



c. 1830

## Margaret Susan Prentis Comes Home

*Sometimes it is hard to look at an old portrait such as that of Margaret Susan Prentis (Webb) and give the subject life. However, if those among us who live downtown in the 200 block of North Main or at College Court could travel back in time just about 125 years we could look out our windows and see Mrs. Webb walk out her door and call on a neighbor or walk downtown to the milliner's shop. If the reader attends one of the four downtown churches he might see Mrs. Webb walking to her church on Sunday morning. This portrait was recently discovered in a White Stone, VA, shop. Thanks to the generosity of many members, she has come back home.*

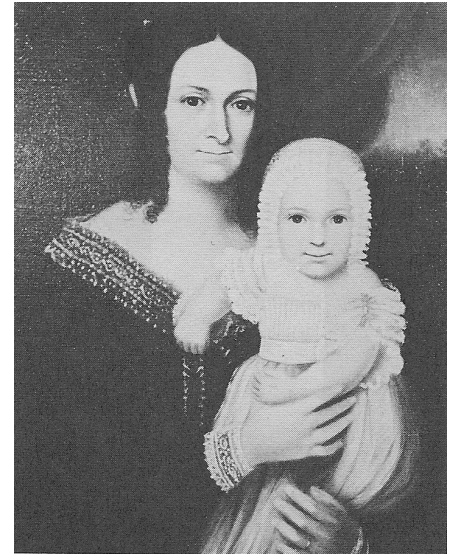
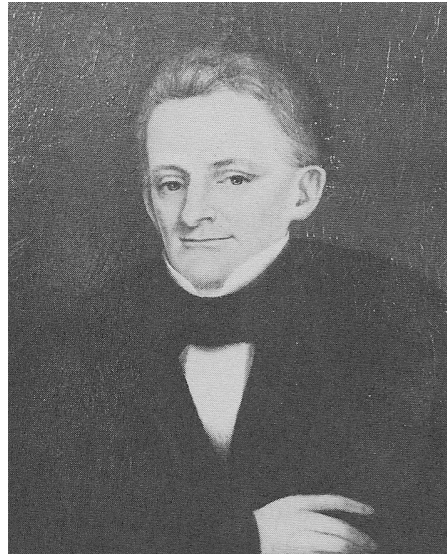


It all began in 1805 when a young lawyer, after graduating from William & Mary, decided to leave his home in Williamsburg to come to Suffolk to seek his fortune. Joseph Prentis set up a law practice in Suffolk. He eventually served as surveyor of the Port of Suffolk (1811-1838) and was Clerk of the Nansemond County Court from 1838 until his death in 1851.

On January 10, 1810 Joseph Prentis married Susan Caroline Riddick, daughter of Robert Moore Riddick and his wife Elizabeth. They were married by Episcopal clergyman, the Rev. Jacob Keeling, in the home of Mathias Jones and his wife Mary who was the bride's sister. **Margaret Susan**, born in December of 1810, was the first of Joseph and Susan Prentis' ten children.

Public schools were all but unknown in those days. The Prentises, as

*David Jordan's large house sheltered the Prentis and Webb families after they lost their home in the Great Fire of 1837. Later it became the Webb's permanent home. The house was eventually demolished for a parking lot.*



L-R: Margaret Susan's father, Joseph Prentis (1785-1851),; her husband, Dr. Robert Henning Webb (1795-1866),; and Margaret Susan Prentis Webb (1810-1888) with young Joseph Prentis Webb (1843-1892)

people of means, were able to provide private education for their children. Margaret Susan's younger brother Peter attended Amelia Academy. Where Margaret Susan attended school is not known to this reporter but the pose that was chosen for her portrait, as well as her family's prominence, would certainly indicate that she was an educated woman.

The Prentis children grew up in the oldest section of town. In 1822 Joseph Prentis purchased Thomas Swepson's property on the west side of Main Street approximately where Western Avenue starts today. That street was originally named Prentis Street. From this house Margaret Susan was married in

1834, becoming the second wife of Dr. Robert Henning Webb.

