2006

Yorktown, Tobacco, and Slaves: The Rise and Decline of a Colonial Port in Virginia

Kimberly Suzanne Renner

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the African History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-y9e5-7w82

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
YORKTOWN, TOBACCO, AND SLAVES:
The Rise and Decline of a Colonial Port in Virginia

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Kimberly S. Renner
2006
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

[Signatures and names]

Approved by the Committee, April 2006

[Signatures and names]
DEDICATION

In memory of my maternal grandparents, Merle and Elizabeth Breighner, and in honor of my paternal grandparents, Paul and Shirley Renner.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. Built by Tobacco and Slaves: Urbanization in the Tidewater</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. The Birth of Yorktown</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. Yorktown as a Successful Port in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV. Yorktown’s Decline</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Professor James P. Whittenburg for his patient guidance and insightful advice, as well as Professors Betsy Konefal and Julie Richter for their invaluable input. I am also indebted to Professors Daniel K. Richter and Charles Jarvis for their inspiration and encouragement during my undergraduate years at Dickinson College.

Thanks also to Jennifer Jones and Georgianna Lee Dandy for their guidance and support during my apprenticeship as well as to Catherine Grosfils, Visual Resource Editorial Librarian at Colonial Williamsburg’s John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library. Last but not least, thank you to Anthony and my family for their dedication, support, and unwavering faith in me.
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fry and Jefferson Map Detail</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. John Mitchell Map</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Map of York and Gloucester</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The port town of Yorktown, Virginia is often completely overlooked by historians studying urbanization in the colonial Tidewater, but Yorktown was a major center of commerce during the first half of the eighteenth century. Yorktown was the primary port for the colonial capital of Williamsburg, receiving shiploads of slaves from Africa and goods from Great Britain and sending countless hogsheads of tobacco, Virginia’s prime cash crop, to England. It was not until the transatlantic trade in tobacco and slaves began to diminish in the Tidewater region in the latter part of the century that Yorktown began to decline as an urban center.

This paper examines the rise and decline of Yorktown, Virginia to determine what factors led to the port’s demise as a major commercial center. This study begins with an examination of urbanization and the effects the colony’s focus on tobacco had on the development of Tidewater towns. The next chapter then looks at the 1691 Act for Ports and Towns, which led to Yorktown’s birth as a colonial port. The third chapter is a study of the port’s people and their commercial activities, most notably concerning tobacco and slaves, which made Yorktown the active port town that it was in the first part of the century. The final chapter examines Yorktown’s decline in the second half of the century and how the changes in the commerce of tobacco and slaves contributed to that decline.

Yorktown was an important urban commercial center during the first half of the eighteenth century, but as Virginia planters began to head west in the 1750s, Yorktown stagnated as other ports along the James River, which reached further inland, flourished. It was undoubtedly the decrease in the commercial activities of tobacco and slaves in older settlements along the York River that led to this decline.
YORKTOWN, TOBACCO, AND SLAVES:

The Rise and Decline of a Colonial Port in Virginia
INTRODUCTION

In the southeastern tidewater region of Virginia, along the York River, rests the historic town of Yorktown. Today this quiet, little town boasts a significant number of annual tourists who recognize the importance of this site as the location of the deciding battle of the American Revolution in October of 1781, but Yorktown has a rich history of its own before this battle. Long before the sounds of cannon fire rocked this river hamlet, Yorktown was a major urban port for the colonial capital of Williamsburg. To its shores came shiploads of goods from all over Europe, albeit all transported through the mother country first. Great Britain was the link between Yorktown and the remainder of the world. Virginians loaded ships with their prized cash crop of tobacco to sail for England, and, in return, the mother country sent vessel after vessel of all manner of goods including textiles, glass, paints, furnishings, books, and even humans, enslaved Africans.

The eighteenth century started promisingly for this bustling river port, although it certainly did not end so. By mid-century, Yorktown began a decline in its once promising economic career. What brought about the downfall of this town’s rich economic potential? Some have argued that the American Revolution caused the town’s decline at the century’s end. Yet others have surmised that the moving of Virginia’s Capital from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780 caused the port to come to little use. These explanations, although intriguing, overlook the rich complexity of Virginia’s colonial history. A further examination of Yorktown’s history reveals that the town was
clearly already in a state of decline before the cannons and muskets broke the stillness
and before Virginia's government leaders packed up and left Williamsburg for
Richmond.

Why did Yorktown decline and fail as a major urban port in the international
market? The trade in tobacco and slaves declined in the older settlements along the York
River of Virginia as more Virginians moved their commerce west in the second half of
the eighteenth century. The York River provided excellent navigation for shipping along
the eastern region of the tidewater, but it does not make inroads into the colony as far
west as does the nearby James River. (See Fry and Jefferson map detail on page 49.)
The James River, and ports conveniently located along it, such as Norfolk, Petersburg,
and Richmond, began to thrive as the major commercial markets in the latter half of the
century while Yorktown stagnated. Yorktown's location along the York River, which
contributed to its success in the first half of the century, led to its decline as a major port
in the second half of the eighteenth century. Yorktown's decline from a bustling, urban
port to a sleepy little village began at mid-century as a result of the westward expansion
of two key Virginia markets: tobacco and slaves.
CHAPTER ONE:
Built by Tobacco and Slaves: Urbanization in the Tidewater

Yorktown was Colonial Virginia’s first example of urbanization. Lying along the York River, the town was conveniently located where the market of Virginia’s two economic staples, tobacco and slaves, converged. This allowed Yorktown to thrive as busy port throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, a fact often ignored by historians of Colonial Virginia.

Yorktown is too often completely overlooked by historians studying urbanization in the colonial tidewater regions of Virginia and Maryland. In fact, some historians debate whether urbanization even existed in the Chesapeake. The colonies’ rugged environment of countless rivers and streams, the dependence on tobacco as the backbone of the economy, the development of plantations, and the unwillingness of native Virginians and Marylanders to realize the benefits of urbanization are often cited as reasons for the lack of town development in this region.¹

Historians focus on varying reasons for what they perceive as Virginia’s lack of urban development, and in so doing they often compare the Tidewater region to other European and American models. Edward M. Riley wrote of Virginia’s vast potential

lands and the focus on tobacco as two of the reasons why Tidewater towns "never prospered in the manner envisioned by the legislators."

John C. Rainbolt agreed with Riley:

> The proper formulation of the problem is not what forces prevented the emergence of towns but why Virginia leaders failed to overcome the geographic barriers to the creation of the centralized economic and social activity they so desired."

Both Riley and Rainbolt focused on Virginia's agricultural dependence on tobacco as the major reason why the Tidewater never developed urban areas to compare with those of Europe or the northern American colonies. Too many scholars mistakenly consider New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore as Colonial America's only areas of urbanization. These narrow theories of urbanization focus on population size and population density at the detriment of overlooking small urban areas such as Yorktown. Yorktown did not compare in size to Philadelphia or Boston, but Virginia's, and specifically Yorktown's, involvement in the colonial tobacco economy was unique.

In "The Space Problem in Early United States Cities," Carole Shammas argued: "The woodland Indians on the Atlantic coast of North America did not concentrate their populations in cities, and the British settlers who displaced them seemed in no hurry to do so either." Clearly, Shammas based her definition of what constitutes a city upon older, European urban sites, which is like comparing apples to oranges. It is preposterous to compare a new colony's small urban areas to major European cities, which had been developed for countless centuries prior to America's English settlement.

---

2 Riley, 323.
3 Rainbolt, 344.
Also, Shammas ignored the fact that some Native American groups were gathered in urban centers much resembling cities prior to European contact. In his groundbreaking work *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*, Daniel K. Richter wrote of the American Indians’ urban centers that existed long before Europeans settled in America. He described Native America as a place where “[n]early everywhere, villages composed of 500 to 2,000 people were the norm; these might be linked in loose regional confederacies or short-lived more tightly central polities, but for the most part each community was independent of the others.” Richter also described a world where “[r]outes of trade and communication...crisscrossed the continent” and where several major linguistic groupings, identified as Muskogeans, Siouan, Iroquoian, and Algonquian, “had even less in common than did the Germanic and Romance families of Europe, and each contained several related but mutually unintelligible languages further diversified into countless local dialects.” Shammas’ view of Native Americans as one huge, unorganized mass of similar people without the sophistication of urbanization is as outdated and unrealistic as her view that England’s American colonies were also devoid of urban settlement.

