

COLO:152 —
CRBIB E016852,
333/130721

10-23
(June 1941)

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

----- NATIONAL PARK

FILE NO.

HISTORY DIVISION
RESEARCH

"An Old Wharf at Yorktown, Virginia",
William and Mary College Quarterly,
Vol. 22, Second Series, July 1942

IMPORTANT

This file constitutes a part of the official records of the National Park Service and should not be separated or papers withdrawn without express authority of the official in charge.

All Files should be returned promptly to the File Room.
Officials and employees will be held responsible for failure to observe these rules, which are necessary to protect the integrity of the official records.

By: Charles E. Hatch, Jr.

W. J. M. C. 2.
XXII, no. 3 (Jul. 1942)

H. Hib
(Colonial-
research-
Yorktown
Wharf)

AN OLD WHARF AT YORKTOWN, VIRGINIA

By CHARLES E. HATCH, JR.

Yorktown, in the eighteenth century, was a trade center of significance in the lower Chesapeake Bay region. Quite naturally wharves, warehouses, and landing places extended out from the shore all along the "waterside." This is well known, yet the nature, design and location of these facilities for landing and loading cargoes is less known. Since material of this nature seems relatively scarce new information becomes of value and adds to the knowledge of colonial life. Because of this the old wharf remains, down stream from the foot of Read Street, in Yorktown prove quite interesting. All that is left of the wharf now lies beneath the water except when the tide is extremely low. On such occasions it is partly visible—a pile of small stones, rocks, rotten wormeaten timber, sand, brick, and accumulated debris.

Just how many wharves, "ways", or landing places jutted out from along the shoreline of the Yorktown waterfront section during the colonial era is not clear, yet that there was a "Public Wharf" here at least as early as 1749 seems clear. The construction of such a wharf was ordered then, and in 1754 there was definite mention of a public wharf in use. Presumably from that date until after the Revolution the public supported a town wharf at Yorktown, the county seat for York County. The records are clear that it was often in disrepair and constituted a real public charge. In 1759 it became necessary to order that a wharf be built at the public tobacco warehouse, and just two years later repairs were in order again. However, the bill presented by Robert Smith, a few months after the repairs were ordered, stated that the stipulated sum of £46 was due for building, not repairing the wharf. Perhaps this meant simply heavy repair work, for on this point the records are not always clear. Again in 1762 Joseph Stroud received £14 for repairing the public wharf.¹ In 1768 there was more court action and:

Dudley Digges, Thomas Nelson Junr David Jameson Nicholas Dickson and Jacquelin Ambler Gent [all prominent merchants, planters, or citizens of Yorktown] or any three of them are by the Court appointed to agree with Workmen to build a Wharf at the Public Warehouse for tobacco at York Town at the Expense of the County.²

¹ York County Records, *Judgments and Orders*, No. 1 (1746-1752), p. 218; *Judgments and Orders*, No. 3 (1759-1763), pp. 110, 249, 450; *Deeds*, No. 5, p. 600.

² Y. C. R., *Judgments and Orders* (1768-1770), p. 54.

recovery of that invaluable Blessing—Health—but enough on this subject for the present.

Mrs. Washington, who takes pleasure in hearing of your welfare desires her compliments may be presented along with the sincerest wishes of

