

The HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF HARFORD COUNTY, Inc.

Preserving Our Past For Your Future



143 N. Main Street
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Society News

September / October 2025

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The Historical Society of
Harford County, Inc.,
headquarters.

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HARFORD MUTUAL
INSURANCE GROUP

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It's been a busy summer at the Society. The *Trials and Triumphs* exhibit closed at the end of July, after receiving widespread praise and a citation from the State of Maryland. The Lafayette Farewell Tour brought thousands to Havre de Grace to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of General Lafayette's final visit to America. The Society installed a new exhibit at the Bel Air Town Hall showcasing a model of the Hays House Museum, along with the continuing displays at the County Administration building, and Society Executive Director, Chris Potts, proclaimed the opening of the Bel Air 4th of July Parade with a reading of the Declaration of Independence.

In August, Ms. Potts was named co-director of the America 250 Committee in Harford County along with Harford County Planner, Jacob Bensen. A subcommittee is now in place to help coordinate events throughout the County to celebrate America's semiquincentennial.

This fall promises to be bursting with new events as well. Everyone is invited to the Society's Annual Meeting on Sunday, September 21, 2025, at 2 pm at the Society's headquarters. In addition to a brief business meeting, the afternoon will feature a luncheon and a performance by professional storyteller Christine Stearns Potts as Sarah Grimke, noted suffragist and abolitionist. Follow Ms. Grimke's life from plantation life in Charleston, S.C., to the halls of Philadelphia and beyond.

More details about upcoming events are included elsewhere in the newsletter, but I did want to draw your attention to a special presentation on September 9, 2025, at 12:30 pm. Tom Guercio and Diana Guercio Prentice, authors of *The Last Raid*, will share a Harford County story you won't want to miss. October will follow with *Spooky Season at the Hays House*, featuring guest speaker Amy Rosenkrans relating the story of *Women Who Kill*, a Paranormal night, and a special children's event to celebrate the season.

I hope to see you soon at one of our programs. Best wishes,

Bill Walden, President

The Historical Society of Harford County newsletter is funded in part through a gift from Harford Mutual Insurance Group.

COMING EVENTS

- **September 9, 2025, at 12:30 pm at The Historical Society, 143 N. Main St., Bel Air, MD: *The Last Raid*, Author Event & Book Signing with Tom Guercio and Diana Guercio Prentice**

Step back to the Bel Air of the 1930s and 1940s with authors Thomas Guercio and Diana Guercio Prentice. Learn about the days of the Bel Air Race Track, the "Graw," boxing at the Armory, poker at the Argonne, and gambling at "The Hole." These good old days included bookmaking, moonshine, and so much more.

The authors tell Guercio's story through the reminiscences of George Van Bibber, a friend of the authors' father. Sam Guercio, an Italian immigrant, settled in Bel Air in 1932. Several of his family members were already residents and local business owners. If you are of a certain age, you may remember visiting Sam's Barbershop, the family's Shoe Repair shop on Burns Alley, Guercio's Grocery Store, or perhaps Sam & Gorrell's bookmaking parlor in Fallston. This promises to be a fascinating story. The event is free. Registration is encouraged. Books will be available for purchase.

Register now, www.harfordhistory.org. Free

- **September 14, 2025 @ 1 pm: Hays House Museum, 324 Kenmore Avenue, Bel Air, MD
Revolutionary Harford! Constitution Day Program**

As part of the Historical Society's year-long celebration of Revolutionary Harford, we are partnering with the William Paca Chapter of the DAR to bring the story of the creation of the U.S. Constitution. The presentation will precede Constitution Day, which will be celebrated on Wednesday, September 17. Learn more about the creation of our constitutional government from the perspective of 1787.

Free, donations appreciated.

