

The History of the Development of Colonial
National Historical Park - *COLO-137C2*

By: Edward M. Riley

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THE HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLONIAL
NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

by

Edward M. Riley
Junior Historian

Yorktown, Virginia

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
COLONIAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
YORKTOWN, VIRGINIA

THE HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLONIAL
NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

The purpose of the Federal Government in creating Colonial National Historical Park was to preserve for posterity an area which, in a circuit of about forty miles, tells the story of Colonial Virginia from the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown to the establishment of the independence of the United States at Yorktown. This part represents a unique experiment in preserving and utilizing historical materials, the value of which will increase as successive generations visit this historic area.

Colonial National Monument was created by Act of Congress approved July 3, 1930 and the boundaries defined by Presidential Proclamation December 30, 1930 to include Jamestown Island, parts of the city of Williamsburg, the Yorktown battlefield and connecting highways. By Act of Congress approved June 5, 1936 the name was changed to Colonial National Historical Park. The importance of these areas in the early history of the United States has long

interested historically-minded people in protecting them from decay or exploitation. At Jamestown Island the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities owned and was caring for twenty-two acres, comprising the most important portion of the Island. At Williamsburg, inspired by Dr. W. A. R. Goodwin and financed by Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Williamsburg Restoration, Inc., was engaged in restoring and rebuilding that Colonial city which was the capital of the Colony of Virginia from 1699 until 1779. The work of these two organizations, together with the approaching celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the victory at Yorktown, and the proximity of these three places, interested many prominent men in the possibility of creating on the Peninsula of Virginia a great historical park. Numerous civic and patriotic organizations recommended the creation of such a park to be administered by the federal government for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. On January 10, 1930 the Honorable Louis C. Cramton, Representative from Michigan, introduced the bill, H.R. #8424. The bill was passed by the House of Representatives on June 9, 1930 and became a law on July 3, 1930. President Hoover issued the Proclamation on December 30, 1930 bringing the park into existence and defining its boundaries.

At present, only a portion of the authorized area of the park has been acquired. A total of approximately 6,000 acres is now owned by the government, of which 275 acres were acquired by donation, 4,965

by purchase, and 606 by transfer from the Navy Department. Included in the land acquired by purchase are 1,539 acres at Jamestown, all of the Island except the twenty-two acres owned and cared for by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. No land has been acquired in the Williamsburg area, but a 500 foot strip is owned from Yorktown to Williamsburg, approximately eleven miles, for the construction of a Parkway. Several hundred acres in the Yorktown area are privately owned, most of such property being divided into lots improved with commercial or private buildings.

On Jamestown Island all of the land purchased by the government was owned privately. After President Hoover had issued his proclamation establishing Colonial National Monument, proceedings were begun to purchase the land. Early in 1934, all of Jamestown Island, exclusive of the A.P.V.A. reservation, had been purchased. In June of the same year, the National Park Service with a staff of trained historians, archeologists, architects, and engineers began a detailed study of that part of the Island now under its supervision. In November, 1934 a Civilian Conservation Corps Company was moved to Williamsburg to carry on the archeological excavations on Jamestown Island. Since that time many things have been unearthed that add greatly to the knowledge of seventeenth century life in the town, supplementing the data found in historical records. A search has been made, by excavation, to locate some of the old boundary lines of the original land

grants and then, by correlation of these excavated property-line ditches with those shown in the contemporary deeds and survey plats, to identify lands and houses belonging to certain individuals in the first century of the colony.

During the process of excavation many brick foundations have been uncovered. Some of these have full basements and thick walls, probably supporting brick buildings, while others have only brick footings to support a frame super-structure. One of the largest and most interesting foundations yet excavated is one which may prove to be the first brick state house in Virginia. This foundation is in three adjoining sections of about twenty by forty feet, making a building sixty by forty feet overall. Another interesting foundation is that of what was probably the first brick "Country House", a building belonging to the colony and used as a residence for the governor.

