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A SUMMARY OF DOCUMENTARY INFORMATION ABOUT  
JAMES FORT (1607-1610) 333/130562

/Note: This is based largely on "Selected  
References to support SKETCH PLAN OF THE  
FIRST FORT BUILT BY THE ENGLISH AT JAMESTOWN.  
That report is in this file - bound separatel

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**A SUMMARY OF DOCUMENTARY**

**INFORMATION**

**about**

**JAMES FORT**

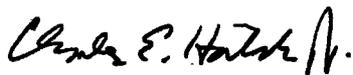
**(1607-1610)**

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FOREWORD

This statement is based in large part on "Selected References to support the Sketch Plan of the First Fort Built by the English at Jamestown, (Drawing No. NHP Col. 10,702, dated May 15, 1951)" and on published material particularly as given in the writings about Jamestown on the part of Samuel Young, Lyon G. Tyler, and Henry Chandlee Forman. The purpose of the statement is to summarize concisely the facts that are known concerning the appearance and operation of "James Fort".

August 18, 1953

  
Charles E. Hatch, Jr.  
Park Historian

# "JAMES FORT"<sup>1</sup>

## (A Summary of Documentary Information)

One of the first acts of the Englishmen who founded Jamestown was the construction of "James Fort". This fortified position alone in the wilderness on a "semi-island" in the James River was the initial toe-hold of the first permanent English settlement in America. For several years--until the Virginia Colony began to grow its roots of permanence --this fort was in substance the town of Jamestown.

Unfortunately no period drawing of this important structure has survived, insofar as is presently known, and no full contemporary word picture appears to have been painted. Until recently no adequate later picture of it had been achieved even though scattered contemporary references and descriptive phrases tell us much about what the early fort was like. The Sidney King painting which is based on extensive National Park Service research and which is now mounted in the Jamestown Exhibit Rooms is a reasonably well documented and understandable picture of "James Fort" as it was built in 1607 and as it continued into 1610. This interpretation is based, where possible, on known documentary information and this is supplemented by reliance on period custom, tradition, and methods about which considerable is known.

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1

"...this Fort which the English call James Fort..." (Copy of a document endorsed on the outside "July 1, 1610. Report on Virginia to Spanish Council of state" in Alexander Brown, Genesis of the United States, (Boston, 1890), I, 394.

Work on the fort was begun initially on May 14, the day after the arrival of the settlers at Jamestown, and a month later, on June 15, George Percy reported it as "built and finished." He, too, recorded a thumb nail description when he wrote that it was "triangle wise, having three Bulwarkes, at every corner, like a halfe Moone, and foure or five pieces of Artillerie mounted in them."<sup>2</sup> All houses and buildings were initially in the fort and this cluster was "the Towne" and was so designated at the time.<sup>3</sup>

"cast almost into the forme of a Triangle..."<sup>4</sup>

It is quite evident that the Fort was and for sometime continued to be triangular in shape, and that it was built close among the "weedes" and the "thickets and long grasse."<sup>5</sup> It was built in this form "by reason the advantage of the ground doth so require."<sup>6</sup> It was a triangle,

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2

"Observations by Master George Percy, 1607" in L. G. Tyler, Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625, (New York, 1930), pp. 14, 15-16, 19.

The Fort was rushed to completion despite harrassment as well as visits and even some good advice from the Indians. ("A relayton of the Discovery, & c." by Gabriel Archer (?) in Edward Arber (ed.), Travels and Works of Captain John Smith (Edinburgh, 1910), I, lii-lv.)

3

"The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia..." in Samuel Purchas, Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, (Glasgow, 1906) XVIII, 476; "A true reportory of the wracke, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates..." by William Strachey in Purchas His Pilgrimes, XIX, 58.

Strachey gives it as "this our Fort, or James Towne."

4

Strachey, "A true reportory" XIX, 56; Percy, "Observations", p. 19; Archer, "A relayton", I, lii-lv.

