

# Masthead

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*The Simons family of Myrtle, c. 1909, (L-R): William Joshua Simons, young Joseph William Simons, Lottie Hunt Phillips Simons and baby Edward Osborne Simons, with faithful dogs looking on, pose on the front porch of their home on what is now Simons Drive. Readers might recognize the rocking horse from our Christmas toy display. Photo courtesy Gin Simons Staylor*

## Stopping at Myrtle

Myrtle is a rural community seven miles northwest of old Suffolk near the Isle of Wight County line. Though the area around a tributary of the Nansemond River certainly must have been home to early settlers, it had no name (that this reporter knows) until sometime after the Norfolk & Petersburg Railroad came through in 1857.

That railroad was eventually known as the Norfolk & Western (now Norfolk Southern). The village called Myrtle centered around that railroad. The source of the name is unknown. Perhaps the name came when the post office opened.

One Civil War era map shows names in the Myrtle area that are still familiar to Suffolkians: Ashard (Archer), Ashburn, Daughtry, Duke, Ely (Eley), Johnson, Kelly, King, Luke, McClenna (MacClenny), Parsons (Persons), Pearce (Pierce), Pruden, Redd, Simmons (Simons), Williams and Wright. By the twentieth century the Powell and Bosselman families were part of the Myrtle community as well.

## Western Branch Baptist Church

The bedrock of the Myrtle community, here long before the railroad came, is Western Branch Baptist Church, the oldest Baptist congregation in Nansemond County/Suffolk.

According to the unnamed writer of a 2004 history of Western Branch Baptist Church, the relative remoteness of the area might well have been the reason for choosing that area for a Baptist meeting house in 1779. Nansemond County people were not accepting of Baptists in the 18th century, particularly in the parts of the County where the established church (Church of England) was especially strong.

The first Baptist meetings were held in 1779 at the MacClenny house across from the current church site. Edward Mintz was the minister. Soon a large log building was constructed. In 1806 another, more typical building was constructed.

John Harrell served as minister at Western Branch from 1815 until his death in 1844. Under his leadership the churches at Suffolk (1827), now First Baptist, and Great Fork (1833), near present day Whaleyville, were founded.



*Old newspaper photo of the MacClenny house where the first Nansemond County Baptists gathered to worship. This building was later moved to become the kitchen of the John Ashburn homestead.*

Holland Baptist Church. Holland would soon grow due to another railroad, the Atlantic and Danville.

The 1866 church building was remodeled and modernized in 1914-1916. Significant additions were made in the 1950s.

Families, schools and businesses have come and gone but Western Branch goes on as it has for more than 225 years. *Church history made available to us by Robert Archer.*



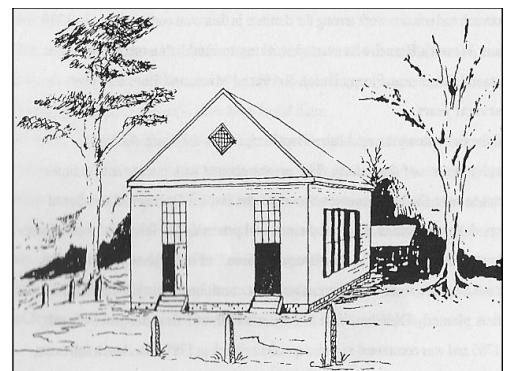
*Western Branch Baptist Church on Old Myrtle Road shown c. 1930*

During the War Between the States, the church was in part of a large no-man's land surrounding Suffolk. On January 30, 1863, significant fighting took place nearby at Kelly's store. Shortly after that battle Union forces set fire to Western Branch Baptist Church. This was unnecessary and unsanctioned destruction. Reportedly, Col. Drake of the 112th N.Y. Cavalry (and himself a Baptist minister) offered \$25.00 to find out who burned the church. Apparently the offer produced no information.

The Church pulpit Bible was destroyed during the War and was replaced by the Simons family Bible which is still at the church today.

Over the next three years, the church met at the Masonic Hall in Windsor or at Archers Schoolhouse. A new building was constructed in 1866. The new building, like the previous one, had a gallery for black worshippers. Western Branch reportedly helped form Piney Grove Church (colored) in Buckhorn in 1878. Reverend Putnam Owens of Western Branch ordained Jordan Thompson, the first black man born in Nansemond County to be ordained as a Baptist minister.

