

# Times in Toano



Volume 5 Issue 2

## Summer 2024

Newsletter  
of the  
Toano  
Historical  
Society

### A Letter from Jack Wray THS President

#### Help Preserve our Historic Buildings



It has been the greatest joy of my life to have taken on a few restoration projects in my hometown of Toano. The Farinholt/Higgs House was always in view from the backyard of my boyhood home on School Lane. A cornfield on about 7 acres lay in between. Looking back on those early years, I've been able to figure out the path I've committed much of my later life to. I simply love the town I grew up in...the people, our rural way of life, our history, our main street, and most important to me at this stage of my life, I love our historic buildings. There is nothing more important than preserving them.

As I stand on the front porch of the Farinholt house and look across the street, the exuberance I feel about its restoration quickly turns to worry and despair. The old Toano Post Office, The Carlton House (for sale), and Mrs. Moseley's Diner all sit empty! What will happen to them? Will they survive? They all have great potential to be saved and occupied by bustling small businesses!

I am hopeful more people will come to realize the buildings that line our corridor are what makes Toano, Toano. They are our greatest assets and define who we are and where we came from.



*The Carlton House and Mrs. Moseley's Diner across Richmond Road as seen from the Farinholt porch*



*Restored Farinholt House*

Sadly, we've seen the inventory of these buildings decline over the years, the most recent being the demolition of the Gatewood House. The good news is that we still have enough of them to recreate an authentic historic village and make Toano a true destination. I say if you are able, step up to the plate, get involved!

Preserve, Preserve, Preserve!

*Jack*



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*The preservation of historic buildings is a one-way street. There is no chance to renovate or save a historic site once it's gone. And we can never be sure what will be valued in the future. This reality brings to light the importance of locating and saving buildings of historic significance—because once a piece of history is destroyed, it is lost forever.*

-Jack Neely, "Nine Practical Reasons to Save Old Buildings"

## THS Membership

Please consider becoming a member of THS to help us preserve and promote the history of Toano.

Annual Membership Cost:  
\$25 Individual, \$35 Family, \$50 Business

Go to the [Membership Page](#) of the THS website to sign up and pay online, or sign up at the THS table at the Toano Open Air Market.



## Toano Open Air Market Toano Village Green Saturdays, 9am-Noon

Come out and support family farms and local agriculture and business at the Toano Open Air Market! Vendors provide a wide variety of items for sale. You can find seasonal produce, delicious baked goods, Tasha's Own products, fresh seafood, and much more! Most weeks feature live music and a food truck.

The Toano Historical Society will be there with Toano merchandise and information on how it is working to preserve the history and character of our special town. Follow the market on Facebook to see what wonderful offerings will be provided in the coming weeks.



## THS Hosts CPAT Work Session

On Sunday, July 21, 2024, eleven THS members and friends participated in a work session with the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association. The organization was holding its annual meeting in Williamsburg, and their custom is to offer a free work session with a local jurisdiction to discuss issues of interest, concern, or importance. This year, they chose the Toano Historical Society.

The group of planners who donated their time to work with us is called the Community Planning Action Team (CPAT). They are professional planners from various jurisdictions throughout Virginia and have a wealth of experience and expertise.



The session began at 2:00pm with a walking tour of downtown Toano, discussion of our history, and an update on progress to date in revitalizing our community. We then gathered inside the Martin & Farinholt Store to discuss challenges and strategies. Topics included traffic on Richmond Road, speed limit changes, a traffic light, enlisting VDOT assistance and establishing increased awareness of our issues with the JCC Board of Supervisors. It should be noted that Barbara Null, the Stonehouse representative on the BOS spent the entire afternoon with us and provided very positive feedback.



THS is grateful for the expertise shared by CPAT and for the participation of all who attended the work session.

# Toano History Spotlight: Chickahominy Shipyard During the American Revolution

By Fred Boelt, THS Historian

Revolutionary War activity in James City County has often been overshadowed by our proximity to Yorktown. After all, that is where our independence from Great Britain was won. But there were battles fought in our county leading up to the ultimate surrender.



