



## George Washington and the Barrier Island Sheep



Hog Island sheep at Mount Vernon. (NPS Photo)

*“When we come to compare the Smith Island wool, with the native wool of the country at large we are lost in astonishment at this wonderful interposition of Providence on our behalf, which serves to shew what a benefit we enjoy, and how little we have estimated the gift.”*

~ George Washington Parke Custis, 1808

Beginning in the mid-1600s, Eastern Shore landowners utilized barrier islands for rearing livestock. George Washington Parke Custis, step-grandson of the first president of the United States, raised sheep on Smith Island off the coast of Virginia’s Eastern Shore. The island provided abundant food, shelter and fresh water making it an excellent environment for raising sheep.

Custis introduced ewes from the island to the flocks at his family home near what is now Washington D. C. This experience convinced him that these sheep if moved to similar locations, would adapt and produce the same high quality wool for others. His hope was to continue raising sheep on the island as well as making the sheep available to landowners in other regions of the country.

### Barrier Islands Used as Pasture

Not long after the settlement of Jamestown in 1603, explorers ventured across the Chesapeake Bay to assess the available resources of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Finding these areas acceptable, settlers began to arrive in 1619 to clear the land for settlements and farming.

At first, the landowners grew grain crops in addition to raising livestock. Problems arose when escalating numbers of free roaming animals trampled the grain fields. In 1662, the Eastern Shore courts ruled that landowners would have to build fences; those farmers failing to comply would be fined. Instead of following the law many landowners sought access to the barrier islands. In addition to the “natural fencing” the surrounding waters supplied, these islands, as noted by Custis, provided the natural resources livestock needed.

### Acquiring Assateague Island

By order of the British Parliament all Virginia lands were the property of the King of England unless claimed through a “patent” by an individual. Once the patent was acquired from the Crown, the individual could hold the claim by building a 12 x 12 house, fencing an acre of land, and living on the land – either in person or through an agent – for one year.

The first to acquire such a patent on Assateague was Captain Daniel Jenifer. In April, 1687 he was granted a patent to all of the land on Assateague from the Maryland state line to the southern tip of the island. Jenifer placed four employees on the island to live and watch over his livestock, fulfilling the requirements of the patent. Two years after his purchase, Jenifer sold the land to Maximilian Core for 12,000 pounds of tobacco.

For the next century, Assateague was broken into smaller parcels through land sales and inheritance. By the time of the American Revolution, an estimated 25 people were residents of the island.

### Assateague Village, Virginia

In 1794 four men bought a 163 acre parcel of land that would later become Assateague Village. Over the next several decades families began to make their homes in the village. A lighthouse was built in 1833 and that along with an increased interest in harvesting seafood drew people to Assateague. The village spread out between the lighthouse and the channel shoreline facing Chincoteague. At one

point the village included a store, church, and school and was home to almost 200 people. In the mid-1920's a number of factors influenced villagers to leave the island. Villagers put their houses on barges and moved them to Chincoteague so that very little evidence of the village remains.

Due to the isolation of the island, families were completely dependent on natural resources of the island for food, shelter and a portion of their clothing. Seafood, waterfowl, and summer gardens provided their food. Wood from the forest provided lumber for their homes as well as fuel for heat and cooking fires. The wool of the wandering sheep was made into textiles needed by the villagers.

From the earliest days of using the island as a corral it was clear that an annual roundup was necessary to determine ownership of the livestock. During these roundups the ears of livestock were notched to show ownership; the sheep were sheared. After the men sheared the sheep, the women would remove debris from the wool and wash it. When it was dry, the women would spin the wool on their spinning wheels making the yarn they needed to knit socks, gloves, and sweaters to keep their families warm.



Sheep penning, circa 1914. (Photo courtesy Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture)

These early roundups of livestock began out of necessity but later became occasions for celebration. The exact year "Sheep Penning" started is unknown, but by the mid-1880s people were coming to Assateague for this annual event to enjoy good food and the chance to buy wool. The penning of sheep was discontinued when villagers and sheep moved off the island. However, according to photos in the National Park Service archives, random sheep wandered wild on Assateague into the 1950's. No sheep remain on the island today.

## Hog Island Sheep

Hog Island, south of Assateague, was also used as pasture for sheep beginning in the 1600's. Following a hurricane in 1933 families began to move off the island leaving behind many of the sheep. When the Nature Conservancy bought the island in the 1970's they removed the sheep in order to return the island to a natural state. Half of the sheep went to a local resident and the other half went to what is now Virginia Tech.

Several years later, with their research complete, scientists at Virginia Tech determined that the Hog Island sheep represented a valuable historic and genetic resource and sought ways to preserve them. The Hog Island Sheep are now designated as an endangered heritage animal by The Livestock Conservancy.

In 1979, out of that effort to preserve the breed, nine Hog Island ewes and two rams were delivered to George Washington's Birthplace National Monument in Virginia. Since then, offspring of the original flock have been shared with private owners and other historical sites.

While the hope of George Washington Parke Custis for the sheep to remain on the islands has not been realized, his wish that they would be greatly valued has certainly been achieved. Today, visitors to George Washington's Birthplace as well as Mount Vernon, Monticello, and other smaller historical sites can see and touch this living remnant of another time.

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