

Chapter V Analysis

A. Period of Significance

The history of Woodlands Farm is one that is typical on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The farm experienced shifts in economy from tobacco to grains and from slave labor to tenant farming. First settled and worked in the 1750's, Woodlands continued to produce livestock and grains with slave labor until just before the Civil War. The tenor of farm life and farming technologies changed after the Civil War with the advent of tenant farming, and has continued to evolve to the high production farming operations that are common today.

With the purchase of the "Sea Side Plantation" from John and Margaret Michael in 1785 and the building of the dwelling house soon after, John Tompkins initiated the greatest period of significance at Woodlands Farm. John Tompkins was really responsible for the physical layout and spatial character of the Woodlands Farm that is known today. This same character was evident throughout the residencies of the Wilson, Jacob, and Thomas families, until the death of George L.J. Thomas in 1882. During this time the farm was being cultivated in grains and potatoes, and outbuildings and other structures were being built to support farming and daily living activities. What those buildings were and their particular locations may never be uncovered, but it is certain that Woodlands was a prosperous and thriving farm.

Woodlands passed down through the family to John Tompkins' grandson, John T. Wilson in 1823. Limited documentation shows that Wilson was the entrepreneurial type. As a partner in business with Thomas Bull, Sr. and Capt. Lewis Mathews, he played an active role in the local and regional economy, as well as the community of seaside farmers. No further records of business or farming activities were uncovered, so the extent of John T. Wilson's residence at Woodlands is unknown. Upon his death in 1837 the farm passed to his sister Margaret S. Bayly of Wellington, and then to her daughter and son-in-law, Rachel Upshur and Teakle W. Jacob. When they first resided at Woodlands is unknown, but they were married in the same year that Wilson died. Teakle W. Jacob was a respected and prosperous farmer in the community, serving as High Sheriff for

Northampton County in the 1850's. But the Civil War was a difficult time for all on the Eastern Shore. Occupied by Union troops until 1870, many families had to sell extensive amounts of property to stave off losing the family farm. The Baylys and Jacobs were no exception; they sold off everything in order to save the family homeplace, Wellington.

In 1866, Woodlands was sold to George L.J. Thomas and for the next sixteen years, the farm would retain the significance of being an active and worked farm, inhabited by a farmer. But changes were taking place in how the farm was worked and managed. Slave labor was no longer a reality and hired hands and tenant farming became common. The working farm was sustained throughout the remainder of George L.J. Thomas's life, and after his death it slowly degraded, and field sizes got smaller. The whole perception of Woodlands as a farm changed after Thomas's death. The 1890 Census recorded that George Thomas's wife Mary indicated that Woodlands was a home, not a farm.

Thomas's Wharf

Somewhat overlapping with Woodlands' history, Thomas's Wharf has a much greater significance all its own. The history and significance of the wharf dovetails with that of the greater Woodlands. They are presented not as separate properties, but one as a small part of a much larger context; Thomas's Wharf as part of Woodlands Farm. The significance of Thomas's Wharf is one that spans many periods. One period alone does not stand out as the most important. What does is the evolution of the landscape, land use, and activities that have occurred at and on this isolated bit of upland. Remnants of each of those periods, Native American settlement, shipping industries, seafood industries, and traditional farming, can be found in this one place. Thomas's Wharf is representative of the continuum of history and culture on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and should be recognized as significant for this reason.

Thomas's Wharf is identified as an archaeological resource and potentially a significant settlement site of the native Machipungo Indian Tribe. Most histories written about Virginia's Eastern Shore make mention of the large seaside villages of Native Americans. Both Brownsville Plantation and Woodlands Farm were significant sites during this era.

Extensive shipping of produce took place along the Machipongo River for hundreds of years, and it occurred at Thomas's Wharf. The first recorded shipping expedition of sweet potatoes to New York City in 1827 was the work of a small three man company that had ties to Thomas's Wharf. John T. Wilson, partner in the company, was living at Woodlands at that time, thus hinting to a very active wharf. Steamboats also frequented Thomas's Wharf during the 1880s and 1890s, making regular stops once or twice a week during the busy growing season to take goods to the mainland of Virginia or to northern ports. Finally, illegal shipments of liquor were common during prohibition. One such shipment was raided in 1930 at Thomas's Wharf. Will Stevens, farmer and landowner of the wharf, was arrested with several local and out-of-town men for transporting and storing illegal, foreign liquor. Not only a shock to the local community, the liquor raid was news for the whole Eastern Shore and Virginia Tidewater.

