

136 Memory Court
Birmingham, AL 35213
June 28, 1983

Special Collections Librarian
Wake Forest University
Wake Forest, North Carolina 27587

Dear Librarian:

I would appreciate it very much if you will let me know if you have any substantial amount of material on Hardin Edwards Taliaferro who was born in Surry County, North Carolina, in 1811, lived most of his life in Alabama, and died in Loudon, Tennessee in 1875. In recent efforts to go back over my two years of research on this man (for my graduate thesis in History at Samford University), one of my fellow students asked if I had thought of approaching you about this matter. I had not, since he had no connection with Wake Forest, so far as I can tell, but his personal papers are missing and the individual who referred me to your institution thought it possible that they might have been turned over to you because of the North Carolina connection.

Here are the basic facts that lead to this query: Mark Hardin Taliaferro (who changed his name later to Hardin Edwards Taliaferro after discovering a cousin also named Mark Hardin) was one of nine children of Charles Taliaferro and Sallie Burroughs Taliaferro. Charles was one of the children of John Taliaferro who came to Surry County from Virginia. Anyway, Hardin left Surry County in about 1829, joined two older brothers (both Baptist preachers) in Roane County, Tennessee. He was converted, felt called to preach, went back to school at Madisonville Academy in Tennessee, married Elizabeth Henderson (daughter of the sheriff of Monroe County, Tennessee) and moved in 1835 to Talladega County, Alabama. He lived and preached there for twenty years. In 1855, his brother-in-law, Sam Henderson, senior editor of the South Western Baptist, the weekly paper, persuaded Taliaferro to work with him as junior editor of the paper and the family moved to Tuskegee where the paper was published. He later became senior editor but gave that up in 1862 during the war. He later became a missionary to blacks from about 1868 to 1871. He moved to Loudon, Tennessee, with his wife in 1873 and died there in 1875.

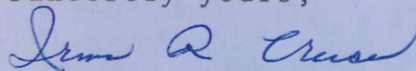
He had two daughters (no sons) and when the last living daughter died in 1917, one of her nieces packed up all the papers, etc., and put them in a trunk or box and mailed them to another niece (who would have been a grandchild of H.E.T.) in Spartanburg, S.C. They never arrived but were lost. Those papers are the object of my search. I have also written Salisbury College to see if they have them. Dr. Richard Walser, professor emeritus of North Carolina State, had already done considerable research on this same subject and I have been in touch with him. I believe inquiries had been made at Furman.

In addition to the fact that I am doing my graduate thesis on Taliaferro, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana, Professor Ray Craig, is doing his doctoral dissertation on the writings of Taliaferro, convinced that he should be classed among the Southwest Humorists.

Both Professor Craig and I are seeking all the information we can get to supplement what we already have. I have been working on my part of the project for two years but cannot be satisfied until I exhaust every possibility of finding the missing papers. When I tell you that he was given a Bible by Chang, one of the Siamese twins, when he made a trip from Alabama back to Mount Airy and Chang came to hear him preach (along with his twin Eng, of course), you will understand that I keep hoping that Bible might have been among the missing papers, also.

I will be glad to pay for search time and reproduction costs of any material you may have that I do not have in my possession already. When you have time to look through your special collection indexes, please let me know whether you have anything that might supplement what I have already. A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your reply.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Irma R. Cruse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Irma" being the most prominent.

Mrs. Irma R. Cruse

for this
Biblio-biography of Skitt Taliaferro

Walter your war
cap research article
By Richard Walser



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Biblio-biography of Skitt Taliaferro

BY RICHARD WALSER*

No writer's two books were ever more dissimilar than *The Grace of God Magnified*¹ and *Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters*, by "Skitt."² Their dissimilarity is even more startling when one is aware that they were the only books by the Reverend Hardin Edwards Taliaferro (pronounced Toll-i-ver) published during his lifetime. The first title, appearing in the spring of 1857 over his by-line, was followed more than two years later by the pseudonymous *Fisher's River*; and while Taliaferro's account of a deeply personal religious experience in *The Grace of God Magnified* is all but forgotten, the second title is now considered one of the more sprightly windfalls of antebellum southern humor. Yet, despite ample internal evidence clearly pointing to Taliaferro's authorship of *Fisher's River* as well as several attributions elsewhere, the comic masterwork seemed so unrelated to the life of the prominent Alabama preacher and editor that little interest was kindled to investigate the nonliterary but relevant career of the folk-humorist, whose name is by no means neglected in Baptist documents and histories. As a result, biographical data on the author of *Fisher's River* have been spotty and error-prone.

Easily enough can one come upon the first time a mistake was printed, but determining how or why the blunder was made is difficult indeed. An unreliable oral source, a mathematical miscalculation, a careless reading of a published record, a faulty document since lost—all are possible. In 1908 a cataloger at the Library of Congress noted that *Fisher's River* was written by Harden E. Taliaferro, born 1818?—a misspelled first name and an incorrect year of birth which have been perpetuated down through seven decades by sketch writers and bibliographers. Until *Harden* appeared on the catalog card, it had been *Hardin* for almost a hundred years. Where, one asks helplessly, did the *Harden* come from? The birth date, recorded as questionable, made him seven years younger than he was.

Mark Hardin Taliaferro, as he was known until he decided to change his name with the purpose presumably of avoiding confusion with a similarly named relative in Tennessee, was born at his father's farm on the banks of Little Fisher

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¹H. E. Taliaferro, *The Grace of God Magnified: An Experimental Tract* (Charleston, S.C.: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857), 122 pp., hereinafter cited as *The Grace of God Magnified*. A copy of this book is in the Duke University Library, Durham.

²[Harden Edwards Taliaferro], *Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters*, by "Skitt," "Who Was Raised Thar" (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 269 pp., hereinafter cited as *Fisher's River*. The book title has the apostrophe, but current spellings are Fisher River and Little Fisher River.

River in Surry County, North Carolina, during the first half of 1811. His brother-in-law Samuel Henderson, in a lengthy memorial appearing a month after Taliaferro's death, wrote that he was born "in the year 1811, (the precise date is not recollected,)"³ and census takers in the Alabama counties of Talladega and Macon, making their rounds in the summer or early fall, confirmed the year in recording his age in the censuses of 1850, 1860, and 1870.⁴ Of the nine children of Charles and Sallie (Burroughs) Taliaferro, Mark Hardin was the youngest.

The spelling of the strange surname, derived not from medieval Italian but from the Norman-French *Taillefer* (cutter of iron), remained unchanged in England from the twelfth century on, even after its pronunciation was dropped to an anglicized three syllables.⁵ Before 1645 a Robert Taliaferro emigrated to Virginia.⁶ In the 1770s his great-grandson John Taliaferro (1733-1821)—physician, Baptist preacher, soldier, and teacher—left Virginia and bought land in Surry County at the same time as did his friend Bernard Franklin. Among Franklin's children were Shadrack, who married Taliaferro's daughter Judith; Meshack, congressman (1807-1815); Abednigo; and Jesse, governor of North Carolina (1820-1821).

John Taliaferro's son Richard was a hero at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Another son, Benjamin, married Ada Snow, whose prolific family was among the early Surry County settlers.⁷ When John Taliaferro moved to Georgia in 1791, a third son, Charles, was allotted a portion of his property,⁸ and there he built a house—"nestled on the top of a beautiful mountain . . . roomy, well screened and comfortable"⁹—where his son Mark Hardin lived until his nineteenth year.¹⁰

Charles Taliaferro was well-to-do, a slaveowner,¹¹ a member of the Primitive Baptist Church, a "Scriptorian" (student of the Bible),¹² and one of the intellectual leaders of the county. He was "Assistant Marshall"¹³ at the time of the

³ *Alabama Baptist* (Marion, Ala.), December 7, 1875, microfilm copy, Alabama Baptist Historical Society, Birmingham, Alabama.

⁴ Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Talladega County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 393, hereinafter cited as Seventh Census, 1850; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Macon County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 791, hereinafter cited as Eighth Census, 1860; Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Macon County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 34, hereinafter cited as Ninth Census, 1870. All census records cited in this article are from microfilm of National Archives manuscript copy, Genealogy Section, North Carolina State Library, Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh.

⁵ Charles Taliaferro and Mrs. Frank J. Sherman (comps.), *Richard Taliaferro, 1762-1836, His Ancestors and Descendants* ([San Diego, Calif.]: N.p., 1956), [1], hereinafter cited as Taliaferro and Sherman, *Richard Taliaferro*; Nell (Watson) Sherman (comp.), *Taliaferro-Toliver Family Records* ([Peoria, Ill.]: N.p., 1960), 1-2; mimeographed copies of both titles examined at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

⁶ Taliaferro and Sherman, *Richard Taliaferro*, 5.

