

# New Kent County, Virginia:

## Ground Where America Took Shape

*A historical case for preserving a living rural landscape*

### Executive historical case

New Kent County is not merely old. It is a place where more than nine millennia of documented human history remain tied to a landscape that still reads as rural Virginia. Archaeology at Moysonec reaches back to the Archaic period; the county itself was formed in 1654; colonial churches, roads and taverns survive; Revolutionary intelligence and movement passed through this ground; the 1862 Peninsula Campaign crossed it; and in 1968 a case arising from New Kent reshaped national school-desegregation law. <sup>[1] [2] [3] [15] [16]</sup>

America is often taught as separate chapters - Indigenous America, colonial Virginia, independence, Civil War and Civil Rights. In New Kent, those chapters overlap geographically. Rivers, forests, farms, rural roads, churchyards, schools, mills and archaeological sites connect one era to the next. That continuity is the county's strongest historical claim: important events are not preserved only in isolated structures, but in a still-legible cultural landscape. <sup>[2] [3] [8] [9] [16] [17]</sup>

#### THE CORE PROPOSITION

**In New Kent, the setting is evidence. Protecting the history requires protecting the rural context that allows people to understand where events happened, how people moved, and how generations lived on the land.** <sup>[8] [17] [18] [19]</sup>

#### FIVE ERAS, ONE LANDSCAPE

| 7000-6000 B.C.                  | 1654            | 1781                                 | 1862               | 1968              |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Moysonec and Indigenous history | New Kent formed | Yorktown-era movement & intelligence | Peninsula Campaign | Green v. New Kent |

## Before Virginia Was Virginia

*New Kent begins as an Indigenous river landscape, not as colonial acreage.*

The deepest documented layer of New Kent history is Moysonec, a Native village site on the Chickahominy River. Virginia Department of Historic Resources records show archaeological material from the site reaching back to roughly 7000-6000 B.C., with later evidence spanning the Middle Woodland and Late Woodland periods. Captain John Smith encountered Moysonec during his 1607 exploration of the Chickahominy River, but the site's meaning extends far beyond that contact moment: it preserves evidence of Native life over thousands of years. <sup>[3]</sup>

The Chickahominy and Pamunkey peoples were part of a river-centered world that long predated English settlement. Chickahominy communities lived along the river that still bears their name; Pamunkey communities occupied the Pamunkey River corridor. These waterways were transportation routes, food systems, settlement corridors and cultural landscapes. Treating New Kent's history as beginning in the seventeenth century would erase the longest chapter in the county's human story. <sup>[4] [5] [6]</sup>

That history also includes disruption. English expansion transformed Indigenous land use, political control and settlement. The value of preserving archaeological ground, wetlands, river corridors and traditional landscapes is therefore not sentimental. These places can retain evidence that written colonial records do not: where people lived, what they ate, how houses were built, how tools were made and how communities adapted before and after contact. <sup>[3] [5]</sup>

### WHY THIS MATTERS NATIONALLY

**Moysonec makes New Kent part of the earliest documented encounter history of English Virginia while also preserving a much older Indigenous record. The county is therefore a place of American beginnings in more than one sense.** <sup>[3] [4]</sup>

The rural character of New Kent helps keep this older geography readable. The Chickahominy and Pamunkey corridors, forested land, wetlands and dispersed settlement patterns are not empty spaces between historic sites. They are the physical framework that explains why communities formed where they did and how people moved through the region. In a county with this depth of archaeological history, undisturbed land is itself a nonrenewable historical resource. <sup>[1] [2] [3]</sup>

# Institutions, Roads, Work and Worship

*By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New Kent had become part of the infrastructure of colonial Virginia.*

New Kent County was formed from York County in 1654, placing it among Virginia's older county jurisdictions. Its growth followed the practical geography of the colony: rivers, roads, farms, courthouse activity, parishes, taverns and plantation agriculture. Regional planning sources describe the roads between Richmond and Williamsburg as among the oldest in America, routes later used by British, French, Revolutionary, Confederate and Union forces. <sup>[1] [2]</sup>

