

# Islc of Kent - 1631

"To Discover, Identify, Restore and Preserve the Heritage of Kent Island"

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE KENT ISLAND HERITAGE SOCIETY, INC. ■ FALL 2005

## OFFICERS

**President**  
Nancy M. Cook  
**Vice President**  
Forrest P. Chisman  
**Corresponding Secy**  
Carole P. Frederick  
**Recording Secretary**  
Flora S. Sossi  
**Treasurer**  
Audrey B. Hawkins  
John Wayne Morris

## DIRECTORS

Joel D. Berger  
John E. Broderick  
Myrtle A. Bruscup  
Francis K. Collier  
Janet C. Denny  
William E. Denny III  
Charles "Gil" Dunn  
Florence M. Dunn  
John E. Gerber  
Daniel T. Hopkins  
Brent F. Lewis  
Gregory J. Nizza  
Frances L. Peters  
Jane G. Sparks

## COMMITTEES

**Docent Coordinator**  
Audrey Hawkins  
**Kent Island Day**  
John Broderick, Fran Peters, Flora Sossi  
**Fundraising - Gil Dunn**  
**Programs - F. Chisman**  
**Kirwan Property**  
Joel Berger, Jack Broderick, Bill Denny, Ned Gerber, Dan Hopkins, Wayne Morris, Greg Nizza (Caretaker)  
**Cray House**  
Janet Denny, Bill Denny  
**Old Stevensville P.O.**  
F. Collier, Fran Peters  
**Train Depot - Florence Dunn, Gil Dunn**  
**Publicity - Greg Nizza**  
**Oral Histories**  
Jane Sparks, Dan Hopkins, Brent Lewis  
**Membership**  
Mae Hutchison  
**Library Files - Myrtle Bruscup, Mary White**  
**Scholarship - J. Sparks**  
**Social - Janet Denny**

## President's Message

Another year of my tenure as president of The Society has quickly passed, and, as always, a time of remembrances, resolutions and reflection is in order so that we may plan for the future.

### Remembrances

☆ Our excellent General Meeting programs:

March 18 Slide presentation by Jere O. Hamill "On the Trail of Lewis and Clark"

June 14 "Mourning In America: American Customs and Artifacts of the Past" presented by Linda Collier  
Sept. 13 "Railroading In America" by Paul Bridge of the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore

☆ The wonderful 2005 Kent Island Day parade and activities that generated so much enthusiasm from the attendees and participants

☆ The reprinting of Mildred C. Schoch's book, "Of History and Houses: A Kent Island Heritage" and Hugo Gemignani's "The Forgotten Seven: The Decoy Carvers of Kent Island," made possible by a donation from American Legion Post 278 of Stevensville

☆ The awarding of The Kent Island Heritage Society's scholarship to John Hamilton, son of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Hamilton of Stevensville

☆ The cadre of docents who gave much volunteer service as we opened

*Continued on page 5*

## Recommended Slate Officers and Directors

An election of officers and directors to lead The Kent Island Heritage Society, Inc. in 2005 will be held at the Annual Meeting on December 10, 2005. The Nominating Committee of Dan Hopkins, Butch Collier and John Broderick recommended the following slate:

**President**  
**Vice President**  
**Recording Secretary**  
**Corresponding Secy**  
**Treasurers**

Nancy Cook  
John E. Broderick  
Flora Sossi  
Carole P. Frederick  
Audrey B. Hawkins  
John Wayne Morris  
Joel D. Berger  
William E. Denny III  
Jean Leathery  
Brent F. Lewis  
Lynne Riley-Coleman  
Gary Walters  
Joyce Woodford

**Director**  
**Director**  
**Director**  
**Director**  
**Director**  
**Director**

Officers are elected for one-year terms; directors serve three-year terms.

Additional nominations may be made 21 days prior to the Annual Meeting. A declaration of intent must be presented to Recording Secretary Flora Sossi, P.O. Box 321, Stevensville, MD 21666 and must be signed by the candidate and two supporting members of The Society.

