BELIEVE IT OR DON’T
Some Stories that are Stranger than Fiction from the History of Colonial Beach

The Museum at Colonial Beach is thankful that Jackie Shinn and Joyce Coates wrote down so many “Remembrances” in the 1990s that give us a beginning for the investigation of the history of our town. You can find printed and digital copies of their work locally at the Abraham and William Cooper Memorial Library and at the Museum.

1. A Ducking Stool was once located at Washington Mill which is about 5 miles away from Wilkerson’s Restaurant near what is now the border of Westmoreland County and King George County on Rosier Creek. It was the location of the first grist mill in Westmoreland County. (There are no markers there now but it was near the road currently named Garnett’s Mill Loop. Garnett was a later owner of the same mill.)

Washington’s Mill was built and first owned by John Washington, the great great grandfather of George. (Washington Parish in Westmoreland Co. is named after this John Washington, not George.) According to some sources including “Westmoreland County” edited by Walter Biscoe Norris Jr., John Washington’s son Lawrence Washington was a justice of the peace from 1680 until he died in 1698, and was also a member of the Westmoreland Court. In 1697 the local court ordered a ducking stool for each parish in Westmoreland, one was to be at “Cpt. Lawrence Washington’s Mill Dam”.

In the 1600 and 1700s there were ducking stools located at Washington Mill and at several other mill locations in the Northern Neck. In his book “Four Centuries of Little Known Washington Parish History,” Carl F. Flemer Jr. says “gossips, scolds, disorderly women, and common troublemakers were dunked in and out of the cold pond water.” The ducking was a spectator event and people came to watch. Women were more often punished for offenses than men in the 1600s and 1700s in Virginia. Ducking ended in the early 1800s in Virginia. There were also ducking stools located in Maryland including Charles County.

The ducking stool (also called cucking stool) was one of the many ideas we adopted from the British.
2. **“Captain’s House” at 211 Irving Ave.** has a “ship captain” ghost. The captain once lived in the original house on this location on Irving Ave. and the spirit moved right in when the current home was built on the former home site. The original had to be torn down due to serious problems with termites and other lack of maintenance. The captain owned the house around the 1930s. He was known to be eccentric according to stories passed down; he kept his valuables hidden in the house, perhaps in the walls. Noises, sounds of walking and sounds of doors opening have been heard by residents of the home; a dark figure who appears to be a man in a black coat has been seen several times by residents. Is it the Captain or is it perhaps the man who (it is said) may have hanged himself in the shed behind the house? (mostly from Shinn and Coates “Another Time and Now”)

Bobbi and John Adamson, the newest owners of the house at 211 Irving, are very comfortable there but they have experienced some “odd things”. Bobbi says “The ceiling fans come on all by themselves so I had my fix-it guy look at it to see if they were on a timer. He said it was fixed but it has happened twice again. One of the ceiling fans was on in a room we never use. Another weird thing happened in the cottage in the backyard. My dogs, who follow me everywhere, will not go in the cottage. When I clean the cottage they will lay down outside the door and wait for me to finish, even if it takes hours. They will not enter.”

The Museum does not have an image of the old Captain’s House, the former house at 211 Irving. Please contact us if you have one!

3. **The Plaza at 21 Weems St.** has been the site of a “little girl ghost” in a white dress who has been seen by several owners and guests in the home which was operated as a B & B for a number of years. As with quite a few reported ghosts the young girl has a fascination with the electricity in the home and can make electrical appliances go off and on. She especially loves to play with the electric fireplace on first floor, usually turning it on. She seems to like heat. Electricians have been unable to find an electrical problem in the home. Visitors and owners have reported seeing spirits in the upper portions of this home as well as on first floor.

The current owners of the Plaza haven’t experienced the “little girl” spirit. They do report that the street light at the end of Weems St. frequently goes out.

