An Historical Sketch of Brooke's Bank

by The Rev. Ralph E. Fall

It is an honor to have been invited by Mr. Sidney Hilton, president of the Essex County Historical Society, to speak "on location" at Brooke's Bank. I have named this address "AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF BROOKE'S BANK." My presentation is given with an appeal to the patient tolerance of some here today whose knowledge of this splendid home and acquaintance with many of its former and present owners and inhabitants surpasses my own.

Brooke's Bank is not the oldest home still standing in Essex County, but it is the best-preserved of the still-inhabited earliest homes in the county. Numerous articles dealing with the history of the house have been published in various periodicals, some (including one of my own, I regret to say) not without errors and mis-information, which this present address hopes to make right.

The date of "1731" carved in the foundation-stone at the rear indicates the year when William Brooke and his wife Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke first began the building of this Georgian-style mansion. William Brooke was of the fourth generation from his immigrant ancestor Robert Brooke (1663-1714) and Catherine (Booth) Brooke of Essex County. William Brooke's wife Sarah Taliaferro was the eldest of six children of Lawrence Taliaferro and Sarah (Thornton) Taliaferro who lived at Snow Creek plantation, twenty miles northward just below New Post also in Essex County at that time.

William and Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke lived at first in a small house on land acquired by Brooke's ancestors very near the site of their planned mansion. The mansion was to be erected close to the Rappahannock River, on land they obtained from Edward Evans and from the earlier Brooke family, as designated on an early plat of the area.

Beginning in 1731, the mansion was under construction for three years, using plans probably acquired from an English design, when William Brooke died in 1734, and the house was still unfinished. It is to her great credit that his widow Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke carried through the completion of the house probably in accord with the plans which had been selected earlier with her husband. The exact date of completion is not known to me, but it must have been sometime soon after 1734 or in 1735. In her will proved in 1764, Sarah Brooke made mention of her "dwelling house built by me." In time, Mrs. Brooke added several carefully-placed dependency buildings to the rear of the mansion, including a kitchen with large exterior and chimney, an overseer's office, a structure for smoking meat, a wooden dairy which burned in 1747 and was never replaced, a carriage house, and several barns. There was also a large wharf constructed at the riverfront which was used to receive the building materials when shipped as needed for the construction of the house and its adjacent dependencies. When Leedstown across the river was founded in 1742 in what was then King George county and later as now, Westmoreland, Joseph Morton soon opened his tavern which grew to be called "elegant," and he also built "Morton's Landing" there. From his wharf, across the Rappahannock River, Morton operated his ferry, large enough in size to transport carriages and horses and cargoes, to the wharf at Brooke's Bank. Sailing vessels, some of quite large size (and larger than the smaller sloops which most planters owned along this river), carrying on commercial trade between Virginia and Britain also made the wharf a stopping place, which could be every few weeks at that time.

Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke died in 1764, and two children survived...a daughter Sarah Brooke who was born in the first smaller house of her parents, and died unmarried in Brooke's Bank in 1768; and a son William Brooke who was born in 1735 and also died in the same year as his mother, 1764. He married Ann Benger, niece of Governor Alexander Spotswood, and inherited his mother's property which remained in the ownership of Brooke families until 1880, a stretch of over 150 years.

In the earliest colonial days, burials occurred on plantations rather than in church cemeteries both because of convenience and also the science of embalming was rare. There was an early graveyard somewhere on the place at Brooke's Bank, its site now unknown to me. Its location was moved not so many years ago to its present location behind the mansion. In addition to some seven Brooke family tombstones still remaining,

