According to the 1957 edition of Essex County, Virginia: Its Historic Homes, Landmarks and Traditions, what we call "the Green Book" for short, "Poverty Ridge" was built by James Rennolds about 1800. Certainly, the architectural style of the house supports this date of construction. In fact, my wife and I had an architect from Richmond, Doug Harmsberger, examine the house before we purchased it. Doug, who specializes in the restoration of historical structures, said that, based on his examination of its construction features, he would date the house from the latter part of the 18th century. However, more recent research--which I should emphasize is still on-going--suggests that Poverty Ridge may have been built at a later date than that ascribed to it by the Green Book. One possibility is that it may have been built about 1818 by James Cox. As will be seen, another possibility is that it may have been built by the Garnett or Ludlow families. For now, I think it is pretty safe to say the house was probably built after 1790 and before 1830.

So, who was this James Cox? At this point, I don't know a lot about him except that he seems to have been rather prosperous, and bought and sold a good deal of land in upper Essex County. This is evident from the many deeds bearing his name. It appears some of Cox's land had previously belonged to Muscoe Livingston, who was the son of John Livingston and wife France Muscoe. She was the daughter of Salvatore Muscoe, one of Essex County's prominent early residents. Another of Salvatore Muscoe's daughters, Elizabeth, married James Garnett. Their son was Muscoe Garnett, who married Grace Fenton. So, Muscoe Livingston was the brother-in-law of Muscoe Garnett. Collectively, Muscoe Garnett, his father-in-law Salvatore Muscoe, and Muscoe Livingston amassed fairly large land holdings from Loretto to Occupacia. The Green Book mentions a house called "Rose Hill-Rouzie," not too far from here, that was part of the old Garnett holdings called Champlain, from whence the vicinity takes its name. It is said that the original house there, a fine colonial structure, was built by a Livingston, perhaps the Muscoe Livingston mentioned above. In any case, the land records indicate that in 1791, Muscoe Livingston mortgaged some or all of his land in the vicinity of Champlain. It also appears that Livingston later defaulted on this mortgage, causing his land to be sold at auction.

Now, I said a moment ago that "Poverty Ridge" may have been built by James Cox about 1818. This is suggested by a deed of November 10, 1818 from Robert S. Garnett and wife Charlotte Olympia to James Cox. Robert S. Garnett was the son of Muscoe Garnett. The language of the deed noted that it was for "part of the tract of land called 'The
Stone Chimney' lying next to land now in possession of said Cox which was formerly Muscoe Livingston's ... now in occupancy of said Cox on which he is about to build a house." This indicates that by 1818, Cox already owned part of the Muscoe Livingston property which he was occupying, and was planning to build a house on it.

A few years later, on July 23, 1824, Cox purchased an additional piece of the Muscoe Livingston property from Archibald Ritchie, it being the same tract conveyed by Muscoe Livingston by mortgage deed dated February 18, 1791. The day after this land transaction, Cox conveyed two tracts from his land holdings to Burkett Gray. From the descriptions in the deeds, it appears that one tract consisted of 372 1/2 acres of open land, the other of 30 acres of woodland.

About three years later, on 28 March 1827, William Gray and his wife Susannah conveyed these same two tracts to James Rennolds. William Gray had acquired this land by descent from Burkett Gray. This was the first of three tracts acquired by James Rennolds. The deed description reads "...with a corner to Richard Ludlow... down the branch...a corner to Lewis Brown...a corner to the land of Ulysses Sullivan...with the road leading to Beverley's corner...corner to Beverley's...corner to R. S. Garnett." Rennolds paid William Gray and his wife Susannah $2450 for this tract of just over 400 acres.

Three months later, in June 1827, James and Martha Rennolds bought 547 acres, 51 acres of which were marsh, from Robert S. and Olympia Garnett. Interestingly, James and Martha paid $8456 for this tract of 547 acres that included 51 acres of marsh, whereas just three months earlier, they paid only $2450 for 406 acres. The amount paid for the Robert S. Garnett property was more than 3 1/2 times as much. This might well suggest the tract Rennolds bought from the Garnetts had a house on it at the time they acquired it.

