

Chapter III Site History

Early Settlement

Bayside land adjacent to waterways was quickly patented and settled by the mid seventeenth century.¹ A shift in this steady settlement pattern came in 1633 when the first land was patented on the seaside. The continued settlement of land with access to water gave rise to a very dispersed population with few if any organized towns. “Although holdings were smaller and population denser in the area of early settlement on Old Plantation, King’s, and Cherrystone creeks, elsewhere settlers on larger holdings were more separated from their neighbors. Landholders were seated on plantations large enough to put them out of sight of their nearest neighbors. The need for sufficient acreage to allow tobacco-worn fields to lie fallow for a lengthy period before being rotated back into production may have influenced this settlement pattern.”² With many resources and a water and agriculturally based economy, the people of the Eastern Shore focused little on the physical structure of local towns as trade centers. Centers of business were the private wharves that were built on waters adjacent to patented lands. A visitor in the early eighteenth century commented on this phenomena; “thus neither the interest nor inclination of the Virginians induce them to cohabit in towns; so that they are not forward in contributing their assistance towards the making of particular places, every plantation affording the owner the provision of a little market.”³

In 1647, 550 acres of land on the seaside of the Eastern Shore of Virginia was patented to Charles Scarborough, who then sold it seventeen years later in 1664 to Major

¹ According to Whitelaw land patents were granted to an individual, or patentee, who agreed to transport persons to the colony in order to settle the granted land. The patentee received 50 acres for each headright which included himself, family members, and any other persons, servants or slaves. Responsibilities of the patentee included living or working the land; “If a patentee did not plant or seat the land within three years, it became escheat land and could be granted to another. Seven years from the date of the patent, the patentee became liable to the Crown for an annual quitrent of about one shilling per 50 acres.”

² James R. Perry, *The Formation of a Society on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1615-1655* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 68.

³ Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia: From Whence is inferred a Short View of Maryland and North Carolina*, ed. by Richard L. Morton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 73.

John Tilney. Born in Ipswich, Suffolk, England in 1618/1619, John Tylley (Tilney) came to Northampton County, Virginia in 1640. His transportation to Virginia was sponsored by John Holloway, who in return received a patent for 550 acres. A physician, John Holloway died in 1643 and left to John Tilney “all my phisick and chirurgeon Bookes with the Chest, Instruments and Lancetts, all my phisicall and Chirurgical bookes Latin and English, one small brass Morter and pestell, and one Cesterne [cistern]”.⁴ In addition to the medical books, Holloway appointed Tilney to care for the inheritance of his unborn child, 100 acres and a “Tenantable house”, until the child came of age. Little of John Tilney is known from 1643 until he began to purchase property in the 1660’s; many land transactions refer to him with the title of Major. “Major John Tilney took the Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy along with the Oath of a Commissioner for Accomack County with Anthony Hodgkins, Capt. George Parker and John West, on March 23, 1662/3. Sir William Berkeley appointed Major Tilney a Justice in 1663, and he may have been a Sheriff at one time in the county. The records of Hungars Church show John was a Vestryman.”⁵

In the same year that John Tilney purchased the initial patent from Charles Scarborough, land adjacent to Tilney’s acreage was patented to John Prettimen. In 1671 Prettimen’s 200 acres was reassigned to Richard Hinman, who subsequently reassigned to John Tilney. Two years prior in 1669, John Tilney received a patent for 1,100 acres, comprised of Scarborough’s 550 acres, Prettimen/Hinman’s 200 acres, and an additional 350 acres of land.

John Tilney was married twice, to Ann Smyth in 1647 and to a Mary sometime before 1688. A total of nine children survived. Tilney’s eldest daughter Ann Michael, eventually recieved the 1,100 of seaside acreage. Married to John Michael, Jr., a cousin of John Custis of Hungar’s, prior to or in the year 1670, Ann Michael recieved a gift of 600 acres from her father. The following year in 1671 Ann and John received an additional 500 acres from John Tilney for the next son born them. That son was Joachim, and in

⁴ Whitelaw, 352-3.

