

Mark May for Membership Meeting

This year's Museum membership meeting will be held on Thursday, May 19th at Holy Trinity Parish House beginning at 5:30 pm. President Gordon Graves will summarize the year's activities and financials, followed by a vote on the slate of candidates for Museum Board officer and member positions.

Nominees for office are *President*: Jan Mroczek; *Vice President*: Henry Hale; *Secretary*: Pat Jessup; *Treasurer*: Bob Valliant.
New Board candidates are Ward Bucher and Nick Nazare.

The evening's highlight will be the announcement of the 2011 winners of the Douglas Hanks Jr. Preservation Award.

Please let us know if you will be attending. Phone: 410-226-0191 or email oxford_museum@verizon.net.

What's in Grandma's Attic?

"All kinds of neat stuff!!" is the answer Dorette Murray expects from children viewing the Museum's new educational exhibit of that title. Murray noted that the exhibit more or less defined itself as she and curator, Leo Nollmeyer, searched through the Museum's computer data base for 18th and 19th c. artifacts used by Oxford citizens in their daily life. "The flagged items looked like my grandmother's attic."

Ideas were flying. That's the way Murray described the brainstorming meeting of the Educational Committee which included Nollmeyer, Nancy Wilson of the Board, Meryl Nolan, a museum professional and relatively new Museum member, as well as, Dr. John Seidel, Professor of Anthropology at Washington College and his wife, Elizabeth Seidel, Director of the Archeology Lab at Washington College. Nolan and the Seidels were particularly helpful with suggestions about the mechanics of interactive presentations.

Kids will get a chance to card wool, use a butter press (but not with butter) and grind coffee. There will be prizes for those identifying mystery items. The children will learn what a now defunct "peck" is. Remember the line in the old song "I love you a bushel and a peck." Is a peck bigger or smaller than a bushel? If you don't know, bring a kid to the Museum and find out. "What's in Grandma's Attic" will answer all such questions throughout the Museum's season.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Oxford Museum collects, records, interprets and shares materials relating to the history of Oxford, Maryland and the surrounding area. Founded in 1964, this nonprofit volunteer organization provides resources for historical research and sponsors a variety of programs, activities, and exhibits to foster knowledge and appreciation of this community's people and history.

THE OXFORD MUSEUM, INC. BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gordon Graves, *President*
Jan Mroczek, *Vice President*

Pat Jessup, *Secretary*
Bob Valliant, *Treasurer*

Ned Crabb	Henry Hale	Dorette Murray	Doreatha Rasin
Jeanne Foster	Susie Hopkins	Larry Myers	Beth Schucker
Sally Fronk	Kathleen Kurtz	Tot O'Mara	Nancy Wilson
Rebecca Gaffney	Bill MacFarland	Carol Patterson	

Ellen Anderson, *Executive Director*
Leo Nollmeyer, *Curator, Board Emeritus*

The Oxford Historian

Editors: Beth Schucker, Rebecca Gaffney

Contributors: Rev. Jay Bunting, Pat Jessup, Dorette Murray, Larry Myers

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 202
Easton, MD



The
Oxford
Museum, Inc.

*A special place.
A special heritage.*

100 South Morris Street
PO Box 131
Oxford, MD 21654

CURRENT RESIDENT OR



1683

Spring 2011

The Oxford Historian

The Oxford Museum
100 S. Morris Street, PO Box 131, Oxford, MD 21654
410-226-0191 (phone), 410-226-0225 (fax)
www.oxfordmuseum.org, oxford_museum@verizon.net

A New Look at Two Revolutionary Heroes Associated with Oxford

What do Oxford and Tripoli have in common? Perhaps a clue lies in an 1785 letter from Spain to Baltimore. Recently acquired by the Museum, the letter was written to "Tench Tilghman & Co, Merchants," by Valentin Riera, head of a prominent Barcelona merchant/shipping company engaged in foreign trade with the new American republic. The letter raises intriguing questions about the role that the two famous "Oxford" contemporaries, Colonel Tench Tilghman and Robert Morris, Jr., may have played in the formation of the American Navy and



its first major victories on foreign shores in the Barbary Wars. Tilghman was the scion of an early Talbot County planter family and George Washington's personal aide-de-camp during the revolutionary war; Morris, the son of wealthy Oxford merchant Robert Morris, has been called the "financier of the American revolution." For details of this unsuspected tale, please look on the Museum's web site at [www.oxfordmuseum.org/Oxford Museum 2011.htm](http://www.oxfordmuseum.org/Oxford_Museum_2011.htm).