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there are eighteen other persons named “Brooke” known to be buried in unmarked graves at Brooke’s Bank, in addition to at least three other persons collateral to this family. The plantation of Brooke’s Bank was not known by that name in its earliest period in any records that I have seen. The first-known reference to the name “Brooke’s Bank,” known to me, appeared in 1829 in a letter addressed to William Thornton Brooke, Brooke’s Bank, Loretto, Virginia. In 1880, Dr. Walton Saunders became the owner of Brooke’s Bank as he lived upriver at Saunders Wharf or Wheatland. For forty years more, or less, Brooke’s Bank was occupied by tenants, during which time the mansion and its dependencies were neglected in their proper maintenance. The place was deserted in 1927. In 1932, Brooke’s Bank was shown on charts of the Rappahannock River and listed as “ruins.” In that year, Robert Roberts became the owner of Brooke’s Bank and is credited with having begun attempts to renovate Brooke’s Bank. In 1934, Mrs. Enos Richardson and her late husband acquired the property, and immediately began the restoration of Brooke’s Bank to its present splendid condition, an ownership that continued for over 40 years. On numerous occasions the warmth and beauty of Brooke’s Bank’s hospitality has been shared with others. We are indeed most grateful today to our host and hostess, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Beverley Osburn, the present occupants of Brooke’s Bank, for graciously permitting this meeting on the premises under discussion. Mr. Osburn’s father, the Rev. Herbert S. Osburn was rector of Vauter’s and St. Matthew’s Churches, and lived in the rectory near Hustle. His wife, Fannie Scott (Beverley) Osburn died this past spring, and both the Rev. and Mrs. Osburn are now buried in St. John’s Churchyard in Tappahannock.

I now speak of Parson Robert Rose who was a predecessor of both Mr. Osburn and myself, as minister of St. Anne’s Parish when both Vauter’s Church and the glebe where Mr. Rose lived were erected in 1731, the year of the beginning of Brooke’s Bank. The date has closer significance than appears just because all three structures were under construction in the year 1731. Mr. Rose had married as his first wife ... Mary Tarent, whose mother Mary Brooke was a sister of William Brooke who had begun the building of Brooke’s Bank. Mary Brooke married Leonard Tarent and lived on a small plantation adjacent to Brooke’s Bank and down-river, when he was sheriff of Essex County until he died in 1718. When Parson Rose’s wife ... Mary (Tarent) Rose died in 1738 ... she was buried at Brooke’s Bank as were two of her three children ... Mary Rose (age 15) and Robert Rose, Jr. (under one year), both in unmarked graves. Parson Rose, therefore, had great interest in Brooke’s Bank, inasmuch as Mrs. Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke was his aunt by marriage, and three members of his family were buried there. My wife, Beth Fall has furthered my own interest in all this, as Parson Robert Rose was one of her ancestors.

Parson Rose kept a diary in the years 1746-1751, which sheds much illumination on the entire valley of the Rappahannock River, but particularly on life going on at the plantation of Brooke’s Bank, since it was here more often than any other place revealed in his diary where Parson Rose visited. Parson Rose was often on extensive travels from the glebe, and back and forth to Vauter’s Church on alternating Sundays. On the Sundays when he was not scheduled at Vauter’s, he held services in Sale’s Church, near present Champlain, which was gone by the year 1800. In addition to some 50 visits made to Brooke’s Bank, recorded in his diary, Parson Rose mentioned frequent visits to his two close friends ... Andrew Anderson who owned a general store and died in 1764 ... and John Miller who kept a tavern and died in 1761 ... both store and tavern being adjacent to Brooke’s Bank. The two oldest graves at Vauter’s Church are those of Andrew Anderson and John Miller, Scottish immigrants as was Rose himself, and both men were remembered in Rose’s will of 1751. Locations of both Anderson’s store and Miller’s tavern are unknown now, but from descriptions of them in Rose’s diary, they were very near to the mansion of Brooke’s Bank, and to the home of Mrs. Leonard Tarent, Rose’s first mother-in-law. (In 1840, Rose married secondly, Anne Fitzhugh of Bedford, King George County.) When Mrs. Tarent died in 1748, she bequeathed her plantation to Parson Rose’s son and her grandson, John Rose, to which the parson thereafter referred as Tarent’s Point and River-side Plantation. Parson Rose also visited Mrs. Sarah Brooke’s mother, Sarah (Thornton) Taliaferro when she was still living at Snow Creek plantation near New Post.

Parson Rose’s references to Brooke’s Bank in 1746-1751 indicate that this great house was itself something of a tavern for way-faring travelers by road or river, although the parson would never have called it a “tavern.” Tidewater Trail (known to us as highway U.S. Route 17) had been used by the Indians, and later by white men as early as 1700 or before. There were also lesser roads criss-crossing plantations which reached Brooke’s Bank through the present fields of nearby farms. Parson Rose could ride his horses ... for he often rode on one horse while pulling a second horse behind which carried his minister’s equipment including his 1662 Prayer Book, Bible ... and his “Diary,” directly from his glebe from about ten miles distance over a road through these fields to reach Brooke’s Bank before going on further to Vauter’s Church another six miles or so. Leaving Vauter’s Church after Sunday services, Parson Rose almost never failed to stop for dinner and over-night lodging in Brooke’s Bank, where he joined other travelers. He picked up the latest news from ships which had arrived here from overseas in England or Scotland, or at John Miller’s tavern, or Andrew Anderson’s store. Brooke’s Bank was more than a plantation-house and a friendly stopping-place; it was the hub of a small trading community, and a news-dispensing center.