In 1880 seven members of Western Branch left to form



*Drawing from the church history of the new building completed in 1806 and later burned by Union soldiers.*

## W.E. MacClenny 1875-1950

Major Wilbur E. MacClenny was one of the South's most noted church, family and regional historians.

He was born in the Myrtle area of Nansemond County April 27, 1875, and died in Suffolk March 3, 1950. During his life he was not only a historian, but at times was also a teacher, author, businessman, insurance man and a banker.

After attending local schools, MacClenny entered Elon College, where he earned a Bachelor of Philosophy degree in 1897. Following that he taught in the public schools of Hobson and Cypress Chapel.

The Spanish-American War interrupted his teaching career. He volunteered in 1898 as a private in Company G, Fifth Virginia Regiment of Infantry, but later transferred to the hospital corps. He served in Havana, Cuba, until his discharge at the end of the war.

While in Cuba he sent dispatches on the war to the Suffolk Herald.

Upon his return to the states he worked with Lee Brothers and Company in Norfolk for three years, then returned to Suffolk to join the insurance firm of Harper and West in 1902. He later entered the banking field and was associated with both the Farmers Bank of Nansemond County and the American Bank and Trust Company in Suffolk.

He organized the Farmers Bank of Sunbury, N.C., and was its cashier for many years.

In 1905 he married the former Martha Irene Brothers [of Cypress Chapel].

Because of his military experience he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Suffolk Home Guard during World War I. Later he was the commander of the local organization of Spanish-American War Veterans, and in 1939 he was named a major on the staff of the commander of the United Confederate Veterans of America.

Meanwhile, his interest in history grew. Among his writings are a biography of the Rev. James O'Kelly, a history of the early Christian Church in the South, a history of the Jones-Lee families of Nansemond County, an account of Suffolk's and Nansemond County's part in World War I, a history of the peanut, and a history of Gates County, N.C.

He also provided special historical articles for newspapers and magazines in the state and the nation. Because of his deep knowledge of family histories, he was included in "Who Is Who in Genealogy."

MacClenny was also the historian for the Christian Church throughout the South. He served as secretary for the Virginia Historical Society and was an associate member of the American Historical Society. *Found in Flag Day, Suffolk, Virginia 1976.*



### Kings Grove Church

This was originally an African Methodist Episcopal Church organized in 1903. It was rebuilt in 1971 and is now a Pentecostal Holiness Church. *Photo by Dana Adams*

In an undated newspaper article Wilbur MacClenny stated that James MacClenny was the first native born Baptist minister from Nansemond County. He wrote that John Simons, a Quaker, lived next door to the old MacClenny home when the first Baptists met there in 1779.



"Grist mills were vital to the colonization of Western Tidewater, indeed America. They were so common there might be a mill within 5 to 6 miles of any farm. With new transportation and development of towns, they faded away one by one." Felice Hancock, author of *Water Powered Mills along the Blackwater and Nottaway Rivers*

*Scrugg's Millpond on Old Mill Road was reportedly where the Myrtle churches—white and colored—held baptisms. There was also a grist mill in Myrtle operated in the twentieth century by John Bunyan Archer. Photo by John Johnson*

**Nansemond County High and Graded Schools**  
**Myrtle High School**  
 REPORT OF

Excellent.....	90...100	} <i>R. H. Archer</i>
Good.....	80... 90	
Fair.....	70... 80	
Poor...Below	70	

*First* GRADE

Above: Front page of report from 1916-1917 school year,  
 L. Emma Bradshaw, teacher

**Nansemond County Schools**

*Myrtle High* School

Monthly, Term and Annual Report of

*R. H. Archer*

*H. H.* Grade

for the school year *1920-21*

*Mina S. Holland* Teacher

## The Schools in Myrtle

In our Schools issue September 2011, we reported that Calvin Archer built a school at Myrtle between 1850-60. The one room Archer School had seven grades. Families desiring and able to pay for education beyond that sent their children to private school in Suffolk or Windsor or, after a while, to Windsor High School. The Archer School, which stood at the intersection of today's Archers Mill and Old Myrtle Roads, was used until a county school was built. Robert Archer related that the old Archer School building was used for Sunday School by Western Branch, Bethlehem and Providence Churches immediately after the Civil War when the respective houses of worship were being rebuilt or repaired.

