

**REPORT >**

## **Economic Context of Middlesex County and the Palmer House (059-5387)**

**LOCATION >** Middlesex County, Virginia

**DATE >** DECEMBER 2017

**PREPARED FOR >**  
Dominion Energy



**PREPARED BY >**  
Dutton + Associates, LLC

**Dutton + Associates**

CULTURAL RESOURCE SURVEY, PLANNING, AND MANAGEMENT

**ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF MIDDLESEX COUNTY  
AND THE PALMER HOUSE (059-5387)**

**MIDDLESEX COUNTY, VIRGINIA**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Under contract to Dominion Energy, Dutton + Associates, LLC (D+A) completed a thematic context for the Palmer House (VDHR #059-5387) located at 215 Bob's Hole Road in the Topping vicinity of lower Middlesex County, Virginia (Figures 1 and 2). This context was requested by Dominion Energy in partial fulfillment of a mitigation plan to address adverse impacts to the Palmer House identified as part of the *Phase I Cultural Resource Survey for the Puller Solar Project* and determined to be potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The intent of the study was to note important time periods or trends in commercial, industrial, and economic growth of the county and how these patterns may have impacted or influenced the owners and occupants of the Palmer House.

To complete this task, a comprehensive literature review and background search was performed. The overview was developed through review of previous cultural resource studies, published and unpublished manuscripts, historic maps, aerial photographs, local histories, county land records, federal census records, newspaper articles and advertisements, letters, and a variety of internet sources. Research was conducted at and through repositories including the Library of Congress, United States Geological Survey, Library of Virginia, Middlesex County Clerk of Courts, local historical societies, and any other repositories identified during preliminary research. This historic context includes local and regional history with a focus on historical economic trends in Middlesex County and a history of the Palmer House with a focus on its place in the identified economic trends. The results of the study are organized chronologically and thematically according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources' (VDHR) guidance titled *How to Use Historic Contexts in Virginia: A Guide for Survey, Registration, Protection, and Treatment Projects* (VDHR 2011). Research was conducted by Architectural Historian Dara A. Friedberg, M.S.

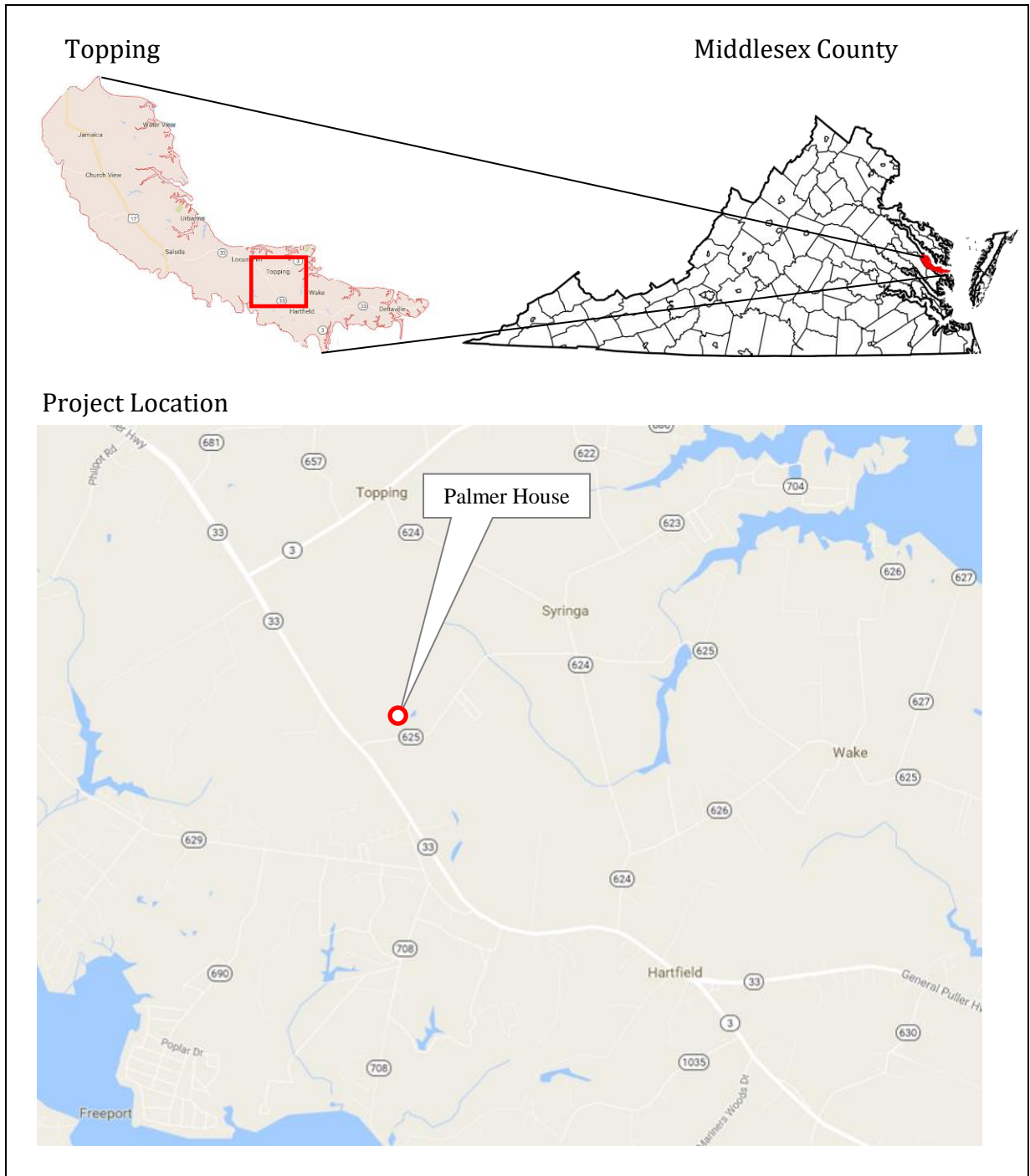


Figure 1: General location of the Palmer House.



