
Essex County Museum and Historical Society Bulletin



VOLUME 62

TAPPAHANNOCK, VIRGINIA

JANUARY 2015

Rappahannock's Magic Theater

By Howard W. Reisinger, Jr.

It's the summer of 2014, a few moments before 10 a.m. I sit in the sunroom of my home on Hoskins Creek, sipping a mid-morning cup of coffee. I dreamily recall the dawn earlier this morning that tinted the face of the creek and river beyond in ever evolving and subtle shades of purple, blue, pink and red. My reverie is broken by the sound of the horn of the Captain Thomas, announcing her departure from her mooring a short distance further up Hoskins Creek. Moments later, the Captain Thomas passes by my home, her decks awash with excited day trippers off for a spree up the Rappahannock to Leedstown, to eat and visit a winery, and return to Tappahannock near the end of the day. What a delightful day is in store for them! I can see that the passengers are excitedly conversing with one another, some in small groups, and others alone or leaning over the rail, and some wave to me as they pass. They give little or no heed to the history in which this trip is engulfed. I have made this trip several times.

Taking a sip of coffee and leaning back on the sofa, my mind drifts off to join these passengers now passing my home on the Captain Thomas for the day's excursion. But today's trip is no ordinary voyage, but one periodically interrupted by a magical theater opening vistas into the past through the mists of time. I invite you, dear reader, to join me on this special cruise. As we look back towards my home on Hoskins Creek receding and the panorama of other properties and houses passing by our port side, to my amazement suddenly a swirling deep fog obscures all.

Scene 1

It is at this very moment that a curtain seemingly rises upon a skirmish at the mouth of this very same creek, or perhaps nearby Piscataway Creek, between the Native Americans in what was to become Essex County and the first English

colonists. The year is 1608. The mists have cleared, and we see Captain John Smith and some twelve others in a barge that they have sailed and rowed down the James River from their settlement at Jamestown, and up the Rappahannock River on a voyage of discovery.

Crossing the river from Morratico, they hope to establish trade with the Rappahannock Indians who dwell in the Indian village of "Toppohannock." Twelve or more unarmed Native Americans on the shore have beckoned the small party into the creek, coaxing the little boat to come close to the land. Captain John Smith, as a customary gesture of good will, has set up a

hostage exchange with the Indians. With an Indian hostage already aboard the barge, one of the Englishmen, Amos Todkill, has hardly stepped ashore when he discovers what he estimates as two to three hundred armed Indians waiting in ambush behind the trees. At his shout that they have been betrayed, there is an exchange of arrows and gunfire. The Indian hostage jumps overboard and is killed, and it is with difficulty that Anas Todkill is rescued

and brought back to the barge uninjured. In fact, no Englishmen are injured, but the outcome no doubt would have been quite different had it not been for their native guide, Mosko, who taught the English to set up shields of hemp on their barge. These shields deflected the arrows and prevented the hostile natives from boarding. It's a dramatic scene, and a close escape for these explorers.

The curtain falls, and once again we are cruising out of a contemporary Hoskins Creek marked by the modern evidence of twentieth century homes, contoured lawns, docks and buoys. We make our way to a buoy at approximately midpoint in the Rappahannock River marking the entrance to Hoskins Creek. Here, we turn sharply to port, and steam



towards the fifty foot high span of the 1963 Downing Bridge. On our left, we see beautiful homes at the river's edge, and the buildings of St. Margaret's School. Most prominent is a large, white condominium. But this view is obscured by a new swirling mist.



Scene 2

Although we are at the same location in the river, the curtain rises upon a very different scene. The time is 1770. There are three huge ships in the river, "tall ships" with towering masts and square sails of heavy canvas reaching high into the sky, and another similar ship docked near the town Customs House. Looking closely, we see that three of these ships are flying British colors, and the fourth, French. Tappahannock indeed is a busy and important international port, attracting these oceangoing ships from around the world. They have crossed the Atlantic Ocean to load the native grown tobacco so much sought in Europe, and to deliver the European manufactured materials so much needed in the new English colony. Looking more closely at the activity on shore, we see much astir. Tobacco is being brought in from the surrounding fields and is being delivered to the stately Anderton House, where it will be "prized" into hogsheads for delivery to the waiting ships. At the Customs House, too, there is a constant flurry of activity as county residents pay their taxes on goods delivered from faraway places.

But this privileged glimpse into the past is short-lived. The curtain falls, and we are as suddenly transported back to our excursion on the Captain Thomas towards a winery and lunch near Leedstown. We are rapidly approaching the center span of the Downing Bridge. We almost can hear the rumble of cars and heavy trucks crossing the bridge, when once again we are blinded by the mists that wipe out all of our surroundings. For a moment, time seemingly stands still.

