

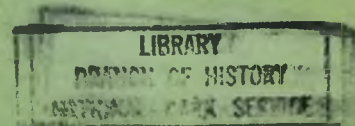
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The West House Property
in Yorktown

A Preliminary Historical Statement

Prepared by: W. R. Sampson
Ranger Historian



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FOREWORD

At the time that Ranger Historian Sampson was called into the Army, he was working on a study of the West House and the West House property (Lots 76-79). His research had not reached the point, nor was time available, to do a documentary report such as was planned. It was possible, however, for him to prepare a detailed statement which he did in the form of a memorandum.

Ranger Historian Sampson's memorandum of March 17 constitutes the bulk of this preliminary study. To it has been added some additional illustrations and a few brief notes about the house and its present status.

April 9, 1956

Charles E. Hatch, Jr.
Park Historian



CHHP
Photo No. 12,092

The West House, built about 1706,
stands on Lot 77 in Yorktown.

March, 1956



CNHP
Photo No. 10, 636

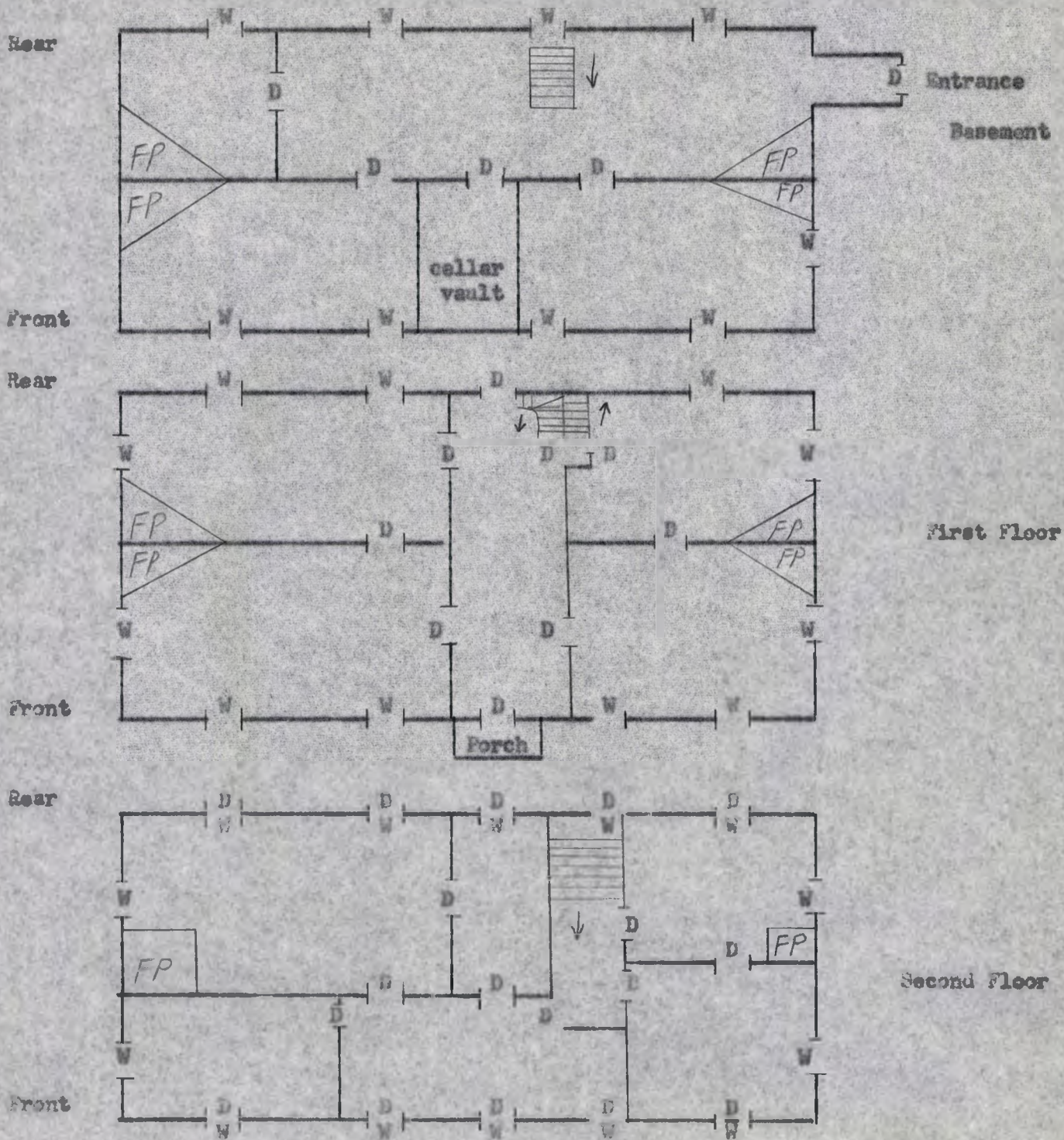
The West House - Front View
(September, 1953)