Apparently around 1910 a county high school was built at Myrtle at the intersection of Kings Fork and Little Creek Roads. From the picture bottom right, it would appear to have been similar to Kings Fork School. The Myrtle High School closed c. 1930. It no longer stands.

Greshen or Gresham Colored School was built in 1922 and was used into the 1960s.



Above: Faculty of Myrtle High School 1927. Below: Myrtle High School 1927.

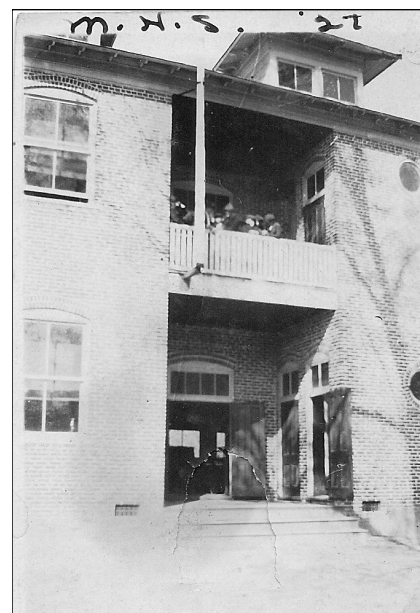
Greshen School site, now a private residence on Old Mill Road, as seen in our September 2011 issue. The Greshen school, built for colored students in the Myrtle area, was on this site 1922-1960s. When the current owners purchased the property, the school was too badly damaged to repair so this house was constructed on the footprint of the old school. Photo by Dana Adams



Miss Myrtie Powell, left, of the Myrtle area dressed for teaching at Everet's Bridge. Early 20th century.



Right: Mrs. Belle Ashburn Brewer and Mrs. Myrtie Powell Daughtry, both former teachers and natives of Myrtle, visiting there in 1935. Prior to her marriage Mrs. Brewer was principal of John Randolph School in Suffolk.



Myrtle High School pictures and report cards courtesy Robert Archer



## Postmasters

Myrtle had a post office from 1877-1939. Here are the postmasters with the year each term started. *Thanks to Andy Maxey.*

John M. Taylor	1877
James T. Pruden	1880
Kinsey J. Norfleet	1882
George T. Atkins	1886
Paul J. Powell	1909
John Henry Powell	1920

*The last two postmasters were brothers, not father and son. Apparently the post office closed after John Henry Powell's death in 1939.*

## Death Claims J.H. Powell 73 Myrtle Postmaster Dies Unexpectedly

Myrtle, Nov. 3—John Henry Powell, 73, prominent resident of Myrtle, and for the past 20 years proprietor of a general merchandise store and postmaster of Myrtle, dropped dead in the store this morning at 10 o'clock. Mrs. Powell had finished making up the mail to send out to the train, and when the mail man returned to the store with the incoming mail bag he failed to find him. Later Mrs. Powell went to the ware room in the rear of the store and found him lying on the floor dead.

*Portion of John Henry Powell's (I) 1939 obituary*



John Henry Powell (II) (1908-1985), son of Paul J. and Sarah Simons Powell, attended school at Myrtle for a while then rode the train to Windsor to attend Windsor High. He went on to the University of Richmond and T.C. Williams School of Law.

## PAUL J. POWELL

—DEALER IN—

**Dry Goods, Notions, Boots, Shoes, Hats, Caps,**

**STAPLE AND FANCY GROCERIES**

**Peanuts and Country Produce a Specialty**

*Myrtle, Va., 5/2 1906*

*Letterhead and obituaries courtesy John Powell*

## The Powells

It appears that the Powell family came to Myrtle from Isle of Wight County around 1900. Myrtle is just below the Isle of Wight/Nansemond line so it might not have been much of a move.

Henry J. Powell, father of Paul J. Powell and grandfather of John Henry Powell (II) was, perhaps, the first Powell at Myrtle. (Can readers correct this?) His obituary indicates that before the Civil War Henry Powell was a member of the Isle of Wight Blues. He was mustered into Confederate service in the Ninth Virginia Regiment, Pickett's Division, Mahone's Brigade, Longstreet's Corps.

