Education in Essex County, 1776-1976

Presented by a panel consisting of Mrs. Agnes Ware, Moderator, Mrs. Louisa Christopher, Miss Sarah Jane Pollard and Robert T. Ryland, Members. Presented to six sections of The Future Homemakers of America (FHA) of Essex County and their teachers on January 28, 1976, in one of their Home Economics Classrooms at Essex High School. This paper is the presentation of Robert T. Ryland. Information on the academies of Essex County has been furnished by Charles W. H. Warner for publication as a part of this article for The Essex County Historical Society Bulletin.

I am honored to be called on by the FHA Chapter of Essex High. I hope I shall be able to render some service to your chapter, individually and collectively, in respect to the education in Essex County during the 200-year period, 1776-1976, our bicentennial years. This is by no means the first time I have appeared before an FHA Chapter during my 46 year span of experience in educational work nor is it the first time I have been honored by such an organization. Actually, at three separate times I have received, first from a local group, second from a district group, and a third time from the State group, your pin, and a certificate making me a life-long member of your organization.

Although I have made a considerable research of the education in general of the period, and of Essex County in particular, I shall be able, during our limited time today, to discuss with you only the high lights, with the hope that I can spark a small flame in each of you, which will spur you on to go into the matter of your own personal research.

PERIOD ONE: EDUCATION FROM 1776 TO 1900

The earliest type of education in this area, including Essex County, for the younger type of children and teenagers (pre-college), was of a very private and individual nature. A governess or tutor was brought into a private family to instruct and take care of their children. Often one or two children from a neighboring family were added to this family group. Just such a plan was used in the education of my older sisters (I was the seventh of eight children) in my home “Ingleside”, in King and Queen County in the 1890’s.

Since many homes were not equipped to have a school room, it became necessary to have private schools in homes large enough to take care of a number of pupils, or to have a separate building to be used as a school. Thus Female Institutes and Academies sprang up for girls and boys. Many such girls’ schools were available in Essex County, one being operated in the Derieux House by my grandfather, Robert Temple Gwathmey, in which my mother taught French, during the period 1876-1880, 100 years ago. Many boys from Essex attended Aberdeen Academy in King and Queen County, near St. Stephens Church, operated by Colonel Councill from 1859 to 1899, except during the Civil War period of 1861-1865. Colonel Councill was a well educated and highly respected teacher, and his school was the source of education for many of the young men of the area, including my father, John Newton Ryland, Jr.

Among academies in Essex County during the nineteenth century there were those of: the Rev. James Hervey Hundley of “Rose Hill”, Dr. Jefferson Minor’s Midway Female Academy, Prof. J. T. T. Hundleys’s school for boys at “Hundley Hall”; Mrs. Trible’s school at “Woodland” and the Garnett’s Elmwood Academy. Judith Brockenbrough McGuire, the authoress and wife of the Rev. John Peyton McGuire ran a school in Tappahannock. Another well known school in Tappahannock from which over 800 women were graduated from 1820 to 1860 was that of Mrs. Thomas B. W. Gray (the former Lucy Yates Wellford).

In an article appearing many years ago in the Rappahannock Times Judge Thomas B. R. Wright referred to Mrs. Gray as “the chief adornment of our Community”. The Negro people of Essex County and this section founded the Rappahannock Industrial Academy in 1900. The school lasted until 1947 and filled a very valuable pioneer role in the needed quality education of black people. An article about this academy by Marie H. Harrison appeared in Vol. 10 of this bulletin (Nov. 1976).

Everyone was not able to attend private schools, and the citizens began to feel the obligation of operating schools at the expense of taxpayers, known as “free schools” or “Public Schools.” Even as early as 1704, prior to the period we are studying at this point, an Essex County Court Order declared that an old Prison House, standing in “Hobbs Hole” (early name for Tappahannock) be used for a school house only, thus implying that the school was to be operated at public expense. Also, in 1856, twelve “Glebe” schools were operated in Essex County at public expense by commissioners and a superintendent, according to a reliable source.

