

[slide 1] Brent Cemetery title slide

I am a native of Virginia—having been born in Fairfax County at Fort Belvoir Army Hospital. [Slide 2]

In 1971, I moved with my parents and brother from Prince William County to North Stafford.

My parents still reside in this home on U.S. 1 just minutes north of Telegraph Road (referred to by locals as Crucifix Road) or Route 637 where Brent Cemetery is located. From this part of North Stafford north to the Prince William County line, their home is one of only 3 single family residences left on the western side of Route 1. [Slide 3]

As a historic preservation major at Mary Washington College in the 1980s, Professor John Pearce suggested that students pick a local historic property to research for a National Register nomination. I was thrilled to choose a site close to home.

Who knew that the deed books that I used in the Stafford's Circuit Court Clerk's Office to trace the cemetery's history 27 years ago would play such a pivotal role in my life and career choice. [Slide 4]

The only substantial link with the Brent family of Stafford County which still survives today is the burying ground (more commonly known as Brent Cemetery.)

The Brents—specifically Giles and his sisters, Mary and Margaret—played a significant part in the early history of both Maryland and Virginia. [Slides 5]

Giles and his sisters, born in Gloucestershire, England and raised in the Catholic faith, emigrated to Maryland in 1638. [Slide 6]

Margaret Brent is considered one of the most prominent women figures in Colonial American history.

Giles was a political and economic leader. He was a councilor, treasurer, commander of Kent Island, a judge, a burgess and in the mid-1640s, Deputy Governor.

He and his sisters settled around St. Mary's City [Slide 7], on the eastern shore of St. Mary's River. Like Aquia, St. Mary's River was also a tributary of the Potomac River. Collectively, the Brents were able to secure large land grants in the state.

[Slide 8] According to Wikipedia, Margaret Brent was the first woman in the English North American colonies to appear before a court of the Common Law. She advocated for her legal prerogatives as an unmarried gentlewoman of property, consistent with English law. **There is an elementary school in Stafford named for her.**

In 1644, Giles, an ally of Gov. Leonard Calvert married native American, Mary Kittimundiq—daughter of the chief of the Piscataway Indians.

With political unrest in Maryland (the outbreak of Fendall's Rebellion) combined with a need for religious freedom, Giles and his wife Mary along with sisters, Margaret and Mary moved across the Chesapeake Bay to Virginia sometime between 1647-1650.

They established the plantations of *Peace* and *Retirement* on the northeast shore of Aquia Creek in Northumberland County—thereby, becoming Virginia's first Catholic settlers. [Slide 9]

Northumberland County was formed about 1645 from the district of Chickacoan, the early 17th century name for the region between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. Various early records from this county were destroyed by a fire in the clerk's office in 1710. By 1653, Westmoreland was formed from Northumberland and Stafford was formed from Westmoreland County in 1664. At one time, Northumberland County included the whole of the Virginia shore of the Potomac from Alexandria to the Chesapeake Bay

The name Aquia was derived from the Potomac Indians who first inhabited the land. **In the Algonquin language, it means "place of the gulls."**

[Slide 10] Aquia Creek, a tributary of the Potomac River, begins as a fresh water stream in Fauquier County, flows fresh across Stafford County for 15 miles and is tidal for its last 5 miles to the Potomac River.

As in Maryland, all Brents engaged in land speculation in Virginia.

Margaret had a 700 acre grant north of Great Hunting Creek which became the nucleus for the town of Alexandria.

The Brent plantation *Peace* was located near Brent's Point on Aquia Creek

[Slide 11] On land adjacent to the Brent's plantations, the Waller family established the plantation *Concord* in 1650.

In 1652, the Fitzhugh family established the plantation *Tranquility*. Both the Waller and Fitzhugh families were Protestants.

In 1658, Mary Brent died.

Slightly before the deaths of Giles and Margaret Brent, between 1662-1670, their nephew George arrived in Virginia. He was born in England ca. 1640 in Worcestershire, England.

Like his aunts and uncle, he was also a Catholic.

George Brent acquired 500 acres of land from his uncle north of his uncle's estate.

Margaret Brent died in 1671 and Giles Brent died in 1672.

George Brent soon achieved a prominent place in the history of Virginia.

He and his brother Robert practiced law.

In the 1680s, George Brent and others were organizing efforts to settle French Huguenots in the Virginia colony.

In 1683, he was appointed Receiver-General North of the Rappahannock.