**Figure 2: Aerial view of the Palmer House. Source: Google Earth 2017**

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## 2. BRIEF HISTORY OF MIDDLESEX COUNTY

After first settling on Jamestown Island in 1608, Captain John Smith and a party of explorers charted the waters of the Chesapeake Bay including those surrounding the Middle Peninsula and Middlesex County. Over the ensuing decades, additional explorers ventured into the area; however it remained American Indian territory thus prohibiting early settlement. This changed by the 1640s when the European population had grown to about 8,000 and settlers were moving out from the James River along navigable waters in search of new land on which to grow the increasingly valuable crop tobacco (Chowning 2012:13). As population increased throughout Virginia and its Middle Peninsula, new counties were created. Middlesex County was formed from Lancaster County in 1669 when the new county had a population of 912 residents and an early town was on the Rappahannock River on land owned by Ralph Wormeley of Rosegill; this would become Urbanna (Figure 3) (Edwards and Salmon 1990). During this early time the economy of Middlesex County, and Virginia as a whole, was centered primarily on the labor intensive cultivation of tobacco. It was tobacco that determined how roads were built, how taxes were collected, and where towns were established (Karnes 1998:8).



**Figure 3: Detail of Virginia and Maryland as it is planted and inhabited this present year 1670 illustrating settlement in the new county of Middlesex and the Palmer House. Source: Library of Congress**

With its early settlement, multiple navigable waterways, and fertile land growing the economically important crop of tobacco, by the Revolutionary War Virginia was the wealthiest and most populous English colony in North America (Chowning 2012:109). The extensive early cultivation of tobacco throughout the Tidewater region of Virginia, however, resulted in depleted

soils and poor crops by the middle of the eighteenth century. The colony's culture, once dominated by the plantation system of the elite and their tobacco, was steadily being replaced by smaller farmers with diversified crops and middle class merchants. The increased cultivation of wheat and corn led these products to become the primary foundation of the local and regional economies. With the transition, multiple mills opened throughout Virginia and Middlesex County to grind wheat and corn.

The population of Middlesex County dropped slightly in the years after the American Revolution and War of 1812, from a high of 4,414 residents in 1810 to 4,056 in 1820 (USCB). Much of the decline can likely be attributed to the continued decline of tobacco and subsequent shift to other crops, which used less enslaved labor. Many planters from the region sold their slaves to plantations in the Deep South after switching from tobacco to mixed crops, while others moved to the Piedmont region of Virginia or to the Deep South themselves to develop new land and plantations, taking slaves with them.

Throughout Middlesex County, roads were poorly constructed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and were limited to connecting plantations and ports along the Rappahannock River. The many local lowlands, swamps, and creeks made construction of substantial roads difficult. The primary road through the county extended approximately 35 miles from Essex County to Stingray Point on the Chesapeake Bay. This road was in existence as early as 1669 and present-day Routes 17 and 33 generally follow this early alignment. While this road served the inland population, navigable rivers and creeks led to the outside world. These waterways provided much easier travel, especially long distance (Edwards and Salmon 1990). The advent of the steamboat in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century brought a renewed period of growth in commerce for the ports and wharves in the county.

As ports and other communities within the interior of the county grew, the timber business throughout the region developed to supply wood to construct buildings. This business became particularly successful in Middlesex County bringing prosperity to many landowners (Chowning 1994). In particular, the swampy region bordering Dragon Run in the central portion of the county offered extensive quantities of valuable cypress (Martin 1835). Meanwhile, diversified agriculture continued to be a large economic driver, and eventually a number of pickle, tomato, and other canning factories emerged throughout the county. Wheat, however remained the staple crop and fueled the construction of a number of large new homes for wealthy landowners.

In Middlesex County, only 10-percent of the county's residents owned slaves, however enslaved persons accounted for nearly 55-percent of the total population in 1860. With its high enslaved population, on April 17, 1861 Middlesex County voted overwhelmingly to secede from the Union with 491 votes to one. During the war, the county saw little direct action except for the occasional foray by Union troops seizing supplies, as well as two small combat actions in 1863 and 1864. Throughout the conflict, Union restrictions on shipping led to a shortage of many items and supplies for the residents of Middlesex who were so heavily dependent on trade by water.

The Civil War left the economy of Middlesex devastated, however, local industry coupled with the schooner and steamboat trade allowed a quicker recovery than many parts of the state. While

important from the beginning, the seafood and particularly oyster industry played a major role in the recovery of the region of the Civil War. Additionally, with the importance of boating in the region, in the early twentieth century, the boatbuilding industry began to grow in the Deltaville area.