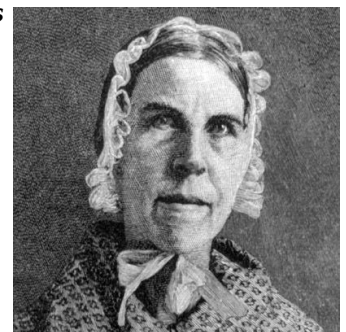
- **September 21, 2025 @ 2 pm: The Historical Society's Headquarters, 143 N. Main St., Bel Air, MD -
Living History Lunch & Show, *Sarah Grimke Speaks***

Join us for this year's Annual Meeting on Sunday, September 21, 2025, at 2 pm. This very special program will feature a delicious lunch provided by one of Harford's most noted caterers, an opportunity to browse the ever-expanding museum collection, and the chance to experience a unique living history performance by historical interpreter Christine Potts as she transports us to the world of Sarah Grimke, noted abolitionist and suffragist.

Sarah Grimke Speaks!

When 26-year-old Sarah Moore Grimke boarded a ship from Charleston to Philadelphia in 1819 to accompany her ailing father north, she embarked on a history-making journey that took her from failed Southern belle to pioneering abolitionist and women's rights activist.

Born into the Southern gentry, Sarah's abhorrence of slavery and devotion to God led her to convert to Quakerism and settle in Philadelphia, where her charismatic and irrepressible younger sister Angelina Emily Grimke later joined her. After tumultuous years within the Society of Friends, Sarah then followed Angelina north to New York, where the two rose to public prominence and national notoriety by doing the largely unprecedented: daring to speak their minds.



Sarah Grimke

In a time when no "respectable woman" would utter a word of public discourse, the Grimke sisters became among the first women in America to conduct a lecture tour. What began as ladies' gatherings in private parlors soon grew to packed audiences of men and women held spellbound by the sisters' calls for immediate abolition of the enslaved and then, perhaps even more controversially, equal rights for women.

In this 50-minute program, Chris Potts tells Sarah's story in Sarah's voice, immersing the listener in a compelling vocal performance. With a background in teaching, writing, and performative storytelling, Chris first developed the idea to research the life and interpret the story of Sarah Grimke after leading a discussion on Sue Monk Kidd's *The Invention of Wings* in 2019 at the Historical Society of Harford County, where she now serves as Executive Director.

- **September 28, 2025 @ 1 pm: Hays House Museum, 324 Kenmore Avenue, Bel Air, MD - Open House at the Museum**

Visit the Hays House, the Historical Society's Living History Museum. Tour the site with Society docents as they recreate the social and cultural aspects of the daily life of rural gentry in the formative days of our County.

Free, donations appreciated.

- **October 11, 2025, 1 pm: Hays House Museum, 324 Kenmore Avenue, Bel Air, MD Spooky Season at the Hays House**

Ever wonder how our Halloween celebrations began? Halloween's origins are deeply rooted in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, celebrated in Ireland thousands of years ago. Samhain marked the end of summer and harvest, and the beginning of the dark, cold winter, a time associated with death. The Celts believed the boundary between the living and the dead blurred on this night, allowing spirits to roam free. This belief led to traditions like dressing up in costumes to ward off evil spirits and the lighting of bonfires. These traditions were carried to America by Irish immigrants during the Great Famine in the 1840s and 1850s. Over time, the celebrations changed, leading to the child-centered event we know today.

The Historical Society is planning a special Halloween event at the Hays House Museum on October 11, 2025, at 1 pm. Bring your costumed children and grandchildren, toddlers to 12-year-olds, for an exciting day, featuring pumpkin decorating, scary stories, games, contests, and more.

Fee \$5

- **October 12, 2025 @ 1 pm: Hays House Museum, 324 Kenmore Avenue, Bel Air, MD Women Who Kill: Hattie Stone of Havre de Grace**



Join talented historian and storyteller Amy Rosenkrans as she recounts the story of notorious 1920s serial killer, Hattie Stone, a Havre de Grace resident with a penchant for murder. Learn the story of this nurse, midwife, and Sunday School teacher who had a truly sinister secret life. Listen as the body count grows, a story you won't soon forget.

Free, donations appreciated.

