

"Lecture in the Church," a presentation by Northampton Historic Preservation Society, at Hungars Episcopal Church, August 30, 2021, 2:00 p.m. Presenters: Jenean Hall, Joan Wehner and Ann Snyder.

"History of the Parish"  
by Jenean Hall

In this part of the presentation, we'll breeze through the first 122 years of Eastern Shore English history for the purpose of illustrating the early story of Hungars Parish. I'll begin with the first settlement and then bring us to the year the churchwardens contracted to build this church where we are today.

What I'm about to tell you is based on my own research in primary sources with the advantage of today's internet and several gifted transcribers of the old records. Those of you who read Eastern Shore history will recognize that my point of view is at times different from that of earlier writers.

The Eastern Shore's permanent English settlement began about 1620. It was known as Accomack. For about 14 years, the settlement was contained in an area encompassing Cherrystone Neck and Old Plantation Neck.

In 1626, the Governor and Council in Jamestown decreed that all settlements throughout Virginia were to build a church or sequester a room solely for the purpose of divine worship. All ministers were to follow the canons of the Church of England. In these early years, the church was used as an arm of the court for announcements and for punishments and also, for providing welfare to those who couldn't care for themselves.

Between 1627 and 1632, Accomack's first church was built. It was built at the Town, on the north shore of Kings Creek (near today's Cherrystone Aqua-Farms). The first minister was William Cotton.

It's important to know that an official church could not be built nor a new parish formed without authorization of the General Assembly. That was never a local decision.

In 1635, the first Accomack Vestry was appointed. Land was selected for the glebe—a glebe being land designated for the profit of the minister. The local glebe at that time was a 100-acre strip of land on Old Plantation Neck, beginning at the bay and running a mile inland. [Just south of the concrete plant.]

The creation of Vestries at this time was a part of the Virginia General Assembly's initiative to create a network for better management across the colony. Another part of that initiative was the creation of counties. Accomack was designated as a county along with seven other Virginia settlements.

Another part of this governmental process was the creation of sheriffs and military officers in each county. Accomack elected William Stone as its first sheriff.

Accomack then shook off its old boundaries and began to expand—southward into the lower peninsula, and northward into what was called Hungars.

Let's look at what it meant in those early years to say "Hungars." Hungars, by the way, is an Indian word. Its meaning has been lost to us.

You should have a MAP that looks like this. [Each attendee was given a map.] This map shows most of where the Hungars community was forming at this time. Hungars Creek is central to this area. (I don't mean to shortchange the seashiders, but in the beginning, settlement favored the bayside.)

Sheriff William Stone was the first man to patent land in Hungars. (His house was in the area of the YELLOW star on your map.) Five years later, in 1639, forty-two tithable people, plus women and children, lived in the Hungars community.

The community, through a spokesperson, went to Minister Cotton and negotiated a private arrangement for him to travel to Hungars once a month to provide divine services including, no doubt, holy communion. They paid him double what he was usually paid. With this arrangement, they didn't have to travel all the way down to the Town, a distance of 10 miles by boat. But still, the community didn't have an official church.

About four years later, the General Assembly renamed the county. It would now be known as Northampton. At this same time, 1643, the Assembly created two parishes in Northampton. The dividing line would eventually be what we know as The Gulf, west of today's Eastville. To the south of that line was the Lower Parish. To the north was the Upper Parish. (Those were the official names: Lower Parish and Upper Parish.) The Lower Parish church continued to be at the Town. It would take a few years yet to build a church in the Upper Parish, but by about 1647, the Upper Parish had its own official church.

That church was called Nuswattocks Church and the parish came to be called Hungars, so you'll hear both: Upper Parish, Hungars Parish: same thing. Nuswattocks at that time was the name of the neck (what we call Church Neck).

That first church was built near Pear Plain. (On your map, Pear Plain is represented by the RED star.) Walter Williams opened an ordinary, or tavern, not far from the church. Williams licensed his establishment so that the Northampton Court could use it for their meetings. The court then met there, alternating months with meetings in the Lower Parish, and later with meetings off Occohannock Creek.

