

# In the Land of Pleasant Living: Names in Virginia's Northern Neck

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Virginia's Northern Neck, also known as the "Land of Pleasant Living," has many historic places and names dating from the first decade of the 1600s. The earliest names were recorded in 1608 by Captain John Smith from an Algonquian dialect of the local Native Americans. Major watercourses and tracts of land in the Northern Neck still retain forms of these names. After 1652 there was intensive settlement from the Jamestown area of southern Virginia and the British Isles. These English-speaking people bestowed their own familiar names on places, tracts of land, and houses, providing a name cover with a very distinctive British flavor. The history of naming in the Neck, though not unlike other areas of the eastern seaboard, has its own characteristic patina of names that reflect the sequence of occupation, economy, and attitudes of people to the land.

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I would like to take you on a trip to the "Land of Pleasant Living." Its longtime residents find this verdant peninsula a wonderful place to live, away from the smog and traffic of both Richmond and Washington, D.C., yet conveniently close to both for some of the amenities associated with metropolitan places. The preferred route from Washington leads south-southeast, then crosses the Potomac River some 75 miles into the Tidewater of Virginia. A map of Virginia reveals three large peninsulas, or "necks" as they are locally known. They extend southeast to Chesapeake Bay, and are bordered by wide estuary-like rivers.

The Northern Neck is the northernmost of these peninsulas, a descriptive name first recorded in the seventeenth century. It is about 70 miles long, and is bounded on the northeast by the Potomac, on the southeast by Chesapeake Bay, and on the southwest by the Rappahannock River. The name originally extended to the headwaters of the two rivers, but is now generally confined to the four lower counties:

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Lancaster, Northumberland, Richmond, and Westmoreland. Visitors today are welcomed by a signboard to a land that has been cherished since the seventeenth century, a land with a remarkable treasure-house of historic American names and places.

Until the late 1920s, when the first bridges were built across the wide rivers, the Northern Neck was an isolated peninsula connected to the rest of Virginia by an isthmus some seven miles across, just east of Fredericksburg. Because of its relative isolation, the area of the Neck carried much of its earlier flavor into the twentieth century. Students of language have collected early English expressions and pronunciations from longtime families living in the Neck. However, with the influx of “outsiders” retiring to this land of pleasant living, the language is slowly losing many of its distinct characteristics.

The earliest recorded names on the Neck were the two dozen or so names of Native American settlements gathered by Captain John Smith during his historic exploration of Chesapeake Bay in 1608. From Jamestown, Smith and his party of gentlemen and soldiers sailed up both the Rappahanock and the Potomac as far as the fall line, beyond which navigation was not possible. The native people encountered along these rivers were loosely associated with the Powhatan confederacy and spoke Algonquian dialects.

Some of the native names still survive in one form or another because early cartographers applied them to streams near the villages shown on Smith’s map. Today we have the Corrotoman River, Great Wicomico River, Little Wicomico River, Currioman Bay, Nomini Creek, Menokin River, Chicacoan, and Totuskey Creek as reminders of the people who occupied the land before the Europeans. These and other native names are found in the records, although with a variety of spellings. *Chicacoan*, for example, has some fifteen recorded spellings. The number of native names has been increased by their having been attached to a variety of adjacent features and places such as points of land, cliffs, populated places, parishes, mills, churches, schools, and ferries. In a sense, they have become English/American placenames.

The contact period between English settlers and Native Americans was short and prone to conflict. It is, therefore, not surprising that almost all existing native names derive from the earliest period of European occupation, which began in earnest in the 1650s. Land grants were given by the Crown and the colony to support English settlement

in Virginia. Ship captains and wealthy promoters in the colony received 50 acres of land for each "headright," for each person transported from the Old World. Considering poor records and surveys, and outright manipulation of numbers, some grants amounted to thousands of acres. Settlement was accompanied by the names and naming patterns transferred from the British Isles. Many of the earlier names, such as those of the counties, were borrowed from England, but after one or two generations, the English-speaking population developed homegrown patterns based on description, association, land ownership, and perceived "upscale" foreign names.

I will discuss briefly the names of tracts of land based on research for my *Place Names of the Northern Neck of Virginia* (1983). The larger grants or plantations, and their associated houses, were often given names, a practice common in Britain. In parts of England where I have visited, some house names take the place of house numbers; having a house with a name is not special, only a means of identification. In the Northern Neck, houses with names carry a certain cachet. Usually the tracts/houses with names date back over a century or more. They also tend to be larger, reflecting the pride and aspirations of their original owners. Some have been in the same family for generations. The early naming of tracts seems to convey an optimism in the land and the future of the plantations.