### Mark Your Calendar

## Kent Island Heritage Society ANNUAL MEETING

Saturday, December 10  
Kent Island Yacht Club

6:00 p.m. Cash Bar

7:00 p.m. Dinner

Please return the reservation form  
on page 6 by December 1

# EXTREME MAKEOVER

By Brent Lewis

Picture this:

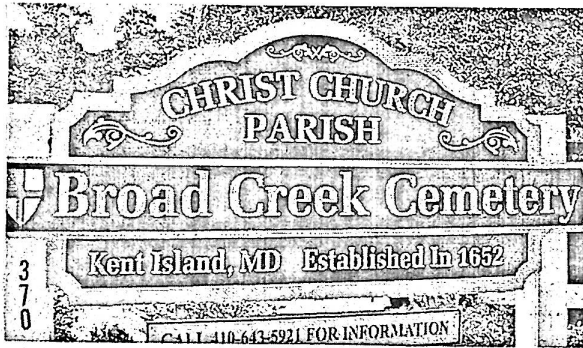
*A crisp Sunday morning in November 1652. Kent Island's Broad Creek is a booming bayside village, a crossroads of sorts. Colonial travelers heading north or south, either having just crossed, or preparing to cross the Chesapeake, bustle about. Tobacco drives a marketplace that supports a ferry system, a post office and a tavern. Mr. Workman's inn has a nice view of the new church, built to accommodate a congregation that has existed since William Claiborne's earliest days on the island. Christ Church Parish is thriving in the town's robust economy. Villagers and locals living outside the borders of Broad Creek are arriving for services. Some have paddled their families up the creek in little canoes and skiffs they built themselves. Dressed in their simple Sunday best, they've come to worship. They carry their little children. They carry their family bibles. And because Indian attack is a distinct possibility, they carry their weapons.*



Thanks to a group of present-day parishioners, it's getting easier and easier to transport our imagination and spirit back to Kent Island's early days. And under much safer conditions.

The Christ Church Cemetery Committee is dedicated to salvaging, recreating and maintaining what committee chairperson DeeDee McCracken calls, "the oldest link we have to this island."

Short history: Kent Island's first religious services were held in Claiborne's Kent Fort. After Lord Baltimore and his Maryland Colony took control, the trade center moved north from Kent Point to Broad Creek. So did the church's Anglican congregation. For more than 200 years, and in three



different structures, the Christ Church Parish worshiped at Broad Creek. In 1880, the parish relocated to downtown Stevensville. The Broad Creek site fell into disrepair. There's evidence indicating that at some point farm animals were housed in the old buildings. It was next to impossible to even get down the lane by the mid-1980s.

Parishioner Joe Thompson, a member of the

church for more than 30 years, saw the severe deterioration of the site. No structures remained. The cemetery was overgrown with weeds, and tombstones had been vandalized. It was "just a big old field," he says. But Mr. Thompson knew this place was much more than that. Joe Thompson made the restoration of Christ Church Cemetery property his mission.

Slow to take credit himself, Mr. Thompson likes to point out the hard work of others, particularly the appropriately numbered Boy Scout Troop 1631 and team archeologist Richard Ervin. Ms. McCracken, however, points out how important Joe Thompson's "fortitude" had been. "Faithful to the church and to the project," is

how she describes the man that brought her on board.

The restoration project is multifold in scope. Funding. Research. Restoration. Ongoing archeological efforts to identify and uncover such historical treasures as the original church foundation. There are legal consideration. Though the organization is nonprofit, modern business strategies are required to help ensure long-term success. Volunteers and donations are crucial.

Plans include construction of a columbarium, memorial English gardens, and interactive educational displays. And as of 2000, members of the general community can once again be buried in Christ Church Cemetery.

Fr. David Green, the church's current pastor, acknowledges "The spiritual sense you get when you go to the Broad Creek Cemetery is pretty amazing. People sense the weight of history. It's a peaceful place."

