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The Development of Merchants Square: Colonial Imagery and the Consequences of Redevelopment in Williamsburg, Virginia and Other Small Towns, 1910-1955

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by

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Accepted for Highest Honors

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Introduction

Merchants Square in Williamsburg, Virginia was the first and most conspicuous shopping district built in a Colonial Revival style during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Built to accommodate commercial buildings displaced by the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Merchants Square combined colonial architectural references with more modern business needs to create a unique shopping district. The square’s connection with the Restoration of Williamsburg links it with one of the most significant events in the rise of Colonial Revival architecture.\(^1\) Because the use of colonial references in shopping centers is a complex subject and since Williamsburg offers such an excellent and early example, most of this thesis concentrates on the people, ideas, events and consequences surrounding Merchants Square.\(^2\)

The architecture of Williamsburg’s business district influenced many other commercial developments in the Tidewater Virginia area, contributing to the region’s architectural identity.

The displacement of main street businesses and subsequent construction of Merchants Square radically altered social and economic life in Williamsburg and represented the beginning of a pattern linking colonial architecture to the redevelopment of small-town commercial centers. Williamsburg’s main avenue, Duke of Gloucester Street, transitioned from a scattered collection of small shops and residences to an outdoor museum featuring colonial structures in just a few short years.\(^3\) Most of the businesses displaced by this process moved to Merchants Square, located on the two westernmost blocks of Duke of Gloucester Street, which became the


\(^2\) For an excellent primer on Merchants Square, see Mary Miley Theobald, “Merchants Square: Williamsburg’s Other Historic Area,” *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* (Autumn 1992), 29-41.

\(^3\) George Humphrey Yetter’s *Williamsburg Before and After: The Rebirth of Virginia’s Colonial Capital* (Williamsburg, Va: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1988) offers an excellent visual record of the changes Williamsburg experienced as a result of the Restoration.
new social and economic center of Williamsburg. The changing uses and appearances of
Williamsburg buildings altered employment and business life, and increased racial segregation in
the small Southern town. These consequences appeared in other communities that pursued
similar redevelopment projects, most notably in Princeton, New Jersey, and Stony Brook, New
York. Events in Williamsburg were indicative of larger trends in the architectural, economic and
social history of mid-twentieth-century America.

Ideas concerning redevelopment using colonial design references appeared in popular
culture even before Williamsburg’s Restoration. Sinclair Lewis, one of the most popular fiction
writers of the first half of the nineteenth century, believed a revitalization of a town’s main
street could fundamentally change an entire community. In his seminal 1920 novel Main Street,
an idealistic liberal reformer named Carol Kennecott arrives in the small American town of
Gopher Prairie, only to find

In all the town not one building save the Ionic bank which gave pleasure to
Carol’s eyes; not a dozen buildings which suggested that, in the fifty years of
Gopher Prairie’s existence, the citizens had realized that it was either
desirable or possible to make this, their common home, amusing or
attractive.4

However, she later imagined

that a small American town might be lovely, as well as useful...She saw in
Gopher Prairie a Georgian city hall: warm brick walls with white shutters, a
fanlight, a wide hall and curving stair...Forming about it and influenced by it,
as mediaeval villages gathered about the castle, she saw a new Georgian
town as graceful and beloved as Annapolis or that bowery Alexandria to
which Washington rode.5

Although the story and characters are fictional, the passages above could apply to many historic
American towns in the 1920s that had experienced the effects of modernization. Like Gopher
Prairie, inelegant commercial structures of corrugated iron and cheap clapboard populated

4 Sinclair Lewis, Main Street, (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 52.
5 Ibid., 148.
Williamsburg’s main street in 1926, which became targets for a reformer. Williamsburg’s reformer, an Episcopal minister named W.A.R. Goodwin (with ideals strikingly similar to Carol Kennecott) dreamed of eliminating unsightly Main Street architecture and replacing it with handsome colonial structures reminiscent of a simpler, more romantic period of American history. However, Carol Kennecott’s dream was fiction, whereas that of Williamsburg’s reformer became reality in the early 1930s at the height of the Depression. One of the main features of Goodwin’s restoration was the two-block commercial development of Merchants Square, which housed most of Williamsburg’s retail and civic establishments in neat brick buildings of colonial design.

The most overlooked buildings in a town’s landscape are often the most important. The bank, the supermarket, the church, the barber shop – all these spaces influence the routine of daily life more than a famous house or landmark. Why are these common places so important? It is because people visit them on a daily basis. Commercial spaces, some of the most frequented buildings, are also some of the most crucial – in addition to being the supply depots for all of our wants and needs, they are gathering places that provide opportunities for social interaction. Commercial areas serve as symbols of civic aspiration, as Sinclair Lewis observed. From the ancient Greek Agora to the Medieval market to the nineteenth-century American main street, commercial districts have been the centerpiece of community life – it is here where people gather to exchange goods, money and ideas, and it is through these areas that we begin to identify with a locality.\(^6\)

In America, the decades between 1920 and 1950 witnessed a shift in the physical fabric of the downtown. Spurred on by the streetcar and the increasing popularity of the automobile, central business districts gave way to periphery regional shopping centers that followed rapidly

expanding suburban sprawl.\textsuperscript{7} Main streets had always been “magnets of commerce” that centralized a community around a core.\textsuperscript{8} Downtown reached its zenith in many areas by 1920 because of growth along trolley lines and automobile lanes, which provided easy access to shops and services.\textsuperscript{9} However, this “strip” development was not without problems. It often neglected architectural quality, so that hastily constructed shops with false-front facades became common on main streets. Some towns and cities grew too rapidly and over expanded, causing their downtown areas to later stagnate. Crime and overcrowding threatened central business areas. The rapid increase of automobile ownership caused congestion in downtown areas that had insufficient parking. This fact combined with evolving methods of commercial development led to the rise of the planned shopping center concept beginning in the 1920s, a form which became increasingly popular throughout the century. Developers saw shopping centers as the cure to the ills of strip development.\textsuperscript{10} Beginning with early examples like J.C. Nichol’s 1921 Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, these shopping centers emphasized architectural and organizational unity, offered plentiful free parking, and boasted shopping experiences free from the congestion and unwanted social groups that characterized downtowns.

The popularization of the planned community shopping center during the mid-twentieth century was one of the most profound transformations in American commercial architecture.


\textsuperscript{9} Richard Longstreth, interview with author, 13 October 2008.

\textsuperscript{10} Longstreth, \textit{City Center}, xiv.
Shopping centers are now ubiquitous features of our built landscape that can be found in virtually every community. By 1950, shopping centers began drawing significant amounts of business activity away from traditional town centers, decentralizing communities and contributing to the decay of downtowns. This manner of growth contributed to the current configuration of shopping malls, suburban housing developments, and decrepit downtown areas Americans find in their built environment today.

An undercurrent flowing within the more general shopping center movement involved the application of colonial references in commercial architecture. William Rhoads has studied how architects designed roadside motels, taverns, gas stations, and rest areas in the colonial mode as a reassurance that American culture was strong and deep in a time when the automobile and other innovations were changing the American way of life in drastic ways. Tourists traveled America’s roadways to view seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses. Through creations like John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, hundreds of thousands of people viewed original and restored colonial structures, making the interpretation of colonial forms extremely popular design choices in the 1930s and 1940s.

Some prominent men sought to use colonial architecture to redevelop their communities’ town centers. The backers of such projects pursued them for the same reasons many developers built shopping centers – to mitigate or reverse the haphazard commercial main street buildings of the previous half century, replacing them with new commercial and civic structures. Developers like W.A.R. Goodwin, Edgar Palmer, and Ward Melville chose to build colonially-inspired commercial centers to enhance the appearances of their communities.

11 Longstreth, City Center, xiii.
Design principles for these centers often resembled those used in later shopping centers. Ironically, although these centers were “colonial,” they often accommodated the modern automobile, albeit less conspicuously than main streets.

Merchants Square and Williamsburg are the subjects of this study for several reasons. First, although researchers have already studied the town’s historic colonial buildings and those reconstructed during the Restoration, the changing function of the town’s center has not been given much attention. In effect, the Restoration removed the center of the existing business district and relocated it to a less central location, which had lasting consequences for the city of Williamsburg and its citizens. Thus, this subject offered an opportunity to add a new perspective to the already extensive collection of works on Williamsburg’s history. Secondly, the commercial architecture displayed in Merchants Square influenced many other developments both in Virginia and elsewhere and its legacy is worthy of study. The marriage of colonial and modern styles in Merchants Square was highly successful, and nowadays colonial-style stores and shopping centers are almost cliché. Third, Williamsburg’s story of commercial development demonstrated an example of efforts to revitalize a downtown area, and while at first it was successful, eventually this well-designed development could not compete with newer shopping centers located away from the old commercial core. Construction of colonially-themed centers drastically affected communities elsewhere, just as later shopping centers did after World War II. Merchants Square demonstrated the value of applying historic imagery and preservation to commercial cores, a practice that many communities have emulated. These historic districts attract many visitors and tourists and help ensure the economic vitality of downtowns.

The unique combination of architectural, planning, social and economic issues required a special approach. Architectural and planning history is the thesis’ main focus because the
most obvious of the changes that Williamsburg and other communities experienced to their
downtowns was in their appearance. Sources including Sanborn Fire Insurance maps,
photographs, architectural plans, diaries, correspondence and newspaper articles provided
much of the material for this analysis. Fieldwork was an important part of the architectural
research for this thesis. Also important were the economic and social consequences of
Merchants Square. The most valuable sources for this perspective were diaries, newspaper
editorials, and census statistics. In order to provide a coherent narrative, these different
perspectives are integrated within the text. My analysis basically follows a chronological path,
which elucidates the changes Williamsburg experienced between the 1920s and World War II.

Chapter one focuses on events leading up to the decision of the Restoration’s leaders to
construct Merchants Square. A brief review of Williamsburg’s condition between 1910 and
1926 is provided, which establishes Merchants Square’s context in the city’s history. The
chapter then focuses on W.A.R. Goodwin’s dream of restoring Williamsburg’s colonial
appearance. The final section analyzes the establishment of key restoration participants and
their subsequent decision to relocate all buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street that were
incongruent with eighteenth-century American colonial architecture.

Chapter two examines Merchants Square’s design process. The chapter analyzes the
architects and administrators behind the planning and construction of the Williamsburg
shopping district and the issues they faced. This is followed by a review of the design of the
shopping center and how it solved certain logistical problems. The design displayed some
qualities present in shopping centers and districts built after Merchants Square.

The local effects and national context of Merchants Square is discussed in chapter three.
In the years after the completion of the shopping district, Williamsburg enjoyed an improved
economy but also its citizens had to deal with the introduction of chain stores. The construction
of the commercial center perpetuated trends towards segregation in Williamsburg and other towns. Merchants Square’s status as a shopping center is discussed in a national context. The chapter then delves into short case studies of Palmer Square in Princeton, New Jersey and the Village Center in Stony Brook, New York, as examples of developments with similar qualities and consequences as Merchants Square.

This thesis does not pretend to be comprehensive. As with any study of limited length and scope, the research raises many questions that require further investigation. It seeks to understand some of the reasons why Merchants Square appears the way it does. Hopefully this study will draw attention to a critical period in urban design. I avoid judging aesthetic questions about the merits of colonial references in commercial architecture, even though they are integral to assessing the appropriateness and success of such an undertaking. What are the possible effects of commercial redevelopment on our communities? Should we design new buildings in historical themes? Does this pay proper homage to the past? Or is it a pastiche of past styles with no real intellectual or aesthetic coherence? Understanding past solutions to problems allows us to explore how to treat our architectural past with the current demands of the present.
Figure 1: Williamsburg ca. 1934. Duke of Gloucester Street runs east to west, with the Capitol at the eastern end and the College of William and Mary at the western. Merchants Square consists of the two blocks immediately east of the college. *Photograph Courtesy of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library Special Collections.*
Chapter 1
Williamsburg Wakes Up

“There were unsettled relationships between what the older ladies jokingly called ‘the invasion of modern barbarians’, and certain grim personal realities in their lives; they were just as genial about their predicament as they could be! But you had to be cautious; we were strangers. We were in a sense invaders uprooting their quiet town.”

-William Graves Perry

Communities often define themselves by the civic and commercial buildings on their main streets. Businesses and public buildings serve as gathering points for the local populace. Due to the transient nature of business, the architecture of main streets changes constantly, and with it the images and identities of communities. In Williamsburg, Virginia, the realignment of commercial and public spaces on its main street in the late 1920s and 1930s redefined the community. Three men drove most of these changes: a local minister and historical admirer named W.A.R. Goodwin, the wealthy philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Boston architect, William Graves Perry. They managed the Williamsburg Restoration, a project aimed to return Williamsburg to its eighteenth-century appearance. During this process, Williamsburg’s businesses were moved to a newly designed shopping district located in the two westernmost blocks of the main street, known as Duke of Gloucester Street. The decision W.A.R. Goodwin and his associates made to move longstanding businesses that had lined the length of Duke of Gloucester Street to a Colonial Revival-style shopping center changed the architectural character of Williamsburg and realigned the center of the community.

This chapter focuses on Williamsburg from 1910 through 1928, the years before its seismic upheaval. First, we will see what life was like on Duke of Gloucester Street prior to the

Restoration’s beginnings in 1928. Before World War I, Williamsburg resembled a typical small Southern town. After 1916, the construction of Penniman, a nearby boomtown, caused a flurry of commercial activity in Williamsburg. Overbuilding hurt Williamsburg’s economy, so that by 1921 several stores stood vacant and Duke of Gloucester Street appeared “shabby.” Tracking commercial development during this period gives us an idea of the sorts of “modern innovations” that the Reverend Goodwin found so distasteful and wanted to eradicate in his efforts to restore Williamsburg’s earlier colonial character. Finally, the chapter will analyze the decisions that Goodwin and his associates made regarding the buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street and how those decisions led to the concentration of public and commercial buildings in a new shopping district. This transplantation of the community’s center not only changed the town’s identity and the lives of its residents but also reinforced some previous trends, such as notions of white dominance.

**A Small, Southern Town**

By 1920, Williamsburg was merely a shadow of its former greatness as a colonial capital. 2,462 people lived in the town, including 855 mental patients at Eastern State Hospital. This left a “normal population” of 1,607 that occupied 369 dwellings on and around Duke of Gloucester Street, a ninety-nine foot wide avenue which stretched one mile east to west.\(^{14}\) The western end terminated in a fork intersection occupied by the College of William and Mary. The east also ended in a fork, which formed a triangular lot formerly occupied by the Capitol building. At the street’s midpoint lay the Courthouse Green and the Palace Green. The Palace Green extended perpendicular to Duke of Gloucester Street, which led to the site of the colonial Governor’s Palace, then occupied by the town’s elementary and high schools.\(^{15}\) Across from the Courthouse

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\(^{14}\) Williamsburg City Council Record Book, 29 January 1929, 201.

\(^{15}\) Edward Belvin, *Growing Up in Williamsburg: From the Depression to Pearl Harbor* (Williamsburg, VA: The Virginia Gazette inc., 1981), x
Green was Market Square where most of the town’s commercial and civic buildings were clustered. The town’s colonial armory, known as the Powder Horn, awkwardly occupied a space in the center of the block, crowded by the modern buildings surrounding it. Most of Williamsburg’s residents worked for one of two major employers: the college or Eastern State Hospital. Others held jobs as shopkeepers, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and skilled and unskilled laborers. A few industrial establishments lay on the north of town on Scotland Street and near the train depot. Although its people still carved lives out for themselves, it was clear to many that Williamsburg had lost its luster.

In many respects Williamsburg prior to the Restoration was a typical small Southern town. But what was a “typical” Southern town in the early 1900s? Sociologist John Dollard’s description of “Southerntown” provides a generalization of town life in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Dollard mentioned several characteristics that matched Williamsburg. First, segregation divided Southern towns into distinct black and white areas. In Williamsburg, black and white residents lived either on Duke of Gloucester Street, which most people referred to as “Main Street,” or within a short walk from there. Despite the segregation of the town’s churches, schools and theaters, blacks and whites still interacted on Main Street, although under the watchful eye of Jim Crow. A second characteristic of Southern towns consisted of the primacy of the courthouse and its surrounding businesses, churches and public buildings, which served as communities’ social and commercial cores. Williamsburg’s courthouse and its surrounding area known as Market Square served this purpose. Although Williamsburg did not

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20 Edward Belvin, Growing Up in Williamsburg: From the Depression to Pearl Harbor (Williamsburg, VA: The Virginia Gazette inc., 1981), 1
yet have a truly centralized business district, much commerce was concentrated around the
courthouse. The third characteristic of Southerntown is vibrant religious life. In Williamsburg
religious life centered in the town’s Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches
near the courthouse and college. Finally, most Southern towns during this time were poor.
Many residents looked at their pasts as happier, more prosperous times, and some wanted to
return to those moments of former greatness. Williamsburg displayed many of these “typical”
Southern qualities prior to its rapid growth and redevelopment between 1916 and 1934. All of
the above characteristics changed with the commercial development along Duke of Gloucester
Street that began in 1916 and culminated in the plan for a new shopping district in 1928.

