The Evolution of Essex County
Looking Back to Its Prehistoric Inhabitants
and Forward to Its 300th Anniversary as
a Political and Societal Entity

The mysterious stretch of Atlantic Ocean Coast which was the landfall of earlier European explorers and the land presumed to be beyond it to the west was claimed by England. In 1580 Sir Walter Raleigh suggested to his queen, Elizabeth I, that in her honor it be named “Virginia.” There was little distinct knowledge of its geography or extent. Latitudes 45° N and 34° N were arbitrarily assigned as north and south boundaries. The westward reach was “from sea-to-sea,” imagined to be a few hundred miles at most.

To exploit the acquisition of this potentially profitable territory, King James I issued a charter on April 10, 1606 authorizing two groups of English business men to establish settlements in Virginia. Those from the city of London were designated as the London Company and commissioned to take charge in the southern section. Business men of Exeter, Bristol, Plymouth, and western England formed the Plymouth Company, assigned to the northern section. Neither was to be within 100 miles of the other. The enterprise was to be a Royal Proprietary, administered by a 10 member Royal Council in England, appointed by the king. This group appointed a Council in each colony and chose a president to govern according to the king’s laws.

The Plymouth group settled at the mouth of the Kenebec River in the area which would later be the state of Maine.

Sir Christopher Newport was in charge of the southern expedition which consisted of: Mr. Robert Hunt, clergyman, 29 Gentlemen, 4 carpenters, a blacksmith, a sailor, a barber, a bricklayer, a mason, a tailor, a drum (sic), a surgeon, 12 laborers, 4 boys, and others to a total of 105 men and boys. In addition were 40 or 50 ship’s crewmen, not to remain as settlers. Sealed orders named the six men who were to serve as the Council. Edward Maria Wingfield was designated as the first president.

They investigated a good many attractive and promising locations around the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The succinct “Instructions” issued by the Royal Council impelled them to seek a site away from the coast. They continued up an estuary which they named James River in honor of their king. They decided on a low lying plot on the north shore where the water was deep enough for the ships to anchor close to land. So began the settlement at Jamestown.

The first three years there were disastrous. The plans, preparations, and support by the London Company were inadequate for such an undertaking. The directives of the Royal Council were based on meager knowledge and erroneous assumptions about the new country. Trying to follow the ubiquitous “Instructions” issued from England resulted in devastating mistakes being made by the colonists.

The northern settlement was soon abandoned. In 1609 a new charter was devised making the London Company a separate and distinct corporate body, under management of a special Royal Council in England which included individual and corporate bodies of wealth and power. Thus the power formerly reserved to the king was vested in the “Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the City of London for the First Colony in Virginia.” The incorporators were 50 city Companies of London, and nearly 200 knights, peers, ministers, doctors, esquires, gentlemen, captains, merchants, and others. Territorial definition began by the designation of Virginia as all the land 200 miles north and 200 miles south of Old Point Comfort and between the oceans from east to west. Government systemization was introduced by the appointment of Sir Thomas West, Lord DeLa Warr as “Governor and Captain General of Virginia for life.”

When he arrived at Jamestown June 10, 1610 to take up his duties, the few surviving, half-starved men were preparing to leave. He persuaded them to return to Jamestown. He was able to establish order and restore confidence. From that time improvements were made so that the permanence of the colony was virtually assured.
However, Lord DeLa Warr, in poor health himself, left and was not able to return.

By 1617 the growth and spread of population necessitated the formation of a second-order political system. Several borough-like settlements developed. Then Governor Samuel Argall identified them as 4 incorporations and parishes: James City, Charles City, Henrico, and Elizabeth City. In 1619 a General Assembly of Burgesses was formed with 2 representatives from each borough. Courts were established in several locations.

In 1622, the Indians of Chief Opechancanough, the brother who succeeded Powhatan, massacred all but 911 colonists. That tragedy and the inroads of the Dutch in the Hudson Valley moved England to revoke the charter and dissolve the London Company. The colony became a Royal Province, again under the Royal Government of the king. The vast extent of the new land was beginning to be understood. An area south of the present North Carolina line was granted a separate identity from Virginia.