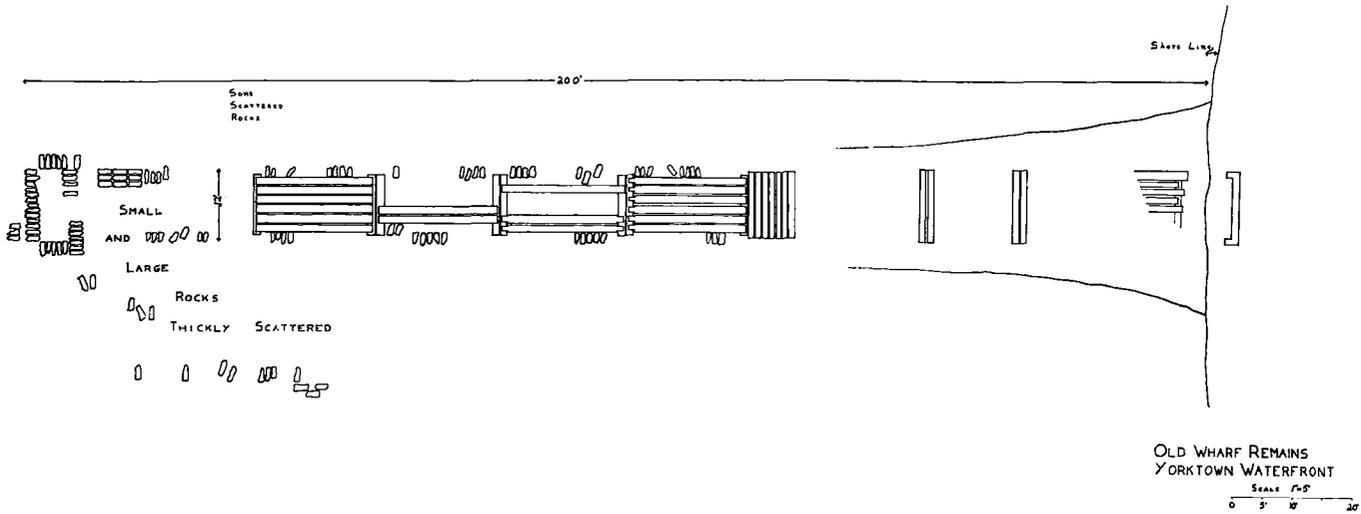
Dear Sir,

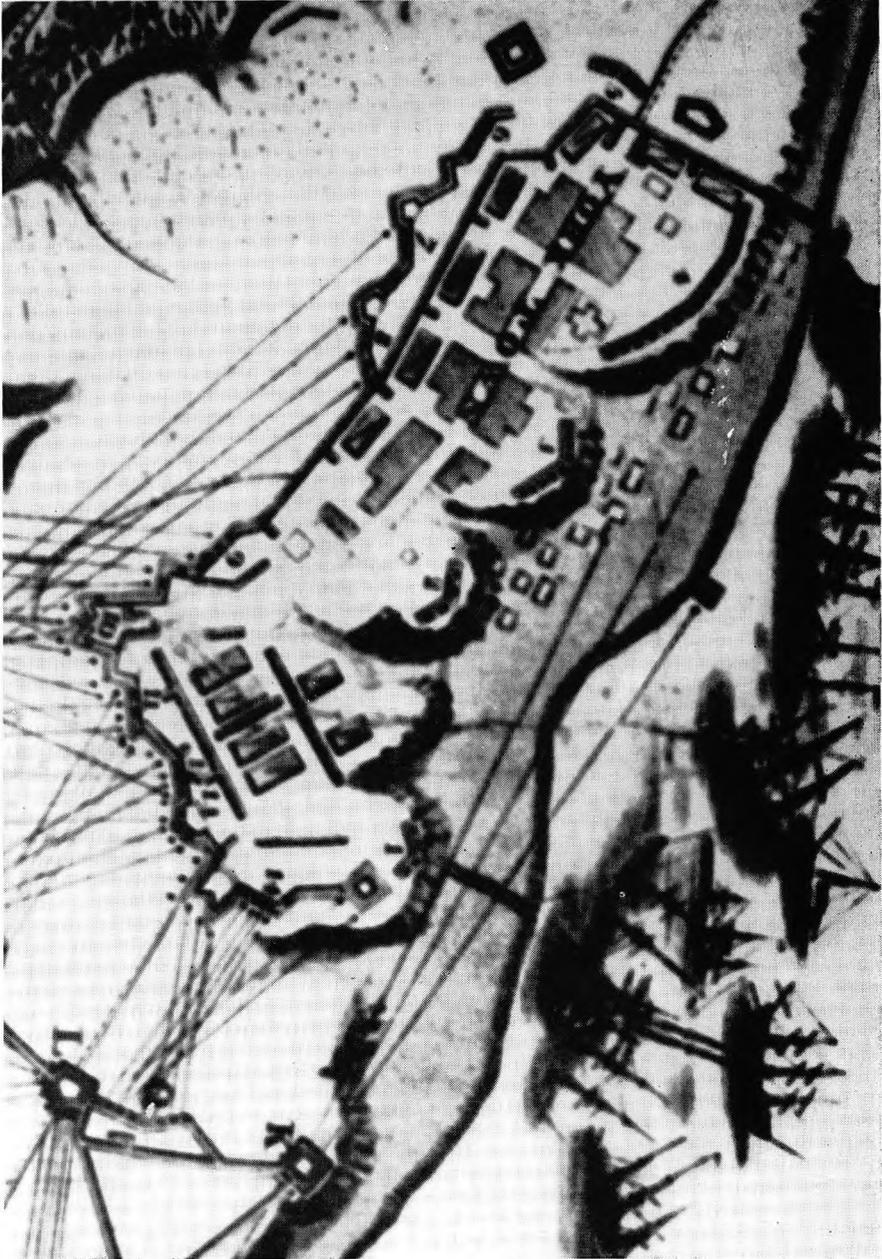
Your most obedient and humble servant,

Geo. Washington.

P. S. Your little white horse departed this life soon after you did this country.

A Drawing—"Old Wharf Remains,
Yorktown Waterfront."





*A section from Sebastian Bauman's "Plan of the investment of York and Gloucester".
Note the line of fire from captured British Redoubt No. 10 ("K" on map)
to the wharf on the Yorktown waterfront.*

In 1769 a hurricane "carried away" the "top of the wharf", yet repairs must have been made very soon for in 1770 it seems to have been in use again.³

Where all of the wharves mentioned in the York County records were built it is not easy to determine. Conceivably all could have been at the same location and the terms repairs, or building (rebuilding), could have been used to explain different stages of disrepair. If this assumption is true, then the one location only would have to be determined. Documentary evidence for the period before 1781 exists, yet it is of a general and elusive type. Data for the 1768-1772 period is better than that for the earlier years, and at that time there is strong reason for the belief that the wharf was located at some point between Read Street and the mouth of the "Great Valley."⁴

In 1781, during and after the siege of Yorktown, the engineers with the American, French, and British armies prepared maps of the areas covered by their operations. It is fortunate that at least four of these maps—two French and two American—carry in graphic form the location of a wharf at Yorktown. As to location all agree that it was at a point between Read Street and the "Great Valley"—the same location as indicated by the earlier