

Pre-Columbian 1500 1600

Moynock Indian settlement (located in present-day Colonies subdivision) Orapax Home of Chief Powhatan (located on Pamunkey near Hanover County line) Matchot - Indian Village on the site of Eltham across the river from "Pamaunkee," the village of Opeocanough. It was here that John Smith traded for corn that saved the colony. Also Pocahontas was captured on the Patomac and brought here as hostage.



Capt. John Smith

1560-1570 Spanish explorers sail the York, James, and Chickahominy Rivers in search of gold. They left some missionaries who were later killed by the native tribes.



Chickahominy Indians

1750

1759 - Marriage of Martha Dandridge Custis to George Washington on Jan 6.



The wedding of George & Martha Washington

1766 - New Kent Presbyterian Church organized

1770 - Rev. Charles Smith comes to Providence Forge to begin a Presbyterian settlement

1775 - Courthouse burned, no loss of records

1776 - Charles City Baptist Church (Emmas) formed



Revolutionary War re-enactment at New Kent Courthouse

1622 - First Indian Massacre

1644 - Indian Massacre

1646 Fort James established near present-day Lanexa, and Fort Royal on the Pamunkey River near White House after the Indian massacre of 1644. Fort James was commanded by Thomas Rolfe, son of John Rolfe and Pocahontas.



Criss Cross

1653 - Blisland Parish Established

1652 Tobacco warehouses and iron forge estab. at Providence Forge. Mill located there ground grain for both Revolutionary and Union Troops. Locals dismantled the forge and buried it at Cornwallis' approach rather than let it fall into British hands.



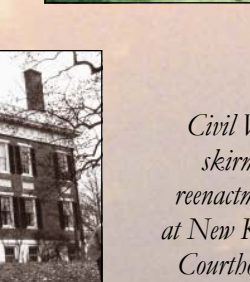
Foster's Castle

1654 - New Kent County formed from Charles River County. Foster's Castle patented.

1669 - Eltham Plantation established, family home of the Bassetts (Martha Washington's sister was Anna Marie Bassett). Bassett also owned the land on which the New Kent Courthouse and Ordinary were established.

1676 - Last battle of Bacon's Rebellion destroyed courthouse and records

1680 Brickhouse becomes the first town incorporated on the York River. First New Kent County seat. Site of Bacon's Rebellion.



Civil War skirmish re-enactment at New Kent Courthouse

1650

1661 - Cumberland Plantation established. Site of ferry from King William county.

1691-1695 - Courthouse moved from Brickhouse to current site

1703 - Wahran (Warreneye) Church est. Richmond Militia camped here during the War of 1812. St. Peters Parish Church erected.

1704 - Criss Cross est. This home and Foster's Castle are two of only 3 examples of this unique architecture in the country.

1713 - Martha Dandridge born at Chestnut Grove

1748 - Cumberland loses to Williamsburg by 3 votes in replacing Jamestown as Virginia's capital. James Armistead, famous Virginia slave-turned spy and who later adopted the surname Lafayette, was born.

(background) The Chickahominy River looks very much as it did when explored by Capt. John Smith in 1609 when he was searching for a route to the Pacific Ocean.

1700

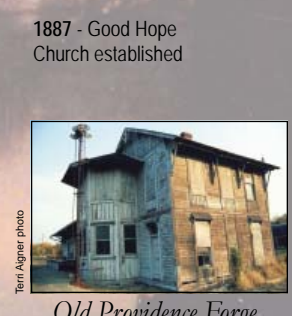
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St. Peter's Parish Church

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Old Providence Forge Railway Station



New Kent County Airport

1800

1817-1819 - Marengo and Waterloo plantations est. 1820 - Hampstead built 1830 - Liberty Baptist Church organized.

1842 - Hopewell Baptist Church organized. 1856 - Olivet Church formed

1861-1865 - The Civil War 1861 April - Citizens meet to make measures for defense and armament of the force of this county - ordered that \$4,000 worth of bonds be issued 1862 - Largest military force (130,000) in U.S. history assembled in New Kent by McClellan at Cumberland and White House. Military engagements at Brickhouse, Slatersville, and Talleyville. Court moved to Tunstall temporarily. 1863 February - Jail destroyed by a general of the CSA. The Congress of the CSA petitioned to rebuild jail or provide money to do so. Henrico selected as place to house prisoners. 1865 March - Slaves gone, farms not cultivated, wealthy families gone, not enough provisions to feed the county due to raids of Sheridan's Cavalry. April - Records burned in Richmond. August - New Justices take Amnesty Oath to uphold and defend the restored government of Virginia, the anti-dueling oath and the oath of office. Clerk's office destroyed by fire. Small loss of records.

