Virginians Liked Each Other Too: Community Life in Colonial Virginia and Massachusetts

by Eric Hazell, Ph.D.

Some of the most innovative and insightful research regarding early America has occurred in the last twenty to twenty-five years in work done on life in the colonial Chesapeake. A small but prolific group of historians has changed our understanding of that place and time, particularly in terms of community life, social networks, and social cohesion. In doing so they have given us a vastly more sophisticated and, in many ways, more positive view of colonial Virginia and Maryland.

The previous view — for some time the general argument — about community in early Virginia was that there was none. This was deemed true especially in relation to colonial New England. In New England, people — often families — settled in towns, their houses fairly close together, with certain land held in common. Churches were quickly established and were the focal points for town events and concerns. Respected ministers and community leaders were there from the beginning. People pledged adherence to a written covenant that stated they would live together in unity, all striving for the same godly purpose.

In Virginia, the traditional argument held that settlement was random and dispersed. High mortality rates, the ravages of disease, the greater number of men over women, and the kind of men that settled made stable community life nearly impossible. Historians depicted a society of self-interested, grasping individuals who fought, cussed, slandered, drank, fornicated, and generally exploited whoever they could in a continuous effort at individual advancement. They grew tobacco to get rich, using up the land along the rivers, which led to a dispersed settlement. Ministers were thought to be the dregs from England, people too disrespected, unqualified, or immoral to get good work and who had to come to America to find a job. They too cussed and drank and fornicated along with the best of them, doing little to advance the cause of religion. All these conditions made for an unstable, violent, selfish, politically chaotic, exploitative society — not a particularly flattering depiction.

That view has changed fundamentally in the last couple of decades. Through some painstaking and imaginative research, historians have shown us societies of people who established strong kinship, friendship, neighborhood ties, and orderly and peaceful channels of authority, who took care of each other, who worshipped together, who overcame many difficulties to establish and maintain social cohesion and togetherness.

My discussion draws heavily from James R. Perry, *The Formation of a Society on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1615-1653*, and Darrett and Anita Rutman’s *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, VA, 1650-1750*. (Because I am dealing primarily with the first half century of settlement, I will not discuss slavery.)

In terms of research there are abundant printed sources for early New England — sermons, diaries, statements of purpose, church and town covenants, correspondence, all kinds of material that states the ideals and feelings of these people. Comparable material is not available for the Chesapeake; either it was not done or it didn’t survive, so historians have turned to the records that are available — county court records of land transactions, debtor-creditor relationships, wills and inventories, criminal prosecution records, civil complaints, depositions, church records, and records of births, marriages, and deaths.

Historians used these records to do “network
analysis," which means examining interactions people had with one another and the patterns that emerged. Scholars looked at who met whom, and when, why, and how. They did "record stripping," in which biographies of people were amassed by taking all references to them from various records, putting references together, and constructing a life — when a person was born, what happened to his parents or, step-parents, when one first bought land, when he became commissioner or vestryman, or when a first child was born and how many children were born, when he died and what possessions he accumulated along the way, and what was left to the children. In short, these historians re-created a social web. As mentioned, when they did this, historians saw social cohesion and kinship/networks rather than the isolated, self-seeking, self-reliant individual.

In this article we will consider six means of social cohesion: land and landholders, family and kinship, friends and neighbors, economic networks, contacts beyond the locale, and institutions.

(1) Land and landholders Where and when one acquired land set the necessary preconditions for the establishment and continuance of a social network. First, settlers chose land contiguous to others, even when they had other options. Second, most people who claimed land for the first time had lived in the area for some time before, usually three to six years, so they had been integrated into the society. They were often related to people who already owned land, or they married into landowning families. Third, the rapid turnover through death and a constant stream of newcomers created a potential for disruption, but this was overcome by fact that newcomers tended to settle in more established areas while long-term residents claimed the newer lands. So expansion was orderly, carried on within the bounds of existing networks.

(2) Family and kinship Settlement patterns show that about half of the new landholders had kin in the area and settled adjacent to or very near family land. The other half formed such ties quickly. So most frequent contact was with kin. The records show patterns of families doing favors for each other, serving as witnesses for legal transactions, providing loans, and other kinds of things families do for each other, because they settled nearby. The high mortality rate actually fostered kin ties, as widows and widowers remarried and kin ties therefore proliferated as one family’s network became connected to another’s.

