



Courtesy of Vivian Ford

Vivian Thomas' mother, Jeannette, with the family horse, c. 1919. Vivian's father used the horse in his job; also, on very bad days, he took the children up the hill to the Hume School in a horse-drawn-wagon.



Courtesy of Vivian Ford

Vivian Thomas with Hume School classmates, helping with yard work behind the school building c. 1920.

Vivian Thomas Ford

Abingdon's Last Living Resident

BY SHERMAN PRATT

At this writing in 2003 the only known surviving former resident of the Abingdon Manor, the ruins of which are now stabilized and skillfully preserved at Reagan National Airport, is Vivian Thomas Ford, who was born there in 1912 and lived there until her family moved elsewhere in 1922. Vivian now lives, and for almost the last sixty years has lived, in her home in the 600 block of South 19th Street in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood of South Arlington. Vivian's parents, father Daniel Allwine Thomas and mother Jeanette (Mudd?) Janusky Thomas, are long gone, having died in 1942 and 1972, respectively. Also long deceased are her six siblings; brothers George, William, Robert, Daniel, and Alfred, and sister Rosy Virginia.

A Brief History Of Abingdon Manor

Until the home on the Abingdon estate burned in 1930, it was believed to have been the oldest house in Arlington. The oak beams and rafters dated back to at least 1746, when Gerard Alexander is recorded in a Fairfax County survey as having a house on the property. John Parke Custis, George Washington's adopted stepson, in order to be close to Mt. Vernon, bought more than 1000 acres from Gerard Alexander's son Robert in 1778. The following year, he and his wife Eleanor moved into the old mansion built for the Alexander family. Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis, their third child, was born at Abingdon on March 21, 1779.

However, John Parke Custis died on November 5, 1781, and his widow could not afford to keep up the payments on the estate. Consequently, the property reverted to the ownership of the Alexander family. They sold it, and it went through a series of owners until 1835, when it was bought by General Alexander Hunter. When Hunter died in 1849, his will left Abingdon to his brother, Bushrod, to hold in trust for Bushrod's only son, also named Alexander Hunter.

During the Civil War, while Bushrod and Alexander were serving with the Confederate forces, Abingdon was confiscated by the federal government and sold at auction for non-payment of taxes (the same thing happened to the Arlington estate). Following the war, Alexander Hunter successfully sued to recover his property. He later sold Abingdon to the Alfred Richards Brick Company, and it was transferred to the New Washington Brick Company in 1900.¹

The Thomas Family Arrives At Abingdon

Vivian Thomas Ford at age 92 remembers her early years in the Abingdon house and grounds with fondness, nostalgia and surprising clarity.² She was born at historical Abingdon in 1912 soon after her parents arrived from the District of Columbia to make their home at Abingdon. Her father wanted to be nearer to the feed company and the brick yard on Jeff Davis highway (U. S. Route One) where he worked. Abingdon and some of its original grounds were owned by the companies that employed her father and as a company employee the Thomas family was permitted to live on the premises rent free or for only a modest rent.

Vivian had six brothers and sisters. Rosy Virginia had died in 1898 at the age of six. Her brothers Daniel and George died just after World War I while the family remained in Abingdon. Her other brothers, William, Robert, and Alfred, lived until well after their days in Abingdon and died in 1971, 1978 and 1980 respectively.

1912 - Vivian Thomas Is Born At Abingdon

Vivian Thomas was born on December 31, 1912 at Abingdon. The yellowing family records record that her mother's physician was a Doctor Walters. She spent her earliest days at Abingdon first as a tottering infant, and then as a young preteen school girl. When she reached school age, she attended beginning grades in the Hume elementary school about a mile away and up the hill from the Potomac River lowlands and flood plains. There were nice days she remembers,

...but in the cold and windy and rainy days of winter the walk of more than a mile for us little kids was almost more than we could handle. To get to Hume we had to struggle up Frazer Avenue, now named South 23rd Street. It was unpaved, steep and usually muddy and slippery. On the very worst of days my father would take pity on us and hitch up the horse or mule to his wagon and ride us to school.. There were only four grades in those years in Hume. The ground floor had two classrooms and the second floor had one large room that was used for storage or purposes other than classes.³