Perhaps it was Henry J. Powell who first opened the store by the tracks in Myrtle where two of his sons would tend the store and serve as postmaster of Myrtle. One of those sons, Paul, became Clerk of Court in Nansemond County (1928-1930). Paul was active in church and in the community at large.

Paul's son John Henry (II), too, was active in church and civic organizations on the local and state levels. In 1943 he served as president of Ruritan National. (Coincidentally, he and his wife Eleanor and their four children would later move to Holland, Virginia, birthplace of the Ruritan Club.)

When Paul Powell died in 1930, his son John Henry, a young lawyer at that time, was appointed to finish his unexpired term as Clerk of Court. John Henry went on to be elected without opposition to serve five eight-year terms as Clerk of Court, choosing to retire after 43 years. He was the last Clerk of Court of Nansemond County before the January 1, 1974, merger that created the new City of Suffolk.



*John Henry Powell*

Statements about John Henry Powell (II) from a Suffolk News-Herald article c. 1970:

"If, in the history of the Commonwealth, there's been a better Circuit Court Clerk, I cannot name him."

*Former Governor Mills E. Godwin, Jr.*

"I have never seen his equal as a Clerk....He's as helpful to young lawyers as any clerk could be."

*Attorney Thomas L. Woodward*

"One of the most popular citizens in the whole state."

*Judge James C. Godwin*

## The Ashburns

Arguably one of the first families in the Myrtle area, the Ashburns have been farming there since before 1750. The 1862 map on page 2 shows the Ashburns and their neighbors, the Kings, near the Alms House or Poor House on what was then called Poor House Road (a/k/a Blackwater Road, now Indian Trail Road). The Ashburns still farm the same land on which their family has lived for more than 250 years.



Parke Ashburn holds his son Parke, Jr., in this 1932 photograph. Today Parke, Jr., and his son, Carson Parke Ashburn, III, farm the Ashburn land.

## The Kings

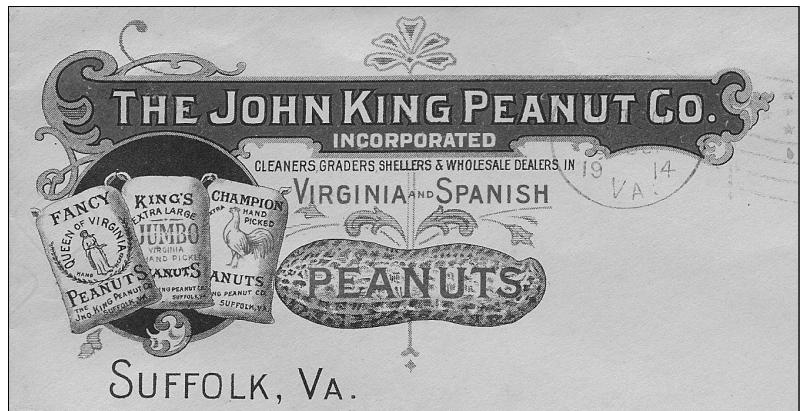
Before they were demolished in the 1970s, the King house (shown here) and the Elisha Ashburn house which stood nearby were among the oldest houses in the Myrtle area. Some other houses were burned by Union soldiers but these two were spared.

John King of the Myrtle Kings made a place for himself in local history when, in the 1890s, he and John Pinner started the Suffolk Peanut Company, the first successful peanut processors here and the start of our claim of World's Largest Peanut Market. Mr. King soon left Suffolk Peanut Company to start John King Peanut Co. and Old Reliable Peanut Company.



1972 photo courtesy Mr. & Mrs. Parke Ashburn

1914 envelope graphic; O'Connor collection



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GENERAL MERCHANDISE

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PHONE 15-F-23

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MINE PROPS  
PILING

## The Archers

The Archer family farmed and, from the 1850s to the 1970s, operated the lumber mill at Myrtle. The mill was, of course, on what is now known as Archers Mill Road. Letterhead courtesy Robert Archer.

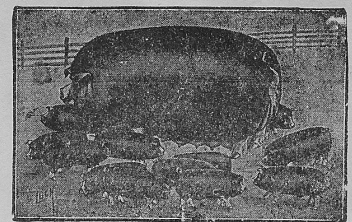


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Myrtle, Virginia., *Oct 20* 1921