By 1624 monthly courts were scheduled in Charles City and Elizabeth City. A detailed land survey was undertaken to establish titles and apportion legal jurisdictions. In 1632 the first permanent first-order boundary in English North America was set, defining the Potomac River as the line between Maryland and Virginia.

By 1634 the population spread required more specific delineations of societal and political responsibility.

In 1200, after the Norman Conquest, England and Wales had been organized in a “shire” system with a “shire reeve” (sheriff) as the king’s administrator of law and order, a bailiff, a coroner, a surveyor, and a Lord Lieutenant authorized to form a militia for defense. By 1500, Courts, Justices of the Peace, and quarterly assizes assumed the tribunal duties of the sheriff. He became the agent of enforcement. This system had been functioning efficiently for 300 years so it was used as a pattern for the structure of government in the expanding English colony of Virginia.

The original 4 divisions along the James River evolved into 7 shires: Charles City, Charles River (Which became York in 1642/1643). Henrico, James City, Warszoguycake (renamed Isle of Wight 1637). Warwick River (became Warwick in 1642/1643). An 8th shire was Accomack on the Eastern Shore (renamed Northampton 1642/1643). Spin-offs, now called counties rather than shires, continued in this area. There were Lower Norfolk and Upper Norfolk (later Nansemond and Norfolk). In 1648 the Chickacoan Indian Reserve north of the Rappahannock River was formed as the county of Northumberland. It, along with York (the former Charles River shire) grew so fast that Lancaster and Gloucester were derived from portions of their lands in 1651. By 1653 Northumberland yielded Westmoreland, York yielded New Kent, Lancaster sired Rappahannock. The James River became the boundary between James City and the new county of Surry on its southern bank. During the next decade these entities were gradually filled. The Eastern Shore re-established the original name as Accomack for a county from the northern portion of Northampton. Stafford was established from Westmoreland’s western section and Lancaster yielded Middlesex with the Rappahannock River as their common boundary.

For a while, political and economic circumstances abroad slowed expansion and discouraged immigration. Improvement after the “Glorious Revolution” in England, placing William and Mary on the throne, stimulated the prospects of the colony. In 1691 part of New Kent became King and Queen, named in honor of the royal couple. Norfolk split off Princess Anne. Strangely, in spite of being divided by the River, Rappahannock County endured as a political entity. Finally by an “Act of their Majesties, Lieutenant Governor, Council, and Burgesses of this present General Assembly and the authority thereof, it is hereby enacted that the aforesaid County of Rappahannock be divided into two distinct counties, saye that Rappahannock River divide the same; and that part which is now on the North side thereof be called and known by the name of Richmond County, and that part which is now on the South side thereof be called and known by the name of Essex County.

...Be it enacted by the authority aforesaid, and it is hereby enacted: That whereas the Town land lying at Hobbe’s Hole on the Southside of the said County was purchased by the entire County as now it is, the charge thereof being equally defrayed by the whole number of tytheable of said county; that the moity of the tobacco arising from the sales thereof to the several takeups of the aforesaid lands be paid unto the inhabitants of the North side thereof, upon the taking up of the said land at the town aforesaid, and that the records of the County Courts of Rappahannock before the said division be kept in Essex County, that belonging wholly to the Majesties and the other to the Proprietors of the Northern Neck.” Rappahannock was no more. Thus implemented in 1692, Essex’s identity as a county began 200 years after Columbus’ first landfall in the “New World.” The area so designated then encompassed parts of at least 50 later counties of Virginia and West Virginia.

There is archeological evidence of the existence of human occupants of this part of Virginia at least as long ago as 12,000 B.C. It had a flourishing population of Indians when European explorers ventured up the Rappahannock during the 16th century.

