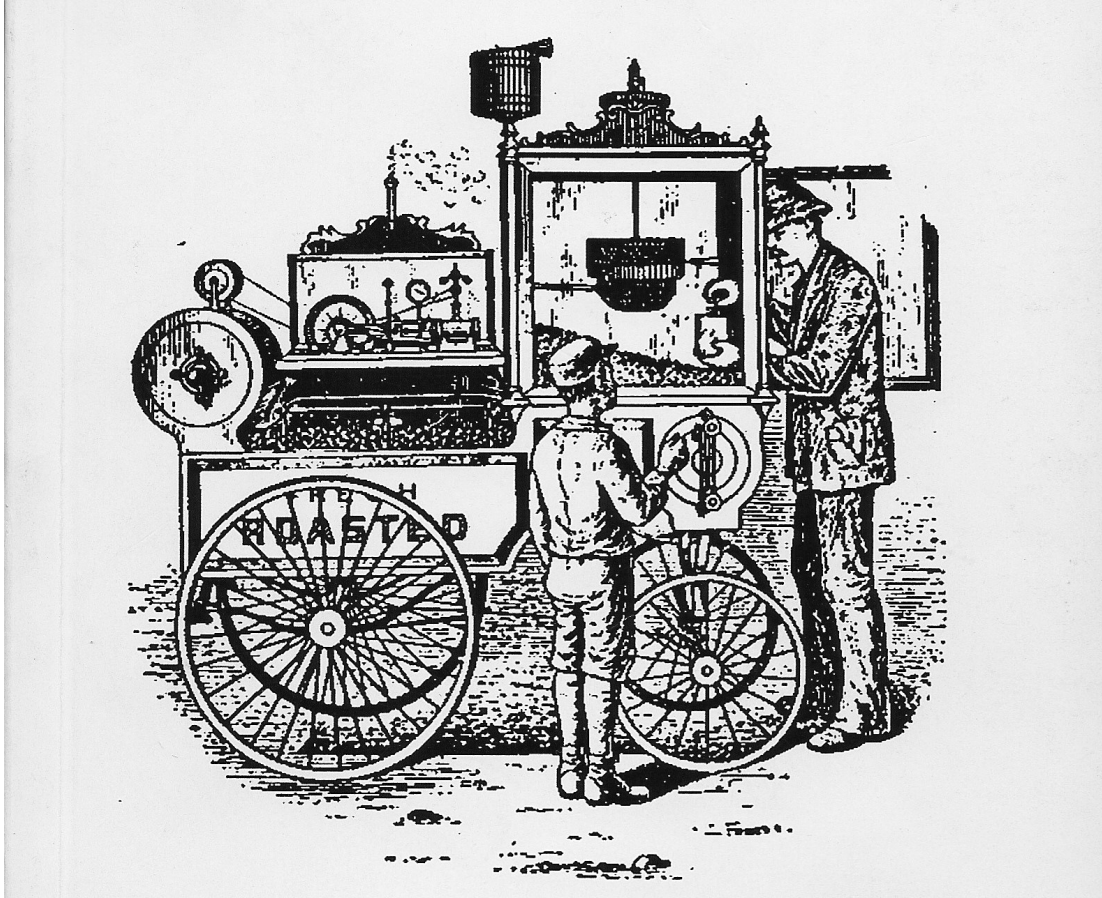


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Volume 19, Issue 3

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Steam Peanut Wagon, from Scientific American, 1894, on the cover of The Peanut Story by Roy Johnson, and used with permission of the publisher.

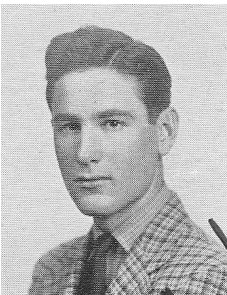
Speaking of Peanuts

In 2004 two SNHS members, Braxton Hill, a Norfolk accountant, and Joe Barlow, a Suffolk peanut farmer, were together talking peanuts. Braxton told Joe about *The Peanut Story* by the late Roy Johnson, which had many items of interest about Suffolk and Nansemond County. Eventually, thanks to Braxton, Joe read it, too. This letter was a record of Braxton's interesting memories about Suffolk and peanuts, stirred by *The Peanut Story*. Braxton Hill died in 2008 but thanks to his letter dated August 20, 2004, we are able to share these memories, too. *Used with permission from Joe Barlow and Bruce Hill Darden.*

Dear Mr. Barlow -

This letter is intended to comment on some of the things relative to the Peanut Book, etc. which I hope you and Mrs. Barlow will enjoy hearing about.