The Christ Church Parish's Broad Creek Cemetery is located on the western side of Romancoke Road between Bay Bridge

Continued on page 3



DeeDee McCracken, Joe Thompson, Fr. David Green

# Kent Islander Profiles

*From Kent Island Historical Society's oral histories project*

By Brent Lewis

## Capt. William "Billy" Harris

Captain Billy Harris is a good reminder of what Kent Island is made of. Born here in 1922, William Harris was the first of two children born to Holton and Viola Harris.

Sis, his wife of 65 years was a daughter of another prominent local family, the Colemans.

Bill and Sis have lived in their current home for over 50 years. He's proud of his close-knit relationships with his two children, five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. And his family business, Harris Crab House & Restaurant, is one of the Chesapeake Bay region's favorite dining establishments.

When Capt. Billy was little his grandfather, J.W. Taylor, owned a general store in Chester. The store was an unofficial meeting place where members of the community would congregate. He recalls a radio, one of the first around. He listened to baseball games and early radio shows. His face lights up

with the memory of Jack Armstrong, The All American Boy, his favorite adventure program. "That's the first time I come up with the name since I was maybe eight or ten years old."

As a young man, Billy chose working for himself on the water over being a hired hand on a farm. He says, "When you're getting fifty cents a day or ten cents an hour, you start to look around."

In World War II Billy served in the Army. The young Kent Islander found himself performing his duties in far-off Hawaii. This was no paradise of current-day travel brochures, but more like an outpost on the fringe of the world.

When he came back home, he followed in his grandfather's footsteps and opened his own general store. He and Sis ran the store for two or three years before moving on.

Capt. Billy's father owned a Kent Narrows shucking house. "My father, he came to see me one evening and told me that the place I have now, it was a shack really, but it was going to be sold. And he asked me did I want it, and I told him 'Well dad, let me sleep on it.' So the next day when I come in from oystering, I said 'Yes, I would like to have it.'"

Running the oyster shucking business was a tough challenge. He worried about his young family and found himself "wondering if [he] was going to make it."

His father ran business in the established fashion. The local shucking houses would

sell oysters to the big distributors in five-gallon cans. In Capt. Billy's mind there was a different way to do things.

Capt. Billy made it his goal "to get to know people throughout the country and Canada." Selling directly was a shrewd business move that paid off. Billy Harris opened markets that had previously been closed to him and at one time was running what was probably the largest oyster business in Maryland.

Oysters weren't all he was buying and selling. Eels, clams, shrimp, if it came out of the bay there was some market for it somewhere. If there wasn't one that day, Capt. Billy would freeze the product until there was. He had special one-gallon bags made for freezing shucked oysters.

His son, Jerry, joined him in the 1960s during the heyday of their seafood business. Daughter Karen came on in 1972

He continues: "Where my oyster house is at now, I started picking crabs. I saw all those people coming down that marina and I said I'm going to try something. May not work, but I'm going to try it. So I built a place, front right on the water, on my oyster house, and man, those people . . ." He remembers them with a fond smile. "I used to serve crabs, steamed, soft crab sandwiches, and crab cake sandwiches. Everything originated around here. Man, them people. Every once in a while, we'd have a high tide, damned if they still wouldn't

wade around in there in their shoes."

Even Capt. Billy was surprised by the restaurant's success. "The second summer it outgrew itself." By the mid-1980s the original operation needed expansion. "There wasn't nothing else to do, only tear down the old oyster house — the one that was my father's — tear it down and put up what you see today."

He speaks a simple philosophy when he looks back on his business successes: "Think about something. If you don't do it, you'll never know."

Wrapping things up, Capt. Billy reminisces about getting married, "Sis was 17. I was 19. And I have to say . . . the happiest days of my life." The emotion that fills him fills the room.

Capt. Billy Harris, like Kent Island itself, exudes character of the soul.

