

King William County Historical Society Newsletter

October, 2012

From Our President

The new board you elected in July has met several times and is working on many projects. A special reception for potential new members is being planned to be held prior to our January meeting. If you know of possible new members please email their names and addresses to Audrey Mitchell audreyribble@hotmail.com. A new supply of the popular note cards of Acquinton Church and the courthouse is being ordered. Signage is planned for Acquinton Church. We will also be requesting that the Acquinton Church and the property the Society owns across the street be placed in a King William County historic district.

I hope you enjoy the visit to Bear Garden. I will be unable to join you as that weekend is the Archeological Society of Virginia's annual meeting, where I have been nominated for re-election as treasurer and must present the 2013 budget. Remember, this is your society, if you have suggestions regarding potential programs or other things please let us know.

Carl R. Fischer

JAIL UPDATE

The jail project is progressing. The HVAC system has been installed and most of the electrical wiring is complete. Dominion Virginia Power will install a new 200 amp electrical service in late September. Plastering the holes in the wall is the next project. It is our hope to have the project completed by January.

Carl R. Fischer

July Picnic Report

On July 15, 2012 the King William County Historical Society met at the Court House for its annual meeting. The meeting began at 4:00 pm with a tour of the Old Court House complex – the Museum and Court House were opened and a description of the intended renovations to the old jail was given by Carl Fischer. County authors, Karen Westermann and Rev. Bill Palmer, sold and autographed their books. The business meeting began at 5:00 in the Board of Supervisors room. The business of the day included a financial overview, the election of officers, and a presentation of thanks to Ron Parker for his countless hours of work on the cemetery project. After the business was concluded we shared our "indoor picnic" in the Board of Supervisors room. Thanks to all who attended and brought the delicious food. Our picnic was a huge success and we were cool and dry even while the rain poured outdoors!

Adele Smith

Membership and Dues

We welcome our new members who have joined the society since July including John and Sally T. Hart of Hanover, Warren W. Roberts of Maplewood, MN and Dana Gregory Rose of Radford, Virginia.

If you have not paid your dues, please note that The King William Historical Society's year runs from July 1- June 30. This means dues are due! We continue to identify projects and needs for preservation in King William County and need your support. We currently have about

40 members who have not paid dues for the coming year. Dues help the society meet our annual expenses for the coming year and each member's support is important.

The dues structure is:

Individual	\$20	Family	\$30
Student	\$10	Lifetime	\$250

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

Ron Parker

King William County Historical Museum

MUSEUM COUNCIL

On September 5, 2012, Ruth Armatage and Rebecca Townsend took a vintage wedding dress, the matching pair of slippers and an early sampler to a conservation clinic that was held at Winterthur Museum in Winterthur, Delaware. More events regarding the items will be forthcoming.

The Collection Committee has been making progress through the generous collections of local artifacts. Anyone who is seriously interested in working with that committee, or the museum, is invited to call me for more information.

Anyone having election memorabilia to share is invited to lend it to the museum for the months of October and November. We already have one collection promised, and look forward to more!

The museum is currently opened on Saturdays and Sundays from 1-5 PM. In addition, we are opened by appointment during the week by calling 769-9619. Many thanks to the dedicated volunteers who are helping keep the doors open. We need more of you!

Rebecca Townsend

Local Events

King and Queen County Historical Society Meeting Sunday, October 28, 2012 at Walkerton

The King and Queen County Historical Society will hold its next quarterly meeting at the Hotel Riverside in Walkerton at 3:00pm on Sunday, October 28, 2012. The speakers are Page Owen McLemore and Ben P. Owen IV. Their subject will be Taylor and Caldwell Inc., the vegetable cannery that operated on the property which is now the boat landing. Mr. Taylor was their grandfather. Everyone is invited to refreshments following the meeting.

Our Courthouse Fires, Part 2

The society is greatly appreciative of the following article by our member Bibb Edwards. This is the second of two articles about our courthouse. The first part was in the July 2012 newsletter.

A fire of uncertain cause and extent at King William Courthouse just before the May 1787 quarterly court meeting ended Part 1 of this short history of our "burned" county. But between then and our well-known 1885 fire, there is evidence of another record damaging fire at the courthouse, maybe two.

