Charter Members of the Essex County Historical Society

From its inception Essex County has advanced through the energy, vision, and dedication of her citizens, in the roles of scholars, educators, soldiers, patriots, clergy, doctors, lawyers, legislators, bankers, farmers, craftsmen, traders, watermen, mothers, fathers, artists, writers, all public servants in a sense, spending their time and talents beyond their personal and family needs to provide for the development of the community.

Results of their efforts in the past enrich our lives continuously. Such citizens are still among us, preserving our history and traditions, strengthening our spiritual, ethical, social, and material values, upholding our laws, making provisions for our safety, health and well-being, comfort and pleasure and continuing to guide the growth and development of Essex County.

Within our own lifetime a group of them formed the Essex County Historical Society, July 11, 1951. There were 72 Charter Members, 18 of whom are living and loyal to the principles and purposes of their forebears. This issue of the Bulletin honors with praise and gratitude all the Charter Members, and two in particular. Future issues will carry reminders of other contributors to Essex history, past and present.

William Alfred Wright
The Gentleman from Tappahannock

Scanning the list of Charter Members of the Essex County Historical Society, one name stands out as representing a majority of the roles which were required in the building of Essex.

William Alfred Wright inherited a sense of commitment to his community and a zeal for public service from his father, Judge T. R. B. Wright.

He prepared himself for fulfilling his roles by studying at Washington & Lee University during his undergraduate years and earned his law degree there also. He was President of the Student Body and chosen later for membership in ODK, National Leadership Fraternity. World War I began as he was graduating, so he went to the front in France as a First Lieutenant of Infantry.

After the war he came home to practice law in Essex and was distinguished by his scrupulous regard for truth, his integrity, and proper professional conduct in every circumstance.

From 1924 to 1932 he represented Essex, King and Queen, and Middlesex counties in the Virginia House of Delegates. For the next 10 years he was Virginia State Senator for Essex, King and Queen, and Middlesex, Gloucester, Mathews, and York. Mr. Wright served as Chairman, Joint Committee on Special Private and Local Legislation, Finance, Roads and Internal Navigation, Courts of Justice, Fish and Game, and Privileges and Elections. In 1940 as Chairman of the Senate Roads Committee and the Fish and Game Committee he was a diligent and powerful champion of actions that were...
advantageous to his constituents in “Middle Peninsula” and “Tidewater” and ardent defender of their rights. He sponsored with success the Bridge Revenue Act, under which the Rappahannock River Bridges, York River Bridge and all the Bridge-Tunnels were built, as a result of his skillful statesmanship and political strategy.

As soldier, veteran, and patriot he supported the development of the American Legion and was a founder of Essex Post 64. Senator Wright served on the State War Memorial Commission which raised the money and built the Carillon in Byrd Park, Richmond. The Carillon was just a monument until after 1942 when Governor Darden appointed “Billy” Wright, Director of the State Department of Conservation and Development. This was a splendid opportunity to implement his ideas for advancement of the Commonwealth. He joined with state funds the City of Richmond in providing someone to give bell concerts and other entertainment weekly at the Carillon on pleasant summer evenings without cost to anyone.

He was able to promote Virginia’s State Park System to the finest in the United States, to improve the Water Control Board, and the Forestry Department, and sparked the promotion, conservation, and development of Virginia’s great natural resources. Senator Wright was president and chairman of the board of the Jamestown Corporation which produced Williamsburg’s famous outdoor drama, “The Common Glory” which was his “brainchild”. They also built another amphitheatre to produce “The Founders” during 1957 for the 350th Anniversary Celebration of the first permanent English Settlement in Jamestown in 1607. He served on the State Commission to plan the many activities which were to take place in Virginia during this anniversary year. He co-chaired the local Celebration which took place in Tappahannock the weekend of July 14, 1957.

He acted to fill a void in the history studies of the school system by commissioning a suitable Virginia History outline which he entitled A Hornbook of Virginia History published in September, 1949 and written by his brother-in-law, Everard Kidder Meade, of Clarke County, Virginia. This book has had several printings and was used widely in the schools of Virginia. When Senator Wright resigned from the Conservation and Development Commission, he ran unsuccessfully for Congress from the First District in 1950, after which he returned to the private practice of law, his first love, in Tappahannock. He was appointed to the State Highway Commission and served on this body until 1958, as a critical force in dealing with a major concern of the State.