1882 - C&O Railway constructed through New Kent County

1887 - Good Hope Church established

1914 - World War I flu epidemic

1930 - New Kent High School (present-day middle school) built

1935 - New Kent Training School (present-day G.W. Watkins Elementary) built

1940 - Diascund Reservoir constructed.

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1968 - Green vs. School Board of New Kent County

1997 - Colonial Downs and Royal New Kent Golf course built

2000

Historic Events

Bacon's Rebellion

In 1676, Nathaniel Bacon formed a small army of Virginia farmers, including men from New Kent County, and rebelled against Governor William Berkeley for failing to protect them from Indian raids. At the end of Bacon's Rebellion, two of the rebel leaders, Lawrence and Drummond, fled from Brickhouse where they were stationed. Drummond was later caught in a swamp in New Kent and executed for his involvement, as was Thomas Hall, New Kent's first Clerk of Courts. Hall was hung offshore on the English ship Aurora.

Green vs. School Board of New Kent County, 1968

New Kent County received national attention in 1968 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a "freedom of choice" plan adopted in 1965 by the New Kent School Board to integrate schools was ineffective. In 1966 the school system served almost 1,300 students. Of these, 740 were black and 550 white. By 1967, three years after implementing the choice plan, no white child had chosen to attend the George W. Watkins School (black school) and only 115 black students had chosen to attend the New Kent School (white school). Dr. Calvin Green, New Kent resident and Richmond school teacher, together with 465 other petitioners, filed a suit on the federal level after their request for relief from a racially segregated school system was not granted by the local or state government. Despite the Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, 1954, that segregated schools were unconstitutional, many school districts were still being operated (fourteen years later) with separate facilities for black and white students. It was not until Mr. Green and fellow New Kent residents took this issue to the highest level that integration in education actually took place full scale. As a result of the May 27, 1968, decision in favor of Green, between 1968 and 1970 all American school districts abolished the dual system and adopted other methods (such as zoning and busing) for ensuring equal education for all students. New Kent chose to create an integrated elementary school from the Watkins school and make the New Kent School the high school (present-day middle school).



New Kent Middle School

Special Places

Orapax

Orapax, the principal village of the Powhatan or chief of the Indian Confederacy (near the Hanover county line), was the location to which Capt. John Smith was taken when he was captured in 1607 by the native Americans.

According to the New Kent County land tax records, another Orapax, near Lanexa was included in 3,407 acres owned by Bartholomew Dandridge, brother of Martha Washington, in 1782.

Fort James & Fort Royal

After the Indian Massacre of 1644, Virginia's General Assembly determined to establish several forts as means of protecting the area from further Indian ambushes. Fort James, lying between Rt. 60 and the Chickahominy River on Diascund Creek, and Fort Royal (on the Pamunkey near White House) were two of these strongholds. Thomas Rolfe, the son of John Rolfe and Pocahontas, was assigned control of Fort James by the General Assembly in 1646.

Brickhouse

In 1680, by act of the General Assembly, Brickhouse was established as the first colonial port town incorporated on the York River. Serving as the county seat from 1654-1691, it contained the county records. The Bassett family, owners of the lands, ordinary, and warehouses located at Brickhouse, profited greatly from the services they provided those coming to and from the courts at Brickhouse.

Blisland Parish and Warreneye Church

Warreneye, the Upper Church of Blisland Parish (1653), near Eltham, was built in 1703 and was frequented by the Bassetts and General and Martha Washington. It was also used as an encampment for the Richmond Militia in the War of 1812. Tombstones dating back to 1736 and 1745 can still be found at the site, located on the Chesapeake Nature Trail on Route 33 near Eltham.

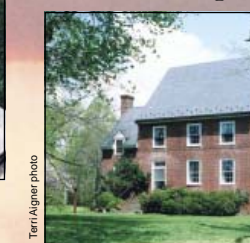
Cumberland

A one hundred acre tract on the south side of the Pamunkey River was donated by Richard Littlepage III in 1748 for the establishment of the town of Cumberland. Originally the location of the Littlepage plantation prior to 1700, it was also the site of a tobacco inspection point and warehouse erected in 1734. In 1748, Cumberland came within three votes of replacing Jamestown as Virginia's capitol. Cumberland also served as a prime location for unloading soldiers and supplies from the Pamunkey during the Revolution. General McClellan and 130,000 Federal troops were encamped here in 1862.

