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THE ATTEMPT TO BUILD A TOWN AT WESTHAM

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In the year 1752 the General Assembly of Virginia authorized the building of a town to be called Beverley. The site of this town was on the land of Peter Randolph in Henrico County at the point where Westham Creek empties into the James River. The Creek is east of the modern Westham Bridge which shows the James River at the beginning of the falls. Seven miles farther down the river below the falls was the town of Richmond, laid out by the rivals of the Randolphs, the Byrd family. Richmond was destined to flourish at the expense of Beverley until it has almost extended its limits to the land where the now-forgotten town of the Randolphs once stood.

The history of the region of Westham is largely the history of the fortunes of William Randolph and his descendants. Virginia's gain was great when the first William Randolph, a young man of twenty-two, left England in 1673 and settled on the banks of the James at Turkey Island. Randolph was a gentleman of an old Northampton family and he quickly gained social and political prominence. His position was heightened when he married Mary Isham, the daughter of Henry Isham who owned Bermuda Hundred. In his first year in Virginia William Randolph succeeded his uncle, Henry Randolph, as clerk of Henrico County, and he remained in public office until his death in 1711, serving as burgess, attorney-general, speaker of the House of Burgesses, and clerk of the House during his long political career.

At the same time William Randolph was increasing his material wealth. He acquired vast tracts of land until he became one of the biggest landholders along the James. According to Bishop Meade, Randolph purchased all of Sir Thomas Dale's settlement of five thousand acres reaching down to Four Mile Creek including Varina, Curles, and the estate formerly belonging to Nathaniel Bacon. This was the land

1 Hening, Statutes at Large, Vol. VI, p. 273.
that had been set aside about 1619 for the establishment of a college in Henrico for the education of the Indians. After the massacre of 1622 the plan was abandoned and the land was given over to private use. Randolph also acquired most of the estate of his father-in-law, Henry Isham, in Charles City County and in England at Isham's death.

William Randolph bought 3256 acres of land in Henrico County on the north side of the James River above Westham near the fall line of the James from Colonel Edmund Jennings in 1690. He also obtained from Colonel Jennings Tuckahoe Island, containing 160 acres. The Island is bounded on one side by the James River and on the other side by Tuckahoe Creek which is fed by Little Westham Creek. From John Pleasants in 1691 William Randolph got 1221 acres on the north side of the river above Westham Creek, adjoining this Creek and extending to Tuckahoe Creek which is the boundary line of Henrico County. Thus William Randolph gained extensive holdings in the Westham region.

His son, the second William Randolph, called Councillor Randolph by his contemporaries, realized the value of land along the James and he sought to consolidate his holdings. The first William Randolph gave his son, Councillor Randolph, 542 acres on Upper Westham Creek in 1702. This was part of the land he bought from Colonel Jennings. At the same time he gave his son, the lower half of Tuckahoe Island. At the death of the first William Randolph Councillor Randolph received the Turkey Island plantation, and the land not already given to the Councillor in the Westham region between Westham Creek and Tuckahoe Creek was divided between the first Williams five sons. Councillor Randolph added to his land by buying from his brother Isham Randolph of Dungemess the upper half of Tuckahoe Island and the five hundred acres lying above Upper Westham Creek adjacent to the land his father had given him.

Councillor Randolph followed in his father's footsteps and he became an influential Virginian. He married Elizabeth

5 Ibid, p. 1399
6 Ibid, p. 1469
7 Ibid, p. 1399
8 Ibid, p. 1369
9 Ibid, p. 1405
Beverley of Gloucester County, the sister of Robert Beverley, the historian. Besides serving as a member of the Council he was a burgess, clerk of the House of Delegates, and justice of Henrico County.10

During Councillor Randolph's lifetime settlers pushed steadily up the James River to the mountain regions. These settlers had to send their tobacco and other products by boat down the James to market. An effort was made about 1729 to build a town below the falls to tap the extensive trade going up and down the river.11 It is possible that Councillor Randolph may have had an interest in this project since he owned land at Wilton and at Chatsworth on the north bank of the James just below the falls.