At the same time that Shammas complained of the lack of urbanization in the colonies, she also wrote of an urbanization decline in eighteenth-century America. She observed that “[b]ased on the proportion of the population living in cities of 8,000 or more, the thirteen mainland colonies actually became less urban during the eighteenth

---

century.\textsuperscript{8} The author’s argument tends to be a bit conflicting. On one hand, Shammas wrote that there were not true examples of urbanization in the American colonies at the same time that she observed that the colonies faced a decline in urbanization. For there to be a decline in urbanization, there must clearly have been a rise in urbanization, which is something that the author would say did not exist.

Also, Shammas’ standard number of 8,000 people to constitute a city is not feasible with Colonial Virginia’s history. Once again, Shammas reverts back to unfair comparisons between the new American colonies and ancient Europe. Also, America’s size in sheer land mass far exceeds any European country, especially the mother country of England. As such, there was not a need for people to be as crowded with large numbers of people in tiny urban centers. By Shammas’ standards, Virginia’s colonial capital city of Williamsburg should not be considered an urban area since it was composed of a population of only 2,000 at the start of the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{9}

Carville Earle refuted historian’s critiques of the lack of Colonial American cities, and he also stressed that these cities should be not be compared to European urban centers. Earle wrote that by the time of the American Revolution in 1775, the two million or more colonists in America practically equaled England’s population in the Tudor era at the same time that the colonists occupied three times the land mass of the British isles.\textsuperscript{10} The amount of available land mass in Colonial America also continued to grow as the population grew and spread farther westward in succeeding years. There is

\textsuperscript{8} Shammas, 505.
\textsuperscript{10} Carville Earle, \textit{The Evolution of a Tidewater Settlement System: All Hallow’s Parish, Maryland, 1650-1783}, (Chicago, 1975), 1-2.
simply no legitimate comparison between young, early-American cities and ancient, well-established European ones.

Colonists also debated the subject of urbanization in the tidewater region hundreds of years earlier. As early as 1697, Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and Edward Chilton, three English and Scottish-born government officials who lived in Virginia at various times, complained about the lack of urbanization in Virginia to English officials:

... if we enquire for well built Towns, for convenient Ports and Markets, for Plenty of Ships and Seamen, for well improv’d Trades and Manufactures, for well educated Children, for an industrious and thriving People, or for an happy Government in Church and State, and in short, for all the other Advantages of human Improvements, it is certainly, for all these Things, one of the poorest, miserablest, and worst Countries in all America...11

Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton believed Virginia to be lacking civilization since it did not have towns and ports that mirrored England’s older, more established urban areas. They believed that Virginia should be a reflection of the mother country, with well-ordered towns, ports, markets, and government buildings that would remind them of home.

The lack of urban development in Virginia greatly troubled Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and Edward Chilton; however, they also recognized the colony’s wealth of natural resources. They observed:

It is astonishing to hear what contrary Characters are given of the Country of Virginia, even by those who have often seen it, and know it very well; some of them representing it as the best, others as the worst Country in the World. Perhaps they are both in the Right. For the most general true Character of Virginia is this, That as to all the Natural Advantages of a Country, it is one of the best, but as to the Improved Ones, one of the worst of all the English Plantations in America.12

---

It was Virginia’s wealth of natural resources, especially land and tobacco, that most appealed to English settlers. In true colonial fashion, Virginia’s raw materials were shipped over to England, and in return the mother country shipped the colony finished manufactured goods from all over Europe and the Orient. Virginia was also a precious commodity to England in regards to its promise of land. In Great Britain, primogeniture, a practice which ensured that land was only inherited by the eldest son, was an important means of keeping family lands intact in a country that did not offer vast tracts of lands within its own borders.13 On the other hand, the colony of Virginia’s promise of land opportunities was its most appealing asset. (Note the size of mid-eighteenth century Virginia on the John Mitchell map on page 50.) Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton were not blind to Virginia’s natural resources, but they did refuse to see any examples of urbanization within the colony’s borders. By 1697, when these men wrote their critique, Yorktown was already established.

Other contemporary critics often described the Tidewater’s perceived shortcomings of urbanization as a lack of civilization, even as a state of barbarism. For example, Robert Beverly, in his 1705 *The History and Present State of Virginia*, also offered his critique of Virginia’s plantation economy and lack of urbanization:

People flock’d over thither apace; every one took up Land by Patent to his Liking; and, not minding any thing but to be Masters of great Tracts of Land, they planted themselves separately on their several Plantations...This Liberty of taking up Land, and the Ambition each Man had of being Lord of a vast, tho’ unimprov’d Territory, together with the Advantage of the many Rivers, which afforded a commodious Road for Shipping at every Man’s Door, has made the Country fall into such an unhappy Settlement and Course of Trade; that to this Day

they have not any one Place of Cohabitation among them, that may reasonably bear the Name of a Town.  

Beverly decried Virginians' propensity to settle in large tracts of land to create plantations and farms as a desire to avoid civilized living in urban centers. Once again, like Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton, he is comparing the newly settled colony to Great Britain, which has existed for a much longer time and also as a nation is much smaller in land mass.

Even as late as 1732, William Hugh Grove, a sailor who traveled to Yorktown, wrote of the port: “A stranger concludes there were at least 100 houses whereas there are really not 30—for their kitchins, warehouses &c: are here &...separate from their dwelling houses & make them appear different habitations[.] [T]here are about 10 good houses not above 4 of Brick [and] ye rest of Timber…” Grove apparently was surprised that Yorktown was as small as it was with as few houses as it had. His focus on the small amount of houses that are brick, which was a definite indicator of status and wealth, reveals that he was apparently surprised to find such a small amount of well-to-do housing in this important port.

Hugh Jones also agreed with his contemporaries in his critique of Virginia’s lack of urbanization. Jones wrote that:

Neither the interest nor inclinations of the Virginians induce them to cohabit in towns; so that they are not forward in contributing their assistance towards the making of particular places, every plantation affording the owner the provision of a little market; wherefore they most commonly build upon some convenient spot or neck of land in their own plantation, though

15 William Hugh Grove diary, June 2, 1732, Rockefeller Library Special Collections, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
towns are laid out and established in each county.\textsuperscript{16}

Jones also fell into the trap of comparing Virginia’s towns to the model of European cities. The two do not compare as eighteenth-century England was industrial while eighteenth-century Virginia was agricultural. An examination of Virginia’s tobacco fields in relation to urbanization reveals more insight into colonial Virginia’s town development.

While Robert Beverly, Henry Hartwell, James Blair, Edward Chilton, and Hugh Jones deplored the lack of urbanization in the colonial Tidewater, many of their contemporaries appeared to believe that too much emphasis was placed on town development. In fact, some Virginians thought concerns about urbanization took away from other important matters, such as education. Designs for the College of William and Mary continued to remain in the forefront of Virginia political discussions for several years, but discussions of town development did occasionally overshadow discussions of William and Mary, much to Benjamin Harrison, Jr.’s chagrin. In September of 1698, seven years after Yorktown was established, he wrote to Governor Francis Nicholson to express his desire that the issues of the College and the Church of England should hold precedence over that of town development. He complained, “...several other direccons\[sic\] are given, about a house for the—Governor, Towns, takeing up & Seating of Lands, &c, but not a word of the College, Church or Clergy, that I can Learne...”\textsuperscript{17} In Harrison’s opinion, urbanization was of minor concern compared to other timely issues such as the establishment of the College, and apparently a good number of his


\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin Harrison Jr. to Francis Nicholson, 1 September 1698, Nicholson Collection, Rockefeller Library, CWF, MS4304.
contemporaries were in agreement with him as evidenced in the records of the House of Burgesses. The question of how important urbanization was in Early Virginia apparently sparked disagreement among Colonial Virginians as it continues to do among modern historians.

Colonial Virginia’s urban systems are worth studying, but they must be studied in a broader context. Joseph A. Ernst and H. Roy Merrens write: “Whatever their function and significance, Southern towns and cities did not exist alone. Rather they formed a part of some urban system, a system that in turn fitted into some regional economy.”

Yorktown should not be studied as an entity unto itself separate from the rest of Virginia’s social and economic history, but rather as a small urban microcosm of the broader trends in Virginia’s development, a development that was played out in the colony’s tobacco fields.