⁷ Willie Catherine Ivey (comp.), *Ancestry and Posterity of Dr. John Taliaferro and Mary (Hardin) Taliaferro* ([San Diego, Calif.]: N.p., [1955]), 3, 24, 25, 31, 68, hereinafter cited as Ivey, *Ancestry and Posterity*.

⁸ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, October 18, 1860, Bagby Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, hereinafter cited as Bagby Papers.

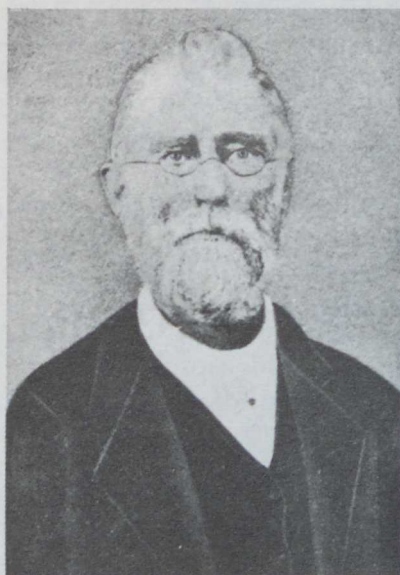
⁹ Ivey, *Ancestry and Posterity*, 67.

¹⁰ Fisher's *River*, 218.

¹¹ Nannie May Tilley (ed.), "Journal of the Surry County (N.C.) Agricultural Society," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXIV (October, 1947), 501, hereinafter cited as Tilley, "Journal of . . . Agricultural Society."

¹² Fisher's *River*, 45.

¹³ Third Census of the United States, 1810: Surry County, North Carolina, final page unnumbered.



Hardin Edwards Taliaferro (1811-1875) as he appeared in old age. Photograph from B. F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Alabama* (Birmingham: Roberts & Son, 1895), p. 183; courtesy Miss Ruth Minick, Mount Airy.

census of 1810, on whose large sheets his penmanship is neat, his tallies precise. He represented Surry County in the North Carolina House of Commons in 1811, 1812, and 1813, as did his son Dickson thirty years later.¹⁴ In the early 1820s he took an active role in the Surry County Agricultural Society and participated in discussions of scientific farming.¹⁵ His daughter Mary (Polly) married her first cousin Wylie Franklin, son of Shadrack. When Charles died in 1837¹⁶ all of his children, it was reported, were present at his funeral, and among them were his three Baptist-preacher sons.¹⁷

In spite of what some readers may conclude after laughing through a few of the low-life scenes in *Fisher's River*, the author obviously came from no ordinary background. The Taliaferro family was a prosperous, well-read, prominent, industrious, and adventurous one. Mark Hardin, whose boyhood nickname was Skitt, wrote that he spent "happy, happy days" along Little Fisher River, where he "was a jolly, singing, hoop-pee mill-boy," working at the "tub-mills" and listening to the wild yarns, tall tales, and exploits of the local denizens.¹⁸ But like many of his kinfolk, Skitt was restless, and in 1829, when he was eighteen,¹⁹ he

¹⁴ John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina from 1584 to 1851* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 2 volumes, 1851), I, 411.

¹⁵ Tilley, "Journal of . . . Agricultural Society," 494-531 passim.

¹⁶ The date is uncertain. Ivey, *Ancestry and Posterity*, 56, gives the year as 1838. *Alabama Baptist*, February 10, 1876, records it as 1839. But in 1857 H. E. Taliaferro, always so definite and careful about chronology, visited his parents' graves in Surry County and later wrote that he had not been in his native county in twenty years, making the date 1837. See *South Western Baptist* (Tuskegee, Alabama), July 16, 1857, microfilm copy, Alabama Baptist Historical Society; and *Fisher's River*, [v]. No grave markers to Charles Taliaferro and his wife have been located.

¹⁷ *Alabama Baptist*, February 10, 1876.

¹⁸ *Fisher's River*, [v]-vi, 114, 139-140.

¹⁹ *Fisher's River*, 110, 167, 218.

set out west across the mountains to join his older brothers Charles and Richard in east Tennessee. On the way, according to a story passed down in the family, a boasting fellow challenged him to a fistfight. Handily did the burly strongman throw Skitt about, around, over his shoulders, and beneath his legs. On each turn Skitt bit him fiercely, and finally the boaster gave up, saying, "I never knowed I wus a-fightin' a dog!"²⁰

Skitt's brother Charles Taliaferro (1799-1856) had left North Carolina in the early 1820s for Roane County, Tennessee, where in 1827 he was licensed to preach at the Prospect Missionary Baptist Church of the Hiwassee Association. He was pastor at Prospect for twenty-five years, from the time of his ordination in 1831 until his death. The church prospered; in 1846 its membership was more than twice that of any other church in the association.²¹ Richard H. Taliaferro, born March 27, 1801, was unlike his stay-at-home brother Charles. After being baptized in Surry County in 1821 and ordained at Prospect Church, he ranged throughout the South from Texas to the Indian missions and was happiest when exhorting at protracted meetings.²²

During his first years in Tennessee Skitt was a tanner and seems to have lived with his brother Charles who, when not preaching, dealt in "hides and tallow."²³ In November, 1831, "God revealed his Son" to twenty-year-old Taliaferro; he was baptized the following month, became a member of Prospect Church, in which his brothers were already active, and during the spring of 1832 was licensed to preach.²⁴ Thereafter, on Sundays, "he began to exercise his gifts" from the pulpit and pursued "his vocation [as a tanner] all the week," but eventually he abandoned that occupation and "had a little farm."²⁵ At this time, convinced that additional formal schooling was desirable and appropriate, Skitt entered an academy at nearby Madisonville and "prosecuted his studies with great earnestness for a year or more."²⁶ There he met Elizabeth Henderson, to whom he

²⁰Ruth Minick to Richard Walser, March 23, 1976. Letter in file of author, who is much indebted to Miss Minick for information about the Taliaferro family and about H. E. Taliaferro's Surry County background.

²¹Obituary by Samuel Henderson, *South Western Baptist*, June 5, 1856. See also *South Western Baptist*, September 20, 1860; *Minutes of the Hiwassee United Baptist Association* (Athens, Tenn.: John M. Biggs, [1834]), [1], microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee; *Minutes of the Twenty-Third Annual Session of the Hiwassee Association* (N.p.: H. & I. E. Barry, [1846]), [1], microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention; Joseph H. Borum, *Biographical Sketches of Tennessee Baptist Ministers* (Memphis: Rogers & Co., 1880), 588, hereinafter cited as Borum, *Biographical Sketches*; J. J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee's Pioneer Baptist Preachers* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Company, 1919), 498-501, hereinafter cited as Burnett, *Sketches*.

²²*South Western Baptist*, August 27, 1857, September 15, 1859, April 11, 1861, and passim; Borum, *Biographical Sketches*, 589; Burnett, *Sketches*, 501-502. Richard H. Taliaferro, like his brother, had a sense of humor. Of one of his numerous visits back to Surry County, he wrote that during a service an "old lady more than eighty years old," who clearly had her mind more on agriculture than religion, interrupted the sermon and asked Brother Taliaferro "how 'craps was in his parts.'" See *South Western Baptist*, November 25, 1858.

²³Ivey, *Ancestry and Posterity*, 58.

²⁴*The Grace of God Magnified*, [9]; *South Western Baptist*, August 27, 1857, September 20, 1860.

²⁵J. L. M. Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro," in B. F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Alabama* (Birmingham: Roberts & Son, 1895), 341, hereinafter cited as Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro." The Curry sketch appeared originally in the *Alabama Baptist* in 1890. The book will be hereinafter cited as Riley, *History of the Baptists of Alabama*.

