

OTHER VOICES: EMBRACING OUR REGIONAL IDENTITY HERE IN HAMPTON ROADS

By: JAMES F. BABCOCK

January 6, 2007

As one who has beaten the drum for regional identity and cooperation for almost 30 years, I am delighted to see the Hampton Roads Partnership take a proactive stance in support of our community's chosen designation. Accentuating Hampton Roads with the tagline "America's First Region" adds a historical dimension to a name that ought to be celebrated for it recognizes a natural and distinctive aspect of our area. In addition, Hampton Roads is actually better known today around the globe, and more accepted locally, than many people realize.

Longtime residents will recall when Southeastern Virginia, west of the Chesapeake Bay, was divided into two sections, referred to as Tidewater and the Virginia Peninsula, separated by the James River and the harbor of Hampton Roads. In the late 1980s, when the two planning districts and metropolitan statistical areas merged, local leadership settled on Hampton Roads as the most appropriate title for the combined region.

Yes, Tidewater might have been chosen, but it was too broad, for the commonwealth uses that term to cover all rivers that feed the Chesapeake Bay. Hampton Roads was much more appropriate, as the harbor is our most recognizable feature. It lies between and joins our two main sections, and it evokes our unique naval and maritime heritage. It is also one of the oldest place designations in America.

How old? Shakespeare buffs will remember that a certain Henry Wriothesley was the bard's principal sponsor. As the third Earl of Southampton, Wriothesley also was a prominent board member of the London Company of Virginia, the investors who sponsored the Jamestown settlement. To honor him, the waterways were named "Southampton Roadsteads" by Lord DeLaWare who in 1610 sailed into Chesapeake Bay with supplies just in time to convince the

starving colonists not to abandon their infant colony. (A "roadstead" is a large safe anchorage, an apt description of our harbor.)

In time, "Southampton Roadsteads" was shortened to Hampton Roads and its fame spread. Well known to sailors over the centuries, Hampton Roads in modern times has been the scene of significant events. The first battle between armored ships -- the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia 3/4 took place here in 1862. Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet sailed from Hampton Roads for its trip around the world during our region's 300th anniversary in 1907. Over these waters, Eugene Ely, in 1912, made the first flight from the deck of a ship. From this harbor sailed the expeditionary forces to Europe in both World Wars. Into these waters were launched all of America's nuclear aircraft carriers.

Since we began calling our region Hampton Roads in the 1980s, the title has gained wide acceptance locally. A 1999 survey asked citizens to indicate the name of the region: 63 percent chose Hampton Roads, 22 percent Tidewater, 4 percent the next most mentioned name. In Old Dominion University's 2006 "Quality of Life Survey," over 85 percent identified themselves as citizens of Hampton Roads. Suffice it to say that in this critical branding effort, we have come a long way in a couple of decades.

External recognition of the name has also grown. Though it could be improved, marketing the region's image is important primarily among potential customers, such as corporate relocation prospects, tourists and college-bound students. To that end, our shipping companies, universities, realtors, chambers of commerce, economic development departments, and others who deal with persons outside the area routinely use Hampton Roads. So the argument by some that "no one" recognizes Hampton Roads is simply not true. Nevertheless, national and global familiarity with Hampton Roads can be increased if we would come together to promote it.

That is the opportunity that "Hampton Roads, America's First Region" provides. By focusing on the shared history that links Norfolk to Portsmouth, Virginia Beach to Chesapeake, Williamsburg to James City County, York to Gloucester, Newport News to Hampton and Poquoson, Isle of Wight to Suffolk and Southampton, Franklin to Surry and Smithfield -- and all to each other -- we help

and encourage our residents to view one another as neighbors in a competitive global marketplace.

This coming spring, the world will be reminded that Hampton Roads was our nation's starting point. The crews of the Susan Constant, Godspeed and Discovery landed at Virginia Beach, then 18 days later established the first English-speaking settlement in the New World at Jamestown. From it grew the United States of America.

In the months ahead, all of us who live in this delightful place can proudly share our historic legacy with each other and with those who come to visit "Hampton Roads: America's First Region."

Babcock is a member of the Hampton Roads Partnership and the Future of Hampton Roads Inc.

Copyright Chicago Tribune Co. Jan 6, 2007