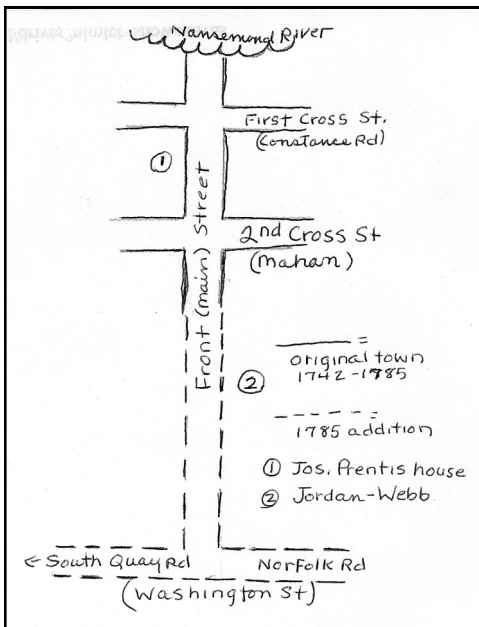
Three years after their marriage disaster struck the Town of Suffolk. On June 3, 1837, a fire started in the shop of cabinet-maker Edward Arnold. The wind was blowing from the south. The fire rapidly spread from today's Mahan Street north to the river. At the end of the day most of the oldest part of town was destroyed--both sides of the street from 2nd Cross (now Mahan)

1846, almost a decade after the fire, Dr. Webb bought the Jordan house, termed by one contemporary source, a "brick mansion." This house and the house the Riddicks built after the fire, now called Riddick's Folly, were unusual both because of their size and the fact that they were made of brick in a place where good wood was so easy to come by.

Dr. and Mrs. Webb eventually had four children, only one of whom, Joseph Prentis Webb, lived to maturity--a sadly normal fact of life in the early nineteenth century.

Margaret Susan Prentis Webb was an Episcopalian who, no doubt, attended services at the Union Chapel on the hill, now Cedar Hill, before an Episcopal church was built on Main Street around 1845, approximately where the new Obici Foundation building stands today. In the church baptismal records, her name often appears as a sponsor. She died less than a decade before the current St. Paul's Church building was constructed.

Mrs. Webb died in 1888 and was buried beside her husband near the old Union Chapel, in that lovely, peaceful place now known as Cedar Hill Cemetery. Information and most pictures from *Suffolk in Virginia: A Record of Lots, Lives and Likenesses*, by Fillmore Norfleet, and used with permission.

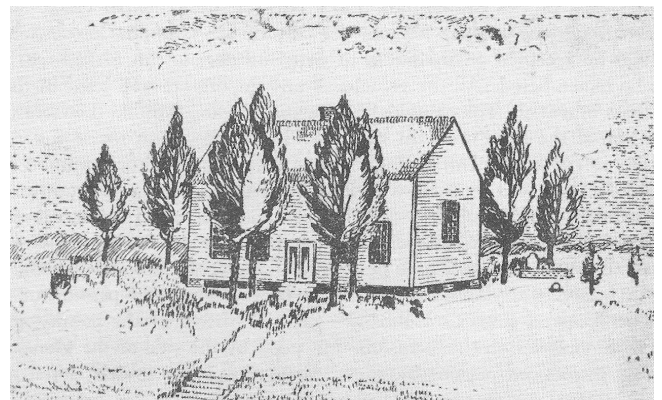


Suffolk in 1837

destroyed--both sides of the street from 2nd Cross (now Mahan) to the river.

Before the Great Fire, the Webbs lived with her parents. That disastrous fire left the Prentises and the Webbs homeless and they, like other families, sought shelter with friends in the newer part of town, soon living in David Jordan's commodious house in the (now) 200 block of Main Street while he moved to smaller quarters.

The house must have been to their liking because in



Drawing of Union Chapel by Gertrude Pruden. This was later moved to Pine St. where it is used by Macedonia A.M.E. Church.



