

An Introduction to Port Royal, Virginia

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to offer a brief background on the history of Port Royal, Virginia in Caroline County, some of the local myths surrounding the town, and offer a background on the town’s unique history.

Introduction

As a young child growing up in Caroline County, I had always heard stories about the history of Port Royal. One of the many myths retold by locals was the town’s prominence as a major tobacco port rivaling Fredericksburg; its importance so great to the early Republic it quite nearly became the capital of the United States before being leveled by fire in the 1770’s. Over time, the town’s importance dwindled, experiencing a brief revival during the mid-20th century as Rt. 301 became a main north-south thoroughfare before the newly constructed interstate dashed hopes. Since then, the growth and sprawl have driven many to seek refuge among the farms and towns of Caroline County, and a few are rediscovering the old tobacco port and restoring old homes that have been there for centuries.

Port Royal’s beginnings were in part due to the “population explosion” that occurred along the Peninsula during the early 18th century.ⁱ By 1744, a wealthy plantation owner by the name of Robert Smith passed away, leaving a tract of 60 acres for a town, and with the permission of the colonial General Assembly the lots were sold off as one-half acre lots.ⁱⁱ The remaining unsold lots were sold off at auction, and the town of Port Royal was booming, complete with its own tavern, doctor, lawyers, warehouses, and even boasting a racetrack and robbery gang.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 1 - A rendering of the original layout of the town of Port Royal in 1744. *Source:* <http://www.geocities.com/portroyalva/>

Eventually the clout of Port Royal became so great that citizens on the other side of the Rappahannock River built their own tobacco port of Port Conway to serve the Northern Neck on the opposite side of the river. A French traveler made the comment about the bustling town of Port Royal in 1765:

Ships of 400 hhds come up to the town, and brigs and large sloops can go up to Fredericksburg, which is next to Norfolk and Williamsburg the largest and most trading town in Virginia. It has all the trade of the



Figure 2 - Armstrong House along the Rappahannock River. One of the larger Colonial era homes within Port Royal that survived the Civil War. Source: *Hidden Village*, 53.



Figure 3 - Market Street circa 1920. At the time, Market Street was often called "Velvet Street" because of the grass that grew there from lack of traffic. Source: *Hidden Village*, 71.

Back settlement s who send Down here quantities of Butter, Chees, flax, hemp, flower, and some tobacco which they roll down many miles.^{iv}

After the Revolutionary War, which for a time the Patriots saw fit to rename the town "Port Roy", the town's commercial interests were suffering due to a lack of trade with England.^v As a number of the merchant class were either British or Irish, those remaining in the town simply packed up and left Port Royal, as they did in many Virginia localities.^{vi} Eventually trade did increase in the former colony, but at Fredericksburg and not Port Royal. Thus the town's significance slowly became eclipsed by that of its larger neighbor and its importance as a tobacco port began its steady decline.^{vii}

Historian and former St. Peter Episcopal Church pastor Robert Fall addresses what he calls a belief "asserted by misinformed persons and locally believed by the credulous" that Port Royal was considered as a location for the nation's capital by Congress.^{viii} Although several Virginia historians have repeated the myth, Fall asserts that through his research and discussions with other historians, that "*not one shred of evidence appears to confirm that Port Royal 'narrowly missed' selection as the site for the nation's Capitol.*"^{ix} (emphasis original) It seems Port Royal was not even suggested for the location of the new Capitol.

Another myth that I remember from being a child was that of a fire sweeping through Port Royal during the 1770's, which coincidentally was responsible for removing the town from consideration by Congress for the new Capitol building. Unfortunately, although there are numerous mentions of small fire outbreaks within the town, there is no mention of the massive fire that local myth perpetuates.

