



George Washington Chapter Sons of the American Revolution



Newsletter

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James C. Rees to Speak at the April Meeting

Continuing a line of notable guests, James Rees will address members and guests at our April luncheon meeting. He has been the Executive Director of Historic Mount Vernon, the nation's most popular historic home, since 1994. Mr. Rees served in several other positions at Mount Vernon since his arrival there in 1983. Under his leadership, Mount Vernon has completed a \$116 million capital campaign, constructed a new orientation center, and education center, restored and reopened George Washington's historic gristmill and distillery, and created a new exhibition area dedicated to George Washington, Pioneer Farmer. The estate's endowment has grown from \$4 million to about \$100 million.

He previously worked on the nationwide properties program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, as public relations director for The College of William and Mary and the Virginia Shakespeare Festival, and as a cub reporter for the *Daily Press* newspaper in Tidewater, Virginia.

Mr. Rees holds an undergraduate degree from The College of William and Mary and a Master's Degree from George Washington University. He has served as the president of the Virginia Association of Museums and as president of the Friends of the Potomac River. He is the author of *George Washington's Leadership Lessons* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007) and numerous other publications, and he has appeared on a variety of television programs, including *The Today Show*, *C-Span* and *CBS Sunday Morning*.

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Highlights of the March Meeting

At the March meeting, President Torrans summarized the recent Chapter activities. We were well represented at the VASSAR Annual Meeting and came home with two new flag streamers - one for Chapter Excellence and one for NSSAR Congress attendance.

The Chapter was also represented at the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Revolutionary War Unknown Soldier and the Washington Birthday Parade held on 18 February.

Some Compatriots may not be aware that the SAR can issue a "Flag Certificate" to individuals and organizations (e.g. businesses, schools) who daily display the *Stars and Stripes*. Our Chapter receives credit for each certificate we issue. Please send the names of those you know are eligible for this recognition to President Torrans or to Flag Committee Chairman David Grimes.

President Torrans reminded us that all Compatriots who have served in our armed forces in war-time are eligible for the SAR War Service Medal. All who are eligible for this medal are asked to provide the dates of their service to President Torrans.

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Dr. James Craik Medal

The Dr. James Craik Medal was struck to commemorate our grave marking project at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House. Those handsome medals have arrived. During the business meeting, Chapter President Torrans distributed medals to members who participated in that important project.

Dr. James Craik Medal

The front of this medal contains a raised profile of Dr. Craik and the words *Excellence in Patriot Grave Marking*.

The obverse contains a raised SAR emblem and the inscription *Dr. James Craik Medal, George Washington Chapter*.



Guest Speaker Congressman Tom Davis

If you did not attend our 8 March luncheon, you missed an opportunity to meet Congressman Tom Davis and hear his candid remarks on the frustrations of service in the current Congress.

He observed that the actions taken by the present Congress have become reactive and designed to avoid risks. The Nation's unsustainable fiscal policies are also of great concern to Davis, who recognizes that difficult and painful corrections will be necessary to control entitlement costs.



Congressman Davis accepts the coveted bust of General Washington from Vice President Walker.

Photo by Gina Briggs

In the Q&A following Congressman Davis's remarks, he identified the three most important concerns of his Northern Virginia constituents — transportation, immigration, and health care.

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General Washington's Fisheries

This spring, as in every spring of eons past, millions of shad and herring will swim past Mount Vernon on the way upstream to fresh water tributaries to spawn. Why? What? Where? When? The answer to the first question, "why", remains a mystery. The "what" and "where" of the annual

migrations are well understood. Within reasonable tolerances, the answer to "when" is known. The beginning of each year's migration seems, in part, related to the temperature of the river's water. Therefore, fishermen still begin testing the waters for the presence of the fish when the first hints of spring appear across the landscape. Old hands say that the flowering of the shadbush, a local native plant, is a certain indication that fish are in the river.

March is the time to get ready. Everything must be in order when the first fish arrive. The run will last for only about four weeks and during that time not a moment can be lost. Washington must make the most of this important fish harvest which only comes once each year. In 1768 the fishing was so plentiful that Washington delayed the spring planting and had the house slaves and carpenters help with the fishing.

On 4 April 1760, he noted in his diary, *"Apprehending the Herrings were come, hauled the sein in but catchd only a few of them tho a good many other sorts"* On the next day, *"Hauled the sein again and catchd 2 or 3 whitefish [shad], more herrings than yesterday and a great number of cats.* On the 10th there were rain showers so he employed his field hands in making a haul or two of the seines and found that the herring had come. On Friday, *"About 11 oclock set the people to hauling the sein and by night catchd and dressed [illegible] barrels of herring and 60 whitefish. Observed that the flood tide was infinitely the best for these fish."*

On April 4, 1786, he began testing the river for the first appearance of the spring migration and noted on April 20 that, *"The shad began to run today, having caught 100, 200, and 300 at a draught."* That year the run was over in just three weeks. The diary entry for May 10 reads: *"The Fish appeared to be quite done running, but I ordered my People to continue at the landing trying a haul on every tide until Saturday."*

The run of 1788 was recorded in some detail in the General's diary:

1 Apr 1788 - Made a draught with the Seine this evening at the Ferry Landing, caught 15 Shad and a few hundreds herring at one haul.

