

How the Jamestown Massacre of April, 1644  
Brought Ragsdale House to Guilford

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Perhaps some will be surprised to learn that an indirect connection exists between Guilford's presidential residence, Ragsdale House, and the family of the popular Native American princess Pocahontas (1595-1617), and that as the result of a massacre carried out by her uncle Guilford College's last three presidents have had a very fine house in which to live. In fact, except for one thoughtful, life-preserving act over 300 years ago, there might be no Ragsdale House.

Constructed in 1936 and deeded to Guilford through a plan developed at the time, Ragsdale House was for nine years the residence of Virginia Ragsdale, 1870-1945, daughter of Joseph S. and Emily Idol Ragsdale. She grew up on her parent's farm in Jamestown and attended school there prior to entering Salem Academy and Guilford College where she was graduated with a B.S. degree in the class of 1892.

Virginia's class at Guilford was a particularly strong one. According to former faculty member, Dorothy Gilbert, it led efforts to build the YMCA building (later removed in order to build Dana Auditorium on the same site), to expand the college's athletic program and to found the Guilford College Alumni Association.

Virginia attended Bryn Mawr for a year to study physics on a

scholarship specifically for the Guilford woman graduated with the highest academic average. Completing an A.B. degree at Bryn Mawr, she then studied mathematics for one year at the University of Goettingen, Germany and next taught in Baltimore for three years before returning to Bryn Mawr to complete a doctorate in 1904 on scholarship from the Baltimore Association for the Promotion of University Education for Women.

Virginia Ragsdale would, during her teaching career, occupy positions at Dr. Sach's School for Girls in New York City, at the Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr and at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, then known as "Women's College," to which she came in 1906 and where she would rise in rank to full professor and eventually serve as department chairperson from 1926 until 1928 when she retired to care for her ailing mother. Following her mother's death, she built the house known today as Ragsdale House.

Respected for her scholarship and excellence as a teacher as well as for her beauty, Virginia Ragsdale had varied interests for which she was also well known and widely admired. These consisted of flower gardening, fine furniture, genealogy, work with the Guilford College Alumni Association and attending New Garden Meeting. But what about Pocahontas' family and a massacre? Well, it happened like this.

According to Virginia historian Carl Bridenbaugh in his work entitled Jamestown, 1544-1699 which was reportedly a refinement of earlier work on the Virginia Colony, before the English established Jamestown on an island in the James River in 1607, a Native

American village known as Paspahugh had occupied the same site. The Algonkian-speaking tribes that lived there and in the surrounding area had already met and experienced numerous encounters, some not so pleasant, with western Europeans, among these primarily the Spanish who were attempting to colonize and tap the richness of the New World ahead of the English. They had also begun to recognize the danger posed by these newcomers.

Powhatan, father of Pocahontas, was despotic chief of the many tribes in the Jamestown Island area. He reportedly (since it cannot be proven beyond question through existing sources) had an older brother named Opechancanough (O-pe-chan'-can-ough) who is believed to have been born in 1544.

As Bridenbaugh relates, in 1561, Pedro Menendez de Aviles, commander of two Spanish ships enroute to Spain from Havana, discovered and entered "Bahia de Santa Maria", or what is known today as Chesapeake Bay. Curious about the ships and the strangers on board them, Opechancanough, then seventeen years of age, accompanied others onto Menendez de Aviles' flagship and soon, with his father's permission, found himself in Cadiz, Spain at the court of King Philip II and what would be the beginning of a nine-year sojourn that would see him given a royal allowance, turned over to Dominican friars at Seville for language and religious instruction, schooled experientially in diplomacy by the Jesuits, converted to Christianity, forced to remain among Dominicans in Mexico and made the namesake of its governor, Don Luis de Velasco.

By 1566 Menendez, after appointment by King Philip to the

position of adelantado (conqueror) of Florida in 1565, was ready to attempt a colonizing expedition back to the area of Bahia de Santa Maria under the navigational guidance of "Don Luis" (Opechancanough).

His ship, manned by two Dominicans, a captain name Coronas and thirty soldiers, missed the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay and anchored in Chincoteague Bay. A storm blew the vessel south, where it coasted along the Outer Banks of North Carolina and made a brief landing. Then, the ship's Portuguese pilot retraced the course back toward Bahia de Santa Maria, encountered another gale of four days' duration and was driven further out to sea. In frustration, and with no consultation with Don Luis, "the pilot, Captain Coronas, and the two friars decided to sail to Spain."

The harbor at Cadiz was entered by Opechancanough once again in October, 1566, but then by 1568 he was back in Havana enroute to assist with the conversion of his people to Christianity, and by 1570 was headed once again for the Chesapeake and his home which this time he would reach successfully on September 10th of that year.

When Don Luis appeared among his people once again, he was believed to have "risen from the dead and come down from heaven." Powhatan "offered at once" to relinquish his chieftainship to his brother, but Don Luis declined. Reportedly, Don Luis quickly returned to his old ways, once among his people. He smarted severely at public reprimands from his Jesuit companions and surprisingly within one year renounced Christianity in October,

1570, then went to live with his brothers on the Pamunkey River. Four months later on February 4, 1571, having been persuaded to return to the Jesuits, he and some of his tribesmen massacred three of the Jesuits, burned their bodies and confiscated their clothing and other belongings.

From this date onward, Opechancanough and Powhatan demonstrated acute awareness of the menace presented by the white man, and they set about by conquest to expand and solidify Powhatan's empire which now grew from six original tribes to thirty-two. Opechancanough is then believed to have conducted a second massacre at Lynnhaven Bay in early April, 1607 among some members of the Roanoke Colony of North Carolina settled in 1585 (later to become known to history as the "Lost Colony").