CNHP
Photo No. 10, 634

The West House - Rear View
(September, 1953)

Present Floor Plan



W - Window
 DW - Dormer Window
 D - Door
 FP - Fireplace

No Scale

March 17, 1956

Memorandum

To: Park Historian Hatch
From: Ranger Historian W. R. Sampson
Subject: Eighteenth Century Development of Lots 76-79 (West House Property)

In attempting to deal with what may be underground on the site of Lots 76, 77, 78, and 79, an unfortunate time element has made it impossible to complete an adequate study of the records of York County. The claims of title for the four lots is fairly complete except for the unfortunate gap of ninety-six years (1691-1787) in the record of Lot 76. However, a more thorough search of the records of Wills and Inventories should be made, since there are some tantalizing statements in deeds, which lead one to surmise the existence of extensive developments on Lots 76, 78, 79, as well as those known to have been on Lot 77.

Lots 76-79 are bounded on the south by Main Street, on the west by "The Great Valley," on the north by a cliff descending toward the York River, and on the east by "The Valley" which separates the property from the Yorktown Victory Monument. The properties are commonly called "The West House Property," but all four lots seem to have been extensively developed independently of each other.

The purpose of this memorandum, as briefly mentioned above, is to attempt, through documentary research and analysis, a description of the development of the four lots, in order that the approximate location of buildings, and appurtenances, may be ascertained in preparation for an archeological survey of the area.

In order to bring some order out of chaos, each of the four lots will be considered separately except in cases where ownership and therefore development overlapped.

Lot 76

Lot 76 was granted by the trustees to Colonel William Cole, Secretary of the Dominion of Virginia in November, 1691 [V.C.R., D.O.R., No. 1, p. 37] and no further record comes to light until Dudley Digges deeded it, and lots 77 and 79 to his daughter, Elizabeth Nicholson on April 3, 1767 [V.C.R., D.O. 6 (1777-1791), p. 353].

William Cole did not forfeit his original title which would indicate that he built a house on Lot 76 at least twenty feet square and within four months of purchase (Act of 1691). However, in the deed to Elizabeth Nicholson, mention is made of the fact that Dudley Digges had been residing on the three lots. Since the West House had long before been constructed, an educated guess might assume that Digges lived there, since a residence on Lot 77 would occupy a more auspicious place than one located to the rear of Main Street as Lot 76 was. A dwelling constructed on Lot 76 would probably have been on the west side of the lot, facing "The Great Valley," since entrance would have been gained from that informal thoroughfare. However, it could have been that the house would have faced the river on the north. I have found no references to development of Lot 76 during the 19th century.

Lot 77

David Stoner, Constable for the lower portion of Bruton Parish, was deeded Lot 77 on November 24, 1691 [T.C.R., D.O.W., No. 1, p. 388]. However, on March 24, 1692, he declared his intention of sailing for England [T.C.R., D.O.W., No. 9, p. 138]; and since he did not build within four months, the property was forfeited, reverting to the trustees.

2 / Miles and Immanuel Mills of Halberry Island Parish, Warwick County, according to an Indenture dated June 8, 1706, paid 180 pounds of tobacco for Lot 77, provision being made for the construction of a house within twelve months, according to an Act of 1699. [T.C.R., Deeds, No. 2 (1701-1713), p. 176]. The Mills held the lot until July 10, 1721 when it was sold to William Stark, Merchant, along with the buildings [T.C.R., D. & B., No. 3, p. 368]. Thus the erection of the West House may be dated sometime during the twelve month period subsequent to June, 1706. The mention of "buildings" would indicate the presence of at least a few outbuildings, but not until Stark sold the property to Cole Digges on January 15, 1730-31, is mention made of specific buildings [T.C.R., Deeds, No. 4, p. 66]. According to this deed, the property was sold together with all houses, edifices, buildings, kitchens, stables, barns, gardens, etc. The known location of the existing outbuildings in 1796 indicates that the earlier structures were to the east and rear of the main house.

In 1744, at the death of Cole Digges, his town lots (76 inherited from his mother, the daughter of William Cole, and Lot 77 purchased in 1730-31) apparently passed to his third son, Dudley,

who also inherited Lot 42, the site of the existing "Digges House." (Riley, "Yorktown," pp. 105-106.)

In April, 1755, Digges purchased Lot 79 (see below) and evidently used the structures on it for his own purposes, since, according to an insurance drawing dated April 6, 1796, the West House stable was on Lot 79.

