

## **A HISTORY OF WARWICK**

Written and edited by Dick Anderson - 1953

(Contributing information compiled especially for this publication by Lewis T. Jestor, G. F. McMahon and Dick Anderson.) Virgil I. Grissom  
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Gold ---adventure”, words which have stimulated rugged men for many centuries, founding and destroying empires and nations, creating love and hate, fortune and misfortune.

The cargo of humans Captain Christopher Newport carried aboard his tiny fleet of three ships in 1607--- each ship scarcely larger than a modern fishing trawler – had the same dreams. When this cargo of 490 fortune hunters landed and established the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, none realized their immortal fortune would be the founding of a nation, not gold. None realized they were to plant the seeds of the modern City of Warwick.

The river they had sailed on was named after their English monarch, James I, as was their permanent campsite, called Jamestown. To explore and seek provisions the first settlers made many trips down the James and overland to reach the tip of the Virginia Peninsula. It was with the exploration and subsequent development of the land near Jamestown that Warwick was born. The first settlers discovered that to the east of the James was another river, which was later, named the York. The two rivers met in the Chesapeake Bay, forming a giant size Peninsula.

The westerly portion of the Peninsula, south of Jamestown, was to become Warwick – at first a small shire of self-contained plantations, then an economically poor agriculture and fishing community, until today its present role is that of a city offering residences to better than average income families employed in military and defense activities.

The colonists of the first permanent English speaking settlement found on pushing south from their new home, that the land between the Powhatan and Pamunkey Rivers (now the James and York) was dominated by the Kecoughtan Indians. The Indians proved a constant danger to the white man’s colonization efforts. The modern City of Warwick is indebted to the Indian harassment for some of the names familiar in the City today.

In 1610, for example, Humphrey Blunt with a group set out down the James to procure supplies. Blunt went ashore to secure a boat, which was adrift. Ambushed by the Indians, he was killed. The scene of the incident near the mouth of the Warwick River was from that time on called Blunt’s Point. A city street leading to the site still carries the name today.

The trials and tribulations of the Jamestown settlement were many – famine and Indian wars took their toll. In the same year of Blunt’s death, the original 490 had been reduced to 60. Discouraged, they decided to give up the venture, so on June 7, 1610, they embarked for the return to England. The waters off Mulberry Island, northern-most tip of Warwick on the James side, were the scene of an event steadying the course of the faltering Virginia Colony. Just off Mulberry Island, the returning 60 men met a long-boat with news that Lord De La Warr had arrived at Old Point with three ships, supplies and a company of 150 men. The provisions and De La Warr’s enforcement of written laws saved the colony.

It wasn't until the first representative assembly in 1619 and the great Indian massacre of 1622 passed that the Virginia colony found any peace. In 1619, the colony received its first charter from the Virginia Company of London. The charter held two provisions- liberal land grants and permission for the first representatives governing assembly. Warwick, then part of the area known as Kecoughtan, elected Captain William Tucker and William Capp to the first assembly.

Warwick remained without identity of its own until 1634 though Virginia became a crown colony in 1625. By the year 1621, nearly all of its land had been taken through land patents. Most of the grants were large and gave rise to huge self-contained plantations, independent enterprises similar to others developed throughout Tidewater.

The first official name was given Warwick in 1634 when the Virginia colony was divided into eight shires (county). Warwick was then called "Warrick River Shire". Its name was after Sir Robert Rich, Second Earl of Warwick, who was a prominent member of the Virginia Company, though he never visited the New World County bearing his name. There is ample evidence to indicate that Rich was instrumental in influencing the Dutch to introduce the first Negro slaves to the colonists in the "Red Letter Year" of 1619. It is more likely, however, Rich, being the scoundrel he was, had more to do with the introduction of the first women the same year.

Patterned after county government in England, Warwick was then governed by a lieutenant and an elected sheriff. In March of 1643, the assembly outlined the boundaries of Warwick and changed its name to Warwick, dropping the River portion. The boundaries outline then are essentially the boundaries in existence today with only several minor variations.

Riding on the crest of prosperity, if such could be said of the demands of living during the period, Warwick was at the time considered very wealthy. Its plantations were prospering and it boasted of a very good harbor -- Warwick River. Its 811 population made it the third largest in the colony, outranked only by James City, the capitol, with 886, and Elizabeth City with 859.

To facilitate trade, collect tariffs, and to establish a better system of government and defense, if need be, the representative assembly decided in 1680 that centralization of activities was essential. Through legislative action, each county was order to establish towns. Apparently, Warwick thought ill of the idea for it wasn't until 10 years later, on a second order from the assembly, that action was taken. Fifty acres were purchased from Colonel Samuel Mathews at what is now Deep Creek. A town site was laid out with lots and a jail and courthouse built. Several other buildings, including a tavern, were erected, but the town, often called "Warwick Towne", did not grow. When legislative action failed to make it a city, it eventually became a remote and isolated spot in a predominantly rural community.