St. Peter's Parish Church is the county's clearest surviving expression of colonial institutional life. The main body of the church was built in 1701-1703 and its tower added in 1739-1741. The church is a National Historic Landmark and is nationally important for its architecture. It is also associated with Martha Custis, later Martha Washington, who belonged to the parish and was baptized, confirmed and married to Daniel Parke Custis there. The National Historic Landmark documentation carefully notes that the popular tradition that she married George Washington in the church is not conclusively documented. <sup>[7] [8]</sup>

### A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SETTING

**The National Historic Landmark nomination does not treat St. Peter's woodland and pastoral surroundings as decorative background. It identifies the rural, commercially undisturbed setting as part of the property's historic integrity and as something that improves understanding of the church.** <sup>[8]</sup>

New Kent Ordinary adds another dimension. A tavern or ordinary is believed to have operated in the courthouse area since the 1690s, and portions of the surviving building date to 1736. The ordinary recalls the county seat as a place of court sessions, travel, exchange and public life. Its history, like the county's larger colonial story, also reaches into the world of enslaved labor. Archaeological and property records across New Kent connect surviving places not only to prominent families, but to enslaved people whose labor sustained the plantation and service economy. <sup>[9] [17]</sup>

Preserving colonial New Kent should therefore never mean preserving a sanitized past. The purpose is to retain enough of the physical record to tell the whole story - architecture and faith, government and travel, wealth and labor, freedom and unfreedom. The rural landscape gives those stories scale and context. A church, an ordinary or a manor house means more when its historic relationship to roads, fields, woods, cemeteries and nearby settlements can still be understood. <sup>[8] [9] [17]</sup>

## On the Road to Independence

*New Kent's Revolutionary significance is a story of roads, intelligence, movement and the campaign that secured American independence.*

New Kent was not the site of the final Yorktown battlefield, but it was part of the connective geography that made the campaign possible. New Kent Ordinary stood on a major travel corridor and was visited or referenced by George Washington during the Revolutionary era. French officers and troops also passed through, including General Francois-Jean de Chastellux. The ordinary demonstrates how taverns, courthouse settlements and roads functioned as the communications and logistical network of eighteenth-century war. <sup>[2] [9]</sup>

The county's most consequential Revolutionary connection is James Lafayette, born enslaved in New Kent County. During the war he served the Marquis de Lafayette as an intelligence operative inside British lines. Accounts from Colonial Williamsburg and the National Park Service describe how he gathered information from high levels of British command, relayed it to Lafayette, and helped provide intelligence used during the Yorktown campaign. He also conveyed false information to the British as part of the deception effort. In 1787 the Virginia General Assembly granted him freedom in recognition of his wartime service. <sup>[10] [11]</sup>

#### A LOCAL LIFE WITH NATIONAL CONSEQUENCE

**James Lafayette's story ties New Kent directly to the decisive Yorktown campaign and to one of the central contradictions of the founding era: a man held in slavery materially assisted the creation of a nation proclaiming liberty.** <sup>[10] [11]</sup>

This is why New Kent's historic roads matter. They are not simply picturesque byways. They preserve the logic of movement between Richmond, Williamsburg, the York River region and the wider Peninsula. Later generations of armies would use many of the same corridors. When historic routes, rural crossroads and surrounding views remain legible, visitors can understand the Revolution as a campaign that depended on geography and movement, not merely a collection of famous buildings and battlefields. <sup>[2] [9] [19]</sup>

The national founding story in New Kent is therefore unusually tangible. It can be read in the surviving ordinary, in old road alignments, in the river corridors, and in the documented life of James Lafayette. Protecting those relationships preserves more than scenery. It preserves the physical context for explaining how independence was organized, contested and ultimately won. <sup>[9] [10] [11] [19]</sup>

## A Corridor of War, A Landmark of Civil Rights

*New Kent returned to the center of national events in the Civil War and again in the twentieth-century struggle over equal education.*

In 1862 New Kent became part of the operational landscape of the Peninsula Campaign, Major General George B. McClellan's attempt to capture Richmond. At Eltham's Landing, Union forces came ashore near West Point as Confederate forces withdrew toward Richmond. At Cumberland Landing on the Pamunkey River, McClellan established headquarters and a major supply base. New Kent Ordinary served as a Union communications point. The county's roads, landings, fields and river access were military assets precisely because of the same geography that had shaped colonial and Revolutionary movement. <sup>[9] [12] [13] [14]</sup>