Parson Rose’s diary rarely referred to places by their accustomed names. It was always “the Upper Church”, never Vauter’s Church; it was always “the Lower Church,” never Sale’s Church; it was always “Mrs. Brooke’s” or “Mrs. Sarah Brooke’s” never Brooke’s Bank where he visited. At her home here on one occasion, Parson Rose recorded that in behalf of Mrs. Brooke and apparently her request, he had

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“turned out a man from Caroline (county),” that is, he had driven the man from the house when he had been noisy. The parson commented that he had never done such a thing in his own home; but he was not critical of Mrs. Brooke, as he was merely recording an event.

Turning to the house Brooke’s Bank itself, the mansion was built of bricks probably fired in a kiln built on the property for the purpose, possibly by the same workmen who had erected Vauter’s Church and the glebe. It was the date in Virginia when bricks were no longer brought over as ballast in the holds of ships from England, and were being made on the site. In all three structures... Vauter’s, its glebe, and Brooke’s Bank, the bricks were laid in the style of Flemish bond with alternating stretchers and headers (“glazed” at Vauter’s), and all the buildings have a high watercourse whose purpose is to cause the dripping rainwater to bounce away from the foundation. Brooke’s Bank house has never needed nor been given extensive alterations, and its central portion remains quite the same as when it was built... about sixty feet in length, about thirty-six feet in width, and with one-story wings on either end. Two brick internal chimneys rise twenty feet above the ridge line, decorated with contrasting brick headers to form a diamond pattern on three faces, the only ones of their kind in colonial Virginia. It has been said that the purpose of the design was to ward off demonic spirits, but its real intention seems to have been just to give a very aesthetic effect pleasing to the eye.

Inside the house and over the Gothic-styled arch in the first-floor hall came to be these words lettered in the Victorian era of the house, but now gone: “Who would be joyful, let him, There’s no surety for the morrow.” Suspended from the arch in the Victorian period, by a silver chain was an oil lamp made in the shape of a sailing-ship (appropriate for this house on the river), “the upper-half glass, the waves and keel silver,” but the lamp fell and broke in 1861. It is written that during the War Between the States, a Union gunboat anchored in the river in front of this house, fired a shell which without exploding burst through the river-front of the dwelling. In 1890, it was noted that the double doors at both the front and rear of the first-floor hall were of paneled oak studded with nails, having massive brass locks with stirrup-shaped handles and keys ten inches long. The first floor of the center section contains four rooms and an ante-room off the wide hall.

The stairway in the downstairs hall winds upward and over the front doorway to the east side of the second floor, making a ninety-degree turn in the last eight steps to the second floor where the number of rooms duplicates those on the first floor, except that another bedroom was created from the front of the hall, and two bathrooms use some of the hall space. The principal rooms in the house are spacious, where the woodwork is the most elaborate... with cornices, chair-rails, baseboards, paneled window-seats, and angle or corner chimney pieces. There are eight angle or corner fireplaces, whose presence must be almost unique among homes in Essex County.

Brooke’s Bank, first begun in 1731, is still here... graceful, handsome, and beautifully situated for a habitation on the river... after 246 years of being subjected not only to the potential type of whims and eccentricities of owners and occupants elsewhere who have often despoiled other great colonial houses in Virginia... but also subjected to the hazards of wind and storm... the risk of fire and flood so near the river... the peril of military attack... and occasional emptiness and neglect and even wanton vandalism... So we say, in the spirit of a prayer... May this great house survive another long period of unknown numbers of years ahead... to continue to serve as an example of one early Virginia woman’s great tenacity and ability... Mrs. Sarah (Taliaferro) Brooke!

NOTE: Francis Taliaferro Brooke, Chief Judge of the Virginia Supreme Court and Robert Brooke, Governor of Virginia were of this family. Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney of the United States Supreme Court was a descendant of the Brooke family.—Charles W. H. Warner.

SOURCES

2) Mrs. Enos Richardson, formerly of Loretto, Va., now of Big Sur, California.
3) Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Jan., 1905, p. 322.

