

PANORAMA

The Land's History before the Meadows at Dahlgren

Mostly forgotten now, but well known to those of a former generation, were a number of fine mansions in the lower Chotank that have mostly vanished – prey to the ravages of fire, war, and the devastating hand of time. The freeing of slaves in the 1860s left many of these estate owners with little besides their homes and many untilled, rapidly overgrown, and suddenly unproductive acres of land. While some estate owners found various ways and means to retrieve their injured fortunes, others never recovered and over time, some fine mansion eventually vanished.

This line of estates stood between the Chotank Creek and the Old County Road that traversed King George County to the northeast towards Mathias Point. The road dates to the Colonial times and was part of a branch road which left the “King’s Highway” at Fredericksburg and followed a course northeastward towards Hooe’s Ferry¹ on the Potomac; thence to Maryland, Annapolis and north.²

One of the estates along this line was “**Panorama.**” The mansion occupied the high ridge overlooking the Potomac Valley and perhaps was rightly named. It was situated on the same range of hills as the “**Salisbury,**” **Hilton,**” and “**Litchfield**” estates and was named for its beautiful landscape. The Greek revival styled mansion was two-story and set in a wide lawn adorned by beautiful trees. The home included a full basement. A newspaper clipping from the summer of 1873 reported, “*That fine estate Panorama containing 1700 acres more or less 600 open land, the rest in wood and timber. The Dwelling house, built of brick, is large and substantial, though somewhat out of repair, and is situated on the first range of hills, about one mile from the Potomac, commanding a most extensive and beautiful view. About 400 acres are low grounds and meadow land: the residue rolling, well adapted to the growth of corn, wheat, tobacco and fruits.*”

The **Panorama** estate was formally part of “**Bedford**”³ and originally was called “**Green Hill.**” Richard Stuart of “**Cedar Grove**” purchased the property from Henry Fitzhugh and his son Dr. Francis C. Fitzhugh, for his only daughter Margaret Robinson Stuart, who married Thomas Lunsford Lomax. The later, in the mid 1830s, built the mansion where they raised three sons and two daughters. In the early 1850s, the Lomax family scattered upon the early death of Thomas Lunsford Lomax. The estate then reverted to Margaret Robinson (Stuart) Lomax’s brother, Doctor Richard Henry Stuart of “**Cleydael.**” The Stuart family enjoyed the Panorama mansion primarily as a summer home as they feared malaria on the Chotank Creek and Potomac River which bordered their **Cedar Grove** estate.

In 1889 Dr. Richard Henry Stuart willed Panorama to his daughter, Margaret Stuart, who was married to Major Robert Waterman Hunter, CSA. Around 1910, the home was deserted as a dwelling. Sometime later, the 1700 acre Panorama property was purchased by Harry T. Berry who farmed and raised livestock on the property. In doing so, Harry Berry used the deserted mansion for grain storage. The Panorama mansion stood unoccupied through at least 1958; sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s, it caught fire and was ruined.

¹ Hooe’s Ferry crossed the Potomac at the present site of Gov. Harry Nice Bridge. The ferry perpetuated the name of Rice Hooe, who came to Virginia in 1621 and whose descendants settled on the river south of Mathias Point in 1715. There they built “Barnsfield,” which remained a Hooe home until it was burned during the Civil War by Federal order, as it was believed that Charles County blockade runners were guided by signals given by lights from the mansion’s windows.

² Sections of this ancient County Road are now part of Rt 206/218. Other portions – that run along and adjacent to Meadows at Dahlgren property line are now called “Chotank” and “Hilton” Loop. And other sections of this ancient colonial highway, while still visible and traversable by foot, are tucked away in the woods and mark the southern border of the Meadows subdivision.

³ William Fitzhugh came to Virginia from England in 1670, where he settled on the Potomac River in King George County (then part of Stafford County), naming his estate “Bedford” for his home town in England. Bedford twice rebuilt, was finally destroyed by fire during the Civil War.

In 1997, Bluegreen Properties of Virginia Inc. (f/k/a Virginia Land and Forest Corporation) purchased the property. Shortly thereafter Bluegreen developed the Meadows at Dahlgren subdivision.

THE RESIDENTS OF PANORAMA

Margaret Robinson (Stuart) Lomax, the first mistress of Panorama, was a half-sister of Anne McCarty, who became the wife of Major Henry Lee of **Stratford**. Her daughter, Roberta Lomax, married her cousin, Charles Stuart, son of Charles Stuart (brother of Richard Stuart and also Dr. David Stuart), and became the mother of Doctor R.H. Stuart of **Stratford**.

Doctor Richard Henry Stuart, the owner of Panorama until his death in 1889, was one of most prominent doctors and wealthiest men in the county. In late April 1865, he was approached at his Cleydael home by John Wilkes Booth and David Herold who attempted to secure accommodations. Aware of President Lincoln's assassination, Dr. Stuart declined them accommodations and also refused to treat Booth's leg. After some arguing, Dr. Stuart allowed the fugitives to quickly dine, and then directed them to the nearby cabin of William Lucas. The following day, Booth and Herod traveled to Port Conway where they crossed the Rappahannock River at Port Royal. Shortly thereafter, Booth was killed by Union soldiers in the Garrett's tobacco barn just south of Port Royal.

Major R. W. Hunter, CSA, the last master of Panorama, was promoted for gallantry at Gettysburg, and fought in nearly every battle in Virginia during the Civil War. After the war, he was appointed Secretary of Virginia's Military Records. He died in 1916.

WHAT REMAINS OF PANORAMA

The Panorama estate stood on or about what is now Lot 110 within the Meadows at Dahlgren subdivision (upon the high ground northeast of the intersection of Granview and Panorama). All that remains of the original estate is a 1/3 mile portion of the road that leads north from the Old County Road, crosses over an ancient earthen causeway at Blackcastle Creek, and then up to the ridge to where the estate once proudly stood. Written records and maps of the area from as early as the 1860s reveal the location of Panorama's estate road as "1.5 miles north east of state route #206 from its junction with state route #218, then 1 mile north on a private road." Though what remains of the original road to the Panorama estate is tucked within the woods, the once graveled roadbed and its crossing over Blackcastle Creek remain visible. Though hidden for years, this historic Meadows at Dahlgren common property was recently reclaimed by the Association. This road, with an origin dating back to at least the early 1830s, is now being restored by members of the Association for use as pedestrian path to connect not only the two sections of subdivision, but also to link today's residents to the land's historic and often overlooked past.

A PANORAMA ESTATE IN MONTROSS?

In 1929, Charles E. Stuart sold **Stratford Hall** to the newly incorporated Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation, and in 1932 built a new home overlooking Chandlers Mill Pond in Montross. The Stuart family's long heritage of revering Colonial architecture and having been kin to those at **Cedar Grove**, **Eagles Nest**, and **Panorama** of King George County was captured in the design of this new home. The Stuart's new Montross home was given the name "**Panorama**" for the former Stuart home in King George County. Like the former estate, this new three-story brick antebellum-style home was also constructed with brick and showcased the Colonial Revival architecture. Montross' **Panorama** estate stands to this day.

Primary Panorama References:

(a) "*The Authentic Guidebook of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia*" 1934, by H. Ragland Eubank

- (b) Four written references obtained from the King George Historical Society, authors unknown
- (c) "Days in an Old Town," by Mrs. Betty Carter Smoot, Alexandria Virginia, 1934
- (d) "The Virginia Dynasties" by Clifford Dowdey, 1977
- (e) Two maps of the King George County area circa the 1800s showing the locations of plantations, one of which was scribed by Captain Fitzhugh and Lieutenant D.E. Henderson, Corps of Engineers, CSA 1863
- (f) Two photographs of Panorama estate ruins (north & south sides) circa, late 1950s/early 1960s.

CHOTANK

The Lands Colonial History

In 1732, the year of George Washington's birth, followed by 125 years the founding of the first successful English colony at Jamestown. Williamsburg had been Virginia colony's capital for 33 years, and William & Mary College was in its 40th year. There were only two towns in Virginia of any size—Williamsburg, and Norfolk, and Virginia has no newspapers in print. The colony's population was estimated at 114,000 – 76,000 Europeans; 38,000 African slaves.⁴

In 1743, when George Washington was 11 years old, his father Augustine Washington died from a stomach disorder. After his father's death, the family scattered and the young George Washington resided variously to include: with his mother at Ferry Farm near Fredericksburg; at his birth home on Popes Creek in Westmoreland County with his elder half-brother Augustine and younger brother Jack; at Mount Vernon with his elder half-brother Lawrence; and with his brother Samuel and other Washington relatives including his close cousin Lawrence in the lower Chotank.

Within this period, the name "Chotank" (once called "Choptank") belonged to a creek, a friendly neighborhood of Tobacco Plantations – including a Washington Plantation – in Stafford (now King George) County. As a young teenager, George Washington spent a great deal of time amongst the families living in the Chotank Area, including memorable visits to his Washington kinfolk. Some of these visits are recorded in his diary as early as 1747, when he was 15 years old.

Washington continued these visits into early adult hood – and even more so starting in 1755 when his younger brother Samuel moved to a farm on the lower Chotank. Washington's diary of April 20th, 1760 (when he was 28 years old) reads: "*Set out and crossed at Cedar Point [Maryland's end of Hooe's Ferry]⁵ Din'd and lodg' at my brothers⁶.... Went to Saint Pauls Church,⁷ and dined at my brother Sam's.*" Ten days later Washington's diary from April 30th, 1760 reads: "*Went fishing, and dined under Mr. Lawrence Washington's shore.*"⁸ His diary from September 1, 1768 (when he was 36 years old) reads: "*Set out from Nomini [in Westmoreland] on my return to Chotank. Came up as high as Hooe's Ferry and walked to my brother Sam's.*" And Washington's diary from September 3, 1768 reads: "*Went to church [St. Paul's], dined at Colo Harrison's [Eagles Nest] and returned to my Brother's in the afternoon.* In a March 1787 letter from Buckner Stith, a Chotank childhood friend of Washington, the author recalls a time in their youth when George, his cousin Lawrence, and Buckner Stith traveled from the lower Chotank to

⁴ For comparison, Virginia's 2015 population was estimated at 8.3 million.

⁵ Cedar Point is located on the Maryland side of the Potomac nearby the PEPCO power plant, adjacent to the north side of the Nice Bridge.

⁶ Samuel Washington, George Washington's younger brother by two years, was willed by his father Augustine Washington a six-hundred-acre farm in the Chotank Creek region, a few miles west of the present Dahlgren Naval Base. In 1755, before Samuel was 21, he had married and set up his home at the Chotank farm. His bride was Jane Champe, daughter of a prosperous neighboring merchant and farmer, Col. John Champe. Samuel lived at his Chotank farm until 1770 when he moved west to what is now Berkeley County. He sold his Chotank farm to his cousin Lawrence.

⁷ Samuel Washington served as vestryman for St Paul's Church. In July 1766, St. Paul's Parish advertised for bids for the construction of the new brick church which survives today. Samuel Washington and William Fitzhugh were the two wardens of the vestry who signed the advertisement.

⁸ It is certainly conceivable that during his several visits to lower Chotank, George Washington fished in the vicinity of what is now the Meadows at Dahlgren Dock Area.

Fredericksburg and back to the Chotank. He wrote: *"I will this minute write to the General. I will tell him, that I am the same Man who marched with him and old Laurence from Chotanck to Fredericksburg, how Laurence and him laughed at me for holding the wine glass in the full hand, but as I was five Years older than either of them, I thought I might hold the wine glass as I pleased; that we lost a Horse or two in the Trip, and were obliged to walk honestly in turn clear to Chotank again; and moreover I will tell him, that although Laurence and I might notice him on the Road when in turn to walk, a sound looking, modest, large boned young Man, still I would not defend the matter for a round sum, that were Laurence and I put to the oath, that we thought at the same time, we had each of us an equal chance at least with him, for a Generalship."* This letter from Buckner Stith (1722–1791), originally of the Chotank area, is unique in that it is the only known letter from a companion of George Washington's childhood recalling the days of their youth.

Later in life, Washington evidently still very much recalled his youthful excursions to the Chotank with great fondness, for when making his last will and testament on July 9, 1799, just five months before his death in December of that same year. Within his will, the following is scribed: *"To the acquaintances and friends of my Juvenile years, Lawrence Washington & Robert Washington of Chotank, I give my other two gold headed Canes, having my Arms engraved on them; and to each (as they will be useful where they live) I leave one of the Spy-glasses which constituted part of my equipage during the late War."*

Primary Chotank References:

- (a) *George Washington, a Biographical Companion* by Frank E Gizzard
- (b) *George Washington, A Life* by Ron Chernow
- (c) *George Washington's Last Will and Testament, of July 9th 1799.*
- (d) *National Archives, Founders Online*

MAP OF THE MEADOWS AT DAHLGREN AREA - circa mid 1800s