Robert Nicholson, Digges' son-in-law, took out an insurance policy on the structures on Lots 77 and 79 in 1796, and it is from this record that the first definite idea of structures on the lots emerges (Illustration on page 17). According to this drawing, the house on Lot 77 was 50 feet long, 30 feet wide and one-story high. Thirty-four feet east of the dwelling, and perhaps 25 feet north of Main Street, was a smoke house (wood) of unknown dimensions (perhaps 10' x 10'). Four to six feet to the rear of the smoke house, and 34 feet from the West House, was a Granary (wood), perhaps 12 to 14 feet square. Six feet behind the Granary was a one-story kitchen (wood) 16' x 22'. Forty-four feet east of the kitchen was a stable of wood 16' x 18' with a shed at each end. The north end probably in line with the north end of the kitchen and the south end probably in line with the north end of the Granary, making the entire structure approximately 28 feet long. Since the original half-acre lots were eight poles wide and ten poles in depth, the stable on the insurance drawing could not have been on Lot 77 since the house and first row of dependencies occupied one hundred feet of the 132 foot frontage and the stable was 44 feet from the first row of dependencies. The stable was probably built after 1755, but

could possibly have been one of the structures standing on Lot 79 when it was sold to Badley Digges. The insurance record shows a well situated perhaps 12 feet to the west of the kitchen and to the east and rear of the house.

In 1821 the three lots passed to John R. West, and it is from his ownership that the property and house derived their names [I.C.R., D. & B., No. 9, pp. 121-217].

There are several extant drawings, plans, and pictures of Yorktown which show the West House. The earliest is a view of Yorktown painted by John Gauntlett in 1755 (illustration on page 15). The West House is shown without dependencies and no houses or other structures are shown on Lots 77, 78 and 79.

In November, 1781, the French billeting officer Berthier drew a plan of Yorktown showing the West House and a large structure immediately to the east, possibly the dwelling on Lot 79 (illustration on page 16). Evidently there are no suitable structures on Lots 76 and 78. Following the Peninsula Campaign of 1862, the Headquarters of Lt. G. L. (?) Wheaton were located in the West House. A sketch made at that time shows the house and two dependencies immediately to the east (illustration on page 18).

In February of this year (1956), a brick footing, or pier, was found 15' 4" to the east and 7' 10" south of the southeast corner of the West House. There were 9 bricks arranged in a 1 1/4" square, each brick being 4.5" x 4.5". Their depth is not known, and no relationship to the main structure has yet been established.

Lot 78

Lot 78 was deeded to ^{Hon^{ble}} Ralph Wornaley, Esq^r of Middlesex County on November 24, 1691, but he evidently failed to build on the lot for it was forfeited [Y.C.R., D.O.W., No. 1, p. 401]. William Gordon of York Parish acquired the property on June 24, 1706 [Y.C.R., Deeds, No. 2, p. 206], and evidently complied with the building stipulation of the deed, for on November 27, 1707, (well past the twelve month limit), he sold it to James Wallace of Elizabeth City County together with its rights, members, and appurtenances. However, the structures could not have been too elaborate, for it was sold for the same price that had been paid for the vacant lot, 160 pounds of tobacco [Y.C.R., D. & B., No. 2, p. 251]. When the property next changed hands in 1726, it was sold with all houses and buildings, its value being £20 current money of Virginia [Y.C.R., D. & B., III, (1713-1729), p. 460].

By 1767 when, after several years of litigation, the property was sold by William Moss to Thomas Trotter and Thomas Tower. The value was set at \$190, indicating a rather elaborate, or extensive, development of the site [Y.C.R., Deeds, No. 7, p. 269]. The property changed hands again in 1767 with no increase in value, but by 1773, when Thomas Archer sold the lot to James Luncey, the valuation was \$250 current money of Virginia. However, it is well to bear in mind that this increased evaluation would be at least partially compensated for by the post French and Indian War inflation [Y.C.R., Deeds, No. 8, p. 352]. According to a court record of March, 1785 in which reference is made to a "Room below Stairs called the

Chamber," the dwelling must have been at least a story and a half
[I.C.R., Deed Book, No. 6, p. 267].

Lot 78 changed hands again in 1792, but the valuation had
dropped to \$60 lawful money, possibly as a result of depression,
but more probably because of damage and destruction either by fire
or war.

The limited research accomplished does not reveal any
description or listing of buildings on Lot 78. I can, therefore,
offer no clues as to location, size, or number of structures on the
lot. In all probability, the dwelling on Lot 78 faced east, though
it possibly could have faced north.

Lot 79

Lot 79 which adjoins Lot 77 on the east was deeded to John
Myhill on November 24, 1691 [I.C.R., D.C.R., No. 1, pp. 359-60].

