



Chatham image by Alan Zirkle



# E-NEWSLETTER

Volume XXXVI, Number 1, March 2016

## *President's Pen*

Dear Members,

Jerrilynn and I had a lovely visit with Al and Jane awhile back and I was able to catch up on many things with Al. Among all of Al's many interests and projects he always found time to provide this organization with a fine newsletter. Due to his health, Al is trimming back some and has decided that it's time for him to pass the torch to someone else concerning the newsletter. Many, many thanks go to Al for providing us with an exceptional newsletter for many years. It takes a fair amount of effort for me to just come up with a president's column and Al could fill pages with great articles about Stafford's past. He still hopes to provide some articles for the new editor. Thanks again, Al!

We are looking for someone to take over our quarterly newsletter. If anyone is interested in doing this, please let me know. This edition is a collaboration between two of our board members. Thanks to Becky Guy and Doris McAdams for this issue of the newsletter.

Art Hart has resigned as board member. Art was responsible for "Voices of Stafford," which captured audio memories from many longtime residents. Some of these have now passed on. Art also created the "Colonial Gardens" at the Rowser Building, the White Oak Museum, and

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Hobby School. Many thanks to Art for all his hard work. Connie Hilker, one of our new board members, is a horticulturist and expert on roses. She is currently working on continuing this project with the gardens.

After several years, the board has drafted new by-laws. We will present them to the general membership for approval at the April meeting. Please plan on attending to vote.

If you haven't already done so, please catch up on your dues for 2016 and, as always, thanks to all of you for your support.

***Rick MacGregor***

**Feature article:** This well-written-and-researched feature on the Falmouth Bridge, its history and collected photographs included, are the work of Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor's diligent search for Stafford's history. She serves as the Historian and Secretary for the SCHS Board and answers numerous inquiries every week from all over the United States and abroad about Stafford families, genealogy, historic structures—some no longer in existence—and documents our history in general. She is a published author and historian. Her works are frequently cited as unique resources--they stand alone in published work.

**The Falmouth Bridge by Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor**



Taken ca 1910

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Thousands of people drive over the Falmouth Bridge every day without giving it any thought beyond perhaps noticing the deteriorating concrete railings or the somewhat disconcerting bouncing felt when traffic stops mid-span. In reality, neither is a problem so far as the safety of the bridge is concerned. Few realize that the present structure is at least the twelfth to have spanned the Rappahannock River at this location.

From the establishment of the town of Falmouth in 1728 until the first bridge was opened around 1798, people crossed the Rappahannock by ferry. Several of these were established at various points between the Stafford shore and Fredericksburg and some operated concurrently over the years. In fact, ferries continued in operation from Falmouth until the 1890s.

The first bridge at Falmouth was built and owned by Robert Dunbar. It crossed the river at the bottom of Cambridge Street just south of modern Amy's Café and was a wooden structure on stone piers. It stood next to Falmouth's first wharf. The land on which the bridge abutted on both sides of the river belonged to the Thornton family of The Falls, later Fall Hill. As part of the deal between Dunbar and Francis Thornton, in return for permission to build the bridge, Dunbar agreed to pay to Thornton and his heirs an annuity of £500 forever after. This was an enormous sum and the annuity remained in force for nearly a century.

For Dunbar, building the bridge wasn't a selfless act for the betterment of his community; it was a business venture that he hoped would turn a profit despite the very considerable expense involved. Those wishing to use the bridge paid a toll. Tolls were charged for people, cattle, horses, sheep, and wheeled vehicles. Dunbar's bridge washed out twice during his ownership, in 1808 and again in 1826. He rebuilt it at his own expense.

In 1847 Joseph B. Ficklen purchased the bridge from Dunbar's heirs, still subject to the Thornton annuity. Like Robert Dunbar, Ficklen collected tolls from those who used the bridge. Part of the bridge gave way in July 1856 "and precipitated into the river and on the rocks below, a fine team of oxen, and a wagon loaded with Wheat...Two of the oxen had to be butchered—the rest were slightly injured and the driver escaped with a few bruises." Ficklen repaired the bridge at his own expense.