1690 Ann Michael deeded him 900 acres. There is some uncertainty about what happened to the 900 acres upon the death of Joachim Michael in about 1707, for no evidence suggests that he was ever married or had heirs. In the deeds this property was referred to as “Sea Side Plantation,” and it cropped up again in the 1752 will of Joachim’s nephew, Joachim Michael (wife Margaret Wainhouse):

8th: Item my will and desire is, that my Loving wife rent out or put an overseer on my Sea Side plantation and the following Slaves Rachel, Bridget, Sabrah, Tamer, Leah, Adam, Peter, Titus, Jacob, Abel, Isaac, Nan, Sarah sister to Nan, Together with Such Horses Cattle Sheep & hoggs as she shall think nescessary for the use of the plantation, till my son Joachim shall arrive to the age of twenty one years; and the profits Arising from the said plantation and Slaves, to be applyd in discharging of my debts, also my desire that all my corn that is to spare, my crop of Tobacco made at Sea Side and oats be sold for money to discharge my Debts.”⁶

This item certainly brings into question the date of the Woodlands house and the number of outbuildings to support slave labor and agricultural activities. The dwelling that exists presently on the site was believed to be built in the 1780’s or 1790’s. In Whitelaw’s original manuscript two statements are made, of which neither appear in the final published manuscript: (1) “The all frame house probably was built by a Michael about the middle of the eighteenth century” and (2) he refers to a much older house being built in the swamp and all that remains is the cellar hole.⁷ If the farm was worked throughout the eighteenth century it is conceivable that another dwelling was built closer to the center of the property for easy access and also in close proximity to water for transportation purposes. Future archaeological work may begin to uncover the location of domestic, farm, and slaves activities and structures, but as of this date there is no historical or archaeological evidence that supports these claims.

⁵ Judith Marshall Stell, *The Tilney Family Journal* [research-on-line] (Genealogy & History on the Eastern Shore, July 1997, accessed 16 January 1998); available from <http://www.esva.net/ghotes/tilney/>; Internet.

⁶ *Northampton County Book of Wills, Inventories, Deeds, etc. No. 20, 249.*

⁷ Ralph T. Whitelaw, *Virginia’s Eastern Shore: A History of Northampton and Accomack Counties*, Original Manuscript, Eastern Shore Historical Society; Onancock, Virginia.

Upon his death in 1752, Joachim Michael nominated his son-in-law Michael Christian to manage the Sea Side plantation until his son Joachim came of age. There is no record of whether Joachim Michael took possession of the Sea Side plantation left to him by his father, but in 1770 he married Mary Blaikley Stith; he died three years later in 1773. Provided in the 1752 will of his father, Joachim could not take possession of the property until he was 21 years of age, and in the event that he was to die without male heirs, the Sea Side plantation, comprised of 783 acres, would pass to his older brother John Michael. No will for Joachim Michael can be found in the Northampton County records, but in 1774 a contract between his wife Mary Blaikley Michael and his brother John Michael is recorded. For the sum of 500 pounds and two negroes, Mary Blaikley Michael “doth remise, release and forever quit claim, unto the said John Michael his heirs, Executors, Administrators & Assigns all the right Title and Interests of Dower which I the said Mary Blaikley Michael hath of in and to eight hundred acres of land, or thereabouts, and one water Grist Mill with the Appurtenances being the Manor Plantation and Tract of Land wheron the said Joachim Michael lately lived.”⁸ Again there is little indication whether or not the Michaels lived at the homeplace or Warehouse Creek on the bayside or at Sea Side Plantation.

In 1785, John Michael and his wife Margaret Christian traded the 900 acres of seaside land to John Tompkins in return for 300 pounds and 1,600 acres in Gloucester County, Virginia. Once in possession of John Tompkins and his wife Frances, Woodlands would remain in the family for three generations. This was the initiation of the most active and significant time for Woodlands Farm.