5

Archer, "A relayton", I, lii-lv.

6

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 56.

an isosceles triangle, with a long side on the south, facing the river, and its two shorter, equal sides facing northeast and northwest, respectively. Its linear measurements are known since they were given, in 1610, as 140 yards on the south parallel to the river, and 100 yards on each of the sides extending away from the James.<sup>7</sup>

There is mention of the Fort being changed into a "five-square forme" in September, 1608,<sup>8</sup> however, in 1610 Strachey described it in some detail as still having triangular shape. Perhaps, a cleared area on the east side of the Fort was stockaded and in a sense joined to it as has been conjectured,<sup>9</sup> but never actually became an integrated part of the Fort proper.

"and so Pallizadoed"--"With all speedes"<sup>10</sup>

The three sides of the Fort were palisaded with heavy stout logs, "Planckes and strong Posts ... of yong Oakes, Walnuts, etc." set vertically side by side.<sup>11</sup> They went some four feet into the ground and

7.

Ibid.

8

"The Generall Historie of Virginia..." by Captain John Smith in Edward Arber (ed.) Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, II, 433-4; "The proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia..." (Purchas His Pilgrimes), XVIII, 494.

9

Samuel H Yonge, The Site of Old "James Towne", 1607-1698, (Richmond, 1930), pp. 31-34.

10

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 56; "A True Relation..." by Captain John Smith in Edward Arber, Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, I, 8.

11

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 57; Archer, "A relayton", I, lii-lv; Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 612; Notes for an answer to Propositions made by Lord Chichester, August or September, 1623 in Susan Myra Kingsbury (ed.), The Records of the Virginia Company of London, (Washington, 1935), IV, 259.

reached a height of 14 or 15 feet.<sup>12</sup> In front of this heavy wall was a trench or ditch.<sup>13</sup> At each of three corners (bastions) of the Fort, where the palisaded walls met, a "Bulwarke or Watchtower was raised," shaped as "a halfe Moone."<sup>14</sup> Here in these raised positions ordnance was set up on prepared platforms--"most well mounted upon convenient plat-formes."<sup>15</sup>

The "principall Gate from the Towne" opened toward the James while each of the shorter sides of the Fort likewise had its gate "at each Bulwarke," all gates being hinged.<sup>16</sup> Each entrance and exit was covered by an artillery piece, mounted on the inside of the Fort, as was the

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12 Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 612; Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 57.

13 "The fortifications antientlie used were by Trench and Pallizado." (Notes for an answer to Propositions made by Lord Chichester, August or September, 1623 in Susan Myra Kingsbury (ed.), The Records of the Virginia Company of London, (Washington, 1935), IV, 259.

The fort, too, was described as "a well entrenched fort." (Report to the Spanish Council of State, in Brown, Genesis, I, 394.

14 Percy, "Observations", 19; Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 612; Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 55-58; Letter of Don Diego Sarmiento de Acana to H.N., London, October 5, 1613, in Brown, Genesis, II, 660.

The bulwarks were high enough for the Indians to hide under. (Archer, "A relayton", I, liii).

15 Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 612.

Smith also relates that there were 24 artillery pieces available in 1608. Strachey mentions, "a peece of Ordnance or two well mounted." ("A true reportory", XIX, 55-58). Percy mentions "four or five pieces of Artillerie mounted in them." ("Observations", p. 19).

Spanish information was that "in this fort they put twenty pieces of artillery," later much more. (Report on Virginia to Spanish Council of State, in Brown, Genesis, I, 394).

16 Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 57.

