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"After Me Cometh a Builder": The Symbolic Landscape of Secretary Nelson's Yorktown Estate and its Transformation

Hank D. Lutton
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“AFTER ME COMETH A BUILDER”:

The Symbolic Landscape of Secretary Nelson’s Yorktown Estate and
Its Transformation

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Hank D. Lutton

2004

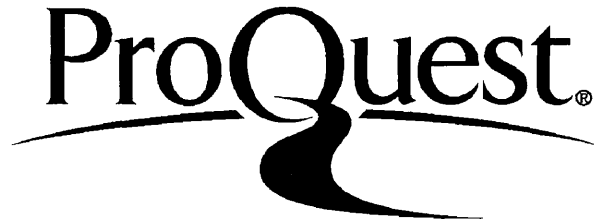
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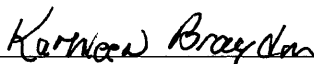
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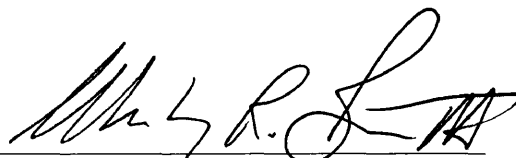


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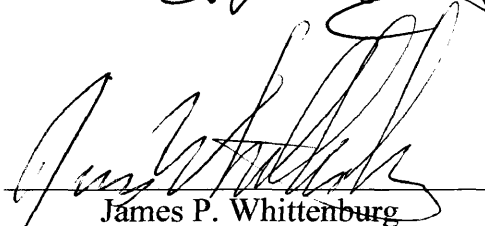
Kathleen Bragdon, Chair



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Audrey J. Horning



James P. Whittenburg

DEDICATION

To my parents—Wayne and Sherry Lutton—ever supportive and proud of my efforts. Thank you for making all my distant journeys possible.

And to the faint voices and treadless footfalls that linger in Yorktown still.

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ABSTRACT

Between circa 1755 and 1781 Secretary Nelson fashioned an opulent estate adjoining the eastern boundary of Yorktown. Utilizing overt techniques of landscape manipulation and ostentation commonly employed by elite Tidewater gentry, Secretary Nelson symbolically demonstrated his hierarchical authority as an elite colonial administrator. The destruction of Secretary Nelson's estate during the siege of Yorktown in 1781 transformed the symbolic landscape and Georgian mansion from a local symbol of his individual privilege and political power into a potent, nationalistic icon for the newly independent nation. Increasingly, Secretary Nelson's shattered and abandoned house was redefined as the headquarters of the doomed Lord Cornwallis. In art and travel accounts after the siege, Cornwallis' headquarters is conspicuously depicted as a symbol of the demise of British rule and the triumph of the young equalitarian Republic. Travel narratives often omit or misidentify who lived there, but never forget who headquartered in the house.

In 1928, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) acquired the house site to prevent its destruction, but has primarily emphasized its role in the siege of Yorktown. Influenced by the symbolic transformation of the landscape and the house, the APVA even misrepresented Secretary Nelson as "a Tory". Without adequate signage or an active role in interpretative tours, the current landscape of the National Park Service's Colonial National Historical Park—comprised of nineteenth-century earthworks atop those of the Revolutionary War, invasive bamboo, a towering Victorian-styled Victory Monument, and a current emphasis on the extant home of the "patriotic" Governor Thomas Nelson—physically and interpretively obscures the house site. The lack of visibility of the site and the current military-patriotic landscape of Colonial National Historical Park reinforces the brief military role of Secretary Nelson's house. By emphasizing this nationalistic icon, the APVA and Colonial National Historical Park relegate the site to little more than military history. Examination of this landscape and its symbolism, and how it functioned in relation to Yorktown—one of Virginia's largest urban centers in the decades preceding the American Revolution—offers the possibility to enhance our understandings of eighteenth-century urban landscapes in the Chesapeake.

“AFTER ME COMETH A BUILDER”:

The Symbolic Landscape of Secretary Nelson’s Yorktown Estate and
Its Transformation

THE PALACE

When I was a King and a Mason—a Master proven and skilled—
I cleared me ground for a Palace such as a King should build.
I decreed and dug down to my levels. Presently, under the silt,
I came on the wreck of a Palace such as a King had built.

