Vanishing Treasures of the Rappahannock

For uncounted ages the pulse of its ebb and rise has maintained the vitality of the land and creatures within the flow of the Rappahannock River. It has been the pathway, the road, the highway for commerce, community, culture to travel, expand and flourish.

Beneath its surface was a vast treasure, not hoarded nor hidden but providing sustenance for all life in its depths and on its banks. Nature’s cycle of consumption and reproduction constantly replenished the wealth of the waters. Early human beneficiaries of this bounty observed the cycle and learned to cooperate with nature without interrupting. They relished the variety of foods which abounded in each season and devised means of harvesting them without disturbing their habitats.

By the time people from other parts of the world found their way to Virginia shores, Indians had been living on the land and plying the waters for thousands of years according to archeological evidence. They had long understood the oyster, its physical requirements for existence and growth and its multiple values as one of the river’s “treasures.”

The men who came from England and chose to settle at Jamestown in 1607 were ill-prepared and far from capable of the arduous efforts required for survival in that environment, so foreign to their former lives. When winter came they would have starved but for the oysters the Indians taught them to gather and eat. The huge mounds of shells in the James River provided an environment which supported living oysters in abundance.

Since then, Virginians have "treasured" oysters as a major source of food and a major commodity of trade. Oysters have provided a livelihood for generations, in good economic times and especially in hard times.

Mr. Witt Garrett tells of the oyster business; planting, protecting, harvesting, and marketing as he has known it.

By the late 1700's there were so many people working the oyster beds in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries that some regulations had to be imposed. The State of Virginia owned, and still owns the river bottom. In the early 1800's the State leased the oyster grounds to the counties which bordered the waters.

Competition between the watermen for the oysters was fierce. In 1890 the government commissioned the Baylor Survey to determine how to separate the public beds from the private ones. The middle of the river for a certain width was designated public oystering territory and the water along the shore reserved for private use. Annual licenses are sold for the privilege of using the public grounds. Leases for acreage in the private space cannot be cancelled as long as the annual rental fee is paid so they pass from generation to generation. Each lease is marked by tall stakes at each of four corners and along the perimeter. Poachers are punished by fines, if they can be apprehended.

The first such lease in Essex was acquired on November 21, 1892 by George Dunn, the second in December, 1892 by C. P. Garrett, grandfather of Witt Garrett and Fred Garrett, Jr. That same month, J. W. Clarkson, their great uncle, signed a lease.

The primary workplace of the early oyster business was the deck of a sailing vessel. Two types were most commonly employed—the square stern schooner with two sails, and the Bug-eye whose prow and stern were both tapered. Each bore a distinctive name, usually in honor of a beloved wife or sweetheart. Men who day in and day out had to trust their lives and their livelihood to these boats regarded them with respect and often with affection. Familiar names of some of these hard-working long lived vessels were Lillian Cooper, Fanny Meyers, Miss Holland, Carrie L., Lula Phillips, Iva W.

Early each week some boats were dispatched to the James River, the chief source of seed oysters. They were gathered by the bushel, then returned afloat to the home beds by Friday to be planted during the weekend. If the winds were contrary or the weather rough, any delay on the trips meant a loss of much of the cargo as oysters cannot survive long out of their watery homes.

Meanwhile, back in the Rappahannock, oysters were lifted by hand tongs from their beds, sorted into barrels and loaded aboard steam boats for the trip to markets in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Bowlers Rock Rappahannock River oysters were in great demand and became famous for their quality and flavor. Always the success of the enterprise depended upon favorable winds and weather.


Between 1908 and 1910, F. L. Garrett ventured into the oyster business. He planted $500.00 worth of oysters, bought with money which he borrowed from his uncle. Anything could have happened in the three years it takes oysters to mature. His gamble paid off and he was finally able to ship a load of oysters to Baltimore. A sudden warm spell during the trip damaged his "treasure" and he had to get rid of it for a reduced price. After paying his uncle back, the interest, and the freight, he netted $15.00.
By the 1920's Henry Ford had built the Model-T automobile and gasoline engines were developed for other uses. Some sailing vessels were converted to power and new boats replaced the rest. Now the trips were swift and the losses were minimalized. In 1928 the successful business became Clarkson and Garrett.