The first "recorded" English encounter with Opechancanough reportedly occurred later that same year in May, when the "Newport party" paid a visit to Powhatan. Then in December, Opechancanough captured John Smith and his foraging party on the Chickahominy River. Instead of killing Smith, Opechancanough spared him and ordered him to be taken to his brother, who released him and allowed him to return to Jamestown.

Smith reportedly understood Native Americans better than others in his party, but even so he underestimated their resentment, and other forceful encounters occurred. Then in 1613, Captain Samuel Argall kidnapped Pocahontas, and she was held hostage in Jamestown for nearly a year and used as a bargaining chip against runaway Englishmen, corn, stolen goods and firearms and a treaty of peace.

In 1614, she would be brought up the Pamunkey River to assist in peace negotiations, but the party of which she was a member was refused audience by Powhatan and received instead by Opechancanough. This series of events, which began with the abduction of Pocahontas, would see the power of Powhatan topple and the fortunes of Opechancanough, his designated successor and now commander of his empire, assume the ascendant. Opechancanough then persuaded his brother to accept the English terms, and he, Opechancanough, permitted Pocahontas to return to Jamestown to marry John Rolfe. Opechancanough would, in fact, attend Pocahontas' wedding in the church at Jamestown.

Although a peace was concluded in 1614, affairs between the English settlers and the local inhabitants were tenuous at best. Between 1614 and 1622, several encounters, some deadly, would occur, and Powhatan, becoming suspicious of Opechancanough's intentions, designated another successor, his younger brother Itopatin, to assume the emperorship after Powhatan's death (which would occur in 1618).

A contest for leadership of the combined tribes ensued, with Opechancanough emerging victorious and powerful enough at last to make an attempt to deal with the English once and for all time. This he would attempt to do unsuccessfully in a third massacre in 1622 and yet a fourth massacre on April 18, 1644 before he would himself be shot in the back and killed in the streets of Jamestown by an English soldier in October of that year. Opechancanough, according to Bridenbaugh, is believed to have been 100 years old at

the time. It is to this fourth and final massacre by Opechancanough that Guilford College owes thanks for Ragsdale House.

An emigrant, one Godfrey Ragsdale of E. Bridgeford, Nottinghamshire, moved to the Jamestown colony area sometime prior to 1644. He and his wife (her identity has not been confirmed, but she is believed to have been Mary Rowlett) had a child, Godfrey Jr., who was born in 1644. Ragsdale family tradition records that on the day of the massacre, which for many years would be called "Opechancanough Day", Godfrey Ragsdale's wife would somehow keep her infant from harm, but both she and her husband would perish in the massacre. Godfrey Jr., tradition tells us, would subsequently be rescued by a neighbor, John Cookney:

The said John Cookney and his wife escaped the massacre, made a survey of the settlement to see how other settlers fared, came to the Ragsdale's and found all the bodies except the infant's. Concluding that the Indians had either taken the infant with them or the mother had hidden him away, they made a search and found the child. They having no children of their own, adopted the child to the extent that they willed him their land. In 1666 Godfrey claimed his own father's estate. He made his will in 1697 and died in 1703.

Virginia Ragsdale was a lineal descendant of this infant male, Godfrey Ragsdale Jr., who survived Opechancanough's fourth attempt to wipe out the Jamestown colonists. Had this effort been successful, it would have altered not only the course of Guilford College's history, but that of the United States of America as well. One can only speculate on what "might have been."

Several generations would later link Godfrey Ragsdale Jr. and Virginia Ragsdale. According to family records in the possession of Mary Ragsdale of Jamestown, North Carolina and mother of William G. Ragsdale III '66, one of Godfrey Jr.'s sons, Benjamin, born in 1698 in Henrico County, Virginia, was Virginia's direct ancestor.

In the years following her death in 1945, Virginia's lovely Georgian style house would become a college guest house for campus visitors and a temporary home to numerous Friends such as Duke University's dean emeritus Elbert Russell who served on the Guilford faculty for a year in the mid-1940s, or retired members of the college community who would either serve as college hosts or hostesses such as Katherine Ricks; Suzette Willcutts Brown, mother of retired faculty member Mary Feagins; and Catherine Russell. Mary and her husband Carroll, also a retired member of the faculty, would live there for a while as would faculty member John Machell, Charlie Hendricks '40, Joe Keiger '50, Noel Haskell '51, Ann and Harry Raeske, Sidney Kennan, Larry Scearse, Shirley Best Rippe '55, Louis M. Hobbs, Ed Burrows, Ray Blakeslee '53 and others lost to memory.

Gifts to support the Alumni House were numerous during its years of operation, and they included money, linens, beds, kitchen equipment, crystal, rugs and a myriad of general household effects from just as many donors. Many social events and college receptions were held there over the years, but in 1965 the decision was made to convert Ragsdale House into a home for future college presidents. To date it has served as such for Grimsley and Lois



Ann Hobbs, William and Beverly Rogers, and most recently for Guilford's seventh president Don McNemar and his wife Britta.

Ragsdale House has just undergone its second major renovation within the past thirty years to improve its liveability and utility as a college facility. Although never a faculty member at Guilford or a member of its administration, Virginia Ragsdale, Class of 1892, left the college a legacy that continues to be of great benefit to the community. And as we have now seen, this would not have happened except for the love of a mother who on April 18, 1644 moved her little boy out of harm's way.

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