The Plaza  If you have an older image of 21 Weems St., please contact the Museum. We would love to find one.
4. **Dockside, 1687 Castlewood Dr**, is where some male bodies rose to the surface of Monroe Bay in the 1980s. Below the entrance to the yacht club is where many men were buried. They may have been thrown overboard after working on a ship perhaps so that they did not have to be paid the promised salary. (see Westmoreland News Thurs. Feb. 25 1993) In 1982 a storm unearthed some male bodies that were found floating in Monroe Bay. Examination revealed that they had probably been buried in shallow graves for 200 to 300 years or more. It was not unusual in the 1600s for men to be kidnapped in Europe and forced to work as crew members on ships, some heading for the British colonies. Some of these kidnapped sailors were sold as indentured slaves when they were brought to the colonies and then worked on plantations for seven or more years (in payment for the “journey”). In some cases the indentured men were never allowed to go free. In other cases the kidnapped sailors were thrown overboard and drowned after the boat reached the colonies because the kidnappers could not return the kidnapped to Britain or other European locations for fear of prosecution.

5. **Bell House at 821 Irving Ave.** was originally named “Burnside Cottage” and was built by Col. J.O.P. Burnside in 1870. Burnside owned the house for a brief time but when he ran into “financial difficulties” the home was sold at auction to Alexander Melville Bell, the father of Alexander Graham Bell. The Bell House is a Victorian home with balconies and a tower. It has retained the Bell House name due to the prominence of the Bell family. A. M. Bell was the creator of a phonetic transcription system called Visible Speech. The system helped deaf people learn to speak. In 1868 A.M. Bell, with his son Alexander, toured the U.S. demonstrating his system. A. M. Bell eventually opened a school for the deaf. A native of Scotland, A.M. Bell lived in several places before moving to Washington D.C. in 1881. He discovered Colonial Beach shortly afterward, and began visiting as our town was developing into a popular summer destination and was reached from D.C. via steamboat. Bell was active in the early planning of Colonial Beach and believed our town was an appropriate location for a summer retreat for children, especially deaf children. He founded The Children’s Salt Air Home which was located on Hamilton St. and Monroe Bay Ave. A building still located at 306 Hamilton St. was part of Bell’s complex for children. He died in 1905 and is buried in D.C.

The Bell House has had several owners since Bell and has sat empty at times in history. For a time it was owned by Judy Jarutka and Bob Wasing. Judy told her own stories of the home in a book called “The Ghosts of Fredericksburg and Nearby Environ” by L. B. Taylor Jr. which was published in 1991. She has graciously offered to allow us to tell her story here.

The Bell House has had a long reputation regarding the “spirits” seen there. Judy knew about the rumors of ghosts and hauntings when she moved in. While living there both Judy and Bob experienced strange noises, the feeling of something “swooshing” past on the stairs, a glimpse of a “wispy” figure leaning out of the bathroom in the dark, and even someone calling Judy’s name. Probably the most impressive phenomenon was the appearance of old-fashioned 2-inch hairpins in various places in the home. Efforts to remove them were unsuccessful. At one time they sanded, varnished, waxed and used a heavy-duty vacuum to remove the remaining wood-shavings. Hairpins were still found afterward. On another occasion, Judy vacuumed a light-
colored carpet, walked out of the room and back into the room, and then found a hairpin on the light carpet. She was certain it had not been there when she left the room.

Judy learned that a former owner named Bertha Bryon had lived in the Bell House for 50 years. Bertha had a long history with the home that she loved. Her father had been a friend of the Bell family and Bertha had visited the Bells as a child. Bertha was a piano teacher and a person who enjoyed serving tea to guests. Judy believed that Bertha approved of the current residents and was just leaving her hairpins as a sign of her approval.

As with some other home owners with “visiting spirits” in their Colonial Beach homes, Judy never felt afraid in her home. A priest once blessed the house. Judy took a picture of the house to a well-known Fredericksburg psychic who told her that good wine had been made in the house. The home owners were able to learn that Bertha did make wine there perhaps from the concord grapes that grew on an arbor behind the home. The psychic told Judy that she felt spirits in the house and that they could be cleaned away with pine chips.