As stated by the State Department of Education, “The public school system in Virginia was authorized by the

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1870 General Assembly and the act which created the system was signed on July 11, 1870 by Governor Gilbert C. Walker.” According to the same source the first public schools in Essex County were operated during 1870-71. There were 23 schools in the three magisterial districts, with a combined enrollment of 971 students and the schools operated for 4.5 months. Monthly salaries ranged from $25 to $40. J. G. Cannon was Essex County Superintendent, followed by Henry Gresham, B. G. Rennolds and Edward R. Baird, coming up to 1909. There is no evidence that these early schools were graded. Probably each individual pupil progressed at his own rate of speed, as he went from book to book—“His Book.” Available statistics seem to indicate that there was little change or improvement in the public school system in the 30-year span covering the years 1870 to 1900, the end of the century, save in becoming a little more popular as the years passed.

PERIOD TWO: 1900 TO 1954

Mr. William Gregory Rennolds, well known to the older citizens of Essex County, was Superintendent of Schools in the County during this entire period, except for the first nine years, extending his services through the next period and eight years of Period Four, finally retiring in 1949. An interesting fact in his career as superintendent is that he served both Richmond County, across Rappahannock River, and Essex County, on the Southside, simultaneously for the 1909-13 period—interesting in that these two counties were formed from old Rappahannock County in 1692. Mr. Rennolds was assigned the counties of Essex and King and Queen, beginning in 1913-14, and at the same time Mr. Blake Tyler Newton assumed the duties of superintendent of Richmond and Westmoreland Counties, which position he held with distinction until October 31, 1954, a span of 41 years.

The records of the School Board Office show that during this period Essex County continued to have elementary schools for the most part, with a few small high schools, limited in their offering, and scattered around the county. At various times high school subjects were taught at Lloyds, Center Cross, Tappahannock, Dunnsville, Dunbrooke, Howertons and Laniew School. Grades 1-7 were combined with each of these high schools during this period. Specifically, for the year 1908-09, the records show the following facts: twenty-two schools, mostly elementary with one and two teachers, designated in most cases as No. 1, No. 2, etc.; four High Schools—Lloyds, Tappahannock, Center Cross, and Dunnsville, a total of 26 school units. There were 48 teachers, with annual salaries ranging from $100 to $300, with few exceptions. In the year 1929-30, agriculture was begun in Rappahannock District High School and by 1951-32 this subject had been extended to Lloyds and Tappahannock High Schools, with one teacher handling the work in three schools. Also, during this period Essex County had its first accredited High Schools: Lloyds and Tappahannock District in 1921-22, and Tappahannock in 1924-25, according to the Division of Secondary Education, State Department.

PERIOD THREE: 1954-1941

In years, this period seems very short—only 7 years. However, due to the fact that during these years I was principal and a teacher of Lloyds High School, living in Essex County. I feel that I can give a very clear and realistic account of education in the county as it then was, based on actual experience and participation, rather than research and hearsay.

At the outset, in 1953-35, Essex County reached a red-letter day in progress in Education. This year marked the opening of the first high school to be of a brick structure, a two-story building with modern, up-to-date plumbing, a sizeable auditorium, adequate classroom spaces for the present and future expansion of curriculum, a Principal’s office, a library room, an oil furnace for central heating. There were three other high schools in the county at this time, all of the four high schools handling grades 1-11, but only the new brick school could boast of the conveniences enjoyed by Tappahannock High School, the largest of the four high schools. However, in offering of subjects, there was little difference in the four schools. As we examine the details in Lloyds High School for the year 1940-41, let us assume that this picture is, in general, that of the four high schools in the county.

