250 NNK

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NORTHERN NECK HISTORY CULTURE HAPPENINGS

Homeland Before Borderland: Reshaping of the Northern Neck

Watch Dr. Babara Heath present "Conflict, Migration, and Early Settlement of the Northern Neck" on the Northern Neck National Heritage Area YouTube channel.

Initially, for the English, the Northern Neck was a borderland—a place far from the centers of colonial power in Virginia and Maryland, a place drawing a divide between the two, explained Dr. Barbara Heath an anthropological archaeologist at the University of Tennessee

As early as 1608, Englishmen such as John Smith explored the area, but no Europeans settled there. The Northern Neck was largely outside Jamestown's scope of concern.

By the 1620s, some colonists were looking beyond agriculture to the fur trade, and people started moving into the upper Chesapeake.

Recognizing that Virginia began as a corporate venture, other Englishmen got the idea of starting their own colonial enterprise and leading a community. So other settlements started popping up, explained University of Florida professor Dr. Phil Levy in a podcast about the formation of the Northern Neck.

Borderlands became places of possibility and transformation for settlers seeking to build communities on their own terms, explains Heath.

One example, John Mottrom—believed to possibly be the first Englishman to move to the Northern Neck—established a settlement along the Coan River in Northumberland. Farther north, toward Annapolis, a fur-trading post developed on Kent Island.

These communities operated on the fringes and did not see themselves squarely as Virginians or Marylanders.

By the mid-17th century, Maryland experienced significant political turmoil, including a prolonged struggle over control of Kent Island, which the Calverts won. Some original Kent Islanders left, wanting no part of the Catholics or chaos in Maryland, looked at Mottrom's success, and migrated south of the Potomac.

By comparison, the Northern Neck appeared calm, stable, and promising, explained Levy.

As men such as Henry Brooks, John Hallows, Nathaniel Pope, and Samuel Smith descended from Maryland, it was becoming more popular for Virginians to settle on the upper peninsula.

Before English Settlement

What appeared to the English as new territory was, in fact, the homeland of Algonquian-speaking tribes, including the Patawomeck, Rappahannock, and Nanzatico.

Mottrom's Chicacoan settlement stood on land obtained from—and named after—Indigenous people, the Sekakowan. For years, the settlers lived alongside those people and maintained relationships with them.

Indigenous communities were firmly established along the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, using waterways for food and travel and higher ground for hunting and farming. They with villages, social connections, and trade networks.

It was a well-used, very efficiently laid-out area that people used for thousands of years. It was not an empty land, as the English liked to imagine it to have been. It was well settled and sustainable, notes Levy.

By the mid-1650s, this borderland had morphed into the colonial apparatus. The English had established three counties—Northumberland, Lancaster, and Westmoreland.

A place of opportunity for newcomers became a landscape of loss for Indigenous people, who faced encroachment, unfair land deals, violence, and eventually removal from their homes.

Heath, who spent years working on the ground in Heathsville, said her team uncovered evidence of this transformation. A prime example—Mottrom's first home stood on land acquired from Machywap near the Sekakowan leader's palisade. Mottrom later built a larger home on top of the palisade's remnants.

"We've interpreted this as meaning that they're literally taking the power of the place that Sekakowan werowance had at that site and claiming it for themselves—for England—and making Mottrom sort of the lord and the most important person in this community," Heath explained.

The Northern Neck, far from being an empty frontier, was a place with a deep Indigenous identity reshaped, and ultimately overtaken, by English opportunism and colonization.

WRITE ON!

"Making 1776 Relevant in 2026"

Northern Neck students have a chance to compete for some cash this summer.

In honor of America's 250th anniversary, the Kinsale Waterfront Fund is sponsoring the "Making 1776 Relevant in 2026" writing contest.

Aiming to bridge the past and present, the contest calls on students to submit a 700 to 800-word essay reenvisioning a statement or speech from the late 1700s, connect it to a current local, national, or global issue, and propose a solution that draws directly from the historical text.

Prizes are$500 for 1st place, $250 for 2nd, $100 for 3rd, and $50 for honorable mention.

The deadline is July 4.

Guidelines are posted at https://nnkwrites.org/

June Muster NNK

June 6-7

"Virginia Resolved," a two-day event at Stratford Hall commemorating Richard Henry Lee's Resolution for Independence.

DJ, live music, speakers, patriotic programs, reenactments, demonstrations, and a fireworks show over the Great House Saturday night.

Full details at: stratfordhall.org/virginiaresolved/

June 14

Dr. Kathleen Bartoloni-Tuazon will present "George Washington and the Presidential Title Controversy of 1789" as part of the NNK 250 Signature Speaker Series.

George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Colonial Beach at 2 p.m.

Full Details at: nnk250.us/speaker-series

June 22 - Aug 3

Historic Christ Church & Museum will host "Give Me Liberty: Virginia & The Forging of a Nation" a special traveling exhibit exploring the essential people, events and sites in Virginia that helped bring liberty and democracy to a nation.

Full Details at: christchurch1735.org/ programs