



# SCHS News



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The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

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(c. 1820-1893)**

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## PRESIDENT'S PEN

Welcome to a new year! The calendar says January, but, as I write this, temperatures feel more like spring. What a blessing it's been to have a few days of sunshine and unseasonable warmth after experiencing the deep freeze of Christmas week.

2023 dawns with a number of changes to the Society, the most visible of which is my name at the top of the list of SCHS Board members as its new president. I'm Connie Hilker, and my husband Steve and I have lived in Hartwood for the past 20 years. Learning about history is my greatest interest, whether it's documenting my ancestors' genealogy, searching for facts about the history of our property and its former residents, or other historical pursuits. I am excited to lead the Society into the new year and beyond.

SCHS presents historical programs on the third Thursday every month at 7:30 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' chamber at the Stafford Government Center. These programs are free and open to everyone. For those of you who cannot attend in person, presentations will now be streamed via Facebook Live on the Stafford Museum and Cultural Center Facebook page. After the live presentation, the programs will be saved on SMCC page's video tab for anyone who wants to view or share them in the future. We experimented with this technology in November when I presented my program about the history of Hartwood Winery, and that video has been viewed over 400 times!

I would like to thank Rick MacGregor for his service to Stafford as this Society's president for the past 11 years. I am very grateful for his advice and encouragement as I take on this new responsibility. Past President Richard Chichester has retired from the Board, and we welcome Terri Blanchette as our newest Board member.

The *SCHS News* for 2023 will include a series of articles about the history of the White Oak area, which has largely been overlooked by historians. This quarter we will explore the early history of the area. Subsequent articles will focus on shipping and transportation, and fishing. We hope you enjoy this informative series.

I look forward to speaking with each of you this year.

Connie Hilker

**Cover Illustration:** Lewis K. Knight (c.1820-1893)

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### 2023 SCHS BOARD MEMBERS

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## **FEATURE ARTICLE: SCHOLARLY NEGLECT, PART 1 – WHITE OAK’S WORTHY PAST**

The first article in this, our new series, will examine the early English settlement of the White Oak area; the accessibility of that area, both by water and land; and how that accessibility made White Oak an important hub for early business, agriculture, and government activities. The compiler will also discuss records pertaining to the local Patowomeck Indians after English settlement.

Information for this series of articles was drawn from the surviving county court records of Northumberland, Westmoreland, Old Richmond, and Stafford; colonial and Virginia state records; church records; and hundreds of newspaper notices spanning from the 1750s to about 1925.

For the purposes of this study, we will consider White Oak to be the land bounded by Potomac Creek on the north and the Rappahannock River on the south; Ferry Road (roughly) on the west; and extending eastward to include Passapatanzy. This latter place had been the seat of Chief Japasaws of the Patowomecks who had assisted Capt. Samuel Argall with the abduction of Pocahontas in 1613. While some of the above-described land is now included in King George County, at various times parts of it have been in Northumberland, Westmoreland, Old Richmond, and Stafford. A discussion of the various county boundary changes is beyond the scope of this article.

Very little serious historical research has ever been done on the White Oak area. One possible result of this scholarly neglect is that some have assumed it to have been a secluded area where very little happened and where, for generations, its residents were largely cut off from the rest of the county, the colony, the state, and the world. As will become evident, this was not the case.

Since English settlement, White Oak has been occupied by plantations/farms of various sizes; multiple county courthouses; government-run tobacco inspection stations/warehouses; at least two commercial landings; and multiple fisheries. The earliest use of the name, “White Oak,” to refer to a place or track of land in Stafford thus far seen by the compiler is contained in a 1781 deed from William Fitzhugh to Jonathan Finnell.

While the navigable portion of Potomac Creek wasn’t as long as that of Aquia Creek, both were used extensively for shipping for much of the region’s history. Belle Plain, an important deep-water commercial landing on Potomac Creek, long served sailing vessels and, later, steamships carrying passengers, freight, and the mail. We will discuss all of these, in turn, in the 2023 newsletters.

The land patent books reveal that most of this area was claimed by English settlers between 1651 and 1692. These records contain no mention of the local Indians, though they certainly were here for at least part of that time. While a few patentees claimed tracts of 1,200 to 15,000 acres each, most others took up smaller parcels ranging from about 150 to 600 acres. In addition to these property owners, there were many tenant farmers.