Further inland, diversified agriculture remained the primary occupation for most residents. Many of the larger plantations in existence before the war continued to be broken up into smaller farms during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Around this time, a number of small stores and markets emerged at many crossroads. Following emancipation, numerous freedmen also stayed in the rural area of Middlesex County, working on the land for pay or a share of crops. However, as tension on and among farms grew, many freedmen chose the independence of water trades in lieu of the farm. The county population reached a high at this time with 8,852 residents in the 1910 census (USCB).

Throughout the first several decades of the twentieth century, steamships continued to regularly ply the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, offering passenger and freight services along their routes and between Norfolk and Baltimore (Lichtenberger 1995). The steamboat and schooner era continued until the 1930s when it largely came to an end in 1933 when the August Storm destroyed most docks and wharves along the county's shores as well as up and down the Bay. Schooner service briefly resumed; although by this time, better roads and the widespread use of trucks and automobiles rendered this means of transportation obsolete (Garnett 1985:6-7; Slaughter 1986:231). As the automobile became more important throughout the nation, roads were improved upon.

The 1930s brought a decline in growth and development as a result of the overall effects of the Great Depression, however Middlesex County did not suffer as much as some other parts of the state and country due to its more isolated nature without any substantial urban areas. Still, the population of the county began a gradual decline around this time, a trend that would continue into the 1970s.

Following World War II, the local economy continued to rely on agriculture, oyster, and timber industries throughout much of the century (Markell 2005:39). Rapidly modernizing equipment and scientific farming sent crop production soaring in the postwar years. Even as the production of corn and grains grew, however, the number of farms and farmers decreased throughout the second-half of the twentieth century.

In 1952, the completion of the George Coleman Bridge over the York River between Yorktown and Gloucester County provided some stimulus to trade and commerce through the connection of the Middle Neck and the rapidly growing Tidewater area. Well maintained roads heading west and bridges brought about a new industry to the region in the 1950s which remains an important aspect of the local economy (Figure 4). As the overall economy continued to grow following World War II, many residents had increased time for travel and leisure and the Middle Neck emerged as a popular recreational and tourism area focused on the river. Boating and other water sports rose in popularity and numerous small communities developed along the many inlets and harbors.



Figure 4: Detail of 1943 Richmond topographic map depicting the roadways of Middlesex. Source: USGS

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PALMER HOUSE (VDHR #059-5387)

The Palmer House is located at 215 Bob's Hole Road in Middlesex County, Virginia. This is inland in the lower half of the county, approximately seven miles southeast of Urbanna and seven miles east of Saluda. The nineteenth century dwelling is on the east side of General Puller Highway (Route 33), between Greys Point Road (Route 3) on the north and Bob's Hole Road (Route 625) on the south; Mill Creek flows east of the resource. Harmony Village, Topping, Syringa, Free Shade Corner, and Grafton are located along those major roadways around the Palmer House.

The earliest documented history of the Palmer House property was in 1690 when the land on which the Palmer House would eventually be built was patented by Thomas Dudley and William Elliot as part of a 722 tract (Nugent 1992:346). The land was then passed to Major Robert Dudley who died in 1701. In his will and testament, Robert Dudley bequeathed to his youngest son, George, about 550 acres that he had purchased from Thomas Dudley and William Elliott (WB A:97). It appears that George passed away shortly thereafter and that his older brother Robert Dudley (II) received this land.

In 1717, Robert Dudley (II) sold the remainder of the Thomas Dudley-William Elliot land to Augustine Smith. At this point, the land consisted of 400 acres and was sold for £156 (DB 3:429). Augustine Smith was part of the "Knights of the Golden Horseshoe," a group of men who accompanied Lt. Governor Alexander Spotswood on his expedition up the Rappahannock River Valley into the Blue Ridge mountains and the Shenandoah Valley to expand the Virginia territory. Augustine Warner Smith passed away in 1736 and left the land to his son Augustine

Smith. Smith died in 1774 at nearby Shooter's Hill and left to his infant son, Augustine Jaqueline Smith, all of his land in Middlesex County (WB F:38).

Augustine Jaqueline Smith sold the land, 300 acres, to Presley Cockrill in 1796 and later that same year Cockrill sold 186 acres to David Palmer of Northumberland County (DB 11:251; DB 11:323). The Palmer family was prominent in the region and David Palmer had served in the Revolutionary War (Gwathmey 1938:601). Just after the war, Palmer married a fellow resident of Northumberland County, Nancy Cundiff, and moved to Middlesex County following his purchase of the property. Soon thereafter, the couple embarked on building the house that now remains on the property. The house was complete in 1804 according to an inscribed date on the north chimney.

In 1824, David Palmer passed away leaving the property, which was described in his will as his "home plantation", to his second son, Opie. According to contemporary norms, his oldest son had already been provided a plantation and other siblings received assorted other properties Palmer owned throughout the region (WB 4:158). Opie Palmer, born in 1793, served in the War of 1812 and married Nancy Wortham in 1814.

