

# **THE GENEALOGICAL AND ORAL HISTORY OF THE RICHARD MERCHANT FAMILY OF DUMFRIES**

By: Thelma Mountjoy

An address presented at a meeting of Historic Dumfries Virginia, Inc.,  
At the Dumfries Town Hall  
January 4, 1979

The persons most helpful in giving oral history of the Richard Merchant family, who owned and lived at the residence on the corner of Duke and Cameron Streets, now known as the Weems-Botts Museum, are Mr. Cecil Garrison, Mr. and Mrs. Ruel Waters, Mrs. Lillian Carden, Mrs. Edith Brawner, Mr. and Mrs. James Bishop, Jack Merchant and Mrs. Annie Shumate. These people were neighbors, friends or relatives, who knew individual members of the family personally. Their contributions helped to make this paper possible.

For almost a century, the Weems-Botts Museum was the home of the Richard Merchant family. Mr. Merchant was considered to be a successful businessman of his day. He is thought to have owned and operated a store on Main Street in Dumfries. Mr. Cecil Garrison and Mrs. Gary West have store bills and receipts made out to Mr. Merchant. Much of his wealth was in the form of land covered with timber, which was gradually disposed of by his widow and daughter after his death in 1906.

Mr. Merchant owned the land where Cecil Garrison, Mrs. McKnight, and Mr. James Bishop now live. He also owned the Henderson House where Rev. and Mrs. A.H. Shumate live today. Skip Cosner's Used Car Lot was once a part of this estate.

Mr. Cecil Garrison, one of the few people in Dumfries that remembers Mr. Richard Merchant, says that he looked the part of a Southern gentleman, with a long beard down on his chest. He always wore a swallow-tail coat and a hat which distinguished him from the general male resident of the town of Dumfries.

Mr. Merchant was a small farmer. He raised cows, chickens, hogs and horses. The barn stood where Mr. Cecil Garrison's home is now located. Between the Weems-Botts house and Mr. Garrison's house was a vegetable garden that Mr. Merchant tended.

The genealogy of the family dates back to the early 1700's. The first Richard Merchant (1752 - no birth date given), was a native of Maryland. He married Mary Sweeting, July 28, 1723, and they had four children. Old St. Paul's Church in Baltimore County, Maryland, has records of the births of the first three children, but the last one was born in Virginia, near Winchester.

The oldest son of Richard Merchant of Maryland, was William Sr., born in 1725 - no death date. He married a lady by the name of Priscilla on March 25, 1748, and they had ten children. The third child, William Jr., was the first Merchant to live in Prince William County.

William Merchant Jr. (1752-1822) married Margaret (1767-1812) and they had seven children. The Merchant Family Bible notes that all of the above listed children were born in Dumfries. William Jr., himself, was born in Queen Anne's County, Maryland, but probably moved to Dumfries between 1784 and 1785 since his name doesn't appear in the tax list for 1783.

Margaret's tombstone in the Dumfries Cemetery reads that she had eight children; however, she had only seven children. The eighth child, Maria Louisa Posey Merchant, was the daughter of Richard Posey and Sarah Berry. After Mrs. Merchant's death, Mr. Merchant married the widow of Richard Posey, therefore, Maria L. Posey Merchant was a step daughter of William Merchant, Jr. This was confirmed in the letter written by Violet to Franziska Jonas in 1967.

The second son of William Merchant, Jr., was Jacob (1786-1816), who married Margaret Watters (1791 - no death date) on December 24, 1807 (note that one "t" has been dropped by the Waters family today). The third child of Jacob was William Henry Augustus Merchant (1812-1879), father of Richard. He married Mary Frances Stonnell (1817-1878) on December 30, 1840. They had three children, the second one was Richard, the owner and occupant of the home now named the Weems-Botts Museum.

Richard Merchant married his second cousin, Annie Speake, on September 5, 1877 in Washington, D.C. They had two boys, James Edward (1878-1879) and Richard Preston (1880-1884), and two girls, Mary E. (1883-1906) and Violet Ish (1886-1968).

Records of the birth and death of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Merchant, Mary E. (Mamie), and Violet Ish can be found on the tombstones in Dumfries Cemetery. Information concerning the birth and death of James Edward and Richard Preston were made available by Mr. Cecil Garrison from the records of Mrs. Shirley Peterson, his daughter.

Mrs. Annie Speake Merchant (1854-1952), wife of Richard, was a very kind, religious, dominant, and proud lady. She was the member of an old and respected family of the town with an aristocratic heritage.

Mrs. Merchant's two boys died before they were five, and Mary E. (Mamie) died at twenty-three years of age. It was her daughter, Violet Ish, who became the loyal and constant companion of her mother all of her life. Her mother died in 1952 at the age of ninety-eight.

Mrs. Annie Keys Cline Shumate, who owns and lives at the Henderson house which was once owned by the Richard Merchant family, wrote the following account of the Merchant family:

"Did I know Mrs. Annie Merchant and Violet? They were dear neighbors and friends for many years. They are the yesterday years; but memories contain many happy hours spent in the old Merchant home, talking often about the years that had gone by; but more often about what was going on in changes in the old town and the surrounding community.