The State of Virginia established the Commission of Fisheries to handle leasing and regulate the growing seafood industry within the state. The Virginia Marine Resources Commission is the present authority.

After Fred Garrett, Jr. graduated from Hampden-Sydney College he took his place in the business. The oysters were plentiful but the nation's economy was in a deep depression. The market price for oysters was very low.

There were small packing and shucking houses up and down both sides of the river: at Sharps, Simonsons, and Morattico on the Northern Neck; John and Justin Waring had one at Lowry's Point; there was one at Eubanks, and one at Bowlers and at Garrett's in Essex County. There were larger ones in Carter's Creek around Irvington and Weems.

The three largest plants in the state were at Norfolk and Hampton. They leased thousands of acres in the Chesapeake Bay and shipped oysters all over the United States.

The youngest Garrett brother, Witt, had begun his participation in the business early. During his years in Junior High and High School, on Saturdays throughout the winter, he loaded the Model-A with oysters his father had shucked and drove to Richmond to sell them house-to-house for .45¢ a quart. John Waring boasts that he was getting .50¢ for his!

In 1946 when Witt returned from service in World War II he became the other son in F. L. Garrett and Sons. One of his duties during the oyster season was shucking and delivering oysters to Lowery's Restaurant in Tappahannock and to wholesale outlets in Essex, King & Queen and King William counties.

There is no natural harbor in Essex County on the 18 mile stretch from the Piscataway Creek to Waterview. Along that shore, boats had to be anchored and secured out in the river, subject to the violence of storms and otherwise exposed in all weather. The three Garretts undertook the construction of their own harbor. After encountering many problems, expending extraordinary effort, a lot of sweat, and many sticks of dynamite they had a functional harbor. They have continued to improve and expand it. Now Garrett's Marina serves a tremendous boating population.

Since Fred L. Garrett, III graduated from Hampden-Sydney in the early 1960's and took up duties in the business there have been many other changes in procedures. The most immediate one was that trucks replaced the power boats for transporting the oysters. This speeded the whole process and eliminated most of the loss that had resulted from delays.

The oystermen often developed personal attachments to the boats which were so much a part of their lives when they lived aboard for days at a time, week after week and had to maintain them in good safe working condition. Trucks do not inspire the same kind of association.

More recent changes have been devastating, resulting in the virtual extinction of oysters in Virginia waters. One has to know the life cycle and environmental requirements of oysters in order to understand what has happened to them. Oysters are filter feeders. They have to have water circulating all around them. They attach themselves to rocks and mounds of shells rising well above the mud and silt on the river bottom. Each oyster needs to drink as much as 100 gallons of water each day. In doing this it purifies the water. Salinity must be in a ratio of 5 to 6 parts in 1000. If the ratio drops below that or rises over 10/1000, oysters die, so weather patterns influence the health of the creatures. Intensive, careless, and greedy harvesting methods such as dredging and mechanical tonging have destroyed the elevations in the water so oysters have sunk into the mud, silt, and pollution on the bottom where they are virtually smothered.

A parasite known as MSX attacks oysters when the salinity is disturbed and the result is fatal. It takes about two years after the water condition improves before the MSX is controlled. The present enemy is a disease called Dermo which kills the oysters when summer water temperatures remain relatively warm and dry seasons cause the salinity to rise. There is no known cure for Dermo. Once affected there is no more oyster.

In optimum conditions a female oyster will produce 2 or 3 million eggs at a time during the spawning season. Those float around and are fertilized by the male sperm deposited in the water. In 14 days a tiny hairlike thread emerges and clings to whatever mound or projection is available. Now it has to survive and grow at least three inches before it can be legally harvested. They may grow very fast in more salty water but will be of poor quality and yield only 4 or 5 pints to the bushel. In brackish water they stay plump and one bushel will shock out a gallon.