But Essex began its colonial history when the first Englishman, Captain John Smith, was an involuntary visitor during the winter of 1607. A victim of mistaken identity, he had been captured by Indians. As punishment, for 7 weeks they put him on display in their villages throughout the area. Apparently he established some friendly relationships among those natives because after his release he was anxious to visit his acquaintances among the Rappahannocks and explore the river. In the summer of 1608 following his remarkable recovery from the near-fatal attack of a stingray, he led a party of some 12 men, including an Indian guide, up the “River of Rappahannock, by many called Tappahannock.” A small group of Indians made signs of friendship and invited the voyagers to put into a creek, which we now know as Hoskins. Smith, wise and wary of the ways of the redmen, laid to at the mouth of the stream and effected an exchange of hostages. Anas Todkill went ashore and an Indian boarded the open boat. A shout from Todkill warned that he had recognized an ambush. The Indian jumped into the water and was shot. Todkill dropped to the ground as Indian arrows and English gunfire flew over him. When the Indians fled the power of the guns, Todkill was rescued and the English continued up the river. During the journey one of their number died of a fever. One of the earliest colonists, this Richard Featherstone, Gent., was buried by the river on soil that would be in the County of Essex.

The tide of settlement was not long in flowing westward after the earliest sites were stabilized. Motivated by desperation or by ambition, immigrants came to use their knowledge, skills, and energy to transplant and
adapt their cultures and their institutions to the new environment. Thousands of acres were patented, cleared, and cultivated. Indian paths became roads. Communities developed and along with them, a need for a structured system for economic and social cooperation. When the central Rappahannock region reached county status and was organized as Rappahannock County, encompassing land on both sides of the river, the southern section had its business headquarters in a court house at Caret.

Prompted by the Virginia General Assembly's 1680 law requiring every county to establish a town, the Rappahannock County justices purchased 50 acres at the site where Anas ToddKill had had his narrow escape in 1608. Though the land was originally patented by Bartholomew Hoskins, the small settlement which had grown there was known as Hobbe's His Hole. This the town which was planned was called. In spite of special inducements offered to settlers, few lots were sold during the first decade. In 1682 it was established as a port and given the dignified name of New Plymouth. However, the old nickname stuck even as the town became a viable river trading point. In 1705 the Assembly approved the adoption of the name by which John Smith had known the Indian community he had visited there in 1607 — Tappahannock. It took another hundred years to outlive its old identification.

Exploration and settlement continued to the west. In 1721 Essex, King and Queen, and King William counties each donated parcels of their lands to comprise Spotylvania. In 1728 each gave more to form Caroline. Though this was the final division of Essex's area, it wasn't until 1866 that Virginia's last changes were made and all county boundary lines were firmly established.

In 1992 Essex will reach the 300th year of its inception as one of Virginia's 100 counties.

**Atlas of County Boundary Changes in Virginia 1634-1895**
Michael F. Doran — Iberian Press

**Twelve Virginia Counties Where the Western Migration Began**
John H. Gwathmey

**Life In Old Virginia**
James M. McDonald
The Old Virginia Publishing Co. (Inc.), Norfolk, Virginia 1907

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**Tribute to the Retiring President**

The October, 1989 meeting was the last in the six years during which Carroll Garnett had been serving the Essex County Historical Society as an officer.

He has earned the respect and gratitude of the organization by the high quality of his leadership, his devotion to the fulfillment of its purposes, the scope of his contributions, the depth of his knowledge, and the breadth of his interests. He inspired the membership's admiration for the grace and skill with which he conducted the affairs of the Society.

Thank you, Carroll, for your careful and generous stewardship.

**THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY** met on Sunday afternoon, October 15, 1989 in the Court House, Tappahannock, Virginia, with our president, Mr. Carroll Garnett, presiding. Mr. Garnett read a letter from Mrs. Henry Cunningham conveying to the Society a collection of artifacts which she had gathered from the Rappahannock River shore during the five years she lived at the Riverside Condominium. She and her husband were members of ECHS and were great friends of the Warfields. She had her collection appraised and evaluated by Mr. and Mrs. Ivor Hume of Williamsburg. She presented it in memory of Dr. Calvin Warfield who was president of the organization when Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham were living here. She had placed it in the care of Mrs. Ruth Little who is also interested in collecting these types of artifacts. The gift was accepted. It was decided that for the time being it would be offered for exhibit in the Essex County Library. Mr. Garnett wrote to Mrs. Cunningham, accepting the gift and thanking her for it.