The letter, which reached Tilghman less than a year before his untimely death, refers to the likelihood that "the Moorish Corsairs" – pirates from the north African "Barbary States" centered in Tripoli – made it too dangerous for Tilghman's ships and those of other American companies to enter the Mediterranean to trade. Riera put his request bluntly: "We hope the Congress of the United States will presume to put a stop to these dangerous consequences by some means or other, that you may have free trade in this side, and hope that when that period will come our correspondence will take a more favorable turn, with a reciprocal advantage..." Riera knew that America had no navy; its "continental navy" during the revolution was a mixture of privateers and merchant vessels, with the last ship sold in 1785. However, Riera also knew that Tilghman and his business partner since 1784, Robert Morris, had the best contacts with George Washington and the U.S. Congress to make a case for building a force for intervention.

(con't on inside left)

Two Revolutionary Heroes (con't)

The question is: did they, and if so how? Will we ever find a definitive answer? What we do know is that a reluctant Congress, encouraged by President Washington, finally commissioned a small fleet of warships in 1796 for defense against the British, the French, and other enemies of its growing trade. Stephen Decatur led a small fleet into the Mediterranean in 1801 and through daring raids forced terms on the three major Barbary States. Tripoli only accepted terms in 1805 when Decatur captured its coastal port city by attacking from both sea and land. This first American victory on foreign soil is of course memorialized in the Marine hymn. The letter will be on permanent display in the Oxford Museum beginning with its opening on Oxford Day.

Reserve Now for Chocolates & Champagne



Capt. Bill



Sara Benson

A party to celebrate a special couple, former ferry owner and captain, the late Bill Benson and his wife Sara, will be held Friday, April 29 from 7 pm to 9 pm at Holy Trinity's parish house. Savor chocolates and champagne, listen to romantic ballads

performed by Nick and Evelyn Nazare and preview "To Sara With Love," the Museum's special exhibit of the many Valentine and other handmade greeting cards Capt. Bill crafted for the love of his life.

\$15 per person for museum members, \$20 non-members. Call the Museum to make reservations (410-226-0191) or email oxford_museum@verizon.net.

A New Twist on an Old Tale: The Battle of Benoni Point

One of the ironies in history is how frequently the smallest action (or lack thereof) turns the tide of major events. Following the lead of historians writing about Maryland Loyalists, Rev. Jay Bunting suggests that the Battle of Benoni Point, recorded in history as a minor fray, could have changed the outcome of the Revolutionary War--if only....

On November 7, 1780, the Tory schooner *Spitfire* carrying a 4-pound cannon and a crew of about forty men, entered the mouth of the Tred Avon River and anchored off Benoni Point. A party landed and seized three Americans. The British hoped they would serve as pilots to guide them into Oxford. They didn't enter the port, perhaps warded off by the patrols operating in the area under the command of Capt. Jeremiah Banning. Instead the *Spitfire* sailed further up the Choptank and seized a schooner. On November 9th, *Spitfire* returned to Benoni Point, and no longer needing the American captives, released them in shallow water so they could wade safely ashore. Banning's militia, not knowing their intent, fired on the British. Over time, this mere fray has been embellished with the name "Battle of Benoni Point."

Why were the British interested in Oxford? According to Dickson Preston's *History of Oxford: The First Three Centuries*, they were after vessels and tobacco, tobacco being the "currency" of the day. But for a twist of timing, they might have had an entirely different mission if a plot being hatched by Maryland Loyalists had come to fruition.

James Chalmers, a Lt. Colonial in the Maryland Loyalists and resident of nearby Chestertown, was aware that Oxford, along with Annapolis, was a major supply port for the continental army. He proposed to Sir Henry Clinton and Lord Cornwallis that they capture Oxford as a springboard to take Annapolis, giving them control of the upper Bay. Then, if they took Port Penn on the Delaware, they would control Philadelphia and the supply lines for the entire Continental Army. For reasons unknown, Cornwallis and Clinton were not convinced. Perhaps they were unwilling to listen to strategy suggested by military "non-professionals."

