

Trailblazing Detectives of Eastern Shore of Virginia History

Cara Burton, June 2018
Presentation of the Chincoteague Island Museum

Ralph Thomas Whitelaw

One of the first books we use in Eastern Shore history research is referred to as "Whitelaws," but formally titled Virginia's Eastern Shore, originally published in 1951, a year after his death. Ralph Thomas Whitelaw was born in 1880 in St. Louis, Missouri. He became president of Whitelaw Brothers Chemical Company there until retirement. In 1926, he and his wife, Paula, bought a home called "Warwick" in Accomack County. They restored it. He grew peonies for market and entered the real estate business. He began his historical research and writing when he moved to the Shore. He sold Warwick after his wife's death and built a house near Accomac. The research in Whitelaw comes mostly from land patents. The book was published by the Virginia Historical Society a year after Ralph Whitelaw's death.

Source: Eastern Shore Authors, 1940-1964.

Nora Miller Turman

Many children on the Eastern Shore learned local history with Nora Miller Turman's book, The Eastern Shore of Virginia, 1603-1964. Born in 1901, Nora Turman grew up near Minden, Louisiana. She came to the Eastern Shore as an employee of Virginia Polytechnic Institute, now called Virginia Tech. She married Charles Franklin Turman, a dentist in Parksley in 1938. She became a librarian at Atlantic High School, which is now Arcadia, after her husband's death, in 1953. Mrs. Turman wrote numerous articles for publication on the history of the Eastern Shore. Her book was published in 1964.

Dr. Susie May Ames

Dr. Susie May Ames was born in Pungoteague, attended Randolph-Macon's Women's College and earned both a Masters and Ph.D. from Columbia University. After teaching high school, Dr. Ames joined the faculty at her alma mater, Randolph-Macon Women's College, and retired in 1955 as a Professor of History. During the 1950's, she wrote numerous books and published in notable historical publications, but may be most remarkably noted as one of the founders of the Eastern Shore Historical Society. Some of her titles include, Studies of the Eastern Shore in the Seventeenth Century and Some Colonial Foundations of Virginia's Eastern Shore.

James Egbert Mears

James Egbert Mears had a popular column in the Eastern Shore News called "The Shoreline," that started in 1933 and were put on microfilm by the Virginia State Library and is available to view at the Eastern Shore Public Library. He was born in 1884 in Hacks Neck. He served as administrative assistant to the president of Sullins College in Bristol, Virginia, and was an

operator of a domestic and foreign travel service before he retired to Hollywood, Florida. He actively wrote about the Eastern Shore, even though he had moved away.

Stratton Nottingham

Stratton Nottingham was a genealogist. He was born in Eastville in 1887 and served as deputy clerk of the Northampton court. He worked with marriage bonds, militia rolls, land causes, wills and administrations. From the knowledge he obtained at work, he compiled valuable volumes of abstracts of court records of Accomack, Northampton, Lancaster, Mecklenburg Northumberland, and Westmoreland counties. Accomack Land Causes is one book that came out of this research. Nottingham died at the age of forty-five in 1932. He is a hero because he made accurate, detailed records accessible to the public.

Gail and Frank Walczyk (Wulzick)

Gail Walczyk was born in New York and lived on Long Island. Mrs. Walczyk's grandparents were Marshes and lived in Chessconnessex where she would come visit in the summer. She and her husband, Frank, became interested in genealogy and produced over 100 books from transcribed court records of Accomack, Northampton, and Northumberland counties. She and Wayne Smith developed a website called Eastern Shore Heritage. Frank, an electrician, predeceased her. She passed away in 2014 at the age of 67.

Frances Bibbins Latimer

Frances Bibbins Latimer dedicated more than forty years of her life educating others about the local history of the Eastern Shore of Virginia and particularly African American history. She unfortunately died from complications secondary to a liver transplant in 2010, leaving her files, collections, books, and hand written notes unfinished and disorganized. Frances Latimer was widely viewed as a community historian. Her wealth of Eastern Shore and African American history was gleaned by listening to the stories of her parents, grandparents, community leaders, and then researching, and transcribing court records, Bibles, and many other documents. After relocating from New York to come home to the Shore, she spent many of her waking hours researching, visiting, collecting, and then documenting all she learned related to the "Black Community." Frances was self-taught and accessed every resource, including the knowledge of other historians, as she developed her talent and skill. Her personal projects traced the lives of Eastern Shore residents by discovering fragments of information one piece at a time in conversations with community elders and then connecting the dots with existing public records including deeds, wills, birth and death records, and the receipts of sale and manumission records that document the country's legacy of slavery. Local government officials, tourists, educators, and residents relied on Frances and sought her out for her expertise related to local and family history/histories.