One can seldom speak of Southern community life in the early twentieth century
without discussing race relations. Williamsburg’s black population dealt with the same
conditions as blacks in other areas of Virginia. The 1896 landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*
legitimized Southern blacks’ second-class status by legalizing the notion of separate-but-equal
institutions, which characterized life in the South for the next sixty years. Jim Crow laws
severely limited blacks’ ability to vote, and the Ku Klux Klan terrorized the Southern black
population. As with most Southern towns, racism prevailed in Williamsburg. Whites believed
popular myths about criminal “negro fiends” and the general superiority of the white race.
*Virginia Gazette* writers stereotyped blacks as prone to crime, showing that local whites
subscribed to the common belief that blacks were inherently violent. In 1900 678
Williamsburg residents were black out of a total population of 2,044, while in 1920 687 were

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21 Dollard, 2-6.
22 The Klan was prevalent in Williamsburg. On September 26, 1926, the College of William and Mary held
a special ceremony thanking the Ku Klux Klan for donating a flagpole to the College. The KKK-donated
flagpole remained on in the intersection of Boundary and Jamestown Road until the 1950s.
23 *Virginia Gazette, 22 Feb. 1902, 2 in Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,”* 16.
black out of 2,462 total residents.\textsuperscript{24} Between 1900 and 1930, the percentage of blacks as a segment of the total population decreased, while the white proportion increased.\textsuperscript{25}

Williamsburg’s main street became a space mainly for whites between 1904 and 1930. Many African-American families moved off Duke of Gloucester Street into the “negro” sections, which included the areas northeast of the Courthouse Green, along York Street, and in the northwest and southwest parts of town between 1910 and 1930.\textsuperscript{26} For instance, the four black churches occupied properties well away from Duke of Gloucester Street in 1921, whereas all white churches faced the main thoroughfare.\textsuperscript{27} This exodus may have been a result of a 1912 Virginia law that required separate white and black districts and forbade whites to move into black areas and vice versa.\textsuperscript{28} In addition, the black school occupied a plot on the corner of Botetourt and Scotland Street, on the outskirts of town, whereas the town built a new white school located prominently on the Palace Green.\textsuperscript{29} The reasons for this relegation are unclear, but considering the history of racial prejudice in the South it is probable that community leaders did not want important black and white buildings intermixed on Duke of Gloucester Street. By 1928, only eleven black families remained on Duke of Gloucester Street, the Palace Green, and Market Square, in addition to four African-American merchants, including the popular Smith’s Meat Market.\textsuperscript{30} The dispersal of black spaces to the periphery of the town indicates the influence of Jim Crow in Williamsburg. The realignment of the town’s population and property

\textsuperscript{24}1920 Census, “Historical Census Browser,” the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html(accessed 11/17/08); A Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,” 19.
\textsuperscript{26}Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,” 20. Foster provides an excellent discussion of how the Williamsburg Restoration reinforced notions of white cultural dominance. Her narrative also gives an excellent description of Williamsburg society before, after and during the Restoration.
\textsuperscript{28}Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,” 20.
\textsuperscript{29}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
ownership trends indicated that blacks lost much of their foothold on Duke of Gloucester Street between 1904 and 1930, although it was not until the Restoration that black residences and businesses became completely absent from the thoroughfare.

Like many small American towns, Williamsburg centered along a main street which housed businesses, residences, public buildings, and other structures vital to the functioning of the community. Duke of Gloucester Street contained most of Williamsburg’s activity. The commercial and civic buildings lining this central avenue provided many opportunities for social interaction, and the architecture and the arrangement of these buildings gave the community a specific sense of place. 31 Much of the plan and many of the buildings that made Williamsburg unique as the colonial capital gradually disappeared over the course of the nineteenth century. Mayor George P. Coleman described the shabby appearance of Duke of Gloucester Street in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a poem:

“Williamsburg on a Summer Day! The straggling Street,
Ankle deep in Dust, grateful only to
The Chickens, ruffling their feathers in perfect
Safety from any Traffic Danger. The Cows taking
Refuge from the Heat of the Sun, under the Elms
Along the Sidewalk...” 32

Although Duke of Gloucester Street appeared somewhat worn, to visitors and residents alike, this thoroughfare represented the town. This was where people shopped, worked, socialized, and attended church. It was the central artery of the community.

Commercial buildings were always a feature of the boulevard, but their locations changed over the years. Prior to the Revolutionary War, businesses clustered on the eastern end of Duke of Gloucester Street and catered to lawyers and politicians working at the Capitol. 33

In the colonial period, this public building attracted the most activity in town, as the College of William and Mary then had a small enrollment and did not draw much business. This eastern section of Duke of Gloucester Street lost importance after the Capitol closed in 1780. Residential housing replaced most colonial shops and taverns in this area. Throughout the nineteenth century the area around the courthouse gained importance after the Capitol area declined. A comparison of Sanborn Insurance maps shows that commercial development was confined to a limited area in 1904 compared to 1910. The celebration of Jamestown’s tercentennial in 1907 spurred growth in Williamsburg during these years, evident in the three hotels appearing near the courthouse on the 1910 map. Although businesses spread out along the length of Duke of Gloucester Street due to the absence of zoning laws, many businesses and public buildings concentrated near the courthouse, the traditional center of Southern towns.

If Duke of Gloucester Street was the central artery of Williamsburg, then the courthouse and surrounding area was the heart between 1900 and 1928. It was a central point of reference for the townspeople, as it divided Duke of Gloucester Street into “uptown” and “downtown” sections. While definitions differed, residents generally considered everything west of the courthouse to be uptown while everything east was downtown. Open space from the palace and courthouse greens combined with the concentration of public buildings on the south side of Market Square to provide a natural dividing point between the two ends of the street. “Court days” and other celebrations such as carnivals made the courthouse and its surrounding green a center for social life, just as it did in many other Southern towns. Although carnivals still came to the Courthouse Green in the 1910s and 1920s, the green gradually gave way to commercial

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36 Virginia Gazette, 27 January 1933, 1 and Belvin, 39.
37 Bevlin, Growing Up, 39.
38 On the importance of the courthouse to Southern towns, see Carl Lounsbury, The Courthouses of Early Virginia, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).
development, as a store block and hotel opened nearby between 1910 and 1921. Located diagonally across from the courthouse between King and England Streets, Market Square housed the City Hall, post office, general store, fire department, drug store, banks, jail, meat market, and Methodist Church. Another important community building, the Williamsburg Baptist Church, stood across the street. For years the courthouse acted as the community’s core, and the construction of new buildings around it between 1900 and 1928 suggests this area was still the center of the community.

Churches served as gathering points for the populace. Like most Southern towns, Williamsburg had a religious population that attended services regularly. Sunday was an opportunity for spiritual and social fulfillment. Common religious sentiments unified sections of the community. Most residents were Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian or Presbyterian. Eight churches served the populace, four for whites and four for blacks. Bruton Parish Church and Williamsburg Baptist Church were the most prominent. The Bruton Church was the oldest surviving church in Williamsburg and served the Episcopalians in the community. Its high steeple served as a landmark on Duke of Gloucester Street and was visible from virtually any vantage point. Williamsburg Baptist Church was one of the more impressive buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street. Built in 1856, the church expressed the Greek Revival style in its finest by boasting a Doric portico. This church and the nearby Methodist church occupied spaces close to the courthouse, supporting the notion that the area around the courthouse and nearby Market Square was the center point for the community.

Symbols around town reminded white residents of their common experiences and helped define the community. Memories of the Confederacy still lingered, exemplified by the annual May fifth celebration when the community gathered to remember the anniversary of the Battle of Williamsburg, a struggle that took the lives of thousands of Confederate soldiers.\textsuperscript{43} A special ceremony in 1908 dedicated a Confederate War Memorial on the Courthouse Green in commemoration of those that died in the war.\textsuperscript{44} Many Southern towns built these monuments between 1880 and 1910.\textsuperscript{45} The Williamsburg monument later became the subject of a heated debate when agents from the Williamsburg Restoration moved the monument off the green to a nearby cemetery.\textsuperscript{46} The response to the monument’s removal indicated the reverence residents had for their Confederate heritage. It also indirectly emphasized the centrality of Market Square and the Courthouse Green to the community, as this was where the town chose to place one of its most important symbols of identity.

Williamsburg’s historic buildings set the town apart from other Southern towns and provided a direct connection to its past status as colonial capital. The powder horn, courthouse, and nearby Bruton Church were reminders of the town’s forgotten greatness. The College of William and Mary, chartered in 1693, lay at one end of Duke of Gloucester Street. In addition, many residents maintained historic property in and around town with varying levels of diligence. These properties later became important assets to Goodwin’s efforts to restore the town’s eighteenth-century appearance. The townspeople had a certain nostalgia for their past. Mayor Coleman described the attitude of Williamsburg’s prominent men in the late 1800s and early 1900s: “Our City Fathers, assembled in Leisure, following the Shade of the old Court House

\textsuperscript{43} Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,” 52.
\textsuperscript{44} Virginia Gazette, 9 May 1908, 1.
\textsuperscript{45} Gloucester, VA has a Confederate monument on its courthouse green, erected in 1880. Several other Tidewater Virginia towns display monuments as well.
\textsuperscript{46} Foster, “They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down,” 132.
around the Clock, sipping cool Drinks and discussing Glories of our Past. Almost always our past!  

The mayor’s observation tells us that Williamsburg leaders relished their pasts and were reluctant to deal with current and future problems. Williamsburg’s apogee was long over, so the leaders thought. But as with many communities, Williamsburg’s history gave white residents a common identity and heritage, which for the most part excluded blacks. This shared identity among white residents created conditions similar to those in many other small Southern towns, which were characterized by racial tensions, courthouses, central squares, devout religious life, and a common reverence and nostalgia for the past, especially the Confederacy. Williamsburg community life centered on the courthouse and Market Square, which was the location for most of the commercial, civic and religious buildings in the town. But communities are never static, and major change came to Williamsburg starting in 1916, caused first by a nearby wartime boomtown and later by a man dreaming of undoing what he viewed as the twentieth century’s obliteration of old Williamsburg. Nowhere was this perceived corruption more evident than in the appearance of buildings along Duke of Gloucester Street.

**Boomtown**

Between 1916 and 1919, a town with a population of about 15,000 called Penniman emerged just a few miles northeast of Williamsburg. Named for the inventor of ammonium dynamite, Russell Penniman, the town grew around a naval weapons factory the DuPont Company constructed in 1916 to prepare for America’s involvement in World War I.  

At its peak, the factory produced 54,000 artillery shells per day and was one of the top five ordinance-

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producing stations in the world. Farmland turned into a teeming industrial area overnight. The boomtown’s population was greater than that of its two neighboring counties, James City and York County, combined. The town only had a few commercial and civic buildings. Williamsburg merchants saw an opportunity to cash in on the emerging market, and began constructing more businesses to accommodate demand from thousands of factory workers. These new buildings later became a source of scorn for W.A.R. Goodwin. But just as suddenly as Penniman appeared, it dissolved, leaving a vacuum in the local market that Williamsburg merchants struggled to fill throughout the 1920s.

Williamsburg felt the effect of this population influx almost immediately. The town became the center of commerce for the nearby boomtown. In one of the Flat Hat’s few articles not covering college student issues, a writer reported that Williamsburg was “Wild with Excitement” when news of the DuPont plant first arrived in March 1916. The newspaper also reported that “land values have increased by leaps and bounds and property in and around Williamsburg is bringing prices never dreamed of before.” Speculation over DuPont’s plans dominated news in another Williamsburg paper, the Virginia Gazette, for months after the company’s announcement. The March 2 issue had this to say about the plant’s effect on Williamsburg:

Williamsburg is having its first taste of a real boom in its long history, and it is useless to say that it is being greatly enjoyed, especially by those who

52 “DuPont Dynamite Plant to be Built on York River,” The Flat Hat, March 7, 1916, 1.
have been paid cash options on their property, for which up to now there has been no demand. It is all a revelation to Williamsburg people.  

Because the DuPont Company assured the public that the plant would remain in operation after the war, speculation and development in Williamsburg continued. The wartime boom brought the town back to life and out of its post-Civil War stagnation.

In July of 1916 the Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce requested that a branch of the C&O Railroad connect the town to Penniman. Residents of Penniman needed access to goods and services, and the few public and commercial buildings in the boomtown could not support the entire population. As a result, Penniman residents patronized nearby Williamsburg stores for supplies. Williamsburg’s banks became crowded with DuPont employees wishing to cash their paychecks. According to Rutherfoord Goodwin, son of W.A.R. Goodwin and future employee of Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Penniman’s “sudden growth brought about a Period of temporary Business Activity and Prosperity in Williamsburg. Enlargement of the City was contemplated and new subdivisions laid out.” This growth, especially among commercial establishments, is noticeable when comparing Williamsburg’s Sanborn maps for 1910 and 1921. Residential settlement, previously confined to Duke of Gloucester Street, expanded north to Prince George Street and South to Francis Street. By September 1916, a “spirit of progress” was “sweeping the city,” as the coming of the DuPont factory and public

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54 “DuPonds to Build Great Dynamite Factory Near Williamsburg,” *Virginia Gazette*, March 2, 1916, 4
55 *The Flat Hat*, 7 March 1916, 1.
57 Rutherfoord Goodwin, *A Brief & True Report*, 426. Rutherfoord Goodwin wrote his *Brief and True Report Concerning Williamsburg in Virginia* in the style and capitalization of a colonial treatise, even though the book was published in 1941. That style has not been changed for this essay.
59 Ibid.
improvements infused new life. Because of the new business Penniman brought, Williamsburg’s population expanded 10 percent from 2,200 in 1910 to 2,462 in 1921. But Penniman disappeared as quickly as it developed, and as the population left so did their money. Williamsburg’s prosperity fled. Despite initial promises from the C&O Railroad that the plant would produce commercial dynamite and therefore remain in business during peacetime, the factory never made dynamite, and therefore had little use after the war was over. After briefly participating in demilitarization activities, DuPont closed and dismantled the plant in February 1919. No more than 100 people from the town’s peak of 15,000 still lived in Penniman by this time. By 1926, the town was completely abandoned, and returned to its original use as farmland. Williamsburg felt the effect of Penniman’s exodus on Duke of Gloucester Street. In 1921, four stores lay vacant on the main road, more than twice the number in 1910, indicating a slowing of business after the war boom years.

Duke of Gloucester Street in the 1920s displayed symbols of modernity that were a result of the war boom years. The town government paved roads to accommodate the increasing numbers of motorists. Power lines bisected the length of Duke of Gloucester Street. Hastily constructed wooden frame buildings intermixed with more handsome brick and mortar structures. Market Square became crowded with buildings “ranging from a national bank to a pig sty,” which hid the ancient powder horn. Most of the new stores existed on the south side of Gloucester Street.

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60 “Spirit of Progress Sweeping the City,” Virginia Gazette, September 21, 1916, 1.
62 The Flat Hat, 7 March 1916, 1.
64 Ibid.
66 Rutherfoord Goodwin, A Brief & True Report, 96.
Figure 2: A 1920 Virginia Gazette advertisement comments on the changes society experienced in the early twentieth century as a result of universal automobile ownership.
of the street since Bruton Church, the graveyard, and the courthouse took up most space on the opposite side. But in the midst of all this progress there existed a sense that something was being lost. Rutherfoord Goodwin described the early 1920s best:

...Duke of Gloucester Street became a teeming Highway of Concrete; great Posts to carry Wires and Cables were raised on every Hand; the empty spaces in Williamsburg, which were the Sites of forgotten Buildings and Gardens, began slowly to be filled with Shops, and Stores, and with Stations for Gasoline. The old Houses and many of their occupants resisted; but Williamsburg, with the Passing of the War, stood upon the Brink of a poor success in a World of vast Accomplishment.

Although the younger Goodwin had the benefit of hindsight, he elucidated an important fact: the war boom changed Williamsburg’s character, beginning with Duke of Gloucester Street. As a result of wartime development and the growing popularity of the automobile, Williamsburg had become “a Highway Town in which the Ancient and the Modern were mingled in an Effect of peculiar Aggravation.” Duke of Gloucester Street lost much of its original charm as modern businesses crowded out historic landmarks and residences. It was perhaps those modern shops that longtime resident Edward Belvin remembered when he described his hometown as “a typical, somewhat shabby small town.”

A March 1926 Virginia Gazette article entitled “Views on Improving Williamsburg” surveyed twenty-five residents on their thoughts of Williamsburg’s current situation. Reporters asked residents what they thought of the past decade’s changes and what else town leaders could do to improve the community. One of those polled decried the appearance of Duke of

67 Belvin, 40.
68 Rutherfoord Goodwin, A Brief & True Report, 92.
69 Rutherfoord Goodwin, A Brief & True Report, 92.
70 Bevlin, Growing Up, xii
Gloucester Street, suggesting leaders “buy a carload of paint and fix up the town. Paint some of those ramshackle and disreputable old buildings.” Duke of Gloucester Street’s image mattered to that resident because it defined his community. Its current state did not meet the resident’s standards. Another person worried about the town’s economic situation, and complained that “we can’t keep up the way we are going. Why, we can’t maintain our own high school, but must go outside for help,” indicating the disappearance of the previous decade’s prosperity. These opinions express a certain discontentment with the results of this growth in Williamsburg. None of the responses more clearly show the loss of old Williamsburg than this resident’s statement:

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71 *Virginia Gazette*, 19 March 1926, 1.
72 Ibid.
...I'll tell you what I think: Williamsburg already has too many improvements. In the old days before we had so many new-fangled things in Williamsburg everybody was happier, more comfortable, and had more leisure time. I'd like to see the daisies and other wild flowers growing on the [Courthouse?] Green again. Yes, son, this town is too jazzy already.73

As a result of speculation over Penniman, Williamsburg grew at an unnatural pace. New development along Duke of Gloucester Street, while bringing temporary prosperity to the town, damaged its historic character, as commercial structures incongruent with the town’s architecture emerged amidst historic residences and old public buildings. Williamsburg lacked a planning commission, so no professionals regulated the new growth or ensured new buildings harmonized with the town’s character.74 The stately old boulevard slowly became just another run-down main street. Mrs. George P. Coleman gave a revealing summary of the changes the town went through in the first two decades of the twentieth century:

That first heartfelt picturesqueness was fast disappearing. There were telephones, no electricity as yet, and no plumbing, but we had two banks and one automobile; and the oxcarts were not so frequently seen. The older generation felt the air of distinction was definitely disappearing. There were certainly some very disfiguring new buildings...Then came the first World War and the old era vanished entirely. Rumors of rising land values as a result of the advent of munitions works, training camps, etc., battleships in the York River, soldiers’ wives seeking board and lodging all created a chaos that one can hardly believe now. Roads improved. There was frantic construction of every kind. Eating houses and bootlegging establishments sprang up everywhere.75

Residents like Mrs. Coleman looked on these changes with emotions ranging from apathy to nostalgia. The quiet town older residents remembered from their youth disappeared into a new modern environment. The new buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street created a new

73 Virginia Gazette, 19 March 1926, 1.
74 Arthur A. Shurtleff, Report to Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, Architects upon the Town Plan and Other Matters Relating to the Restoration of Williamsburg, (Boston:1928). One of Shurtleff’s recommendations was to create a planning commission for Williamsburg, which the town currently lacked.
identity for Williamsburg. Unfortunately, this new identity neglected much of Williamsburg’s past. The town’s colonial legacy began to disappear as automobiles, filling stations, telephone wires and corrugated iron buildings invaded the town. W.A.R. Goodwin, always an activist, looked upon these modern “improvements” with disgust, and, determined not to let the march of modernity completely erase Williamsburg’s colonial character, set in motion a program to undo the changes of the 1910s and 1920s.