## Christ Church Cemetery

*Continued from page 2*

Airport and Bay City. The site is always open to the public, and on the first Saturday of each month a volunteer is present as part of the Historic Consortium of Queen Anne's County to guide guests around the site. Stop in and visit. You'll see what "linking the past with the future" means to our community.



Billy Harris as a fry

# TURKEY AND DUMB-LINGS

By Skeeter Philpot

My business partner, Burle, rode with me the other day. His truck needed new brakes. At least they did before I would get in her again. We'd dropped our culler Ebb off at his brother's place and were a quarter mile from the Casa de Shoalwater when we got stuck behind a school bus. One of the little kids getting off reminded us of Thanksgiving. Must have been the brown and orange construction paper turkey hat he was wearing. "Why'd they let the

turkey join the band?" Burle's grin pained me. "Why?" "He had drumsticks." The bus moved maybe a hundred yards. And stopped again. Burle kept smiling. "What did the widowed mother turkey say to her bad kids?" "What?" "If your father could see you, he'd turn over in his gravy." "Just stop." The bus did. Three houses down. And then again at the end of the block. I wouldn't look at him.

"Why'd they arrest the turkey?" "Suspected it of fowl play." He looked hurt. "No, really, did I tell you about daddy when he tried to breed turkeys? We all liked the leg, so he tried to breed a turkey with six legs. And you know, after hundreds of attempts, he finally got it right." I didn't ask what happened, so he told me. "But he couldn't catch it." We finally made it to his driveway. "Why'd the turkey cross the road?" He wouldn't

leave without one last one. "Uhm?" "Chicken's day off." He shut the passenger door with a chuckle I've been hearing since the first time he told me those same jokes three or four decades ago. He's been a splinter under my skin ever since. A never-tiring nerve-plucker. A distraction. A bad influence even. I'm very thankful I've got him.

---

*Skeeter Philpot knows what kind of music the Pilgrims liked. Plymouth Rock.*

## Oral Histories Project

The oral history committee, formed in 1999 to capture reminiscences of long-time Kent Islanders and others who could contribute bits of information critical to insight and understanding of Kent Island's lore and history, has recently sprung into high gear. The committee is producing an increasing volume of video taped interviews.

Completed interviews include Melvin Clark, William E. Denny III, Alvin Grollman, William Harris, Wes Thompson, Fordonia Watkins, Bessie Tolson, Charlotte Severa, Robert Timms, Eva White Thompson, Joe Thompson and Mary White. Video tapes are being converted to DVD format for viewing in order to preserve the original tapes.

Each interview includes a topical index and a release form signed by the interviewee.

The next step is to make transcripts of the interviews in standard Q and A format. One has been completed. Others await availability of transcribers — and funds. Grant funds are being sought to hire transcribers for this most important project.

In the meantime, if someone out there has an interest and a bit of time available, we can set them up with the necessary hardware. A completed transcription runs about 40 pages. Double-spaced, of course. Let me hear from you, please. Also, if you would like to recommend someone you think would be an interesting interview, please mail it to The Kent Island Heritage Society, P.O. Box 321, Stevensville, MD 21666.

## IN MEMORIAM

LUCIE M. BALDI

ANN H.V. CARVEL

LEMUEL A. THOMPSON JR.

*The society is very thankful for the interest and support shown over the years by these members of our organization and our community. We will continue to honor their memories by discovering, identifying, restoring and preserving the heritage of Kent Island.*

## Isle of Kent

John Bonner, Editor

*Isle of Kent* is published quarterly by The Kent Island Heritage Society, Inc., a nonprofit corporation chartered by the State of Maryland, P.O. Box 321, Stevensville, MD 21666. Every effort is made to assure the accuracy of published information, but no responsibility is assumed by The Kent Island Heritage Society Inc. or the editor in the event of claim of loss or damage from any article. Statements attributed to individuals do not necessarily reflect official policy of the KIHS. Send correspondence regarding newsletter to Editor, 324 Columbia Lane, Stevensville, MD 21666. Email: jlbanner@verizon.net