(See flyer on page 4; article continues)



Flyer posted to collect tolls for owner Joseph. B. Ficklen

The Rappahannock River has always been prone to violent flooding, which often destroyed or seriously damaged the bridges built at Falmouth and Chatham. In April 1861 the local newspaper reported, “The heavy and continuous rain of the past few days resulted in a tremendous freshet in the Rappahannock River, the like of which has not been known since 1814. On Wednesday morning, the swollen, turbid mass of water, increasing rapidly in height and volume, raged onward with such force as to sweep away panel after panel of the Falmouth Bridge, which with similar velocity, borne down by the impetuous current, struck the Chatham Bridge...and carried off about one-third of that structure...In a few hours the whole of Falmouth Bridge had disappeared, and from bank to bank surged the restless tide of waters.” In 1929 Sarah Anderson recalled standing on the hill at her home, Pine Grove, in April 1861 and watching the flood (Woodmont Nursing Home now stands on or very near the Pine Grove house site). Sarah wrote, “I watched from that hill Falmouth’s bridge come floating down the river and hit the Chatham bridge [sic] and knock more than half of it off the pillars. Then both bridges came on down the river & hit the car [railroad] bridge which was too high out of the water for them to pull it down. The bridge was quickly rebuilt, only to be burned in April 1862 when Confederate forces withdrew from Fredericksburg. A year later I saw all those bridges and all the vessels at the wharfs all burning at once to keep the Yankees out of Fredericksburg.”

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Union soldiers used pontoon bridges to cross the river during their occupation.

There was no bridge at Falmouth from 1862 until the summer of 1866 when Joseph B. Ficklen arranged “for the building of his stone piers on the Falmouth bridge, the woodwork of which will also soon be contracted for.” The work was quickly completed and, in direct competition to the owner of the Chatham Bridge, Ficklen reduced the toll on his bridge to nearly the same rate as before the war “or just one half that has been charged by the Chatham bridge.”

Ficklen died in 1874 and the bridge, then valued at the considerable sum of \$12,000, passed to his wife and children. The Thornton annuity passed with it. For a number of years people had been discussing the advisability of having a free bridge connecting Falmouth and Fredericksburg. Of course, that required the use of public funds, i.e. taxes, to build a bridge and maintain it, which certainly didn't suit those Stafford residents who anticipated using it infrequently, if at all. In February 1882 the Virginia General Assembly passed the “Free Bridge Act” in which the Stafford Board of Supervisors was authorized to borrow money to build a bridge across the Rappahannock. The projected cost was \$24,150 for a new structure to replace Ficklen's bridge, which was still standing and functional. A board of commissioners, one from each of Stafford's four districts, was established and tasked with building, maintaining, and operating the bridge. They contracted with the Wrought Iron Bridge Company of Canton, Ohio to build the structure, but the project stalled. In March 1886 the commissioners agreed with the Ficklen family to purchase the existing bridge with its toll house and lot as well as the 64-acre Amaret farm on the Spotsylvania side and upon which the bridge abutted. The bridge was still subject to a \$1,666.66 annual annuity due Francis Thornton's heirs. The commissioners agreed to pay the Ficklens \$1,000 twice each year “forever” with Stafford residents being taxed to raise this sum. Stafford residents whose names were included on the tax rolls were entitled to cross the bridge free of charge. All others paid tolls.

In the fall of 1889 Fredericksburg decided to take over the Chatham Bridge, previously a toll bridge, and make it free. Thus, Stafford assumed financial responsibility for the Falmouth Bridge and Fredericksburg for the one at Chatham.

Shortly after purchasing Ficklen's bridge, the commissioners decided to build a new one anyway. The newspaper reported, “The bridge promises to be a magnificent structure when completed. It will stand for ages as a monument of the wisdom of its friends, and a rebuke to its enemies, past and present...’Rah for the free bridge, for Stafford, her people, her old hares, herrings, persimmons, and her Republicans. We will also include her Democrats, with one or two exceptions.”

Just 29 months after this was written, a flood swept away the entire structure. It was rebuilt in 1893, but lasted only until 1918 when ice floes carried off panels from both ends. A middle section was all that remained standing. Stafford County sold bonds to raise money to rebuild.

In April 1922 the Virginia State Highway Commissioner brought suit to have the Falmouth Bridge condemned so it could be added to the new state road system. The Richmond to Washington Highway was then under construction and the Falmouth Bridge was to be included. The purpose of the suit was to determine the damages due those who still retained a financial interest in the bridge. It was at this point that the Thornton annuity ceased and the Ficklen family was paid off.

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The bridge was severely damaged by flooding in 1937. For several years a narrow swinging footbridge connected the Falmouth side of the river with what remained of the bridge.

Many Falmouth residents worked in Fredericksburg and having a means of crossing the river was a necessity. The only other option was to walk down River Road and use the Chatham Bridge.

Construction of a new bridge finally commenced in 1942. In November of that year one of the worst floods of the river's recorded history sent water over the top of the deck of what remained of the previous bridge and effortlessly twisted the steel superstructure. At that point, all that had been completed of the new bridge was the pouring of the concrete piers. The flood waters actually submerged these and, after the water subsided and work resumed on the new bridge, engineers added another five feet of concrete to the tops of the piers to provide extra height. These may be viewed from beneath the current bridge. Raising the height of the bridge deck required realigning and raising Route 1 as it approached the bridge, thus accounting for the present configuration.

