

MUSEUM

THE ESTHER THOMAS ATKINSON
OF HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE

MAY 2011

A Venable Ghost Story

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Professor Emeritus of Mathematics & Computer Science, H-SC

On Friday morning, November 10, 1775, young Samuel Woodson Venable was up at the crack of dawn. This was the day of the official opening of Hampden-Sydney College and he wanted to be the first student there. He was already the first student to register for classes and he wanted to keep the string going. He grabbed something to eat, dashed out to the barn, saddled his horse, and was off at a gallop. He took the shortest route from Slate Hill to the College, which took him right past the future site of Mercy Seat Church (1870).

Samuel Woodson Venable (1756-1821) was the first child born to Nathaniel Venable (1733-1804) and Elizabeth Michaux Woodson (1740-1791) of Slate Hill. He was also the first Venable born in the fledgling county of Prince Edward (chartered in 1754). Samuel was coming of college age when starting a college became a topic of conversation at Slate Hill, so it was fitting that he should be its first student.

In 1778, when Hampden-Sydney's founding president, Samuel Stanhope Smith, returned to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), Samuel went with him and graduated from there in 1780, first in his class. Although Samuel did not graduate from Hampden-Sydney, he is considered an alumnus (HSC 1777).

In spite of British raids into Virginia during the summer of 1781, Samuel, who had participated in the fighting, married Mary Scott Carrington (1758-1837), daughter of Judge Paul Carrington (1733-1818) and Margaret Read (1734-1766) of Mulberry Hill in Charlotte County. They were married on August 15—two months before Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, effectively ending the war. That both his father and father-in-law were Trustees of the College would bode well for Samuel's future.

Nathaniel Venable cut a chunk out of Slate Hill and built the newlyweds a home less than a mile from Prince Edward Court House (now Worsham). Samuel and Mary named their plantation Springfield. Their home survived the

Civil War but burned in 1877, five years after the courthouse moved to Farmville. Judge Asa Dupuy Dickinson (1816-1884; H-SC 1836) and his wife, Sallie C. Irvine (1825-1899), were living there when it burned.

Within a fortnight of his first wedding anniversary, Samuel was named to the Board of Trustees of the College. This appointment gave him the lasting distinction of being the first alumnus to become a Trustee. He would serve until his death on September 7, 1821.

At their meeting on September 26, 1821, the Trustees took the unprecedented action of passing the following resolution and having it published in the October 9th *Richmond Enquirer*: "Whereas it has pleased the Almighty Ruler of the Universe in His wise providence to take unto Himself our worthy and much lamented friend, Col. Samuel W. Venable, by which dispensation Hampden Sidney College has lost one of her firmest supporters and her board of Trustees one of its most efficient members, be it therefore Resolved unanimously that the remaining members will wear crepe around the left arm for the space of thirty days as a token of respect and veneration for our departed friend."

In compiling the book *Cemeteries of Prince Edward and Surrounding Counties*, I discovered that Col. Samuel Woodson Venable was not buried at College Church or any other cemetery in Prince Edward, including those at Springfield and Slate Hill. His wife, Mary, and his son, Samuel W. Venable, Jr. (1797-1855; HSC 1819), are both at College Church, but the Colonel was nowhere to be found.

After months of searching I found that in his old age Col. Venable used to visit the Spa at Sweet Springs in Monroe County, Virginia. He had learned about the healing springs there from his mentor, Samuel Stanhope Smith. A check revealed that the Spa at Sweet Springs had its own cemetery because guests occasionally died there.

Further research revealed that Sweet Springs is about 160 miles from Hampden-Sydney. In 1821 embalming was still forty years in the future, and the only way to move a corpse was in a sealed coffin. If the Colonel died at Sweet Springs, it is probable that he was buried there. A search of the Sweet Springs cemetery led to the discovery of the Colonel's grave and the grave of his favorite son-in-law, Lt. Isaac Read, Jr. (1777-1823).



The gravestone of Samuel Woodson Venable in Sweet Springs, Virginia, identical to that of his wife Mary at Hampden-Sydney, below center.