It appears that Myhill forfeited the land, for in 1706 William
Gordon purchased the lot from the trustees [I.C.R., Deeds, No. 2,
p. 29] at the same time that he purchased Lot 78. On July 2, 1714,
Gordon entered into partnership with John Andrews, Charles Cox, and
Nicholas Phillips "for digging and stoning a Wall to be placed in
ye lott of William Gordon on ye South side of said lott adjoining
to Main Street . . ." [I.C.R., Deeds and Bonds, No. 3, p. 78].

About ten square feet of the lot were deeded to Andrews, Cox, and
Phillips, and all partners were to share in the original cost and
subsequent upkeep.

The will of William Gordon, dated September 19, 1730,
gave Lot 79 and the houses and storehouses at the river side (the
beach area) to his wife, Margaret Gordon. His daughter, Mary Dowling,

was given another town lot, not 78, since that had been sold in 1707 to James Wallace, but was already in the Dowling family through purchase in 1726 [T.C.R., Orders & Wills, No. 17, p. 130].

There is a break in the title, but in 1749, when Mordecai Booth, a merchant of Gloucester County, sold it to James Fride, Esqr., the property was valued at £300 current money. The purchase price included a warehouse and dwelling house, and a pump, pumphouse, and shop at the river side [T.C.R., Deeds, No. 5, p. 314]. Such purchase price included Booth's holdings in the beach area, evidently, for by the time Dudley Digges acquired the property in 1755, the asking price was only £50 including houses [T.C.R., Deeds, No. 6, p. 17].

It is interesting to note that the aforementioned well on the south half of the lot was prominent enough to define the lot. One might speculate about the developments on the property for evidently at one time, there were several elaborate structures. As before proved, Dudley Digges had a stable on the premises. This stable could have been part of the development of the lot under the Gordon family or it could have been built by Digges. At any rate, the stable was not in a suitable location to have been a converted dwelling.

What happened to the buildings on the lot is unknown, although the plan of Berthier (1781) shows a large structure, gable end to the street immediately east of the West House. Since Berthier was not unduly concerned with perspective, and since no such structure is indicated on the insurance record of 1796, it might be assumed that such a structure as Berthier shows was farther to the east on Lot 79.

John Gauntlett's view of Yorktown of 1755 shows a sizeable dwelling east of the West House with its gable end to the street. A shed attached to the north end might indicate that the artist was looking at the rear of the building, thus placing the structure on the north side of Main Street and in accordance with Berthier's plan. Gauntlett's perspective, however, was sometime awry, and he may have misplaced the structure in question, since it is too close to the West House to actually be on Lot 79.

In the above suppositions, it must be remembered that there was a concentration of allied artillery fire on the east end of Yorktown during the Siege of 1781. During, and after, the Siege the larger dwellings were used to quarter troops. Thus, many of the buildings which have disappeared could have been destroyed by the cannonading or by destruction and fire during the occupation of the town by troops, notoriously careless of private property.

The 1862 drawing shows a large structure gable end to the street and this might be the one shown on Berthier's plan or one of later construction.