**At March 17 Meeting Irish Brigade Presented**  
**By NPS Historian Westermeier**



The Irish Brigade Horse Races, From NPS Historian's Power Point

On St. Patrick's Day March 17, 2016 at 7:30 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' Chambers, we gathered to hear Mike Westermeier, a new historian with the National Park Service stationed at Chatham. He spoke to us about The Irish Brigade and the entertaining activities in Stafford County on St. Patrick's Day in 1863. The Irish Brigade, under the direction of Gen. Meagher, USA, presented his men with horse races, had them climb greased poles and many other events. After working up an appetite, the Brigade enjoyed a celebratory banquet of "thirty-five hams, and a side of an ox roasted; an entire pig, stuffed with boiled turkeys; an unlimited number of chickens, ducks and small game." The drinking items provided "filled eight baskets with champagne, plus ten gallons of rum, and twenty-two of whiskey." *(continued on page 7)*

NPS Historian Mike Westermeier was humorous yet revealing of a side of the Yankee Occupation with which we were not familiar. However, we sat spellbound by his narration and power point. We all agreed we would like to have him return again to speak to us. Refreshments were served as we peppered Historian Westermeier with more questions and heard his responses and good natured comments.

## **Important information to keep/Post:**

### **STAFFORD COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Our website: [staffordhistoricalsociety.org](http://staffordhistoricalsociety.org)

#### **2016 Officers and Committees (Board)**

President:	Rick MacGregor **
Vice-Presidents:	Jane Conner ** Al Conner **
Secretary/Historian	Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor
Treasurer:	Jim Brown
Corresp. Secretary	Doris McAdams
Membership:	Doris McAdams
Museum:	Jane Conner **
Publications:	Al Conner **
Cemetery Committee	
Liaison:	Linda Belles
SCHS Liaison to The Patawomeck:	Becky "Nokomis" Guy
Connie Hilker * and Emma Williams *	The Gardens
Immediate Past President:	Richard Chichester **

\* New members of the Board

\*\* Denotes past president

## **Important Notices to Members:**

**Next Meeting: Thursday, April 21, 2016 at 7:30 PM DST at Stafford's George Gordon Government Center in the Board of Supervisors chambers. Refreshments will be served. Come and join the group of regulars now that the danger of snow has passed and the weather is nice. Rick and Jerrilynn MacGregor will do a program about many historical sites that have been lost to modern "progress" and development. The powerpoint will feature vintage photographs of these wonderful old places.**

**On January 16, 2016, you received an email from our Secretary Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor stating that the board had worked very hard on drafting a new version of the by-laws. She**

asked, “If you have any questions or concerns about this document, please feel free to contact the president, Rick MacGregor. His contact information is: email: [staffordhistory1@verizon.net](mailto:staffordhistory1@verizon.net) and phone number 540-659-8206.” The proposed by-laws were attached to the secretary’s email. Please read those over carefully and come prepared at the April 21<sup>st</sup> meeting to vote on the by-laws. We hope you will be able to attend because **those members present** will be voting on the by-laws. Thus, we hope you will make every effort to be there and give your input.

**Successful Electronic Dissemination of our E-Newsletter requires that we have your current and accurate E-mail Address or that we are made aware of your specific lack of access to a Computer. Contact Doris McAdams ([dmac200592@msn.com](mailto:dmac200592@msn.com)).**

**Dues for 2016 were due January 1<sup>st</sup>. They are now past due. Please heed the President’s notice on page one to catch up your dues now so you won’t miss out on any of our group activities, will have access to the “members only” section of our website and will receive the quarterly newsletter. If you are currently not a member of SCHS, we would love to have you join the Society. Please cut the application below, include your check made out to *Stafford County Historical Society* and mail to**

Treasurer  
Stafford County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 1664  
Stafford, VA 22555

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail completed form and check for either: \$15 (Annual Dues); \$25 (Family Annual Dues); \$5 (Student) or \$200 (Life Member) to the SCHS Treasurer [address above]. If you elect to use a credit or debit card, convenience fees will be **\$6.00 on life memberships, \$3.00 on yearly membership dues and \$3.00 on all merchandise purchases.**

**We would like to encourage you to volunteer your skills/talents to further the work of the SCHS. Please contact President Rick MacGregor [contact information is on our website and above in the by-laws announcement]. We need YOU, your skills and your interests to further the rich heritage and history of Stafford County!**