Tappahannock and the Stamp Act (February, 1766)

By Charles W. H. Warner

The imperial policy of the British Empire after the French and Indian War (1756-1763) was governed by a desire to consolidate and strengthen its American colonial possessions. This empire had been more than doubled by the Peace of Paris as a result of territory gained from France west of the Allegheny mountains. To make this policy effective, Britain stationed more troops in the colonies and strengthened administrative ties to England in order to govern more efficiently. To govern more efficiently, greater money had to be raised. It was reasoned by Parliament that England would benefit from this new policy and also the colonials, in better government and better protection from the Indians, many of whom had allied themselves with the French in the recent war.

This policy of England met with growing resistance in the colonies because men were beginning to identify themselves more and more with the new country, born of a frontier which had little in common with the old. Thus when Parliament passed the Stamp Act in early 1765, great resistance erupted. This act provided that stamped paper must be used for all legal documents, pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs and other articles. The revenue secured from the sale of stamped paper was to be expended in the colonies for the purpose of “defending, protecting and securing them.”

In May of 1765 Patrick Henry opposed the Stamp Act in the House of Burgesses. He said “that the general assembly of this Colony have the only and sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes and impositions upon the inhabitants of this Colony, and that every attempt to vest such power in any person or persons whatsoever, other than the general assembly aforesaid, has a manifest tendency to destroy British as well as American freedom.” A sharp debate followed. In the course of this debate Patrick Henry made a famous speech in which he said, “Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I his Cromwell, and George III” — here he was interrupted by cries of “Treason.” He continued—“may profit by their example. If this be treason, make the most of it.” Four of Henry’s resolutions were adopted by the House of Burgesses and the sentiment to resist the Stamp Act was established in Virginia.

Archibald Ritchie was a wealthy merchant in Tappahannock, dealing with many planters along the Rappahannock River and with numerous merchantile firms in England. He was economically tied to England as a merchant and benefitted from trade through the extensive merchantile system of the empire. Therefore it was not strange that he should think it wise to comply with the Stamp Act. Consequently at the Richmond County Court in early February of 1766, Ritchie announced that he had a cargo of grain destined for the West Indies which he intended to clear on stamped paper unless others were willing to take it off his hands at cost, which he said was 2800 pounds. Ritchie had furthermore said he knew where he could get stamped paper and would do so in order to sail his vessels.

The countryside was aghast and then enraged upon hearing of Ritchie’s statements. Thomas Ludwell Lee wrote his brother Richard Henry Lee, “We have concluded that the most effectual, and in all respects, the most advisable method, will be to pay Mr. R. a visit; and to insist on a declaration from him in writing, expressing the deepest sorrow for having formed so execrable a design, and promising in the most solemn manner, never to use the Stamp Paper unless authorized by the Assembly of Virginia.” T. L. Lee went on to say Ritchie’s “profusion is rather to be esteemed fortunate”—the “genius of liberty requires to be awakened.” In another letter to his brother, T. L. Lee wrote: “We propose to be in Leedstown in the afternoon of the 27th inst, where we expect to meet those who will come from your way. It is proposed that all who have swords or pistols will ride with them, and those who choose, a firelock. This will be a fine opportunity to effect the scheme of an association, and I would be glad if you would think of a plan.”

While the Lees were busy notifying other planters for a meeting, the first popular mass protest against the Stamp Act on the Rappahannock occurred on February 21, 1766. Men of Essex County led by Col. Francis Waring and Col. William Roane went to Ritchie and protested his stand in regard to the hated act of Parliament. Troops from a British Man of War were landed at Tappahannock and dispersed the men. This event in Tappahannock gave urgency to the Lees and their group who pressed forward for a meeting of planters from the Northern Neck and both sides of the Rappahannock River. This meeting took place on February 27, 1766 at Brays Church in Leedstown, Westmoreland County.

Richard Henry Lee offered six resolutions which were passed on and signed by the delegates:

“First—We declare all due allegiance and obedience to our lawful Sovereign, George the Third, King of Great Britain. And we determine to the utmost of our power to preserve the laws, the peace and good order.