A “Dreamer of Dreams”

Even in his early days in Williamsburg before the Penniman speculation, Goodwin dreamed of restoring the town. In 1902 Goodwin accepted the position of rector at Bruton Parish Church and arrived in Williamsburg for the first time. A graduate of Roanoke College, the young Goodwin had a penchant for history. His son, Howard, described his father as a “good historian, fine antiquarian.”

Goodwin also had a magnanimous personality, and was adept at getting what he wanted through stubbornness, persuasiveness, and unyielding commitment to his task. After arriving at Bruton and recognizing its historic value, Goodwin made efforts to restore the church. A previous rector had made modern alterations between 1839 and 1840, which Goodwin thought inappropriate for a structure of such historic value.

This building was, after all, one of the original churches of Williamsburg and a place where George Washington and Thomas Jefferson formerly attended services. The successful 1905 restoration of the church to its colonial appearance, largely paid for with contributions gained through Goodwin’s

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78 Ibid.
persuasive and genial manner, gave the young rector confidence. He espoused his vision for Williamsburg in a 1907 report on the church’s restoration:

> The spirit of the days of long ago haunts and hallows the ancient city and the homes of its honored dead; a spirit that stirs the memory and fires the imagination; a spirit that will, we trust, illumine the judgment of those who have entered upon this rich inheritance of the past and lead them to guard these ancient landmarks and resist the spirit of ruthless innovation which threatens to rob the city of its unique distinction and charms.  

Bruton was a microcosm of Goodwin’s eventual goal – the restoration of the entire town. Although this project meant huge changes to the current way of life in Williamsburg, they were changes Goodwin believed to be necessary and proper. Unfortunately, Goodwin’s appointment to a parish in Rochester, New York forced him to forgo these plans until 1923, when he returned to Williamsburg after the College of William and Mary hired him as head of the school’s religion department.

Goodwin came back to Williamsburg to find the town had succumbed even further to the “ruthless innovation” he had seen in 1907. Filling stations, automobile repair shops, and car dealerships now presented themselves on Duke of Gloucester Street. The results of the 1910s economic boom were everywhere – new groceries, general stores, and a movie theater – but evidence of the recent bust was also apparent, as several buildings lay vacant and others appeared unkempt. Power lines strung up on a meridian down the middle of Duke of Gloucester Street obstructed the vistas Governor Nicholson originally planned in the 1690s. To the eyes of the preservationist Goodwin, there existed two Williamsburgs: one that consisted of the newer twentieth-century structures and improvements that modernized the town and

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82 Ibid.
another that included the old buildings and landmarks from the colonial days that reminded all of the town’s historic importance. Goodwin considered the former a very real and definite threat to the historic Williamsburg he valued. In his published report of the Restoration, Goodwin lamented the “corrugated iron buildings and other incongruous structures” that had “modernized and spoiled” the colonial city.83 He considered the automobile and automakers like the Fords to be “the chief contributors to the destruction” of Williamsburg’s historic atmosphere because of the paved roads, filling stations, lunch stands, billboards and traffic signals that auto use necessitated. Goodwin thought returning colonial structures to prominence would improve the “shabbiness” of Duke of Gloucester Street and return the town to its former greatness.

Goodwin did not yet know the details of his plan but he did know that he needed help. Most of all, he needed money. Goodwin pleaded with several philanthropic-minded millionaires (ironically, the automaker Henry Ford was among them) before he finally convinced John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to fund the project.85 The multi-millionaire heir to the Standard Oil Company dedicated much of his time to philanthropic projects, including the conservation of National Parks.86 After a tour of Williamsburg on November 27, 1926 during which Goodwin used all of his good nature and charm, Rockefeller authorized the pastor to draw up plans for a restoration of Williamsburg. Rockefeller later rationalized his decision, arguing that it “offered an opportunity to restore a complete area and free it entirely from alien or inharmonious surroundings as well as to preserve the beauty and charm of the old buildings and gardens of

85 Hosmer, Preservation, 18
the city and its historic significance.\textsuperscript{87} Rockefeller’s decision to support the project secured the resources Goodwin’s dream needed.

It was at this point that Goodwin and Rockefeller made a key decision that changed Williamsburg’s appearance and spatial arrangement. Since Goodwin first conceptualized his dream, he struggled between restoring the entire town or just a few select structures. Whereas cities like Boston and Philadelphia were too large for complete restorations of their historic areas, Williamsburg was small enough to make a complete restoration possible.\textsuperscript{88} Rockefeller supported a full reclamation of the town. Only a complete effort justified his involvement.\textsuperscript{89} He later remarked that “to undertake to preserve a single building when its environment has changed and is no longer in keeping, has always seemed to me unsatisfactory.”\textsuperscript{90} When Goodwin later suggested that they connect the Capitol and Governor’s Palace by buying property along Francis Street and thus bypassing Duke of Gloucester Street, Rockefeller refused because it did not meet his standard of total renewal.\textsuperscript{91} This decision made the fate of the many non-colonial houses, small businesses, and stores that dotted Duke of Gloucester Street in 1926 clear: they needed to go. Despite the fact that many of these structures were unattractive and unkempt, the buildings partly defined Williamsburg prior to the Restoration, just as the old colonial-era structures did. But to Goodwin and Rockefeller these buildings represented a period of Williamsburg’s history that was not worth saving. The two men quietly made preparations for restoration. To redesign so much of the town, Goodwin and Rockefeller

\textsuperscript{88} W.A.R. Goodwin, “The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg,” 426.
\textsuperscript{91} Hosmer, \textit{Preservation}, 22.
needed a master architect able to help them implement their plans. They eventually found such a man in the Boston architect William Graves Perry.

Goodwin met Perry at a dinner party on May 23, 1926.\textsuperscript{92} Earlier that spring Perry and a friend had travelled on vacation to Williamsburg. During that trip, their car broke down, so they decided to take the train back to Boston and leave their vehicle sitting under a tree in the town. To both Perry and the sleepy citizens of Williamsburg, this “seemed a perfectly reasonable thing to do,” and was “quite in character with the repose and atmosphere of the town.”\textsuperscript{93} It was on Perry’s trip to retrieve the car that he met Goodwin. Perry shared Goodwin’s admiration for the historic atmosphere of the town and helped him repair locks for the George Wythe house near the palace grounds, which was currently under renovation as a parsonage.\textsuperscript{94} Goodwin remembered this favor when the time came to choose architects for his grand restoration, and offered the work to Perry’s firm, Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, after considering other architects. Goodwin kept Rockefeller, his funding source, a secret from Perry. Although this irked the architect, Perry’s firm nevertheless took a risk and accepted Goodwin’s request. The rector later validated his choice when he reported that Perry was “a most competent man” for the job.\textsuperscript{95}

Progress inched along based on Rockefeller’s preference for a methodical process. The benefactor first authorized Goodwin to hire an architectural firm, then to gather information about the town’s buildings, and finally to develop a plan for a restored colonial town. Rockefeller limited Goodwin’s advancement to the next task until the previous one was complete, which consequently limited Perry’s progress on developing plans. Goodwin and Rockefeller instructed Perry to first sketch out plans for restored areas around the Capitol and the Governor’s House, but later authorized him to draw a layout for the entire town, with no

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} W.A.R. Goodwin to J.D. Rockefeller, Jr. Jan 11, 1927, quoted in Hosmer, \textit{Preservation}, 21.
promise that the plan would actually be carried out. During Rockefeller’s visit in May of 1927 the benefactor brought forward a program for acquiring properties on Duke of Gloucester Street. Secrecy would be of the utmost importance, as property prices would spike if residents realized that Rockefeller was behind these property transfers, just as they did when rumors of Penniman’s development reached the town. As such, Rockefeller made Goodwin his proxy for purchasing properties under the guise of using it for the College of William and Mary’s endowment. Even Perry did not know Rockefeller’s identity until November of 1927, after he had worked on the project for several months.

Goodwin and Rockefeller wrestled with the problem of what to do with the existing “inharmonious” buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street. The businesses and public buildings, clearly, had to go, but what about the residences? And what would happen to the displaced businesses? Regardless of the quality of architecture on Duke of Gloucester Street, its buildings were key assets to the town. While simply purchasing properties and razing them would serve the immediate interests of Goodwin and the Restoration, this would amount to cutting out the heart of Williamsburg. Restored buildings could not serve all of the various commercial and civic needs of the community, as Goodwin planned many of them to become museums. Important buildings like the post office, City Hall, churches and businesses needed to be moved. Rockefeller and Goodwin made a crucial decision to relocate, rather than eliminate, institutions occupying modern structures on Duke of Gloucester Street. Some of these buildings were relocated away from Duke of Gloucester Street, but most moved to a newly designed commercial district on the western end of the road near the college. The buildings arranged here later took Market Square’s place as community core.

96 Hosmer, Preservation, 21-22.  
97 Ibid.  
Several different types of buildings needed moving. First, there were the commercial establishments. Auto garages and dealerships, like the Person Motor Company on the corner of South Nassau and Duke of Gloucester Street, could not exist next to colonial-era buildings.\footnote{“Williamsburg, VA,” 1921, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1867-1970 – Virginia; Belvin, x.} The Person Motor Company, started in 1908, was the first Ford dealership in Virginia.\footnote{Belvin, 35.} Other establishments held importance to the community. For instance, the Peninsula Bank was a fixture of the town. The institution marketed itself as “the Oldest Bank in the Oldest City in the Oldest State in the United States.”\footnote{Advertisement, \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 15 June 1916, 4.} Though Person’s Motor Company and the Peninsula Bank were modern establishments, they still had value to Williamsburg, just like the older colonial buildings. Another prominent business, Pender’s Grocery, remained on the corner of Duke of Gloucester Street and Botetourt Street, but the Restoration authorities remodeled its building to fit the colonial mold.\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, \textit{William Graves Perry Papers}, Rockefeller Library Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Inc., 11 May 1928.} Groceries, general stores, barber shops, banks, restaurants, clothing stores, drug stores, and offices also needed new homes.\footnote{“Williamsburg, VA,” 1921, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1867-1970 – Virginia.; Belvin, x.} Some shopkeepers and other tenants lived in spaces above these shops. Also, what would happen to the few remaining black businesses on Duke of Gloucester Street, like Smith’s Meat Market?\footnote{Foster, “\textit{They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down},” 20.} Would the new shopping district accommodate these businesses as well? Rockefeller and Goodwin could not eliminate these businesses without severely impacting residents’ ability to supply themselves with goods and services.

Although the boom mentality changed the town’s appearance between 1916 and 1919, not all of the buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street were inconsequential architecturally. One of the notable exceptions was the Williamsburg Baptist Church on Market Square in front of the
Powder Horn. Dating from the 1850s, the church was a fine example of Greek Revival architecture. Surely, the church was not among the “shabby” buildings visitors and residents complained about in the early 1920s. Did this structure deserve destruction? Unfortunately, its architecture was anachronistic to the colonial period, and the Restoration tore the church down. Because it was a vital center to the community, Rockefeller and Goodwin needed to construct a replacement for it and other churches that needed relocation away from the restored area. Many of these churches moved to sites along Richmond Road away from Duke of Gloucester Street after 1932.

Figure 4: The changing locations of civic and commercial property on Duke of Gloucester Street, 1921-1933. Merchants Square is located on the first two blocks east of the college. Commercial and civic property includes shops, churches, banks, government buildings and other public structures.

Civic buildings such as the small Free Public Library needed new homes. The post office on the southern block between Nassau and King Street was an integral part to the community but had to be moved. Most of the civic buildings, such as City Hall, the fire department, and the jail were located on the southern block between King Street and England

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Street. The subject of city-owned lands became a point of debate as the Restoration progressed. On January 21, 1928, the City Council proposed that in exchange for the city-owned buildings and lands on Market Square, the courthouse green, and the Palace Green, Goodwin was to build a new government complex to house the courthouse, jail and library. Goodwin originally proposed to erect the complex “on the back of the block on which the Peninsula Bank now stands,” but the council later deemed this location unsuitable, and eventually built the courthouse, jail and library on the corner of Francis Street and England Street. Except for the fire house and post office, government buildings relocated away from the community’s center on Duke of Gloucester Street.

What of the residential houses and their property owners on Duke of Gloucester Street? The Restoration needed to buy these properties to ensure continuity, but many homeowners had lived their whole lives in these buildings, which had passed down through their families for generations. These homes had sentimental value to many residents. Rockefeller’s money and Goodwin’s vision overcame many of these difficulties. Mary Coleman recalled the early sale of residential property in her 1932 diary:

It was funny how loudly we one and all announced, in the beginning, the impossibility of giving up ownership of our houses, the indignation indeed that we felt at the idea, and the way in which one after another realized the advantage of the scheme.

The fact that the Williamsburg Restoration allowed residents to move back into their homes rent-free softened the sale of houses with sentimental value. A few residents resisted, such as Cara and Doris Armistead, but the vast majority of residents accepted the transfer of ownership.

108 Ibid.
109 Mary Haldane Begg Coleman, unpublished diary, Rockefeller Library Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Inc., 1932, 3.
110 Mary Haldane Begg Coleman, unpublished diary, Rockefeller Library Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Inc., 1932, 3.
Some white families and all black families sold their property and moved to other parts of the city or left Williamsburg altogether. In most cases, the Restoration constructed houses around town away from the Historic Area for displaced residents, such as the six “negro houses” built on an extension of Scotland Street in the northwest part of town.\footnote{Arthur A. Shurtleff, “The New Negro Houses and Vicinity,” \textit{Report to Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, Architects Upon the Town Plan and Other Matters Relating to the Restoration of Williamsburg}, (Boston: 1928), 36-38} For the most part, however, parts of Duke of Gloucester Street lost their residential character after the Restoration.

The majority of Williamsburg merchants benefitted from their removal to the new shopping district near the college. Not only did they receive new facilities with handsome facades, but they also moved closer to the college market. The planners promised to rectify the crowded parking situation on Duke of Gloucester Street by providing off-street parking lots. Several stores moved into larger, more spacious buildings than before. The Friedman store expanded in a new forty-by-eighty-foot space, while Binn’s Millinery Shop more than doubled its former depth in its new building.\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 10 May 1928 and 26 Nov. 1928.} Goodwin reassured merchants that “those interested in this endeavor desire the continued and increased prosperity of every business man and every business interest in Williamsburg.”\footnote{Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, W.A.R. Goodwin, “An Open Letter to the Business Men of Williamsburg,” in Elizabeth Hayes, \textit{The Backgrounds and Beginnings of the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia}, 1933, 159.} Over the first few months of 1928 many businesses accepted Goodwin’s offers and agreed to move into the new business district near the college.

A key moment in the history of Williamsburg occurred on June 12, 1928. After giving Goodwin permission the month before to improve sidewalks and streets, move telephone lines underground, and lay sewer and water mains, the City Council held a meeting at the local high school auditorium to evaluate Goodwin’s plan for Williamsburg.\footnote{Williamsburg City Council Recordbook, 10 May 1928, 169.} More than 150 white
residents attended the town hall meeting to assess Goodwin’s proposals. After presenting Perry’s plans, Goodwin surprised all and revealed the identity of his mystery benefactor to the public. As soon as those assembled learned that John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had a stake in the transformation of their small town, the hall erupted into applause, and all but five of those assembled voted in favor of Goodwin’s restoration plan. The future of Williamsburg was set. Like other parts of Williamsburg, the Restoration forever altered Duke of Gloucester Street as colonial-style buildings replaced contemporary structures and displaced businesses concentrated into a new commercial district and community center on the street’s two westernmost blocks.

During the next six years Williamsburg completely changed its appearance and character. In 1926, Williamsburg was a small, “shabby,” Southern town. By 1928 forces were in motion that completely reinvented life on Williamsburg’s main street – contractors leveled non-colonial buildings and moved residences and businesses away from the area encompassing Goodwin’s plan for a grand restoration. The new business area became one of the finest examples of commercial architecture in the country, just as other structures in Williamsburg demonstrated excellent architectural craftsmanship. For some residents, the removal of modern buildings was a blessing, as many thought the removal of poorly designed buildings did more to beautify the town than any of the fine colonial structures the Restoration erected. The development of the new shopping center near the college represented a change in the architectural patterns of Duke of Gloucester Street, as academic-designed buildings replaced

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115 Williamsburg City Council Recordbook, 12 June 1928, 170.
Figure 5: Top: Duke of Gloucester Street looking east from the College of William and Mary, 1928. Bottom: The same perspective after the Restoration. Merchants Square appears in the foreground. Photographs courtesy of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library Special Collections.
existing low-quality vernacular buildings. This change in the built environment transformed the community’s character in the decades after 1934, when the first stage of the Restoration reached completion. Merchants Square today remains an excellent reminder of how alterations in building patterns change town life.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{117} It is important to remember that Merchants Square did not gain its name until the 1970s. Although this text refers to the shopping district as Merchants Square when discussing years prior to this date, townspeople and Williamsburg officials would have known the district as “the business district” or simply “downtown.” Restoration architects and officials referred to the district as the “new shops” or “new shopping area.”
Chapter 2: The Design Process

On Saturday, December 10, 1927 the Richmond-Times Dispatch ran a headline entitled “Williamsburg Restoration to Cost Millions.” The article exposed the full extent of Goodwin’s vision for the town, including plans for buying historic properties, destroying anachronistic buildings, and creating a new shopping district for displaced businesses.118 This first public announcement of the full intention of the Williamsburg Restoration worried Goodwin immensely, for he feared this would make restoring the town untenable by inflating land prices.119 The properties on the west end of Duke of Gloucester Street, already expensive because of their proximity to the college, were especially susceptible to inflation.120 These properties were the site of the proposed shopping district.

The article made a brief mention of the design of the new business district that accompanied the Historic Area plan. At this early stage, all the reporter publicly knew about the development was that planners meant it to “assure complete harmony” between the town’s commercial and residential sectors – in a sense, create a link connecting modern and colonial Williamsburg.121 How were Perry and other architects to accommodate the modern businesses that contributed to the town’s economic growth and sense of community, while simultaneously express the colonial imagery soon to be prevalent along Duke of Gloucester Street? A combination of patience, extensive research and analysis, and design flexibility contributed to the eventual success of the master-planned shopping district. Perry, Goodwin, and the several other men responsible for the development of Merchants Square took careful consideration of conditions in Williamsburg and constantly changed and refined their plans, so that the final

120 Ibid., 91.
121 “Williamsburg Restoration to Cost Millions,” The Richmond-Times Dispatch, 12/10/1927, 1.
product of their efforts ensured Williamsburg smoothly made the transition from a small hamlet to a historically-restored town. The successful integration of colonial imagery into modern commercial development became an example for future projects ranging from New York to Texas.  

