William Fitzhugh and he was the immigrant. He had a son, Henry Fitzhugh, known as Blind Henry--then he had-

Q: Blind?

Sister: He was blind in his latter years and they spoke of him as Blind Henry.

A: Blind.

Sister: Blind Henry.

Q: Was it he who built Chatham?

Sister: No--no, no.

Q: Because he had one eye.

A: No--that was William.

Sister: But it was Blind Henry's brother that did.

Q: Okay.

Sister: His name was William. And then Blind Henry, as we speak of him, had a son, John, who married an Alice Falton(?) and Alice and John had a son named John, whom they named John Falton Fitzhugh and they-- that's when--they moved from Stafford into what is now Prince William, and they had a son named George FitzhughGeorge Fitzhugh who was a doctor in the war of 1812--then he had a son named George who was a writer and lived down in Port Royal, Virginia. Then they had a son named George, who was an Episcopal minister and in his latter years, he did preach a little bit here in the locality of Fredericksburg-- Old Trinity Church--but it was for a very short period. Then he had a son, Lee Fitzhugh who was a lawyer.

A: Who was my father.

Sister: Who had a son, John Fitzhugh, and Lee Fitzhugh, of course married Sally French and who settled here.

Q: In Poplar Grove.

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Sister: In Stafford, to really the Fitzhughs started in Stafford and then they came back to Stafford.

Q: Okay, well, that's good. Thank you. And the names that you all have in your family are all traditional family names.

A: Yeah, on the Fitzhugh side, they were either John, Henry, or--

Q: George.

A: George.

Q: And then Sally and Sarah.

A: Sarah.

Q: Which--Sally is--

A: That sorta runs in the family, too.

Q: You said that--of course, you have farmed all of your life--what size farm do you have and has it grown larger or smaller over the years?

A: Well, it has grown smaller--originally it was around 1,000 acres, but now, I have right around 400 of it left in my possession. But the rest of it is still in my mother's family.

Q: And what kind of farming have you--

A: I guess you'd call what I do just general farming. I raise crops and cattle-a little bit of everything. Have been known to make whiskey.

Q: So you raised a little corn?

A: I had an uncle who was a lawful distiller.

Q: Oh, good.

A: Yeah--his name was Charles French.

Q: Okay--was he in Stafford?

A: He woned the farm right across the road from here. Part of the French property.

Q : All right--what--?

A: And he made apple brandy--the French brandy was noted all over the country.

Q: Oh, and it was--and he was a licensed distiller?

A: He was a licensed distiller.

Q: Oh, all right--and how long ago was that?

A: Oh, I--it's been, been at least 75 years--it was before Prohibition that he made i 6

Q: And he--and brandy?

A: Apple brandy. He was noted for that. And he was a Confederate verteran. And he died fighting damn Yankees.

Q: Where did he die? Where was--

A: He died right here in this house--in our hime when he was 80, I think, he was 85 years old when he died, but he never did stop fighting the Civil War.

Q: Oh, I see what you mean. I see--he fought the war the rest of his life. Okay--and is he buried here?

A: He is buried in the family cemetery.

Q: Family cemetery here--okay, and what was his name you said?

A: Charles J. French.

Q: Charles J. French--do you have any--do you remember any of the stories that he might have told about the Civil War in this area or do you--?

A: Well, I was right small to remember some of things he told, but, of course, I heard about some of the things. They said he was captured during the battle of Antietam. He had two hams hanging on the saddle he'd gotten from somewhere-

Q: He must have been--

A: He was in prison in New York for several years and during his trip after he was captured when they were sending him to prison, the troop train stopped somewhere in Delaware and this young lady came over and asked this Yankee soldier if she could see one of those Rebels. That she understood they had horns. And, of course, they weren't supposed to talk to the prisoners, but anyhow, she was a pretty girl and he was a young man and he let her talk to this fella and he slipped her a note and gave her his name and rank and so forth and where he was going and they kept in touch. He was a Southerner sympathizer.

Q: I see--from Delaware.

