

# Essex County Museum and Historical Society Bulletin



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## Major Garnett and the California State Seal

*By Robert LaFollete*

Robert Selden Garnett, Jr. is well known to local historians. His distinguished family, early military career, and tragic death leading Virginia troops at Carrick's Ford have been well documented. Garnett's role in California history, however, is not well known locally. He created the State Seal of California and with that creation, he also popularized a word that would later become the California State Motto.

Garnett was born on December 16, 1819 and raised at his father's home, *Champlain*, in upper Essex. A tradition of civilian and military distinction surrounded him. Robert Selden Garnett, Sr., his father, studied law at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), and served one term in the Virginia House of Delegates and five terms (1817-1827) in the U.S. House of Representatives. His uncle, James Mercer Garnett, also served in the House of Representatives, and was a leading agriculturalist and advocate for women's education. His mother, Olympia Charlotte de Goughes, was the daughter of a French general and a leading French feminist. His cousin of nearly the same age, Richard Brooke Garnett who lived at nearby *Rose Hill*, also experienced a tragic death, but later in the war at Cemetery Ridge in Gettysburg. It is easy to imagine the two as youths riding without a care through the fields and forests of Occupacia before their years of service. Robert and Richard would later attend West Point together, graduating numbers 27 and 29 respectively in

the Class of 1841. Their classmates would later be generals on both sides of the battle line, including Confederates: Josiah Gorgas, Samuel Jones, Claudius Sears, Abraham Buford, and Federals: Zealous Tower, Horatio Wright, Albion Howe, and Alfred Sully.

Robert Garnett, Jr. soon saw action in the war with Mexico. He ended up serving as an aide-de-camp for General Zachary Taylor, participating in the important battles of Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterey, and

Buena Vista, rising to the rank of First Lieutenant in 1846. After the war he became a captain in the infantry, leading expeditions against the Yakima Indians and participating in the military administration of California. He later served as Commandant of Cadets at West Point (1852-54) while Robert E. Lee was Superintendent. He was promoted to Major in 1855.

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, February 2, 1848, ended the war with Mexico and ceded California to the U.S. The California of 1849 was a dynamic, contentious place but full of promise and vast, untapped resources. Legacies of aristocracy,

neglect, and abuse from Mexican, Spanish, and Franciscan authorities, along with absolute pandemonium and massive immigration due to the 1849 Gold Rush, were all complicated by the reluctance of Congress to address California's status due to the slavery issue. Despite these factors, there was a sense of excitement and opportunity among the people of



*The colors of the California State Seal were officially established in 1937. The 1937 seal, with updated graphics, contains the same basic elements as the original 1849 version, and remains the most current colored version available.*

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California. The military governors, Colonel Richard B. Mason and later General Bennett Riley, desiring the creation of stronger ties to the U.S. rather than Mexico, supported and encouraged California's rapid drive to statehood. Forty-eight delegates were elected to attend the Monterey Constitutional Convention in September



*Major Garnett's California State Seal was presented at the Monterey Constitutional Convention in October of 1849. The colors of the California State Seal were not officially established until 1937.*

of 1849. The people of California adopted the constitution, Peter Burnett of Sacramento was elected as civilian governor, and the military administration of California was transferred on December 20, 1849. All this was done without authorization from Congress. The Compromise of 1850 was finally reached in Congress and California became the 31st state on September 9, 1850

without ever being a territory.

Caleb Lyon, a convention clerk, presented Major Garnett's State Seal at the Monterey Constitutional Convention.

The explanation accompanying the seal, as read to the convention on October 2, 1849, is as follows:

"Around the bevel of the ring are represented thirty-one stars being the number of states of which the union will consist upon the admission of California. The foreground figure represents the Goddess Minerva having sprung full grown from the brain of Jupiter. She is introduced as a type of the political birth of the

State of California without having gone through the probation of a Territory. At her feet crouches a grizzly bear feeding upon clusters from a grape vine emblematic of the peculiar characteristics of the country. A miner is engaged in a rocker and bowl at his side, illustrating the golden wealth of the Sacramento upon whose waters are seen shipping typical of commercial greatness and the Snow-clad peaks of the Sierra Nevada make up the background while above is the Greek motto 'Eureka' (I have found it) applying either to the principle involved in the admission of the State, or the success of the miner at work."

