

**The Life Cycle of the Adam Keeling House,  
Virginia Beach, Virginia**

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The Adam Keeling House is a private residence in the Great Neck Point neighborhood of Virginia Beach, Virginia . It is near the Lynnhaven Inlet and the Chesapeake Bay, and about five miles from Cape Henry. Built sometime between about 1680 and 1714, it is considered the second oldest home in Virginia Beach (after the Adam Thoroughgood house) and has been continuously occupied for three hundred years. The house retains almost all of its original features, with several stages of telescoping additions bringing the house up to modern standards. The Keeling House, or Ye Dudlies as it is sometimes called, is currently owned and occupied by Dr. and Mrs. Glenn Carwell. The Keeling family cemetery survives nearby “at the northern end of Lynn Cove Lane”<sup>1</sup>.

#### Pre-1600: Indigenous Inhabitants

Native Americans were the first inhabitants of Virginia’s Tidewater region. At the time of the first landing of permanent English settlers at Cape Henry in 1607, Chesapeake Indians occupied what is now Virginia Beach<sup>2</sup>. According to J. Davis Reed, “Great Neck Point was the location of the main town of the Chesapean Indians<sup>3</sup>.”

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<sup>1</sup> Reed, J. Davis. “A Short History of Great Neck Point.” Princess Anne County/ Virginia Beach Historical Society: [www.virginiabeachhistory.org/CommunityRoot-Communities/communities-GreaNeckPoint.html](http://www.virginiabeachhistory.org/CommunityRoot-Communities/communities-GreaNeckPoint.html) (accessed December 3, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Jordan, James M. and Frederick S. Jordan. *Virginia Beach: A Pictorial History*. Published by Thomas F. Hale: undated.

<sup>3</sup> Reed, J. Davis.

## 1600-1881: The Keeling Family

Thomas Keeling was born in England and transported to the Virginia Colony by Adam Thorowgood, who would be the godfather of Thomas Keeling's son, Adam Keeling<sup>4</sup>. Several sources state that Thomas Keeling received a land grant in the Great Neck Point area<sup>5</sup>. According to the house's present owner, Dr. Glenn Carwell, a man named Richard Dudley owned a corn and tobacco farm which was sold to a member of the Keeling family in about 1660 for 8,000 pounds of tobacco. This would explain the name "Ye Dudlies," however, this information does not appear in published accounts of the house's history. It is possible that the house was indeed built on the former Dudley farm, and that the Keeling land grant was for a separate parcel.

Thomas Keeling's son, Adam Keeling, died in 1683, and although he passed "that parcel of land commonly known as 'Ye Dudlies'"<sup>6</sup> to his son in his will, he did not explicitly mention a house. (It will be useful to note here that for several generations, the names of Keeling heirs alternate between Thomas and Adam). Adam Keeling's son, Thomas, is generally acknowledged as having commissioned the construction of the house. The builder is unknown, however a master mason would have been employed to execute the chevron-patterned gable-ends and double chimneys. The second Thomas Keeling died in 1714 or 1715, depending on the source, and mentioned the house in his will, passing it to his son Adam.

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<sup>4</sup> "Thorowgood" Genealogical information. GHOTES (Genealogy and History of the Eastern Shore) of Virginia, [www.esva.net/ghotes/thorowgd/index.html](http://www.esva.net/ghotes/thorowgd/index.html)(accessed December 3, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. "Ye Dudlies".

<sup>6</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. "Ye Dudlies".

The second Adam Keeling died in 1771, leaving the property to his grandson, the third Adam Keeling. In his will, he left sixteen slaves to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren<sup>7</sup>. No detailed descriptions of the house or property from this period were found, however it can be inferred that the Keeling property was still functioning as a farm or small plantation, and would have had the accompanying outbuildings, though none survive.

During the Keelings' occupation of the Great Neck Point property, portions of the land were given in wills to children and grandchildren aside from the principal heirs. Thus the property gradually shrank in size until approximately 362 acres were sold by Martha Keeling, widow of Solomon (sic) Keeling, and eleven other Keeling heirs to John Avery in 1881<sup>8</sup>. Three African-American slaves, Eliza Willy/Wilroy, Wilson Willy/Wilroy, and Samuel Willy/Wilroy, were listed as belonging to Solomon Keeling<sup>9</sup>. It is possible that the Keelings were unable to sustain a profitable farm after the Civil War and Emancipation, resulting in the 1881 sale of the property.

#### 1881-Present: Modifications and Modernization

John Avery sold the 362-acre property to Charles Consolvo in 1890, who sold off parcels of land before selling the remaining property to George and Jane Syer in 1938 for

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<sup>7</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. "Ye Dudlies".

<sup>8</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. "Ye Dudlies".