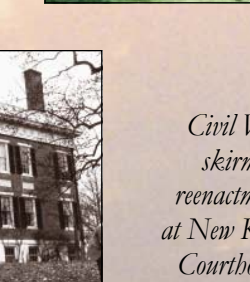


Powhatan entertaining Capt. John Smith

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Marengo



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New Kent County Airport

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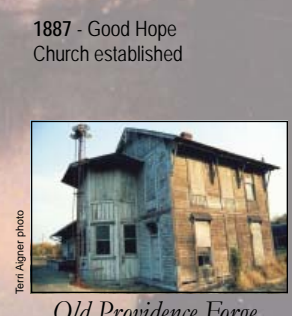
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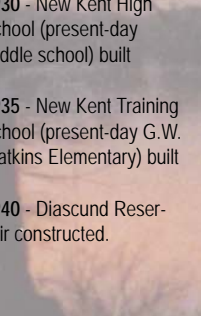
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Colonial Downs



Colonial Downs

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The Native Americans

When Spanish and English explorers arrived on our shores, they discovered that a highly developed civilization of native people already existed in the area we now call New Kent County. These people were united by a common language, system of government and culture. The Powhatan, or "great leader," had formed a confederacy of tribes, each with their own chiefs and councils.

The natives regarded the land, sky, water, and air as integral parts of the earth that could not be bought or sold. Their society was matrilineal.

In other words, family descent and inheritance passed through the women rather than the men. Most coastal natives were Algonquin speaking and the population was between 14,000 and 21,000.

Wahunsunacock, the Powhatan when the first English settlers arrived, reigned over 32 subchiefdoms in over 150 villages of various sizes. By 1669 the population of these native people had dropped to about 1,800 from warfare and disease. Most tribes were extinct by 1722. We are fortunate that the Pamunkey, Mattaponi and Chickahominy tribes and people still remain in our area as a reminder of this once very special nation.

While the Spanish visited the area in search of gold in the 1500s, colonial exploration of New Kent began with Captain John Smith in 1609. He explored the Chickahominy River and was captured by the native people. Taken across New Kent lands to the Powhatan's main village, Captain Smith relied on one of Wahunsunacock's daughters, Pocahontas (Matoaka), to serve as mediator between the two cultures. Relations between the colonists and the native people were tolerable considering the cultural differences,

as long as Pocahontas and her father were alive. Things changed soon after Pocahontas died in 1617 in England and her father died in 1618 at Orapax.

The European population grew quickly. Lands were claimed and homes established all along the rivers bordering our county. In 1622 the natives launched the first coordinated attack to expel the settlers. Wahunsunacock's brother, Opeacanough, led this attack and the intermittent warfare that followed.

In 1644, the native Americans tried to rid themselves of the colonists again, but by

then the colonists were 15,000 in number and the natives much less. Following the Indian War of 1644, three of the first colonial forts were established on the "frontier" for protection. Pocahontas's son would serve as one of first commanders of these, Fort James, near the present-day Colonies subdivision. The other fort in present-day New Kent, Fort Royal, on the Pamunkey River near White House landing, would serve as the nucleus for a thriving town and port. With the death of Opeacanough in 1646, the great native confederacy fell apart.

New Kent Notables

Martha Dandridge Custis Washington

One of the most fascinating stories of New Kent County's history involves the First Lady of our nation, Martha Washington. It was here at Chestnut Grove, only four miles from the present day courthouse, that Martha Dandridge was born on June 2, 1731. Her father, Major John Dandridge, came from London to New Kent and soon after married Frances Jones in 1730. That same year he became the Clerk of Courts in New Kent, a position which he retained for 26 years. He also served as a vestryman and churchwarden in St. Peter's Parish, where Martha and the other Dandridge children attended church. Her brother, Bartholomew Dandridge, later followed his father's footsteps in becoming Clerk of the Courts, and served as a vestryman and churchwarden for almost twenty years in the Blisland Parish.