This early attempt to build a town below the falls was blocked in the General Assembly through the rival interests of William Byrd.12 Byrd too saw the possibilities of such a town, however, and he turned his efforts to the building of a town on his own land at a site just below the falls. He laid off lots with William Mayo for the town in 1733 and in 1737 Byrd began to advertise the convenient public warehouses, the healthy location, the springs of good water, and the available quantities of grain and other provisions which could be found at Richmond.13

After the death of Councillor Randolph in 1742 his eldest son Beverley realized that he could receive lucrative profits if he could build a town on his Westham plantation just above the falls where goods brought down from the Upper James had to be stopped on the way to market and conveyed by land past the falls. An act of the General Assembly in 1745 authorized the clearing of obstructions to tobacco trade in the Fluvanna River, i.e., the Rrovanna. The same bill provided for a public warehouse to be built at Westham on the land of William Byrd.14 This was probably on the south side of the river since it is doubtful that Byrd owned land on the north bank near Westham at that time.

10The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. XXXII, p. 395.
11Letter from William Byrd to Micajah Perry, May 27, 1729, MS, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc.
13Virginia Gazette, April 15, 1737
14Hening, Statutes at Large, Vol. V, pp. 377-378
Beverley Randolph laid off one hundred lots of one-half acre each on the east bank of Westham Creek at the point where Westham Creek enters the James, the last point on the river that the boats could reach without being dashed against the rocks on the fall line. After the lots had been laid off, Beverley Randolph began to seek subscribers for the town. Robert Rose, a prominent Virginia minister, wrote in his diary on May 9, 1750 of riding to Albemarle to promote subscriptions for lots at Westham. Before Beverley Randolph could complete his plans they were cut short by his death in 1751. He had no children and left his plantation at Westham to his younger brother, Peter Randolph. He directed in his will that a town be laid off there according to his agreement with the subscribers and asked that the profits be applied to his debts and legacies.

Beverley Randolph always called the proposed town Westham from the name of his plantation. In the deeds recorded in 1751 Peter Randolph called it by the same name, but in 1752 he changed the name to Beverley, presumably to honor his dead brother. Peter Randolph took the changing of the name of the town so seriously that he incorporated this point into the bill to be presented to the legislature. Another indication of the strong affection he felt toward his brother was the fact that he named his own son Beverley. Although Beverley was the legally recognized name of the town, Westham remained the name in popular usage. Peter Randolph immediately took up his brother's work in planning the town. He got subscribers for the original one hundred lots near the point on Westham Creek where it emptied into the James. Then he drew off fifty-five lots on the west bank of the creek, extending the town from the creek to the north bank of the river. The subscribers were asked to meet in June, 1751 "to draw their lots," indicating that the subscriptions had not been tied to a specific lot. Deeds for the lots were recorded between August 5, 1751 and July 1, 1752.

Subscribers to the town of Beverley included some of the most prominent Virginians of the age. Joshua Fry, Professor of Natural Philosophy and Mathematics at the College

15 Diary of Robert Rose, Photostat in Archives Division, Virginia State Library.
16 Deeds, wills, etc., Henrico County, 1750-1767, p. 43.
17 Ibid, pp. 60-148
18 Virginia Gazette, June 6, 1751.
of William and Mary and a well-known surveyor, bought three lots from Peter Randolph. Peter Jefferson, the father of Thomas Jefferson, bought four lots, William Stith, the historian and the third president of the College of William and Mary, owned one lot there. Five lots were sold to Carter Braxton who later signed the Declaration of Independence. John Hunter, editor of the Virginia Gazette, and Robert Rose, the author of a valuable Diary covering this period also owned lots in Beverley.

