



I

The Colonial Period

A thoughtful review of Fredericksburg's history in its half century as a colonial town suggests that some of its importance was particular to the time.

The town had been arbitrarily positioned by Alexander Spotswood to suit his own purposes. Unlike some of the lower colonial town sites, Fredericksburg had no earlier record of settlement.

The town created in 1728 owed its early survival to the steamroller tactics of Henry Willis, who captured the public tobacco inspection created by the Crown in 1730 and the county seat in 1732. It was never a popular location for the courthouse, but it had the uncompromising protection of the Crown.

Economically, Fredericksburg enjoyed a monopoly on the tobacco shipments of a large area during the colonial decades when tobacco was the key to local prosperity.

But it was its cultural resources—the blending of Virginia's gentry, younger sons often with English educations, and Scottish merchants—that enriched its colonial character.

Although the timing was accidental, Fredericksburg's founding had coincided with the agreement between England and Scotland that permitted the Scottish merchants to begin trade with the colony.

Earlier, English merchants and agents had come through the lower ports well before Fredericksburg was established, and the Scotsmen who arrived there in the 1730s were their rivals (as, for example, in Norfolk).

But the Rappahannock was a ripe new market, and among the first residents of Fredericksburg were Scotsmen who came and spent a lifetime here. We have only to reflect on the founding in 1752 of a Masonic Lodge and the early membership of local Virginia gentry (Fielding Lewis, Charles Dick, John Thornton, and George Washington) to comprehend the Scottish influence on Fredericksburg's colonial years.

Then, thanks to the sons of the area gentry who were sent to England to study but were more preoccupied with Arabian stallions, Fredericksburg's fairs and its Jockey Club races became one of the most popular gatherings in the colony.

The tavern of the gregarious George Weedon was known throughout Virginia, and he carried over 450 accounts in his ledger. The Town House was also a drawing card, not only for local celebrations and regional entertainments but as a stop on the theater circuit for companies touring in Virginia and Maryland.

These rich resources did indeed make Fredericksburg one of the most prominent centers in the colony. The quarter century before the Revolutionary War was perhaps Fredericksburg's cultural heyday.

But a decline in Rappahannock shipping had already begun. As early as 1764, Governor Francis Fauquier notified the Board of Trade and Plantations:

The seat of trade is altered, the northern part of the colony employing fewer vessels than heretofore, the southern many more.

At the end of the colonial period, Fredericksburg claimed 1,000 residents. Yet here a surprise awaits us. When we survey the populations of the other colonial towns which had become urban centers by 1790, Fredericksburg was now the smallest of the lot. That would remain its destiny.

The Economic Realities of Living in a Brand New Country

In 1778, the General Assembly of the new state of Virginia had granted the petitions of Spotsylvanians who had long sought a central location for the courthouse. The court's business had been one of the underpinnings of the town's colonial prosperity, with fairs, auctions, and parish vestry meetings geared to its calendar.

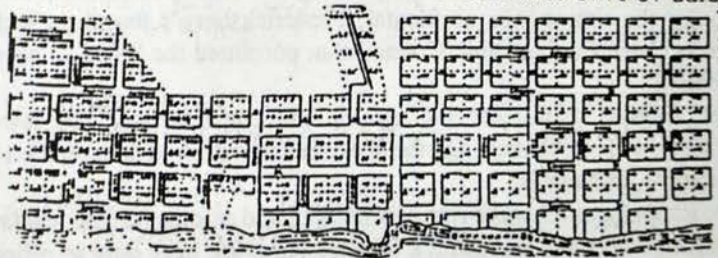
Independence also saw the loss of stable trade relationships with Scotland and England. ("We are here as dead as doornails," wrote the merchant Charles Yates in 1786.)

Although the long-term consequences of these changes would have a major impact on the town's economy and character, this was understandably not foreseen at the time.

The elected council of the newly incorporated town was busily occupied with civic arrangements—regulation of the twice weekly market; fire prevention; maintaining peace and order in the streets; the collection of taxes; oversight of the public wharf and the market house; and the care of the poor (which had formerly been the responsibility of the parish vestry).