William Graves Perry worked on plans for Williamsburg’s new arrangement throughout the second half of 1927. His first reference to the two blocks just east of the College of William and Mary was in a journal entry dated June 30, 1927. He labeled the northern section Block 23 and the southern section Block 15. Later described as a “scattered location of shops, stores, etc.,” this area consisted of many “graceless structures with unattractive signs” and “the usual row of small buildings, many of them badly dilapidated” before development. These two blocks, which already included a theater, restaurant, candy store, and college-oriented shops, seemed a natural place for the construction of a new retail center. The leaders of the Restoration recognized that Williamsburg’s center of gravity had already started to shift west away from the Capitol towards the college. Angelo Costas and George Rollo owned most of the properties in Block 15 and maintained the Norfolk Restaurant and the Imperial Theatre in addition to a barber shop, pool room, and bowling alley. The northern block included several residences and small stores, including the College Pharmacy, a popular local social spot. These two blocks were the center of “uptown,” located at a crucial junction between Duke of Gloucester, Boundary, Jamestown and Richmond Roads, and were within easy walking distance.

122 Developments in communities such as Princeton, New Jersey, Stony Brook, New York, and Katy, Texas all contained similar characteristics to Merchants Square and are discussed in Chapter 3.
124 Belvin, x, 39-47.
126 Belvin, 42; The City of Williamsburg. Prod. Harvard Film Foundation, 1930.
of the college. They were somewhat removed from the primary areas under restoration, meaning that architects had more leeway when designing the shopping area than they did with structures closer to the Palace Green and courthouse. Most importantly to the Restoration, however, was the fact that this section of Duke of Gloucester Street lacked extant buildings with historic value, and records pertaining to what existed there in the colonial era were for the most part few or nonexistent. Therefore, the Restoration could make use of this area in whatever way they saw fit without worrying about disturbing historically sensitive sites. For these reasons, Blocks 15 and 23 were an ideal choice for a new planned shopping district. Goodwin, Perry and their associates realized this fact early, and Perry began to draw up plans for this section beginning in June of 1927.

By December of 1927, Perry had a rough sketch of the new town plan of Williamsburg, which included designs for the new business district. These plans were a result of a watershed meeting in New York on November 21, 1927 during which Rockefeller, Goodwin, and Perry finalized their vision for Williamsburg. Goodwin suggested to Rockefeller that purchasing the Williamsburg business sections east of the college would allow the financier to lease out commercial space, contributing funds to the restoration. Rockefeller expressed interest in the idea, so Goodwin asked Perry for “two perspective drawings of the retail commercial centers that you have indicated here on the plan up by the College of William and Mary,” to

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129 As indicated in Perry’s journal and Arthur A. Shurtleff’s report to Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, this section appeared to be the principal choice for a commercial center from the beginning. A fleeting idea of turning Market Square into a business center was considered, but Goodwin and others rejected this on the basis that it would interfere with the character of the Restoration. Perry always mentions the new business district with connection to Blocks 15 and 23 in his journal. The only exceptions were revamped downtown branches of the A&P and Pender’s built near the Capitol site. Ed Belvin recalled that the Restoration refurbished these businesses according to the wishes of “some influential ladies who lived downtown” and thought uptown was too far a walk to shop.
130 Hayes, 137.
show to the millionaire.\textsuperscript{131} Goodwin sat with Perry until the early hours of the morning poring over plans for the business section, demonstrating the minister’s active interest in the area’s design.\textsuperscript{132} Perry still required more information in order to definitively reorganize the town’s businesses, however. On December 13, 1927 he wrote Goodwin for a “survey of all businesses, needs, locations and likelihood of growth” so he could gauge the commercial situation in the town.\textsuperscript{133} Although Perry’s preliminary drawings appeared satisfactory to Rockefeller, the plans and elevations were still in an infant state and needed extensive modification.

Goodwin and Perry were largely responsible for the early concepts of the shopping district, but several other important members of the Williamsburg Restoration eventually took part in its design. These actors fell into two broad categories: designers and administrators. After Perry’s firm, Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, became the official architects of the Williamsburg Restoration in March 1928, representatives from the firm appeared in the town.\textsuperscript{134} The firm sent many draftsmen like George S. Campbell and Samuel McMurtle, Jr., whom Goodwin affectionately nicknamed “Mr. Perry’s Scotchmen.”\textsuperscript{135} Although these minor associates did not have the final say in the design process, they still contributed to the final form of Merchants Square by drawing up countless plans, sketches, figures and measurements. Perry and his partners remained in Boston aside from a few sporadic trips down to the colonial city, so they appointed Walter Macomber as resident architect in Williamsburg in April 1928 to oversee the project.\textsuperscript{136} Perry strongly recommended Arthur Shurtleff, professor of landscape architecture and city planning at Harvard, to take on the role as landscape architect for the Restoration, a

\textsuperscript{132} Hayes, 137
\textsuperscript{133} William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 13 December 1927.
\textsuperscript{134} Hayes, 192.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 198.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
position Shurtleff accepted on March 6, 1928. Shurtleff played an integral role in developing early plans for the shopping district. He conducted a six-month survey of landscape and city planning issues in Williamsburg, which he published in a 1928 report detailing his recommendations. One of the important sections in this report discussed the shopping district. The responsibility of constructing Merchants Square came to the Restoration’s contractors, Todd & Brown Co., a building firm Rockefeller and his associates thought of “very highly.”

Draftsmen, architects, planners and builders all contributed to the shopping district’s form and each provided feedback and recommendations to Perry on his designs.

The other group of principal players working on Williamsburg’s business district problem acted as administrators and representatives for Rockefeller. These men supported Rockefeller’s cautious, systematic approach to Williamsburg’s development. Rockefeller had three lieutenants he relied on throughout the Restoration: Colonel Arthur Woods, Charles O. Heydt, and Thomas Debevoise. Debevoise, a trusted Rockefeller attorney, handled legal matters relating to the Restoration. Charles Heydt focused on real estate acquisition and sales.

Goodwin addressed most of his letters to Rockefeller for Mr. Heydt, to prevent the chance that a visitor to Goodwin’s office would see Rockefeller’s name on a stray piece of correspondence and reveal the benefactor’s identity. Arthur Woods specialized in matters of policy. He was an able administrator from his past experiences as New York City police commissioner and school principal. Woods played a central role in implementing the design for the new shopping area and corresponded often with Goodwin, Perry and Rockefeller. Kenneth Chorley, an associate of Arthur Woods and future president of Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., consulted

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137 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 6 March 1928.
138 Hayes, 179.
139 Ibid., 138.
140 Ibid., 94. Rockefeller and Goodwin wanted to keep Rockefeller’s identity a secret because they believed that if people realized that a multimillionaire planned to purchase most of the central property in Williamsburg, prices would inflate.
frequently with Perry on design and city planning issues beginning in the summer of 1928.\footnote{Hayes, 201.} Finally, W.A.R. Goodwin continued to work tirelessly on the business district, where he acted as part designer and part administrator. The poor appearance of commercial buildings on Duke of Gloucester Street prior to the Restoration had, after all, been a major factor motivating Goodwin to restore the town. Goodwin and the members listed above contributed their administrative skills to the shopping district project, keeping design and construction on track and eventually influencing the success of the final product. Perry enjoyed working with Rockefeller, as the architect later commented that Rockefeller “never permitted the expression ‘to work for’” in reference to men working under him, demonstrating the benefactor’s respect for his employees.\footnote{William G. Perry, “The Mystery Story of Williamsburg,” \textit{The Boston Globe}, Interview, 2 June 1963, A-7}

Although design concepts began with Perry and Goodwin, other professionals working on the Restoration contributed their skills towards the district’s completion. Thus the two visionaries did not work alone. Perry, however, was still the head architect for the Restoration which included the business district, so he was ultimately responsible if the area succeeded or failed. Perry’s design process, influenced by Rockefeller and his associates, ensured that no decision was made too hastily, no problem was carelessly researched, and no building was shoddily constructed.

Merchants Square’s designers knew that creating a viable business district congruent with restored Williamsburg was no easy task and they did not take the issue lightly. During the November 21 meeting of Williamsburg’s architects and administrators, Rockefeller, Goodwin, and Perry discussed the difficulty of the situation. Goodwin later remarked in his summary of the meeting that “an area, in which the natural business life of Williamsburg could function, constituted...the most difficult part of any plan looking to the restoration of the Duke of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Hayes} Hayes, 201.
\end{thebibliography}
In addition to walls, roofs, and windows, the architects also had to redesign the heating and sewer systems. Perry constantly mentioned working on the shopping area in his daily work summaries, showing that there was no quick solution to the issue. One major problem was that thirty-seven of the sixty-eight businesses located on Duke of Gloucester Street in 1927 already occupied spaces in the first two squares east of the college, meaning that the Restoration needed to make additional room for the other thirty-one businesses. This issue needed to be solved before a wholesale restoration of Duke of Gloucester Street could move forward, as many businesses occupied historically important lots and buildings. Goodwin saw another potential for the shopping area – if it was properly designed, it could help transform the architectural character of Duke of Gloucester Street by replacing the tasteless with the tasteful. Elizabeth Hayes, Goodwin’s secretary, summarized the minister’s opinion on the shopping center problem: “this problem, while difficult, was of vital importance from every artistic point of view – for, at that time [in 1927], there were no artistic points of view to be found anywhere on the first two squares below the College.”

As head of the design team, Perry had precious little time to work with. The shops needed to reach completion as soon as possible, so that the rest of the Restoration stayed on schedule. A definitive plan would help allay Williamsburg shop owners’ fears that there would be no room left for them in Rockefeller’s restored town. Having ready-made replacement commercial space for displaced shop owners to move into would help the Restoration “secure possession of their property” and fulfill “numerous promises which were made when the commercial property was purchased,” according to Arthur Woods, who believed the shopping

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143 Hayes, 118.
144 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 1927-1928.
145 Hayes, 118.
146 Ibid.
district issue was “critical.” Civic buildings vital to the town’s functioning needed to be moved and returned to operation. Charles Heydt notified Perry that “we are in great need of this business block so that we may transfer the post-office and two or three other stores in the region of the proposed court-house” so that Todd & Brown could construct the new county seat. Thus Merchants Square played a crucial role in the rearrangement of Williamsburg’s buildings, for without this district much of the town’s restoration could not take place.

One of the most important considerations in architectural design is a site’s existing characteristics. Blocks 15 and 23 were key approaches to the College of William and Mary. Any buildings designed for these blocks needed to support this view and not interfere by being out of scale. More generally, the structures needed to support the Restoration’s goal of re-establishing ancient vistas on Duke of Gloucester Street, which the twentieth-century telephone poles and wood frame buildings had disrupted. An appropriate arrangement of the rear of each block, the sides not facing Duke of Gloucester Street, needed to be considered as well. Would these be parking lots, green space, or more shops? To be successful Perry needed to address parking concerns along Duke of Gloucester Street, which had become a serious problem in recent years, especially in Blocks 23 and 15. Pedestrians needed to be able to walk around the district without fear of being hit by an automobile while they shopped, so Perry needed to build in sidewalks with curbing. The final architectural style and scale needed to not only harmonize with both the college and the restored colonial buildings, but also allow the district to retain a separate identity and sense of place. The atmosphere created by the architectural

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149 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Charles Heydt to William Graves Perry, August 2, 1929.
150 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Charles Heydt to William Graves Perry, August 2, 1929.
arrangement of the buildings needed to attract local residents as well as tourists. The many
different requirements for the location made the shopping district problem complex.

The development’s future users also deserved consideration. Would this space be
limited to shops, or would some combination of office and residential space be appropriate? A
letter from Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn indicated that the shopping district’s designers wanted it
to be flexible in terms of use.151 Spaces could be used for merchants, lodging, offices, or
storage. This flexibility was necessary, as it was impossible to know which merchants would
occupy which spaces in the early design stages.152 Some citizens desired a tea room next to the
existing church, so Perry altered his plans to accommodate this request.153 Perry noted that the
attic space over the one-story buildings in the plan allowed for future lodging or office uses.154
Eventually, Perry decided to reserve the second floor for “offices rather than habitation,”
presumably to accommodate the professional offices wrecked by the Restoration.155 The
tenants were subject to the architect’s preferences, as exemplified by Gardiner Brooks’
assertion that the plans’ sixty-foot deep shops were too shallow. Perry responded by deciding
to “proceed with the 60’ depth since such is universal practice. The merchants have used excess
space uneconomically in the past and will find it possible to conform.”156 While Perry certainly
took his clients’ needs into consideration, he did not allow their suggestions to rule his design
process.

Perry balanced the planning of the shopping district with overseeing other colonial

building projects between 1927 and 1930. He focused on Block 23 first. This northern block had

151 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks
General, Perry, Shaw and Hepburn to Charles O. Heydt – Williamsburg Restoration: Block XXIII, 18 July
1929.
152 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, William G. Perry to
John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 18 December 1929.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
fewer active commercial buildings, which benefitted the Restoration because commerce could continue as needed in the stores on the southern side of the street while Block 23 was under construction. Perry did not begin plans for Block 15 until early January 1930, when a “substantial area” of the block lay vacant so that new stores could move in.\footnote{Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Williamsburg Holding Company Memorandum for the files re: Block 15, 24 January 1930.} Another possible reason he started Block 15 later was the uncertainty of the property line at the corner of Boundary Street and Duke of Gloucester Street, which needed to be resolved.\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 7 February 1930. Perry noted that “Mr. Chorley will take steps to clear up the City and property line at cor. Boundary and D of G. St. to give us a line to design to.”} Perry had a final design concept for Block 23 by mid-1930 and Block 15 by 1931, but his plans changed many times between the project’s conception and completion.

**Early Plans**

Perry and his associates considered a number of options before they settled on a final design. The early 1927 general town plan showed two large connected structures that outlined several squares within Block 15 and Block 14 on the south side of the street, while the north side of the street contained a church and a multi-part connected building. The larger structures on the plan were likely general outlines for hotels planned to accommodate Williamsburg’s tourists. However, these large square buildings do not appear in plans after 1927, as Rockefeller chose another site for the Williamsburg Inn south of Market Square. In June 1927 Perry sketched structures on Duke of Gloucester Street and “discussed treatment of two blocks east of College on both sides, tentatively deciding on leaving the north side for churches and residences.”\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 30 June 1927.} These designations may have changed however because Perry did not submit his preliminary town plan to Goodwin until late December.\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 21 December 1927.} Perry still considered some sort of commercial development on Market Green near the courthouse at this point, but later
abandoned this idea.\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 21 December 1927.} The 1927 plan did little to accommodate the growing number of automobiles in Williamsburg and indicated only vague outlines of the commercial structures in Blocks 23 and 15. Plans became more definite in 1928.

Arthur Shurtleff, the landscape architecture professor from Harvard, turned out to be a major contributor to Merchants Squares’ layout. In March 1928 Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn commissioned Shurtleff to conduct a six-month study of Williamsburg’s planning issues, ranging from architecture to traffic to landscaping. Shurtleff believed that Williamsburg’s lack of a planning commission and zoning regulations caused the generally poor appearance of Duke of Gloucester Street.\footnote{Arthur A. Shurtleff, “Report to Perry, Shaw & Hepburn Upon the Town Plan and Other Matters Relating to the Restoration of Williamsburg,” September, 1928, 6.} Because of this, he proposed a very ordered and strictly-zoned plan for the commercial area. Shurtleff realized that architecture was the most important aspect of the Restoration.\footnote{Ibid., 4.} However, his study also revealed the severity of the parking problem along Duke of Gloucester Street, and this became his focus for the westernmost blocks of the avenue.

Shurtleff’s plan prioritized parking and traffic issues. The landscape architect recognized that the current parking area for customers was insufficient and the on-street parking interfered with traffic on Duke of Gloucester Street.\footnote{Ibid., 100.} The redesigned business district needed increased parking capacity. But creating more parking spaces by eliminating the grass median on Duke of Gloucester Street would interfere with views of the college and confuse main streams of traffic.\footnote{Ibid. Perry and Shurtleff eventually decided to remove the grass plot from the entire length of Duke of Gloucester Street.} In addition, paving over the street trees near the sidewalks to create more parking would eliminate an important source of shade and beauty. In light of these considerations, Shurtleff advocated widening Duke of Gloucester Street to create a true square that would

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\footnote{William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 21 December 1927.}
\footnote{Arthur A. Shurtleff, “Report to Perry, Shaw & Hepburn Upon the Town Plan and Other Matters Relating to the Restoration of Williamsburg,” September, 1928, 6.}
\footnote{Ibid., 4.}
\footnote{Ibid., 100.}
\footnote{Ibid. Perry and Shurtleff eventually decided to remove the grass plot from the entire length of Duke of Gloucester Street.}
accommodate automobiles, trees, benches and shops. The widening began just short of the
intersection of Duke of Gloucester Street and Boundary Street and extended until just before
the main road’s intersection with Nassau Street, making the development nearly twice as large
as previous proposals. Shurtleff did not carry this widening through the entire four blocks
because a wider street on the west edge would undesirably accentuate the triangular front of
the college property and cause the planned tall Methodist church to visually compete with the
smaller college buildings.\textsuperscript{166} Within the square were two parking lanes, set apart from the
mainstream traffic, which freed Duke of Gloucester Street from parked automobiles, expanded
the parking area, and provided an opportunity for new shade trees.\textsuperscript{167} Shops surrounded the
square and two churches, a Methodist and a Presbyterian, together acted as a gateway to the
college. In Shurtleff’s view, “every desirable object appears to be attained without any
attendant drawbacks.”\textsuperscript{168}

If Shurtleff thought his plan was the best possibility, then why did Perry, Shaw, and
Hepburn not adopt it as the solution? The final design of Merchants Square was certainly very
different from Shurtleff’s. Several aspects of Shurtleff’s plans needed revision. To begin with,
Shurtleff’s square was massive – it occupied nearly four complete blocks between Boundary and
Nassau Streets. This was an issue for two reasons: scaling and cost. Although Shurtleff took
great care in scaling the center with the college, he did not mention how the area would
contrast with the restored historic district. A square as large as Shurtleff proposed would have
drawn attention away from the Historic Area. The square also allotted too much commercial
space, which would have been difficult to fill without the appropriate level of demand. At one
point Arthur Woods, one of the shopping area’s stoutest advocates, doubted whether the

\textsuperscript{166} Shurtleff, “Report,” 103.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
Restoration should build the shops at all, noting the potential “inadequacy of return.”\textsuperscript{169} The area’s size needed to match the expected level of business in Williamsburg, and so not repeat the overbuilding Williamsburg previously experienced in the early 1920s when several shops lay vacant.\textsuperscript{170} The beginning of the Great Depression brought much economic uncertainty to commercial projects, and some Restoration developers wondered if they should build more stores under the unfavorable economic conditions.\textsuperscript{171} Merchants Square was an investment, and its creators needed to see return on their venture. Kenneth Chorley at one point even suggested that instead of rebuilding Block 15, the Restoration should simply redesign the facades in a colonial style to reduce costs.\textsuperscript{172} Finally, Todd & Brown noted that Shurtleff’s plan for a “full plaza scheme” would inhibit traffic flows on Henry Street.\textsuperscript{173} The building firm instead advocated a “no plaza scheme” which is closer to what was eventually built.\textsuperscript{174}

Despite these problems, certain aspects of Shurtleff’s plan appeared in the final design. Although the front parking lanes did not appear, a comparison of Shurtleff’s plan to the final product clearly show that the “Play spaces” and parking lanes became the rear parking areas in Merchants Square, a feature that contributed to the district’s initial success.\textsuperscript{175} Furthermore, Shurtleff provided passageways between buildings connecting the shop fronts to the rear parking areas. At least one of these passages was well-landscaped with shade trees.\textsuperscript{176} Both the presence of rear parking lots and significant passageways between those lots and the shop fronts became two important characteristics of Merchants Square’s final design. But Shurtleff’s

\begin{itemize}
\item[169] William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 14 February 1929.
\item[170] “Williamsburg, Va.” Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1921. The increase in shop vacancy as a result of overbuilding is discussed in Chapter 1.
\item[171] William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 8 May 1930.
\item[172] Ibid.
\item[174] Ibid.
\item[176] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
design may have even reached beyond Williamsburg, as architectural historian Richard Longstreth suggests. Longstreth believes that the parking forecourts in Shurtleff’s design may have directly influenced the Park and Shop, an early automobile-oriented shopping center in Washington, D.C., built in 1929. Arthur B. Heaton, the Park and Shop’s architect, made numerous trips to Williamsburg in the years before 1929, and would have likely known of Shurtleff’s plan. Although the Restoration did not adopt Shurtleff’s design to the letter, his report raised important issues for Perry and other contemporaries to consider in the future.