There was not a sudden decline but as far back as 1888 fresh water from flooding in New York and Pennsylvania surged down the Susquehanna River into the Chesapeake Bay, diluting the salinity and killing tons of oysters.

Violent storms in 1933 damaged oysters but hurricanes in 1955 were so destructive that the process of growing them had to begin all over.

It takes hundred of bushels of shells to build a habitat for oysters. Then it takes 1000 bushels of seed oysters to plant one acre. In 1890 seed oysters cost .08¢ a bushel. In 1988-89 the price was $4.00 to $6.00 per bushel. The rent is $1.50 per acre each year and only a small portion of the total lease can be planted. It requires an investment of thousands of dollars to establish a private oyster bed. In 1958 new beds were producing. Then MSX killed most of the oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. Before that Virginia had controlled the world market, shipping 5 or 6 million bushels every year. In 1993 less than 100,000 bushels were harvested in Virginia.

Recently Fred Garrett, III planted oysters in his beds at the power lines near Ware's Wharf. There are still no oysters growing. 1993's long hot, dry summer has not encouraged a recovery for this remarkable treasure of the Rappahannock.

Information for this article was furnished by Mr. Witt Garrett and Mr. F. L. Garrett, III, better know as "Skipper", in talks before the Essex County Historical Society on July 11, 1993.
Joint Meeting of Essex County Historical Society and APVA
August 16, 1992

Members of the Essex County Historical Society and of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities from Middlesex County were guests of Mrs. James C. Wheat, Jr., present owner of "Blandfield", ancestral home of the Beverley family.

Each of the many generations of Beverleys who had lived in the Handsome Colonial mansion made modifications in the building to adapt it to their individual needs, tastes, and lifestyles. When Mrs. Wheat and the late Mr. Wheat acquired the property they aspired to return it to the condition of the height of its early grandeur.

They obtained the services of Mr. Allen Morley, architect, specializing in historical restoration. Then began an intensive search for and study of documents, pictures, any material which related to the original structure and furnishings of the house.

Mrs. Wheat and Mr. Morley conducted the groups through the house, describing construction details of each room and the origins of the items in it. They told anecdotes to illustrate the extensive research required to discover, assemble, and authenticate the material.

Tea and refreshments were served at the Woman's Club in Tappahannock by Mrs. Witt Garrett, chairman, Mrs. Ludwell Smither, and Mrs. Robert Ellis.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Fall Meeting

On Sunday, October 18, 1992 the Essex County Historical Society met at 3:00 p.m. on the lawn at "Clydeside" overlooking Piscataway Creek, the home of Mr. & Mrs. Harold Little.

Mrs. Douglas Lindsey, President, first asked for a moment of silent prayer for Mrs. Olga DeShazo, a member who died recently in an automobile accident.

Mr. Ludwell Smither, Treasurer, gave his report and the minutes were dispensed with, to be published later in the bulletin.

Mrs. Lindsey and a committee composed of Mrs. Witt Garrett, Mrs. Robert Ellis, Mr. Hill Wellford, and Mr. Wilson Ware are to prepare a revision of the society's Constitution and By-laws. This is undertaken in order to clarify and eliminate redundancy in the present document. The report will be presented at the January meeting.

Chairman of the nominating committee, Mrs. Robert Ellis, presented the nominees for office in 1993: Mrs. Douglas Lindsey, President, Mrs. Vincent Montsinger, Vice-President, Mrs. William Wright, Secretary, and Mr. Ludwell Smither, Treasurer. Mr. Wilson Ware moved that nominations be closed, Miss Rowenetta Allen seconded, the slate was elected unanimously.

