



# SCHS News



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The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

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## PRESIDENT'S PEN

Spring bulbs are now in full bloom as are the redbuds and the early fruit trees. For our predecessors, this was a significant time of year. The soil was dry enough to plow and people planted their early gardens – onions, peas, potatoes, cabbages, beets, etc. They anxiously watched the blooms on their pear and cherry trees hoping they wouldn't get burned by a late frost before being pollinated.

The herring were on their annual spawning runs up the Potomac River tributaries and residents used dip nets to catch hundreds or thousands of the fish that would be salted down in crocks and barrels and used all year. The large commercial fisheries along the Potomac extended seines out into the river to catch the spring runs of herring and shad. Some of these nets were a mile or more in length and a typical single draw of the seine often captured hundreds of thousands of fish. At the Clifton Fishery in Wide Water, men drove their wagons from distant counties to purchase their year's supply of salted fish for their households. Spring was a time of renewal and activity.

This is the perfect time to search secluded areas for long-lost house sites because the blooming daffodils will briefly reveal what was once a home – and possibly a cemetery where beloved family members were laid to rest. At some long undisturbed sites, the daffodils form great yellow drifts across what were once lawns and gardens. In a few weeks, the blossoms will have faded and the scant remains of the domestic site will have disappeared to all but the most experienced eye.

We were saddened by the loss of Mrs. Felicia Bonelli Parlier, a life member of our Society. She descended from the Wallers of Concord, Clifton, Richland, Grafton, and Wayside and had dedicated much of her amazing life to documenting the history of her family and Stafford County. Much of what we know today about the Wallers is the result of decades of research conducted Felicia and her father.

We are grateful for another spring and we look forward to seeing each of you at our upcoming meetings. We have some excellent programs planned for 2023.

With fond regards,  
Connie Hilker

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**Cover Illustration:** White Oak Primitive Baptist Church

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## **FEATURE ARTICLE: SCHOLARLY NEGLECT, PART 2— TRANSPORTATION & SHIPPING IN WHITE OAK**

Until the railroads developed sufficiently to provide a viable alternative, the moving of people, freight, and mail was handled largely by ships. The primary shipping points in what is today Stafford County were on Aquia Creek (town of Aquia and Coal Landing); Potomac Creek (Cave's Warehouse and Belle Plain); and the Rappahannock River (Falmouth). Eighteenth century records for all these locations are limited, but a bit more may be discovered about shipping activities during the nineteenth century. This quarter's feature article will focus on the shipping and transportation of people, freight, and mail to, from, and through the White Oak area by way of Potomac Creek. While Potomac Creek doesn't seem to have been as busy as Aquia, it was certainly a vital link in the Atlantic Seaboard transportation system.

Transportation was as important to people in the 18th and 19th centuries as it is to us. Today, we struggle with traffic jams, work zones, and dangerous drivers. Our predecessors struggled with mud and unpredictable weather, which usually resulted more mud. During this period, transportation was an orchestrated combination of stage coaches and ships and, later, trains.

During the early 19th century, there was lively debate over the best location for a steamboat landing in Stafford. The long-range plan was to establish a transportation link between Fredericksburg and Washington, the predominate length of which would be traversed by ship. For obvious reasons, many of those in Fredericksburg and Falmouth wanted the landing located at Belle Plain on Potomac Creek. Others advocated building it at Thorny Point on Aquia Creek. Both sites were close enough to the Potomac River to be practical and, in the end, both were utilized as part of the transportation system between Fredericksburg, Stafford, Alexandria, Washington, and Baltimore. In January of 1812, "Subscribers to the stock for establishing a Steam Boat to run between the City of Washington and Potomac creek" gathered in Alexandria. This was followed soon after by the General Assembly's passage of an act to construct a "turnpike road from Lewis's ferry, opposite the town of Fredericksburg to the Steam boat landing on Potomac Creek." This was accompanied by an act to incorporate a steam boat company.

While there were several smaller landings on Potomac Creek, Belle Plain is the best documented because it accommodated not only keeled sailing vessels, but steamships, as well. There are literally hundreds of newspaper notices regarding shipments coming into and leaving Belle Plain as well as landing and departure schedules for the steamboats that long dominated the Potomac River passenger, mail, and freight trade. Some of the smaller landings provided shipping points for wood products and fish.

