



## **Rappahannock Hunt History**

The Rappahannock Hunt is measured by the standard of recognition of the Master of Foxhounds Association of America (MFHA). The Hunt was formally established in 1926 and recognized by the MFHA only in 1939. However, the tradition of foxhunting and hound breeding is very old in The Rappahannock Hunt country. It goes back to the beginnings of foxhunting in the United States. According to Alex Mackay-Smith, in his *The American Foxhound: 1747-1967*, "The Upper Rappahannock Valley (which includes today's Rappahannock Hunt territory of Rappahannock, Culpeper and Madison counties) is the cradle of the American Foxhound."

Although it is known that foxhunting flourished in the area during the 18th century (avid foxhunter George Washington was a frequent visitor), the earliest existing records show that Col. Charles Green (1807-1881) of "The Shade" maintained a pack of hunting hounds through the Civil War. Col. F. G. Skinner was another well-known hound breeder of the period. He lived with his father-in-law, Dr. Philip Thornton, at "Montpelier," near Sperryville.

One of the most famous hound breeders in America was Burrell Frank Bywaters (1848-1922) of Olive in Culpeper County. His hounds were the foundation stock for many modern hunts. His son, Hugh L. Bywaters (1872-1952), carried on the family tradition of breeding and selling hounds.

Farmers' packs were common in the territory during the first part of the 20th century. Jack Bruce (later to be a huntsman for The Rappahannock Hunt) began his own pack with three or four hounds in 1926. During the week, Jack would go out alone on horseback with his hounds. He would climb to the top of Pickerel Ridge and blow his father's ram's horn, and soon, some of B. R. Miller's hounds and some of William "Bill" Sisk's hounds would come to him. Now he had a pack and a-hunting they would go.

Most often, their quarry was the gray fox, which outnumbered the red by two-to-one at the time. When they put their fox to ground, Jack would dig it out, put it in a sack and carry it home. Sunday, when all the neighbors got together, Jack would turn out the bagged fox and off they would go on a five- or six-hour hunt.

In 1926, Hugh Bywaters and Joseph B. Johnson of Sperryville founded The

Rappahannock Hunt as a farmers' pack. They were Joint Masters and hunted their own hounds for nine years. They remained Joint Masters until 1938, when Robert Mercer Menefee and Oliver Durant, II, took over for the 1938-39 season.

A banner season for The Rappahannock Hunt was 1939-40. Hugh Bywaters and W. A. Miller were Joint Masters of the hunt when it was officially recognized by the MFHA. Bywaters and Miller remained in their leadership posts until 1943.

The hunt went inactive during the WWII years, 1943-46, and, as a result, lost its recognized status. In 1946, Curtis Campbell paid the registration fee to the MFHA and so preserved the hunt territory. Campbell had come to the Rappahannock in the late 'teens. He was a construction engineer who built most of the bridges for the paved road system that was begun in the early 1920s. He was an enthusiastic foxhunter and always ready to pitch in.

That same year, Campbell, J. E. Keyser, W. F. Moffett, Jr., and John R. DeBergh reactivated the hunt with Arthur W. A. Miller as Master. Keyser and Miller were Joint Masters from 1947-9 renting their hounds from Bywaters. Earl Yancey was huntsman.

J. W. Fletcher and Keyser became Joint Masters in 1949 and served together until 1950. From 1950 until 1972, Fletcher and DeBergh served as joint Masters. They continued to hunt Bywaters' hounds with Yancey through early 1951, when Clifton Clark, a farmer and hound breeder, and Weldon Burke became huntsmen and hunted Clark's hounds for the 1951-1952 seasons. Clark barely rode and Burke did not ride at all. They would truck the hounds to the meet and turn them out to hunt. Then Clark, on a gray mare named Pepsi Cola, would walk to the top of the nearest hill listen to the chase. He would follow from hilltop to hilltop, never once jumping a fence.

Rappahannock's first kennel was built at Fletcher's "Thornton Hill" in 1952 to house a gift of several hounds from Fletcher Harper, MFH of the Orange County Hunt. They were the foundation of the hunt's own pack.

Rappahannock regained its recognized status in 1953. Fletcher cared for the hounds during the season at "Thornton Hill," while DeBergh took charge of care and breeding at his farms, "Pleasant View," and later at "Ivy Cliffs," for the summers. But DeBergh had no kennel and hounds were left to wander at will. They stayed pretty close to the trough most of the time but, being foxhounds, they took to hunting on their own, often giving chase all the way to the Shenandoah River at Browntown, a day's journey, returning a day or two later.

Some farmers were worried the hounds might be chasing and killing sheep. To acclimate the hounds to the little darlings, Fletcher moved a lamb into the kennel. One day at a joint meet with the Blue Ridge Hunt, Ollie Dodson, the huntsman, led hounds on parade from the kennel with a very dignified sheep in the center of the pack giving tongue in mournful "baas" for all assembled to hear.

One of the most spectacular performances by The Rappahannock Hunt hounds occurred while Dodson was huntsman and it wasn't in the hunt field. The hunt had been asked to participate in the Town of Culpeper Bicentennial Parade of 1959. The crowd was enormous. Spectators lined the streets. There were brass bands and steam locomotives. The noise was terrific. But the hounds ignored it all and marched proudly up the street packed tightly together, amazed riders following closely behind.

The hunt held its first point-to-point races in 1951 at Mr. and Mrs. Leon T. Greenaway's "Leeway Farm." They were successful from the start, with the hound race and the farmers' race being big crowd pleasers. The only glitch came when, in a snow squall during the hound race, the contestants took off on a live fox and were not seen again for a couple of days. Not one finished the race.

In 1956, the Masters believed they had a pretty darn good pack, so entered two hounds at the Virginia Hound Show at Mrs. Marion D. Scott's "Montpelier" in Orange County and, lo and behold, those hounds—Bounty and Brilliance—got a first and a second in the "brood bitch" class against some stiff competition.

The pack grew dramatically in size and quality in 1979 when the New Market Hounds of Maryland went inactive and the MFH-cum-huntsman, Gilmore Flautt, III, gave his entire pack to The Rappahannock Hunt when he moved to Texas. DeBergh retired as Master in 1972 and Fletcher became sole MFH. He continued in that capacity until 1981, serving for 31 years.

During Billy Dodson's term as huntsman, Fletcher introduced technology to foxhunting, equipping himself and Billy with two-way radios. Billy just could not adjust to these gadgets. When he complained that it rattled around too much at the gallop, Fletcher had a special pocket sewn into Billy's scarlet coat. Fletcher liked calling Billy, but Billy did not like talking into that unnatural device. Besides, Billy still contends that the radio's range was so limited in the hills and mountains of The Rappahannock Hunt territory that he could hear further than it could broadcast. Technology's day was short-lived—just two seasons—as CB radios became so popular there were no longer clear channels available.

J. A. Bernard Dahlgren and Larry LeHew became joint Masters in 1981 and served together until Dahlgren's tragic and untimely death in an automobile accident in 1985. LeHew served as sole Master until 1999, when Huntsman Oliver L. Brown was elected Joint Master. They served together until 2000. Janet Payne O'Keefe became the hunt's first lady Joint Master in 2002 and served until 2009. The current Joint Masters are Brown, R. Augustus Edwards, III, (2005) and Oliver's son, Michael O. Brown, (2017) who is the Huntsman.