- **October 18, 2025 @ 10 am: The Historical Society of Harford County, 143 N. Main St., Bel Air, MD
- Annual Genealogical Workshop**

Join long-time researchers and guest speakers Claudine Adams and Joann Merrill as they describe the genealogical treasures held in the Harford County Courthouse. Following their presentation, the speakers and Society genealogists will conduct a research workshop to help attendees find their long-lost ancestors. Don't miss this unique opportunity to have expert assistance in navigating the often-confusing array of files and documents available so close to home.

Register Now, www.harfordhistory.org. \$15

AMERICA 250 HARFORD COMMITTEE HOLDS INAUGURAL MEETING

On July 18, the Historical Society of Harford County welcomed community members and local leaders for the first meeting of the newly formed America 250 Harford Committee. Led by Executive Director Christine Potts and Harford County Historic Preservation Planner Jacob Bensen, the committee initiated the planning process for Harford County's commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the United States. Also supporting the committee is Maryland 250 Fellow Rylee Miller, who is currently working with the Historical Society to assist in organizing and promoting upcoming initiatives.

The meeting featured a special presentation from Michelle Johnson, Director of the Maryland 250 Commission, along with Mary Zell Galen, Programs and Partnership Specialist.

Rylee Miller, America 250 Fellow



THE TEXTILE DEPARTMENT

Part 2: Wedding Bliss

If you missed Part 1 (July/August newsletter), here's a brief recap: After making a discolored 1920s tuxedo shirt look new again, we wanted to display it. Alas, there are no 1920s tuxedos in our collection, but we do have an 1885 wedding suit that would suffice, and an 1888 silk wedding dress. A perfect pairing for an exhibit in the County Administration building's lobby! We called the exhibit Wedding Bliss, and it got a lot of attention. We recently moved it into the Society's museum, where many more visitors will have the opportunity to see these stunning garments from so long ago.

Both outfits illustrate a milestone in their owners' life stories. The suit's storage box contains trousers, a vest, a cutaway coat, some mystery objects, and pieces of cardboard torn from the original delivery box. These tattered fragments are important because the notes written on them tell the suit's provenance: "May 5, 1885 Mr. Harlan's wedding suit" and "W. H. Harlan, Esq, Bel Air, Md." The address label also tells us who made this superior morning suit: "John G. Mohlhenrich, Merchant Tailor, NE Cor. Fayette and Liberty Sts., Baltimore, MD."



The pieces are all of black wool. The fitted coat has a narrow collar, fabric-covered buttons, a kick pleat in the back, and black braid trim all around. The back of the vest is a lightweight glazed cotton with an ivory ground and blue pinstripes. The button-fly front trousers feature a watch pocket, larger pockets on each side that button open or closed, and an adjustable "belt" at the center back. The pants hems are heavily reinforced, with the back angled longer than the front to cover most of the heel of the shoes without any bunching on the front of the shoes. While examining the pieces, we found handwriting on the lining inside the watch pocket: "Mr. W H Harlan July 1885." Old handwriting on garments and linens thrills us to pieces!

William Hawkins Harlan (1850-1942), a prominent Harford County lawyer, wore this suit when he married Bessie Webster (1859-1927) on Wednesday, July 15, 1885. Genealogy research by volunteer Carol Schatz shows that the ceremony was small and private, without bridesmaids or groomsmen, and took place at 11:30 am at Ingleside, Bessie's parents' home near Bel Air. The published wedding announcement doesn't describe the bride's or the groom's attire. During their 42 years of marriage, the Harlans raised four children. (Their fifth child lived less than one year.) Mr. Harlan was appointed Judge of the Third Judicial Circuit in 1911 and served until 1926, retiring at age 76.

The suit was stored carefully by the family. It shows little wear, although it was made to withstand years of use and was fashionable from 1880 through 1910. When researching men's formal attire of the 1880s, we discovered that the Philadelphia Museum of Art has a wedding suit exactly like Mr. Harlan's in its collection, made by C. Prueger & Son in Philadelphia in 1885, and photographed with a detached-collared shirt very similar to our tuxedo shirt*.

