

"A Century of Service: The History of Rotary Club of Cape Charles (1924-2024)"

By: Metty Vargas Pellicer

Introduction

In the picturesque town of Cape Charles, a legacy of service, fellowship, and community impact began on May 15, 1924. Founded by 15 visionary individuals, the Rotary Club of Cape Charles emerged as a beacon of positive change. As it marks its centennial year, this historic club stands proudly as the oldest Rotary Club on the Eastern Shore, having reached a remarkable milestone of 100 years of unwavering dedication to service.

Founding and Early Years (1924-1934)

One hundred years is an achievement by any standards, and the Cape Charles Rotary Club achieves that venerable age when it celebrates its charter on May 15, 2024. This is the story of how it began.

On February 13, 1924, at the urging of Rotary Club International, and with the sponsorship of Hampton Rotary Club, fifteen prominent businessmen and professionals from Cape Charles met at the Farmer's and Merchant Bank offices to discuss organizing a Cape Charles Rotary Club. In April of the same year, they elected their first set of officers, and, with the support of the Hampton Rotary Club secretary John Waymouth, their application was submitted to Frank Lanz, the President of Newport News Rotary Club who was then the Area District Governor. Cape Charles Rotary Club's application was then forwarded to Rotary International which issued the Rotary International Rotary Club Charter # 1772 to Cape Charles Rotary Club on May 15, 1924.

At its inaugural Dinner celebration the following month, held on Friday June 13, 1924, at the Athletic Club Room of the Pennsylvania & Norfolk Railroad, fifteen charter members were inducted as well as its slate of officers, with Guy L Webster as its first President and David W Peters the first Secretary. The other charter members were Porter Allen, W D Williams, J Warren Topping, Otto Lowe, J R Parsons, James W Wilson, James M Lynch, John T Borum, Frank C Fitzhugh, Roscoe Jones, George P Smith, Mallory H Taylor, and Upshur Wilson. These founding members, driven by a sense of responsibility to their community, embarked on a journey that would focus on community welfare, local projects, and fostering international goodwill.

If the date of the Club's inauguration on Friday, the 13th of June, is considered a bad omen by some, the club's existence as the oldest Rotary Club on the Eastern Shore has proven the fallacy of such beliefs. The induction ceremony was witnessed by hundreds of Rotarians who came aboard a special ferry for the occasion. They arrived at 4 pm the day before the ceremony and made the return trip across the bay at 10 pm the following evening. It was the biggest event held by the Club in Cape Charles with guests coming from Rotary Clubs in Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, and Portsmouth.

After its inception, the club's unique meeting place every Friday was shipboard on the ferry PRR Pennsylvania as it docked at noon at Cape Charles Harbor. The time it took to make the turnaround for its return trip to Old Point and Norfolk was sufficient for the members to have a fine lunch in its elegant dining room, conduct its program, and enjoy some fellowship. Their

invited speakers often were distinguished members of the community such as the governor of Virginia.

In December 1924, the Rotary Club, through its President Guy L Webster along with J L Restein, Trainmaster of the PRR and N Railroad, negotiated on behalf of Northampton County to obtain the Eastern Shore Baseball League franchise to bring baseball to the Patton Field in Cape Charles.

The next year it held its annual induction of officers at the dining room of the Eastville Inn, a stag affair which inducted Porter Allen as President.

The following year, the club hosted its most brilliant affair yet in the Annual Ladies Ball, with covers laid out for 150 guests at the Athletic Club room of the PRR and N Railroad and music from a 5-piece band and entertainment from a Negro Quartet with party favors for everyone prepared by the hosts, Rotary president W D Williams, and various officers.

In May 1927, three years after its formation, it held a big organizing meeting to give birth to two new Charters simultaneously. It inducted 30 new members to form the Exmore Rotary Club serving the Lower Northampton areas of Belle Haven, Franktown, Willis Wharf, Nassawadox, and Exmore, and the Onancock Rotary Club serving Parksley, Onley, Onancock, and Accomac. The Cape Charles Rotary Club membership expanded to fifty members.

The club installation dinner at the Chesapeake Hotel in 1937 of J L Restein as President for 1937-1938 was notable in the fact that the speaker invited by outgoing President Frank Parsons, Jr. was Thomas Dixon, of Raleigh, NC, nationally known author, lecturer and playwright, and a former resident of Cape Charles. He had become famous for his book, *The Clansman*, which became a best seller in 1905.

