

Essex County Museum and
Historical Society

Bulletin

Volume 66

Special Edition

December 2018

**A MODEST HISTORY OF
ESSEX COUNTY, VIRGINIA**

1600 -1950

by Gordon Harrower



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\$500

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The Bulletin is published by the Essex County Museum and
Historical Society,

218 Water Lane, PO Box 404,
Tappahannock, Virginia 22560.

Layout & design by Suzi Maggard, Publications
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The Essex History Museum is located at 218 Water Lane. Please
visit www.ecmhs.org for more information and upcoming events.

Early Pioneers...

Essex County's first settlers, who came in the early-to-mid 17th century, mostly from the British Isles, got here on small, crowded boats that traversed the stormy Atlantic, the Bay, and finally, the Rappahannock River. Ah, the Rivah! As we will see, it would for centuries be the very life blood of Essex's people; it was the 'road' there being few in the county- over which they traveled, shipped their produce, received



goods from other, John Smith explores the Rappahannock River often distant, parts, and the route whereon new immigrants made the final leg of their journeys here. It was also a wartime avenue of attack for enemies.

These early pioneers struggled just to survive. They existed in shacks, lean-tos, pole huts and other primitive forms collectively known to some as Virginia houses, as they labored to bring in their crucial tobacco crops. With gradually increasing prosperity, many borrowed from their Anglo-Saxon heritage and built more durable one-over-one homes, or if even more affluent, the hall and parlor type which had two rooms downstairs, a sleeping loft above, and generally a tall English basement below. These houses had gable roofs, some with dormer windows, and a large chimney at either end, which served large cooking and heating fireplaces. They subsisted on home-grown vegetables, cattle and hogs, and game; and small cotton patches provided the wherewithal for weaving clothing.

Tobacco was harvested, dried, then put in hogsheads and literally rolled to a river landing such as Bowlers, Piscataway Creek, Tappahannock or Laytons, where it would be inspected and shipped, mostly to the North or England. Initially, the family furnished the hands

to work its spread, but in time many were able to bring from overseas indentured servants who worked for a stipulated time and then were granted what amounted to freedom. Then, in the late 17th century, came slaves, who were acquired in small numbers - say three or four - by yeoman farmers, and into the hundreds by larger plantation owners the emerging gentry.

Although tobacco brought prosperity to the area, it also took a heavy toll on the soil, and when planters further south and west competed successfully, Essex farmers were left in search of new cash crops. For a brief while, cotton seemed to be the answer, but a run of frozen crops put an end to that. Next came wheat and corn, which were harvested and taken by wagon to a landing or most often, to one of the scores of grist mills that had sprung up along the county's many streams.

Early Tappahannock...

Prominent among landing sites was Tappahannock, first known as Hobbs Hole, the only town in the county. It was first inhabited by Indians who spoke of it as *Topahanocke* and then because of its deep water anchorage, it became a central commerce center. In time, residences were built, along with an ample array of ordinaries, or taverns, where the those vending their crops might pause for food and drink - or tarry while waiting for the ferry to take them across the river to the Northern Neck. With receipts from the sale of their crops, Essex inhabitants purchased or bartered for, all manner of goods brought by ship, mostly from other east coast ports or from Britain. For the struggling farmer, these tended to be necessities, while their more prosperous brethren acquired fine clothing, spirits, furniture and ornamental woodwork for their upscale homes, and even in some cases, the very materials for constructing them.

First churches in Essex County...

Apart from those living in Tappahannock, the county's population was scattered and socializing was difficult, except for church-going. The only recognized denomination prior to the Revolution was the Church of England. Four of its churches were erected in Essex at crossroad locations ostensibly convenient to their

widespread parishioners. Up-county, St Anne's, formerly Sittingbourne Parish, was comprised of Vauter's and Sale's churches, while South



Vauters Church Saint Anne's Parish Essex County

Farnham Parish's central and lower areas were served by Upper and Lower Piscataway churches. More about them later. Attendance at these establishments or state-run institutions were deemed obligatory. Indeed, the role of their wardens was to enforce it quite different from their

Episcopal descendants of today. Still, albeit mandatory, going to church was pleasant, a stimulus for the otherwise isolated farm families, and much looked forward to.

18th Century Architecture in Essex County...

In the early 18th century an interesting architectural change occurred with the emergence of the gambrel-roofed three-bay home, also atop a high English basement. For reasons unknown many of these are in the Millers Tavern-Dunbrook area- places such as Cherry Walk, Elton, Retreat, and Shelba, most of them are visible to the passer-by, as is Tappahannock's Little Egypt. Also termed Dutch-roofed, their top stories are more spacious than those of gable houses. This style was popular in the south because it stayed cool during the summer months, bricks and siding were cheap and the right soil for making bricks was at hand.

As the descendants of the immigrant farmer attained more wealth and stature, they were apt to improve their homes and for many this took the form of raising the roof to achieve two stories, adding a flanking wing or so to the sides of the existing structure or for the most affluent, relegating the old house to tenant farmers or servants and building for themselves quarters even more lavish. The choice was to some extent governed by location, since the more fertile soil of up-

county made for more productive agriculture than the sandy loam of the south. Thus, most of the county's grand mansions are found north and west of Tappahannock. Whether swell or less pretentious, most every homestead had some dependencies - detached structures that served the household in specific ways, such as meat house, dairy, office, privy, laundry, school and kitchen. Some used their kitchen dependencies year- round, while others did so only during the warm season returning to the in-house kitchen - most always in the basement - at the onset of colder weather.

Resistance to Change...

Many plantation owners were loath to adopt new farming techniques that had been developed in the North and which virtually ensured significant increases in crop yield. Married in a sense, to practices wherein large numbers of slaves toiled to bring in minimal yield per acre, the solution was to add more land and more slaves, which in part accounted for the size of many of the plantations. Innovative agriculturalists like Elmwood's James M. Garnett, and several of the Baylor and later the Taliaferro families, were few and their prescience was not accepted by their peers. A little further on, we will see how this resistance to change would continue to negatively effect the area's economy.

Revolutionary War Era...