A: From Delaware and he was in prison with a man by the name of Irving from this Hartwood neighborhood and they both stayed in the same prison and they built themselves a shanty out of cracker boxes. Evidently, crackers came in wooden boxes and said that the lice was so bad--said they couldn't stand to live in the living quarters so they lived in this shanty--it was in the compound. And he made jewelry out of anything he could get his hands on--hambone or button or something and would send it to this girl in Delaware and she would sell it and send the money back to him. And that's the way he managed to buy things that he needed while he was in prison. And he corresponded with her for all his life until they were real old. And he never did see her again.

Q: But they maintained--

A: They kept in touch.

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Q: Maintained correspondence.

A: And later on, her daughter came down here and visited him and stayed a while. And he took her to all the battlefields and showed her all around and when they got down to the National Cemetery here in Fredericksburg, she says, "Oh, my goodness--there's certainly a lot of dead Yankees there." He said, "Yeah, but not near as many as it ought to be."

Sister: Okay--you want to tell some more tales--tell about the story--about the rooster.

A: Oh, yeah--well, during the time of the Civil War, the Yankees were camped near-well, all down around Falmouth and they would make raids out in surrounding country, stealing anything they could get their hands on. One time, they came here and rounded all the sheep up by the graveyard and knocked them on the head and each soldier carried a dead sheep away on his horse.

Q: Here--at this farm?

A: At this farm. And so they hid the chickens up in the attic of the old big house and the Yankees came and searched the house, but they didn't find any chickens. As they were going down this hill out here in front of the house, the old rooster crowed upstairs and he came back and researched the house and they got all the chickens and the next morning, that old rooster crowed again--he was the only one left and he had gotten wedged behind the chimney somewhere, so my great-grandmother cooked him for dinner that night. So the Yankees wouldn't get him.

Q: Oh, goodness--well, there wasn't any fighting right in this particular area-but the Union troops were all in here.

A: Yeah--they'd come by and visit every now and then.

Sister: Tell her what happened about our horses.

A: Yeah--during--I think it was in 1863, Mr. James French had a son by the name of Hugh--Hugh Ri (?) they called him--and word was sent back here that he had died somewhere down in Louisa County at some doctor's home. So two of his sisters went in the spring wagon and brought his body back. And so they had to keep the horses hidden--they couldn't keep them here on the farm close to the road 'cause the Yankees would steal them, so they carried them way over on the opposite side of the road in an old piney field and hid them back in these thick pines. And feed them all winter--so in the spring of the year--along about April, grass got right tall in the yard and my great-grandmother sent my grandfather and a colored boy to get those horses and put them in the yard and to graze it down. She said she hadn't seen her son's horse since the fall before. So, while the horses were grazing, they looked and here come a band of Yankees down that

rocky hill out there. They drove up, came in the yard, started catching the horses and old Mr. French was an old man then--he went out and begged them not to take the bourses, but they said no--they were going to take them. So he said, "Well, if you have to take them, how about leaving that one horse"--said, "I lost my son and this was his horse--that's the only thing I've got to remember him by," he said, "Could you leave that?" And the officer said yeah, he'd leave it. Finally, he said, "No, I don't believe I will," and he took his sword and cut the reins out of the old man's hands and took that one, too. So they stole every horse on the place. And left here, there wasn't a horse left on the farm.

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Q: And, did--I don't guess the family received any compensation?

A: No, indeed.

Q: For the horse--obviously. Only a few--I know a few public buildings and so on that were damaged received a little bit of-

Sister: Oh, well, now--this was during the Civil War, but my grandmother when she was little and she got caught--tell her about that.

A: Well, my grandmother was about six or seven years old and she was caught down in what is know as Leeland neighborhood now and the Yankees were camped all around that winter--around everywhere and she told me that as far as you could see there was not a tree standing 'cept one in the graveyard down there. She was visiting her grandparents, whose name was Daffan, and there was a--all the rail fences were burned up. The people were--they were just freezing-

Q: They... for heat.

A: Yeah, and said they wouldn't let them come back through the line to come home--they lived above here in the upper end of Stafford. So finally in the spring of the year, they did let them come through. And her uncle went down there and picked her up--said he thought he'd never get home with two little girls--said they'd jump out and run and pick flowers--he couldn't get them back in the buggy. He hate getting them home. And they left some tripods with the pots and so on that they cooked--and they left them down there and my--somebody gave my grandmother three of them and they are right here in the yard right now. Those same three tripods that the-

Q: Probably Union--

A: The Union camp.