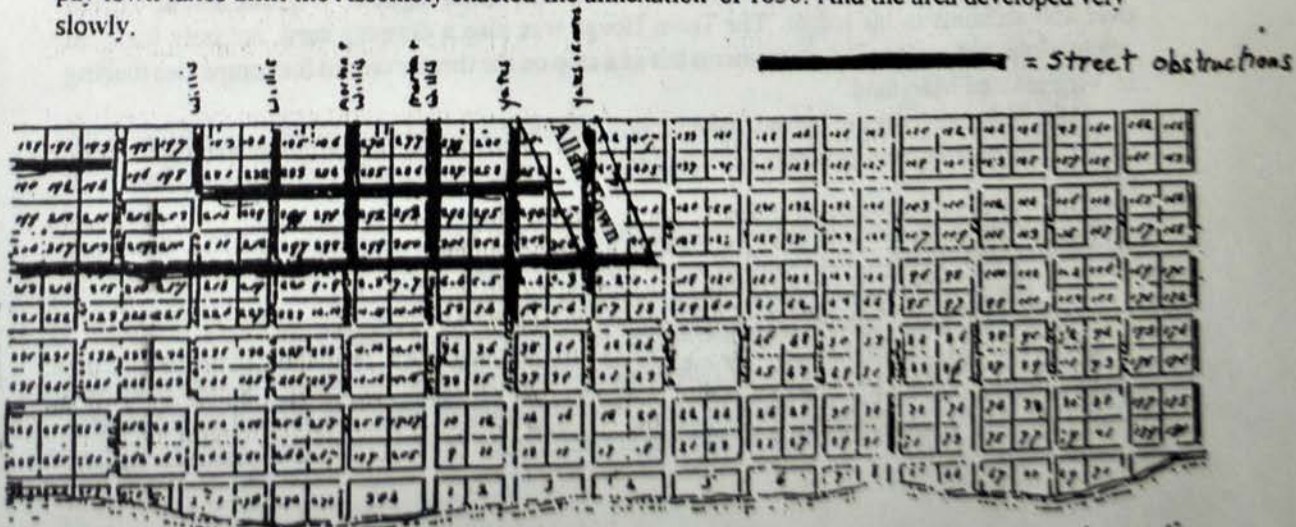
It was not until the end of the century that the council departed from 18th century accounting practices and also sought to improve the town's financial resources by regularizing the tracts at the lower end of town into streets, blocks, and taxable lots.

Much of this area had been exempted by special legislation in 1759 when the Assembly authorized the town's expansion—for it had been privately owned since 1741 by purchasers of Henry Willis' estate.



After the incorporation enacted by the Assembly in 1781, the council maintained it was now included in the town bounds. But much of the lower town, including the streets, was fenced off by the owners.

In 1806, the council sued the owners and ordered a new survey showing the area laid off in lots. The lawsuit met with some success. It eliminated the street obstructions and produced a new lot grid which eventually filled in some of the 30 acres. But the owners of the land still did not pay town taxes until the Assembly enacted the annexation of 1850. And the area developed very slowly.



Surveyed by ...
May 1848

There were other setbacks at the beginning of the century. The fire of 1807 destroyed 20% of the taxable properties. There was also a devastating flood in the same year.



In the first quarter of the 19th century, the Jockey Club races and other festivities enjoyed by the gentry, citizens, and hundreds of visitors faded away. The public gatherings now had patriotic and agricultural themes.

The Public are respectfully informed, that an ELEGANT BAR-BACQUE will be provided, on Brown's Island, on the 4th July, in celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence.—Terms, Twenty one Shillings, to be paid at the bridge.
1806

A citizen recalls the pleasures of the past

No company of players ever found encouragement here except during the time of the RACES, when that fashionable amusement brought crowds of gay and fashionable people hither from the adjacent country. These now no longer take place.

The famous Rappahannock Race Course is now an elegant wheat-field—the Play-house itself is occupied by a carriage-maker and a blacksmith; and those respectable citizens who once by their presence gave countenance and credit to the Race-Field, are now seen in decent attendance at the TEMPLE, and reverently engaging in the solemn duties of religion.

The gaiety and dissipation which once characterized the people of this town, has given place to that plainness and simplicity of manners, which indicate the presence, and are ever the fruit, of sound morality and rational piety.

W.

