

King William County Historical Society Newsletter

July 2012

From Our President

July is the time for the election of new members of the society's board. Emilie and Guy Townsend and Alvin Lomax have served two terms as officers or board members and cannot be re-elected. I will miss them. Emilie was always there to keep us on track and ready to help. Guy and Alvin would listen and then provide wise guidance. Bob Hubbard, Treasurer and Patricia Haile, Recording Secretary are not seeking re-election. We are also grateful for their service.

The Jail Project is progressing nicely. A lease of the property from King William County was signed in late May. Two days of initial demolition were held on June 23 and 24. Construction will start this summer and should be completed this fall. As a result of your matching contributions, we were recently informed by the Elis Olsson Memorial Foundation that an additional \$5,000 will be awarded.

I will give more updates on society matters at the July meeting. I hope to see you there. *Carl Fischer*

Picnic – Sun., July 15

The July meeting of the King William County Historical Society will be a Picnic on the Grounds. The meeting will begin at 4:00 PM at the historic courthouse with members and visitors touring the Museum, the courthouse, and the jail. Demolition will have begun in the interior and you will be able to see the plans for the new use of the old jail. We're excited! Local authors will be in attendance with their books and be ready for book signings and conversation. Those who have old books pertaining to the history of the county and families are invited to bring them so that others might enjoy seeing them. At 5:00 PM we will move to the administration building for a business meeting and our "picnic."

We will eat in air-conditioned comfort and bug free dining. The KWCHS will provide fried chicken, drinks, and paper products. We ask that members and visitors bring a dish to share. The front door of the administration building will be open by 3:45 PM prior to the meeting to allow you to drop off your food before you visit the historic area. We encourage you to enjoy our history, see what we are doing, and enjoy a good meal.

If possible, please let Adele Smith (804-769-1960) know how many will be attending. A head count by Wednesday, July 11 would be appreciated so that we can purchase enough chicken for all attending. But come anyway at the last minute....there's always enough. Hope to see you there.

Museum News

Exciting things are happening at the museum! Visits have increased dramatically. 184 visitors have signed the book. Additionally, we have had 5 group tours since opening this spring. A Heritage Day Celebration which was held in April involved about 380 members of our county (school children, college students, and adults). We have had tours for international guests (Korea) and out-of-state guests (Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Indiana, and Ohio) and this with being open two half-days during the weekend. Imagine what it would be like if we had enough VOLUNTEERS to stay open longer!

Wanted!

Live Volunteers!

To do any of the following: Tour Guide and Hosting, Data Research and Entry, and Exhibit Planning and Care, call 804-759-9619 to volunteer. *Rebecca Townsend*

April Meeting Report

Our April meeting was held at the Administration Building of King William County. In the absence of President Carl Fischer, Vice President Adele Smith conducted the meeting and introduced the program highlighting the Society's project in gathering oral histories. Steve Colvin introduced the panel: Elizabeth McAllister, Dorothy Martin Walker Krewatch, and B. W. White – all three between the ages of 85 and 94 years old and life-long residents of the county.

Steve asked questions about family life as children, how their fathers supported the families, and school memories. They remembered Halloween pranks, farm life experiences, working in the family store, college experiences, first jobs, and military life. Listening to the radio – where it was located and what programs they heard brought back a flood of memories.

They laughed at memories of happy times. Each sparked memories or made another on the panel share a similar story. All in all, it was entertaining, witty, and kept the audience in rapt attention waiting for the next story. We saw King William County through their eyes and experiences as they shared stories of life during the 20's and 30's. The program passed all too quickly, and was adjourned to the lobby of the building where Ruth Armatage and Ruth Childress had refreshments. We were able to ask questions of the panel members and share stories from our own experiences. History came alive that day in a very special way, and we treasure the tapes of our members who shared their stories. *Adele Smith*

Our Courthouse Fires

Editor's Note

The society is greatly appreciative of the following article by our member, Bibb Edwards. This is the first of two articles about our courthouse.

For those studying the history of King William County there is no larger gap in the primary sources than that caused by the fire in the clerk's office at the

courthouse on a chilly Sunday morning, January 18, 1885. No matter the primary sources which remain, the reputation of King William being a Burned Record county has discouraged historians and genealogists alike for over a century. Curious about the fire's circumstances, several years ago I began my own investigation. What I discovered not only enriched my understanding of county history, but revealed additional fires and suggested possible causes not mentioned in 1885, nor in recent accounts.

