

Carolyn J. Weekley
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October 14, 2011

Mark Carter
Director of Planning
York County, Virginia

Dear Mark,

On October 13, I received a copy of remarks regarding the Yorktown windmill that will be made before the Board of Supervisors on October 18, 2011. These were sent to me as an alternate member of the Historic Yorktown Design Committee and my comments here are made in that capacity. In preparing this letter to you, I have also read again Walt Akers's excellent account of his research and design of the Windmill on the Yorktown Windmill Project web site.

Some good points are made by opponents to the Akers's windmill, as well as some that reflect a lack of knowledge on the subject. The most grievous of these is the notion of what historic preservation entails and a reference to Yorktown as a 17th-century town. Obviously, we all know that Yorktown was founded in the 17th-century, but the few historic features that remain here are 18th-century in date. Grace Church's foundation or remaining parts thereof and perhaps part of another house may be the only exceptions. The village consists mostly of modern structures, some of which are in a style and design sympathetic with the town's surviving 18th-century structures. Yorktown's supervisors and staff, along with the National Park Service, have done a fine job in keeping the "look" of Yorktown appropriate to its 18th-century interests.

I do not believe the intent of either the governing authorities of York County or the National Park Service is or has ever been to eliminate or restrict buildings that are not of an "authentic" 18th-century origin. Clearly, most of us would not be living in houses here if that were the case, including myself. Yet some continue to argue a need to retain 17th-century accuracy without recognition of what actually is here and what Yorktown's post 17th-century history has been. My guess is that without the famous battle and surrender of Cornwallis, Yorktown would today be another kind of town altogether.

Furthermore, opponents have insisted that Walt Akers's research is flawed. I believe they fail to understand that even the best historic research by the best historians is always an interpretation of the past, however well informed it may be by "original" documents and surviving physical material. Many have made mistakes in interpreting the physical remains and documents of the past, providing reasoned, conjectural conclusions. Those kinds of results are neither right nor wrong, but simply the best that can be offered with what is available at the time. History is constantly being rewritten by later generations of historians as new discoveries and research become available. This process will continue long after we are gone. Historic interpretation as we know it is not cast in stone but is continually evolving. We should celebrate and savor every new discovery and bit of research that tells us more and more of the past.

Walt Akers has done a fine job of researching one of Yorktown's early 18th-century industries, milling. He has exhausted all the known sources to document its original design and type, and he has provided the documentation that exists about its original location. The latter may be somewhat questionable given the evidence, either west or east of Windmill Creek, and likely west of the modern George Preston Coleman Bridge (route 17). It is entirely possible that the site no longer exists because of erosion over the years. Akers's design of the mill is based in solid research provided by HABS, the best source for materials available on historic windmills in America, and other sources that detail how these mills were engineered.

I would like to add a few notes to his for the record. The 1754-1756 view Akers illustrates on his web site is one of two that Lt. Thomas Davies, a British naval officer and trained draughtsman, *made on site*. Davies's view is probably the most accurate of the mill's design that we have, and it appears to be the one that Akers selected to build. Lt. Davies's purpose was to faithfully record colonial towns and features for military purposes. For this reason his sketches are thought to have a high degree of accuracy. Other pictures by him survive for northern ports. His views of Yorktown and Gloucester Point are both owned by the Mariner's Museum in Newport News.

The view of *George Washington and his Generals* that Akers attributes to Charles Willson Peale has been reassessed by art historians in recent years, revealing that Charles Willson "may" have painted the vignette with the generals, but the background was likely painted by his brother James Peale (1749-1831). There are two versions of this painting owned by public institutions, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the Maryland Historical Society. The date 1784 is correct, and it is also correct that neither of the Peales were in Yorktown in 1781. The picture is undoubtedly based on some as-yet-unidentified first-hand account or more likely a combination of accounts known to the Peales. The group with Washington is placed to the west of the windmill with the town east and behind: they are also standing west of Windmill Point Creek, which can be seen between the group and bluff, running towards the river. The painting seems to corroborate the placement of the early mill sketched by Davies and also shown on the early maps of 1781 and 1825. The color of the mill in the Peale picture is soft pink, suggesting a brick structure. The other brick buildings in the picture cannot be precisely identified. The dwelling nearest the head of one of the "generals" might be the Nelson House. The other large dwelling is unknown, but we do know that there was another large brick house and gardens west of the Nelson House. My point in reviewing these details is that James Peale undoubtedly took some artistic liberties with the background features. In other words, the painting documents the presence of a windmill in Yorktown but very likely not its specific design. Unlike Davies, the Peales *did not make their view on site*.

Finally, the 1862 Robert Knox Sneden view of Yorktown shows a tall, wooden windmill that appears to be decaying. In this picture this mill is located beyond a ravine, probably the Windmill Point Creek bed, a placement confirmed by at least two civil war maps of the area. I would argue that this could easily have been a mill built after 1781, perhaps to replace the old one. The Robert Sears 1848 view is based on Sneden's view and was not made on site. Sears copied the work of many other artists in preparing his published engravings featuring scenic views of historic places in America and abroad. In sum, I would discount the Peale and Sears images as sources of the mill's design. Of the two remaining -Sneden and Davies - I would reason that the Davies mill was closer in design and correct placement for the mill that was here in Yorktown during the revolution and earlier.

As for the placement of the Akers windmill, the original site may not exist due to erosion; archaeology might help with this question. If the site does exist, it's probably on private property which cannot be used for the windmill. One opponent of the Aker's mill gives, as part of the argument for not having the Windmill at the Watermen's Museum, a rather twisted story of why Colonial Williamsburg moved its windmill. A quote from a newspaper article is used to verify that the move was due to the mill being situated in the "wrong place." Colonial Williamsburg strives to interpret the restored/reconstructed town as it was during the 1770s, not the 1720s or so when Robertson's windmill was originally in operation. It was only after planned reassessment and research involving archaeology and outbuilding reconstruction at the Peyton Randolph property that the issue of Robertson's mill was also reconsidered. In that process several facts emerged that supported the decision to move the mill, not the least of which was tree growth around the mill that blocked sufficient wind to operate it. Additionally, Robertson's Mill was not standing there at the time period assigned to the Peyton Randolph property interpretation; and thirdly, there was recognition of mounting expenditures to operate and maintain the mill as part of the rural trades program when, in fact, much of that program and its staffing had been moved to the Great Hopes Plantation site. These issues were carefully considered and resulted in the move of the mill to Great Hopes Plantation site where it is interpreted today as part of the rural trades program. There is no knowledge that a mill of Robertson's design ever stood at Great Hopes, but Colonial Williamsburg staff felt the interpretation of 18th-century technology, as revealed by the mill's mechanisms, was of greater importance than eliminating it altogether. In my opinion, "wrong site" was not the significant factor in Colonial Williamsburg's thinking; how to preserve an important interpretive tool while allowing the Peyton Randolph site to be more fully and accurately interpreted to the 1770s was. I see a similar parallel between how the Foundation thoughtfully handled its mill and how county officials have handled the Yorktown mill location.

I believe that the county has made the right decision by:

- a. recognizing the thoroughness of the research and concluding that Akers's interpretation is, for our time at least, as close as we will ever come to knowing what the mill looked like;
- b. concluding that it cannot be located elsewhere at this time for various reasons so recorded by the Board of Supervisors;
- c. deciding that having the mill at a temporary site close to where it originally stood is appropriate and its interpretation does contribute significantly to an understanding and appreciation of Yorktown's early history.

Mark, you may share this as you deem necessary.

Sincerely,

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