When Judy Jarutka and Bob Warsing first purchased the Bell House they had not yet put anything inside the home but had placed a couple of plants on the porch. A friend took a photograph of the home at that time. Much later when they looked at that photograph they noted the image of a man looking out of the window. He had white hair and a white beard and looked just like the image of A. M. Bell in newspaper pictures.
6. **Old Colonial Beach Hotel** formerly located on what is now called **Town Hill** (Washington St.) was reported to have had several ghosts according to Shinn and Coates in 1995 & 1996 articles. Apparently one of the ghosts was little old lady in a rocking chair once seen sitting in front of a TV. She was dressed in Victorian clothing with her grey hair piled on top of her head. She suddenly disappeared while several people were in the room with her. On another occasion the night clerk at the hotel saw a woman in an old-fashioned grey skirt with a white high-necked blouse and with grey hair in a bun. As he walked toward her she disappeared. (Has anyone seen a ghost wandering on the former site of the hotel?)

![Image of The Colonial Beach Hotel which was once located on our current Town Hill (where the community stage is located).](image1)

7. **The Ice House or Ice Plant** was located on the corner of **Monroe Bay Ave. and Madison St.** It was built by Samuel Hammond around 1900. Originally it mostly served as place for seafood to be frozen. According to Shinn and Coates, in later years it was a power plant for the East Coast Co. and supplied electricity to the town in the 1950s. After that it served as an ice house again for years. The ice house had several owners and the last owner was Mr. Melson, the father of Gloria Rogers, who is one of the children in the foreground of the picture below.

![The Ice House once located on the corner of Monroe Bay Ave. and Madison St. with Mrs. Melson and two of her children in front.](image2)
The U.S. Naval Surface Warfare Center at Dahlgren (as it was then named) has been firing shots heard around town for many years. Back in the 1940s shells were known to be found around Colonial Beach. Town resident Mr. Osterman once found a large shell and decided to make a lamp using a drill and blow torch. Mr. Osterman worked at the Ice House on Monroe Bay and this was the location where he was working on the lamp. Some local business people kept their perishables at the ice house and on this day Bernard Denson, a local grocer, had gone to get some of his perishables to take back to his store. He watched Mr. Osterman work on the lamp for a time. A short time after he left the Ice House Bernard Denson heard an explosion and rushed back. The shell had exploded. Mr. Denson narrowly escaped and Mr. Osterman eventually died from injuries sustained in the explosion. (From a Shinn and Coates article)

8. **Green Gables** was a home that is no longer standing on **Boundary St.** Over a period of years, the residents of this home, which has been taken down, saw door knobs turning on their own, heard footsteps in the home, saw an ashtray break in half and heard a chanting noise which seemed to be coming from the attic. The residents saw the image of young girl inside the house on several occasions including at Christmas. The spirit often made itself known before a thunderstorm in the fall or summer. There was a strange breeze noted in the upstairs of the home which seemed to disturb the family Doberman so much that he wouldn’t go upstairs to rest in his favorite spot when the breeze was present. (from Shinn and Coates) Did this ghost disappear with the home or is she appearing in the new house on the property?

The former Green Gables which has been razed.

9. **Chessie the Sea Monster** is now part of American lore. Some folks say that Chessie lives in the Chesapeake Bay but Chessie has also been reported in various rivers too. Reports of Chessie sightings date back at least to 1945.
Some local residents recall the excitement when Chessie spottings brought newspaper reporters to Colonial Beach. In June 1980, Godwin Muse, a farmer from Westmoreland County, Virginia, saw a 14-foot snake with an undulating body in the Potomac River. Less than two weeks later, Chessie was spotted about 15 miles downstream from the Muse sighting by G. F. Green, his family and a friend. They saw a creature with 3 or 4 humps swimming smoothly and rapidly. The animal was about 25 feet long and 5 to 6 inches in diameter. (From a blog by Denver Michaels www.denvermichaels.net and from “Chessie Is Back in the Potomac.” The Spartanburg Herald, June 26, 1980.)

