



SCHS News



The Newsletter of the Stafford County Historical Society

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FISHING ON POTOMAC CREEK**

THE 2024 SLATE OF SCHS OFFICERS



PRESIDENT'S PEN

The Stafford County Historical Society, and the Museum and Cultural Center, are visible and active in the county and the surrounding area. We just finished the unique and exciting Via Colori community art event in September and manned a display with other local organizations at the Library of Virginia's History Day at the library in downtown Fredericksburg in October. Our social media presence reaches thousands of people every month, as we share interesting tidbits of old and more recent Stafford history. Our goal is always to aim a spotlight on the unique history of our county, from the prehistoric and pre-contact, to its founding in the colonial era, its well-documented role in the Civil War, to recent history that contributes to the Stafford County that we have today.

Stafford's story is as significant as the stories of more visible sites like Williamsburg, Jamestown, Mt. Vernon, Monticello, and our neighbor, Fredericksburg. Our agricultural products like tobacco and timber led the way in the beginning, and early industries like sandstone, iron production, and fishing soon followed. All of these products were funneled to ports at Coal Landing and Falmouth, and were distributed worldwide. The details of these stories would be lost if it weren't for the 50+ years of dedication, activity, and energy of the people of the Stafford County Historical Society. This enthusiastic and committed group of volunteers work tirelessly to discover, document, preserve, interpret, and share our rich history. Our visibility and activities are limited only by the availability of willing volunteers. We need YOU to get involved to grow our organization and help make others aware of the richness that is all around us in Stafford. Join us!

On the third Thursday evening of every month, we host experts who present topics of local historical interest. Please plan to attend our next meeting and presentation on November 16 at 7:30 at the Stafford Government Center on Courthouse Road. We will start with a short announcement and election of the 2024 Board of Directors. (The slate of nominees is included in this newsletter.) November's program, presented by professional historian and preservation specialist Terri Blanchette, is titled "You and Your Stuff: How to Successfully Transition Your Memories to the Next Generation".

As the late, great, public historian, David McCullough (1933-2022) once said, "History is who we are and why we are the way we are." Come help us make and share new discoveries about ourselves and our place in history!

With kind regards,
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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Belle Plain Crabbers. Image courtesy of the Central Rappahannock Heritage Center, Ralph Happel Collection.

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FEATURE ARTICLE: SCHS NEWS, PART 4: FISHING ON POTOMAC CREEK

This year's *SCHS News* has focused on the White Oak area of Stafford. January's feature article discussed the White Oak area as the seat of Stafford government for over a century as well as the permanent disappearance of the Patawomeck Indians between 1666 and 1724. April's article explored White Oak as a hub of sailing and steam transportation and shipping to and from Potomac Creek. In July, National Park Service Historian Donald Pfanz explained the roles of Potomac Creek and Belle Plain during the Civil War. This quarter's feature article looks at fishing in Potomac Creek and on the Potomac River.

Throughout history, people have fished. Before Europeans arrived in this region, the native peoples fished, the product of their efforts providing an important source of protein. European settlers also fished Aquia Creek, Potomac Creek, and the Potomac River and, in time, commercial fishing became a vital part of the local economy. Some operations were large and some were small, but nearly everyone who had access to the water fished and by 1803 the newspapers were publishing information about the various commercial fisheries throughout the region.

There is relatively little documentation for the many fisheries in Stafford beyond the newspapers, but these are abundant in number and offer a wealth of information. The writer of this article drew upon no fewer than 126 newspaper notices and advertisements spanning from 1803 to 1923, though limited commercial fishing continues on Potomac Creek today. These papers were published in Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Washington, Richmond, Staunton, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, and New York. Despite the Patawomecks having disappeared from the historical record after 1666, some persist today in claiming that the tribe remains in White Oak. It is significant that none of the multitude of sources used for this article mentions Indians, despite many of the notices pertaining specifically to the Potomac Creek watermen. Indians fishing Potomac Creek and selling the fruits of their labor in Fredericksburg, Philadelphia and elsewhere, would have been newsworthy in its own right, yet the newspapers contained no mention of it.

Until about 1930 when the Depression put many commercial fisheries out of business, the region's newspapers abounded with water-related notices pertaining to the comings and goings of sailing vessels and steamers that carried passengers, mail, and freight as well as the fisheries then operating. Readers seem to have been fascinated with the commercial fisheries and they watched their local newspapers to learn when the various operations opened in late winter and when they closed or "cut out" in the spring. The arrival of fresh fish in the markets was newsworthy as were the prices for the different varieties. The men running the larger fisheries were, in many cases, household names.

Not surprisingly, commercial fishing ceased during the Civil War. Fourteen months of Union occupation devastated Stafford County both physically and financially and most business came to a halt. As the region's economy gradually improved after the peace, the fishermen were able to find markets for their fish, including in Fredericksburg, Alexandria, and Washington. The completion of the RF&P Railroad over Aquia Creek in 1872 positively impacted the fishing industry making it possible to ship fresh fish to more distant markets. As a result, fisheries on the Potomac River and its tributaries expanded in size and number.