Court and church days were the most important and most interesting days of the month. People came out for these events. The court often used the church

congregation as a witness for mandatory apologies and demonstrations of contrition. Shame and embarrassment were reliable tools of justice in those years. Church attendance was not optional; increasing fines were imposed for truancy. And, on court days, if you were summoned, you better be present.

With all this required (and voluntary) attendance, access to the court and to the church was essential. People came by personal boat, by public ferries, or on foot. A bridge existed in those early years, but not at what we call Bridgetown. The earliest bridge, a footbridge no doubt, was further down the creek to the west.

In the summer of 1648, not long after the first Hungars church was fully operational, the Northampton Court held a joint meeting with the Upper Parish vestry. They discussed bridges.

Three bridges were on the agenda. One was in the northern reaches of the county.

The second bridge was on a branch of today's Church Creek.

The third bridge was the Hungars bridge. This bridge now needed to be sufficient for "horsemen" as well as people on foot. The court gave the community six months to build this better bridge. Still, this was not at the Bridgetown site; it was further west on the creek.

Over the years, this bridge was often in disrepair. If you were coming to church or court from the south in those early years, your best bet was a public ferry.

Fifteen years later, in 1663, the populated land-area had grown so much that the General Assembly carved a new county from Northampton. The new county took the old name, Accomack. The early boundary between the two counties was much further to the south than it is today. It was where that second bridge was, at a branch off of today's Church Creek. (If you're traveling Rt 13, it would be about in the area of Weirwood.)

The creation of this new county did not affect the boundaries of the parishes. The Upper Parish (or Hungars) reached into the new county and ended close to today's Belle Haven.

Northampton County now had less land area, and because of it, the court established what it hoped would be a permanent home for the court. It built a courthouse—not a tavern or an ordinary, but a bona fide courthouse! It was built at the Town, near the still-operating Lower Parish church (near today's Cherrystone Aqua-Farms).

Back up the road at Nuswattocks, the ordinary couldn't make a go of it without the business of the court. So it closed, but the Upper Parish continued to be served by that first Hungars church. It would survive another twenty years, at least.

In 1677, the year after Bacon's Rebellion, the General Assembly changed the boundary between Accomack and Northampton counties. The boundary was moved seven miles further north to the upper reaches of the parish. The entire parish was now—once again—fully within Northampton County. Occohannock Neck returned to Northampton County at this time.

To accommodate this increased land area, the freeholders of Northampton voted to move the location of court seven miles further up the road—from that bona fide courthouse at the Town to Henry Mathews house at a place called "the horns." Mathews acquired his ordinary license so that he could host and serve court meetings.

The church in the Upper Parish (or Hungars Parish) was now thirty years old. It had been built when the population of Hungars was hardly more than one or two hundred people.

The church was too small and it was not reasonably accessible to the majority of parishioners. In 1680, the churchwardens contracted with a carpenter, Simon Thomas, to build a new church on an acre at Smiths Field. That site was here, where we are, the next acre to the west. It's the BLUE star on your map.

That new church was to be 40 feet by 20 feet, with a ceiling 10 feet high.

After eight months of work, the carpenter quit and sued for payment. The community was in an uproar about this new church. The bickering was so bad that the governor ordered a halt to construction. When the carpenter died sixteen months after he quit, the parish still owed him 7,000 of the 10,000 pounds of tobacco he'd been promised.

That may mean that the church was only 70% completed.

The next year (1683), John Custis—who lived where William Stone used to live (at the YELLOW star on your map)—sued the churchwardens, compelling them to appear before the governor and council in Jamestown. While we don't know what was decided, we do learn that there were two main issues: the churchwardens had stayed in office beyond their terms, and these illegal churchwardens had relocated the church without the consent of the parishioners.

Who would be protesting the relocation of the church from down in the neck to this site here, an acre to our west?

I believe the protestors were not the neck folks. I think the discontented people were the ones who lived between what is today Bridgetown and Eastville. And the reason for their discontent had to do with the bridge.