*This c. 1914 photo appears to have been taken in front of the Webb house/ Nansemond Seminary. Maybe the Seminary accepted boys toward the end of its time. Or was this one of the several buildings rented by the Suffolk School board to use for classrooms? First boy, first row left, identified as Cannon Eley. Blond girl 2nd from right, second row, is identified as Tony Darden. Photo courtesy Edie Higinbotham*

## Jordan-Webb House

This house first stood at 240 N. Main Street before being replaced in the 1970s by a parking lot. The fine brick house was built by David Jordan in the first quarter of the 19th century. It sheltered the Prentis/Webb family after the Great Fire and was later purchased by Dr. Robert Henning Webb.



*Webb staircase*

The Webb family owned it almost until the end of its days though it had other inhabitants over time. Late in the 19th century Mrs. Lucy Quimby moved her Nansemond Seminary here from the original location on Bank Street. The closing date of the school is not recorded.

Later the home of Mr. and Mrs. E. A. White, this house and two of its nineteenth century neighbors were razed in the 1970s. The Webb house staircase was saved and still graces a home in Driver today.

## The Prentices and Webbs in the War

When the Union Army occupied Suffolk in 1862, many families had left to seek safe haven elsewhere.

The Webbs, Margaret Susan and her husband, must have been among those like their neighbor, Mayor Benjamin Riddick, who closed their shutters, locked their doors and presented a blank face to the invaders. Her brother, Peter Prentis, also stayed and was one of several men taken hostage by the Union Army in 1862 to insure the good behavior of the people of Suffolk. We cannot imagine the fear, worry, want and deprivation that the Webbs and other Suffolkians must have endured for four years especially during the Union occupation.

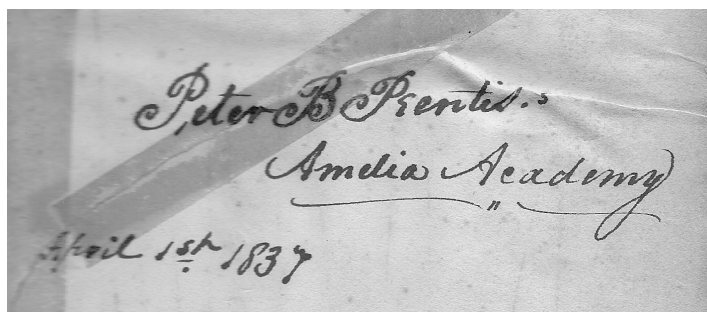
We're reminded of an oral history that Dr. Webb stayed in town and by coincidence was able to retrieve from a train car a large mirror that the Yankees had attempted to take away from the Riddick house (Riddick's Folly).

Joseph Webb, by then his parents' only child, enlisted in March of 1862 at the age of 19. He enlisted as a 2nd Sergeant in Company C, 13th Virginia Cavalry. He was hospitalized with a fever in May-June 1863 and was wounded at Brandy Station in October. He never really recovered from that wound. Because of surgeries/amputation, one leg was several inches shorter than the other and required some sort of prosthesis for the rest of his life. *Information thanks to Fred Taylor and Lee King.*

## Lafayette and the Prentis Family

There is little doubt that all members of the Prentis family, including Margaret Susan, unless away at school, must have seen and/or met General Lafayette when he came to Suffolk in 1825. Their house was across from the inn where he stayed (now 444 N. Main St.) and in sight of the courthouse where the event was held in his honor. Most importantly, Joseph Prentis gave the address at the banquet honoring the Frenchman.