Scene 3

As the curtain rises on a new scene, the bridge we see before us is not the fifty foot high, gently curving span we know today. The time is 1927. We see a brand new Downing bridge, a low and straight drawbridge that crosses the river at almost the same location as the 1963 replacement bridge we were approaching only moments before. Instead of automotive traffic, a huge crowd of people have clustered on this bridge for an opening ceremony. This is a ceremony punctuated by the florid speeches of politicians and orators, and culminating in Governor Harry Byrd officially cutting the ribbon to open the bridge to traffic.

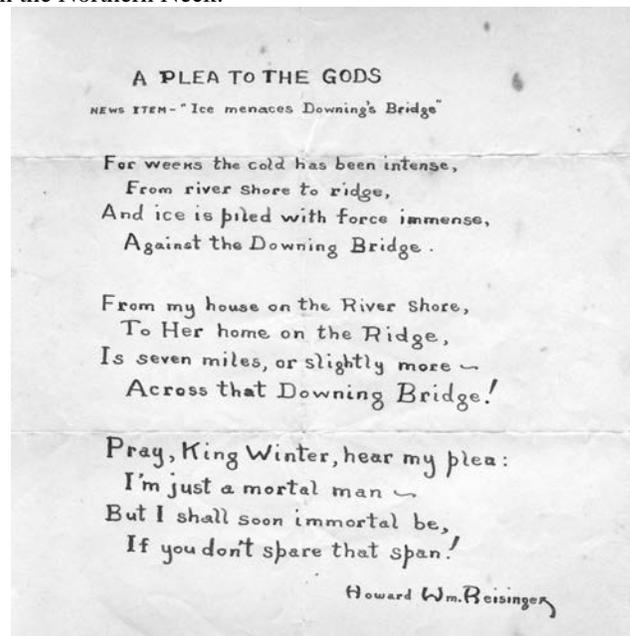
Viewed at first glance with 21st century eyes, all of this pomp might seem somewhat over-the-top for the mere opening of a new bridge. But this is not just any bridge opening. At this moment, with the opening of the 1927 Downing bridge, we

are witnessing a very important and historic moment. In fact, it would be very difficult to imagine any single event that would carry as much significance to the Northern Neck counties. All phases of life would be affected: commerce, political, theological, governmental, and even social.

In this part of the country, where streams and creeks so frequently crisscross the land, travel had been a challenge since the English first arrived at Jamestown. While shallow streams could be forded by horses, and bridges could be built across deeper, wider creeks, crossing the mile-wide Rappahannock by bridge was an inconceivable project. In fact, the only way to cross between the Southside and the Northern Neck was by small ferryboats. There were ferryboats at Tappahannock and Wares Wharf, among other crossings, since colonial times. When a party wished to cross the river at Tappahannock, and the ferry was on the opposite side, I understand a flag was raised. It was hoped that the ferry operator on the opposite side of the river would take note of this signal and cross the river to provide this service. Crossing the river on these very small ferries could be a precarious affair for passengers, horses and carriages, and later, motor cars. Of course the ferry could not cross when the river was rough. And there must have been timers when a sudden, unforeseen summer thunderstorm transformed the river into a raging maelstrom, and the trip then must have been not only extremely uncomfortable, but also frightening.

This isolation of the Northern Neck prior to the opening of this bridge is a thing difficult to appreciate today. It is rather amusing to reflect that, in colonial times, a preacher had to cross the river to hold services at churches on both banks. In fact, my own grandfather, Judge Joseph W. Chinn, had to cross the river by ferry boat to hold court in his home town of Warsaw, and in Tappahannock and other courts on the Southside.

In a somewhat lighter vein, it seems romance was not quite secure even after the bridge was built. My father penned the following bit of doggerel, to my mother, probably in the early 1930's, when ice threatened the structure of the 1927 bridge and he was living on the north side of the river, while she was in the Northern Neck:



But the curtain falls, and our time as participants in this gala bridge opening draws to a close.

We pass beneath the present Downing bridge and round a channel marker, the Captain Thomas setting a new heading that appears to be taking her far off course towards a wharf in Richmond County. In fact, the channel takes a rather odd direction here, almost to the shores of Richmond County. Leaning over the starboard rail of her deck, we now can see that the shore is lined with homes and cottages that we are fast approaching, and a number of pleasure craft are noisily flying across the water on this beautiful day.



Almost predictably now, the fog rolls in again to blot out this gala bridge opening that did so much to end the isolation of the Northern Neck.

Scene 4

When the curtain lifts, we again are witnesses to a drama from the past. We see a number of folks gathered on the shore near Naylor's Beach, dressed in their finery. We now can make out folks standing in the shallow water near the bank in white robes, and we hear voices raised in the beautiful strains of gospel music coming to us from across the water. What a moving scene! What we are witness to, of course, is a baptism in the living waters of the Rappahannock, a spiritual use of the river rarely seen today when churches most often are equipped for this essential ritual using their own church baptisteries.

