



BRIDGING THE NORTHERN NECK

Crossing the Rappahannock to a New Era

Given how we freely we move today, it's easy to forget that less than 100 years ago, the Northern Neck was still a remote place, largely disconnected from the rest of Virginia by the Rappahannock River.

Before that time, the problem was not that the Northern Neck was completely inaccessible or lacked commerce but rather that the region's waterways were its highways, and its connections followed the water.

With the rise of steamboat transportation, wharves emerged throughout the region, linking the Northern Neck's farms, trade, and communities to the outside world, but those connections were often stronger outside the state than within it.

There was long-running trade between Northern Neck and Baltimore ports, for example, while comparatively few people from the region had ever visited Richmond, a city that a 1927 *Rappahannock Record* article described as "practically cut off from communication with our section."

Well into the 20th century, there were no bridges connecting the Northern Neck to the interior or major roadways to cities like Richmond and Washington, D.C. Travelers and shipments crossing the Rappahannock had to rely on water transportation, often ferries.



Bridge Opening in Tappahannock February 16, 1927

By the 1920s, the tides were changing. Faster, more reliable, and efficient connections were becoming increasingly important. Virginia was in the midst of a major highway-building era. Governor Harry F. Byrd wanted to connect various sections of the state while also creating a county system of farm-to-market roads.

For the Northern Neck, an important missing link was passage across the Rappahannock. Although "the undertaking was impracticable," the *Rappahannock Record* reported, "and in some quarters it was assailed as a useless expenditure of public money," Senator Thomas J. Downing played a leading role in bringing a bridge to the region.

On February 16, 1927, before a crowd of approximately 15,000 people, the mile-long, swing-span Downing Bridge was formally dedicated with Byrd's son and Downing's grandson cutting the ribbon.

In 2002, the Virginia General Assembly, commemorating the bridge's 75th anniversary, described its opening as an event that "ended the isolation of the Northern Neck from the rest of the Commonwealth" and "made the unique qualities of the Northern Neck much more accessible to citizens from other areas."

Indeed, the bridge was a game-changer. The day it opened, the Ware's Wharf Ferry reportedly closed. Shortly after, a bus line extension was announced to Irvington, with its terminal at Totuskey. River transportation continually declined, and economic relationships, such as that between Baltimore and the Northern Neck changed.

People's whole perception of life and work changed, a National Park Service record stated. With the region connected, many left the countryside to seek employment in places like Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond, it added.

Experience a Skipjack



Skipjacks, an iconic part of Chesapeake Bay maritime history, are traditional, shallow-hulled sailing vessels built for oyster dredging and designed for working on the Bay.

Sometimes called a "two-sail bateau," the skipjack was once a common workboat, but only a few remain operational. One of those survivors is the *Claud W. Somers*, owned by the Reedville Fishermen's Museum.

Although listed on both the National Register and the Virginia Register of Historic Places, the *Somers* has not retired to display. She continues to sail, now offering visitors the rare opportunity to experience Bay history from the deck.

In addition to charters, in October, the museum will welcome passengers aboard for two ticketed trips — on the 10th and 24th — both departing at 10 a.m.

John H. Hunt II Chesapeake History Forum

Lady Frances Berkeley and the 350th Anniversary of Bacon's Rebellion



Historian & Thespian Amy Stallings

Join for a performance where Lady Frances Berkeley, wife of Virginia's Royal Governor, composes a letter to her husband while guiding you through the political upheavals that saw Jamestown laid to ash.

Will King Charles offer justice to Sir William Berkeley and clear him from the accusations of wrongdoing?

Fresh oysters, shrimp, handcrafted cocktails and a light supper will be served.

Details: October 11 / 4 - 6:30 p.m.
@Historic Christ Church

Tickets: christchurch735.org/programs