<sup>9</sup> Stewart, Selma. "Re: Princess Anne Co., VA Keeling Family." Message posted to AfriGeneas Slave Research Forum, February 27, 2004. [www.afriGeneas.com/forumd/index.cgi?noframes;read=5284](http://www.afriGeneas.com/forumd/index.cgi?noframes;read=5284)(accessed December 3, 2006).

\$15,200<sup>10</sup>. The Syers hired architect Mary Ramsal Brown to design a modern kitchen to be added to the south gable-end of the house<sup>11</sup>. This addition accesses the main floor of the original house through one of the original closets to either side of the chimney, so that the interior of the historic house maintains its original appearance. Electricity and plumbing were added to the original house for the first time, and a small bathroom was placed at the top of the stairs. The Syers also added a detached garage close to the street, accessible to the house by a long brick walkway now bordered by large shrubs. The property was divided into residential lots at this time, many of which were sold to friends and acquaintances of the Syers<sup>12</sup>. Many of the houses in the neighborhood today were built in the 1940s and 1950s.

A survey of the Keeling House for a Works Progress Administration of Virginia Historical Inventory was undertaken in 1938, with the date of construction listed as “prior to 1681.” The condition of the house was listed as “poor,” however, it was noted that “Mrs. Syer is having the original house enlarged by the addition of a kitchen wing with small bedrooms over it.”<sup>13</sup> The architectural description, written by Daisy Lawrence of Norfolk, Virginia, describes the house as a “small brick structure with a gabled roof, and chimneys on the ends, and with two dormers. Two of the chimneys are within the walls. On the west is an old blacksmith-made wrought iron lightning rod.” This description is corroborated by dated photographs from 1934, 1937, and 1938 which were included in the Historic American Building Survey of the house (See images 2, 4, and 8). The HABS report, begun after 1933 and revised in 1936, includes one map, five measured drawings

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<sup>10</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. “Ye Dudlies”.

<sup>11</sup> Carwell, Dr. Glenn. Informal interview: 11/25/06.

<sup>12</sup> Carwell, Dr. Glenn. Informal interview: 11/25/06.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence, Daisy. “The Home of Thomas Keeling.” Works Progress Administration of Virginia Historical Inventory: Feb. 24, 1938.

of exterior and interior features, and several photographs, but only two pages of text with very little information about the house's history. The report gives the condition of the house as good, although it appears to be in need of maintenance in a 1934 photograph (image 4). This photograph shows a small addition to the south gable-end of the house, and it is unclear when it was built and whether it was replaced by the Syers' remodeling or incorporated into it.

Mr. and Mrs. Syer sold the house in 1955 to Rear Admiral and Mrs. Leon J. Maness, who added the solarium to the rear of the 1938 addition, and added a new master bedroom to the south of the 1938 addition<sup>14</sup>. The telescoping bedroom addition can be seen in image 7. In 1976, former Virginia State Senator and Mrs. Edward Breeden purchased the house. According to Dr. Glenn Carwell, they added the transept window over the front door. The Breedens remained in the house until 1997, when they sold it to the Carwells.

Dr. and Mrs. Carwell have made some minor changes to the house, including adding heat pumps and lining the chimneys to protect against fire<sup>15</sup>. The rooms of the original house are furnished with antiques and artwork, and instead of being frozen in time as in a house museum, there is a sense of living historic continuity. The house is situated at the end of a finger of the Lynnhaven Inlet, and, according to Dr. Carwell, when the channel was dredged to provide boat access, bricks were found and an archaeological survey was undertaken. He believes the waterway was originally used to transport agricultural products and materials to and from the plantation.

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<sup>14</sup> Carwell, Dr. Glenn. Informal interview: 11/25/06.

<sup>15</sup> Carwell, Dr. Glenn. Informal interview: 11/25/06.

## 2006: The Adam Keeling House Today

The Keeling House survives today largely intact. The only major alterations of the original structure are the small bathroom added inside, and the projecting addition on the south façade. Even these alterations are not too invasive, and the exterior and interior characteristics probably appear much as they did three hundred years ago. One exception is the surrounding landscaping. As seen in image 2, dated 1934, the house has very little of what we would consider landscaping in the modern sense. The house in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would not have had the type of foundation plantings seen in images 3, 6, and 7. Though the landscape treatment is not historically accurate for an early-18<sup>th</sup>-century period of significance, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century landscape would appear out of keeping with the modern additions.

Much attention has been given to the Keeling House's striking brick masonry, with the Flemish bond used on all four facades and the chevron-pattern in the gable-ends which was characteristic of many colonial houses in the Tidewater area. Throughout the house, the header bricks are colored deep blue, noted in the Princess Anne County/ Virginia Beach Historical Society literature as possibly achieved with a salt glaze. According to Dr. Carwell, the bricks were probably made on the site, and an oyster-shell mortar was used in the construction. He also notes that the interior chimneys are unusual for a Tidewater house because of the warm climate. This feature is also seen in the nearby Adam

Thoroughgood house (which has one interior chimney and one exterior chimney) , and given the close connections between the two families, it is highly likely that the builder of the Keeling House was familiar with (if not directly involved with) the construction of the Thoroughgood house.