Both modern historians’ and colonial observers’ critiques of Virginia’s lack of urbanization overlook the complexities of the plantation system and its eventual ties to urbanization. Tobacco is always referred to as Virginia’s economic staple, but Tidewater Virginia had two economic dependencies: tobacco and slaves. John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard write that the economy of the colonial Tidewater, both that of Virginia and Maryland, was based entirely on tobacco. McCusker and Menard are only half correct, because along with tobacco came slaves. Every other economic pursuit in Virginia always tied back to these two economic factors, and this affected how Tidewater towns developed. It is useless to compare urban centers of the Colonial Tidewater to

---

other regions, because Northern cities like New York and Philadelphia developed differently due to very dissimilar economic circumstances. The Tidewater towns, like Yorktown, developed as a result of both tobacco and slaves.

When Tidewater Virginia was first settled by the English at Jamestown in the beginning of the seventeenth century, there really was no basis to Virginia's economy. Early settlers actually hoped that gold and silver would be the basis of Virginia's economy. The first settlers may have had dreams of economic pursuits, but those dreams were quickly replaced by the reality of attempted survival. The Tidewater's beginnings were marked by extremely high death rates, inadequate food, unstable relations with the American Indians, and a lack of a profitable export. All appeared bleak until the introduction of tobacco. McCusker and Menard eloquently describe Virginia's quick dependence on the tobacco plant: "Paradoxically, Virginia became a relatively stable, permanent plantation with a secure future only when it began to build upon smoke."

The milder strain of Virginia tobacco that later became popular throughout Europe was introduced by John Rolfe from the West Indies in the 1610s, and by the 1620s, the crop had taken off, and the remainder of the seventeenth century saw it explode as Virginia's prime export. Fortunately for Yorktown, the sweet-scented variety, which originally was the most preferred type that brought the highest prices, grew exclusively along the York River basin. In fact, by 1675, one-third of Virginia's

---

20 Ibid., 117-143, 118.
21 John W. Reps, Tidewater Towns: City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland, (Charlottesville, 1972), 43; Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 73; McCusker and Menard, 118; Kulikoff, 30.
total tobacco trade was from the York River area. The farther away from the York the tobacco was produced, the lower the rate of exportation as well as the price.22

Virginia’s dependence on its growing tobacco industry created a dramatic shift in the colony’s labor force in the seventeenth century. The first participants in the Tidewater tobacco economy were planters, their families, and white indentured servants. Some of the indentured servants had come over by choice from Europe to make a hopeful start in the new colonies after working off the terms of their indenture, while yet others were brought over by force as punishments for various crimes they were accused of committing. Then as Virginia’s dependence on tobacco grew stronger, the colony shifted its labor force from free white and indentured white workers to primarily enslaved Africans. As the labor became more intense and involved more of Virginia’s lands, Virginia began to depend on enslaved workers to do the arduous work of maintaining its economy. Throughout the course of the seventeenth century, Virginia switched from a primarily free to a primarily enslaved work force.23

Exactly how slavery began and later became entrenched in Virginia society is a difficult question to answer. To begin to answer this question, it is necessary to examine the origins of slavery in Virginia. For years, it was believed that the first Africans were brought to Jamestown by accident in August 1619. John Rolfe recorded in his journal, “about the last of August came a Dutch man of warre that sold us twenty negars.”24

---


23 Kulikoff, 23-44; McCusker and Menard, 124.

24 Robert Edgar Conrad, In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading and the Crisis of the Union, (State College, PA, 2001), 1; Apparently there exists a dispute over whether this census was taken from 1618/19 or 1619/20, see Martha McCartney, “An Early Virginia Census Reprised,” Archeological Society of Virginia Quarterly Bulletin, 54, no. 4 (Dec. 1999), 178-196.
Recent evidence suggests that the first Africans may have come over a bit earlier than previously thought. In his book, *In the Hands of Strangers: Readings on Foreign and Domestic Slave Trading and the Crisis of the Union*, Robert Edgar Conrad points out a recently discovered document in England that reveals that there were already fifteen African men and seventeen African women in Virginia by March of 1619. They are described as already being in Virginia by that date, so they must have arrived sometime earlier. If this is true, is it possible these African men and women may even have witnessed the Dutch ship unloading its cargo of more Africans in August of that same year?

Regardless of when they first arrived, historians are not in agreement as to whether the first Africans were regarded immediately as slaves or rather as indentured servants or as both at the same time. Regardless of their status initially, throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, African-Americans became slaves as it was written into law. An examination of Virginia laws throughout the seventeenth century reveals that Africans’ status quickly became that of slaves with the introduction of more and more Africans into the colony. The first example of this in the existing records involves an African man named John Punch. In 1640, three indentured servants, one Dutch, one Scotch, and one African, ran away from their master Hugh Gwyn. In court, the two European servants were ordered to serve out the terms of their indenture with the additional time of a few years added on. John Punch, the African, was not given the same treatment even though the three had run away together. He was ordered to "serve

---

his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere.”

John Punch is the first African to be legislated as a slave for life in the surviving Virginia records. This is also the first evidence in Virginia’s law where a distinction between an enslaved African and indentured servants is made. According to the records, all three men committed the same crime, running away, but only the African was ordered to serve his master for life.27

In 1662, an act was established that declared that the status of a child was to be determined through the mother rather than the English tradition of the father. This act declared, “Be it therefore enacted...that all children born in this country shall be[sic] held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother...”28 This act ensured that all of the offspring of white masters and their enslaved women would be slaves like their mothers. In 1670, another act established all Africans as slaves. The 1670 Act stated, “It is resolved and enacted that all servants not being Christians imported into this colony by shipping shall be[sic] slaves for their lives...”29 This act not only served to further distinguish Africans from Native Americans with its mention of people “not being Christians imported into this colony,” but it also clearly demonstrated Virginians’ intent to enslave the Africans “for their lives.”30

Once slavery took hold in Virginia, it established itself quickly as an important basis to the economy. Kevin Kelly’s research reveals just how quickly the ratio of African slaves rose compared to the declining rate of indentured servants in York County.

---

26 H.R. McIlwaine, ed., Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia, (Richmond, 1979), 466.
29 Ibid., 2:283.
30 Enslaving Virginia, 58, 60.
Virginia. He explains that before 1660, there were four slaves for every ten indentures working in this region. The rate changed from five slaves for every ten indentured servants in the 1660s to eight slaves for every ten indentured servants in the 1670s. In the following decade, slaves slightly outnumbered indentured servants. By the 1690s, as Yorktown began to grow, there were twenty-two slaves for every one white indentured servant!31

As Europe’s dependence on tobacco grew, Virginia’s dependence on slaves to work the tobacco fields grew. Tobacco became Virginia’s greatest export to the mother country, but it truly was part of an international market. All of Virginia’s tobacco for export had to be shipped to England, where only fifteen percent was consumed. The tobacco had to pass through England, by order of law, on its way to markets around the world.32 Truly tobacco was cosmopolitan in the ironic respect that British Virginia’s greatest export was a product of “Indian land and African slaves.”33

Virginia’s economy was built by its dependence on tobacco and slaves, and Virginia’s urban growth reflected this fact. Tidewater Virginia’s urban areas developed as a result of legislation that attempted to determine the best areas where tobacco and slaves naturally converged, and along the York River, Yorktown was the place. William Hugh Grove, the sailor who traveled to Yorktown, wrote his observations of a Virginian slave’s daily routine: “[to] work from Sun rising to setting 6,000 plants of Tobacco which will make 1,000£ weight beside their share of Com is a slaves task.”34 Yorktown became the scene where hogsheads of tobacco were inspected and shipped to England

33 Ibid., 71-73.
34 Grove diary, July 13, 1732.
after months of labor performed by slaves in the hot, humid tobacco fields. Slaves undoubtedly were also the workers at the docks who loaded the hogsheads full of tobacco onto the boats. These same slaves, some African-born and many eventually Virginia-born, surely noticed as countless ships arrived at the port of Yorktown, ships that left Virginia laden with tobacco but returned to Virginia filled with human cargo of more African slaves to work the tobacco fields. The powerful economic combination of tobacco and slaves inevitably led to the development of important small urban ports throughout Virginia. From the beginning of its Colonial history, the York River, alongside the first urban center established in Virginia, became a major center for Virginia commerce. The town of Yorktown was born, built by tobacco and slaves.
CHAPTER TWO:
The Birth of Yorktown