Perry designed much of Merchants Square in response to conditions and problems specific to Williamsburg, but experiences and examples outside of Williamsburg also influenced the architect. Previous project experience influenced Perry’s style. Perry kept photographs and sketches of different designs for Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P) stores in New England in his personal library. Unsurprisingly, A&P occupied one of the finest buildings in Merchants Square, now the Craft House, on the corner of Duke of Gloucester Street and Henry Street.

Before the Williamsburg project, Perry, Shaw and Hepburn focused on “commercial, educational, library, church, and residential building.” The firm’s past experiences with commercial architecture likely influenced the architects’ thought processes when developing a design for Williamsburg’s commercial area. Merchants Square’s meticulous detailing and colonial Virginian imagery was a product of the architecture firm’s previous works, which “had warned them to be on the alert to identify subtle variations of type, especially those which put a stamp of regional identity upon a building.” This passage suggests that Perry deliberately included references to architecture from specific regions and time periods not only because

\[178\] Ibid.
\[180\] Ibid., 7.
those references increased aesthetic appeal, but also because this architectural imagery identified Merchants Square with its surrounding region.

One specific example of a contemporary development that contributed to Merchants Square’s form was the commercial district in Radburn, New Jersey. Constructed in 1929 and billed as “a town for the motor age,” the master-planned community merged parking lots with colonial references, thus unifying the old and the new in a similar manner as Merchants Square.\textsuperscript{181} Radburn’s creators, as followers of the Garden City movement in urban planning that emphasized decentralized, regional metropolises, strove to create city blocks that accommodated the automobile but also promoted foot traffic. Radburn caught the interest of Kenneth Chorley and other Williamsburg developers. Chorley asked for a copy of the plans and cost estimates for the Radburn development, specifically the Plaza Building, designed by Frederick L. Ackerman.\textsuperscript{182} He later discussed these plans with Joseph Brown, a Williamsburg contractor. Brown responded by remarking that “since the Radburn plans are so similar to what we are thinking of for Williamsburg, it would be great help to us to keep them for a while, for reference,” suggesting that Ackerman’s design influenced Merchants Square’s final design stages.\textsuperscript{183} The building contractor elaborated with a more detailed report of the similarities between Radburn and Williamsburg, which included corresponding traffic conditions, layout, form, heating, service entrance locations, and second story space.\textsuperscript{184} Brown concluded that “we believe that the Radburn plan, very definitely, confirms the wisdom of the store plan proposed for Williamsburg, with the exceptions necessitated by the conditions peculiar to

\textsuperscript{181} William Rhoads, “Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age, 1900-1940,” Winterthur Portfolio, 21:2 (Summer-Autumn 1986), 149.
\textsuperscript{182} Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Kenneth Chorley to J.O. Brown, 8 July 1929.
\textsuperscript{183} Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, J.O. Brown to Kenneth Chorley, 11 July 1929.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
Radburn’s example may have influenced Shurtleff to change his parking lanes into rear parking lots in the center of each block, especially since Chorley received Radburn’s plans after Shurtleff’s report but before construction commenced. It is impossible to know to what extent Radburn’s precedents influenced Merchants Square’s final design, but at the very least, the evidence shows that the example validated Williamsburg’s plans in the eyes of its developers.

As a result of these and other emerging issues Perry’s design constantly changed between 1927 and 1930. Perry altered the location of shop buildings several times. For instance, the report from Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn detailing architectural issues in Williamsburg, published in late August 1928, included perspective drawings and preliminary plans of a multi-unit store block on the corner of Block 22, not Block 23. These proposed stores occupied Casey’s general store lot on the corner of Henry Street and Duke of Gloucester Street. Although the perspective sketches of the shopping area included in the report resembled Merchants Square’s final design, we know that the Restoration eventually chose to refurbish and expand Casey’s store rather than build the multi-unit block in this lot. Perry and other architects also changed the theater location, as they “originally thought to put the theatre on 23 next to [the] Methodist church,” but “later decided to put it in block 15 by adding a new front” to the existing Williamsburg Theater. Perry’s journal entries show that he worked on the Block 23 and 15 plans on an almost daily basis and constantly revised and refined his designs. Like most major architectural projects, constant review and revision characterized

185 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, J.O. Brown to Kenneth Chorley, 11 July 1929.
Merchants Square’s design process as the architects strove to find the best possible solution for the area. Throughout this revision process Perry constantly communicated with Rockefeller, Chorley, Goodwin and other key members of the Restoration regarding design issues. Perry’s partners, Andrew Hepburn and Thomas Shaw, also served as consultants.

Periodic meetings of the major Restoration players provided an opportunity for review and criticism on Perry’s plans. Rockefeller’s lieutenants made suggestions for improvements, and Perry’s design was ultimately subject to their approval. In December 1928 Chorley noted that Heydt did not approve of Perry’s plans for the business area and wanted to consult with the architect.\(^{188}\) By the summer of 1929 Heydt and other members of Rockefeller’s staff became frustrated that the plans were not yet complete. Heydt noted that by August of 1929 “everything was approved except the corner of Henry and Duke of Gloucester Street,” and that “the rest of the construction...could be begun at once” on Block 23.\(^{189}\) Heydt asked Perry why Todd & Brown had not started constructing the central post office section, as Perry had mentioned that all plans and specifications were ready on July 31.\(^{190}\) Later on Kenneth Chorley noted in a letter to Andrew Hepburn regarding progress on Block 15 that when the Williamsburg Holding Corporation (WHC) purchased this area in 1927 “it was anticipated at that time that certainly by 1930 this work would have been at least started if not completed.”\(^{191}\) The above passages indicate that Rockefeller’s lieutenants were at times frustrated with the lack of progress on the business blocks. Uncertainty over property lines and difficulties associated with buildings around African-American property the Restoration did not own delayed construction,

\(^{188}\) Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Kenneth Chorley to Charles Heydt, 28 December 1928.  
\(^{189}\) Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Charles Heydt to William G. Perry, 20 August 1929.  
\(^{190}\) Ibid.  
\(^{191}\) Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Kenneth Chorley to Andrew H. Hepburn, 21 February 1930.
but Rockefeller’s careful review and revision of Perry’s plans and sketches contributed as well.¹⁹²

Eventually the members of the WHC approved Perry’s designs and construction began on Block 23 in October 1929.¹⁹³

Rockefeller reviewed Perry’s designs in a letter dated December 13, 1929. The Restoration benefactor worried about the lack of symmetry present in the business block, but accepted this because “the remark was made that it was desired to have the building give the

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**Figure 6: Map of Merchants Square.** Adopted from a 1974 architectural plan, this map shows the locations of businesses within Merchants Square at the time of its completion in 1933. Notice the key corner locations of Casey’s Department Store, Peninsula Bank, Williamsburg Methodist Church, the A&P and the Greek Restaurants.

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¹⁹² Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, William Perry to Kenneth Chorley, 11 February 1930.
impression that it had been changed or altered from time to time” in an effort to make the
design look more natural. He also questioned the appearance of the windows and doorways
in the central part of the building. Overall, however, Rockefeller approved of the designs and
wrote that he “liked immensely the elevations of both the bank and the post office. They seem
to be simple, dignified, appropriate and charming.” Rockefeller’s approval validated Perry’s
design and pushed the construction process forward.

Construction continued through 1931 and 1932, and by October of 1933 Merchants
Square appeared relatively complete. Though the firm Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn claimed credit
for the design and layout of the new shopping center, the final product was actually a result of
input from many different sources. W.A.R. Goodwin, Kenneth Chorley, Charles Heydt, and other
Rockefeller associates all provided valuable feedback and review. Arthur Shurtleff and Todd &
Brown both contributed practical design and construction solutions to some of the problems
facing Perry. Finally, John D. Rockefeller Jr. gave his approval on the project while also making
suggestions. It is a testament to Perry’s strength of vision and character that he was able to
incorporate suggestions he deemed important, such as Shurtleff’s emphasis on parking, while
ignoring others, such as Rockefeller’s suggestions relating to the windows in Block 23. The
above evidence shows that like the design processes of many other large-scale architectural
projects, review and revision characterized Merchants Square. The final product was a result of
diligence, refinement, and patience, and it took a special designer in William Graves Perry to
effectively accommodate the many difficult issues attached to the commercial center’s
construction.

194 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks
General, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to William G. Perry, 13 December 1929.
195 Ibid.
Design Characteristics

Although the Restoration attracted numerous tourists and jobs to Williamsburg, both of which stimulated local businesses, Merchants Square ultimately succeeded because of its design. The citizenry needed to take ownership of the area and accept it as Williamsburg’s new town center. Without a specific sense of place achieved through design, the center would not attract the businesses and shoppers it needed to thrive. Perry stated that he wanted to design the area in a manner similar to what builders would have done in the eighteenth century if posed with the same problem of recreating a town center. Several design qualities solved important problems and made the center an attractive place to shop and conduct business. These qualities are divided into two groups. First were those qualities that enhanced the circulation and flow of the area. The next group involved design aspects that contributed to the colonial imagery and architectural significance of the district.

The successful resolution of parking concerns was a key part of Merchants Square’s eventual success. Parking shortages became an increasingly worrisome problem in downtowns across the country in the 1920s and eventually factored into their decay. In Williamsburg, Shurtleff modified his early parking lane designs in 1930. The final solution was to pave parking areas behind the main storefronts in the center of each business block, with entrances and exits on side streets. No entrances appeared on Duke of Gloucester Street. In addition to providing more parking space than before, these rear parking areas also took the bulk of automobile traffic off Duke of Gloucester Street. Instead of parallel parking in front of stores, shoppers could now access shops without ever having to actually drive on Duke of Gloucester Street. This not only freed up traffic on the major road but also limited motorized

intrusion into the newly-restored colonial corridor. The placement of necessary filling stations and garages in the parking areas or in the streets away from Duke of Gloucester Street also limited modern encroachments. Restricting the automobile’s presence was likely desirable for Rockefeller, Perry, and especially Goodwin, who viewed the car as one reason for Williamsburg’s degradation before the Restoration. Furthermore, Perry and Shurtleff lavishly landscaped these parking areas with trees, gardens and benches, which made the lots more attractive to automobile shoppers. The two designers discussed the matter of lighting the parking areas several times between 1931 and 1932, demonstrating the care they took in designing the lots. Perry not only detailed the front facades of the shops but also the rear facades facing the parking lots. This made the parking areas much more inviting than if the rear facades were ignored. The increased parking capacity allowed more shoppers to patronize Merchants Square’s stores and the fine landscaping ensured that drivers felt comfortable using the new lots.

As Baker and Funaro demonstrated in Shopping Centers: Design and Operation, rear parking lots eventually proved to be a problem as some shopping centers forced shoppers to use service entrances or endure lengthy walks around the sides of store blocks to reach the entrances. Although Baker and Funaro wrote their treatise twenty years after Merchants Square’s conception, Shurtleff avoided circulation issues by creating well-landscaped arcade

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198 Longstreth, City Center, xiv, 43-54.
199 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 29 August 1930.
200 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 30 November 1931.
201 Goodwin commented that the Fords were “the chief contributors to the destruction” of Williamsburg’s historic character because of their role in the popularization of the automobile (above, p. 29).
204 Ibid., 33.
Figure 7: Top - Aerial view of Merchants Square looking northeast at Block 23, 1933. One of the important features of Merchants Square was the availability of off-street parking and variation shops. Bottom - Merchants Square landscaping, 1933. Shade trees, benches, and a large pedestrian area were all crucial to the success of Merchants Square. In the background is a passageway leading from Duke of Gloucester Street to the rear parking lots. Photographs Courtesy of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library Special Collections.
passageways that led from the parking areas to the Block 15 and 23 storefronts. In addition to improving circulation, these passageways also served as key advertising devices: shop windows lining the sides of the passages advertised products from nearby stores. Aesthetically, the passages broke up the store blocks, helping to rectify scaling issues with nearby college and colonial structures. These passages drew people to the storefronts while also advertising what they could buy once they arrived.

Merchants Square had other features that distinguished it from the college and Historic Area. One way Perry achieved this was by using certain buildings as anchors, which defined the area and served as customer magnets. The corner properties were especially important. Each corner boasted a significant structure. The western corner of Block 23 displayed a fine Colonial Revival Methodist church while the eastern corner had the Peninsular Bank building and post office. Perry noted that the post office, which fronted a small plaza, would likely be more dominant than the bank building. Across the street to the south the pretentious A&P building, a fine structure referencing Thomas Jefferson’s classical pavilion at the University of Virginia, anchored the east while the “Corner Greeks” building, which resembled a large Georgian house, occupied the western corner. These buildings were significant enough to define the district but small enough so that they did not create scaling issues with their surroundings. The eventual occupants of these buildings, a bank, post office, church, restaurant and A&P grocery, reinforced the buildings’ status as anchors. In future decades supermarkets and groceries like the A&P became staples to neighborhood shopping centers as planners recognized that these stores attracted throngs of customers. Also important was the

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205 Hayes, Background, 118.
Williamsburg Theater, which drew night crowds and supported evening businesses like restaurants. Both architecturally and commercially, these anchor stores served as crucial points in Merchants Square’s layout.

Merchants Square not only displayed admirable designs for individual buildings, but the arrangement and size of the buildings with relation to each other, called massing, also proved very effective. Shops in the development appeared as a collection of separate structures. Perry achieved this by designing hyphens, or linking sections containing only one dormer or shop window, and also varied setbacks between buildings. Pender’s Grocery, the Arcade Buildings,

Figure 8: Block 15 shops looking southwest from Henry Street ca. 1933. In the foreground is the A&P, now known as the Craft House. Perry designed buildings with both colonial and neoclassical references. Also notice the variation in setbacks and roof height. Photograph Courtesy of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library Special Collections.

208 Baker and Funaro, Shopping Centers, 11.
and Frazier-Callis Co. on the eastern end of the north block were all linked in this manner. This not only gave the area a more concentrated, varied, and urban feel, but also helped rectify some of the size and scale issues with the college and other surrounding buildings. The massing, along with other elements, also introduced variety to the district, which distinguished the shops from the college and restored areas. Several other qualities of Merchants Square also emphasized variety, which became a key aspect for the success of the development.

One of the most important details of Merchants Square that contributed to its unique sense of place was the use of varied setbacks, which complemented the massing techniques. Prior to Merchants Square, shops extended as close to the sidewalks as possible, since this maximized the use of space in the valuable downtown properties. Perry and Chorley decided on a setback of seventy feet from the center of Duke of Gloucester Street for Block 23. Perry at first thought it would be interesting to discontinue this setback for Block 15, but later reconsidered, noting that a setback “would balance off the street very much better.” In addition to the seventy-foot setback, the setbacks for each building varied. The most notable variation was in the post office building, which was set back several feet from the bank, creating a small plaza. The varied setbacks served three purposes. First, they provided space for benches, shades trees, and wide sidewalks. These amenities made the district a comfortable place to shop. Second, the setbacks broke up the scale of the development so that it would not overwhelm surrounding buildings. After a discussion with Rockefeller and the minister of the Methodist church, Perry decided on a setback for Stringfellow’s electric shop that would “serve to screen the shopping area from the church and give the church a setting with the College.”

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210 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, “Memorandum of Interview by Mr. Chorley with Mr. Perry – Block 15,” 21 February 1930.
211 Ibid.
212 Chappell et al, “National Register,” Section 7, 1.
indicating a concern with how the Stringfellow shop would fit in with surrounding structures.\textsuperscript{213} Third, the varied setbacks distinguished Merchants Square as a separate place from the Historic Area.\textsuperscript{214} The setbacks provided necessary variety and also contributed to the important goal of ensuring that the commercial buildings did not overshadow the restored structures.

Nothing did more to establish Merchants Square as distinct from the Historic Area than the development’s unique mix of modern and colonial imagery. Perry and his staff all extensively researched seventeenth- and eighteenth-century building forms from colonial America and England to restore Williamsburg’s colonial structures, but Rockefeller allowed more freedom for the shopping area’s design. This research influenced the appearance of Merchants Square, as most buildings featured modillion cornices, gables, hipped and gambrel roofs, windows, and Flemish bond brickwork, all of which characterized eighteenth-century colonial and English structures. For instance, Binn’s fashion shop recalls an English market hall with its glazed arcade and the Corner Greeks building resembles a Georgian colonial house.\textsuperscript{215} Further colonial references included the division of previously large single pane display windows into small panes divided by wood muntins, which gave the fronts a colonial air.\textsuperscript{216} Perry also included Neoclassical references with Doric columns and pediments in some buildings, most notably in the A&P.\textsuperscript{217} These visual clues alerted visitors crossing Henry Street that they were in a new area, not subject to the rigid rules of historical accuracy in the restored section.