But this glimpse into the past is indeed ephemeral, to be replaced again by our continuing steady cruise towards wine tasting and lunch near our landing at Leedstown. Recreational use of the river during summer months has grown exponentially in recent decades. Fast speedboats pass by us heading to no particular destination. Sheaths of spray fly from their bows as they bounce into the oncoming waves. Boys and girls aboard these fast craft are enjoying the cooling blast of wind against faces as their hair streams out behind them. The river also is dotted by an occasional boat at anchor with fishing poles extended over the water. There is even a catamaran moving quickly across the river in response to the now fresh breeze out of the north. Two personal water craft follow close behind us, enjoying the thrill of crossing our wake.

By now we are no longer surprised when a mist again veils this very contemporary scene to be replaced by a vignette of past history.

Scene 5

As the curtain rises again, we are overtaking a boat of very different character from those seen today on the river, but one that played an extremely important role in the life of citizens

in this part of the country for over 100 years. We now can make out the name proudly emblazoned on her side: "Middlesex." She is but one of several steamboats that have been serving a vital role in the lives of the local citizens since the early 1800s. She definitely has many destinations along this river at the many wharves built specifically to welcome the steamboats as they make their way from Baltimore towards their terminus at Fredericksburg.

The sight of this steamboat suddenly reminds me of the very different orientation and lifestyle imposed upon the citizens of this area from colonial days to well into the twentieth century, and the prominent role of this river and of the steamboats that plied its waters between Baltimore and Fredericksburg for over 80 years. The river was the interstate highway system for citizens of the Northern Neck and Southside until the first Downing Bridge was built. It must be recalled that the closest railroad available to our local counties was in Fredericksburg. Even after the invention and popularization of the motor car in the early twentieth century, roads were unpaved until well into that century, and more often than not, they were no more than muddy tracks often following Native American trails. In fact, travel over these roads remained difficult in good weather, and all but impassible in inclement weather. But it was the river that was the great barrier, isolating the counties of the Northern Neck from the Southside and all points west in the state. Yet, at the same time the river served as the "interstate road system" of the day, carrying the major commerce, and linking counties in the Northern Neck with the city of Baltimore rather than Richmond.

My mother, Sally Chinn Reisinger, born in 1905 and raised in nearby Warsaw, was of the steamboat age. When she was just a young child, her father arranged for a spinster lady to move to Warsaw from Baltimore to teach her, her four siblings, and other neighborhood children in the schoolhouse located immediately behind their home. And how did she arrive from Baltimore with all of her belongings to take up residence in Warsaw? By steamboat, of course! Special Christmas candies and toys were ordered from Baltimore and arrived by steamboat. Wool from sheep raised on their farm in Warsaw was sent by steamboat to Baltimore, to be returned later processed into sweaters, scarves, and other woolen goods. Later my mother would travel overnight by steamboat from Wellfords Wharf to Fredericksburg, where she boarded a train to travel west to schools in Charlottesville and Staunton. In fact, it seems a number of youth must have made a similar trip by steamboat to attend schools in the western part of Virginia, and I understand that these young folks had a merry time playing games, flirting, laughing and giggling well into the night.

I was again reminded of the importance of the steamboats and the Northern Neck trade with Baltimore only a few years ago when I explored the woods near an old gravesite on Edgehill, a now abandoned property that was in my mother's family in Richmond County. Still legible on this tombstone, which carried a death date of 1852, was the name of the Baltimore firm that made the stone, and the stone was almost certainly delivered by steamboat from Baltimore to the Northern Neck. The steamboat food was reputed to be excellent. In fact, shortly after the end of the steamboat era, my father fell in love with the lifestyle in this area and purchased a remote farm in Richmond County with a "million dollar view" overlooking the Rappahannock River valley and the silver

gleam of the distant Rappahannock river beyond. Being single at that time, he employed Frank Robinson to live in a small house on this property and cook for him. Mr. Robinson had been a cook on one of the steamboats, and my father often spoke highly of his culinary skills.

Once again the curtain falls, and we are back in the reality of our summer cruise aboard the Captain Thomas to Leedstown. We have reached a stretch of the river that is always a favorite on this cruise. The character of the river has changed rather dramatically since we left the mile-wide expanse of the river at Tappahannock, and we are afforded a much more intimate view of both banks now as the river is much narrower. Off our starboard bow rise cliffs of diatomaceous earth, known as Fones Cliffs. I have heard that President Roosevelt once cruised up the Rappahannock and remarked that these cliffs reminded him of the Hudson River in New York state. While to me this would be quite a stretch of imagination, the Rappahannock cliffs nevertheless are rather majestic and unusual in this part of the country. I recall stories I have often heard of cliff combers often discovering fossilized shark's teeth buried in face of these cliffs. My musings are broken by the crackle of the loudspeaker on the Captain Thomas. The captain calls our attention to an eagle sitting high up in a tree growing about three-quarters of the way up towards the top of the cliff, his white head resplendent in the bright sunlight. The captain informs us of the phenomenal comeback of the American Eagle since the pest spray DDT was removed from the market. Off our port bow, we are privileged now to see several young eagles whirling in a show of aerobatics, a fascinating display seemingly staged just for our benefit.