Locally, our support began when the Virginia Committee of Safety was tasked with establishing a small navy to offer protection to the colony during the probable war. A Board of Naval Commissioners was created on May 6, 1776, and they were tasked with commandeering existing ships and constructing shipyards to create a State Navy. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, John Herbert, Master Shipbuilder, selected a site on the Chickahominy River for a shipyard.

## *Building and Equipping the Shipyard*

On April 3, 1777, the Naval Board purchased 119 acres for the shipyard from brothers Phillip, James Bray, and William Johnson. In addition to providing land and river frontage for ship construction, there was abundant timber also on this acreage. Immediately, construction began on housing for the superintendent, the paymaster, and the foreman and his workers. Warehouses, a saw pit and two boat ramps were also rapidly constructed. Shipbuilding and repairs started prior to June 1777, when numerous supplies were sent to the “Shipyard at Chickahominy.”

In March 1778, the Virginia Assembly, in an effort to attract more laborers, exempted from military service all ships carpenters, blacksmiths,

joiners and clerks associated with the shipbuilding industry. Extant records do not disclose the identity of the shipyard staff. However, two clothing requisitions offer some insight. On November 8, 1780, winter clothing was requested for fifteen men and two women employed at the Chickahominy Shipyard. Additionally, on December 7<sup>th</sup>, winter clothing was requested for twenty-six men. There were also numerous requisitions for staples such as flour and corn and occasionally hogshheads of rum.

Captain James Maxwell was the shipyard director from its earliest days. Jonathan Browne served as clerk and paymaster until he was succeeded by Issac Smith in September 1780. State Naval records indicate that the shipyard was a very active military installation. Many new ships were constructed there as well as numerous repair jobs. In 1779, the State decided to dispose of several ships lying at the shipyard. In October 1780, James Maxwell reported to the Governor that several state vessels were lying in readiness at the shipyard for mobilization.

## *Orders from Gov. Thomas Jefferson*

In January 1781, Governor Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Maxwell, requesting that he build twenty portable boats as recommended by General George Washington. He also requested several bateaux for use above the falls of the James River. Around the same time, the British fleet arrived in the James River causing tension to rise. Maxwell outfitted and dispatched the Lewis galley down the river. In February, he added guns to the brig Jefferson and dispatched it along with the Tempest to join the French fleet. He then notified the governor that he would also dispatch the Tarter and the Safe Guard if he could find seamen to man them.

## *Shipyard Under Attack*

By March 15<sup>th</sup>, the Chickahominy Shipyard requested twenty-five muskets with powder and ball for its defense and requested that the state sloop be returned to the shipyard.

*(continued on page 4)*

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On April 4<sup>th</sup>, James Maxwell informed the governor that all stores would be removed from the shipyard by the end of that week. He had ordered the Tempest and the Jefferson up the James River to join several privately armed vessels. In spite of precautions taken, on April 22, 1781, at four o'clock in the afternoon, a British detachment lead by Lt. Colonel Abercrombie seized and destroyed the Chickahominy Shipyard. Colonel James Innes wrote to the governor, "that from the fire discovered in that quarter last night, they have totally destroyed it." The next day he wrote that the British destroyed the vessels and buildings at the shipyard and some naval stores at Diascund Bridge. Other naval stores were sunk aboard the Lewis galley which was scuttled when unable to be maneuvered out of the enemy's reach.

Colonel Innes and his troops were camped at Hickory Neck Church on the night of the shipyard fire. The glow from the flames was seen in the night sky all the way from the river to the church. This small victory for the British forces was all for naught as the American colonists succeeded in forcing Lord Cornwallis to surrender in Yorktown in October 1781.

### *After the War*

The shipyard was never rebuilt. In 1784, a decision was made to remove all uninjured cannon from the Shipyard and Diascund Bridge to Richmond and to sell any broken cannon and other public property that remained. As late as 1804, a report was sent to the governor that there were a few more pieces of ordnance at the site. The report also stated that when the attack commenced, several pieces of cannon were thrown into a nearby sawpit near the shipyard and that they were still buried.