The petite bride in our exhibit wears a sleeveless front-lacing bodice and a separate matching bustle skirt with asymmetric styling and a very long, full train. The dress was worn by Katherine Morris (1865-1947) when she and William Roebuck Brown (1862-1938) married on December 4, 1888, at Grace Cathedral in Indianapolis, Indiana. Thanks to Carol Schatz's research, we know that unlike the Harlans, the Browns invited 200 guests to witness their wedding. The published wedding announcement also describes Miss Morris as a "beautiful blonde" who "wore a dress of white faille francaise, and her veil, a family heirloom, was of real lace. She carried a bouquet of Niphetos rosebuds."

The dress is discolored and fragile due to age and the chemicals used in silk processing. When Mrs. Jacqueline Merritt, the Browns' granddaughter and a former resident of Abingdon, donated the bodice and skirt in the late 1980s, she included the wedding invitation, a calling card, and a photograph of Katherine Morris Brown taken in 1910. Unfortunately, the photograph cannot be located.

We want to tell you more about these 140-year-old garments, the pains and pleasures of creating an exhibit with them, and the mysterious objects found with Judge Harlan's wedding suit. So, stay tuned for Part 3!

*You can see the suit at <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/185791>

By Susan K. Wooden and Kathy Scholl, Textile Department

RICHARD'S CORNER

In our last edition, Ken Sterner's research unveiled a fascinating story about the nation's postal history as told initially by researcher Frank Stewart, Jr. We continue the story now, beginning with a story from the mid-1800s following the Archer family correspondence as James Archer takes up his appointment as Judge of the Mississippi Territory.

Frank Stewart, Jr., Postal History Project (1989 – 1991) (continued)

• A Maryland-Mississippi Connection

The longest letter was seven pages, written by James Archer (1811–1899) from Oakwood Plantation to his father, Judge Stevenson Archer (1786–1848). It was mailed from Church Hill, Mississippi, near Natchez, to Baltimore, Maryland, on March 12, 1840. In 1817, President James Madison appointed Judge Archer "Judge of the Mississippi Territory with Gubernatorial Powers." At that time, the territory encompassed what is now the states of Mississippi and Alabama. The Judge returned to Maryland in less than a year. James moved to Mississippi in 1835 and moved to Oakwood Plantation after his marriage to Mary Ann Hunt (1817–1884). According to his letter, James was disposing of the property his father had accumulated. He sold the items listed below for a total of \$549 to his brother-in-law, Joseph Turpin (1816–1894), who was married to Laura Stevenson Archer (1817–1897). James wrote that Joseph was establishing his planting operation nearby on approximately 450 acres.

<i>7 head of horses (an eighth horse had fallen into a deep gully and died)</i>	<i>1 lot of blacksmith tools</i>	<i>medium scales</i>
<i>2 yokes of cattle</i>	<i>1 cross-cut saw</i>	<i>mortar & pestle & knife</i>
<i>1 wagon</i>	<i>1 pair of small scales for weighing meal</i>	<i>medicines</i>
		<i>1 plough</i>

James said he sold another wagon and a pair of balances for \$114 to his father-in-law, David Hunt (1779–1861). Mr. Hunt was a wealthy "gentleman planter" who lived on one of his plantations, Woodlawn, in Mississippi, with his wife Ann Ferguson Hunt (1787–1874). They gave Oakwood Plantation to James and Mary Ann as a wedding gift, along with a set of silver tableware from Baltimore and about 100 slaves.