Recognizing that the ubiquitous commercial advertisements displayed prior to the Restoration were abhorrent, Perry, Goodwin and Rockefeller made strict requirements on the appearance of signage in the new shopping area. Perry personally designed several signs

\textsuperscript{213} William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 26 May 1931.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Chappell et al, “National Register,” Section 7, 10-12.
\textsuperscript{216} Baker and Funaro, Shopping Centers, 59.
\textsuperscript{217} Chappell et al, “National Register,” Section 7, 8-10.
including the A&P’s. Each shop in Williamsburg displayed a modest, dignified painted sign with the business’s name on it. Because the district was under a unified authority, shops did not have to compete with each other through making more noticeable signs to attract customers. In the words of Baker and Funaro, “when everyone is talking quietly, no one has to shout.”

Although businesses still competed, it was in their best interest to increase the appearance of the district as a whole, thereby drawing more potential customers to the area. An example of this cooperation included limiting the size and color of signs, which improved the district’s atmosphere.

Signage was just one quality that made shopping in Merchants Square enjoyable. Another key aspect was landscaping, which was as important as architecture for creating an atmosphere conducive to consumerism. Arthur Shurtleff designed arrangements for benches, shade trees, shrubbery, and lighting conducive to shoppers. Benches allowed people to rest and relax while moving from store to store, while sidewalk trees shielded pedestrian shoppers from the sun’s heat. Shade trees were also important in reducing glare from street pavement and shop windows on the opposite side of the street.

Contemporary observers later observed that if properly arranged, street trees reinforced the historic spirit in small downtowns by correcting citizens’ “perceived visual and environmental degradation of the traditional business district.” Shrubbery and gardens helped buffer the sidewalk from the road and made strolling down Duke of Gloucester Street more enjoyable. Shurtleff and Perry designed twelve-foot street lamps to be placed irregularly, perhaps to coincide with the varied setbacks and massing

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218 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 24 September 1932.
219 Baker and Funaro, Shopping Centers, 73.
220 Ibid., 76.
221 Ibid., 59.
of the store buildings. In addition to this, Duke of Gloucester Street required repaving and new curbing. Shurtleff’s plan for removing the unsightly telephone poles and wires from the center of Duke of Gloucester Street eventually took hold, and the Restoration buried wires in the rear of each shopping block away from the main road. These different landscape refinements enhanced Merchants Square’s atmosphere and helped attract customers to the new stores.

Perry carefully chose the materials for the facades of the shops. Color, consistency, durability, and historicity were all qualities the architect considered. Fire protection was a major concern for Merchants Square’s developers, so they pursued “full fireproof construction” despite the increased cost. Choosing the bricks for the commercial buildings was no simple task, as Perry inspected bricks in Annapolis and Richmond before finally settling on “fulton brick” for Block 23 and “Maynard brick” for Block 15, testing each brand of brick prior to use. Block 15 may even contain some colonial brick, as Chorely suggested Perry use excess brick from the restored area for the shops there. Exterior painting became a source of frustration for Perry. Several times the architect mentioned he was unhappy about paint colors and quality in Williamsburg, and at one point had a heated argument over an “impossible situation” Williamsburg’s head painter put Perry in regarding colors that led him to describe the painter as “the man with the least instincts of a gentleman in the world.” Perry’s solution was to eventually set up a special Restoration paint shop using handpicked staff. For the most part coloring and materials matched colonial examples in the restored area, meaning these qualities

223 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 5 November 1931.
225 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Correspondence – Business Blocks, Business Blocks General, Joseph O. Brown to Kenneth Chorely, 11 July 1929.
226 William Graves Perry, unpublished diary, 4 September 1930, 11 April 1932, 18 April 1932. These terms relate to the locations where Perry purchased the brick.
227 Ibid., 10 May 1932.
228 Ibid., 27 April 1930.
229 Ibid., 12 May 1932.
linked Merchants Square with the Historic Area rather than setting it apart like setbacks and massing.

The design process was a complex and ultimately successful venture that had an important impact on commercial development. The project was a result of several different important actors. Although Perry was largely responsible for most design decisions, his clients including Kenneth Chorley, Arthur Woods, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. all contributed to the area’s final layout and appearance. Also, Arthur Shurtleff made important contributions to the concept and numerous draftsmen refined the design of the commercial area. Second, near constant revision characterized the design process. Plans for the district changed several times between 1927 and 1930 as a result of new ideas and events that arose for consideration. Third, Merchants Square’s layout and appearance contributed to its initial success because it solved important circulation and parking concerns and also made the area attractive to new shoppers. The quality construction ensured that Merchants Square was perceived as permanent and not likely to decay in the near future.

Ultimately, shifting trends in consumer behavior challenged premises of the design. However, from 1933 into the 1940s Merchants Square thrived as Williamsburg vaulted to the national stage as a result of the Restoration. Locals also embraced the new area, partly out of necessity, but few found much to complain about after the shops opened. Through the use of colonial imagery and careful design, Duke of Gloucester Street had gone from shabby to snazzy in a few short years, a transformation that other communities emulated after Williamsburg’s Restoration. Although the old Market Square south of the colonial courthouse had been demolished, the new business district ensured that Williamsburg retained a viable town center on Duke of Gloucester Street for the foreseeable future. The newly-built commercial district influenced life in Williamsburg, but had a national impact as well.
Chapter 3: New Old Towns: Merchants Squares’ Local and National Significance

It has been truthfully said that without vision we perish and it can be said just as truthfully that without the vision of the Rev. Dr. Goodwin, Williamsburg would never have occupied its place in the sun as it does today.  

- The Virginia Gazette, 1935

We cannot sit back and defy modern improvements, but we can modify them to blend with our historic structures.

- The Princeton Herald, 1936

In 1935, about a year after Todd & Brown Company completed the last building in Merchants Square, Williamsburg citizens honored W.A.R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for their parts in the Restoration of Williamsburg at a banquet attended by several hundred of the town’s most prominent patricians. The attendees thanked Goodwin for revitalizing the town and restoring its historic beauty. To the businessmen, bankers, and attorneys at the banquet, the future seemed bright: Williamsburg had a new polished and prestigious image, the Restoration had “cleaned up” Duke of Gloucester Street, and businesses would certainly prosper from the increase in tourism and placement of the well-planned central business district. People already frequented the new post office and were “well-pleased” with its new location and appearance.

Merchants Square became the center of Williamsburg in the 1930s and 1940s. Residents went there to eat, shop, mail letters, and socialize. Resident G.T. Brooks remembered relaxing at the College Pharmacy with his friends during his teenage years.

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232 Virginia Gazette, 9 January 1931, 2.
234 Quoted in Theobald, 38.
College students and townspeople alike frequented the Greek restaurants in Block 15. The barber shops along with the bowling alley underneath the A&P provided places for social interaction. The Bruton Parish House held dances and parties. All of the above places provided outlets for Williamsburg’s townspeople to interact with each other, making Merchants Square a social center in addition to a commercial center. Brooks best summarized Merchants Square’s importance when he said “[the business area] was our whole world...it was the shopping center for our parents and the social center for the young people.”

However, the above quote does not paint a complete picture. The rearrangement of businesses and residences altered other aspects of Williamsburg life. Merchants Square improved economic conditions, encouraged chain store development, and affected segregation and racial relations. The development was also important outside of Williamsburg because it was part of a national trend of “improvement” programs that redeveloped community centers using colonial imagery. Townships like Princeton, New Jersey, and Stony Brook, New York, experienced similar changes to their commercial cores as Williamsburg did during the 1920s and 1930s. Analyzing Merchants Square’s importance both locally and nationally gives new meaning to the shopping district. Locally, it altered some conditions for the better and others for the worse, while nationally Merchants Square appeared as part of a growing trend reshaping local communities through strict design guidelines, more often than not patterned on colonial architecture. This chapter will examine the above issues by first focusing on the impact of Merchants Square on local society and then examining the project in a national context.

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236 Belvin, 57.

237 Theobald, 38.

238 Quoted in Theobald, 38.
A New Center

The construction of Merchants Square and other restored buildings combined with the new jobs created by the new retail stores and restored properties spurred Williamsburg’s economy and helped the town weather the Great Depression. The stock market crashed on October 24, 1929, just as William Perry finalized his plans for Williamsburg’s new commercial district. Although the crash may have influenced Perry and Shurtleff’s decision to shrink the square from a full four blocks to just over two, the project continued despite the dire economic conditions due largely to Rockefeller’s determination and near limitless wealth. The millions of dollars Rockefeller funneled into Williamsburg’s economy created many new jobs in construction, management, and other fields related to the work of the Williamsburg Holding Corporation (WHC). Residents’ accounts reveal the town’s relative prosperity. In his memoir Edward Belvin noted that “the Great Depression was upon the land but Williamsburg was not as badly affected as other areas.” Throughout 1930 the Virginia Gazette ran articles describing the prosperity of Williamsburg. One article in August reported that “through the work of the Restoration...hundreds of thousands of dollars are expended monthly giving work to every able-bodied man in the city.” The article also noted that several other towns and cities grappled with business inactivity and unemployment while Williamsburg continued to grow. A second article in October of that year went so far as to say that “if there was no restoration going on, our town would be about as stagnant as any other small town in the country.” Merchants Square’s construction was an integral part of the Restoration’s work and provided jobs to many planners, architects and laborers. The new retail and community center also served as a key

240 Belvin, xi.
241 “Williamsburg is Prosperous,” Virginia Gazette, 15 August 1930, 2.
242 “Why, Our Prosperity!” Virginia Gazette, 3 October 1930, 2.
gauge of Williamsburg’s prosperity for the townspeople. In addition to the new jobs and private homes the Restoration created, the Gazette mentioned the “new and larger business blocks” as signs of the city’s growth in prosperity and appearance.\footnote{243} Although the overall population only increased by 164 between 1930 and 1940, the average annual number of retail employees in Williamsburg doubled, increasing from 151 to 293.\footnote{244} Since the majority of tenants in Merchants Square were retail and most new business development concentrated in the square during this period, many of the new workers likely worked in the new business district. By providing employment, Merchants Square had a beneficial impact on Williamsburg’s economy.

The new commercial blocks also established much more permanent business buildings than before, which likely reassured citizens who watched run-down stores close in other communities. Merchants Square, with its concentrated arrangement of brick buildings, was much less transient than the scattered wooden clapboard structures on Duke of Gloucester Street before the Restoration. The Williamsburg City Council recorded that brick became the standard on Duke of Gloucester Street by March 1931.\footnote{245} Williamsburg’s leaders also intended the new face of Duke of Gloucester Street to attract a “very high class” of people.\footnote{246} William C. Ewing, a member of the local business association, noted the organization’s “purpose to invite to our community that class of people who will most surely appreciate our traditions and intensify rather than divert the national interest that is increasingly centered on us.”\footnote{247} In other words, Ewing sought only well-heeled white citizens with proper American heritage. Merchants Square, with its American colonial imagery serving as a reminder of white Protestant heritage, was likely attractive to the sorts of people Ewing wanted in Williamsburg.

\footnote{243}{“Why, Our Prosperity!” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 3 October 1930, 2.}
\footnote{244}{1930 U.S. Census, “Historical Census Browser,” the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html(accessed 2/25/09).}
\footnote{245}{Williamsburg City Council Record Book, 13 March 1931, 376.}
\footnote{246}{William C. Ewing, “Planning for Nineteen-Thirty-Four,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 5 January 1934, 5.}
\footnote{247}{Ibid.}
Although the construction of Merchants Square and other restored buildings delayed the economic downturn in Williamsburg, eventually the town felt some effects from the Great Depression. By 1935, unemployment became an issue, especially among Williamsburg’s black population. Although unemployment was not recorded on the census of either 1930 or 1940 for Williamsburg, the town sought Federal Emergency Relief Act funding in February of 1935 in the amount of $5,600. The first day jobs funded under the act became available, the town received 200 work applications, mostly from blacks. This fact indicates that at least some of Williamsburg’s residents still felt the shock of Depression despite the amount of funding supplied by the Restoration’s construction programs. The construction and operation of Merchants Square temporarily delayed the arrival of the Depression in Williamsburg, but not indefinitely, as economic conditions eventually worsened in the mid-1930s.

The new town center that Merchants Square embodied also continued development of business trends that made some Williamsburg residents uncomfortable. Disdained by many, the chain store arrived in Williamsburg during the 1920s and Restoration leaders reserved spaces for such stores in Merchants Square. One of the first truly national chains, the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), occupied a prominent property in the new district on the corner of Duke of Gloucester and Henry Streets in Block 15. Founded in 1859, A&P had over 15,737 stores nationwide in 1930. In addition to the A&P, Merchants Square also featured the Norfolk-based Pender’s Grocery chain, which consisted of 244 national branches in 1926.

248 "City and County Seek FERA Relief Funds," Virginia Gazette, 8 February 1935, 5.  
249 Ibid.  
Pender’s chain later became Colonial Stores and then Big Star supermarkets. Both of these stores occupied new buildings on prominent Duke of Gloucester Street property after the Restoration.

Restoration officials had a cordial and accommodating attitude towards the A&P and Pender’s store owners when discussing their relocations. In October 1930, A.M. Scarry, a Pender’s Vice President, wondered how the “proposed changes” in Williamsburg would affect his two branches there. Kenneth Chorley responded by cordially inviting Scarry to review the Williamsburg business plan over lunch with him. Shortly after this Chorley invited Joseph Strauss, an A&P Vice President to come to Williamsburg to discuss the matter of relocating A&P’s two stores. Strauss and other A&P officials strongly desired to locate their new store on one of the key corner properties in the new commercial district, a request that Chorley gladly fulfilled. Chorley suggested the corner of Duke of Gloucester and Henry Streets to Perry for the A&P building in accordance with the chain’s wishes. Restoration officials’ accommodating attitudes towards the chains continued during the construction of the business district as seen by the approvals of the many requests made to alter the interiors of Pender’s and the A&P. Edward Belvin even noted that the Restoration constructed a colonial-style A&P branch in the

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252 Belvin, 40.
253 “Unfair Competition,” Virginia Gazette, 30 May 1930, 2.
254 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Block 23 #30A Shops 7-8, Kenneth Chorley to A.M. Scarry, 4 December 1930.
255 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Block 15 #28D Shop 17 – A&P Store, Kenneth Chorley to Joseph Strauss, 4 December 1930.
256 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Block 15 #28D Shop 17 – A&P Store, Kenneth Chorley to William graves Perry, 7 January 1931.
257 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Block 23 #30A Shops 7-8, Kenneth Chorley to J.W. Wood, 13 February 1931.
eastern end of Duke of Gloucester Street, well within the Historic Area. This accommodation is striking in light of the negative views many had towards chain stores at the time.

The antipathy towards chain store development was a national movement in the 1930s. People from the Deep South to the Midwest feared chain stores because they took money away from communities and placed it in the hands of absentee Wall Street owners. Consumers also had the impression that chain stores sold inferior quality merchandise. Although locally-owned businesses often had higher prices and less variety than chain stores, citizens of a community were confident that the dollars they gave to independent business owners would most likely stay within their town. This antipathy spurred governments at all levels to tax chain stores more harshly than small independent businesses. One 1938 Congressional tax proposal would have basically taxed chain stores out of existence. Appropriately, it was nicknamed the “Death Sentence Tax.”

Articles published in the *Virginia Gazette* show that Williamsburg citizens had a strong dislike of chain stores. Writers encouraged independent merchants to do everything in their power to compete with the chains, including increasing service, making their stores attractive and clean, and increasing their variety of goods. One 1930 article pointed out that chain stores “take all and give nothing,” noting that

> In some quarters the encroachment of the chain store on the business of the independent merchant is being resented by those who see in the future a business condition which will be the undoing of the community which depends on the independent business man for support.

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258 Belvin, 40-41. According to Belvin, the Restoration did this in order to “appease some influential ladies that lived downtown and objected to walking uptown to shop.” Eventually this A&P and a nearby branch of Casey’s department store went out of business due to lack of customers.

259 Ryant, 209, 212.

260 Ibid. Some chains actually sold higher-quality merchandise than local merchants.

261 Ibid., 214.


One writer called the chain store “a real enemy to the community.” The author later described how Williamsburg’s four chain stores in 1930 had “displaced a number of individually owned stores that formerly made a living for several families.” Clearly, Williamsburg citizens resented chain store incursions on their community.

Interestingly, the very chains Williamsburg residents hated solved several of their economic problems. In the 1935 annual report of Williamsburg’s Retail Trade Board, local merchants noted how customers complained of high prices and lack of variety in local stores. Chain stores could rectify some of these issues. During the Depression, the scarcity of money made chain stores “the place to shop” because of their lower prices. In addition, chain stores created more retail jobs. In 1930, an average of 151 employees annually worked in 71 retail stores in Williamsburg, while in 1940 only 53 stores employed 293 workers. Since chain stores like the A&P employed more workers than independent merchants (Edward Belvin recalls how he and several high school classmates staffed the A&P in Merchants Square), the increase in employment was probably due to the opening of larger chain stores that employed more workers. During a time when the U.S. suffered its worst unemployment in its history, any industry that created jobs helped. Eventually, it seems that the A&P and Pender’s won the support of Williamsburg’s townspeople, as customers patronized their stores in the business district.

264 “Unfair Competition,” Virginia Gazette, 30 May 1930, 2. Williamsburg had two A&P’s and two Pender’s stores before the Restoration.
266 Ryant, 208.
269 Theobald, 38.
By incorporating chain stores into Merchants Square’s business profile, Restoration officials clearly supported chain store development, a trend already apparent in Williamsburg prior to 1930. Although the shopping district became the new center of the community, it incorporated symbols that at least some Williamsburg citizens initially felt strongly against. The type of tenants for the new district also indicated a shift in the town’s business makeup: a few chain stores and independent merchants replaced many of the scattered general stores and groceries lining Duke of Gloucester Street prior to the Restoration. Although not all of Williamsburg’s residents felt comfortable with chain stores at first, eventually they accepted places like Pender’s and the A&P. The permanent establishment of Merchants Square cemented these chains in Williamsburg’s commercial life after 1933.

