

VB2040 EXISTING CONDITIONS STORY MAP

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CITY

Prehistoric Settlement – Native peoples have utilized the natural resources found near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay and along local inland waterways for perhaps 15,000 years. The nomadic life of following the migration patterns of various animal species eventually gave way to seasonal habitation as the climate changed and the coastline and environment followed. Eventually, the native people lived as tribes in relatively permanent villages. This is what the English encountered when they arrived as settlers in the early 17th century.

Artifacts dating to the Paleoindian period (9500 – 8000 B.C.), Archaic period (8000 – 1200 B.C.) and Woodland period (1200 B.C. – 1600 A.D.) have been discovered in various locations in Virginia Beach. Algonquian speaking tribes occupied the Tidewater area of Virginia and the Eastern Shore during the late Woodland period (900 – 1600 A.D.). Maps created by Englishman John White in the 1580s located the native villages of Apasus and Chesepiooc within the geographical areas of Virginia Beach.

In the late 16th century, the Chesapeake occupied the land from the Atlantic Ocean to the Elizabeth River. They tended to remain aloof from the Powhatan chieftain that controlled most of the other Algonquian speaking tribes in southeastern Virginia. The Chesapeake were eradicated by Powhatan just prior to English colonization. In the aftermath, the Nansemonds, who were settled to the west, spread to the east to occupy area in Norfolk and Virginia Beach.

English Colonization – Virginia Beach is the site of the landing of the Jamestown colonists on April 26, 1607 at Cape Henry. After a few days exploring the area they moved inland up the James River to settle. Permanent English settlement occurred in Virginia Beach in the 1630s when Adam Thoroughgood was provided a land grant of 5,350 acres along the western branch of the Lynnhaven River.

Eight shires (counties) were established in 1634 by the English government as the first administrative subdivisions in Virginia. Virginia Beach was originally part of Elizabeth City Shire. In 1636 New Norfolk County was created from Elizabeth City County and included the land area south of the James River and Chesapeake Bay. This new county was further divided in 1637 into Upper and Lower Norfolk counties. Lower Norfolk County was divided in 1691 into Norfolk County and Princess Anne County.²¹ The Princess Anne County boundaries coincided with the Lynnhaven Parish boundaries that had been established by the Church of England in 1643.²² Most of the Princess Anne County land area would eventually become the City of Virginia Beach in the twentieth century.

Agricultural pursuits provided the economic basis for Virginia Beach throughout the colonial, early national and antebellum periods. Subsistence level farms and small to medium size plantation operations were the typical forms seen in the landscape. The legendary Virginia tobacco staple did not grow particularly well in this area and a more diverse agricultural approach occurred very early in Virginia Beach. Wheat, oats and corn proved to be better cash crops in the eighteenth century in Virginia Beach.

²¹ http://www.lva.virginia.gov/whatwehave/local/county_formation/index.htm

²² *Colonial Churches in the Original Colony of Virginia: A Series of Sketches by Especially Qualified Writers* (Richmond, VA.: Southern Churchman Company) 1908.

Other industries developed around the abundance of natural resources. The most notable of these were the production of pitch, tar and turpentine for their maritime uses. A small port for ships called Kempes' Landing developed on the Elizabeth River and the town of Kempesville was officially established there in 1783.²³ A few other small settlements appeared elsewhere in the county but none grew much beyond a handful of houses and shops/services.

Post-Colonial – A skirmish in 1775 between British troops under British Royal Governor Lord Dunmore and a local militia occurred in Kempes Landing killing several militiamen, including John Ackiss. A significant loyalist presence in the area and occasional British troop activities nearby made for an unsettled period during the Revolutionary War. British ships and troops were again active in the area during the War of 1812 and local militia companies provided what protection the residents had.

Plans to construct a lighthouse at Cape Henry during the colonial period were developed but never executed. The tricky navigation in the area required a constant physical assistance and the Cape Henry Lighthouse was finally built in 1792 as the first public works project of the new United States of America government.