²⁶*Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

was married in 1834, the year of his ordination. He stayed on in Madisonville, "travelling and preaching as a gratuitous evangelist, having no special charge,"²⁷ and there his daughter Nancy was born.²⁸ Then in the fall of 1835, presumably because a less transient situation was offered him, "he removed to Alabama and settled one mile from the town of Talladega."²⁹

A year later his father-in-law, John F. Henderson (1793-1857), left Madisonville and followed Taliaferro into Alabama, bringing the first printing press to the county.³⁰ Henderson and members of his family were soon active in the newly formed church at Talladega.³¹ Two of the sons rose to prominence: John Henderson became a noted judge, and Samuel Henderson (1817-1890), after serving his first pastorate at Talladega, moved gradually into a position of leadership among Alabama Baptists.³²

For the next twenty years, though Taliaferro had occasionally to forsake "his life work" to earn money, he "served nine or ten churches" of the large Coosa River Association extending over four counties and also made "by no means unfrequent missionary excursions over a still broader territory."³³ In the early 1840s his second daughter, Adelaide, was born.³⁴ In 1843 he and his brother-in-law Samuel Henderson represented the association, then with twenty-four churches and eleven ordained ministers, at the state convention.³⁵

In the mid-1840s Taliaferro's talents as a writer first came to be recognized. Remembered with admiration many years later was a report he made on sabbath schools at the state convention in 1846,³⁶ at which time his sermon on "The Covenant of Redemption" was so well received that it was chosen for publication in the important *Virginia Baptist Preacher*.³⁷ This discourse and Taliaferro's

²⁷ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

²⁸ Seventh Census, 1850: Talladega County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 393.

²⁹ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

³⁰ *South Western Baptist*, October 22, 1857.

³¹ Mabel Ponder Wilson (comp.), *Some Early Alabama Churches* (Birmingham: Alabama Society of D.A.R., 1973), 201, hereinafter cited as Wilson, *Some Early Alabama Churches*.

³² John Gilbert Appleton, "Samuel Henderson: Alabama Pastor, Editor and Leader," *Alabama Baptist Historian*, V (January, 1969), 6, hereinafter cited as Appleton, "Samuel Henderson."

³³ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875. See also *South Western Baptist*, October 2, 1856, and *Minutes of the Seventeenth Session of the Coosa River Association* (N.p.: Democratic Watchtower, [1850]), [15], microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, hereinafter cited as *Minutes . . . of the Coosa River Association*, [1850]. As to his "missionary excursions," Taliaferro reported visits to Eufala, Alabama, in both 1845 and 1848. See *Fisher's River*, 249-250.

³⁴ Eighth Census, 1860: Talladega County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 791.

³⁵ *Journal of the Proceedings of the State Baptist Convention in Alabama* (Marion, Ala.: Marion Herald, 1843), 3, also unnumbered insert following page 28, microfilm copy, Alabama Baptist Historical Society.

³⁶ B. F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Alabama*, 168.

³⁷ "The Covenant of Redemption, the Soul of the Missionary Enterprise, Preached before the Baptist State Convention at Marion, Ala., Nov. 19, 1846," *Virginia Baptist Preacher*, VIII (January, 1849), 1-18, decried the small number of foreign missionaries in face of the need for them. Three other sermons by Taliaferro were published in the *Virginia Baptist Preacher*. "The Root and Offspring of David: By Rev. H. E. Taliaferro, pastor of the Baptist Church, Talladega, Alabama," X (July, 1851), 134-148, was followed by a companion sermon, "The Sure Mercies of David," XII (June, 1853), 89-107. "Life and Immortality Brought to Light: A sermon on the death of Wm. C. Hill, Esq., preached on the second Lord's day in April, 1853, at Mount Zion church, Talladega co.," XIII (May, 1854), 75-90, was primarily the eulogy of a promising young lawyer (1822-1853) who died of consumption. Microfilm of University of Chicago Library copies, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina.

other printed sermons, formal and philosophic, evinced his extensive reading. Yet his serious nature must often have been thrown off-balance by an inborn vein of frivolity. In "Foolish Jestings Is Not Convenient," a short piece on the evil of taking religion too lightly, he wrote that "Cheerfulness is allowed, but not levity and foolish jesting; they are not convenient."³⁸ Convenient or not, his undeniable sense of humor was not to be suppressed, as was attested in "Deacon Dogood,"³⁹ a trivial bit of satire taking its cue from Benjamin Franklin's "Dogood Papers." One of those with whom Taliaferro was in frequent correspondence during these years was the editor of the state Baptist weekly newspaper, who wrote that his "many virtues [had] made him a universal favorite among his acquaintances."⁴⁰ Proof that he was a favorite with his congregations as well can be adduced by citing an 1850 contribution of \$44.50 from Coosa River's Good Hope Baptist Church to the Indian Missions, "\$30 of this to constitute the Rev. H. E. Taliaferro a Life Member."⁴¹ In that year he was elected moderator of the association and president of the Coosa River Book Society, the purpose of the latter being to distribute religious publications among members of the association.⁴² In 1851 he was appointed as a messenger (i.e., a delegate) to the Southern Baptist Convention,⁴³ but he did not attend. The appointment came at the lowest period of his life. A black despondency held fast to him, and his spiritual strength was depleted.

One of Taliaferro's most salient characteristics was a questioning intelligence. For more than a decade and a half after his baptism in 1831 he had, he later wrote, been "harassed with perplexing doubts and fears and skeptical suggestions"⁴⁴ concerning the certainty of his salvation. In 1848 his misgiving increased.⁴⁵ With a persistence that was almost unbearable he began to think that he had "been deceived by his confession of faith in Christ."⁴⁶ Though he continued his pastoral duties for over two years, a sense of his unworthiness tortured him. In March, 1851, he read for the first time Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative," a famous conversion tract by the most noted of the New England mystics. His terrors multiplied. As soon as he could and when he was sure that no one noticed, Taliaferro slipped away to a grove of trees and there "prostrated [himself] before God in prayer,"⁴⁷ but his act of submission did not, inexplicably, relieve him of his agonies. He was, he decided, not a converted man, not a Christian, but a mere "mass of moral putridity and vileness."⁴⁸ Time and again he

³⁸*Alabama Baptist*, January 8, 1848. The name of the *Alabama Baptist* was changed to the *Alabama Baptist Advocate* on February 23, 1849, to the *South Western Baptist* on July 31, 1850, and back to the *Alabama Baptist* after the period of its suspension following the Civil War. See F. Wilbur Helmbold, "Baptist Periodicals in Alabama, 1834-1873," *Alabama Baptist Historian*, 2 (July, 1966), 2-12, hereinafter cited as Helmbold, "Baptist Periodicals."

³⁹*Alabama Baptist*, June 23, 1848.

⁴⁰*Alabama Baptist Advocate* (Marion, Alabama), May 18, June 15, 1849, microfilm copy, Alabama Baptist Historical Society.

⁴¹*South Western Baptist*, September 11, 1850.

⁴²*Minutes . . . of the Coosa River Association*, [1850], [1], [16].

⁴³*South Western Baptist*, April 9, 1851.

⁴⁴*The Grace of God Magnified*, 10.

⁴⁵*The Grace of God Magnified*, 11.

⁴⁶Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro," 343.

⁴⁷*The Grace of God Magnified*, 59.

⁴⁸*The Grace of God Magnified*, 76.

wept and prayed without deliverance. He was damned. Then one day, unexpectedly, without forewarning, his mind dwelt on the Cross. In a sudden visionary moment he was aware that Jesus' crucifixion "had satisfied every claim that law and justice had against him"⁴⁹—a doctrine he had never before fully grasped. His "perturbed spirit was calm; it had found a resting place at last."⁵⁰ And now, with the dark clouds vanished, nothing remained but light and "grace! grace!! grace!!!"⁵¹ His redemption came "about the first of June";⁵² the crisis was over; and, wrote Samuel Henderson, "Salvation by grace and grace alone was ever thereafter his perpetual theme."⁵³ His life became a harmonious admixture of work and blessedness and joy.

In a letter to the *South Western Baptist* in the fall of 1851 a correspondent soberly noted that Taliaferro had "been the pastor of the Baptist church at Talladega for a number of years" and that no man in the section was "exerting a more powerful influence in favor of all that is good than he." He had "reached considerable distinction, both as a preacher and as a writer," had completed a year as moderator of the Coosa River Association, and was on the board of directors of the proposed Male High School in Talladega.⁵⁴ At subsequent meetings of the association, such as the one two years later, his committee assignments were many, his duties numerous; he was elected to preach the "Introductory Sermon" and chosen to read the report on "Deceased Members."⁵⁵ In 1854, besides Talladega, he had a church at Kymulga.⁵⁶ At the Alabama State Convention in the spring of the next year he read, as chairman "Of the Committee on Education," a lengthy report pleading for aid to ministerial students, especially at Judson Institute and Howard College.⁵⁷

Taliaferro's twenty years in Talladega came to an end late in 1855 when he received an attractive and challenging invitation to become the "junior editor" of the weekly *South Western Baptist* in Tuskegee, where Samuel Henderson, pastor of the Tuskegee Baptist church, was "senior editor." Henderson had been publishing the paper for several years, but the time-consuming work demanded an assistant.⁵⁸ It was only natural that he looked to his brother-in-law, "whose articles [had] often enriched" its columns.⁵⁹ Taliaferro, still known among some of his friends as Mark⁶⁰ but apparently no longer as Skitt, "made his debut" at the *Baptist* on January 10, 1856.⁶¹ Shortly thereafter he was minister of at least

⁴⁹ Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro," 343.

