

***LECTURE ON THE LAWN AT HUNGARS CHURCH
NORTHAMPTON HISTORIC PRESERVATION SOCIETY
AUGUST 29, 2021 AT 2 PM***

Our last speaker, Jenean Hall, is an expert on primary sources of information, such as the Northampton County court records, which are among the oldest continuous court records in the nation, dating from 1732.

I, on the other hand, still depend on Ralph Whitelaw's 2 volumes, Virginia's Eastern Shore, published 70 years ago and H. Chandlee Foreman's book, The Virginia Eastern Shore and Its British Origins, published almost 50 years ago. The difference between these two interpretations was apparent when we met to rehearse. A lot of new information has come to light which is accessible in this digital age. This presentation includes the traditionally available information as well as new insights

The 1700's were a golden age of prosperity on the Shore. The Anglican Church was powerful in most aspects of life, providing governance, establishing courts, exacting punishments, levying and collecting taxes, and providing for the indigent and infirm.

The mid-eighteenth century was an era of prosperity and expansion on the Eastern Shore, chiefly because of the cultivation of tobacco. The population was expanding and moving northward. Many of the old homes that are treasured today were built during this time." I live on Church Neck and will focus on the houses in this area, although there are many other notable homes nearby.

Church Neck is bounded by Hungars Creek, the Chesapeake Bay and Church Creek, and has two existing seventeenth century houses, which I know of, Winona c.1645 and Pear Plain c.1672, which was the site of the first Hungars Church.

There are at least five existing eighteenth century homes on Church Neck- Westerhouse c.1710, The Glebe c. 1745, Vauclose c.1784 and Grapelands c.1790. Most of these homes are on the National Register of Historic Places, as is Winona.

For many years, the most important bridge on the Eastern Shore was Hungars Bridge located at the head of Hungars Creek. The court had ordered the bridge to be built to connect two important terminals, the church and the courthouse. The town of Bridgetown began to grow around the bridge which provided a good road for travel on foot, horseback, by cart or carriage and later by stagecoach from the courthouse and the Eastville Inn to the courthouse at Snow Hill and on to Philadelphia. Now this bridge has been replaced by a drainage pipe under the road as the headwaters have receded. Ferry service to York, Hampton and Norfolk was provided by Littleton and Severn Eyre who had "at great expense erected convenient houses for the entertainment of travelers and commodious boats for their speedy passage from the public ferry at Hungars". The location of this ferry is not given in the court records, and may have been located closer to the mouth of Hungars Creek.

This then is the setting for the ambitious planning that began for a grand new brick church to replace the old second church on the same site which had been deemed beyond repair. The land for the church to be replaced, the second Hungars Church, had been given by Major William Spencer by deed dated 13th December, 1680 described as “That ground whereon the frame of a Church now standeth and one acre of ground about it for a Church yard or burial place...upon the head branch of the Creek of Hungars.”

The site chosen for the second Hungars and the new brick church was beside the colonial highway, a quarter mile east of the village, on the tract of level land known as Smith’s Field which had been used as a race course prior to this date.

My comments on the construction, and a description of the new brick church, when it was completed, are taken from a 2009 talk by Jean Mihalyka at Founders Day here at Hungars, and from a brochure prepared by Ann Snyder and others for a more recent Garden Tour. Ann’s comments will follow mine. She is so enthusiastic and committed to this project that she has inspired me. Jenean Hall provided me with a reference to a 1940 William and Mary Quarterly Historical Magazine with an article by George Carrington Mason entitled “The Colonial Churches of the Eastern Shore of Virginia,” which provided many new insights.

In 1742 the Hungars Parish vestry appointed two vestrymen, Robert Nottingham and Littleton Eyre, to select a man to supervise the building of the new church. They hired Bartholomew Petit to undertake this project. Petit was a prominent figure in the 18th century, he was a bricklayer as a young man, and later a merchant who owned a schooner and built and owned a store in Bridgetown, near the church.