There was no worth in the fashion—there was no wit in the plan—
Hither and thither, aimless, the ruined footings ran—
Masonry, brute, mishandled, but carven on every stone:
"After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I too have known."

Swift to my use in the trenches, where my well-planned groundworks grew,
I tumbled his quoins and his ashlar, and cut and reset them anew.
Lime I milled of his marbles; burned it, slacked it, and spread;
Taking and leaving at pleasure the gifts of the humble dead.

Yet I despised not nor gloried; yet, as we wrenched them apart,
I read in the razed foundations the heart of that builder's heart.
As he had risen and pleaded, so did I understand
The form of the dream he had followed in the face of the thing he had planned.

When I was a King and a Mason—in the open noon of my pride,
They sent me a Word from the Darkness. They whispered and called me aside.
They said—"The end is forbidden." They said—"Thy use is fulfilled.
Thy Palace shall stand as that other's—the spoil of a King who shall build."

I called my men from my trenches, my quarries, my wharves, and my sheers.
All I had wrought I abandoned to the faith of the faithless years.
Only I cut on the timber—only I carved on the stone:
"After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I too, have known!"

Rudyard Kipling (1902)

CHAPTER I
OVERVIEWS OF THE LANDSCAPE

Think of a house. It is a matter of form, of the sculptural arrangement of masses and voids. It is decorated. Its walls display the colors of stone or wood or earth, whitewash or paint...Its parts fuse in use. Seen, the house is used as an emblem for its occupants. Entered, it is used as a stage for social drama, as shelter from the storm.

Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art* (1989)

Nationalistic Icon

With the orchestra muffled by the discharge of artillery and the impact of cannonballs crashing into his headquarters, Lord Cornwallis stands pensive—seemingly disconnected from the peril—gazing toward the siege lines of the Allies. His headquarters, once a magnificent Georgian edifice richly appointed with gilded frames, mirrors, and mahogany furniture, is battered and reduced (Figures 1 and 2). Amidst the broken interior with gaping holes and piles of brick debris around him, Cornwallis tersely yet fatefully utters:

*How could it come to this?—an army of rabble—peasants!
Everything will change. Everything has changed* [Emmerich 2000].

And with those words, the director of *The Patriot* presented moviegoers with the image of the immense Georgian headquarters—its brick symmetry askew by the pockmarkings of artillery shells and the irregularity of scorch marks. On the roof beneath the Union Jack and massive chimneys three Redcoats emerge (Figure 3). A drummer

beats out the request for parley while another soldier slowly waves the universal symbol of surrender—a white flag.

Whether or not audiences were cognizant of it, *The Patriot* fashioned a potent nationalistic symbol that extends far beyond the narrow confines of the actual Battle of Yorktown. In just a few fleeting seconds, *The Patriot* exposed millions of viewers to a symbol intended to represent the ultimate outcome of the American Revolution. Director Roland Emmerich with these few frames and scant dialogue presented a common American stereotype: well-pressed, arrogant, English noblemen unwittingly defeated by simple—though typically underdressed—egalitarian freedom lovers. Emmerich's depiction of Lord Cornwallis' headquarters—in an elegant Georgian mansion—not only reinforces this stereotype, but also symbolizes the Revolution's triumph of equal individuals over a hierarchical order based upon inequality. While Emmerich utilizes speech patterns, uniforms, and cuisine throughout *The Patriot* to differentiate the combatants and their ideological differences, the depiction of the headquarters of Cornwallis is the film's paramount representation of these distinctions. Ensnared amid the trappings of privilege and hierarchy, Lord Cornwallis is doomed—trapped by an army of republican farmers who reject the very system expressed by the Georgian architecture of his headquarters.