As there was no "harbor master" to oversee or document activities at the wharf, the sources of information available for this type of study are limited in large part to newspapers. The transportation of people, freight, and the mail were of enough importance to the general public that many newspapers carried regular columns on the arrivals, departures, burdens, and destinations of the hundreds of ships that worked the Potomac River, its tributaries, and the Chesapeake Bay.

A sampling of several hundred newspapers spanning from 1813 to 1916 revealed the names of no fewer than 69 sailing vessels, 24 steamers, and 24 barges that were working Potomac Creek during that period. They were picking up and delivering passengers, agricultural products, store merchandise, cordwood, lumber, railroad ties, and other timber products. These notices likely represent only a portion of the vessels that did business on the creek as the newspapers were under no obligation to report upon every ship's activities in every port; still, these notices illustrate how busy Potomac Creek was during this period. Note that these same ships were picking up and delivering cargo from other Potomac River ports, as well.

As was mentioned in last quarter's newsletter, Potomac Creek's early commercial landing was at Cave's Warehouse that was, during the mid-eighteenth century, the highest point on the

creek that was navigable for sailing vessels at low tide. By 1772, silting had made it difficult to get ships to the warehouse landing and by 1780, that facility was closed and shipping had moved about two miles downstream to the deeper water at Belle Plain. No doubt, this latter site had long been utilized as a shipping point as in 1806 it was referred to by a Washington newspaper as a “well known” landing. In early 1814, an Alexandria newspaper informed the public that a “regular line of Packets [medium-sized ships] is established to ply between here and Potomac Creek. Passengers will find this a cheap and pleasant route.”

By 1812, planning was underway to construct an eight-mile-long “turnpike” (toll road) from Lewis’s Ferry opposite Fredericksburg to the landing at Belle Plain. In theory, this would have been an “all weather” thoroughfare, its construction and maintenance being paid for by those who used it. (Does that sound familiar?) While turnpikes were built and operated in other areas of Virginia, they never took hold in Stafford. In the end, a “Stage road” was built linking Fredericksburg (by way of Lewis’s Ferry) and Belle Plain. Part of this route is known today as Belle Plain Road (Route 604). During the 19th century, its condition differed little from the county’s other muddy dirt tracks.

By the early 1830s, the Belle Plain landing was an important part of the local economy, but the absence of a dependable all-weather road between it and Fredericksburg hampered its use. New technology, in the form of steam locomotives, offered solutions to many of the transportation issues that plagued Virginia and Fredericksburg residents and businesses, who typically used Belle Plain, saw a rail line as the solution to the muddy “Stage road.” In 1832, the Fredericksburg and Potomac Creek Rail Road Company was formed for the purpose of exploring such a possibility and, if feasible, to build the tracks. A preliminary survey between the Lewis’ ferry landing and Belle Plain found that the “ground was ascertained to be much more favorable than was anticipated” and the engineers estimated a cost of \$50,000 to construct a single track between the two points. However, “The elevation to be overcome is considerable, amounting to 238 feet; this will, in all probability, preclude the employment of Locomotive Engines, but will afford no obstacle to horse power, by which the distance can be accomplished in an hour.” The benefit offered by a horse-powered railroad didn’t justify the cost; directing the railroad eastward to Potomac Creek would not have accomplished the greater vision of a future rail link between Fredericksburg and Washington; and the public was unwilling to pay for both.

A sampling of 78 newspaper notices published between 1825 and 1916 provides a glimpse of freight shipments leaving Potomac Creek. What quickly becomes obvious from an examination of these notices is that, before the Civil War, outbound freight shipments from Potomac Creek were largely comprised of agricultural products such as corn, oats, wheat, and hay. Fish and timber products were listed infrequently. These were delivered to ports in Occoquan, Alexandria, and Washington where wholesale dealers provided ready markets.

During the pre-war years (1825 to 1861), the newspapers record the shipping of 25 loads of wheat, 21 loads of corn, 2 loads of oats, 1 load of wood, and 120 bales of hay. After the war, shipping quickly resumed and (non-military) steamers were again landing at Belle Plain. But the agricultural products, which had dominated pre-war Potomac Creek exports, were largely replaced by cordwood, lumber, railroad ties, and barrel staves. The change in outbound freight from Potomac Creek is logical given the Union occupation of the White Oak area that so devastated the farms and fields and made the cultivation of crops nearly impossible.