For his own use, James wrote that he would keep the following items and pay his father \$619:

<i>4 mules</i>	<i>table [illegible] 3: 2 [illegible],</i>	<i>1 large iron pot & 1 tea kettle</i>
<i>2 yokes of oxen & 1 add on</i>	<i>4 chairs, 1 cupboard, 1</i>	<i>6 old ploughs</i>
<i>medicines</i>	<i>bedstead (all sold to</i>	<i>1 harrow</i>
	<i>Hamilton)</i>	
<i>spinning wheel</i>	<i>1 pair of andirons & an old</i>	
<i>whip saw & two old axes</i>	<i>[illegible]</i>	

James noted that he had also paid his father's tax bill of \$80.98, which included the \$41.00 tax on his slaves. He had also paid other bills and enclosed with this letter his note for \$1156.15 as the balance remaining in Judge Archer's account. (As expected, James' note is not in the file.)

Further on in the letter, James expressed his opinion on the land that Joseph Turpin was planning to purchase, agreeing with his father that Mt. Olivia, free of rent, was a better alternative. But, recognizing that Mr. Joseph Dunbar (1783–1846), Ann Hunt's uncle, was *"so liberal in his offer of time & is so anxious to befriend him"* James was unsure whether to advise Joseph not to accept it.

James described to his father his own planting and plans for growing corn and oats, as well as cotton, even without an overseer managing the work. He also wrote about "The Colonel" who had an opportunity to make *"upwards of \$14,000!!!"* if he would sell in New Orleans at 10 cents per pound the 200 bales of cotton he had on hand. James suggested that The Colonel could use the money to pay off his bank debts. The Colonel was Colonel William Smith Hays (c.1797–1848), James' maternal uncle. The following passage describes a family situation involving Colonel Hays, his wife Sarah "Sally" MacBeth Hays (1801–1851), James' sister Hannah Catherine Archer Van Bibber (1815–1906), and Archer Hays Jarrett (1825–1869), James' cousin.

When I was up, Aunt Sally heard from Archer Jarrett. He had got with a respectable commission House at Vicksburg, for his victuals and other. Hannah rec'd a letter from him requesting her to send him all his clothes, that he had made a little money, enough to carry his house & that he was determined to start as soon as he heard from her. Hannah wrote to him immediately & I enclosed \$45 to him in the letter, which I trust will enable him to get home. I sh^d. have gone after him, but I was afraid it might embroil me with the Colonel. You need not mention my having enclosed him any money, as it appears to come from Aunt Sally & will appear better as coming from that quarter. I have been very much mortified at this affair of Archer's. It is generally known in the County & it is generally believed that the Boy had been harshly dealt with. He has not been properly treated it is true but there is no question, that he deserved a severe chastisement for his conduct, tho' not one administered exactly in a modo et forma in which the Colonel does these things. I do hope & trust that the Boy will get home to his Mother, & wish he kept with her.

The letter continued, describing the business and financial situations of other planters in the area, including that of David Hunt, who James described as *"one most prudent, careful & perseveringly housekeep men I ever saw, & his prudence & foresight are displayed more conspicuously the more I know him."* James also told his father about the financial problems of the State of Mississippi:

The affairs of our state are in a most disastrous condition. Our banks are absolutely wicked and our Governor is making war on the entirety of the state. He has just issued a Proclamation in which he warns everyone again not trading for the \$5,000,000 Bonds of the State, which he says he has reason to believe the Directors of the [illegible] Bank are endeavoring to dispose of. And this Proclamation is issued a few days after the adjournment of the Legislature! Did you ever hear of such high-handed presumption since the days of General Jackson? Four fifths of our community are irretrievably ruined. Many are making fraudulent conveyances of their property to cheat the County & and many more are running their negroes to Texas. I am told that upwards of 15,000 negroes have been crossed this winter at the Rodney Ferry."

James closed his letter to his father, saying his sons, David and Stevenson, were well and soon able to go to school. Unfortunately, David died before his fourth birthday. Stevenson went on to become a Presbyterian Minister and a leader in the community of Greenville, Mississippi.

This particular letter was very illuminating to me as it mentioned so many members of the Archer extended family and their lives in Mississippi. The website sankofagen.pbworks.com was the source of

information about plantations throughout the South and the people associated with them, even though it misspells our County as "Hartford" and "Vanberber" instead of "Van Bibber." It would be very interesting to learn more about the post-Revolutionary War "Old Maryland Settlement" in Jefferson County, Mississippi, that gave rise to the town of Church Hill and the plantations around it.