Relations with the mother country, while rocky at times, did not materially effect the people who lived here - until the infamous Stamp Act of 1765. Its few Essex supporters included Archibald McCall and Archibald Ritchie, the latter quickly branded "the greatest enemy of his country," a measure of the animosity felt toward the King and his minions. The next year gentlemen from nine counties gathered at Leedstown and drafted the Resolutions which pointed the way for Virginians to disobey Parliament. As we know, most colonists did not seek independence from Britain. In fact many were disturbed at the prospect. Instead they wanted a fairer shake from her. The Stamp Act was subsequently repealed, but the situation continued to deteriorate, and in 1770, a boycott was imposed on importing British goods, culminating with a ban on tea - an issue highlighted by the well-known Massachusetts Tea Party. Sympathy for Boston, then occupied by

British troops, inspired the Essex Resolutions, which in part called for all the colonies to unite "in Defence of our Common Rights" - the onset of true revolution - and soon virtually all the Essex citizenry chose to take arms against the perceived oppressor.

We are familiar with the course of this long war, wherein euphoria over independence gave way to alternate waves of defeatism and hope. The Essex militia was activated, and not a few enlisted in the Continental Line, the precursor of the regular army, many in its Seventh Virginia Regiment. Meanwhile, the British blockaded the eastern seaboard, including the bay, and mouth of the Rappahannock, where a number of lively dust-ups and cutting-out adventures occurred. Of greater significance, this also meant nothing could be entered or be shipped which effectively ended trade, causing a surfeit of locally produced crops, barely a trickle of imported goods and inflation. Wheat farmers then distilled their crop, to the temporary enjoyment of some, but just about everyone was affected, notably the poor element of local society, the slaves, who suffered most of all from lack of clothing and provender and worse they would come to the harsh realization that independence and liberty did not apply to them. A state law to banish Tories and other British immigrants who were loyal to the crown had been enforced here with dispatch. The same law also stipulated a form of amnesty for these individuals if and when the war ended. When it finally did, however, the citizens of Essex would have none of it, and some of the returning exiles were given the gate via a ride on a rail and a coat of tar and feathers.

Peace was ushered in by continued upheaval and economic stagnation. As noted, tobacco had largely failed as a money-making crop, and its final knell sounded shortly after the war. As well, ports like Richmond and Fredericksburg began to siphon off the produce that had previously come through Tappahannock, and the once-active port town fell back on its status as county seat, its public square replete with a courthouse, clerk's office, debtor's prison, and a jail, not to mention stocks and a dunking stool for punishing those found guilty of minor offenses. More serious offenders were apt to face the whip, or even the gallows, but not surprisingly, the gentry usually got off with a letter of apology or a fine.

Meanwhile, the Church of England was no more; although a successor Episcopal denomination had been formed, it met with

hostility from many citizens who felt the taxes they had paid to maintain the old state-run church during the colonial era entitled them to ownership of its properties including not only its buildings, but the glebes or farms which had supported them.



Essex County Courthouse on Prince Street, Tappahannock

So Old Sales in Upper Essex, and the Upper and Lower Piscataways further south were first vandalized then destroyed to provide building material for other uses. The best way to do this was to set fire to the interiors, which loosened the mortar so that bricks might be prised loose, and made nails more accessible. An addition to Marigold near Ozeana and the Tappahannock Chapel - now Modem Cleaners - were built of these raw materials. Just Vauters Church in Champlain escaped such a fate, and only because a loyal parishioner claimed the land on which it stood as his own. The ecclesiastical void created by this lamentable business was in large part filled by the already-extant Baptists, who carried no imperial baggage.

Post-war Essex County saw continued economic woes and political strife, as, like the rest of the new nation, it struggled under beleaguered state, and largely impotent federal governments. The call, sounded initially by Virginia's James Madison, demanded stronger leadership at the top.

This was bitterly opposed by the disciples of Patrick Henry, among them Essex's Meriweather Smith who fearing the return of tyranny, held an innate distrust of omnipotent government.

In the end, the General Assembly barely ratified the US Constitution, and the county collectively set about its own affairs which were not always harmonious. For example the attempt by disgruntled

denizens of Essex, Caroline and King and Queen counties to form a new one, including a big chunk of upper Essex. A weary General Assembly ultimately turned down this proposal.

Early Essex Education...

From their primitive beginnings here, the citizens of Essex County were determined to provide their progeny with some form of an education, and by the mid-1600s, the gentry had established several private schools. However, since most families lived in rural, often remote places, their children simply could not attend these institutions and the precursor of home schooling was set in motion. On most large plantations and on some not so prosperous, small schoolhouses were built and tutors hired to teach everything from reading and writing to Latin and science. In many instances these facilities were made available to children from neighboring farms. Wealthier families could send their children to England, where truly classical curricula awaited, while others might consider a more accessible choice, the College of William and Mary for men only.

As the foregoing suggests, educational vistas were broad for the elite, but not for the yeoman farmer's family. Most whites in early Essex could neither read nor write and slaves were largely illiterate because their owners feared the consequences of enlightening their chattels. Public education for all would not become a reality until after the Civil War. Still, the common man did what he could to instill some form of knowledge in his young, even if it was confined to reading and understanding the Bible. One who could do that and sign his name was ahead of the game.

The War of 1812...

The War of 1812, was brought about by numerous factors: the British attacking our vessels and impressing American seamen, the cupidity of a few who aspired to seize Canada and so on. In any event the United States was ill-prepared to take on the might of the British Empire, notably its navy, the largest and finest in the world, and the American armed forces were comprised primarily of state and local militias. As in the War of Independence, the British imposed a tight blockade on the East Coast, naturally including Chesapeake Bay and

the Rappahannock River. In 1814, the British, having just defeated arch enemy France and keen to teach a lesson to their upstart former colony, which had de facto been allied with Napoleon established a base on nearby Tangier Island and began raiding the middle Atlantic seaboard. As we know, its forces attacked Baltimore, ransacked Washington, then headed south and up the Rappahannock.

Opposing them was the recently-activated Essex militia, which fled as an enemy landing party occupied Tappahannock. Wisely so since a handful of citizen soldiers with one cannon were no match for eight armed schooners and a large contingent of British troops, a third of whom were recently liberated blacks. During three days ashore, they proceeded to sack the town, not only stealing and vandalizing as they went, but taking away slaves, both from Essex and from across the river, which infuriated their former masters. Then the war ended. While many touted it as a great American victory, the United States had been fortunate to emerge with barely a draw.

Plantation Life...