[Slide 12] The land that the Town of Brentsville in Prince William County now encompasses was originally part of the Brent Town Grant of 1687. George Brent and three London residents were granted 30,000 acres by King James II to exercise their religious freedom. [Slide 13] **This was the first instance of religious toleration in Virginia. The crucifix, placed there in 1930 by the Catholic Women's Club of Richmond, remembers the Brents and religious freedom. Sources do exist that put this claim into doubt. "The Brents deserve acknowledgment as pioneers, and they were clearly Catholic, but the Brent Town project was a real estate venture motivated by a hope of profit and targeted initially towards Protestants, rather than a pioneering initiative to establish religious freedom for Catholics in Virginia."**

He was acting Attorney General under the Crown from 16 Nov. 1686 to before 1 May 1688.

In 1690, he was appointed Ranger General of the Northern Neck.

Representing Stafford in 1688, he was the only Catholic member of the House of Burgesses.

Like his relatives, George acquired immense tracts of land in Northern Virginia—south of Alexandria.

He died in 1699.

The cemetery is located northeast of the George Brent's original home, *Woodstock*. [Slide 14]

The original owner of the site was George Brent, esquire. From this point on, however, the ownership of the cemetery becomes impossible to trace accurately until 1792.

The reason for this difficulty is that Stafford County is one of Virginia's Lost Record Localities. A county of catastrophic loss, very few original records exist prior to the Civil War.

In 1792, George Brent, third from the original, entrusted his 50 acres of land to his cousin Daniel Carroll Brent of Washington and others. According to his mandate, the trustees were to establish a town by the name of Woodstock.

Daniel Carroll Brent later released this property in 1822 to William P. Bayly of Stafford (who apparently had purchased it from George Brent.) Mr. Bayly retained the property from 1822-1825. According to the 1810 Federal census, William P. Bayly owned 34 slaves.

Next, the property was jointly owned from 1825-1842 by a Mr. Hancock Eustace and William P. Fitzhugh, both of Stafford. According to the description in Deed Book MM, found in Stafford Circuit Court Clerk's office, out of 745 acres—six acres was reserved for a mill seat and family graveyard. According to the 1810 Federal census, Hancock Eustace owned 24 slaves.

These men, in turn, deeded the property to the sons of William P. Bayly, William and Pierce, who retained the property for a mere 10 days.

The Bayly brothers, in turn, transferred their holding to Charles F. Suttle who owned the property from 1842-1845. According to the 1840 Federal census, Charles F. Suttle owned 16 slaves.

The chain of ownership continues with Edward Waller (1845-1882) The property, at this point, was reduced to 130 acres.

His daughter, Ellen Bayton, from 1882-1908 and Thomas Waller (1908-1924). During Waller's ownership, the site was part of an orchard farm.

It was not until 1924 that anything was done to preserve this historical cemetery. In that year, Bishop Denis J. O'Connell of Richmond purchased the land incorporating the cemetery. This purchase included ten acres of land. His basic intent involved converting the cemetery into a National Shrine. With the help of the Catholic Women's Club, he began the fulfillment of his dream.

The land was cleared. A brick wall was built to enclose the main portion of the cemetery in 1930 and an altar, for dedications, was erected in 1933. [Slides 15]

[slide 16] On April 7, 1937, a WPA worker, Julia Marie Heflin from Cropp, Va., conducted a historical inventory of the cemetery. [slide 17] She was able to identify, by reading the tombstones, eleven individual graves which date from 1685-1802. Among those identified: the two wives of George Brent, George Brent's oldest daughter, Ann Maria Brent, who died on Feb. 17, 1685 at the age of 8, [slide 18] a husband and wife, Katherine and Dennis Doyle, who died a year apart in the late 1790s, Flora, a slave who

died in 1697 and Mariah Bronaugh, daughter of Marmai Fitzhugh who died in 1802. Her headstone was recently returned and reerected.

George and his brother Robert are also identified as being buried there but those may be the graves of George Brent's children instead. [Slides 19]]

Based on the marker erected by the Catholic Women's Club, Miss Heflin connected the historical importance of the cemetery to the mission of the Spanish Jesuits in 1570—which turns out to have taken place on the York River. [Slide 20]

At one time, copper plates were apparently affixed to several of the graves—indicating that some knew of their importance. The plates were stolen by Union soldiers during the Civil War. In documents from the Catholic Women's Club in 1925, Marie Bernhardt states that two have been reclaimed—Robert Brent and George's second wife and are said to be in possession of W. B. Chilton of Washington, D.C.—who wrote a series about the Brent family in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* in the late 1890s.

