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ROBERT SULLY AT JAMESTOWN, 1854

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ROBERT SULLY AT JAMESTOWN, 1854

by Charles E. Hatch, Jr.,
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Throughout the nineteenth century, as is the case today, there was no town of Jamestown. The town site, in fact the entire island, once again resembled much of the country round about - an area of few inhabitants, some open cultivated fields, the rest a wooded area fringed with brackish marsh. The already decaying, visible evidences of the once flourishing town were slowly disappearing. Throughout the century the historically inquisitive, those in search of genuine inspiration, curio hunters, and others journeyed to the Island by whatever means they found. Most of the visitors came and departed unnoticed, others left a written, or pictorial, record. Such a visitor was Robert Sully in the fall of 1854.

Robert Matthew Sully, a native of Petersburg, Virginia, was born in 1803 the son of Matthew Sully, an actor for many years attached to the Charleston Theater. At quite an early age, Robert "evinced extreme fondness for drawing", a fondness, perhaps, that grew out of his father's interest in landscape painting. When sixteen or seventeen years of age Sully resolved to become a painter, and, while still a youth, studied for a period of months under the supervision of his uncle, Thomas Sully. According to his own statement, he profited a great deal through this instruction. To make an attempt at professional

work, he returned to Virginia where he encountered many attending difficulties. He writes that: "My uncle's letters about this time were very encouraging, and strongly advised me to visit London as soon as possible. I felt a strong desire to follow his advice, and to assist my purpose, I visited several towns in North Carolina where I was successful." ¹ He sailed for England in August, 1824 and remained there four years studying painting, particularly portrait painting. Several works from his brush won favorable attention in London. He returned to America in 1828 and settled in Richmond where he began in earnest his career as a portrait painter. Among his works were a portrait of John Marshall from real life, portraits of the Indian Black Hawk, Black Hawk's son, Winnebago Prophet, and the portrait of Pocahontas made from an "original portrait". ²

William Dunlap commented in his History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, which appeared in 1834 that "Mr. Sully has performed the promise made by his early works." ³ In fact Sully assisted Dunlap in assembling material for his History.

Dunlap writes that to assist him Robert Sully "kindly exerted himself in making researches into the antiquities of art in Virginia ..." ⁴

Later in life Sully decided to leave Virginia and to become a Wisconsin pioneer. Induced by commissions to paint portraits of the founders of Wisconsin, and because of an inclination toward the "simple life" of that section, he resolved to move to Madison. He left Richmond in October, 1855. However, he was taken ill at Buffalo, en route, and

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died there on October 28. ⁵ The State Historical Society of Wisconsin in its Annual Report for 1855, in the sketch of his life given there, clearly shows the high esteem in which Sully was held by the members of that society. ⁶

Robert Sully seems "to have been the first to appreciate the value of some record of Virginia's relics and history in a pictorial form ..." ⁷ He was deeply concerned with the preservation of Virginia's historic shrines and records, and what he interpreted to be an apparent disregard of, or lack of interest in, Virginia's past troubled him greatly. He felt that this lack of interest was entirely too common throughout the state.

Perhaps it was his interest in preservation, in history, and in making pictorial records that prompted him to make an excursion to Jamestown in the fall of 1854. On May 13 of that year he told of his projected visit in a letter to Lyman Draper, then Secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin:

There is a probability, in compliance with the wish of Mr. Maxwell [Secretary of the Virginia Historical Society] that I will ere long visit the sacred spot of "Jamestown" for the purpose of painting the ruins of the old church. The entire arch (of itself covered with Ivy, is a picturesque object) is still standing. All that remains of the earliest settlement of Virginia. Your Society shall have a copy of it. There are still existing the old tombs, quaint epitaphs, many mementoes of deep interest (out of Virginia). ⁸

In September the visit took place and fortunately Sully has left a written as well as a pictorial record of what he saw at Jamestown.

The pictorial records remain in the form of original sketches, evidently made on the site, and water-color drawings made from the sketches at a later time. His written account appears as a letter to Lyman Draper prepared in October, 1854.

Richmond, Oct. 1854.