Historic Seatack Community and Vicinity – A settlement of free people of African descent was established in the eastern area of northern Princess Anne County in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Historic Seatack is located in the Beach District near the City's Oceanfront Resort Area. It is considered by area residents to be the oldest African-American community in Virginia and the United States, with original settlement by free men dating back to the late 1700s and early 1800s. The area eventually took its name from the words "Sea Attack," based on British Warship cannons along the coast firing inland during the War of 1812. Seatack men fishing in the Atlantic Ocean were known to pull people to safety after shipwrecks. U.S. Life Saving Station Seatack, Virginia No. 2, was ultimately established in the area, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. In 1908, the citizens of Seatack formed the "first school for Negro children" at the "mother church" of Seatack, Mt. Olive Baptist Church on Birdneck Road. In the 1920s, the parents of Seatack formed the Seatack Public School League of Princess Anne County, and Seatack citizens later provided land for the original Seatack Elementary School, which opened in 1952. Men of Seatack served in every war in which the United States was involved, and those returning from WWII organized and built the first black-owned and operated fire department, known as the Seatack Volunteer Fire Department. In 1985, Mr. Joseph Grimstead, Sr. dedicated the land for the Seatack Community and Recreation Center, which opened in 1997, and was later rededicated in honor of Mr. Grimstead. In October 2011, the Seatack Civic League, which is over 100 years old, organized a 200th "birthday" celebration for Seatack.

Civil War –Princess Anne County (Virginia Beach) remained a mostly rural and agricultural locality well into the twentieth century. Much of the early success of the agricultural economy had been achieved through the use of enslaved laborers of African descent since the seventeenth century. The growing division between northern and southern states erupted in the American Civil War in 1861.

The strategic location near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay made this an important area for the opposing sides to control and the United States forces were able to do so early on in the conflict. This was accomplished without a major battle and very little military engagement occurred in

²³ *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619. : Published Pursuant to an Act of the General Assembly of Virginia, Passed on the Fifth Day of February One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight. : Volume I-XIII*, (1823).

Virginia Beach during the war. Despite federal occupation, the enslaved population remained in bondage and the Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, specifically noted that Princess Anne County was exempt from the executive order. The eventual surrender of the Confederate States of America and the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865 finally provided the enslaved people in the area with their freedom.

Some enslaved people made their way to freedom while the war was still underway. Miles James was able to escape enslavement in 1863 and made his way to Portsmouth where he enlisted in the United States Colored Troops. As a corporal in the 36th U.S.C.T. Infantry, James was awarded the Medal of Honor for extraordinary heroism in action at New Market Heights, Va. on September 29, 1864. After a bullet shattered his arm, necessitating an immediate field amputation, he continued to fight, urging his men forward and discharging his weapon with one arm. James was later promoted to the rank of sergeant.²⁴

Post-Civil War –The most influential black leader in post-Civil War Princess Anne County was Willis Augustus Hodges. He had left the county for New York as a young man and returned during the war. He became the county’s first black elected representative, serving in the 1867-68 state constitutional convention. The new constitution, which went into effect in 1870, changed the administration of the county from the justices of the peace to a board of supervisors. Hodges was elected to be the supervisor to represent the Kempsville District.²⁵

Other black citizens were voted into political office including Littleton Owens who was elected in 1879 to represent Princess Anne County in the House of Delegates. Some of the recently freed black citizens acquired land and small new communities, such as New Light and Burton Station, began to develop in the 1870s (see Figure 1).²⁶

Virginia Beach – In the 1880s, Colonel Marshall Parks erected a wooden clubhouse at the oceanfront, which was the first structure built on what is today called the “resort strip.” Parks, who is credited with naming Virginia Beach, and a group of investors formed the Norfolk and Virginia Beach Railroad and Improvement Company to acquire oceanfront property to build a hotel and pavilion and to construct a railroad. The first railroad service from Norfolk to Virginia Beach was initiated in July 1883. The resort grew into a small town and was incorporated as the town of Virginia Beach in 1906.²⁷

The small community of Oceana Gardens was platted west of the oceanfront in the early 1900s and it soon became a viable residential and commercial area that served much of the surrounding rural area. The first paved roadway between Norfolk and Virginia Beach was completed in 1920 and the automobile would eventually push the passenger railroad out of the city’s landscape. Oceana sat strategically between the roadway (today’s Virginia Beach Boulevard) and the rail line. Although the commercial area of Oceana has undergone significant change, the residential neighborhood has retained much of its character. The Oceana Neighborhood Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on September 18, 2017.²⁸