Plantation Economy

With the primary industry of the salt works abandoned for the production of tobacco, the first shift in the economy and trade of the Eastern Shore is evident. Tobacco remained prominent until the late seventeenth century when a gradual shift to grain began to occur. Several influencing factors in this agricultural and economic change were poor markets and falling prices of tobacco during the 1660's and 1670's, declining fertility of

⁸ *Northampton County Book of Deeds, etc. No. 21, 95.*

the soil due to the cultivation of tobacco, and the limited availability of free land.⁹ The growing of grain was less a replacement of tobacco than as an expansion of an existing commodity. Eastern Shore agriculture also included vegetables and livestock. An 1835 article published in *A New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia and the District of Columbia* reads, the “principle crops are wheat, Indian corn, rye oats, peas, beans, cotton and potatoes.”¹⁰

In 1796, eleven years after the Tompkins/Michael land trade, John Tompkins leased Woodlands farm to his daughter Peggy Custis and her husband William W. Wilson. As part of the natural life lease to his daughter, John and Frances Tompkins reserved the right to pasture 20 head of cattle, 20 head of sheep, and 4 horses, as well as to get as much timber from the plantation as they “think proper”. An addendum to the lease was also registered at the courthouse:

This shall certify whom it may concern that William W. Wilson, hath lately removed with his family from the State of Maryland and brought with him sundry slaves; and that it is not his intention to sell or dispose of the same, and that he hath complied with the act of assembly for the preventing the further importation of slaves within the Commonwealth by taking the Oath therein prescribed, and that the Slaves he has brought with him were not by him imported either from Africa, or any of the West India Islands. Given under my hand this 13th January, 1796.

John Tompkins¹¹

This raises some interesting issues about the status and culture of slavery in Virginia and on the Eastern Shore. Members of the Michael family were certainly large enough landholders to warrant the need for slave labor. In the 1752 will of Joachim Michael he lists 28 slaves by name, 10 others less specifically, and the remaining property, including, slaves to be divided among his heirs. By the standards of the period this was a sizable holding. No information could be found regarding the slave holdings on Woodlands Farm from the time John Tompkins purchased the property until 1850 when the Jacobs lived

⁹ Susie May Ames, *Studies of the Virginia's Eastern Shore in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, Virginia: the Dietz Press, 1940), 51.

¹⁰ Nora Miller Turman, *The Eastern Shore of Virginia, 1603-1964* (Onancock, Virginia: The Eastern Shore News, Inc., 1964), 166.

¹¹ *Northampton County Book of Deeds, etc. No. 23, 124.*

there and worked the farm. Little doubt remains that African slaves resided and worked on this farm.

William W. Wilson died in 1820 and left Woodlands to his wife Peggy Custis, and upon her death in 1823 the land went to their son John T. Wilson. Little is known about John T. Wilson and his ownership of Woodlands, but in 1891 a reminiscence was published about an 1827 voyage of the first shipment of sweet potatoes to New York from the Eastern Shore. A small company comprised of John T. Wilson, Thomas Bull, Sr., and Capt. Lewis Mathews purchased the schooner Providence for transporting goods. Sweet potatoes from about 100 farmers along Matchipongo Creek were collected and a total of 200 barrels were transported to sell in New York City. There was much speculation of how successfully “sweets” would be accepted and sold, but in two weeks time the entire cargo had been sold and Capt. Mathews then proceeded to fill the many orders for goods he had received from the Eastern Shore farmers. The memory of this voyage was written by John W. A. Elliott, and he and Thomas Bull, Jr., both young boys at the time, accompanied the voyage as passengers. Elliott aptly summed up the significance of the voyage: “thus ended the first venture in a line of trade destined to open up a new era in the industry and prosperity of the E. Shore.”¹² Little else is known about this company’s business activities after this voyage, whether they continued to ship produce to markets along the coast or went out of business. Specific census, tax, and business records could not be located for John T. Wilson, but it seems probable that Woodlands and the wharf played a significant role in this endeavor.