There is specific mention of both "portes" and "gates" (Letter of the Governor and Council of Virginia to the Virginia Company of London, July 7, 1610, in Brown, Genesis, I, 405-6.

market place.<sup>17</sup>

The one small and highly diagrammatic sketch (1608) of the Fort confirms the written word about the general form and design of the structure. This sketch, however, shows two projections on the south side which are not mentioned in the various accounts and are, in a real sense, baffling. This sketch shows, too, in a symbolic manner, that colors flew from the north bastion.<sup>18</sup>

"a settled streete of houses"<sup>19</sup>

The records reveal that inside the Fort a formal arrangement prevailed. There was a street, some 30 to 36 feet wide, parallel to each side of the enclosure with palisades on the outside of the street and a row of houses on the inside.<sup>20</sup> The three rows, embracing some 20 to 30 cottages or cabins,<sup>21</sup> when joined, like the palisaded walls, formed an inner triangle. Within the resulting triangularly shaped center of the

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17

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 57.

18

A chart of Virginia sent from London, September 10, 1608, by Zuniga to the King of Spain, reproduced in Brown, Genesis, I, between pages 184-185.

19

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 56.

20

"The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia...", (Purchas His Pilgrimes) XVIII, 476.

Smith, in his "Generall Historie", (II, 406-407) gives the width as 8 or 10 yards. Strachey ("A true reportory", XIX, 56) describes the streets as "a proportioned distance from the Pallisado."

21

This estimate of houses (cabins) is projected on the basis that in the fall of 1609 there were reported to be some 40 to 60 and of these some 20 were built earlier in 1609. (Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 471, 486, 612; "The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612" in Arber, Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, I, 154.)

Fort were the buildings and spaces of a more public character<sup>22</sup> such as the enumerated Church ("a pretty Chappell"), storehouse, guard house ("Corps du guard"), "a market place"<sup>23</sup> and very probably the "faire Well" of "excellent sweete water" known to have been dug in the Fort. Then, too, at some point there was the "stove."<sup>24</sup>

"thatcht cabbins" for homes<sup>25</sup>

The first homes and buildings at Jamestown were crude--flimsy structures of wood, frame, and thatch. Green timber for buildings and reeds

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22

It is of interest at this point to quote the instructions of the Virginia Company to the first settlers in 1606: "And seeing order is at the same price with confusion, it shall be adviseably done to set your houses even by a line, that your street may have a good breadth, and be carried square about your market place and every street's end opening into it; that from thence, with a few field pieces, you may command every street throughout, which market place you may also fortify if you think it needfull." (The Original Writings & Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts (The Hakluyt Society, 1935), 2nd Ser., No. 77, pp. 495-6).

23

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 56; "A Discourse of virginia" by Edward Maria Wingfield in Arber, Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, I, lxxxvi.

24

Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 471, 612; "The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612", (Arber) I, 154; Wingfield, "A Discourse", I, lxxvii.

In 1610 this well was not considered so sweet being then described as 6 or 7 fathoms deep and "fed by the brackish River owzing into it" making it a source of infection. (Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 58.)

25

"A Briefe Declaration of the Plantation of Virginia duringe the first Twelve Yeares...By the Ancient Planters nowe residing..." in H. R. McIlwaine (ed.), Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1619-1658/59. (Richmond, 1915), pp. 28, 31; Smith, "A True Relation", I, 8-9.

In "The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia", (Purchas His Pilgrimes), XVIII, 476), they were mentioned as "being but thatched with Reeds."

for covering were at hand and soon put to use.<sup>26</sup> Initially the houses were "pargetted and plaistered with Bitumen or tough Clay,"<sup>27</sup> and tents were used to protect the settlers from the elements.<sup>28</sup>

Smith, in later years, commented that the "Church...was a homely thing like a barne, set upon Cratchets, covered with rafts, sedge, and earth; so was also the walls: the best of our houses of the like curiosity ..."<sup>29</sup> So frail was the construction that repair and re-roofing was a constant problem and done often.<sup>30</sup> It was recognized that the houses had "no great uniformity, either for fashion, or beauty of the streete."<sup>31</sup>

Experience was a great teacher and soon the settlers were using Indian mats for the walls and bark for roofs as the natives did.<sup>32</sup> Strachey in 1610 mentioned the existence of "wide and large Country chinneys" and the use of strong boards and mats for covering. He mentioned,

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26

Smith reported "we cut planks" ("Advertisements For the unexperienced Planters of New England..." in Arber, Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, II, 957.

