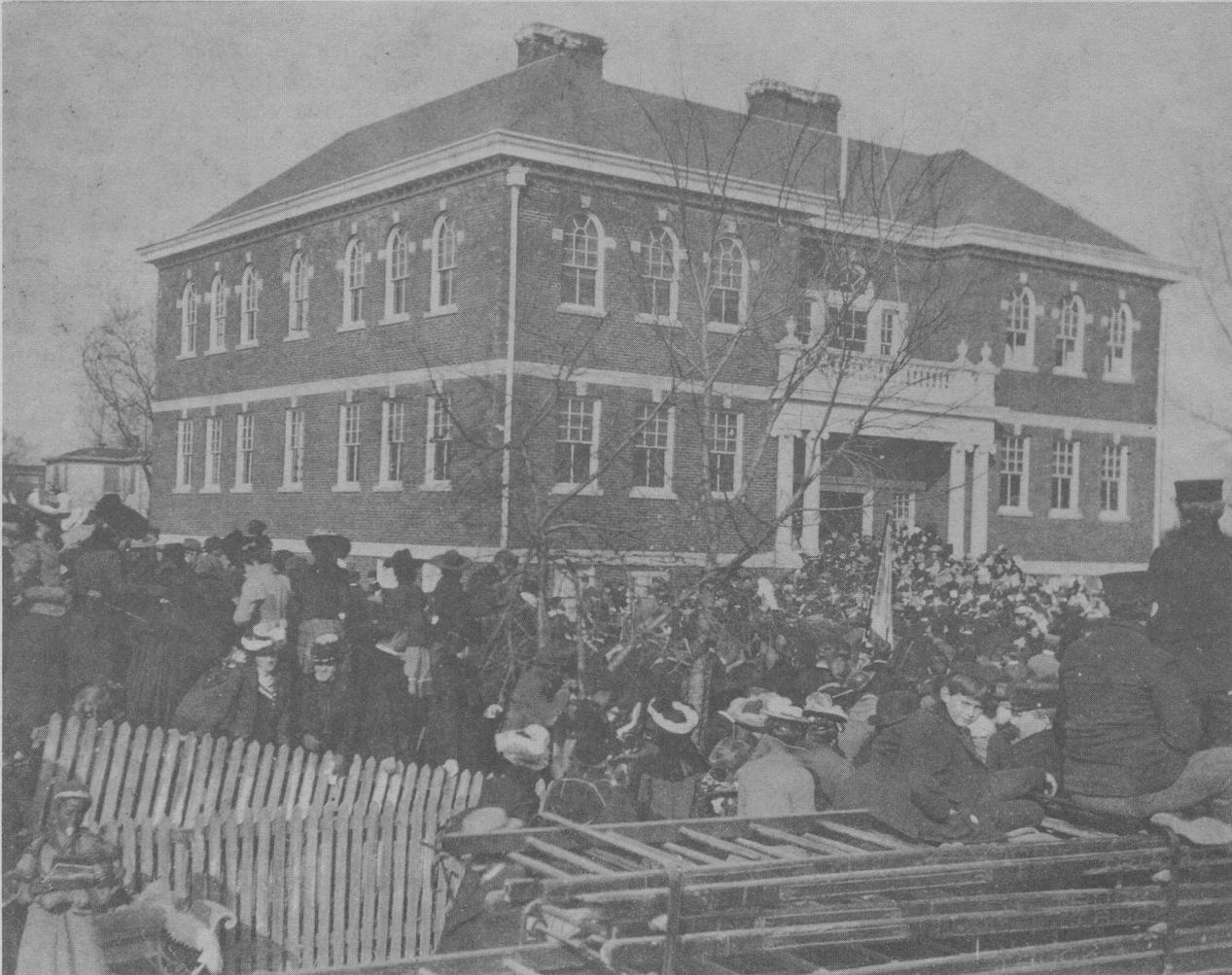


NO. 2

THE SYMS-EATON STORY



Dedication ceremony for the new Syms-Eaton Academy, February 12, 1902.

It is unfortunate that so little is known concerning the life and history of Benjamin Syms and Thomas Eaton. They are shadowy figures in Virginia history and they must remain so until, perhaps, portraits of them are discovered or lost diaries are found.