⁵⁰ *The Grace of God Magnified*, 91.

⁵¹ *The Grace of God Magnified*, 113.

⁵² *The Grace of God Magnified*, 119.

⁵³ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

⁵⁴ *South Western Baptist*, October 8, 1851.

⁵⁵ *Minutes of the Twentieth Session of the Coosa River Association* (Montgomery, Ala.: State Gazette Job Office, 1853), 4, 5, 8-9, microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention.

⁵⁶ *South Western Baptist*, August 17, 1854.

⁵⁷ *South Western Baptist*, May 31, 1855; see also July 7, 1852, for an earlier letter on the same subject.

⁵⁸ Helmbold, "Baptist Periodicals," 6, 11.

⁵⁹ *South Western Baptist*, October 4, 1855.

⁶⁰ *South Western Baptist*, January 24, 1856.

⁶¹ *South Western Baptist*, November 22, 1855, January 10, 1856.

four rural churches in the vicinity.⁶² No one can doubt that the new situation was an agreeable one. The subject of education was constantly on his mind, and Tuskegee had a number of schools, two for girls (Baptist and Methodist) and four small academies for boys, one called the Tuskegee Classical and Scientific Institute.

In these mature years Taliaferro presented a striking figure, "more than six feet in statue [*sic*]," with a "grave but benevolent face," a "tall brow, and profuse hair and beard."⁶³ To the boys in the neighborhood "he was a very interesting character as well as a terror to their sporting proclivities."⁶⁴ Among his peers he was known for his ingenuousness and modesty, for his detestation of any "efforts at notoriety."⁶⁵

On the pages of the *Baptist* an improvement in the writing of the articles was soon noticeable.⁶⁶ Famous authors were quoted more frequently, books were reviewed, and a light touch crept in occasionally. Some of the unsigned poems may have been Taliaferro's. His literary style was "solid, and at times, uncouth as granite . . . angular [and] transparent,"⁶⁷ his language "most nervous and graphic," "his colloquial powers . . . fine, and his humor most spontaneous and rich."⁶⁸ His studies at the Madisonville academy, it was said, had "created an irrepressible thirst for mental improvement which followed him through life" and embarked him on an "extensive range of reading, especially in the domain of profane and ecclesiastical history."⁶⁹ As confirmation of the statement, Taliaferro wrote of himself: "I am a seventeenth century man in my theology and feelings. . . . I have but little patience with, and taste for, the most of our modern authors. They are too poor in thought, and too shallow in piety."⁷⁰ And while it is true that he studied the works of such seventeenth-century divines as Richard Baxter and Thomas Boston and John Bunyan,⁷¹ he was also aware of the Swiftian satire of *Gulliver's Travels* and the impertinent antics of Tony Lumpkin in Oliver Goldsmith's comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*,⁷² to say nothing of the Old Southwest rascals in Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1846),⁷³ famous title in a genre to which he would soon make a contribution.

Even so, Taliaferro's first book was a far cry from the rowdy shenanigans of a Simon Suggs. Hardly had he settled in Tuskegee, and a healing period of five years passed, than he began to tell close friends of his earlier spiritual crisis. Though they "uniformly suggested its publication in some form," Taliaferro was

⁶² *South Western Baptist*, June 25, 1857.

⁶³ *Alabama Baptist*, January 6, 1876.

⁶⁴ Bessie Conner Brown (comp.), *A History of the First Baptist Church, Tuskegee, Alabama* ([Tuskegee]: First Baptist Church of Tuskegee, 1972), 7, hereinafter cited as Brown, *A History of the First Baptist Church, Tuskegee*.

⁶⁵ *Alabama Baptist*, January 6, 1876.

⁶⁶ See, for example, "Bishop Pierce in Danger," *South Western Baptist*, April 24, 1856.

⁶⁷ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

⁶⁸ *Alabama Baptist*, January 6, 1876.

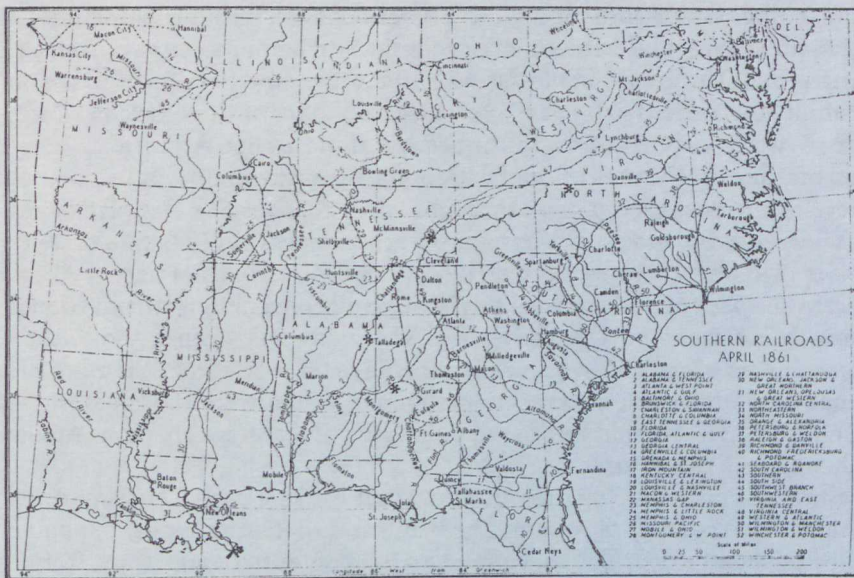
⁶⁹ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

⁷⁰ *The Grace of God Magnified*, 110.

⁷¹ Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro," 341.

⁷² *Fisher's River*, 32-33, 36; *South Western Baptist*, July 2, 1857.

⁷³ *South Western Baptist*, January 19, 1860.



Skitt Taliaferro was born in Surry County, North Carolina, but spent most of his life in and around Talladega and Tuskegee, Alabama, and his last three years in Loudon, Tennessee. The asterisks added to the above map denote those locations. Map from R. S. Cotterill, *The Old South . . .* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1936), [p. 221].

uncertain about what to do until May 1856, when one whom he highly respected urged him: "Write it out, by all means—publish it. It will do good to souls, and lead to a deeper tone of piety."⁷⁴ During the ensuing months he composed his account, signing the preface from Tuskegee on January 1, 1857.⁷⁵ His original title, "The Precious Work of Grace in His Soul, as Wrought by the Holy Spirit,"⁷⁶ was changed by the time of publication to *The Grace of God Magnified: An Experimental Tract*. Two thousand copies⁷⁷ of the 30-cent clothbound book were put on sale in March. Following a modest advertisement in the *South Western Baptist*, various reprints of reviews and notices appeared in Taliaferro's weekly for months thereafter, extolling the book with high praise, even placing it "by the side of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*."⁷⁸ By September the stock was almost sold out and a second edition planned, but Taliaferro, happy and proud of his success, indulged himself by reprinting yet another laudatory notice, risking, he admitted, "being called egotistic."⁷⁹

Meanwhile, in spite of his happiness and pride, his energies were exhausted. He had, he gently complained, been laboring for eighteen months in Tuskegee

⁷⁴ *The Grace of God Magnified*, [iii].

⁷⁵ *The Grace of God Magnified*, [iv].

⁷⁶ Curry, "H. E. Taliaferro," 343.

⁷⁷ *South Western Baptist*, May 21, 1857.

⁷⁸ *South Western Baptist*, March 26, May 28, 1857. See also issues of April 9, 23, May 7, 14, 1857.

⁷⁹ *South Western Baptist*, September 10, October 29, 1857.

and preaching to four churches,⁸⁰ and he was convinced that nothing but "a trip to the mountains" would recoup his strength. Furthermore, he wrote editorially, "we wish to see the graves of our father and mother, and once more to behold the land of our Juvenile existence."⁸¹ In the latter part of June he left Tuskegee, preached two days in Auburn, continued by train through Atlanta on June 22 to see his brother in Whitfield County, Georgia, spent overnight in familiar Roane County, Tennessee, then passed through Knoxville to Bull's Gap, transferred to a hack for Max Meadows in Virginia, preached at Hillsville before crossing the state line into Surry County, and arrived at the "place of [his] nativity" on June 30. There he spent about two weeks "visiting and conversing with old friends and relations." He went to the graveyard where lay his "venerated father and mother" and at Mount Airy, "a beautiful village ten miles from the Blue Ridge," preached three times to congregations, among whom were the Siamese Twins. On the return trip he held two services in Hillsville and was back in Alabama a month after his departure.