My Dear Sir-

My frequent absence from Richmond during the summer, to say nothing of my having been somewhat of an invalid, has been the cause of my unusual silence - Since I last wrote, I have been in the footsteps of Capt. Smith, wandered through forests, sacred by the memory of the Indian Princess, & reposed, at least mused, among the very bones, of the hardy Spirits, that two Centuries & a half ago, planted the seeds of the old Dominion. In sober parlance, I have been to Jamestown Island, where I sojourned several day's, my Sketch & Memorandum book never out of my hand - It is allow'd, I have done more, to picturize [?], renew [?], the few Colonial relics that remain, than has ever been done before - Let me give you my adventures, as well as an accurate description of this deeply interesting spot. There is exceeding difficulty in landing on the isolated Island. After landing some miles, above the place, I took my chance, in an Oyster boat. On a fine Autumnal Morn, my sketch book, under my arm, I first touched the beach of Jamestown! But, Robinson Crusoe, was never more completely bewildered, on his Isle, than I on mine! Not the sign of a human being, a dwelling, could I perceive! Not even a "footstep on the sand. An object that would have been far more agreeable to me, than it was to poor Crusoe! There is you must know, but one white occupant on the whole Island. ¹⁰ My object was to find the house. But [page 2] all in vain! Hour after hour, did I wander up and down the lonely beach! Far more romantic, than agreeable - at last, I determined to strike for the grove, where I know the Ruins of the Church stood. This, after some difficulty I reach'd - You can imagine, all I felt, in standing before this lone Relic! The Ruin

presents, a square Tower, about 35 or 40, feet high - ten feet square, inside. A lofty arch, in back & front. The Ivy still clings around it in many a fantastic Embrace. Immediately behind the tower, is the little ancient grave yard, with its broken walls, - The tombs, shattered, & shivered. A monumental wreck! The trees, growing thickly around it, have in a strange fashion, interlaced their boughs into each other, forming over head, a complete canopy, - As if by compact, to protect these sacred relics, so impiously neglected by man. ¹¹ I have seen many a ruin in many a land, but irrespective of all appreciation [?], never did I behold a scene of such funereal solitude. The death like, unbroken silence - Bird and even insect have forsaken the spot. You are alone among the dead. The light, playing through the arch casting a dim reflection, in the broken tombs, The massive trees hemming in & enclosing the whole, is indeed a Picture. Twilight was fast approaching, yet, I could not tear myself from this holy ground - It was a time & place, for "thick coming fancies" - Nesting on a prostrate trunk. I could but think, of the many wild scenes of romantic adventures this enchanted land had witnessed - In yonder grove with its venerable looking Trees, hand in hand may have wander'd the chivalrous Smith, and the darling Princess - ¹² The only blot on Smiths escutcheon is not marrying that dear girl! Then the romance would have been perfect, instead of its "lema & impotent conclusion" - That she loved him is evident! On their meeting in London, if his heart had not been as hard as his steel blade, The first words uttered by that dear being, (half reproachfully,) must have smote him. "They told me you were dead" - Much of her womans heart was expressed in those few words - Why did they tell her so! - To induce her to marry another - The Colonists knew the advantage of such an alliance! [page 3] The church yard is a complete wreck. "Shame where is thy blush" - a little timely attention might have saved all this - in some places, the marble has been broken to pieces, evidently by violence! On my making enquiry, of the Manager of the Estate, he affirmed me, that Gentlemen (heaven save the mark) often broke the tombs and carried the fragments away - on curiosity! "Think of that Master Brook" - I think were [I] the curator of this property, and had some of these gentlemen, in fair Rifle distances, I should