My wife, Barbara, and I were both born in 1920, so we are told. She was raised in Riverview in the old Dumville home, now occupied by Jerry Canaday. Her father was with Suffolk Clay Company, brick manufacturers, located near Reid's Ferry (owned by the J.M. Butler and Sons family--his cousins) until the depression when it closed down. He then went with Pond Peanut Company and remained there until he retired in the 1950's. He was in charge of the weighing and grading of all incoming peanuts. Mrs. Ballance's interest lay



Braxton Hill and Barbara Ballance, Suffolk High yearbook The Peanut 1938





Braxton Hill's father worked here and then later at Jos. P. Hall just around the corner.

in garden club work, and she served as President of the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs. As an aside, every year she typed up all the crop liens for the old American Bank and Trust Co.

My father was raised on a farm in Northampton County about 8 miles west of Murfreesboro, N.C. near Severn and Pendleton. This was a good size farm of about 1,000 acres of which about 600 were tilled, 300 in timber, and 100 in lowland or swamp; major crops were corn, peanuts and sundry grains. After attending Trinity College (now Duke) my father married a girl from Winton. Her father, a Livermon, was raised on a farm, but later ran a blacksmith shop, auto mechanic shop, and made wagons. He was also a deputy sheriff for years, and let the moonshiners stay in business as long as they behaved. After his marriage in about 1914, my father left the farm and moved to Eure to work in the bank. Practically all his customers were farmers. In 1919, he moved to Suffolk and was an officer in the National Bank of Suffolk until the 1930's, at which time he became part owner and manager of Jos. P. Hall Drug Co. My family moved from Suffolk in 1938 to Newport News, at which time I went off to college.

All of the above is an indication of the exposure that my wife and I were fortunate enough to have had in knowing many of the people involved in the peanut industry.

So here goes with some comments:

1. The enclosed newspaper clipping mentions Betty Pretlow's peanut dress. Am sure that you and Mrs. Barlow know Betty (and knew Josh) real well. My wife's mother made her peanut crown and peanut dress.



Betty Cross (Pretlow) 1941

2. When in my late teens, I worked in "Saunders Service" a soda shop and luncheonette (owned by Miss Bea Saunders of the county) during the summer. This was located close by the Chadwick Theatre, which had offices upstairs over the theatre. We delivered fountain cokes, nabs, aspirin, etc. to business people, postal workers, police station folks, etc. around that area. A Mr. Bain had an office over the theatre. He was a tall man, good looking, seemed to be in his seventies perhaps, very gentlemanly and liked sports. He was in the peanut business. I do not think he lived in Suffolk. He was a good tipper. I understand that he had something to do with Bain Field in Norfolk--a baseball diamond. I think Mr. Bain helped athletes go to college, much like Mr. Garland Gray of Waverly did. He was a nice man. Your sister can tell you more on this. See Note #1.

3. The Peanut Book mentions the different names that peanuts are called. When I was about 10 to 15 years old, I spent 2 or



Saunders Service (above) was just two doors from the Chadwick Theater. M.T. (Pete) Elliott's hotel is shown at right side of picture. St. Paul's Episcopal Church is clearly visible in the next block because the bank building (which now houses Wachovia) on the corner was still years away. The stores are decorated for the National Peanut Exposition (1941?) and Saunders Service Sundries' window is filled with peanuts. There are also burlap bags of peanuts leaning against the front of the store. An enlarged version of this photo shows the Gift Box, Mae Brinkley's store (our Franklin Street issue) about two doors past the theater (see arrow). The Saunders Service building was later swallowed by a larger building that now houses The Virginian-Pilot office.

3 weeks every August on the Hill Farm down in N.C. with my cousins. My Uncle Jarvis called peanuts "ground peas." When visiting, I would join my cousins (about 6 or 7 of them) grassing zillions of rows of peanuts with razor sharp hoes, pulling corn, shelling corn with hand cranked shellers, pulling and tying up fodder, feeding swill to the hogs, cleaning out mule, horse and cow stalls, eating watermelons, smoking corn silk cigarettes, and skinny dipping in the Meherrin River. A good time was had by all! To show you how things change, my Uncle Jarvis planted what he called Jay-Pan Peas between each corn stalk. When we cut out the corn stalks, we left the pea plants standing for later maturity. It turns out that these Jay-Pan Peas were soybeans to be used for feed. There was no market for soybeans as it is today.