In Surry County he had found the home folks to be "honest, kind and hospitable. The country is poor and healthy, and so are the people . . . and many are hard pushed to live. Yet they are cheerful, contented and happy."⁸² He himself was, he wrote, "a perfect wonder" to them, for he "wore a long beard—the whole beard," and in Surry at that time there was "no full-grown beard, except among the 'Dunkards.'"⁸³ But no matter about the "perfect wonder" that he was, for his visit was a productive one, and from it came *Fisher's River*, a book which placed him solidly in the annals of comic American literature.

"I visited my old native section in 1857, after an absence of twenty years," he later wrote, "and while there the reminiscences of my early years naturally revived . . . and on my return I concluded to write out some of the scenes and stories of that age [1820-1829] and section. When I had nearly finished them," he confided in the appropriately modest literary statement expected in mid-nineteenth-century America, "they were read to some friends, who warmly suggested their publication."⁸⁴

Though Taliaferro had often in the past flavored his serious writing with a dash of lightheartedness, it was not till the period when he was drafting his Surry County "scenes and stories" that his raw spirits erupted in print. Always careful to respect religion and particularly the Primitive Baptist faith of his father, he nevertheless permitted himself at that time to use the columns of the *South Western Baptist* for some anecdotes considerably less than sedate. He repeated the yarn about

⁸⁰But see *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Session of the Tuskegee Baptist Association* (Tuskegee: Office of the South Western Baptist, 1858), 14, microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention. As of September, 1858, Taliaferro was assigned only three churches: Auburn, 115 members; Notasulga, 164 members; and Cotton Valley, 110 members.

⁸¹*South Western Baptist*, June 25, 1857.

⁸²*South Western Baptist*, July 2, 16, 23, 30, August 6, 1857. Taliaferro's travel letters in the *South Western Baptist*, and often his weekly activities, are tucked among the church news, the discussions on religious controversies, and expository articles on theological dilemmas such as, for example, the one on April 15, 1858, about whether a converted polygamist in Africa should be baptized.

⁸³*Fisher's River*, 111.

⁸⁴*Fisher's River*, Preface, [v].

the way Parson Monk, a "Hardshell" Baptist preacher, once turned the tables on the "Missionary" Baptists in one of his "spell-bound" sermons. Said the Parson: "Brethering, they call us 'Hardshells'; and Monk's willin' to bear it, ah! Now let's see what the Hardshells will hatch ah! Well, thar's the goose, ah! and the turkey, and the duck, and the chicken, and the dove, ah! and, in short, ah! all of the beautiful fowls uv the air, ah! And now dear, childring uv the covenant, let's see what the Saftshell's will hatch, ah! Thar's the Crocadile, ah! and the turkle [turtle], and the tarrapin, and the snake, ah! and the spider (O my soul!) and all the abominable animils uv the yeth [earth], ah! Now what have they made by thar nickname, brethering?" "Nothin'?" [sic] responded the "brethering."⁸⁵

Sometime afterward, on a visit to the French Market in New Orleans, Taliaferro's always receptive mind switched from his pleasure in Hardshell cleverness to sheer delight in observing man's chicanery:

The richest scene I saw was a shrewd negro selling his articles. He was an "old stager" in the business. He had some otter and beaver skins; several "possums" [sic] and "coons," cleaned and salted; and then he had a small carcass that no one could decide as to what it was. The negroes were disputing, some in French, and some in broken English, whether it was "possum or not." The owner affirmed it was, some agreed and some disagreed. In cleaning it he had parched it up, purposely, so no one could identify it. It attracted attention, and that was what he wished. I left them, and on my return I found he had sold it. My own opinion is, it was a fat puppy.⁸⁶

The preface of *Fisher's River* was dated July, 1859, indicating that Taliaferro was some two years writing the sketches which he hoped would "contribute a mite toward our country's stock of humorous literature,"⁸⁷ and the book was published four months later. Thirteen steel engravings by John M'Lenan enlivened the book. In fact, Taliaferro had "got Harper & Brothers to publish it," he said, "because they had practiced artists who could make the 'picters' which are important in such a work."⁸⁸ After its autumn publication Taliaferro's *South Western Baptist* noted briefly that it was "a fair specimen of Southern backwoods vernacular. There is a naturalness about the delineation which will make the reader feel easy in the perusal. . . . Price one dollar."⁸⁹ A month later the book was on sale at Keesee's Book Store in Tuskegee.⁹⁰

Fisher's River was Taliaferro's conscious effort to follow in the tradition of well-known Old Southwest humorists like Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, William Tappan Thompson, Johnson Jones Hooper, and Joseph Glover Baldwin. Taliaferro's anecdotes were narrated by the Surry County storytellers in an authentic oral style. Indeed, reported Taliaferro, the natives retained their "rustic vernacular . . . with great tenacity" in spinning out their whoppers about drinking at a militia muster, about a ridiculous mountain courtship, about "fist-fighting and scratching," and about affrays in which the participants would "gouge like screw-augers, and butt like rams." Church meetings and religious affairs were fair game for humor, as in the tale of the Hardshell Baptist simpleton

⁸⁵ *South Western Baptist*, December 9, 1858.

⁸⁶ *South Western Baptist*, February 7, 1860.

⁸⁷ *Fisher's River*, vi.

⁸⁸ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, August 10, 1860, Bagby Papers.

⁸⁹ *South Western Baptist*, November 10, 1859.

⁹⁰ *South Western Baptist*, December 1, 1859.



Shown above are four of the thirteen steel engravings of drawings rendered by artist John M'Lenan for Taliaferro's *Fisher's River* (1859). At top left, Uncle Davy Lane watches as his horse is lifted into the air by unburdened tree limbs (p. 82); at top right, Uncle Davy, shown in his blacksmith shop, bends the barrel of his gun Bucksmasher so that bullets might follow a "pesky old buck" around a mountain (p. 66); Oliver Stanley, at lower left, reposes temporarily in the belly of a whale (p. 131); and John Snow, at lower right, rests awkwardly in a fine "Weasler" chair (p. 215).

preaching, and Taliaferro had persuaded John E. Dawson, minister from Columbus, Georgia, to come to the weekly as joint editor and proprietor.⁹⁷ Since Dawson was not in good health, the heavy duties fell to Taliaferro who still had his rural charges, including a church at Bethel in the "Fishhead Valley" of Tallapoosa County.⁹⁸

Beginning early in 1860 Taliaferro traveled by ship and train throughout the territory which the *South Western Baptist* considered its own. When invited, he preached from friendly but unfamiliar pulpits. He was an indefatigable sightseer and promoted the "interests" of his newspaper wherever he went.⁹⁹ The travel letters written back to the *Baptist* were lively ones, describing the people, the towns, and especially the exciting experience of travel by rail. In January he was in Mobile for the first time and took a ship to New Orleans.¹⁰⁰ From February on he stayed closer home, called at Alabama churches in Talladega, Oxford, Shelby Iron Works, Jacksonville, Lafayette, Montevallo, Auburn, Montgomery, Greenville, Eufala, Clayton, and Wetumpka. He crossed over into Georgia to visit Columbus, Dalton, Atlanta, and Tunnel Hill and spent several days at the copper mines in Ducktown, Tennessee.¹⁰¹ He turned up at Mount Zion Church, which he had "served for years as pastor," and went by "buggy to Fayetteville," whose Baptist church had been his charge for "four years."¹⁰² He called on bookstores, such as B. B. Davis's Book Emporium in Montgomery,¹⁰³ doubtless promoting *Fisher's River* if the opportunity presented itself. When the census taker called in the summer, Taliaferro listed the value of his real estate at \$1,600, his personal property at \$3,200.¹⁰⁴ The Tuskegee Baptist Association held its annual meeting at Good Hope Church in early autumn, and Taliaferro was assigned, as usual, a plethora of duties.¹⁰⁵

He did not neglect his literary concerns. In August he had written George William Bagby, editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and an admirer of *Fisher's River*, that "an occasional humorous Sketch" might be furnished the Richmond periodical if it was requested. He signed the letter Skitt, explaining that he chose "for the present to remain incog."¹⁰⁶ Bagby, a humorist himself, evidently expressed an eagerness to receive contributions by Skitt, as Skitt then sent off "Duck Town," a revision of his recent travel letters about that strange place. Shortly thereafter, "Duck Town" appeared in the *Messenger*, the first of nine sketches published by Bagby over the next three years.¹⁰⁷ In his August letter as well as later Taliaferro proposed "Some Chapters in the Life of Robert

⁹⁷ *South Western Baptist*, July 29, October 28, 1858; July 14, 1859; July 19, 1860.