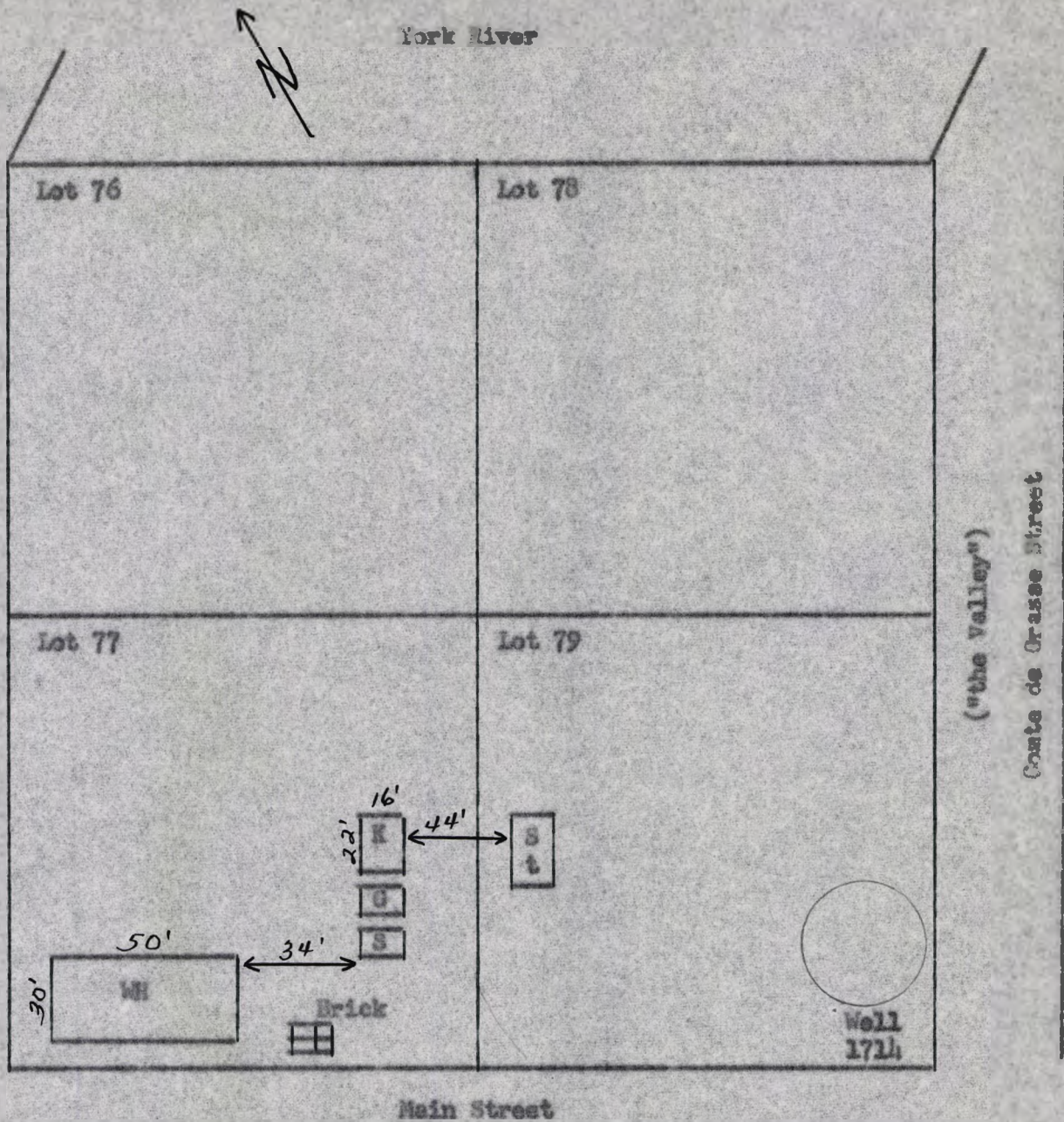
My apologies accompany this brief study for so few facts are known that it has been necessary to rely on internal analysis of documents and much conjecture.

Although all four lots were developed, the only accurate description is of Lot 77 and the wall on Lot 79. The lots changed hands frequently, two or more lots often belonging to the same individual. The question necessarily arises as to the development of the Lots 76, 77, and 79 when they were owned by Dudley Digges.