The construction of large plantation homes, begun in the 18th century, had peaked by 1860, the end of the antebellum era. In the early 19th century, Greek revival architecture made its mark here as exemplified by the present court house, and Richard Baylor's magnificent Kinloch. Soon, the Federal genre appeared and blended with Greek-revival, two fine examples-being Edenetta and Wheatland. With these and many other grand mansions came a distinctly Southern style of living that featured lavish entertaining. Dinner parties laid on just for family or for sizable gatherings of friends and acquaintances, were reminiscent of Renaissance England. Main courses offered many choices of fish, flesh, and fowl, accompanied by the ubiquitous hominy, and always copious amounts of wine, brandy and whiskey. Most if not all of the provender came from the property or the nearby river.

On a more egalitarian level, fish-fries brought white men of all social strata together several times a month during fish season to eat and drink while chewing the fat about matters of mutual interest, mostly farming. A precursor of 'guy things,' they allowed yeoman and gentry to mingle in their shared status of land and slave-owners. Another favorite, barbecues, tended to be more formal, primarily because the ladies were present. In essence, they were full fledged parties, with lots

of dancing and other amusement, held outdoors, often under elaborate artificial arbors. Another fetish of well-to-do Essexians was horse racing and many were the spreads that boasted their own ovals and strings of ponies. Creatures quite different from the Clydesdale types who were the plantations' prime movers. A natural concomitant of racing was wagering, an itch that was applied here to almost any kind of competitive activity, from foot races to frog and crab contests.

And what provided the wherewithal for this high style of living? Farming. The gentry operated huge plantations that worked hundreds of slaves, often under the sometimes harsh ministrations of overseers. Eventually they were confronted by a literally underlying problem: the soil in which they grew their crops was getting worn out because much was taken from it and little given back. Thus the yield per acre could not begin to match that of farms in new areas mostly to the south and west. As was earlier noted, progressive farming techniques propounded by the likes of Edmund Ruffin and James Garnett, were eagerly adopted by some Essex farmers but in the main the solution was to increase acreage and the number of slaves. When this did not work, many owners belatedly decided to modernize, bankrolling new machinery, fertilizer, and better methods through the sale of their now-excess slaves. But soon they faced a double quandary: there were too few slaves left to sell and the newfangled equipment and methodology required skilled workers. Unwilling to educate their slaves, lest they become 'uppity' or worse, rebellious, they returned to their old ways and ultimately failure.

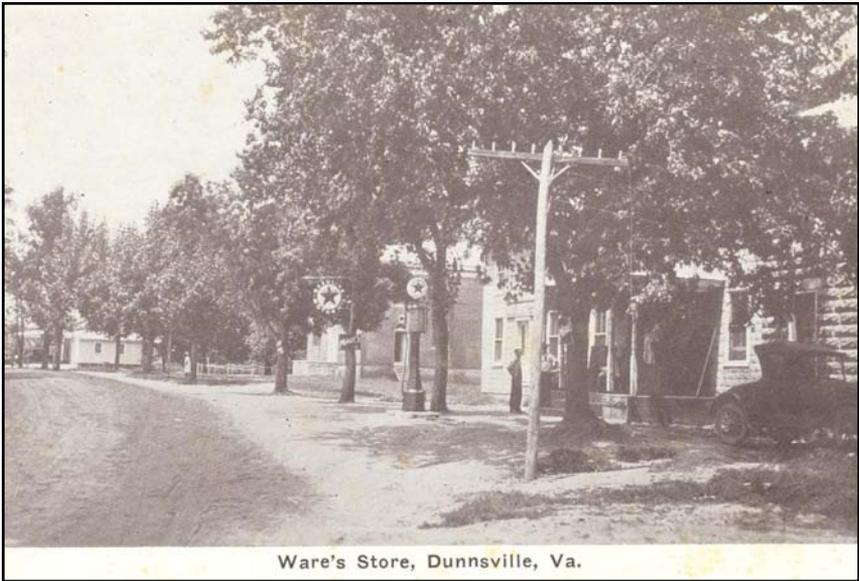
With their 200 or so acres and perhaps two or three slaves, yeoman farmers raised and sold enough wheat and corn to pay for their families' wants, while ample gardens and a few head of cattle provided their subsistence. Content with their lot, they were less apt to take the sorts of strategic risks as their aristocratic fellow countymen; forerunners of today's middle class, they tended to be spiritual, stolid and thrifty. There also existed a societal substratum known as white trash... no comment is needed here.

Commerce...

Meanwhile, Tappahannock began to emerge from its post-War of 1812 torpor, largely as a result of increased river trade. All manner of schooners, sloops, cutters and barges had for almost two centuries been the prime movers carrying crops and merchandise to and from Essex.

Riverine commerce was dynamically enlivened by the advent of the steamboat which unlike its precursors was not dependent on the vagaries of wind. By 1828, regular paddle-wheel service had been established between the 20-odd Rappahannock River landings. Essex alone had six and the vast beyond. Mostly these vessels carried merchandise and not a few passengers who wished to visit such exotic destinations as Baltimore, a primary commercial site. Too, given the poor quality or even absence of roads, a person might travel from Tappahannock to Richmond starting with a boat trip to Fredericksburg and then complete his journey by rail. Roundabout by today's standards, it made perfect sense then. As we will see, river commerce and travel would only grow and improve. A logical offshoot of this economic boom was the rise of service commerce: banks stores, warehouses and the like, which contributed to the resurgence of Tappahannock.

In light of the road situation, planters were apt to send their harvests and livestock to the shipping points that were closest to them. Port Micou and Saunders Wharf met that need up-county, while Ware's and Bowler's wharves served lower Essex. Over time, they evolved into veritable complexes of mercantile activity with not only landing places but stores, hotels, canneries, and post offices. With so complete an array of services right by the river, what need could there be for towns and villages further inland? The short answer was very little. Although Essex County has many place-names, only one of them denotes a town and that is Tappahannock. Most of the others, such as Upright, Supply, Center Cross and Dunbrooke, are in essence crossroad locations where one might find a church, a post office, several dwellings and perhaps the vestiges of a store or other commercial enterprise which had existed to serve the needs of nearby plantations and yeoman farms. As the tourist will see, virtually none of these hamlets today has an active store, primarily because decent roads and automobiles have since enabled rural folks to do their shopping elsewhere. Somewhat larger than these, and much smaller than Tappahannock is the village of Dunnsville. In its heyday it boasted a hotel, a blacksmith's establishment and four stores - one including, after 1900, the post office. Three of the latter have survived, albeit not in their original



incarnations. As the only place of its size and composition in Essex, Dunnsville was and is literally unique.