He lived in Cape Charles for only two years, in 1894-1896, but he was promptly elected to become a member of the Town Council for 2 years, and he became part-owner of the town newspaper "The Headlight". He lived at the Honeysuckle Lodge, 629 Tazewell Ave, which was the former residence of successive train superintendents, and he commuted on the trains every week to deliver his sermon as a minister in New York. He adapted his book, *The Clansman*, onto the stage, and it played to a packed audience in Cape Charles in 1908. It required a special run of the trains to transport the audience from all over the Eastern Shore. Later, it became the basis of the blockbuster silent movie, *Birth of a Nation*, by D W Griffith, which held its Eastern Shore premiere at the Strand Theater in Nassawadox in 1917. The book and the movie glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and many of his writings expressed his belief in White Supremacy. When he returned to Cape Charles in 1933, he was already a well-known lecturer. It was standing room only at the high school when he gave his lecture, "This Country of Ours".

The club's commitment to service endured even in the face of challenges posed by the tumultuous events of the mid-20th century. The Rotary Club of Cape Charles continued its mission then, adapting to wartime restrictions and economic fluctuations. Dr. Raymond Pinchbeck, dean of the University of Richmond, was the principal speaker at one of its regular

meetings, at that time held after dinner at the Beach Casino tearoom on Friday evenings. Dr. Pinchbeck spoke about “The Economic Effect of War.”

In 1949 the Club celebrated its 25th Silver anniversary at the Chesapeake Hotel in Cape Charles, where it inducted Willis S Parsons as its president. The spirit of resilience that defined this era would lay the groundwork for decades of impactful service.

Expanding Horizons (1960s-1980s)

As Cape Charles evolved, so did the Rotary Club's initiatives. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a broadening of the club's reach, as it embraced new projects in education, healthcare, and community development. The club's commitment to youth engagement led to the establishment of scholarships and mentorship programs, reflecting its deep-rooted belief in nurturing the potential of the next generation. In August 1969, it was cited as a 200% Foundation Club by Rotary International. The first Foundation awards scholarship for student study abroad was granted to Burleigh T Wilkins of Bridgetown who went to Cambridge in England to study Chemical Engineering.

On Thanksgiving 1963, the club hosted Ms. Williams of Wales, a Rotary Scholar studying at George Washington University, while she visited Cape Charles.

In 1974 it celebrated its 50th Golden Anniversary at the America House.

Modernization and Global Outreach (1990s-2010s)

With the turn of the millennium, the Rotary Club of Cape Charles embraced technological advancements and innovative approaches to service. It chartered its third Club by helping organize the Melfa Rotary Club in 1993. Global initiatives took center stage, as the club participated in Rotary International projects, contributing to eradicating diseases, promoting literacy, and facilitating clean water access in distant corners of the world.

At its 75th Anniversary dinner meeting in 1999, aboard the Spirit of Norfolk sailing on Chesapeake Bay, it recognized ten members as new PHFs. Paul Harris Fellows are members who have contributed \$1000 to the Rotary Foundation, the charitable arm of Rotary International. The Foundation supports programs globally such as Polio Plus, which was launched by Rotary International in 1985 and aimed at eradicating polio globally. This period marked a chapter of impactful change beyond local borders as members generously supported the Rotary Foundation with regular fundraising efforts such as participation in the purple Pinkie program and the Gift Giving Tuesdays program.

The club's charter did not specifically mention race in its criteria for membership (it did specify males), but its membership consisted exclusively of white males until Rotary International issued a ruling in 1982 saying it would revoke a Club's Charter if it refused to accept African American members. This was after a protest called national attention to a club in NC which voted to continue its 1913 charter of specifically admitting only white males to its membership. In 1996, Rotary Club of Cape Charles member Tommy Long sponsored Tom Godwin, who was a member of the City Council at the time, to become the first African American member of the Cape Charles Rotary Club. Tom, who remains an Active Member to this day, tells us that he tried to bring in other African Americans, but he was unsuccessful in recruiting any at the time. He feels

that in the Jim Crow era most African Americans were still distrustful and afraid to get involved with white establishments.

Women were not admitted as members of our club until after Rotary International passed legislation in 1987 permitting their admission--this was after the US Supreme Court had ruled in March 1987 that Rotary could not exclude female members. The club first admitted Dawn Goldstein, the Eastern Shore School Superintendent, and shortly after they elected her as their first female President in 1993-1994. Member Mark Clarke recalls that Dawn was blackballed at first-- some members were just too uncomfortable with her presence. However, she was an assertive woman, and she held an important position as Superintendent of Schools on the Eastern Shore, so she subsequently prevailed, paving an easier way for other women. Norma Spencer was admitted later and became President in 2001-2002. Cela Burge, who was President in 2003-2004, recalls that for a long time it was just the three of them who were female members until Hollye Carpenter joined and subsequently became President in 2005-2006, as did Beverly Harper in 2006-2007 and Glenda Miller in 2007-2008. The most recent woman president was Monica Bridgeforth who served in 2015-2016.