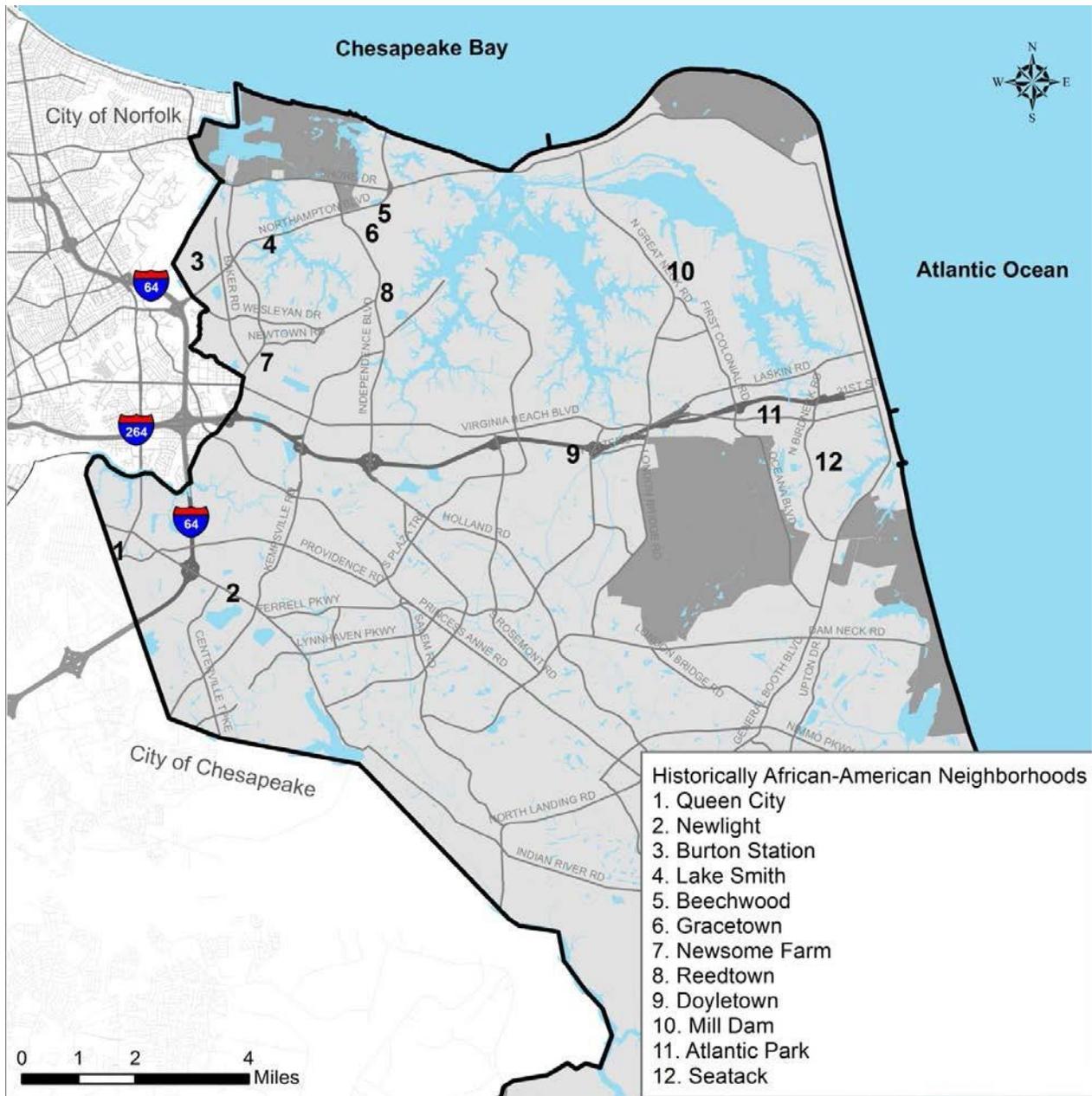
²⁴ Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Historical Highway Marker text approved June 20, 2019 by Virginia Board of Historic Resources

²⁵ Stephen S. Mansfield, *Princess Anne County and Virginia Beach: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company, 1989), 68.

²⁶ Mansfield, 76.

²⁷ *The Beach: A History of Virginia Beach, Virginia*, Rev. ed. (Virginia Beach, VA: City of Virginia Beach, 1998), 81-84.

²⁸ Debra A. McClane, *National Register of Historic Places nomination: Oceana Neighborhood Historic District, Virginia Beach, Virginia*, Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2017



Historically African-American Neighborhoods

FIGURE 1

The Seaside Park amusement complex opened at the beach in 1912 and the Princess Anne Country Club was incorporated in 1916. A new concrete boardwalk was built along the Atlantic Ocean beach in 1926. Further investment by businessmen from Norfolk and Portsmouth resulted in the construction of the Cavalier Hotel at the oceanfront in 1927. Along with the growth of several hunt clubs, the Cavalier and its associated leisure activities attracted a wealthy clientele to Virginia Beach, even after the stock market crash of 1929.