Petit contracted with brick makers from York and carpenters from Talbot County, Maryland, to do the work and agreed to procure for them “sufficient diet, good small beer, lodging and washing of clothes.” Bringing contractors from across the Bay and from a different colony gives us a glimpse of how connected the colonies had become in 1742. He also agreed to find the supplies and labor needed for construction.

There were many lawsuits brought against Petit by those with whom he contracted – another similarity to today’s world. Bills for church expenses and furnishings and details of the lawsuits were carefully filed by the County Clerk in a Packet where they remained unread for almost 300 years. Jean Mihalyka, a tireless researcher and expert on the Shore until her death, published these papers in 3 volumes entitled, ABSTRACTS.

Included in the Packet were descriptions of very large hinges for the outside doors, and other door and shutter hinges wrought by skilled local iron workers as well as details of law suits which shed light on, for example, the arduous process of building such a remarkable church. Think about how many cords of wood had to be cut for building kilns and as fuel for burning the 9,000 bricks needed to build the church.

The existing Hungars Church occupies the eastern half of the two-acre churchyard, the other half of which was formerly the site of the second church of the same name. In 1940, a dozen venerable sycamore trees, of unusual size, still marked three sides of the lot, and the remains of the kiln in which the bricks for the present building were burned were still in evidence at the field east of the church. Traces of the colonial highway north of the churchyard indicate that it must have passed close to the earlier church site. We have photographs of the road and the church in close proximity which you will see in the Parish House exhibit.

When completed, “The building was 90 feet long, 40 feet wide, with walls 2 feet thick, and the height from Floor to the coved Ceiling was 24 feet. The interior had a fine pine floor; a center aisle flanked by boxed pews and spectacular windows,” the entrance doors were located north and south where the third window from the altar is today. It was the longest and next to the largest Colonial church of rectangular shape of any on record in Virginia at that time. The only larger church in Virginia was Bruton Parish in Williamsburg. Hungars would have been furnished much like Bruton Parish with a raised, ornate pulpit.

Several notes exist which describe the new church interior as very elaborate and beautiful. The chancel was hung with dark crimson velvet draperies, edged with bullion gold braid, all imported from England. The new brick church had one of the first pipe organs in the country, at the time when Bach and Handel were still actively composing works in Europe.

A three-piece silver communion service given to the “Upper Church of Hungars Parish” in 1742 by John Custis, Esquire, of Arlington, is still in use and on display today. John Custis was the father-in-law of Martha Dandridge Custis, who later became the wife of George Washington. Much of this colonial church silver was lost after the Revolutionary War, though Hungars silver was hidden and saved by an unknown parishoner.

On December 13, 1749 Bartholomew Petit met with the Vestry for Hungars Parish for the Reception of the Church and Distribution of the Pews. It had been seven years since the undertaking began.

When Ann Snyder approached me to participate in this talk, I was very interested because I had spent the winter of the pandemic preparing a preliminary report to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources on Chatham, our Family home, for consideration of being put forward to the National Trust for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. In the process, I learned much about Bridgetown, the bridge, Hungars and the surrounding countryside.

What sparked my interest is that two different owners of the original 600 acre land grant on which Chatham is built, had given land for the building of the second and third Hungars Church. The land was first patented in 1640 and re-patented to William Spencer in 1673. The tract stretched from Hungars Creek to Church Creek with the Colonial Highway bisecting it. As explained earlier, in 1680 Spencer deeded to Hungars Parish,

“that ground whereon the frame of a church now stands and one acre of ground about it for a church yard or burial ground.”

In 1682 Spencer sold the 600 acre tract to William Preeson, “Mariner of Leverpoole”. In 1752, his grandson and heir, Thomas Preeson, gave an additional acre of land adjoining that given earlier by William Spencer “in consideration of a Pew in the brick Church called Hungars Church.”

A survey was commissioned in 1818 by General Major Scarborough Pitts, the new owner of the 600 acre property. The survey shows the location of Hungars, the Preeson house, and the site of Chatham. A paper given by Dr. David Scott, during an earlier lecture on the lawn, provided quotes from court records that indicate that both Spencer in 1673 and Preeson in 1682 had homes on the property.