Their properties seized and destroyed and bereft of ministers, almost all of whom had left during the late 18th century, the Episcopal Church - successor to the Church of England - appeared moribund, unable to tend to the many who still adhered to the faith. Although some had switched to other denominations, a number of dedicated Episcopalians remained and by 1820, they had led in the creation of a new Town Chapel (built, as noted, with the bricks of old Upper Piscataway Church!) which, though nominally multi-denominational, granted preference to Episcopalians.

Then came the Reverend John Peyton McGuire as rector of Vauter's and before long he had engineered the births of St Paul's in Millers Tavern and St John's in, Tappahannock, both of which this aptly-named "Apostle of the Rappahannock" also served as minister.

The War Between the States...

The War Between the States/War of Yankee Imperialism/The American Civil War: No matter what you call it, you probably know a good deal about it; perhaps from a mixture of what you have studied, and genuine interests you have developed over the years. Suffice, then, for us to remember here that it was an intense, bloody conflict that pitted outmoded tactics, mainly frontal assaults, versus modern firepower - the lethal combination of the .58 calibre rifled musket and its Minie bullet. Both sides, notably the Federals, suffered crippling losses from the misconception that massed numbers could prevail over intrenched defenders adept in the use of 'high tech' weaponry.

Why was this war fought? The issue of slavery is today presumed by many to have been almost alone in igniting the struggle - that the North fought to emancipate the slaves, and the South was determined to maintain the 'peculiar institution' as it was termed. Others are convinced that states' rights was the primary fuel of Southern martial ardor, and that the North mainly rallied to the cause of restoring the Union. Certainly it was a combination of the two. Strategically, the North could prevail only by invading and defeating the Confederacy; if it could not succeed at this, the South would win. A measure of the intensity generated by the Union's incursive strategy may be found in this 1864 exchange between a Yankee officer and a Rebel POW in Winchester:

Yank: "Why do you fight us so damned hard?"

Reb: "Because you're here."

Essex County had earlier sent her men off to fight Indian, French, British, and Mexican foes, and its venerable militia had ever stood willing, if not always prepared, to defend the homeland. Now, at the outset of the 1860's, there loomed the specter of a heartrendingly different enemy - fellow Americans. Initially, concerns about abolitionist raids spurred the formation of volunteer units throughout the South and thus the Essex Sharpshooters came into being, as some months later, did the Essex Greys and a cavalry company known as the Essex Light Dragoons. While most people here did not initially believe war with the United States was inevitable, a groundswell of secessionism formed in the Deep South and before long it surged into

the border states, including crucially-situated Virginia. Following the election of 1860, in which not one Essex vote was cast for Lincoln and the withdrawal of South Carolina from the Union, the sentiment here was overwhelmingly ‘secesh.’ In early 1861, delegates from Essex and King and Queen met at Millers Tavern and adopted the Millers Resolutions which set forth that:

1. States could withdraw from the Union;
2. Virginia was committed to the defense of the South; and most important,
3. Virginia should indeed leave the Union.

In April 1861, the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, and the war was underway.

Soon the Sharpshooters were joined with the Greys and other volunteer units to form the 55th Virginia Infantry Regiment and the Dragoons similarly became a company of the 9th Virginia Cavalry Regiment. It was estimated that virtually every able-bodied white male in the county volunteered and not surprisingly, most of the leadership positions were filled by men of means - the gentry. Other Essex men also chose to serve their new nation; for example, cousins Robert and Richard Garnett, both of the West Point class of 1841, were career officers in the US Army, the former a distinguished veteran of the Mexican War. In early spring 1861, they resigned their federal commissions, and donned Confederate gray. Robert was appointed a brigadier general and while in command of forces in what is now West Virginia, was killed in action. Richard, too, was made a brigadier, sent to the Shenandoah Valley, and placed in charge of the famous Stonewall Brigade, previously led by his now-corps commander, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. After incurring the latter’s wrath by withdrawing his troops when they were badly outnumbered and out of ammunition, he was restored to command of another Virginia brigade. Mounted, and in their van, he was killed during Gettysburg’s famed Pickett’s Charge. Among his last words was this exhortation to his troops, “Step out (but) don’t double quick. Save your strength and ammunition for the final charge.”

In the summer of 1861, the 55th Infantry was tasked with the construction and manning of a bastion on the Rappahannock River to defend Fredericksburg from Federal naval forces. Its ramparts built of

layer upon layer of marsh sod covered with sand. Fort Lowry was comprised of an eight-gun battery, powder and shot magazines and barracks sufficient for several thousand troops. Then in March 1862, came orders to abandon the fort, and assigning the 55th to A.P. Hill's Light Division, Army of Northern Virginia, where it served with distinction in all of that Army's many score battles: its shaky baptism of fire at The Seven Days; shining redemption at Second Manassas; the seizure of Harpers Ferry during the Antietam campaign; Chancellorsville, where at the front of Stonewall Jackson's decisive flank attack, the 55th lost 140 of its 300 men; Gettysburg and Pickett's charge which took down still more and later, the command lapses at Falling Waters that caused many to be captured. Among the many casualties incurred by the 55th at Gettysburg was Captain Austin Brockenbrough who fell to a sniper's bullet. He is buried in the family graveyard adjacent to the Essex History Museum; The Wilderness, where the 55th held firm against repeated assaults; the siege of Petersburg's nine months of debilitating trench warfare and finally Appomattox and the unthinkable: surrender.

