

Interview with Jerry Stokes by Jeff Wright

How did you become Involved with FODR?

In October 1985, I took on the role of Virginia Land Conservation Coordinator, on loan from the U.S. Forest Service to the Commonwealth of Virginia. My primary task was to assist the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) as part of the Chesapeake Bay Program.

The Big Island Project in November 1985, Louise McKenna reached out to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), expressing her interest in selling a 27-acre island in Dragon Run to a conservation organization. Her connection to CBF was facilitated by Jim Walton, a member of a hunt club that used her property. He also served on the King and Queen County Board of Supervisors in the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission. Jim Walton was an unsung hero in the early efforts to protect Dragon Run. Recognizing McKenna's desire to sell the property while preserving it, CBF referred her inquiry to me.

I visited the property with Jim Walton and reported to CBF that the land had significant natural value, making its protection worthwhile. I suggested that safeguarding the island could serve as a catalyst for a broader Dragon Run conservation initiative. CBF authorized me to proceed with the project, and I was informed that Jimmy Morgan, a strong advocate for Dragon Run protection, would be a key contact.

December 17, 1985, I met with Jimmy Morgan at his drugstore to discuss the property, the purchase price, and the possibility of raising funds from local individuals to buy it. Jimmy's response was an unequivocal "yes."

Jimmy immediately began forming the purchase group. Over the next several weeks, I coordinated the project and negotiated the purchase specifics between McKenna and Morgan on behalf of the potential purchase group. This involved:

- Meeting with the purchase group that Jimmy had formed to discuss raising the money and channeling the purchase through the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) until a local land trust could take title to the property.
- Meeting with Ms. McKenna to discuss the details and terms of the purchase. • Initiating the required survey for the purchase.
- Meeting with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation Board of Trustees and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation Trustees to explain the project and secure their support and approval.
- Meeting with the purchase group committee to explore organizational options, including forming a land trust and obtaining 501(c)(3) IRS status as a tax-exempt conservation organization. By this time the project had grown to include Big Island, the surrounding wetlands owned by Ms. McKenna, Little Island owned by her brother, a group of 30 buyers, a volunteer survey of the project area, and a right-of-way from Chesapeake Corporation and Russell Williams. The right-of-way was necessary for gaining access to the property. Involvement also included the lawyer representing the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Attorney General's office, and the staff and boards of the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

April 29, 1986 - The purchase group met and formed the Friends of Dragon Run (FODR). It began on January 8, 1986, with a meeting between me and Ed Haile, in which I requested Ed's assistance with the survey. Reconnoitering the project boundaries began on January 9 and involved breaking ice in a canoe.

May 1987 The survey was finally complete. The last shot of the project boundary was taken in November 1987, and the right-of way survey was completed in December 1987.

The entire survey took 17 months—from January 1986 to May 1987—to complete and finalize the plat. Most of the survey work was done on weekends and took approximately 50 man-days of my and Ed's time. The estimated value of the services donated by Wind Survey through Ed and me was approximately \$7,500 in 1987 dollars, or more than \$17,000 today. The project involved 24,080 feet of survey line, or 4.5 miles. On June 12, 1987, I notified Jimmy Morgan that the survey project was complete and forwarded a copy of the survey to the Friends of Dragon Run. On August 7, 1987, I notified the VOF attorney that negotiations for the right-of-way (which Ed and I had surveyed) across Chesapeake Corporation and property owned by Russell Williams were complete, and both had agreed to grant the right-of-way at no cost. My role in the Big Island project ended in August 1987.

What was your Biggest Challenge?

Surveying Big Island, Little Island, and the buffer zone along the adjacent Chesapeake Corporation lands, including the right-of-way from the highway to Big Island Landing, across Chesapeake land and Russell Williams' property, and the associated title transfer to FODR/VOF.

Favorite Memory?

Mine: Completing the survey. Ellen's: Being home alone with a 5-year-old daughter and 3-year-old rambunctious twin boys for many weekends over a 17-month period while Ed Haile and I were in Dragon Run.

Funny Stories?

Someone once asked one of our boys where their dad worked, and he answered, "Dragon Run." The survey was conducted under the supervision of Mike Wind, a licensed surveyor, who had to be present for the final shot to close the Big Island survey traverse. The last shot was taken from a wooded knoll across a 15-foot-wide body of water. It was December, and the water was cold! Ed, Mike, and I drew straws to decide who would wade across to the knoll to hold the rod for the shot. Mike lost! I will never forget seeing Mike, standing shivering in just his undershorts on that wooded knoll, holding the rod while Ed hurried to get the last shot!

Ideas for Future Protection?

We need active engagement of adjacent landowners to participate as members of FODR and to encourage the donation of conservation easements on their Dragon Run frontage. Additionally, we should actively seek younger members, as most of us are an older bunch.