It is not known if John T. Wilson ever married, but he did die without heirs in 1837. Woodlands, along with the other Wilson family holdings of Wellington and Bush Hill, were combined and divided among the family. Margaret Bayly, daughter of Peggy Custis and William W. Wilson, inherited Wellington upon the death of her father and it is assumed that she inherited Woodlands from her brother John.¹³ Rachel Upshur Jacob (husband Teakle Jacob) and Edmund Bayly, children of Margaret Bayly, received Woodlands and the other family holdings upon her death in 1863. Teakle and Rachel U.

¹² *Peninsula Enterprise* (Accomac, Virginia), 7 March 1891.

¹³ Doris Adler, interview by author, 22 November 1997, Silver Beach, Virginia, tape recorded.

Jacob lived at Woodlands sometime after 1837 until the Civil War, when the property was sold in 1866.

In the 1850 Agricultural Production Census for Northampton County, Teakle W. Jacob was recorded as having in the previous year 200 improved (cleared) and 585 unimproved (wooded) acres of land for a total farm cash value of \$10,600. Livestock was valued at \$975 and included: 8 horses, 2 mules, 15 milk cows, 4 working oxen, 25 cattle, 50 sheep, and 60 swine. Indian corn (1600 bushels), oats (600 bushels), sweet potatoes (300 bushels), and Irish potatoes (5 bushels) were grown during the previous year. Also produced as part of homemade manufacture were 100 pounds of wool and 150 pounds of butter.¹⁴ Teakle Jacob is also recorded as holding a total 15 slaves in 1850: 7 females and 8 males. It is believed that Flavius G. Gib was the overseer at Woodlands during this time and his entry appears very near Teakle Jacob in the 1850 Population Census. These records reflect a great deal about what activities were taking place on the farm and what buildings were needed to house the family, the overseer and his family, slaves, and livestock. Storage areas were also needed for produce and equipment. Understanding what was being produced on this farm is an indicator of what the farm may have been like. From all these records the farm appears as if it was a substantial operation; a large plantation very typical of the Eastern Shore that produced large quantities of grain and potatoes with slave labor.

Little mention or record of the wharf is found during this period at Woodlands. Family diaries mention Rachel's brother Edmund going down to the wharf on many occasions. These same accounts also refer to the weekly travel between Wellington and Woodlands and the close relationship between Margaret and her daughter Rachel U. Jacob. The Jacob and the Bayly families also had close relations with the Upshurs at Brownsville. One particular entry in Margaret Bayly's diary tells of the time when the Upshur family is visiting at Woodlands and all are involved in papering the walls.¹⁵ Other evidence left behind by those who lived at Woodlands can be found in the windows. Scratched in several window glasses throughout the house are the first and last names of

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Agricultural Productions*, 1850, Northampton County, Virginia; 431.

¹⁵ Doris Adler, interview by author, 22 November 1997, Silver Beach, Virginia, tape recorded.

individuals, according to local folklore, that may have attended an engagement party. It is said that young people would scratch their name in the glass with the engagement diamond. Several familiar names appear including Maggie Jacob and Rachel Jacob.

In 1861 the Shore was occupied by Union troops and remained under rule throughout the Civil War. Many local young men went across the bay to join the Confederate Army and continued to run the blockade during the occupation. With the Civil War came hard times for those on the Shore, a time of great poverty. Many families had to sell extensive amounts of property and the Baylys and Jacobs sold everything to hold on to the family homeplace, Wellington. In 1866, Edmond Bayly and his sister Rachel U. Jacob sold Woodlands to Freeman Hiscox, Jr. and Charles L. Sneed. The following year Trustees Hampton S. Neale and Miers W. Fisher sold the farm at auction for a debt owed by Susan Sneed. Woodlands was purchased by Col. George L. J. Thomas; 789 acres of land for a sum of \$10,950.