Finally, about 2 years after the above mentioned transaction, David Pitts and John Mercer Garnett, Trustees in the Chancery Suit of Richard Ludlow v. Mary E. Ludlow, sold to James Rennolds 219 acres, 29 acres of it marsh, for $3,274.89. This was in May 1829.

These three land transactions would have given James Rennolds a total of about 1168 1/2 acres. In any case, if James Rennolds built Poverty Ridge on the property he received from William Gray, he must have done so after 1827. My best guess at the moment is that the house was already standing when Rennolds acquired it in 1827, built perhaps by James Cox, by a member of the Garnett family, or by one of the Ludlows. Hopefully, more research will provide a definitive answer.

Now, James Rennolds' wife was Martha Gray, daughter of Philip Gray and his wife Ann Spindle. One record I have indicates that James Rennolds married Martha Gray in 1811. This would be about right, for census records indicate James Rennolds was born sometime between 1780 and 1790. Martha was born c. 1793. James and Martha had 4 known children: Mary (b.c. 1813) who was still single and living with her mother in 1860, Burkett Gray (b.c. 1815) who married Venelia Helen Pitts on 18 Jun 1838, Rufus Streshley (b.c. 1822), and Lucy (b.c. 1830). Given the gaps in the dates of birth, there could have been other children who did not survive. Burkett became a doctor and Rufus a Commonwealth Attorney for Essex County and a judge. There is an old cemetery at the back of the house. It is said that Dr. B.G. Rennolds, his wife, their daughter, and a son, Dr. W.R. Rennolds, and Judge Rufus S. Rennolds are all buried there in unmarked graves.

James Rennolds probably lived on the property until he died in 1858. He left no will nor is there any account for his estate. The 1859 land tax records in the clerk's office list the Rennolds family holdings as totaling about 1176 acres, close to the 1168 1/2 acres James bought.

Later land transactions show that the house and property on which it stood passed out of the Rennolds family in 1905 when it was deeded to a Mr. R.L. Ellis by A.G. and Venilia Rennolds, both of Arkansas. In 1907, 220 acres of this property passed to William D. Saunders who gave the house its present name, "Poverty Ridge." Before that, some say the house was referred to as the Rennolds Place.

One local resident with whom I have spoken recalls that his grandfather said the place was called "Scotland," but I have found no evidence to prove this as yet. The house remained in the Saunders family until it was purchased in 1982 by Ms. Karen Parker.
The House

Let me now turn my attention to the house itself. It is what is technically called a story and a half over an English basement. The basement is, however, almost all completely above ground. The house, in basic form, is rectangular. It is of single pile construction, meaning it is only one room deep. It has two large external end chimneys, each supporting three fireplaces, one in each of the principal rooms of the house. The house is situated on the four points of the compass so that the front faces west. In general appearance, the house is similar to “Rosemount” at Loretto although that house is two and a half stories over an English basement.

The brickwork is well executed. The brickwork on the front-side of the house is laid in Flemish bond—that is, it consists of alternating rows of header and stretchers. This was the formal side of the house. The brickwork on the other three sides is laid in a modified version of Common, or American, bond, which consists of three rows of stretchers, a row of all headers, then another three rows of stretchers and so on. Some of the original mortar can still be seen, especially along the back of the house, and traces of a grapevine pattern can still be seen in the mortar. Another interesting feature of the brickwork is the brick corbeled cornice, that is, the stepped rows of bricks along the front and back of the house where the brick walls meet the roof. The brick walls at the basement level are approximately 18 inches thick. The bricks for the house were burned on the property. A Mrs. Thomas Noble, interviewed by the Rev. Ralph Fall in 1971, noted that, as a girl at “Poverty Ridge,” she could see the site where the bricks were made.

