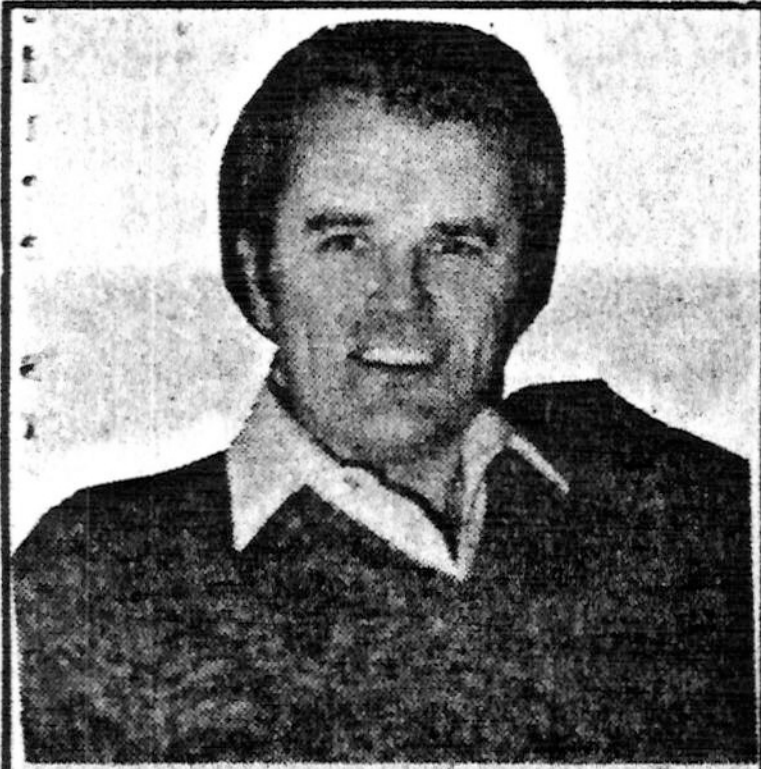


# Indians, John Smith play part in Saxis history



## Chronicles

By Kirk Mariner

### (First of three parts)

Strictly speaking, Saxis is not an island. Though located two miles out into the Chesapeake Bay, it is separated from the mainland by marshland, not water. Still, for centuries that stretch of marshland kept Saxis as remote as Tangier or Watts or Smith, functionally if not officially an island. And throughout most of its history townfolk have readily referred to their community as "Saxis Island."

The many stone arrowheads found in Saxis over the years are evidence that the Indians at least knew and frequented the place, though not necessarily that they actually lived there. In fact, given the Indians' lifestyle and dependence upon the land, this remote piece of high ground seems an unlikely spot for a permanent settlement.

Probably the first white man to see Saxis was none other than Captain John Smith, who explored this region in 1608. Smith did not land at Saxis, but sailed around it, up through Pocomoke Sound and into the Pocomoke River. But the map that he published in 1612 as a result of his journey makes it certain that he observed it. For there, very

clearly jutting out into the Chesapeake, is the peninsula of marsh that we know as Saxis, its northern shore bordering the Sound, its southern shore sheltering the wetlands we know today as the Bernard Islands. And at its western tip is the little island of marsh known today as Tunnell's Island.

It was not until 1666 -- late by Eastern Shore of Virginia standards -- that anyone laid claim to this lonely piece of high ground. By then most of the good land on the Bayside had already been "patented," and was being settled. Charles Ratcliffe owned the nearest high ground on the mainland (an area southeast of Sanford), and other settlers had by-passed Saxis for better land further up the Shore.

Then towards the end of the 17th century, the English settlers began to turn a wishful eye upon the marshy islands on the Bayside and the Seaside, not as a place to live but for use as pasture, naturally "fenced" grazing lands for their livestock. In 1666, George Parker and Robert Sikes took out "patents" for such land, which they labelled "St. George's Island" and "Sikes' Island." Two years later Sikes obtained Parker's portion. Though by 1671 Robert Sikes had sold the entire property, though he never lived there and only owned the place for five years, his was the name that somehow became attached to the land. Today, more than 300 years later, it still goes by his name, for "Saxis Island" is simply a corruption of "Sikes' Island."