Mr. Garnett then asked Mrs. Wright to give the Secretary's and Treasurer's reports in the absence of the Treasurer, Mr. Ludwell Smither. Mrs. Wright asked that the reading of the minutes be dispensed with because they had been printed in the Bulletin which was mailed to every member with notice of the meeting. She then read the Treasurer's report stating a balance on hand in the checking account of $963.24, less disbursements of $35.56, and a Savings Account of $606.27, a total balance on hand of $1,535.96.

Mr. Garnett accepted these reports and said that we would have the Nominating Committee's report and election of officers after the program.

He then turned the meeting over to our Vice President, Mr. Wilson Ware, who introduced our guest speaker, Colonel Wallace B. Stockdon, U.S.A.R. (ret.) Colonel Stockdon is a member of our Society. He lived in Richmond most of his life, graduating from the University of Richmond and T.C. Williams Law School of the University. He worked for years in the Legal Department of the Life Insurance Company of Virginia. He now lives at Bowlers where his family owned a summer cottage. His boyhood insights and memories of Essex and Bowlers are the topic of his address to the Society.

Having thanked Colonel Stockdon following his entertaining presentation, Mr. Garnett called for the nominating committee's report. In the absence of the Chairman, Mrs. Jeannette Ellis, Mrs. Frances Garrett presented the slate prepared by the committee: President - Mr. Wilson Ware, Vice President - Colonel Wallace B. Stockdon, Secretary - Mrs. Anne Scott Wright, Treasurer - Mr. Ludwell F. Smither. There being no further nominations from the floor, the slate was accepted and elected. Those four officers, the retiring president, and a member-at-large constitute the Executive Committee.

Mr. Garnett called attention to the fact that the ECHS By-Laws provide that officers be elected to serve one year. For the term to be extended the By-Laws would have to be amended in accordance with procedures mandated by the Constitution of the Society in Article VIII of the By-Laws.

Mrs. Wright announced that she would be in charge of refreshments following the January meeting. Mrs. Lib Smither, Mrs. Polly Taliagerro, and Mrs. Nancy Ball will arrange for hostesses for post-meeting receptions during 1990.

Upon adjournment those present went to the Club
House to examine the attractive display of Mrs. Cunningham’s findings which Mrs. Little had prepared.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

Views from Bowlers

Address by
COLONEL WALLACE B. STOCKDON, U.S.A.R. (RET.)
October 15, 1989 meeting of ECHS

Colonel Stockdon’s original drawings illustrated adventures and anecdotes, woven together with bits of historical background for the settings of his stories. He introduced an early Rappahannock Indian, watching the river from the shore at Bowlers, surprised, perhaps alarmed, by the approach of a large sailing vessel, very different from the familiar canoe. Colonel Stockdon was reminded of the poignancy of such a scene when, years later, enroute to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, he traveled the “Indian Trail of Tears,” legendary route of the red men’s banishment to western Reservations.

His sketches showed later vessels carrying grain which Tory sympathizers at Leedstown collected for the Royal cause. Sometimes the cargos were confiscated and put to use by the colonial Revolutionary forces determined to be free of British control. Several decades later, descendants of the colonial settlers watched in fear as British warships plied the Rappahannock, firing at houses and wharves. One of Colonel Stockdon’s pictures showed Admiral Cochran aiming his marine artillery which damaged the lovely old home, “Bowers,” during the War of 1812. Next came the Union threat. The Yankees brought ferry boats up the river. Their open ends enabled them to move both forward and backward by reversing the paddle wheels. With their shallow draft and not needing space to turn around, they were able to reach into creeks, do their damage, and withdraw safely.

Peaceful missions were carried on in the following years. “The City of Baltimore,” Captain Daws of Accomac commanding, was accustomed to navigation in the Caribbean. Once he brought his ship up the river at high tide to transport a load of grain from Leedstown to Savannah. Returning on the ebbing tide and riding low in the water with his cargo aboard, he had trouble avoiding shoals along the narrow channel. He hailed a farmer on the shore and asked if there were anyone who could pilot him. The farmer reminded him of an old-fashioned practice of watching the knuckles of his hand on the wheel to gauge the distance from the church steeples to keep away from sand bars. He must have managed all right because no grounding was reported.