Transcription, Virginia Herald, May 24, 1817

The Agricultural Show and Fair, which is to take place on Wednesday next, we are authorized to state, will probably be very interesting; as it is understood, there will be an exhibition of fine Horses—a number of fat Cattle, Sheep and Hogs—together with Farming Implements, and some articles of Domestic Manufacture, which were not enumerated in the communication of the Secretary, published in the Herald.

The Committee of Arrangements is busily employed, in erecting stalls and pens, for the reception of the stock to be shewn—and a shelter, with refreshments, for the accommodation of the public, will be prepared, by one of our citizens, upon very moderate terms, on the new Turnpike Road, near the town. Nov. 9, 1822.

III Private Development

Meantime, a major opportunity for private enterprise was now being enjoyed by the owners of land adjacent to the town. They proceeded to lay off and sell lots independently.

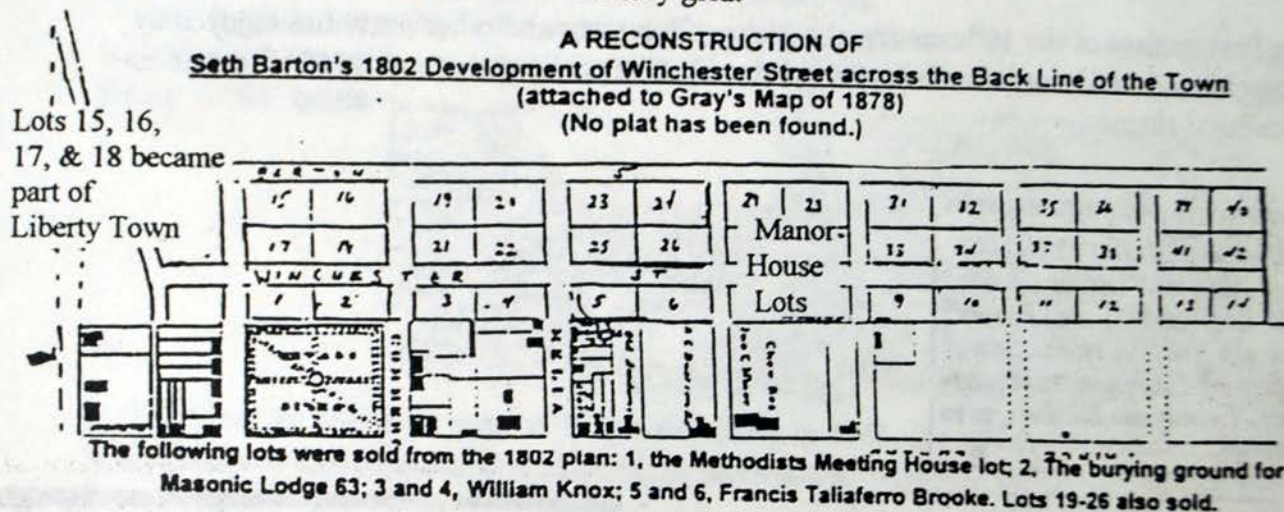
This was an important difference from the 18th century. The expansion of 1759 from 50 to 200 acres had been enacted by the Assembly and conformed to the original town grid.

When the town was incorporated in 1781, these additions were naturally included. As it was several decades before many of the lots became tax producing, the council was faced from the beginning with a need for revenue to support substantial urban services.

But the new 19th century neighborhoods lying outside the town boundaries, like the 30 acres from the Willis estate, did not pay taxes to the ^{town} county until the next annexation, which did not occur until 1850.

The New Neighborhoods on Royston/Lewis Land

In 1802, Seth Barton, the new owner of the Fielding Lewis plantation, laid off his first development, 42 lots and a new street (Winchester) along the back line. Though it was not a part of the town, he conformed to the 18th century grid.