Documents commonly recorded with county clerks of court include official copies of deeds, wills, plats, legal and financial agreements, plus court and other governmental records. The loss of these papers is a severe blow to the orderly administration of the legal processes in any county, as the *Richmond Dispatch* wrote in 1885, "...a world of trouble.." ⁱ Unfortunately, paper records are vulnerable to numerous outrages. Over the years many Virginia counties have suffered the loss of local records, many more devastating than ours.

Virginians are usually quick to point to the Civil War (i.e. the Yankees) as the cause of their loss of courthouse records. While deliberate and incidental acts of that tragedy were certainly devastating to many of our counties, including New Kent and King & Queen, Virginians have proven over the years perfectly capable of destroying their own records through accident, maliciousness, or neglect. Such was probably the case at King William Courthouse that Sunday. Or could it have been an "Act-of-God?"

King William County was Pamunkey Neck in early colonial days, first part of Charles River (name changed to York in 1643), then New Kent, and finally King & Queen counties. Local records before King William's establishment in 1702 would have resided at those courthouses. However, as there was negligible - if any - English settlement on Pamunkey Neck prior to 1654 when New Kent was formed, records from York County would tell us little.

Pamunkey Neck was part of New Kent until 1691, during its first rush of - mostly illegal and extralegal - English settlement. County records pertaining to

King William would have been numerous at New Kent Courthouse and highly valued by historians today. But the clerk's office and jail burned the night of July 15, 1787. John (Price) Posey, was identified as the leader of a small band of arsonists. He confessed and was hanged in Richmond the following January.

Price Posey was a childhood neighbor and family friend of the Mount Vernon Washingtons. He moved to New Kent to manage the extensive properties of his crony John Parke (Jacky) Custis, George Washington's stepson. While not financially secure himself, he married well, became a magistrate, and was representing New Kent in the Virginia House of Delegates when Jacky died unexpectedly in late 1781. Reports to Washington from the Custis estate administrator then confirmed his earlier suspicions. Washington fired Posey, suspecting embezzlement. He later wrote of Posey's "abominable Sin of ingratitude," describing him as "a most consummate villain." By 1787 Posey was a very troubled man. Washington was still pressing him for repayments. He had had several unpleasant run-ins with the law, including a recent assault on the county Sheriff for which he was convicted and jailed.ⁱⁱ

Even so, Posey's motivation to arson is unclear. Burning the jail could have been personal; he had escaped from there just three days earlier. However, torching the clerk's office, seemingly an afterthought, suggests motivations beyond his personal financial and legal problems, especially considering the events across the river described below.

His mental state aside, anything pertaining to King William remaining after the Posey fire would have been destroyed in April 1865 when New Kent records, sent to Richmond for safekeeping, burned during the Evacuation Fire. Between 1691 and 1702 Pamunkey Neck was part of King & Queen County. While only a short period, it was a time of consolidation of land holdings, a vital transitional time in local history. But again, any records that would provide information about those days - and the founding families of King William - were lost in fires. The first in the King & Queen

clerk's office in 1828 was extensive and probably fatal to pre-King William records. County resident John Walker wrote in his diary it was "supposed by an Incendiary in the night A.M."ⁱⁱⁱ Then on March 10, 1864, Union General Kilpatrick sought vengeance for the death of Col. Ulric Dahlgren during the controversial raid the previous week. At King & Queen Courthouse his troops burned all but one building to the ground.^{iv}

Little is known about the earliest King William Court records, how and where they were kept, or even their custodians. The redoubtable historian Elizabeth Hawes Ryland wrote that between 1726 and 1785 she could not identify who served as clerk. Nevertheless, Ryland was confident the brick courthouse we have so long honored was built sometime after 1723, and before the Hanover courthouse was constructed. It replaced a "dilapidated" building that had served the county for its first two decades.^v Unfortunately, history is generally quiet on clerk's offices. Thus, we have little idea where early clerks conducted business or stored records; nor do we know the origin of the clerk's office that burned in 1885. Aside from that, we do have evidence of two, maybe three, record damaging fires at King William Courthouse before then.

In a letter dated August 8, 1787, Francis Corbin wrote Dr. Arthur Lee,

"You have probably heard, no doubt, that another Court House (New Kent) with the Clerk's office and all the records has been burnt down. Where is the Executive? Ought not a Proclamation have been issued by him to apprehend the offenders when King William Court House was burnt? And would not this probably have prevented the destruction of the New Kent one? But they are all Honorable men, and wise as they are Honorable.... by Courtesy. Happy State with such an Executive! but Happier Executive with such a State."