The current proposition that in 1666 the English carried out an annihilation of the Patowomecks is based purely on speculation and this compiler has seen no documentation to support it. Stafford County court records generated between 1664 and 1692 contain fewer than a dozen Indian-related entries. Of these, only four clearly involve residents of the White Oak area and those date from 1666 and 1667. Three of these pertain to residents’ requests in August 1667 for permission to “Employ an Indian...according to Act of Assembly in that case provided.” Few details are recorded but, had the Indians been annihilated in the summer of 1666, finding some to hire a year later might have been problematic. Certainly, the Indians were gone by 1724 when the Rev. Alexander Scott reported to the Bishop of London, “There are no Indians nor other Infidels among us.” And parish records, which list births, deaths, and marriages from as early as 1719 contain no mention of Indians. During this period, Scott’s parish included Passapatanzy and White Oak and extended northward to the Anacostia River. Exactly what became of the Patowomecks is open to debate. Clearly, the White Oak area was a hub of activity and well-documented over time. It is unlikely that an Indian tribe could have been hiding there undetected. Without the massacre as a catalyst for the Patowomeck’s disappearance, one can only speculate as to their fate.

Westmoreland County was divided from Northumberland in 1653 because the population was increasing and moving further up the navigable waterways. Stafford was divided from Westmoreland in 1664 for that same reason as settlement expanded up Potomac and Aquia Creeks. The new county included White Oak and Passapatanzy.

Transportation was critical to Virginia's early development. From the 17th through the 19th centuries, most local transportation was by water. There were few overland roads and those that existed were notoriously difficult during wet weather. Navigable water was the equivalent of our modern interstate highways and White Oak was flanked on two sides with water deep enough to accommodate ocean-going sailing vessels. In addition to the Rappahannock River on the south side, what is now U. S. Route 3 followed the shoreline as did many "creekside roads" of the past. This early road provided an overland link between Falmouth and the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula.

Another early road that ran east/west through White Oak followed the top of the ridge that separates Potomac Creek and the Rappahannock. A well-worn Indian trail prior to English settlement, the colonists called it the "Potomac Path" and it became an important early road that extended from the Indian village of Passapatanzy up into northern Virginia. In 1662, the Virginia Assembly ordered it to be kept clear and passable. The Stafford segment, now designated as White Oak Road (Route 218), remains in use today. These four transportation routes within the White Oak community brought a continuous flow of people and commerce to the doorsteps of early residents.

Built sometime after 1664 was Potomac Church. It stood on the north side of Potomac Creek, diagonally across the creek and a short distance upstream from the site of the early courthouses. This impressive brick building served as the main parish church and from its pulpit Alexander Scott preached. It was one of the largest churches in colonial Virginia, its size reflecting the number of parishioners it served.

Over the course of Stafford's history, it has been served by a total of ten courthouses. Upon the county's creation in 1664, a courthouse was either constructed or an existing building was put to that use. Some historians have speculated that Stafford's first courthouse may have been at Passapatanzy. Others think it may have been closer to Salvington on Potomac Creek. Unfortunately, the surviving records do not reveal its location.

#### Stafford's courthouses:

- 1—1664/5—Passapatanzy(?).
- 2—November 1690, house of Thomas Owsley on the south side of Potomac Creek.
- 3—1692—frame courthouse at Marlborough on north side of Potomac Creek. Burned 1718.
- 4—c.1719—courthouse about two miles upstream from Belle Plain. Burned 1731.
- 5—c.1732—built on or near site of previous building. Burned 1744. Some records lost.
- 6—c.1750—brick building on or near same site. Burned by arson in 1751.
- 7—c.1753—structure rebuilt and used until c.1777 when a county boundary change forced the relocation of the courthouse.
- 8—c.1777—small structure next to Garrard's Tavern near present courthouse used by the court.
- 9—1783—new brick courthouse on site of the present judicial complex.
- 10—1922—present courthouse built.

Of these ten courthouses, the first seven were located on Potomac Creek, largely because it was more centrally located to the county's population at that time and because of the commerce and activity in that area. Those built between 1719 and 1753 were situated at the uppermost head of navigation, very near the Salvington house. By 1742, an official tobacco inspection station, called Cave's Warehouse, was standing near the edge of the creek and quite close to the courthouse.

County courts met monthly and residents came to buy, sell, and trade wares, livestock, and land; to listen to court cases being argued; to pay their taxes and other fees for which they were responsible;

and to drink, fight, and otherwise socialize. A court crier read important announcements to the public, many of whom were illiterate. Courthouses were vital gathering spots and, with the exception of Sunday church, provided some of the rare opportunities for people to mingle with friends and neighbors.

