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COMPREHENSIVE PLAN



PREPARED BY

Westmoreland County Planning Commission
Westmoreland County Land Use Administration
Northern Neck Planning District Commission

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INTRODUCTION TO WESTMORELAND COUNTY

Location

Westmoreland County is located in an area of Virginia known as the Northern Neck, a colonial name for the narrow peninsula between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. The County is bordered on the north by the Potomac River, on the west by King George County, on the south by Essex and Richmond Counties, and on the east by Northumberland County. The Rappahannock River forms part of the southern boundary.

Montross, the County seat, is located about forty-five miles east of Fredericksburg, one-hundred miles south of Washington D.C., and sixty-three miles northeast of Richmond. Colonial Beach, Westmoreland County's largest incorporated town, is located about twenty-two miles north of Montross. Colonial Beach and Montross are the only incorporated towns within the County.

Westmoreland County has a rather narrow, elongated shape. Lying in the eastern section of Virginia's Coastal Plain, between the Potomac River and the Piedmont Plateau, its greatest width is about twelve miles, and its greatest length is approximately thirty-two miles. Elevations in the county range from sea level to approximately 200 feet above sea level. The total land area is approximately 250 square miles. The County enjoys a temperate, semi-marine climate and a long growing season. Large areas of water temper both summer heat and winter cold and the close proximity of water and land generates breezes near shore which mitigate the high humidity.

History

Geological scientists believe the last ice retreat took place about 25,000 years ago. The melting glaciers formed the rivers, creeks, and land areas of the Northern neck, which is the land bounded by the Chesapeake Bay, Potomac River, and the Rappahannock River westward to and beyond the Allegheny Mountains. Projectile points found in the Northern Neck prove that Paleo-Indians lived here about 12,000 years ago. They moved with the seasons to find food. The Indians of the Archaic periods lived in roaming tribes within the Tidewater area. By the year 1000 BC, the Indians of the early Woodland period had settled into small villages along the estuaries of the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers. Evidence of a relatively large village has been found in the Leedstown area on the Rappahannock River.

In 1608, Captain John Smith left Jamestown Island with a small ship and crew to sail up the Chesapeake Bay. The earliest English settlement in the Potomac Valley occurred in 1634 with the founding of St. Mary's City in Maryland. Six years later, John Mottram settled at Coan Hall, near Heathsville in Northumberland County. This initiated a land boom which established, in succession, the four counties of the Northern Neck.

In 1644, when Cromwell's forces took over the British Parliament, Richard Ingles, an adventurer and supporter of Cromwell, invaded the Maryland plantations. The surviving Maryland inhabitants fled across the south side of the Potomac River where they had

previously established hunting and fishing rights with the local Indians. The names of some of the 17th century colonists can be found in the 1652 record "Oath of Allegiance to the Commonwealth."

Westmoreland County, named for a British shire, was established in 1653 by the Colonial Government in Jamestown. When originally formed, the County stretched westward beyond the present District of Columbia, but territorial changes in 1664 and in 1778 brought about the present day boundaries. Within its boundaries are the birthplaces and former homes of more statesmen "of national stature" than in any other place in the nation. The land area of the County was originally a part of Northumberland County, of which Westmoreland's first justices were formally residents. The first County Court in Westmoreland met at the plantation of Colonel Walter Brodhurst on Currioman Bay. By 1675, the Court had its first building on the site of the present courthouse in Montross. The original courthouse has been enlarged and remodeled at least five different times. The modern George D. English Senior Memorial Building was completed near the courthouse in 1976.

Many of the geographical names in Westmoreland County come from the names of early English plantation owners in the County. Coles Point is named after the seventeenth century Dick Cole. Bonum Creek derives its name from Samuel Bonum, whose son, Samuel, married Elizabeth Johnson, half-sister of Mary Ball, the mother of George Washington. Spence's Point is named for the seventeenth century Spence family, who first lived in the Stratford Hall area. Lee's Creek is named for Richard Lee I, who was known as the "emigrant" and who was the progenitor of the famous Lee family of Westmoreland County. Pope's Creek is named for Colonel Nathaniel Pope, an original County justice, whose daughter, Anne, married the first John Washington. Anne and John Washington were the great-grandparents of George Washington, who was born at Wakefield off the Potomac River at Pope's Creek. The original home where the first President was born in 1732 is no longer standing, but a typical 18th Century plantation house has been built near the site, which was identified by an archaeological excavation and is now part of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument.

Some of the estuaries of the Potomac, which are located in the County, retain their Indian names, such as Yeocomico, Machodoc, Nomini, and Mattox. Mattox creek was first called Appomattox after the Indians of that same name. King Copsico Point was named after an Indian Chief.

Among the early settlers were many African Americans who brought their culture and traditions with them. They have contributed greatly to the economic development of the County. The eighteenth century "Potomac River Barons" could not have attained their financial success without their hard work. In 1768, Richard Henry Lee of Chantilly, in Westmoreland County, in his first speech as a Burgess in Williamsburg, advocated the abolition of slavery. In 1791, Councilor Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, in the County, made a Deed of Manumission, filed in the County Court House, which provided the liberation of a certain number of slaves each year during a period of twenty years. Among the original County records, there are three Registers of "Free Negroes," beginning in 1817 and continuing until April 1, 1861.

The County's inhabitants have always been politically active, especially in protecting

their personal liberty, their homes, and their property. The Leedstown Resolutions, written in 1766, ten years before the Declaration of Independence, showed the intolerance of the County residents for taxation without representation. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, of Chantilly, introduced the resolution in the Continental Congress calling for independence from England. Westmoreland County is the birthplace of the only two officers in the Revolutionary War, who later became Presidents of the United States: George Washington and James Monroe. Many County residents, including Richard Henry Lee, Squire Richard Lee, John Augustine Washington, and others, were military leaders during the Revolutionary War. The County also produced officers who commanded military units during the war of 1812 and the Civil War. Because of the County's long and rich history, there are a number of significant historic landmarks. The most significant historic dwelling is Stratford Hall, designed and built around 1725 by Colonel Thomas Lee, the grandson of Richard Lee I. Thomas Lee was the father of two signers of the Declaration of Independence. Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, the only two brothers to sign that document. The mansion and adjoining 1,400 acres are maintained by the Robert E. Lee Memorial Association, in honor of and as a memorial to general Robert E. Lee, who was born at Stratford Hall in 1807, the son of Colonel "Lighthorse" Harry Lee and his life, Anne Hill Carter.

During the "War of 1812," in the Fall of 1814, British troops were ordered up the Potomac river towards Washington, D.C. Along the way, they burned several mansions and churches. When they reached Stratford Hall the troops slashed a portrait and drank wine from the cellar. During the Civil War several "skirmishes" were reported and the region was vulnerable to shelling from Federal boats associated with the naval blockade. After this war, life in the area returned to fishing, timber, and agriculture, which provided the primary employment within the region.

Today, Westmoreland remains a relatively rural residential county. Two towns serve as primary community centers and growth nodes. Public facilities and services are being improved through a variety of capital projects such as the extension of water and sewer service south of Montross, establishment of a County industrial park and construction of a shell building, renovations to Montross Middle School and creation of a Human Services Center and cultural museum at the old A.T. Johnson School. Waterfront home construction is steady and increasing due to the County's ideal location for vacation and retirement homes. Agricultural production continues to play a large role in an economy supplemented by increased local commerce in general retail and tourism as well as a steady but, endangered seafood industry.