Sister: Tell about the home that she was staying in--her grandparents--they were using it for headquarters.

A: Yeah, they were using it for sorta headquarters--the Daffan place and when they got ready to leave this commanding officer took some of his trusted lieutenants in and had them dig up the basement floor which was dirt and buried salt, meat, blankets, and all kinds of things because they just scorched the earth around there. And he told them that after the war, that if there was anything he could do to help them, to call on him--write to him, and they did keep in touch for many years afterwards, and the man's name was-

Q: Did the family live upstairs?

A: And the man's name was--I think it was Chamberlain, something like that--the Yankee officer.

Sister: The family stayed upstairs and the army was downstairs.

Q: On the first level of the house?

Sister: Yeah, they stayed on the first level.

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Q: And the family was Daffan?

A: Yeah, Daffan--D-a-f-f-a-n.

Q: And this was what--the Leeland area.

A: That's right.

Q: Today. Oh, no--

A: Has it run out?

Q: Had it already run out--was not of that taped? No, but Joe Davis--when we stopped and we started talking about Joe David--it was on pause--I could scream. Oh--John, you have it on that one-

A: Yeah.

Q: ... or some particular topic that you like to talk about.

A: Well, I never did dabble much in politics and I can't think of anything now.

Q: Okay.

Sister: Your daddy ran for an office.

A: Yeah, my daddy...

Sister: Back in 1921--the year I was born.

Q: Are you and... the same age? You were telling us about the Joe Davis store here--... community...

A: ... all right.

Q: ...

A: Is Joe Davis'...

Q: Yes, yes, you were talking about that before--so, okay, go ahead and talk about that. The last time we talked, you were telling us about the Joe Davis Store which was a variety store here in the center of the county--right here-

A: Man by the name of Joe Davis. He was a Russian Jew and he came to this country from North Africa. He'd been peddling all over North Africa with a partner and they decided--one wanted to go to Australia and one wanted to come to America. And they couldn't agree so they wound up Joe Davis came to this country and the other fella went to Australia. And he started out with a pack on his back and they say you could hear him a mile away with his tin cans and pans rattling.

Q: Did you hear about when this was when he came through?

A: Well, it had to be--

Q: Was it after the Civil War?

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A: Yeah, it had to be after the Civil War.

Q: Late 1800's or early 1900's?

A: Yeah, I'd say. Late 1800's or early 1900's. Anyhow, he owned a store in here near Tackett's Mill. He married a Miss Heather ... (?) and they had two children and they all worked at the Protestant church(?).

Q: Davis was the name that he took.

A: Yeah, I guess it was--I don't know what his original--but anyhow, he built up this--he built warehouses to store things in and in the fall of the year, before the roads got so bad, of course, after work out here, there was just no traveling on this road here--it would just get axle-deep. And he had four horses--had a four-horse team and a big covered wagon like they used out west--Conestoga the wagon and that wagon went to town every day and brought a load back to go in that warehouse. And you could go to Joe Davis Store and buy just about anything you could buy at Fredericksburg. Bolts of material of all kinds--you bought kerosene by the barrel, salt meat, fish--everything you could think of--dishes, all kinds of things like that and his prices were comparatively lower than Fredericksburg, really. And he's get people from all over the country--all up in Fauquier and everywhere would come down and deal with Joe Davis.

Q: Well now, when did he go out of business? Did he die or--

A: Well, he stayed in business until, I'd say, until i'd say the middle of 1930's. He went out of business. He got so old he couldn't tend to it. But he--that was a landmark around here--everybody dealt with Joe Davis' Store. I can remembe when I was a little boy, see those wagons go up the road.

Q: He always used the horse and wagon?

A: Oh, yeah, there was no truck big enough to haul the stuff he was hauling. And the roads--you couldn't get over them...

Q: The roads weren't paved?

A: They didn't pave this road out here until after World War II.

Q: That's Poplar Road?

A: That's right.

Q: That would seem to go to ... ?

A: Well, I guess that was the part held cross. They call it Route 616, but it runs all the way to Warrenton, really.

Q: okay, if--there was another route to Warrenton?

A: it winds all around into the country up into Stafford and the lower end of Fauquier until you get to Warrenton.