The Colonel's tomb at Sweet Springs and Mary's tomb at College Church are identical. Both are above-ground three-foot-by-six-foot brick enclosures with marble tops. From his death in 1821 to her death in 1837, his grave was unmarked, perhaps because she intended at some point to bring him home. A marker for his grave was provided in her will (written February 18, 1837). Without a marker, his grave would never

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

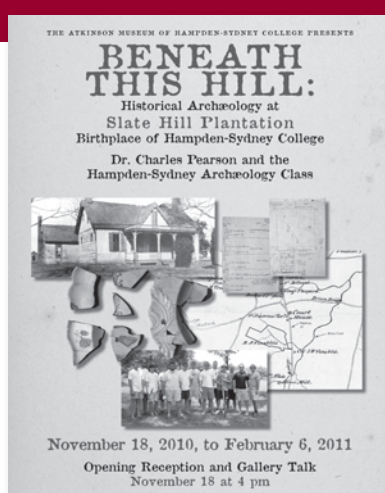
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have been found. The same craftsman who built Mary's tomb at College Church traveled to Sweet Springs and built Samuel's.

For twenty-five years all was quiet at both cemeteries. In 1862, when Monroe and forty-nine other western counties voted to secede from Virginia and form the state of West Virginia, all was still quiet. But in 1863, when West Virginia was officially accepted into the Union, rumblings began to be heard in the Sweet Springs cemetery. The Colonel was now resting in enemy territory, and he was not happy about it.

The Colonel's spirit had been watching over his descendants, so he was aware that two of his grandsons were staff officers in the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Major Andrew Reid Venable (HSC 1852) was on Gen. Stuart's staff, and Lt. Col. Charles Scott Venable (HSC 1842) was on Gen. Lee's. The Colonel's spirit must have been, in short, fit to be tied.

In an effort to calm things down, Mary Carrington Venable's spirit started coming out on nights with a full moon. She would sit on her tomb, look at the moon, and try to get through to the Colonel. In time, the Colonel got the message, calmed down, and started doing the same. Since 1863, there have been sightings, both here and in West Virginia, of one or the other of them—always during a full moon. The sightings here have always been described in the same way—a woman in a flowing white dress sitting on her tomb and looking at the moon.

Now that we know where he is, will the Colonel ever be brought back home? With all of his firsts, if anyone deserves to be buried at the College, it's the Colonel. According to a local funeral director, moving the Colonel here would cost about \$4,000, "just a matter of paperwork and money." There is a vacant space beside Mary that has been waiting for Samuel for a very long time. Twin brick tombs, side-by-side at College Church, would be unique in all of Prince Edward County and would be a must-see on anyone's cemetery tour.

Slate Hill Unearthed

Angie Way

A staple of May Term at Hampden-Sydney is the Beneath This Hill Historical Archaeology Class, in which Doctor Charles Pearson leads his Hampden-Sydney students to the place of the founding of Hampden-Sydney College, the site of Slate Hill Plantation. Students in the May Term class have been working to reconstruct the 18th- and 19th-century landscapes at Slate Hill Plantation. This work has included identifying the locations and types of buildings that once existed on the property. This effort is made difficult because no early maps of the plantation exist—the earliest dates to 1911. All the buildings at Slate Hill were removed many years ago, and all that is visible today are a few foundations. Students rely on primary documents such as original deeds, wills, probate inventories, and photographs, as well as oral histories and archaeology.

Slate Hill Plantation was a typical Virginia working tobacco plantation. A cluster of buildings around the Venable home served the economic and household needs of the plantation: a detached kitchen, blacksmith shop, ice house, pigeon house, privies, stables, carriage house, and barns and storage buildings.

At the site, Dr. Pearson and his students work on excavating, measuring, photographing, and piecing together what remains of everyday life on the plantation. According to Dr. Pearson,

"The May Term class in Historical Archaeology is structured to take students along the path typically followed in historical archaeology research. Students examine and discuss historical documents relating to Slate Hill Plantation; they learn the importance of oral histories, conducting interviews with individuals familiar with the plantation; they apply basic



The Slate Hill exhibit included narrative panels, artifacts, and a model of the house.

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archaeological field work in sessions at the plantation site. Since the first class in the summer of 2006, students have examined and collected a considerable amount of information on the history and archaeology of Slate Hill Plantation that has expanded our understanding of the lives of plantation residents.”