(3) Friends and neighbors As with kinship ties, relationships with friends and neighbors were based on sociability, providing favors, sharing responsibilities, providing loans, and giving gifts. Most contacts were with those living nearby. Neighbors were often given goods through wills and were often named as godparents. Of course, neighborhood ties frequently developed into kinship ties. Neighbors helped care for children if parents died. As these relationships overlap, there developed group responsibility and informal methods of dealing with conflict and enforcing some kind of group morality.

Darrett and Anita Rutman’s book A Place in Time, has a guest/gift list from a 1671 marriage. A wedding ceremony was in some ways similar to the monthly court day — it was an occasion for people across a fairly extended area to get together. The bride in this case was linked by blood to five families (which was on the high end for individuals of the time), plus the friends she had there, involved in networks that connected her to nine other families. Over her life her three husbands, her children, her siblings’ spouses and children, and her nieces and nephews by blood and marriage, connected her to three quarters of the families living in her area. “Network” here was really the source of family stability more than individual household, because of the death rate.

(4) Local economic network Again, most economic ties were with those close by. Most creditors and debtors, for example, were neighbors. Some — commissioners, shopkeepers, ministers, merchants — had a wider range of contacts, but most economic ties involved the same small distance as neighbors and family.

(5) Extended contact Early settlers had some ties with other parts of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, the Bay, New England, New Amsterdam, the West Indies, England, and Holland. Ships came to import goods and take tobacco to England. Sons were sent “back home” for their education. Ties with the Mother Country were maintained. There was some trade with New England and Holland. This commerce allowed the exchange of news, mailing letters, and credit and debt networks. The average individual had few such extra-local contacts, but when taken all together, the total shows decent integration with the Atlantic world of the time.

(6) Institutions and societal networks Government, religion, and militia all connected people. Here too is evidence of expansion of people’s networks — contact was less frequent but connected people farther apart geographically. Commissioners, representatives of local authority, usually dispersed along with population, could settle issues out of court — they basically performed official tasks and government services in their vicinity. Churches too brought people from noncontiguous residences together. And the militia, comprised of all able-bodied men between prescribed ages, basically did the same thing to a lesser degree. Usually these institutions were developing and maturing as settlement spread, so over time they compensated for population that was dispersing as they became increasingly unifying forces.

In sum, claiming land in contiguous patterns set the preconditions for a social fabric. Individual kinship, friendship, neighborhood, and economic networks all formed. Blood relations, sociability, support structures and, exchange contacts bound landholders. As settlement spread,
The Missing Tappahannock Graves

Professor William C. Garnett’s little 1927 classic, Tidewater Tales (again available in a recent reprinting by his son, Carroll, Society member and a former president), includes the following comment in a chapter describing a notional car trip along Route 17, entering Tappahannock via “the old” alignment of the route along what is now Essex Street, rather than the modern South Church Lane route:

“[H]ere is Tappahannock…

The first building to attract notice is the Town Hall. This building was for many years a house of worship, and was the first church building in the town, the land on which it stands having been held by trustees to be held for the express purpose of building a church on it for the general use of Christian worship. And for many years the building was so used, but later abandoned was going fast into decay. Rather than see it like this, the town took it over and remodeled it and turned it into a hall for entertainment and such other uses as town halls generally have. So now where once was heard the voice of the inspired clergyman and the saintly hymns of “ye olden tymes” may be heard the sound of flute and viol and gayest laughter. BUT THE HONOURED DEAD, MARKED BY THE SLABS NEARBY, SLEEP UNDISTURBED” [emphasis supplied]. (Pp. 49-50.)

In a later portion of the book is a lecture presented to the girls of St. Margaret’s School around 1927, in which Mr. Garnett advises them:

“[S]hould you stroll as far as the Town Hall, there you may even yet see tombstones, and maybe sunken graves, indicating that this was once a church, and it may be told you that it was the first house of worship to be erected in the town.” (P. 106.)