When the Colonel was a boy spending happy summers beside the river, the steamships which passed by regularly were objects of constant interest. At night, ablaze with lights, they were especially thrilling. When the ships unloaded mail and orders at the dock, the treasures were transferred to a small hand cart. The children could hardly wait to see what the mailman delivered ashore. Everything was fascinating—farming machinery, tools, furniture, mysterious packages and goodies, and the exciting assortment of mail.

One old work horse on the Rappahannock was the

“Ann Arundel.” She was slower than most but a great favorite of the youngsters who looked forward to meeting her at the dock. Many a lad dreamed of an adventure afloat. The pilot house of a steamship held a magic allure and the Captain seemed an heroic figure, master of all he surveyed. Colonel Stockdon knew a Captain Winder on the “Richmond,” a ship of the Old Dominion Line. Once his purser was ill so he got his cook, Billy, to take over the job of announcing the ports of call. Billy proudly sang out “Sharps,” then “Wellfords,” and so on up the route. Not a word when he got to Piscataway! When Captain Winder prompted him, Billy said, “I’m not about to start cussing at this late date in my life.”

The most exciting arrival at the dock was the Adams Showboat—dazzling entertainment and rousing music from spectacular brass bands. Edna Ferber spent several weeks aboard, absorbing the atmosphere and collecting the action, collecting authentic information for her novel which was to be “Showboat.”

Watching the laborious process of tonging oysters from the depths of the river, seeing the mounds of shells grow on the decks of the low lying boats was another pastime. The best part of that was anticipating the taste of those supreme delicacies, the finest in the world.

One sketch showed the picturesque old Bowlers Lighthouse before it was demolished by breaking ice and carried away by a terrible winter storm.

When the playmates were not spellbound by the waterfront traffic they often explored the wonders of the Brizendine Boat Yard at Centre Cross. The Stockdon family’s boat had been crafted there.

The trip from Richmond to “The Cottage” always seemed unbearably long. When the 1926 Chevrolet finally reached Centre Cross it stopped at Durham’s store—another stop at Rice’s store to get a block of ice. That rode on the front bumper along with a watermelon. Somehow the rest of the way til the river came into view was the longest of all.

THE ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY’s winter meeting was on Sunday, January 14, 1990 at 3:00 p.m. in the Court House, Mr. Wilson Ware presiding. Mrs. Wright, Secretary, asked that the reading of the minutes of the last meeting be omitted since they would be published in the Spring Bulletin. Mr. Smith, Treasurer, reported a balance of $1,435.49 on deposit, after receipts and disbursements.

It was moved, seconded and approved that the Society purchase a copy of The Roster of the 55th Virginia Regiment of Infantry, CSA, recently written and published by Carroll Barnett. The book will be included in the ECHS Archives. Mr. Charles Warner moved that the book just authored and published by Miss Betsy Fleet about her ancestor, Henry Fleet, be acquired for the ECHS Archives. Mr. Ware asked about purchasing a personal copy. Miss Fleet said she would like to give a copy to the Society. Additional copies are for sale in the Stratford Hall Gift Shop.

Mr. Ware thanked Miss Fleet for her generosity. He also expressed the gratitude of the members present to Mrs. Anne Scott Wright, Chairman, and Mrs. Gene Christopher, Mrs. Madeline Ware, Mrs. Nan Page Carleton, Mrs. Raye Handly, and Mrs. Louise Shepherd for the arrangements for the social hour in the Club House. Mrs. Wright introduced her neighbors, Mrs. Jesse Williams and Mr. and Mrs. Van Arsdales.

The Van Arsdales have enrolled as members of ECHS.
The Health of the Chesapeake Bay

Address by

DR. FRANK O. PERKINS, PHD, DIRECTOR OF VIMS

January 14, 1990 meeting of ECHS

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science is the most extensive Estuary Laboratory in the United States. It is staffed by 70 scientists all of whom are PHD’s. Its annual budget is $16 million. Its equipment is the most advanced and efficient which has been developed. An extraordinary recent addition is a microscope which magnifies to the molecular level! All of these resources are directed at reversing the damage which we, the people, have inflicted on the organisms in our streams and rivers.

