Foundation Document Overview
Colonial National Historical Park
Virginia

Contact Information
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Colonial National Historical Park protects key sites that span the history of the entire British colonial period in North America, from the first permanent English settlement on Jamestown Island to the battlefield where the colonies ultimately secured their independence from Great Britain at Yorktown. The park is located on the Virginia Peninsula between the York and James Rivers, part of the Tidewater region of southeastern Virginia. The site of significant human habitation for more than 11,000 years prior to the first English contact, the park protects resources and evokes stories of the interaction and conflict between the English colonists and the American Indians of the Powhatan Paramount Chiefdom; the economic, political, and social evolution of the colonies; and the development of the institution of lifelong African American slavery.

The park was first established on July 3, 1930 (Public Law 71-510, 46 Stat. 855, HR12235), and initially included most of Jamestown Island, the battlefield grounds at Yorktown and several Yorktown structures, and a corridor for the planned Colonial Parkway. In the years since its establishment, the park has added several properties, notably the site of Governor Sir William Berkeley’s Green Spring Plantation, Cape Henry, and the Thomas Nelson House in Yorktown. The park contains 8,677 acres of which 8,049 acres are federally owned. (Note: This is the total authorized boundary acreage and NPS fee acreage.)

**Jamestown Island.** The site of the first permanent English settlement in North America, the Jamestown Colony gave rise to key institutions of the American colonies, including the plantation agricultural system, representative government, and slavery. Jamestown also served as the capital of the Virginia colony until 1699. Visitors can experience the archeological remnants of Old Towne, the site of initial settlement that is managed by Preservation Virginia. The Voorhees Archaearium displays artifacts documenting the origin and history of the colony, reflecting its early mismanagement, famine, and conflict that nearly resulted in the failure of the colony. Located on NPS property are the archeological remnants of New Towne, the expanded settlement that reflected the growing importance of Jamestown as a colonial capital. Visitors can experience the Jamestown settlement through a seamless walking tour between Old Towne and New Towne, as well as view archeological excavations in progress. Visitors can also experience the natural landscape of the island through the Island Drive, a 5-mile road system with two loops that span the island.
Yorktown. The park preserves several significant structures from pre-Revolutionary Yorktown, and a number of key sites related to the battle including the French Encampment, Washington’s Headquarters, French and American artillery parks, the Allied siege lines and British inner defensive line, which includes Redoubts 9 and 10, Surrender Field, and Moore House, the site of the surrender negotiations. This site also includes the Yorktown Victory Monument, the French Cemetery, and Memorial Wall, which commemorates French casualties in the Yorktown campaign. Located near the second siege line is Yorktown National Cemetery, where Union veterans of the Peninsula Campaign of 1862 are interred. Two loop roads provide access to these sites, one covering key battlefield sites and the other covering encampment sites. Walking paths allow visitors to explore battlefield resources in more detail and connect the battlefield to Yorktown itself, offering visitors an opportunity to experience the atmosphere of a colonial-era port city.

Other Park Sites. In addition to the two main park units of Jamestown Island and Yorktown, Colonial National Historical Park includes several smaller units with significant roles in the establishment and growth of the Jamestown Colony and the siege at Yorktown. Swanns Point is across the James River from Jamestown Island and was the site of early trade between colonists and American Indians and a cemetery with multiple graves dating to the 17th century. Gloucester Point lies across the York River from Yorktown and was the site of British fortifications that guarded the river narrows. Cape Henry forms the southern boundary of the entrance to Chesapeake Bay and is the site of a memorial that commemorates the first landfall on April 26, 1607, by the initial 104 colonists who eventually settled on Jamestown Island. Cape Henry is within the currently operating Joint Expeditionary Base East, formerly known as Fort Story, once the site of an army coastal artillery battery guarding the bay entrance.

Green Spring is the site of the plantation of royal Governor Sir William Berkeley, one of the longest-serving governors in American history. Berkeley’s administration lasted from 1641 to 1652 and from 1660 to 1677, during which time he sought to diversify the economy of the Virginia colony and expand trade. His term saw the development of the legislative assembly into a bicameral body and the establishment of one of the first Indian reservations. At his plantation, an early form of the southern plantation that would become common in the South, Berkeley experimented with a variety of crops and manufactured goods with the goal of diversifying the economy of the colony beyond tobacco. All that persists of his manor house are the archeological remains, which were investigated and documented by NPS researchers in the 1950s and 2000s. The site is not currently open to the public.

Colonial Parkway. Connecting Jamestown Island, Yorktown, and Colonial Williamsburg is the Colonial Parkway, a designed 23-mile-long road and associated landscape that physically links the three components of the “Historic Triangle.” The pavement, a unique concrete poured in jointed slabs and brushed to reveal a locally sourced aggregate, is intended to mimic the appearance of the roads of the colonial era. Portions of the parkway are carefully sited along the James and York Rivers, and the relatively small amount of visible development throughout the route contributes to a pleasant driving experience.
Purpose

Colonial National Historical Park preserves and interprets sites and stories central to the origin and establishment of the United States of America and the evolution of American institutions and identity, including the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown Island and the American victory in the last major battle of the American Revolution at Yorktown, which are linked by the historic Colonial Parkway.

