

SCHS News



The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

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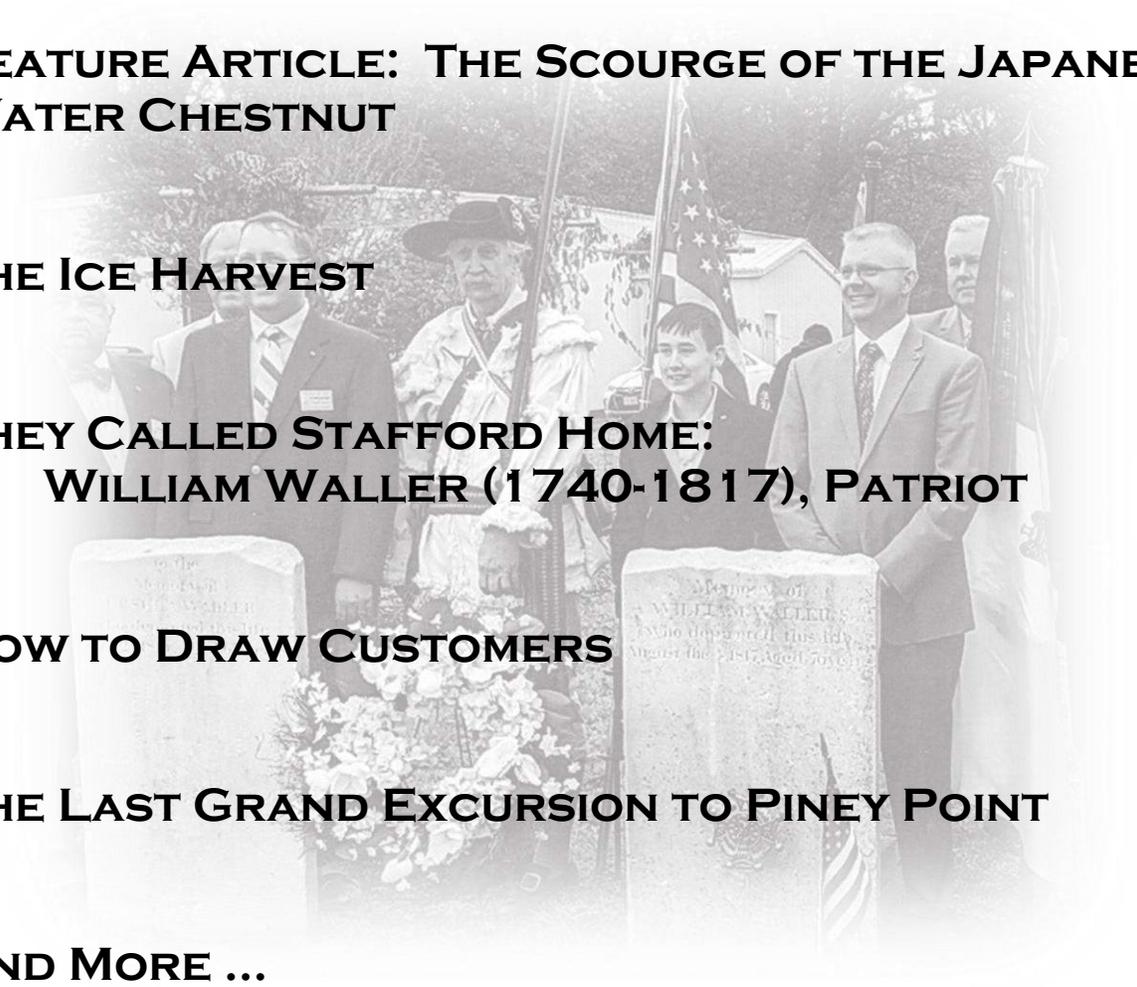
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PRESIDENT'S PEN

Dear Members,

Happy New Year!

2022 certainly came in with enthusiasm. We lost some trees, lots of limbs, and many bushes due to the heavy snow but, thankfully, suffered no major damage. I hope that each of you fared well in the storm and that the rest of the year will bring you hope, health, and happiness.

One of the last things we did in 2021 was take a field trip to see the old stone obelisk property markers in the median of I-95. Thanks to Brent McKenzie of Transurban we were able to gain access to the markers. We went there with the intention of removing the stones so that they could be placed somewhere with interpretive signage so that the public could enjoy them. In my imagination, they were in a perilous situation where an errant tractor trailer careening off the roadway would obliterate them, but to our pleasant surprise they were in a very favorable location. As I stood looking at the one that was set, seeing that it was still set firm and true where it had stood for over two centuries, I decided that it would be a shame to dig it up.