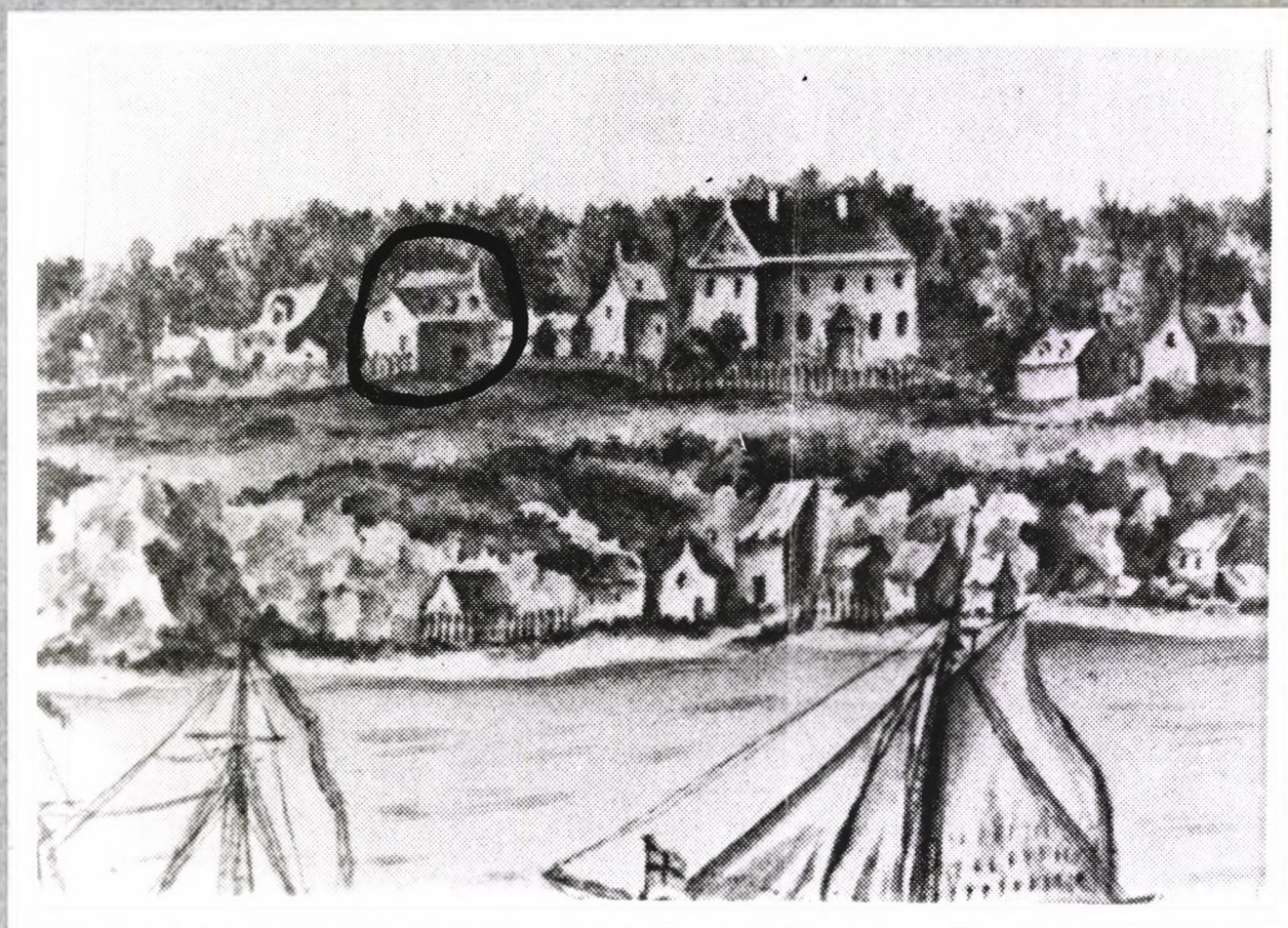
Did he develop the three for his own personal use, or did he rent out the three dwellings? If he lived in the West House and leased or rented the Digges House on Lot 42, one could assume that Lots 76, 77, and 79 were developed for his own use and such structures as he found already existing, would be modified or destroyed. Digges might well have lived in the West House for with the three lots he would have had more room than on the one lot where what is now called the Digges House stands. Clyde Trudell claims that the mulberry trees which framed the house on Lot 77 from the street were planted by Digges (Trudell, Colonial Yorktown, p. 87). Such beautification and improvement might indicate that Digges occupied the house personally.

There are no known records of nineteenth century development on the sites—an unfortunate occurrence since lack of such knowledge necessarily detracts from the value of this report.