Thirty years later, Richmond bishop John J. Russell visited the site and found it in deplorable condition; vandals had broken part of the brick wall, torn down some of the bricks from the altar and desecrated the tombstones. He then asked the George Brent Council (Knights of Columbus) to maintain and restore the cemetery. The council gladly accepted the task.

In 1969, the Virginia State Council of the Knights of Columbus implemented a program to establish Brent Cemetery as an important historical site. The first step involved creating the George Brent Foundation.

In April 1970, due to increased vandalism in the area, the George Brent Foundation allocated funds for erecting a security fence around the property. [Slide 21]

[slide 22] In 1971, a historical marker was erected, inside the grounds, to commemorate the First Catholic chapel in Virginia. George Gordon, local historian, had the Foundation locate the old chapel in Oct. 1868. He remembered the ruins from the early 1930s. The Smithsonian Institution was to verify the stones. Based on what is known about the time period, the chapel's existence is doubtful. The initial reason for the archaeological dig conducted in the 1990s was to verify that a chapel existed. The volunteer who led the dig, Martha Williams, states: "I don't think there ever was one." To have constructed a specific Catholic chapel during the late 17th century in Virginia would have been an act that called attention to the "popish" population that lived on the site. The Anglican church was the established faith at that time. I think it far more likely that any religious services would have been held in private houses such as *Woodstock*.

The upkeep and maintenance of the cemetery was continued by George Brent Council 5332 through the 1970s. The Council is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

Sometime in the early 70s with the building of St. William of York Catholic Church, the property came under the ownership of the Diocese of Arlington.

By the time that I went to the site in 1985 with Professor John Pearce, a local resident, Carl Lewis, talked about helping care for the site.

From the time that I completed my project until the mid-1990s, the property essentially remained as it was. Access to the site was never improved. However, the Knights of Columbus along with the Catholic Women's Club and parishioners of St. William of York have continued to celebrate a yearly field mass since 1929.

From 1995-1999, volunteers from the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Archaeological Society of Virginia conducted digs on behalf of the Diocese of Arlington and the local parish, St. William of York.

Field work identified both a substantial prehistoric component and the boundaries of a domestic site that appears to have been occupied between 1675-1725—now known as George Brent's original home, Woodstock.

The house was located about three-quarters of a mile from the town of Aquia. Due to its proximity to Government Island, it had a free stone basement. The site of the house is the earliest Anglo-American site North of Fredericksburg in Virginia that has been examined archeologically.

Brent's heirs abandoned the old plantation house about 1725 and built a more elaborate home on a hill nearby—a ridge above the flats of Aquia Creek. This is the present day site of Aquia Harbour's Golf and County Club.

Cartographers with Rochambeau's army, which camped in the area on their way to Yorktown in 1782, carefully mapped this larger plantation. [Slide of Rochambeau Map—Slide 23]

1998 marked the discovery of 2 items recovered from the basement fill:

The mariner's cross, which might have been a pendant or part of a rosary and the King James II's tuppence (1687) which has been perforated and could have been worn around the neck. Both of these items represent the Brent family's loyalties. [Slides 24]

In 1999, efforts exposed the hearth and chimney base of George Brent's original house. [Slide 25]

The report cites that the property at this time was cared for by the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus.

The 1999 dig also identified and mapped 14 additional graves outside of the fence. It is not known who is buried in these graves.

In the late 1930s, the property surrounding the cemetery was subject to sand and gravel mining in support of local road building efforts. This effort included mechanical leveling of the area around the site, except for the cemetery itself and the immediate adjacent area. Because of these disturbances to the area, no outbuildings associated with the Brent plantations were discovered.

A recent visit to the site marked the discovery of 2 20th century graves—one is of a male 94 years old, 1894-1988, Augustine Morales. The other is a male—most likely a still birth. The baby's name was Patrick Donahue and his marker only contains the year 1995. [Slides 26]

Even today, who is really buried in Brent cemetery and beyond, like the history of this site, remains a mystery.

We are left with more questions than answers.

[Slide 27] **As I mentioned before, ever since 1929, there is a field mass celebrated at the Brent Cemetery. Prior to the mass, the Knights of Columbus gather at the crucifix to place flowers at the site. It is held every October. You might wish to view this event commemorating the Brents and freedom of religion. Just remember that Freedom of Religion in Virginia first happened in Stafford.**