

Carving the Northern Neck

How Court Access Shaped Virginia's Upper Peninsula

By the mid-17th century, the settler population on Virginia's upper peninsula was growing rapidly. The Northern Neck we have today was largely shaped by the need to access local courts.

From certifying land patents to handling debts, residents constantly needed to visit the courthouse, explained historian Dr. Phil Levy. As people settled farther out, those journeys became increasingly difficult. When a distant community reached a tipping point, they would petition for their own court—and a new county was born.

Northumberland (1648)

It's believed John Mottrom was the first white settler in the Northern Neck, arriving between 1635 and 1640 and building a homestead in Chickacoan, an Indigenous district near present-day Heathsville.

Others soon followed: Virginians moving north for economic opportunities, and Marylanders moving south across the Potomac to escape religious tensions.

By 1646, Jamestown was already collecting taxes from these remote colonists—who were essentially squatters, as settlement north of the Rappahannock wasn't technically permitted until 1648, when Northumberland County was formally established from York.

Known as the "Mother County of the Northern Neck," Northumberland originally encompassed Virginia's entire northern peninsula. According to the Northumberland County Historical Society, it's likely named after Northumberland, England, which also sits at its country's northern border.



Lancaster (1651)

With tobacco as the colony's primary cash crop, planters were increasingly drawn to the region's rich, virgin soil. But as more settlers arrived, long trips to the court in Heathsville grew more burdensome.

In 1651, Lancaster County was officially formed from the southern portion of Northumberland and the northern portion of York. At its creation, the sprawling county stretched along both sides of the Rappahannock River.

To keep governing manageable, Lancaster's vast territory was sheared over time. A western portion was carved off in 1656 to form the short-lived Old Rappahannock County. In 1669, its

land south of the Rappahannock was split off to create Middlesex County.

Westmoreland (1653)

As more people settled upstream along the Potomac River, they also found the journey to Heathsville arduous. In 1653, Westmoreland County was formed from the northern and western portions of Northumberland.

This new county began with a population of about 400 settlers, according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Originally, Westmoreland's only bordering river was the Potomac. In a 1778 redrawing with King George, Westmoreland got its modern footprint, with land stretching from the Potomac to the Rappahannock.

Richmond County (1692)

When Old Rappahannock County was created, like the original footprint of Lancaster, it straddled both sides of the Rappahannock River. Travel in the late 17th century was difficult under the best conditions, but having a county split down the middle by a river amplified the challenges.

In 1692, colonial leaders dissolved Old Rappahannock County entirely. The land south of the Rappahannock River became Essex County, while the land on the Northern Neck side became Richmond County.

These initial boundaries remained intact for nearly 30 years until a portion of Richmond County's upper territory was carved off to establish a new neighbor.

King George (1720)

In the 18th century, continued population growth on the northern peninsula prompted yet another division. An act passed in 1720 led to Richmond County being split into two counties in 1721, its northern half becoming King George County.

Named in honor of King George I, initially, this new county was a long, narrow strip across the peninsula from the Rappahannock to the Potomac. Early on the county included Ferry Farm, location of George Washington's childhood home.

In 1776, King George ceded upper territory to Stafford and got Potomac River frontage.

Then, in 1778, King George's southern shoreline on the Rappahannock went to Westmoreland, giving the county its current boundaries and completing the modern, five-county layout of the Northern Neck National Heritage Area.

What's Cooking?

Buttered Onions



Photo & Recipe: George Washington Natl Birthplace Monument

Bring some 18th century flavor to the table with buttered onions, historically served as a side dish and considered well paired with pork.

This recipe is from *Adam's Luxury, and Eve's Cookery* (1744) published in London and is representative of the English culinary and gardening literature that circulated in colonial Virginia.

"Slice some Apples and mince your Onions, but more Apples than Onions. Bake them with Bread, tying a paper over the Pan: When baked butter them, adding Sugar and boiled Currants. Serve them with Sippets, and strew over them fine Sugar and Powered Cinnamon."

More NNK

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Photo: Visit King George

Complete the 10 geocache puzzles on the King George Native American GeoTour.

DETAILS:
visitkinggeorge.com/attraction/naht/



Photo: Meritkin

Kayak Cat Point Creek. Enjoy a free access point from Menokin in Warsaw. (FYI: a Declaration of Independance signer lived there!!)

DETAILS:
menokin.org/plan-your-visit

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