When the Fort was under construction in May and June 1607, some colonists were put to work "to binde thatch; some to build houses, and others to thatch them." ("The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present," I, 96).

27

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 58.

28

Smith, "Advertisements", II, 957; "The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612", I, 91; Archer, "A Relayton", I, lii-lv.

29

Smith, "Advertisements", II, 957.

Henry Chandlee Forman gives an explanation of "Crotchet" construction in Jamestown and St. Mary's: Buried Cities of Romance (Baltimore, 1938), pp. 30-54.

30

Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 406-7, 433-4; "The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612" (Arber), I, 154; "The Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia", (Purchas His Pilgrimes), XVIII, 494.

31

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 57.

32

Ibid, 157-8; Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 502-3.

too, that to his eyes the Church was "a pretty Chappell" measuring 60 feet  
by 24 feet.<sup>33</sup>

"Artillerie" and "armes"<sup>34</sup>

The ordnance listed for the Fort in January, 1608, consisted of 24  
"Culvering, Demiculvering, Sacar and Falcon" and "most was well mounted  
on convenient plat-formes."<sup>35</sup> It is from these that the Fort ordnance  
was drawn. There were several pieces in each "Bulwarke" and there were  
"Demi-Culvering" before the gates and in the market place.<sup>36</sup> Such pieces  
functioned in the protection of the Fort and on occasion small shot was  
used to repell the Indians.<sup>37</sup>

Small arms in use are known specifically to have included "Muskets,  
Snaphances, and Firelocks" and "Curats Pikes Swords and Morrio  $\sqrt{n/s}$ ."<sup>38</sup>  
These undoubtedly would have been seen prominently in the Fort and on the  
drill field, "Smithfield" as it was called, on the west side but just  
beyond the Fort in 1608 where "the whole Company every Saturday exercised."<sup>39</sup>

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33

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 55-58

Strachey gives considerable detail on the Church repairs contemplated in 1610 and the services as conducted at that time.

34

"The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612," (Arber), I, 103; Percy, "Observations", p. 19.

35

Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 612.

36

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 56-57.

37

Archer, "A relayton", I, lii-lv.

38

Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 486.

39

Ibid, 433-4.

## Life went on in the Fort

Here in the wilderness in 1607 and in those first seasons that followed, home for the settlers was in the Fort. Here they lived and worked and here many died as in the "Starving Time" of 1609-1610. Here men, and several women too, ate, slept, worshiped, and rested. Here they held off the Indians. Around them were their "Armes, bedding apparell, and much [or little as the occasion dictated] private provision."<sup>40</sup> Here they husbanded their supplies, "Tooles of all sorts to worke", "Nets for fishing", and accoutrements of life and work such as they had, even their "Hennes and Chickens."<sup>41</sup>

"in a marish ground, low, flat to the River"<sup>42</sup>

The exact location at which James Fort was built has long been argued, and the known records are insufficient to prove any particular case. Contemporary references such as "standing on a point which goes out from the land into the river,"<sup>43</sup> are obscure in pin pointing precise

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40

"The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612", (Arber), I, 103; Smith, "Generall Historie", 406-7.

Food stuff, mentioned as at Jamestown in the first winter included "Oatmeale, meale, corne" "beefe, porke, oile, aquavatae, fish, butter and cheese, beere and such" and also "fish" and "bisket."

41

Smith, "Generall Historie", II, 486; Percy, "Observations," p. 19; "The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia...till this present 1612," (Arber), I, 154; Report on Virginia to Spanish Council of State in Brown, Genesis, I, 394; Archer, "A relayton," I, lii-lv; Wingfield, "A Discourse", I, lxxx.