"The Old Mine, the railroad - Narrow Gage with the Dinkie Engine that ran to Sparrows Point carrying not only the Pyrites from the Mine but also passengers and the community doctor for there was no other road to travel. Never just gossip!

"Violet gave up a woman's right to home and family to care for her mother.



"Violet had been away from Dumfries, probably in some school for a time, I do not know where or how long. She was still young. She never left her mother again. True devotion.

"Mrs. Merchant was a gentle lady, frail looking, always making you welcome, and showing much pleasure in your visit with her. My mother, Mrs. Van Keys, stayed in our home often during the later 1930's. She loved to visit with Mrs. Merchant, as they could talk of interesting things that suited their age.

"Mrs. Merchant was confined to her bed for a number of years; just old and weak.

"I had the pleasure - as I was near - of taking her things - tidbits to eat, and books for Violet to read.

"The old house was always interesting to me. I had started housekeeping on Washington Street in 1907 in one built just like it.

"I never knew Violet's father, Richard Merchant. I knew Dr. Merchant, a relative, a surgeon from Richmond, Virginia, who later moved to Manassas.

"Mrs. Merchant's two brothers, Clay Speake and Willie Speake, were honored men of this community, also our dear friends. They were a generation who lived to old age. Willie Speake's wife taught school and played the church organ for many years. Mrs. Annie Speake outlived Mr. Clay by a number of years. She was a very special friend of ours. Many evenings were spent in her home.

"I am glad they named the park to honor an old family."

Mrs. A.H. Shumate

or

Annie G. Shumate

November 9, 1975

When Mr. Merchant died in 1906, Mrs. Merchant took in boarders with the help of Violet. Most of the people were workers in the Pyrite Mine in Dumfries. Some were schoolteachers such as Miss Nettie Robinson, who later married Mr. Willie Speake, and Mrs. Lillian Carden, both teachers at the Dumfries Elementary School. Mrs. Elizabeth Reynolds' father, Mr. Barlow, boarded there. Mr. and Mrs. Claude Brawner lived with Mrs. Merchant and Violet when they were first married.

Miss Violet, like her mother, was a very gentle, kind, and proud lady. She was an active member of the Dumfries Methodist Church, played the organ, helped with the Sunday school, and was an active member of the Women's Society of the Church. Mrs. Genevive Garrison, her cousin, who lived next door, often worked with Violet on Christmas entertainment's for the church.

Violet went to Washington, D.C., for some schooling, and is said to have worked for a while in D.C. Violet fell in love with a young gentleman, but her mother made her give him up and return home to live in Dumfries with her.

Violet had a number of male admirers. One of her friends was Riley Wright. Mr. Garrison has a picture of Violet and Wright taken on top of the Akens Department Store in Washington, D.C., during the first inauguration of President Wilson in 1913. Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Garrison, Violet, and Wright attended this event together. Due to the wishes

of her mother, Violet gave up all rights to marriage and family to be a companion to her mother.

The Merchants, like most people in early days, were afraid of fire. There was not much chance of saving a house once the fire had a start. No fire was left in the stove overnight. A woodstove was used to cook on and heat the Weems part of the house. A heater was used in the parlor or Botts area. A register was cut through to heat the bedrooms upstairs where the family slept.

Oil lamps were used to light the house and boarders were always cautioned to be careful of fire.

Mr. Ruel Waters and Mr. Wilson Merchant sawed wood for Mrs. Merchant about 1913-1915 with a crosscut saw for 10 cents an hour after school and on Saturdays. Later, George Weedon had a saw-rig and cut the wood for the Merchants and other neighborhood people.

After Mr. Merchant's death, Mrs. Merchant and Violet gradually disposed of much of the family estate. Dr. Cline bought the Henderson House for \$600.00 because it was in such need of repair. Many workmen at the mine had lived in the Henderson House and rented rooms. Other lots were sold to Mr. Cecil Garrison, some have changed ownership and today Mrs. McKnight and Mr. Bishop live on land that was once a part of the Merchant's estate. Skip Cosner bought his business location from Violet.

Violet Ish not only had a very lonely life after her mother's death, but a small income. Her cousins, Mrs. Cecil Garrison and June Bishton, and other neighbors were very good to Violet. Often they would take her to their home because the old house was cold and drafty during winter storms. In later years, they prepared and took food to her and were most kind to her in many ways. Mrs. Bishop brought Violet her mail, stamps and also many goodies to eat. Mr. Bishop was often asked to repair furniture. He rebuilt the back steps with the help of a friend.

Violet finally sold her home and used the money to enter a nursing home where she died, the last member of Richard Merchant's family.

Although all members of the family are deceased and the estate has passed into other hands, the Richard Merchant family has left a legacy. It is the careful care that this old house received as the Merchant's home that has made possible its restoration as the Weems-Botts Museum for future generations.

A record of Merchant memorabilia and a genealogy of the Merchant family are available for inspection in the archives of Historic Dumfries, Virginia, Incorporated, at the Weems-Botts Museum.