The “Town Hall” mentioned in the foregoing comments is not the current Tappahannock building of that name, but what is now, and has been since 1953, a commercial dry-cleaning establishment, “Modern Cleaners,” at the west end of Duke Street. Its history as “the” church of Tappahannock is well known — that it was specifically to be an interdenominational “Free Church” (but placed under the stewardship of the Episcopalians), with alternating use by the Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, and “Presbyterians, if any.” The early date, 1817, is usually associated with this building, but that marks the acquisition of the land from Thomas and Elizabeth Henley, and the initiation of the building project. Some of its “pre-Revolutionary” bricks with glazed headers may have been salvaged from the Upper South Farnham colonial church, Upper Piscataway, located near DeShea (earlier, “Texas”—a marker at the supposed location stands near St. John Baptist Church). In 1824-25, when Rev. John Peyton McGuire arrived as rector of South Farnham parish, it was still not finished, but was by 1826. It served as the home of the Episcopalians until those in the Miller’s Tavern area completed St. Paul’s in 1837-38. In late 1849 the parish purchased land three blocks east on Duke Street and the remaining members of that denomination moved in 1850 to the present St. John’s.

But what became of the burials? Taken literally, Prof. Garnett’s word, “slabs,” would imply ledgers or flat slabs, along with “tombstones, and maybe sunken graves.” As he describes the entrance into Tappahannock from the south, along Essex Street, these seem to have been prominent objects near the chapel/town hall in 1927. A photocopy of pages of a burial register at St. John’s notes that members were being buried in the 1880s at three different locations — the churchyard (St. John’s), the “old church” (presumably the Duke Street “chapel”), and “Texas,” site of the colonial church, implying that at that late date, burials were still taking place at the colonial church site. No record of removal from the chapel site has been located so far, and, for that matter, no burial site near DeShea accounts for the “Texas” burials. Renovations for Modern Cleaners in 1953 and later uncovered no evidence of graves, according to the then-owner, although he had heard mention of graves thereabout. Were they moved, and if so, where and when? Were they “plowed over and forgotten,” as has too commonly been the fate of graveyards? It would be helpful, perhaps, to establish a chronology for the building. According to the 1957 edition of “The Green Book,” “since its use as a church was discontinued, it has been used as a dwelling, the Town Hall for Tappahannock, a motion picture theater, a warehouse, and... ‘Modern Cleaners.’” But when did it cease to be used as a church? Who occupied the building after the Episcopalians vacated their occupancy? Could this be the structure referred to in The Children of Bladensfield around 1862 as “the old Presbyterian church?” The history of Baptist and Methodist denominations in Tappahannock seems to date from the post-war years of the 1870s, but had they been using the building earlier? (“The Green Book” says that, “In 1873 when the Rev. Howard Montague began holding services once a month in the old Free Church (Town Hall), there was a nucleus of fewer than a dozen Baptists in Tappahannock.”) Centennial — now Beale Memorial—Baptist Church dates from 1875, the year they purchased the “old courthouse.” Can some member or reader cast light on any aspect of this mystery?
Meeting Notes

(Continued from “Minutes” in Bulletin #43 of February 1999.)

April 1999
Based on his research and an exhibition he had prepared at the Essex County Museum, Society President David Gaddy gave a presentation on “The Mills of Essex County,” later printed in Bulletin #44. He spoke of the water gristmills, and he urged the documentation before memories faded and records were lost.

July 1999
Meeting at Rappahannock Christian Church, Dunnsville, the Society heard from the minister, Dr. Kenneth Wilbur, and a member, Wilson Ware, of our Society. Together they traced the history of the denomination, the history (since 1832) in Essex County, and the history of the church building itself, erected on the eve of the Civil War. At the meeting, Ludwell Smither, Society treasurer for eighteen years, announced his retirement from that post, and past president “Van” VanArsdale, who had been acting as secretary, also announced that he would be stepping down at the end of the year.

October 1999
Meeting at Angel Visit Baptist Church, Dunnsville, Society member Lillian H. (Mrs. Charles E.) McGuire presented a program on Rappahannock Industrial Academy (1902-1948), Essex County’s first high school for students of African origin and her own alma mater. (Officers for 2000-2001: President Mike Marshall; Vice President — vacant; Secretary, Pat Given; Treasurer, Larnie Hughes; At-large members of the Executive Board, Shan and Ted Rice; past president, David Gaddy.)

January 2000
At the Essex County Court House, Anne Richardson, chief of the Rappahannock Indian Tribe, presented an account of her tribe, its current status, and the museum and cultural center being established at Indian Neck in King and Queen County.

April 2000
Dr. Eric Hazell presented the lecture in this issue and participated in a follow-up discussion, conducted at the Courthouse. (Meeting held 9 April.)