All these women brought new energy into the club and made it more inclusive of all members from different backgrounds and occupations. They also tried to bring in younger members, including Wayne Bell who was admitted and later became President in 2008-2009. Wayne was a young, accomplished African American who was another excellent addition to the club. After him other African Americans joined, mostly brought in by Bill Payne, who has been a very active member and has served three terms as our President, in 2018, 2021 and 2022.

Bill Payne continues to be involved in many Rotary projects, often almost single handedly maintaining long-term Club projects such as the holiday Salvation Army bell ringing, the local Boy's and Girl's Clubs, the Rotaract Clubs, the New Roots Youth Garden Initiative, the annual Backpack and School Supply drive, the Dictionary Program for all 3rd Graders in our county, etc. After Bill became a member, several other African Americans joined the Club, including Robert Church, Diane Dawson, Stan Plowden, Reggie Widgeon, Jackie Chatmon, and Betty Bibbins. Tom Godwin recalls that early on he considered himself to be a token member and experienced some condescension among the older white members, but today he feels that Rotary has sincerely changed its attitude towards his race and that acceptance is based on merit and the capability and willingness to do "Service above Self" rather than skin color.

Cela recalls that the requirement of attendance at meetings was strict at one time, and members had to make up for missed meetings, even though it was difficult for many who were working full-time to make most of the weekly meetings at 12:15 pm. The practice of periodically holding meetings in the evening was started then. Cela also recalls that there was a policy of limiting membership to one member per profession, so there was one doctor, one lawyer, etc., although there were several farmers who held other important and influential positions in the community which allowed them to belong. She further recalls that the highlight of the social events were the Christmas parties held at Old Castle, the home of the Hubbards at Savage Neck. Cela recalls that Cliff Thibadeux sponsored her, having badgered her for a long time until he wore her out and she finally relented. She also recalls that she was one of the younger members, along with Mark

Clark and Ralph Dodd, and that they felt surrounded by a bunch of old white guys who liked to socialize with each other and who called themselves the “Eat, Play and Burp Club.”

It is noteworthy, that among the service projects initiated during Cela Burge’s presidency, the Cape Charles Rotary Club, along with the other Eastern Shore Rotary Clubs, helped to raise funds to establish the Shore Cancer Center, the first such center on The Shore.

For a few years, the Cape Charles Club was mostly a tight group of older white males, who were prominent and influential members of the community, which engaged itself in mostly local projects, supporting them financially but not actually becoming actively involved.

This changed when it engaged in the project helping New Roots Youth Garden, which was initiated by the club during John Burdiss’ first term as President in 2011. In fact, our Rotary District recognized this as a community project worthy of a District Grant. This transformed a blighted area of town into a beautiful garden which has become a laboratory for youth to learn hands-on about plants and growing vegetables as well as about ecology and climate change. The club continues to be involved in the garden by donating money and encouraging members to volunteer to help our youth from spring planting until harvest. In 2018 the 3 Eastern Shore clubs (Onancock, Exmore, and Cape Charles) presented to New Roots another District Grant check for \$12,000, to help with refurbishing the plant stand, replacing the fencing, and installing concrete slabs around the farmstand. The presentation ceremony was presided over by District 7600 area Governor Susan Zachensky Walthall and Bill Murphy, then Area Asst. Governor and a former President of the Cape Charles Rotary Club.

Another notable service the Cape Charles Club began to provide was its sponsorship of public forums for candidates running for public office in Cape Charles. This began in May 2014, and it has continued for every election since then, thereby providing all local voters the chance to get to know the candidates for Mayor and the Town Council. The club secures the venue, contacts each candidate to get their commitment to attend, plans the event providing the structure of the schedule and a neutral moderator, and supplies a few questions while providing an opportunity for members of the audience to submit their own.

The year 2014 was also notable when it received its first EREY (Every Rotarian Every Year) Award from the District (this is earned by a club in which every member contributes at least \$100 to the Rotary Foundation that year). The Club has earned this award yearly since then. The club also earned the Presidential Citation Award with Distinction (given to a club which has fulfilled a series of the requirements including participation in numerous local projects) and Paul Strong received the Outstanding President Award, given to only 10 Presidents in our Rotary District 7600, which has 66 local clubs. Through Paul’s presidency, the club became more organized by adopting a number of policies and procedures which improved its structure and function.