Dr. Pearson further writes, “Since 2007, May Term classes have been excavating the buried foundations of the detached kitchen building located a short distance away from the Slate Hill house. They have exposed portions of the kitchen foundation and recovered a variety of artifacts related to its use. The discovery of the kitchen was guided by early 19th-century Mutual Assurance Company fire insurance policies that include sketch maps showing the location of the kitchen, as well as its dimensions.

The Slate Hill kitchen was separated from the main residence, a common practice on southern plantations. Kitchens contained open fireplaces and hearths, so a separate kitchen building decreased the danger of fire in the main residence—as well as separating slaves, who did most of the cooking and kitchen work, from the residents in the main house, reinforcing the social mores of the times.

Early 19th-century insurance policies show that the Slate Hill kitchen was forty feet long and sixteen feet wide—exactly the dimensions of the brick foundation discovered in the archaeological field work. Larger than most Virginia plantation kitchens, the building may also have contained storerooms, quarters for household slaves, and possibly other facilities, such as a laundry.

No evidence of the kitchen hearth has been found at the ends of the building; a fire insurance policy issued to Nathaniel Venable in 1803 contains a sketch of the kitchen with the chimney near the middle of the building.

It is unknown when the Slate Hill kitchen was built. It may have been constructed as early as



China fragments from the Slate Hill trash deposit.

1756, the year Nathaniel Venable built his home. It was standing in 1803, when it was depicted on the earliest fire insurance policy for Slate Hill Plantation. The kitchen was still standing in the 1930s, according to Mrs. Annie Harkleroad, who remembered it from when she was a young girl.”

The students found surprising treasures at the site, especially in the circa-1790 trash pit. Dr. Pearson notes that “at the time it was common to simply throw food waste and broken items to the rear or sides of buildings.” What was trash to the residents over two hundred years ago is now part of the historical record of their lives at Slate Hill Plantation as the varied items recovered from the trash pit include pieces of plates, cups, saucers, chamber pots and other ceramic items, buttons, pipes and pipe stems, pieces of glass bottles, glass beads, thimbles, straight pins, and very large numbers of nails and animal bones—debris typically associated with kitchen activities, such as food preparation, cooking, and butchering.

Not only is Venable family life recorded in the

debris from excavation sites around the plantation grounds, but also that of their slaves. “Nathaniel Venable, Sr., writes Dr. Pearson, “was a slave owner, as were all of his descendants who owned Slate Hill through the Civil War. Slaves were used to work tobacco, the principal crop on the plantation.

In fact, slaves normally composed the largest population living at Slate Hill for the first 125 years of its existence... Tax records in the Prince Edward County Courthouse reveal that Nathaniel Venable owned forty-three slaves in 1783, making him the third largest slave holder in the county. “

Today, Hampden-Sydney College owns the land where Nathaniel Venable built his home in 1756, as well as that of the 1730s house of Joseph Morton, Jr., the original settler of the property. Further ties to the College exist through the descendants of Richard Venable.

Richard N. Venable, son of Nathaniel Venable attended Hampden-Sydney before going to Princeton, where he graduated in 1782. Richard N. Venable was a committed supporter of the College; he served on the Board of Trustees for more than forty years and, along with his father and brothers, provided much financial support to the College during its early years.

The information in this article comes from the labels and panel text of an exhibit that recently closed at the Atkinson Museum, Beneath This Hill: Historical Archaeology at Slate Hill Plantation, Birthplace of Hampden-Sydney College.

The exhibit continues to circulate to area schools and at the time of printing was on display at Fuqua School. With the help of Dr. Richard McClintock, Dr. Pearson created the panels and labels that accompanied materials excavated by his students.

The work at Slate Hill Plantation continues. For more information concerning the May Term course in historical archaeology, please see the Hampden-Sydney College May Term Web Page at www.hsc.edu/Academics/May-Term-2011.html

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To request a brick order form, call the Museum at (434) 223-6134, or download one from www.hsc.edu/Museum/Personalized-Brick.html



Supporting the Museum

The Museum's operating budget comes principally from gifts from its friends, augmented by income from its small endowment.