The idea of the British seizing control of the upper Chesapeake to cut off supply lines didn't die. It resurfaced as a recommendation from Major General William Phillips, subordinate to Sir Henry Clinton. The British high command may have ignored Chalmers suggestion, but listened this time (considering the source perhaps?) and gave Phillips permission to capture Oxford. Phillips died of typhoid fever at the beginning of May 1781 before he could execute the orders. Five months later the British were trapped at Yorktown and the Revolutionary War was over.

If the British had heeded Chalmers' initial proposal, this Loyalist plot might have succeeded. The Battle of Benoni Point could have been a major action in our war for independence and the outcome of the war might have been different.

(In the Museum's collection is a copy of Banning's journal which provides his own account of the Battle of Benoni Point.)

Special Slates for Sale

Starting May 14, the Museum will offer a limited number of framed slates for sale which were made from the blackboard (slateboard) that hung in the historic schoolhouse and sail loft at 208 Tilghman Street.

The Museum gratefully thanks Ward Bucher for donating the original slate on which countless children scribbled their alphabets and Downes Curtis sketched sail designs for skipjacks and sloops. We also thank Evan Kruger of Solidtops for cutting the large slate into multiples and Ned Crabb of Crabb & Company for donating material and labor to frame them. Each slate measures approximately 9" x 12" and is framed in cedar, suitable for hanging inside or out. A limited number are available at \$50 each. Each slate comes with the story of its origin.

Oxford Day Almost Here!

Oxford Day (April 30), is almost here. The list of things to see, do, taste, experience is huge with exciting options for all ages and interests.

For those with a historic bent (and that would be our readers of course), there's a free sail on the skipjack *Nathan of Dorchester* and a chance to chat with that important personage in Oxford's history, Mr. Robert Morris. Mr. Morris will be about town, from appearances at the Community Center's pancake breakfast in the morning to the parade and strolling in the park afterward. If you see him, inquire when he sent Robert Morris, Jr. from Oxford to Philadelphia. We've been trying to find out for years!

Visitors wanting to know more about Oxford's origins will find it at the Museum where they can enjoy permanent and special exhibits and purchase a self-guided walking tour brochure containing a chronology of the town's historical highlights.

Our gratitude to everyone whose volunteer efforts enable this celebration of our special town to weave its magic. Let's hope for warmer weather or those pirates will really be shivering their "timbers"!

For complete information on Oxford Day activities, visit the Oxford Day website at: www.oxfordday.org.

2011 Lecture Series Begins with Bucher

On May 14th nationally known restoration architect Ward Bucher will discuss the do's and don'ts of restoring historic houses. The talk is scheduled for 11 am at St. Paul's Church in Oxford. Mr. Bucher will discuss a range of



Ward Bucher

restoration strategies with examples from many areas of Maryland, including Talbot County. He will also discuss construction techniques, hiring architects and contractors, and how to get Maryland tax credits for restoring your home. Mr. Bucher, AIA, has built a career designing and preserving spaces people love. He has extensive experience in historic preservation, architecture and green buildings in Maryland and throughout the United States. He has also volunteered his technical expertise as a member of numerous boards and commissions and is currently the preservation architect for two National Historic Landmark properties.

Attendees are invited to lunch at one of the town's two historic, landmark restaurants, Pope's Tavern and the Robert Morris Inn. Both restaurants will donate a portion of lunch proceeds to the Oxford Museum from those who dine there following the lecture.

An open house tour follows from 2 pm to 4 pm featuring the following historic homes:



310 South Morris Street



102 Caroline Street

301 South Morris Street (winner of the 2007 Douglas Hanks Jr. Preservation Award); **102 Caroline Street** (historic preservation by architect Cameron Mactavish, AIA); **208 Tilghman Street** (home of speaker Ward Bucher, formerly Oxford's African American schoolhouse and sail loft of noted sailmaker Downes Curtis).

The program and tour are free and open to the public. Donations gratefully accepted.



208 Tilghman Street