July 2000

October 2000
With our default meeting site shifting from the Courthouse to the Essex County Public Library, past president David W. Gaddy of Tappahannock spoke on “Three Ladies of Tappahannock,” Frances Blake (the second Mrs. Austin) Brockenbrough, Judith Brockenbrough (the second Mrs. John Peyton) McGuire, and Anne Mason (Mrs. Benjamin Blake) Brockenbrough, linked by family, church membership, and home.

January 2001
Charles W. H. Warner ably represented himself and Mrs. Ruth Little, who was unable to attend, in recalling the “first fifty years” of the Society, his role in establishing the Bulletin, and his hopes for the future.

April 2001
Kenneth M. McFarland, director of Education and Research, Stratford Hall Plantation, spoke on present and future prospects for this historical property and the Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation.

July 2001
Meeting at the Library, a report from the Nominating Committee resulted in the election of new officers — Shan (Mrs. Ted) Rice, president; Henry Hundley, vice president; Pat (Mrs. Gordon) Given, secretary; Mrs. Larnie Hughes, treasurer, At-large members of the board Ted Rice and Ann Beverley (Mrs. Kenneth) Eubank, and Mike Marshall, past-president. Dr. Camille Wells of the Department of Architectural History, University of Virginia, spoke on “A Grain of Truth: Dendrochronology for Early Virginia.”

October 2001
A Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting was hosted by Society member A. Fleet Dillard, Jr., Esq., at the historic Ritchie House, which he has restored and uses as law offices. The Rices then held a reception and tour of their new home, historic Little Egypt in Tappahannock, where they had recently moved from Mahockney.

January 2002
Meeting at the Court House, President Shan Rice conducted a brief business meeting and introduced a “special guest,” the first First Lady of the United States, Mrs. George Washington of Mount Vernon (portrayed by Mrs. Anita Harrower of Dunnsville, president of the Essex Woman’s Club, in costume and drawing on her own original research). Mrs. Rice presented to A. Fleet Dillard, Jr., Esq., the Society’s first award for historic preservation of the Ritchie House — a framed, colorful map of Essex County. Refreshments were served at the 1808 Woman’s Club building on Prince Street.
February 2002
First Members’ Gala held at Shelba near Millers Tavern, home of Brian Penniston. Approximately fifty members attended.

April 2002
Members met in the wharf house at Wheatland, home of the Bance family, and site of Saunders Wharf, the last remaining steamboat wharf on the Rappahannock River. Captain Bob Wilson from the Mariner’s Museum in Norfolk presented an overview of steamboats on the Rappahannock. Steamboat stories and experiences from the audience added a personal note to the meeting. Following the presentation, members enjoyed refreshments and a view of the river from the wharf.

July 2002
Despite triple-digit temperatures, members enjoyed an entertaining presentation (indoors) by Joe and Julie Johnston about the circus folks who made Woodlawn Sandy their winter home. Through the use of original letters, newspaper articles, photos, and circus memorabilia, they painted a colorful picture of circus life in the Johnny J. Jones Exposition at their rural home. Most famous among the residents were Percilla, the Monkey Girl, and the Alligator Man. Refreshments were served on the colonial porch.

October 2002
The Society met at the Emerson Ordinary, which recently has been purchased by George Jennings and is undergoing restoration. Dr. Douglas Sanford, from Mary Washington College, helped the Society celebrate Archaeology Month by speaking to the group on what artifacts can tell us about the past. After his presentation the group enjoyed refreshments on the lawn while Dr. Sanford examined and commented on artifacts that members had brought to the meeting.

December 2002
Mary Lynn Kennedy and Jeff Willet hosted a holiday potluck at their home, Melbourne, near Bowler’s Wharf.

January 2003
Meeting at historic Howertons Baptist Church, the Society heard a presentation by Steven T. Bashore, Stratford Hall’s mill director, on mills, and their construction, types and uses. Reverend Paul Beith, the church’s pastor, also presented an entertaining history of the church. A trip to nearby Essex Mill had to be postponed due to inclement weather. Members met for refreshments and discussion in the church’s family life center.

March 2003
The Annual Members’ Gala took place at the restored Essex Inn in Tappahannock. Gordon and Anita Harrower, Robert LaFollette and Sally Settle were presented with the Historic Preservation Award for publishing, under the auspices of the Essex County Museum, a significant update of the Essex County Virginia Historic Homes book.