Thirty-five years ago I bought a place in the Northern Neck, and being a gung ho student of onomastics, I decided to name it. I learned a lot about names and naming, but there were few other tangible results. When my husband found out what I proposed to call it, he was aghast at my extremely pretentious choice. Looking back now to that time, I realize that he was entirely correct. The name I chose was *Somerfield Deer Park*. The name combined several threads in a single phrase. The maiden name of my husband's mother was Somerhalter, and so there was a play on "somer" with "summer." Besides there were three deer out on the lawn, nibbling the grass and feeling very secure in the frosty dawn. That made it a deer park, much like the King's deer park in Copenhagen. Getting the right name for a place is one thing; getting the public to accept that name is another; and getting people to refer to it by that name is still another.

Of all the named places in the Northern Neck, the one most likely to lend itself to fantasy and reverie is the name bestowed by owners on

their land. The choice of a name for a house or a tract of land is a privately determined one which scarcely needs the approval of neighbors. Since so many of the new landowners in the Northern Neck were the recipients of grants, knowledge that one owned a tract of land, perhaps a very large piece of land, was overwhelming enough without the considerations of employee relations, threats by Indians, and worrisome problems of providing enough for everyone to eat. Although what to call their tract must have been far down on the list for most people, an actual name provided a sense of ownership and prestige. Perhaps the owners who chose fanciful names were those with prosperous harvests and hardworking help. They must have been the ones who amassed more land, imported more indentured servants, and had larger families of healthy children.

Many of those who settled in the Northern Neck demonstrated great resilience and good fortune. One such family was the Lees of Virginia, who first lived in a somewhat primitive wooden earthbound structure near the Potomac River. In the 1730s, prosperous circumstances allowed Thomas Lee to build Stratford Hall, a mansion of pleasing proportions in Westmoreland County. The house, situated on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River, has its main living quarters on the second floor. It was built with the climate in mind, in particular the torrid and humid summers, because the double doors on the river side opened to the breezes from the water. Opposite these doors on the land side was another set of double doors, providing the opportunity for cooling breezes and verdant views on either side. The name Stratford Hall is a direct British transfer, probably from Strat-by-the-Ford, an estate once owned by Thomas Lee's grandfather, Richard Lee, in England. Two of Thomas Lee's sons, Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot, were signers of the Declaration of Independence. Francis later built Menokin in nearby Richmond County, a name deriving from the Native American name of a stream flowing through the plantation.

I would like to digress here a moment to explain the nature of relationships in the Northern Neck. In that famous "Land of Pleasant Living" all of the oldtimers are in fact surrounded by cousins, dozens of cousins. If one's cousins came early in the first half of the seventeenth century, and stayed, then every second family is related to the other families in the Northern Neck. Elliott Gaskins, a neighbor in Fairfield's District, and near the south shore of the Potomac, explained

how this situation arose. His family came to Virginia in the early seventeenth century, first to the Eastern Shore, then to Northumberland County and has been here ever since, for the past 350 years. His family seat is called Gascony, an obvious reference to his own family name, and the romantic historical region of France. The engraved chalice in Wicomico Episcopal Church was donated by his ancestors in the seventeenth century. At that time life was short and most people died before the age of 50. This often led to swift remarriage after the death of a spouse, which helped maintain the continuity of the social system. The fate of hundreds, even thousands, of acres of land, plus indentured servants, slaves and children made the plantation a vast enterprise. Multiple marriages were necessary in order to keep the social mechanisms functioning properly. One person could marry four or five times. This is the source of multiple families and multiple cousins (Gaskins 1970-2000).

It is apparent that all the transferred place names mentioned so far, such as Stratford Hall, Wakefield, and Richmond, are of British origin. While these are the best known names for tracts, houses and counties in the Northern Neck, there are many more names well worth notice.

Farnham and Crondall were two tract names patented by Colonel Moore Fautleroy, one of the earliest and largest landowners in what is now Richmond County. In England, Crondall was the name of a parish and village in north Hampshire, three miles northwest of Farnham. Another tract, between Dividing Creek and Prentice Creek, with an English name was called Ditchley by Richard Lee. It was named to honor Ditchley Park, the seat in Oxfordshire of the Earl of Litchfield, to whom his ancestor, Colonel Richard Lee, mistakenly believed he was related. Aldborough, a former tract in Westmoreland County, commemorates Sir Marmaduke Beckwith's birthplace in West Yorkshire. His daughter married the patentee of this tract.