This show is suddenly interrupted by a boiling mist.

Scene 6

The curtain rises again to reveal Captain John Smith and his crew aboard the little barge or shallop. The time again is 1608, and Captain John Smith and his little band have continued upriver the day after the ambush at "Toppohannock." The hostile Rappahannocks have continued their pursuit of the Englishmen and their barge. We catch site of these warriors hiding behind bushes in the low marshes opposite Fones Cliffs. From behind this new ambush, they let fly towards the barge a new volley of arrows. However, the day is saved again for the Englishmen by the hemp shields they judiciously affixed around their boat. The arrows cannot penetrate these shields, and fall harmlessly into the Rappahannock. Another close call for the Englishmen!



With the fall of the curtain, we once again are back in our own century, making our way towards Leedstown. The river has become increasingly narrow and the water is very deep, sometimes as much as 40 feet where the fast-moving current has cut deep into the river bed. Suddenly we round a sharp bend in the river, and catch our first view of the dock where we will land at Leedstown. We are somewhat disappointed that this dock is no more than a landing place for our bus trip to the winery. There is nothing here to remind us of the thriving colonial seaport at Leedstown.

But then the now familiar mist swirls over this scene.



Scene 7

The curtain rises over Leedstown as a bustling international port of colonial times. The date is February 1766. To my amazement, there stands the very ordinary that my father described to me many years ago from a recurrent dream he had. In this dream that he related to me several times, he had ridden horseback from his home at Belle Mount in Richmond County to Leedstown, Having stopped before this ordinary and hitched his horse, he opened the door and entered ... only to discover that he had stepped back in time to the eighteenth century. This transposition in time was immediately apparent by the dress of the patrons gathered there, and the lively discussion of "current" issues from nearly two hundred years before. He said he dared not speak, and hoped not to draw attention to himself in his twentieth century attire, which he feared surely would break this spell and end this fascinating moment as a voyeur of the past.

On our magical stage, in this Leedstown ordinary, Richard Henry Lee is reading a document that he has authored, known variously as the Leedstown Resolutions, Leedstown Resolves, or Westmoreland Resolves. These resolutions, ultimately signed by 114 patriots (including several of my relatives), represent a bold statement of protest against the British Stamp Act. Those signing these resolutions viewed the imposition of this Stamp Act as a blatant instance by the Mother Country of taxation without representation, and this group of men vowed to act together in its opposition. In fact, from this now very

remote and undistinguished community, these resolutions were a clarion call of colonists to end unjust British practices a full ten years before the Declaration of Independence. But now the curtain of this magical theater falls for the last time upon this dramatic scene of local history along the Rappahannock, and I find myself ... not in the 18th. century, or cruising aboard the Captain Thomas ... but still seated comfortably in my sunroom. The sun now stands near its noonday zenith. The cup of coffee remains almost untouched on the table before me. Had I been dreaming? Had I floated off into a land of fantasy, enjoying my “willing suspension of disbelief?” It matters little, other than my sudden and intense desire to share with you, my readers, my drift through layers of reality and time that comes so easily in this land of history along the Rappahannock that we call “home.”

Sources:

Edward Wright Haile, *John Smith in the Chesapeake*. RoundHouse, April 2008.

James Slaughter, *Settlers, Southerners, Americans: The History of Essex County, Virginia*. Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., third printing, 1998.

Photos: *Courtesy of Howard Reisinger (Rappahannock River views and John Smith Shallop replica and David Broad (Leedstown)*

About the Author

Howard W. Reisinger, Jr. attended school in Tappahannock and received his high school diploma from Christchurch School in Middlesex County. He holds a BA degree from the University of Virginia, and an MA degree from the University of Maryland, with a major in French language and literature, and a minor in Comparative Linguistics. He also studied at the Alliance Française in Paris, France. Howard enjoyed two careers: one as a French Instructor, the second working with the Department of Social Services, first in Middlesex County, and later in Richmond, Virginia. Upon retirement, he returned to his childhood home on Hoskins Creek. He enjoys international travel, sailing, photography, reading, singing with local choirs, and volunteering.

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We encourage you to visit the Museum when you are in Tappahannock. There is always something interesting to see and a great selection of books and gift items in our Gift Shop. One of our volunteer docents will be on hand to welcome you and help make your visit enjoyable. We hope to see you soon!

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