It was at St. Peter's that the young Martha would frequently see Daniel Parke Custis, who became a vestryman there in 1739. Custis was a 37 year old bachelor who had just inherited his father's large White House Plantation on the Pamunkey River when he and Martha decided to marry. Rev. Thacker married the two on June 15, 1750, and they established their home at White House. During the eight years of their marriage Martha and Daniel had four children; only two (John Parke and Patsy) survived to adulthood. When Daniel died unexpectedly in 1758, Martha and the two children were left to manage the large estate. It was only eight months later, however, that the wealthy widow would visit Poplar Grove, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Chamberlayne and meet the man who would later be the first president of the United States.

On that March evening of 1758, Col. George Washington and his military servant, Bishop, crossed the Pamunkey, arriving at the Chamberlayne home, where he was persuaded to stay for dinner. Washington insisted that he could not stay long as he was on his way to Williamsburg intending to request aid from the Governor and Council for his regiment. After Chamberlayne introduced him to Martha Custis, however, Washington informed Bishop that he would be staying the evening at Poplar Grove. Several days later, Washington returned to White House to meet Martha and made plans for a wedding.

Rev. David Mossom of St. Peter's Parish officiated at the marriage of Martha to George Washington on January 6, 1759. According to her

grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, the winter wedding took place "at candlelight" in the White House, instead of in the unheated church. Years later, Gen. Robert E. Lee, the husband of Martha's great-granddaughter, would attempt to save St. Peter's Church from desecration by writing that St. Peter's was the site of George Washington's marriage. No official record remains which could confirm the location of the wedding.

When Martha left New Kent to join her new husband at Mt. Vernon, the White House estate was managed in Quarters by overseers until her son, John Parke, became old enough to take it under his control. She and Washington made several visits back to New Kent to see family and friends.

New Kent was a special place to Martha Washington and her family members. Our records are permeated with her family's presence and leadership in our county. Though her homes at Chestnut Grove and White House are no longer standing, the history Martha Washington made in our county undoubtedly serves as a more lasting relic of her residency here.

James Armistead Lafayette

James Armistead was born a slave in 1748 on William Armistead's farm in New Kent County. In 1781, he received permission from his master to volunteer with the American forces under the Marquis du Lafayette. James's intelligence and work ethic caught the attention of the Marquis, who sent him to enemy camps as a spy. He worked in the camps of both Benedict Arnold and Lord Cornwallis, and proved to be a trusted servant - so trusted that Cornwallis sent James back to Lafayette's camp employed as a British spy. James's assistance to Lafayette played a key role in setting the stage for Washington's victory at Yorktown.

In 1786, James was granted money to buy his freedom by the Virginia legislature using a certificate Lafayette wrote in praise of "the essential services" James had provided him. He took the surname of Lafayette, obtained 40 acres of land in New Kent (St. Peter's Parish), and prospered until his death in 1830.

Letitia Christian Tyler

Letitia Christian was born at Cedar Grove in New Kent on November 12, 1790. Her father, Robert Christian, was a colonel in the militia of New Kent and served in the General Assembly of Virginia in 1808. He was a friend of George Washington and a highly respected citizen of New Kent County. At the age of 22, Letitia Christian married John Tyler of Charles City County, who became the tenth president of the United States. When she died in 1842 while Tyler was still in office, her body was sent to Richmond by train and then brought back by carriage to Cedar Grove, where she was buried. Her gravesite still remains in the brick walled cemetery just a short distance from the old house.

Rev. George W. Watkins and the New Kent Training School

Rev. George Washington Watkins' lifelong dedication to providing an education for the county's black students is memorialized in the elementary school on New Kent Highway which bears his name.

A graduate of Virginia Union University, Rev. Watkins was pastor of both Elam Baptist Church in Charles City and Second Liberty Baptist Church in New Kent when he was asked to teach at the new school for black students in September 1931. Joined by his wife, they taught at the one-room schoolhouse with pride, stressing the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, instilled with his own daily dose of citizenship. Enrollment grew rapidly; the school was moved twice in the following two years to keep up with the student population. The 1933-34 term marked the beginning of the New Kent Training School, offering high school advantages to the black children of the county.

Rev. and Mrs. Watkins found it was no easy task to keep things running smoothly in the wood-stove heated schoolhouse, when some children had to walk as far as 12 miles daily just to get to school. The Watkins would buy small packets of cookies or crackers to give to those children who had a long walk ahead of them after school; having no children of their own, they would often have students at their house for dinner and even overnight; eventually they boarded a few who lived the farthest away.

