

Westry: A History

BY AN OLD REPORTER

Westrayville: The crossroads now known as Westry, 6 miles east of Rocky Mount, on Highway 64, was once known as Westrayville and was the site of one of the largest plantations in the section and the site of Nash County's first official academy. Samuel Westray first appears in the Nash County deeds in 1790. He is said to have been a school teacher in Northampton County. At any rate, as we shall see, he realized the value of education and was active in promoting it in his new county. He continued buying up land and at the time of his death owned about 10,000 acres. One of the early conveyances was from William Westray but no relationship was given. Samuel Westray probably descended from the Westray family of Isle of Wright County, Virginia where the name appears at an early date. On Nov. 23, 1809, an advertisement by Samuel Westray appeared in the Raleigh Star, stating that the academy at Westrayville would commence in January, 1810 under the direction of Mr. John Bobbit who would teach Latin, Greek and French. It further stated that a large two story house had been erected for the purpose on the road from Tarboro to Louisburg, five miles from Nash Court House. There are records showing that one William Salter taught school at Nash Court House about 1790. However, the Westrayville Academy appears to have been the first school in the county with any official organization. In an editorial in the Raleigh paper in 1810, Samuel Westray and Dr. T. Jones were listed as patron of the school and John Bobbit stated to be a graduate of the University of N.C. According to the Raleigh Star of June 11, 1811, Alexander Falconer, James W. Clark, George Boddie, and Robert C. Hilliard comprised the Board of Visitors. Falconer was from Franklin County and James W Clark from Edgecombe. For a few years the academy enjoyed an excellent reputation in Nash and the neighboring counties. However, there is no further mention of it and it is not known when it closed.

Samuel Westray married Sally Bradford Turner, the widow of David Short. Her descendants own an oil portrait of her wearing the lace bonnets then popular. She had children by both marriages. The will of Samuel Westray, dated April 1, 1827, was probated in Nash in 1828. He devised to his son Turner B. Westray the Gandy place on Great Saponi and to his wife Sally B. Westray the home plantation saving the academy and twenty-five acres around it which he gave to his son Turner Page Westray. He devised his Fishing Creek plantation to his daughter Martha, the wife of Dr. John Arrington and other property to Harriet, the wife of James Smith Battle. The will of his widow, Sarah B. Westray was dated Sept 8, 1838 and mentions her daughters Harriet Battle and Martha Arrington; grandchildren Sarah B. Short, Jordon Hill Short and Thomas Short; children of son William Short; grandchildren of Harriet. Eliza Drake, the wife of Dr. Joseph Drake and Solomon David Sessums, children of daughter Mary Ann Sessums, wife of Dr. Isaac Sessums. Also mentioned was her grand grandchild Wm. Smith Jordan, child of Mary Jane Jordan. The last named is of interest. His full name was Will Smith Battle Jordan, but he later shortened it to Wm. Battle Jordan. He was a resident of Rocky Mount for many years and though he married twice, left no issue. His entire estate was left to the Episcopal Church.

Turner Page Westray married and left one son Samuel Westray who never married. Samuel Westray was active in civic affairs in Rocky Mount and died about 1909. Kemp Plummer Battle, in his book, "Memories of an Old Time Tar Heel", had the following to say about Mr. Westray, "I often make the journey to Edgecombe by horse and buggy. A very convenient and most pleasant trip was to go by Westrayville, the home of my wife's uncle, Turner Page Westray, and spend the night there. Mr. Westray was a highly intelligent man, with such a well balanced judgment that it was pleasant and profitable to listen to him. As I lived in the capital and often met leading actors in the strife going on, he gave me the impression that my visits were grateful to him. This and the winning welcome of his beautiful wife and only child, Samuel, make my evenings delightful. The roads were so good that the fifty miles to Raleigh were passed without injury to the horse or horses, for sometimes I had two. Mr. Westray was a man of pluck. Once a number of deserters from the army came armed at night to his dwelling and demanded a supply of bacon. He walked into his porch with his double-barreled gun and with the fiercest vituperations, drove them away. After the war he found it irksome to carry on his farm with hired Negroes and accepted the invitations of his nephew and namesake Capt. Turner W. Battle to live with him at Cool Spring. A short time afterwards, he died of heart disease while traveling on the railroad. He left his estate of about \$250,000 to his son and after his son's death, it was divided among his heirs at law. My son Thomas was his executor"

Very little remains at the site of Westrayville today. The former residence stood in the Southeast corner of the present Westray Crossroads, about 900 yards from the road. It was surrounded by a grove of oaks and approached by a drive through a long lawn with an entrance gate on the highway. It was a large two story house with four rooms and a wide central hall on each floor. The house was burned soon after the property passed out of the family after the death of Mr. Sam Westray. The family graveyard was on the highway near the present crossroads filling station. It has been ploughed up. Only one grave was marked, that of Mr. Sam Westray. Some years ago this grave was moved to Pineview Cemetery in Rocky Mount. When the monument was erected and the iron fence placed around it, it is said that one of the old family servants became upset because the iron fence was placed across the grave of her old master Turner Westray and had cut his legs in two. The old house site is now marked by a couple of tobacco barns. The old academy building has disappeared also. This stood in the southwest corner of the crossroads on the highway. When the railroad trunk line to Nashville was built, the station a mile east of the Westrayville Crossroads was also named Westray. It now presents a dilapidated appearance with a few rundown stores. (The information on Westrayville was kindly supplied by Mrs. Nell G. Battle.)