The first appearance on the map of the name "Sikes' Island" dates from 1673, when Augustine Herrman of Maryland published a map of the Chesapeake region, the first to employ the local placenames then actually in use on the peninsula. On Herrman's map, what we know as Saxis appears, correctly, as a peninsula with an island at

its western end. The peninsula he labeled "Ratclif" and the island "Sicsco Ile," deriving the names from landowners Ratcliffe and Sikes, even though by then neither of them still owned land in the region. For many years mapmakers in both Europe and America, copying Herrman, labelled the area either "Ratcliffe" or "Sicsco," or some variation or combination of both. Not until 1832 did a new map draw and label the features as we know them today: the marsh peninsula itself as "Sykes Island," the island off its southwestern end as "Tunnell's Island."

By 1679 the sole owner of Saxis was William Anderson, who had the entire property re-patented to himself in 1686, and it was he who brought to the island its first settlers as keepers of the cattle which he pastured there. In return for tending the livestock, they were given half the proceeds that could be obtained from dried beef, hides, butter and cheese. Anderson was from the new town of Onancock, a successful businessman remembered today as the father of Naomi Anderson Makemie, wife of the Reverend Francis Makemie, the pioneer of Presbyterianism in America. Years later Makemie himself owned Tunnell's Island.

For more than a century, Saxis was little more than an outpost of people whose main industry was cattle-keeping. In 1800, when it first appears in the census, Saxis had a population of 35, of whom only 15 were over 20 years of age, and the four households on the island -- three of whom were named Marshall -- were still raising cattle for a living.

For most of the 1700s and the first part of the 1800s Saxis goes virtually unmentioned and unnoticed in the records. In 1710 Samuel Sandford of London, former high sheriff of Accomack,

bequeathed the marshes between Saxis and the mainland as a source of income to be used for the education of poor boys in the region. On the mainland the marshes were thereafter known as the Freeschool Marsh, but on Saxis that name never became current, and it was probably well over a century before any boys from Saxis benefitted from Sandford's generosity. There must have been some activity on the island during the American Revolution, for townfolk have found buttons that have been identified as those worn by Revolutionary soldiers, but the records are silent about Saxis' part in that war. In the War of 1812, Tangier Island was occupied by the British, and the neighboring Chesapeake region was busy with activity related to the war, but again the records make no mention of the part played by Saxis.

By the mid-1800s a small village had begun to take shape on the island. The main road followed the route of today's Saxis Road from

the water's edge at the south up to approximately the location of Adolph's Market, and already the road we know as Dennis Drive had come into being. The island's first store, where a later store building still stands today at 20101 Saxis Road, was opened by John T. Lewis (1826-1886). Many of the islanders were turning to farming; seafood was not yet the principal occupation, for there was not yet a wharf for larger boats.

In the summer of 1851 the Methodists conducted a camp meeting on the island, and out of that effort grew a churchly connection which was one of the first regular contacts between Saxis and the mainland. By November 1851 there was a Sunday School on the island, "the first . . . and only school of any kind" that the community had ever seen, and by 1852 the island had a Methodist Church named Connor's Chapel.

