

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 25, 2008

Buena Vista: Once I asked Leon deValinger, Delaware's longtime archivist in the mid-20th century, who was Delaware's most outstanding citizen. Somewhat to my surprise, he snapped back John M. Clayton. Clayton was born near Dagsboro in southeastern Sussex County about 1800 and is buried in the churchyard on Governors Avenue in Dover, now a part of the Delaware State Museum. He became Secretary of State in the administration of President Zachary Taylor in 1849 and served until just after Taylor's death in July 1850, being succeeded in the Fillmore administration by the aging Daniel Webster. His claim to fame seems to be the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with Great Britain, giving the U.S. the right to build a canal across Central America. President Taylor, "Old Rough and Ready," was the hero of Buena Vista, the 1847 battle that effectively ended the Mexican War, making vast areas of the southwest, including California, part of the United States.

Clayton must have considered Taylor his personal hero, as he was, indeed, an American hero. The Delawarean named his estate in New Castle County "Buena Vista" in honor of his hero's crowning victory. Here he built a spacious country house, which was passed down through later generations of his family. A direct descendant, Clayton Douglass Buck and his wife, the daughter of T. Coleman du Pont, made this their permanent residence and enlarged and improved the home for 20th-century living. Mr. Buck was president of the Equitable Trust Company in Wilmington and served two terms as Delaware's governor (1929–1937) and one term in the U.S. Senate (1943–1949). His son, C. Douglass Buck Jr., was an architect by profession, was active in local theatrical productions, and served as the first president of the New Castle County Council, which came into being in 1966. A very young Joseph R. Biden Jr. became a member of that council about three years later and jumped from the County Council to the U.S. Senate in 1972, upsetting the incumbent J. Caleb Boggs.

My father knew Governor Buck through banking, and he and Walter Jefferis, as representatives of the Kennett bank, were invited to an evening dinner at Buena Vista in the late 1930s, when Buck entertained banking leaders from the greater Wilmington area. The Bucks also rented our property at #1 Queen Street in Rehoboth on at least two occasions. When Buck's Secretary of State, Mr. Grantland, wanted to get the first 10 auto license numbers assigned to state officials, my father called on the Governor in his office. He did not want to lose #8, as he had been the only motorist to have that number (since 1909). Fortunately, the secretary's plan died, and only the first three numbers are designated for government officials.

Late in their lives, the Bucks donated their estate, Buena Vista, to the State of Delaware, and by the late 1960s it was being used as a conference center and an entertainment site for Delaware's governors. When I was active in the Delaware Travel Council, we had our annual meeting there on several occasions. The Bicentennial Reliability Tour, for cars 1914 and older, stopped for lunch at Buena Vista on the last day of their Seattle-to-Philadelphia trek in early July 1976 (I went down in the H-5 to see them). Perhaps it will be possible for FAHP to have a special event some day at this beautiful property on the DuPont Highway just south of State Road (where U.S. 40 diverges from U.S. 13).