Chessie is reported to be a sea serpent with body parts that resemble flippers. The sea serpent has been reported to be at least 25 feet long and perhaps as long as 40 feet. Chessie swims in snake-like motions, curving through the water. The majority of sightings were in the late 70s and early 80s.

Various people have tried to photograph Chessie. Explanations have included that Chessie is actually a “mutant eel”, some prehistoric lizard-like creature, a huge anaconda that hitched a ride on a ship and then escaped, a manatee, or a huge otter. The creature has been spotted by a military helicopter crew, by fishermen, by boaters, and by folks standing on shore. Two people attempted to videotape Chessie near Kent Island, but the video is dark though it shows the pattern of side-to-side movement.

There was a sighting in 2014 on the Arundel Beach Rd. next to the Magothy River at high tide. Two men reported Chessie was less than 5 feet away from them. They described a black snake-like creature about 25 to 30 feet long with no fins and with a slender football-shaped head. The creature swam just breaking though the water surface “with a serpentine motion”. There are no known snakes in MD near the size of the reported creature. (Search Chessie on the Internet for more stories.)
10. A bit of the history of the **Henry Disston House at 120 Monroe Bay Ave.** This property was owned by Samuel D. and Mary C. Watson. (Samuel D. Watson was Mayor of Colonial Beach from 1896-1897). The house was built by Rudolph Watson (son of Samuel and Mary) who was the Mayor of Colonial Beach from 1908-1910. Mr. Edward and Lillian Cox and two children (Eldred and Shelby) probably lived at this address from 1910 on but did not purchase the house until June 2, 1914. Various members of the Cox family owned the property from 1914 until 1989. Long time Colonial Beach residents know this property as the “Cox House”.

Captain Edward F. Cox captained a schooner called Henry Disston. Built in 1881 in Portsmouth, VA., the vessel was 73 foot in length and weighs 41 tons. Around July 1941, Captain Ed Cox sold the Henry Disston to D’Arcy Grant, a woman skipper. Captain D’Arcy Grant reconditioned the Henry Disston from a freight schooner to a passenger vessel; Ed Cox stayed on as her navigator. On September 2, 1943, (WWII) Captain Grant joined the coast guard SPARS. The story goes that the Henry Disston was returned to Captain Cox. Believing it was bad luck to own the same vessel twice he sank it in Monroe Bay. Before sinking it, he salvaged the two masts and put them on his porch. John C. Lynham II and his wife Carolee purchased the property on January 7, 2000. Mr. & Mrs. Lynham began an extensive renovation of the Cox home place. The Lynham’s sold the house in 2006, after which the house gradually fell into a state of disrepair. Richard and MaryAnn Berry purchased the house in October of 2013. The Berry’s decided their home should be named the Henry Disston House.

This following story is from MaryAnn Berry (homeowner 2017): When we first moved into our home we heard strange noises. We still do but only in the winter time now and then only in the evening. Richard and I just look at each other and say “Mrs. Cox is at it again.” My grandson visited us and slept in the guest bedroom. In the morning he was sleeping on the couch. We asked why and he said someone sat on the bed during the night and woke him up. Needless to say he hasn’t slept in that room since. When Mrs. Cox’ grandson came to visit our house with his daughter, I asked him if there were ghosts in the house. He said “yes” and that it was his grandmother. He told me the guest bedroom used to be her room. He also told me that Mr. Lynham, while renovating the home, would find his tools in a completely different spot than where he left them the night before. A friend of mine gave me information to contact paranormal investigators but I haven’t done it yet. Maybe we got used to each other.

Three cropped images of the former Henry Disston House prior to renovation by the Lynham family and a picture of the Henry Disston House in 2017.
11. Eastlake Murder – This story will be told separately on this site.

Contact us at: cbhsmuseum@gmail.com

If you have an unusual story to tell about your home or the Town of Colonial Beach – write your story and email it to the museum or contact us and we’ll help you write it. If you have some pictures to accompany our stories, we would love to see them!

Corrections or additions will be gladly accepted.

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