The Shipyard slipped into obscurity and the land was owned by the well-known Warren family until 1894, when 100 acres of the tract was sold to George Menzel, a German immigrant. His heirs operated a fish packing and shipping industry on the site throughout much of the twentieth century.

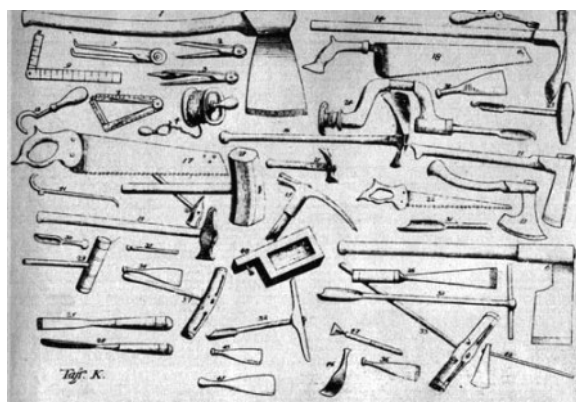
About fifty years ago, an archaeological survey was done of the Shipyard area. The foundation remains of one structure dated to the fourth

quarter of the 18th century was located. The remains of a ship slip were found at the edge of the river directly in front of the foundation. Three timber skids were also located under water. The remains of two shipwrecks dating to the fourth quarter of the 18th century lie underwater just beyond the launching area.



*Shipyard site on the Chickahominy River*

Virginia was the only colony/state that had its own state navy. This very significant site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. Major contributions toward our independence from the British crown originated right here in the greater Toano area!



*Colonial ship building tools*



*Revolutionary War era ships*

## THS Strategic Planning for 2024-25

The annual THS strategic planning meeting took place on July 9, 2024. At this meeting, the THS Board reviewed the mission statement and decided on key objectives for the next eighteen months. A wide variety of topics was discussed, and the board selected several priority items.

### Modified THS Mission Statement:

Toano Historical Society is a 501c3 non-profit organization established in 2018, dedicated to inspiring a sense of community spirit, promoting interest in our community, and preserving our small town character and its history.

### Priority items:

These items will be worked on during the coming 18 months and will be reported on at the monthly board meetings.

- Create updated job descriptions for each of the board positions.
- Recruit for the open board positions of Volunteer Coordinator and Events Coordinator
- Host four events each year: Spring and Fall Members Events, Summer Solstice, and the Christmas Tree Lighting.
- Begin the process of expanding the Toano Historic District to include the Founders' homes.
- Begin the process of installing signs for Historic Toano
- Archive, catalog, index, and safeguard the THS artifacts and documents
- Continue regular social media postings
- Interact with new residents and provide them with Toano history information
- Follow up on the Toano Walking Tour created by W&M students and work to complete the necessary installation.
- Identify our fundraising needs and develop a case statement for our organization.

This is an ambitious list, and the board will be working hard!

## SAVE THE DATE! 6th Annual Toano Christmas Tree Lighting Saturday, December 7, 2024



Mark your calendar and plan to attend the 6th Annual Toano Christmas Tree Lighting. On December 7, 2024, Toano residents and friends are invited to gather on the Village Green to welcome and celebrate the Christmas season.

Activities will include: wagon rides, crafts for the kids, visits with Santa, a fire pit with s'mores, holiday vendors, the tree lighting and more! Concessions will be available to purchase.

Come be a part of this Toano holiday tradition!

### Volunteers are needed for this event!

Shift times and lengths can fit your availability. If you are interested in helping, contact us at [info@toanohistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@toanohistoricalsociety.org).





## **Toano Historical Society Board of Directors**

President, Jack Wray

Secretary, Richard Krapf

Treasurer, Susan Kohlman

Historian, Fred Boelt

Virginia Main Street Liaison, Deidre McAuley-Hayes

Newsletter, Patte and Tim Martin

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Social Media, Emmalyn Carter

Board Member-At-Large, Rena Wray

Membership and Website, Tim Martin



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