Roots of Virginia Culture: Tobacco and Hops

TOBACCO AND HOPS FACTS:

◆ In 1612, John Rolfe introduced the first commercially successful type of tobacco to Virginia. He later married Pocahontas.

◆ Imported tobacco is not new to Virginia. Turkish tobacco has added intense flavor to Virginia-made cigarettes for almost a century.

◆ Hop pickers kept track of their harvest with wooden tally sticks. Today, these sticks are collector’s items.

◆ Established in 1698, the Shepherd Neame Brewery in Faversham, Kent, is the oldest brewery in England. Shepherd Neame now has some 370 pubs across South East England.

◆ Kent has been known as the “Garden of England” since King Henry VIII was particularly satisfied by a dish of Kentish cherries.

GROWING TOBACCO in Virginia and growing hops in Kent County, England, may seem to have little in common. Yet, in similar ways, these crops are culturally and historically important.

Virginia tribes used tobacco for ceremonial purposes; varieties suited to European tastes became the colony’s “gold.” Growing tobacco was labor intensive; in the early years, Native Americans and enslaved Africans worked the fields. After the Civil War, many Virginians became tobacco sharecroppers and tenant farmers. But the state’s tobacco profits dwindled when other countries started to produce cheap tobacco and public health concerns led to legislation less favorable to cigarette manufacturers. Many Virginia tobacco farmers have turned to other crops or have stopped farming altogether.

Hops, which flavor beer, have been grown in Kent County since the sixteenth century. Hop “gardens” and oast houses (used to dry the hops) dotted the landscape. For the fall harvest, many hop farmers hired itinerate labor—often residents from the East End of London. Despite the difficult work, “hopping down in Kent” is still remembered fondly. Today, hops can be grown more profitably elsewhere, so most farmers in Kent have stopped growing them.