Audiences were never informed that this Georgian mansion with which Lord Cornwallis' identity is so closely associated, was not his. When he occupied Yorktown, Virginia in 1781, Lord Cornwallis appropriated the home of Thomas Nelson for his headquarters. Commonly known as “Secretary Nelson” because he had served as deputy secretary of the colony since 1743, the owner is never referred to or depicted in *The Patriot* although he remained in the bombarded house just as long as Cornwallis. The

absence of any reference to Secretary Nelson is not surprising for the three brief weeks that comprised the Allied Siege of Yorktown transformed the house and its commemoration since. In a matter of weeks, the house that one of Virginia's most distinguished members of the gentry had so carefully and deliberately crafted to overtly express his political authority was forever transformed and associated with another.

FIGURE 1

THE HEADQUARTERS OF LORD CORNWALLIS



The headquarters of Lord Cornwallis as depicted in *The Patriot*. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

FIGURE 2

LORD CORNWALLIS IN *THE PATRIOT*

Lord Cornwallis inside his battered headquarters. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

FIGURE 3

ULTIMATE VICTORY IN *THE PATRIOT*

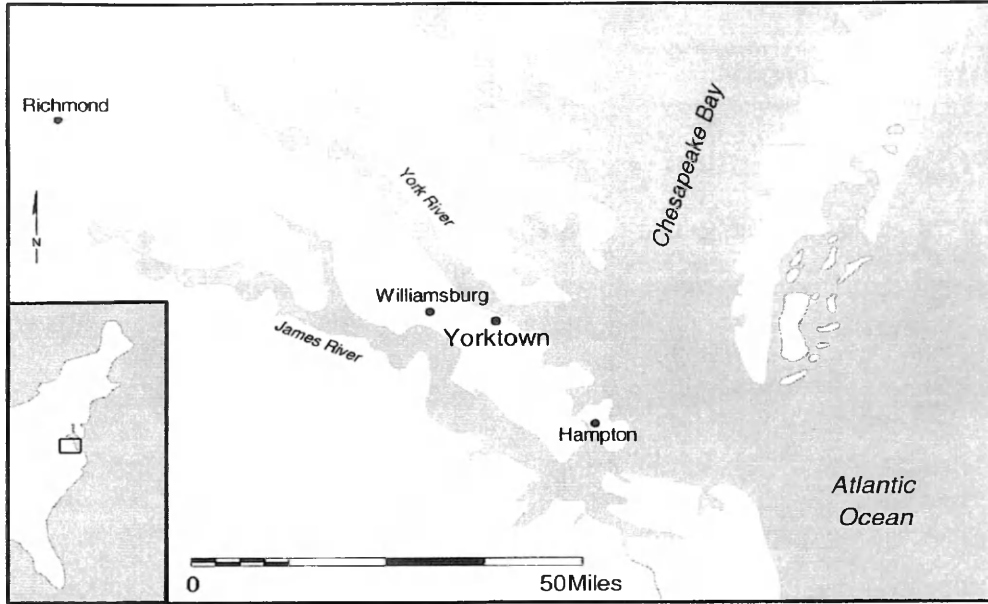
English troops on the roof of Cornwallis' headquarters request a parley to discuss terms of surrender. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

Archaeology

In the fall of 2002—after audiences had been exposed to the computer generated representation of Secretary Nelson's house in *The Patriot*—archaeologists confirmed the location of the original. Between October and December 2002, the Department of Archaeological Research of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation conducted a combined Phase I/II archaeological assessment of the Secretary Nelson house site. Requested by Colonial National Historical Park (CNHP), the assessment was designed to locate and tentatively identify significant cultural and historical resources—particularly those associated with Secretary Nelson—within a 4.1-acre parcel between Zweybrucken Road and Tobacco Road in Yorktown, Virginia (Figures 4 and 5). To insure adequate sampling, archaeologists excavated 145 50 centimeter square (20 inch x 20 inch) test units systematically placed at 5 meter (16.4-foot) intervals in a standard Cartesian grid pattern (Figure 6).