4 Apr 1788 - Caught 500 and odd Shad today

14 Apr 1788 - Caught about 50,000 herrings at a draught this afternoon.

[Now that should catch your attention. Can you imagine the scene? About 50,000 wiggling and squirming fish which must be processed very quickly. If only 30 seconds of labor were spent attending each herring from the time it was brought to shore until it was salted away in a barrel, how long would it take to process 50,000 fish? My answer is, it would take

about 42 workers to finish this job in 10 hours. This is why Washington sent every available hand, including the butler and the maids, to the fishery when the run was on.]

23 Apr 1788 - At the fishing landing there was plenty of customers but no fish. Last week there was plenty of fish and no customers.

24 Apr 1788 - Not many fish caught today. Two little carts employed in carrying out the heads and guts of the fish upon the Corn ground at the Ferry.

26 Apr 1788 - But few fish caught today

28 Apr 1788 - the offal of the Fish were carried to Field No. 7 where they were spread and plowed in.

29 Apr 1788 - No fish caught today of any consequence.

5 May 1788 - No fish being caught today I ordered the hogsheads and everything else to be secured, and the People to repair to their respective places and businesses

[Fish sales brought GW £60 18s 4d in cash the spring of 1788. In addition he delivered 68,000 herrings, worth £17 to the firm of Peterson & Taylor in initial payment for their lumber.]

And the herring and shad still come! The *Virginia Outdoor News* reported that shad migrating up the James River hit Richmond's city limits on Thursday, March 15, 2001. By the following Saturday some anglers were landing 15 to 20 shad, both males and females. It is expected that the shad run will peak and be red hot in down-town Richmond by April 1st. Elsewhere, the shad should be arriving at Fredericksburg any day now. Where there are shad there will be herring, too.

So, what requires attention? The seines must be moved from the salt house to the fishery and inspected and repaired where necessary. The seines were not constructed at Mount Vernon, but ordered from England. In April, 1760, Washington ordered two seines from his London agent, Robert Cary & Company. His order stated: "Please send two seines by the first ship to the York River directed to the care of Mr. Joseph Valentine and charge them to Jno. Parke Custis. I apprehend that it is needless to describe the size as you may see by your books what sorts have been sent every two years for some time past. They must be in use here by the first of March since the fishing season begins then and is of no long continuance in that river.

In the early 1760s, Washington used seines that were 210 feet long and 20 feet deep for the entire length. The upper edge was fitted with cork floats and the bottom was held down with lead weights. As Washington's experience grew he changed the dimensions of his seines. Successive orders to his

London agent were for longer seines of less depth with longer haul lines and finer mesh. The deeper seines were difficult to handle and included undesirable bottom feeding catfish in the catch. Greater length and longer haul lines let the seine be taken farther out into the river. Fish became entangled in coarse nets and were difficult to remove so the finer mesh helped solve that problem. In 1771, Washington ordered a seine that was to be 450 feet long, 10 feet deep in the middle and 8 feet at the ends. Cork floats were mounted every 2 ½ feet on the top edge of the seine and lead weights were 5 feet apart on the bottom. Hauling lines on each end of the net were 2,400 feet long. From the ends of the hauling lines this seine and hauling line combination was just 8 feet short of one mile. You can imagine the weight and bulk of this equipment.

A large boat was required to carry this seine into position and Washington had such a boat. In March of 1772 he purchased a whaleboat obtained for him by the Governor of Maryland for 20 pounds sterling. Before each season the boats used at the fisheries had to be inspected and made ready.

What else was needed? Salt, of course — the essential agent for preserving the fish. And it could not be just any salt. Why did the kind of salt used matter? The best and only really acceptable salt came from Lisbon. It was made by flooding large land areas with ocean water, allowing the sun to evaporate the water and leaving the salt, a slow process. This provided a product that was stable and did not hydrate or draw up moisture rapidly. Thus it did not melt easily in contact with wet fish. It preserved, was easily transported and easily stored. The salt from Liverpool, in contrast, was made by boiling sea water and resulted in a salt not much different from that in use today. This salt was allowed to enter the southern colonies and was preferred for domestic use. However, it was found, by long experience in warm climates, to be too weak to accomplish preservation. The fish or meat preserved or cured with it turned rusty in color and, in six or eight months, was unfit for use. Because of the impurities left by the evaporative boiling process, it was so corrosive that meat lost its fat content and the remaining lean hardened and was of little value. The same difficulties were evident when used to preserve fish.