42

Strachey, "A true reportory", XIX, 58.

43

Report on Virginia to Spanish Council of State in Brown, Genesis, I, 394.

position. It seems quite logical and has been generally accepted that the Fort was built near, but not at the point of landing. Even the point of landing is not specifically given as in the reference that is recorded by George Percy--"The thirteenth day, we came to our seating place in Paspihias Countrey, some eight miles from the point of Land Archer's Hope, now College, Creek... where our shippes doe lie so neere the shoare that they are moored to the Trees in six fathom water. The fourteenth day, we landed all our men, which were set to worke about the fortifications..."<sup>44</sup>

Col. Samuel H. Yonge, an army engineer who built a seawall at Jamestown in 1900-1901, proved a serious student of Jamestown history and did extensive research in the records and studied as well the James River channel and island erosion. His conclusions are important, and they substantiate tradition as to the Fort location.<sup>45</sup> Lyon G. Tyler accepted his interpretation.<sup>46</sup> Later, George C. Gregory advanced the idea, supported by fragmentary data (largely documentary) and logic based on this incomplete data that the site was not at the traditionally accepted spot in the general vicinity of the area above the Church Tower, but at a point some distance east of "New Towne."<sup>47</sup> This conception was accepted

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44

Percy, "Observations", 15.

It is important that the ships could be brought in close to the shore. This, Percy relates, is the principal reason that Archer's Hope Creek was rejected as a settlement site.

45

The Site of Old "James Towne," 1607-1698 (Richmond, 1930), 25-34.

46

The Cradle of the Republic: Jamestown and James River (Richmond, 1906), v-vi, 30.

47

"'James City' and 'James City Island', 1607-1700: The First Fort Site and City Limits from Time to Time", 1935 (photostat of typescript in Colonial NHP Library.)

by Henry Chandlee Forman, who marshalled all of the available facts in an able fashion in his book published in 1938.<sup>48</sup> Exploratory excavations made in 1937 at the site proposed by Gregory and Forman yielded negative results although this does not necessarily dispose of the interpretation. The archeologist doing the work considered that additional excavating was needed,<sup>49</sup> and there seems to have been erosion here as well.

The documents do not prove, or disprove, either of the site locations, and neither has been proved by positive evidence in the ground. Each site raises a number of unsettled points. In the absence of conclusive proof, however, it appears that the stronger case, at least a good case, rests with the acceptance of the traditional location for use for interpretive purposes.<sup>50</sup> Archeological study at, or near, this site is needed but has not been undertaken. It is assumed, generally that the greater part of the site has been destroyed, yet a small portion may still exist. To find positive evidence would settle the point. To find nothing would leave the question in its present state. A photograph of the "James Fort" painting follows, and the insert on this painting shows the traditionally accepted location.

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48  
Jamestown and St. Mary's, 331-37.