A century later, New Kent became nationally important for an entirely different reason. In *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, decided in 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a school "freedom of choice" plan that failed to dismantle the county's dual school system. The Court made clear that school boards had an affirmative duty to eliminate segregation in practice, not merely to adopt formally neutral plans that left the old system substantially intact. <sup>[15] [16]</sup>

### FROM LOCAL SCHOOLS TO NATIONAL LAW

**The National Park Service identifies the New Kent School and George W. Watkins School as the places associated with the most significant public-school desegregation case decided by the Supreme Court after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Both schools are National Historic Landmark resources.** <sup>[16]</sup>

The importance of *Green* lies in the difference between promise and result. The Court examined what had actually happened under the county's plan and found that meaningful desegregation had not occurred. Its ruling helped shift federal constitutional law from passive permission to active responsibility: school systems had to produce a plan that worked in reality. A rural Virginia county thus became the setting for a national standard applied far beyond New Kent. <sup>[15]</sup>  
<sup>[16]</sup>

Placed beside the Peninsula Campaign, *Green* reveals something unusual about New Kent. National history did not pass through the county only once. The same rural place that had carried armies and supplies toward Richmond later became the factual record through which the Supreme Court defined the obligations of public institutions under the Constitution. Preserving that landscape means preserving the settings in which the nation repeatedly confronted questions of power, freedom and citizenship. <sup>[12] [15] [16]</sup>

## The Landscape Is the Artifact

*New Kent's most important historical resource is the relationship among its sites, roads, rivers, forests, farms and rural viewsheds.*

New Kent's official description notes that roughly 66 percent of the county is covered by pine and hardwood forests. That physical character matters because so much of the county's history depends on landscape relationships: Indigenous river settlements, colonial parishes and farms, courthouse roads, Revolutionary travel, Civil War landings and school communities. The history remains unusually legible because many of those relationships have not been completely severed. <sup>[1] [2]</sup>

The county also contains an exceptional concentration of recognized historic resources. Beyond Moysonec, St. Peter's Parish Church, New Kent Ordinary and the Green-related schools, Virginia's historic register records include Criss Cross, Foster's Castle, Hampstead, Cumberland, Crump's Mill and Millpond, Emmaus Baptist Church, Cedar Grove, Marl Hill, Moss Side, Shuttlewood and South Garden, among others. Together they document architecture, agriculture, religion, milling, transportation, slavery, war, reconstruction and community life across centuries. <sup>[17] [18]</sup>

### PRESERVATION PRINCIPLE

**Preserve the landscape, not just the landmarks. Roads, river corridors, forests, farms, churchyards, archaeological ground and rural viewsheds are the connective tissue that keeps New Kent's history understandable.** <sup>[8] [17] [18] [19]</sup>

This does not mean turning New Kent into a museum or romanticizing every part of its past. It means recognizing that historical context is finite. A landmark can remain standing while the landscape that explains it is steadily lost. The St. Peter's National Historic Landmark record is especially instructive because it expressly treats the secluded, pastoral setting as part of the church's integrity. Crump's Mill is significant in part because its millpond and watershed remain intact. Preserved river frontage and scenic road corridors similarly maintain relationships that shaped settlement and movement. <sup>[8] [18] [19]</sup>

For a county with this depth of history, the historically responsible presumption should be retention of intact rural fabric wherever possible. Preservation is not opposition to the future; it is an obligation to pass forward a place that future generations can still read. Once archaeological context, historic setting and landscape relationships are permanently altered, documentation can record the loss but cannot recreate the original place. <sup>[3] [8] [17]</sup>

New Kent is a living American landscape. The stewardship standard is simple: keep New Kent recognizably New Kent, preserving the rural beauty that gives its history meaning for generations to come. <sup>[2] [3] [8] [9] [16] [17]</sup>

## Sources and Citations

*Reference numbers correspond to bracketed superscripts in the six-page narrative.*

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**HISTORICAL CAUTION**

**St. Peter's Parish Church has a well-documented association with Martha Custis Washington. The National Historic Landmark nomination also makes clear that no conclusive documentation has established the tradition that she married George Washington in the church.** <sup>[8]</sup>