If a diary was discovered, it would have been kept by Thomas Eaton, for Benjamin Syms, who lived in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, could not write. Syms' will, dated February 10, 1634, was signed with "his mark" — an X. However, this document signed by an individual who must have had little, if any, formal schooling, would prove to be a landmark in the history of Ameri-

can education.

Syms, in his will, donated 200 acres of land for what became the first free school in the New World. The will stated that: "Whereas there is due to me two hundred Acres of Land Lying in the old Poquoson River and Eight Milch Cows... I bequeath it as followth Viz The use of the said Land with the Milk and Increase Male of the said Cattle to be for the Mantayance of an honest Learned Man to keep upon the said Ground a free school to Educate & teach the Children of the adjoining Parrishes of Elizb. City & Poquoson (viz) from Mary's Mount downward to the Poquoson River. My Will and

in 1624



Graduation day, about 1905.

desire is that the Worshipful the Commander and the Rest of the Commissioners of this Liberty with the ministers and Church Wardens of the said Parrish where the said school is founded to see it from time to time justly & truly performed.

My Will and Desire is that when it please God there is sufficient Increase of the said Cattle that some part of them be sould for the Erecting of a very sufficient school house and the Rest of the Increase that are left to be disposed of before nominated and in Repairing the said School. My Will and Desire is that the Increase of the said Cattle after the said School Master is sufficiently stocked for his maintayance shall be spent according to the directions of the said Commander & Commissions with the rest of them to manteyne poor Children, or decayed or maimed persons of the said Parrish."

Students who attended the Syms School were required to be residents of Elizabeth City County (present-day Hampton) but this was the only requirement. The schoolmaster was paid, and the school building was maintained by funds obtained by selling the cattle and their produce, as stated in the will.

The date when the Syms School opened is unknown. It was operating in 1647, for a document

of that date entitled *A Perfect Description of Virginia* stated that the Syms Free School had "two hundred Acres of Land, a Fine House upon it, forty milch Kine and other accommodations to it; the Benefactor deserves Perpetuall memory..." Benjamin Syms does indeed deserve to be remembered and the debt owed to him by the United States was well expressed by Philip Alexander Bruce in his classic work, *Social Life in Old Virginia*: "We are indebted to Benjamin Syms for the earliest foundation for free education made in English America by a citizen of an English Colony; and for that reason his name is entitled to extraordinary honor in a land where the free school system has been carried to the highest state of usefulness perhaps to be observed on the globe."

Unlike Benjamin Syms, Dr. Thomas Eaton, a physician, lived in the Hampton area. Like Benjamin Syms, Dr. Eaton left a will, dated September 19, 1659 which stated that: "I the said Thomas Eaton being at present weake in body but whole & perfect in memory, praised be God, out of my own free will (and the love) that I beare towards the Inhabitants of the County of Elizabeth City, I have for the maintenance of an able schoolmaster (to) educate and teach the children borne within the said County of Elizabeth City... given, granted, assigned and set over and confirm after the time of my decease for the use aforementioned Five Hundred acres of land whereon the sd Free School shall bee kept."

We saw that Benjamin Syms left "Eight Milch Cows" whose produce was to be used for the maintenance of the school. Dr. Eaton was able to provide considerably more than this for his school's upkeep: "Twelve cows and two bulls, Twenty hogs, young and old, one bedstead, a table, a cheese press, twelve milch trays, an iron kettle contayning about twelve gallons, pot rack and pot hooks, Milk Pailes, water tubs and powdering tubbs, to have and to hould the said land with all other premises before mentioned for the uses afores'd, with all the male increase thereof, for the maintainance of the said school master."