FIGURE 4

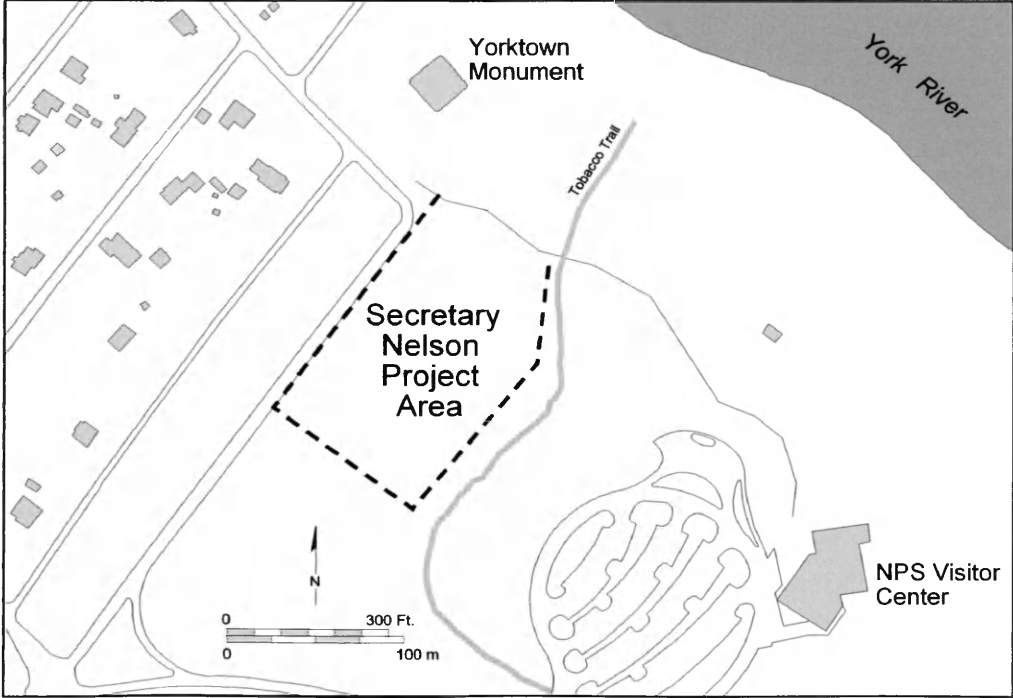
REGIONAL LOCATION OF THE SECRETARY NELSON SITE



Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

FIGURE 5

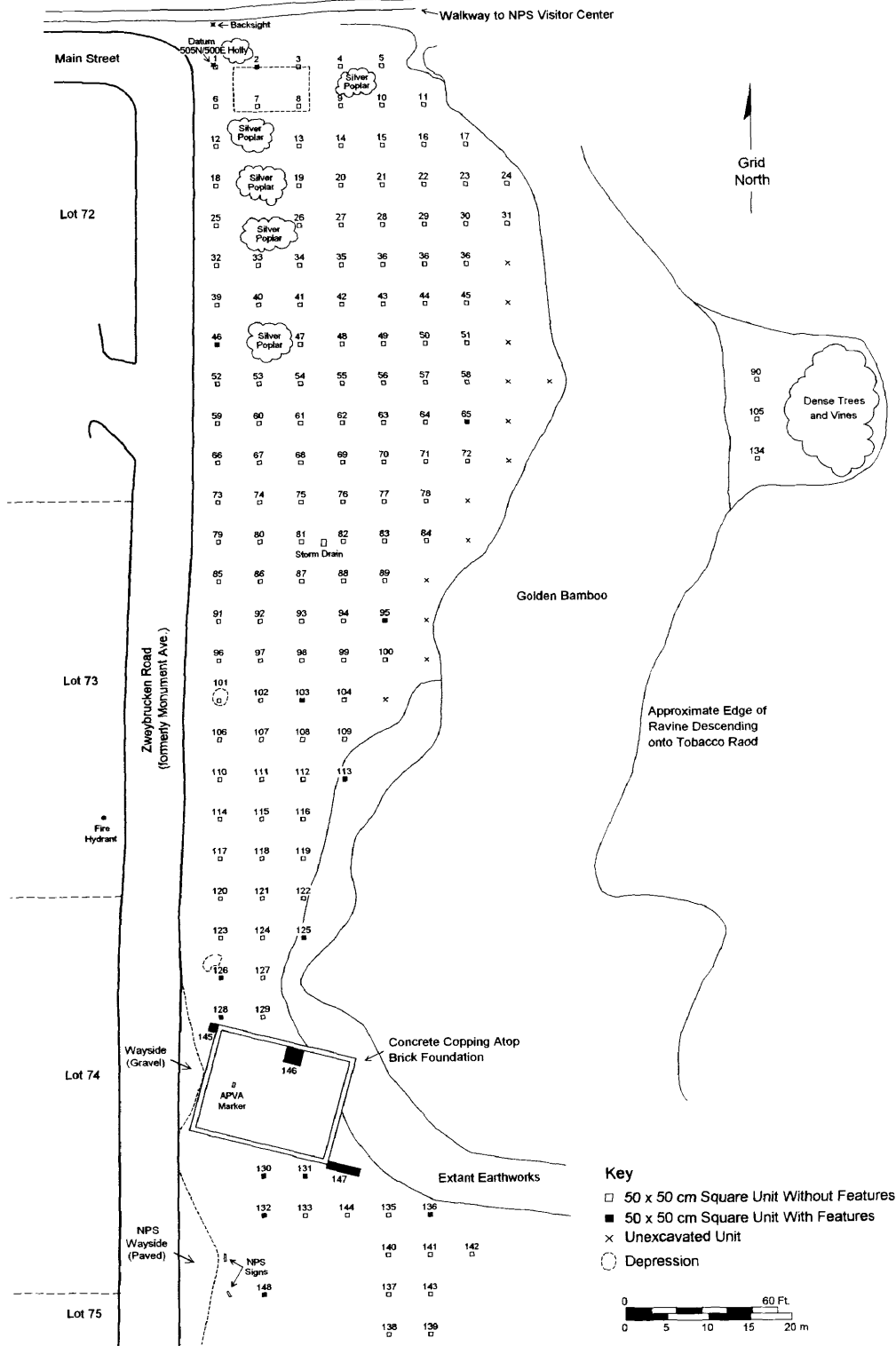
ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT AREA IN YORKTOWN



Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

FIGURE 6

PROJECT AREA WITH TEST UNIT LOCATIONS



Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Three larger units were excavated within or abutting the foundations owned by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). Because of an infestation of dense golden bamboo and the precipitous slopes of the Tobacco Road ravine, portions of the project area were not tested.

Stratigraphic excavation of the test units revealed intact historic layers and features dating from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth-century. Although archaeologists recovered evidence of the construction of earthworks during the Civil War and of twentieth-century domestic occupations, these were spatially confined to the north and east boundaries of the project area and of such a condition to offer very limited research potential.

By contrast, the features and layers associated with mid-to-late eighteenth-century domestic occupation were far better preserved and potentially more informative. Widely dispersed across the site, archaeologists encountered layers stratigraphically associated with Secretary Nelson and characteristically consistent with garden beds (Lutton 2003:64-66).

Despite local oral history that the APVA marker was incorrectly located—that it marked one of the Secretary's outbuildings or that the footprint of the house was incompletely marked—archaeologists confirmed that the plaque and concrete coping correctly designated the residence of Nelson. With permission from the APVA, archaeologists excavated three larger, strategically placed units on the northwest corner (Figure 7), the southeast corner, and along the north interior wall of the house foundation. The placement of these units enabled archaeologists to determine the dimensions and condition of the house foundations. Doing so, archaeologists encountered an intact brick cellar with a surviving builder's trench. Inside the cellar, archaeologists also identified

the remnants of a vaulted arch (Figure 8). Filled with destruction rubble, the cellar had not been compromised by the construction of nearby earthworks or APVA “excavations” to expose the foundations.

FIGURE 7

NORTHWEST CORNER OF SECRETARY NELSON’S HOUSE



The intact builder’s trench is revealed after the excavation of the robber’s trench. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Although rich eighteenth-century stratigraphy encompassed most of the house, these deposits were somewhat limited because of the dual impact of military earthworks and highway construction along the south and east sides of the house. Unfortunately, evidence of the outbuildings and potential refuse middens is either buried beneath the earthen fortifications or was scrapped away by grading to construct them or the road. Although a portion of the fenceline that enclosed these support structures was identified, no outbuildings were located. Remnants undoubtedly survive, but are most likely buried beneath a succession of British, French, and Confederate earthworks nearby.

