

PRESIDENT'S PEN

I hope that all of you had a healthy and happy 4th! This quarter, we continue our series of articles titled "Seeking Truth in History." The purpose of this series is to encourage our readers to be thoughtful consumers of historical information. There is certainly no shortage of "history" available in both print and electronic format, but how does one evaluate it for accuracy? First, always remember that it's OK to be skeptical. Secondly, when possible, don't hesitate to ask, "Where did that come from?" Never assume that something must be true just because it was written by a historian, even a highly respected one. Perhaps the simplest, and most important question to ask may be, "Is the information logical and does it make sense?" Last quarter's article on "Seeking Truth in History" discussed the differences between oral history and primary source documentation and demonstrated how critical it is to have original sources that confirm or deny long-held oral traditions. This quarter, we discover some of the pitfalls of extrapolating an historical narrative from a single piece of original documentation. I hope that you will enjoy this series. There are more articles to come. Thanks for your continued support.

With kind regards,
Rick MacGregor

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Cover Illustration: July 1794 Payroll B from the "public quarries," National Archives and Records Administration.

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FEATURE ARTICLE: THE POTOMAC SILK FARM

A short distance east of Brooke on Brooke Road (Route 608) was the Potomac Silk Farm tract that by the mid-nineteenth century included the old Potomac Church site. This property seems to have been part of a 1,600-acre patent to William Horton (c.1625-after 1688) and William Heabeard (1678-c.1721) dating from Feb. 9, 1663. An elongated tract of land, it straddled Potomac Creek with the lower part being in the White Oak area of Stafford and the upper part just east of what we know as Brooke. That part located on the north side of the creek has an interesting history that has been largely forgotten.

Just prior to his death, James Hore (died 1807) acquired 666 $\frac{2}{3}$ acres of the Horton/Heabeard patent, his parcel being located on the north side of Potomac Creek. The Hore family was long associated with Stafford County, James being the son of Elias Hore (1719-1782) of Stafford. James married Frances Nelson who, upon her husband's death, received 249 acres as her one-third dower interest in his real estate. (Typically, a widow's dower interest in her husband's real estate included their dwelling.) Other heirs briefly retained an undivided ownership of the remaining 498 acres.

Around 1811, Frances Hore conveyed her 249 acres to Archibald Rowley, Jr. Shortly thereafter, Rowley and the Hore heirs conveyed both tracts, roughly estimated as containing about 700 acres, to Dr. Thomas Fitzhugh Knox (1772-1835) of Fredericksburg. A margin notation in the 1813 land tax records states that the property was "Rather broken [hilly] & bounded by P. V. Daniel, Philip Alexander, Potomac Run, Alexander Hay, and John M. Daniel." Knox sold part of the property, retaining 391 acres. At his death in 1835, the parcel passed to his son, Thomas F. Knox, Jr. (1807-1890).

In an effort to expand beyond the Virginia colony's growing dependence on tobacco, as early as 1620 Virginia authorities were attempting to encourage the production of silk. Modest attempts at silk production continued throughout much of the seventeenth century, though with limited success. The problem seems not to have been with the hatching, feeding, and raising of the silk worms, but with the workers' ability to "reel" or unwind the 3,000-foot-long silk thread that made up each cocoon. That critical part of the manufacturing process remained an impediment for another 200 years.

The 1830s was a decade of frantic industrial development in Virginia, which included a renewed interest in silk. In March 1836, the Virginia General Assembly granted Layton Y. Atkins (died 1866) and Thomas F. Knox permission to incorporate the Potomac Silk & Agricultural Company "for culture of silk and other agricultural products in Virginia." The charter was valid for thirty years from the date of incorporation. In addition to Atkins, officers of this venture were John Moncure (1793-1876) president; Thomas F. Knox, Jr. treasurer and secretary; William A. Jackson (1806-1876), Henry R. Robey (1810-1876); and William Allen (c.1785-1866). This joint stock company commenced operations with \$5,000 in capital "and liberty to extend it to \$50,000." The directors purchased Knox's 400 acres on the north side of Brooke Road and by 1837 had planted 2,000 Chinese mulberry trees. The company developed its facilities and by January 1839 had "a large cocoonery, that will accommodate one or two millions of worms, and seventeen acres of mulberry orchard." That same year, Layton Atkins noted that 5,000 pounds of mulberry leaves produced 25 pounds of silk. Layton was a prolific writer of pamphlets and seems to have been rather passionate about agricultural pursuits. A newspaper article reporting on activities at the 1840 Fredericksburg Agricultural Fair states, "The Stafford Silk Company, under the management of Mr. Layton Y. Atkins, deserve the thanks of the Agricultural Society for the display of reeled Silk, and also for the exhibition of the process of reeling – and they would recommend to those engaged in the culture and manufacture of Silk, Reels made by the Union Manufacturing Company of Fredericksburg."