The Cavalier group also platted a residential neighborhood in 1927 to the north of the hotel that had access to facilities and the leisure activities that they offered. A wide brick promenade, called Myrtle Walk, led from the hotel through Cavalier Shores. This neighborhood of single-family homes retains its historic character and the Cavalier Shores Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 2, 2019.²⁹

Cape Henry – Development occurred in the late nineteenth century at Cape Henry, as well. A United States Weather Bureau Observation Center was established there in 1873 and a United States Life Saving Station in 1874. A new lighthouse was built there in 1881 and it became operational in place of the nearly century old beacon. A group of investors created the Cape Henry Syndicate and they began buying land there in the 1890s and the resort they established became increasingly popular during the first decades of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, the civilian development of Cape Henry consisted of a small community of frame cottages, several hotels, a railroad station, O’Keefe’s Casino and St. Theresa’s Chapel.³⁰

The strategic nature and location of Cape Henry prompted the federal government to appropriate funds in 1913 to purchase land there and to build a military installation named for General John P. Story. Fort Story was operational during World War I and has served as an important training facility and coastal defense ever since.³¹

World War II –Plans to establish a military airfield near the Oceana community began as early as 1938. Construction of a 2,500 foot runway began in 1941. The attack on Pearl Harbor accelerated the process and resulted in expanded plans and facilities for the Oceana Air Station. It was commissioned on August 17, 1943 and remained active through the war. In 1950, an expansion extended four runways to 8,000 feet making it a master jet base.³²

The military facility at Dam Neck was first organized as an anti-aircraft school during World War II and was called the Fleet Air Defense Training Center. The Amphibious Training Base at Little Creek came under construction in 1942 and was operational by August 1943.³³ The Tidewater Victory Memorial Hospital, a state tuberculosis sanitarium, and 22 acres around it were converted into Camp Ashby in 1943. This U.S. Army camp provided coastal defense shore patrols until June 1944. From September 1944 until April 1946, Camp Ashby served as a German Prisoner of War camp.³⁴

County/City Merger – Post war Virginia Beach in the 1950s saw a movement of population from nearby Norfolk to Princess Anne County. Suburban neighborhoods, such as Aragona and Princess Anne Plaza, sprouted along route 58. As this was occurring, Norfolk began annexing sections of western Princess Anne County. On January 1, 1959, Norfolk annexed 13.5 square miles from the county and the 38,000 residents that lived within that area.

²⁹ Robert J. Taylor, Jr., *National Register of Historic Places nomination: Cavalier Shores Historic District, Virginia Beach, Virginia*, Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2018

³⁰ *Phase I Reconnaissance Survey of Architectural Resources at Fort Story*, Dutton + Associates, 2012.

³¹ *The Beach*, 96.

³² *The Beach*, 97-98.

³³ *The Beach*, 98-99.

³⁴ <http://www.northamericanforts.com/East/varoads.html#ashby>

The local political machine, under the leadership of Sidney Kellam, saw such annexation as a threat and reasoned that more county land would soon be absorbed by Norfolk. In response, the consolidation of Princess Anne County and the City of Virginia Beach as a municipality began to take shape. Norfolk controlled the water supply to the county and Virginia Beach and tried to leverage that power to thwart the merger. The ploy backfired pushing the consolidation forward resulting in the establishment of the modern City of Virginia Beach on January 1, 1963.³⁵

With the establishment of the independent City of Virginia Beach came the establishment of the City Council/City Manager form of government. From 1963 to 1988, the mayor was selected by City Council from among their membership. In July 1988, Meyera E. Oberndorf became the first mayor of Virginia Beach to be directly elected by the public. She also became the first female to serve as mayor of the city.³⁶

Steady and rapid population growth characterized the first quarter century of the post-merger period. Virginia Beach grew into the most populated city in Virginia as large farming tracts in the northern half were developed primarily on a suburban model.

Virginia Beach's status as a vacation destination also grew during this period and the resort area was modernized and improved. A new boardwalk and seawall were constructed to both accommodate the growing tourist trade and to protect the oceanfront from storms. Development and modernization took its toll on historic resources with many early twentieth century buildings near the oceanfront and older farmhouses and related structures inland being lost during this period. In 2000, plans for a downtown in the Pembroke area finally came to fruition. The first building in the new downtown, the Armada Hoffer Tower, opened in 2003. The Westin Virginia Beach Town Center & Residences was completed in 2007 and, at 38 stories, became the tallest building in Virginia.

³⁵ *The Beach*, 101-107.

³⁶ Mansfield, 213.