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USE STUDY OF THE
HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN YORKTOWN

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In order to formulate a plan for the use of the restored buildings in Yorktown, the general assumption may first be made that such buildings have been restored, and possibly additional ones will be restored, in order to assist in presenting to the public the historic story to preserve which this park was established. The possibility that the National Park Service would carry out extensive research and go to the expense of restoring historic buildings merely for the purpose of providing attractive living quarters or administrative offices is ignored in this study. Therefore, in order to work out a detailed and comprehensive plan for the use of each of the restored buildings, it will be necessary to state just what the historic story is which this park preserves and presents to the public, and to place each building in reference to that story.

When the Colonial National Monument was established in 1930, its primary interest was the battlefield of Yorktown, the scene of the final battle of the American Revolution and of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis to General Washington in 1781. However, as was evidenced by its name, Colonial, more than just a battlefield site was planned. Yorktown, settled in 1631, only a quarter of a century after the first settlement at Jamestown, has a long and significant history, and the preservation and interpretation of the story of the town of Yorktown as well as that of the siege of 1781 soon became an important part of the program. However, with the development of the Williamsburg Restoration and the acquisition of Jamestown Island as a part of the Monument, three Colonial areas, within twenty miles of each other, and overlapping each other in time very considerably, existed. It is obvious that for each of these units to take cognizance of all the aspects of

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of the 174 years of Colonial History would be foolish. Fortunately, a natural division has manifested itself. Williamsburg, first in the field, has concentrated on the eighteenth century and on the political and social aspects of the period. Jamestown, first settled, and an important town while Williamsburg and Yorktown were only plantation villages, naturally carries the burden of 17th century history. Yorktown, established as a port in 1691, an important commercial town for nearly a hundred years, and scene of the final battle of the Revolution, has emphasized the commercial and military aspects of the story not touched by Jamestown and Williamsburg.

This Yorktown story falls naturally into three chapters: The establishment of the great tobacco plantations of the James and York Rivers in the years following the settlement of Virginia, and the development of tobacco culture and the economic system founded on it; the establishment of the port of York and the commercial history of this town, center of shipping and trade during the 18th century; and the final campaign of the Revolution and the siege of Yorktown in 1781.

On this basis, therefore, the historic restorations in Yorktown should be planned to assist in the presentation of the commercial and military aspects of its history. This will involve, first, the creation in the town of a convincing 18th century atmosphere. Fortunately, Yorktown is still a small and peaceful town, and some of the original buildings are still standing. Many of the more recent structures, while not historically or architecturally 18th century, blend into the general picture or at least do not detract from it. In this respect the responsibility of the Park is to preserve present 18th century buildings, remove unsightly modern accretions where possible, and perhaps erect or restore historic buildings of especial interest. It does not include the restoration and furnishing of many old homes and exhibiting them as historic house museums. If for no other reason, the fact that in this section of Virginia, particularly at Williamsburg, there are so many restored and refurnished houses, would make it seem valueless to add to the number, unless the building in question is unique or of especial interest and importance historically. Second part of the program of telling the commercial and military story here is the selection, when and as possible, of interesting and unique buildings, for restoration and repair and inclusion in the interpretative program. At Yorktown, with its particular colonial story, the restoration of a wharf, a tobacco warehouse, a tavern, and the Customhouse if it ever becomes the property of the government, seem to me to be of the most interest and value.

In discussing the restoration of historic buildings, there are several considerations which it might be pertinent to mention here. For when a building is restored, it may be done in one of several ways.

- 1) A building may be completely restored, both as to exterior and interior, furnished with genuine antiques or reproductions of period furniture and the necessary accessories, and exhibited as a historic house museum. Mount Vernon is a notable example of this. Such a method is of course ideal for presenting a historical incident or period, and gives best to the public the story to be told. However, having such a complete restoration has certain drawbacks, most notable of which is that in such a building a custodian-guide service must be provided, to protect the furnishings from vandalism and thievery, and to explain the building and its historical background to visitors. This should be borne in mind in planning the restoration of a building for exhibit purposes, and no such restoration should be started unless provision is made for such personnel.
- 2) A building may be completely restored exteriorly but not interiorly, and open to the public for a modern use — a museum, a shop, etc. — quite frankly restored only to fit into the surroundings and to give historic atmosphere and feeling. Such a program may be desirable or undesirable, depending on the building and its use. The effect of the historic exterior may be unaltered, if the building is distinctive in itself or the modern use fits in with the historic one; the effect may be practically neutralized, especially if the building be small or nondescript; or the historic idea may be entirely contradicted and the value of the restoration lost almost entirely by a modern use such at variance with the historic function.
- 3) A building may be restored as to exterior but not interior, and be put to such a use that the public does not enter it. The Lightfoot House stable now being restored is such a restoration, since to all intents and purposes a telephone exchange is not visited by the public. This type of restoration is valuable and desirable if no building of great historic importance is used; because it permits the location of neces-

very modern facilities in a historic area without detracting from the colonial atmosphere. For the exterior adds definitely to the scene observed by visitors, and the modern interior is not seen by them at all.

Bearing in mind, then, the aims of the National Park Service in interpreting the historic story at Colonial, and also taking account of the considerations mentioned above, the use of the restored buildings in Yorktown may be considered individually and in detail.

