



SCHS News



The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

VOLUME XXXXIII, NUMBER 3 JULY 2023

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PRESIDENT'S PEN

Dear Friends,

It's a typical warm July in Virginia and the flower and vegetable gardens have joyfully responded to the recent rains.

This quarter's newsletter features an excellent article by Civil War historian Donald Pfanz. Our own editor continues to amaze by giving us interesting and well documented stories about our county's amazing history.

Your Historical Society has been very busy over the course of this year as we strive to promote Stafford's history. We've been having some awesome monthly programs, which are now being live-streamed for those unable to attend in person. Our Museum Committee is actively working to position us to begin seeking large-scale donors to fund our goal of one day having an actual brick and mortar centerpiece. They are also nearing completion of a new website and Society logo and the Collections Committee is currently working with the SCHS's inventory of historical artifacts. Recently, we participated in the Juneteenth celebration at Colonial Forge High School and we are working with the Langley Flight Foundation to promote Stafford's early aviation history.

We would love to hear from you. Are there any program or newsletter topics you would like to see covered? We welcome your feedback and, as always, we appreciate your support!

Also, mark your calendars for the following:

Via Colori Artist Art show – now until August 30, daily at Howell Library; Via Colori Stafford – street painting festival Sept. 23 and 24, Stafford Airport; *Discover Stafford* Scavenger Hunt – Google it for directions, permanently ongoing with our partners at librarypoint.org.

Sincerely,
Connie Hilker

SCHS News is published by the Stafford County Historical Society, a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization founded in 1965. The Society's mailing address is Post Office Box 1664, Stafford, Virginia, 22555. The Society's web address is www.staffordhistorical.org.

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FEATURE ARTICLE: BELLE PLAIN, CIVIL WAR SUPPLY DEPOT BY DONALD C. PFANZ

In southwest Stafford County, at the end of Belle Plains Road (Route 604), stands a boating facility overlooking the quiet waters of Potomac Creek. Standing there today, it's hard to imagine that 160 years ago this tranquil spot was, for a short time, a bustling port—one of the busiest in the country, if not the world. The small tongue of land had been a transfer point early in the 19th century. There were no trains between Washington, D.C., and Fredericksburg at that time, and travel by roads was slow and uncomfortable. Ships were faster and far more relaxing. Southbound travelers from Washington therefore preferred to take steamboats down the Potomac River to Belle Plain, where stagecoaches waited to carry them to Fredericksburg. From there, they could catch a train that would take them to Richmond and other points south.

It was the railroad that eventually put Belle Plain out of business. In 1842, the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad extended its line northward from Fredericksburg to Aquia Landing. Overnight, Belle Plain's business dried up as travelers booked passage to Aquia Landing instead to avoid the tiresome and time-consuming stage ride from Belle Plain to Fredericksburg.

The Civil War brought new life to the abandoned port. In September 1862, Union general Ambrose E. Burnside unwisely destroyed Aquia Landing and its rail connection with Fredericksburg to prevent their later use by the Confederate army. When he returned to Fredericksburg ten weeks later, as commander of the Army of the Potomac, Burnside had to rebuild both the port and the railroad. In the meantime, the Union army utilized Belle Plain's facilities to help supply its troops.

Burnside crossed the Rappahannock River on December 11, only to suffer defeat at the hands of General Robert E. Lee's Confederates. The Army of the Potomac fell back across the Rappahannock River, establishing its winter camps in southern Stafford County. By then, Union engineers had repaired Aquia Landing and put the railroad back into operation. Burnside and his successor, Major General Joseph Hooker, nonetheless continued to ship supplies to the army via Belle Plain because of its proximity to the camps of the First and Sixth corps.

In April 1863, after four months of dreary weather, spring arrived. Hooker's troops essayed from their winter huts and passed over the Rappahannock River again to cross swords with Lee at a former country inn west of Fredericksburg known as Chancellorsville. Before the army broke camp, President Abraham Lincoln paid it a visit. He held four reviews while there, including one of Major John Reynolds's First Corps that took place near Belle Plain.

Hooker's foray across the Rappahannock, like Burnside's earlier attempt, ended in defeat. Riding a wave of victory, Lee invaded the North only to be turned back at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. For nearly a year, Fredericksburg was spared the horrors of war. But in March 1864, President Lincoln appointed Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant to be general-in-chief of Union armies throughout the nation. In May of that year, Grant led the Army of the Potomac across the Rappahannock River yet again, engaging Lee in battle in the Wilderness, a region of dense thickets 15 miles west of Fredericksburg. Casualties were staggering. In two weeks alone, Union forces suffered approximately 35,000 casualties. Most of these were wounded soldiers, who were carried by wagon or ambulance back to Fredericksburg and thence to hospitals in Washington, D.C.

