

Chapter II Location and Site Context

A. Significance of the property

The Eastern Shore of Virginia is comprised of two counties: the northern county of Accomack and the southern county of Northampton. (Figure 2.1) The Eastern Shore is traditionally a rural, agricultural region in Virginia. Population on the Eastern Shore has gradually decreased. Young people are moving away and those who remain are aging. In 1995, Northampton County population totaled 12,900 with 100% considered rural. About 50% of the population is non-white, primarily consisting of African Americans, and Latinos. Approximately 27% of the total population is below the poverty line, with a median household income of \$22,969. Very dependent on a large seasonal labor force to work the large agricultural fields and crops, the Shore population witnessed slavery, tenant farming, and migrant labor as a means to satisfy labor needs. Agriculture ranked fourth on the list 1995 employment figures for Northampton County with 13.2%, while the top three were services with 27.4%, government with 24.6%, and trade with 22.2%.¹

Northampton County reported 6,183 housing units in 1995. Manufactured homes are prevalent and can be found along Route 13 in parks, and along the seaside and bayside roads on very small lots. The Eastern Shore was initially patented in hundreds of acre tracts. There are many old farmhouses now in ruin. As the Shore population grew, land was divided and sold, and

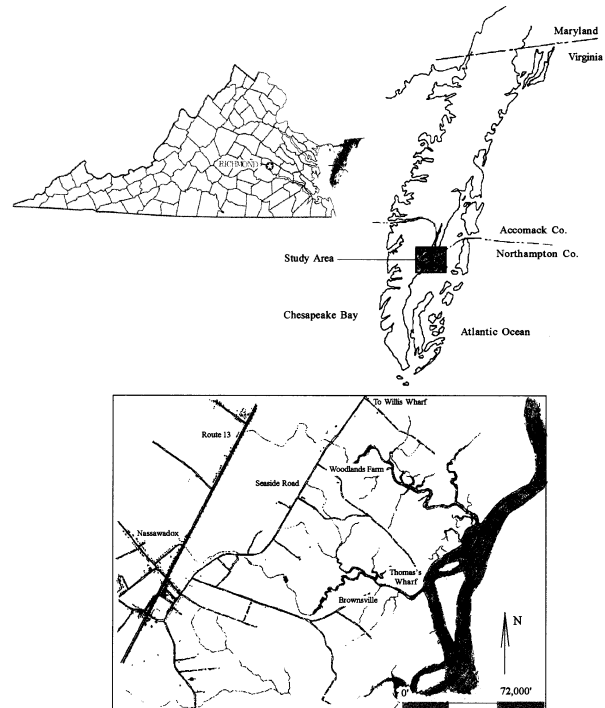


Figure 2.1 Location Map of Eastern Shore of Virginia and Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf

¹ Virginia Employment Commission, Economic Information Division, 1996 Community Profiles, Northampton County, Labor Market and Demographic Analysis Section.

this continues today. Many large farms sold off parcels of land for homesites along the seaside and bayside roads. It is not uncommon to see four and five manufactured homes along a small stretch of road.

Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf as it exists today, was part of a much larger 1647 land patent in Northampton County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Ownership of the property has subsequently passed from three Eastern shore families, Michael, Tompkins, and Thomas, to The Nature Conservancy. Historically and culturally significant, Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf is a wonderful example of a traditional Eastern Shore landscape, providing clues about the history of the farm, as well as the historical and cultural development of Virginia's Eastern Shore.

An eighteenth century house provides the physical center of Woodlands Farm. Reportedly built by John Tompkins for his daughter Peggy and her husband William W. Wilson, Woodlands is a two story, two room deep, central hall house with large chimneys on either end and a full basement with a cooking-size fireplace. (Figure 2.2) At one time the house followed the traditional Eastern Shore architectural development with a big house, colonnade, kitchen.² (Figure 2.3)



Figure 2.2 North side of Woodlands. Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1963.



Figure 2.3 South side of Woodlands. Author. January 1997.

² According to Eleanor Walton Upshur in "Early Houses of Virginia's Eastern Shore," *Virginia Cavalcade* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1974), a certain house form developed on the Eastern Shore of Virginia; "'big house, little house, colonnade, and kitchen' style of house. The kitchen might once have been the entire house; the colonnade was often the last portion to be built; the little house served as the dining

Woodlands Farm is layered with a rich history, thus reinforcing the significance of the farm, but man and nature struck a large blow to the integrity of the dwelling and surrounding landscape. Little remains of what was original. Few ruins and the disturbance of the land make it difficult to recognize the physical structure and organization of the farm and yard. Elements such as the dairy, graveyard, and remaining vegetation lend character to the farmsite and hint of an earlier era. (Figure 2.4 and 2.5)

East of the house and farmyard is Thomas's Wharf on the Matchipongo River. (Figure 2.6) One of the few deep-water ports on the seaside of the Eastern Shore, much activity is associated with the wharf. In 1827 the first shipment of sweet potatoes from farmers along the river was sent to New York on the schooner Providence under the watch of Captain Lewis Matthews. John T. Wilson, a member of the company that arranged the shipment, was then the current owner of Woodlands and



Figure 2.4 Looking northeast towards the dairy and the schoolhouse in the background. Author. June 1997.