Vivian Thomas grew in the years at Abingdon. As she matured, she became aware of the prosperity and advancement of the three long ago famed and youthful residents who preceded her in Abingdon, and of the historical legacy they left behind. Vivian Ford recalled to this author that she learned early in her life that upon the death of President Washington in 1799 and of his wife Martha shortly thereafter in 1802, Washington lands and assets were made available by will or otherwise for the benefit of the Abingdon youngsters. Martha Custis and her husband Thomas Peter of Georgetown built their home, Tudor Place,



Courtesy of Vivian Ford

Vivian Thomas (sitting, second from right in front row) with Hume School classmates, c. 1920.

on 27th Street in the District of Columbia; Nelly Custis and her new husband Lawrence Lewis built their home, Woodlawn, on land now overlooking U.S. Route 1 near Fort Belvoir; and their brother, George Washington Parke Custis, took possession of lands owned and passed from his father on the Virginia side of the Potomac River across from Georgetown. He built his home, Arlington House, on those acres in what is now Arlington National Cemetery. Vivian Thomas was ever mindful of the historical importance of all three of these early mansions and estates and their residents or owners. She was ever impressed that she was privileged to live in the same house as did they while at Abingdon.

Of daily life at Abingdon, she relates:

In the warm and sunny days of spring and autumn, my nearby schoolmates and I had fun when not making the trips to and from school. We often had beautiful warm and sunny spring days at Abingdon with numerous blooms from fruit and other trees. The area was mostly quiet and peaceful, except for occasional trains that passed nearby by on their way to or from the Potomac River railroad bridge when coming from or going into Washington, at which times they usually blew their whistles, but there was no roar of auto traffic as in later years. My brothers and I played

often in the Abingdon yard or the surrounding fields. In the house the bathroom was on the opposite end from the kitchen and there was a basement with a dirt floor. Some foods were stored in the basement to include molasses, black walnuts and chestnuts. My brother Alfred, that we called Freddie, and I would often slip into the basement to sneak molasses. Some times we over-indulged and got sick with belly aches.⁴

Mrs. Ford further remembers that her father kept horses and a mule to haul coal from the California Coal Company on Route One where he worked. Vivian recalls watching and talking with the "colored man" Jim who helped around the house cooking slop for the pigs and performing other chores for the Thomas family. The two grew close and were fond of each other and he let her accompany him to set the rabbit traps in the surrounding corn fields.

1922 - The Thomas Family Leaves Abingdon

In 1922 the Thomas family moved from Abingdon into a modest house nearby on Route One. Abingdon and its surrounding lands were about to be purchased by the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad company for new tracks through the area⁵ and the Thomas family's favored privileges with respect to low or no rent for Abingdon were about to be terminated. The family was reluctant to pay, or could not pay, the higher rent expected to be set by the railroad company so they were obliged to find different housing. Whereupon the Thomases moved temporarily into a makeshift and aging house nearby on Route One, known also as the Jeff-Davis Highway. It was in this period that Vivian's father replaced his animals with a Model T Ford truck. Upon the departure of the Thomas family from Abingdon, the E.W. Beckworth family became the tenants. The railroad company unexpectedly delayed its purchase of the land, so the Beckworths were allowed to remain and farmed the fields for four years from 1923-27. That family eventually moved to a house still standing today at 621 21st Street, South only a couple of blocks from the present Ford house on South 19th Street.⁶

Abingdon Burns

Vivian continued her schooling at Hume and one spring day after her family left Abingdon she remembers a poignant incident with particular sadness and nostalgia: that day in March 1930 her former home caught fire and she watched it burn to the ground. She and her classmates suddenly heard fire engines with motors grinding and bells clanging. Someone in her class shouted "Look! There's a fire down below near the river!" Vivian rushed to the window and saw columns of smoke rising about a mile away. She recognized that it was Abingdon where she was born and had recently lived.

In its March 6, 1930 issue the Washington Post provided details of the fire and surrounding events in an article headed "Old Nellie Custis House Destroyed By Brush Fire."⁷ In later years, the remains of the manor, part of the floor, some outer walls and much of the brick fireplace were stabilized by the Washington Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia antiques⁸ and the area was enclosed in a wrought iron fence erected by the local chapters of the DAR.