Bacon's Rebellion of 1676 provided little stimulus for action in Warwick. In a petition similar to that offered from other countries, Warwick asked pardon from any part it may have had in the rebellion, noting the county's participation was small since it was remote from the immediate scene of the trouble.

Warwick grew little during the next hundred years and most of its population, like the other 13 colonies, sided with the revolutionary cause at the outbreak of the war. Its partisanship caused the small community to suffer immensely from British plundering by land and sea during the war. Continental ships loading at Warwick River were sunk by the British at the mouth of the river.

During the campaign, two skirmishes took place within Warwick. On one occasion, a British force of 40 men on a foraging expedition met a contingent of Virginia volunteers under Captain Edward Mallory at Water's Creek. The British officer was killed; his men routed and forced to retreat.

In the late summer of 1781, shortly before the surrender that was later to shape the destiny of the world, Lord Cornwallis invaded Warwick, along with the other Peninsula communities, as soon as he established his base in Yorktown. Using force, he ordered all able-bodied men to be driven out of the area. Conditions in Warwick became distressing.

Secretly at the time, preparations were afoot to bring General Washington's Army from the north to the Peninsula. The colonists assembled small boats of every kind and description in the James River. Facing tremendous odds, the mosquito fleet was used to collect provisions for Lafayette's men, already assembled at Williamsburg. Reinforcements from Maryland landed at Burwell's Ferry and Trebell's Landing just north of Warwick. Moving across the Peninsula to Yorktown, a portion of the Revolutionary forces marched across Warwick, halting at "End View", a plantation belonging to the Harwood-Curtis families, for rest and water. Water was readily available from an abundant spring, which today is one of the sources of the Lee Hall reservoir. Even after Washington's victory in 1781, Warwick remained harassed by British ships for some months to come.

The revolution's end did not bring the return of prosperity to Warwick. Water traffic was diverted to Norfolk and Baltimore and the little port on the Warwick River, which previously was busy with a shipyard, a ropewalk and allied businesses, was finally abandoned. Through sale and inheritance splits, its large land tracts were divided one by one.

The first official census following the war came in 1790. By that time, Warwick could record only 1,690 persons, making it the third smallest county in Virginia a rating it held until the outbreak of World War II.

Pocketbooks were thin, but spirits proud with the newfound Democracy. In the first free election under the Constitution of the United States, Warwick County, as part of the First District, elected Burr Bassett, Jr., as its first congressman on February 14, 1792.

The period between the Revolution and the War Between the States brought only minor changes to the county, which was fighting to eke out an existence. Its development was the development natural progress forced upon it. The slight 2,258 population in 1880 was a direct reflection of the hard times.

It was shortly after the Revolution (1807) that a proposal was made to abandon “Warwick Towne” and move the county seat to a more desirable and assessable location on the main highway at “Stony Run”. The idea stirred public attention and controversy but the State legislature finally passed a law approving the town’s abandonment and reversion of its lots to acreage. Richard Young, who then owned the former Mathews land adjacent to the town, bought it. A new county seat was established in 1809 at “Stony Run” named “Denbigh” after the Mathews home place in England, It was in the same location as the buildings today. The main portion of the Clerk of Courts office, though destroyed in part later, is the same building. A rough, hand carved stone above the door to the office today bears the date (1810) and the inscription “Nov. 1810, T. Sandy under T. R. Dunn and R. Ratcliff.”

\*\*\*\*\* Opening of the Civil War hostilities found the struggling county once more making out. Its numerous small farms were producing and much undeveloped farmland was being put in use. A Federal soldier ordered to Fort Monroe in 1861 wrote home the Peninsula was “A veritable Garden of Eden with numerous fine homes and beautifully cultivated lands.”

The peaceful state was to soon vanish. On June 10, 1861, the first major battle of the war broke out at Big Bethel, in what is the City of Hampton today. Confederate General Bankhead Magruder came out the victor, and Warwick became the in-between ground.