⁹⁸ *South Western Baptist*, August 25, September 8, 1859.

⁹⁹ *South Western Baptist*, March 29, 1860.

¹⁰⁰ *South Western Baptist*, January 19, 26, February 2, 9, 16, 23, 1860.

¹⁰¹ *South Western Baptist*, March 1, 8, 15, 22, 29, April 5, 12, 19, 26, May 17, 31, June 21, 28, 1860.

¹⁰² *South Western Baptist*, March 22, 1860.

¹⁰³ *South Western Baptist*, April 19, 26, 1860.

¹⁰⁴ Eighth Census, 1860: Macon County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 791.

¹⁰⁵ *Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Session of the Tuskegee Association* (Tuskegee: Office of the South Western Baptist, 1860), 4, [16], microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention.

¹⁰⁶ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, August 10, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹⁰⁷ "Duck Town, by 'Skitt,' Who Has Been 'Thar,'" *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXXI (November, 1860), 337-342; "Parson Squint, by Skitt, Who Has Seen Him," XXXII (January, 1861), 50-52; "Some Chapters in the Eventful Life of Captain Robert Exquisite, by Skitt, Who Knew Him,"

who mistook a donkey's braying for a heavenly voice calling him to the ministry.⁹¹ Though the impression left with the reader is that Surry County was a primitive place, given to ignorance, barbarity, and superstition, with its inhabitants placing more importance on guns, butcher knives, fiddles, and a drink locally called "knock-'em-stiff" than on learning and good manners, Taliaferro was careful to point out that "for all this, they were a clever folk, and one [Taliaferro himself] raised among them, who [knew] their worth every way," had in his book with the utmost humility "ventured to record some few of their deeds of daring."⁹² The most incredible hunting pranks, the most amazing encounters with animals and snakes came from Uncle Davy Lane, who "had a great fund of long-winded stories and incidents, mostly manufactured by himself." Uncle Davy told Skitt of how his horse, tied to a tree, was lifted into the air when his gun Bucksmasher slaughtered a mighty flock of pigeons roosting there, thus relieving the limbs of their weight. At another time Uncle Davy climbed a tree to eat some fruit and "'hadn't gulluped down more'n fifty master peaches afore, by golly! the tree started off, with me in it, faster nur you uver seen a scared wolf run.'" From his perch Uncle Davy looked down and was terrified to perceive that "'the peach-tree was growin' out'n an old buck, right behind his shoulders.'" By then the buck was running so fast that "'he split the wind, and made it roar in my head like a harricane.'" ⁹³ Besides these two outrageous concoctions, Uncle Davy had a supply of tall tales about a panther, a tapeworm, a coachwhip snake, and a horn snake with a "'stinger in his tail, six inches long and sharp as a needle, stickin' out like a cock's spur.'" ⁹⁴

And there was Jonah-like Oliver Stanley who, upon lighting his pipe while sitting comfortably inside a whale's belly, was forthwith ejected from his pitch-black abode. Oliver Stanley and Uncle Davy Lane were actual, well-known Surry County men whose preposterous stories Taliaferro wrote down from memory. Perhaps unwisely, he did not disguise the names of his characters, some fourscore of whom were mentioned in *Fisher's River*, including the slave-preacher Charles Gentry, blacksmith Meredy Edwards, Congressman Meshack Franklin, and Frost Snow and Hail Snow.⁹⁵ It was the rustic John Snow who, after visiting an elegant mansion and being politely received, told his cronies: "'I tell you, boys, with my dirty britches I sot right smack in one o' the finest Weasler [Windsor] chairs you uver seen in all yer borned days, and my big, mud-bustin, pis-ant-killin' shoes on thar fine carpet looked like two great big Injun coonoos. I'll be poxed ef I knowed how to hold my hands nur feet.'" ⁹⁶

The publication of *Fisher's River* came at the end of a breakneck year for Taliaferro and the beginning of another busy one. In July, 1859, Samuel Henderson had left the senior editorship of the *South Western Baptist* for full-time

⁹¹ *Fisher's River*, 17, 193, 198, 233-236.

⁹² *Fisher's River*, 18.

⁹³ *Fisher's River*, 51, 72-73.

⁹⁴ *Fisher's River*, 56.

⁹⁵ But not Ice Snow, More Snow, and Ice and Snow Snow, whose father had planned to name the next son Deep Snow until his wife declared she'd had enough snow. See [Ruth Minick], *Some Surry County Tales Which Were Told at the October Surry County Historical Society Meeting (and Some Which Were Not)*, ([Mount Airy, North Carolina], N.p., [1976?]), [1].

⁹⁶ *Fisher's River*, 214.

Exquisite,' " which he "designed as a humorous satire upon exquisite, bombastic talkers, those bores of the literary world. My character is a real one, and the incidents in his life are true."¹⁰⁸ Bagby of course accepted it, as he did a "Hardshell Baptist Sermon" ["Parson Squint"], which Taliaferro thought took "the 'shine' off the 'harp of a thousand Strings.'" ¹⁰⁹ To the important Virginia publisher Taliaferro confided what he thought to be his literary shortcomings, explaining that as senior editor of the *South Western Baptist* with its 4,000 subscribers he had to "do nearly all the writing and correspondence" and thus could "not bestow that attention upon my sketches which will make them pass muster with hypercritics." He revealed his identity to Bagby but wrote that he wished to retain his pseudonym, since a "fictitious name . . . attracts attention and awakens curiosity."¹¹⁰ He had his mind on the future, too, and if ever another edition of *Fisher's River* was published, he would, he promised Bagby, "put the sketches I furnish you in it, if they take well."¹¹¹

At year's end, life in Tuskegee was a bit frantic. Taliaferro's southern patriotism was total, and when South Carolina considered pulling away from the federal government, he was ecstatic. "Hurra! for Secession," he wrote Bagby. "I'm for lighting my pipe, after filling it full of good tobacco, and go smoking deliberately out of the Union."¹¹²

Taliaferro's associate, John E. Dawson, died on November 18, 1860,¹¹³ and in January his office clerk, J. E. Jones, went off to Pensacola with the Tuskegee Light Infantry. "To attend four churches, act editor and clerk, and see to the interests of ones family is not an easy task,"¹¹⁴ he told subscribers of the *Baptist*. But for a while sectional pride mitigated the hard-pressed days at home. In the spring he wrote that the constitution of the Confederate States of America was "the best human production in the world" and later followed up the statement with a long editorial defending slavery.¹¹⁵ In May he wrote Bagby: "Hurra for my Old North Carolina! 'Fisher's River,' with all its wonderous 'Scenes' will soon be in the Southern Confederacy. Where is Uncle Davy Lane's 'Old Buck Smasher?' Let it be hunted up, placed in hands of some Fisher's River hero, and become a 'Republican Smasher.'" ¹¹⁶

By December the desperate days were irrevocably upon him, evinced by his unfeigned gratitude when a pair of homemade jeans was given him by the "sisters of the Baptist Church in Notasulga, of which we are pastor." Four months later he sadly announced the suspension of the *South Western Baptist*,

XXXIV (January, February-March, 1862), 25-31, 91-97; "Tasting Religion," XXXIV (May, 1862), 329-330; "The 'Desparade,'" XXXIV (June, 1862), 398-399; "Sketches by Skitt: 'Militeer Power,'" "Johnson Snow and Uncle Davy Lane," XXXIV (July-August, 1862), 471-472, 473-475; "A Sketch by Skitt"; Johnson Snow at a 'Hottle,'" XXXV (February, 1863), 97-101; and "Deacon Crow," XXXV (October, 1863), 635-636. These nine sketches were later collected and reprinted, with a foreword by David K. Jackson, as *Carolina Humor* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1938), 87 pp.

¹⁰⁸ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, October 29, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹⁰⁹ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, October 18, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹¹⁰ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, October 4, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹¹¹ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, October 29, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹¹² H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, November 15, 1860, Bagby Papers.

¹¹³ Appleton, "Samuel Henderson," 9.

¹¹⁴ *South Western Baptist*, January 17, 1861.