Great Valley

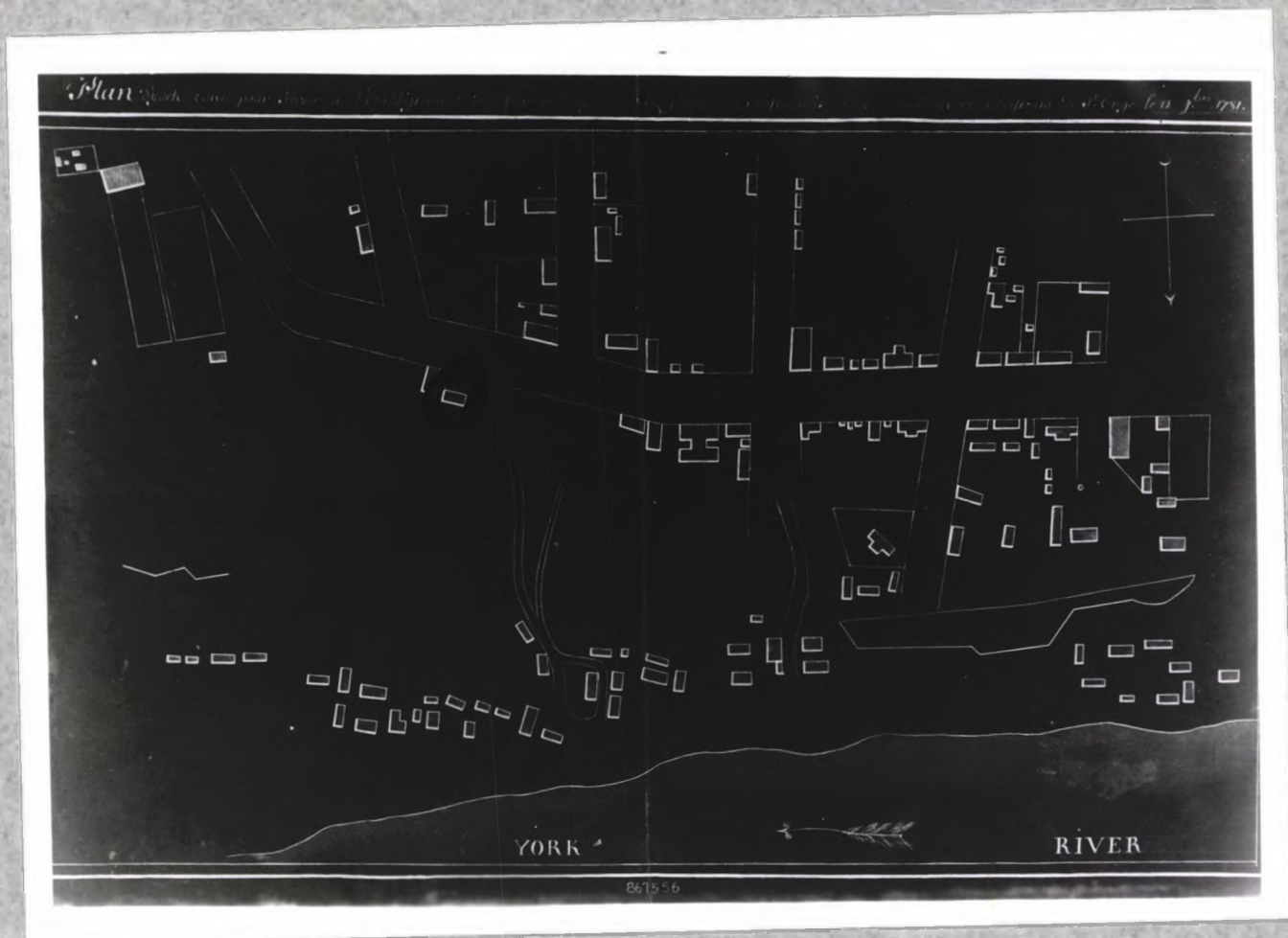


- WH - West House
- S - Smoke House
- G - Granary
- K - Kitchen
- St - Stable



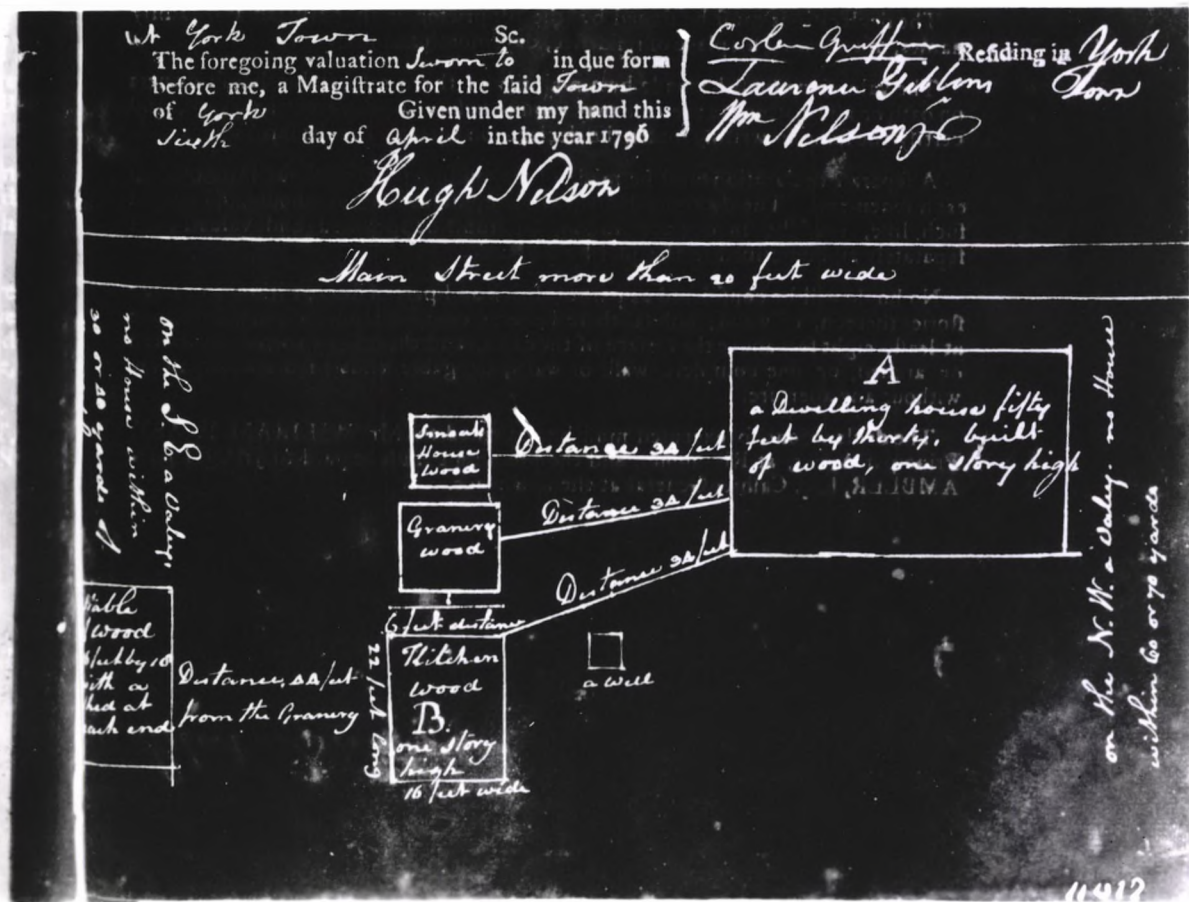
CMHP
Photo No. 11,080

From the 1755 sketch of Yorktown
drawn by a British naval officer.



CNHP
Photo No. 10,974

The Berthier billeting plan of
Yorktown - 1781. The West House
is circled in black ink.



CHMP
 Photo No. 11,017

From an Insurance Plan dated
 April 6, 1796. The best House
 proper is noted as "A".



OWAP
Photo No. 11,019

The West House as seen from its
west end in a Civil War painting
(1862).

Rehabilitation - 1954-1955

During this two year interval, essential repair and replacement on the West House has been carried out by the Park to the limit of available funds. This work has included the removal of recent appendages on the rear of the house, some re-weatherboarding, the replacement of some windows with the repair of others, the replacement of faulty timbers and such--all needed to stabilize the structure. The greater part of the work has been handled by Carpenter William L. Shos under the supervision of the Park staff and others. Original design as seen in the house, or in the locality, has been followed. The work done was in the critical and emergency category and does not constitute a restoration. That has yet to come.



CNRP
Photo No. 10,986

Original timbers and lathes were
exposed when the kitchen was re-
moved.



CNRP
Photo No. 10,080

New weatherboarding being applied.



ONHP
Photo No. 11,047

Structural damage that may have
resulted from artillery fire in
1781 can be seen here.



ONHP
Photo No. 11,027

A faulty foundation wall is being
noted here.

Two Statements About
the West House

1. Clyde F. Trudell, Colonial Yorktown, (1931), pp. 85-87.

Should a commission ever be appointed to select one certain house of the Colonial period that would portray in its plan, details and proportions the typical home of Tidewater Virginia perhaps no better choice could be made than the West House in Yorktown.

Its large full depth central hall, the like of which was so universally employed in houses large and small throughout the Colony; the general arrangement with two rooms opening off each side of the hall; the rear open-string staircase with its gracefully turned balusters and ornamented facings; the corner fireplaces grouped to make but two chimneys necessary; all are details of the plan and disposition of rooms and major appointments of the type of home most generally built throughout the Old Dominion.