4. I never met Mr. John King mentioned in the book, but as a kid I knew his widow. She was a very dignified lady (about 1930) who drove an air-cooled Franklin sedan. She lived in a stately home, which is now Baker Funeral Home on West Washington Street. *See Note #2.*

5. I knew both of the Mr. Pinners. They lived in adjacent homes on Pinner Street (noble homes still standing and in good repair), near Judge McLemore's home. *See pictures p. 5.*

The Pinners' office was at the corner of Washington and Main Streets where there is now a small park and a statue of "Mr. Peanut." Their office building had two entrances. Door #1 for their insurance business and door #2 for their peanut business. At one time I was a Suffolk News Herald paper boy (located on S. Main Street a few doors away). I delivered a newspaper to each door. Why 2 papers? Because each Mr. Pinner took a paper home with him!



The John King house (now Baker Funeral Home), from Pen and Picture Sketches, the City of Suffolk, Virginia, Year 1915, published by SNHS



The Pinner building, 100 block of W. Washington St., shown in 1941, with Pinner offices upstairs. This building and the adjacent one were demolished for the widening of Main Street for the N&W overpass. Now Mr. Peanut stands in a small park on part of the property.

His home at the corner of South Broad and Smith Street still stands, a beautiful place. I lived at the east end of Smith Street, 4 short blocks away. He was a real promoter! I remember Elliott Motor Co. Also he was largely responsible for the construction of the Elliott Hotel, corner of N. Main and Market Streets--now a condominium (I think). He was a heavy duty Byrd Democrat, and was appointed manager of Suffolk's first A.B.C. store located on the first floor of the "Law" Building at the corner of W. Washington and Saratoga Streets. He had enough political savvy to open a second A.B.C. store for blacks on East Washington Street just past the N. and W. Rwy. tracks. The blacks' store had more whites trading there than blacks. This was to avoid being seen buying their booze at the white mens' store on the Square downtown! I never knew much about Elliott's connection with the peanut industry, but he must have learned a lot! *See Note #3.*



Suffolk Oil Mill on Moore Avenue (now demolished)

6. The Birdsong people came to Suffolk from around Courtland, I believe, and lived all over town. Nice people. They were in some way related to the McLemores. I remember that one of them was named McLemore Birdsong. They've been very generous to the community as you know.

7. Carl Livermon (page 184 of the book) was my mother's cousin. I saw him several times as a boy, and several of his machines on farms in Northampton and Hertford County. I don't think he got as big time as Benthall, etc.

8. When the Suffolk Oil Mill was operating off Holaday Street in Suffolk (ruins are near the DMV building) it was the best smelling place in town. Those p'nuts parching made my mouth water.

9. The well known Pond Brothers (C.B. "Cat-bird", W.T., etc.) had a tie to Parker Peanut Co. One of Mr. Parker's daughters married C.B. Jr. Mr. Parker had 2 sons, Bawlie [sic] who was a dentist, and Ben who stayed in the peanut business. They invented Conan Beach, a recreation area below the Lake Cohoon dam on Pitchkettle Road. Many youngsters in Suffolk and the county learned to swim there. (And do other things at night not related to swimming!)

10. I knew M.T. (Pete) Elliott and his family well.

11. What with so many people in the shelling and storage business, etc. prospering in the way they did, not many people realized that the several counties surrounding the Tidewater area could not possibly furnish the volume of peanuts necessary to provide so much wealth. Huge volumes of nuts came in from the south by rail. Although inferior to the N.C. and Va. jumbos, most were used for oil, etc. or re-shipped elsewhere than Suffolk. Also, local brokers such as Jack Wells and Jack Cockey (whom you would know) dealt with enormous amounts of peanuts that never passed thru Suffolk, or Virginia for that matter. A lot of people made (and are making) money on the nut. Sometimes it seems as though farmers get less credit and more grief than the others, and are the first to have to tough out more problems than the others in the business.