Opie passed away around 1844 and left the land to his son John W. Palmer. The transfer of ownership was complex and appears to have not occurred until after a court injunction. Unfortunately John W. Palmer died in 1849 at which time the use and occupancy of the home becomes unclear for several decades. Following the Civil War, the property was associated with two men that had served in the 55<sup>th</sup> Virginia, Company H which was made up primarily of Middlesex County men. John Lumpkin and Robert Valentine Revere, both wed John W. Palmer's two oldest daughters. Ann Elizabeth Palmer married Robert V. Revere and Lucy married John Lumpkin. Once again, it appears that the Palmer House and property were part of a dowry, related to Lucy's marriage to Lumpkin.

It is likely that Lucy and John Lumpkin resided in the Palmer House during the decades after the Civil War and until Lucy's passing in 1907. At that time, interest in the property, which at that time included just 35 acres, passed to Robert V. Revere, Lucy's brother-in-law and husband of her sister of Ann Elizabeth (Deed Book 40:332). Ann Elizabeth had passed away in 1885 and Robert remarried Sarah Steiff.

Whether Robert V. Revere ever resided at the Palmer House is unclear. According to family members, both he and John Lumpkin are buried on the property to the rear of the house. Robert V. Revere died in 1916, but not long before a large addition was attached to the Palmer House. Presumably the occupant of the house at that time was Robert and Sarah's only child, Elias Burdette Revere, as reflected by "E.B.R." which is inscribed in a foundation brick with the date '09. In 1909, Elias would have been 22 years of age.

Elias does not appear to have resided at the Palmer House long for in 1914, when his father Robert Valentine died, the property was passed to his daughter from his first marriage to Ann E. Palmer, Lucy Catherine Revere (Deed Book 44:122). This Lucy had married a cousin, Edward Bailey Revere in 1903. Edward died in 1924, and in 1942, Lucy sold a portion of the property to their only son, Edward Leroy "Paul" Revere. In 1956, Lucy died intestate and the remaining

portion of the property, including the Palmer House, passed to Edward as her only son, and heir at law (Deed Book 56:12).

In 1964, Edward and his wife Zelma Revere, sold the property to their relatives, Howell L. and Elizabeth Anne Carlton Revere (Deed Book 84:231). In 2003, the property was put into a trust as “Parcel 2” of the Revere Family, LLC and remains one of many properties owned by the Revere family in the area (Deed Book 358:596).

### 3. ECONOMIC CONTEXT FOR MIDDLESEX COUNTY

Given its location on Virginia's Middle Peninsula, with its navigable waterways and fertile land, it is unsurprising that Middlesex County's economy has historically been focused on both land and water. As previously touched upon, the primary drivers of the county's economy have been tobacco, diversified agriculture, oysters, and tourism. Lesser contributions are put forth by the boating, timber, and dairy industries. All of the county's endeavors were encouraged by the use of steamboats. These individual forces will be discussed in further detail below as well as the connection to these by residents and owners of the Palmer House.

It appears to have been during the mid-century of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century that significant changes occurred thereby changing the economic forces in Middlesex County. This includes the decline of former cash crops, innovations on land and water, and population shifts.

#### TOBACCO

Following the initial goal of surviving, early English colonists in Virginia struggled to make the colony an economically viable asset for the stockholders back in England. This changed when, around 1612, John Rolfe was able to cultivate a strain of tobacco that sold in the English Market. The introduction of this 'cash crop' was the impetus for European expansion throughout the colony. During this early time the economy of Virginia as a whole was centered primarily on the labor intensive cultivation of tobacco. It was tobacco that determined how roads were built, how taxes were collected, and where towns were established (Karnes 1998:8). With the ability to grow this valuable crop, there was little need of a "metallic medium of exchange" (Bruce 1896).

There were soon two distinct varieties of tobacco grown in the colony; a strong flavored tobacco called "oronoco" and a milder "sweet scented" tobacco. It was the sweet scented tobacco that became extremely popular in England. Fortunately those settled and looking to settle on the Middle Peninsula found that the soil between the Rappahannock and Piankatank was superb for growing sweet scented tobacco (Chowning 2012:13-14). By the time permanent settlement was underway, in 1649, it was clear that the expansion into Middlesex would be tied to the success of the tobacco trade (Chowning 2012:23). According to Rutman and Rutman, tobacco houses and fields bordered by heavy timber fences were ubiquitous in the mid-seventeenth century. The rise of the labor intensive crop would also be associated with the institutionalization and rise of slavery in Virginia. The biggest change that occurred on the early Middlesex landscape was the shift from white farm laborers to slaves (Rutman and Rutman 1984:65, 236).

In 1680, the General Assembly passed an act to create trade towns in counties on deep water creeks, one of which was the new town of Urbanna, or "City of Anne," in Middlesex County. The first mention of the new town in county records occurred in 1706 (Lichtenberger 1995). Urbanna's primary business was tobacco (Edwards and Salmon 1990). As a port town, English merchant ships arrived and off-loaded goods and on-loaded hogsheads of tobacco (Chowning 2012:22). In 1730, the House of Burgesses passed the Tobacco Inspection law to prevent the exportation of bad quality tobacco, and required all exported tobacco shipments to be inspected and bear an official certificate (PWCHC 2012). Without a reliable road network in place, tobacco

inspection stations and warehouses were constructed along waterways which served as the primary transportation and shipping routes. Urbanna continued to grow and thrive as a result of a tobacco inspection station being placed there (Slaughter 1986:29).