Union forces held the lower end of the Peninsula and Confederate forces north to Richmond. Confederate earthworks were constructed from Fort Crawford on Mulberry Island across the Peninsula to Yorktown. Union plans to take Richmond materialized in April 1862. General George B. McClellan landed his forces at Old Point and Newport News. Ahead Magruder’s Confederate forces undertook to lay waste the countryside, preventing Federal troops from “living off the land.” Before the job could be finished, Union forces appeared. Warwick families for the most part fled, taking what they could with them by whatever transportation was available. What was left behind became prey for the invaders. It was the prey that cost Warwick its most devastating blow of the war. Part of McClellan’s forces marched up the main highway (Route 60) and the others traveled the Yorktown Road. The Union troops, reaching Denbigh, found the abandoned courthouse full of records and carted them off as souvenirs, or burned them. Except for a few pieces which have been returned by relatives of the Union troops, there are no official county records in Warwick prior to 1865. The chaos the missing records brought on was felt quickly when its citizens began to return home after the scenes of battle shifted elsewhere. They experienced great difficulty in ejecting those who had taken possession of their lands.

Lean years of reconstruction following the war left scars. Its previously well balanced economy was hard put to supply the meager needs of an existence. The only major industries were fishing and farming. Early failures to exercise crop rotation began to be felt – productivity dropped with the decrease in soil efficiency. Much good farmland remained undeveloped, in timber. \*\*\*\*\*

It was about this time (March 1897) that Daniel Shenk, a Mennonite from Ohio, visited Warwick and through his observations, the present Mennonite Colony was founded. In a Mennonite publication Shenk noted the variety of soil and though it seemed depleted, he was

sure it would yield “very kindly and promptly to manure and good treatment”. And so it did, for the Mennonite Colony became one of the most prosperous agricultural communities in Tidewater with its dairying and fruit growing. Mennonite farmers from Ohio, Michigan, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and the Shenandoah Valley populated the original 1,200-acre colony site.

Though little known at the time, agriculture was not to be the commander of Warwick’s destiny. As early as 1866, representatives of the Collis P. Huntington interests had begun to acquire large tracts of land at the southern-most tip of the county. Titles to land Huntington acquired during the next 20 years were vested in a holding company, the Old Dominion Land Company.

When 1881 was ushered in, Warwick found it was on the threshold of the greatest prosperity it had known to date. The era came when the Huntington culminated Chesapeake and Ohio Railway completed extension of its tracks from Richmond. The new line ran transversely through the middle of Warwick terminating at what was to become the deep-water port of Newport News. Newport News was at that time a fishing village of scant population. At intervals for the full distance of the county, the railroad established stations to care for passengers and freight and regular schedules were established. The stations established then still bear the same names --Lee Hall, Oriana, Oyster Point, and Morrison.

The establishment of the railroad assured Warwick’s industrialization. Huntington then built the Chesapeake Dry-Dock and Construction Company. Chartered in 1886, the company’s name was later changed to the one it bears today, the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. The company’s slogan “At a profit if we can, at a loss if we must, but always good ships” was to become the hallmark of the world shipbuilding interests. Today the shipyard extends across the waterfront of three former Warwick landmarks --the Briarfield Farm, the Betsy Lee Farm, and the Robert H. Lee Farm.

With the railroad and substantial industry to boost its sagging economy, Warwick naturally flourished again. By 1890, its population had risen to a record high of 6,650. The fishing village of Newport News grew with the county and in 1896; the State legislature granted it a charter as the City of Newport. It was at this time that the county seat of Warwick was transferred from Newport News back to Denbigh when the conflict of interests between the rural and industrial interests of the two communities proved too much. The seat was reestablished at its present Denbigh location. A courthouse and jail were added to the site, both of which are in use today. The courthouse was built in 1884 and the jail in 1899. Warwick’s seat was moved to Newport News in 1891.

The nationwide depression of 1898 once more caused a slump in Warwick’s growth. Times were hard and money scarce, but 20 years later the Huntington shipyard enterprise was paying off. Employment was at its peak and Warwick again tasted the sweetness of stabilized economy, though its nature remained rural.

World War I quickly followed and the war’s overnight utilization of the Lower Peninsula marked the beginning of the modern Warwick and established the trends that have continued to be governing factors in the City’s development.

Camps Morrison, Hill, Alexander, and Eustis were established within its boundaries. By 1917, the shipyard was committed to a large naval shipbuilding program and the need for homes for shipyard workers became acute. Warwick with its vast acres of undeveloped land was the logical place. In January of 1910, Hilton Village, the first of many residential areas, was started. The Emergency Fleet Corporation purchased 200 acres of the Darling tract. With \$1,200,000 provided by the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation, 500 houses were built on the site to house additional shipyard workers.

Mulberry Island, which played such a commanding part in earlier Warwick history, was acquired for the U. S. Army during the First World War and Camp Eustis established. Camp Morrison was set up at Morrison and still further south Camps Hill and Alexander were established as temporary encampments for troops.

The war passed and the military camps gradually were abandoned except for Camp Eustis. The influences of war seem to pass also, except for the very noticeable fact that the population Hilton Village stayed.

