

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 3, 2016

Bassett Ferguson (1878–1961): Bassett Ferguson was descended from Colin Ferguson (1751–1805), the second president of Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, and Richard Bassett (1745–1815) of Bohemia Manor, Dover, and Wilmington. Bassett pushed for the adoption of the U.S. Constitution by Delaware in 1787 and became one of its two inaugural U.S. Senators. He was an early Delaware governor, as well as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. In addition to his political life, he was one of the organizers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America and entertained in his home the first American bishop, Thomas Coke.

By the mid-19th century, the Fergusons were settled on several farms surrounding Blackbird, midway between Middletown and Smyrna, Delaware. Bassett Ferguson, along with his younger brother Theodore and two sisters, was born in a farmhouse, long gone, that stood in what is now the middle of the DuPont Highway, U.S. Route 13. Bassett never attended high school, as there were none near Blackbird. In 1898, at the age of 20, he enlisted to fight in the Spanish-American War. When discharged in 1900, he realized that all the officers seemed to have college educations, so he wanted one. He found a tutor who helped him pass the entrance exam for Delaware College in Newark. During his four years at Delaware, he excelled in his scholastics, was captain of the football team, and was graduated as a civil engineer. He became a member of the “McDonough Crowd,” a group of young couples, married and unmarried, of which Mary Shallcross, my mother’s eldest sister, was a member. Bassett Ferguson and Mary Shallcross were married on the lawn of Belleview, the Shallcross family farm northwest of Odessa, on June 6, 1906. My mother, not quite 21, was maid of honor.

Using his civil engineering skills, Bassett worked along the Delaware River for the Army Corps of Engineers. He and Mary settled in Ridley Park, three miles north of Chester, and he soon established his own wholesale lumber business, buying rough timber on the Delmarva Peninsula and selling it for piers, ferry slips, jetties, and piling along the river. First he owned a Maxwell and then a Mitchell and often kept them in Pocomoke City, Maryland, commuting by train once a week from Ridley Park. After my parents were married in 1921 and my father became a dealer, he converted to Packards. Once he told me he encountered a farmer in the backwoods in 1921 who did not know World War I had ended (which had happened on Nov. 11, 1918). In 1923, the Fergusons bought a large 1876 farmhouse around which Ridley Park had been built, in which their two sons, Bassett Jr. and Eugene, grew up. They lived there until Uncle Bassett’s death in 1961 (and Aunt Mary lived there until she sold the property in 1970). In the 1920s, he built homes for those of limited means around Ridley Park and got caught when the market crashed at the end of 1929. Having good business acumen, however, he regained a sound financial condition by the late 1930s. My mother and Aunt Mary both liked to celebrate birthdays, and Uncle Bassett’s was one day different from mine, just before that of George Washington. So, we often had a combined birthday party, despite Uncle Bassett’s indifference to such things. He was a good looking man about six feet tall, a man of few words who seldom laughed but had a keen sense of humor. When he said something, it was worth listening. When we got together at holiday time, he and my father would engage in long conversations about banking and politics, with my dad doing 2/3 of the talking. Uncle Bassett and I both liked mincemeat pie, so on Christmas Day when we got together the hostess made sure it was available.

Uncle Bassett liked to do his own work, like painting his big house, top to bottom. He also owned a farm at Blackbird and would drive down about once a month to check on things. In his mid-70s, he decided to re-roof his barn. One day, with no one around, he fell off the tall roof, broke several vertebrae in his back, and in extreme agony, drove himself home to Ridley Park before getting attention. After several months, he seemed to be 100% again. Although he has been gone now for 55 years, I still cherish the times I spent with my uncle-by-marriage, Bassett Ferguson.