Thousands of fragments of glass, pottery, iron, and other metals, clay pipes, and building materials have been excavated and are being classified and studied in the National Park Service laboratory. Pottery is of various kinds from crude "every day" earthenware to beautifully glazed and decorated slipware and Delft. Heavy rum and wine bottles, thin-sided, square gin bottles, delicate perfume bottles and goblets, and window panes are the most common varieties of glass found. Bottle seals with the initials of the manufacturer or

the owner of the bottle or wine were frequently used. Many examples of these seals are in the laboratory.

Iron is well represented by hinges of several types, fireplace equipment, locks, keys, and other building hardware, kettles, tableware, and tools of various kinds. Other metal articles include pewter spoons, copper and brass tacks, ornaments, buckles and buttons, lead window comes and lead shot. A number of coins and trade tokens have been found, most of them of copper, but two or three of silver, one of the latter being a Spanish coin.

Clay pipes were much used by the colonists and are found in great quantities and in various forms. At first the bowls of the pipes were tiny, due to the costliness of tobacco, but later they became almost as large as some of our modern pipes. Many show the initials or identifying marks of the maker, from which it is hoped that the date of manufacture can be determined, which in turn will indicate the approximate date of occupancy of the foundation in or near which the pipes were found.

The archeological work at Jamestown is of great value, because in the ground itself can be found what is literally a mine of information about the early settlement, which cannot be obtained from any other source. It will take many years to complete the work of excavation, but when it is finished the story of Jamestown will be richer in detail and much more colorful.

No restoration of Jamestown is contemplated; but models showing the progressive stages of the development of the town may be prepared. A museum has been established on the Island in which are exhibited the more interesting archeological discoveries.

In October, 1931 the United States Yorktown Sesquicentennial Commission, with the cooperation of other Federal agencies, the State of Virginia, the Yorktown Sesquicentennial Association, and various patriotic societies, conducted the magnificent celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. Since that event, the National Park Service has turned to the slow and painstaking work of developing all the historical possibilities of the Yorktown area.

Before 1931, little had been done in the way of preserving the historical past of Yorktown. Of the seventy houses standing in Yorktown in 1781 only ten were still in existence. The Daughters of the American Revolution and various private individuals have repaired some of these historic buildings.

When the Park Service started its work at Yorktown, it lacked the money to do more than administer the park property and lay the ground-work for development whenever that should be possible. The historians gathered and correlated materials which would be a necessary basis for future development. That this preliminary study was done thoroughly is proved by the efficiency with which the Park Service has

directed the activities of the Civilian Conservation Corps in this section.

In May of 1933, two Civilian Conservation Corps Companies were stationed at Yorktown as a part of the Emergency Conservation Work. In October, two more companies were added, making a total of eight hundred men at Yorktown. The transference of one of these companies to Williamsburg in November, 1934, caused another company to be brought into the Yorktown area to replace the one transferred. The supervisory personnel of these five camps consists of approximately fifty men trained in their especial fields. Most of these foremen are in immediate supervision of field work. Others are detailed for special work, of which there are four divisions - history, landscaping, engineering and forestry. The technical divisions cooperate in working out plans for various projects.

The Emergency Conservation Work program at Colonial National Historical Park includes five major projects. They are the Parkway, forestry rehabilitation, battlefield development, restoration of important Colonial buildings, and archeological studies.

Colonial National Historical Parkway, connecting Yorktown, Williamsburg and Jamestown, has been completed from Yorktown to within approximately two miles of Williamsburg. Trained landscape foremen have replanted trees and shrubs along the completed section to beautify the Parkway. Following the banks of the York River, and winding

through stretches of woodland, this road, when completed, will be one of the most beautiful scenic highways in America.

Equally important is the work of forestry rehabilitation on those timbered lands belonging to the park. Under expert foresters, the C.C.C. enrollees are employed cutting down trees and thinning overcrowded stands. Fire hazards such as thick underbrush, fallen timber, and other debris are cleared away.

In the development of the Yorktown battlefield area of Colonial National Historical Park, the National Park Service has the task of interpreting the events which transpired on this historic ground in such a way that understanding will be made easy for all, yet even the highly trained specialist may learn something new by going through the park.