In February 2015, primarily resulting from the efforts of Bill Payne, the club began a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of the Eastern Shore by providing them technological support via a District Grant for purchasing new computers. We also provided mentorship to the Eastern Shore youth to help prepare them for college and/or job application. By sponsoring a career day and

other workshops, and most importantly by sharing our members' experience and knowledge with them, we hopefully made an impact on their choices in life and their preparation for success.

Rotarians Bill Murphy and Bill Payne also sought to energize and inspire young leaders through service and to encourage them to become responsible global citizens by organizing 2 Interact clubs on the Eastern Shore. Broadwater Academy Interact Club was chartered in 2014, and Northampton High School Interact Club started in 2018, both with Cape Charles Rotary Club's sponsorship. Our Club still supports these Interact clubs in many ways, from supporting their attendance at RYLA (Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, which are weekend gatherings of students where they learn leadership skills) to providing them access to our members' skills and expertise along with our club's monetary donations to their projects.

One of the most ambitious projects launched by our Rotary club has been the Walking Tour of the Invisible History of African Americans in Cape Charles, which was proposed in 2021 and spearheaded primarily by Metty Pellicer with the help of Tom Godwin, the first Black member of our club. The Invisible History Committee, which had been appointed to develop this project, applied for a grant from the Virginia Humanities (part of the University of Virginia) and a grant in the amount of \$9800 was awarded in April 2022. Members of the club had already worked hard to obtain oral histories, permanently recorded on video, from many of the descendants of the early African American residents of Cape Charles, some of whom dated back to the town's founding in 1886. The grant money then allowed the Committee to hire a consultant to do additional background historical research for the project and help the Committee to put together a tour consisting of 12 Black historical sites in Cape Charles along with individual histories of each site.

This tour tells the story of the separate and vibrant community of African Americans which existed in Cape Charles during the era of Jim Crow, but which has never been documented in the town's history prior to this. By shining some light on this part of life in Cape Charles, its current residents will now know how this segment of the town's population has contributed to the present reality of the town and our African American residents and their descendants will now know how their ancestors made an impact on their town and their current lives. This important and ongoing project is expected to continue to evolve as time passes. For more information, see www.invizhistory.org.

Club Fundraisers

The Club's effort to fund our projects reflects the member's commitment to service following the four-way test of the things Rotarians think, say, or do: 1. Is It the Truth? 2. Is It Fair to All Concerned? 3. Will It Build Good Will and Better Friendships? 4. Will It Be Beneficial to All Concerned? And we chose to add a fifth 5. Will it be fun?

Introduced by Bill Stramm in his presidency in 2010, the Happy Dollars segment during each meeting had become an enduring continuously run fundraiser where each member could have the floor at the meeting to share whatever he chooses, such as a visit from one's grandchildren, or ones' celebration of a life event, or simply to have the floor to tease another member, a long-standing good-natured joust between friends, where they alone could follow what's going on.

Then there was the 50/50 Raffle at each meeting, where oftentimes the winner would donate the money prize back to the Rotary, until it was replaced by the current Card Jackpot game: Queen of Hearts.

The most successful and well-known fundraising effort of the Club is its Bi-annual Crab Cake Sales held before the July 4 and Thanksgiving holidays.

The History of the Rotary Crab Cake (Contributed by Bill Payne)

The Cape Charles Rotary Club is renowned for its 100% crab meat, no filler, crab cakes. Since the 1980's, the service organization has sold crab cakes to support its mission – "Service above Self". In the beginning, crab cake sandwiches were prepared in a donated pop-up tent trailer that was converted into a sales stand.

Rotarians Rick Hubbard, Grant Robbins and Cliff Thibodeaux led the trailer conversion effort. However, no one goes to market without a killer recipe. Another Rotarian, Paul Watson, Chip and Bill's father, owned a Cheriton restaurant called "Paul's". The original crab cake recipe is attributed to Paul, but Sherman Stairs, often the lead cook, recalled the original recipe was contributed by Mary Barns of Cape Charles.

Regardless, this fundraising tradition was launched, and the community became accustomed to the Rotary selling crab cake sandwiches, with all the condiments, at holiday celebrations and other community events. While the experience was rewarding, it was hard work and sales were modest.