York County was one of the original Virginia counties created in 1634, but the area that was to become Yorktown was only explored and settled by a few Englishmen throughout most of the seventeenth century. The land that eventually became Yorktown came from the Martiau and Reade families’ plantation, land that stayed in these two families until 1691.1 It was not until the end of that century that the county witnessed the development of its first major town. Yorktown, with its favorable geographic location along the deep York River, was established as a result of the Act for Ports and Towns, passed by the General Assembly of Virginia in 1691.2

There had been two attempts to establish urban settlement on the York River prior to 1691, but these earlier attempts failed. In 1662, the General Assembly passed legislation to establish a town on each major river. They planned to create these towns through levies of thirty pounds of tobacco per poll, which Jamestown received the first year. The York River area was to receive the next levy, but that fell through as legislation focused entirely on Jamestown before falling to the wayside. The issue of settlement was not legislated again until 1680. The 1680 Act ordered that fifty acres be

---

purchased by each of Virginia's counties for ten thousand pounds of tobacco within two months of the act's publication. Government officials had selected twenty sites to transform into developed, urban areas, one of which was the Read plantation in York County. (The Read plantation site is the land that eventually became Yorktown.) While the 1662 Act's flaw was its narrow focus upon Jamestown, the 1680 Act's flaw was its broad focus on too many areas. Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and Edward Chilton pointed out that the 1680 Act "appointed too many Towns...for every Man desiring the Town to be as near as possible to his own Door..." Both the 1662 and the 1680 Acts failed to create anything resembling urban settlement along the York River.

After two failed attempts at legislating tidewater towns, the members of the House of Burgesses discussed without great emphasis the act "for Ports &c" several times in the spring of 1691. The act is only mentioned briefly in the midst of discussions of bills involving free trade with the Indians and "horses running at large & barkeing[sic] fruit trees." The lengthiest discussion of the Act for Ports and Towns in the Journal of the Burgesses states:

The house tooke into consideration the Severall amendments and clauses proposed by ye Councell to the byll for ports &c Severall where of were by ye house agreed to and Severall disagreed to whereupon a Conference with the Councell was desired and held touching the subject matter of the Said Clauses & amendments & upon reporte of the Same, the house drew up agreed upon & adhered to Some certaine Clauses and amendments which the Councell upon a Second Conference wholly concurred with.

---

3 Hartwell, et. al., *The Present State of Virginia and the College*, 12.
By and large, the Act for Ports was considered a minor matter in the Burgesses’ records in comparison to their decision to establish a “Colledge”, later to become the College of William and Mary. Discussions on the College clearly overwhelmed all of the other matters during the 1691 session.

Many colonists did not have high hopes for the 1691 Act for Ports after the earlier attempts at urbanization failed, but the 1691 Act was successful in establishing an urban settlement at Yorktown. The success of the 1691 Act was partially due to the fact that it strictly outlined the responsibilities of the individuals who chose to purchase lots.

According to the legislation, the purchaser of each lot:

shall within the space of four months next ensuing such grant begin and without delay proceed to build and finish on each halfe acres granted to him one good house, to contain twenty foot square at the least, wherein if he failles to performe then such grant to be void in law, and the lands therein granted lyable to the choyce and purchase of any other person.6

The 1691 Act created towns and ports where people could live as well as enact business in close proximity to one another. The purchasers of town lots had a specific amount of time, four months, to erect a dwelling upon their properties or else their lands would revert back to the crown.

The fifty acres of land that became “Yorke Town” was surveyed and divided into lots on August 18, 1691. This land was formerly the Read plantation, belonging to Benjamin and Lucy Read of Gloucester County. This land was in a prime location for a port. Read’s property was situated along the York River to the east of the mouth of Yorktown (formerly Smith’s) Creek. The river channel was very deep along the shore at this location making it perfect for large, seagoing vessels. The Reads received ten

6 Hening, ed., The Statutes at Large, 3:56.
thousand pounds of sweet-scented tobacco, the best quality, in return for their land. It is interesting that this land that was bought by tobacco was to become a leading port in the tobacco market during the early part of the eighteenth century.

It is remarkable that Benjamin Read almost did not inherit the land that he eventually sold to the Crown for the development of Yorktown. The land originally belonged to Nicholas Martiau, Read’s grandfather. Upon his death, eight hundred and fifty acres, including the fifty acres that later became Yorktown, was willed to George Read, Martiau’s eldest daughter’s husband. Upon George Read’s death, the land was to be divided between his sons, George and Robert. A stipulation in the elder George’s will required that if either George or Robert died, their respective share was to be further subdivided among their brothers, Francis and Benjamin. This is indeed what happened. If the younger George had not passed away without heirs, Benjamin Read would never have inherited the land that later became Yorktown.

The land was divided so that Robert received half of the property. Francis and Benjamin split George’s former property, each receiving a quarter. In November 1688, the property was partitioned so that the:

...division being made on the presents & by the free consent of each person...One halfe of sd land belonging to Robert Read & the other halfe belonging unto Francis Read & Benjamin Read as by our deTd father’s will doth & may appear. The deviding line btwn sd Robert & Francis & Benjamine begining at the river syde at a rock lyinge by the edge of the water & runing south 39 degrees west on the north side of a small swamp, which is a little above the well where the ships usually water, & soe runing into the woods keepeing the same course by a line of marked trees.

---

8 Riley, “Suburban Development of Yorktown,” 522; Reps, Tidewater Towns, 81-84.
Benjamin Read acquired two hundred, twelve and a half acres as a result of the death of his brother, George. Read eventually sold all of this property. He sold fifty acres to establish Yorktown, twelve acres of his southern property to his brother, Francis, and the remaining one hundred, fifty and a half acres to his relative, Thomas Read.10

The first Yorktown property sites became available on November 24, 1691 after York County Surveyor Lawrence Smith laid out eighty-five lots. Yorktown’s initial property investors all had close local ties to the area. Of this beginning group, most were from York County, except for three who were from neighboring counties. Many of the initial investors were well-respected planters, merchants, and government officials, such as Governor Francis Nicholson, who also played a major part in the development of other tidewater towns, such as Williamsburg, Virginia and Annapolis, Maryland. Edmund Jenings, the Secretary of the Colony, and William Cole, a member of His Majesty’s Council, also helped to found Yorktown. Not all of the members of the initial group of investors were wealthy planters and political leaders. Two men, Francis Callowhill and Edward Moss, were small planters from Charles Parish, the poorest area in York County. There were also a few artisans and tradesmen who purchased lots during this initial period. Enough lots were sold to make up for the amount of tobacco that the county had paid to Benjamin Read to acquire the Yorktown site. Peter Bergstrom and Kevin Kelly write that no other location in Colonial Virginia ever saw such a successful initial response to town settlement.11

---

9 York County Deeds, Orders, & Wills, 1691: 4.
A year after the 1691 Act, sixty of the eight-five original lots had sold for one hundred eighty pounds of tobacco per lot. The lots remaining for sale were located in the southeastern corner of the town, away from the riverbank and creek, suggesting that this was a more unappealing area. Considering that most of the town's new inhabitants would be drawn to the water to make their living in this port, it is not a surprise that the land in closer proximity to the shore would be the first to go.\textsuperscript{12}

In spite of the fact that the land near the waterfront was most valued, the five acres of land directly beside the waterfront—the beach below the high bluffs—was not included in the fifty acres acquired for the establishment of Yorktown. By omitting this important land from Yorktown proper, the surveyor ignored specific directions of the Act of Ports, which specified that such port towns be laid out directly beside the main body of water. Despite the fact that the beachfront land was crucial for the port to be successful, these five acres of beach were proclaimed as "Common Shore of noe value."\textsuperscript{13}

Even though the beach area was not officially recognized as part of Yorktown by the lawmakers, it was recognized as valuable by the townspeople. From the town's beginning, people who owned lots near the waterside claimed small areas on the beach that they used as their own. The beach became an area of commercial activity with warehouses and docking stations. Yorktown's waterfront became comprised of two distinct parts. The distinguished Carters, Buckners, and the merchant family of the Lightfoots took over areas of the beach in front of their respective lots, and the area of waterfront towards the eastern limits of town was dominated by the major merchant families, the Nelsons, Amblers, and Digges. This latter area was the center of

\textsuperscript{12} Barka, et. al., \textit{The "Poor Potter" of Yorktown}, 43; Richter, \textit{In Pursuit of Urban Property}, 13-15.
commercial life on the water’s edge. Apparently, Benjamin Read, the original seller, had no problem with the townspeople’s use of the beach as there is no indication in the extant records that he took any action to prevent their use of it during his lifetime, even though the beach property was not officially part of the fifty acres of land for the establishment of Yorktown.\(^\text{14}\)

The first urban center along the York River, Yorktown, was born as a result of both the 1691 Act for Ports and Benjamin Read’s sale of fifty acres of land to the Crown. Historians occasionally argue that the 1691 Act for Ports was not successful since it did not succeed in legislating the sale and growth of tobacco, which the act had attempted.