Visitors to the court, warehouse, and landing needed food and a place to sleep. By 1753, there was at least one tavern/ordinary operating within yards of the courthouse. From c.1753 to at least 1768, the Ohio Company used the courthouse as a meeting place. Some of the region's most influential men were members of this group that regularly came and went from this building.

During the late 17th century and the first half of the 18th, Parliament passed a series of laws called Acts of Ports. The purpose of these laws was to create official ports/landings for the receiving and handling of goods passing to and from the colonies as well as to establish tobacco inspection stations and warehouses. In Virginia, some of these towns still exist, but many disappeared long ago. Those in Stafford were, from north to south, Aquia (Aquia Creek), Marlborough (Potomac Creek), Cave's (Potomac Creek), and Falmouth (Rappahannock River). Typically, these port towns were placed as far upstream as the water was navigable at low tide, thereby reducing the distance inland planters had to haul their tobacco overland to the wharf. Obviously, silting was a problem and many of these landings were abandoned after a few decades.

By law, planters were required to bring their tobacco to an official warehouse where court-appointed inspectors viewed the product, graded, and taxed it. Since tobacco functioned as legal tender, the warehouses were the equivalent of banks. The hogsheads (barrels) of tobacco were marked and stored in the warehouses until a ship came to collect them. An explanation of the payment for the tobacco and the issuing and use of tobacco notes is more detail than is necessary here. Suffice it to say that these warehouses generated a good deal of activity.

Cave's operated from at least 1742 to 1779 and consisted of two or more buildings, a new one being constructed in 1772. To the immediate south of these buildings was the previously-mentioned courthouse and a considerable number of the county's population lived within a few miles of the site. In 1776, the Virginia Assembly authorized James Hunter of Hunter's Iron Works near Falmouth to use Cave's for the storage and shipping of naval stores for the war effort. While this use seems to have been temporary, it brought yet more activity to Potomac Creek. By 1779, the water at Cave's was too shallow to accommodate large vessels, the court had already moved, the warehouses were closed, and shipping shifted to Belle Plain, about two miles downstream where the water was deeper.

Even though Falmouth didn't become an official town until 1728, by 1721 tobacco and other goods brought by wagons from the Shenandoah Valley were being shipped from Falmouth down the Rappahannock. This activity naturally led to the establishment of stores, warehouses, shops for tradespeople, and taverns near Falmouth's wharf. Other port towns grew up along the length of the river and became ports of call for the ships. The Rappahannock connected the Shenandoah Valley with the rest of the world. The previously discussed King's Highway, now U. S. Route 3, paralleled the river and provided overland connections between Falmouth, White Oak, and the rest of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Business and travel through this region were steady and the area was anything but secluded.

In next quarter's article, we will explore transportation and the shipping industry that long dominated activity on Potomac Creek.

## **MUSEUM MUSINGS BY SUE HENDERSON**

With 2022 decidedly in the rear-view mirror, the Stafford Museum and Cultural Center is jumping into the new year with gusto. We're excited at the new partnerships, programs and policies already planned for this first quarter and hope you will join in the fun.

Our partnership with Stafford NAACP will bring the first event of the season. On Jan 15, we will co-present "Celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr." beginning at 2 pm at the historic Rowser Building.

Admission is free, but since seating is limited, registration is required. To register, visit [tinyurl.com/StaffordMLKDay](http://tinyurl.com/StaffordMLKDay).

On Jan 21, (snow date Jan. 28) Hollywood comes to Stafford with a showing of Houseboat which was filmed on location in Stafford's Wide Water. Our friends at Porter Library will host the comedy starring Cary Grant and Sophia Loren with light refreshments at 1 PM. For more details go to: <https://librarypoint.bibliocommons.com/events/63727746bb62982f006af8ab>

And in late February we are supporting the SCPS Social Studies Showcase. Keep an eye out for this open-to-the-public history fair focused on all age groups of students and their passion projects related to history. Also at the Showcase, we plan to unveil a beta test of our high-tech virtual museum. This hands-on, interactive project will initially explore the Revolutionary War period in Stafford and will be suitable for all ages.

In March, you'll see the new electronic scavenger hunt kickoff allowing 24-7 access to our history all over the county. Discover Stafford Scavenger Hunt will have folks of all ages checking out important spots right here in your backyard. More details about logging in and prizes available at <https://www.librarypoint.org/discover-stafford/>.

