

HOLLAND ISLAND, EROSION AND EFFIE LEE

**By
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When Captain John Smith, the English explorer, entered the Chesapeake Bay in 1608, he was entering the largest marine estuary, in what would become the United States. Sailing northward along the Bay's east side, he found a chain of islands stretching from Watts Island in the south to Kent Island in the north. He named them the "Russell Islands," reportedly after a Doctor Russell on board his ship. He noted that fish were so plentiful that they could be scooped up with a bucket. Perhaps this was the beginning of the great fish stories. He found that the natives also made great use of many shellfish and wildlife found on and around these many islands. Feeling that the area would be advantageous for settlement, he encouraged people to come and take advantage of nature's bounty. Not too long after...these islands were to be settled by those looking for a better life. From the Cornwall area of England came farmers and seafarers, bringing with them a way of life and accents that can still be found in places such as Smith and Tangier Islands.

It appears that the first settlers of Holland Island arrived in the last decade of the sixteen hundreds. The Island's west side was an inviting area. Extending for over a mile and a half, it had high sandy ridges that were almost thirty feet above sea level in spots. With a nice sized cove on its east side, anchorage was available for their boats. The ridge produced yellow pine, hackberry elm, locust and cedar, while the hard marsh area could be used for grazing. The earliest settlers farmed the land and took advantage of the shallow water surrounding the island to catch fish, crabs and oysters. Being natural hunters they found the abundance of ducks and geese a ready food source. When the railroads were extended from east coast cities to the rural waterfront towns just after the Civil War, a ready market developed for this abundance of wildlife, finfish and shellfish. The skillful watermen of the islanders prospered as they built nice homes, raised large families, and enjoyed their island life.

After the Civil War, Holland Island experienced several decades of rapid growth. Almost all of the islands near Holland were also settled. Few people know that there was an island just northwest of Holland that, as shown in Liber HD, Folio 297 of the Land Records of Dorchester County, "Contains 80 acres, and more of sand." This was St. Johns Island, also known as Long Island and was only a few hundred yards from the shoreline of Holland Island. John and William Price were among the earliest settlers of this area. Soon the Parks, and Todd families, along with scores from as far away as Philadelphia and Virginia's Eastern Shore began to arrive at the island. A church and school were soon built as the population surged. In 1868 the school opened with 12 students and R. B. Parsons became the teacher. By 1901 school enrollment grew to 68 and there were now two teachers, Emma Willis and Blanche McNamara. In 1866 a new church was erected on the east ridge and the settlers also constructed a Red Men's Hall, (A Fraternal organization), for social gatherings. There were several stores and a large fleet of work boats. For instance, there were 55 skipjacks, along with several larger types of sailing vessels, such as pungies and schooners.

The late eighteen hundreds were happy years for the Islanders. They made a comfortable living from the waters surrounding the Island. In the summer they played baseball against teams from the surrounding islands and mainland. When the ponds froze over they skated. They had ice-cream socials. They had friendly games on Saturday night at the Red Men's Hall. The children played "Spin the Bottle" and the young adults especially liked the boxed socials. Unmarried ladies would bring a cardboard box containing a charitable gift. If a young man guessed the contents in a young ladies box he earned the right to walk her home. Outdoors, the children played tag, hide-go-seek and rolled hoops along the white oyster shell roads. On Sunday morning, they came from all directions to join in worship as Reverend George Penny Jones led in joyous songs of faith and hope. Doctor John Ruby cared for the sick and administered aid for the occasional stubbed toe or splintered finger. The Ladies Aid often gathered to find ways to help the needy or to meet at the home of Margaret Ann Parks for a quilting party. It is little wonder that Holland Island was called the "Paradise of the Chesapeake."

After the turn of the century the gradual loss of the Island's shorelines, due to erosion, seemed to accelerate following several years of high rainfall and tides, with the greatest loss on the Island's west side. Concern was so great that the residents decided to purchase stone from quarries near the mouth of the Susquehanna River. Five barge loads were brought to the Island and the arduous task of placing the stone, by hand along one-and-three quarter miles of shoreline tested their will and stamina. When it was finally done it appeared that they had halted the erosion. A dynamic unknown to them at the time, was at work. We now know that stone must be placed on a "scour pad," which is a heavy meshed fabric that keeps the movement and weight of the rocks from gradually sinking into the bottom. Much as a puddle of water on a dirt road is deepened with every tire that rides over it, so a rock placed in the water is slightly jostled by wave action and scours the bottom under it. Over time, the rock will completely sink into the ground. It is safe to assume that if present technology was available in 1900, Holland Island's 60 homes and its population of over three hundred might still exist.