In the 1830s and 1840s, various people became involved with silk worms and the Fredericksburg newspapers contain a number of advertisements for the sale of silkworm eggs and mulberry tree seedlings. One of the more prolific advertisers for eggs was Fredericksburg bookseller Robert Gray. These advertisements suggest there may have been numerous people then experimenting with silk, but little documentation of their efforts survives.

During this period, several silk mills, which wove silk threads into cloth, opened in the northern states. While this should have provided a market for Virginia silk the stumbling block in the nineteenth century remained what it had been two centuries before, the efficient and dependable reeling of the silk

fibers from the cocoons. A few local attempts to build filatures, or reeling facilities, seem not to have been financially successful and Virginia's brief venture into silk manufacturing died quietly.

Relatively little is known about the Potomac Silk Company because its business records were destroyed during the War Between the States. It's not known when operations ceased and certainly no business would have been conducted there during the war. By the close of that horrific period, some of the company's principals had died and the charter expired in 1866. The following year, William Allen's widow, Anne E. Allen, brought suit in the Stafford Circuit Court to force a sale of the Silk Farm in order to settle her husband's estate. Mrs. Allen claimed that it wasn't possible to divide the property equitably between the surviving shareholders and asked that it be sold and the proceeds divided between them. At that time, the shareholders were William Allen's estate, Layton Y. Atkins' estate, Reuben T. Thom, John J. Young, and Miss Ellen Lomax.

The court agreed with Mrs. Allen and in 1869 the Silk Farm was sold to Robert Shelton. He defaulted on his payments, but it was thirteen years before the property was again put on the market. In 1881, Armistead Dishman (c.1837-1903), a tenant on the tract, agreed to purchase it for \$1,500. He paid \$900 in cash and financed the remaining \$600 for 397 acres. Mr. Dishman was a former slave who had been born in Fauquier County and who moved to Stafford in 1867. \$900 was an astounding amount of cash in hand at that period. Married three times, he was the father of eleven children. He died of heart trouble. His obituary stated, "He tried to give his children a good common school education and train them how to work; that he was successful is shown by the fact that seven of his children have taught school in Stafford. He was a church member, honest and faithful and respected by both white and colored." Another newspaper notice described him as "a highly respected colored citizen of Stafford." One of his sons was John Norton Dishman (1863-1951) who ran the Brooke Pickle Factory for a number of years. After Armistead's death, the property was divided between his heirs and at least part of it remained in the Dishman family until 1992.

SEEKING TRUTH IN HISTORY: THE GOVERNMENT'S USE OF SLAVE LABOR IN THE PUBLIC QUARRIES

Historical research can be full of pitfalls. Sometimes these are the result of a shortage of surviving or known records; sometimes it's due to faulty interpretation – and sometimes both. It is also not unusual for one generation of historians to build upon the work of their predecessors. However, this may become problematic if an earlier researcher was in error and subsequent writers weave that error into their own work. The matter is compounded by the internet that allows the spread of information, be that accurate or otherwise, at lightning speed and keeps it circulating in perpetuity.

When researchers intersect with historical documents, they may endeavor to fit them into a context that will support a particular point of view. Also, a researcher's interpretation of the documents he uses cannot help but be influenced by his own background knowledge - or lack thereof. Our example this quarter relates to the labor force that was engaged in working the "public quarries" (that is, Gibson's and Brent's/Government Island) on Aquia Creek during the three years, 1792-1795, that the government Commissioners operated these facilities themselves.