Peter Jefferson was closely connected with the enterprise not only as owner of four lots in the town but as a friend of the Randolph family. He married Jane Randolph of Dungeness, the daughter of Isham Randolph and the cousin of Peter Randolph. William Randolph of Tuckahoe, another cousin of Jane Randolph Jefferson, requested Peter Jefferson to look after his estate at his death. When his friend died in 1745 Peter Jefferson compiled with his wishes by moving to Tuckahoe where he remained until 1752. Thus Peter Jefferson was in the immediate neighborhood of Beverley at the time the town was planned. When Peter Randolph wanted a surveyor to draw a plat of the new town it was natural that he should get Peter Jefferson to do it.

The map drawn by Peter Jefferson fixes definitely the location and plan of the town. Although it is dated June sixth, 1756 there is evidence to indicate that it is a plat of Beverley as it was in 1751. Each lot is shown on the map with its number and the name of its owner written on it. The owners of the lots shown on the map correspond with the purchasers of lots in 1751. Some of the most prominent owners shown on the map died before 1756, including William Stith and Joshua Fry, men Peter Jefferson knew well. If the map had been made as Beverley was in 1756 he would surely have noted this change in ownership. Other lots on the map do not reflect the change of hands brought about by purchase before 1756. To cite one such case, in 1754 a Merry Carter bought lot number five from John Woodson and Lot number 110 from Langton Bacon, but Woodson and Bacon are shown on the map as the owners of lots number five and number 110.

19 Goochland County Deeds and Wills, Number V, p. 73.
20 Photostat of Map from Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.
No buildings are shown on Peter Jefferson's plot of Beverley. The lots are drawn in squares of four lots each with streets running between the squares. The map is signed by Peter Jefferson and by Peter Randolph.

When Peter Randolph was ready in 1752 to ask the Virginia Assembly to establish in law the town already projected he met with immediate success. Peter Randolph's friend, Joshua Fry, presented the bill to the House of Burgesses on the nineteenth of March and on the thirtieth of March was passed with several amendments. The bill notes that the town "is seated near the lower landing of an extensive navigation above the falls of the James River, and is likely to become the chief place of trade for all the upper inhabitants of the river, and its several branches." The bill further provided that all keepers of storehouses already built or to be built shall be under the same rules and regulations that apply to other keepers of public warehouses.

By consummating his brother Beverley's plans Peter Randolph was successful in locating a town by law at a strategic point on the river, but the Byrd family who had blocked earlier attempts was still to be reckoned with. With his town officially authorized and with most of the lots sold Peter Randolph seems to have turned his thoughts away from Westham to his home at Chatsworth and to his political offices. In 1753 he sold the land around Westham to his younger brother William who immediately resold it to William Byrd III for two thousand five hundred pounds. The tract of five thousand acres included all of the late Beverley Randolph's holdings on the north side of the James, but no mention was made of the town. A deed for a lot recorded in 1766 in Peter Randolph's name shows that he was still associated with the town. It is probable that William Byrd encouraged the growth of Beverley or Westham only as a storehouse above the falls on the way to the town of Richmond his father William Byrd II had founded.

Although the town of Beverley did not develop as Beverley and Peter Randolph had laid it out, a settlement did grow up there near the warehouses. This settlement was called Westham, the name applied to the whole region. Records are


23Ibid, pp. 60-64.


26Deeds, Wills, etc., Henrico County, p. 971.
not available to show the number of houses which were built there. A foundry was located close to the site of the town on the low terrain east of the present Westham Bridge and log cabins were constructed nearby to house hands at work enlarging the foundry. By the time of the Revolutionary War it was important for making cannon and cannon balls, and its defense was necessary.27

That the land was widely used for a storage place for tobacco is shown by the act of the Assembly in 175528 which provided that everyone leaving goods on Byrd's land at Westham for longer than twenty-four hours must pay storage rates. This was in answer to Byrd's complaint that people used his land for storage without paying him despite the expense of maintaining a public warehouse.