Fishing on a massive scale was conducted in the Potomac River where the great seine nets were often a mile or more in length. Weather and other factors permitting, one good draw of the seine could capture 100,000 or more fish. Stafford's major river fisheries in the 19th century included Clifton, West Farm, St. Marysville, Arkendale, Gums, Tump, and Marlborough/Windmill Point, not all of which operated simultaneously. Withers Waller, owner of the large Clifton Fishery in Wide Water, wrote in 1890, "There are three fisheries in the county which catch an average annually of one million herring, 8,000 shad each, besides numerous bunches of rock and perch. The creeks are mainly fished with trap nets and all do a lucrative business" (*Alexandria Gazette*, Mar. 14, 1890).

Since Potomac and Aquia creeks and the Rappahannock River were much smaller than the Potomac River, fishing operations in those waterways were more limited in scope. On Aquia and Potomac creeks, fishermen used shorter seines as well as gill nets and various types of traps. Many of these fishermen operated as individuals or as small family ventures, the Newtons dominating the Potomac Creek fishing scene for decades. A 1909 newspaper article commented, "In some way the Newton family has figured in the first new herring on the market [for] the past 45 years" (*Free Lance*, Jan. 30, 1909). A wide variety of fish and other edibles were caught in these local waters, including herring, shad, perch, rockfish, carp, bass, catfish, eels, crabs, and turtles. In 1908, B. T. Sullivan and son caught 42 turtles in Potomac Creek and took them to Fredericksburg where they "were shipped by express to Northern markets" (*Times Dispatch*, Mar. 5, 1908).

Some of the fisheries that operated in the Potomac Creek area, and a very rough estimate of their years of operation, included:

Belle Plain	1840 - 1919
Marlborough	1867 - 1923
Passapatanzy (King George)	1909 - 1913
Pratt's Point (King George)	1860 - 1909
Tump	1803 - c.1914
Windmill Point	1866 - 1918

Eels thrived throughout this region and populated the creeks and the river. Some locals caught and ate eels, which, when cooked, are much like any other fish. But, in this area, they were also commonly used as bait for crab pots. The Potomac Creek watermen were noted purveyors of eels that they caught by several means. One newspaper notice informed readers, "A fisherman on Potomac Creek sunk a barrel in the creek, baited for eels to be used in crabbing. A hole was bored in the top of the barrel about one and one-half inches in diameter and the bottom was covered with bait. It was then sunk in the water. Two days later, when an attempt was made to move the barrel it was found to be very heavy and on examination proved to be filled with eels. It required the efforts of several men to get it out of the water. The eels were brought to this city [Fredericksburg] and shipped to Philadelphia. They netted the fisherman \$12" (*Richmond Times*, Aug. 22, 1901).

Also widely used in Potomac Creek were eel traps woven of thin split oak splints. Late 19th and early 20th century newspapers from the Mid-Atlantic northward contain many articles about the manufacture and use of these traps or pots. While some have suggested that the woven splint traps used for years on Potomac Creek prove a connection between the White Oak watermen and the ancient Patowomeck Indians, no such proof exists. Examples of these pots may be seen in various watermen's or maritime museums in Virginia and other states. In 1892, a Pittsburgh newspaper carried an article about the means by which eels were caught and shipped to that city from New York. The reporter wrote, "All of the pots are alike, and, while dozens of new fangled ones have been tried, this one, made of oak strips, with an opening which grows narrower and ends with sharp points turned inward, remains the only useful eel trap... The average eeler... must have from 60 to 80 pots, costing 60 cents apiece, and as many poles, to which they are tied" (*Pittsburgh Dispatch*, July 18, 1892). A 1904 article in a Washington newspaper, titled "Eel Fishing Growing," informed its readers, "The fishermen use eel pots, which are nothing more than closely woven splint baskets about three feet long and six inches in diameter, to catch the fish. The interior of the pot is so arranged that the fish can go into them easily, but cannot get out. Baited with salted herring, the pots are put overboard, forty or fifty attached to a rope at regular intervals, and are taken up two or three times in twenty-four hours and the imprisoned fish removed. They are then skinned and cleaned and shipped to Philadelphia and New York" (*Evening Star*, Apr. 23, 1904).

Basket weaving was an essential skill long-practiced by rural residents who were in constant need of baskets and other utilitarian containers. It was not a skill exclusive to the Indians. For a thrifty fisherman who was not inclined to spend his hard-earned money on a commercially-made woven eel trap, it was easy enough to disassemble one, figure out the pattern and size, and make his own. In fact, that's precisely

what D. P. Newton and a friend did with an old eel trap found in White Oak. This was not a skill handed down through generations of Indians. It was an effort on the part of some self-sufficient fishermen to save a few cents.



Archie and Jimbo Newton with eel traps. (Image courtesy of the Central Rappahannock Heritage Center, Ralph Happel Collection.)

To some degree, commercial fishing was a seasonal occupation. The larger operations used haul seines that they commenced setting in January or February (whenever the ice thawed and the fish started moving) and fishing continued until April or May. Many local men found employment at these operations and then did other things for the rest of the year. Smaller fisheries netted and trapped fish for most of the year and set crab pots in the summer. These men worked out of small, wooden, open craft that provided no protection from the elements or even simple amenities.

