

The Archaeology of Gloucester Point, Site of Revolutionary and Civil War Fortifications

At the end of Main Street at the southernmost tip of the middle peninsula lies Gloucester Point, sitting at the confluence of the York River and the Chesapeake Bay. The roughly 60-acre district is one of Gloucester's most historically significant areas due to its proximity and access to multiple waterways. Before it was known by its current name of Gloucester Point, the area was named Tyndall's Point for colonial mariner Robert Tyndall. Tyndall, along with Captain Christopher Newport, arrived in Virginia as one of the first English settling parties in 1608. Together, the two men sailed and explored the York River, and Tyndall charted both the York and James Rivers.

Tyndall's Point became an important agricultural site for Gloucester as the tobacco industry proliferated across the rural countryside on the other side of the York River in the second quarter of the 17th century. The colonial government elected to build a tobacco warehouse on Tyndall's Point in 1633 to serve the regional planters and the expanding economy. During this period of growth, the York River quickly became an important waterway for commerce. The bustling area soon became known as Gloucestertown, officially established as a town in 1680.

However, the area's strength as an economic powerhouse soon changed, as an era of wartime commenced. Because of the point's strategic location between the Chesapeake Bay and the York River, the area played an important role in protecting Virginia's waterways. In 1667, during the war with Holland, numerous fortifications were erected, with the York River fort standing at Tyndall's Point. In 1671, the York River fort was officially renamed Fort James, after it was rebuilt with brick. During the next two centuries, several fortifications were built in this location. During the Revolutionary War, colonial troops, as well as the British army, strengthened their positions at Tyndall's Point. George Washington secured the colonial victory here when General Lord Cornwallis surrendered to close the Revolutionary War, with the victory at Yorktown across the river.

The point again played a significant role during the Civil War, as confederate troops refortified the area, building a new fort and a fully enclosed water battery. The battery was protected by the star-shaped fort built at the extremity of the point. During construction of the battery, Union forces on armed steamers attacked the Confederate forces but were repelled. Per General Robert E. Lee's request, the battery was finally completed, with more than 12 large cannon. The battery was eventually deserted in May of 1862, as the peninsula campaign came to a close and Union General George McClellan moved his troops upriver toward West Point.

Today, the various wartime roles played by Tyndall's Point are commemorated with the area's designation as the Gloucester Point Archaeological District. While neither colonial buildings, nor any remnants of the settlement formerly known as Gloucestertown remain on the site, the archaeological district stands as a Virginia landmark. Evidence of the fortifications protected the area remain, however, and continue to conjure up images of wartime invasions to the many visitors that flock to the historically significant district. Today, the point continues its dedication to the waterways that created it, with public tours and research workshops focusing on the marine environment through the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, which is now located on the point. An exhibit located in

Watermen's Hall also displays numerous relics discovered during the area's archaeological investigations in 1983 and 1984.