There followed the indefinite period of Warwick's life. Its population dropped gradually from the World War I peak of 10,000 during the next 22 years. Its form of government was the magisterial Board of Supervisors similar to other Virginia counties -- three elected supervisors who exercised complete control. During this period, Newport News felt its first growing pains and looked to its mother Warwick for more room. Warwick became a haven for the city residents smitten with the suburban fever for larger lots and less complicated restrictions of city life. There developed a growing anxiety between Newport News and Warwick over annexation suits. The city was successful during the period in seven annexation suits, the last coming in 1940 setting the boundaries as they are frozen today.

The federal census of 1940 placed Warwick's population at a scant 9,248. The county had a hard core of rural people who lived and worked in Warwick in control. Presenting a slightly different picture of interest was the other 50 percent of its population that lived in Warwick but found its livelihood in surrounding communities.

Like the German blitz, World War II completely overpowered tiny Warwick, transforming it into a boomtown of the first order. Housing, housing, and more housing was the order of the time, providing more homes for defense workers, military personnel and their families, and workers at government installations. In four years of war, its population jumped to 33,950.

Camp Eustis was reactivated as the much-enlarged Fort Eustis. The giant staging area of Camp Patrick Henry was created; Camp Hill reopened and enlarged and several supply and ammunition dumps opened.

Federal government financed defense housing sprang up at Copeland, Newsome, and Ferguson Parks. Through the frenzied war activities, the die of Warwick's destiny was cast. Its rural interests waned. Where 12 years before there had been 303 farms, the number dropped to

146, occupations of its population changed with only 15 percent remaining in agriculture and allied professions. The other 85 percent were either in business, professionals, or defense and military personnel and workers.

The population influx brought new demands on the county government. Schools to house many new pupils were paramount and as a result of numerous needs and desire for improvements, the voters approved in 1945 a new form of government -- the county manager form. After the fashion of the times, its government was made a business, and became a national example of a model, economically efficient government.

World War II closed its ugly chapters but again the unexpected happened to maintain the status the county had obtained. Predictions from the areas most farsighted had said Warwick's newly acquired population would return from whence it had come. A few thousand did return to their former homes elsewhere, but the vast portion stayed on. With a new population, the county set about to stabilize the temporary influence of war.

Through the joint efforts of all the Lower Peninsula Communities -- Warwick, Hampton, Newport News, Elizabeth City County, and the town of Phoebus -- Camp Patrick Henry was obtained from the War Assets Administration for a municipal airport and site for a hospital for the aged and chronically.

The fateful year of 1950, which ushered in the Korean War, rolled around putting Warwick, still unrecovered from World War II, back in the role of providing housing and more housing. The biggest building boom Warwick had seen was undertaken, mostly through private enterprise. New subdivisions, now well planned with curb and gutters, sidewalks and spacious lots, sprang up on almost every available piece of land in the southern regions.

Feeling growing pains once more, Newport News reinstituted another unsuccessful and costly annexation suit. Then equal in size to Newport News and showing signs of becoming much larger, Warwick began to think of ways to protect its right to decide what form of government its populace wanted to live under. The 1950 census revealed Warwick had grown more in the preceding 10-year period (more than 300 per cent) than any other community in the nation.

War again brought an undreamed of era of prosperity. Employment was high in the shipyard and neighboring military installations. Fort Eustis, with upward of 20,000 men, became the Transportation Center, permanent home of the Army Transportation Corps. The Federal Government began a \$34,000,000 renovation project of the post.

It was not without misgiving that in 1952 civic leaders gained permission from the state legislature to once again change the county's form of government. Its estimated 52,000 population was becoming impatient with all the talk of annexation and the richest residential portions of the lower end of the county being named as the next area to be added to Newport News. Consequently, on June 10, 1952, Warwick citizens by a 5 to 1 popular vote approved the changing of its historical county into a city. It was an unprecedented move in the nation's history. Warwick's sprawling 60 square miles of territory became Virginia's largest city in land

area and seventh largest in population. Hampton, Elizabeth City County and the town of Phoebus took similar action in a three-way merger, leaving the Lower Peninsula an area of three cities instead of, as previously, two counties, a town, and two cities.

So it was that on July 16, 1952 the City of Warwick was born. Following out the provisions of its new charter, a year later (June 9, 1953) the city elected its first full five member governing council. Though operating under the modern city manager form of government, Warwick, in addition to council members elects its treasurer, commission of revenue, commonwealth attorney, clerk of the court, and city sergeant.

Extending its roots to before 1634, the City has been firmly established on the principles of representative government coupled with a sound business like economy which has been heralded throughout the nation as a new departure in local self governments.

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