A page in a volume recovered amid the smoldering clerk's office in 1885 provides documentation of this second fire. Amid the prose is the description of a deed, "...bearing date in the year 1804 but which was so far destroyed by fire in the late attempt to burn the clerk's office of the County of King William as to be rendered so unintelligible as not to admit of its being recorded, &c." ¹ As this deed was re-recorded July 25, 1808, the "late attempt" was likely between those dates. Nothing else has been discovered that would suggest the fire's circumstances or the extent of damage to county records.

The 1885 clerk's office was located beside the courthouse where the old jail now sits. There seems to be no extant photograph; all we know of its construction is that it was "...brick, two stories high, and covered with slate," and "...fairly large." We trust it complimented the courthouse architecture. It was likely one room. There was no stove, only a large wood-burning fireplace with a five-foot square hearth on the first floor. ²

The best account of the fire is found in the *Richmond Dispatch*, Tuesday, January 20th. The fire was first noticed about 6 AM Sunday, well before dawn. By 9 AM the building had collapsed. ³ Little was done to stem the fire; indeed it seems little could have been done. ⁴ The *Dispatch* also noted a previous fire, "...(about 1840), but then most of the records were saved." Additional evidence supporting this reported third fire has not been found.

O.M. Winston, clerk since 1869 who lived at White Bank two miles away, "went down in the morning, took a look, and went back home." About noon an unidentified bystander took an interest in some smoldering volumes, removed them from the ashes and poured water over them. More could have been rescued according to another onlooker, future clerk B.C. Garrett, Sr. ⁵

Winston was quick to blame "...an incendiary." He mentioned a window-blind usually kept closed was seen open when the fire was first noticed. He also cited, with no explanation, "...other circumstances." ⁶ But Alonzo Thomas Dill in his *King William County Courthouse - A Memorial to Virginia Self-Government* suggested arson "...lacks credibility." Dill then repeated the legend of "...a Saturday night poker party that left a dormant fire whose embers flared up and ignited the dry records after the participants had gone home." ⁷ He did not suggest why the embers flared this particular night or how they reached combustible materials.

However, Dill also included, with no comment, B.C. Garrett's reflection of, "...some talk of it having been set because there had been a particularly disgraceful case concerning a member of a family of standing." ⁸ If Dill chose to write around the well-organized lynching of a black prisoner at the courthouse almost a year earlier that involved O.M. Winston, also the county jailer, his assistant L.L. Waring, and the Littlepage family, we probably will never know. ⁹

Probably neither will we know if politics played a part in the fire. Virginia's newly reconstituted Democratic Party regained control of both houses of the General Assembly in the November 1883 elections. The 1884 Anderson-McCormick Act then put the state's electoral process into their very partisan hands. Supplemented by the Walton Election Act (1894) and the Constitution of 1902, the Democrats would eventually end what they saw as a threat to Virginia's "traditional values" by Radicals, Readjusters and Republicans. Almost half of the state's voters would be - more or less - legally disenfranchised, mostly blacks, Republicans, and poor whites. Solidified in the process was the power of local "courthouse rings," the foundation of the Martin and Byrd Democratic political "machines" that would dominate Virginia politics for three-quarters of a century. But in the short run the 1884 act soon contributed to increased electoral fraud, corruption, intimidation, and violence that had already been playing itself out locality-by-locality, about equally, in the wake of Reconstruction. ¹⁰

By 1885 King William was already well divided along party, debt adjustment, and racial lines. While the vast majority of the county's wealth was still in the hands of white Democrats, the majority black population consistently took the county Republican by a substantial margin. Significant numbers of northern-born residents in the growing Town of West Point added a merchant versus farmer - not to

mention *sectional* - tension to an electorate already divided along the long, narrow county. Thus King William had all the makings of a contentious post-Reconstruction political environment. ¹¹

Shortly before the Anderson-McCormick Act was passed King William made a small contribution to that year's election intrigue. The locally certified results of an August 1884 special election to fill a position in the House of Delegates were overturned within a week by the board of state canvassers. They ruled lawyer and Democrat H.I. Lewis of West Point the winner over Republican merchant A.T. Mooklar, "the Mangohick Boss." This despite the written certification of three King William commissioners that Mooklar had won, a document clerk O.M. Winston attested. Three months later the House Committee on Privileges and Elections reversed their decision and seated Mooklar; it had all been "a clerical mistake." ¹²

While this was unfolding the very contentious November Presidential election saw Democrat Grover Cleveland narrowly defeat James G. Blaine, ushering in the first non-Republican national administration in almost a quarter century. But would electoral mischief or voter outrage have led to arson?