rather damp their antiquarian curiosities - But to the end of my adventures! Night was fast closing in! The question was to find this one lodging place, or to take my rest among the tombs. The latter would have quickly consigned me to a tomb of my own! For this spot, is considered the sickliest in all Virginia. I again sought the lone Beach, where I discovered, marching single file, a gang of domestic Geese, I knew that they were homeward bound - I followed close in their wake, and, O joy! in brief time came with in sight of the Overseers home! There I was welcomed with old Virginia hospitality, still thank heaven one of its few remaining characteristics ~~XXXX~~ - As Capt Cutter says, "put that down & make a note of it" - A Goose once saved the Capital of Rome! and secured me a capital resting place. I shall always hold the Bird sacred! - In this place I remained several day's - and wandered over every part of it - Of everything bearing the least Colonial antiquity, I made careful and elaborate Study - highly finished drawings. Now for a general as well as particular description of this deeply interesting place. The Island is 3 miles long. 1. Mile in breadth. Nearly an oval, except the projecting point, ¹³ where the Settlement stood. A Creek ¹⁴ opening from James River, runs around its northern boundary, and again emptys into the River! Two hundred yards above the Church, on an elevated Point is the Site of the old Fort ¹⁵ - The Magazine, 40, yards behind it - The foundation of the magazine is still in good preservation. Of the same kind of bricks as the Church. small size, hard as granite - admirably put to-gether. The Excavation or Powder Pit - is about 5 feet under ground, 10 feet square. Into this I scrambled, found sundry [page 4] old bullets, fragments, of what I believe to be Gunlocks. The most interesting relic I possess - was given me, by my worthy host - the remains of an old musket barrel, of antique, old fashioned shape. This was plowed up near the Fort Point - . I have moreover some blue beads, Indian arrow heads, a stone hatchet - Indian Pipe bowls, ¹⁶ &c - One Mile below the Church stands the ruin of a private Colonial Residence - to which there is a grave yard, with 4 marble slabstones - dated, 1700 - 1713 - 1730 -

It is merely interesting as the only fragment on the Island, of colonial residence. This was the residence of the Champion family! ¹⁷ I send you some slight sketches of all these places. Slight, as they are, they will aid my description - I spent an entire day, in making out all that could be, of the tombs in the James town Church' yard. All that are not utterly destroyed or perfectly illegible, I send you! 'Robert Ludwell! Died 1720. Ludwell was one of the deputies sent by the Colony to remonstrate with Charles 2nd on his prodigal gifts of lands, to his favorites ¹⁸ - 'Mrs Sarah Blair wife of Revd Samuel Blair! ¹⁹ Died. 1713. Ursula Beverly, Wife of Robert Beverly. Died 1698 - 'Beverly was the clerk so persecuted, by the old Tyrant Gov Berkely. ²⁰ Robert Sherwood. ²¹ no date. John Knight 1732. ²² Old Mortality [?], with all his perseverance, could not make further discovery. All along the Banks of the Creek are indications of former Cultivation - deep trenches, marking the divisions of land, - broken Pottery &c - The encroachment of the water on the land has been long going on - but, of late years, particularly at the point where the Church stands, it has been fearfully rapid. A little while, and this last, lone relick, will forever pass away - A little below the Fort Point, There is, some distance from the beach, a Cypress Tree, ²³ under water to its lower branches - In the recollection of the living, Carriages, once, drove around this tree - It is now at least 60 yards from the beach. - A considerable distance from the Beach, at low water, there is distinctly seen the Inclosure of a well Brick'd round in a circle ²⁴ - At a former period, the little tongue of land on which the Church stands, projected much further out, - a gentle slope. It is now washed away to an abrupt half circle, ²⁵ - In close proximity to the water - The Banks are of a soft chalky ochre, easily washed away leaving the hard sand beach underneath.

The original pencil drawings, made on the site, and the water-color sketches made later, when more time was available, supply a more vivid picture of what Sully saw in September, 1854 than does

his interesting and detailed letter quoted above. Copies of a number of these drawings are reproduced here as plates 1 to 6. Each provides information about some individual aspect of Jamestown at that time.

PLATE - 1 Ruins of the Old Church Tower as Seen from the Front (a water-color sketch).

This water-color sketch showing principally the Old Church Tower at Jamestown now hangs in the William and Mary College Library as a gift from Miss Julia Gully of Richmond. Robert Gully made at least two drawings showing the front of the church tower. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has a second one which is detailed as if the painter stood somewhat closer to the Tower. In this, more of the low beach area is shown including one decaying post, or pile, almost on the water line, and less river detail. On the left in this sketch the painter portrays greater disorder with what appears to be two broken tombstones lying out of position. In both sketches the tower is placed much nearer the shore than is actually the case even today.

PLATE - 2 Ruins of the Old Church Tower as Seen from the Graveyard (a water-color sketch).

In this sketch Gully shows more graphically than in any other the isolated and "neglected" nature of the church site of which he so bitterly complains. The view is from the back of the present

memorial church built in 1907 directly over the old church site to the tower. The wall is perhaps a section of that built near the close of the eighteenth century by William Bee and John Ambler to enclose the tombstones that were still remaining. 25

PLATE - 3 The Old Cypress (a pencil sketch).