- **Another John Archer**

The letters I found most interesting were those written between 1826 and 1830 by John Archer (1806–1889) to his father, Dr. Robert H. Archer (1775–1857), his uncle, Judge Stevenson Archer (1786–1849), and his brothers, Thomas (1808–1870) and Henry (1811–1899). John Archer had been admitted to the United States Military Academy in West Point, NY, in 1822 at the age of 16. Upon graduation in 1826, he headed to Cantonment Gibson, a temporary billet for troops on the Neosho River near what is now Tulsa, Oklahoma. In a November 1826 letter to his father, John described his journey from Louisville by skiff, canoe, steamboat, and horse via the Arkansas, Mississippi, and White Rivers that had taken more than three weeks. Although it is unclear who they are, John also wrote, *"I called at Mr. Lewis' today and delivered to young Jarrett the letters from his sister."*

In January 1827, John again wrote to his father from Cantonment Gibson and described its location on the Grand (Neosho) River in relation to the Arkansas and Verdigris Rivers. The 90,000 square foot structure was built to be secure from attack by Indians. The Osage, Delaware, Cherokee, Quapaw, and Kikapoo tribes were all living, in peace, nearby. John noted that he was attached to the 7th Regiment and that there were four other officers from Maryland as well: Lieutenants Dawson, Miles, Ganey, and Dr. Stineby. With little military action, the officers established a subscription library of books and newspapers to occupy their time. Other officers who had arrived with John Archer had been transferred to Cantonment Jessup near Natchitoches in Louisiana and Cantonment Towson on the Red River.

In a March 1827 letter to his brother, Thomas, John Archer congratulated him for graduating from St. John's and told him he was certain that he would be successful in his future endeavors. John briefly described his daily activities, the abundance of game in the area, and the likelihood that he would soon be transferred to another outpost. He also asked Thomas to remind his friends Hopkins and Horace Miller of their promises to write to him. In subsequent letters, John Archer updated his father on his duties and expectations for a transfer to the 3rd Regiment; and told his brother of his moving to Cantonment Leavenworth on May 2, 1828, and described the landscape around him.

There is so much history and information within these and other letters from Lt. John Archer—names, places, and relationships— that it makes me want to explore his life and military career even further; I've already located letters he wrote while at West Point.

Watch for the final excerpt from these remarkable files in our next edition or consider visiting the Society to peruse this fascinating file and travel through history on your own.

IN MEMORIAM

Jon Harlan Livezey (1938-2025), a Lifetime member of the Historical Society of Harford County, Inc. and George W. Archer lecturer (2006), passed away on July 29, 2025. Mr. Livezey was a noted genealogist, historian, attorney, and former member of the Maryland House of Delegates (1970-1974).

TRIALS & TRIUMPHS SAYS "THANK YOU"

As many of our readers know, the *Trials and Triumphs: A History of the African American Experience in Harford County* exhibit made its sixth and final stop at the Historical Society Headquarters in July.

This first-of-its-kind (but certainly not the last) traveling exhibit made its way around our County with roughly month-long stops at the Hayes Heighe Museum at Harford Community College; the Abingdon branch of the Harford County Library; the Roni Chenoweth Senior and Recreation Center in Fallston; the Havre De Grace Opera House; and the historic Hosanna School Museum, for a special viewing at the annual Juneteenth Celebration; before spending its closing month at the Historical Society. While on view at Society headquarters on Main Street, we welcomed many guests and visitors to browse and/or enjoy daily exhibit tours and hosted a thank you gathering on July 21 for all those who contributed to the exhibition. On July 25, the Harford County Delegation of the Maryland General Assembly presented the Society with an Official Citation commending "the creation and display of this important exhibit."