Also in keeping with other colonial examples, the Keeling House has a cross-passage plan with two rooms on the main floor and two rooms above. In such a plan, the main entrance to the house is centered and a hall crosses directly through the first floor to a door on the rear façade. This type of plan was popular in the colonial south as it allowed both doors to be opened to facilitate ventilation, as well as providing for a strict hierarchy of public, private, and servant spaces. Like the Adam Thoroughgood House, the Keeling House is almost Georgian in composition, but without concern for rigid symmetry (see images 4 and 8).

Between 1881 and 1938, the Keeling house changed from being the public focal point of a small but functioning plantation with extended families and enslaved families to being a private home for nuclear families. During this time, the house itself remained intact, but the use of the land surrounding it changed drastically as the former plantation was divided into residential lots. The house has arguably never functioned as an “ordinary” nuclear-family residence, but has since 1938 served as a showcase example of colonial building by and for the upper class. In the past, it was inhabited by a comparatively wealthy and influential family (Keelings served as Vestrymen, Gentlemen Justices, and Tax



Collectors)<sup>16</sup>, and in recent years it has been inhabited by an admiral, a former Virginia state senator, and a surgeon.

The house's status is reinforced by its listing in both the Virginia Landmarks Register (on April 17, 1973) and in the National Register of Historic Places (on June 19, 1973). Because of its high profile as a rare 17<sup>th</sup>-century survivor, its high degree of craftsmanship, and its livability through modern additions, the Adam Keeling House's chances for continued survival are very good. It has survived the past three hundred years with a very high degree of integrity largely due to the care of its recent owners and their respect for the house's historic nature.

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<sup>16</sup> Princess Anne Historical Society house tour literature. "Ye Dudlies".

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## Appendix



1. The location of the Adam Keeling House, with approximate location of Keeling family cemetery



2. The north and west facades in 1934, from 1936 HABS report



3. North elevation, 2006



4. Main (east) façade, 1934, showing wood addition to the south, from 1936 HABS report



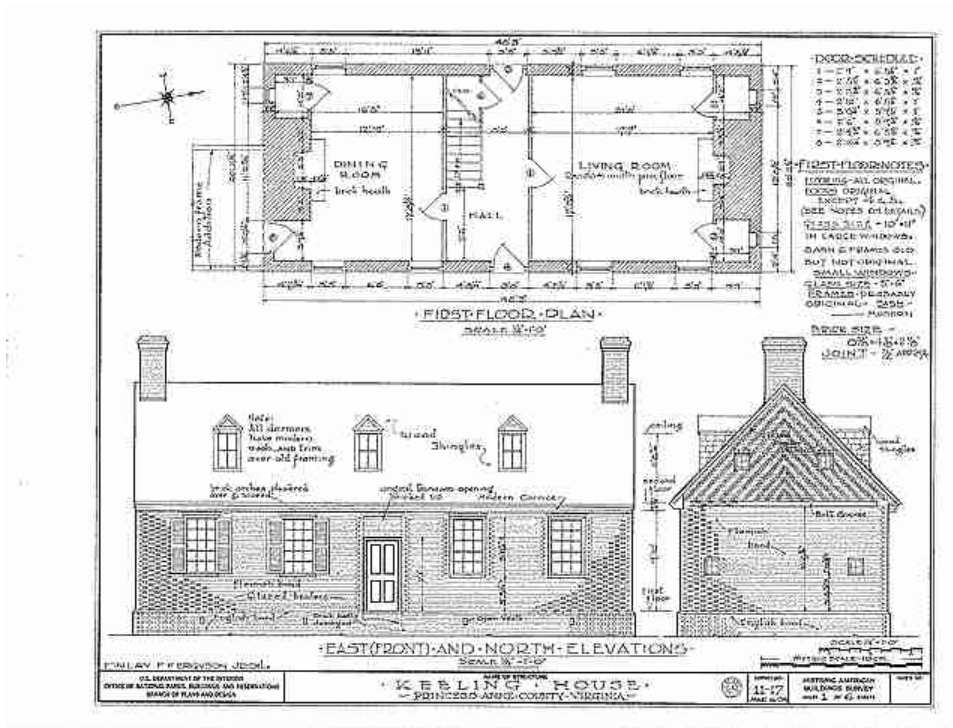
5. Interior, 1937, with pine paneling and closets flanking the fireplace, from 1936 HABS report



6. Main (east) façade, 2006



7. Telescoping additions to the south, 2006



8. Circa 1936 HABS report measured drawing, east and north elevations