As a valued component of General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry corps, the 9th Virginia Cavalry Regiment, too, had a distinguished war record. Assigned to seemingly constant patrol, picket, reconnaissance and flank protection duties, they and their mounts seldom enjoyed a moment of down-time, still were ever present to fight in many of their corps' major engagements: Antietam, where just behind the lines they could hardly find a place to camp because of the piles of dead and wounded; the containment of Stoneman's raid on Richmond; the bloodletting of Fredericksburg; the huge all-cavalry fight at Brandy Station and another on Gettysburg's third day; glory at Reems Station and Aldie; dismounted action at Spotsylvania Court House; the last charge at Appomattox. A measure of the 9th's worth came from the hated Yankee cavalryman, Judson Kilpatrick, "they were the best Cavalry regiment in the Confederate service." The 9th is also known because of the death of Dragoons' commander Captain William Latane, the only man killed in a Confederate cavalry charge at Old Church during Stuart's 1862 ride around McClellan's Union Army. The painting, later lithograph, entitled *The Burial of Latane* is to this day a touchstone of white Southern pride and nostalgia.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Essex from time to time found themselves embroiled in the struggle since the Federal navy not only

blockaded the coast, but probed up-river, seeking enemy shipping and conducting amphibious raids on both the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. In April 1862, a Union landing party came ashore at Tappahannock, raised the Stars and Stripes, refreshed themselves, and left without freeing any of the many slaves who had thought deliverance was at hand. In May 1864, a small Union force landed and set fire to a grain-storage building, and a month later, a regiment of US Colored Troops, supported by cavalry and sailors, swept through Montross and Warsaw on the Neck, then crossed the river to land just above Tappahannock.

There, they took 500 head of cattle, many sheep and horses and freed several hundred slaves. Confederate attempts to thwart this incursion were repulsed by the firepower of Yankee gunboats.

On an unspecified date a ten-man detachment from the 1st Maine Calvary landed at Tappahannock and was confronted by 450 Essex militiamen who, when the Yankees refused to surrender, chased them into Great Dragon Swamp. The next day, local planters assisted by bloodhounds, hunted them down, captured them and sent them off to Richmond under guard. En route, they ran into a large Federal unit which freed the Maine men and captured their escorts. The final Union landing occurred in March 1865, resulting in the destruction of several



Wright-Latane Camp of Confederate Veterans at Essex County Courthouse, 1900-1910.

watercraft and the shelling of a Confederate cavalry patrol. Another incident occurred when Federal gunboats bombarded a group of family and friends who had come to visit with Edward Macon Ware, then near death, somehow mistaking their horses and carriages for a Rebel artillery unit. The day was saved when slave Randall Segar got the ships to stop firing by running back and forth waving a white tablecloth.

After Gettysburg, and particularly the fall of Vicksburg, the fortunes of war turned against the South, as large, well-equipped Northern forces gradually wore down their never-say-die foe.

In April 1865, General Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox and within a few weeks the war, by far the worst in American history, was over and the troops came home what was left of them.

The 55th Virginia Infantry had sustained forty percent casualties and the 9th Virginia Cavalry over 37. Oddly in a sense, the troops - later veterans - of both sides had come to look upon one another with respect and, in time, with a fondness that would be expressed so touchingly at joint reunions of major battles. Yet for Southerners, The War remained and still does, a talisman of their honor, bravery, rightness and dedication, as exemplified by the haunting image of the embattled Confederate courageously fighting for his home and the rights he so firmly believed in.

The citizens of Essex, who had supported the Confederacy with patriotic enthusiasm and all manner of goods and services - no mean task given the blockade and the ongoing threat of enemy raids - were now faced with uncertainty about their future; what, for example, they wondered, would become of their plantations and farms without the slaves? Would freed blacks work the fields, and what, if anything, would they be paid, and in what kind of specie? (Confederate money was now worthless). While some stayed on out of a kind of loyalty to their former masters, most, understandably, did not. With little income, many owners offered their ex-slaves shares in their farms in lieu of salaries, thus the emergence of the term 'sharecropper,' a system that did not work, largely because white owners were loath or unable, to pay freedman their expected share, either in currency or in kind. As it evolved the big plantations suddenly went fallow for want of labor and the gentry came to the abrupt realization that they were poor.

Young William Campbell, a Dragoon veteran who had ever been in the thick of the fighting, said, "Laying down arms was the hardest battle I ever fought." Raised in Dunnsville, he had gone out west before the war and afterwards tried Chicago, but found there a deep antagonism toward the South. Returning to Essex, he soon established one of Dunnsville's four general stores. Of the new Federally-imposed 'reconstruction' he observed, "To keep the Negroes in their place when they were three to one in number was a man's job." As if in reply, a freedman famously stated, "we colored people didn't know how to be free and the white people did not know how to have a free colored person about them."

Reconstruction...

Reconstruction, then and for generations to come, most white Southerners would see it as punishment for their having seceded from the Union. In essence it consisted of a series of legislative measures imposed by the federal government, ostensibly to bring the former Confederate states back into the Union under the latter's frequently harsh terms - terms stringently enforced by Federal military occupation. (Essex County was garrisoned by the 2nd New Hampshire Infantry Regiment, headquartered in Tappahannock). It was also a political football, since passage of legislation granting voting rights to blacks - almost all of whom were illiterate - ensured that the Republican party would maintain its majority in the Congress and extend its hold to all 11 southern governorships and state legislators. And so it was that blacks throughout the South cast their ballots for Republicans and were themselves elected to myriad positions. In Essex County, these ranged from representation in the Virginia House of Delegates to magistrate, sheriff and membership on the town council. Alarmed and offended, whites reacted with the formation of the "Conservatives" who fought back successfully, resulting in their continued hold on most of the important county offices such as court clerk, supervisor, and treasurer.

Against this background of political maneuvering, life in Essex County boiled down to a struggle for survival. Land values fell dramatically, crop yields similarly plummeted and many were reduced to subsistence farming - growing barely enough to stay alive - which exacerbated the sense of bitter hopelessness felt by most whites, particularly the gentry whose fall from the heights had been so ruinous. For all here it was terribly hard; a citizen noted, "It was worse than the

war itself. Transportation was wrecked, livestock gone, there were enormous difficulties in getting seed and machinery. The patriarchal system was shattered. Roaming bands of bewildered freed men wandered the countryside, clinging to Union Army troops, wearying their deliverers. Most schools were closed but schools for Negroes were being organized by Yankee schoolmarms. These inequities and the corruption engineered by certain northern carpetbaggers were met by the Conservatives, who were at one with the resurgent Democratic Party; ultimately, implementation of literacy tests and the poll tax as prerequisites for voting disenfranchised most blacks and brought about Democratic Party victory and control at all levels of government.