We decided that the risk, effort, and expense, in their retrieval was far greater than the benefit of removing them. So, there they will remain, hopefully, for a long time as part of a testament to the early quarriers and Stafford's amazing freestone industry.

In closing I would like to extend our condolences to the families of Lois Gibbons and Anne Brooks Brauer, both life members of our society.

Thank you for your continued support,
Rick MacGregor

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Cover Illustration: The Headstone of William Waller (1740-1817) of Concord.

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FEATURE ARTICLE: THE SCOURGE OF THE JAPANESE WATER CHESTNUT

As a young man, SCHS president Rick MacGregor heard his grandfather talk about the Army Corps of Engineers having dumped toxic chemicals into Aquia Creek for the purpose of killing an invasive species of water plant that was choking the waterway. Mr. MacGregor said that the treatment killed every plant in the creek and that it was years before the waterway recovered. Rick was long curious about what had happened and why, but wasn't able to find anyone who could tell him. Finally, an online newspaper resource, *Chronicling America*, yielded information about an infestation of Japanese Water Chestnuts and the government program to eradicate it.

Around 1929, the water chestnuts were discovered at the mouth of Oxen Run below Blue Plains on the Maryland side of the Potomac River and by 1933 the plant was spreading rapidly. Also known as a water caltrop, the chestnuts grew on long stems, 6 to 14 feet long, with thick rosettes of leaves that floated on the surface of the water. These formed a mat of vegetation so dense that water birds could stand on top of them. The seeds, contained in barbed, spiny pods, collected on beaches making it unpleasant to walk barefooted in the sand. The chestnuts "crowded out the water plants ducks feed on, made useless the feeding grounds of fish, aided in the breeding of mosquitoes, and lately has gone so far as to impede navigation" (*Evening Star*, June 18, 1939). In addition to choking out the Potomac River feeding grounds for water fowl, it "destroyed the native species of vegetation which supports the life that forms an essential food for game fish. Many sections of the river are almost completely devoid of any plant life other than the water chestnut. Coves and tributaries of the Potomac River formerly well known for game fishing, according to the Izaak Walton League, now produce very few fish which may be caught from small boats. The thick beds of water chestnut collect large quantities of organic waste and create pollution hazards. This matter decomposes under the hot summer sun, with a resulting stench and unhealthful conditions, and in the comparatively stagnant water in the plant beds the mosquito breeds prolifically" (*Evening Star*, July 16, 1939). In an effort to control the mosquitoes, the Marines at Quantico used airplanes to spray the water chestnut beds with arsenic at ten-day intervals (*Evening Star*, July 16, 1939).

By 1939, various government agencies had decided that serious steps had to be taken to stop it. Researchers pointed out, "The Potomac River infestation has elements of national importance...If the plant is not eradicated...it will undoubtedly reach other great river systems of the United States and the fresh water bodies of the interior...The injury that would be caused if this plant got a foothold in the great duck feeding grounds in the nearby Susquehanna River and Upper Chesapeake Bay could hardly be estimated, and this menace is felt to be very real" (*Evening Star*, July 16, 1939).

Several experimental programs included the use of underwater mowing machines and rakes, underwater steel-bladed cutters, chain drags, rigs for removing the plants from the water for crushing or cutting, and poisoning (*Evening Star*, July 16, 1939). Because of the plant's rapid growth and prolific seed production, the Corps realized that eradicating it would take a concerted effort over several years.

The Army Corps experimented with various chemical agents, including salt and unslaked lime, but the one that proved effective was a mixture of arsenic and sodium chlorate applied by spraying. "This method has no harmful effects on fish...The cost of this method is high, the period

when it may be used is very limited, and there is a possibility of resulting danger to life” (*Evening Star*, July 16, 1939).

At Oxon Run, the Corps prepared to attack the chestnuts with a compound of arsenic and caustic soda that was said to be “non-injurious to fish in the quantities to be applied, but deadly to humans and livestock. The chemical is to be applied by spraying with specially designed equipment and falls on the plant in the form of a heavy fog. Within a week, the upper section of the plant will turn brown and finally sink below the surface of the water, where decomposition takes place.” The public was cautioned “not to get close to the spraying operations. Children, especially, should be kept away from the vicinity and not allowed to play in the water until the vegetation has disappeared. Livestock should be kept from drinking the water near the operation or eating the sprayed vegetation for at least 10 days after the poison has been applied” (*Evening Star*, June 18, 1939).