Elliott house shown c. 1915 soon after its construction



Farmer stacking peanuts for drying

12. There is no question that Mr. Obici was largely responsible for making the industry what it is today. However, all people did not take kindly toward him, as I will point out. He was much my senior and I don't ever recall being with him in private. As a youngster, I would see him from time to time, but never on the street--at the Post Office, shopping in stores, at local sport events, the annual fairs, etc. as was the case with other men. I did see him being driven thru town, at his yacht which sometimes waited up by the old drawbridge on the river down hill from the old courthouse, at his farm when he opened it up every spring for a week or two for public tours, and the like. He did not consort with the public, but played it "close to the vest." He did employ several good men who were active in civic and community affairs such as Mike English, Hunter Haines, Charlie Murden, Harry Petit, Charles Thiedich, etc.--but not himself as far as I knew.

After joining a C.P.A. firm in Norfolk at the conclusion of WWII, I practiced for about 40 years from the same office in the Wainwright Building. A considerable number of my clients lived in

northeastern N.C., there being from none to very few C.P.A.s in the peanut belt. The large scale farmers got their C.P.A. services from Norfolk and Suffolk rather than Raleigh. We were "dual licensed" to practice in both states. Those farmers had large holdings--some as many as 3 to 4 thousand acres. Knowing that I was a native of Suffolk, they often spoke highly of the Ponds, the Birdsongs, the Parkers, and so on. But not so with Obici. Practically to a man, they felt that Obici caused them great grief during the depression days. He controlled the price paid to them for peanuts, and consistently forced them to sell below their cost of production. They cited several reasons for this--Obici's determination to hold the consumer price of his "Nickel Lunch" to 5¢ per bag, his high style of living at Bay Point Farms, his maintaining a luxury yacht, and so on. I was surprised at the animosity that existed. These Carolinians felt that Obici kept them under a yoke when they needed relief. Some of the bankers down there felt the same way. I never did C.P.A. work for any large peanut farmers in Virginia, and never heard any dissatisfaction such as with the N.C. people.



Mike English & Mario Peruzzi, Mr. Obici's partner, at the doors of the old Planters Building



A. Obici on steps to swimming pool at Bay Point Farm

To his credit, Mr. Obici was certainly generous in making the Louise Obici Hospital possible, built primarily to serve the people in the surrounding area and to provide a top flight School of Nursing. The first administrator as you may know was Gibson Howell, formerly of the Raiford Hospital in Franklin. My firm in Norfolk had served Raiford Hospital and had experience with others. Through Howell's influence, the Obici trustees retained us to audit the Obici Trust funds, to audit the construction costs, and to install a first class accounting system using the most modern analog computers available (digital computers were not available at that time). After the above, the Board would (by prearrangement) retain a local C.P.A. to replace us, which was appropriate.

I undertook this assignment along with one of my associates; found the Trust Funds in excellent shape, and all other matters were brought to satisfactory conclusions. The Obici people were a real pleasure to work with. During the course of my engagement, I read every trust instrument, minutes of all trustee meetings, and all other legal, engineering, architectural, construction contract documents, etc. I can say that Obici's wishes were carried out to the letter, and his and his wife's thinking were given every consideration by the Trustees. I couldn't help but feel a touch of sadness when the School of Nursing was discontinued and the beautiful old buildings were replaced by the new Taj Mahal. See Note #4.

13. Now that I've about worn you out with all the above, I'm going to test your endurance by letting you know about my own venture into the peanut business world.

Upon finishing Suffolk High School in 1938, I took a job during the summer at a shop at about 17th Street and Atlantic Ave. at Virginia Beach--soda fountain, light meals, beach supplies, wine and beer, etc. Good tips! Saving for college. The following summer, 1939, I worked at Saunders Services (mentioned earlier) in downtown Suffolk. I found out that one of the peanut mills had a government program going that would furnish free small burlap bags, mailing tags, etc. to anyone who bought unshelled peanuts from the mill to repackage and sell for souvenirs. I contacted the owner of the shop at Virginia Beach where I had worked the previous summer, and he agreed to take several dozen on consignment, provided I put Virginia Beach "decals" on the mailing tags. To start with, I bought 2 or 3 5 lb. bags of nuts from the mill, rebagged them in 2 lb. bags (I believe), attached the mailing tags, borrowed a car, and delivered most of them to the Beach shop about a week later. I think my total cost was about 25¢ per bag; I sold them to the Beach shop for about 60¢ per bag; the Beach shop sold them for about \$1.25 per bag. They would sell out every week or so, and I kept replenishing them! I do remember 2 things: (1) I made several hundred dollars that summer on peanuts and (2) you couldn't give them away after Labor Day!