Although the history of the land goes back to 1631, and though happenings of wide importance have taken place here during the last three centuries, a single date has been chosen around which the development is being carried on. That date, October 19, 1781, is considered the most important single date in Yorktown's history. For that reason, when a building is restored or a site developed, it is intended to be as it was, or as it might have been, in 1781.

In developing the park, then, the restoration and reconstruction work falls under three general heads: work in the town proper, in the encampment areas, and on the trenches and batteries of the fortifica-

tions. These will be taken up separately in detail later.

The bases for all restoration work are documentary research, field studies, and excavations - one supplementing the other.

Documentary material includes maps, journals, and diaries made by participants in the Siege of 1781, contemporary descriptions of the action here by non-participants, and some few secondary works compiled during the century following the Siege when authors could talk to men still living who had been present or known others present at the fighting around Yorktown.

Other records pertaining to Yorktown during Colonial and Revolutionary times are preserved in the York County Clerk's office and include deeds, orders, wills, inventories, and other documents relating to lots and buildings within the town. It is from such sources, plus the information obtained from excavating an old foundation, or following traces of an old road for a few yards here and there, that we are slowly reconstructing the Yorktown of 1781. Of course, a complete restoration is not contemplated, but enough will be done to give the visitor a picture of the town and surrounding area as it was when Cornwallis and Washington and Lafayette and Rochambeau were here.

The headquarters sites of general officers, the encampment positions of troops, and in adjacent grounds the field hospitals, artillery parks, magazines, and artificers' laboratories make up what is called the encampment area. Almost all of this land is now partially

or heavily wooded, there being few traces of its occupancy a century and a half ago. Landmarks, such as houses and fences, are gone, road alignments have been changed and in a great many cases the roads are entirely obliterated, new ones being made elsewhere.

In order to open the park and to make accessible the historic sites within it, portions of the road system of 1781 have been restored. Using landmarks such as creeks, springs, or known sites of the Revolutionary period for points of departure, the original locations of roads are determined as nearly as possible from old maps. These locations are then checked by searching for physical traces of the road itself. Such traces may consist of a single rut a few feet or yards long, or a double rut extending a hundred yards. In a few cases a fairly well defined road bed can be followed through a densely wooded section. Of course, there are also roads in use today which are of Revolutionary origin. Finally, when all information is at hand and plotted on maps, a road may be staked out and constructed.

The establishment of the road system greatly facilitates other restorative work; since the Revolutionary armies marched over these roads to their camp locations, the officers' headquarters and other such sites were set up in fields along the roads. Although these fields have by now grown up in trees, they are readily found by reference to maps. Markers are placed at the site and the locale partially cleared to make it distinct from the surrounding woods.

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At intervals through the battlefield it is considered necessary - to establish the proper picture - to make restoration on a larger and more exact scale. Such a project, now under way, is the restoration of the American Artillery Park. For this outdoor museum, a field is being cleared where the park was originally established. The artillery park was used by Washington's army for keeping surplus field guns, extra carriages, shot wagons, powder carts, and limbers. In the restored park there will be one authentic copy of each type of gun and of each means of conveyance used by Americans at the Siege of 1781. Although it is impossible to secure original gun carriages, etc., of the Revolution duplicates are made at Yorktown from old manuals on artillery and equipage.

Another outdoor museum is a reconstructed portion of the Grand French Battery of the Siege. This is located in the first parallel, that is, one of the two lines of Allied trenches established around Yorktown. Built during the first four days of the Siege, the Grand French Battery was a potent factor in the bombardment that forced the surrender of Cornwallis's army.