Meanwhile his wisdom and energy were expended directly for the benefit of Tappahannock and Essex County. He was a founder of the Bank of Essex in 1926 and a Director and Vice-President until his death. He served as vestryman and was a life long member of St. John’s Episcopal Church, and was a member of Arlington Masonic Lodge No. 102. In his law practice he never turned down anyone who came to him for help. He encouraged young people, helped many to go to college and to find work.

From the time of his marriage to Anne Scott Taylor in 1952 he had the full support of her knowledge, capability, and inspiration to enhance the scope and success of his activities.

His death in October, 1959 was widely mourned and he was eulogized throughout the State. An editorial in the Norfolk Virginia-Pilot, recognizing his many significant accomplishments and exemplary character, was headed: “THE GENTLEMAN FROM TAPPAHANNOCK.”

THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY met at 3:00 p.m. at the Court House in Tappahannock on January 15, 1989 with our president, Mr. Carroll Garnett, presiding. In the absence of the secretary there was no reading of the minutes. The Treasurer’s report was presented and will be filed for future audit. Mr. Smither announced the addition of three new members: Mrs. Evelyn Weaver, Mr. Wallace B. Stockton, and Miss Sue Wright of Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Mr. Garnett thanked Mr. Smither for his report. Mr. Charles Warner reported that the completion of the Bulletin would be delayed because of illness in his family. Mr. Garnett thanked the member ship committee, Mrs. Lib Smith, Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger, and Mrs. Elizabeth Tribble for preparing an article for the newspaper announcing the meeting and program of the ECHS. The committee has had two callers inquiring about membership in the society.

Mr. Garnett turned the meeting over to the Vice- President, Mr. Wilson Ware, who introduced our speaker, Mr. William H. Hunley, Retired Chief of The United States Naval Architects.

In conclusion, Mr. Garnett thanked Mr. Hunley for his interesting and informative talk. The president announced the plan to hold the April 16, 1989 meeting at “Mahockney”. The meeting adjourned. Refreshments were served in the Woman’s Club Building, Mrs. Smither and Mrs. Montsinger, hostesses.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

The Invention of the First Steamboat

Address by
MR. WILLIAM H. HUNLEY
January 15, 1989 meeting of ECHS

Mr. Hunley has roots in Mathews County and now lives in Alexandria. Part of his mechanical engineering training was at George Washington University and at the University of Michigan. His subject, one close to the hearts of those who grew up in Tidewater, was the development of the steamboat.

James Rumsey was born in Cecil County, Maryland in 1743. He moved to Shepherdstown in an area of Virginia which eventually became a part of West Virginia. Despite a limited education he became a skilled and inventive craftsman. Thomas Jefferson recognized him for his many advances in the mechanical sciences, and judged him “the most ingenious, most brilliant technician in the United States.”

George Washington commissioned James Rumsey to build a house for him. During this association James Rumsey told Washington of his experiments to develop a paddle boat which would go upstream with the current and showed him a model. Washington was favorably impressed and wrote a testimonial commending the potential of the invention. He later hired Rumsey to take over as Chief of The Potomac Company which was developing improvements to increase the navigability of the Potomac River as far as the fall line.
Meanwhile, Rumsey was building and testing a steam powered boat. The tests were conducted in secrecy at night in order to protect his invention until he could obtain patents. The first boat was smashed by ice. The second operated on the Potomac River in 1786. The third, loaded with 8 tons of rock and 8 people, navigated from Shepherdstown to Steamboat Bend and back during all of one afternoon before a crowd of observers which included General Gates and other prominent men.

Benjamin Franklin and some other influential citizens formed the Rumsey Society to help protect Rumsey's inventions. Under the Society's auspicies, Rumsey went to England in 1790 to build and demonstrate a working model of his steamboat and obtain a patent. This was a very costly project and it took two more years to finance and complete his vessel.

The week before the scheduled launching on the Thames, Rumsey died of a stroke. No one among his supporters was qualified or far-sighted enough to pursue the promotion and development of this remarkable achievement. The boat was allowed to deteriorate at its mooring.