In 1870, George L.J. Thomas is recorded as holding 270 improved (cultivated), 465 unimproved (woodland), and an additional 57 acres of unimproved land. Livestock holdings included: 6 horses, 5 mules, 8 milk cows, 18 cattle, 30 sheep, and 65 swine for a total value of \$1,110. Products grown and produced on the farm included Indian corn, oats, irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, orchard products, and butter. Again Woodlands appears as a thriving farm with many activities taking place. George Thomas refers to himself as a farmer and his eldest son Levin as a laborer. The remainder of the Thomas children, Sallie, Lettie, George, and William were attending school. Thus the existing outbuilding known as the schoolhouse must have been in operation at this time.¹⁶

At the age of 58, George Thomas and his son William were working the farm. In 1880, his landholdings consisted of: 125 acres improved land composed of tilled acreage including fallow and grass in rotation, whether pasture or meadow; 100 acres improved land consisting of permanent meadows and pasture, orchards, and vineyards; and 400 acres of unimproved land which included woodlands and forests. A reduction of livestock holdings from 1870 is evident, but the total of grains produced on 140 acres remained

¹⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Agricultural Productions*, 1870, Northampton County, Virginia; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population*, 1870, Northampton County, Virginia.

very similar. An interesting addition to the previous farm information includes a notation of \$25, the value of all forest products sold or consumed.¹⁷

George L. J. Thomas died in 1890 and his daughters Sallie C. and Lettie B. Thomas both received the house and 406 acres of upland and 217 acres of marsh each. His inventory gives a detailed account of household items, farming implements, and livestock. All the articles are listed under the place where they were found, therefore providing some information about the physical structures and activities associated with Woodlands. The inventory specifically notes a yard, grain house, and barn. All buildings except the grain house are remnant on the farm today.¹⁸

While life was going on at the farm, Thomas Wharf had an active steamboat service in the 1880's and 1890's. According to schedules published in the local newspaper, steamers made weekly stops at the wharf for produce, mostly potatoes, during the busy season. These particular steamers were of the Old Dominion Steamship Company, which traveled between Norfolk and New York. Announcements in the local paper commonly announced the arrival of steamboats: "According to the latest advices a steamer of the Old Dominion Steamship Company will be put on the line from the Eastern Shore to New York next week and will be at Smith's and the Saw Mill wharves Thursday and at Thomas' Wharf Friday."¹⁹ Unlike some of the other wharves, access to Thomas Wharf was relatively easy due to the deep channel of the Matchipongo, thus becoming an active point of departure and entry for local goods.

Changing Traditions

Woodlands Farm continued to pass through the unmarried females of the Thomas family. Miss Lettie died in 1907 and her portion of the farm passed to her sister Sarah Core Thomas, who continued to live at Woodlands until her death. Few changes to the farm took place during this time period. Miss Sallie remodeled the house in the Victorian

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Agricultural Productions*, 1870, Northampton County, Virginia.

¹⁸ *Northampton County Book of Inventories, etc. No. 4*, 15.

¹⁹ *Mear's Scrapbook, Volume 7*, Eastern Shore Library, Accomac, Virginia, 40.

style during the early twentieth century and the Thomas family graveyard was erected sometime after 1900 and before 1930.

As evidenced by Willis Wharf, the fishing and seafood industry contributed much to the economy of the Eastern Shore. In 1902, William E. Thomas deeded ten acres of the Thomas family lands containing Thomas Wharf to the Battle Point Fish and Oyster Company. Little is known about this operation, but the right to oyster beds in Hog Island Bay were purchased in the company's name. Five years later the fishing enterprise was disbanded, and James A. Marian deeded the land held in common to his brother-in-law William C. Stevens. Stevens and his wife Malissa continued to farm the upland at the wharf until 1955. Accessibility to the Atlantic Ocean and the secluded location of the wharf made it attractive for illegal activities as well. Headlines from a 1930 newspaper read: "541 Cases of Liquor Seized at Thomas Wharf" and "Seizure is Largest Ever Made of Contraband Liquor on Eastern Shore of Virginia". Will Stevens, the farmer residing at Thomas Wharf and one of the two men who operated the Battle Point Fish and Oyster Company, was arrested along with the bootleggers, and eventually testified for the government. The contraband, "imported liquor of a very fine quality," was smuggled in with the help of several local residents.²⁰ The local community was shocked and curious about the raid the day it happened. On that day, anybody who could tried to get a glimpse of what was taking place at the wharf.²¹