The Lightfoot House Group. This group consists of the main building, now used as the Park administration building, the stable, approved for use as a telephone office, and other dependencies proposed. It is generally understood that the housing of the Park offices here was a temporary measure, pending the erection of a permanent administration building. At that time I do not believe that the house should be furnished and used for exhibit purposes, because there is no especial historic interest attached to the structure, and the cost would be high and out of proportion to the interest which it would attract. I would therefore recommend that when the administrative offices are removed to a permanent administration building the house be converted into a modern residence. The practice of using restored colonial buildings as residences, it might be noted, is followed extensively in Williamsburg without detracting from the scene. On the same basis, the dependencies might be put to any use which seemed desirable and which would not conflict with the effect of the exterior restoration. The use of the stable as a telephone office, for instance, is perfectly proper, since it would contribute its bit to the general colonial atmosphere, and the modern interior would not be open to the public and therefore could not detract in any way from the effect which is being sought in Yorktown.

The Swan Tavern Group. The buildings of the group are at present being put to a variety of uses. In the main building, the upper floor is being used as the offices of the historical staff of the park and the lower floor has been turned over to the Park Operators, who have refurnished it with modern reproductions of period furniture, and are using it for exhibit and for the sale of souvenirs, etc. The Tavern Kitchen has been refurnished with colonial type furniture made in the Park, and at times used as a museum; but is closed at present due to lack of a suitable attendant or custodian. The Stable is being

used as the navel museum, and the smaller dependencies are put to various utility uses.

This group of buildings could, I believe, justifiably be completely refurnished and exhibited to the public. Although not an integral portion of the commercial story, as outlined in the first section of this study, the tavern played an interesting and rather important part in that story. And it is a less commonplace type of exhibit than an ordinary residence, so would probably be of considerably more interest. In its final development, I believe that the story of the Swan would throw interesting light, for the visitor, on travel and trade in the 18th century, and make one side of it, that concerning people who travelled and sailed and stopped at a tavern in a port town more real to him. This development would of course include the kitchen and stable as well, for both would have been closely associated with the life of the tavern. The use of the stable as a museum is of course only temporary, pending the erection of a permanent museum. In the present and immediate future, until such time as the Park has the resources properly to do this, the Tavern, and, if approved, the Kitchen, will continue to be exhibited by the Park Operators. I am of the opinion that it would be preferable, in a National Park, to have the exhibit buildings operated by the Park itself. But since, due to lack of funds at present, the choice seems to be between allowing the Operators to exhibit or not to exhibit at all, I believe that it is better for them to make appropriate use of the building as long as they show a proper regard for the Park Service standards, than for the buildings to be closed to the public entirely.

The suggestion has recently been made that the Park headquarters be shifted to the Swan Tavern, and the Lightfoot House be turned over to the Operators. This would have the advantage, to the Park Service, of concentrating all the offices in one building instead of two, for the present, and would give them, at the future time when the offices were moved to a permanent administration building and the Tavern could be refurnished and opened for exhibit, a free rein in the development of the building without being hampered by obligations to the Operators. Advantage would accrue to the Operators by the move, since they would in the Lightfoot House be more strategically situated to attract the visitors than they are at present. This suggestion has been discussed briefly with the general manager of the Operating Company, and from this I gathered that their reaction would be somewhat determined by their success this coming season in the Swan Tavern. Last year they did not attract a very large proportion of visitors; but since they have spent considerable amounts of money in refurnishing the Tavern, they would be loathe to change unless the

Tavern continued unprofitable and they were sure the change would be advantageous.

From the standpoint of the historical and interpretative work of the Park, I am of the opinion that the desirability of the change would hinge upon the probable future course of development here. If there were any likelihood of a permanent administration building² being constructed in the near future, such a shift would probably be desirable from all sides. But otherwise I should not be disposed to recommend it. For reasons outlined previously, I feel that the Swan Tavern is the more important of the two restored buildings, and that if only one is to be exhibited, the Tavern should be the one. Therefore, if placing the offices there would remove it from circulation, so to speak, for ten years, I would consider the move rather questionable.

The Corbin Griffin Medical Shop. This building at present houses the United States Post Office. When the building was restored, it was probably with the intention of ultimately restoring it completely and furnishing it as an Apothecary Shop. However, since it has no particular connection with either the commercial or the military story of Yorktown, I would recommend that its present use be continued indefinitely. The contribution that it makes to the colonial atmosphere of the town justifies its existence as an exteriorly restored building, but I do not believe that its historic interest justified a complete interior restoration and exhibit. Its use as a Post Office does not detract from the general colonial atmosphere, since to most visitors it is just an attractive building, and its modern function does not force itself upon them.

The Reynolds Storehouse. This building has not been restored as yet, but since this restoration has been considered in the past for use as a museum and may come up again, its inclusion in this ⁵⁸ study seems justifiable. The restoration of the Reynolds Brick Storehouse would be of considerable interest because of its commercial function. As will be seen in the historical section of this report to follow, the extensive shipping interests of its owner, and the knowledge we have of its records, make this a logical building to be restored completely and exhibited to the public. However, I would not recommend any restoration which applied only to the exterior and would make use of the interior as a conventional museum. Such a thoroughly modern and unhistoric use of the building would, in my opinion, tend to destroy its effectiveness as a restoration, except as a contribution to the atmosphere of the town. Most visitors would leave thinking

of it as a museum building, and not as a restored 18th century store and warehouse. And on the other hand, the type of architecture would make it difficult to use it properly as a museum. Modern museum methods, as exemplified in the Department of the Interior museum in Washington, favor a simple, windowless building, planned around the exhibits to go in it, rather than trying to fit exhibits effectively into a building originally designed for some totally different purpose.

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