To keep up with all the exciting details, it's easiest to follow our social media pages at Discover Stafford and Stafford Museum and Cultural Center.

Finally, all these programs are the product of a dedicated team of volunteers and we could use your help. Everyone is welcome to be in the room where it happens and contribute to how we tell our Stafford stories. We have tons of new stories to dig into so if you have an interest, we're sure we can work together to make it happen.

Whether you would like to help frame our infrastructure or hand out cookies at a registration table, we would love to have you join us. Please get in touch with me at [director@discoverstafford.org](mailto:director@discoverstafford.org) and help frame the future in this exciting new year!

## **IN MEMORIAM**

We are saddened by the loss of four people who were important figures in historic preservation in Stafford. Sally Lou Fitzhugh had been a life member of the Society since 1993. She lived on her family farm called Poplar Grove in Hartwood. The Fitzhugh side of her family came to Stafford in the 1670s. She and her mother were both passionate promoters of Stafford's history.

Mary Cary Kendall had been a life member since 1989. A graceful, elegant lady, she loved her family, both living and those gone before. She was a repository of the history of Wide Water and its families and had been designated as one of Stafford's "Keepers of the Knowledge."

While not a life member, C. M. Williams was a champion of historic preservation in Stafford. His position as County Administrator from 1984 - 2003 enabled him to lead in the preservation of Government Island and Ferry Farm in addition to many other contributions.

Finally, we lost Margareta Williamson, a life member since 2016. Born in Finland, Margareta earned a Master's Degree in Architectural History from the University of Virginia. For many years, she and her husband resided in an older home overlooking a branch of Accokeek Run. For decades, she was a strong supporter of historic preservation in Stafford.

## **THEY CALLED STAFFORD HOME: LEWIS K. KNIGHT (c. 1820-1893)**

Lewis K(enneth?) Knight was the son of William Knight (before 1775-c.1830) and Gladly Fritter (c.1780-c.1857) of Stafford. Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Lewis was arrested for the murder of Elijah A. Ennis (c.1826-c.1860). The county court gave him the option of serving in the Confederate army or being tried for murder. He chose military service with the understanding that if he survived the

war he would be free. He did survive and lived in Stafford for the remainder of his life. He seems to have supported himself by farming and by helping his son, Capt. John Wesley Knight (1846-1937), with his timber business. Lewis' farm is now part of Embrey Mill subdivision and the developer restored his house. Notice that the main body of the chimney is built of blocks of Aquia freestone. The foundation, not visible on this side of the house, is also of freestone. Although this part of Stafford is some two miles from Aquia Creek, it abounds with Aquia stone that was not only used locally for chimneys, foundations, steps, and gravestones, but was also sold and shipped to Washington for the construction of the public buildings there.



## FROM FORD TO BRIDGE

In 1903, the local newspaper reported on the effects of heavy rains in the region. “As these rains deprive us of our daily mails frequently on account of high waters in Muddy Creek, we are anxious to have that long talked of bridge between King George and Stafford built. Can any definite answer be given as to when it will be completed?” (*Free Lance*, Dec. 24, 1903).

Several years later, readers were informed, “The boards of supervisors of Stafford and King George Counties have awarded the contract for building a first-class iron bridge over Muddy Creek to the Nelson Construction Company of Chambersburg, PA, at a cost of \$1,095. The work will be commenced at once and the bridge is expected to be finished and in place by next summer” (*Free Lance*, Feb. 19, 1907).

A progress report that September announced, “The iron for the bridge across Muddy Creek, the dividing line between Stafford and King George, has arrived here and is being hauled in wagons by Mr. W. H. Deshazo to the bridge site. Workmen will arrive here and put it in place in a few days” (*Free Lance*, Sept. 24, 1907).

### UPCOMING PROGRAMS:

January 19—Samuel P. Langley and the Langley Project with Chris Hornung

February 16—The Influence of George Washington and His Father on Stafford with Jane Conner

March 16—Stafford Women in the Military with Donna Sayer of the DAR

**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](mailto:dmac200592@msn.com)) or 540-720-1321.

# DUES ARE DUE IN JANUARY!

Dues for 2023 are 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:

\$15	Individual Annual Dues	\$5	Student
\$25	Family Annual Dues	\$200	Individual Life Member

Please make your check payable to Stafford County Historical Society (SCHS) and mail it and the completed form (below) to the **Treasurer** at:

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

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