An amendment to the design was adopted on October 11, 1849, adding the words, "The Great Seal of the State of California". The word *Eureka* is a famous exclamation attributed to Archimedes. He reportedly used it after suddenly making a scientific discovery. It basically means, "I have found it!" Garnett's use helped popularize the word in California folklore. It was made the official California State Motto in 1963.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Garnett resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to fight for his native state. He was commissioned a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army on June 6, 1861 and assigned the defense of northwest Virginia (now the state of West Virginia). Despite valiant efforts, his vastly outnumbered command was forced into a retreat. On July 13, 1861 he led a small detachment to Carrick's Ford on the Cheat River to stall the advance of Federal troops while the bulk of his force escaped. He was killed while bravely leading his men, becoming the first general to be killed in the war. His former West Point roommate, Major John Love, was the first Union officer to come to his side.

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**Robert LaFollete** lives with his wife, daughter, and two black labs in the metropolis of Tappahannock. He worked for the defense department for nearly 20 years as an Engineer and is currently teaching at Essex High School. His hobbies are gardening, outdoor sports and Virginia history. He is the co-author, along with Anita and Gordon Harrower, of the book *Essex County Virginia: Historic Homes*. We wish to thank him for this intriguing article highlighting a little-known connection between the east, here in Essex County, and the west coast of the US during the developing statehood of our country. We look forward to continuing contributions from Robert in future Bulletins.

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### *Recent Acquisitions*

Essex County Museum and Historical Society is fortunate to be the recipient of two new and important artifacts: a miniature gold-encased portrait on ivory of Dr. Thomas Branch Willson Gray (1784-1818) and a silk-on-silk needlework picture created by his wife, Lucy Yates Wellford Gray (1781-1860). Dr. Gray practiced medicine in Tappahannock from 1807 until his death at age 34. After his death Mrs. Gray started the Tappahannock Female Seminary in her home on Prince Street, which she operated for over forty years, from 1818 until her death in 1860. Lucy Gray and "Mrs. Gray's School" came to be respected and cherished names in the community. The oval portrait of Dr. Gray was painted about 1805 by one of the foremost American portrait miniature painters of the time, Benjamin Trott of Philadelphia. Trott was an associate of Gilbert Stuart of George Washington portrait fame, who called Trott "the best and closest of my imitators." Other Trott miniature portraits can be found in the collections of the Yale University Art Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The stunning portrait of Dr. Gray is a treasure of American

painting in its own right. Mrs. Gray's beautifully executed needlework picture measures 18 by 24 inches and represents "The Descent from the Cross" by Rubens. At her seminary, Mrs. Gray taught ornamental needle work, painting and embroidery. These skills were considered important elements in the education of young ladies the time.

These wonderful art works with their Tappahannock association promise to be the shining focus of an exhibit on the Grays, and other people and events of Antebellum Tappahannock and Essex. Sincere thanks to our members who spearheaded the fundraising initiative, and to all those who contributed so generously to make the acquisition of these priceless items a reality. We welcome additional donations to help defray the costs of conservation of the needlework picture and for the construction of a special case to exhibit the Gray artifacts. Please contact David Jett, Curator, at the Museum, 804-443-6490, or mail donations to ECMHS, POB 404, Tappahannock, VA 22560.

