CASTLE HILL
Home of Dr. Thomas Walker

By Guy Meriwether Benson

Castle Hill was once part of the *Mountain Tract* of Nicholas Meriwether II (1667-1744) who in 1734 gave the plantation to his grandson, son of his son William, also named Nicholas Meriwether (1699-1739). The latter Nicholas married Mildred Thornton (1721-1778), a sister of Elizabeth Thornton, wife of Thomas Meriwether. After the early death of Nicholas in 1738, Mildred married Dr. Thomas Walker in 1741. With this marriage Walker gained the property that was to become *Castle Hill* and other tracts of land. Some accounts suggest, incorrectly, that he obtained most of the *Mountain Tract* in this way; however, he and his son did purchase some additional tracts at a later time. It is not known when the first house was constructed at *Castle Hill,* but an analysis of the Fredericksville Parish records indicates that Dr. Walker was living there, or nearby, shortly after his marriage to Mildred Thornton. In 1764 a frame house was constructed on the property. Some parts of the original house were incorporated into the present brick residence, built in 1823, making it one of the oldest buildings in Albemarle County. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places. In the early nineteenth century *Castle Hill* was the home of William Cabell Rives, a United States Senator from Virginia and a Minister to France.

Dr. Thomas Walker was a prominent resident of Louisa and Albemarle Counties. He was a physician, planter, trader, surveyor, cartographer, explorer, a Burgess, an active member of the Fredericksville Parish and his local governments, a participant in the French and Indian Wars and a supporter of the American Revolution. He founded and laid out the City of Charlottesville. Mary Walker, a daughter of Thomas Walker and Mildred Thornton married Nicholas Lewis, uncle of Meriwether Lewis. Another daughter, Elizabeth, married Matthew Maury, a tutor of Meriwether Lewis. During the American Revolution Dr. Walker and his wife delayed the British General Tarleton at *Castle Hill* long enough for Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, and the Virginia Legislature to escape the area.

Thomas Walker was the attending physician at the death of Peter Jefferson, an executor of his estate and a guardian of Thomas Jefferson for a short period. Walker was named an executor, along with Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson, in the will of Thomas Meriwether, Meriwether Lewis' grandfather. He served with Thomas Jefferson in the House of Burgesses. The two sponsored an act to improve navigation on the Rivanna River. In 1779 he was a Virginia Commissioner, along with Daniel Smith, in the running of the Virginia - North Carolina border to the Mississippi River. A friend of the Indians, he was often called on to negotiate treaties with them.

In 1749 Thomas Walker, Peter Jefferson, Joshua Fry, Thomas Meriwether and James Maury and others received a grant for 800,000 acres. This group of Virginia Piedmont gentlemen called themselves the *Loyal Company*. They appointed Thomas Walker to lead an expedition to explore and survey their grant in what is now southeastern Kentucky. He left *Castle Hill* with five companions on March 6, 1749 (*OS*) and returned on July 13, 1750. He traveled through the Cumberland Gap, through much of eastern Kentucky and back by way of the Greenbrier River. A cabin he built near present-day Barbourville was the first house built by a European in Kentucky. Walker's explorations showed the practicality of the Cumberland Gap – seventeen years before Daniel Boone passed that way. A map he drew of his journey was included in his journal of the trip. In 1752 he became the head of the *Loyal Company* and remained in that capacity until his death in 1796.

In 1753 some members of the *Loyal Company* drew up a plan to send an expedition up the Missouri River and to the Pacific Ocean. James Maury said that this plan was presented to the Governor and the Virginia Council of State by Joshua Fry. Thomas Walker was chosen to lead the expedition. He got as far as drawing up "a list of all necessary implements and apparatus" and "an estimate of the expense." However the plan was postponed and never carried out when

Walker was appointed the quartermaster for the Virginia troops at the beginning of the French and Indian War. Meriwether Lewis, grandson of *Loyal Company* member Thomas Meriwether, would live out their adventure fifty years later.

The Cidery at Castle Hill

http://castlehillcider.com/

In 1764, Castle Hill opened its doors, hosting over the years an array of creative minds, from dignitaries and politicians to explorers and novelists. Today, its creative legacy continues with artisan cider makers handcrafting cider on the property. Castle Hill's doors are now open to anyone wishing to experience its natural beauty, deep history, and the cider that proudly bears its name.

Listed as one of the world's best ciders, we will have a break while enjoying a tasting.

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Dan Pollard
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