While it remained popular and growth of the crop of possible, tobacco “would allow all classes to enjoy more trading goods...and allow standards of living for even the lower classes to improve rapidly during the eighteenth century” (Chowning 2012:22). The extensive early cultivation of tobacco throughout the Tidewater Region of Virginia, however, resulted in depleted soils and poor crops by the middle of the eighteenth century. Still, Middlesex in 1740 remained essentially a part of the “tobacco coast.” (Rutman and Rutman 1984:235).

As the tobacco’s profitability in the county lessened, farmers had to explore other options. The increasing attempts at agricultural diversification caused the closure of tobacco inspection stations along the Rappahannock, increasing the expense and level of difficulty required get the tobacco to market and further reducing the amount of the substance being exported from the area. Despite the closure of other tobacco inspection stations, Urbanna continued to thrive and a new tobacco warehouse was constructed there in 1766. The tobacco inspection station at Urbanna was the only one left in the county and in 1785 it closed and the tobacco traffic was moved to Port Royal (Chowning 2012:111).

#### *Palmer House*

Owners of future Palmer land in seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, the peak of tobacco cultivation in Middlesex County, included Thomas Dudley and William Elliott (1690 to 1692), Major Robert Dudley (1692-1701), George Dudley (1701 to 1707), Robert Dudley (II) (1707 to 1717), Augustine Warner Smith (1717 to 1736), and Augustine Smith (1736 to 1774). Little is known, however, of these individuals and their use of the land.

In 1682, Robert Dudley was elected a member of the vestry of Christ Church Parish in Middlesex, and in 1686 he was the church warden of Lower Chapel. In 1685 he was elected member of the House of Burgesses and acted as sheriff in 1690 and 1691 (McGhan 2007:632; Dudley 1894). By the turn of the eighteenth century, Robert Dudley had nine enslaved people and two white servants living at this “Dwelling Plantacion”. Before his death he was in the process of opening up quarters of his estate (Rutman and Rutman 1984:168). While Robert Dudley worked within the church and in politics, the era in which he lived, his vast landholdings, and ownership of slaves indicates that he used his land for the cultivation of tobacco though possibly not to the large extent of other plantations. In 1685, Robert Dudley’s estate was valued at £548 (Austin 2014). In comparison, one of largest estates in the county belonged to Robert Beverley and was valued at £1131; these numbers were not nearly as high as some other plantations in other counties in the colony (Austin 2014; Bruce 1896).

The likely cultivation of tobacco on the land continued through the remainder of the Dudley family ownership and into the Smith family ownership. Letters written by Augustine Smith to John Norton in London in the late 1760s reference the large quantities of tobacco sent by Smith (Smith 1767; Smith 1768).



**DIVERSIFIED AGRICULTURE, MILLING, AND LIVESTOCK**

The intensive tobacco cultivation pursued in the early decades of the colony succeeded in severely depleting Tidewater's soils of much-needed nutrients. Under these harsh conditions, by the mid-eighteenth century Tidewater planters found it difficult to compete with the higher-quality tobacco being produced on the newly opened lands of the Piedmont. While tobacco had long been the primary agricultural crop in Middlesex County, corn and livestock also filled an early need in the economy. While the earliest Virginian settlers were sustained by eating foodstuffs carried from England or bought or stolen from surrounding American Indian villages, this arrangement was unsustainable and in the 1620s and 1630s corn and livestock were integrated into the agricultural system. These products were the only ones that could be easily combined with the economically important tobacco. By mid-century, cornfields and grazing livestock were as much hallmarks of the tobacco coast as tobacco itself (Rutman and Rutman 1984:43-44).

Even as it remained a cash crop, tobacco's downturn forced most planters, including the gentry, to add wheat to their mix of tobacco, corn, and livestock; previously wheat had been cultivated only for home consumption (Chowning 2012:109; Rutman and Rutman 1984:235). This addition would lead to the establishment of mills throughout Virginia and Middlesex County to grind wheat and corn. These mills emerged into centers of commerce and a number of mills opened in the county. In the Colonial Period of Middlesex, while the most valuable real estate was located near the mouth of deep-water creeks with a water depth that would allow large sailing crafts to moor, perhaps the second most valuable real estate in the county was located at the headwaters of the creeks, where dams could be built to create spring-fed, fresh water ponds and spillways that generated waterpower to operate gristmills (Chowning 2012:142). A number of operating mills in Middlesex County from this period included those at Rosegill, Healy's, Conrad's, Barrick's, Burches', and Hilliard's (Chowing 1994). By the Antebellum Period (1830-1860), Middlesex had a flour mill that produced 227 barrels of flour annually; and 11 gristmills spread throughout the county (Chowning 2012:130).

It was also during the Antebellum Period that great advances in farming were made making "farming more easier and more efficient" (Chowning 2012:130). Such innovations included McCormick's horse drawn reaper in 1834 (a forerunner to the self-propelled combine used today) and the self-raking reaper in 1858 with an endless canvas belt that delivered cut grain to be bundled. With these innovations, gradually, the farmer's need for slave labor became less important and many slaves were sold to the cotton plantations of the Deep South (Chowning 2012:130).

As time passed, further diversification occurred. After the Civil War, with tobacco plantations a thing of the past, small farms were becoming more prevalent in the county. Although better wages were being made on the river, the land still provided for basic family needs, growing grain, and harvesting timber for building construction (Chowning 2012:220). Diversified agricultural continued to be a large economic driver and the primary occupation for most residents. Farms grew a wide range of produce from watermelons to potatoes (Chowning 2012:298).