Another disturbing possibility was suggested in the rash of revelations just before the fire of embezzlements and sloppy bookkeeping by local and state public officials. As the Commonwealth was initiating audits and well-publicized efforts to settle accounts, one newspaper noted, "The clerk's office of King William county having been burned, and all the papers of the clerk having also been destroyed, it is a question as to how the accounts of the officer are." ¹³ The anonymous writer stopped well short of suggesting O.M. Winston was responsible for the 1885 fire, or if he indeed had a motive. If such thoughts were entertained at the time they soon faded. We do know that King William had a new clerk two years later, Col. James Christopher Johnson. ¹⁴

But what if the fire at the courthouse that cold January morning had as its origin an act of nature?

The local weather preceding the fire began unremarkably for mid-January. After an unusually warm mid-day Monday the temperatures dropped to normal. The next two days were clear and crisp. Rain moved in Thursday and temperatures began to rise. For those who have spent more than a handful of winters in Virginia what followed will seem unusual only in its intensity.

Midnight Thursday in Richmond was 45°, 2° warmer than it had been at noon. As the rain slacked off Friday morning the temperature still continued to rise. It was 69° at noon, and reached the high for the day, 74°, at 3 PM. But by then people were noticing the wind rather than the temperature. The *Dispatch* on Sunday wrote, "It increased in force until at 4 o'clock it was blowing great gusts, the velocity being greater than has been seen in years." The temperature remained unusually warm, 69° at 6 PM and 60° at midnight. The paper went on to describe roofs blown off around Richmond, signs tumbling down the street, and fences falling over. Local damage was noted in Lynchburg, Washington, Baltimore and Norfolk newspapers. Citizens throughout the state reported difficulty sleeping Friday night because of the howling wind. The wind began to slacken on Saturday with the temperatures dropping hour over hour throughout the day. By midnight it was 35°; the worst was over. But for King William Courthouse perhaps the most dramatic effect of the weather was still to come. ¹⁵

It takes little imagination to suggest that Friday's warm temperatures encouraged someone in the clerk's office to bank the embers in the open fireplace and perhaps open a window. O.M. Winston's comment about a window-blind usually kept closed but seen open Sunday morning suggests something unusual inside the building, not outside. Buildings of that time were drafty at

best. Even if any open windows had been closed Friday afternoon as the wind increased, embers could easily have been blown throughout the building during the long evening hours of the windstorm. There they could have smoldered unnoticed – even by poker players – amid the old dry volumes until, near dawn Sunday morning, fire erupted.

We may never know for certain the origins of the fire that cold Sunday morning. We can only hope there is more to be discovered, and people interested enough to keep looking.

1 - King William Record Book 5, p. 218, as abstracted in Elizabeth Hawes Ryland's, *King William County Records Phostatic (sic) Copies in Virginia State Archives, Vol. 3*, p. 33, 194?. Ryland notes earlier on page 20 of another entry, recorded July 27, 1807, "possibly re-recorded after the destruction of older records," but above is the only entry where there is mention of "the late attempt" within the deed itself.

2 - *Richmond Dispatch*, Tuesday, January 20, 1885, p. 1, col. 4. B.C. Garrett, Sr. described it as "rather large" in the interview mentioned in endnote 5. Given its location between the courthouse and the head of a ravine, and the design of other county clerk offices of the time, it would be very unusual if it had more than one room. That second floor was probably an attic. See Carl Lounsbury's excellent *The Courthouses of Early Virginia: An Architectural History*, 2005.

3 - *Richmond Daily Whig*, January 20, 1885, p. 3, col. 1.

4 - On page 22 of his *King William County Courthouse - A Memorial to Virginia Self-Government*, 1984, Alonzo Thomas Dill mentions the "poor water supply" at the courthouse in the 1880s.