The major problems are: denuding the land of vegetation so that the soil erodes into the water. This accumulation of silt blocks the penetration of sunlight to aquatic plants, thus preventing photosynthesis. The plants die and their roles of cleansing the water and furnishing food and shelter for animal life are lost. In addition, the decomposition of that dead matter produces toxins. Next, the leaching of fertilizers and chemicals from coastal soil poisons the water. Then, the dumping of all kinds of foreign matter and sewage stifles healthy development of plant and marine life while promoting the growth of dangerous microorganisms and diseases.

VIMS is charged with the responsibility of examining every aspect of the condition of Virginia’s waterways throughout the state and all the way to the continental shelf in the Atlantic Ocean. From this continuous, meticulous accumulation of knowledge, the experts diagnose the problems, formulate solutions, and implement means of restoring the balance of nature which a healthy system requires.

The intensive level of pollution in the Norfolk-Portsmouth area has made the deadly condition of the Elizabeth River there irreversible. It is mandatory that measures to prevent that happening anywhere else be rigidly enforced.

A basic necessity is to keep “land on land.” Shoreline erosion control and wet lands preservation must be strictly practiced. Shoreline vegetation must be protected and encouraged.

The rate of harvesting of the diminishing stocks of seafood must be carefully planned and controlled. Observing and recording climate cycles and correlating them with the development of marine life provides a means of predicting the decrease or increase of mature specimens, thus optimum limits of quantities to be harvested can be set.

The conditions of the spawning grounds determine the health and survival of fish. Infancy and adolescence, spent where they are hatched, are the periods of critical development. Species which start life in the environment of the continental shelf have a much better chance than those such as the rock fish, which begin in the inland streams.

Dr. Perkins illustrated his talk with slides. Views of the splendid facilities of VIMS at locations on the York River and on the Eastern Shore were very impressive. Pictures of the staff at work in their laboratories were encouraging and inspiring. The vessels of the Institute, probing, observing, testing, and documenting evidence, were especially interesting. Examples of some of the mutations and destruction which occur in creatures because their habitat is polluted told the frightening story graphically.

Recommendations of the marine scientists have resulted in some corrective and protective legislation. It is up to the citizens and their elected officials to recognize and understand the truths which VIMS scientists are proving and to provide for remedial action.

Study of Private Cemeteries and Gravesites in Virginia

The Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Conservation and Historic Resources, Division of Historic Landmarks has instituted a compilation of records concerning private cemeteries in the state.

Questionnaires went to persons who were believed to have knowledge of such gravesites.

Carroll Garnett was appointed to furnish information about the Garnett Cemetery at “Ben Lomond.”

His report included this:

The property was acquired by Muscoe Garnett in 1858. In the front yard to the left of the house was the colonial graveyard of early owners. Here Garnets were buried also. There is no evidence of colonial grave markers or unidentified mounds at present.

Two markers, both inscribed with the date only, 1847, are the oldest. Others are those of:

Judge Muscoe Garnett
Born March 17, 1808—Died October 5, 1880

Dr. David S. Garnett, Surgeon C.S.A.
son of Judge Muscoe and Sarah A. Garnett
Born October 3, 1834—Died October 3, 1862
Officers of the Society

President ........................................ Wilson Ware
Vice President ............................ Colonel Wallace B. Stockdon
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

Request for Genealogical Information

Mr. Roy Geoffrey Bendrey asked the ECHS to locate records relating to the family of that name in Essex County. There are many documents in the Court House which prove the presence of William Bendry, his wife and children in Rappahannock/Essex County between 1685 and 1704. The spellings Bendry, Bendery, Bendrey, and Bendrig appear in relation to the same activities. If anyone can furnish information about these people, please write to Mr. Bendrey at:

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Morley Street, Waterloo
London SE1 7 Qu.
England