

SMITH'S ISLAND

By

Ruth Preston Rose

Smith's Island, one of the southernmost of the Virginia Barrier Islands, was named for Captain John Smith, who explored the area in 1608. In early writings about the barrier islands and on the 1608 map, "The Virginia Sea," the islands are called Smith's Isles. The Virginia settlers established a salt house on Smith's Island in 1614, providing a commodity so important that the government supported a detachment of twenty men to run the operation.¹ The salt house was still there in 1621 when John Porey, an early visitor to the island, described the operations in his writings.²

Smith's Island came into private ownership later in the seventeenth century. On Aril 28th, 1691, the island, which consisted of 2600 acres, became the property of John Custis, who received the land in return for transporting fifty-two persons to the New World.³ Custis was a direct ancestor of Daniel Parke Custis, Martha Washington's first husband. The island therefore came under the control of George Washington, and later, of General Robert E. Lee. It remained the property of John Custis' descendants until the twentieth century.

In May 1832, Robert E. Lee, as a young bridegroom, visited Smith's Island and sent back a report to his father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, who was Martha Washington's grandson. Lee, exhibiting great thoroughness in his attention to detail, wrote a description of the island and its inhabitants. Following are excerpts of his letter:

The whole island is nearer the level of the sea than I expected to find it; the Tenants told me that the gale of 27th April, 1831 nearly covered it with water. In fact only some of the *highest* ridges escaped upon which the Cattle & Sheep took refuge. Their little patches of corn around their houses were destroyed & the salt not having yet left the ground, deprives them of a crop for this year. You may recollect that the surface of the Island is composed of alternate Ridges & Glades, running as near as I could judge from North to South, & from one extremity to the other. The soil of the glades is as rich as possible & covered with fine grass, that of the ridges contains a great deal of sand & is covered with Pine. But as the part of the Island exposed to the ocean is wearing away, & the Beach which used to protect the glades, has been in many places levelled, the water at common high tides finds its way into them & renders the Pasturage not so good. There are four families residing there, Thomas Roberts, Hamilton, Hamby & Hitchings . . . Each of these families have from 30 to 40 head of cattle, which they milk, take care of & and as they rapidly encrease [sic] will at last be valuable. There are besides 150 *wild* cattle, as near as can be estimated, which perhaps encreases as fast as the Tame. The females are of course valuable for the encrease, but the males only for their *bides*. I therefore think the best plan would be to shoot *all the old Bulls* in the Fall, & to catch the calves in the Spring (If possible) & alter the males, they would then make Steers, or beef in the Fall. I saw a drove of about 60 of these fellows early one morning on the Beach where they had taken refuge the

night previous to get rid of the moschettoes, [sic] (which are *already very thick*). But they would not let me get nearer than about 300 yds. of them. They were all small & had not recovered from the hard winter. There were a great many calves & yearlings among them - I suppose the breed must have very much degenerated. The tame cattle were somewhat larger & in better order. The number of sheep is not accurately known, but is supposed to be over 100. They are nearly as wild as the cattle & looked very *ragged*. The shearing had not commenced, And I directed that they should then be counted & marked. I could learn of no one who wished to purchase, nor do I believe there is anyone who would give for it 1/4 its value. I think it would improve the Island, to sell some of the timber & wood off of it, as it would render the interior dryer, diminish the quantity of *ticks* (of which I got full) & moschettoes, which must harrass the cattle very much, & might tend to *civilize* the stock. Timber is much wanted on the main for Ship & House building & I might make some arrangement with those, who supply Norfolk with pine wood to cut it of [sic] the land. It is even carried to N. York from Carolina, for the Steam Boats. The keeper of the light house & tenants were very kind and attentive to me, gave me plenty of milk, butter & eggs & fish. They had plenty of Sea birds eggs those of the willet & sedge hen were the best. Fish is so common there that they cooked a large dish of the *Roes* for me. The season for Rock & the *Streaked* Bass was just commencing, & in a few days that of the Drum would begin.*

*Lee's letter is printed with the permission of the Perkins Library of Duke University of Durham, N.C.

Robert E. Lee's letter reflects the life of the island from the time of John Smith's visit to the present day. Human activity has largely depended upon the ways of nature. Since the gale of 1831, described by Lee, numerous storms have ravaged Smith's Island, changing drastically the configuration of the shoreline.⁴ A severe storm in 1851 cut a wide channel, dividing the island into two separate bodies of land with the northern portion known afterwards as Myrtle Island. Other major storms occurred in 1893, 1896, 1903, 1928, and 1933. The storm of 1933 is thought to have been the most significant event in the known history of the island. The hurricane brought water over all of the barrier islands with the exception of Parramore. Livestock, trees, and buildings were carried by the water onto the mainland. Additional severe storms in 1936 and 1962 were a major reason for the subsequent movement of islanders onto the mainland.