In addition to project partner and co-leader Dr. Iris Barnes, we wish to thank all the researchers, curators, catalogers, designers, movers, marketers, and funders who worked on this exhibit. We are especially grateful to all the community members who shared their stories, artifacts, documents, and photographs with us, in addition to the remarkable men and women who participated in both in-person and virtual interviews, sharing their recollections and experiences. The exhibit would not have been possible without all of you—the people whose families, friends, and neighbors made this history, and those who worked so hard to bring that history to current audiences.

Although the displays are coming down now, our exhibit website will remain. Please join us online at <https://www.aaexperiencehc.com> and help us study this history further by submitting photographs, business cards, and information to our online collections. Our exhibit was designed to inspire continued learning, spark interest, and foster new projects. So hop on Board, and let's keep traveling by creating, exploring, and discovering this rich history together.

A special shoutout to our wonderful moving crew members and to Thompson Moving & Storage, who ensured we got to and from each location flawlessly.

By Roxann Redd-Wallace, Recording Secretary

NEW MEMBERS

Dorothy Ward
Pacione Family
James Wood
Douglas Munnikhuysen

Carolyn Barrett
Robin R. Stokes
Jeff and Susan Dorsey
Lisa Spelker

Regina Recifo
Lisa Melody
Marcie Birk
Bonita Markle

BOARD OF TRUSTEES NOMINATIONS

The Historical Society's Bylaws require that a list of possible Trustees shall be nominated by the Board through its Nominating Committee and placed on the ballot at the Annual Meeting. This year, the nominating committee has submitted the following candidates for consideration: Sandra Rhodes Wallis, Ph.D., Joseph Snee, Esq., and Nicole Barnwell. Nominations may also be accepted from the floor at the Society's Annual Meeting on September 21, 2025, at the Society's headquarters.

ON DOING HISTORY: A HISTORY OF THE HISTORY CLUB

The Bel Air American History Club (BAAHC) was founded in 1965. The Club provided interested persons a forum for the study of various aspects of America's social, cultural, political, diplomatic, and military history. Its founding membership consisted of eleven professional men, most of whom were retired scientists from Aberdeen Proving Ground, former military officers, or local college or school teachers.

Administratively, general understandings guided the organization. Nothing was formal. There was no constitution or formal membership requirement; no application form, entrance fee, or regular dues. The expectation was that a member would be a fitting companion and produce one presentation approximately every two to three years. Meetings were at six-week intervals from September to June, and normally took place at the home of the individual giving the program.

Topics could be on any aspect of American History, except current politics and family genealogy. The host chose the subject and format, which could be a lecture, a book review, a discussion of a well-known event of the past, or even a short film or slide show. Representative programs from the early years included John D. Rockefeller and the Founding of Colonial Williamsburg, The Overland Travel Experience of the California Gold Rush, Political Aspects of the Emancipation Proclamation, American Imperialism in late 19th century Hawaii, Beleaguered Neutral: Maryland and the Civil War, The Surprising Prevalence of Divorce in Colonial America, and Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan.

The Founder and first President of the Bel Air American History Club was David L. Hill (1909 - 1981). Hill, a native of Carthage, Illinois, with a love of American History, worked as a biochemist at APG. In 1965, he gathered like-minded men from around the area. Among the early members were C. Milton Wright (former Superintendent of Harford County Schools), Ed Bull (retired NYC banker and founder of Steppingstone Museum), F. Wayde Chrismer (*Aegis* journalist/ad man and author of numerous articles on Maryland in the Civil War), Rear Admiral Benjamin H. Adams (Retired, USN Medical Corps), Dr. M. Joseph Bernardo (History Professor at HCC), and Robert E. Lee Ross (History instructor at Bel Air High School). It was Ross who playfully dubbed the group the "old men's history club."

The Club gradually evolved into a larger and more diverse group. In 1967, teachers Richard Sherrill and Jim Chrismer became, Chrismer jokes, "token young" members. Susan Deeney, an archaeologist and later a librarian, became the first female member in the 1970s. By the 1990s, the average age had fallen into the mid-50s, and women constituted about 20% of active members. Despite having occasional African Americans attend meetings as guests, sadly, none committed to becoming regular members.