In reconstructing this work it was first tentatively located from maps; ditches were opened and the battery located through excavation. Since the fortification had been established in a brown clay soil, it was possible to determine from the different color texture of the ground just where the original clay had remained untouched and where

the old trenches had been dug and the dirt piled back after the termination of the Siege. So carefully was this work carried on that the locations of beams used to support cannon were found. Excavation uncovered the battery proper, adjacent infantry and communicating trenches, and magazines - small bomb proofs at the rear of the battery where powder and shells were kept. While this work was being carried on other work crews were busy fashioning auxiliary trench materials of the type used during Revolutionary times for strengthening earthworks. These consisted of gabions - baskets woven of small branches and filled with earth; fascines - bundles of twigs bound with withes; and saucissons or long fascines. Such materials were made to conform to specifications set forth in the orderly book kept at Yorktown in 1781 by Brigadier-General Gist.

Ordnance for the battery is to include authentically reproduced French style carriages of the period, and howitzers, mortars, and siege guns of two sizes. Locations for the guns were determined by the excavation; their size is known from lists of batteries and ordnance appearing on the military maps as well as from the shape and size of platform locations excavated at the battery site.

An interesting feature of this outdoor museum is its permanency. Faced with the problem of constructing an exhibit for posterity which was to be an exact copy of a fortification built for a few days' use, it was necessary to make all perishable parts as permanent as possible.

accordingly the parapets, tops of magazines, and trenches were heavily sodded to prevent wind and rain from destroying or altering them.

Wooden parts, such as planks on the gun platforms and logs in the powder magazines, were constructed by making concrete slabs and providing them with a grain or bark finish to simulate wood.

Somewhat similar to the method used at the French Battery was that used in restoring a British work, a redoubt defended by the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. The fortification, the extreme right of Cornwallis's defenses, did not have the complicated layout of the battery, it was simply a large earth fort strengthened by a moat ditch and high parapet. Around the outside there were probably fraises - pointed stakes about seven feet long, set at an angle to deter an attacking party.

The redoubt was located and excavated in the same manner as at the battery; fraises are of concrete of the proper size and shape to simulate logs.

Restoration of the Colonial buildings in the town proper may be divided into two phases, viz., the restoration of buildings still standing in Yorktown to their Colonial appearance, and the complete reconstruction of buildings destroyed since the Colonial period.

In 1781 Yorktown was a prosperous port town. The passage of a century and a half has left only ten of those houses that made the town then. The National Park Service owns only one of this number -

the Philip Lightfoot house. This building was erected about 1710 and was purchased in 1716 by Philip Lightfoot from whom the house takes its name. In 1862 the house was used as a hospital by the Union army and a wooden wing was added to the original brick building. The house was used as an inn from about 1865 until 1931, when it was acquired by the National Park Service. During this period the frame wing was enlarged. From 1931 until early in 1935, the building served as the headquarters for Colonial National Historical Park. In the latter year, the headquarters were removed to the Swan Tavern and preparations were completed to restore the Lightfoot House. The York County records were searched for all information regarding the lot and buildings and insurance records examined for drawings of the various buildings standing in 1781. The frame wing was then razed and the excavation of the lot was begun. The walls of the main brick building were original, and careful excavation discovered the foundations of the old kitchen, smokehouse, and paved floor of the stable, as shown in early records. These outbuildings will be restored after the work on the main house has been completed. By carefully studying the walls of this main house it was discovered that some of the entrances and windows had been changed. These have been reopened and the house restored to its Colonial appearance.

Similar work was done at the Moore House, which stands about a mile east of Yorktown. Fortunately, the building had not been de-

destroyed, and due to its important place in history as the meeting place of the commissioners from the British, French and American armies to draw up the articles of Cornwallis's capitulation, a large number of photographs, drawings and descriptions are extant. A wing had been added in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the outbuildings had been destroyed. The National Park Service, with the cooperation of architects from the Williamsburg Restoration, have restored the building, and a kitchen was rebuilt on its original marl foundations. The furnishing of the house with Colonial pieces and the planting of the gardens around the house will complete this work.