While poison was used initially, a study of the plant’s growth cycle resulted in the successful use of underwater mowing machines that cut the stems before the plants had an opportunity to bloom and make seeds. Even then, it took years before the water chestnut was fully under control.

By 1942 Piscataway Creek, just below Fort Washington, was pronounced clear of the pest. A newspaper reported in July, “This season more than 2,000 acres have been mowed. Hunting Creek below Alexandria is clear, as well as Oxen Run directly across on the Maryland side, and already eel grass has made its appearance in scattered places, which means the great rafts of ducks soon will return each fall to this area as was their habit before the advent of the chestnut” (*Evening Star*, July 2, 1942).

By 1947, the Corps had cleared more than 20,000 acres of chestnuts. “This was good news not only to boatmen, hunters and fishermen, but to property owners along the Potomac below Washington. At a number of points, property values have been affected by the heavy growth of the weed. The plant became so thick in many places that it interfered with fish propagation and forced out the celery and other water plants that wild ducks eat” (*Evening Star*, June 5, 1947).

Even then, though, the water chestnuts attempted to make a comeback. In the fall of 1954, a dense bed of about 25 acres was discovered in Days Cove near the Aberdeen Proving Grounds on the Gunpowder River. “Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent in efforts to control the water chestnut in the Potomac River during the past decade or two. It had taken over such famous fishing coves as Gunston, Potomac Creek and a host of others and was rapidly becoming a menace to navigation until the United States Engineers got after it. Although these extensive beds in the Potomac no longer exist, patrol activity to locate and destroy isolated plants or colonies is continuing, and may be necessary for unforeseeable years ahead” (*Evening Star*, Sept. 1, 1954).

Thankfully, the water chestnut hasn’t been seen in Aquia Creek for decades.

“GETTING BIG ICE HARVEST. REPORTED TO BE FIVE INCHES THICK ON TRIBUTARIES OF POTOMAC”

Long before ice makers came to be commonplace in home kitchens, families obtained ice for the summer by cutting it during the winter from the nearby rivers and creeks or from ice ponds that were sometimes built on peoples’ farms. Property owners dug deep pits in the ground that they lined with straw for insulation and ice stored in these pits lasted all summer. Remnants of ice

pits are often found around early home sites. The following article is from the *Evening Star* (Washington, DC) of February 19, 1914.

Residents of the Creeks tributary to the Potomac are taking advantage of the present freeze to gather a crop of good thick ice for summer use, and, according to reports, more ice is being stored this winter than has been done for the past four years or longer. When good heavy ice last made it was reported throughout the country that it was full of disease germs of all kinds, and as a consequence few of the country people cared to take chances in cutting and using it.

This winter, it is stated, the ice has been pronounced good, and it is being cut in large quantities. In the vicinity of Occoquan, Va., the ice being cut off Occoquan creek is said to be about five inches thick and is good and hard, and the same conditions are said to prevail in Aquia creek, at Quantico and other points, and many thousand tons of the natural product are being harvested and housed.

THEY CALLED STAFFORD HOME: WILLIAM WALLER (1740-1817) OF CONCORD



William Waller was the son of Edward Waller (1702-1753) and Ann Tandy (1721-1748) of Concord on Aquia Creek. During the American Revolution, he served as a Corporal in the 11th and 15th Continental Lines as well as in Capt. George Rice's Company #9 in the Virginia Battalion.

In his civilian life, he served as a tobacco inspector at the Aquia Warehouse in 1778, 1780, and 1786 and, possibly, during the intervening years, as well.

The Concord tract included at least five quarry pits from which large quantities of Aquia freestone were raised and sold for the

construction of the public buildings in Washington, DC. At least two of William's sons were involved in the freestone business, including Withers Waller (1785-1827) who, with his cousin, shipped the massive monolithic column shafts from Brent's/Government Island to Washington where they were placed on the east portico of the U. S. Capitol. (Photograph courtesy of the Fielding Lewis Chapter of the SAR.)

William married first Elizabeth Allen (1746-1768); secondly Margaret Waller (1744-1772) of nearby Spring Hill; and thirdly Ursula Withers (1750-1815). William and many of his family are buried at Concord.

On November 14, 2021, the Fielding Lewis Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution placed a bronze marker on William's grave in recognition of his patriotic service.