With this diversification and mechanization, pickling and canning became important in the county and a number of pickle, tomato, and other canning factories emerged. Canning factories near the many wharves and landings of the county further encouraged agricultural commerce. Local farmers hauled and sold tomatoes to those plants, which, in turn shipped their freshly canned tomatoes on the sailing vessels to market (Chowning 2012:226). The cultivation of cucumbers became even more profitable when they were pickled and pickle factories opened near steamboat wharves. Examples include Rosser Walton's pickle factory near Mill Creek Steamboat wharf and Dixie Pickling Co. located in Urbanna as of 1916 (Chowning 2012:297).

Following World War II, the local economy continued to rely on agriculture, as well as fishing and timber industries (Markell 2005:39). Rapidly modernizing equipment and scientific farming sent crop production soaring in the postwar years. However, even as the production of corn and grains grew the number of farms and farmers decreased. Throughout the second-half of the twentieth century, the number of farms in the county continued to drop and residents became employed in the retail and service industries in nearby locales. In 1969, Middlesex County had only 186 operational farms. The largest products produced by these farms were grains followed by poultry and poultry products, dairy products, and hogs, sheep, and goats (VEPCo 1974:4).

### *Palmer House*

With its inland location, the land around the Palmer House most assuredly transitioned from tobacco farming to diversified agriculture, likely beginning when it was under the ownership of Augustine Smith. Advertisements for the sale of Smith's land in the late eighteenth century mention "stocks of cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs, the crops of corn and fodder", orchards, "meadows and marsh, with other very good range, sufficient for a large stock of cattle" ("SEVERAL likely NEGROES..." 1774; "For Sale" 1771 ; "To be SOLD..." 1777). His property holdings by the time of this death in 1774 were ample and it is unclear what the land around the Palmer House was being used for but the advertisements give some indication as to the different possible uses.

As the property transitioned into the Palmer family it continued to be used agriculturally and the first owner, David Palmer, was noted as "an industrious and successful Middlesex planter" (Gray et al. 1978:272). David Palmer operated a still on his property; however it is unclear whether he distilled wheat or corn, some other grain, or a fruit. Upon his death in 1824, David left his son Opie the land and a still, hand mill, and one-third of all of his tools (WB 4:158).

By 1860, it appears that the property was occupied by John R. Lumpkin and members of the Palmer family, including his wife Lucy and mother-in-law Elizabeth (USCB 1860). The 1860 Agricultural Schedule for Lumpkin indicates that the farm produced corn, sweet potatoes, and swine (USCB 1860). By 1880, the farm had expanded its products to also include butter, poultry, eggs, wheat, apple trees, and peach trees, as well as timber (USCB 1880). Farming of the land continued when the Palmer House passed to the Revere's. According to 1910 census records, Robert V. Revere and his son Elias were farmers though the goods produced is not known. Farming of the land surrounding the Palmer's House continued into the twenty-first century; most recently the fields were planted with soy beans.

## OYSTERS

With its location between two rivers, the Rappahannock and the Piankatank, and its proximity near the Chesapeake Bay, the harvesting of marine life has long been an important industry in Middlesex County. Oysters in particular were important as they once grew in abundance in the rivers, especially the Rappahannock River (Chowning 2012:234). Oysters were staples of the salt waters of Tidewater Virginia and as early as the late 1700s Rappahannock River oysters were well known throughout the bay region and up and down the East Coast (McDonald 1907; Chowning 2012:235). The initial widespread growth of this industry occurred during the Antebellum Period as farming innovations made farming easier and allowed people the time to seek out other work like oystering. Residents of Middlesex County became involved in this expanding seafood industry, harvesting, buying, shucking or canning oysters (Chowning 2012:129-130).

Like diversified agriculture, it was also during the Antebellum Period that innovations were made in the oyster industry. The first large oyster packing house was built in Baltimore, Maryland in 1836 which was easily accessible by Middlesex oyster workers via the Chesapeake Bay. Additionally, the ability to hermetically seal oysters in small cans was developed which led to an increased number of large oyster shucking houses. Soon, local residents built their own shucking houses and instead of selling all their oysters to Northerners, began to sell at the local market allowing for increased economic growth. Eventually, Middlesex oyster houses would steam and seal their own oysters and distribute them across the country in tin cans marked with “Middlesex County” (Chowning 2012:129). As the industry grew locally, two Middlesex inventors were issued a patent for improving deep water oyster “drop” tongs (Chowning 2012:236).

The four years of the Civil War gave overfished oyster beds an unfettered opportunity to reestablish themselves. After the war, the waters provided a more level economic playing field for everyone, unlike agricultural pursuits on land which required capital for land and farming implements. This led to hundreds of oystermen working the waters. By the 1880s and 1890s, the Chesapeake Bay’s oyster fishery boomed which helped breathe economic life back into the shores of Maryland and all of Tidewater Virginia, including Middlesex (Chowning 2012:219). By the end of the century, the seeding of oyster beds had become an accepted practice and Urbanna’s oyster-packing industry was reaping the financial benefits (Edwards and Salmon 1990).