Traditional activities on the Shore included, and still does, fishing and farming. Local watermen depend greatly on having suitable and ready access to the water. Thomas's Wharf had those qualities and for a short time, from about 1903 to 1908-9, the Battle Point Fish and Oyster Company was operated by James A. Marian and his brother-in-law, Will Stevens. Built out at Thomas's Wharf to support the fishing activity was a wharf, oyster house, and a dwelling with outbuildings. After the close of the fish company, Will Stevens and his wife Malissa continued to live and farm at Thomas's Wharf. Living in a two story, frame dwelling with several outbuildings placed along the edge of the cultivated field, they worked the land until 1955 when Thomas's Wharf was sold to the commercial fishing company of Standard Products.

The one element of the physical location of Thomas's Wharf that resulted in consistent use throughout history was and is the deep water access. Bathymetric readings have shown the depth of the channel at the point of the wharf to be 66 feet, and it has been consistently the same depth since the first recorded reading in the late nineteenth century. Access is certainly the outstanding attribute of this landscape that influenced the layers of history and culture deposited at Thomas's Wharf.

According to the National Register criteria for evaluation of significance, Thomas's Wharf's significance lies in Criterion A and D: (A) association with events that

have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history and (D) have yielded, or likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.¹ What these two areas do not address is Thomas's Wharf as a significant place where layers of human influence on the landscape, both visual and just under the surface, have accumulated with little disturbance. Nature is changing the Thomas's Wharf landscape, deteriorating the characteristics of the landscape, such as built structures, introduced vegetation, and manipulated topography, but the remnants still remain.

In proposing to look at the significance of Thomas's Wharf as an archive, the issue of ordinary landscapes is addressed. The history of the wharf does not speak about great design or intention, but rather the everyday living as the impetus of settlement and change. Thomas's Wharf is an ordinary landscape. No great American citizen was born or lived there. No great battle was fought. It is a typical seaside landscape on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, a place where something used to happen. Most importantly it is a landscape of memory; memory in the remnants of prehistoric and historic human culture and memory in those people who recall when the landscape was active. The landscape should be appreciated as ordinary, as one of the few places where the influences of past generations and cultures have not been erased; an extraordinary example of an ordinary landscape. For the community of seaside residents and Eastern Shoremen, Thomas's Wharf is of local significance and a cultural palimpsest; one of the few places where the many histories of the Eastern Shore of Virginia are not wholly erased.

B. Evaluation of Integrity

The landscape of Woodlands Farm as it is today retains little of the physical historic fabric that made it significant. The razing of buildings that took place in the 1980s and in 1997, the integrity of the dwelling, farmyard, and the general look of the landscape. Disturbance of the landscape immediately surrounding the house has also destroyed any visual remains of vanished building, trees, and gardens. Regardless of the absence of these

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *National Register Bulletin 30, Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*, by Linda Flint McClelland, J. Timothy Keller, Genevieve P. Keller, and Robert Z. Melnick (Washington, DC, n.d.), 20.

defining structures, the general character of the landscape and spatial relationships between house, road, and field is still present.

Thomas's Wharf

Thomas's Wharf is a landscape of ruins. No structures of any significance remain on the site. Many are in the process of decomposing, while others have been carried away by the sea. Those defining features that do remain are subtle hints of past activities and movement that provide the site with a high level of integrity: the traces of old roads through the marsh, fence posts defining edges of usable space, piers rising from the marsh, a lone utility pole, brick scatters, wood shingled roofs resting on the ground, a concrete walk leading to concrete steps, early spring daffodils, and rose bushes. The upland that comprises Thomas's Wharf has changed slowly over time. Pioneer species have taken over the edges of upland, creating a wall of vegetation encompassing the cultivated field. Successive vegetation now grows where once there was a house, a foundation pier, and a garden. The rapid growth of successive vegetation has changed views to and from Thomas's Wharf, but overall the landscape has retained a significant amount of integrity.