Many, many more sumptuous dwellings there were 'tis true, and the West House cannot be compared with the great manor houses of the mighty plantations. But they were in their day . . . not typical of the thousands of more humble dwellings . . . [and] during the eighteenth century the frame dwellings far outnumbered their brick . . . The simple dignity of the West House is most eye arresting in its visual appeal . . . It is of the story and a half type

of construction with a full first story and a simple gable roof that makes necessary the employment of dormer windows to light the second floor . . .

Perhaps the most interesting interior phase of the house is the parlor, paneled from floor to ceiling, with the series of panels broken by a moulded chair rail. A delightfully naive arch treatment leads to the rear room. The paneling retains its original paint colors which were a rather alarming combination of lavenders, greens and golds now so mellowed and softened by time as to but barely suggest the vivid hues they must have originally presented.

2. A. E. Kendrew, Vice-President and Resident Architect, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc. - 1952

My estimate of the value of the West House itself was based on the fact that it is a good example of a mid-18th century house, some parts of which indicate that it may have been built somewhat earlier than this. It is of generous size with an unusual side gable. It has good proportions and is attractive both on the exterior and interior. It has ten rooms and the principal ones are large and commodious. Much of the interior woodwork is original and in good condition and is representative of two very interesting periods of architecture. The two periods indicate the original and later 18th century alterations. Modern alterations have not spoiled the original appearance to any great extent and could easily be removed. The cellars are of unusual interest with

massive brick wall partitions, heavy beamed ceilings and a vaulted wine cellar. The structural features appear to be in good condition. A moderate amount of repair and restoration work would make the house suitable for exhibition The complete restoration of the house and grounds would not be difficult in relation to restoration work which has been done elsewhere in the vicinity . . .