(Continued on page 2)
Tappahannock and the Stamp Act

(Continued from page 1)

of this colony, as far as is consistent with the preservation of our constitutional rights and liberty.

Secondly—As we know it to be the birthright privilege of every British subject, (and of the people of Virginia as being such) founded on reason law and compact, that he cannot be legally tried but by his peers, and that he cannot be taxed, but by the consent of a Parliament in which he is represented by persons chosen by the people who themselves pay a part of the tax they impose on others. If, therefore, any person or persons shall attempt, by any action or proceeding to deprive this Colony of those fundamental rights, we will immediately regard him or them as the most dangerous enemy of the community; and we will go to any extremity; not only to prevent the success of such attempts, but to stigmatize and punish the offenders.

Thirdly—As the Stamp Act does absolutely direct the property of the people to be taken from them without their consent expressed by their representatives, and as in many cases, deprives the British-American subject of his right to trial by jury; we do determine at every hazard, and paying no regard to danger or to death, we will exert every faculty to prevent the execution of the said Stamp Act in any interfering the Revolution of the King and Queen militia, an abandoned wretch who shall be so lost to virtue and public good, as wickedly to contribute to the introduction or fixture of the Stamp Act in this Colony by using stamp paper or by any other means, we will, with utmost expedition, convince all such profligates that immediate danger and disgrace shall attend their prostitute purposes.

Fourthly—That the last article may most surely and effectually be executed, we engage to each other, that whenever it shall be known to any of this association, that any person is so conducting himself as to favor the introduction of the Stamp Act, that immediate notice shall be given to as many of the association as possible; and that every individual so informed shall with expedition repair to a place of meeting to be appointed as near the scene as may be.

Fifthly—Each associate shall do his true endeavor to obtain as many signers to this association as he possibly can.

Sixthly—If any attempt shall be made on the liberty or property of any associate for any action or thing done in the consequence of this agreement, we do most solemnly bind ourselves by the sacred engagements above entered into, at the utmost risk of our lives and fortunes to restore such associate to his liberty, and to protect him in the enjoyment of his property.

Col. Francis Waring and Col. William Roane were the chief leaders in the Essex resistance to the Stamp Act. Col. Francis Waring of "Goldberry," large land owner, represented Essex in the House of Burgesses, as had his brother and their ancestors since 1659. Col. William Roane, lawyer, Clerk of Essex, member of the House of Burgesses and brother in law to Archibald Ritchie, was the father of Judge Spencer Roane (1762-1822), Chief Judge of the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, founder of The Richmond Enquirer and Jefferson's leading man in Virginia. Judge Spencer Roane's first wife was Ann, daughter of Patrick Henry. His second wife was Elizabeth Hoskins (1781-1825), daughter of Col. John Hoskins, (1751-1813) of "Mount Pleasant", King and Queen County, Captain during the Revolution of the King and Queen County. The latter commander, in the Siege of Yorktown and a descendent of Bartholomew Hoskins who began the colonization which later became Tappahannock with his patent of 1,350 acres in 1645.

Col. Francis Waring and Col. William Roane were also signers of the Leedstown Resolutions. Other Essex men who signed these Resolutions were: John Upshaw, Meriwether Chotard, James Edmondson, James Webb, Jr., John Edmondson, James Banks, Smith Young, Richard Hodges, James Upshaw and James Booker.

On February 28 four hundred men gathered in Tappahannock. They called themselves Friends of Liberty or Sons of Liberty. This was a name scornfully applied to colonials in the course of Parliamentary history. This use of the name in Tappahannock was one of the earliest in the colonies and became more generally the following year in other colonies. The famous Boston Tea Party on the eve of the Revolution was carried out by The Sons of Liberty. These four hundred men drew up in two lines somewhat resembling military formation, on Main Street (Prince St.), while a committee visited Archibald Ritchie. In 1766 Ritchie owned the house which after 1786 became known as the Distons House of which Tappahannock was established, although Tappahannock had actually been a legal port by The Port of Entry Act of 1680 and the consequent establishing of the town in 1682.