The Confederates had again destroyed the facilities at Aquia Landing, and once again Belle Plain became the Army of the Potomac's main base of supply and evacuation. Each day supply wagons carried tons of supplies from the small port to the army fighting at Spotsylvania Court House, returning with a ghastly cargo of wounded soldiers. Relief agencies, such as U.S. Christian

Commission and U.S. Sanitary Commission, sent personnel and supplies to Fredericksburg to assist in caring for the wounded. Among those who responded to the crisis was Sanitary Commission delegate William Howell Reed and nurse Clara Barton, later founder of the American Red Cross. Reed described the scene that met his eyes as his ship reached Belle Plain wharf:

A simple beach, with richly-wooded hills, rose abruptly from the water, from which long piers, hastily extemporized out of pontoon boats, ran out into the river, where seventy-five steamers and transports were unloading supplies or landing the reinforcements which were pouring down from the defences of Washington. Long wagon trains were moving off loaded with commissary supplies and ammunition for the new fields of carnage in prospect, while other trains of wagons and ambulances were coming in, discharging the wounded upon the ground, where they were to lie without shelter until transportation to Washington could be furnished them. Heavy rains had made of this soft Virginia soil sloughs of mud up to the wheel hubs; and the roads would have been considered impassable in any other than such circumstances of fearful necessity. Three or four thousand wounded had been discharged, and the numbers were every hour increasing. News also came of another train, three miles in length, now due from Fredericksburg. We could not feed them all; we could not dress their wounds; we could not help the dying; we could not minister those consolations which are so precious in such cases to those who needed outwardly all our care. We could only do a little, and, in this vast aggregate of suffering, how trifling this little seemed!

Union engineers opened the railroad between Fredericksburg and Aquia Landing on May 22, 1864, relieving the strain on Belle Plain's limited facilities. By then, the armies had left Spotsylvania and moved on toward Richmond. Within days, Belle Plain was abandoned, falling into an obscurity from which it may never again rise.

Donald Pfanz worked as an historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County National Military Park from 1981 to 1985 and again from 1991 until 2013. His new book, Fredericksburg: A Comprehensive Civil War Guide, includes information about Belle Plain, Aquia Creek, Falmouth, and many other Stafford County sites.

WEATHER REPORT FROM 1901

An Accomac County newspaper carried the following:

Old fishermen on the Potomac river say that this has been the wettest season in 20 years, and the frequent and steady rains have so freshened the water as to kill the sea grass in the river and in Potomac and Aquia creeks. They also say that for the first time in many years, no barnacles have formed on the wharves and boats this year (*Peninsula Enterprise*, Aug. 24, 1901).

THE ROUTE 1 CRUCIFIX



The *Evening Star* newspaper (Washington, DC) carried a question and answer column in 1937. It included this entry:

Q. Who erected the enormous crucifix on the road between Washington, D. C., and Richmond, VA.?

A. The Historical Committee, Catholic Woman's Club, Richmond, Va., was responsible for the erection of the crucifix on the roadside of the Jefferson Davis Highway at Aquia Creek, 14 miles north of Fredericksburg, Va. The site of the crucifix is that of the first English Catholic settlement in Virginia. This heroic-size crucifix is bronze, 30 feet high, and weighs nine tons. The cost was \$7,500 (*Evening Star*, Mar. 29, 1937).

The postcard to the left was mailed in September 1938, not long after the *Evening Star* article appeared. Note the lack of buildings in the photograph.

BASEBALL IN WHITE OAK

“Nick Young was a cricket star from Amsterdam, N. Y. He belonged to a famous cricket team, which carried the English game to the front. He saw his first baseball game at White Oak church, Virginia, in 1863, and immediately abandoned cricket for the American sport. He lived to become another great baseball man, and served several terms as president of the National league” (*The Detroit Times*, Feb. 6, 1917).