The original Louise Obici Memorial Hospital and the School of Nursing on N. Main St., now demolished

Time to quit writing. Hope you have a good crop this year.

Regards --

R.B.H. Jr.



- Notes:**
1. Mr. Bain was from Wakefield where his family started in the peanut business in the late nineteenth century.
 2. Mr. King and John Pinner started Suffolk's first successful peanut processing plant in the 1890s. They went their separate ways before long with each having his own business. John B. and John F. Pinner were involved in real estate, insurance and peanuts.
 3. Pete Elliott wore many hats but he's probably best remembered for the hotel that bore his name. He is also said to have helped Amedeo Obici find land to purchase for his business when he first came to town.
 4. Amedeo Obici's generosity to the people of Suffolk and Nansemond County will long be remembered. When he died in 1947 Mr. Obici left 98% of his considerable estate for the construction of Louise Obici Memorial Hospital to ensure adequate health care for all people in the area. His legacy lives on today through the Obici Health Care Foundation and Sentara Obici Hospital.



The McLemore house (left) and the two Pinner houses stand in a row on Pinner Street. When the Birdsongs first came to town, they lived across the street from the McLemores.

Postscripts

To our May 2010 issue, Welcome Sweet Springtime:

- Regarding our listing of private kindergartens prior to the time when public schools offered them, SNHS member Alma Cross Duke reminds us that she started a playschool in the 1940s, first at her family home on S. Broad St. It lasted for several years and moved to different locations. She first saw a playschool when a Navy wife asked Alma to help her drive across country with the Navy wife's young child. The playschool was at Coronado, California. Many SNHS members of a certain age went to "Miss Alma's."
- Also, the week our last issue went out we were given these two pictures (below) of another private kindergarten at the Jordan School on Johnson Avenue. The kindergarten was opened in 1939 but the school had been in existence for decades prior to that. The school, supported by the Unitarian Universalist Church, closed in 1984.



- SNHS member Beverly McGahee identified the 1939 Holland May King and Queen (right) as Warren Austin and Cleo Byrd (Byrd).



To our June 2009 issue, History Endangered

- SNHS member Betty Ann Harrell (Kyle) tells us that she and Polly Vann (Odom) are the "big girls" on the left end behind the table (picture at left). The little boy across from them

at the end of the table is thought to be Billy Taylor. The tall boy behind the table (center) is believed to be Forrest Cathey.



Happy Birthday, BSA!

The Boy Scouts of America are celebrating their 100th anniversary this year. Cole Barclay, an SNHS student member, was one of the many boys from across the country who attended the celebration at Fort A.P. Hill. Readers might have seen Cole's reports recently in the Suffolk News-Herald.

The first Suffolk troop, a community troop started in 1912, is shown here. In this photo taken early 1920s some people are identified. Back (4th) row, 3rd & 4th from left: I.P. Brinkley, Claude Eley; 3rd row, from left: Fred Hart, unknown, Frank Butler, Pretlow Brinkley.

Fred Hart became Suffolk's first Eagle Scout in 1924 and, according to newspaper articles, was the only Eagle in Suffolk for a long time.

Troop 1, at Main Street United Methodist Church, was started in 1923. Troop 1 has had 126 Eagles as of this printing.

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Girls on left are chopping weeds around peanuts while a Ferguson Manufacturing Company peanut printing machine is demonstrated early twentieth century.

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The Peanut Story is available at the Train Station. It is a treasure trove of Suffolk information with names like John Pinner, C.A. Shoop, Henry Land, Alex Jordan, P.H. Lee, A.T. Holland, William & George Lummis, Thomas Old, etc. Also there is an explanation of how the peanut rose to importance, including a chapter about the work of Dr. George Washington Carver who at least once visited Suffolk. And how did Suffolk become the Peanut Capital? It's in the book. This publication is a jewel for those interested in local history in general and peanuts in particular. *Price \$15.00.*

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Left, sorting peanuts, perhaps at Planters; right, filling peanut butter jars at Producers Peanuts c 1940



"These trucks are loaded with bags of freshly harvested Hertford County peanuts waiting to leave Ahoskie for the huge peanut market in Suffolk, Virginia." Picture and caption from Arcadia Publishing Company's Hertford County by Frank Stephenson and used with permission of the author.

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Peanut picker at work in the first half of the twentieth century. Mechanized pickers replaced hand picking, a very time consuming operation.