Essex County History

Essex County - A Short History...

If you are journeying along U.S. Route 17, Essex County might appear to be simply another rural landscape along the way. Essex County is truly a worthwhile destination in itself! A land of pastoral rural beauty, bounded on its northern shore by the Rappahannock River.

The river itself provides more than beauty and weekend retreats for residents and visitors. The river was the life blood for the county's inhabitants. Still a life source for the watermen of the area, the river is also a draw for the many weekend visitors from urban areas surrounding the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Centrally located about an hour's drive from Richmond, Williamsburg, and Fredericksburg, this close proximity has made the county a quick get-away from the rigors of city life.

History of the County

Captain John Smith, one of the original tourists to the area, visited Essex during the winter of 1607-08, when he wrote of the "excellent, pleasant, fertile, and goodly navigable" Rappahannock Valley. On his first visit he did not linger. While he was trying to disembark near what is now the county seat of Tappahannock, the Native Americans drove him back to his ship. Rest assured, present day visitors will not meet with this hostile welcome! Using the river as their highway, people and goods moved along its shores.

The British settlers established counties on both sides of the Rappahannock River. The original county was Northumberland County, established in 1645, and subsequently divided into Northumberland, Lancaster, and Westmoreland Counties. Eventually Lancaster became Lancaster, Rappahannock, and Middlesex Counties.

In 1645 Bartholomew Hoskins patented the Tappahannock site, which became known, at various times as Hobbs His Hole, Hobb's Hole, the short-lived New Plymouth, and the Indian name Tappahannock. The port town was to become a center of commerce during the 17th and 18th centuries establishing a crossroads.

During Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, armed men gathered near Piscataway Creek and defeated Governor Berkeley's cavalymen. Later they prevailed in the Dragon Run Swamp, but eventually English warships and troops suppressed the uprising. Frontier patrols, however, were maintained against hostile northern Indians into the early 1700's.

In 1692, the now extinct Rappahannock County split into Essex and Richmond Counties. Still heavily influenced by British domain, the county name of Essex may have come either from the shire or county in England, or as a nod to the Duke of Essex himself (patrons are often generous!). Essex County Virginia today still maintains links with Essex County Council and the people of Chelmsford, Essex, England.

In the 1660s, Capt. Richard Hobbs owned 800 acres along Gilson’s Creek (now Mt. Landing Creek) at the Rappahannock River. He dropped anchor of his ship “Elizabeth and Mary” at the deepest place in the water nearby, hence “Hobb His Hole Harbor.” The town was comprised of 50 acres divided into half acre squares. Tappahannock's first call to duty was as a port for river traffic. The town grew, developing into a village of substantial importance. Colonial Charm is evident in a number of private homes still in existence, as well as in numerous businesses still existing in the buildings of that era. Street names such as Marsh, Queen, Prince, Duke,
Cross, Church, and Water are original nomenclature. In 1705, the town was once again known by its Indian name of Tappahannock meaning "town on the rise and fall of water."

The British Stamp Act of 1765 led directly to the American Revolution, and it was in Tappahannock that one of the first confrontations occurred.

Leading merchant Archibald Ritchie, who supported the Stamp Act, was labeled as "the greatest enemy of his country." On February 27, 1766, gentlemen from nine counties gathered at Leedstown to draft the "Resolutions" that led Virginians to disobey Parliament. They also made plans to publicly humiliate Ritchie and the Scots merchant Archibald McCall. These events occurred seven years before the Boston Tea Party.

A map of the Rappahannock shows some of the impact the river had on the history of the area. Place names such as Ware's Wharf, Bowlers Wharf, Saunders Wharf are found up and down the shores of Essex. These were important commerce ports for the whole county. Before the days of the combustible engine, the river was the quickest way to move products and expand the area.

With the building of the first Downing Bridge to the Northern Neck in 1927, reliance on the river started to change. Until then, the only way to cross the Rappahannock was by ferry from either Tappahannock or Ware's Wharf. The present bridge was built in 1963. You can also take advantage of the county's two marinas and several public boat landings.

Museum, Historic Markers, War Memorials