Mrs. Little spoke about the history of her home, "Clydeside", and the surrounding area. On display were many artifacts discovered on the property. These have been carefully preserved, identified, and labeled as to age, origin, and use. Everyone was invited to inspect the interior of the house where refreshments were served by the Hostess Committee: Mrs. Nancy Ball, Chairman, Mrs. Ashby Parker, Mrs. Lawrence Andrews, and Mrs. Vincent Montsinger.

Details of Mrs. Little's talk will be published later.

ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Winter Meeting

The Society met in the Courthouse on Sunday, January 17, 1993 at 3:00 p.m., Mrs. Douglas Lindsey presiding. She welcomed all in attendance and asked that all guests stand and be acknowledged. Among those were Mr. James Moore, Chairman of the Essex Board of Supervisors. Mr. Gladding and Mr. Hammond, members of the Tappahannock Town Council, Miss Augusta Wilkerson, Clerk of the Essex County Court, Mr. Earl Johnson, President of the Bank of Essex, and others who are interested in the proposed expansion of the courts' facilities.

Mr. Ludwell Smither, Treasurer reported the Society's current financial position. Mrs. Lucile Andrews, a Life Member, has contributed, for the fourth time, $100.00 to help finance the printing of the Bulletin and purchase relevant genealogical material. The membership expresses profound gratitude for her generosity.

Annual dues are now $10.00 per individual, $15.00 for a family.

Mrs. Witt Garrett, Chairman, presented the report of the Committee for the Revision of the Society's Constitution and By-laws. The report was accepted as read.

Mr. Gwynn Tayloe has been appointed Chairman for Accessions.

It was moved and seconded that a letter be sent from ECMS to the Tappahannock Beautification Committee stating the Society's appreciation for the many projects they have undertaken in order to improve the appearance of the streets and public buildings of the town. Mr. Harold Van Arsdale is Chairman of the Committee.

Mrs. Lindsey will appoint a committee to nominate a slate of officers for 1994-1996. She thanked Mrs. Robert Ellis, Mrs. James C. Wheat, Mrs. Daisy Gouldin, Mrs. Hill Wellford, Mrs. Joseph Aaron, and Mrs. Helene Garnett for preparing and serving refreshments at the social hour in the Woman's Club after the meeting.

The guest speaker was Mr. Hugh C. Miller. In his capacity as Director of the Development of Historic Resources for the State of Virginia, he encourages and implements preservation and improvement of sites of historical and architectural significance in Virginia's towns. This involves research and feasibility studies, planning and cooperation with local authorities and property owners. One objective is to restore the older buildings and to adapt the newer buildings to blend into an attractive and functional business area.

He cited several of the successful Main Street Development projects which have been begun in Virginia towns. His slide pictures of phases of work and completed results were inspiring. He assured the audience that the resources and cooperation of his department can be called upon to help in undertaking similar restoration and renewal.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary
ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Spring Meeting

The Society met Sunday, April 18, 1993 at 3:00 p.m. in the Viola Woolfolk Learning Center, newest building on the St. Margaret's School Campus.

The Treasurer's report was given by Mr. Ludwell Smither, approved by those present, and filed with the secretary, Mrs. William Wright.

The president, Mrs. Douglas Lindsey appointed Mrs. Tyler Bland, Colonel Wallace Stockton, and Mr. Wilson Ware as the nominating committee to present a slate of new officers for 1994-1996 at the July meeting.

The guest speaker was Mr. David Winfred Gaddy, a much published and well known Civil War scholar and historian. He is a native of North Carolina but boasts a Virginia ancestry. He attended Mars Hill College and the University of North Carolina and received a Master's Degree from George Washington University. Participant in many groups with active interest in Civil War history, he was president of the famous Civil War Round Table in 1990.

He began his message to the group with the suggestion that one must go beyond the mainstream presentations of history and explore the towns and by-ways inhabited and traveled by individuals whose daily lives composed the larger drama. Applying this concept in his studies of the Civil War, Mr. Gaddy has compiled a body of information about elements not included in general accounts.