White Southerners were devastated economically, emotionally and spiritually by the defeat of the Confederacy and were ever reminded of their loss by the poignant sight of the wounded and incapacitated veterans in their communities. As healing set in, the intellectual and literary movement known as the Lost Cause emerged to portray the Confederacy as noble and most of its leaders as exemplars of old-fashioned chivalry, most powerfully Robert E. Lee. The South, it maintained, had fought valorously for the cause it believed in and had succumbed in the end not to the military skills of the Union armies which it was alleged, were led by incompetents of low moral character, but by overwhelming Northern resources and force. Pickett's Charge stood as a symbol of this credo which also tended to vilify General James Longstreet because he had at the time opposed the attack and later faulted Lee for its failure. Lost Cause themes were taken up by organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans represented in Essex by the Wright Latane Camp and United Daughters of the Confederacy. Fairs were laid on in Tappahannock to honor veterans, many proudly wearing their old grey uniforms and in 1909 the Confederate Monument, paid for with funds raised by the Women's Monument Association of Essex, was dedicated, with some 4,000 former Confederates and thousands more visitors on hand.

Reconstruction ended in Virginia in 1870. For white Southerners its legacy, which was to last well into the future, was bitterness and resentment for what they felt was the unwarranted humiliation and economic ruination which had been heaped upon them by the victors. Indeed, the brand of retribution visited upon the former Confederacy is deemed by many to have far exceeded in its harshness

that dealt to our enemies of World War II. For the former slaves, it had begun with liberty, feelings of euphoria and opportunity but sadly they were suddenly engulfed by circumstances for which their earlier bondage had ill prepared them. Apparently little thought had been given to the notion of readying them for gradual introduction into the mainstream culture and alas for them, that old shibboleth, politics, along with Northern weariness, prevailed in the end. Following several decades of see-saw maneuvering, de facto white supremacy was back; the 'separate but equal' doctrine of Jim Crow became the way of the South and would remain so until the contentious civil rights era of the 1950s and '60s. (Alas, that era's desegregation mandates would find virtually half of the black population as unprepared for their legislated equality as their forebears had been a century earlier). Nevertheless, most African Americans now consider the period of Reconstruction to have been beneficial, both because of the fleeting aura of stature they briefly enjoyed and because for the first time in the United States, all of them were free.

Noted Essex County educator and historian Lillian H. McGuire wrote that Southern blacks now had choices: they could "venture out and make a living for themselves. While many chose to migrate North, many others chose to stay in the South, where the Freedmen's Bureau helped the displaced former slaves made adjustments to their newfound way of life. Of equal importance, they were," she added, "freed spiritually, no more having to worship God in secrecy or having to sit in the segregated section of the master's church."

In postwar Essex, the grandeur of plantation living was gone, and many citizens continued to experience hunger and economic deprivation. Still, they were a resilient people who took comfort and support from the institutions which had always buoyed them, from Colonial times onward. Socializing across a broad spectrum of down-to-earth activities helped lift white Southerners' spirits and most importantly they turned to religion for solace and stability, their worship free for a spell of the interdenominational haggling which oddly has marked periods of prosperity in this country.

Blacks, too, reached out for spiritual revival, but in a dynamically different way; as we have seen, they had previously attended white churches, albeit on a carefully segregated basis and while some were now involuntarily unchurched by the white

congregations, they for the most part made the choice to leave and establish their own places of worship. Typical was Dunnsville's Angel Visit Baptist which derived from nearby Ephesus Baptist. Other black churches similarly formed included Champlain's Antioch Baptist, 1867; First Baptist, Tappahannock, 1868; Beulah Baptist, Minor, 1873; Oak Grove, Howerton and First Baptist, Loretto, 1867. Most of these transitions occurred right after the war. The dates shown denote the founding of the respective congregation and construction of church buildings occurred later. Formed in 1877, the Southside Rappahannock Baptist Association would coalesce black unity and progress, despite the heavy yoke of Jim Crow, wherein among other onuses, public education for blacks extended only through eighth grade. To partially at least, fill this void, the Association spurred the establishment of the Ozeana-based Rappahannock Industrial Academy. A boarding and day high school for boys and girls, completely funded by student fees and local Baptist churches, it had strong ties to nearby Angel Visit Church. It operated until Essex County Training School, a blacks-only public high school, was opened. After the war, many, many of what are today termed elementary and middle schools came into being; most were situated near crossroad locations, and all were segregated.

Virginia blacks freed before 1865, had at times faced the legal requirement of either leaving the state or returning to slavery, but after the war, the choice of staying or leaving was pretty much up to them. So, beginning in the late 1800s, and despite the urging of the Association that they remain, many Essex blacks opted to escape the constraints of Jim Crow, and avail themselves of the relatively broader personal freedom and economic opportunity to be found in the North.

Literally thousands emigrated, resulting in a shift of the county's ethnic balance from black to white majority and a decrease in the overall population to its lowest tally since the 1790, onset of census-taking. Others did, however, stay and worked as farmers, watermen, loggers and in time, operators of retail establishments. Following emancipation, they were apt to live in structures abandoned by whites, in their old slave quarters, in barrack-like dwellings known as tenant houses (none of which has survived in Essex) and in more substantial homes they erected.

The Rappahannock, Essex County's Lifeline...

As before, the river was the county's lifeline. Paddle-wheel and later propeller driven steamboats carried its crops, livestock and passengers to the world beyond and brought the merchandise and sundry goods that went to make up the inventories of the ubiquitous country stores that served nearby farms. At each of the landings, wharves were built to accommodate deep draft vessels and around some of these places there grew what amounted to villages. "Bowlers was a really thriving community," wrote a denizen whose father operated a 14-room hotel "right at the end of the pier." He also ran a general store, a tomato cannery and a granary. "Buggies and wagons would be lined up around that store, but the main thing was the steamboats coming in here from Baltimore. They came twice daily on their way to and from Fredericksburg." Her family also took the boat for overnight shopping trips to Baltimore - "We couldn't get to Richmond because we didn't have a highway there." Schooners and other sailing vessels, along with tugboats which pushed barges and scows laden with logs and other heavy cargoes continued to ply the river as did the watermen who fished, crabbed and oystered from their small craft and along the shore. In time refrigeration would enable their succulent produce to be shipped to far away places.

