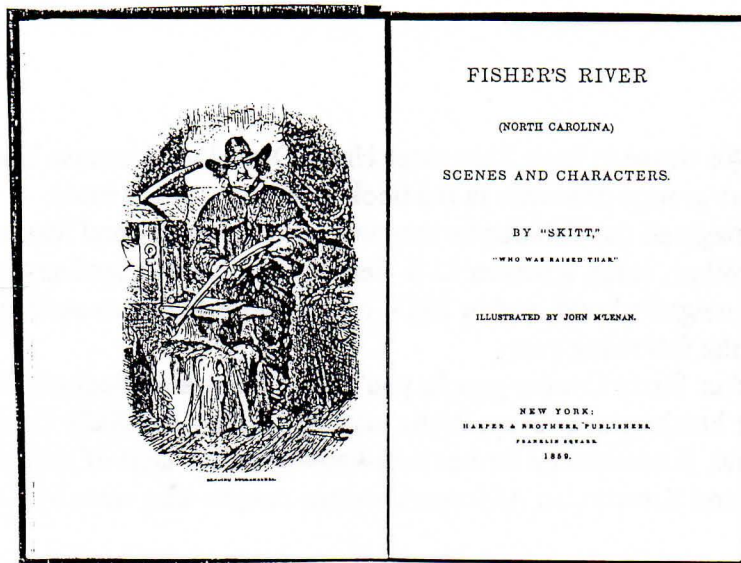




May 5, 2000

How Festivities at the Franklins' Was Created

Festivities at the Franklins' invites you to travel in your imagination to an afternoon in 1823 to meet two of the people who lived at the Edwards-Franklin House: Meshack Franklin, a well-to-do planter and former U.S. Congressman, and his wife, Milly Edwards Franklin, whose father, Gideon Edwards, built the house in 1799. You will also meet two people who might have visited here, Uncle Davy Lane and Skitt Taliaferro. These historical figures are portrayed by our actors. Two other visitors, Charles and Mary Taliaferro, are present, but you are asked to imagine them.

We've set our presentation in 1823 because extensive renovations were done that year, and the house has been restored to its look after they were completed. Choosing that year allowed us to imagine an occasion when Meshack and Milly might have entertained their friends and shown off the new staircase, the new porch, and the new paint work. Historians think the Franklins were influenced in their tastes by the elegant homes Meshack had seen in Washington, the "Federal City" which had become the capital of the new nation.

The Franklins were related by marriage to their neighbors, the Taliaferros. Meshack's father and Charles's father had come down together to North Carolina from Virginia during the Revolution. Hardin Taliaferro, known as "Skitt" as a boy, was Charles and Mary's son. He became a prominent Baptist minister and writer in the mid-19th century. His 1859 book *Fisher's River Scenes and Characters* is well-known to literary historians for its folk humor and its colorful portrayal of people who actually lived in Surry County in the 1820s. *Fisher's River Scenes* mentions Meshack Franklin several times, and one incident describes a visit of his daughters to the home of Dick Snow after attending a Methodist quarter meeting.

Because *Fisher's River Scenes* is a vivid and unique source for how people lived and talked in Surry County at the time, we wanted to use it in creating our presentation. Its stories are entertaining, and since we wanted to entertain you as well as tell you about the Franklins and their house, why not incorporate the stories into the presentation? But the tales in the book are told by rustic characters, not by educated gentry like the Franklins.

So we needed a way to introduce a storyteller. We thought it would be fun to have Skitt Taliaferro, who was 12 years old in 1823, hear some of the tales while visiting

the Franklins. We chose to have Skitt meet Uncle Davy Lane because Uncle Davy has one of the largest groups of stories in the book (and some of the best).

We've imagined the Taliaferros stopping by to see Milly and Meshack after a visit to Meshack's brother, Jesse, a former U.S. Senator and North Carolina Governor. Jesse also lived in the neighborhood, and in 1823, he was suffering from an illness that would cause his death the following year.

Some other Surry County people you'll hear about are Shadrack Franklin, Meshack's other brother, whose son Wylie married Charles and Sally Taliaferro's daughter Mary; Dick Snow, a subsistence farmer well-known for his habit of abbreviating his words; and Aly and Kinston, an African-American couple who were Millie's house servants.

While historians have discovered much about the external details of the Franklins' lives, very little is known about them personally. Meshack's and Milly's wills tell us what they owned, and the items mentioned in *Festivities at the Franklins'* are listed in their possessions. The books that Milly and Meshack refer to, Mrs. Edgeworth's *Parent's Assistant*, a book of children's stories, and Thatcher's *American Orchardist*, a horticultural handbook, are in the inventory of Meshack's library.

All the details about Uncle Davy - his slow way of moving, the gun he carries with him everywhere, his tendency to drop by at breakfast and not leave until dinner, his fondness for blackberry pie, his mill that moved as slowly as he did - come from *Fisher's River Scenes*. John Senter and the nails protruding from his wooden-bottomed shoes also come from the book, as does Meshack's anecdote about Dick Snow and the rabbit meat.

Glimpses of Meshack are found in the Journal of the Surry County Agricultural Society, an organization he helped start in 1819. The journal records the minutes of the society's meetings until it disbanded in 1823. Meshack spoke occasionally at the meetings, and some of what he said there is referred to in the *Festivities*. The journal lists Charles Taliaferro as a member. He and Meshack were present when the group discussed becoming an auxiliary of the state agricultural society.

The hardest character to reconstruct was Milly. If she wrote letters, none have come to light, and what she looked like or how she spoke is not known. In *Fisher's River Scenes*, Uncle Frost Snow speaks disparagingly of the "big quality words" used by the Franklins, in contrast to the colloquial speech he uses. (He prefers "britches" to "pantaloons," for example.) Meshack was known as a down-to-earth man, and the language of his one published document, a campaign broadside, is straightforward. So we imagined it might have been Mrs. Franklin who adopted fancier speech.

To suggest the talk of a North Carolina planter's wife and to gain insights into her household concerns, we turned to *The Pettigrew Papers*, documents in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill relating to a prominent Eastern North Carolina family, published by the North Carolina Department of Archives and History. Some of Millie's flavorful expressions, such as "seized with the fever," "disposed to patience," "it is a work of time," "enough to craze one's brain," "I was obliged to bestow attention," and "She is a Quaker in one respect, which is moving when the Spirit moves," come from letters an early 19th-century Mrs. Pettigrew wrote to her husband.