These two schools, in separate buildings on their individual lands, gave instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic until the early 1800's. Alas, by 1803 complaints had arisen and a petition was sent to the Virginia Assembly asking for consolidation of the two schools and requesting (if the schools were consolidated) that the new single school be built within the city of Hampton. The citizens insisted that the location of the schools outside the town was inconvenient. "An Academy might as well be es-



Faculty of the new Syms-Eaton Academy, 1902. Front row, left to right: Hessie Chernault, Anna Hudgins, J. H. Bonneville, Lallie V. Darden, Suzee T. Elam. Standing left to right: Mollie A. Phillips, Nellie E. Carr, Corneille Hickman, Zilpah Tignor.

established in Kentucky as at Hampton if those poor children cannot repair there for to receive their education". They also protested that "the limited income of these Lands is not an object sufficient to induce a Man of Literature to take charge of the schools and it is a very natural conclusion that when men are badly paid for services they are indifferently rendered..."

On January 12, 1805 the Assembly authorized the sale of the Syms and Eaton properties and appointed trustees to establish a new school in Hampton. This school was called "Hampton Academy" and it stood on Cary Street. The names of Syms and Eaton were not used in connection with the new school, although funds from the sale of their lands maintained it. Not until nearly one hundred years later would a school again bear their names. Today the sites of these first Syms and Eaton schools have been lost, although it is probable that the Syms School stood somewhere within the present area of Langley Air Force Base.

Hampton Academy had a stormy existence. It may have been burned and probably was sacked

when British troops plundered Hampton during the War of 1812. And by 1830, residents of the county were complaining that their children lived too far outside Hampton to attend the Academy. This was a complete turn-about from the sentiments expressed in 1803 and petitions were again presented asking that "two or more schools be established in the county".

Hampton Academy, however, enjoyed full use of the Syms and Eaton funds and the Academy trustees were reluctant to endorse new schools which might demand a share of the money. Many meetings were called and feelings ran high for several years. Indeed, tempers were so frayed that Christopher Pryor, the Academy schoolmaster, attacked a supporter of the county schools, Dr. Richard Banks "with horse whip and pistol". Pryor was dismissed from his post but ill-feeling lingered over his dismissal and on July 4, 1837 the expected explosion occurred when Major Cooper, who had replaced Pryor, shot and killed one Thomas Allen, a supporter of the ousted schoolmaster.

Major Cooper and his two daughters were walking eastward on Queen Street in downtown



The Syms and Eaton schools of the 1600's may have looked like this English school of the same era.

Hampton. Allen attempted to pass on the narrow sidewalk and jostled the Cooper family. Cooper drew a pistol and Allen foolishly threw open his coat and shouted, "Shoot, you coward!" Cooper shot the young man in the heart. Allen died but Major Cooper escaped to New Orleans where his family joined him. These squabbles caused a later writer to comment that Hampton citizens "were no doubt inclined to wish that the pious Mr. Syms and Dr. Eaton had not been so benevolent in the first place". The county schools were not built although citizens of the Fox Hill section on the outskirts of Hampton opened their own private academy in 1837.

In 1845 the Virginia Assembly passed a public school act which made possible the type of schools which exist today, and in 1852 the Syms and Eaton funds were deposited in the public school treasury. A public school was opened in Hampton on Queen Street on the site where the post office stands today and Hampton Academy, which had been the cause of so much argument, became the district school of the area.

These schools were burned in 1861 when the Confederates set fire to the city to prevent Union troops from occupying it. Rebuilding after the war took much time. Public schools were not reorganized until 1872 and only grade school

work was offered until 1887. The first high school was constructed in the 1890's on the site of the present-day John M. Willis School.

In 1902 Benjamin Syms and Thomas Eaton became newsworthy names again in Hampton. On February 12th of that year a new grade school, christened "Syms-Eaton Academy" was dedicated and opened with ceremony. This public school with grades one through eight stood near the site of the old pre-Civil War Hampton Academy. The Soldier's Home Band, the Peninsula Guards and the Hampton Fire Department were featured in the dedication day parade while the *Hampton Monitor* reported that "A handsome bronze tablet erected to the memory of the two distinguished statesmen, whose names the Academy bears, was unveiled by Colonel E. E. Savage and little Miss Dexter, the oldest and youngest living pupil of the Academy". This Syms-Eaton Academy closed in 1939, although efforts were made to save it. During World War II it was a USO center and after the war the offices of the Hampton City Schools were installed there. Thus a third school closed which bore the names of Syms and Eaton but these founders of America's first free schools are remembered today in Hampton. Two junior high schools bear their individual names.