



## Sykes Cemetery Adventure

By Lori Pickett,  
NCHSC Vice President and Wallace Room Volunteer

On a hot, sunny morning in June I climbed up into my 4-wheel drive truck to meet NCHSC cemetery committee members Kay Ziegler and Suzy Fleming and Chesapeake resident Emma Nixon to search for the Sykes Cemetery off of Benefit and old Ranger Road. Inez Randolph, a friend of Ms. Nixon, visited the Wallace Room and mentioned the cemetery to Kay. The cemetery committee contacted Ms. Nixon, hoping to find and document the cemetery and any markers.



Kay Ziegler, Doug Davis, Lori Pickett,  
Martin Holten, and Emma Nixon (left to right)  
at Sykes Cemetery

Ms. Nixon, as a small child, lived in the African-American community referred to as “Up the Neck” located south of Benefit Road and west of Bunch Walnuts Road. The community has long since vanished and only the foundations of some of those homes can be found if you look closely through the abundant vegetation. The cemetery, although difficult to find, is still there tucked deep in the woods along the banks of a swamp.

As I had been out to the cemetery years before with the members of the Cornland School Foundation, I knew approximately where the cemetery was located. After a few phone calls I was able to connect with Martin Holten, who leased the land, and Doug Davis, the property owner. Martin and Doug kindly agreed to lead us on this expedition to document the cemetery site.



Suzy Fleming and Kay  
Ziegler Photograph  
Headstones

The property heading back to the site is mixed farmland with blocks of pine trees and beautiful hardwood forests. We followed closely behind Martin and Doug as they carefully navigated the farm roads that were covered in tall grasses that hid the soft, muddy areas that we occasionally got bogged down in. Had it not been for our 4-wheel drive vehicles we would never have made it to our destination unless by foot. Horse flies and deer flies swarmed our vehicles -- not an adventure for “city folk”. I had warned ladies to wear long sleeves, pants, hats and lots of “bug” spray. They were happy they did!

Once parked we walked about a quarter of a mile under a canopy of large trees to the cemetery site. There we spotted a large obelisk stone and a few smaller head and foot stones.

We also noticed at least 40 or more indentations in the ground denoting sunken graves without markers. Suzy and Kay quickly began photographing and documenting the surviving markers. They carefully took GPS coordinates so locating this site in the future would be an easier task.

Notable names carved in the obelisk include George Washington Sykes (1821-1883) who was founding pastor of Bethel Baptist Church on Benefit Road and his daughter, Amanda Sykes (1863-1903). Amanda Sykes had been a teacher at Cornland School, a one-room African American, pre-Rosenwald school which was located near the church on Benefit Road.

On the drive back Ms. Nixon reminisced about the community she had lived in, the long distance they had to walk to school, and the fond memories of family and friends in a simpler time.

All that remain are her memories and a long-forgotten cemetery that has now been recorded by our faithful NCHSC volunteers so that future generations may know the people who lived in a community called "Up the Neck".



Suzy Fleming Washes the Obelisk for a Better Photograph

## Do You Remember? (Stevie Wonder Comes to Great Bridge)

By Terry Riggs,  
NCHSC Board Member & Wallace Room Volunteer

On a very cold day in November of 1986 pop-singer, Stevie Wonder, performed a few songs at the Chesapeake Civic Center to kick off Mayor Sid Oman's war-on-drugs initiative. NCHSC board member and retired Chesapeake Police Officer, Terry Riggs, was working the event that day.

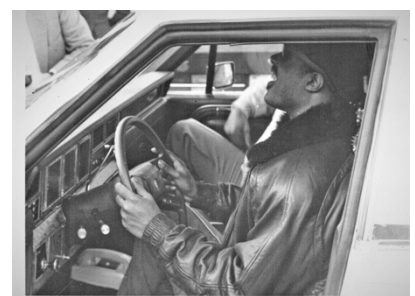
After the performance Terry amusingly recalls standing outside the limo that Mr. Wonder was sitting in. Mr. Wonder asked who was nearby (as he is blind) and Terry replied. Mr. Wonder then said to Terry, "Let me give you a picture." He exited the back of the limo, hand-walked his way to the front seat and got behind the steering wheel.

With a large smile on his face Mr. Wonder exclaimed, "You can take your picture now!"



Above: Terry Riggs on Security Detail During Stevie Wonder's Concert

Below: Stevie Wonder Pranks for a Photograph





## Historian J. Michael Moore to Lead Discussion on The Peninsula Campaign of 1862

Our September guest speaker will be Mr. J. Michael Moore, an employee of the City of Newport News and curator for Lee Hall Mansion and historic Endview Plantation. Mr. Moore received a Bachelor of Arts in history from Christopher Newport University and a Master of Arts in history from Old Dominion University. During his tenure with the city, he has curated exhibits at several local historic sites, developed historic signage, and led battlefield tours in Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. Working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, he has placed Causey's Mill, Endview Plantation, Lee's Mill, and Whitaker's Mill on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, Mr. Moore is a popular lecturer for CNU's LifeLong Learning Society. He has co-authored two books - *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis* in 2005 and *Yorktown's Civil War Siege: Drums Along the Warwick* in 2012. In addition, he has served as the editor and photographic editor for 12 books and has written articles for *Virginia Cavalcade*, *North & South*, *Military Collector & Historian*, and *Mulberry Island Notes*. In recognition of his work in public history, the Governor of Kentucky commissioned Moore a Kentucky Colonel in 2014. He is a Newport News native and resides in Historic Yorktown.



Mr. J. Michael Moore,  
NCHSC Guest Speaker  
for September Meeting

Join us at the Chesapeake Central Library on September 18, 2022, at 2:00 pm. Mr. Moore will lead us in a lively discussion about the battlefields and historic sites in the City of Newport News and their impact on one of the Civil War's largest campaigns, the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. Don't forget to bring a friend! Light refreshments will be provided.

