

THE MUSEUM NEWS

CELEBRATING THE HISTORY AND COMMUNITY OF CAPE CHARLES

CAPE CHARLES HISTORICAL SOCIETY 814 RANDOLPH AVE.

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OUR OFFICERS:

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Dora Sullivan, Vice Pres.

Brittany Cannon, Secretary

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Summer Visitors

The town of Cape Charles has attracted more people than ever this summer, and many have included the museum in their visit. Some museum visitors have just been passing and wandered in to see what's here; others have come in because the beach just got too hot and they were looking to spend an hour or so in air conditioning. But many have found us online and put the museum on their itinerary.

There have been several organized group tours, but one stands out in the memory of that day's docents. A small group from Bournely Special Camp in West Chester PA excitedly arrived in three large golf carts (which have become a Cape Charles signature) along with their care givers. They were interested in everything they saw in our unusual museum, but were particularly fascinated by the working model steam engine and the whistle as it let off steam! ... and the demonstration of the huge power generator ... and the 1920s penny-arcade hand-cranked "video" featuring Hoot Gibson! Lots of smiling pictures were taken and a good time was had by all—visitors and docents alike.

Early in the summer we were contacted by a yacht club interested in having a guided tour of Cape Charles as part of a weekend stay at Kings Creek. Board member Andy Dunton, a Cape Charles native, led the tour and provided an account of the day. "On June 11th the group of about 30 people arrived at the museum. After CCHS president John Griffith gave a well received presentation we all hopped on golf carts that the yacht club had rented, and I carried them on a guided tour of Cape Charles. Our procession went along the business district, some side streets and of course the old school and beachfront. Topics included the history of our older buildings, businesses, and features, what they are now and what they were when I was coming along. We even stopped and all waved at my dad while he was cutting his grass. Everyone had a blast and they showed their appreciation with generous donations and kind words."

Outside, the jetty house has been scraped and will soon receive a fresh coat of white pain, courtesy of board member Jim Carnegie. Repairs continue on the caboose and baggage car roof. The pilot house received its sandblasting and will get its new coat of paint once the weather cools, work covered by the grant we received from the Eastern Shore of Virginia Community Foundation.

Safe-Crackers

There are two heavy iron safes in the museum, one from Savages Drug Store and one from the old railroad office:

you know, the kind every small business used to have before the digital age changed our way of life? There are instructions posted for opening these safes, and it seems to be an easy matter for those who have lots of patience, a steady hand and good eyesight. Some days the safes get opened several times a day, other days a lot of young people leave in disgust at themselves, feeling they "failed". On one day in July we had three "safe-crackers" in a row—Edward from Nottingham PA, Carly from Ashburn VA, and Brian from Philadelphia PA. Sometimes there is gold "bullion" in the safes, other days none ... guess someone eats it all.

We were told recently by one of our visitors that one, or maybe both, of these safes are on the GEOCACHING app and Cape Charles Museum is a destination for "Geocachers". This was news to the museum staff! How did we get chosen? Why doesn't "someone" inform us that we're on a world-wide app? Of course it's all fun, and we're very glad of the visitors this free publicity brings.

Donation of Artifacts

Members and friends of the museum know that we have an extensive archive of thousands of artifacts: photographs, documents and objects donated by past and present residents of Cape Charles, families of retired and deceased employees of the railways and ferries, and people who have somehow ended up with items they believe will be of interest to us. Earlier this year we were given a number of treasured items from the collection of Anne Wood Bryant, whose father worked for NYP&N (New York Philadelphia & Norfolk) Railroad. They have been accessioned and will be incorporated into our exhibits for the 2023 season. We also received some PRR tug log books from Jack Hallett of Nassawadox and a copy of the Brian Travis Album on Sport Fishing from Robert & Bonnie Travis.

We are always glad to receive artifacts from our town's long and colorful history of the rails and ferries as well as seafood harvesting, fishing and agriculture. Should you wish to donate something, it is best if you contact us in advance at capecharleshistory@gmail.com or by postal mail. If you drop off items, be sure that you receive a donation form from the docent on duty. If the items are accepted as a good fit to our collections you will receive a deed of gift letter for your signature once they are accessioned.

Whatever Happened to the Virginia Lee ?

There are over 25 miles of Chesapeake Bay water between Virginia's Eastern Shore and Norfolk. Getting across is a challenge. Birds fly over it, native Americans

used log canoes, later travelers and merchants employed skipjacks and other sailing vessels. Using recently perfected steam engines, the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) built elegant ships known as “steamers” to complete their railroad link between the shores. To accommodate passengers with more bulky baggage, notably cars, these steamers were later replaced by ferries and eventually the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT). But the steamers were the stars. We are indebted to Reverend William A. Wall for the history of the steamer *Virginia Lee*. Rev. “Billy” Wall was one of the most important contributors to our CCHS collections—309 items in the Collections Database (photographs, postcards and documents) list him as donor. His inquiries to *Virginia Lee's* last owner provide first hand detail of her eventful life.