5 - B.C. Garrett, Sr. interview recounted by Ms. Milnor Ljungstedt in a March 12, 1920 letter to Morgan P. Robinson, state archivist of Virginia, in "Collection of materials concerning county courthouses, records, and clerks of court, 1916-1929," Library of Virginia, Call Number 35002. B.C. Garrett would have been 23 at the time of the fire.

6 - *Richmond Dispatch*, Tuesday, January 20, 1885, p. 1, col. 4. O.M. Winston may have wished to insulate himself or his staff from accusations of negligence by suspecting "...an incendiary." He was quick to mention to the *Dispatch* his loss of valuable personal papers. However the political climate of the day was as unsettled as it had been in 1787. O.M. Winston was in the thick of it.

7 - Dill, p. 22.

8 - Dill, p. 21.

9 - (Richmond) *Daily Dispatch*, February 6, 1884, p. 3, col. 4. Also *The West Point Star*, January 31, 1884, p. 5, col. 2. Either Mr. Dill did not know the significance of the comment

"concerning a member of a family of standing" or he chose – out of politeness I suppose – to quote from Ms. Ljungstedt's letter without comment, leaving the connecting of the dots to others. My read of his character and scholarship leads me to suspect the latter.

10 - See *Virginia - Bourbonism to Byrd 1870 - 1925*, Allen W. Moger, University of Virginia Press, 1968, for a good overview; p. 56 and pp. 97-98 for those in a hurry. Also *Old Virginia Restored, An Interpretation of the Progress Impulse, 1870-1930*, Raymond H. Pulley, University of Virginia Press, 1968. And for a trip into the trenches, the woefully under-read and thus under-appreciated dissertation by Herman L. Horn, *The Growth and Development of the Democratic Party in Virginia Since 1890*, Duke University, 1949, especially Chapters 4 and 6, details all manner of ways used to steal Virginia elections, legal and illegal. It is available at the Library of Virginia. Also, Dr. Bathurst Browne Bagby, one time West Point physician, wrote of fraudulent election practices in Essex, King and Queen, and King William counties in his *Recollections*, 1950, pp. 63-67.

11 - The KW 1884 Personal Property Tax book counts 826 white males (44%) and 1,034 (56%) colored males subject to tax. The Presidential vote that year in King William was Cleveland 782 (43%) and Blaine 1,033 (57%). The 1891 taxes were the first to fully segregate taxpayers by race. That year the value of land and improvements owned by KW county whites was \$1,134,825 (95%), colored was \$60,914 (5%). The value of white personal property recorded was \$502,800 (94%); for colored it was \$30,523 (6%). Page 49 of Moger reprints a map from *William Mahone of Virginia*, Nelson Morehouse Blake, 1935, which shows King William has having "Divided Sentiment" on the Funder/Readjuster question.

12 - *The West Point Star*, Aug 14, 1884, p. 4, col. 2. *Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of Virginia for the Extra Session of 1884*, Richmond, Rush U. Derr, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1884, pp. 61-63, pp. 71-73 and pp. 111-112. Hidden amidst the rather dry language of the *Journal* and in lost newspaper accounts must be quite a story. It should be disclosed that O.M. Winston and William Edwards, who was acting as an election Commissioner, are distant relatives of the author.

13 - *The Evening Critic*, Washington D.C., January 23, 1885, p. 4, col. 3.

14 - Col. Johnson was Elizabeth Hawes Ryland's uncle. She dedicated her book, *King William County, Virginia from Old Newspapers and Files*, to him just before her death in 1955. Even though she was about six at the time of the fire I am sure she knew *something* about it we would like to know.

15 - The *Richmond Dispatch* carried a daily weather report, including a very generalized forecast from Washington by "Special Telegram," probably from the U.S. Army's Signal Corps' National Weather Service. In addition to a general assessment of the previous day's weather the report included temperature readings taken locally at standard times of the day. The *Dispatch* did not publish Mondays. These two paragraphs are based on these weather reports in addition to descriptions of the damage caused by the wind around the region, mainly "A High Wind," January 18, 1885, p. 1, col. 6. The distance between Richmond and King William Courthouse, about 25 air miles, is not enough to suggest substantial temperature differences.