“Cleaning Up” Duke of Gloucester Street

In the eyes of Goodwin and other prominent Williamsburg leaders, Merchants Square not only visually and economically cleaned up Duke of Gloucester Street but improved it socially as well. By the time the Restoration work was complete, African-American establishments were completely absent from the town center. A Rockefeller associate noted that “there is considerable property on Duke of Gloucester street owned by negroes which needs to be acquired if the idea is to clean up the street,” showing that blacks and their property were an undesirable part of the community in the 1930s. Goodwin also gave preference to whites when relocating residents and thought that blacks leaving the town would be beneficial as it would free up more housing. The Restoration built six houses for whites and six houses for blacks to accommodate those displaced, but the houses for blacks were generally small and

270 Correspondence to Heydt from AA, 20 August 1927, Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 2 (OMR), Cultural Interests, Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg-General, Box 143, Folder 1251, in Foster, 183.
271 W.A.R. Goodwin, Report and Recommendations, Williamsburg, Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 2 (OMR), Cultural Interests, Colonial Williamsburg, W.A.R. Goodwin, Box 155, Folder 1354, 4 February 1938, 6, in Foster, 182.
poorly built whereas the whites’ houses were made of brick, which implied permanence. It appears that Restoration leaders along with Williamsburg’s white citizens wanted to reduce the presence of blacks on Duke of Gloucester Street. Such attitudes towards segregation were common across the country during the period and were prevalent in Williamsburg, which was a Jim Crow town. Some even considered the Restoration’s plan for blacks as somewhat generous, as the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, an African-American newspaper, mentioned that the Restoration seemed “to promise some consideration for the colored citizens, according to the plans of Dr. Goodwin.” Restoration officials denied any discrimination, as one official assured Williamsburg’s mayor, John Garland Pollard, that “regardless of race, [the citizens of Williamsburg] will receive the same consideration” in relocation decisions. Despite this assurance, one resident remarked that there were “a lot of negro settlements springing up in odd corners, as the Restoration Association buys up the property of negroes in Town.”

Intentionally or not, Restoration construction disrupted neighborhoods of both blacks and whites, which resulted in segregation.

Merchants Square helped create a more segregated town. Architecturally, the new district exemplified colonial imagery whites appreciated as part of their common heritage. Blacks, on the other hand, had little connection with the colonial imagery displayed, which likely reminded some of a time prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. The WHC limited leases for commercial spaces to white tenants only. Encouraged by Restoration officials, displaced black businesses moved off Duke of Gloucester Street to the northeast and northwest corners of the

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272 Foster, 186.
273 *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 9 August 1930, 12
274 Williamsburg, Virginia, Swem Library Special Collections, John Garland Pollard Papers, Mss. 70 P76, Box 17, Folder 426, Robert Lackey, Jr. to John Garland Pollard, 21 January 1929.
275 Williamsburg, Virginia, Swem Library Special Collections, Mss. 96 C67 Coleman-Wilson Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Mary Haldane Coleman to Julia Wilson, 5 December 1928.
276 Foster, 176.
town. Some black shop owners hesitated to sell their holdings to the WHC. The African-American owner of the meat market on Block 15, located on the site of the proposed A&P, initially resisted Goodwin’s purchasing scheme, making Perry’s task of designing the store block more difficult. Bank’s Café, the last black business to move, relocated to Botetourt Street in the northeast corner of town in August of 1930. Several black businesses and residents moved to an area bordered by Armistead Avenue, Prince George Street, and Scotland Street known as “the Triangle,” which became a black neighborhood in the years after the Restoration. Although Merchants Square businesses still served blacks, these citizens had fewer reasons to venture to Duke of Gloucester Street. In 1934 the town built a new theater for blacks, but it was located on Bypass Road, far away from Merchants Square. The theater, which drew hundreds of customers on a weekly basis, pulled blacks away from uptown, while the Williamsburg Theater attracted whites to the new business district.

Evidence suggests that by 1939 large numbers of blacks were no longer welcome in Merchants Square. In May of that year several retail merchants from the business district complained to the City Council of the “congregation of colored people” that crowded in front of their businesses. Shops with black owners, which formerly offered a social outlet to locals, were few by that time. Blacks congregated in Merchants Square because they had nowhere else to go. Also, the fact that white merchants complained of their presence indicates that this was something they were not accustomed to and did not accept, which reinforces the notion that

279 Belvin, 96.
Williamsburg whites desired blacks to stay in the background away from the community’s center.\textsuperscript{282}

Clearly, such attitudes relating to segregation were commonplace throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. However, racial issues are still important to mention in the context of shopping center development. Merchants Square and the Restoration amounted to primitive urban renewal for the Williamsburg community. Racial-spatial relationships changed as a result of the commercial district’s construction. Even more importantly, the racial impacts of shopping center development was a phenomenon several communities shared, most notably in the case study of Palmer Square in Princeton, New Jersey.

**Merchants Square’s National Context**

Several historians mention Merchants Square as one of the earliest master-planned shopping centers built in the colonial mode.\textsuperscript{283} However, what exactly is a shopping center? The earliest example was J.C. Nichol’s Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, which incorporated multiple shops under unified ownership.\textsuperscript{284} This became the common accepted definition for a shopping center. The Williamsburg Holding Corporation, a single entity, owned Merchants Square, defining it as a shopping center. Merchants also worked collectively as members of the Williamsburg-Yorktown-Jamestown Trade Board that strove to solve common

\textsuperscript{282} Foster, 220.


\textsuperscript{284} Richard Longstreth, interview with author, 13 October 2008.
problems. Other shopping center qualities, such as off-street parking, pedestrian malls, and unified architectural styles varied from center to center. Nancy Cohen describes the shopping center as an “umbrella” under which tenants complemented each other and presented a unified image. With its unified ownership, off-street parking, and colonial imagery, Merchants Square fell under these historians’ definition of a shopping center during the mid-twentieth century.

Merchants Square also holds a subcategory within its shopping center classification. Several architectural historians have divided American shopping centers into three broad categories. Neighborhood centers, the smallest of the classifications, served a minimum of 750 families and contained a drug store, supermarket, barber, variety store, filling station, and one or two small shops. The next classification, community centers, were shopping centers that served a larger number of families and included additional restaurants, clothing, toys, hardware, gifts, and candy stores. These centers included a bank, a post office, and offices for professionals, which drew people to the area and made this class a true center of the community. The final and largest classification was regional shopping center, which included centers with a large department store and several fashion outlets. Ranging from twenty to fifty acres, these centers required a market size of between 300,000 and 900,000 people living within thirty miles. In consideration of the above definitions, Merchants Square’s business tenancy and size fit into the community center category. This classification is important because it

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288 These classifications can be found in Baker & Funaro, 10 and Nancy Cohen, 10.
provides a means of comparison when looking at other shopping center developments similar to Williamsburg’s – the case studies listed below all fall under the community center classification.

Mercants Square mattered beyond Williamsburg’s city limits. Nationally, the neo-colonial architecture that the Williamsburg shopping center displayed appeared in several commercial developments. Although Merchants Square probably did not directly influence all of these developments, at the very least the center was part of a greater national movement marrying commercial architecture with colonial imagery. This section analyzes two of these developments incorporating colonial imagery with the case studies of Palmer Square in Princeton, New Jersey and the Village Center of Stony Brook, New York. Constructed after Merchants Square, both developments displayed qualities strikingly similar to the Williamsburg business district. The following is by no means an exhaustive list of shopping center developments displaying colonial imagery and intends to encourage future research into this subject.

**Palmer Square – Princeton, New Jersey**

Leaders in Princeton planned a revitalization of their town’s center in a colonial mode almost concurrently to Williamsburg. However, unlike Williamsburg, the impact of the Great Depression delayed the initial 1929 groundbreaking for the Princeton project until 1936. Spearheading redevelopment efforts was Edgar Palmer, a local capitalist and longtime Princeton benefactor who financed and planned construction. Palmer tasked the New York architect Thomas Stapleton with developing an appropriate design. Stapleton’s plans appeared so similar to William Perry’s that some residents believed Princeton would become “a second Williamsburg.” Consisting of twenty-four retail shops, apartments, a post office, a theater,
and a hotel, Palmer Square displayed a similar neo-colonial architectural style to Merchants Square and also served a comparable function within its community.

Palmer Square demonstrated familiar solutions to similar problems as those that created Merchants Square. “Old wooden houses and tenements” on and near Nassau Street, Princeton’s main avenue, had long degraded the town’s appearance and created fire hazard, leading some to describe the area as a “slum.” Palmer’s organization, Princeton Municipal Improvement, Inc., razed undesirable buildings and relocated their occupants to other properties. Palmer seemed to have parallel goals to Williamsburg’s benefactor. Princeton was to cease its status as a mere “main street town” and transition to a “public square town,” as had “happened to many another Colonial town,” including Williamsburg to some extent.

With its shops, post office, and hotel, the square’s planners envisioned it to be a true community center and social gathering place. Palmer wanted to not only revamp the appearance of Princeton but also ensure any new development did not become “an unwelcome contrast” to colonial-era buildings such as Nassau Hall, located across the street from the new square in the university. New buildings displayed a combination of seventeenth- through nineteenth-century colonial imagery to ensure they harmonized with, and not mimicked,
Figure 9: Palmer Square Construction ca. 1939. Several neighborhoods required razing for the construction of the new town center. Photograph courtesy of http://www.princetonhistory.org.

Such aesthetic intent is very reminiscent of the desires of Merchants Square’s designers.

Like Merchants Square, Palmer Square was a master-planned community shopping center in a small historic town setting with a university nearby. Princeton housed a comparable number of residents in 1940 – 3,251 compared with 3,942 in Williamsburg for that same year.

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295 “Plans for Building New Municipal Center in Princeton Will Cost $4,500,000; Hotel Will Be Complete by September, 1937, and Entire Project Before 1941. – Tradition to be Maintained,” The Princeton Herald, 28 August 1936, 3. The Herald remarked that “the architecture will be derived from native sources of the 17th and 19th centuries, thus harmonizing with Nassau Hall.”

Palmer Square’s physical appearance and plan displayed many features akin to its Williamsburg counterpart. The Princeton development relied on corner properties as anchors, which defined the area. Stapleton emphasized variety in his commercial design, just as Perry did in Williamsburg. Different materials and colors reduced monotony, as did fluctuating roof heights and setbacks between the stores. The resulting facades appeared as a collection of small buildings rather than one large mass. Palmer Square also functioned similarly to the Williamsburg shopping district. Princeton Municipal Improvement, Inc. managed tenancy, leasing costs, and store appearances in much the same manner the WHC managed Merchants Square. Palmer and Stapleton even created a degree of codependency when they decided to heat each store from a centralized unit for economical reasons (Merchants Square featured a similar heating scheme). In appearance and function, Palmer Square resembled Merchants Square to a high degree.

Although the two developments resembled each other, important differences still existed. The first and most noticeable is size – Palmer Square spread over twelve city blocks, whereas Merchants Square occupied slightly more than two. Palmer and Stapleton did not focus on increasing parking capacity for the area or using off-street lots. Although Stapleton emphasized variety, he nevertheless standardized some elements, such as shop windows. Palmer Square also centered on a town square, deliberately meant to deemphasize Princeton’s main street, while Merchants Square continued to draw townspeople to at least a small part of Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg. But perhaps most importantly, Goodwin and Perry designed Merchants Square to accommodate the restoration of historic buildings, whereas

298 “Plans for Building New Municipal Center in Princeton Will Cost $4,500,000; Hotel Will Be Complete by September, 1937, and Entire Project Before 1941 – Tradition to be Maintained,” The Princeton Herald, 28 August 1936, 3.
Palmer and Stapleton designed their square to *supplant* existing buildings, historic or otherwise. Although a majority of citizens supported the project, the destruction of historic sites became a heated point of contention with a small number of residents.\(^\text{300}\) Some argued that Princeton’s historic buildings needed to be preserved while Palmer Square backers countered that the buildings were unsalvageable in their run-down condition.\(^\text{301}\) Several citizens expressed concern over the old Nassau Inn that dated to 1757, which Palmer demolished.\(^\text{302}\) Palmer Square thus was somewhat hypocritical: the development flaunted colonial imagery yet its construction involved the demise of several historic buildings on which it based its appearance.

Palmer Square had other positive and negative effects on Princeton similar to those in Williamsburg after Merchants Square’s construction. First, the development had a beneficial impact on local finances. Prior to Palmer’s announcement, Princeton’s economy was in shambles due to the Great Depression – over 200 of its citizens applied for Works Progress Administration (WPA) benefits, indicating an unemployment problem.\(^\text{303}\) A delay in WPA funds caused an “emergency” in the town in July of 1936.\(^\text{304}\) After the announcement, Princeton leaders predicted that the construction of Palmer’s Square would relieve the unemployment problem by providing months of work for “any able-bodied man.”\(^\text{305}\) Palmer chose the

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\(^\text{300}\) “The Princeton Herald’s Poll Revealed Strong Approval of the Square,” *The Princeton Recorder*, 10-11. 75% of those polled thought the development would improve the town, included 82% of wealthy residents. Some merchants (37%) expressed concern that the rents were too high and that the unified ownership would mean an end to small business. The article also describes a “muted black protest” against the development.


\(^\text{303}\) “Delayed WPA Funds Create Emergency as Work is Halted,” *The Princeton Herald*, 31 July 1936.

\(^\text{304}\) Ibid.

Princeton-based Matthews Construction Company for his project, which gave preference to local workers.\(^{306}\) Real estate values and general business increased as well, leading historians to comment that “Palmer Square broke the back of the Depression in Princeton.”\(^{307}\)

However, Palmer Square also had negative consequences for some citizens. Palmer continued his replacement of black neighborhoods with his commercial center.\(^{308}\) Princeton Improvement Inc. razed several neighborhoods of mostly black businesses and residences near Nassau Street and provided six duplexes known as “Rainbow Houses” on Birch Avenue as replacements.\(^{309}\) Palmer owned all of the black rental property in the area, and although few forceful evictions took place, most tenants took Palmer’s offer to move to Birch Avenue, which was far off Nassau Street to the northwest.\(^{310}\) This process is almost exactly the same as what happened in Williamsburg – construction of a new civic center pushed blacks to new housing on the town’s periphery, away from the traditional heart of the community, segregating the town further. The leaders of each development provided new housing. It is beyond the scope of this study to deduce the reasons why men like Goodwin and Palmer built housing for blacks in areas away from the traditional community center, either altruistically or otherwise, but the evidence proves that by moving African-Americans to “black sections,” these developments had a definite impact on segregation in the Jim Crow towns of Williamsburg and Princeton.

\(^{308}\) “Plans for Building New Municipal Center in Princeton Will Cost $4,500,000; Hotel Will Be Complete by September, 1937, and Entire Project Before 1941 – Traditional Objects Preserved,” The Princeton Herald, 28 August 1936, 3. Palmer had previously “cleared” a slum area behind Nassau Street and moved the blacks living there into new houses along Birch Street in Princeton.
\(^{309}\) “Dwiggins and Williams Were Among Those Relocated,” Recollector, 14.
\(^{310}\) Frances Dwiggins, quoted in “Dwiggins and Williams Were Among Those Relocated,” Recollector, 14. Dwiggins and Williams recalled that many complained the new “Rainbow Houses” were poorly constructed with cinder blocks in an almost temporary fashion. Others complained of the far distance they were forced to walk to go to work at stores in Palmer Square.
Palmer Square was not the only development similar to Williamsburg’s shopping district. Beginning in 1940, seven years after the completion of Merchants Square, a small historic hamlet of about three thousand inhabitants on the northern tip of Long Island underwent a redevelopment of its town center. Ward Melville, a local philanthropic millionaire, planned to create a colonial-themed shopping center in response to the “haphazard, shoddy and unattractive construction” of retail outlets that arose as increasing numbers of automobile tourists visited the town in the mid-1930s. Melville created a corporation called the Stony Brook Community Fund (now known as the Ward Melville Heritage Organization) to eliminate modern development and return Stony Brook to its historic roots. By 1941 Melville had completed his restoration and Stony Brook boasted a new community core.

The similarities between Stony Brook’s Village Center and Merchants Square with regard to function, imagery, and intent are striking. Unified ownership characterized both centers as the Stony Brook Community Fund owned the Village Center and the WHC owned Merchants Square. The business profile of the Village Center included a post office, hardware store, fire station, barbershop, grocery, butcher, real estate, gifts and clothing, all types of stores found in Merchants Square. Melville played the role of both Goodwin and Rockefeller in Stony Brook, and even used similar terminology as the Williamsburg men. For instance, Melville noted that the town had “fallen asleep” during the nineteenth century, which is similar to what

311 Stony Brook dated to 1665 when it was part of the New Netherlands.
313 Melville, 293.
314 Ibid.
contemporaries remarked about Williamsburg prior to the Restoration. Both Goodwin and Melville pursued their redevelopments in response to modern buildings encroaching on their towns’ historic appearance. Melville used a similar (although less deceptive) method of property acquisition to Goodwin, and even held a town meeting to gain the support of residents just like the one in Williamsburg. The two men’s parallel objectives for new shopping districts in their respective towns resulted in similarities between the two center’s designs.

Melville’s architect, Richard Haviland Smyth, planned and designed the crescent-shaped Village Center in a style similar to Perry’s development. Smyth needed to create a new community center, so he anchored his design with a fire station and hardware store on either end of the crescent. The post office acted as the centerpiece of the development, just as it

Figure 10: Shops in Stony Brook’s Village Center.

315 Melville, 290. See Mayor George P. Coleman’s poem and Perry’s remarks in Chapter 1 above. Perry describes the “repose” of the town, and Coleman notes the “leisure” in which many Williamsburg citizens spent their days.
316 Ibid., 292. Goodwin and the Williamsburg town council called a general town meeting on June 12, 1928 to discuss Goodwin’s proposal for the town’s restoration.
317 Ibid., 293.
The building’s height, cupola and large portico unequivocally established its dominance. When combined with the center’s colonial references, these features created an interesting combination of Greek and American colonial imagery similar to Williamsburg’s commercial center. However, unlike Merchants Square, Stony Brook’s Village Center had no need to distinguish itself architecturally from nearby colonial structures, making Smyth’s design somewhat less academic and more whimsical than Perry’s. Parking accommodation also resembled Merchants Square, as Stony Brook incorporated both front and rear parking (front for customers and rear for employees and service). The two centers also displayed similar notions of variety, as Stony Brook’s center featured varying roof heights, segmented massing, and differing shop window designs. Despite these many similarities, some differences existed between the two centers, such as the lack of passageways between the front and rear parking lots. Smyth and Melville also set the Village Center off Stony Brook’s main street in a manner more akin to modern shopping centers, unlike Merchants Square which clasped to Williamsburg’s main avenue. Ultimately, however, Stony Brook’s Village Center displayed a design and layout similar to its Williamsburg predecessor.