Corbin then described the issuing of paper money as a form of fraud, and lightening up a bit, sent his

regards to Arthur's brother, Richard Henry Lee. This was one unhappy FFV. Corbin's frustrations were well founded, and he was not alone.^{vi}

The period between the end of the War of Independence and the European wars of the 1790s that increased agricultural exports saw considerable economic hardship and political instability in the newly independent states. The financial system, based on barter, English credit, and internal private debt which had become incredibly complicated, had begun to stagnate. Specie, or hard money, to pay debts or taxes became extremely scarce. By 1787 Virginia's economy was in depression.

In response, state legislatures debated issuing paper money, debtor and tax relief, and reform of court-based debt collection. As ever, those of modest circumstances bore the brunt of the situation and generally favored relief schemes. Yet most of Virginia's wealthy creditors had become substantial debtors themselves. Many from the *best families* faced ruin; grandees could end up in prison as debtors too. That greatly complicated the political situation. As solutions were debated and elections held, the country's first political parties were taking form against this background of unrest. Anxiety was turning to fear.

By spring a rebellion focused against debt-collecting courts in Massachusetts had recently been put down by force. In Philadelphia a Constitutional Convention was underway to replace the failing Articles of Confederation. Virginia's unpredictable county courts, modestly reorganized by creditor interests to better enforce debt and tax collection had become convenient targets for debtors wishing to delay, or avoid, forced sale of their property. The burning of court records in two adjacent counties only weeks apart looked very ominous indeed to Mr. Corbin.^{vii}

Another reference found in a June 12, 1787, letter, John Dawson to James Madison, suggested the King William fire, was, "designedly done."^{viii} A third letter, James Duncanson to James Maury, July 3, 1787, read,

"...the People are getting exceedingly restless & have threatened in many counties to stop the courts. King William Courthouse was burned down the night before the last quarterly court met, & all the records destroyed..."^{ix}

But a 1983 study of the courthouse by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation found, "...no evidence of a severe fire which may have damaged or destroyed the building in the late eighteenth century."^x In addition, the Virginia Council of State recorded, June 21, 1788,

"The Board having received information, that the records of the County Courts of New Kent and King William are destroyed by the burning of the Clerks offices in the said counties..."^{xi}

It is thus likely it was a separate King William clerk's office that sustained the bulk of the damage that May.

Part Two will begin with an offhand comment buried in one of our famous burned records and conclude with a meditation on Virginia's winter weather patterns. *Bibb Edwards*

An annotated version of this article is available from the author.

ⁱ *Richmond Dispatch*, Tuesday, January 20, 1885, p. 1, col 4.

ⁱⁱ *General Thomas Posey: Son of the American Revolution*, John T. Posey, Michigan State University Press, 1992, pp. 284-291. *Old New Kent County, Some Account of the Planters, Plantations, and Places in New Kent County, Vol. 1*, Malcolm H. Harris, 1977, pp. 97-99. Also George Washington to Judge Bartholomew Dandridge, December 18, 1782,

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Bulletin of the King & Queen County Historical Society of Virginia*, No. 17, July, 1964, p. 2, col 2.

^{iv} *Land and Heritage of the Virginia Tidewater: A History of King & Queen County*, Barbara Beigun Kaplan, Ph. D., King and Queen Historical Society, 1993, pp.138-143.

^v *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, "King William County and Its Courthouse," 2nd Ser., Vol. 20, No. 1 (Jan., 1940), pp. 99-112, and "Pamunkey Neck: The Birth of a Virginia County," Vol. 50, No. 4 (Oct., 1942), pp. 321-333, Elizabeth Hawes Ryland.

^{vi} Lee Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (photostat from Lee Papers, Harvard College.)

^{vii} *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, "Speculations on the Significance of Debt: Virginia, 1781-1789", Vol. 76, No. 3 (Jul., 1968), pp. 301-317, Myra L. Rich. Also *Chesapeake Politics 1781-1800*, Norman K. Risjord, Columbia University Press, New York, 1978.

^{viii} Madison Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.,
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/madison_paper_s/

^{ix} Maury Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. Copied by the author.

^x *The Bulletin of the King William County Historical Society of Virginia*, No. 10, Oct. 1983, p. 1, col. 1. Also *King William County Courthouse - A Memorial to Virginia Self-Government*, Alonzo Thomas Dill, King William County Board of Supervisors, 1984, p. 28.

^{xi} *Journal of the Council of the State of Virginia, 1786-88*, Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1967, p. 253.