¹¹⁵ *South Western Baptist*, March 28, May 30, 1861.

¹¹⁶ H. E. Taliaferro to George William Bagby, May 7, 1861, Bagby Papers.

giving as his reasons the loss of his clerk, the difficulty of getting paper, and \$10,000 due from subscribers. He disclosed that what small support he received came "from the churches, and it was a question of meat and bread."¹¹⁷ With Taliaferro's promise that he would continue writing for the weekly, Samuel Henderson resumed his post as editor and kept the paper going until it was closed down by occupying Federal forces in April, 1865.¹¹⁸

Details about Taliaferro's life for the ten years after 1862 are sparse. About all that is known is that he stayed on in Tuskegee, "looking after his private affairs, and preaching to several country churches."¹¹⁹ The 1870 census lists him there, age fifty-nine, with his wife E[lizabeth], fifty-seven, and his unmarried daughter A[delaide], twenty-six. The value of his real estate was \$1,500, his personal property, \$300. Next door lived his older daughter, Mrs. Nancy J. Ham, with four children nine years old or under, her real estate valued at \$3,500, personal property at \$500.¹²⁰

In 1872 or shortly thereafter Taliaferro "moved back to Tennessee, near where he first settled, and established himself in Loudon."¹²¹ Perhaps he was drawn there by nostalgia, perhaps by a missionary zeal to provide new life for the declining church in Loudon, perhaps by an opportunity to play a role in the proposed Providence Association. In January, 1873, Elder J. B. Lee was pastor of the Baptist church in Loudon,¹²² but Taliaferro was its delegate to the association meeting in October.¹²³ A year later the Loudon church, with Taliaferro as "minister in Memberships," was reported to "Have lately reorganized on a better basis; hoping for better times."¹²⁴ Taliaferro was preaching there in the summer of 1875¹²⁵ and represented its twenty-five members at the association meeting in October, when he was elected moderator of its current session and appointed to preach the Missionary Sermon the following year.¹²⁶ A month later, on "Tuesday, the 2nd day of November, 1875, in the 65th year of his age,"¹²⁷ he died. At the next association meeting, the Committee on Obituaries reported: "Since our last Annual session our venerable and beloved Brother and Moderator Elder H. E. Taliaferro has been called by his Divine Master" and no

¹¹⁷ *South Western Baptist*, December 12, 1861, March 6, April 3, 1862.

¹¹⁸ Helmbold, "Baptist Periodicals," 7.

¹¹⁹ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

¹²⁰ Ninth Census, 1870: Macon County, Alabama, Population Schedule, 34. Nancy (Taliaferro) Ham was the wife of William G. Ham. See *South Western Baptist*, November 20, 1862. The younger daughter, "Mrs. Addie Taliaferro [sic] Weaver, became city missionary in and round Anniston" in later years. See Brown, *A History of the First Baptist Church, Tuskegee*, 7.

¹²¹ *South Western Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

¹²² *Loudon Journal* (Tennessee), January 11, 1873, microfilm copy, University of Tennessee Library, Knoxville.

¹²³ "Proceedings 1st Session [of the Providence Baptist Association in 1873]," 5, manuscript in ledger book, microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention.

¹²⁴ *Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the Providence Association of Baptists* (Athens, Tennessee: Thos. T. McWhirter's Job Printing Office, 1874), 5, [9], microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention.

¹²⁵ *Loudon Times* (Tennessee), July 31, 1875, microfilm copy, University of Tennessee Library, Knoxville.

¹²⁶ *Minutes of the Third Annual Session of the Providence Association of Baptists* (Loudon, Tenn.: "Times" General Job Printing House, 1875), [3], 6, 7, microfilm copy, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention.

¹²⁷ *Alabama Baptist*, December 7, 1875.

longer would "his clarion voice" be heard. The committee, "in the absence of dates and facts," could not provide "a more extended notice," and so it would have to rest content to add "that Elder Taliaferro was not only a good Presiding officer, but able in council, eminent in piety, thoroughly orthodox as a Baptist, and for many long years had led in the van of the hosts of God, as an editor, an author, and faithful exponent of gospel truth; his consistent and delightful theme was salvation by grace."¹²⁸

As an author, Taliaferro had met with reasonable success, especially in the publication of *The Grace of God Magnified*, whose first edition sold out in six months.¹²⁹ A second printing was ordered, page size and type size reduced, allowing the number of pages to be cut from 122 to 96 and the price to be lowered. The "muslin bound form is 25 cents, at retail," it was announced of this second edition, "and the thick paper covered form is 20 cents per copy."¹³⁰ The subtitle *An Experimental Tract* was omitted.¹³¹ Both editions carried the introductory essay by the Reverend D. Manly.

As expected, the first notice of *Fisher's River* appeared in *Harper's*, which extolled "the graphic and expressive style of the writer. He is evidently at home among the mountains and backwoods of North Carolina," wrote the anonymous reviewer in his brief comment, "and his descriptions have a racy flavor of the soil on which 'he was raised.'" ¹³² The six-page account of *Fisher's River* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, including several excerpts from the book and three of the M'Lenan engravings, was probably the work of the editor, George W. Bagby. Though Skitt's identity was unknown at that time, he was "one among ten thousand, nay, one among a million," for rarely in the South could be found that writer who could "paint with pen and ink the real life around him, this Southern life, rich with every element of humour and pathos." The *Messenger* found one fault with *Fisher's River*: "The talk of the Fisher's River folks is at times entirely too plain to be put in type. . . . In truth, 'Skitt' uses horrible language very often."¹³³

In 1862 *Harper's*, probably hoping to speed up lagging sales caused by the war, gave the book an all-out coverage by A. H. Guernsey, who, after two introductory paragraphs, provided a running account of some of the best portions among the sketches with brief to medium-length excerpts alongside seven of the M'Lenan illustrations. Guernsey proclaimed it "one of the half dozen clever books of American character and humor, deserving to rank with Judge Longstreet's 'Georgia Scenes.'" Guernsey noted that the author, an "esteemed Alabama clergyman," had penned several anecdotes of "clerical oddities, which he may do with a good grace, he being a minister of the Baptist order."¹³⁴ The name

¹²⁸ *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Session of the Providence Association of Baptists, Held at Shady Grove, Loudon County, Tennessee, September 30th, 1876* (Loudon, Tenn.: "Times" General Job Printing Office, 1876), 5.

¹²⁹ *South Western Baptist*, September 10, 1857.

¹³⁰ *South Western Baptist*, March 4, 1858.

¹³¹ A copy of the second edition of *The Grace of God Magnified* is in the library of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

¹³² *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XIX (November, 1859), 837.

¹³³ "Fun from North Carolina," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXXI (August, 1860), 106, 109.

¹³⁴ [A. H. Guernsey], "Surry County, North Carolina," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XXV (July, 1862), v, 178, 184.



The Taliaferro family home, no longer extant, stood near the Little Fisher River in northwestern Surry County. The site is designated by an asterisk on this map of the county. Map (1976) prepared by the North Carolina Department of Transportation, Raleigh.

behind the pseudonym was of course not revealed. Public acknowledgment of Taliaferro's authorship seems to have had to wait until five years after his death when in a short biography it was said that he had been "the author of two little works that were read with interest, viz: 'The Grace of God Magnified' and 'Valley River Scenes.'" ¹³⁵ The correct title of *Fisher's River* obviously had been forgotten. Much later, even in Tuskegee it was remembered only that Taliaferro published "one or two books on the subject of grace and wrote some stories of hunting." ¹³⁶

But *Fisher's River* lived on. About 1905 a printer in Eona, Virginia—a village directly north of Little Fisher River and some ten miles above the state line—brought out a second edition, declaring the book to be "one of the most humorous ever written." ¹³⁷ Taliaferro's name was not mentioned. Omitted from the 1859 edition were the "Big Peach-eating" and "Some Apple-eating" portions of the Uncle Davy Lane section and the entire final sketch, "Ham Rachel of Alabama." But much more disastrous than these excisions were liberties taken by the publisher with the text, evidently with the thought of "improving" Taliaferro's dialect: "were" changed to "war"; "skinned" to "skunt"; "Ev'ry" to "Uv'ry"; "repair" to "repar"; and many others. Taliaferro's capitalization and punctuation were tinkered with. Two new illustrations, amateurish and quite inferior, were added to several of the M'Lenan drawings.

