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## Middle Plantation

### Middle Plantation in 1699 by Jennifer Jones

In June 1699, Virginia's General Assembly voted to move the capital of Virginia to the small, inland settlement of Middle Plantation and rename it Williamsburg in honor of the king. This vote marked the end of a decades-long effort on the part of Middle Plantation residents to promote their settlement. The men who lived there tried as early as 1677 to make Middle Plantation Virginia's capital city. It took two more decades of growth and the help of the Reverend James Blair and Governor Francis Nicholson to sway those who found Middle Plantation an unlikely site for such an important town.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Virginians were reluctant to move the capital from its "ancient and accustomed place." Jamestown had always been Virginia's capital. It had a state house and a church, and it offered easy access to ships that came up the James River bringing goods from England and taking on tobacco bound for market.

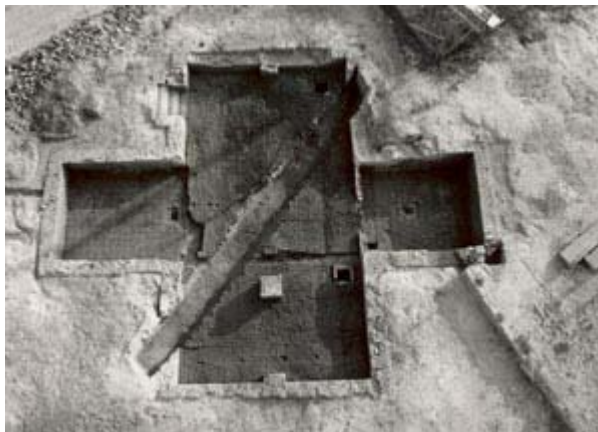
Virginia's entire economy depended on the ebb and flow of the tidal rivers. The tobacco that grew prolifically in Virginia's soil demanded considerable amounts of land. Within decades planters had spread out into the countryside, laying claim to every acre of river land up to the falls of the James River. To seventeenth-century critics of the colony, this dispersal into the countryside was considered a dangerous trend. English men and women were supposed to live in towns, close-knit communities where they would reinforce one another's civility and religious conformity. This was particularly true in the forested wilderness of the colonies. Moreover, Virginia's dearth of port towns was detrimental to the growth of the colony's economy. Virginia's legislature sought to remedy the situation by passing a series of town acts in the seventeenth century that ordered that Jamestown be improved and that a number of other towns be established along the rivers. Middle Plantation was never mentioned in these seventeenth-century town acts.

Although Virginia's legislature did not recognize the site's potential, Middle Plantation

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residents believed it was a worthy contender for the capital site. In 1676, rebel Nathaniel Bacon burned Jamestown. When Governor William Berkeley regained control of the colony, the government had no place to meet. Middle Plantation residents saw an opportunity. The following year, they petitioned the king's commissioners, who had been sent to the colony to investigate the rebellion, to designate Middle Plantation as the site of the new capital. The commissioners responded to this seemingly insensible suggestion with scorn. To move the capital of the colony away from the James River to the middle of the peninsula was as foolish as if "Middlesex should have desired, that London might have been new built on Highgate Hill, and removed from the grand River that brings them their Trade." (Nevertheless, the General Assembly did meet in Middle Plantation in the fall of 1677.)

What made Middle Plantation residents think their settlement was worthy of being the most important town in the colony? Certainly the status of some of its residents had something to do with it. The site's "serene and temperate air" and its "agreeable" climate attracted men such as John Page and Thomas Ludwell, both of whom had settled in the area by the 1650s. Moreover, Middle Plantation began to look more populated and wealthy. The house that Page and Ludwell built were among the finest in the colony. By the third quarter of the seventeenth century, Middle Plantation must have looked like a place of importance.