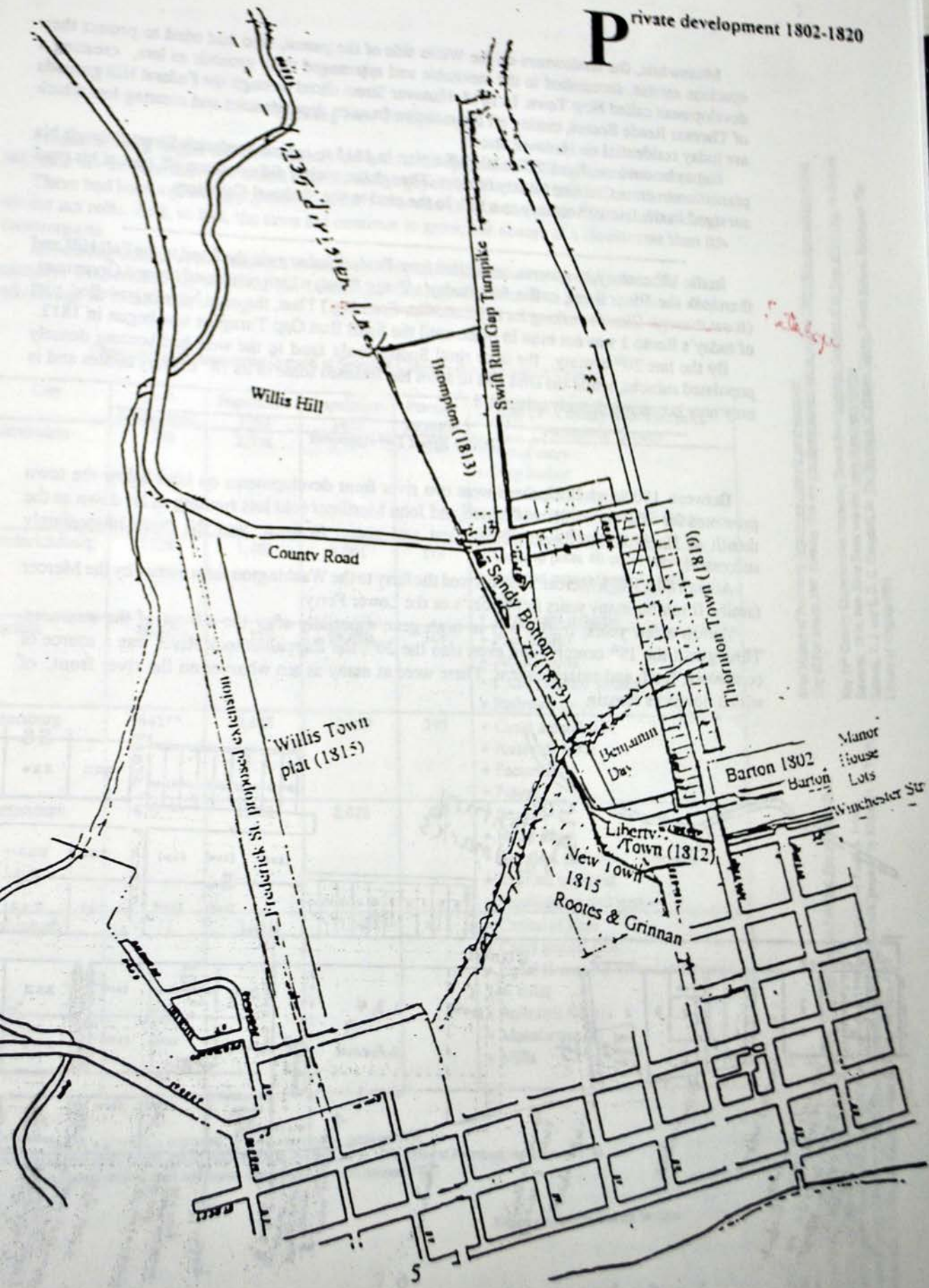
Thereafter, the 18th century division of the Buckner Royston patent—and the impetus for access to western markets—were the principal factors in the development of the new neighborhoods.

The county road laid down by Henry Willis along the division line about 1735 had promoted Willis' interests, and it had continued to be an important link between county and town. But the real economic beneficiary in the early 19th century was Seth Barton, the new owner of the Lewis half of the patent. In 1812, he offered the turnpike company a shortcut (today the curve in George Street) through his property to link it to the new Swift Run Gap Turnpike (today Hanover Street extended) and to the county road.

This created a major advantage for Barton, who laid off the neighborhoods of Liberty Town along the turnpike and Sandy Bottom along the county road. *Note that the Liberty Town plat incorporated the four end lots from his Winchester Street plan, bisected now by Liberty Street.*

Barton intended Liberty Street to be the major entrance to Fredericksburg from the west. But this advantage was lost when the next owner of the Lewis estate, John Thornton, extended William Street in 1820 beyond the back line of the town in a development of his own to merge with the turnpike, as it does today. Liberty Town has thus languished for almost two centuries between the two streets.