Neck people didn't need a bridge. They never had. It's a different story for the folks who lived on the south side of Hungars Creek. They needed a bridge to get to church. By this time, people had horses and carts. Just as today, many people wanted to drive

to church. If that old bridge was out—which it was most of the time—you needed a ferry. But when the court left Hungars, the public ferry was discontinued and private service wasn't reliable.

Moving the church to this site perhaps seemed a good idea, but in actual practice, it was a hardship to those who lived to the south of Hungars Creek. If the county couldn't keep that bridge in repair, the road to church wound up being eight miles further—around the Johnson Town Road, to Bay Side Road, to this site.

With suits and countersuits, it appears that the Second Church was never properly finished.

Eight years later (1691), Northampton's two vestries came together to petition the governor, asking that the two parishes (UPPER and LOWER) be reunited into one parish with two churches. The reasons given were that the county was too small to support two ministers and too small to be able to build a "decent church." That last reason is interesting, because the Lower Parish had just built a new brick church, Magothy Bay Church, near Arlington. That was more than a "decent church" by all accounts, so it seems that the concern was with the Hungars church. The Hungars church had apparently been made functional, but it was not a "decent church."

Combining the parishes meant that tithes and fines could be collected from the whole county for the purposes of paying a minister, providing for the poor, and apparently for building "a decent church" here.

Additionally at this time, these same parish representatives asked the governor to have this one parish—the new parish— named "Hungars" so that gifts given to the former parish could still be honored. They were speaking about Stephen Charlton's legacy.

Stephen Charlton had died thirty-seven years before. In his will he gave 1,600 acres on today's Church Neck to his daughter Bridgett, but if she were to die without a legitimate heir, the land and all its appurtenances would go to the minister who preached to the inhabitants of "this parish."

When this plan was presented to the governor and his council, Bridgett was still living. She would live thirteen years more. In 1704, she died as a childless widow at the age of 59. In her will she left many things to many people and she left the 1,600 acres to her friend and neighbor, Andrew Hamilton.

One of our most beloved historians, Ralph Whitelaw, commented on this; he said: "As she must have known the terms of her father's will....It is not understandable how she could have attempted this disposition."

When Bridgett died, her friend Andrew Hamilton was a 28-year-old, up and coming lawyer. William Byrd of Westover would call him a man of bad character, but years later, Benjamin Franklin would write loving praises of Hamilton.

Unless we find some long-lost letters, we'll never know Bridgett's motive for this surprising bequest; however, I suspect it was simply that Bridget considered her father's gift nullified by the creation of this new parish. Even if it did carry the old name, it was not the same parish. Knowing that the most powerful men of the county did not agree with her, she left the issue in the hands of a brilliant, tenacious lawyer who was her friend. Perhaps it had given her some measure of satisfaction to imagine that she might prevail even if it were from the grave.

Nothing in the record indicates that Hamilton ever took up the issue. He later moved to Maryland and then to Philadelphia. After Bridgett's death, there's a forty-one-year gap in the information about the Charlton land, so I think, in a way, she did prevail (at least for forty-one years).

In the meantime, the bridge problem had persisted. The court commissioners had tried a private contract to keep it in repair, but they finally gave up in 1695. In that year, they directed Richard Nottingham and Jonathan Stott to inspect a certain swamp to see if they could devise a more convenient way to church from the south and to court from the north. Nottingham and Stott reported back that it looked like a good, durable site. A bridge could be built here, they said, with a lot of work and a lot of money. This crossing was built and it gave rise to Bridgetown.

Forty-one years after Bridgett died, an Act of the General Assembly decreed that a new parish house was to be built on the glebe that was Stephen Charlton's legacy. At this same time the legislators also decreed the sale of the old glebe and—this is disturbing, but necessary to know—the legislators also decreed the purchase of slaves to be annexed to the new glebe. Three of the enslaved were to be young females.

That was in 1745.

John Custis (whose tomb is at Arlington) was in his last four years of life. His niece Esther was married to Thomas Preeson who owned the land where we are today.

The time had come to build a decent church.

END [If a reader wishes to know the citation for a particular section, contact Jenean at jenealogy.2x@verizon.net; please include "Hungars Parish" in the subject line.]