Note the change: Between 1862 and 1916, the following were shipped out of Potomac Creek: 3 loads of wheat, 3 loads of corn, 2 loads of unspecified grain, 2 loads of watermelons, 12 loads of unspecified wood products, 7 loads of railroad ties, 5 loads of lumber, 1 load of barrel staves, 5 loads of cordwood, 1 load of pulpwood, and 1 load of fish. Between 1862 and 1916, 4 loads of unspecified merchandise and a load of building material were delivered to Belle Plain.

The merchandise may have consisted, at least in part, of goods to be sold in the local country stores.

Timber products were carried from Potomac Creek and delivered to wharves in Boston, Alexandria, New York, Washington, and Philadelphia. A September 1908 newspaper announced, "The big barge *Severn*, which has been loading railway ties in Potomac creek for several weeks past, has completed her cargo and the tug *Defiance* has sailed from Baltimore to tow her to New York. The *Severn* has aboard about 27,000 ties – the largest cargo of ties ever shipped from the Potomac aboard a barge." Those familiar with Civil War-era photographs that show the White Oak area denuded of trees will wonder how Belle Plain could have been such an important shipping point for timber products. Obviously, some stands of timber survived the Union occupation and the cutting and hewing of railroad ties put food on many a Stafford table after the war.

From the early years of the Virginia colony, dependable mail delivery had been an elusive but earnestly pursued goal. Keep in mind that, until relatively recently, a person's address was the name of his nearest post office. Mail was delivered to dozens of post offices scattered over the county, not to individual homes. A sampling of 15 newspaper notices spanning from 1825 to 1851 records the delivery and pick-up of mail from Belle Plain, mostly using steamers. The steamship *Washington*, built in 1813 under the direction of Robert Fulton, was operated by the Potomac Steamboat Company, and was the first steamer known to have carried mail to and from Potomac Creek. (Previously, the mail would have been carried on sailing vessels.) The *Washington* carried the mail from 1815 until 1826 when the company replaced it with "a new and superior boat."

In 1825, copies of the "President's Message" traveled from Richmond to Washington in just 14 ½ hours. "The Steam-boat brought them to Potomac Creek; and thence by Expresses, who travelled all night to this city. We seize this opportunity of acknowledging the meritorious efforts of Mr. Porter [the contractor for the Northern Mail] to contribute to the public accommodation." This was record-breaking time, made possible by the lightning speed of the steamship.

By early 1832, the steamboat *Sydney* was carrying mail, passengers, and freight between Washington and Potomac Creek. In 1836, her owners noted, "She is not surpassed in speed by any other boat on the Potomac waters, is unequalled in accommodations having a large and airy Cabin on deck fitted up with berths, and two large Cabins below. The route by Potomac Creek has but eight miles land carriage to Fredericksburg, over a good Turnpike Road, and passengers by this route will reach their place of destination several hours earlier than by any other line."

The RF&P built its tracks through Stafford in the 1840s, ending them at Aquia Landing. Not until the 1870s was the line extended northward across Aquia Creek and connected to the already existing line in Prince William County. At that point, carriage of the mail shifted from ships to the trains. Although the railroad seems to have had some impact upon freight and passenger transportation, the use of sail and steam vessels continued for many years and phased out gradually as opposed to abruptly ceasing.

In next quarter's newsletter, National Park Historian Donald C. Pfanz will explain the role of Belle Plain during the Civil War.

## **THE WEATHER IN WHITE OAK**

Camp of the 2d Vt. Vols., White Oak Church, Va., March 23. Mr. Editor:--For some days past we have had alternately snow, rain, hail and fair weather, and to-day is no exception to the rule. We Vermonters had hitherto supposed that the cold wintry winds and snow storms were confined to more northerly latitudes, but from our past few days' experience we have found it otherwise" (*Rutland Weekly Herald*, Apr. 2, 1863).

## WHITE OAK PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH MEETING

“The Old School or Hard shell Baptist, held a four days meeting at White Oak church in Stafford closing on Sunday. Eight hundred persons attended the morning service” (*Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 18, 1874).