In December of 1792, the Washington Commissioners ordered their business manager at the public quarries "to hire twenty five able bodied negro men Slaves...the said negroes to be employed at the quarries" (Commissioners' Proceedings, roll 1, vol. 1, p. 151). This was to address the anticipated labor needs for the upcoming 1793 quarry season. Despite the lack of any known follow-up to this order, noted White House historian, William Seale, grabbed this snippet from the Commissioners' records and worked it into a compelling narrative about labor in the government-run quarries. He wrote that, with the sudden appearance of such a large number of workers, then quarry manager, Collen Williamson, "was having to train hired slaves on the spot at the quarry" (Seale, William. *The President's House, a History*, vol. 1, p. 50). That catchy little phrase has

been picked up by countless media outlets and untold numbers of writers and it certainly parallels nicely with the prevailing assumption that the government's labor force in the public quarries consisted largely of enslaved workers. In reality, that is far too generalized a concept and the truth actually depends upon who was running the quarries and when.

Another writer, Bob Arnebeck, who is not a trained historian, noted that Seale's claim was illogical. Curious about the government's use of slave labor during the construction of Washington City, Mr. Arnebeck meticulously explored the Washington Commissioners' records at National Archives and studied the correspondence between the Commissioners and quarry manager Collen Williamson, and William Wright who preceded him at that post. Both men complained of perennial labor problems at the quarries.

In 1792, Wright wrote, "In order to keep peace and quietness with the former hands I give the new comers five five & a half & six according as they merit" (Commissioners, Letters Received, roll 9, vol. 2, #124, Aug. 19, 1792). About three months later, Wright informed the Commissioners, "I have to divide the hands & with much Difficulty...and in the division Expect to loose some good hands whom I have taken great pains" (Commissioners, Letters Received, roll 9, vol. 2, #165, Dec. 3, 1792). Williamson replaced Wright in January of 1793 and three months later, Collen wrote to the Commissioners, "There is at present about thirty four men at work the greatest No. of which is recomended to me as good hands and willing to forward the work, but hath been threatening to leave the work if they not be allowed seven dolores per month for summer season." His men also demanded that their number be increased from 34 to 40 (Commissioners, Letters Received, roll 9, vol. 3, #233, Mar. 23, 1793). Arnebeck realized that these demands could not have been made by slaves, but only by free workers and he published these thoughts in a book about the construction of Washington, DC. Obviously, the book didn't make the New York Times Best Sellers list and Mr. Seale's more compelling narrative remained the accepted one for decades.

More recent research efforts at National Archives turned up a few government payrolls (long thought to have been lost) from the public quarries. Dating from 1794, partial payrolls survive from June and August and a complete payroll exists for July (Frederick Manning Collection, Miscellaneous Records from 1794, Box 43). On these rolls, the men working as quarriers were carefully designated as such and nearly all of them were recognized by this writer as being local to the area. The fourteen slaves working at the public quarries in 1794 were all held by local residents and may already have been at least marginally familiar with freestone. They were certainly not coming to the job sites from distant locations where freestone didn't exist. However, according to the payrolls, few of these enslaved men were actually quarrying. Of the 45 quarriers listed on the July 1794 payroll, only 3 were enslaved; thus, it is unlikely that Collen Williamson spent much time training them. The remaining slaves would have been engaged as laborers, doing important tasks such as clearing rubble, removing overburden, moving stone, and loading it on scows, but they were not quarrying. The repeated use of this one incorrect and undocumented statement has resulted in a nearly universal misunderstanding of the role of enslaved workers in the government-run quarries.

The early records prove that, during the three years the public quarries were being operated by the government, a combination of slaves, free blacks, and whites worked together to provide stone for Washington's public buildings. Other period documents also show that slaves were widely used in the many privately run quarries, including at the island and at Gibson's after the government turned over the operation of these facilities in 1795 to the private firm of Cooke & Brent. While the Commissioners' records contain ample documentation proving that the government wanted to utilize slave labor in the quarries (as a cost cutting measure), the evidence indicates that they were unable to procure enslaved quarriers in sufficient numbers, thereby forcing them to deal primarily with local free workers. The reasons behind this situation constitute a separate story.

THEY CALLED STAFFORD HOME: JOHN HEDGMAN (c.1776-1887)

Thanks to a Canadian researcher, the following biographical information has recently come to light regarding an African-American man who was associated with the Aquia freestone industry in Stafford. Without her query, which was posted on the SCHS website, we would never have known about this man.