Board of Directors Meet
August 25, 1977

Mr. Sidney J. Hilton, President of the Essex County Historical Society, called a meeting of the Board of Directors in his office on the above date. The Board consists of your elected officers, Mr. Hilton, Mr. Wellford, Mrs. Ferry and Mrs. Wright and two appointed members, Mr. Charles W. H. Warner and Mr. Spotswood Taliaferro. All were present except our Vice-President, Mr. Hill Wellford, who was unavoidably detained.

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held on Sunday, September 18th and that there would be

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no meeting in October. It was decided that all regular meetings for 1978 will be held on Sunday afternoons—the third Sunday in January, April, July and October at 3:30 p.m.

We have asked Mrs. Jack Acree to be Membership Chairman and she has accepted.

Our president is trying to find a Publicity Chairman, but as of this date has been unable to do so.

Rev. Ralph Fall has agreed to be our speaker on the 18th at Brooke's Bank and has invited us in case of rain to use the Assembly Hall at Vauter's Church.

Mr. Hill Wellford, Vice President, and as customary, is our Program Chairman. The Board wishes him to arrange two meetings a year at one of the county's historical homes or churches.

The Woman's Club Community Calendar will carry our meeting dates.

September Meeting
At Brooke's Bank

Brooke's Bank was the site of the September 18 meeting of the Essex County Historical Society. At 3:30 p.m. on a beautiful Sunday afternoon members and guests arrived at this beautiful old historic home in Upper Essex on the broad front lawn leading to the Rappahanock River and enjoyed delicious punch and cookies before the president, Mr. Sidney J. Hilton, Sr. called the meeting to order. Minutes of the last meeting and treasurer's report were dispensed with. The only business taken up was the proposal of the Board of Directors to change our meeting date from the third Wednesday evening of January, April, July and October to the third Sunday afternoon at 3:30 p.m. This proposal was unanimously adopted by the members.

The Board of Directors also decided that this year this meeting would take the place of both the July meeting which could not be held due to the excessive heat, and the October meeting. In the future, the Board decided to try to have outdoor meetings at an old home or church in the community in April and October.

Mr. Hilton read a letter from Mrs. Margaret Hilton, Library Chairman of the Woman's Club thanking the Society for the purchase of a new genealogical reference book, "Cavaliers and Pioneers" to be placed in the Library for use of all Essex County residents, Mr. Hilton thanked Mrs. Emory Carlton and Mrs. Anne T. Wright for taking charge of the refreshments.

Mr. Hilton then introduced our Vice-President, Mr. Hill Wellford, who will be our program chairman and Mrs. Anne Wright, Secretary, and Mrs. Preston Ferry, Treasurer. The Reverend Ralph E. Fall, our guest speaker, was then introduced by Mr. Hilton and gave a most interesting talk about the building of Brooke's Bank and about the Brooke family and their importance in the community in the 18th and 19th centuries. Following this splendid address, Mr. Fall issued the invitation from Mr. and Mrs. Robert Osburn, the present occupants of Brooke's Bank, to tour this beautiful, old historic home which had been restored in 1934 by Mr. and Mrs. Enos Richardson, Sr. and still belongs to this family. The secretary, Mrs. Wright, read a note from Mrs. Enos Richardson, Sr. who is a member of our Society and is now living in California wishing for us a beautiful afternoon at Brooke's Bank, which it certainly was, and everyone enjoyed seeing the exquisite corner fireplaces, the handsome arch in the central hall and the lovely staircase in particular, which Mr. Fall had described.

This was one of the most interesting and excellent meetings of the Essex County Historical Society and more new members joined than at any other meeting. We certainly hope that our meetings in the future will be just as successful and we welcome the new members particularly.

Mrs. Anne T. Wright, Secretary

Officers of the Society

President Mr. Sidney J. Hilton
Vice President Mr. Hill B. Wellford
Treasurer Mrs. A. Preston Ferry
Secretary Mrs. William A. Wright

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PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

Chairman, Mr. Charles W. H. Warner; Members: Mrs. William A. Wright, Mrs. J. M. Evans, Mrs. Charles N. DeShazo.

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Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex Court House or in an historic home of the County. Dues are $2.00 per year. For copies of publications send 60¢ to Mrs. J. M. Evans, Box 8 Tappahannock, Virginia.

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