Q: Goes to Summerville(?)?

A: Yeah, it goes right by Sommerville.

Q: To Bristersburg?

A: That's right.

Q: I came down that road ... has been a road there for a long, long time.

A: Yeah, that's right. Ever since I ever heard anything about this ... been using it.

Sister: Tell her about Tackett's Mill.

A: Yeah--Tackett's Mill was just a little bit above Davis' store and it was a water mill run by a water wheel and there was a store and a saloon there and up on the hill from there was the girl's boarding school. Before the Civil War, I had two aunts that were going to school there-

Q: Who operated the school?

A: I don't know who operated the school, but I had two great-aunts who were going there and they said they could hear the guns going off when they had the battle of Bull Run in Manassas. They could hear the guns.

Q: They could hear the firing.

A: That's right. And so their father thought it wasn't safe and he had them-brought them back home. And I guess the school closed soon after that. Which you can still see some old Lombardi poplar trees standing around up there, that were evidently part of the grounds of the school.

Q: And the family that operated the mill, were they the Tacketts at that time?

A: And some people by the name of Barber. Tacketts and the Barbers and the Goolricks

Sister: The Rowe family.

Q: The Rowe family?

A: I never heard of him.

Q: And you said the Goolricks?

A: ...

Sister: I always thought Mama said that the Rowe's--where did they come from?

A: No, I don't know.

Sister: Well, they did--that's what you used to say.

A: Maybe so.

Q: What were they--now, that was a grain mill?

A: Yeah, A grist mill actually.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah, they didn't make flour there or wheat--they would grind whole wheat flour, but they couldn't make white flour there.

Q: They didn't have--

A: They weren't set up to make-

Q: I guess they started out with cort--

A: Yeah, they started out with making cornmeal--and then they made some dry

small grain, but they couldn't refine it to white flour like the other mills did.

Q: Were there other mills in this general area?

A: Yeah, there were other mills, too. There was one--about Josiahs Rowe's family.

Sister: One... when they used to come up here.

A: ... Aunt Mary's.

Sister: But they had come from up this part of the country.

A: You tell it--I don't know. But anyhow, there was another mill down here called Kellogg's Mill where Able--just above Able Lake. Now they could make white flour and had a grist mill there, too. And they also had an up and down sawmill with a rip saw that sawed lumber. And they ran by water power. And was known as Kellogg's Mill. And just above that on the same creek, was another mill called Shackleford's Mill--Beryl Shackleford ran it. That was just a grist mill.

Q: You said--what creek was that--

A: Potomac Creek.

Q: Potomac Creek?

A: That's right.

Q: Well, Tackett's Mill is on Potomac Creek--

A: No, it's on the upper end of Aquia Creek.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry.

A: There was an Old Mill Pond--there was just a big swamp there and the millrace was real long and they would collect water in that swamp--in that mill place and... dry weather lots of times you couldn't do--dry... there was no water up there.

Q: Well now--most everyone who lived in this area, of course, was farming--

A: Oh, yes, everybody depended upon farming for a living.

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Q: Well, I heard you mention earlier that at the time of the Civil War having sheep, but were there many people raising sheep?

A: Oh, yeah--everybody was raising them.

Q: Okay... now.

A: But don't many people around here fool with sheep now, but there used to be a lot of sheep in the neighborhood, but dogs got to killing them so bad-

Q: Stray dogs?

A: Yeah.

Q: Attack.

A: And it's even worse now with all these subdivisions and dogs running loose.

Q: What are some of the major changes that you have seen in this part of Stafford County since you've--can remember--as a child?

A: Well, one of the biggest things was the improvement of the roads. And telephone system. We used to have an old party line system--everybody was responsible for fixing their line in front of his own property, even though everybody used it. And when the telephone rang, everybody ran to hear the gossip because there was nearly a feud going on somewhere.

Q: Okay--was your family one of the earlier families to get a phone that--electricity do you remember when that was put in?

A: Yeah--we didn't get electricity until after World War II. They had--

Q: ...

A: No, we had the private telephone system--had the old crank telephone on the wall and it was more of a local system--of course, you could call out, but it was used mostly for local calls.

Sister: I'm going to chick on the cake now.

A: Okay.