A duplicate of this corrupt Eona printing in text, omissions, and illustrations was a third edition, ¹³⁸ erroneously said to follow the "original." In this 1958 paperback Taliaferro's name was again unmentioned, but the Surry County connection was strongly emphasized by a hand-drawn map of the region pointing out some of the places referred to in the book. In 1977 a fourth edition, a facsimile of the 1859 printing, was issued, ¹³⁹ with the old errors from the 1908 Library of Congress catalog card repeated on the verso of the new publisher's title page.

What may be considered a third book by Taliaferro is *Carolina Humor*, ¹⁴⁰ comprising the nine sketches which appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. David K. Jackson's struggle to write a biographical sketch of Taliaferro in a foreword was so hampered by an insufficiency of sources that the conclusions he drew are unreliable and often faulty.

The publication of *Fisher's River* in the autumn of 1859 came at an unpropitious time. A year and a half later the guns at Fort Sumter stifled any interest in or concern for works of southern humor. Though extracts from the book were reprinted in the *Spirit of the Times* (New York), ¹⁴¹ the most famous and

¹³⁵ Borum, *Biographical Sketches*, 588.

¹³⁶ Brown, *A History of the First Baptist Church, Tuskegee*, 7.

¹³⁷ *Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters*, by "Skitt," "Who Was Raised Thar" (Eona, Va.: Excelsior Printing Company, Second Edition, 1905?), [v]. In the copy of the truncated paperback of this edition of *Fisher's River* in the Duke University Library, the last extant page is number 142, leaving some fifteen pages missing.

¹³⁸ *Fisher's River Scenes* ([Dobson, N.C.]: "Reproduced from the original by John Allen Snow," 1958), 107 pp.

¹³⁹ Arno Press, New York, N.Y.

¹⁴⁰ See n. 107.

¹⁴¹ Norris W. Yates, *William T. Porter and the Spirit of the Times: A Study of the Big Bear School of Humor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 197.

popular newspaper in that day dispensing American humor, and new sketches appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, no solid recognition of Taliaferro and his ingenious work resulted. From the mid-war years on, he and it drifted into obscurity. After the turn of the century even those patriotic and undiscriminating worthies who compiled and edited the multivolume *Library of Southern Literature*¹⁴² did not include Taliaferro, and the obvious reason was that they simply had never heard of him. Though a book in 1925 listed Taliaferro and *Fisher's River* in its "Selected Bibliography of Southern Humor and Satire,"¹⁴³ the first effective indication of rediscovery came in 1931 when Ralph Steele Boggs, in pursuit of North Carolina folktales, was advised by W. A. Blair of Winston-Salem to look into *Fisher's River*. Three years later Boggs told of his thus stumbling upon Taliaferro; he reprinted sixteen of the anecdotes and provided footnotes in which he named various North Carolina counties where he had heard variations on eight of the tales.¹⁴⁴ From then until the present, literary surveyors have never quite agreed on whether to treat Taliaferro as folklorist or humorist, as both or something else, or whether to ignore him completely. Frequently, the last option seems to have been most convenient. In 1935 Taliaferro received a one-sentence treatment by Fred Lewis Pattee, who cited Uncle Davy Lane's horn-snake and pigeon-roost anecdotes as "typical examples of humorous literature of exaggeration."¹⁴⁵ Two years later, in a 558-page book on American humor, Walter Blair confined Taliaferro to a few words and a footnote.¹⁴⁶ In 1937 Guion Griffis Johnson used passages from *Fisher's River* in compiling a "social history" of North Carolina before the Civil War.¹⁴⁷ And after Archibald Henderson in his lengthy monograph on the state's literature wrote up Taliaferro in a page-long paragraph,¹⁴⁸ its botched data unfortunately drawn almost entirely from David K. Jackson's foreword, no longer were book-minded North Carolinians unaware of *Fisher's River*. In fact, from the 1940s on Taliaferro was seldom ignored by those who examined antebellum southern writing. The most inexcusable derelictions were a fourteen-word sentence awarded him in a 974-page history of pre-1900 southern literature and the failure to mention Taliaferro even once in the chapters on humor, folklore, and speech, or elsewhere amid the hundreds of names in a bibliography of writing in the South.¹⁴⁹

In one of his numerous collections B. A. Botkin used nine of Uncle Davy Lane's twelve yarns as well as Larkin Snow's story about his Fast-Running Dog;

¹⁴² Edwin Anderson Alderman, Joel Chandler Harris, and others (eds.), *Library of Southern Literature* (Atlanta: Martin & Hoyt Company, 16 volumes, 1910-1913).

¹⁴³ Jennette Tandy, *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 101.

¹⁴⁴ Ralph Steele Boggs, "North Carolina Folktales Current in the 1820's," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 47 (October-December, 1934), 269-288.

¹⁴⁵ Fred Lewis Pattee, *The First Century of American Literature, 1770-1870* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935), 484-485.

¹⁴⁶ Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (New York: American Book Company, 1937), 72.

¹⁴⁷ Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 80-81, 617, 824.

¹⁴⁸ Archibald Henderson, *North Carolina: The Old North State and the New* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 2 volumes, 1941), II, 687-688.

¹⁴⁹ Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1954), 682; Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (ed.), *A Bibliographical Guide to the Study of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

and in a later anthology he reprinted Brother Walker's call to preach.¹⁵⁰ In 1964 the editors of *Humor of the Old Southwest* included three selections from *Fisher's River* and made the comment that "Taliaferro's graphic transcriptions of tales, dialects, proverbs, superstitions, and folkways of the North Carolina back country command the interest of folklorists."¹⁵¹

The many proverbs scattered throughout *Fisher's River* prompted an investigation in 1947 which turned up over 200 of them, hardly a third of which were checked as being listed in the then unpublished Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore.¹⁵² A 1953 article, "Harden [sic] E. Taliaferro, a Sketch," though genuinely appreciative, does little more than relate a few anecdotes from *Fisher's River*, repeat errors from David K. Jackson's foreword, and initiate a few misinterpretations of its own.¹⁵³ A much more valuable presentation came in 1956 when the Surry County folk, their tale-telling and customs, and their similarity to characters in books by other Old Southwest humorists were set forth by James H. Penrod, who believed that Taliaferro had won for himself a secure spot in American folklore and literature.¹⁵⁴ In 1965 Tristram P. Coffin argued that *Fisher's River* was a classic example of how a writer used raw folklore in the creation of literature; for, rather than elaborating on a folk motif, as Mark Twain did in "The Jumping Frog," Taliaferro wove his superstitions, proverbs, and stories into his narratives as basic ingredients of a people's culture.¹⁵⁵ The skeptical Professor Coffin intuitively skirted the backlog of egregious biographical misinformation about Taliaferro. In 1968 Cratis D. Williams, specialist in Appalachian speech, declared that perhaps *Fisher's River* was "the most important book portraying the social life and customs of the Southern mountain people before the Civil War" and contained "one of the most honest transcripts of dialect it has been the pleasure of this reader to encounter."¹⁵⁶ After Penrod's essay was included in an authoritative collection of scholarly articles on frontier humorists in 1975¹⁵⁷ it was no longer possible for Taliaferro to be casually overlooked, and two years later a summary of Skitt's credentials upheld him as being unimpeachably within the literary coterie known as humorists of the Old Southwest.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁰ B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), 581-592; and *A Treasury of Southern Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 103-104.

¹⁵¹ Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham (eds.), *Humor in the Old Southwest* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), 296-309.

¹⁵² B. J. Whiting, "Proverbial Sayings from Fisher's River, North Carolina," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XI (September, 1947), 173-185.

¹⁵³ James E. Ginther, "Harden [sic] E. Taliaferro, a Sketch," *Mark Twain Quarterly*, IX (Winter, 1953), 13-15, 20. This article had previously appeared in the *Durham Morning Herald*, September 30, 1951.

¹⁵⁴ James E. Penrod, "Harden [sic] Taliaferro, Folk Humorist of North Carolina," *Midwest Folklore*, VI (Fall, 1956), 147-153.

¹⁵⁵ Tristram P. Coffin, "Harden [sic] E. Taliaferro and the Use of Folklore by American Literary Figures," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 64 (Spring, 1965), [241]-246.

¹⁵⁶ Cratis D. Williams, "Mountain Customs, Social Life, and Folk Yarns in Taliaferro's *Fisher's River Scenes and Characters*," *North Carolina Folklore*, XVI (November, 1968), 143-152.

¹⁵⁷ M. Thomas Inge (ed.), *The Frontier Humorists: Critical Views* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), 187-193.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Walser, "Skitt Taliaferro: Facts and Reappraisal," *American Humor: An Interdisciplinary Newsletter*, IV (Spring, 1977), 7-10.