In recent years this house was the home of Mr. Allen Latane, Clerk of the Essex Court and editor of The Tappahannock Times for many years. This old house is now one of thirteen structures comprising the "Tappahannock Historic District" which is both a Virginia and National Landmark District.

The committee visiting Ritchie promptly brought him out and required him to choose immediately whether to make oath to the Resolutions signed the preceding day at Leedstown or take the consequences in accordance with a resolution of the Committee that, "this Person should be taken and stripp'd Naked to his Waist, tied to the tail of a cart, and drawn to the public Pillory, where he should be fixed for One Hour, and if in that Time he did not comply, that he should be brought up by the Whole Company to Leedstown, there to be farther determined on, as should seem expedient to the Friends of Liberty."

Ritchie asked for time to think this over but this proved unavailing to those assembled including "Capt. Lee" (possibly Richard Henry Lee) who was a member of the Committee and its chief spokesman. Archibald Ritchie signed and swore to the following declaration pressed upon him:

"Sensible now of the high insult I offered this country by declaring at Richmond Court lately, my determination to make use of Stamp Paper for clearing out my Vessels: and being Convinced such Proceeding would establish a Precedent by which the hateful Stamp Act might be introduced into this Country to the Injury of Public Liberty; I do most submissively, in Presence of the Public Sign this Paper meaning to show my deep Remorse, for having formed so execrable a Design; and I do hereby solemnly Promise and Swear on the Holy Evangel, that no Vessel of mine shall sail cleared on Stamp Paper, and that I never will on any Pretense Make Use of, or Cause to be made Use of Stamp Paper, unless the Use of such Paper, shall be authorized by the General Assembly of this Colony."

John Carter Matthews in his article on The Leedstown Resolutions states—"Every element of pride in Ritchie rebelled against the idea of signing such a declaration. Is the statement just one of the leaders asked? The merchant saw two long lines of faces as grim as death's heads. He murmured that the declara-

(Continued on page 3)
Tappahannock and the Stamp Act  
(Continued from page 2)

tion was just, took the quill handed him, and signed his name." By late 1774 Archibald Ritchie was a firm patriot, being a member of the Association of Essex to prevent trade with Britain and to protect American rights, the lawyer and father of the famous editor of The Richmond Enquirer, Thomas Ritchie for whom the Ritchie House was named. He was born here.

Events such as this throughout the Colonies beginning in early 1765 led to a repeal of The Stamp Act by the Rockingham Ministry in London on March 18, 1766. The Virginia Gazette published joyful news of this on May 22 and a formal proclamation of the repeal of The Stamp Act was made in Williamsburg on June 9.

Thus did Tappahannock and Essex County play an integral part leading to The Leedsdown Resolutions and in giving effect to these Resolutions on the following day. Here was witnessed the largest popular protest on record in Virginia against The Stamp Act and one of the earliest appearances of the Sons of Liberty who were to inspire so many patriots in the developing struggle for Colonial rights.

SOURCES


Garnett, William C., Tidewater Tales, Dunnsville: Tidewater Publishing Co., 1927, p. 34.


Order Book, Minutes of the Essex County Court, 1766, Essex County Court House, Tappahannock, Va.

Reminiscences of Essex County

The Essex County Historical Society held its regular quarterly meeting January 15, 1975, in the Court House at 8:00 p.m., Mr. Sidney Hilton, Sr., president, presented for the program a group of ladies who formed a panel to discuss their earliest memories of happenings in our town and county. The panel members were: Mrs. Catherine Pendleton DeShazo, Mrs. Louise Broadducks Dickinson, Mrs. Neale Dowell, Miss Betty Wright and Mrs. Margaret Hilton, moderator. Many interesting stories were told about the days when the steamboats plowed the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg to the Bay and Baltimore. This was the only means of public transportation except by coach on very rough roads. The forms of entertainment were remembered by all: sailing, hay rides, sugar store lawn parties, the floating theater, Chatqua and County Fairs, horse racing, dancing and local talent entertainments. April 3rd was always celebrated as Emancipation Day with parades, bands and all Negroes in the County were dressed up and came to town for this celebration.