From its outset, the BAAHC made meaningful contributions to the preservation of Harford County history. In 1975, the Club aided the HSHC in moving thousands of county legal records from the dank basement of the Courthouse to a nearby empty office, where sorting, annotating, and cataloging began. This was quickly followed by the group's undertaking, in cooperation with Dr. Cary Carson of the University of Delaware, a detailed analysis of the 1798 Direct Federal Tax list for Harford County. The outcome was to be a published account of the material culture of the County at the end of the 18th century. Unfortunately, the project proved to be too much for such a small group and had to be abandoned, although the Club donated microfilm and photocopies of the film to the HSHC.

Starting in the following decade, less spectacular but essential contributions became commonplace. Using original sources, members published articles on county history, presented public lectures, served as officers for other local heritage organizations, accepted appointments or election to public and private commissions, appeared on DVD's concerning Harford History, and volunteered their expertise to help other persons

throughout the country interested in Harford County and family history. This included persons writing major commercial books, producing self-published accounts, and working on their Ph.D. dissertations.

Evidence of the group's community contributions is very evident. Between the Winter 1991 and the Spring of 2025, twenty-seven of the 81 issues of the *Harford Historical Bulletin* (33%) were written by BAAHC members. Nine members served as Officers, Trustees, or as the Director of the HSHC, and County Executives appointed five to the Historic Preservation Commission. Additionally, several individuals received awards from the William Paca Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Between 2006 and 2025, the Historical Preservation Commission honored five members with its highest award: the Preservationist Honor Award.

Until 2020, the History Club had a remarkable record of sustainability. Only with the onset of COVID-19 did it ever cancel (versus postpone) a scheduled meeting. Other outside factors began to impact the Club negatively. Members grew old and became inactive, moved away (e.g., Keir Sterling, John E. Brown, and Jeff Smart, APG Historian, now "Director of the BAAHC West Coast Operations"), or died (e.g., Richard Sherrill, 2024). The addition of new members failed to offset the losses, and the group has struggled in recent years to meet on any regular basis, despite adopting the capability to meet in a hybrid fashion through Zoom.

Several positive signs exist for the group's future. Most notably, the leadership of Jacob Bensen. With his recent M.A. from UMBC, Bensen, the County's Preservation Planner, became the group's third president in 2023. This occurred as Sherrill, who had replaced David Hill in 1981, grew ill and died (yes, Richard was president for 42 years!). The loyalty of the ten "continuing hard core" of the group, and the Club's obvious determination, are likewise hopeful signs of the BAAHC's movement beyond this year's 60th Anniversary.

Dr. John E. Brown, former president of the HSHC, articulated the spirit of the Bel Air American History Club that evening in May 2015: *"It has never occurred to me that the Bel Air American History Club [will ever] cease to exist.... Rather, {the group} has ever been too vital, too energetic, too filled with a fellowship of like minds and kindred spirits to fade away."*

Persons with an interest in joining the BAAHC should call Jacob Bensen at 410-638-3103, extension 1385, or contact him at historic@harfordcountymd.gov.

James Chrismer, Researcher and Bulletin Editor

GOOD NEWS FOR RESEARCHERS! PAST PERFECT UPGRADE

This month, the Historical Society is conducting a significant upgrade to our Past Perfect collections database. The new version, Past Perfect Web Edition, will allow us to easily enter and edit information on a cloud-based database as well as attach forms, research, and provenance directly to an item. We will have volunteer training scheduled each week of August. This update will catalog our collection in a more streamlined way and significantly improve our public access site, making online research easier!

Chelsea Cline, Associate Director

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COURT RECORDS
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Wednesday
ARCHIVES
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Third Wednesday
ARCHIVES & HENRY
C. PEDEN Jr. LIBRARY
5:00 P.M. - 8:00 P.M.

Thursday
HENRY C. PEDEN Jr.
RESEARCH LIBRARY
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Fourth Saturday
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