HOW TO DRAW CUSTOMERS

The *Alexandria Gazette* of May 13, 1873 reported:

Something New. Mr. John W. Graham is about introducing to the attention of this community a very unique and ingenious contrivance called the "Adjudicator," which violates no law. It consists of a round table, say three feet in diameter, laid off into thirty-two points, with a rotating arrow working on a pivot in the centre; at each point a prize is placed; the arrow, or needle is then made to traverse the circle, and is allowed to settle on a point, and the prize placed at that point belongs to the purchaser of a picture, or other article that may be offered for sale; it will therefore be seen that this game has 32 prizes and no blanks. Mr. G. says the adjudicator is unlike a somewhat similar game set up some years ago by Crab (or Grab) Horton, of Stafford county who asserted that the only advantage his game had was in claiming the "splits"—that is when the needle paused between two points, or prizes, the player claimed both, but in Mr. Grahams game the player claims nothing in any case.

THE LAST GRAND EXCURSION OF THE SEASON TO PINEY POINT

Past issues of the SCHS newsletter have featured newspaper notices about "excursions," which served as diversions for busy people and opportunities to escape some of the summer heat by taking a boat ride. These trips were quite popular from the 1850s through the early twentieth century. Some of the ships that offered excursions were already outfitted as passenger steamers. Others were freight carriers that were normally laden with cord wood, railroad ties, stone, fertilizer, or other necessary items. During the excursion season, some operators cleaned up their vessels a bit and fitted them with a few niceties to make them more acceptable to paying passengers.

The steamer mentioned in the following newspaper notice was the *Powhatan*. Potomac River researchers Frederick Tilp and Edwin W. Beitzell recorded some of the interesting history of this vessel. Tilp wrote, "As early as 1854, newspapers noted that Washington's Negro church were chartering the 202 foot sidewheeler *Powhatan* for summer excursions to Aquia Creek beaches. Following the Civil War, more and more Negro churches began chartering white-owned excursion boats, and Fort Washington became the favorite resort for their picnics, Sunday School outings, etc." Edwin Beitzell noted the change in use that occurred a few years later writing, "At the beginning of the Civil War, which gave a great impetus to the further development of steamboats, a number of vessels were berthed along the Washington water front, some of which

were seized by the Government, armed at the Navy Yard and used both as fighting ships and for transporting troops and supplies. Four of these, the 'Powhatan,' 'Mount Vernon,' 'Philadelphia,' and 'Baltimore,' were turned over to Companies 'A' and 'E' of the Washington Light Infantry."

The *Alexandria Gazette* of Sept. 9, 1853 carried the following notice to readers:

On Saturday, the 10th instant, in view of the close of the season at Piney Point, the quick and comfortable steamer POWHATAN, Capt. Charles E. Mitchell, will make an excursion to this agreeable bathing place, leaving Washington at 9 o'clock, A. M., and Alexandria, at 9 ½ A. M., touching at Aquia Creek, where the boat will stop an hour or two. The company will be joined by a party from Fredericksburg, accompanied by a band of music, which may be expected to add much to the interest of the excursion, through means of the opportunity thus afforded for dancing on the spacious decks of the steamer, prior to her arrival at the Point, about 8 ½ o'clock, P. M., where she will remain until the following evening. Returning, the POWHATAN will take her departure from the Point after supper on Sunday evening, and her passengers, after being afforded the opportunity of passing a few hours in the town of Fredericksburg, or at Aquia Creek, as they may elect, will return to Alexandria and Washington, by the mail steamer on Monday. Fare for the round trip is \$2 only. Meals on board and at the Point extra.

UPCOMING MEETINGS:

January 20—"George L Gordon" with Rick and Jerrilynn MacGregor

February 17—Patriot Grave Marking Program of the Sons of the American Revolution with Lt. Col. (ret.) Thad Hartman

March 17—To Be Announced

NEWSLETTER DISSEMINATION: Successful dissemination of our newsletter requires that we have your current email address or that we are made aware of your specific lack of access to a computer. Please contact Doris McAdams at (dmac200592@msn.com) or 540-720-1321.

DUES ARE DUE IN JANUARY!

Dues for 2022 are due January 1st. Membership benefits include a subscription to the newsletter and participation at special events. Please don't forget to renew your membership so you'll not miss out on any of our 2022 activities. Mail your check or money order made payable to Stafford County Historical Society (SCHS) to:

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

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