data concerning the "town wharf". One of the French maps shows the wharf by enclosed lines, with a smaller wharf just a little down stream. The second French map locates it in even bolder manner with two heavy lines extending parallel into the river. J. F. Renault shows it and Sebastian Bauman does this and more. He denotes it as a point covered by the fire from captured Redoubt No. 10, with its two 8-inch howitzers and two 18-pounder cannon.⁵ There seems little room for doubt that a wharf stood here in 1781, and it seems very probable that it was the town wharf of the late colonial period.

After 1781 there is little mention of this wharf, or little reference to any Yorktown wharf that might apply to it, except

³ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon, publishers), issues for September 14, 1769 and September 13, 1770.

⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (William Rind, publisher), issue for October 27, 1768; Y. C. R., *Deeds*, No. 5, p. 600 and No. 8, p. 53.

⁵ "Plan du Siege d'York, en Virginie par l'Armee Alliee d'Amerique et de France Sous les Ordres des gaux Washington et C.te de Rochambeau, contre l'Armee Anglaise Commandee par Lord Cornwallis en Octobre 1781"; "Plan du Siege d'York en Virginie par l'Armee alliee d'Amerique et de France, Sous les Ordres des Generaux Washington et Comte de Rochambeau; Contre l'Armee Anglaise Commandee par de Lord Cornwallis en octobre 1781; Sebastian Bauman, Major of New York, or 2nd Regiment of Artillery, "Plan of the investment of York and Gloucester"; J. F. Renault, American engineer with the French Army at Yorktown, "Plan of York Town in Virginia and Adjacent Country." Copies of these maps are in the library of Colonial National Historical Park.