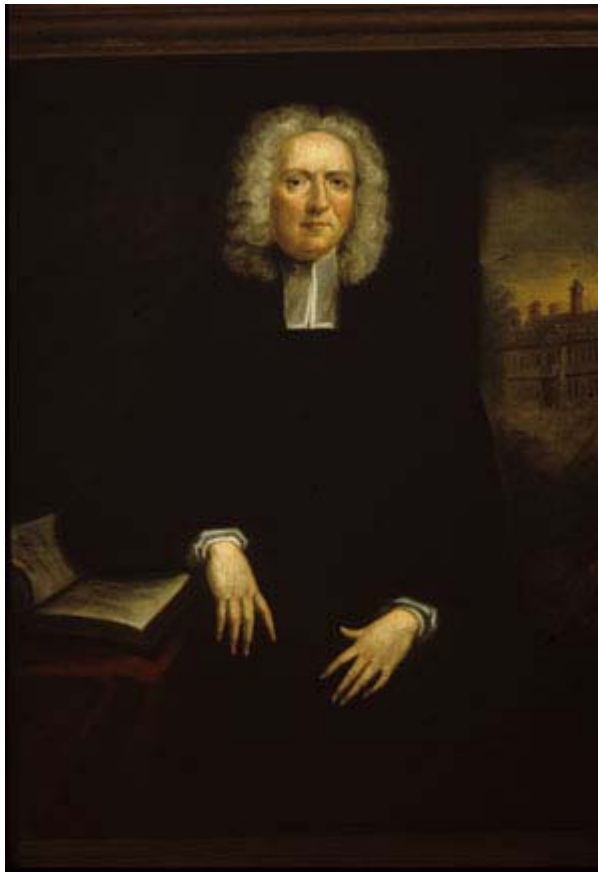
John Page House foundations.  
Photo by Willie Graham

Before Duke of Gloucester Street became the main thoroughfare of downtown Williamsburg, a meandering horse path wended through the area along the high land between the ravines. A traveler from Jamestown riding through Middle Plantation on his way to the York River would pass by the fine brick houses of John Page, Francis Page, and the Ludwell family as well as a number of smaller dwellings clustered in the area. He might notice a brick barn, a malt house, and other solidly built support buildings. He would see the stylish brick church built for Bruton Parish in 1683. He might stay the night at one of several ordinaries in the small settlement that catered to travelers like himself. He would have a sense that, after his long ride through the woods and past the tobacco fields, he had arrived at a place of some significance.

By 1693, Middle Plantation could boast of another distinction. The College of William

and Mary had been chartered that year, largely through the efforts of Commissary James Blair, the highest-ranking clergyman in Virginia. The Virginia legislature resolved in that year that the location of the new college would be "as neare the church now standing in Middle Plantation old fields as convenience will permitt."

When the statehouse at Jamestown burned in 1698, Middle Plantation had another opportunity to become the capital of Virginia. This time, prominent men in Middle Plantation were joined by two powerful allies: James Blair, the energetic founder of the College of William and Mary, and the colony's new governor, Francis Nicholson. Anglican minister Blair arrived in Virginia in 1685; four years later he was named as the Bishop of London's representative in the colony. Blair managed to get himself appointed to the Council, and he solidified his position among the gentry by marrying the daughter of a prominent planter. Nicholson succeeded Edmund Andros as governor of Virginia. He had previously been governor of Maryland and had displayed a knack for urban planning by laying out the town of Annapolis. Now, he and Blair put their talents and their positions to good use to convince their fellow Virginians to move the capital to Middle Plantation.



James Blair by Charles Bridges.

Courtesy Muscarelle Museum of Art, College of William and Mary

On May 1, 1699, Blair put five students of the College of William and Mary in front of the combined assembly to argue that the gentlemen should designate Middle Plantation the capital of Virginia. The third student speaker summarized Middle Plantation's merits. Already the settlement could boast of "a Church, an ordinary,

several stores, two Mills, a smiths shop a Grammar School, and above all the Colledge." He also acknowledged the many important men who already made their homes in and around the settlement. "Here is a good neighborhood of as many substantial Housekeepers that could give great help towards the supplying of a constant Market," he told his audience. Blair's speakers were carefully prepared to counter ambivalence and opposition to the choice of Middle Plantation as the new seat of government. The fourth speaker addressed the major objection "in many mens minds" to Middle Plantation when he referred to its inland location. When access to a settlement, he conceded, was "reduced to two Creekes navigable only by small craft that draws 6 or 7 foot of water" the site was "no such might conveniency to boast of." The student argued that the many other benefits of the location outweighed its inconvenient location.

The assembly was persuaded. The next month they voted to rename the settlement "Williamsburg" and to build the new state house there.

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### **Editorial Declaration:**

All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing part of a word has been joined to the preceding line.

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