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### *Quilts, Coverlets and Textiles*

While ornamental needle work and embroidery have always been art forms in and of themselves, they, along with appliquéd fabric, bits of ribbon, thread, and yarn were also incorporated in the design of bed coverlets or quilts. A quilt is made by sandwiching a layer of insulating padding between two pieces of fabric, the whole held together by a network of stitching. In the early days, all of the stitching was done by hand and could take years to complete, depending on the skill and artistry of the crafter and the intricacy of the pattern. In many instances, a quilt would be crafted by several people, possibly additional family members, or friends and neighbors. These hand-made works of art, from primitive design to display quality, have become heirlooms for many families over the generations, some very fragile, others still a usable piece of family art and history. Once crafted as a necessity of life, today's creations are as apt to be made by hobbyists as diehard quilters, all of whom now have the choice between hand stitching and the advantage of state-of-the art mechanical sewing technologies, or the combination thereof.

Check the [Upcoming Events](#) on the back page for the date and time of the opening reception for our exhibit, "Homespun Treasures: Quilts, Coverlets and Textiles", currently on display in the museum. Wonderful examples of simple to intricate styles of this art form will take you back in time. Bess Haile will demonstrate the art of spinning and quilters Patricia Wright and Trudy Koch will be on hand to answer questions about quilting. You may even be tempted to try a little quilting yourself. Refreshments will be served and admission is free.



*The Baltimore Album style quilt (above) was often given by ladies of the church to Methodist preachers moving west to serve new congregations.*

*Courtesy of Anita Harrower.*

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**Editor's Note:** *While enjoying the new exhibit in the Museum, we encourage our visitors to shop the ECMHS Gift Shop for lots of interesting books, such as [Essex County Virginia, Historic Homes and Settlers, Southerners, Americans](#), references for Major Garnett article. Give the gift of Essex County history to family and friends, or add these handsome hard bound editions to your own collection. And look for many other quality items, jewelry, pewter ware, games, and historic toys. There is something for everyone and every age.*

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### Historic Green Falls House Tour

The Essex County Historical Society and Museum will be taking a trip back in history on Saturday, May 3rd at 11:00am. Mr. Herbert A. Collins will be hosting in his home at Green Falls. Green Falls is considered by most historians to be the earliest surviving 18th-century home in Caroline County. This claim cannot be substantiated through documentation because nearly all of Caroline County's colonial records were destroyed during the Civil War.

Mr. Herbert Collins was born and raised at Green Falls, and since inheriting the property, has meticulously worked to restore the house and grounds to their early appearance. Many 19th-century plant and tree species have been planted. He has also taken great care of the historic trees on the property, one of which is a mulberry tree with a circumference of 15 feet! It is believed to be among the last of the many mulberry trees planted in the early 19th century in Caroline County with the hope that raising silkworms would be profitable.

Tickets will include a home tour and picnic box lunches on the back lawn, and can be purchased at the Museum. For more information and ticket purchases, call Amy Griffin at 443-3893.

### Executive Committee

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*\*The Board of Directors also includes all members of the Executive Committee.*

### Museum Staff

Curator/Collection Management..... David Jett  
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### Essex County Museum hours are:

10 am-3 pm on M, T, Th, F, S and 1-3 pm on Sun

*Admission is always free*

Visit our website, [www.ecmhs.org](http://www.ecmhs.org) for additional information on all of the activities, board meetings, exhibits and exciting historic information opportunities about Essex County.

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### Upcoming Events



**March 9 - Opening of the Quilts and Fabrics Exhibit, 2 p.m.-5 p.m.:** Essex County Museum.

**March 13 - Northern Neck Essex County Business & Professional Women celebrate Women in History Month, 6 p.m.:** Essex County Museum. For more information, call Lisa Roccaforte at 443-4343.

**March 15 - Applebee's Breakfast, 7:30 a.m.-9:15 a.m.:** Tickets available at the Museum, \$5.00, or purchase at the door for \$7.00.

**May 3 - Historic Green Falls House Tour, 11 a.m. :** 22329 Old Stage Road, Melford, Virginia.

**May 9 - Annual Membership Spring Gala at the Essex Inn, 5 p.m.-8 p.m.:** Look for invitations in the mail.

**May 24 - Annual Memorial Day Yard Sale, 7 a.m.-noon:** 1257 Tappahannock Blvd.



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