One such intriguing activity was a spy system, a network of secret agents operating what we would refer to today as the Intelligence branch of the military services. There were Virginia heros and heroines supporting the war efforts in clandestine roles. Captain Austin Buckenbrough, namesake of several illustrious ancestors, gave invaluable service mapping the northern counties from Loudon down through the Northern Neck for the use of the Confederate Army strategist. He mined the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers for the defense of the peninsula from Union Naval forces. He was involved in an effort to capture President Lincoln.

Many names both familiar and obscure appear in the rosters of spies in this area.

A carolary evolved into the Army Signal Corps. Battlefield communication was extremely difficult in the chaos of hand-to-hand, face-to-face, man-to-man fighting. Techniques and devises for coordinating plans and directing actions had been invented and employed throughout all the ages when armies clashed in combat. These methods could and often did, result in misunderstanding, misdirection, and costly delays.

In order to transmit the Intelligence information gleaned by the operatives in the field, use was made of the developing technology of telegraphy. A contingent of experts became the Signal Corps and helped revolutionize the conduct of war.

More about the fascinating on-the-scene events of this era may be found in publications by Mr. Gaddy.

Hostesses for the social hour were Mrs. Ludwell Smither and Mrs. Robert Ellis.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

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ESSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Summer Meeting

The Society met on Sunday, July 11, 1993 at 3:00 p.m. in Garrett's Marina on the Rappahannock River just below Bowler's Wharf. Mr. Witt Garrett and his nephew Mr. Fred Garrett, III displayed and demonstrated many items of the heavy equipment which have traditionally been used in the planting, harvesting and management of oyster beds. The group inspected the enormous vessel which "Skipper" Garrett designed and had constructed with innovations which increased the efficiency of the oyster beds.

The Garretts explained the functions of the crab shed where the moulting process takes place before soft shelled crabs emerge to be harvested. Distressingly, these facilities remain idle at present because of environmental conditions which have drastically diminished the valuable creatures formerly so abundant in our tidal waters.

The meeting continued in the home of Mr. & Mrs. Witt Garrett, just up river from the marina.

Mr. Wilson Ware, chairman of the nominating committee announced the slate of officers for the 1994-1996 term: Mr. Harold Van Arsdale, President; Mr. Ludwell Smither, Treasurer, Mrs. William Wright, Secretary. Election will be at the fall meeting, October 17 at Mt. Airy, Richmond County.

Mr. Douglas Lindsey, president advised the group that efforts are being made to catalog materials in the Society's archives and duplicate some of the fragile items on acid free paper. She asked that members donate genealogical material and other things which may be of interest and help to students and researchers using the archives.

In the cool and spacious ground floor, tables were arranged and furnished with the essential tools for obtaining the succulent meat from an "all-you-can-eat" supply of steamed crabs. An inviting buffet offered fried chicken, potato salad, potato chips, carrot pentry salad, and a variety of desserts and beverages.

Twenty-four members and guests enjoyed the gracious hospitality of the Garretts, the comfort and beauty of their home, and the satisfying food and fellowship.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

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In Memorium

Hill Beverley Wellford
Born: September 29, 1912
"Selby" The Plains, Virginia
Died: September 13, 1993
"Kendale" Chance, Virginia
Essex County Historical Society
President, 1985-1987

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Officers of the Society

President ........................................... Mrs. Douglas G. Lindsey
Vice President .................................... Mrs. V. M. Montsinger, Jr.
Secretary .......................................... Anne S. Wright
Treasurer .......................................... Ludwell F. Smither

PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE
Mrs. Mary Ball Montsinger, Chairman
Mrs. William A. Wright, Mr. Charles H. Warner

Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex Court House, or in an historic home or church of the County. Dues are $10.00 yearly per individual and $15.00 per family. For copies of publications send $2.00 to Mr. Charles H. Warner, Tappahannock, Virginia 22560