Records of the flood of 1771 witness the extent of the tobacco stored at Westham with the intent of sending it by land to Richmond. The warehouses were washed away in their entirety with three hundred hogsheads of tobacco. 29 To alleviate the distress caused by this destruction the House of Burgesses provided thirty thousand pounds to reimburse the owners of the ruined tobacco.30

Canoes were usually used to bring tobacco to Westham from the upper James because they required fewer men, they could be more easily handled in rough water, and two of them "are capable of carrying as much as three boats."31 Negroes were often used as boatmen.32

Thomas Anderson, Commissioner of Provisions, wrote from Buckingham in 1781 advising Colonel Davies "to have a large canoe made for each hand and lay them off into brigades of ten or twelve each and employ a good industrious white man to overlook them... these canoes will answer the river service much better than bateaux for the many rapid falls between Point of Fork and Irving's Store will render it difficult for them to pass heavily loaded, whereas the canoes can go a trip and back again every ten days, and each canoe and hand carry 5000 lbs. and bring in return up to 2000 lbs.

30Virginia Gazette, July 18, 1771
and may go where the Bateaux cannot for want of water." 33

The difficulty in the location of Beverley in regard to trade was caused by the falls which prevented boats from going to points on the lower James or down to the sea. Tobacco and other goods had to be transported by carriage past the falls to Richmond for further shipment down the river. Vessels coming up the river could not reach Westham and they had to unload below the falls. Richmond became the center of trade and Westham a place for temporary storage.

The importance of the tobacco trade coming down the river to Westham is indicated by the bill passed by the Assembly in 1772 providing for the appointment of a committee to "view the lands on both sides of the James River, from Westham, to navigable water below the Falls of the said River." 34 The purpose was to make an exact survey of the land and to present an estimate of the cost of building a canal to circumvent the falls.

During the Revolutionary War Westham was not only the site of buildings erected for planters to store their agricultural products until they could be put on the Richmond market but the site of the storage of arms and ammunition which were sent to Richmond, the center of supplies for the Yorktown campaign. An example of the stores kept at Westham is shown in a letter from Colonel William Davies who wrote to Governor Thomas Jefferson in 1781 that he was sending "two thousand lbs. of powder to Westham along with ropes, flints, and other military stores." 35

The settlement at Westham was practically wiped out by the British during the war. A line of defense was drawn above the foundry but the rangers of General Arnold made a dash for Westham Foundry in January, 1781, put the cannon out of commission, destroyed the small arms, and threw tons of gun powder into the river. The British destroyed the foundry and burned the public buildings at Westham.

**Governor Jefferson informed the General Assembly March 1, 1781 that "So rapid were the movements of the enemy,**

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33 Calendar of Virginia State Papers, Vol. 11, p. 362.
35 Calendar of Virginia State Papers, Vol. 11, p. 28.
and so favorable to them the circumstances of wind and tide, that they were able to penetrate to Westham on the fifths to destroy what public stores we had not been able to get away, to burn the public buildings at Westham... and to retire to their shipping before such a force had assembled as was sufficient to approach them."36

The destruction of Westham by the British was a blow from which it could not recover. There is nothing to show that any attempt was made to rebuild the settlement and after 1790 Westham is mentioned in records only in connection with the canal which circumvented the falls to the successful rival town, enabling goods to be taken straight to Richmond.

Richmond in the meantime had become a thriving town. In 1789 Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The extreme convenience has acquired it universal approbation. There is one street in Richmond which would be considered as handsomely built as any city in Europe."37 Thus William Byrd and his town of Richmond which would grow to become the capitol of the State and later of the Confederacy triumphed while Beverley, Peter Randolph's town above the falls, was destined to failure.

36 Nening, Statutes at Large, Vol. 10, p. 573
37 Ford(ed.), The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, p. 137
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