

Environment Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes

Today mosquitoes are a nuisance and pose only a limited health risk. Until the mid-19th century, however, mosquitoes carried a variety of potentially deadly diseases including malaria. From the time the first colonists arrived in the early 1600s until well after the conclusion of the Civil War, mosquito-borne diseases were some of the most feared maladies. Early settlement in Virginia was concentrated along waterways which, because of the lack of overland roads, constituted the main transportation routes. Typically, the earliest houses were built very near the water's edge enabling the land owner to easily obtain water, catch fish, and get in his boat. Settlers quickly learned that, while convenient, living right on the water was dangerous. Within a year or two of moving onto their property, owners usually built a new house up on a ridge some little distance away from the water. Some local residents went so far as to send the women and children to inland farms in the mountains or Piedmont. Of course, the greatest threat was during the warm months when the mosquitoes were most active. Many were unable to avoid the water. Servants, slaves, or men whose livelihoods depended upon the water had little choice but to remain in proximity to it. Malaria was the most common mosquito-borne disease in this area.

18th and 19th century newspaper advertisements for the sale of property often included detailed descriptions of the land and buildings. These ads also often referred to the farm as being "healthy," meaning that the dwelling or potential dwelling site was on a well-ventilated hill well above streams, lakes, or rivers.

Mary Cary Kendall said when her grandparents and their children, the Alfred Pyke family, lived at *Richland* in Wide Water (Widewater) they would have to move every summer because of mosquitoes. *Richland* looks over the Potomac River and attracted the pesky insects each year. "The family considered this the 'unhealthy season' and would move away, because the mosquitoes were so bad!" The family purchased a house on Garrisonville Road, located near today's Meadow Farms Nursery. They named the home *Red Top*. (*Red Top* sat on a red-clay bluff which is no longer there because of the widening of Garrisonville Road.) *Red Top* was "more like a camp house. It consisted of a big room with a fireplace and a wrap-around porch."

Next door to *Richland* was *Clifton*, the home of the Waller cousins. (Kate Waller Barrett's family.) The Waller girls would move to Markham in Fauquier County during the summer and would stay with their relatives. This "summer-migration" took place at many Widewater homes. Only women and girls would leave their houses. Men stayed to oversee the property and would visit their families every weekend. Usually the females left the middle of July and returned to their homes the first of September.

Red Top was sold in 1915, as the mosquitoes did not return to Widewater in great numbers anymore. Residents believed that the coal dust from the railroad engines, which traveled up the Potomac shoreline, settled on the water discouraging mosquito breeding.



Richland overlooking the Potomac River



Clifton also faced the Potomac

Female residents of Widewater usually left homes like this during the summer because of the mosquitoes.