In 1940-41, in Lloyds High School, the smallest of the four schools in the county, we had a total of 202 pupils 45 in high school, and 157 in grades 1-7. We had four teachers in high school and four in the grades. Every grade teacher had two grades in her room. High School teachers taught in three subject fields. The offerings in high school were English, 4 units; Math, 4 units; Agriculture, 6 units; History, Government, and Physical Geography, 5 units; Latin, 2 units; Biology, 1 unit; and Typing, 1 unit—a total of 23 units during a four year period. This was just slightly more than enough for graduation, so that each pupil was compelled to take nearly every subject offered, especially the girls, who ordinarily would not take Agriculture. There were nine graduates in Lloyds in 1934-35, and only eight in 1934-41.

Our building, a two-story frame structure, had six fair sized classrooms, two small rooms and a small laboratory. A separate Agriculture building, with classroom and shop, accommodated the Agricultural students. A nice auditorium was built in 1936. Heating in each room was in the form of a large cast-iron wood stove, fed from a large “woodpile” and woodhouse near the main building. The main building had only one double door in front as a exit, with no other out doors, back or sides. A fire escape connected with a back up-stairs window. This front door seemed adequate for ordinary use each day, but when we gave the signal, with hand bell and gong, for back exit, (fire drill), it was a little exciting and sometimes disastrous. At the signal, a back window downstairs in the first and second grade room was opened, the older boys jumped from the window, then helped the little folks out, followed by all other pupils and teachers on the lower floor. On the top floor, the pupils and teachers crowded through the window, and went down the fire escape. An over-sized high school teacher, excited butt her head as she squeezed through the window on one occasion. There was no indoor plumbing in the building except a drinking fountain in the front hall, resulting in only outdoor facilities to be used by all pupils and teachers.

The small laboratory room contained only some useless chemicals, which had to be destroyed. Having no cafeteria, the government furnished a NYA worker to help with the library and to make it possible to have a hot lunch to send around to each homeroom. This lunch consisted of home-made soup, crackers, and milk. The ladies

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of the community, organized through the PTA, canned meats and vegetables during the summer for the base of the soup.

Since we had no gymnasium, our principal sport was baseball, and our teams were excellent, in spite of our small schools. In fact, a few of our boys were good enough for the word to get around, causing the University of Richmond coach to "scout" our game on one occasion. We also played a little basketball, using an outdoor court back of the school for our boys and girls.

Our teachers and pupils worked hard each day with the teaching learning process, but we also had some fun together. Our high school had a Student Cooperative Association (SCA) which met regularly, and once we took the whole high school to a District SCA meeting in Middlesex County. With great planning, our high school students and teachers arranged a trip to Luray Caves. We were permitted to use one of our rickety old buses to make the trip. We left very early on a Saturday morning, and finally reached the Cave, but the boys had to push the old bus up the mountain. After we had gone through the cave we went on to see the town of Winchester. And we made it all in a day, including some of the late hours of the evening, coming close to the "wee hours" of Sunday morning!

One of our principal entertainment features from year to year was the "Big Homecoming Day." This was made possible by the combined efforts of teachers, pupils, the PTA, and indeed, the community-at-large. After extensive advertising, and ticket sales, and much practicing day and night, the day finally arrived, and the crowds poured in. The program began with an hours entertainment by the grades and high school pupils. This was followed by a delicious supper, planned, prepared, and served by the ladies of the community, sponsored by the PTA. Such a delicacy as a whole country-cured ham was donated on one occasion by one of our good patrons-I know, because I solicited this gift! At 8 p.m. the Community Play was presented, the cast being composed of the teachers, the people of the community, and occasionally a high school senior to fill in. These plays were on the comedy style, and provoked much laughter and fun for the audience, as well as an occasional tear at certain spots, at some tragic moment. The proceeds of the day were all clear gain, but were small in amount, since a full supper was only 35 cents, and, the play was 25 cents for adults, and 15 cents for children.

You have now heard the story of Lloyds High School, typical of most of our high schools of the period. We should note, however, that during this period, commercial work on a full scale, Home Economics, and Laboratory Sciences were introduced in some of the other high schools, but were not taught in Lloyds.