petitions to the General Assembly of Virginia, one in 1839 and one in 1847, to the effect that Yorktown had no wharf to meet the needs of the residents there. A significant statement, however, is found on a sketch map showing buildings in the waterfront area in 1866. In 1922 Mr. Ed Gallagher made this sketch from his recollection of the area as it had been in 1866. On this sketch he notes near the foot of Read Street the "Site of Stone Warf."⁶ Apparently this location is that of the old wharf remains that exist today, that shown on the 1781 maps, and that indicated in the data for the period of years from 1768 to 1772. This, together with observations made when the remains were partly visible, constitutes strong proof that they are those of a wharf of the 1781 period, or even of an earlier period—perhaps the town wharf. This last statement rests in part on the fact that military engineers in 1781 would have been interested in the strongest and most serviceable pier, or piers, if there were more than one. Logically it would seem that the town wharf, built to accommodate the nearby public tobacco warehouses, would have been designed for heavier use than a private structure. In colonial Yorktown tobacco was the chief export, and in keeping with the inspection system, practically all tobacco was inspected in the public tobacco warehouses and must have passed over the wharves built to accommodate these inspection points. Judging from casual references in the Orderly Book kept by Ensign Dennis of the British Army during the Siege of 1781, at that time, there was a principal wharf serving the town. He thought of it as "the Wharf" and "the landing."⁷

When the tide at Yorktown is extremely low, the remains of the old wharf, located 265 feet down stream from Read Street, are visible for almost three-fourths of their 200-foot length.⁸ At first glance it appears as a long pile of stone, yet on examination more of its real features come to light. Apparently the wharf that stood here was not more than 12 to 14 feet wide except at the outshore end. Visible close to the shore is an old timber imbedded in the sand—possibly a footing. Farther out on the wharf, but still near the shore, other timber construction has been observed. Here, there is a heavy cross-timber, with equally heavy hewn logs at-

⁶ Petition of Robert Anderson, February 22, 1839, and petition of William Nelson, February 8, 1847, to the General Assembly of Virginia. Documents in the Virginia State Library; Pencil sketch "Map—Made by Ed Gallagher of Buildings on Beach 1866 made from recollection June 1922", exhibit filed in the suit of J. A. Shield versus Trustees of Town of York, *et al.* Map filed in the York County Records.

⁷ Page 7 of the typescript of the Orderly Book in the library of C. N. H. P.

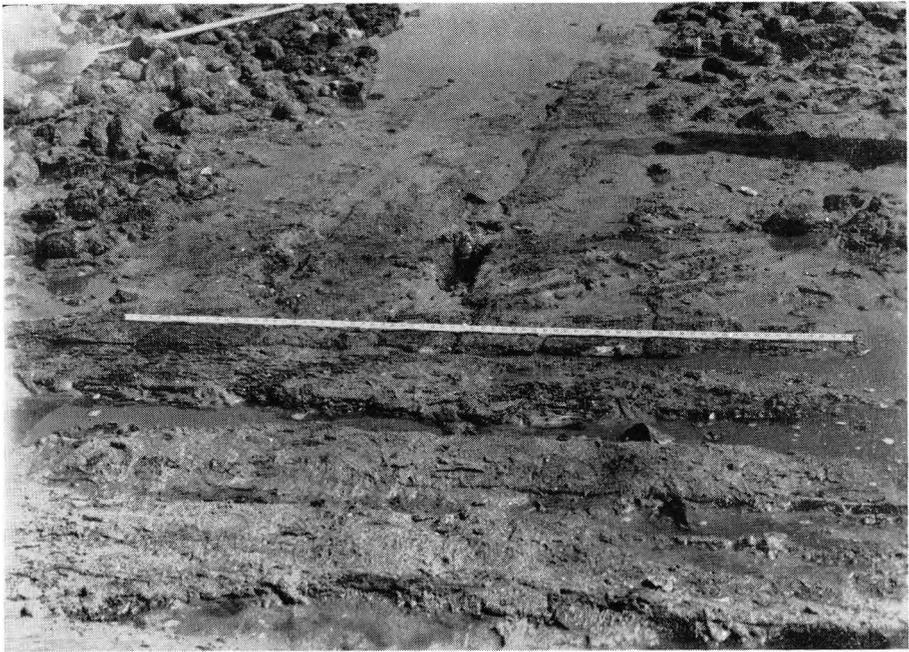
⁸ Observations of the old wharf were made on March 26, 1940 and March 20, 1941 by the author and others. In addition some photographs were taken during December, 1940.



