

West Annapolis – Our Roots in History

by Virginia Vroblesky, March 2012

2015 marks the 365th anniversary of a decision that affects the lives of everyone who lives in West Annapolis. That decision gave us a unique history and a connection to the major events that founded our colony and shaped our growing nation. It is the story of how our land was transformed from unclaimed wilderness to a plantation called Norwood Beale and to an Incorporated Town named West Annapolis.

In 1650, John Norwood decided to uproot his wife, Ann, and two sons, John and Andrew from their home in the Virginia colony. He determined to move to the small growing colony of Maryland. He came in response to the offer of free land – so many acres promised as payment for the number of people a potential settler brought into the colony. Earlier, in 1632, King Charles 1 of England had granted to Lord Baltimore and his heirs (the Calvert family) a charter to establish the colony of Maryland and the right to distribute land however they wished. It was a tobacco colony, tropical and challenging, in need of hard workers. The Calverts actively recruited tobacco farmers from among the Virginia colonists. It was also an era of indentured servants, men and women who were willing to leave England for the promise of a future in a new world. These servants gave seven years of their lives to the tobacco farms in exchange for land and provisions. John Norwood also came because of the promise of religious tolerance – appealing to Protestants, Quakers and Catholics alike. In those days, a potential land owner surveyed a piece of property and applied to the Calverts for a ‘patent’ on that parcel of land. A patent is the right of ownership given on a piece of property with no former owners. We don’t know how Native Americans felt about our peninsula. But in 1658, John Norwood received a patent for 230 acres along the Severn River, land he called Norwood (current West Annapolis). Surprisingly, the Archives have discovered a few parcels of land in our state that have never been patented. After a patent, all other land transfers are secured with a deed. So John Norwood might be considered the ‘founding father’ of West Annapolis.

Over the next few years, John patented other pieces of property within the county including ten acres for bringing a servant to Maryland. He built a four room house with an additional kitchen (likely outside). His role as the first sheriff of Anne Arundel County gives a glimpse of early settler life. He was charged with collecting taxes for the Crown, maintaining law and order, levying fines, arresting prisoners, and acting as Clerk of the Court. The money of the colony was tobacco and wages depended on a good harvest. John was paid in tobacco. In 1661, he was commissioned Captain in the Militia and commanded the forces from north of the Severn to the south side of the Patapsco River. Two years later he became Justice of the Peace.

Life in the early colonies was hard. Very few children could expect to grow to adulthood with both parents alive. Malaria and other diseases, plus the hard work of tobacco farming took its toll. The Norwoods experienced the early deaths and multiple marriages characteristic of the era. John died in 1664 and his wife remarried. In 1675, after his mother died, Andrew (John’s son) took his stepfather to court to secure the inheritance for John Norwood’s ‘orphan children.’ He contended that the estate included not only land and tobacco, but cattle as well. In 1686 Andrew completed ownership of our peninsula by patenting Norwood’s Recovery (Wardour).

In this era of marital confusion, in-laws became guardians to young relatives. When Andrew died, his young son Andrew became the ward of an Annapolis Lawyer, Jonathan Beale who had married Andrew Sr’s daughter Elizabeth. Jonathan had to go to court on behalf of young Andrew to clarify his ward’s inheritance – again because of multiple marriages because of early deaths. Jonathan

served in the colonies legislature and was respected enough to be entrusted with the great seal of the Honorable Charles Calvert. These were the pre-Revolutionary War days when the rule of England and the old customs prevailed. In 1718, Andrew sold Norwood to his brother-in law and the property became known as Norwood Beale. When Jonathan's wife, Elizabeth died, her obituary noted that she had died peacefully on her plantation near town. Estate ownership in those days included slaves, tobacco, and debts.

For the next 90 years Norwood Beale plantation passed by inheritance through some of the prominent families of Anne Arundel County history - the Beales, Nicholsons, Dorseys and Weems. These men and women are a rich field for potential local biographers. Perhaps you would like to tackle one or more. A great source of information can be found in books, such as Anne Arundel Gentry and The Dorsey Family in the Goldstar collection at the Annapolis library. The State Archives has put a lot of information on-line easily accessed from home.

A new era began in 1809 when John Beale Weems sold Norwood Beale plantation to Jonathan Pinkney. Though the land became known as the Pinkney Farm, legal documents still referred to the property as Norwood Beale. Jonathan's father, also Jonathan, had come to America from England before the Revolutionary War. The first Jonathan was a Tory, loyal to England. He was imprisoned for a brief time during the Revolution. But his three sons served the new land well. Farmer's National Bank had newly been established in Annapolis and our land's Jonathan became their cashier. He was a captain in the militia during the brief involvement of Annapolis in the War of 1812. Ninian, his brother, served as Maryland's Secretary of State for 30 years. Ninian's wife, Amelia was the sister of Maryland's first governor elected under the State Constitution of 1838. Their son, William, became Maryland's 5th Episcopal Bishop. Jonathan's other brother, William, a lawyer, wrote the Declaration of War of 1812 and was sent to represent the US to England and Russia.

Ninian's wife, Amelia, wrote about her experiences in Annapolis in the initial stage of the War of 1812. Later almost every male was involved in the militia.