P rivate development 1802-1820



Meanwhile, the landowners on the Willis side of the patent, who had tried to protect their spacious estates, succumbed to the inevitable and rearranged their grounds as lots, creating a development called New Town. In 1815, Hanover Street sliced through the Federal Hill grounds of Thomas Reade Rootes, cutting off the mansion from its dependencies and creating lots which are today residential on Hanover Street.

Not to be outdone, Byrd Willis laid off a plan in 1815 to extend Frederick Street through his plantation to draw Caroline County farmers. Though the project did not come off, part of his road survived in the late 19th century as a link in the road to the National Cemetery.

update?

In the 18th century, to go west, one exited from Fredericksburg via the Road to the Fall Hill and then took the River Road, or the fork (today's Bragg Road) which continued toward Germanna. (It cut through Giant's parking lot at Chancellor Crossing.) Thus, the most heavily travelled part of today's Route 3 was not even in place until the Swift Run Gap Turnpike was begun in 1812.

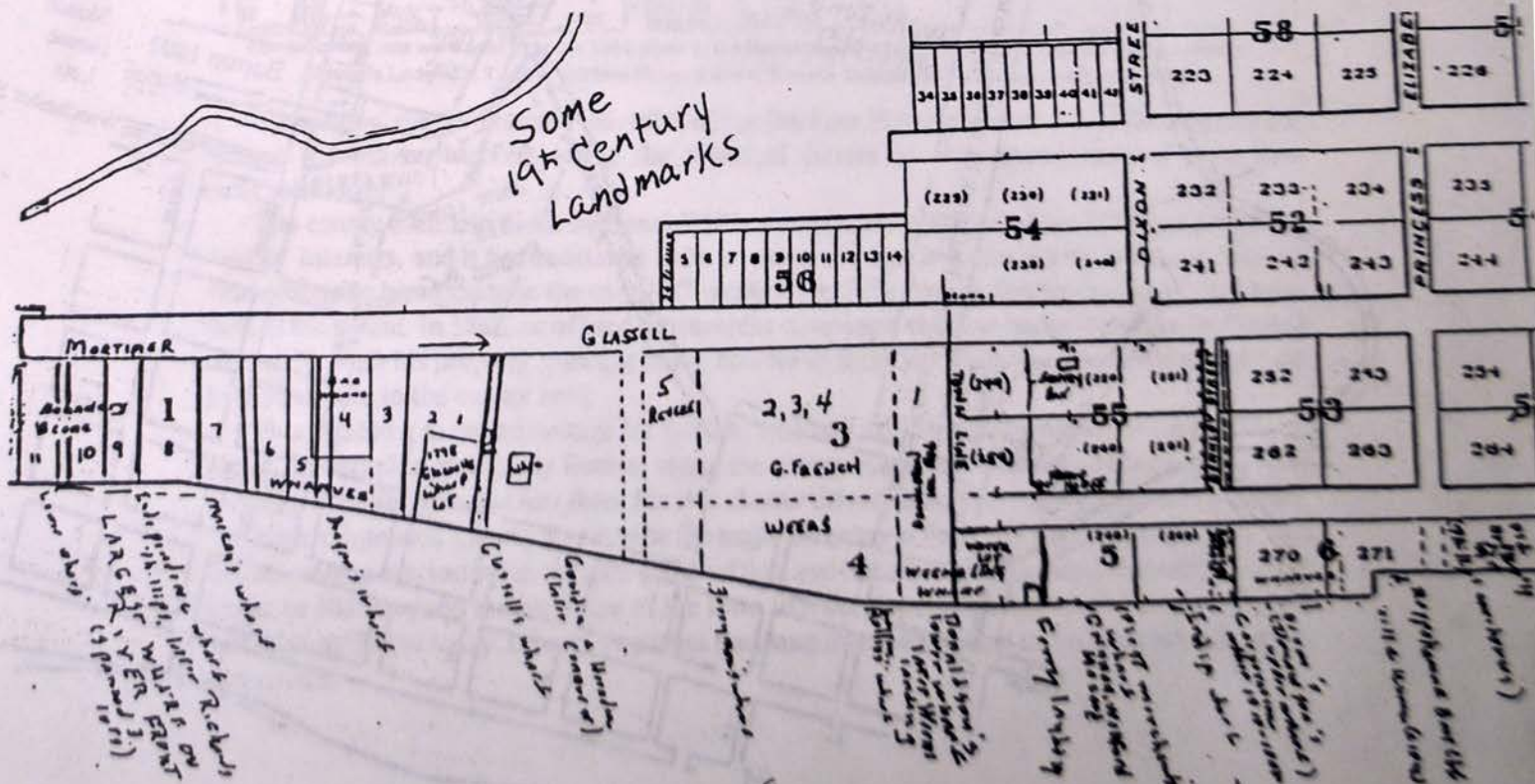
By the late 20th century, the once rural Spotsylvania land to the west had become densely populated suburbs, while the land east of town has retained some of its 18th century estates and is only now becoming densely urbanized.