The 1691 Act for Ports and Towns stated:

\[
\text{that from and after the first day of October, which shall be in the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and ninety two, all ships, barques, and other vessels whatsoever, arriving into, or sayling out from this country for trayd, shall unload and put on shoare, and take from shoar to load on board, all tabaccoes, goods and merchantdises, at some one or other of the poarts, Wharifes, Keyes, or places hereafter mentioned in this act...}^{15}
\]

The Act for Ports, like previous acts, legislated that the tobacco trade, (along with the trade of other goods,) was to be transacted legally only at the port towns designated by the act. Once again, legislators attempted to place the tobacco trade under their complete control, and once again they were not able to do so. The 1691 Act’s attempt to regulate tobacco was not successful, but its attempt to establish urban settlement where the tobacco market would benefit was successful. Yorktown began as a major port when the


\(^{15}\) Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large*, 3:54.
markets in tobacco and slaves were just starting to take off, but legislators could not control urban centers as the only locations for these markets as there were numerous private landings utilized by plantation holders throughout the countryside.\(^{16}\)

Why did the 1691 act ultimately succeed in the creation of Yorktown when the previous acts had failed? The earlier acts of 1662 and 1680 failed because they offered insignificant inducement to investors to purchase lots and contained impractical requirements that ultimately obstructed trade. The most significant reason that the 1691 act led to the settlement of Yorktown is that a number of local men and women gave support to this act and took up property in the town. In some of the previous urbanization attempts, those who bought property were not local and had little to no interest in the actual town they were hoping to develop. For many earlier investors, the venture was based entirely on material gains, and many properties reverted back to the crown when the investors never got around to erecting dwellings on their properties after their initial investments did not pay off. After the 1691 Act, Yorktown’s lots were bought by individuals who developed the lots rather than by land speculators who were only interested in profits rather than town development.\(^{17}\)

In 1693, England suspended the Act for Ports and Towns, but by this time, Yorktown’s development was already well underway. By October 26, 1693, Yorktown was so well-established that it was considered as a possible location for the College of William and Mary. The Journal of the House of Burgesses for that year records:

Then according to ye order of Yesterday the house resumed

---


ye adjourned debate about a place for the Colledge & ye Rector & divers of the Governors of the Colledge who attended also according to order, were called into house where ye S[ai]d Rector…read & presented a Memoriall concerning four places Vizt Middle Plantation, Yorke Town, Yorke old fields, & Greens land in Glocester County as proper places for such an use with a Narrative of ye Conveniences & inconveniences of each they severally wth drew and the house took ye whole matter under consideration, & therein having spent some time.  

After much deliberation, Middle Plantation, which later became Williamsburg, was selected as the proper location for the College to be built, but Yorktown’s consideration as the possible site is significant. The very fact that Yorktown was considered as a possible location to house the royal institution of the College in 1693, merely two years after the act that created the port town, signifies that Yorktown was quickly recognized as an important small urban center in the Virginia Tidewater. Yorktown had finally gotten its start by the end of the seventeenth century, and the town would continue to flourish throughout the first half of the eighteenth century as a major port for tobacco and slaves. 

---

CHAPTER THREE:
Yorktown as a Successful Port
In the First Half of the Eighteenth Century

The first half of the eighteenth century was a time of growth and development for the young port of Yorktown. The 1691 Act for Ports and Towns had gotten Yorktown off to a successful start, but it was investors who purchased lots in Yorktown between the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first two decades of the eighteenth century who most influenced Yorktown’s growth as an urban port. After the 1693 repeal of the Act for Ports and Towns, Yorktown’s growth was encouraged by more legislation. In April 1699, the General Assembly passed “An act for confirming titles to towne[sic] lands.” This act guaranteed ownership of town lots to those who had purchased them before the 1691 Act’s suspension. Also, in 1705, the General Assembly passed another “act for establishing ports and towns.” This act further encouraged urbanization and brought another growth spurt in Yorktown’s development.¹

The 1691 and 1705 acts were both successful because local men and women invested and had substantial interest in seeing that the town prospered. Wealthy merchants such as Thomas Nelson and Philip Lightfoot were leaders in developing the community; however, the largest group of lot holders with known occupations consisted of men and women with service careers, such as tavern keepers, craftsmen, and

tradesmen. Women also played an important role in the initial growth of Yorktown. In an age when most women did not own property because they themselves were considered the property of their husbands, four women ordinary or tavern keepers were among the ranks of those with service careers. Six of the new lot holders in the first decade of the 1700s were women. Three of these women received their lots as gifts, and two purchased lots themselves.²

In Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia, Linda L. Sturtz comments that there are numerous examples of Colonial Virginian women running businesses particularly in urban settings like Yorktown. Sturtz writes, “Virginian women experienced more autonomy and power over family property than did those in England and New England, where women became widows later in life, after their children had reached maturity.” Mary Smith is one of the women featured in Sturtz’s work. Smith opened a tavern in Yorktown during the time of its major economic development in the 1710s. Smith came to Yorktown to open up her own ordinary business after separating from her husband, who was formerly a Williamsburg tavern keeper. Sturtz emphasizes that Yorktown was a desirable location for women like Mary Smith to operate taverns because of its proximity to a ferry between York County and Gloucester County across the York River.³

The ferry was an important mode of transportation that helped to encourage Yorktown’s growth. The ferry was established before the town, at least as early as 1690. Various ferry keepers ran this form of transportation for their livelihood during the eighteenth century. As part of their job, they were responsible for the operation of two

boats, one for human travelers and the other for their horses. As the town grew, the business became officially regulated. Ferry keepers were eventually appointed by the County Court, and the ferrying rates were set by the General Assembly.\(^4\)

Yorktown also became the site of a battery for the town’s protection. The battery was originally established at Tindall’s point—now known as Gloucester Point—across the river from Yorktown. The first battery was located there before the town of Yorktown came into existence. By 1691, with the establishment of Yorktown, Governor Nicholson petitioned the British government to have the battery rebuilt on the Yorktown side of the river. The new battery was quickly built, but by 1699 the guns were already in disrepair, primarily due to the saltwater and humidity. The guns in the battery were constantly rotting out and being repaired throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. Governors Nicholson, Spotswood, and Gooch all expressed their concern about the condition of the battery during their respective tenures in office. The battery was viewed by the three Governors as an important measure of protection for a major port town, not only from pirates who often attempted to devastate the shipping industry, but also from foreign invaders. From 1710 until 1711, Governor Spotswood worried about preventing the French from attacking while he ordered the repair of Yorktown’s battery.\(^5\)

In 1697, the construction of two important political buildings demonstrated that Yorktown’s residents believed in their community’s status as an urban center. First, the County Court decided on Yorktown as the best location for the new courthouse. In the same year, a Parish church for York County was constructed at Yorktown. Grace Episcopal Church still stands there today.