Acquiring Lisbon salt was one of the most difficult logistic aspects of the fisheries. Because of English law, Virginia and the colonies to the south were unable to import Lisbon salt directly. If a Virginia ship took a cargo to Lisbon, traded and bought salt, the ship had to sail to England, clear customs, pay duty on the salt, then sail for the colonies. Many times the salt was required to be

delivered to a northern colony for transshipment to Virginia. This added to the time for delivery and substantially increased the cost. This problem originated with the English merchants who had a large and highly lucrative dried salt cod business with the northern colonies and had strong support in the House of Commons. By controlling the importation of Lisbon salt into the colonies, they protected their northern fisheries.

Washington's diary in April 1775 shows a dinner visit by Captain Phillip Curtis, skipper of Washington's schooner the *Farmer*, who had just returned from a trip to Lisbon with 4000 bushels of salt from Turks Island in the Caribbean.

The last very important need was for barrels — and Washington needed a lot of them — 1000 or possibly many more. A skilled cooper could make from five to eight wet (i.e., water tight) barrels a day starting from reasonably well prepared staves. But staves originally came from logs which came from trees. It is easy to imagine the scope of the task of making the barrels. Add to that the task of transporting all those barrels to and from the fisheries.

And what, you ask, is a fishery? As applied to the Potomac River, a fishery is simply a reasonably flat and accessible stretch of shore from which the seines could be carried into the water and the catch processed. Washington had three such shoreline spots at Mount Vernon. One was at Posey's Ferry, often called the Fishing Landing. A second was in the vicinity of the wharf, and known as the Landing. The third was a mile or so above Sheridan Point, in the River Farm area.

In 1799 Washington wanted to lease his very productive fishery at Fishing Landing. The advertisement provides a detailed description of that large facility.

Columbia Mirror and Alexandria Gazette

December 12, 1799

To Let, for one or more Years, A fishery, at the mouth of Dogue Creek, well known by the name of Posey's Fishing-Landing. To say much on this subject would be unnecessary, as the property is generally known, and has commonly turned out to great account. The last year upwards of 500 barrels of herrings were cured at this landing, and not less than 110 barrels of shad; besides, very large quantities of shad and herring were sold on the shore to country customers. There are excellent accommodations on the premises for carrying on the fishery, to a larger extent than has been done, as there are a strong log house of 20

feet by 16, for holding salt and cured fish; and this house is shedded all round, in which nearly 100 hhds. may be contained for the curing of the fish. Besides, there are a shed of considerable size, for the striking or first salting of the fish, and a house newly built, of 16 by 14, for the fishers to cook in, and another of 14 by 12, for an overseer to lodge in, and keep the accounts of the business. The tenant may also be accommodated with a seine and ropes, rigged and ready for fishing, a fishing-boat, and about 30 or 40 hhds. to cure fish in; all upon reasonable terms.

Nothing would have induced Gen Washington to have let such a valuable property, but the firm determination of simplifying and contracting his concerns.

Proposals may be made to the sub-scriber for the Fishery and the houses thereto appertaining, or for the fishery houses, and too purchase the seine, boat, and hogsheads, as may be most agreeable to the offerers. No offers will be received after the 12th of January, 1800, as any person wishing to rent the premises, will require time to make the necessary arrangements, and in six days thereafter, the offer which is most agreeable to Gen. Washington will be preferred, and made known to the offerer.

[From the above advertisement it is seen that in 1798 the Dogue Run fishery required at least 610 barrels. The production of these barrels was no small undertaking. Marshal Sheetz, an artisan who practices the colonial cooper's trade, says a cooper could make five or six barrels in one day, starting from seasoned and fairly well prepared lumber. Washington's 1799 slave census identifies three slaves (Tom, Moses and Jacob) who were working as coopers. Not counting the effort required to fell trees, cut and split them into boards, and move the lumber to the cooperage, these three slaves would have worked steadily for about six weeks to produce just those 610 barrels needed for the Dogue Run fishery. Of course, with other fisheries, the gristmill, and the distillery, that was not the only Mount Vernon industry that needed barrels.]

April 12, 2008
Lunch Meeting Reservation Form

Please use this form to make a reservation for the chapter's lunch at the Belle Haven Country Club, 6023 Fort Hunt Road, Alexandria, Virginia. The lunch cost is \$35.00 per person. Check in and social time begin at 11:30 a.m. The meeting will be called to order at 12:00 noon. Feel free to invite your wife and friends as your guests. ***RSVP no later than April 7th.***

Walk-ins will be accommodated if possible, but note that to cover the Club's charge for serving those without a timely reservation a walk-in price of \$37.00 is required.

Name: _____

A check for ____ persons in the amount of \$_____ payable to **G. W. Chapter SAR** is enclosed.

Mail this reservation form with your check to:

Vern McHargue, Treasurer
6846 Ericka Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22310

You may also phone (703) 313-0671 and leave a message or e-mail
vern.mchargue@heritage.org.

It is important to provide advance notice of attendance to be sure you get a seat.
Valet parking is available.