As a result, individual gifts of annual support are extremely important to the continued health and progress of the Museum, both as a guardian of Hampden-Sydney's heritage and as a memorial to Mrs. P. T. Atkinson, who founded it.

Gifts may be mailed in the enclosed envelope or submitted online at www.hsc.edu/development/give.html. You may specify that your gift be used by the Museum. All gifts to the College are tax-deductible.

The MISSION of the Esther Thomas Atkinson Museum is to promote an awareness and understanding of the history of Hampden-Sydney College as it relates to its role in the history of Virginia and the United States, while serving to support and enhance the College's mission to form good men and good citizens in an atmosphere of sound learning.

New entry welcomes visitors, protects exhibits

Richard McClintock

If you haven't heard about our new front entrance, here is brief overview of the project and of the reasons for undertaking it.

The front door of the Atkinson Museum—unchanged since the building's former use as a post office—opened directly from the outdoors into the exhibit space, allowing outdoor temperature and humidity to invade the building with every visitor. It has long been a goal of the curators to find a way to minimize the effect of outside climate on the air inside the Museum; that goal was reinforced as a high priority in the recent facilities survey by the American Association of Museums.

Thanks to a recent challenge gift to the Museum, this long-awaited improvement has become a reality, and matching funds are being raised, so that almost three quarters of the funds needed—\$130,000 out of \$170,000—are in hand. In order to make deadlines for completion at the start of the fall semester, the College allowed the Atkinson Museum to begin construction while continuing our fund-raising. (If you would like more information on giving to the project and a copy of the explanatory brochure, we will be happy to help you.)

The addition in effect extends the old façade forward about ten feet, providing not only an airlock but also an entry vestibule for visitor reception and even introductory material.

A columned porch, matching those on other College buildings, provides shelter for entering visitors, who used to have to stand uncovered before the door. An additional benefit of the project is the replacement and upgrading of the obsolete heating, cooling, and ventilation system for the front half of the Museum, fulfilling another facilities survey recommendation.

In addition, the sidewalk has been raised level with the street to provide unhindered access to the Museum without a ramp. The memorial bricks have been reset into a grid pattern

in the new walk.

The new lobby now serves as an introductory area. The visitor is greeted by the large busts of Patrick Henry and James Madison, early trustees of the College, set off by banners containing quotations by them. The Museum collage is also hung there, to alert visitors to the breadth of displays within.

We have had overwhelmingly positive response, especially about the graciousness of the space and the increased visibility of the Museum from College Road.

The new front addition to the Museum provides both an airlock and a welcoming space for visitors.



HOW TO HELP?

At this point, \$130,000 has been raised toward the \$170,00 project cost.

If you would like to help with this worthwhile project, please make your check payable to "Hampden-Sydney College" and attach a note stating that your contribution is for the Museum entry addition. Send your contribution to the Atkinson Museum, Post Office Box 745, Hampden-Sydney, VA 23943, or hand it to the Curator when you visit. All gifts to Hampden-Sydney College are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

ON EXHIBIT

A bit more history and a lot more art

Two new exhibits this fall meshed with the themes of the inauguration of the College's president, Christopher Howard.

The front gallery display emphasized the history of Hampden-Sydney, and in the back gallery an exhibition complemented the visit of inauguration speaker Ken Burns.

Iconic artifacts and images continue on display in the front gallery with a special exhibition, *Hampden-Sydney's Leaders in Higher Learning*. The thirty-foot linear display traces the role of Hampden-Sydney men in leading and establishing institutions of higher learning.

Complementing Ken Burns' spectacular documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, the back gallery held "Following Seas: From Pretty Marsh to Great Head," an exhibition of *plein air* paintings of Acadia National Park by Virginia artist Beverly Rhoads, helping viewers recognize the important role that art and artists have played in our nation's efforts to preserve and protect valuable natural areas.

2010-2011 Exhibits

September 2 through December 10
Hampden-Sydney College's Leaders in Higher Education

October 7 through November 13
Following Seas: From Pretty Marsh to Great Head

November 18 to February 6
Beneath This Hill: Archaeology at Slate Hill

February 8 through March 26
Take Our Stand: the African American Military Experience in the Age of Jim Crow

April 28 - May 8, 2011
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www.wm.edu/museum/museum.html

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