---

5 Ibid., 530-531. By 1711, Governor Spotswood also had erected batteries in four other locations, one of which was placed again across the river from Yorktown in Tindall’s point.
Both the courthouse and the church were constructed near the town’s center to allow easy access to residents of Yorktown as well as neighbors from surrounding rural communities. York County’s justices of the peace were instructed to ensure that the new courthouse “be erected built and finished att the charge of the county upon some certain place within the said limitts of York Towne.” A site was selected in the center of the town area, about a block from the York River. This proved to be a convenient location for a busy courthouse. Court meetings, which were held monthly, brought “throngs of people to sue and be sued, to do business, and to visit.” Men and women came from all over York County to participate, watch, and socialize at the Courthouse. The Courthouse was as much a social gathering location as it was an official government building.\(^6\)

York Parish, much like the Courthouse, also served as a social center for the community as well as a government building. Both buildings are within easy walking distance from one another, and it was at both of these buildings that York County residents were able to discuss politics, share community concerns, and catch up with the latest gossip. The church also served another important purpose besides religious and social. The Church of England was very much a part of the British government, and official business was transacted within the Parish walls. Yorktown residents heard readings of Governors’ Proclamations, new laws, and official notices inside of York Parish. The men who comprised the church vestry were important local government leaders. As British citizens, Yorktown residents were expected to support the Church of

---

England and attend Parish services regularly. Fines were issued for those who did not comply.\(^7\)

York Parish flourished and grew fairly quickly after its establishment. With the threat of American Indian warfare diminished in the Tidewater area by around 1630 and with the growth of colonial population, parishes were able to grow and merge at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and that is what York Parish did. Early in the seventeenth century, before the white settlers had pushed the Native Americans out of the eastern areas of Virginia, some believe the threat of Indian warfare prevented families from traveling significant distances to attend services. At this time, it was common to find practically one parish for every plantation. By the time of Yorktown’s establishment, however, the Indians had been pushed out of the area and there was opportunity for parishes to grow and merge. This is the history that has gotten passed down in the community of Yorktown, but the union of the two parishes probably had more to do with the fact that the undersized parishes of York and Hampton was each too small to support a minister on their own rather than the disappearance of American Indians. It was more beneficial for the two parishes to merge into one. York Parish did just that in 1707 when it united with Hampton to form York-Hampton Parish. By 1724, York-Hampton Parish encompassed eighty square miles and served about two hundred families.\(^8\)

---


In 1699, the establishment of Williamsburg as the Colony’s capitol further sealed Yorktown’s destiny as an active port town. Yorktown became one of the main port centers for the new capitol, which was only about fifteen miles west of Yorktown. Williamsburg lies in between two major rivers, the York and the James, but this city does not have a port of its own. Francis Nicholson, who championed urban development in Yorktown by buying land after the 1691 act, also actively encouraged the development of Williamsburg, in the area formerly known as Middle Plantation. Nicholson was instrumental in encouraging that the colonial capitol be moved from Jamestown to Williamsburg, and he also designed the layout of Williamsburg’s town center. Like Yorktown, Williamsburg streets were laid out very symmetrically with one major artery—Main Street in Yorktown and Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg—and smaller side streets branching out from it. Yorktown’s merchants and ports grew busier after the establishment of the new capitol as Williamsburg did not have a port of its own. Tobacco and other raw materials such as hemp, flax, and salt peter left Yorktown’s shores en route for England as newspapers, books, fabrics, furniture, and numerous other manufactured goods as well as slaves and indentured servants were imported.9

By 1710, Yorktown was a strong and stable port community. There were fifty to seventy buildings in the town proper, which included residences, outbuildings, shops, taverns, and warehouses, as well as the aforementioned church and courthouse. The main commercial centers were located in two major areas: along the waterfront and along the main street in the center of town. Yorktown’s population fluctuated widely throughout

---

the year, as is typical of any port. Sailors would increase the numbers in town as would people gathering for monthly county court sessions. It is estimated that the population of the town fluctuated between one hundred and fifty and five hundred people by the year 1710.10

Besides tobacco and slaves, local manufacturing industries also played a part in Yorktown’s development, even though it was illegal to operate manufacturing industries in Colonial American under British rule. According to Norman F. Barka, Edward Ayres, and Christine Sheridan, manufacturing occurred in Colonial Virginia on three levels: in households, in mills, and in factories. Clothing and textiles were primarily processed at the household level; flour and bread were processed in gristmills; and casting and forging of tools, making of pottery, and other such industries occurred at the factory level. Manufacturing occurred in a wide range of different industries in Yorktown. This led to diversification of the economy beyond tobacco and furthered urbanization.11

The importance of colonial manufacturing is particularly evident in the case of the “poor potter.” In 1732, the industrial importance that the “poor potter,” William Rogers, played in Yorktown’s economy was downplayed by Lieutenant Governor William Gooch to authorities in England. Gooch insisted:

As to manufactures set up, there is one poor Potter’s work for course earthen ware, which is of so little Consequence, that I dare say there hath not been twenty Shillings worth less of that Commodity imported since it was sett up than there was before.12

For many years, historians took Gooch’s assurances to the British at face value, and emphasized the minute scale of William Roger’s pottery production; however,

11 Ibid., 1-2.
archaeological advances in the 1960s and 70s have uncovered the truth behind the “poor potter.”

Gooch fooled both the British Board of Trade as well as numerous modern historians. William Rogers was not at all the “poor potter” working on a limited scale, as Gooch’s words would have his readers believe. In 1970, archaeologists and historians uncovered the bottom half of a potter’s kiln under a modern garage in Yorktown. Also, numerous examples of broken earthenware and salt glazed brown stoneware vessels, indistinguishable in quality from London wares from the late seventeenth through mid-eighteenth centuries, were found near the site of the kiln. Since these previous discoveries, adjoining structures or rooms over one hundred feet long that served as a factory, a smaller kiln, three or four other post structures perhaps used for storage, and several large waster pits have also been uncovered. There is also evidence that Rogers shipped pottery outside of Virginia. This was no small scale, “poor potter’s” operation.13

It is clear that Rogers ran an efficient and successful factory. As Ivor Noël Hume attests:

the quantities of stoneware and earthenware with possible Yorktown associations which have been found in archaeological sites in Tidewater Virginia leave little doubt that the venture established by William Rogers was of considerable value to the colony. There can be equally little doubt that Governor Gooch was aware of this fact and that he gave his tacit approval to the venture in minimizing its importance in his reports to the Board of Trade.14

It is now clear that William Rogers was involved in large-scale manufacturing of a very high-quality product. It is also believed by Noël Hume and other historians that

---
Governor Gooch knew of the potter’s successful manufacturing operation and wanted to hide the production from his Superiors in Britain. As colonists, the Virginians were expected to supply Great Britain with raw materials such as tobacco, and they were likewise expected to purchase finished goods such as earthenware from Great Britain. A full-scale pottery factory would definitely conflict with the expectations that Britain had for its colony, and Gooch appears to have been aware of this conflict of interest. He must have considered it to be in Virginia’s best interest to keep William Roger’s business a secret from England.\textsuperscript{15}

Local manufacturing in Yorktown also included industries other than pottery. William Rogers himself engaged in several manufacturing ventures throughout his lifetime. He actually began his career at Yorktown as a brewer prior to the establishment of his pottery factory. After the success of his pottery, he engaged in merchant trade at the same time that he continued to run his ceramics business. It is at this time that Rogers is often referred to by other Yorktown residents in the records as a “merchant” rather than a “brewer”, denoting his rise to Yorktown’s middle class society.\textsuperscript{16}

Rogers’ diverse manufacturing background reflects the varied industries of his town and community. Numerous craftsmen, such as tailors, blacksmiths, and possibly even silversmiths to name a few, lined Yorktown’s streets. Thomas Nelson, today recognized as one of Virginia’s most elite colonial merchants, rose from the ranks of middle class to gentry by investing in various local manufacturing ventures. Besides his

\textsuperscript{15} Barka, Ayres, and Sheridan, \textit{The “Poor Potter” of Yorktown}, 3-10; Watkins and Hume, \textit{The “Poor Potter of Yorktown}, 75-111.

\textsuperscript{16} Barka, Ayres, and Sheridan, \textit{The “Poor Potter” of Yorktown}, 25-27.
involvement in both the tobacco and slave trades, Nelson invested in taverns, ironworks, ships, lumber mills, and blacksmith shops.\textsuperscript{17}

By the early eighteenth century, Yorktown’s beachfront area, the five acres of waterfront land that was not included in the original fifty acre survey, was an important commercial center for the port. Despite the fact that this land did not legally belong to Yorktown, at first there were no problems with the community’s takeover of this area. There is no record of Benjamin Read, who sold the lands that became Yorktown to the Crown, objecting to the townspeople’s use of the beachfront for their own material gain, but there is record of Read’s heir disputing the town’s claim to these five acres of land later in the century. Forty years after Benjamin Read sold his land for the settlement of Yorktown, a dispute erupted over both the river front and the inland sides of the town. Gwyn Read, Benjamin’s son, claimed that he had a right to both the five acres of beach which the town had been using as a common area as well as many acres of additional land lying between the town proper and Yorktown Creek.