Figure 2.5 Thomas family graveyard located north of Woodlands. Author. June 1997.



Figure 2.6 Looking north at Thomas's Wharf with Matchipongo River on the right. Author. June 1997.

room; and the main, or big house contained the formal rooms and cross hall with entrance porches at either end. Use of this architectural style continued throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth.”

the wharf. Trade at the wharf continued through the Thomas family ownership after the Civil War, hence the name Thomas's Wharf. Steamboats traveling between Norfolk and New York frequented the wharf for produce during the growing season. Twentieth century fame is due to the largest liquor raid on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in 1930. Today, Thomas's Wharf remains a living timeline with prehistoric, historic, and modern layers of activity and artifacts to tell the traditional Eastern Shore story. There is no doubt that this landscape is extremely dynamic, changing quickly in a short time. The natural processes have taken over and they are transforming and reclaiming the landscape, recording yet another layer of history.

B. Surrounding Properties

North Adjacent Property

Whitelaw refers to the parcel of land North of Woodlands as N95 and N95A. In 1650 a patent was granted for 1,000 acres, then another four years later for an additional 1,700 acres. Through many complicated land transactions the remaining 2,050 acres were broken up into smaller parcels. In 1781, 947 acres passed from Kendall Lee to John Waddy; "the area became known as Lee's Neck and it extended up the seaboard around the bend of Machipongo Creek to what was known as Core's Gut, up that a little way and then over to the seaside road and down that to the branch separating from [Woodlands]."³ That branch today is called Green's Creek, but Whitelaw states that it was referred to as Michael's Branch and Woodland's Branch in earlier deeds.⁴ John Waddy and his wife Elizabeth sold a total of about 800 acres to John Upshur II; a portion of that in 1782 and again in 1793. Upon his death 760 acres was divided between his sons William M. Upshur, who received land on the seaside road, and James Upshur, who received land on the waterfront.

From historic and modern maps the property line dividing this parcel from Woodlands follows the centerline of Green's Creek. Evident along this creek are

³ Ralph T. Whitelaw in *Virginia's Eastern Shore: A History of Northampton and Accomack Counties* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 1951), 478.

⁴ Ibid.

remnants of a mill, consisting of a mill pond, dam, and old road bed. Again from the maps it appears that any such feature would belong to this property instead of Woodlands Farm. No conclusive information disproving that assumption was found.

South Adjacent Property

South of Thomas's Wharf, across Upshur Creek lies the farm and land known as Brownsville Plantation. First patented in 1652 by John Browne for 1,000 acres, the land has remained in constant ownership of the founding family. Thomas Browne, son of John, left the north half of the property to daughter Anne who married Arthur Upshur II. Their son John Upshur I, through many land transactions, acquired the whole of the original patent in 1823. Brownsville continued to pass through the subsequent generations of the Upshur family until 1978 when it was deeded to The Nature Conservancy. A property of great significance to the Eastern Shore, Brownsville Plantation currently serves as the headquarters of the Virginia Coast Reserve.⁵

South of Woodlands along the seaside road lie Custis Farms and "Upshurshire" on a portion of the original land patent for Woodlands. In 1683, the southern 500 acres of Woodlands was sold to Owen Edmunds, by Major John Tilney. Upon his death the homeplace and land went to son David Edmonds. The remaining 150 acres was left to daughter Ann, whose land eventually passed to the Churn family. David Edmonds and his wife Sinah sold the property to Thomas Upshur, Sr. and his wife Ann Stockley. The property "Upshurshire" remained in the Upshur family until 1833 when it was sold to Joshua K. Roberts.

Nearest Urban Area

Willis Wharf, earlier know as Downings Wharf, is a small town located on the seaside just north of Woodlands Farm and just east of Exmore. Traditionally a significant seaside port for the shipment of grains and potatoes to East Coast destinations, it attracted

⁵ Ron M. Kagawa, "A Guideline for Future Preservation, Management & Interpretation of Brownsville Plantation circa 1652, Northampton County, Virginia" (Masters Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1996.)

the business of the local farmers and thrived. E.L. Willis store was the closest place for those living at Woodlands, before the railroad came, to purchase necessary items and interact with the local community. With the coming of the railroad in the 1880's, the town of Exmore grew dramatically, Willis Wharf's industry changed to harvesting and processing seafood, one that continues today.

With the railroad also came the development of new depot towns along the rail line and the expansion of those already existing. A good example of this is Nassawadox, the nearest town to Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf in the twentieth century. Nassawadox attracted businesses away from the nearby towns, such as Willis Wharf, and to its busy intersection, and subsequently became a "heavy shipping point for white potatoes, oysters, small truck, etc."⁶ While the railroad allowed for the growth of Nassawadox and other towns such as Exmore, it also depleted the type and amount of business common to some of the principal shipping ports on the seaside of the Shore.⁷

⁶ C.W. Holland, Jr., N.L. Holland, and W.W. Taylor, *An Economic and Social Survey of Northampton County*, University of Virginia Record Extension Series (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1927), 15.

⁷ *Ibid*, 23.