Jail Funding Project

Editor's note:

The historical society is greatly indebted to Gary Young for a substantial donation to the restoration of the jail facilities as a memorial to his sister, Betty Gardner Young.

BETTY GARDNER YOUNG
October 4, 1946 – July 25, 2011



It is fitting that Betty Gardner Young should be memorialized at the King William Court House complex. Betty's roots in King William go deep, even preceding the County itself, and she spent her entire life as a proud

resident.

Betty's 8th Great Grandparents were John West II and his wife, Unity Croshaw. He was son of the Second Lord De La Warr, served as Governor of the Virginia Colony, and was founder and namesake of what would become the Town of West Point. Through the Wests, Betty's genealogy goes back to Royal and Noble families of England and Western Europe. In King William, the West's' descendants and Betty's other ancestors included some of the most prominent family names in King William, including Fox, Lipscomb, Blake, Sweet, Davis, and Rice. Betty's parents, Ellie Power Davis of Enfield, King William County, and Andrew Shelby Young of Lorne, Caroline County, were both descended from the same late 18th century Davises and Blakes making her about the "Blakest" and "Davisest" resident around. While she professed to know little about her family tree, she was actually quite aware of her ancestors' role in shaping the County and, in particular, in the founding of Mangohick Church and its successor, Corinth Christian Church, where she was a lifelong member.

Despite losing her father at an early age, Betty had a normal and pleasant upbringing. Because of her birthday (Oct 4), she had to wait a full year after her age group to begin school. But on her first day at King William Elementary School in September 1953 her teacher quickly recognized her abilities were far ahead of those of her peers and immediately moved her across the hall thus starting her public education in the Second Grade. That pattern of educational excellence followed her through her entire 12 years in King William Public Schools. Betty ultimately graduated with straight "A's" through her high school years (except one "B" in Phys Ed for being unable to "tumble" . . . she quickly learned!) After high school, Betty attended The Pan American School and upon graduation accepted employment at the Virginia State Corporation Commission. Thus began nearly 44 years of service to the Commonwealth. Betty was a stickler for accuracy and attention to detail and she received multiple awards, including from the Governor, for her efforts in cost-cutting and fiscal integrity. While her job shifted and changed over the years, she remained employed by the State for her entire working career. She retired in October 2006 and looked forward to doing what she enjoyed most: spending as much time as possible nurturing her carefully tended trees, flowers and shrubs, which made her lawn a standout in her community.

On a personal level, Betty was a much loved and respected member of her community and her church.

Seemingly incapable of pettiness and animosity, everyone around her was impressed by her willingness to be helpful, her loyalty, and, most of all, by her endless kindnesses to everyone she met. These qualities made it all the more devastating to all who knew her when in late 2007 she was diagnosed with Stage 3 Colon Cancer. But in typical fashion, she made up her mind to give the fight her best effort and was ultimately able to return to her beloved home and yard for another good 3 years. Sadly, the cancer returned with a vengeance in the spring of 2011 and, though the spirit was willing, she simply lacked the strength to halt the inevitable. With her typical concern for never inconveniencing or worrying others, Betty bore her last difficult days with courage and stoicism and died peacefully at noon on July 25, 2011.

King William County's history will continue to be studied for many years to come and Betty's friends and family are proud that her name will always be a part of that. Despite her modesty and disdain for self-promotion, she would be pleased. *Gary Young*

Annual Membership Dues

Please note that The King William Historical Society's year runs from July 1- June 30. This means it's time to pay your dues. We continue to identify projects and needs for preservation in King William County and need your support.

The dues for annual memberships are:

**Individual..... \$20 Family \$30
Student \$10**

Lifetime memberships are:

Single Lifetime... \$250 Lifetime Couple.... \$300

**Mail to: King William Historical Society
PO Box 233
King William, Va. 23086**

New Member

Welcome to Mr. James Tarrant of Falls Church, VA.

Upcoming Events

Beulah Baptist Church (Rt. 600, River Rd., Aylett, VA) celebrates its 200th anniversary on Sunday,

September 30, 2012. A special service is scheduled for 2:00 p.m. Put this on your calendar.

Deaths

Rose Lee Williams McGeorge of Varina, Virginia, a longtime member, died Thursday, May 3, 2012. She is survived by her husband of 62 years, Ellett Richard McGeorge, a former president of our society. Other survivors include her daughters Pat and Pam, sons Rick and Bruce, their spouses, numerous grandchildren, great grandchildren, extended family and many dear friends. We will certainly miss her.