Gwyn Read decided to take his claim as the heir of both areas of land to court. In 1735, following Benjamin Read’s death, Gwyn Read won a suit in the General Court to recover the portion of land between the town and Yorktown Creek based on the law of entail. Gwyn had argued that since the land had been entailed by George Read, it was impossible for Benjamin to sell it as he was merely tenant in tail and not the rightful owner. Although this argument was a bit shaky, Read won the case and was awarded a one hundred acre tract in the southwestern outskirts of the town. Read subdivided the land into lots and offered the lots for sale, at what appears to have been a fairly cheap price. The lots sold quickly, and although wealthy residents of Yorktown proper such as

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 25-27.
Philip Lightfoot and Dr. John Payras purchased lots from Gwyn Read, many more members of the lower classes (such as carpenters, wheelwrights, butchers, barbers, tailors, bricklayers, blacksmiths, gardeners, and cordwainers) purchased lots here. This one hundred acre plot is often referred to by historians and archaeologists today as the Gwyn Read Subdivision. By 1757, the Gwyn Read subdivision was almost entirely developed and this area was decreed a part of Yorktown proper in that same year.18

Gwyn Read used almost the same argument to claim the waterfront property as he did to claim the one hundred-acre subdivision. Read argued that since his father’s land was entailed, only fifty acres were allowed for Yorktown per contract and the five acres of beach were to revert back to his estate. Once again, although his argument was not perfect, the General Assembly seriously considered his pleas. This time, however, the citizens of Yorktown took action. They knew that they could not stand to lose their precious shoreline property. They petitioned the General Assembly for a bill to purchase the land from Read for a reasonable sum and to vest it in town trustees for use as a common area. Although Read opposed the measure, the bill was passed and the townspeople were assessed on February 23, 1739 in order to raise one hundred pounds to pay Read for his property.19 This action assured that the waterfront property would remain in the townspeople’s hands and it sealed Yorktown’s commercial life as an active port town for at least another decade. If the townspeople had lost the waterfront, it is a

18 Riley, “Suburban Development of Yorktown,” 523-526; Metz and Richter, An Archaeological Evaluation...

19 The assessment proves that the eighty-five lots of Yorktown were completely developed by that time. Thirty-two men and four women held eighty-two lots. The remaining lots were York-Hampton Parish’s two lots and the Couthouse’s lot.
safe bet that Yorktown’s status as a major port would have ended even sooner than it eventually did. The waterfront remained a common area until 1788.\textsuperscript{20}

The waterfront was more than just an area of commercial activity—it was home and a way of life for many Yorktown residents. In the eighteenth-century sketches of Yorktown’s waterfront discovered in the manuscript “Voyage of H.M.S. Success and H.M.S. Norwich to Nova Scotia and Virginia 1754-1756,” Yorktown’s people and character were witnessed from a view of her shoreline. On the high bluffs overlooking the York River, the three stately mansions of the well-to-do merchant families, the homes of Secretary Nelson, Thomas Nelson, and the Lightfoots, were most visible; but the waterfront also revealed the homes and workplaces of the lower class families, with the most typical structure being a “one-and-a-half-story dormer window dwelling.” The waterfront was home and livelihood to both Yorktown’s lower classes as well as its wealthy residents.\textsuperscript{21}

The waterfront continued to offer business opportunities to women throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. The shoreline was dotted with taverns, managed by tavern-keepers and their families. Women, particularly women who were widowed, continued to benefit from the independence of tavern keeping throughout the eighteenth century like their counterparts, such as Mary Smith, did in the earlier part of the century. It is estimated that about fifteen percent of colonial Virginia’s taverns were run by women.\textsuperscript{22} Ann Bond, a widow, was granted a license to keep an ordinary at Abraham

Archer's house on the waterfront in January of 1743. Also, the wives of the various men who owned taverns along the waterfront played a major part in running their respective taverns along with their spouses. Often the entire family would be involved in helping to run such an establishment.\textsuperscript{23}

Storehouses and warehouses lined the waterfront, and women were also involved in both of these enterprises. Upon the death of her father, William Gordon, Mary Dowsing received both a lot and a storehouse on the waterfront when Gordon’s will was probated on September 19, 1730. The widowed Sarah Montgomery received two lots in Yorktown as well as a warehouse on the waterfront after her deceased father, the “poor potter” William Rogers, willed her these properties in 1739. She jointly possessed them along with her sister, Susanna Reynolds, until they sold the properties in 1760 to a Mr. James Pride. She received three hundred, eighty-four pounds for their sale. Mary Moody sold both a waterfront storehouse and a dwelling to William Stevenson for sixty pounds in 1748. The waterfront was clearly a place where both men as well as women transacted business and raised families. It was both a commercial area as well as a residential area, and women were involved in both facets of waterfront living.\textsuperscript{24}

An urban area, such as Yorktown, gave female property-owners and tenants a degree of freedom and independence that their rural counterparts did not have.\textsuperscript{25} From the evidence that remains, it is estimated that ten percent of tenants and property-holders in colonial Yorktown and Williamsburg were women. Historian Emma Lou Powers writes that:


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.; Ibid; Barka, Ayres, and Sheridan, The “Poor Potter of Yorktown.”

\textsuperscript{25} Sturtz, Within Her Power, 98.
These women went it alone in what was very much a man’s world. Both landladies and women tenants, most of whom were widows, engaged in business to a greater or lesser degree, and some of them succeeded in highly competitive fields. Nearly every woman tenant, as well as some landladies, put her career first and purposefully chose a town as the best spot for her business.  

It is clear that Yorktown’s women and their dedication to their work played a major role in developing their community into the successful urban port that it was during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Yorktown’s enslaved residents played a huge role in the town’s development as well. Philip Morgan emphasizes, “In labor recruitment, British America was the land of the unfree rather than of the free. From 1700 to 1780, about twice as many Africans as Europeans crossed the Atlantic to the Chesapeake and Lowcountry. Much of the wealth of early America derived from slave-produced commodities.”  

Although there are examples of free blacks in York County in the eighteenth century, most black Americans were enslaved and considered the property of their white male and female owners. Slaves were willed as property, as if they were furniture or land, in York County probate inventories.

Every aspect of Yorktown’s economy was involved with the work of enslaved Virginians. Slaves worked in the taverns and households in the port community. They grew the tobacco in fields surrounding the area of Yorktown. Slaves loaded and unloaded goods from the ships that came to port, many of which were filled with hogsheads of tobacco. Surely enslaved Virginians also noticed the many ships which

---

28 York County Probate Inventories, York County Records, CWF, and www.pastportal.com.
came to Yorktown filled with more Africans who became slaves. It was these African slaves who built Virginia and built its early economy from their forced toil. These are the men, women, and children who were being brought to work Virginia’s tobacco fields as well as to work in all other industries throughout the colony.

Yorktown was a busy and vibrant small urban port as long as the markets of tobacco and slaves continued to do well in the York River area. As soon as these markets began to stagnate along the York and flourish farther west along the James River, Yorktown started to decline. It was in the last half of the eighteenth-century that Yorktown began to see an end to its involvement as a major player in Virginia’s tobacco and slaves economy.
CHAPTER FOUR: Yorktown’s Decline

While the first half of the eighteenth century was a time of growth and development in Yorktown, the last half of the century was a time of decline and stagnation. Many historians erroneously write that this decline began as a result of the Siege of Yorktown in 1781, which was one of the most decisive American victories in the American Revolution. While the Siege undoubtedly did have a major impact on the people, buildings, businesses, and resources of Yorktown, this port’s decline as a major economic player in Virginia actually began three decades prior to the 1781 battle.

By the 1750s, Yorktown had reached its peak of growth and economic activity and was already beginning its steady decline. Yorktown was once a major port in the important Virginia trade of tobacco and slaves, but by the mid-century, the major markets of tobacco and slaves were booming farther west in the interior of Virginia along the James River. As businesses along the York River began to stagnate, Yorktown’s promise of growth and economic development became a part of Virginia’s history. The town’s reality became stagnation.

