

Sunderland

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Photos by Shelley Gill



Our farm lies on the south side of LaGrange Creek on the Rappahannock River not far from Urbanna. The creek was not always known as LaGrange. Before the land on each side was claimed by English settlers, the creek was known as Sunderland. No one knows for sure why the creek was named Sunderland, but here are four plausible explanations:

- 1) The literal meaning of the word is to *sunder*, separate or divide *land*. The entrance to the creek is defined by two opposing points of land *sundered* by water.
- 2) Though not likely, some of the explorers may have been from the northeast coast of England and familiar with the township of Sunderland with a similar harbor entrance.
- 3) Frequently, places were named after the person who discovered or mapped them, but I have found no references to a settler named Sunderland in any of the records.
- 4) Since the creek was probably named by Royalists during the late 1640's, it was most likely named after Henry Spencer, the first Earl of Sunderland. Young Henry was the wealthy and influential 3rd Baron Spencer who was elevated to Earldom by Charles I in June of 1643 for his contributions as the King's negotiator and financial supporter. Tragically, he was killed only three months later, in his 23rd year, at the indecisive battle of Newbury. Henry was succeeded in title by his two-year old son, Robert. From Robert, the Spencer line led to Sir Winton Churchill, Lady Diana, George Washington, George Bush, and many other leaders and notables on both sides of the Atlantic.

Settlement

Settlement started and land patents were issued on the peninsula of land lying between the Rappahannock and the Piankatank Rivers, now known as Middlesex County, as early as 1642. Two years later the ancient and feeble Chief Opechancanough, successor to Powhatan, orchestrated his second concerted attack designed to drive the English from these shores. Ironically, the attack was prompted by an intense fight between a Parliamentary vessel sent to pillage the plantations of settlers loyal to the King and to disrupt shipping, and a Royalist merchant ship loaded with tobacco in the James River. Since the English were fighting each other, Opechancanough decided that the time was right to strike. Surviving settlers north of the York River were ordered to abandon their holdings and “repair speedily” to the south. Chief Opechancanough was subsequently captured and then killed by a guard in Jamestown. The ensuing treaty designating the peninsula as Indian hunting grounds delayed the inevitable settlement until 1649. During this interim period, cattle were grazed, the land was explored, and geographic features and places were named in anticipation. Most of this exploration was conducted by a closely associated group of planters living in York County. They were all in cahoots and privy to the information that the peninsula would soon be open for settlement in spite of the treaty, and they wanted to claim the best lands for themselves. They were wealthy, aristocratic second (or subsequent) sons of wealthy, aristocratic English families. All were Royalists. Some had fought for the King and were known as *Cavaliers*. They were all connected socially; they served together in the House of Burgesses or the Royal Council and three were married to Eltonhead sisters. They were all adventurers eager to risk their lives and fortunes to establish new dynasties and add to their personal prestige and family wealth. All would have been familiar with the fate of the young Earl of Sunderland and were in a position to name the creek in his honor.

As soon as settlement was permitted, these and other adventurers filed their claims: Ralph Wormeley, married to Agatha Eltonhead, claimed the land on each side of Nimcock Creek, later to become Urbanna Creek, and named his extensive holdings “Rosegill” after the family manor house in England; Capt. William Brocas, married to Eleanor Eltonhead, settled land adjacent to Rosegill; and Rowland Burnham, married to Alice Eltonhead, patented land on both sides of Sunderland Creek. Soon the creek was known and recorded as Burnham’s or “Sunderland alias Burnham’s” Creek.

Richard and Ann Eltonhead were married in 1607 and lived in Prescott, England just east of Liverpoole. They were blessed with four sons and ten daughters. The youngest, Alice, was born in 1630. The Eltonhead family owed a debt of service to the royalist Earl of Derby: a knight’s service and two gauntlets. Despite the gallant efforts of Henry Corbin and other Cavaliers, King Charles I was beheaded, Cromwell took power and the Eltonheads lost their wealth and prestige. Consequently, the sisters faced the unhappy circumstance of approaching womanhood without sufficient dowry to secure satisfactory unions in British society. Fortunately, brother William had already settled in Maryland as an agent for Lord Baltimore, and was able to secure husbands for the five younger sisters in Maryland and Virginia. In settling new lands, dowries were not deemed as important as good breeding and good breeders

Married Often and Well

Life was uncertain in the colonies at that time and all three Eltonhead sisters were soon to be widows. With inherited property and the proper relationships, they married three of the most prominent men in Virginia and literally *mothered* the Virginia aristocracy.

Burnham died in 1651 and his “relict”, Alice, married Henry Corbin, a Cavalier of Norman descent, who sought refuge in the Colonies. Henry entered Maryland and then settled on the South side of the Potomac. He married Alice in 1656, moved to her holdings on "Sunderland alias Burnham's" Creek and built Buckingham - reputed to be the finest mansion of its time in Virginia. They had three sons and five daughters, including Laetitia, great-great-grandmother to Robert E. Lee. Alice's sisters also did well: Eleanor Brocas married John Carter of Corrotoman, forming the "King Carter dynasty" and Agatha Wormeley married Sir Henry Chicheley, Deputy Governor of the colony. Through their descendants, Eltonhead genes spread amongst the gentry of tidal Virginia and then westward across the nation as the frontier expanded. Practically anyone who claims Virginia *blue blood* will find an Eltonhead or two lurking in their family tree.



The Upper Chapel of Ease

Overland travel was difficult and dangerous during the early colonial period. Colonists were required by law to carry guns to church to fend off marauding Indians. Where our paved roads are now, ancient trails cut through woods, farms and Indian fields, skirting the headwaters of the creeks that cut deeply into the backbone of the county. Sunderland Creek was a major impediment as it was wide, deep and extended far into the peninsula. When Christchurch was established on a portion of Rosegill adjacent to Capt. Brocas, it was a major ordeal for settlers at the upper end of the parish to cross the creeks to get to the "Mother Church" in the center of the county. "Chapels of Ease" were ordered built, but a dispute arose between plantation owners as to which side of Sunderland Creek should benefit from the location of the "Upper Chapel". Plantation owners from both sides met at Buckingham, could not reach agreement and ultimately drew lots to determine where the Chapel of Ease would be built. The lot fell to the North side. Mr. Corbin provided land at Buckingham, near Waterview. To even things out, each major landowner on the North side of the creek was required to crop the ear of a heifer calf for identification, and maintain her for one year. Then the heifer and any increase was given to the church to help offset the cost of construction.

LaGrange

After Henry married Alice and assumed her inheritance, the creek became known as "Mr. Corbin's Creek". Henry died in an Indian uprising in the 1680s. Indians also raided the funeral party and carried off forty persons. Henry's brother assumed his share of the estate and sold the land lying on the south side of the creek, then known as LaGrange Plantation, to the Robinsons of Hewick. Because LaGrange Plantation had its own tobacco rolling road and natural landings for shipping, it became a destination and the creek became known as LaGrange. The name *Sunderland* lay dormant and unused for over 350 years until I rediscovered it while doing patent research and resurrected it. Our house overlooking the creek is named *Sunderland* and the road leading to it is *Sunderland Creek Road*.

© Dan Gill - Published in Pleasant Living January - February '13
Something Different Country Store and Deli www.pine3.info