River Front Development

Between 1800 and 1817, there were two river front developments on land below the town promoted for wharves. William Glassell and John Mortimer sold lots running as far down as the mouth of Hazel Run. Glassell, being first and nearer to town, was the more immediately successful.

About 1806, Hugh Mercer's son revived the ferry to the Washington farm owned by the Mercer family. It ran for many years as Mercer's or the Lower Ferry.

Within a few years, traffic was in high gear, especially after the advent of the steamers. Throughout the 19th century, and even into the 20th, the Rappahannock River was a source of commerce, food, and entertainment. There were as many as ten wharves on the river front, of which no traces remain.



(Diagrammed on Grey's 1878 map)

Seeking New Prosperity

Fredericksburg began the new century on a note of optimism. The new town newspaper reflected the diverse activities which citizens now enjoyed, both socially and in commerce.

There had been a growing population in the 1790s and an increase in the number of buildings on the tax rolls. And, in fact, the town did continue to grow, but always at a slower rate than its counterparts.

In seeking access to the markets in the western part of the state in the early decades of the century, Fredericksburg followed the pattern of the lower towns. But it did not have their advantage in location or timing.

Characteristics Promoting Growth of Selected Cities in the Nineteenth Century

City	Date Established	Population 1790	Population 1850	Percent Increase	Key 19 th Century Characteristics Promoting Growth
Alexandria	1749	2,748	8,734	218	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port of entry • Deep harbor • Near nation's capital • Canal connecting to C&O Canal • Railroad to Gordonsville
Fredericksburg	1728	1,485	4,061	173	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canal to point 40 miles upriver • Railroad passes through, 1837 • Mills • Some light industry
Norfolk	1680*	2,959	14,326	384	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port of entry • Naval station • Canal (Dismal Swamp) • Railroads (two)
Petersburg	1645**	2,828	14,010	395	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canal around falls • Railroads (two) • Factories • Forges
Portsmouth	1620***	1,702	8,626	407	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seaport • Naval depot • Excellent harbor, large vessels • Railroad terminus • Shipbuilding and repair
Richmond	1742	3,761	27,570	633	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital of state • Canal around falls • Canal (James River) to Lynchburg, 146 miles • Railroads (four) • Manufacturing • Mills

*Norfolk established as settlement, 1680. Incorporated as borough, 1736.

**Garrison (Fort Henry) and fur trading post at this location in 1645. Town of Petersburg incorporated 1784.

*** Settlement as plantation community began 1620. Town established 1752.

Further, there was new competition for the markets which Fredericksburg had served. The Valley towns had traffic on north-south roads; and upper Culpeper County was attracted to the new Federal City and Baltimore trade.

Just as Fredericksburg's efforts were launching, the state government's support was crippled by depressions. With the exception of the Swift Run Gap Turnpike, which was at least completed without debt, one unsuccessful or uncompleted project followed another.

Fredericksburg's misfortunes were disheartening. The Council relied on ventures which were poorly managed, and it compounded its problems by investing large amounts of the public funds in bond ventures, always with the voters' endorsement in referendums.

Based on information in the Abstracts of City Council Minutes, Fredericksburg City Council.

- Between 1806 and 1861, borrowed at least \$128,100 from various sources, including banks and individuals.
- Between 1827 and 1854, bought at least \$316,000 worth of stock in ventures such as Rappahannock Canal Company, Plank Road Company, Fredericksburg and Gordonsville Railroad, and Fredericksburg Water Power Company.
- Between 1851 and 1861, issued bonds totaling at least \$298,200 to pay for various internal improvements and other debts. Five bonds were issued in 1854 alone.
- Borrowed against the following year's taxes in 1856, 1859, 1860, and 1861.