Gone were the busy seasons of ship after ship pulling into harbor. With fewer ships and less crews, fewer taverns were needed in the town. There were less people for merchants to sell their wares to and a decreased amount of goods for merchants to be
selling in the first place. In the last half of the eighteenth century, Yorktown was changing, and the change was not for the betterment of its economic future.¹

In spite of the common error of trying to describe Yorktown’s decline several decades later than when it really occurred at mid-century, there are numerous historians who note a massive migration of tobacco production from the tidewater to the western piedmont regions of Virginia around the century’s mid-mark. Allan Kulikoff writes that the population in the piedmont had increased so much by the middle of the eighteenth century, that it was necessary for those who wished to continue in the production of this important cash crop to move their production to the James River basin instead of the York River area. He writes, “Tidewater planters could, of course, avoid the consequences of diminished land supply by moving to the frontier. Thousands of planters left tidewater for piedmont with their families and slaves during the middle half of the eighteenth century...Tobacco exports from the Upper James Naval District... rose from about five million pounds in the mid-1730s to about thirty million pounds in the early 1770s...”² Yorktown was losing influence in the tobacco arena just as Norfolk, in the lower James River Naval District, was gaining influence and power in this market.

The reason for the shift in the tobacco market from tidewater to piedmont is not just attributed to the higher levels of population along the York River and vaster tracts of land available along the James River. It also has to do with the soil itself. In spite of the fact that the sweet-scented variety of tobacco which grew only along the York River was considered superior throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was becoming nearly impossible to grow even in its home area by the middle of the

² Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, 52-53.
eighteenth century. Linda L. Sturtz writes that soil exhaustion in the tidewater is another important reason that the tobacco market moved farther west to the piedmont.³ Tobacco, aside from being very labor intensive, is also very hard on the soil it grows in.⁴ Allan Kulikoff writes that colonial planters also inflated this problem by rotating their fields instead of fertilizing nutrients back into the soil. He writes that planters would horde excess amounts of land. They would grow tobacco consistently on various tracts of their land until the tobacco leached all of the nutrients from the soil, and then they would allow that exhausted land to “lay fallow” while they moved tobacco production to other, more nutrient-laden tracts of their land.⁵

As the market in tobacco declined at Yorktown, so did too the market in slaves. Kulikoff writes of the hardships and turmoil that slaves endured on the middle passage, the cramped and unsanitary journey by boat to Virginia, and the demoralizing experience of being sold at slave sales. Yorktown was too often a part of this sad chapter of our nation’s history during its economic glory days. Kulikoff writes:

[In the 1720s and 1730s, slavers first went to Yorktown and then upriver to West Point or to ports on the Rappahannock River. Once they arrived in Virginia, slave ships took about two and a half months to sell their cargoes and leave the province, and slaves were shown to customers for an average of two to five days before being bought. How often an African was placed on sale depended upon the individuals age, sex, and health and the state of the market for slaves.]⁶

A huge part of Yorktown’s economic stability in the eighteenth century was based on the sale of human beings. As the market in tobacco and slaves moved west, fewer of these ships spent time at Yorktown’s ports as they instead headed to more lucrative

³ Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, 3.
⁴ This is a fact that this author can attest to after growing tobacco herself with the assistance of her colleagues at Carter’s Grove Plantation, part of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, from 2001-2002.
⁵ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 47-49.
destinations. Slavers began sailing up the James more often than the York River. Yorktown, a town built both literally and figuratively by the hard work of enslaved African-Virginians, was likewise crushed economically when the market for these enslaved Africans moved elsewhere in Virginia.

Kulikoff's observations of Yorktown's involvement in the transatlantic trade of slaves is evidenced in a search through *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, which is a CD-Rom Database containing details of numerous slave ships' passages. As an example, the slave ship Planter, under the direction of Captain Thomas Foulkes, departed from Liverpool, England on November 9, 1745. It made its purchase of slaves along the Gold Coast, and then made its first and only stop in Virginia along the York River. The slaves disembarked from the Planter on September 16, 1746. This was a seventy ton vessel with a twenty-three member crew. Not all of the Planter's slaves were fortunate enough to survive the horrors of the middle passage to see the shores of the York River. According to the records, two-hundred, sixty-one slaves were forced on the ship along the Gold Coast, but only two-hundred and twenty-six disembarked in Virginia. The records are silent as to what happened to the unaccounted for thirty-five slaves that did not disembark from this slaving ship. The records are filled with many accounts of other ships like the Planter who set sail from England, loaded their vessels with people to sell into slavery along the coasts of Africa, and then made their way to sell their human cargo like livestock along the York River of Virginia. Some ships sold their slaves only along the York River, like the Planter, others stopped first at the York River and then to other locations such as the Potomac River, supporting Kulikoff's research. From a perusal of
the database, it appears that there are more records of slave ships stopping along the York River either exclusively or first from the 1710s through the 1740s.7

As Yorktown’s involvement in the intertwined economies of tobacco and slaves dwindled in the 1750s, so did Yorktown’s status as an important port in Virginia. Yorktown’s involvement in Virginia’s economy and politics was strong as long as its involvement in the transatlantic trade in tobacco and slaves were strong. When the markets for tobacco and slaves shifted to the piedmont of Virginia, Yorktown’s hopes for a successful future of wealth also shifted. Never again did Yorktown emerge as a major player in Virginia’s economy.

Both the cities of Yorktown and Norfolk were created by the same 1691 Act for Ports and Towns, but only one remains a major port today. Norfolk was incorporated as an independent borough in 1736.8 It was then around the 1750s when Yorktown’s involvement in the naval economy of tobacco and slaves declined and Norfolk and surrounding areas of the James River Basin took over in the tobacco market. Norfolk remains an important port in modern times because of its location along the James River as well as the fact that it is one of the world’s most naturally-protected ports because of the way the surrounding land almost hides it. Today Norfolk is the site of one the United States of America’s most important naval bases as well as being a busy commercial and industrial center along the east coast. While Yorktown, on the other hand, is not a busy economic center in the modern marketplace, it does indeed demand attention as one of Virginia’s most important historic sites, not only because of its important role in the

---

7 David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom, (Cambridge, UK: The Cambridge University Press, 1999), CWF. Of particular interest are the ships Planter (1745-46), Gildart (1746), Three Sisters (1716), Bootle (1717), as well as an un-named ship under the direction of Matthew Goulding (merchant, 1731).
8 Julie Richter, conversation, January 2006.
American Revolution, but also because of its role in shaping our nation’s urbanization history and destiny. The story of Yorktown is the history of Colonial Virginia as well as the history of the transition from Colonial America to the United States of America.
The York River (in the center of the map) narrows and becomes shallow rapidly the farther inland into Virginia that it flows. The James River (at the bottom) is much more navigable than the York farther inland.

(This photograph is used courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)
The John Mitchell map shows how Colonial Virginia extended up into parts of modern Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania as well as as far west as the British colony was hoping to claim. Citizens of other regions and colonies and Native Americans disputed these claims.

(This photograph is used courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)
FIGURE 3

MAP OF YORK AND GLOUCESTER

Gloucester Point is the small piece of land jutting into the top of the map. Yorktown is the area of land exactly opposite the York River from Gloucester.

(This photograph is used courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:


Francis Nicholson Papers.
Alexander Spotswood Papers.
Edward Blathwaite Papers.


*York County Probate Inventories*, York County Records. The Rockefeller Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

*York County Records*, 1633-1811. Yorktown Virginia.
Secondary Sources:


Hatch, Charles E. *Yorktown's Main Street (From Secretary Nelson's to the Windmill) And Military Entrenchments Close in and around the town of York.* (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1974).


Kerrison, Catherine. "By the Book: Eliza Ambler Brent Carrington and Conduct Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia." *The Virginia Magazine of*


York County Project. Master Biographical File. Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
VITA

Kimberly Suzanne Renner

Kimberly Suzanne Renner was born in Littlestown, Pennsylvania on August 15, 1974. She graduated from Littlestown Senior High School in 1992. The author graduated Magna Cum Laude from Dickinson College in 1996 with a B.A. in history, a certificate in Women’s Studies, and the 1914 Senior Prize in American History.

Ms. Renner is an M.A. candidate in the Department of History at the College of William and Mary. From fall 1999 until summer 2000, the author was an intern for The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s Digital Library Project where she then worked as a Research Assistant from summer 2000 until spring 2001. She later worked as an interpreter for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation from 2001 until 2003. She currently teaches seventh grade social studies and English at Toano Middle School and owns a small business as a yoga instructor.