John Hedgman was born around 1776. He died in 1887 in Detroit, Michigan. His obituary reads:

John Hedgman, Aged 111 years. John Hedgman, who died in Detroit last Sunday, was perhaps one of the oldest persons of modern times. He was born in Fauquier Co., Virginia, in August 1776, and in that state spent nearly half a century under the galling chains of slavery. He could remember General Washington and assisted in quarrying the stone for the foundation of the White House, which was procured from a Virginia quarry. Deceased removed to Kentucky in 1819 and 13 years subsequently came to Canada, settling in Amherstburg. In 1797, deceased was married to Charlotte Boyles, who died August 28th 1868, leaving a family of nine children, out of a total of fourteen, those surviving being Jane (Mrs. James Wright), of Amherstburg; Caroline (Mrs. Joseph Holbert), of Amherstburg; J. H. of Detroit; Moses, John, George, Sarah, Dorcas and Clara. When Mr. Hedgman left his southern home for Canada, he left his hard taskmasters secretly and therefore was compelled to leave Mrs. Hedgman behind and after 13 years separation she joined her husband in the land of the free. Having doubts of the legality of their marriage, they had the ceremony re-performed in Sandwich. Deceased had lived in this vicinity for about 54 years, following farming and shoemaking alternately, and about a year ago he went to live with his son in Detroit, where he breathed his last, his death being solely due to old age. The funeral took place, Tuesday forenoon, from the Baptist church (of which body deceased had been a member for 18 years) to the Amherstburg cemetery (*Amherstburg Echo*, Sept. 23, 1887).

The information about John's early life that is included in the obituary makes sense. The white Hedgman family settled in Stafford County during the early years of the eighteenth century and most of them remained there for several generations. An exception was William Hedgman (1732-1765) who removed to southern Fauquier County, Virginia where he raised his family. The presence of the Hedgman family in Fauquier is reflected in the naming of Hedgman River and Hedgman Run.

John recalled "assisting" with stone used in the lower level of the President's House. Work on that building commenced in 1792 and the lower level is believed to have been completed the following year. During this period, the only sources of stone for this project were Brent's (Government) Island and Gibson's both of which were then being operated by the government. Thus, if John's memory was correct, he would have been at one of those two sites. Whether or not he was actually quarrying is unknown.

Inconsistencies in the Canadian census records lead to questions about John's actual age. (It was not unusual for someone at that time to not know their exact birth date.) If John was actually born in 1776, or shortly thereafter, then he would have been old enough to have been

working at the quarries. If he was younger than that, he might have been the son of one of the men hired for that work and was helping or “assisting.” Whatever the case, it was an experience he remembered for the rest of his life.

Apparently, John was taken to Kentucky in 1819 when his owner moved there. Around 1829, he was sold to someone in Alabama. (Being sold down south was frequently a punishment for a recalcitrant slave with repeated infractions.) He managed to escape, and by 1832 was residing in Amherstburg in Ontario, Canada. When he was sent to Alabama, his wife remained in Kentucky. She made it to Amherstburg around 1836 and they were reunited.

By 1839, John had saved enough money to purchase 100 acres in Malden Township. In 1841, the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church was established and its members erected a sanctuary on John’s farm. He served as a deacon and clerk in the church and in 1852 represented Mount Pleasant at a meeting of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Baptist Association. Black males living in Canada also had the right to vote. A commemorative journal entry from 1883 notes, “27 Feb 1883 – At Amherstburg, Ont., a vote is poled at the Prov. Legislature election by a man, Hedgman, who is 106 years old, and has to be carried up a flight of stairs to vote.”

YOUR SCHS PARTICIPATES IN JUNETEENTH

The SCHS was honored to participate in this year’s Juneteenth Celebration sponsored by the Stafford County NAACP and held at Colonial Forge High School on June 18. As part of an historical narrative, Mr. Frank White, who is a member of the SCHS board of directors, portrayed a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church shortly after Emancipation. The SCHS had a table of merchandise, offered free memberships, and shared information about the county’s history with a large number of people.

UPCOMING MEETINGS:

July 21—Annual picnic at the Rowser Building (Room B)

August 18—Hartwood Winery with Connie Hilker

September 15—Cedar Hill with Melisa Butler

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 WERE DUE IN JANUARY!

Dues for 2022 were due January 1st. 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 2022 activities. Mail your check or money order made payable to Stafford County Historical Society (SCHS) to:

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