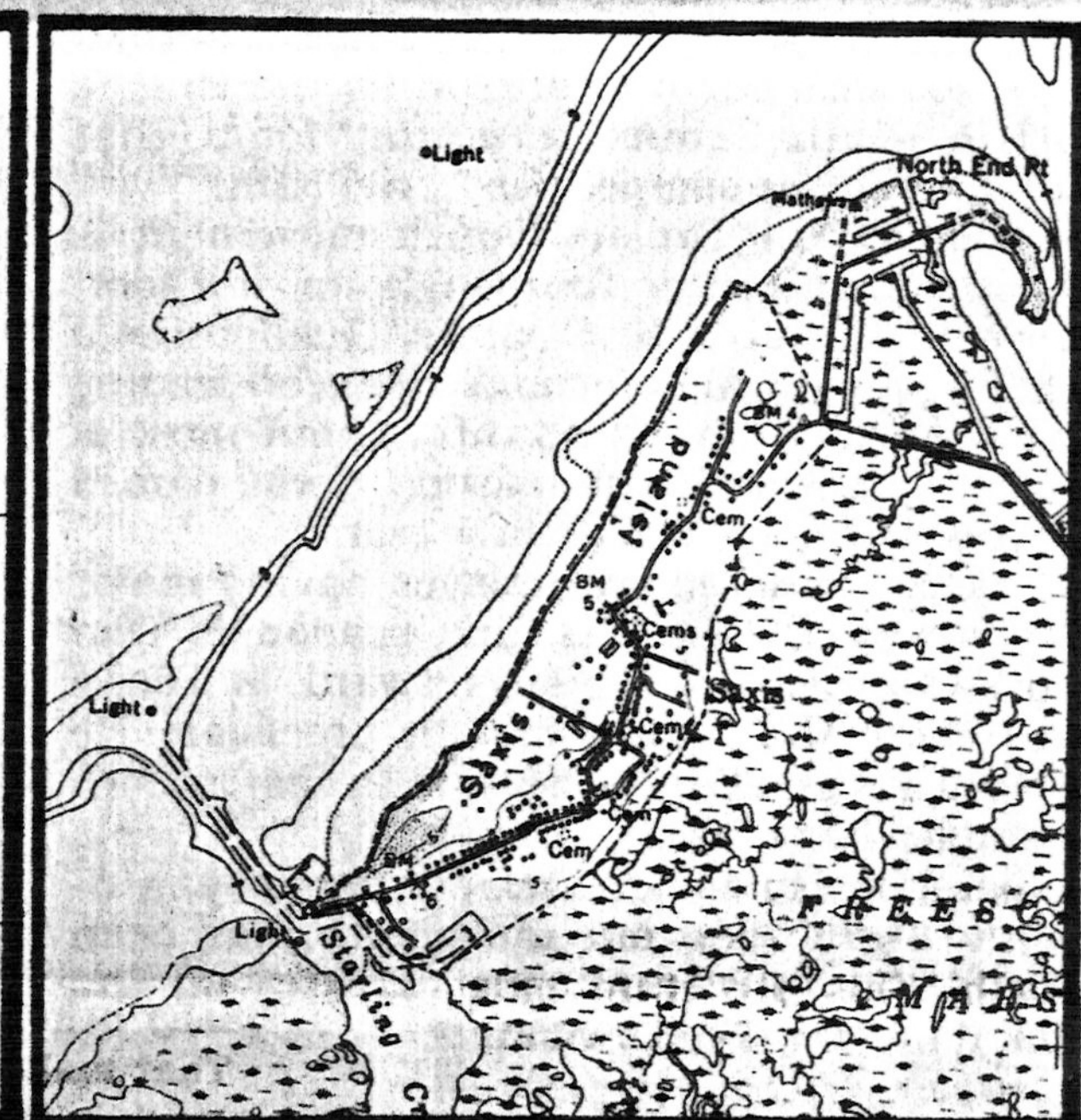
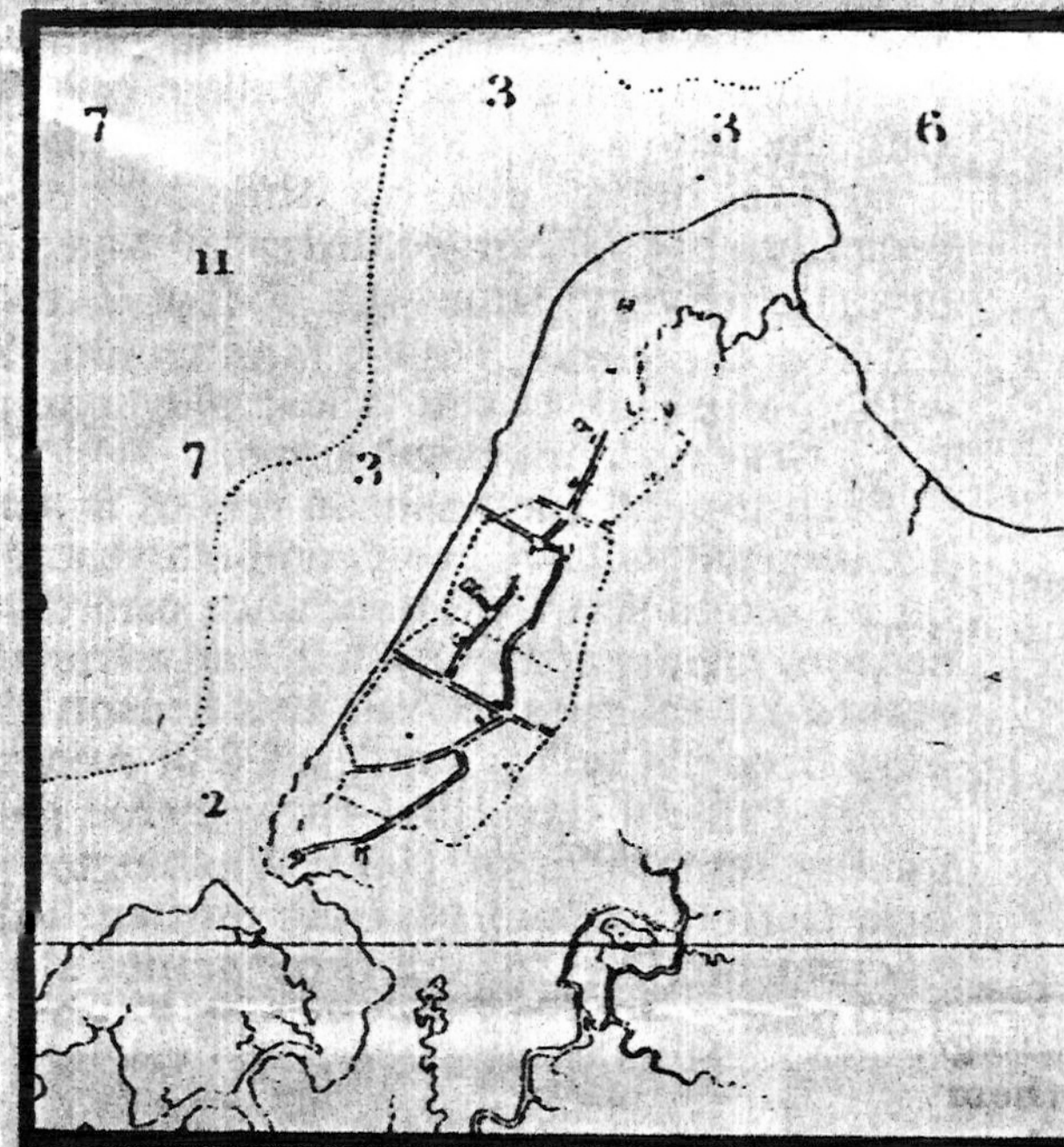
For three summers in a row there were camp meetings at Saxis, and in 1857 the

Methodists appointed the Reverend E.W. Stickney as a special pastor to the region. His parish embraced "Saxis Island . . . and other places below the mouth of Pocomoke River on the bay side." This was an area where "there are no preaching appointments at present," for Saxis, separated by its marshes, was still a remote place, well off the beaten track from most of the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

During the severely cold winter of 1855-56 the Pocomoke Sound froze completely over, and for perhaps the first time in its history Saxis could be reached by horse-drawn teams. But those who ventured across the ice to Saxis came not from Accomack County but from Maryland, from the William's Pond area of Somerset County.

The days when Sykes' Island would be truly "connected" to the mainland of Virginia's Eastern Shore lay still in the future.

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Saxis in 1859 (left) and 1968 (right). The main road of 1859 follows approximately the route of today's Saxis Road, but there is no wharf at the south end, and no connection to the mainland at the north end. At that time much of the "island" was farmland, and some sections of it were farmed until well into the 20th century.