The wharf remains extend into the York River a distance of 200 feet. The figure at the extreme right marks the end of the pile. Debris is scattered along the shore on each side of the remains. This is chiefly brick, stone, bottle fragments, and miscellaneous objects. Much of it is obviously modern deposit, some apparently old.



Old timbers, worm-eaten and waterlogged, in place at the shore end of the wharf.



Old timbers at a point about 75 feet from the shore. Note the construction details visible here—lengthwise timbers in the background joining crosswise timbers in the foreground. A six foot rule shows the scale.



Stone scattered over the old wharf remains. Note the large regularly placed stones forming a line in the center of the photograph. Such a line followed down much of the outer edges of the timber construction. The smaller stones appear to have been used as a filler. The deposit of sand seemed greater in 1941 than in 1940.

tached and overlapping. These extend out on to the wharf. For some distance along the wharf, beyond this, at different points, timbers from 10 to 12 feet long have been seen. These, placed only an inch or two apart, extend across the structure.

At a point about 77 feet from the shore line this type of construction seemingly ends, and in its place are what seem to be separate sections.⁹ Each section extends longitudinally about 21 feet and has the same features. Each begins and ends in a cross-timber that ties the longer timbers extending the full length of the section. As many as six of the longer, heavier timbers have been noted lying parallel in a single section. At least four sections can be defined.

Along the edge of each side extend cut stones approximately 2 to 2½ feet long, 11 inches wide, and from 8 to 10 inches deep. Apparently they were placed there to help keep the timbers in position, or to make the whole structure more solid. Many of these stones are still in place, while many more seem shifted out of position. The stones are slate gray in color on the outer surface and seem to be a variety of sandstone. Much small stone is scattered over the entire wharf site and some has been washed ashore on each side of the ruins. The abundance of small stone suggests that it was used as a support for the wharf, or to fill timber cribs.

From the end of the last observed timber section to the end of the pier no wood construction has been noticed. Regularly placed stone across the end of the wharf, however, definitely marks the end of the structure. In fact, the regularity of the stone work at the end seems particularly significant.

Because of a mass of stone, most of it in irregular position, on the upriver side of the wharf, there seems reason to believe that there may have been a widening of the pier at this point. The fact that the outer course of stone has some degree of regularity would add strength to this. Such an enlargement would have accommodated smaller boats and given space for a shelter, or storehouse, on the wharf itself.

The plan of the wharf as observed has a good deal in common with the plan of a wharf proposed to Neil Jameson by George Veale in 1773. This wharf was to be constructed, it would seem, somewhere in the Norfolk, or Portsmouth, area. The structure was to consist of two separate piers 160 feet long by 16 feet wide, both running out to, and connecting with, a 54 by 40 foot wharf-

⁹ If it becomes possible to erect a dike around the remains and to drain off the water a careful study of the old timbers should reveal much more than can be observed at short intervals when the tide is low. By moving stones and timber, where necessary, other timber and stones may yield additional information.

head at the end. The plans called for a log bottom made up of 46 logs 12 inches thick and 40 feet long in the outer "penn" (head) with sides "9 Logs high to be 18 Inches thick Sided Two sides, and Clossley Trayed, . . .", the inner section to be "filld mostly with stone." The 160 foot piers 16 feet wide (and apparently only one was considered for immediate construction) were to be divided into 10 sections by means of 10 ties "12 Inch thick 16 feet Long". That is to say, the 160 foot pier would be made of ten sections each 16 feet by 16 feet by eight logs high, all encased except on top by log cribbings—the compartments to be "filld up with wood & Mud". The "Bottom to be made up all of Loggs to keep from sinking in the Mud".¹⁰

From observations and from research, it appears that the old wharf remains occasionally visible on the Yorktown waterfront are those of the principal wharf of the town in the late colonial era. Built as other wharves of the period, and located in one of the busiest sections of the waterfront, it served the planters and merchants of Yorktown and the outlying districts. When the British reached Yorktown in 1781 there seems little question that they used it. With many ships and small boats in the harbor, Cornwallis found such a structure of immediate value. This is sufficient explanation for the fact that the wharf was considered a legitimate target by the American engineers and gunners.

¹⁰"Neil Jamieson Papers", Vol. 6, No. 1322, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.