In 1932, Miss Sallie left Woodlands Farm to her niece Nancy Adah Joynes Thomas, daughter of her brother William E. Thomas. Like her aunts, Miss Adah never married, so the house eventually passed out of the Thomas family. Even though she never lived at Woodlands, Miss Adah had a great fondness and reverence for the homeplace. Those who knew her said she wanted to give the house to the historical society because she knew there was a lot of history associated with Woodlands.²² During her ownership, Miss Adah lived in New York City. When she came back to the Shore for extended visits she always stayed at Brownsville. For periods at a time the Woodlands house remained

²⁰ *Peninsula Enterprise* (Accomac, Virginia), 5 July 1930; 19 July 1930.

²¹ Nancy Dick Cockerill, interview by author, 8 February 1998, Purcellville, Virginia, tape recorded.

vacant and then was rented out to local tenant farmers. It was during this time that changes were happening out at Thomas Wharf. In 1955, the Stevens sold Thomas Wharf to Standard Products Company, Inc., known today as Ampro Fisheries, one of the largest menhaden fisheries in the country.²³ Interested in the wharf's access to abundant fishing waters, the company purchased a right of way from Nancy A.J. Thomas to the wharf from the Seaside Road, but the road was never fully completed. Standard Products retained Thomas's Wharf until 1993, when it was purchased by The Nature Conservancy.

In 1971, Miss Adah passed away and left Woodlands to friends Carter Darnel and John Hunter Jones of New York City. Upon their death, as designated in the will, Woodlands was to be sold to seaside neighbor L. Thomas Lewis, Jr. In 1987, Lewis paid \$15,000.00 for Woodlands, and a year later sold it to The Nature Conservancy. After placing a conservation easement on the property, Woodlands was sold to JKNC, Inc. of Delaware. A portion of Woodlands Farm, consisting of 72 acres, the dwelling, and remaining outbuildings, was sold to locally prominent Eastern Shore family.

The Seaside Farm program is offered by the Virginia Coast Reserve as a means to help retain the current visual and aesthetic character and ecological security and diversity of the mainland of the Eastern Shore. The program is a means to conserve the fragile natural system of the barrier islands by protecting the mainland, which directly impacts the island system. John M. Hall, Director of the Virginia Coast Reserve, writes, "Today many people either directly or indirectly make their living from the land and waters of the Eastern Shore. The question, then, is how to best protect the natural system that is the basis for jobs and recreation, how to use it to further stimulate a compatible local economy, how to improve the quality of lives of those of us who live here, and how to build a broad community commitment to protecting the resources upon which so many of us depend."²⁴ The Virginia Coast Reserve is proposing to look at conservation with a

²² Janet Stone, telephone interview by author, 25 November 1997, Nassawadox, Virginia.

²³ Larry S. Chowning, *Chesapeake Legacy: Tools and Tradition* (Centreville, Maryland: Tidewater Publications, 1995) 81, 200-201.

²⁴ The Nature Conservancy, Virginia Coast Reserve, "The Islands," Fall/Winter, 1997-1998, 2.

very broad lens; to consider people, history, culture, and community, as well as the environment.

To support their goals and objectives, several foundations and organizations were established to tackle portions of this broad view. The Eastern Shore Sustainable Development Corporation, Inc. was established as a means by which to market locally grown Eastern Shore produce and goods to outside markets. A partnership between the Volgenau Foundation and the Virginia Coast Reserve resulted in a prototype seaside cottage constructed near Brownsville, so as “to demonstrate ways in which residential development can take place on the Eastern Shore seaside without damaging the coastal ecosystem.”²⁵

²⁵ Ibid, 6.