## FINDING STAFFORD’S HISTORY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Most people in this region who are at least somewhat familiar with local history are aware that Stafford is considered a burned record county. The loss of court records wasn’t so much the result of courthouse fires as it was of the activities of Union troops during the Civil War. By their own accounts, during their little visit here in 1863/1864, they made at least two devastating raids on the courthouse and clerk’s office. The result was the theft or destruction of about two-thirds of Stafford’s court records generated between 1664 and 1864. Just this past April, the *SCHS News* contained an article about the return of a stolen estate account book spanning the years 1764 to 1822. Such returns are rare.

Documents relating to Stafford’s history aren’t limited to court records and newspapers. A variety of pertinent documents are known to be scattered over a wide geographical area, including in archives in Fredericksburg and Richmond, Virginia; as well as in Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Washington, DC. During a recent visit to National Archives in Washington in search of information about the construction of the south portico of the White House, a copy of the will of Cossom Horton (c.1735-1821) of Stafford County was discovered in a roll of Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts microfilm. The copy of Horton’s will that was filed in the Stafford clerk of court’s office has been lost.

Cossom lived on the Hope tract on Aquia Creek and near what is now Hope Springs Marina. At the time of his death, he was selling Aquia freestone to the Commissioners in Washington for use in the public buildings there following the damage done after the British burned the city in 1814. Between 1815 and 1822, he (or his estate) was paid \$54,197.54 for 5,539 tons used in the President’s House, the Capitol, the Executive Offices, and the Treasury. Despite the extent of his business dealings, he was unable to read or write and signed his receipts with a mark. Cossom died while engaged in business with the Commissioners and in order to continue dealing with his estate through his executor, John Moncure, Jr. (1772-1822), the General Accounting Office, which was paying the bills, required that a copy of his will be included in their records.

While Horton’s will doesn’t mention his quarry business directly, it does leave readers with a glimpse into the personal side of the man. In addition to Moncure, his other executors were John M. Conway (1779-1864) and Cossom’s son, George A. Horton (died 1827). The deceased asked that his executors pay his creditors as soon as possible “without recourse to my real or personal estate, there being debts due me which will be more than sufficient for that purpose.” To his wife, Lucy (Brown) Horton (died c.1824), he devised a life estate in one-third of all his real and personal property. After her death, all of his property was to be divided equally amongst his children after the youngest one attained the age of 21 or married. If either of his sons “should manifest a disposition to spend imprudently such portion of my estate that he may be entitled to,” then the executors were to hold that property in trust for him and he could receive it “whenever he shall be disposed to an opposite conduct.”

Moncure died the following year and the Stafford court became involved with the final settlement of Cossom Horton’s estate. Those records may be seen in a volume titled *Stafford County Estate Accounts, 1812 – 1834* that survives and is housed in the Clerk of Court’s office.

## INJUNCTION AWARDED IN STAFFORD

“John Dagg, Joseph Grayson, Marshall Jackson, and Howard Johnson, partners, through their attorney, Wm. W. Butzner, have filed suit against George W. Herring and G. B. Wallace, trustee, in Circuit Court of Stafford county. The object of the suit is to audit the business transactions and have an accounting between the plaintiffs and the defendant, Mr. G. W. Herring, which arises out of sawmilling done by the plaintiffs for Mr. Herring, and to stop the sale of the sawmill which is now being advertised to be sold Sept. 9, 1910. Judge Jno. T. Goolrick, in the absence of Judge Mason, awarded the plaintiffs an injunction restraining G. B. Wallace, the trustee, from proceeding further with the sale” (*Free Lance*, Aug.25, 1910).

### UPCOMING PROGRAMS:

April 20—The History of the Career and Volunteer Fire and Rescue Program in Stafford with Willie G. Shelton  
May 18—Law and Order in Stafford County with Daniel M. Chichester  
June 15—Juneteenth with Scott Mayausky

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## DUES WERE DUE IN JANUARY!

Dues for 2023 were due January 1<sup>st</sup>. Membership benefits include a subscription to the newsletter, email notification of meetings and programs and invitations to special events. Please don't forget to renew your membership so you'll not miss out on any of our 2023 activities.

### NOT A MEMBER? JOIN TODAY! WE OFFER THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF MEMBERSHIP:

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