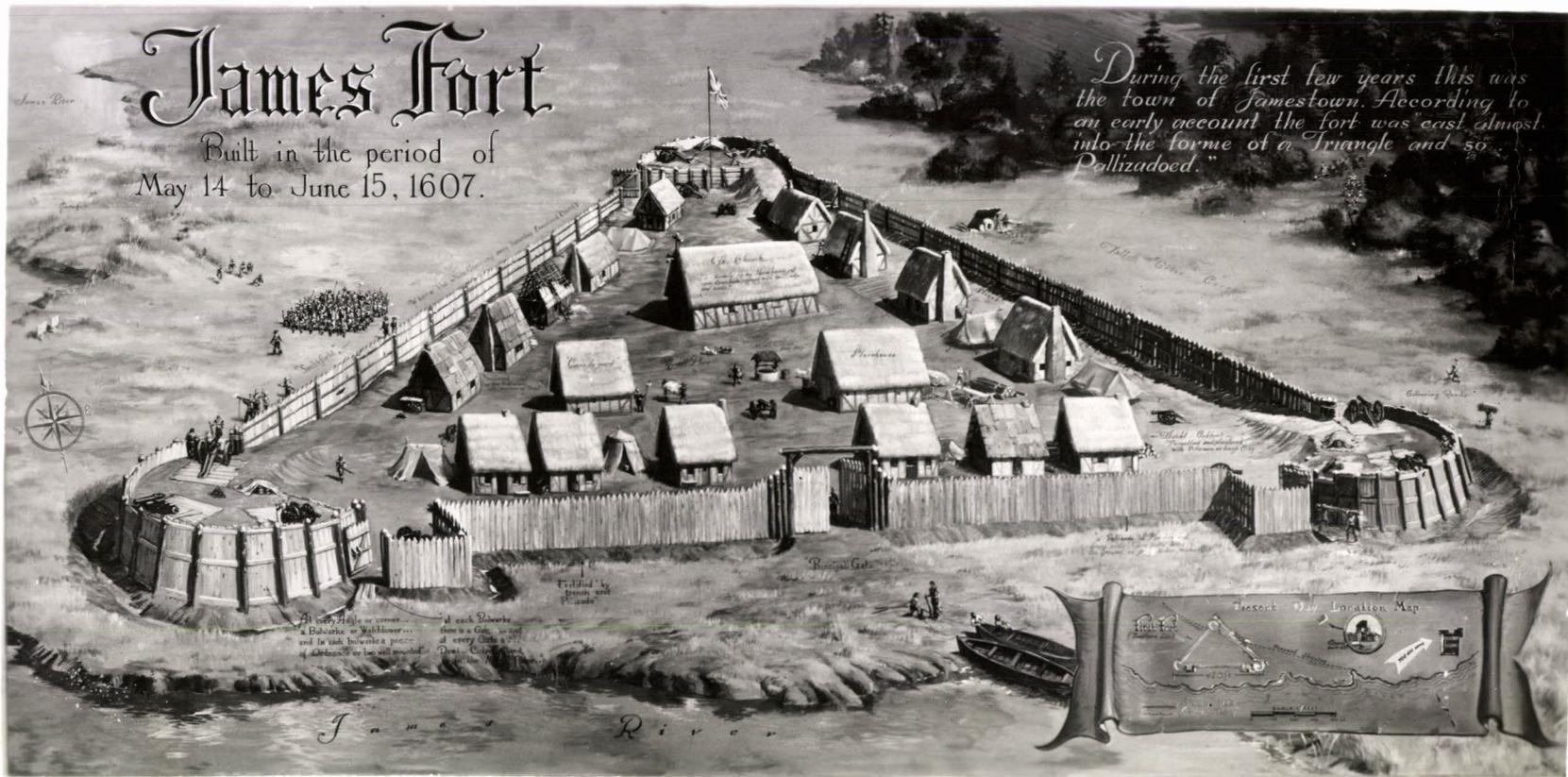
49  
Carl F. Miller, Junior Archeologist, Memorandum to Mr. J. C. Harrington, (December 18, 1937) in Colonial NHP files.

50  
Charles S. Marshall (in an 18 page typed paper, "The First Settlement at Jamestown, Virginia", written, it appears, about 1936) evaluated the merits of the conflicting schools of thought (Yonge-Tyler vs Gregory) and concluded: "There is strong evidence to substantiate either theory. This question will not be settled until one or more field of primary source material is covered--the actual remains in the ground."

# James Fort

Built in the period of  
May 14 to June 15, 1607.

*During the first few years this was  
the town of Jamestown. According to  
an early account the fort was cast almost  
into the forme of a Triangle and so  
Pallizadoed.*



At every stile or corner...  
a Barbette or Raignlower...  
and in each bowwin a piece  
of Ordnance or two well mounted.

At each Barbette  
there is a Gate, so that  
at every Gate a well  
Drest Guard is kept.

Fortified by  
trunks and  
Planks

Principal Gate





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