PUBLIC NOTICE TO MECHANICS

“The undersigned is authorized to invite proposals from workmen, as undertakers, for the complete repairs of old Aquia Church, situated in the County of Stafford, about three miles from Stafford C. H. The repairs, which are contemplated are so extensive, that a particular description of them is deemed unnecessary, as it is presumed that Mechanics wishing to undertake the job, will visit the Church and inspect its condition for themselves. A meeting of the vestry will be held at the Church, on the twelfth day of next October, for the purpose of receiving and acting upon such proposals as shall then be made; at which time and place any workmen desirous of undertaking the repairs can meet them. Should any mechanics wish to inspect the building at an earlier day, the subscriber will take great pleasure in accompanying them to the Church, and explaining the contemplated improvements.

H[enry] R. Conway, Register of the Vestry”

(*Alexandria Gazette*, Oct. 5, 1852)

AQUIA LANDING

Many people are familiar with the R F & P railhead that existed at Aquia Landing from the 1840s until the 1870s when the company built a bridge across Aquia Creek and extended the line northward to Quantico. Less well known are the tourist facilities that existed at Aquia Landing during the years that it was a transfer point between ships and trains. The only information about these buildings and businesses, seen by the writer, are found in various newspapers. These provide little substantive information about these ancillary businesses, or the people who operated them, merely tantalizing references to them.

During the years that the railhead existed, there was a hotel nearby that provided food and lodging to travelers waiting for or departing from the trains and steamships.

In 1845, "Passengers and travelers going South or coming North, will find the trip up or down the Potomac, in the Mail Boat, under the command of Capt. Rogers, a most delightful part of their journey. There is a most excellent Tavern kept at the mouth of Aquia Creek, where the boat stops" (*Alexandria Gazette*, Feb. 19, 1845).

By 1855, Abel S. Lewellyn (1807-1857) and his wife, Sarah, were running the hotel there. An advertisement for a summer steamboat excursion noted, "A fine band of cotillion music will be in attendance, and a fine dinner will be served up by Col. Lewellyn, the proprietor of the Point" (*Daily Union*, Aug. 21, 1856). When not hosting train and steamer passengers, Abel provided accommodations for sportsmen. Another news notice recommended that hunters and fishermen enjoy "a brief sojourn at the capital hotel of Capt. Lewellen, where one will be promptly put through if going there in search of such sport. Captain Lewellen's locality is the best within fifty miles of Washington for shooting and fishing, and no more agreeable or better kept house of entertainment is to be found in the United States, as unpretending as his is" (*Evening Star*, Mar. 31, 1857).

Another newspaper notice informed the public, "The grocery store and kitchen, property of the Richmond Railroad Company, at Aquia creek, and kept by Major Dix, formerly of the Fountain Hotel, Baltimore, took fire on Saturday night and was totally destroyed—a keg of powder exploded and scattered every thing in great confusion. The hotel was saved. It is said Major Dix's loss is \$500" (*Alexandria Gazette*, Dec. 24, 1850).

THE SIBERIAN BOG

In case you take for granted paved roads, the following notice, which was first published in Richmond before appearing in an Alexandria newspaper, may remind you what a blessing they are.

The Richmond Compiler, speaking of the late repeated failure of the Mails at that place, says: Mr. Porter, the Contractor, has called at the office, to state the horrible condition of the roads. That Siberian Bog, between Dumfries and Fredericksburg, is said to be the obstruction which retards the progress of the Mail. We understand him to have said, that he came in the Mail Cart on Tuesday from Dumfries to Fredericksburg; that the mud was over the horses' knees; and most of the hair from the knee to the fetlocks was worn off by the attrition; that it took the Cart, with four horses hitched to it, four hours to wade through eight miles of that beautiful road. He speaks of avalanches of newspapers, having accumulated at Occoquan, sufficient to fill we know not how many flour barrels, wheel-barrows, &c. &c. This

difficulty will hereafter be obviated. The Mail Boat—the new Steamboat Sydney—has commenced running between this place and Potomac Creek (*Phenix Gazette*, Feb. 14, 1832).

By 1942, there were only two paved roads in Stafford County, U. S. Route 1 and U. S. Route 17. All others were unpaved and proved difficult to impossible to traverse in all but the driest weather. In January 1898, the local newspaper commented, “The condition of the roads through the county is horrible. The Garrisonville road has been practically abandoned” (*Free Lance*, Jan. 25, 1898). Seeing this road today, it’s difficult to imagine it as a dirt track and all but impassable in the wintertime.

UPCOMING PROGRAMS:

July 20—Annual SCHS picnic at the Rowser Building, 6:30 p.m., Room A

August 17—Stafford County School Murals with Casey Clark

September 21—History of the U. S. Flag with Trip Wiggins

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 2023 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 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:

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Stafford, VA 22555

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P. O. Box 1664
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