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THE STORY OF THE HISTORIC TRIANGLE

Jamestown, the 17th-century Capital

The story of Williamsburg, the capital of 18th-century Virginia, really began at 17th-century Jamestown. For more than 90 years after the first English adventurers set foot on Virginia soil, Jamestown served as the seat of government and administrative center of England's largest colony in North America. From its statehouse on the banks of the James River, officials and lawmakers governed the colonists, promoted the spread of settlement and sanctioned the importation of African slaves to meet the colony's labor shortage. As Virginia grew, Jamestown's role did too.

When the statehouse burned for the fourth time in 1698, many Virginians, including the royal governor, Francis Nicholson, seized on the accident as an opportunity to move the capital. Several prospective sites were considered. After some debate, members of the House of Burgesses chose the propitious site between the York and James Rivers five miles from the old capital city, an up-and-coming place known as Middle Plantation.

Middle Plantation had been founded in the early 17th century as the outpost to defend against Indian attacks. By 1690, it had developed into a prosperous neighborhood of widely scattered houses belonging to successful tobacco planters and merchants. It also contained a church, several stores, a tavern, two mills and, after 1695, the College of William and Mary (chartered in 1693). In 1677, following Bacon's Rebellion, when Jamestown was burned to the ground, Middle Plantation served as a substitute capital. Its main attractions as a potential site for a capital were several. First, it was located on high ground between the James and the York Rivers and therefore was relatively healthy. Its inland location was thought to be safe from naval bombardment, and it was already the home to the college, one of Virginia's principle institutions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, several of Virginia's leading politicians lived at Middle Plantation. Begun in 1699, the new city was named Williamsburg in honor of the King of England, William III.

The Williamsburg Community

Once the decision was made to move the capital from Jamestown to Middle Plantation, an entirely new capital city was laid out on the site. The desire to design a completely new city fulfilled one of the reasons for moving the capital from Jamestown. Many Virginians thought their colony was becoming too important to be served by anything less than a capital city built to reflect Virginia's preeminence among England's American colonies.

Unlike Jamestown, Williamsburg did not remain a small, undeveloped administrative center. Partly because the colony's growth continued throughout the 18th century and partly because economic forces reshaped Virginia society; Williamsburg fulfilled the expectations of its founders and kept pace with the growing colony.

At first, the business of government attracted the nucleus of Williamsburg's urban population. Joining the small staff already living at the college were the governor, his household and the clerks of various government offices. Soon the regular meetings of the General Court, the attendance of councilors on the governor, and the periodic meetings of the General Assembly brought a number of other people to Williamsburg to support these governmental activities. Taverns were established to feed and house those in town on government business. Lawyers settled here to be close to the General Court. As the century progressed, more stores were opened to provide merchandise to residents and out-of-town shoppers. The townspeople engaged in these activities needed to be housed and provided with foodstuffs that they didn't grow themselves. Carpenters and masons moved to town to build houses and shops. Bakers, tailors and barbers settled here to serve both visitors and townspeople. Much of the heavy and domestic work around town was performed by blacks, most of them slaves, although a few were free. By the eve of the American Revolution, nearly 2,000 men, women and children—roughly half white, half black—lived in the growing capital city. The 18th-century capital of Virginia became Great Britain's largest and most populous colony.

Yorktown

The Town of York is located not far from Williamsburg on the banks of the York River. In 1691, Virginia's General Assembly, hoping to diversify the agricultural character of the colony, passed an act for the establishment of ports and towns. The Assembly chose this land for one of its ports because of its proximity to a deep-water channel in the river and its connection to the Chesapeake Bay.

Before 1750, between 60 and 80 percent of slaves arriving in Virginia came through the Port of York. Its proximity to rich coastal tobacco plantations made it an ideal location for the

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exportation of a large portion of this important commodity. Along with tobacco, such products as wood and timber products, iron, and animal skins were sent out, mostly to England.

By the 1740s, the shipping industry at Yorktown made its mark on the development of the town as a port. The area along the waterfront continued to grow with the addition of warehouses, taverns and ordinaries patronized by the hundreds of sailors in port at Yorktown. By 1758, the population grew to approximately 500 people, including craftsmen, merchants and shopkeepers associated with the shipping industry.

Beginning in the 1750s, the wave of growth in Yorktown slowed. The town retained an increasingly smaller share of the trade running through Virginia's waters. As the center of tobacco production shifted southwestward, the percentage of Virginia's tobacco crop exported from Yorktown declined. The eruption of the Seven Years War (French and Indian War) in the 1750s and its concurrent interruption of the international trade made a significant impact on Yorktown's growth. Yorktown never was to recover from these decreases in the shipping industry.

Yorktown's major role in history came at the close of the American Revolution. On October 19, 1781, following a nine-day bombardment, British forces in Yorktown under Lord Charles Cornwallis surrendered more than 8,000 soldiers and sailors to the combined American and French armies, commanded by General George Washington. This represented the close of the last major military action of the American Revolution, effectively granting independence to the American colonies following a six-and-a-half-year military struggle.

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