Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander, Ph.D.
Professor of History and Dean, College of Liberal Arts
Norfolk State University

Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

English depiction of paramount chief Powhatan (Wahunsenacawh) in a longhouse at Werowocomoco

John Smith's Map of 1612

The Powhatan Chiefdom in 1607
After Wahunsenacawh’s death, his younger brother, Opechancanough began a war with the English who were unrelenting in encroaching on Indian lands. The Anglo-Powhatan War began in 1622 in an effort to force the English from Powhatan territories. This effort was met with strong reprisals from the English, ultimately resulting in the near destruction of the tribe. The twenty-year war ended with the capture and killing of Opechancanough. The subsequent treaty that was negotiated with the Powhatans (Treaty of 1646) marked the effective dissolution of the united confederacy.

The town of Skicoak was located on the Elizabeth River. This 1590 White-De Bry map shows the town near one of the tributaries of the Chesapeake (not far from the upper Chowan), which river they call Occam.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Original site of Norfolk, 1680.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Diverse population in Norfolk developed and lines of free and enslaved became diffused.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

This scene taken from a 1775 map, which captured the activities of enslaved black workers and white merchants on the waterfront. African Americans were so critical to the shipping industry as stevedores, common laborers, caulkers, shipwrights, pilots, and crewmen that it was doubtful the commerce would have developed as fully without their presence.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Growth of Norfolk as a seaport.

Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation and creation of Ethiopian Regiment
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Rebuilding of Norfolk after American Revolution.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

William Still, a runaway slave, became a noted station master on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. Still recorded over 763 freedom seekers from the South. Of that number, 285 came from Virginia; 350 came from Maryland, 42 from Delaware, and the rest from other states including NC, GA, SC, MS, LA, KY, and Washington, DC.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

Captain Alfred Fountain’s schooner was boarded by the Norfolk Mayor and a search team to find fugitives hidden aboard the ship. Twenty-two escaped successful in 1855.

Numerous laws were passed in Virginia beginning in 1800, establishing night watchmen who would stop any African Americans traveling at night. By the 1850s, the law would mandate the search of all vessels leaving Virginia’s ports.

Slaveowner Dr. Charles F. Martin, dentist, had an office located at 21 E. Main, lived in the rear of 23 Holt Street (at the corner of Talbot Street). His slave and dental apprentice, Sam Nixon, alias Thomas Byne, worked as a conductor on the UGRR. Sam was described as a dark-complexioned slave who, because he substituted for the doctor in all aspects of the dental trade, was able to travel about the city at all hours without being questioned. Sam eventually came under the suspicion of the slaveholders, and escaped in 1855 and went to Philadelphia. Eventually, he moved to New Bedford, MA. He would later return to Norfolk, set up his practice as a dentist, and within four years, he was elected to the city council of that city. He opened an office in New Bedford, and sought to improve himself in his profession by studying medicine, served in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War, returned to Norfolk in 1865 and entered politics, serving as the Norfolk representative to the 1868 Virginia Constitutional Convention.
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

St. Mary’s Basilica and its possible connection to Norfolk’s Underground Railroad
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future

The City of NORFOLK
Mermaid Tales: Past, Present & Future