Exhibit prepared by Marian McCabe.

Perhaps no other strategy was available for reaching western markets. But even if the projects had been more efficiently executed, their efficacy would have been short lived, once the era of railroads arrived.

Still, by the middle of the 19th century, Fredericksburg's prospects were beginning to brighten as new businesses opened to take advantage of the publicly funded opportunities for commerce. Unfortunately, before the economy was really revitalized, the Civil War wreaked its terrible toll before the debt could be eliminated. The last half of the 19th century found Fredericksburg dealing not only with financial ruin and destruction but also with the mountainous debt incurred as an investment in a future which was no longer possible. The council painstakingly and slowly worked the debt off.

The doctoral dissertation of Thomas Field Armstrong deals with the comparative experience of three Virginia towns in the first half of the 19th century. One of its chapters is an invaluable economic history of Fredericksburg for the period, which I have included in this notebook.

New Tobacco Factory.

We learn from the 'News' that Messrs. Alexander & Gibbs have contracted with Mr. Wm. M. Baggott for the erection of a factory to be used for the manufacture of Tobacco, on the lot opposite the railroad Depot, formerly occupied by Slaughter's cotton factory. The building is to be 58 by 44, and 3 stories high. It is to be completed by the first of January next, after which time it is stated that the firm will work about 100 hands.

WEEKLY ADVERTISER 10CT 1859

The Machinery Arriving.

The machinery for the new Cotton Factory, recently erected by Mr. J. B. Fickler on the Bridgewater Mill site has arrived and is now being placed in the building. Thus one after another of our public improvements are quietly getting under way. Fredericksburg will assuredly be a large manufacturing town, and that in a very few years from this time.—Herald.

WEEKLY ADVERTISER 14 JULY 1860

CARRIAGES.

The largest and most splendid assortment of Carriages ever offered for sale in this Market, may now be seen at PRITCHARD & THORNTON'S Coach Factory, on Main-street. We are also constantly manufacturing CARRIAGES of every description.

Persons wishing to purchase will find it to their advantage to call and examine for themselves, as we are determined to sell lower than can be bought anywhere else.

Carriages repaired at the shortest notice and in the best manner.

PRITCHARD & THORNTON.

March 21, 1848.

The New Social Order

In spite of economic strains and uncertainties, the first half of the 19th century left a vivid imprint on Fredericksburg's character. These citizens vigorously epitomized the new pluralism of the young republic. They continued longstanding traditions of social pleasures, diversions, and hospitality, while creating new avenues for commercial, civic, religious, social, and political participation.

- River commerce continued to be Fredericksburg's hope for prosperity.
- Churches proliferated, an unusual phenomenon when one realizes that there had been only the one official church until 1776.
- Women became more involved participants in social issues and needs.
- The free black population grew, even as the issue of slavery troubled the new republic.

But we should also realize that to our predecessors two centuries ago, Fredericksburg was already an old town which they were busily modernizing. We have only to walk around our historic district to see the splendid settings which they created in spite of the town's economic distress—the Federal row buildings, handsome churches, public structures, and impressive mansions.

Much of Fredericksburg is still as they built it. But their times are difficult to grasp—perhaps because the new way of life which they were creating was uncharted, both diverse and pluralistic. We need to become much more aware of their times and the economic uncertainties and social issues which they faced as part of a young and inexperienced nation.

A town as rich in history as Fredericksburg has a profound obligation: To depict its own character, which has evolved over nearly three centuries, and also to provide a context for understanding and appreciating our national history.



PLEASURE EXCURSION—3d July

THE Steam Boat Rappahannock, Capt. Fairbank, will make a Trip of Pleasure, on **TUESDAY** the 3^d JULY, at 10 for **PORT TORORO BAY**—leaving Fredericksburg at 3 o'clock A. M., due on board, and returns the same evening. Every exertion will be made to render the trip agreeable. June 18.

It is intended that the Boat, in promoting her regular trips to and from Baltimore, during the summer, will take Old Point Comfort and Norfolk in the way, both going and returning; of the commencement of which early notice will be given. 1837



A VIEW OF FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA. SKETCHED BY W. K. RUSSELL.