### President's Message, *Continued*

It's projects like these that bring us together as a society. One day, 50 years from now, a new generation will look upon our work and be grateful we took the time to label and date these pieces of our city's history. It has truly been a passion project in getting these photographs labeled and dated. I am happy to report that two boxes are finished and one to go!

Now, try to stay cool, and remember, our ancestors went through sizzling summers too without air conditioners. We too shall get through this HEAT WAVE! Thank goodness for air conditioning!

Robert B. Hitchings, NCHSC President

## The Great Portsmouth Bank Robbery of 1852: A Daring Break-In

By P.S. Vredenburg,  
NCHSC Board Member and Wallace Room  
Volunteer

On Monday, January 19, 1852, William H. Wilson, cashier at the Portsmouth Branch Bank of Virginia, opened the bank as usual and discovered that the bank had been robbed! The bank management reported that \$66,000 (equivalent to almost \$2.5 million today) in gold and bank notes. It was one of the largest bank heists in U.S. history.

Investigators determined that this break-in was no ordinary robbery, and these were no ordinary miscreants... They must have been professionals!

The culprits, armed with an assortment of tools, easily gained entrance via a back window. The vault, made of sturdy iron bars, was surrounded by a brick wall 2 feet thick. The perpetrators picked a hole through the masonry and removed the brick. They then used drills on the iron bars to make a gap large enough for a single man to gain access. Once inside the vault, the robbers cleaned it out of gold and bank notes -- leaving the silver and some of their tools strewn across the floor -- and disappeared without notice.

A terrible storm that Saturday night and an empty courthouse over the weekend meant that foot traffic in the neighborhood would have been light and any passer-by happening upon the crime scene would be unlikely. Additionally, the back window of the bank was not in view of the courthouse watchman, so the robbers had all weekend to execute their well-planned caper!

The heist was just the beginning of the story that gripped the country from New England all the way to California gold-rush territory, and included a nationwide manhunt, a sensational trial, several convictions, and a number of daring jail breaks.

**FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS  
REWARD!**

**OFFICE BANK OF VIRGINIA,  
Portsmouth, Jan. 22, 1852.**

The Branch Bank of Virginia at Portsmouth, was robbed on the night of Saturday or Sunday last, of the following *Bank Notes and Specie:*

Notes of Bank of Virginia payable at Portsmouth, of the denomination of \$100,	18,900
Other denominations,	8,850
In other Notes of the Banks of Virginia and North Carolina,	37,750
In Gold,	10,774
	27,783 88
In all,	66,307 88

At the time of the robbery, there were in circulation only eleven notes of the Bank of Virginia, payable in Portsmouth, of the denomination of \$100; and it is earnestly requested that those who may be the holders of the eleven notes will not circulate them, but forthwith return them to this Office for redemption. The public are warned against receiving notes of the denomination of \$100, payable at this Office, as the payment of all notes of this denomination, (other than the eleven notes mentioned,) will be resisted, and no other notes of the denomination of \$100, payable at this Office, will be put in circulation.

Among the notes abstracted payable at other Banks, were \$65 of counterfeit notes, of which one \$30 note of the Farmer's Bank of Virginia, and one \$5 note of the Bank of the Valley.

The Gold was nearly all American, of all denominations, and among it \$1,000 in dollar pieces. There were also \$75 in Georgia \$5 pieces, and a Portuguese half-Joe.

The above Reward of \$5,000 will be paid for the recovery of the money stolen, or proportionably for what may be recovered

**WM. H. WILSON, Cashier.**

Reward Bulletin Issued by the  
Board of Directors of the Bank of Virginia,  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Norfolk County Historical Society of Chesapeake, Virginia  
298 Cedar Road  
Chesapeake, VA 23322

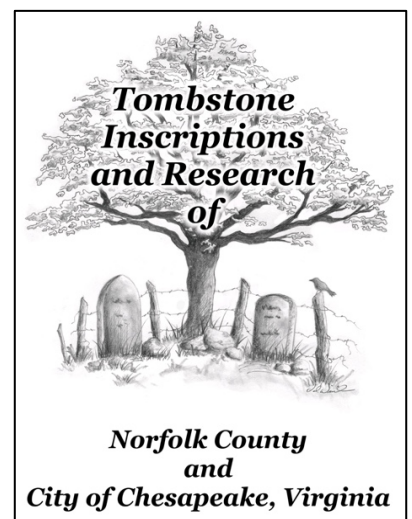
**Annual membership dues are now \$20 and are due by May 31st.**

Questions or suggestions? Email us at [nchs.wallaceroom@gmail.com](mailto:nchs.wallaceroom@gmail.com), call us at (757) 410-7152, or visit our site [NorfolkCountyVAHistory.org](http://NorfolkCountyVAHistory.org). Date submitted (for your records) \_\_\_\_\_

## SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

After more than 10 years of research, the NCHSC is proud to announce that our book *Tombstone Inscriptions of Norfolk County and City of Chesapeake, Virginia* is ready for print! This project has truly been a community effort, with Chesapeake residents helping the team locate and document these lost treasures.

The original 1979 cemetery project was revived over 10 years ago by Jean Spencer and Frances Griffin. Kay Ziegler joined the project soon afterward, and other NCHSC volunteers donated their time and skill over the past several years to complete the research. The NCHSC wishes to thank the publication's editorial team -- Jean Spencer, Suzy Fleming, Kay Ziegler, and Kay's sister Janis Johns -- for making our publication print-ready!



Details on price and availability will be forthcoming. Be sure to look for updates in our next newsletter, on our web site, and on social media!