Furthermore, the health department frowned upon the cooking arrangement, and the "crank-up" camper had become a maintenance issue. Driven by necessity, around the turn of the century, the Club realized it would be more successful if it sold uncooked crab cakes to its friends and neighbors. As anticipated, production and sales greatly increased.

The "cook them yourself" model was a fundraising success. Enter former Rotarian, Ann Sayers, who oversaw crab cake production during and many years after her active Rotary service. She "tweaked" the original recipe; however, fillers have never been used. In 2015, the product was further enhanced when Panko crumbs replaced the traditional recipe's cracker meal coating.

The Rotary now prepares its crab cakes at the Cheriton Volunteer Fire Company, 21334 South Bayside Road, in Cheriton, where they are available for pickup around noon. Volunteers begin arriving at the place around 8 am where they put on their gloves, hair nets, and, while masks are optional since Covid restrictions have been lifted, they are encouraged. Many long-time Rotary supporters purchase multiple trays and freeze them for later consumption.

Over the years the organizers have perfected the production line for efficiency, consistency, and strict timeline schedules so that by noontime, all the trays have been sorted out and wrapped in clear plastic on the table for pick up around noon. The trays not picked up are then brought home to be frozen until their owners can claim them. At the last crab sales in November 2023, the Club sold 1710 crab cakes and had a net profit of over \$8000.

During the height of the Covid pandemic, in 2021, the Club could not hold its bi-annual crab cake sales, and we had to come up with a new idea to raise funds. Randy Diamond secured the

donation of a golf cart from Peebles Golf Carts in Charlottesville and Bay Creek Resort so that we could run a raffle with the golf cart as the prize. Member volunteers sold tickets to friends, at the Cheriton campground, and at Strawberry Plaza on Mason Avenue. The drawing was then held on July 4, 2021, after the Independence Day parade, at the gazebo by the beach, with the lucky ticket drawn belonging to Mrs. Lee Walker. It was a lot of fun, and the 1629 tickets sold resulted in the Club getting \$14K to fund its projects. The fundraiser was so popular that other community groups then followed our example with similar raffles.

The next year, an Art Raffle fundraiser drew participation from 20 artists from the Eastern Shore. It was spearheaded by Bill Payne, from an idea by Chuck Huber, and with technical support from Jim Ritch and Joan Natali, who designed the website and flyers. A series of drawings for the 20 donated art pieces was held at Lemon Tree Gallery in April, with the resulting effort generating an overall profit of \$6600. This fundraiser was also notable in drawing out the African American artist (born in Cape Charles but now residing in Hampton) Richard Press, who introduced his work locally through a special showing at the Lemon Tree Gallery. Richard's interest then led to his active participation in the club's Invisible History project as Chair of its Advisory Board.

The Centennial Celebration (2024)

Today, on its centennial anniversary, the Rotary Club of Cape Charles stands as a testament to the power of enduring ideals. For a century, its members have upheld the values of service, integrity, and fellowship, leaving an indelible mark on the town they call home.

Its service initiatives, such as the quarterly highway clean-up of Stone Road, restoration of the railway caboose at the Cape Charles Museum, the holiday ringing of the bell for the Salvation Army, the annual distribution of dictionaries to Northampton County 3rd graders coordinated by Tom Godwin, and our annual campaign to donate school supplies for needy children, are ongoing commitments.

The Rotary also supports community projects via monetary donations from \$150-\$4000 to the Kiptopeke Elementary School, Camp Fragile Hearts, the Boy's and Girl's Clubs of the Eastern Shore, Smart Beginnings, New Roots Youth Garden, Rise From Hunger, Main Street Festive Fridays, Citizens for Central Park, the Barrier Island Center, the Cape Charles Museum, Cape Charles Historical Society, Habitat for Humanity, Eastern Shore Food Bank, ESVA Chamber of Commerce, Arts Enter Cape Charles, the ES Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative, and various other community organizations.

It also volunteers time to help with event set-ups, parking, painting and other services. In 2019, for example, Robert Church single-handedly restored all of Eastville's fire hydrants with the help of funds from the club to cover the materials. Through all these activities and more, our club clearly embodies the spirit of Rotary International's motto, "Service Above Self."

In summary, the Rotary Club of Cape Charles, founded by 15 visionary individuals in 1924, has journeyed through a century of service, transformation, and dedication to its community. As the oldest Rotary Club on the Eastern Shore, its legacy serves as a beacon of inspiration for generations to come. With its centennial celebrations, the club not only commemorates its history but also renews its commitment to making a positive impact in its community and beyond.