In 1906, the Rumsey Society was reactivated and erected a monument to James Rumsey in Shepherds town.

In 1985 Mr. Hunley was asked to produce a replica of Mr. Rumsey's steamboat from sketches and models. Mr. Hunley recorded the progress of the boat's construction on slides. It was completed and launched in 1987, 200 years after Rumsey's first steamboat was demonstrated at the same location.

The replica is exhibited in the Museum at Shepherds town. It is loaned for display at many Marine and Inland Waterway celebrations—a graphic proof that James Rumsey had invented the steamboat many years before Robert Fulton's.

THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY met Sunday afternoon, April 16, 1989 at "Mahockney", the colonial home of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Rixey.

The meeting was called to order by the president, Mr. Carroll Garnett. The secretary, Mrs. Anne Scott Wright read the minutes of the January meeting which were approved as read. The treasurer, Mr. Ludwell Smithers reported a balance in the checking account of $472.01, and a CD for $945.01, a total of $1,417.02. He announced the addition of new members, Mrs. Willie Stockdon, Mr. and Mrs. David Butterick, and Mrs. Elizabeth G. Minor. The membership committee had no further announcement.

Mr. Garnett introduced Mr. and Mrs. Rixey who have been so generous and hospitable in inviting us to meet at their lovely old home which they are gradually restoring. They gave us a warm welcome. Mr. Rixey explained that the oldest part of the house is the three story brick section on the right, built around 1752. The part on the left was added around 1816. "Mahockney" was the home of the Latanes until sometime near the end of the 19th century. After that it was owned by the Crutchfield family for a time. Mr. Rixey passed around some pictures of the house as it appeared around 1900. He pointed out some alterations which had been made by Mr. Trent Taliaferro who owned the property until the Rixeys bought it a few years ago. Mr. Wilson Ware thanked the Rixeys for their hospitality again and introduced the guest speaker, Dr. Charles F. Bryan, Jr.

The afternoon was windy and there was threatening thunder but the rain held off and at the conclusion of Dr. Bryan's remarks, Mr. Garnett asked Mrs. Agnes Ware to tell something about Dr. James Latane who was one of the original owners of "Mahockney". Mrs. Ware distributed copies of an article about Dr. Latane which had been published in the "Tidewater Democrat" and read a few highlights concerning his career and his character.

Mr. Garnett thanked the Refreshment Committee, Mrs. Nancy Tuck Ball, Chairman, Mrs. Ashby Parker, Mrs. Mae Andrews, Mrs. Patricia Haile, and Mrs. Felicia Haile. We adjourned to enjoy the delicious refreshments, talk about the meeting, and go through "Mahockney" which was quite a treat.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

On the Importance of Being Near-Sighted:

Interpreting the History Around Us

Address by

DR. CHARLES F. BRYAN, JR.
Director of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.
April 16, 1989 meeting of the ECHS

Dr. Bryan is a native of Tennessee. He graduated from V.M.I. He holds a Master's Degree from the University of Georgia and a Ph. D. from the University of Tennessee. He served in various capacities for several historical organizations before becoming, in 1986, Director of the Virginia Historical Society, with headquarters in the Battle Abbey. The Society also has charge over the Virginia House in Windsor Farms.

Dr. Bryan began his remarks with a brief report on the Society and the tremendous amount of material it has collected since it was founded in 1831. It has millions of documents, books, manuscripts, letters, etc. which relate to all of Virginia. Its collection of 700 portraits is the largest in the Southeast. Plans are being made to increase the space in the building to enable the Society to render better service throughout Virginia and particularly to societies earlier than that of Essex.

There will be meeting rooms, auditorium, exhibit galleries, etc. for the use of the public. There will be additional display and storage facilities to accommodate the ever increasing volume of historical data which is being acquired. 20th century history may be lost if it is not preserved now. During the 89 years of this century there have been more changes in this county than ever before. Dr. Bryan predicts an even greater rate of change during the next 40 years.

He asked if anyone knew where Floyd County is and very few of us did. He cited the changes which took place in this remote county in the hills southeast of Roanoke during and after World War I as an example of what happened all over Virginia.