April 2003
Meeting at the home of Mrs. Franklin Hundley, the membership approved revised by-laws for the Society. Ted Rice facilitated a planning session in which the membership developed and prioritized a list of potential activities for the organization.

June 2003
At Tappahannock’s first Rivahfest, Michael Rawlings was instrumental in launching the Society’s oral history program with “man on the street” interviews and opportunities to record longer, more detailed oral histories.

October 2003
In accordance with the revised by-laws, the Society held its first annual business meeting. In addition to a presentation of past activities, the membership voted to explore the possibility of a merger with the Essex County Museum.

November 2003
Outing at the historic operating mill at Stratford Hall. Steven Bashore had recently completed the restoration of the Stratford Hall mill to its full operations. He presented a detailed explanation of mill operations and gave the Society members a tour the operating mill.

December 2003
Sharon and Radford Compton hosted a holiday potluck at their home in Tappahannock.

March 2004
The Annual Members’ Gala was again held at the Essex Inn in Tappahannock. Kelly and John Owen Gwathmey, the inn’s owners, received the Historic Preservation Award for their meticulous renovation of the inn.

Books and Papers Received
Lillian McGuire’s Uprooted and Transplanted has been inscribed to the Society, and a copy of Dr. Tombs’ When the Peaches Get Ripe was donated by Lawrence S. “Mac” McDowell of Waynesboro and Tappahannock.

Two monographs in plastic wraps were prepared and donated by Joan (Mrs. Kenneth G.) Paris of the Woman’s Club, one recounting the history of the Confederate memorial statue on Prince Street, the other on the background of the Civil War memorial cannon on the
courthouse lawn.

Latane Trice donated two of his publications: *Horse Tales*, detailing horse racing history on the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula of Virginia, and *Two Bells and a Jingle*, about steamboats on the Mattaponi River.

Purchased *Essex County, Virginia, Historic Homes*, by Robert LaFollette, Anita and Gordon Harrower, in conjunction with the Essex County Museum. The publication includes photographs and descriptions of homes built in the county prior to 1900.

Purchased *The Caponka Caper*, by Carroll M. Garnett that chronicles the World War I-era wooden ship that was anchored on the Rappahannock River near Tappahannock for many years. Includes written history and photographs.

**Oral History**

The Oral History Project has been greatly aided by the thoughtfulness of the late Madeleine Ware. We have begun to record the memories of county people, a transcriber has been purchased, and we now have several interviews transcribed into written form. We hope to record as many of these memories as possible before they are lost forever.

**Archives**

The historical society is the repository of a substantial number of historical records. Under the guidance of Dale and Tracy Harter, the society is beginning the process of archiving and organizing the collection. Both Dale and Tracy have worked extensively with the historical societies in Augusta and Rockingham counties.

**Upcoming Events**

**May 29, 2004** — A garden soiree fund-raiser for the oral history fund will be held at the Essex Inn in Tappahannock from 5-8 pm. We will honor Madeleine Ware and discuss our Oral History Program. Call (804) 445-1578 for details.

**June 19, 2004** — The second annual Rivahfest will be held in Tappahannock. Come and visit us at the Essex Inn at Water Lane and Duke Street.

**September 2004** — Mr. Latane Trice will present an entertaining and informative history on horseracing in Essex County.

**October 2004** — A unique program blending house histories, genealogy, and oral history will be led by Mr. Michael Rawlings, an accredited genealogist and founder of our oral history program.

**Membership**

If you know someone who might be interested in joining the Essex County Historical Society, call Membership Chairman, Henry Hundley (804) 443-2242 or Kelly Gwathmey (804) 769-2601.

| Individual | $15 per year |
| Family     | $25 per year |

$_____ I'd like to contribute to the Oral History Fund
$_____ ... just because history is important

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**Officers of the Society**

| President       | Theodore L. Rice |
| Vice-President  | Henry Hundley   |
| Secretary       | Sharon Compton  |
| Treasurer       | A. Radford Compton |
| Archivists      | Tracy and Dale Harter |
| Historian       | Richard Carter  |
| Member-at-Large | Kelly Gwathmey  |
| Past President  | Shan Haley Rice |

For additional information about the activities of the Society, please visit our website at [www.historicalessexcounty.org](http://www.historicalessexcounty.org) or email us at info@historicalessexcounty.org.

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*(note new postal address)*