Like most small towns in Virginia during the 1850's, there does seem to be

evidence of a renaissance within Port Royal shortly before the War. In 1850 citizens of the town petitioned General Assembly for a bank, and in 1852 received that request.^x In 1853 the citizens of Port Royal petitioned for a plank road to be constructed between the rail depot at Milford and the town, and by 1854 the request had been amended to several plank roads to connecting towns in addition to a railway to Milford.^{xi}

When the Civil War came to the citizens of Port Royal, they were all too cognizant of the realities of their position so close to both the waterways and the Federal Capital. As early as 1861, Federal gunboats would periodically pound the small town, so frequently that the Vestry of St. Peter Episcopal Church refused to meet during the four years the war continued for fear of being fired upon.^{xii} During the First Battle of Fredericksburg, Federal armies briefly considered crossing the Rappahannock near Port Royal in order to cut off Confederate soldiers 12 miles to the north, only to be cut short by Confederate artillery situated on the hills surrounding the town.^{xiii} Federal gunboats were keen to return the favor in kind by pounding the town mercilessly, destroying several homes while sparing the citizens themselves.^{xiv} The war would not return until May 1864, when Federal troops occupied the town as a resupply depot for Grant's advancing armies during the Wilderness Campaign.^{xv}

Port Royal's last mention during the war was as the final location where Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth was surrounded by Federal troops and killed at Garrett's farm just outside of the town.^{xvi} After Booth and his party had been refused lodging by the residents inside of the town, one of the residents suggested that the Garrett family would take the party in for the night.^{xvii} Booth, his leg broken from the fall from the balcony at Ford's Theatre, was "presented as a wounded Confederate soldier" and promptly taken in by the Garrett household.^{xviii} After Booth and his party fled towards the Garrett barn after news of Federal cavalry approaching from Port Royal towards Bowling Green in search

of the assassin, the Garrett's refused to allow Booth to remain in the house.^{xix} At 2:00am the following day, Federal troops were alerted to Booth's presence and shot in the Garrett barn, a building which was destroyed with the expansion of U.S. 301 in the 1960's.^{xx}

The aftermath of the Civil War was the final straw for the town of Port Royal. While businesses continued to spring up and fold, the town slowly atrophied into a small collection of grand homes and churches.^{xxi} By the 1890's, the No. 2 Masonic Grand Lodge's Lyceum had fallen into disuse, the organization and interest in the proposed railway which the citizens of Port Royal looked to with hope for the future in the 1850's had dissipated, and by the 1950's was a collection of farmers and businesses accommodating a once-glorious historic farming tradition that made Port Royal great.^{xxii} The land acquisition by the Federal Government of the massive Army training facility at Fort A.P. Hill only cut into Port Royal's dependence on nearby farmers.^{xxiii}

The 1960's saw this fortune change. With the construction and widening of U.S. 301 as a major north-south thoroughfare, Port Royal became blessed with a number of restaurants, motels, and gas stations.^{xxiv} By the 1980's, the old 1930's era bridge had been replaced with the more modern structure we see today, and at the time of Fall's writing it was seen as a great boon to the community as an alternative route towards I-95.^{xxv}

This was not to be the case, as interstate travel would continue to dominate highway traffic, and Port Royal's importance as a rest stop declined with each closed business along Main Street. Fortunately for the town, the interstate's popularity with those working in Washington and Richmond made the remoteness of the town more and more desirable. Within the past ten years, a revival of interest has taken place in restoring old Port Royal to her former colonial glory, as several homeowners have

taken an interest in the Colonial and Federal-era homes that dot the old town. Although a few homes have survived, many of the old homes are spaced between empty lots that held the flimsy wood frame houses of times past and dingy trailers. Although Port Royal still holds promise, much work remains to be done in order to return the visitor to the bustling tobacco port of the 18th century.

ⁱ Fall, Robert E. Hidden Village: The History of Port Royal 1744-1981. (n.p.), 31

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, 34

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, 35-6

^{iv} *ibid*, 37

^v *ibid*, 162

^{vi} *ibid*, 163

^{vii} *ibid*, 163

^{viii} *ibid*, 164

^{ix} *ibid*, 164

^x *ibid*, 167

^{xi} *ibid*, 167

^{xii} *ibid*, 301

^{xiii} *ibid*, 302

^{xiv} *ibid*, 303-4

^{xv} *ibid*, 319

^{xvi} *ibid*, 335

^{xvii} *ibid*, 337

^{xviii} *ibid*, 338

^{xix} *ibid*, 339

^{xx} *ibid*, 339

^{xxi} *ibid*, 343

^{xxii} *ibid*, 344

^{xxiii} *ibid*, 344

^{xxiv} *ibid*, 215

^{xxv} *ibid*, 216