Dr. Bryan illustrated his premise with the story of one young farm boy. He had been out of Floyd County only twice in his life, and then no farther than the small city of Roanoke, when he was drafted. He had never even heard of Washington, New York, or France. He was sent to
Lincoln's Virginia Roots
address by
MR. PAUL VERDUIN
Silver Springs, Maryland,
July 16, 1989 meeting of ECHS

Tantalizing allusions to his Virginia origins in some of Lincoln’s speeches, in autobiographical, and in biographical material, and in some obscure historical references challenged the scholarly curiosity of Paul Verduin. Two and a half years ago he began to amass documented evidence that Abraham Lincoln’s mother’s people were living and working in Richmond County as early as 1650 until her family migrated to Western Virginia in 1783 and then to Kentucky.

Nancy Hanks was born to Lucey Hanks, daughter of Ann Lee and William Hanks, between 1781 and 1784. Facts that escape Mr. Verduin’s careful and thorough pursuit of the truth are: the actual date and place of the birth of Nancy Hanks, of whom Lincoln said “All that I am or ever hope to be I get from my mother, God bless her,” and the identity of the man who was her father. Lincoln expressed the belief that Nancy’s father was a “Nobleman of Virginia” or “well-bred Virginia planter.”

With the help of Mr. Charles Warner, Mr. Verduin has presented a proposal to the Richmond County Board of Supervisors urging that the several hundred acres in the Sharps vicinity proven to have been occupied by the Hanks family for so long during the early years of America be acquired for use as a Park for recreation and enlightenment available to all Americans. Anyone interested in a complete account of Mr. Verduin’s research may read his article published in the Northern Neck Historical Society Magazine December, 1988.

Officers of the Society

President .......................... Carroll M. Garnett
Vice President .......................... Wilson C. Ware
Secretary .......................... Anne S. Wright
Treasurer .......................... Ludwell F. Smither

PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger, Chairman
Mrs. William A. Wright, Mrs. J. M. Evans

Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex Court House, or in an historic home or church of the County. Dues are $5.00 per year. For copies of publications send $2.00 to Mrs. J. M. Evans, Box 8, Tappahannock, Virginia 22560

THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY met in the Court House in Tappahannock on Sunday afternoon, July 16, 1989, with our president, Mr. Carroll Garnett presiding. He opened the meeting by announcing that Charles Warner, who has been Chairman of the Publications Committee for the past 19 years, desired to resign from this job. After Mr. Warner was given many accolades for a job well done and received a standing vote of thanks from the members, his resignation was accepted. Mr. Garnett then announced that Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger has agreed to be Chairman of the Publications Committee. Mrs. Montsinger told the members something about her life and remembrances of Essex and how much she would need their help to do this job the way she would like.

Mr. Garnett asked Mrs. Wright, Secretary, to read the minutes of the April meeting and the Treasurer's report since Mr. Smither was unable to be present. Both the minutes and treasurer's report were read and approved.

Mr. Garnett said that frequently when the hostesses for the social hour following our meetings were thanked, they had already left to attend to these duties, so he was going to thank them before the program from now on. Thanks to Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger, Chairman, Mrs. Agnes Ware, Mrs. Anne Warner, Mrs. Cornelia Garnett, and Mrs. Thelma Aaron for providing and serving the delicious refreshments at today's social hour.

Mr. Garnett turned the meeting over to Mr. Wilson Ware who introduced our guest speaker, Mr. Paul Verduin. After thanking Mr. Verduin and Mr. Warner for their remarks about Lincoln’s mother, Mr. Garnett accepted Charles’s resignation from the Nominating Committee also and appointed Mrs. Jeanette Ellis, Chairman, Mrs. Frances Garrett, Mrs. Elizabeth Trible, and Mrs. Betty Latane Walser members of the Nominating Committee. They will bring in a slate of officers for the October 15, 1989 meeting. The slate and nominations from the floor will be voted on in October and take office at the January 1990 meeting.

Mr. Garnett stated that he had been connected with the Society in a leadership role for the past six years and he felt that it was time for him to step down. He has already informed the nominating committee of his intention. The meeting then adjourned.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary