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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Eastern Neck

National Wildlife Refuge

History of Eastern Neck Island

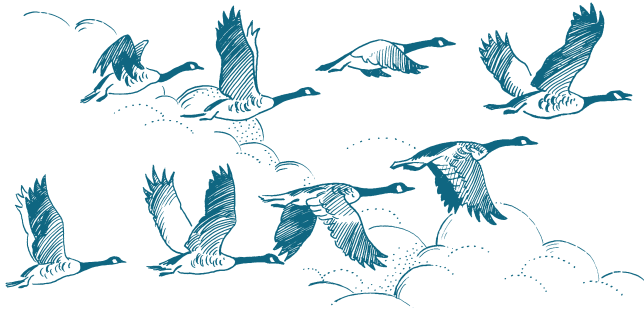


The History of Eastern Neck Island



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Eastern Neck Island is located at the mouth of the Chester River on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay in Kent County, Maryland. Its abundant natural resources have been the basis of a long and varied history. Today, the 2,285-acre island is a national wildlife refuge that is managed to provide habitat for many species of migratory birds. Farming, fishing and hunting still occur on the refuge, although they are now tailored to suit the needs of wildlife.



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The Island in Prehistoric Times



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During the time of the last great ice sheet ten thousand years ago, Eastern Neck Island was not an island at all. Native Americans may have paused here while hunting to look out over a wide forested valley to the west. There, the Susquehanna River was carving through fine-grained deposits placed by meltwaters and wind during earlier glacial cycles on its long way to the sea. The Atlantic Ocean's shore at that time was 200 miles east of its present location.

As the last glacier melted, sea levels slowly rose. Ocean waters swallowed up the Atlantic coastal plain and drowned the river valley. About 4,000 years ago the ancient hunters would not have recognized the area where their descendants, the Woodland Period Indians, fished and gathered shellfish from the brackish waters of the Chesapeake Bay. After the Woodland people began to settle and cultivate crops around 1300 A.D., they still used the island. They left behind huge mounds of discarded oyster shells, as well as ceramic pots, stone tools and the tips of spears and arrows as evidence of their presence.

When Captain John Smith explored this area in 1608, he made contact with the Ozinie Indians, who were related to the Algonquin-speaking Nanticoques. This tribe was noted for their exceptional beadwork made from shells. During the 1600's, English settlers pressed local Native Americans onto reservations, or forced them to disperse with the Powhatans. Some Native Americans abandoned their traditional lifestyle and remained among the English.

European Settlement

In 1631 William Claiborne began the first permanent settlement on the Eastern Shore, a fur trading post on Kent Island. Colonel Joseph Wickes, another early settler on Kent Island, could look east across the Chester River from his plantation on Love Point to the lands that came to be called Eastern Neck, where he decided to acquire land as well.

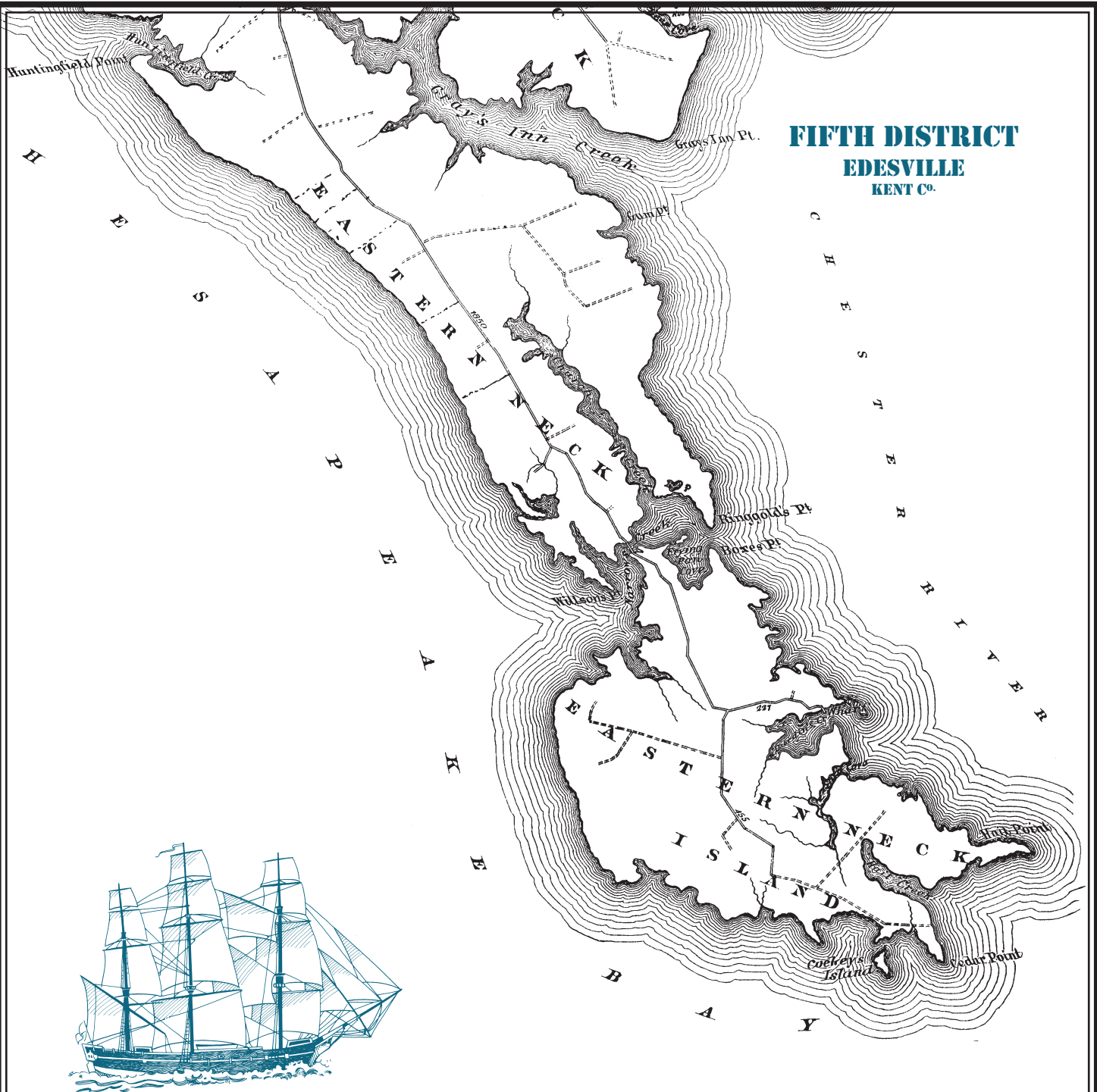
From 1658 to 1680, Wickes and his partner, Thomas Hynson, were granted tracts until they owned all of Eastern Neck Island. Joseph Wickes built a home, “Wickliffe,” one of the finest mansions of the time. He made his living by raising tobacco and other crops, and exporting them on ships built at the family’s shipyard. For a time, the island may have been the County seat, for Wickes was Chief Justice of Kent County. “Hail Point,” the southeastern tip of the island, was named because it was a place where all ships coming and going on the Chester River could be seen and hailed to enforce shipping regulations. In 1675 the settlement of “New Yarmouth” was established just north of Eastern Neck Island at Gum Point. This town became the county seat until 1696, when the county government moved to the fast-growing port of Chestertown.

The American Revolution

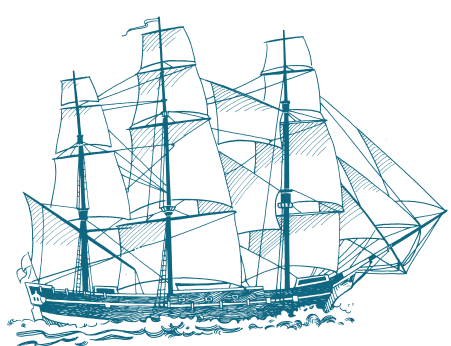
Joseph Wickes’ most famous descendant was his great-grandson, Captain Lambert Wickes, the first Navy officer named by Congress in 1776 to carry the American flag in European waters. During the Revolutionary War he terrorized British shipping, capturing at least twenty-eight “prizes.” He also carried Benjamin Franklin to France aboard his flagship, the *Reprisal*, when Franklin was trying to gain French support for the American Revolution.

Lambert Wickes was lost at sea when his ship sank in a severe storm off Newfoundland on a return trip from France in 1777. A memorial to Captain Wickes can be found on Eastern Neck Island, near the Wickliffe historical site.





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Quieter Times

Hynson's heirs eventually sold all their Eastern Neck Island lands to Wickes' heirs, and the island was owned by the Wickes family until 1902. The period from 1800 to 1900 witnessed the division of the original parcels of land among the Wickes family and the diversification of farming activities. Small family farms and sharecroppers engaged in logging, dairying, raising sheep and horses, and growing peaches, pears, asparagus, and various other crops for subsistence and cash. A small fishing village, which included an oyster-shucking plant, was located at Bogles wharf. The Chester River Steamboat Company operated a wharf nearby that was regularly served by steamships from Baltimore and other ports.

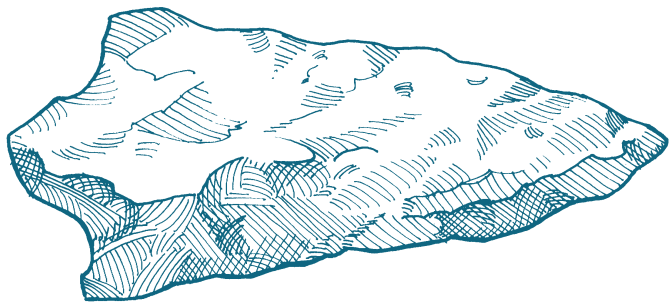
As society became increasingly mobile in the 1920's, wealthy individuals from surrounding cities who were attracted by the area's notable concentrations of waterfowl, bought portions of the island for hunting retreats. One of the hunting lodges, built in 1933, still stands. It was refurbished in 2000 and now houses the refuge office and visitor contact station.

In the 1950s a developer bought a large tract and subdivided it into 293 small lots for a housing development. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, responding to concerns over the development expressed by the local community, acquired the entire island between 1962 and 1967 to preserve its valuable wildlife habitat. The Cape Chester House, located by the Bayview Butterfly Trail, was the only house ever built in the "Cape Chester" subdivision. It now serves as housing for interns and visiting scientists.



Artifact Hunting

Artifact hunting was once a popular activity at Eastern Neck. This practice is no longer allowed, as conserving historical and natural resources is an important part of refuge management. When artifacts are removed from their original location, historical information and knowledge are lost forever. All of the sites and artifacts on the refuge are now protected by Federal and State laws. If you discover any artifacts on the refuge please leave the object in place and report its location to refuge staff or volunteers.



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The National Wildlife Refuge System

Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge is one of more than 560 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat for the continuing benefit of the American people. It represents the most comprehensive wildlife management program in the world. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The character of the refuges is as diverse as the nation itself.