By the late 1800s, Essex farmers were reaping less than two-thirds of the corn and wheat yields their predecessors had realized in 1860, a situation that derived from destruction caused by the war, the at times seemingly impossible transition from slave labor, lack of funds and land that was literally worn out. As noted, forward-thinking agriculturalists like James Mercer Garnett had convinced some antebellum planters to adopt progressive methods, such as new growing techniques, modern equipment and enriching the land. Now, there was literally nothing for it but to change, or call it quits and leave the area as, ominously, many of the county's young were already doing. Concurrently, many of the old plantation houses and the more modest yeomen's homes had begun to decay and when faced with the grim option of putting food on their families' tables, or making extensive repairs to aging structures, there was really no choice at all. Some built new, smaller houses nearby and either abandoned the old ones outright or rented them to tenants who were even less able to care for them.

Gradually, new, savvier agricultural methods replaced the old and with the introduction of such crops as tomatoes and watermelons, which were much in demand at our Nation's capitol, things began to

look up for the county's growers. Just eight years after the war Essex's first vegetable canning factory appeared, and soon many others joined in. Farmers brought tomatoes, black-eyed peas, fruits and all manner of other crops to canneries, where large contingents of workers, mostly black, prepared and canned them for shipment by boat or later truck, to wholesalers.

This was a boon to farmers, workers, and to the county's economy as a whole as was lumbering and the related sawmill business which were said to have had the aura of the Yukon about them.

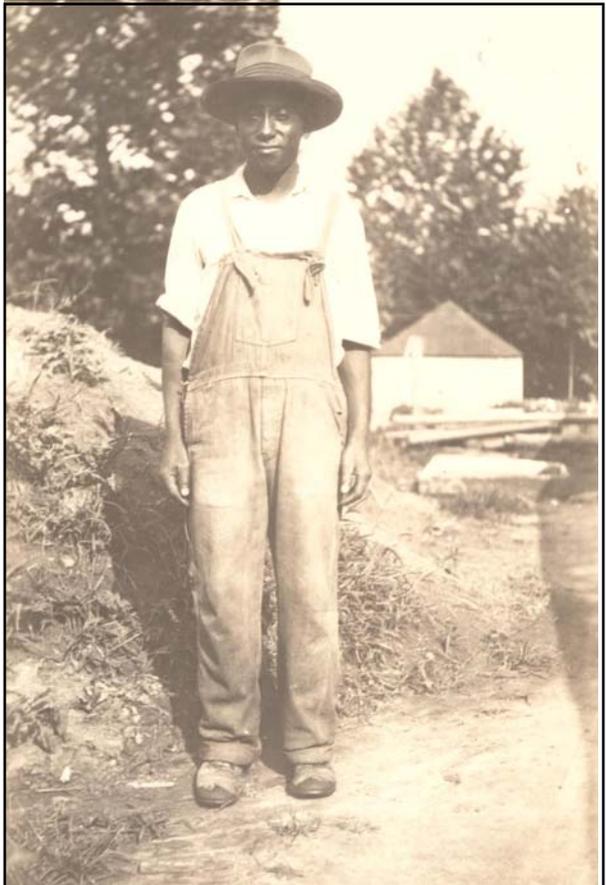
To further enhance growth and prosperity, the quest for a railroad resurfaced (its seeds had been sown before the war). Many schemes were proposed and as you know, none succeeded. One of the most ambitious, which came the closest to fruition, was a plan to run a line from Richmond to Millers Tavern and on to Ware's Wharf at Dunnsville. Thence it would cross the river to the Northern Neck. A plethora of logistic and engineering obstacles, along with a host of social objections finally did this, and the other proposals in, which accounts in large part, it is said, for the continued rural character of Essex County.

As we have seen, the country store was an important part and in a sense, a way of life here and in rural areas throughout the nation. Found at most every crossroads in the county, it served the farms around it with all manner of items for sale and as a convenient, informal place to socialize. Along with the steam boat, it would fall victim to progress as automobiles and improved roads enabled shoppers to take their custom to the ever-growing array of retail establishments in town. Let's for sentiment's sake have a closer look at the grand old institution with a description culled from this writer's long ago jottings: "The village is little more than a crossroad, with two churches, four or five homes, several barns, my elementary school and Hance's Store. Run by Mr. and Mrs. Hance, it houses the post office and has for sale a vast assortment of dry goods, hardware, clothing, canned goods, groceries, fresh meat and candies (the best homemade fudge ever costs one cent per large square). It is a news stand, a lending library, a kind of drug store and most significantly, a rendezvous for the scattered members of this farming community who come on weekends and evenings to shoot the breeze. Weekdays, old-timers gather in front of the big pot-bellied stove in wintertime and under a slow-turning ceiling fan in summer.

Conversation is ongoing and even an old fellow who is said to be loco from having been shot in the head by a Spaniard in 1898, rates his turn, “Damned seldom where I put my hat,” and after inadvertently sticking his hand into the spittoon, “You can't run a store in spite of Christ.” Given the distance to the larger towns, our family does its much of its ad-hoc shopping here. Mrs Hance bills us twice a year.”

Essex men who served in the Spanish-American War of 1898, were among the many Southerners who in a sense formally reunited with their country by wearing its uniform as they traveled far away to do battle in Cuba and the Philippines. The

next major call to arms occurred in 1917-18, when 150 countymen would join two million other Americans who donned khaki and traveled ‘over there’ to fight the Hun in the Great War. (The names of Essex citizens who served in this, and the nation's other conflicts, are etched on the strikingly evocative war memorial donated by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Ware in November 2009. Standing proudly on Tappahannock’s courthouse green. It is a must-see!)



Webster Gaines, Oyster Shucker

Prohibition and the Downing Bridge...

For many years social progressives had attempted to rid the entire country of the manufacture, sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages and little by little they succeeded. Essex, known from its earliest beginnings as a 'wet' community, was finally dried. First by local option then, a state-wide moratorium and finally national Prohibition. Scores of local taverns closed, yet purveyors of now-illegal booze had a field day smuggling it in from overseas, as did operators of countless stills tucked away in secluded spots. Not only did this unpopular constitutional amendment fail to stop people from indulging in what was said to be a natural human propensity, it actually spurred their use of alcohol. Widely seen as an imposition of governmental control over one's traditional liberties, it endured until the much-welcomed Repeal of 1933.