The level of influence Merchants Square may have had on Stony Brook is uncertain. Melville certainly had knowledge of the Williamsburg project. The two centers were very similar in nature and both radically changed the appearance of their respective towns. Residents in Stony Brook eventually copied the Village Center’s architectural style for their homes, giving the town a more unified, if somewhat homogenous appearance. Interestingly, Stony Brook represents a twist on the Williamsburg model – whereas the restoration of historic residences drove redevelopment of Williamsburg’s business district, in Stony Brook the new

\[318\] Melville, 293.
\[319\] Ibid.
\[320\] Ibid., 295. Melville mentions Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg.
\[321\] Ibid., 293.
shopping center encouraged many residents to redesign their homes according to the commercial Village Center example. This is indicative of the possible effects commercial centers have had on their communities.

It is difficult to say how directly Merchants Square may have influenced developments in Princeton and Stony Brook, if at all. Williamsburg’s Restoration was certainly widely known and popular, especially among architectural circles, so such a statement is plausible. At the very least, however, these three developments displayed designs in reaction to similar problems, desires, and settings. All three centers involved the creation of a real estate corporation, the redevelopment of an existing historic town center, and the use of colonial imagery. The commonalities between the developments tell us that the new-found value of colonial architecture and references was not limited to Williamsburg but in fact spread to other regions and settings, including the commercial sector.

One example succinctly exemplifies the commonalities between these three developments. Each architect, despite being separated geographically and chronologically, used similar terminology when describing their use of colonial details in commercial developments. After he completed Merchants Square, Perry commented that “it has been assumed that had the people of Williamsburg been faced with a similar problem [recreating a commercial center] in the eighteenth century, they might have solved it in this manner and with buildings similar in appearance to these.” 322 Thomas Stapleton described Princeton’s Palmer Square as representing “the natural progression in time which would have occurred if the square had actually been built in the 18th century.” 323 Ward Melville described his project as “what might have been at the start of the nineteenth century, had it needed at that time as many as fifteen

323 Thomas Stapleton, quoted in “Plans for Building New Municipal Center in Princeton Will Cost $4,500,000; Hotel Will Be Complete by September, 1937, and Entire Project Before 1941 – Tradition to Be Maintained,” The Princeton Herald, 28 August 1936, 3
stores, a firehouse, and a post office.\textsuperscript{324} Ironically, although each of the above architects claimed to design these commercial centers as builders would have in the eighteenth century, the architecture each district displayed still only aped colonial forms. The architects likely gave these statements to enhance the allure of their creations. Although this pseudo-colonial style somewhat inaccurately represented each community’s architectural heritage, the buildings’ forms eventually became a boon to communities. Towns displaying accepted historical styles became desirable homes for well-to-do property owners, and those who relied on the tidy appearance of their communities began to fear intrusion from messy strip development and undesirable social elements.\textsuperscript{325} They looked to limit these problems through the creation of colonially themed shopping centers. This supports the assertion that the use of colonial imagery went beyond aesthetic needs and actually represented social and economic stability by serving as a reminder of a romanticized period of white Americans’ pasts, a reaction to the devastating events of World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic. To the white businessmen and proprietors who lost much of their wealth during the tumults of the Great Depression, this imagery was especially reassuring.

The construction of Merchants Square affected Williamsburg in ways similar to redevelopments in Princeton, New Jersey, and Stony Brook, New York. The revamping of each of these communities’ centers altered economic conditions, deemphasized main streets, and affected racial relations. Colonial references, which became common to many commercial buildings after 1930, created more permanent business spaces and also reminded whites of a romanticized colonial period, both of which white business owners and proprietors found to their liking. Each development improved the appearance of the community in the eyes of their

\textsuperscript{324} Melville, 290-291.
\textsuperscript{325} William Rhoads, “Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age, 1900-1940,” Winterthur Portfolio (Summer-Autumn 1986), 144.
creators, both by transforming the architecture and, in the case of Palmer Square and Merchants Square, removing undesirable social elements. Racial segregation and the growing corporate power evident in the rise of chain stores were hallmarks of the era and became consequences of these commercial developments. In the unforgiving economic climate of the Great Depression, William Perry’s commercial creation in Williamsburg encouraged segregation and reflected the rise of chain stores in local communities. The Princeton, New Jersey, and Stony Brook, New York examples displayed many of the principles Perry followed in Williamsburg with similar effects on those communities — for better or worse.
Epilogue: A Center No More

Merchants Square represented a turning point in Williamsburg’s history. The historic avenue of Duke of Gloucester Street, which housed the coffee houses, taverns and other commercial enterprises Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Monroe frequented shrank to a mere two blocks of contemporary businesses near the College of William and Mary. Tourists replaced Williamsburg residents as the chief occupiers of most of Duke of Gloucester Street. The construction of the new business district, which acted as a boon for the local economy, also attracted chain stores and augmented trends towards segregation in the town. Merchants Square’s unique architectural features, most notably its neo-colonial style, was later copied in communities outside Virginia. Both its creators and its customers deemed the new district a resounding success. Merchants Square’s dominance of Williamsburg’s commercial life was relatively brief, however.

As early as 1934 people began noticing problems in Merchants Square. The most pronounced were traffic and parking issues.\footnote{Reckless Driving to be Curbed in City,” Virginia Gazette, 18 May 1934, 3.} In a 1934 article the Virginia Gazette reported that “in the business section, the 30 minute parking limit will be strictly enforced and motorists who park double, if only for a minute, will probably find a tag on their car when they return,” showing that parking was already scarce.\footnote{City Traffic Laws to Be Rigidly Enforced,” Virginia Gazette, 4 January 1935, 1.} Although Perry and Shurcliffe certainly gave the automobile consideration when they designed the shopping area, they underestimated just how universal the car would eventually become. Although Merchants Square may have been able to handle Williamsburg’s current traffic volume, not much leeway existed if the town were to grow. Furthermore, the college to the west and the Historic Area to the east naturally confined Merchants Square, leaving precious little room for expansion. The business district did expand to Prince George Street in the 1930s, but Williamsburg businesses continued to develop creating
demand for more commercial space. By the 1950s, it was clear that Merchants Square could no longer meet all of Williamsburg’s business needs.

Between 1935 and 1955 businesses began to move piecemeal to locations on Richmond Road, northwest of the college. These businesses followed new residential development as Williamsburg’s population expanded to 6,735 in 1950.\(^{328}\) In 1953 planners from the firm Harland Bartholomew and Associates recognized this trend when preparing Williamsburg’s town plan. They declared prophetically that “undoubtedly, more stores and shops will be built in the outlying parts of the city in the future.”\(^{329}\) That is exactly what happened with the construction of Williamsburg Shopping Center on Richmond Road west of the college.

Colonial Williamsburg, Inc. sought to relieve the congestion of the Duke of Gloucester Street business district with the construction of Williamsburg Shopping Center. A Vice President of Colonial Williamsburg noted that the district could no longer handle the increasing amounts of traffic due to the town’s residential growth and the mounting hordes of tourists that descended on the city, who then numbered almost 750,000 annually.\(^{330}\) The Gazette noted that “the city was reaching the point where it could not handle the traffic difficulties of its residents, much less those of its visitors.”\(^{331}\) Architects and administrators at Colonial Williamsburg, Inc. recognized these problems and pursued the development of a new shopping center on the corporation’s Richmond Road property. The new center offered free parking space for 714 automobiles and catered specifically to Williamsburg residents, as its business profile

\(^{329}\) Harland Bartholomew & Associates, Comprehensive Plan – Williamsburg, Virginia, (St. Louis, Missouri: 1953),
\(^{330}\) Carlisle H. Humelsine, Virginia Gazette, 18 November 1955, 9; “New Shopping Center Direct Result of Williamsburg Growth, Popularity,” Virginia Gazette, 18 November 1955, 9.
\(^{331}\) “Shopping Center Reflects Growth of the City,” Virginia Gazette, 18 November 1955, 9.
reflected. Williamsburg Shopping Center contained fifteen shops, including variety, furniture, liquor and hardware stores, a pharmacy, an optometrist, a barber, a drive-in bank and two supermarkets. Some of these stores moved from locations in the old business district on Duke of Gloucester Street, including Casey’s Furniture, Zuma’s barbershop, and Peninsula Hardware. All of these businesses drew activity away from downtown, as their builders intended. Architecturally, Williamsburg Shopping Center for the most part abandoned the colonial imagery present in Merchants Square in favor of a more modern approach. However, the Colonial Williamsburg architects in charge of its construction still desired a “harmonious design” that did “not contrast too severely with the 18th century buildings in Williamsburg.” It appeared that modern Williamsburg had returned after its hiatus during the Restoration years, though under the new guidelines of Colonial Williamsburg.

The result was that as Williamsburg Shopping Center rose in prominence, Merchants Square declined. Universal car ownership and Williamsburg’s popularity made Merchants Square obsolete. From 1955 onward, the Duke of Gloucester Street business district could not compete with the convenience, selection, and parking space that the newer center boasted. The new shopping center’s construction continued the trend of decentralizing Williamsburg’s businesses to the town’s periphery that planners in 1953 recognized. The center supported other trends present in Williamsburg, most notably the increasing dominance of chain stores. Colonial Stores Supermarkets (formerly Pender’s), Rich’s Supermarket, Casey’s furniture, and

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332 Virginia Gazette, 18 November 1955, 9.
333 Casey’s only moved its furniture department to the new shopping center, while its main property in Merchants Square continued to sell clothing and other goods. Peninsula Bank also retained its property in Merchants Square and opened a new branch in Williamsburg Shopping Center.
334 “CW Architect’s Office Develops Design for New Shopping Center,” Virginia Gazette, 18 November 1955, 28. The new center prominently displayed Williamsburg brick, however it was of different colors than the typical Williamsburg shades.
335 A map showing the location of new business development between 1940 and 1950 showed several new businesses constructed on Richmond Road northwest of the college.
Woolworth’s, all large chains, leased space in Williamsburg’s new shopping center.\textsuperscript{336} Woolworth’s in particular was common in many modern shopping centers nationwide.\textsuperscript{337} However, the popular backlash against chain store development had subsided by the 1950s, and Williamsburg’s citizens were much more accepting of these chain stores than in the early 1930s. While Williamsburg Shopping Center replaced Merchants Square, it also continued longstanding trends in Williamsburg’s commercial fabric.

As businesses like supermarkets and variety stores moved out of Merchants Square, tourist- and student-oriented businesses moved in. From the 1980s onwards restaurants, art galleries and boutique shops like the Fat Canary, the Trellis, the Christmas Shop, the Craft House, Scotland House Limited and the Gallery on Merchants Square replaced the A&P, Pender’s Grocery, Stringfellow’s Electric, the Williamsburg Drugstore, and the post office. Slowly, the business district’s importance as community center diminished as residents had fewer reasons to visit these specialty boutiques. Merchants Square transitioned to its tourist orientation in order to survive. A series of shopping centers on the town’s periphery that followed suburban development, the first of which was Williamsburg Shopping Center, offered better shopping experiences than downtown Williamsburg could hope to provide, drawing business away from Duke of Gloucester Street. This same process happened in communities across the country, a phenomenon \textit{Virginia Gazette} writers recognized. According to the \textit{Gazette}, “the new Williamsburg Shopping Center is only one manifestation of a widespread movement sweeping the country. Store space problems and inadequate parking facilities have prompted the construction of huge centers on the peripheries of many urban areas.”\textsuperscript{338} Just as

\textsuperscript{336} The Southern Department Stores chain purchased Casey’s Store in 1941 (“Casey’s Furniture Department Moves To Shopping Center,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 18 November 1955, 10).
\textsuperscript{337} Richard Longstreth, \textit{City Center to Regional Mall}, 189, 231, 247.
\textsuperscript{338} “New Type of Shopping Centers Widely Used For Urban Areas,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, 18 November 1955, 16.
Colonial Williamsburg experienced its renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, modern Williamsburg began its resurgence after 1955 with the construction of new shopping centers, which changed the role of the town’s colonial-style business district.

Today, Merchants Square resembles more a tourist mall than a downtown. In the 1970s the town closed off the Merchants Square section of Duke of Gloucester Street to automobile traffic, creating a pedestrian mall that confirmed the business section’s new status as tourist retail outlet. Students still frequent the square to visit the Barnes & Noble bookstore (formerly Casey’s Department store) and eat lunch at the Cheese Shop, but nighttime options have long since left the district and students do not regularly socialize there. Few of the original businesses remain on the square. One of the most vital, the Peninsula Bank (now Suntrust Bank), moved out of its Duke of Gloucester Street quarters into new accommodations rebuilt on Prince George Street in 2008. The old Peninsula Bank building, located at a key corner location, awaits a new tenant. Binn’s Fashion Shop and Williamsburg Theatre (now the Kimball Theatre) remain, but Binn’s is now more tourist-oriented as larger department stores in periphery shopping centers offered better bargains and variety, while new multiplex movie theatres in the recent New Town development and upcoming High Street development ensure that the theater will continue its current emphasis on showing independent and foreign films, which it began in 1991. Merchants Square appears unlikely to ever regain its status as a community center and will continue to cater to its student and tourist clientele in the near future.

So what, then, is Merchants Square’s legacy? In Williamsburg, its heyday lasted only twenty-one years, from 1934 to 1955, demonstrating how quickly commercial areas can change. It is easy to overlook the significance of Merchants Square but its importance spans local to national issues. First, on a local level, the square’s construction drastically altered the appearance and layout of Williamsburg, and also affected the locality’s economy, business
profile, and racial segregation. It elucidated trends in Williamsburg that occurred both before and after the district’s groundbreaking. Second, Merchants Square is one example of methods and consequences of a redevelopment of a small-town center using colonial references, a process seen in the communities of Princeton, New Jersey, Stony Brook, New York, and elsewhere such as Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Finally, the unique combination of colonial and modern themes in Merchants Square’s architecture had a direct influence on several developments in southeastern Virginia, and the development’s influence can be seen as far west as Texas and as far south as Georgia. Richmond, Virginia’s River Road Shopping Center, built in 1960, displays forms nearly identical to Merchants Square, while developments in the twenty-first century like New Town and High Street in Williamsburg and the Riverwalk district in Yorktown, Virginia, appear inspired by the 1934 business district.339 Spawned by the philosophy and design tenets of “New Urbanism,” New Town and High Street emulate main streets and emphasize walkable commercial districts with nearby residential homes. Shopping centers in Gloucester, Virginia and the Eastern Shore also demonstrate colonial themes similar to Merchants Square. Perry’s design provided an architectural model for future commercial development in southeastern Virginia, which contributed to the regional architectural identity of the area. Beyond Virginia, shopping centers bear the name “Williamsburg Shopping Center,” “Williamsburg Village Center,” and “Merchants Square Mall.” It is unknown how much, if at all, these centers may have been influenced by Merchants Square, but at least one historian has suggested that there may be a connection. In his book Main Street Revisited, Richard Francaviglia suggests the mid-1980s Williamsburg Shopping Center in Katy, Texas is “Williamsburg-inspired” because of its “gabled firewalls, massive chimneys, and simple gabled

dormers” as well as its use of gas lamps and brick. Merchants Square had local, regional, and national importance and was indicative of architectural trends that began in the mid-twentieth century.

The contemporary developments of New Town and High Street represent a new national trend in planning and architecture that rejects suburban sprawl and the shopping centers that followed it in favor of more centralized, walkable communities. Like Merchants Square, they seek only to accommodate the automobile, rather than emphasize it like Williamsburg Shopping Center did. Planners, developers, and citizens desire a return to a romanticized idea of the classic American Main Street, an idea that was lost as a result of the shopping center craze that began in the 1950s. New Town and High Street more closely resemble developments like Merchants Square, Palmer Square, and Stony Brook’s Village Center than they do Williamsburg Shopping Center. It appears that the fast-paced world of commercial development is changing again, as urban planners try to repackage our town centers that were lost due to the decentralization and suburban sprawl of the mid-twentieth century.

Developments like Merchants Square will serve as crucial examples of the benefits and consequences of main street redevelopment. Studying this history provides an impetus for new design ideas that hope to amend past mistakes and improve upon old designs. In the end, it is an elusive pursuit of something every village, town and city strives for – a true community center.

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Bibliographical Note

Shopping center history and commercial architecture have increased in popularity recently and several recent volumes were available for this thesis. These texts provided background information and exemplary methodology that taught me much about how to write on the subject. Of particular note is the work of Richard Longstreth, which served as a model for my own writings. His clear explanation of events and use of case studies to elucidate larger trends made his explanation of issues easy to understand. Also worthy of mention is Mary Miley Theobald, who produced an excellent primer on Merchants Square in her article entitled “Merchants Square: Williamsburg’s Other Historic Area.” Finally, George Humphrey Yetter’s Williamsburg Before and After provided excellent historical photographs and explanations of the changes Williamsburg experienced during the Restoration.

Since this thesis encompasses several different genres of history, many different kinds of sources provided evidence for the text. Architectural plans, photographs, and particularly Sanborn Fire Insurance maps were crucial to understanding the architectural history of Merchants Square. The writings of Perry, Goodwin, and other Williamsburg planners provided architectural cues as well. Newspapers were most useful for elucidating commercial and social history. Most newspaper citations come from the Virginia Gazette, Williamsburg’s primary newspaper at the time of the Restoration. Firsthand accounts and memoirs, especially Edward Belvin’s Growing Up in Williamsburg, provided excellent records regarding social issues. Census data, gained from the University of Virginia’s Census Browser, were useful for gathering population figures and economic data. Finally, this thesis could not have been possible without the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s publication and preservation of the writings of the fathers of the Restoration, especially William Perry, W.A.R. Goodwin, John D. Rockefeller, Kenneth Chorley, and Arthur Shurtleff. These documents provided the protagonists’ perspective
of events, which clarified the thought processes behind the Restoration. Goodwin’s secretary, Elizabeth Hayes, kept a diary of the early years of the Restoration, which proved to be an important firsthand, contemporary account of events. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives deserve praise for their dedicated preservation of these documents, which helped form the backbone of this thesis.

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