The oyster industry persevered into the twentieth century, surviving the spread of the MSX virus in the 1940s which destroyed most of the oyster beds of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries including the Rappahannock River (Edwards and Salmon 1990). Though not nearly the industry that it once was, there continued to be oyster related companies in the county in the late twentieth century (VEPCo 1974:4). Historically, oysters were plentiful in the clean water and watermen would go out and collect them from their natural habitats. Today, oysters are largely grown in aquatic farms (Thomasson 2012).

*Palmer House*

Given its inland location between both the Rappahannock and Piankatank, the owners of the Palmer House do not appear to have been largely involved in the oyster industry in Middlesex County though there is the possibility that some worked in it to some extent. North of the Palmer House, Locklies Creek served oystermen living in the Topping, Hartfield, and Regent areas; Piankatank River creeks also had commercial oyster traffic, particularly those closer to the Chesapeake Bay (Chowning 2012:220).

**STEAMBOATS**

Given the terrible condition of early roadways, travel along navigable waterways in colonial Virginia was the primary form of travel. Though the conditions were better, travel was often slow because it often depended on the river current and manpower (*A History of Steamboats* n.d.). The speed of travel by water was greatly improved in the late eighteenth century with the introduction of steam-powered boats. Residents of the Middle Peninsula of Virginia were fortunate in the proximity to waterways. The first steamboats arrived in Middlesex County in the summer of 1821 and they provided a vital economic link to surrounding counties, the cities of Baltimore and Norfolk, and beyond. George Weems of Baltimore had a steamboat, the *Patuxent*, which was the first to have a regular route from Baltimore to Middlesex County. The Piankatank was probed for commerce in 1830, but was proved unprofitable (Chowning 2012:131-132). Not only was Urbanna an important steamboat stop, but by the 1840s, additional points along the Rappahannock and Piankatank rivers became regular stops including Deltaville, North End, Burhams, Remlik, Water View, Bay Port, Conrad's, and Stamper's (Lichtenberger 1995). Like the boats long before them transporting tobacco, these docked and off-loaded products for local sale and on-loaded local goods for market (Chowning 2012:131). Local farmers delivered their goods of crates of chicken and eggs, fish and crabs, fresh produce, furs and wild ducks. The boats also transported canned products from local canneries, lumber, grain and livestock (Chowning 2012:224).

The primary importance of steamboats in Middlesex County was that they led to exceptional growth of the economy. Steamboats became even more important after the Civil War to help the local economy recover (Chowning 2012:131). As steamboat traffic expanded, new, longer, wharves were built especially on the Rappahannock River. For example, a long wharf replaced an earlier pier at the mouth of Mill Creek in the late 1880s. From here, a store and post office were opened as well as a fertilizer factory (Chowning 2012:221, 224).

Steamboats sparked growth in the local industries and was a major contributor to economic growth. Throughout the first several decades of the twentieth century, steamships continued to regularly ply the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, offering passenger and freight services along their routes and between Norfolk and Baltimore (Lichtenberger 1995). The steamboat and schooner era continued until the 1930s when transportation improvements and nature forever altered the industry.

As automobiles were becoming more popular, the 1932 Byrd Road Act placed the maintenance and construction of secondary roads under the State of Virginia instead of local governments.

This was a major factor in redirecting transportation from the water to the land. The timing of this proved ideal as a year later the August Storm of 1933 substantially destroyed the infrastructure of the bay's steamboat lines. This would lead to the end of the steamboat era and the final run was made in 1937 (Chowning 2012:251-252). While there was a slight resurgence, better roads and the widespread use of trucks and automobiles rendered this means of transportation obsolete (Garnett 1985:6-7; Slaughter 1986:231).

#### *Palmer House*

Though the property was located inland, it is likely that products produced on Palmer land benefited from its accessibility to steamboats on the Rappahannock. The nearest wharf may have been to its northeast at Mill Creek, where a member of the Revere family was clerk at the post office. Additionally, in Urbanna, Alfred Palmer, a son of Opie Palmer's, was owner of Palmer's Steamboat Wharf (Chowning 2012:202).

### **WOODEN BOATS**

In the southern portion of Middlesex County, boat building was an important part of the economy. In the early twentieth century, the boatbuilding industry began to grow in Sandy Bottom, now known as Deltaville. Chesapeake Bay and Rappahannock River waterman needed strong and sturdy work boats to harvest oysters and until that time most had relied upon log canoes, many of which were built in the Poquoson area. As frame ship building grew and replaced canoes for waterman around this time, Deltaville rose to real economic prominence with the wooden boatbuilding industry there. Deltaville's industry spanned 80 years and laid the infrastructure for the modern maritime economy found in the eastern (lower) end of Middlesex (Chowning 2012:251). Though not nearly the industry that it once was, there continued to be boat building companies in the county in the late twentieth century (VEPCo 1974:4).

#### *Palmer House*

Given its inland location between both the Rappahannock and Piankatank west of Deltaville, the owners of the Palmer House do not appear to have been largely involved in the boat building industry in Middlesex County.