There is one Hermitage in the Northern Neck, but fifteen of them in the British Isles, each one in a different county. There is a single Iona in the Northern Neck (the name is painted in white on the red barn). The Scottish Iona is an island in Argyllshire. Three Kendall Halls in England are matched by one Kendall Hall in Lancaster County, and six Kirklands in the British Isles are recalled by Kirkland Grove in Northumberland County. There is a Hampton Hall Creek, which seems to suggest the previous existence of Hampton Hall tract. A somewhat

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unusual name is Mount Airy in Richmond County, but it too has its counterpart in East Yorkshire, nine and one half miles north of Hull.

Names of British Isles origin are not limited to tracts of land. There are small towns with British and Irish names such as Kilmarnock, a prosperous place in Lancaster County, which recalls a town in Ayrshire, Scotland. Another small town found in Westmoreland County is Kinsale, a twin of the place found in County Cork, Ireland. There has been hardly any attrition of the names from England, Scotland or Ireland; in fact, their number has been growing. In the last four centuries some British Isles names have changed from one British/Irish name to another. The types of names that were impoverished by these changes were surnames, Indian names, and flora/fauna names.

It is remarkable that so many names from the British Isles survived, and, even more remarkable, grew in the nineteenth century after the worsening relationship with the mother country had culminated in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. The only explanation that I can offer is the similarity between this love-hate relationship and the parent-child relationship as explicated in a recent book entitled *Get Out of My Life But Would You First Take Me and Trisha to the Mall*.

The highest attrition rate in placenames occurred with tracts named for persons. Of the 177 tracts named for persons since the mid-seventeenth century when the grants of land began, 119 have been lost. Perhaps this might have been expected, for the land ownership patterns were subject to the turbulent times in which our ancestors lived. A tract probably lost its name when it acquired a new owner, or when two or more tracts were integrated into a single one. Families came and went, and so did family names. An example of a tract with a family name which has endured is Gascony, named in the seventeenth century for the Gaskins family (originally Gascoyne). There is also a tract named Abington after a family; it was attested in 1657, but later became Wakefield after 1717. Also Nusum's, attested about 1650, became Blakemore's, probably introduced in the eighteenth century.

The fascination with Native Americans was shortlived and native names faded quickly. More than two-thirds of the tracts that had received native names in the seventeenth century lost them soon thereafter. The reason for their loss was the reluctance to befriend native people because of the unfortunate results of many of the earlier contacts. The respect and neutrality, which had at first marked relations, cooled

on both sides as each perceived the problems arising from the influx of white Europeans.

Many of the early patentees of land adopted locally available Native American names as a convenience. There were, and still are, several tracts with the designation Nomini. Others native names are Currioman Farm (possibly a variant spelling of Corotoman), Monaskon Farm (a return to an earlier naming), Pecatone, Pinapoke Hall (if indeed it is an Indian name), Roanoke, Shalango (attested in 1812), Wicomico View (attested in the eighteenth century) and Nomini Hall. The seventeenth century Quinton Oak tract, whose name appears in such spellings as *Quentennoke*, *Quntoncake*, and *Quintanicoke*, appears to be a name of native origin as well (Miller 1983).

Flora and fauna names began modestly with 1% of all names attested in the seventeenth century. This grew to 15% in the eighteenth century, and 51% in the nineteenth century. By flora names I refer to the five names using the word *cedar*, the four names with *chestnut*, the eight names with *holly*, the five names with *laurel*, the eight names with *locust*, and the eleven names with *oak*. This does not exhaust the list of flora in tract names. A somewhat common flora name throughout the southern United States is *linden*. The one tract that I am most familiar with is Linden, also called Linden Farm, on the north edge of Farnham in Richmond County. Its handsome early Tidewater house was purchased by Donald and Martha Orth in 1977, and it has been faithfully restored. Built in stages between 1700 and 1735, Linden is one of the oldest frame houses in Virginia.

The Northern Neck of Virginia is not only the "Land of Pleasant Living," it is also a land steeped in fascinating placename history. Who cannot wonder about the dreams and motivations of the Neck's settlers who over almost 400 years gave to their places such names as Bleak Hall, Burnt Chimneys, Canada, Cupids, Devils Woodyard, Frog Hall, Good Luck, Hard Bargain, Juggs, Perfect, Pop Castle, Spindrifft, Taskmakers, Tranquility, and Whirlabum?

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