The country stores were quite an institution and their stock was really something and each one had a big stove around which the customers sat and settled all the problems. Several good stories were told about Miss Annie Gordon’s School and Mr. Bently’s Boys’ School here in Tappahannock.

Following the program the business meeting took place with Mr. Hilton presiding. The minutes of the October meeting were read and approved as corrected. The Treasurer's report was given. Mr. Hilton told the members we were supposed to elect two members to the Executive Committee. Mr. Robert T. Ryland was nominated for one year, by Miss Willie Weathers, seconded by Mrs. Daisy Gouldin and Mrs. Sidney Hilton. Mr. John J. McManus was nominated for two years, by Mrs. John F. Wall, seconded by Mrs. Hilton and both were elected to the Executive Committee which also consists of the four elected officers.

The slate of officers was presented by the nominating Committee consisting of Mr. Joseph Ewing, Chairman, Mrs. Catherine P. DeShazo and Mrs. Mary Evans, for president, Judge Sidney Hilton, Vice Pres. Arnold Motley, Secretary, Mrs. Anne Scott Wright, and Treasurer, Mrs. Rue Eubank. The slate was unanimously elected and since all were incumbent, we did not have an installation.

Miss Willie Weathers, chairman of the Committee to find an historical site in Essex where we can hold our July meeting stated she would have a report at the April meeting.

There was further discussion about the preservation of “Old Essex Mill” as an historic site. There was a strong voice vote that we should endeavor to do everything possible to have the mill continue in operation and also to have the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission list it on the Virginia Registry of Historic Places.

Mr. John J. McManus, made a motion that our bulletin be a joint project and carry information which has been collected by the Essex County Bicentennial Commission. The motion carried and the bulletins will be presented jointly since the Bicentennial Commission will pay 50 per cent of the cost of printing. All proceeds will go to the Historical Society.

There being no other business the meeting adjourned.

ANNE T. WRIGHT, Secretary

Miss Dibble Speaks on Furniture

The April 16, 1975 meeting of the Essex County Historical Society, was held in St. Margaret's School Gym at 8:00 p.m. President Sidney J. Hilton presented Miss Ann W. Dibble, Field Representative of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Old Salem, Inc., Winston-Salem, N. C. Miss Dibble attended St. Margaret's and graduated from Hollins College and spent a year abroad studying French history and art. Miss Dibble talked about the formation of MESA by Mr. Frank Horton and its objectives to locate and catalogue as many objects as possible which were made in the South from 1690 to 1820. The Museum has 16 rooms which are furnished with Southern made articles of the Jacobean era, the William & Mary era, the Queen Anne period which was from 1725 to 1775 and the time American furniture came into its own. In 1750 individual designers started setting the styles. One of the leaders in this period being Thomas Chippendale who made furniture which was larger and more decorative than the Queen Anne style. New England, Philadelphia, and Charleston were the leaders in producing fine furniture in this period and following with the Federal, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton influence on furniture. Though Virginia was in the forefront in architecture, much of the furniture was imported from Eng-

(Continued on page 4)
Miss Dibble Speaks on Furniture

(Continued from page 3)

land and France and some was made locally. Miss Dibble has been visiting homes in this section of Virginia from the York to the Potomac. Many of the pieces she has found, she has made slides of and has catalogued these fifty or more articles found in Essex County for the Museum. The slides and the talk were most enjoyable.

Following the program, a short business session followed. Mr. Jerry Lazarus moved that we accept Mrs. Nell Greening Keen's invitation to hold our July meeting at her home "Adam Springs" on July 2, 1975 at 4:00 p.m.

The motion was seconded by Mrs. William Beverley and following discussion unanimously approved. We are looking forward to having our July meeting at Adam Springs and hope all members will be present.

There being no further business the meeting adjourned.

ANNE T. WRIGHT, Secretary

Bicentennial Commission Report

The Essex County Bicentennial Commission is working on a three part program extending over the 1975-1983 period.