The younger students sat on discarded church benches, the windowsills or trashbaskets; the older children had discarded desks whose surfaces were often so scratched it was often difficult to find a smooth surface on which to write. Until the 1940s, children hauled water for the school from the well and chopped logs for firewood.

During his morning addresses to the students, Rev. Watkins always stressed character, excellence, and service to the community. The young reverend hand-wrote notices to the children's parents in reference to school meetings or regarding a student's schoolwork, and often would deliver them in person to make sure they were received.

On June 11, 1950, the newly-named George W. Watkins School was dedicated, offering first through eleventh grades. In his address, Rev. Watkins led the audience in a pledge to "dedicate themselves anew to providing the finest educational opportunity for all people."

Rev. Watkins passed away in 1972. Today, the G.W. Watkins Alumni and Scholastic Association honors his legacy by awarding scholarships to deserving county students.



Pocahontas



Chief Powhatan, Wahunsunacock



M. & M. Karolik Collection of American Watercolors & Drawings, 1800-1875 • Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
View of New Kent Courthouse, Va., by John Donaghy U.S., 1838-1931

area, would serve as the courthouse until 1691. Bacon's Rebellion ended at Brickhouse in 1676.

A commercial center also developed in the 1700s at Providence Forge. Canals for access to the town by ship were built by slave labor along the Chickahominy River there, and are still evident today. A large forge and mill were located on the pond that still exists near the intersection of Rt. 60 and Rt. 155. The forge was destroyed and buried by locals during Cornwallis' invasion to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. The mill ground grain for both Revolutionary and Civil War troops until its use was discontinued around the beginning of the 20th century.

During the American Revolution, Washington and Lafayette used several routes through New Kent to corner Cornwallis at Yorktown. James Armistead, a black slave from New Kent, became a celebrated spy for the Americans and was a key player in providing information which led to Cornwallis' surrender.

New Kent also proudly proclaims itself as "the home of the first First Lady," Martha Dandridge, wife of President George Washington, was born here at Chestnut Grove. She regularly worshipped at St. Peter's Parish Church, married Daniel Parke Custis of White House on the Pamunkey River, and raised her children here. At nearby Poplar Grove she met Col. George Washington, and soon after married him.

Cedar Grove in New Kent is the birthplace and resting place of Letitia Christian Tyler, wife of President John Tyler. Mrs. Tyler was one of only two First Ladies to die while her husband was in office. New Kent is the only county in the nation that is the birthplace and marriage place of two president's wives.

In later years the sons and daughters of our forefathers would support our new nation during other conflicts - The Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the Gulf War. Nearly one-third of our population would die during a flu epidemic at the turn of the twentieth century; yet New Kent County endured.

The Story of New Kent

Understanding the history of New Kent County helps us understand the history and development of our nation.

Long before there was a nation called the United States, there was New Kent County - more than 121 years earlier, in fact. Our history describes the early struggles between the native Americans and the European settlers. It relates how Africans were introduced in America as slaves and how they would form the foundation for an economy that would last until today. Battles would be fought in New Kent for the rights of land owners to maintain slave property and states' rights. Slaves and their descendents would win their own fight years later for educational equality and the freedom to worship as they chose. These same Africans would help our earliest white settlers obtain freedom from control of the crown in England. New Kent residents would fight and die for independence from that crown. Those who fought with Nathaniel Bacon would be hung long before the rest of America joined in the revolutionary fight. Soldiers from almost every war fought in America would walk across New Kent County.

Our history is also the story of everyday people building homes and families, a story of spiritual and community development, and a story of hope and pride in the future. Our founders and their children have led this nation in its development.

Visited by gold-seeking Spaniards in the 1500s, colonial exploration of New Kent began in earnest when Captain John Smith of England was captured near Lanexa at Windsor Shades by the natives as he explored the Chickahominy River. Carried across New Kent lands to the Powhatan's main village, he was befriended by the native American princess Pocahontas (Matoaka)...and the legend and a nation were born.

The first eight counties or shires in Virginia were formed in 1634, but by 1654 the population was so great that several new counties were formed. New Kent, said to be named for County Kent, England, was among them. At the time it contained parts of what is now James City county, all of King William, King and Queen, Hanover, and all points west that were inhabited. Settlements first grew along the rivers. Brickhouse, the first town in the Eltham

View of New Kent Courthouse, Va., ca. 2000

Photo by Tom Algren



New Kent Historical Society
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HISTORY

New Kent County

VIRGINIA