The house itself exhibits the high degree of symmetry that is typical of the Georgian style. The five bays on the front (four windows and door) are exactly matched on the back. The house also has ten dormer windows, five on the front and five on the back, and these too are symmetrically located above the windows and doors of the lower floors. There were originally shutters at all the main windows and one of the shutter doors at one of the windows on the front, main floor, of the house is still present. The numerous windows and the center hall on the main floor of the house combine to provide excellent ventilation that naturally cools the house in the summer. The rooms on the main floor have 10 foot ceilings which also help cool these rooms.

There are large double-leaf doors at either end of the center hall which are secured by wooden bars. Glass lights above each of these doors, fashioned in the Chinese Chippendale style, help light the hallway. There is an enclosed winder stair at the rear of the center hall on the main floor that leads to the third floor. There are also cross-halls in the English basement and on the third floor. The basement floor was originally constructed of wood. However, because it was badly deteriorated, the floor was replaced by brick during the restoration of the house. I should add that most of the restoration was done by Ms. Karen Parker, who purchased the house in 1982. At that time, the house had been vacant for many years and was in a terrible state of deterioration. It was covered by vines and there were all sorts of animals that used the house as a home. Karen replaced the basement floors, added new wiring and plumbing, installed central heating and air conditioning, rebuilt all six fireplaces, put on a new roof, built the porches you now see at the front and rear of the house, and did a hundred other things that needed to be done to save the house. And she did all this work in a way that preserved as much of the original fabric of the house as she could, including the beautiful heart pine floors which can be seen throughout the upper levels of the house. She also created the garden enclosed by the low goose-fence. While Poverty Ridge is clearly no Blandfield or Elmwood, its size, refinements, and construction details mark it as the home of a member of the prosperous middle-class of the day; and Karen Parker deserves tremendous credit for preserving this wonderful example of Essex County architecture.

Like all small plantation farmhouses of its period, “Poverty Ridge,” had the usual outbuildings—kitchen, barns, chicken houses, meat houses, etc. Sadly, all have now vanished. The two outbuildings you see here today were built at the time the house was restored. They are constructed of materials salvaged from an old country store and church that were being torn down.

As with all old houses, the restoration is an ongoing project. Because Karen Parker did all the hard work, my wife and I have been able to focus more on making gradual improvements like the new
kitchen we installed this summer. We have really enjoyed living here. The house has a lot of character, and gives you a warm feeling when you are around it. We have especially enjoyed living in Essex County. The people have been exceedingly friendly, and we have made lots of new friends. As two people who spent almost 20 years living in the busy Washington-Baltimore corridor, we consider ourselves very fortunate indeed to be able to live like this in the country.

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Highway Historical Markers in Essex County

The familiar black-on-silver highway signs comprising Virginia’s historical marker program constitute a system that has been the envy of many states and a model for others. Designed in an era in which cars moved along at a much gentler pace, some came to question whether highway markers had outrivaled their usefulness in a modern world in which automobiles sped by. The answer incorporated into Virginia’s plan all along was a distinctive identifier for each sign (a letter and a number), a good, clear title ... and published compilations or guides suitable for a glove compartment: As the motorist went past, seeing a title that interested him, he had but to note the identifier, turn to his companion, and ask “What is marker number so-and-so in the guide book?” The full content of the sign could be read, and, if of sufficient interest to justify turning around to visit the spot, that was one option, as was making a note for a future visit.

For a county with the history of Essex, one could question whether we have our “fair share” (whatever that might be) or have made adequate efforts to apply such markers. But we do have some fifteen. For those of you who are curious, here is a listing (which may not be complete): The motorist coming into the county on Rte 17 southbound is greeted at the entrance to the county by a marker giving a brief account of Essex County. Continuing down Rte 17, sign N-19 (11.8 miles north of Caret, marks “Portobago Indian Towns.” At 10.7 miles, above Caret, “Vauter’s Church” (N-23) is marked. Seven miles from Caret is N-9, “Early Settlement,” noting Richard Coleman’s 1652 trading post and a 1660 church. The home of R.M.T. Hunter, “Fonthill,” is marker N-20, which also notes a Union army raid in 1863 and the post-war arrest of Mr. Hunter, a Confederate official, at Champlain, three miles above Caret. At Caret is N-18, “Old Rappahannock Courthouse” (1665-1693) and a reference to a participant in Bacon’s rebellion. “Departure of the Indians” on 4 Feb 1684 is the title of N-28, 2.8 miles north of Tappahannock. “Historical Tappahannock” itself is the subject of N-21, at the foot of Queen Street and Newbill, near the Downing Bridge in Tappahannock. Also in town is “Ritchie’s Birthplace” (N-22) on Cross Street behind the restored Ritchie House.