We must note that in addition to the high schools discussed above, there were, in the period (1940-41) also five two-teacher elementary schools, nine one-teacher elementary schools, and two elementary supervisors for these 14 schools. The average annual salary for most teachers was about $450, some increase over earlier years.

PERIOD FOUR: 1941-1976

Now we are on the home stretch, as we rapidly review the tremendous strides made by the schools of Essex County during this period, bringing us up to this present session, 1975-76. All of the little schools, and the combin-
ed High and Elementary Schools have faded out of the picture, and become only a fond recollection of the older citizens. The entire school system of Essex County has been concentrated within the new city limits of the Town of Tappahannock, being located at only three sites, Tappahannock Elementary, taking care of kindergarten through third grade pupils, with an enrollment of 612, and 30 teachers; Essex Intermediate, handling in grades 4-7 a total of 661 pupils, with 34 teachers; and Essex High School, new and imposing, with its comprehensive Vocational Building, taking care of grades 8-12, with an enrollment of 741 pupils and 44 teachers. A vast fleet of new and shining buses serves the county from end to end, including the Town Tappahannock. There is a program of study in high school, covering 79 courses (85 credits), including academic, business, vocational and specialized interest, with equipment and laboratory spaces to handle these courses effectively; with libraries in the high school and other two schools to facilitate proper sources for reference work, research, pleasure reading, and current events in accordance with needs of each grade level and each subject. The buildings and grounds are well planned, well manned and well kept; and spacious enough to take care of classwork, physical education, and sports.

St. Margaret's School

BY THE STAFF

St. Margaret’s School, founded in 1921 under the aegis of Bishop Brown and a local Board of Governors, is one of the six schools in The Church Schools System operated by the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. Tradition has it that the gentlemen of the Board, when seeking a suitable location for the school, happened to look over the present site (on the shore of the Rappahannock River) one evening as the moon was rising over the river, and the sheer beauty of the scene so enchanted them that their decision to locate on the western bank in Tappahannock was spontaneous.

While the building which was to become St. Margaret’s Hall was being remodeled and enlarged to house the whole school, the first classes were held in the upper floor of a drugstore on Prince Street.

Miss Bertha Latane was the first headmistress, and among other outstanding headmistresses are Miss Edith Latane, who served for sixteen years, and Miss Viola Woolfolk, who, at present on a year's sabbatical, has served for the last twenty-nine years.

Through the ensuing years, the school grew from St. Margaret’s Hall, built on land patented in 1650 by Epaphroditus Lawson, which housed academic classrooms, living quarters for some of the staff and the boarding students and the offices, to the acquisition of the Brockenbrough House (1763), a faculty residence purchased in 1927, and the Anderton House (1801), the senior dormitory, purchased in 1947. The first Ball Memorial Gymnasium was given by Mrs. Alfred I. du Pont in 1927. During Miss Woolfolk’s tenure, Latane Hall, a dormitory housing 81 students, a modern science building, a large Ball memorial gymnasium and theatre, three tennis courts, a swimming pool, and new faculty apartments, Pettigrew Hall, have been built. The Dunn House and the Phillips House, faculty residences, and the

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Mitchell House, the home of the Associate Headmistress, Mrs. John Sheppard, were acquired.

The enrollment now includes 116 boarders and 37 day students, and the scholastic requirements imposed meet those necessary for college entrance. The school grounds, including the buildings, have been kept in approximate easy distance and include a playing field and facilities for canoeing, sailing, and water skiing.

Among those fine men and women who have given of themselves to St. Margaret's, there were — Miss West, the beloved Latin teacher; Miss Caldwell, who had "no tolerance for fools" but who gave to the discriminating visions of scholarship; the dearly loved Dr. Churchill Gibson; and Miss Woolfolk whose dedication to the welfare of the girls gives to them the vision for seeking "A Way, and Ways, and a Way".

The school, which started so simply, has grown, even as St. Margaret's Hall has grown with its sprouted wings and is still characterized by its emphasis on "plain living and high thinking" which characterized its patron saint, St. Margaret of Scotland. The Students, Staff, and Board, with faith, loyalty and determination, carry the school forward to the lofty goal its founders envisioned.