Virginia Lee was undoubtedly the most beloved of all the Cape Charles-Norfolk steamers. Built in 1928 for the PRR and named for the daughter of its then president Elisha Lee, she was elegant both inside and out, and very fast. For 14 years she served the Bay crossing out of Cape Charles. A railroad timetable of 1934 indicates that the crossing to Norfolk via Old Point Comfort, a distance of 37 miles, was generally made in 2 hours and 50 minutes. Her fortunes changed with World War II. The federal government requisitioned her, along with four New York ships, for the war in Europe and converted her steam engine from coal to oil. Because the business interests of coal and railroads had always been close, conversion of coal burning steamers and locomotives to oil was not readily undertaken by the railroads. But then, instead of going to Europe, she was sent up the Amazon River in Brazil to bring out rubber.

In 1948, still sitting somewhere up the Amazon River, she was offered for sale by the government. The sole bidder was Mr. B.B. Wills of the Wills Line in Baltimore who offered \$51,000. Mr. Wills then set off for Brazil to bring her back. He purchased from the government a wooden “A-N” vessel, powered by two 1500 H.P. diesel engines, each driving a generator, and commissioned her for the trip to Brazil. Using this vessel as a tug, he brought the *Virginia Lee* back to his Tolchester Dock, Pier 16, Pratt Street in Baltimore. According to his letter, Mr. Wills then converted her from steam to diesel, installing two 3,000 H.P. General Motors diesel engines, and renamed her *Holiday*, operating her for about a year between Boston and Provincetown, MA.

By 1951 he had sold her back to the PRR through its subsidiary, the Virginia Ferry Corporation (VFC), which converted her for use as an automobile ferry and changed her name to *Accomac*. So she made the Chesapeake Bay crossings again until 1964, when the CBBT opened. Again, she was offered for sale, and again Mr. Wills bought her, this time for \$75,000—he valued her engines. He docked her in Portsmouth and began converting her back to a passenger ship. Late in the night of May 28, 1964, she caught fire and her entire top deck was burned off. Undaunted, Wills then took advantage of a

government program to trade her in for another “moth-balled” ship. Then, when her new owner similarly traded her in for a refrigerated ship, he bought her back yet again and sold her up the Potomac River for scrap. Some years ago the old hull of the *Virginia Lee* could still be seen at Mallows Bay on the Potomac.

Memberships and Donations

New memberships and renewals continue to come in and are still needed. If you are in doubt as to your renewal status, send an email to madnaar2@gmail.com and we will let you know. If you prefer to use a credit or debit card, that can easily be done over our web site capecharlesmuseum.org. The website also features some items from our museum shop that can be viewed and purchased online. These donations are processed by Paypal but you don't need to be a Paypal member. CCHS has recently been granted Paypal charitable status which results in lower Paypal fees and enrolls us in the Paypal Giving Fund. If you have an IRA and are of an age that requires you to withdraw funds every year, remember that any portion of that distribution which you contribute to a 501c3 non-profit like CCHS avoids the capital gains tax.

Many people continue to donate \$250 or more as membership or special funds and thereby receive plates in memory or honor of people they choose. Plates are mounted on plaques at the museum. Plates added this year for 2021 contributions include: JAMES & RITA HOPKINS, VIRGINIA SAVAGE (3), ELEANOR M. HARRIS, JEFFREY LAVRICH, SADIE LEATHERBURY, FOSTER BROWN DOG, J. DOUGLAS RIPPON, and ANDREW BARBOUR. This year we already have nine requests for plates. If you wish to add one, be sure specify the person/s you wish to name and your relationship to them.

Coming: Our Third Popular December Seafood Sale

For the upcoming holiday season we are again offering to bring to your tables a fresh harvest of local clams and oysters. Bags of 100 little neck clams and bags of 50 seaside oysters should be ordered in advance, with pickup at the museum. Keep a lookout for more details on our Facebook page and website. You may also contact Brittany @ Bcannon@cbbt.com.

Regretfully, the board has decided not to hold our traditional Thanksgiving weekend Oyster Roast. Price increases, an aging volunteer base, and the continuing risks of COVID and weather drove the decision.

If you not longer wish to receive these newsletters, please let us know by sending an email to madnaar2@gmail.com.

We now receive close to \$100 annually from Amazon Smile, thanks to people who have designated CCHS as their charity to receive Amazon donations when they order merchandise from Amazon. It's easy to sign up - please join if you haven't already.