In the second phase of the restoration work, the National Park Service has rebuilt the Swan Tavern group on the original foundations. The first Swan Tavern was erected between 1719 and 1722 and was for many years a leading Virginia hostelry. During the Civil War it was destroyed by the explosion of a powder magazine. Another Swan Tavern was built in 1881 and destroyed in 1915. The same intensive program of research was carried out in this project. Photographs of the Main Street of Yorktown taken by the Union photographer Brady in 1862 showed portions of the original tavern. Insurance records showed the locations of the buildings on the lot and the York County records gave further information. Excavation of the lot uncovered the foundations of the Tavern with its kitchen, smokehouse and stable. In 1934, these buildings were all rebuilt on their original foundations. Com-

plete descriptions of the buildings were lacking, but every detail of their construction has a Colonial precedent. Where information was lacking, Colonial precedent was followed.

The Tavern is the administration building of Colonial National Historical Park; the kitchen is a museum of artifacts found in the Yorktown area; in the stable may be seen a cross-section model of an English frigate of the Revolutionary War.

This new naval exhibit at Colonial National Historical Park has been constructed so as to display the many invaluable articles salvaged by diving operations during the past two summers from British ships sunk in the York River during the Siege of 1781. The exhibit consists of a part of the gun deck and captain's cabin of a forty-gun British frigate. Here, as in the other reconstructions, information was gathered from the various libraries of this nation, from the knowledge gained by the diver in exploring the interiors of the sunken vessels, and from studying the construction of the U. S. Frigate "Constitution". In the construction of the full size model it was found that very little of the wood from the British ships could be used except the knees or braces along the sides, but as many articles salvaged by the diver as could be were used. Four twelve-pounder naval cannon, blocks from the ships' gear, numerous bottles and earthenware jugs, a grindstone, salt pork barrels, and various articles of pewter tableware were recovered from the British

ships sunk during the Siege of 1781, and used in furnishing the gun deck and captain's cabin. Additional furnishings, such as boarding pikes, naval cannon mounts, and handspikes for manœuvering the cannon, were made in the shops of Colonial National Historical Park, and are exact duplicates of those used on British war vessels of a century and a half ago.

Across the street from the Swan Tavern, a lot was completely excavated for the foundations of Dr. Corbin Griffin's Medical Shop. Everything pertaining to the Colonial medical shop was studied for possible clues in finding the old foundation. The excavation revealed merely the fireplace of the original building. As the insurance records described the Colonial shop, it was a relatively simple matter to restore the building. This frame building now serves as the local Post Office.

The Trustees of the Town of York donated to the National Park Service a portion of the waterfront at Yorktown, and a wharf was constructed in 1935 to replace the one destroyed in the storm of August, 1933. It is the best equipped small wharf on the eastern seaboard. While not a Colonial restoration, the wharf was constructed to harmonize with the Colonial atmosphere which is gradually being restored to the historic town.

Already the restoration work has progressed sufficiently to present a good picture of Yorktown in 1781 and of the military activities

around the town in that year. Further work will fill out the picture, although much must depend on the visitor's imagination; the extent and size of the operations must be visualized through the stimulus provided by museums and reproductions.

The future physical development of the Yorktown area calls for the development of the Colonial road system to open every portion of the battlefield area to the public, and the creation of outdoor museums by restoring enough portions of the battlefield to permit the visitor to obtain a thorough understanding of the events that transpired here in 1781. In the town proper additional Colonial buildings will be restored as need for administrative and museum facilities necessitates their erection. Unsightly buildings and signboards will be removed and the electrical lines will be placed underground in order to restore to Yorktown its Colonial appearance as far as possible.

The proper marking of all historic sites in the park area has been given a large amount of study. All encampment areas of the French and American armies and headquarters sites of the officers have been marked in the portions of the battlefield open to visitors. Certain portions of the trenches have been restored in order to present to the visitor an understandable story of the Siege of 1781. Narrative markers have been erected on these restored trenches as well as in other portions yet undeveloped so that the facts of the

story can be easily gathered.

Colonial National Historical Park will become an important factor in the educational program of the National Park Service. The educational features are developed simultaneously with the development of the area. While Colonial National Historical Park is able, at this time, to present a large amount of information of general interest and of genuine educational value to the visitor, the further development of the area will make it of paramount importance in the educational facilities at the disposal of the people.

E. M. Riley
Junior Historian
April 30, 1956
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