### **LUMBER**

As communities in Middlesex County and the Middle Peninsula grew, a timber and lumber business throughout the region developed to supply wood to construct buildings. The lumbering business became particularly successful in Middlesex County bringing prosperity to many landowners (Chowning 1994). In particular, the swampy region bordering Dragon Run in the central portion of the county offered extensive quantities of valuable cypress (Martin 1835). Like many other industries, the timber business grew during the Antebellum Period and the federal census reveals that there were seven sawmills in the county that employed 36 men (Chowning 2012:130). Lumber produced was hauled to the river where they would be floated to a boat and then transported to Baltimore or Norfolk. Mills in the county would be moved as necessary, as areas of trees were exhausted; at some point, there was a sawmill on Bob's Hole Road (DeBusk

et al. 1982:252). This continued to be an important addition to the county's economy into the twentieth century. In 1974 Middlesex County had 84,480 acres of forest, 54,001 acres of which were for commercial purposes (VEPCo 1974:1).

### *Palmer House*

Throughout its history, timber was harvested from Palmer land, though likely not to the same degree as other land owners. The 1880 Agricultural Schedule indicates that John R. Lumpkin had 20 cords of wood harvested from his land at a total value of \$50 (USCB 1880).

## **DAIRIES**

Historically, farmers in Middlesex County would have small herds of cattle for modest production of dairy products which would be locally distributed (DeBusk et al. 1982:240). However, in the early to mid-twentieth century, as families began purchasing milk and milk products from grocery stores, a number of large dairy farms developed in Middlesex County. World War II sparked an increased need for scheduled availability of milk at military bases and at schools, where milk was being served for lunch which led to a new period of larger dairies in Middlesex (Chowning 2012:320). Included among early, modern dairies were Rosegill, Bethpage Farm, and Hampstead Farm, though the largest was Fairfield Farm in the Hartfield area (DeBusk et al. 1982:240).

### *Palmer House*

It does not appear that any large-scale dairy operation took place at the Palmer House although owners of the property did historically have milk cows. According to the 1880 Agricultural Schedule, Lumpkin had two milk cows and produced 100 pounds of butter (USCB 1880).

## **TOURISM AND THE MODERN ECONOMY**

Though it was easily accessible by waterways, Middlesex County has historically been fairly isolated with few passable roads to connect it to the rest of Virginia. This began to change in the twentieth century with the growing popularity of automobiles and the Byrd Road Act of 1932 in which the maintenance and construction of secondary roads was taken over by the State of Virginia. These factors redirected transportation from the water to the land and the paved roads provided easier access to Richmond instead of Baltimore, launching the "Rivah Era" for the county (Chowning 2012:251-252). Additionally, in 1952 the completion of the George Coleman Bridge over the York River between Yorktown and Gloucester County provided some stimulus to trade and commerce through the connection of the Middle Neck and the rapidly growing Tidewater area. As the second half of the twentieth century began and farming and oystering began to decline, these roads offered county residents new forms of employment in West Point, Newport News and Richmond (Chowning 2012:338).

The 1950s also brought about a new industry to the region which remains an important aspect of local economy. As the overall economy continued to grow following World War II, many residents had increased time for travel and leisure and the Middle Neck emerged as a popular

recreational and tourism area focused on the river. Many people were now able to afford buying their own boat and began building “summer cottages” on the water and in the last decades of the twentieth century the county’s population increased by 57-percent (Chowning 2012:253). Recreational boating and other water sports rose in popularity and numerous small communities developed along the many inlets and harbors.

Just as tobacco and seafood were economic forces in earlier centuries, recreation, tourism, and “second home” ownership along the rivers and creeks became the new economic force in the second half of the twentieth century and twenty-first century (Chowning 2012:338). According to a 1974 economic analysis of the Middle Peninsula, as the twentieth century neared its close Middlesex County was becoming a “haven for water sports enthusiasts” (VEPCo 1974:7).

### *Palmer House*

In the mid-twentieth century, the Palmer House continued to be owned by the Revere family, Lucy Catherine Revere (1914-1956), Edward and Zelma Revere (1956-1964), and Howell L. and Elizabeth Anne Carlton Revere (1964-2003). It appears that Edward Revere followed the roads west to Richmond and graduated from the Virginia Mechanics Institute and attended the University of Richmond (“Timberlake Engagement Announced” 1951). When his mother, Lucy, passed away in 1956 Edward was living in Richmond; a later article indicates that he remained in the city (“Mrs. Lucy C. Revere” 1956; “Timberlake” 1968).

Howell and Elizabeth Revere on the other hand remained in Middlesex County. The Palmer land continued to be farmed and Howell operated a general store in Hartfield. He also created a business based on twentieth century needs. After purchasing a gas range in 1942, he found that there was no local supplier of propane in Middlesex County. Revere stored cylinders of gas at his general store in Hartfield to accommodate his family’s gas range. This grew into the delivery of propane tanks and by the early twenty-first century “Revere Gas” had grown to be one of the largest private businesses in the county with six locations and a fleet of more than 60 service and delivery vehicles (Chowning 2012:357). In this way, Revere accommodates the newer population living in Middlesex County.

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#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

With Middlesex County's location on Virginia's Middle Peninsula, its economy has historically focused on both land and water, predominately tobacco, diverse agriculture, and the oyster industry. Minor economic forces include the construction of boats, timber, and dairy. These historic economic drivers were encouraged by steamboats throughout the nineteenth century. Water life continues to play an important role in the major, modern economic driver of tourism. With the Palmer House's inland location, residents and owners of the house partook in the major land industries to various degrees.

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