She studied county records and later published two transcriptions through a Maryland Publishing firm. The success of these books led Frances to start her own publishing company, which she named Hickory House. Hickory House produced dozens of works including a guide that

interprets Eastville court records, as well as a volume that cataloged African American historic sites on the Eastern Shore. Frances only published books that depicted life or history about the Eastern Shore. In 1998 she was featured in a PBS documentary series called Africans in America. She was involved with many organizations that promoted and preserved history including GHOTES (Genealogy and History of the Eastern Shore), the NABB Center at Salisbury University, the Eastern Shore African American History Coalition, Preservation Virginia, and the Eastern Shore Historical Society. In many of the organizations, Frances was the only African American member and her tenacity sparked interest that has advanced the inclusion of African American history, programming, and collaborations today.

Additionally, Frances was a significant contributor to a series teachers guide titled, “America’s Journey Through Slavery,” which was underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities and endorsed by the National Council of the Social Studies. In 2005, the Virginia Foundation for Humanities provided funding to publish the first book written entirely about “Black People” on the Virginia Eastern Shore. This book, “Landmarks,” documented the historic sites in Accomack and Northampton counties, which examines the largely neglected history of black institutions – churches, schools, lodges, and businesses, and the buildings that housed them. In 2010, Frances began writing its companion book, “Life for Me Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair,” telling biographical stories of “Black People” with roots on the Eastern Shore. The stories of formerly enslaved individuals are highlighted as well as many educators, pastors, physicians, business men and women, politicians, veterans, heroes and heroines.

Moody Kellam Miles

Moody Kellam Miles, often referred to as M.K., grew up on Saxis Island. He graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in Civil Engineering and served in the Air Force in Germany. He joined the Army Corps of Engineers and worked at its headquarters in Washington, D.C. M.K. became interested in genealogy after watching the television mini-series, Roots, in 1978. He collaborated with Mary Frances Carey and Barry Miles compiling Accomack County tombstone inscriptions. With Barry Miles, he published abstracts of Accomack County will and marriage books and a list of Eastern Shore Civil War veterans. M.K. is most well-known as co-creator with Barry Miles of the “Miles Files” genealogy database. This is often the first resource library visitors are pointed to because it is an easily accessible wealth of information. M.K. also give classes in genealogical research.

Kirk Mariner

Kirk Mariner was a charmer and a musician as well as an accomplished author. He was a Methodist minister. Born in New Church, he studied at Randolph-Macon College and Yale Divinity School. He received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Wesley Theological Seminary in 1979. Mariner’s work makes Shore history accessible by being interesting and readable. Bestsellers include Revival’s Children, Off 13, and Slave and Free.

Dr. Brooks Miles Barnes

Dr. Barnes started the Eastern Shore Room in 1984 when the library addition provided for space for the local history collection's development. Dr. Barnes has both his Masters in Library Science and a Ph.D. in History. Now retired, he continues to consult for the Eastern Shore Public Library. He has provided enormous help to professional researchers and individuals doing simple local history research. He frequently reviews and edits others' publications. He has authored several books including the popular, "Seashore Chronicles: Three Centuries of the Virginia Barrier Islands," and "Gallows in the Marsh: Crime and Punishment in the Chesapeake, 1906."

Miles gets much of the credit for this presentation by pulling together the biographies of these people. Eastern Shore Authors, 1940-1964 was a key source. It was difficult for him to select which of the many researchers, publishers, and genealogists to highlight. While preparing this talk, we discussed the study of genealogy. He said the only certified genealogists he could name were Mrs. Turman and Mary Frances Carey, that obtained certification from the National Genealogical Society. I joked that I knew he wasn't a certified genealogist, to which he quipped, "I have never done one in my life!" He also said there are private genealogists, like my father that spent many hours doing his own and friend's genealogies, and public genealogists that compile genealogies and publish. What he calls a professional genealogist is by the degree of accuracy and detail that can provide.

Summary

Some historians turn their nose down at genealogists and consider them hobbyists. As you can see from this presentation, many of our local history heroes did not set out in life to transcribe and scan documents. They took up this research out of personal interest to the rich history of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. For some, they didn't even have family ties here. What compels an individual to go beyond the casual reading and research to devote hours and personal funds to compile these histories to share with the public?

A Forbes magazine article estimates that genealogy will be a \$3 billion industry by 2018. Today, genealogical and local history research is so much easier because of the hours and hours of transcription and scanning by our history heroes. It is also much less expensive by eliminating much of the traveling required. Hidden gems are more easily found.

What are ***your*** plans for researching your own local and personal history?!