The stock market crash of October 1929, ushered in the Great Depression, which lasted until the onset of World War II. Essex, like most rural communities, was not affected as harshly as cities and industrial areas but growers here felt the pinch of drastically reduced crop prices forcing many to revert to subsistence farming. Soon the federal government, through several of its New Deal 'alphabet agencies,' began paying farmers to either plant less or not plant at all to force the raising of prices. Severe unemployment here, experienced particularly by loggers and cannery workers, was similarly addressed by the creation of community improvement projects and funding the jobs needed to work on them. New or improved roads, bridges, sidewalks, civic and school buildings and sanitation facilities were among the many benefits which accrued to Essex County, notably Tappahannock, during this bleak era and, of course, the employment these measures provided which kept many a citizen from financial ruin. Notable, too, was what came to be labeled 'rural electrification,' another federal initiative which was to bring electricity to farms and other country families, an undertaking that would not be completed in Essex until the 1950s. In all, the depression was another hard time to be endured, particularly coming as it did little more than a generation after Reconstruction.

Automobiles and trucks, which appeared shortly after the turn of the 20th century, had little effect at first on the county's commerce or

the private travel of its citizens, because the road system - what there was of it - was not good but as more vehicles appeared the demand to improve the primitive dirt roads grew and by the 1920s, the state government pitched in. Route 17, linking upper and lower Essex was built, as was the Coleman Highway, now Route 360, which led from Tappahannock to Richmond. The jewel in the crown of terrestrial mobility was the 1927 Downing Bridge which connected Tappahannock with the Northern Neck - in the process making obsolete many of the passenger and vehicular ferries that had traversed the mile-wide Rappahannock.

People could now visit with their heretofore unknown neighbors on the other side, while Northern Neckers might consider doing their shopping in Richmond instead of Baltimore - at the end of an overnight boat trip. Moreover, the improved road network meant that goods and products of all sorts could be transported by truck into and out of the county, without dependence on ships - and thus there began the decline of the colorful, yet now decreasingly-needed steamboat business on the Rappahannock, a devolution abetted by the damage done to the county's wharves by a spate of hurricanes in the 1930s and '40s.



Downing Bridge with swing open as seen from a steamboat

World War Two...

Twenty years after the signing of the Versailles Treaty that ended the war to end all wars, Europe became embroiled in another, World War II. Although still neutral, America saw fit to prepare by instituting the first peace-time draft in its history and rapidly constructing the hundreds of camps needed to house and train its new levies, one of them being Fort A.P. Hill in neighboring Caroline County. Then on December 7, 1941, came the sneak Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; the “act that will live in infamy” which plunged the United States into the global conflict.

Hundreds of Essex men and women - they who would later be numbered among ‘the greatest generation’ served in all branches, in all theaters, of this the most horrendous war in history. Back home, farmers met the challenge of producing maximum yields for the war effort and as in communities all over the nation, Essex's citizens made do with the rationing of food, clothing and gasoline, bought war bonds, and grew victory gardens. Men too old to fight often served as air-raid wardens or in the ranks of the Virginia Reserve Militia or Virginia Protective Force, which took the place of the federalized national guard. The attitude which then defined most Americans, whether in uniform or on the home front, was expressed as a fervent desire to win this war so they could resume their ‘real’ lives. And when the war finally ended, that is what they did, likely assuming those lives would pick up pretty much where the onset of war had left them, a reasonable expectation, as there was then little surface evidence of the cultural sea-change that hindsight tells us had already begun its inexorable surge.

Agriculture in Essex County...

Farming evolved dynamically with the wartime push to maximize crop yields, notably through the use of innovative methodology, better fertilizers and modern machinery, in particular the combine, a seemingly magical device that moved across fields, cut the crop where it grew, sorted grain from chaff and even baled the straw. This was a radical improvement over the stationary thresher, which in its day was considered very high tech because it obviated manual-flailing.

Similar equipment and the use of hybrid seed resulted in huge

increases in com yield and then came soybeans. First grown here during the war, they would soon become and remain, a major part of the county's agricultural output. It should be noted that these phenomenal harvests were due almost entirely to greater productivity, not, as a century and more earlier, through expansion of farm acreage. In fact there were fewer farms than ever before, the smaller ones having been consolidated, through purchase or lease, by huge commercial farms. Still, it has never been easy. Years ago it was said that if the profession of farming didn't have the highest rate of occupational insanity in the country, it damn well ought to, for despite miraculous advances, the growing of crops is ever dependent on the vicissitudes of weather, disease and market fluctuation, all of them factors that are clearly beyond the grower's control. In short, a risky business, one that involves an awful lot of just plain hard work.

With farm production so high, and steamboats long gone, the need for a deep water landing to accommodate large vessels was apparent and at the urging of farmers, farm organizations and local government, the Corps of Engineers dredged Hoskins Creek, just below Tappahannock town, so that tug-propelled barges could dock year-round at the newly constructed granaries there and load already-sold harvests of load com, soybeans, barley and wheat for shipment to buyers.

Perhaps taken for granted now, it proved to be the missing link sorely needed to market grain yields that increased ten-fold in the decade and a half following World War II.

Education Following the Brown v. Board of Education Decision...

The 1954 US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which held that separate educational facilities for blacks were inherently unequal, shocked the South. In Essex, school officials and county supervisors decreed that the integration mandated by *Brown* would be impossible to accomplish and detrimental to both races. The struggle between segregationists led by Senator Byrd and civil rights advocates continued apace. In 1958, implementation of "massive resistance" effectively shut down several large public school districts in other areas that were faced with court orders to accept black students,

with the result that many children, black and white, simply did not have any schooling for over a year. Removal of federal funding or the threat thereof, proved an effective force in ultimately compelling compliance. More equable about all this than many Virginia counties, Essex authorities came to accept the inevitability of integration and by 1970 had adopted it in all components of the school system - in the process realizing a savings, since running two school systems costs a lot more than one.

Essex County handled the transition, which at the time seemed virtually impossible to achieve, in a responsible, level-headed manner. While it may be posited that the cause of racial equality is still a work in progress and that there remains much to be accomplished, Essex has gotten off to a good start.

Gordon Harrower is a retired educator with a lifelong interest in history, a career enhanced through military service to his country and teaching in institutions of higher learning. He is a former board member and Past President of the Essex County Museum and Historical Society. He and his wife, Anita, have lived in Dunnsville, Virginia for 21 years.



The Essex History Museum is located at 218 Water Lane in the Historic District of Tappahannock and is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 10-3. Phone (804) 443-4690.

Please visit www.echms.org for more information and upcoming events.

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