There is a legend that John Smith first named the island Shooting Bear Island because of the small bears which were supposed to be numerous there, but Smith's island has been better known for the domestic animals which have been found there since the early settlers, lacking fences, found the natural limitations of the island especially suited to the grazing of cattle.

It is not surprising that Robert E. Lee found wild cattle there in 1832. During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, cattle had roamed freely on the island, their owners capturing them at their convenience. The island was equally attractive to marauding seafarers, however, and there is a long history of pillaging. As early as 1699, Colonel John Custis complained that pirates had

landed on Smith's Island and victualled their sheep with his beef cattle. A militia was established on the island, but it was difficult to obtain help if prowlers were spotted, so piracy was not easily controlled.⁵ A point of land on the island was named for Blackbeard, who is said to have been in the area.

During the Revolutionary War, British soldiers took cattle from the island, and in 1807, the English again stole from Smith's Island, taking beef and sheep. A force of forty to fifty men was sent to guard the animals at that time.

In 1819, the President of the United States (Monroe) accepted an offer from the owner of Smith's Island, who was later to become the father-in-law of Robert E. Lee, to house a shipload of slaves who had been illegally brought into the United States for sale. George Washington Parke Custis, an opponent of slavery, was a member of the Colonization Society, which was to return the slaves to Africa.⁶

The Cape Charles Lighthouse, of which Lee spoke, first made its appearance on Smith's Island in 1828. There is a legend that the body of Theodosia Burr, daughter of Aaron Burr, who was then Vice President, was washed up there in 1813. It was believed that she had been captured by buccaneers who had made her walk the plank. The lighthouse was supposed to have been built near her grave on land donated by George Washington Parke Custis. The sea now covers the site of the original lighthouse, which was replaced by 1864. The last Cape Charles Lighthouse was condemned in 1917. The first Coast Guard Station to be built on Smith's Island was erected in 1874; another was built in 1916. Both stations had to be moved back from the encroaching surf in 1927. Neither station nor lighthouse exists today. During the Civil War, some Confederate soldiers, who pretended to be fishermen, landed on the island and dismantled the lighthouse, removing sperm oil and lantern parts. They demanded food from the lighthouse keeper's wife and paid her with a \$5.00 Confederate note.⁷

Illegal hunting on Smith's Island is documented as early as 1675 when John Custis put up a sign at the Northampton Courthouse threatening to sue county residents who were disturbing his cattle by shooting on the island. Lee's letter indicates that the hunting of birds by the island's residents was acceptable to his father-in-law. Later in the nineteenth century, members of the island's Life Station were active market hunters, using the decoy and shooting birds with the punt gun and the breechloader. In 1887 the repeating shotgun was invented, and the automatic shotgun came into use in the early twentieth century. Game birds which were hunted included ducks and geese as well as numerous shore birds. By the end of the nineteenth century birds had become scarce and, in 1894, Virginia passed legislation which limited the killing of waterfowl but which did not eliminate it entirely. The location of the island made enforcement difficult, as it had throughout its history. Sportsmen joined together to encourage the regulating of hunting in order that the game fowl might be preserved for future sport. In 1911, the Bungalow Club, a private twenty-three room hunt club, was built on the island. The clubhouse has now been removed from the island.

Today's preservationists would no doubt frown on Lee's proposal to remove timber from the island, as tree removal would add to erosion of the sandy soil. Today the dune ridges are heavily wooded despite man's influence, which included a major fire earlier in this century.

The egging which Robert E. Lee noted has been a practice on Smith's Island since its earliest history. Eggs were collected and eaten in the spring of the year. In the late nineteenth century it was popular for shore residents to go to the island and collect eggs. Under current wild life protection laws, shore birds and their breeding grounds are protected and their numbers are increasing.

Fishing has always been a way of life for the residents of the Eastern Shore and for its visitors. The Nature Conservancy, in preserving Smith's Island along with the other barrier islands as part of its Virginia Coast Preserve, is providing a vital setting for the continuance of an adequate supply of seafood which is nurtured in its marshes. The forces of nature will continue to alter the geography of the island, but man's destruction has been halted. Today, Smith's Island is again uninhabited by man, and wildlife grows undisturbed, as it did when John Smith was there in 1608.

¹Frances Landford Taylor, *Highlights in the Early History of the Eastern Shore of Virginia*, 1939, p.5-6.

²*Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1903), p. 67.

³Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, Vol. 2, Richmond, Virginia State Library, 1972, p.364.

⁴Modern history and current descriptions of Smith's Island were found in *The Virginia Coast Reserve Study*. Nature Conservancy, 1976.

⁵Lloyd Haynes Williams, *Pirates of Colonial Virginia* Richmond, 1937, p. 50-51.

⁶*Washington Gazette*, April 23, 1819, p. 2.

⁷*Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 12, 1863.