Vivian's Life After Abingdon

Upon finishing her first and lower grades at Hume she then continued her schooling to the 11th grade at the Mt. Vernon Avenue school just across Four Mile Run.⁹ She remembers her walks to that school were also sometimes pleasant and enjoyable but also very often painfully difficult and demanding.

On cold or rainy days my parents gave me five cents so I could catch the trolley on Route One at the foot of Frazer Avenue. The trolley line ran down to and across Four Mile Run and then down Mount Vernon Avenue to the school. On some days my friends and I would secretly walk anyway and save the five cents to buy candy.¹⁰

In 1939 Vivian Ford's father died at the age of 62. He is buried in Columbia Gardens Cemetery on Arlington Boulevard at Glebe Road. In that same year Vivian met and married John Ford, who was born on August 12, 1906 at Colonial Beach in Stratford County. She thus became Vivian Thomas Ford. The two were married by Rev. Townsend, who was the minister of the Mt. Vernon Baptist Church on Fraser (South 23rd) Street. They traveled to the residence of the minister in Snow Hill, Maryland for the ceremony. Vivian would have preferred to be married in the new Calvary Methodist Church on South 23rd Street that she had just joined, but could not be married there because of church construction underway.

John Ford had been living with his uncle in the 1000 block of South 20th Street in Arlington. He then worked as superintendent of construction in the building of houses in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood along Jeff-Davis Highway. The construction company superintendent offered the Fords a just-completed cottage on 19th Street, South at an attractive discount price, partly as compensation for Ford's services. The Fords quickly accepted, and in 1939 moved in at 623 19th Street, South. The home has remained their residence to this date. The Fords had only one child, a daughter, Jeanette, who died at the age of 49 in 1992. She was married to Gerry Feneske.

In World War II, John Ford served in the U.S. Navy on Midway Island with the Seabees (special engineer units that specialized in invasion beach con-



Sherman Pratt

Vivian Thomas Ford and her husband John at home, April 2001.

struction). In the post World War II years he worked at the Fort Myer Army post and for the Corning Construction Company of the District of Columbia. He died on July 15, 2003 after spending his last days in a local nursing home.¹¹

Vivian remembers that when Abingdon was set afire in March 1930 and burned it left only some brick from the walls and fireplace. She recounts that she has revisited the area with some regularity in the later years and knows of and appreciates the contributions and efforts of the DAR, the Preservation Association and others to preserve and protect the Abingdon ruins.

Vivian Thomas Ford is well aware and proud of the recognition bestowed on her former home, Abingdon, where she was born. She knows that her county has a street and an elementary school named Abingdon, and that there is also a vibrant and historically and culturally renowned town by the name in the southwest corner of the state, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She knows too that many other states also have towns or other public facilities named Abingdon. She

can become philosophical and emotionally reminiscent about Abingdon as reflected in her following comments:

Future visitors or history buffs may never know that I or the Thomas family lived at Abingdon, but at least they can know there was an Abingdon plantation, where it was located, and something of the unique and exciting role it played in the birth and development of Arlington County and northern Virginia in the earliest days when settlers were few and far between and Indians were still around with whom the early settlers had to cope.¹²

Sherman Pratt has been a resident of Arlington County since his retirement from the Army and Civil Service. He is a past president of the Historical Society and has repeatedly contributed to the Society's *Magazine*. He is the author of books on World War II and the Korean War and on Arlington County history.

Endnotes

¹ A more complete history of Abingdon can be found in George Dodge, "The Abingdon of Alexander Hunter, Et Al." *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol.11, No. 3 (October 1999), pp. 43-53, from which these paragraphs were excerpted.

² As told to the author in personal interviews in the years 2002 and 2003; notes in author's possession.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ From a visitor brochure prepared and distributed by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority.

⁶ Sherman Pratt, *Arlington County Virginia: A Modern History* (Chelsea MI: BookCrafters, 1997), pp. 342-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁸ Brochure, Airports Authority.

⁹ At the time in question, before the 1929 annexation of portions of Arlington by the City of Alexandria, the location of the Mt. Vernon school would have been in Arlington.

¹⁰ Personal interviews.

¹¹ In July, 2003 Vivian Ford was making plans, with the assistance of her son-in-law Gerry Feneske, to sell her home on 21st Street, South and also move into a nursing home.

¹² Personal interviews.