1. Research on many aspects of early pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary history is being conducted. This will culminate in historical writings exhibits and episodes of a pageant.

2. Accumulation of historical data of the area during later periods, activities conducted during the years indicated above and plans for the future.

3. It is hoped that a local museum can be opened as the physical result of the observation of the 200th anniversary of the founding of the country.

To meet these objectives the Commission has programmed a succession of events and activities. From this research an initial portion of the pageant will be presented August 17 and August 24, 1975. The two episodes to be presented are enactment of the protest meeting at which Archibald Richie was convinced that the safer thing to do was to observe the Colonists' stand against shipment of exports to England, and the one where ministers were jailed for daring to preach new religious doctrines contrary to the church of England. These will be done on the Courthouse lawn at 5 p.m. during the Sundays of the Tappahannock-Essex County Summer Festival.

During the week of August 17-24 there will be an exhibit of early artifacts from the area. This will be held in the lobby of the Washington-Lee Savings and Loan Association and will be sponsored by the Woman's Club of Essex County under the chairmanship of Mrs. John McManus. All people of the area are urged to work with this and to display any worthy articles they possess. The ability to produce a good exhibit may be a determining factor in the success of obtaining a museum at a later date.

Also as soon as possible a Bicentennial Cookbook is being published. Local business is sponsoring this project. One thousand books will be printed. These will become Bicentennial issues that will grow in value over the years. Reservations for these limited first edition cookbooks should be made early. Chairman of this project is Mrs. N. Greening Keen.

The roster of Essex county Revolutionary soldiers is being compiled and will be appropriately displayed when completed.

The old houses of the State and National Historic Landmarks Registry have been marked by the Chamber of Commerce. Four of these houses were among those in Tappahannock that were open for Garden Week this year. A total of 1,300 persons visited the town during the one-day tour.

In May the Chamber of Commerce is cooperating with the Commission in sponsoring a one day seminar on the history of the town and county. This will be open to all interested persons, but special efforts will be made to have persons whose work places them in contact with the public attend. It is felt that strangers and tourists frequently ask questions which the service personnel of the area cannot answer. With the growing interest in historical facts during the Bicentennial period it is important for the people, all the people, of the area to be familiar with the history and the offerings of this community.

One of the most neglected subjects in our historical past may be the Black history. Great efforts are being made by a committee headed by Mrs. B. F. Harrison to obtain data pertaining to this aspect of our past. For over a year this committee appeared to be running into major obstacles, but last month some helpful information was obtained and this may be one of the outstanding contributions this Commission makes to the Virginia Bicentennial work.

CATHERINE P. DESHAZO, Chairman,
Essex County Bicentennial Commission

Colonial Artifacts Found in River

For three days during the first week in April an unusually strong northwest wind combined with very low tides to expose the river bottom almost to the channel. During this time Mr. Wayne C. Hayden of Tappahannock walked on the mud flats in front of the old part of town between the bridge and the old steamboat dock and found the following artifacts: one English wine or rum bottle, handblown and dated, circa 1740, by the mariners Museum in Newport News; one 18th Century handblown ink well; several keel bolts from an old sailing vessel; one anchor, probably last half of 19th Century, about 4 feet high and one section of twelve inch anchor chain.

These artifacts, are the only ones known to your editor to have been found in such a location. We are grateful to Mr. Hayden for this find and hope that they will someday be preserved appropriately in a local museum which is very much needed by this historic county and town.

Officers of the Society

President ____________ Mr. Sidney J. Hilton Sr.
Vice-President ____________ Mr. Arnold Motley
Treasurer ____________ Mrs. Percy R. Eubank
Secretary ____________ Mrs. William A. Wright

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Chairman, Mr. Charles W. H. Warner; Members, Mrs. William A. Wright, Mrs. J. M. Evans, Mr. Jeffrey M. O'Dell.

Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex County Court House. Dues are $3.00 per year. For copies of publication send $1.00 to Mrs. J. M. Evans, Box 8, Tappahannock, Virginia.