Minutes of The Society

The Essex County Historical Society met in the Court House at Tappahannock, Virginia, on Sunday afternoon, January 20, 1980, with Mr. Charles W. H. Warner, vice-president presiding. The minutes of the fall meeting were not read, since they were published in the bulletin. Mrs. Taliaferro gave the Treasurer's report. Mr. Warner introduced our speaker, Mr. Edward F. Hiete, Chief of the Bureau of Archives and Modern Records, Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs for the State of Delaware. Mr. Hiete is the author of many articles on Archeology and History in many magazines and quarterlies. He was managing editor of the "Virginia Calvacade" published by the Virginia State Library. He is a graduate of the University of Richmond and has done graduate work at the University of Delaware.

Mr. Hiete's talk was on one of the most interesting and helpful subjects we have ever had, "Sources of Virginia Local History". Mr. Hiete did not dwell on the usual places, such as Court Houses and Libraries where most of our historical records are kept and are easily available, but rather he gave us many other sources to which we should turn, depending upon whatever our research project may be. These sources will be given at another time, when there is more space available in the bulletin.

Mr. Robert T. Ryland, chairman of the Committee to look into all the records of the Essex County Historical Society, first thanked our president, Mr. Hill B. Wellford, who had donated the money for a bookcase which could be locked, in which these records could be kept, and stated his committee had completed their job of cataloging and organizing these records so that they are more accessible for research projects, etc.

Mr. Warner thanked Mrs. Robert L. Ellis, who is Refreshment Chairman for this year, and also thanked Mrs. Nancy T. Ball, Chairman, Mrs. Lawrence Andrews and Mrs. Haile Parker, Co-chairmen, and their committee who served the delicious refreshments in the Club House following our meeting.

The Essex County Historical Society met at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Miller's Tavern, Va., Sunday afternoon, April 20, 1980, with Mr. Hill B. Wellford, president presiding. Mrs. Wright, Secretary, read the minutes of the January meeting which were approved. Mrs. Taliaferro gave the Treasurer's report. Mr. Wellford called on Mr. Spottwood Taliaferro, Chairman of the Nominating Committee, who nominated the present officers to serve another year, and they were unanimously elected.

Mr. Wellford then turned the meeting over to Mr. Charles W. H. Warner, our vice-president, who called on Mrs. Catherine DeShazo to give us a short history of St. Paul's Church. Mr. Warner then introduced Mr. Muscoe Garnett of Suffolk, who is a native of Essex and has been a member of our Historical Society since its inception, who in turn introduced our guest speaker, Mr. Edwin Ferguson, President of the Virginia State Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Ferguson was born in Suffolk and attended the College of William and Mary, where he received his B.S. and Law degrees. In 1940 Mr. Ferguson entered the Navy as an apprenticed seaman and later coming out as a Lt. Commander. He is a past president of the Bar Association of Virginia, and has served as senior warden of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Suffolk. Mr. Ferguson gave us an excellent talk on the Heritage we as Virginians have and how much this heritage means to us individually and as a State, where Tourism is our second ranking Industry, based on our wonderfully preserved historical sites and history.

Following this splendid talk, the meeting adjourned to the Parish House for delicious refreshments prepared by Mrs. Robert L. Ellis, Jr., Mrs. Ludwell Smithers and Mrs. Spottwood Taliaferro, Co-chairmen, and their committee from Occupacian District.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

Officers of the Society

President .................. Mr. Hill B. Wellford
Vice President ............ Mr. Charles W. H. Warner
Treasurer .................. Mrs. Spottwood Taliaferro
Secretary .................. Mrs. William A. Wright

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PUBLICATIONS 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, in an historic home or church of the County. Dues are $3.00 per year. For copies of publications send $1.00 to Mrs. J. M. Evans, Box 8 Tappahannock, Virginia.