Significance

Significance statements express why Colonial National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- American Indians occupied southeast Virginia for more than 11,000 years prior to the arrival of the first English settlers at Jamestown, provided the new settlers with the resources necessary to survive, and made lasting contributions to the economy and society of the region.

- The founding of the Jamestown Colony as a private venture, the cultivation of tobacco and evolution of the plantation system at Jamestown, and the development of Yorktown as the principal commercial port of colonial Virginia reflect the central role of economics in the establishment and growth of the British colonies of North America, and highlight their connection to a complex trans-Atlantic trade network that developed in the 17th century among Britain, its American colonies, and Africa.

- The labor-intensive plantation system that evolved in Jamestown initially relied on the forced labor of American Indians and indentured servants, and led to the introduction of African slaves into the English colonies and the development and growth of the institution of lifelong, chattel slavery in the United States.
Significance

- As the first permanent English settlement in North America, a new cultural, social, and political identity emerged at Jamestown as the result of a blending of people and cultures including American Indians, Africans, and the English. Jamestown is the birthplace of representative government in English North America, with the first legislative assembly meeting in the church building in 1619, and served as Virginia’s capital until 1699.

- The Green Spring site contains the grounds and archeological remains of the plantation of 17th-century Virginia royal governor Sir William Berkeley, who strove to diversify the economy of colonial Virginia through the development of new agricultural and industrial projects. Berkeley was a key figure in the evolution of American law and the system of government through the adaptation of English law and institutions, including the bicameral legislative assembly, to a frontier setting.

- Strategically located at a narrow, defensible point on the York River, the Village of Yorktown supported one of the largest deepwater ports in colonial America and secured a critical navigable connection to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

- Yorktown is the site of the last major battle of the American Revolution, where French and American forces under the command of General George Washington laid siege to and captured the forces of British General Charles Cornwallis on October 19, 1781, accounting for one-third of the British forces in North America. This victory led to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which secured independence for the 13 colonies from Great Britain and inspired and influenced revolutionary movements around the world.

- As part of the Virginia Peninsula Campaign of the U.S. Civil War during March-July 1862, Union forces under the command of General George B. McClellan laid siege to a Confederate front that incorporated British fortifications built at Yorktown during the Revolutionary War. An elaborate deception operation conducted by Confederate General John B. Magruder led to the siege and delayed the Union advance up the peninsula, which ultimately forced McClellan to abandon the campaign and kept the Confederate capital of Richmond out of Union hands until April 1865.

- The 23-mile Colonial Parkway is a preeminent example of American parkway design of the 1930s, a scenic corridor with views and vistas of the James and York Rivers that connects Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown into an entity known as the Historic Triangle. Free of modern intrusions, the Colonial Parkway is intended to evoke the appearance of roadways of early America, and influenced the designs of other significant parkways such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Natchez Trace Parkway.

- The development of the methodology of modern historical archeology by NPS archeologists J. C. Harrington and John Cotter originated from their work at Jamestown, which was critical to the discovery, preservation, and interpretation of the park’s archeological resources. Methodologies developed within the park are still used in the United States by archeologists studying historic-period archeological sites.

- The reconstructed Swan Tavern in the Village of Yorktown is the first National Park Service reconstruction of a historic structure based on an analysis of the existing original foundation, and was the model for future NPS reconstruction efforts.
Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- Jamestown Island
- Colonial Parkway
- Green Spring
- Yorktown Battlefield and Associated Earthworks
- Village of Yorktown
- Archeological Resources
- Museum Collections and Archives
- Memorials and Monuments

Colonial National Historical Park contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- Rolling Coastal Plains and Lowlands Ecosystems
- Civil War Resources including Yorktown Cemetery
- Cape Henry
- Passive Visitor Experience

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Cultural Encounters. This theme will convey how Indian, European, and African cultures came together, beginning with the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown and how these cultures interacted and influenced each other.

- Early America: The Challenges of Settlement, Colonization, and Revolution. This theme will cover the arc of early American history from the first permanent English settlement (1607) through the American victory at Yorktown (1781), and will also focus on George Washington’s character and leadership abilities.

- Strategic Location. This theme relates to the geographic factors that influenced the reasons for the settlement of the region, the role of location in the region’s economy and trade, and location as a reason for conflict throughout history.

- Preservation, Commemoration, and Memorialization. This theme relates to the rationale for the creation of Colonial National Historical Park as an early attempt to preserve sites key to the history of the United States, how its creation reflects changing attitudes toward land use and protection, as well as the site of pioneering work in historical archeology.