Well, do I remember the day when the tidings that our National Government had declared war against Great Britain reached our city. Soon afterwards came the night alarm that the British fleet was in the bay and approaching our harbor. There was at that time no means of defense in this place; neither was any effort made for that purpose. All seemed blank confusion, except on the score for personal safety and personal interest, which are the last things forgotten in this selfish world. It was tacitly admitted that Annapolis must be given up on demand and no show of resistance be made. How sad it was to think that our habitations would be laid in ruins by a merciless foe. On two occasions it was deemed necessary that the women and children should take refuge for safety in the neighboring country. My husband's first care was to secure the public papers belonging to his department in the State House and then prepare the children and myself for flight. I had been previously kindly invited by one of the Governors of the State, Gov. Robert Bowie, residing in another county, to take refuge at his residence, near the village of Nottingham, which I then gratefully declined to do, but now we gladly accepted the hospitality of his home.... It seems a little remarkable that the very place to which I had gone for safety was afterwards visited by the enemy and suffered more than we did. [1]

After Jonathan Pinkney died in 1827, his estate was divided among his eight children. His son, Sommerville, was a lawyer, President of the Annapolis-Elkridge Railroad and executor of his father's estate. In June, 1828, Sommerville ran an advertisement in the Maryland Gazette seeking two slaves, Jim Wootten and Ben Snowden, who had run away from the Pinkney Farm. The men were still at large in 1829 and their further history is unknown. But it gives another clue to life in our community before our time. The land passed back and forth among Jonathan Pinckney's heirs but in 1869 it all had to be auctioned to pay debts. Alexander Randall and Alexander Hagner,

trustees appointed by the courts, arranged a "Trustee Sale of Valuable Land.....230 Acres called Norwood Beale." They said:

The soil is of fine quality, producing all the county crops, and particularly adapted to the growth of early fruits and vegetables for which Annapolis affords ready sale. The site is one of the most beautiful on the Severn, commanding an extensive view of the grounds of the Naval Academy and across the Chesapeake.

The improvements consisted of a small dwelling, two fine barns, servant's quarters, a corn house and all necessary buildings.

Luther Giddings, a Major from the Mexican War, was the highest bidder at \$46.00 an acre. He sold 10 acres to Judge Magruder for his home 'Fair Oaks' (probably where the District Court Building now stands; and 10 acres to William Feldmeyer (check out the concrete posts in the woods at the end of Monterey and Forbes Streets). After the Civil War, Maryland had to reconsider its state constitution. Major Giddings was one of four delegates from Anne Arundel County elected to the 1867 State Constitutional Convention. When he died in 1884, the farm was inherited by his two daughters, Katherine Giddings Aldridge and Elizabeth Giddings. Katherine's husband, Joseph West Aldridge, had been a Captain in the 42nd Virginia Calvary during the Civil War. He helped Katherine and Elizabeth as they began to transform the farm into a community. In 1890, the Giddings sisters contracted George T. Melvin to develop the land. Melvin was designing the Annapolis area of Murray Hill at that time. He created a plat, dividing the entire parcel into 50'x150'foot lots. An early drawing showed orchards on several sections of the property. In 1890, the Maryland Legislature passed an Act authorizing the land to become the Incorporated Town of West Annapolis. Melvin enticed potential buyers with the advantages of living in a town so close to the city. Eighteen regular trains passed daily within a mile of West Annapolis. The new name signified that:

"nothing intervenes between this suburb and the city except the beautiful ground of the US Naval Academy and the College Creek...The water is salt, abounding in fish in great numbers and variety; also oysters, crabs,etc. with choice locations for oyster planting and farming, which the state encourages by conferring the right upon residents and owners of lands adjacent to salt water to survey, stake off and appropriate for that purpose, without charge, a section of the same, not exceeding five acres....The building lots of West Annapolis are laid off so large in area that persons locating here have the benefit of a good vegetable and flower garden. The soil is rich and very productive, and an ordinary garden will not only yield abundant supply of fruits and vegetables for home use, but will give a surplus, which can readily be sold in the city market or to private families at the good prices uniformly prevailing, Annapolis being without exception the best vegetable market in the State." [2]

Elizabeth Giddings eventually gained control of all the property after Katherine Aldridge's death. The grid style did not fit the landscape of the hills and wooded areas facing the Severn River. In 1905 she began a correspondence with the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted. Eventually she persuaded Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to visit, and to design the development of Wardour. She wanted this property to be divided into 'good building lots of two to three acres or larger according to the natural configuration of the ground.

So, our community began to grow, slowly. Instead of a piece of property owned by a single family, the neighborhood began to reflect the lives of individual homeowners. The homes themselves tell the story of changing architectural styles. Our trees and plantings connect us with the past. Some are pioneers - trees that grew naturally from a farm field allowed to lie fallow for a time. Some were probably bought from a nursery, products of botanical explorations around the world. Some of the tallest beech trees in the ravines along Monterey could certainly have been living during the Civil War. We still grow good vegetables in backyard gardens scattered across the peninsula. The War Memorial honors the lives of our neighborhood residents who were engaged in the wars of

the past century. We have modern day stories to tell of inventors, businessmen, parents, and children. We hope you will share yours.

[1] Hutton, O. Life of the Right Reverend William Pinkney, D.D.LL.D. Firth Bishop of Maryland. Gibson Press 1890.

[2] Melvin, George T. The Beautiful Suburb of West Annapolis, collection of advertisement available from the Vertical File of Maryland Department. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Main Branch, filed under Annapolis.