By 1910 the rocks had sunk enough to render them ineffective and the erosion began anew. One can only imagine the disappointment and the feeling of helplessness as the relentless waves of the Chesapeake wore away the Island's west ridge. Some families moved their homes back from the shoreline only to find that in a few years the water was again a short distance from their homes. Mrs. William Wiley Parks remembered that when she first moved to the island there was no talk of erosion, but by 1910 she remembered, "Walking along the sandy ridge and seeing huge cracks in the surface near the shore." "Sometimes," she said, "While laying in bed at night you could hear an awful sound, like the low rumble of thunder, of parts of the ridge sliding down the embankment into the water." The inhabitants of the West Ridge saw their way of life changing before their eyes. The sadness became more acute as people began to think the unthinkable. "We must leave the island that we love." By 1915, several homes were dismantled and moved to the mainland, an awesome reality, was being faced by a sorrowing community, that their way of life was forever changing.

Picture a boat ride along the west side of a lovely island: At sunset the sun casts its golden glow upon the Chesapeake. By evening, the 30 homes facing the Bay begin to light up and the ridge is peaceful, beautiful, and alive, with the sound of barking dogs, and the children playing games echoing in the fading light. Could anything so good, beautiful and right, ever have an ending? Yet, there came a time when the relentless forces of nature did their work upon the land. No longer would the sounds of children playing along the oyster shell roads be heard. No longer would the lamps shine from lighted windows. The land was surrendered to the sea, to the osprey and the gull. Birds flew in and out of the broken windows of the few remaining empty houses. The wind blew in mournful silence and a hush fell upon the land, because the laughter had died.

By 1920, all permanent residents of Holland Island had moved to the mainland, leaving the land of their forefathers. They settled in various places in the mid-Bay area. Most moved to Cambridge or Crisfield. Entering Crisfield where Maryland Avenue begins there are several homes that once sat on the west ridge overlooking the Chesapeake Bay. Travel down Willis Street in Cambridge and you will find four homes side by side that were once part of the island community. Most homes were disassembled piece-by-piece and re-assembled on higher foundations and a safe distance from the shoreline. A few homes were left on the island and their owners came back for periods in summer. They came back for many reasons. A few even thought the Island would gain back the land that it lost. Some found it hard to forget the place where they grew up. Many came back because they had to leave the remains of their departed loved ones. They had tenderly laid them in the soil of their precious Island, with their headstones pointed to the setting sun. On those headstones were engraved their words of hope and faith in an eternal God who would never leave or forsake them. They spoke of lives well lived and lives too soon ended. They spoke of both tragedy and heartache, yet always underlined by their faith in God.

There are two graveyards left on the island. The main one is in a fairly open area and is close to the site where the Methodist church once stood. The second is a smaller and more private one established by Jenkins Cannon (1814-1898). In this small graveyard there are two graves that tell a moving and poignant story that is important to me, and what I am doing to save this Island. John W. Wilson married 18 year-old Annie E. McNamara on March 22, 1879. The next year their daughter, whom they named Effie Lee, was born. What a proud day January 16, 1880 must have been when John and Annie stood in front of the church while the Reverend John W. Poole baptized little Effie in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Their life seemed so happy and fulfilling. However, life has its unexpected twists and turns. Sadly, Annie became ill and died on February 16, 1885. She was 25 years old, and John was left to raise his 5 year-old

daughter. In time John met, and in July of 1886 married Mary A. Parks. He now had a mother for Effie and looked forward to a happy life. Tragically, his life was again sadly interrupted when his loving daughter died on October 12, 1893. Effie was laid to rest beside her mother in a little grove of trees only a few yards from where she had lived.

The headstones of Annie and Effie speak of beauty, hope, and a moving plea. Annie's epitaph reads as follows: "Sown in weakness here below

One day raised in power
That which is sown an earthly Seed
Is raised a heavenly flower."

When I found this little graveyard, Annie's grave was among the first that I noticed. I then saw beside it another headstone. It has a dove at the top, with an olive branch in its beak. The inscription states: "In memory of Effie L. Wilson, daughter of John W. and Annie E. Wilson. Born January 16, 1880 Died October 12, 1893." Her epitaph reads:

"Forget me not, is all I ask
I could not ask for more,
Than to be cherished by my friends
So loving and so dear.
Dearest Effie, thou hast left us,
And our loss we deeply feel.
But tis God that has bereft us
He will all our sorrows heal."

To say that I was moved by Effie's pleas is an understatement. I stood up, and through my tears I made a vow to Effie, and before God, that I would do all that is within my power to see that both she, and her island would never be forgotten! These precious people have lain silently in their grave for over a century. Their island is being gradually eaten away by the forces of nature. It is now time to tell the waters: "This far shall you come and no farther. Here will your proud waves be stayed." My dedication to this task is a complete one, and in my heart I know it is the right thing to do. When I am discouraged, or fatigued, and when it seems that the way ahead seems so difficult, I think of Effie Lee, and the vow I made at her grave. When it seems that words of encouragement are so rare, and another hope has been dashed, I hear a tiny voice spanning the years, and speaking lovingly to my heart. . . "Forget me not, is all I ask. I could not ask for more." It is then that my back becomes straighter, my chin a little higher, my steps a little longer, and my arms a little stronger. No, Effie! I will not forget, and the God that you and your mother trusted, the God that I serve, will stand beside me, and others will join in the battle, and together we will save that sacred ground where you now sleep.

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