A sign 1.75 miles west of Tappahannock on Rte 17 marks an “Ancient Indian Town,” perhaps the one called, “Appamattuck.” Some 12.4 miles southeast of Tappahannock is “Mann Meeting House” (N-26).

Thanks to the efforts of Carroll M. Garnett, a member and sometime president of this Society, Confederate “Fort Lowry” has a descriptive marker (N-29) on-site, with a second marker, “Fort Lowry-Camp Byron” (N-24) on Rte 17 at Dunsville.

The stretch of Rte 360 toward Richmond has two markers, “Mattaponi Indian Town” (O-22) and “Bacon’s Northern Forces” of 1676 (O-23), both in the vicinity of Millers Tavern.

We should be proud of these markers and the story they tell. But what more should we add? The site of Rappahannock Industrial Academy, the county’s first institution to provide a high school-level education for African Americans, has a monument alongside Rte 17 south of Tappahannock, but its significance is lost to the passing motorist. The curious driver must stop along the northbound shoulder of the road and go over to see what is said. Sites of our colonial era Anglican churches have obscure markers, located on private land, to be found only by the most persistent searcher. As the new Essex County Museum excites curiosity and comment about our history, perhaps we will find the impetus and energy (and resources, for no funds are allocated by the State) to secure additional State historical markers in the county.
Essex County Historical Society Information Bulletin

The following note on sources was inadvertently omitted from the article on the Blake-Brockenbrough Cemetery in the February 1997 bulletin (No. 42):

"Material for the foregoing sketch came from the excellent records maintained by the Essex County Clerk of Court, Ms. Augusta Wilkerson; resources in the Essex County Library, Mrs. Bess Haile; and a chart of the Brockenbrough family, from Mrs. Evenly Chinn, of Tappahannock. To be singled out are Elizabeth Ryland's Richmond County, Virginia, James Slaughter's Settlers, Southerners, Americans, and genealogical research on the Brockenbroughs by Suzanne Derieux, Curator of the Essex County Museum. Mr. Harold Gouldman, Jr., of Montross, supplied the maiden name of Elizabeth Blake, which is not given on her ledger."

Minutes of the Society

April 19, 1997

Mr. and Mrs. H.L. ("Joe" and Julie) Johnston graciously welcomed Society members to their home, "Woodlawn-Sandy," built circa 1790, near Millers Tavern. Among the many outstanding features of this house are its chimneys, which are of "tumbled brick course" construction. There are only two others like them in Essex County, one at "Cherry Walk," and the other at "Miller's Tavern" in the vicinity.

July 20, 1997

At a meeting in the Court House, Mrs. Rita Lises, a member of the Tappahannock Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, talked to the Society about their recently opened genealogy library and its resources, available to the community. Several members of the Society had used the services of this library before the meeting and reported on the ease with which these resource materials can be utilized.

October 19, 1997

The First Baptist Church in Tappahannock was host, with Mrs. Lillian McGuire, retired local teacher, historian of the African-American experience in Essex County, and church historian, as the featured speaker. She presented a history of the church, which was separately established over 130 years ago. Pastored by the Rev. Mr. Marion Tapscott, it is the largest, as well as the earliest, church in Tappahannock for Christians of African origin. The church's choir sang a selection of songs accompanied on the organ by Mrs. James Cary. Refreshments were later served in the church's social hall.