During the winter months, the fishermen repaired and painted their boats, mended their nets, and checked the rest of their equipment in preparation for the upcoming season. Prior to the availability of relatively cheap plastic nets in the mid-20th century, fishermen used handmade wooden net needles/shuttles to mend holes in their fiber nets, often of cotton. The men on Aquia and Potomac creeks, the Potomac River, and all around the Chesapeake Bay used the same types of homemade net needles to repair the nets. Contrary to information currently circulating, the technique was universal. It was not limited to Indian fishermen on Potomac Creek as has been suggested.

A lucrative winter activity for the local fishermen was duck hunting. In addition to putting food on their own tables, ducks were immensely popular in the restaurants and clubs frequented by wealthy patrons and the birds sometimes fetched a dollar a piece, which was very good money, especially during the Depression.



George Henry Newton, Potomac Creek waterman, at Belle Plain with duck decoys, December 1938. (Image courtesy of the Central Rappahannock Heritage Center, Ralph Happel Collection.)

Belle Plain was an ideal landing and was used as such for centuries. The earliest newspaper notice known to this writer that pertains to fishing from this point dates from 1840 when William H. Browne and Henry L. Rodgers were running two seines “near the steamboat Landing...It is the nearest Fishery to Fredericksburg and the best road” (*Political Arena*, Mar. 27, 1840). There is little doubt but that fishing at and from Belle Plain commenced long before the publication of this notice. Another article in 1909 stated that Lee Newton at Belle Plain had caught 9,000 herrings in a single haul of the seine (*Free Lance*, Apr. 15, 1909). A more generalized assessment in 1919 reads, “A good supply of fish of all kinds were brought here [Fredericksburg] today. They came from the Potomac, where the Newtons are fishing at Belle Plain...Bob Jennings, at Passapatanzy shore, is doing better in herring but less in rock and shad. From these two shores [Marlborough and Passapatanzy] most of the fish ought to go to Northern markets” (*Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 6, 1919). Many of the fish caught in Potomac Creek were hauled to Fredericksburg in wagons (later by trucks) where they were sold to local residents or loaded on trains and shipped north. In 1900, Lee Newton drove two wagon loads of black bass from Potomac Creek to Fredericksburg (*Free Lance*, Jan. 13, 1900).

The Newtons, long noted for their hospitality, hosted annual fish fries in late summer at Belle Plain. The Fredericksburg and Richmond newspapers carried articles about the food, entertainment, activities, and people who participated. In 1900, “The annual fish fry of the farmers of Stafford and King George counties took place yesterday on the Potomac near Belle Plains” (*Richmond Times*, Aug. 18, 1900). A few years later, another article stated, “The best fish-fry of the season was given at Belle Plains, on the Potomac, in Safford by Messrs. Geo. H., Bennie and Lee R. Newton, three of the most successful fishermen at that place. By 12 o’clock 123 people were on the shore. Fish, crabs, and coffee steaming by a large log fire, and the air filled with the joyous voices of merry boys and girls. Half an hour later dinner was spread, and such a feast! Full enough of every kind of solid to feed as many more as were present and liquids, anything from ice to boiling coffee. The feast closed with lemonade and confectioneries. Then two large sailboats filled with lads and lassies set sail toward the shores of Maryland, while the older persons lolled around on the grass and talked of the past, present and future.” In attendance were the local families of Newton, Green, Jett, Deshazo, Peyton, Fines, Henderson, and others (*Free Lance*, Sept. 21, 1905). None of the articles made any mention of Indians in White Oak.

Commercial fishing gradually faded on Potomac Creek as the young people sought more dependable incomes, less exposure to the elements, and the benefits that came with jobs in business and government. While a few still fish and crab in the creek, most such activity is now recreational in nature. Just as was common on Aquia Creek after the close of the Civil War, men came from Washington and other areas to

enjoy sport fishing on Potomac Creek. One newspaper announced, “Potomac creek, only a short distance from Aquia is credited, by Fredericksburg anglers, as being the best bass stream on the lower river. During the present month the boys from over the Mason and Dixon line have made record catches of big-mouthed gamesters” (*Washington Times*, Sept. 26, 1925). Today, a good deal of fishing still takes place on Potomac Creek, but most is recreational in nature.

2024 SLATE OF SCHS OFFICERS:

The election for the 2024 officers of the SCHS will be held at the November 16 general meeting at the George L. Gordon Administration Center. We hope everyone will be able to attend. The slate of officers is:

President (2-year term)	Connie Hilker
Vice President (2-year term)	Jane Conner
Recording Secretary	Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor
Members At Large (2-year term):	
Anita Dodd	
Chris Hornung	
T. J. Walding	

Additional nominations may be made from the floor at the November 16 meeting.

UPCOMING PROGRAMS:

November 16—“You and Your Stuff: How to Successfully Transition Your Memories to the Next Generation with Less Heartbreak” with Terri Blanchette
December 17 (Sunday)—Annual SCHS Christmas Party at the Rowser Building – 2:00 p.m.

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:

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

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Phone () _____ - _____

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**STAFFORD COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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