*From the title page of Elements of Geometry and Trigonometry, published in 1836*





## The Old Oak Tree

*The mighty oak before the chain saw. Below: Julie Johnson stands beside remnants of the upper portion of the huge trunk before it was removed. Photos by John Johnson*

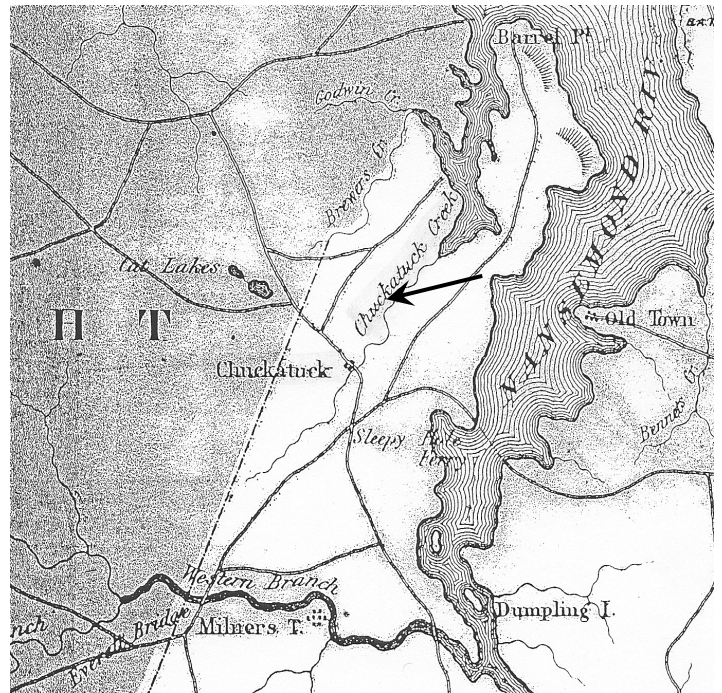


What would Cedar Hill be without its trees? The cedars that gave the cemetery its name serve as buffers from wind and shade from the sun. They give the place its peaceful, timeless quality—all the trees do. We miss the trees that have been lost to bad weather over the last several years but they were small losses compared to the loss of the giant oak that created a huge canopy in the whole southeast corner of the burial ground. We're told it had been growing there since well before the War Between the States. Now it is gone, removed for safety reasons. We hope another tree will soon be planted in its place but we will miss the great oak. Margaret Susan Prentis and Robert Henning Webb's graves are near the spot where the tree stood.

. . . . .

## Postscripts to our November 2010 issue, Along Chuckatuck Creek

*C. 1862 map of Nansemond County shows Chuckatuck Creek with its tributaries Brewers Creek and Godwin Creek.*



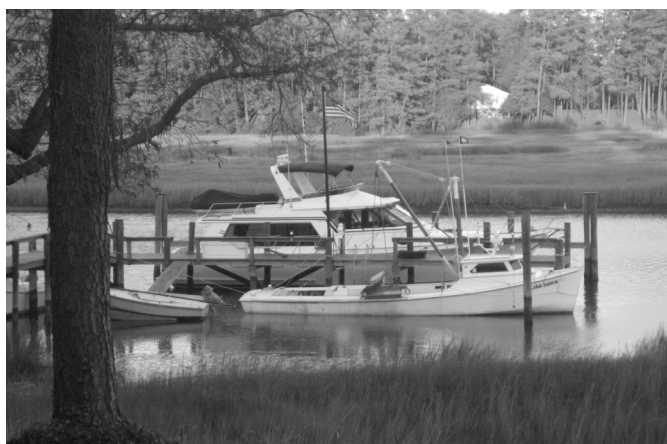
*People in this often seen photo are seldom identified. Here are the names and faces of the Possum Club. From left: Mrs. George Balance, Mrs. Henry Land, **Mr. Percy Pitt**, Mrs. Gertrude (J.B.) Pruden, Mrs. Thomas Lilliston, Mr. Henry Land, Mr. George Balance, Miss Marie Woodward, Mr. E. B. Caldwell (hidden in picture), Miss Nettie Cowling, and one other not named. Courtesy Edie Higinbotham*

## Scenes from the 34th Annual Candlelight Tour—on Chuckatuck Creek

*Photos this page by John & Julie Johnson*



Thanks to all who helped!