During the business portion of the meeting, new officers were elected as follows: President, David W. Gaddy; Vice-President, Mike Marshall; Secretary, H. Van Arsdale; Treasurer (reelected), Ludwell Smithers; Members-at-large, Julie Johnson and Dawn White.

January 18, 1998

The meeting was held in the Court House. Following the normal business portion of the meeting, Mr. John Wemple, science teacher at St. Margaret's School, spoke about his archaeology ventures on Hoskins Creek. He showed the Society fossils of a jawbone and other bones of an ancestor of the alligator, which dated back some 20 million years. The fossil remains were discovered by Mr. Wemple and a group of students, and were excavated from a bank of the creek. Mr. Wemple noted that when he is finished studying the fossils, he will donate them to the Essex County Museum.

April 18, 1998

Vauter's Episcopal Church, sole remaining religious structure of the Colonial era in Essex, was the location for this meeting, the first of two presenting the history of the Established (Anglican) church and its post-war reestablishment as the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Rev. Mrs. Karen Woodruff, priest-in-charge at Vauter's, welcomed the Society. Mrs. Lillian Blackwell, a parishioner, presented a paper on the history of Vauter's church and some of its early members. Built in 1731, Vauter's is the eleventh oldest Episcopal church in
Virginia, and the seventh oldest in terms of continuous use. Mrs. Blackwell noted that, following the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Virginia, because of the Revolution, Vauter’s was saved from destruction or appropriation (as affected the two Colonial churches of middle and lower Essex) by one of the members, Mrs. Muscoe Garnett, successfully demonstrating that it stood on her family’s property. Mike Marshall followed Mrs. Blackwell with a paper outlining the history of the church’s communion silver, which dates from the 1720s. The meeting concluded with a selection of music played by the church’s organist, Mr. Dennis Stephens, on a reed organ of a type found in Essex in the early 19th Century, which he had restored and donated to the church.

July 19, 1988

To conclude the review of the Colonial church and the restoration of the Anglican communion after the Revolution, Mr. E. Lee Shepherd, assistant director for manuscripts and archives at the Virginia Historical Society, addressed our Society on “Revival on the Rappahannock,” concentrating on the quarter-century of labor by The Rev. Mr. John P. McGuire commencing in the 1820s. One of two churches established by Mr. McGuire, St. Paul’s, Millers Tavern, provided the location for the meeting. Mr. Shepherd is completing a commissioned history of St. Paul’s, and he shared a preview of the chapter dealing with the subject.

October 18, 1998

Our final meeting of the year took place at “Poverty Ridge,” home of Mike and Chris Marshall and is described in an accompanying article.

January 17, 1999

Mr. E. Jackson Simmons, Lancaster County attorney, author, and former president of the Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Society was to have spoken at the Court House on the theme of his new book, Speaking of the Northern Neck. Years of interest and study have made Mr. Simmons an authority on the speech of the English immigrants to this area, including quaint expressions and pronunciations that prevail, but have solid roots in the land of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth. Last minute illness precluded his presence. The time was devoted instead to a general discussion of his book and the work of our Society.

A Note on Essex Post Offices

According to records of the United States Post Office in Washington, researched years ago by Edith F. Exelson, the following is a list of early Essex post offices and their earliest date of reference or establishment: (1) Hobbs Hole/Tappahannock (1776), George H. Doby’s postmaster in November, 1830; (2) Layton’s (1796); (3) Lloyd’s (1801); (4) Montague (1804); (5) Loretto (1819); (6) Miller’s Tavern (1826); and (7) Dunnsville (1829). (Edith F. Exelson, Virginia Postmasters and Post Offices, 1789-1832. Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing Co., 1941)

Officers of the Society

President ......................................... David W. Gaddy
Vice-President ................................. Mike Marshall
Secretary ...................................... H. Van Arsdale
Treasurer ................................. Ludwell Smithers
Members-at-Large ......................... Julie Johnston
........................................ Dawn White

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(note new postal address)