This is a reproduction of Robert Sully's on-the-site pencil drawing showing an old cypress together with a smaller one nearby. A cypress can be seen standing out from the shore at Jamestown today. Perhaps it is the same cypress that Sully saw. Although only one is standing now, when the tide is extremely low the submerged stumps of several others become visible.

The note penned on the drawing reads:

The above sketch will give an idea of the rapid encroachment of the water on the land. In the memory of a few of the oldest inhabitants in the neighbourhood, Carriages once drove around the Tree. - It is now at least 60 yards from the shore. More than half under water - The Point of land where the Church stands, formerly extended much farther out. It is now washed away, to an abrupt half circle. - + - . The Cypress^x Tree is a little above the Fort Point. 27

PLATE 4 The Old Magazine (a pencil sketch).

Foundations of the Magazine. About 40 yards from the Point [Church Point]. The Pitt or magazine about 5 feet in depth - 10-feet square.

Evidently Sully made this drawing during his visit to Jamestown. Later he prepared a finished water-color sketch. 28 The Brick

Powder Magazine shown here, from location and from detail, seems to have been that erected as outlined by order of the Council in 1692, which called for " a powder roome and a small building over itt." In 1699 it was described as "The Magazeen House in James City the vault ... digged between two flashes and ... near ye water ..." Evidently the magazine was abandoned in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, yet it was an object of interest to visitors to Jamestown until its complete disappearance about the close of the nineteenth century. 29

PLATE - 5 'Site of the old Colonial Fort and Magazine' (a water-color sketch).

In this sketch Sully was looking from the site of the "Colonial Fort" (commonly called the first settlement area) up the James River bringing into view the "Old Magazine" and the "Old Cypress". Here he shows, although in exaggeration, the nature of the shore line from Church Point to the site of the isthmus as it was before the construction of the seawall - a strip of sandy beach in front of a rather steep bank broken by marshy slashes that cut through to the river. It is in this area that heavy erosion has taken place.

In a second sketch Sully gives what is almost a close-up view of the bank and sandy beach on Church Point. In this, however, the perspective is lessened and the magazine and the cypress are omitted. 30

PLATE - 6 "Remains of the old Colonial residence of the Champion Family - 1 - mile below the Church" (a water-color sketch).

Written on the on-the-site pencil drawing that furnished the basis of this sketch is the caption "Champions. Ruins of the only Colonial dwelling on Jamestown Island." Perhaps Sully forgot to mention the Ambler House, or, possibly he thought of that as falling in another period. In any case he seems to have been in error in calling it the Champion residence. It was more likely a residence of the Travis family. Sully may have been influenced by the marriage alliance of the Travis and Champion families, or by the tombstone inscriptions in what is now called the Travis Graveyard where were buried, as is shown by the legible inscriptions, members of the Champion and Travis families. 31

It is interesting to note that in his pencil sketch Sully noted no gravestones near the ruins of the house. Apparently he added these from memory later when he prepared the sketch. 32

Colonial National Historical Park
July, 1942

FOOTNOTES

1. William Dunlap, A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States (new edition, Boston, 1918), III, 194.
2. Louise Phelps Kellogg, "Pocahontas and Jamestown" in Wisconsin Magazine of History, XXV, 38-42 (September, 1941).
3. Dunlap, History of ... Arts of Design ..., III, 196.
4. Ibid., I, 166; Diary of William Dunlap (1786-1839) in Collections of the New York Historical Society for the Year 1931 (New York, 1930-1), III, 696, 767, 787.
5. Kellogg, "Pocahontas and Jamestown", 42.
6. Second Annual Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the Year 1855 (Madison, 1856), II, 63-71.
7. Miss Julia Sully (a letter) to Elbert Cox, Superintendent, May 26, 1942, in the files of Colonial National Historical Park. Miss Julia Sully, Junior Historian in charge of the Virginia - Art Index Division of the Virginia State Conservation Commission, is the granddaughter of Robert Sully and has in her possession considerable material regarding his life and work.
8. From a copy of the letter in the hands of Miss Julia Sully of Richmond. Original manuscript in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
9. The original ^{of the} letter given below is in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
10. Apparently the owner of Jamestown Island from 1851 until after the War between the States was William Allen (born William Allen Orgain). The identity of the "one white occupant", described later in the latter as the "overseer", on the Island in 1854 has not been established. Lyon G. Tyler, Cradle of the Republic, Jamestown and James River (Richmond, 1906), 94.
11. As Dr. E.G. Swen, Librarian, College of William and Mary, has remarked, undoubtedly Sully was under the influence of the effect created by the deep, luxuriant growth of trees, shrubs,

and grass that is characteristic of this section. In a single growing season, if left unattended, an area will quickly appear as if it has been forsaken and forgotten.

