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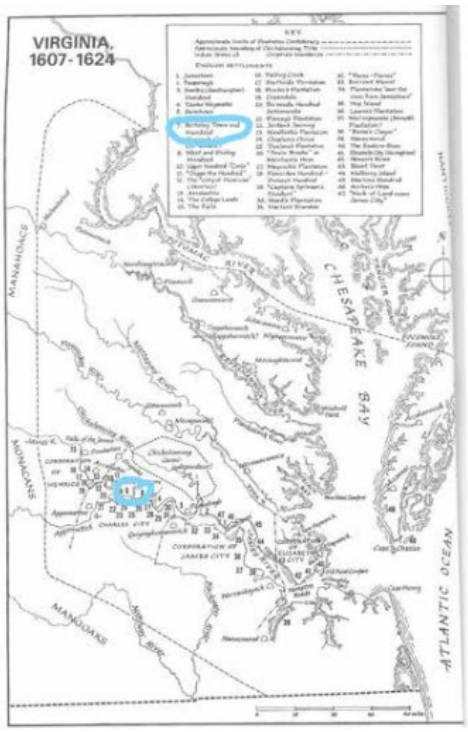
Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Virginia's first Thanksgiving

Alexandria Times, November 25, 2021

Image: The Old Dominion in "The Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606 - 1689," edited by Warren M. Billings. University of North Carolina Press, annotated.



Previous versions of Thanksgiving Out of the Attics have mentioned Virginia's claim to the first Thanksgiving at what's known as Berkeley Plantation in 1619, a year before the arrival of the Separatists at Plymouth Rock. What makes Virginia's claim to the first Thanksgiving different is that it was to be celebrated annually and the colonists who celebrated their arrival on the shores of Virginia were killed in a bloody uprising of Native Americans across the Virginia shoreline in 1622.

What today is Berkeley Plantation, between Jamestown and Williamsburg, was originally named Berkeley Hundred, after an estate in Gloucestershire of the same name owned by one of the four principal partners of the Virginia Company of London. The partners received a land grant from King James I of more than 8,000 acres including three miles of shoreline.

Unlike Jamestown, where it was difficult to grow crops, Berkeley Hundred in Virginia was ideally located to grow crops and start other commercial ventures. The company sent 36 men from Bristol on Sept. 16, 1619, and they arrived on Nov.28 of that same year. After two and a half months of rough seas in a small ship, the 36 were grateful to arrive in the Chesapeake Bay. They arrived on the land granted to them by King James on Dec. 4.

Per the instructions of the Virginia Company, the expedition's leader, Captain John Woodlief, prayed:

"We ordain that this day of our ship's arrival, at the place assigned for plantacon, in the land of Virginia, shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God."

In the case of Captain Woodlief, that instruction proved easy to follow. Unfortunately for him, the Virginia Company's main instruction was to make them a lot of money. His inability to do so led to the board replacing him in August 1620 with George Thorpe and William Tracy.

Thorpe was also a clergyman and thought that he had a good relationship with the Native Americans in the area, especially since he had constructed an English-style house for the local leader. These gestures did not engender the goodwill that Thorpe assumed, as Paramount Chief Opechancanough, successor to the chief we know as Powhatan, led a confederacy of Algonquian

peoples to attack English colonists on both sides of the James River on March 22, 1622. Supposedly, Thorpe was the first of 11 colonists at Berkeley Hundred to lose their lives that day.

The Virginia Company of London pulled the plug on their expedition, and their instructions to celebrate a day of thanks were lost. In 1931, Dr. Lyon Tyler, son of former President John Tyler and former president of William and Mary University, published an article on the celebration at Berkeley Hundred in the Richmond News-Leader. The traditional festival on the Berkeley Plantation was resurrected in 1958 and continues today.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.