*Top, L-R: Charnell Blair and Mary Williams at the Eure house; tour group at the Cherry house; Sandra Council at the Bickham house. Bottom, L-R: Cheri Babler spinning cotton at the Barlow house; Jack Eure's pleasure boat and Thomas Hazelwood's workboat on the Creek; Barbara Harris at home.*

• • • • •

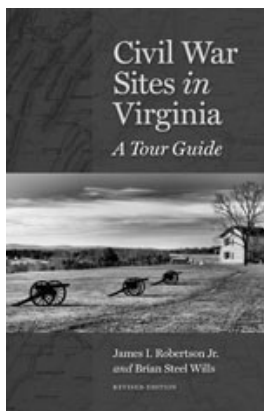
## Lafayette Party

*Left: Doug Kincaid, SNHS, and John Woodard, of the Murfreesboro Historical Society, were among those who told of Lafayette's journey. Right: Sylvia Pond and Clela Norcross. Below: Gin Staylor and Mary Ann Eure. Bottom right: Everett Bagnell, Brenda Kincaid, Linda Helms and others say goodbye to Lafayette.*

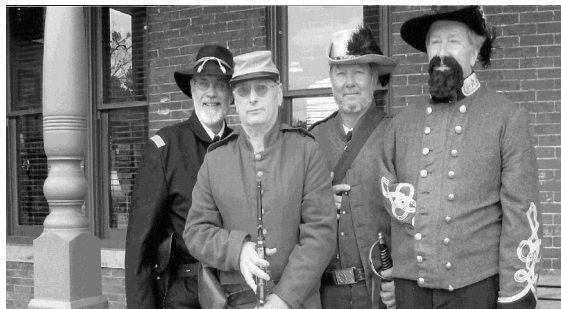




## Brian Wills signing books at the Train Station



Thanks to Hubert Young and Fred C. Morse, sponsors of the event. *Photos by Marie Carmean and Marie Baker*



## March Member Meeting

Nita Bagnell speaks to a roomful of members at St. Paul's Church

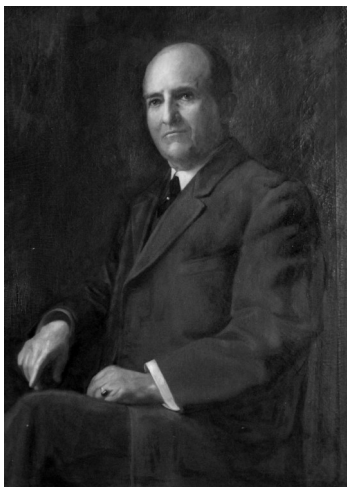


## What's in a name? History, that's what.

The house at 137 Bank that houses our office has been called the Dawson House for years. The Dawsons bought the house in 1941 and their son, Gerard, kindly left the house to the Society.

The SNHS board recently voted to call the house the **Phillips-Dawson House**. We believe this is more accurate and appropriate as the Phillips family apparently built the house in or around 1880 and owned it until the Dawsons purchased it in 1941. The portraits of Horace (1857-1926) and Evie (1855-1936) Phillips now hang in the hall.

These portraits of the original owners were gifts to the Society from member Dorris Withers McNeal, widow of the Phillips' grandson. *Photos by Kermit Hobbs*



## About Another House . . .

SNHS has been presented a beautiful antique dollhouse, believed to have been built just up the street from our own Phillips-Dawson House. It was given to the Society by the Valentine Museum/Richmond History Center where it has been since the early 1960s.



Apparently the original owner was Bess Holland (Creekmore) who gave it to the Valentine before our organization existed. She was a little girl in the 1890s when, according to a letter from her to the Valentine, the house was made.

Her father was Col. E.E. Holland who was eventually Congressman from this district. When Bess was a child the Hollands lived at 216 Bank Street, now an apartment house.

The charming dollhouse needs some renovation but comes with more than 100 pieces of furniture and decorative items. *Photo by John Johnson*