12. Sully had a deep reverence for Pocahontas. In another instance he referred to her as "our dear Princess", and in a letter to Lyman Draper written in March, 1855 he wrote, "The truth is she has been the idol, of my romantic dreams, since boyhood." Kellogg, "Pocahontas and Jamestown", 40.
13. Church Point.
14. Back River (Back Creek).
15. At this point in his letter Sully sketches a rough outline of the Island and mainland back of the Island. On this outline he locates the "Church", "Fort", and "Magazine". His use of "old Fort", obviously, is reference to the first settlement.
16. The "relic" that he treasured most was the "match lock-barrel". His "Jamestown relics" were given to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Robert Sully to Lyman Draper, February 10, 1855. Copy of letter in possession of Miss Julia Sully. Original in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Kellogg, "Pocahontas and Jamestown", 42.
17. Apparently he has reference to a residence of the Travis family.
18. In a manuscript, in the Virginia State Library, dated circa 1822 and labeled "Jamestown Tombstone Inscriptions" there is no mention of the tomb of Robert Ludwell. There is in this manuscript the inscription from the tomb of Philip Ludwell who died, it is stated, in 1723. This Philip was the son of Philip who was the brother of Thomas Ludwell. It was Thomas Ludwell who was named one of the three agents to go to England to work for the repeal of the Northern Neck land grant to Lord Arlington and Lord Culpeper. "Ludwell Family" in William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine, 1st Ser., XIX, 199-214 (January, 1911); William Waller Rening, Statutes at Large Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia (New York, 1823), 518-519.
19. Apparently Sully had reference to Reverend James Blair.
20. The comments made here regarding Robert Beverley relate to Robert Beverley the father of Robert Beverley, the historian, who married Ursula Byrd.

21. Reference here must have been to William rather than Robert Sherwood. The manuscript "Jamestown Tombstone Inscriptions" (see footnote 17) carries a copy of the inscription: "Here lyth William Sherwood that was born in ye Parish of White Chapell near London, a great Sinner waiting for a joyful resurrection".
22. "Jamestown Tombstone Inscriptions" does not have mention of the tomb of John Knight, yet it does give the inscription from the tomb of Mary Knight, his wife, who died in 1732.
23. Sully shows the relationship of the Cypress and the shore line by a diagram in the body of the letter.
24. Here Sully uses another diagram to convey the idea of the well.
25. Again Sully reverts to the use of line sketches to show how the church once stood on a sloping point and how it had been "washed away to an abrupt half circle..."
26. Bishop William Heade, Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia (Philadelphia, 1861), I, 111-112.
27. Historical study and actual archeological investigation have established the fact that since 1680 the shore line has receded approximately 500 feet in the general area of the "Old Cypress". J. C. Harrington, "Archeological Exploratory Excavations in Unit A, Jamestown Island, Virginia" (dated March 20, 1941), p. 41; and Charles E. Hatch, Jr., "Preliminary Historical Study, Unit A, Northwestern End of Jamestown Island in Colonial National Historical Park" (dated September 14, 1939), pp. 34-36. Copies of these two National Park Service Reports are in the library of Colonial National Historical Park.
28. The water-color sketch is in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
29. H. R. McIlwaine, Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia (Richmond, 1925), I, 275 and II, 153.
30. This water-color sketch is in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
31. The old Travis dwelling down the island at Jamestown appears to have burned during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This would account for the ruins seen by Sully in 1854. One

author has written of the old Travis home: "In appearance, the house was good, one-and-a-half storeys high, with a brick chimney at either end, in the common seventeenth century style". Henry Chandlee Lorman, Jamestown and St. Mary's; Buried Cities of Romance (Baltimore, 1938), p. 324-5.

32. The pencil drawing is in the possession of Miss Julia Sully of Richmond.

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