FIGURE 8

INSIDE SECRETARY NELSON'S CELLAR



Springer course forming the arching base of the brick vault in the cellar. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The potential for additional study is particularly encouraging for the house and garden areas. Despite the bamboo infestation, that portion of the project area likely contains telling evidence of the garden and outbuildings. Similarly, the property immediately north of the project area may also contain crucial evidence about the earliest landscape of Secretary Nelson's estate. Considering the amount of information extrapolated despite the preliminary nature and limited scope of the assessment, the Secretary Nelson house site possesses the archaeological resources to provide insights into a unique household and its cultural landscape.

Cultural Landscapes

Since its origins, archaeology has been largely concerned with spatial dimensions, the environment, and their effects upon human lives; however, until the emergence of postprocessual archaeology, practitioners often approached landscapes discontinuously. With the infusion of anthropological theory and greater interdisciplinary approaches of the New Archaeology, archaeologists reevaluated traditional notions of space and environment. Often treated as spatial voids and passive backdrops to cultural dramas, archaeologists reassessed the landscape and began to perceive it as an active and complex component of sites.

Only since the 1980s has landscape analysis emerged as a distinct focus of sustained attention within historical archaeology. As archaeologists have embraced the landscape as an artifact, studies have abounded. Due in large part to the willingness of archaeologists to seek interdisciplinary approaches to traditional problems, other disciplines such as architecture, history, environmental sciences, geography, folklore, urban planning, and broad anthropological theories of symbolism and cultural transformation have contributed significantly to the flourishing of landscape analysis. By discarding previously limiting notions, the umbrella of landscape archaeology now accommodates garden, household, urban, regional, and plantation archaeology.

Considering the extensive range of landscape studies conducted by historical archaeologists, it is difficult to formulate a definition. At the core of landscape archaeology are three common factors: spatial dimensions, the creation of cultural symbols, and the transformation of those through time—what Deetz termed “the three dimensions of archaeology” (Deetz 1990:1). Heavily influenced by the work of Henry

Glassie, Deetz established one of the tenants of landscape study by insisting that the landscape was a form of material culture and contained the same mental structures and worldviews as other artifacts (Deetz 1996). Drawing upon tenants of Structuralism and the work of linguists, Deetz not only believed that material culture—including the landscape—“provides access into the minds of those responsible for creating it in the first place” (Deetz 1988:220), but that material culture contains a grammar that can be translated and conveyed. In the prologue of a cornerstone collection of landscape studies, Deetz offered this definition:

Landscape is, however, a rather general, nonspecific term. For the purposes of this discussion, however, we can take the word to mean the total terrestrial context in which archaeological study is pursued and use cultural landscape to denote that part of the terrain which is modified according to a set of cultural plans. These terms embrace the entire range of terrain from the house lot, the smallest and the most frequently studied, through gardens and field systems to truly large units of analysis, entire regions that bear the imprint of a shared set of values [Deetz 1990:1].

A particularly cohesive bloc of archaeologists associated with Annapolis has produced an extensive and influential body of scholarship on urban landscapes, especially the study of towns and urban lots. The combined scholarship of Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, Mark Leone, Barbara Little, Paul Mullins, Parker Potter, Paul Shackel, and Anne Yentsch has forged a virtual epistemology for the archaeology of urban landscapes. Primarily examining the eighteenth-century gardens and the confines of the town grids of Annapolis, St. Mary’s City, and Baltimore, this group has collectively explored the changing meanings of landscape. Excavations and research at the Annapolis gardens of William Paca, Charles Carroll, and John Ridout convinced Kryder-Reid, Leone, and Shackel that wealthy merchants and planters in Annapolis employed “out-dated” Baroque garden designs to express ideological claims intended to impress passersby. They also

compelling argued that the garden designs utilized during times of crisis were intended to restate their claims and bolster their positions (Leone et al 1989). Although in agreement with Deetz about the nature of landscape and material culture, the more ideological members of this Annapolis cadre have substituted capitalism for Deetz's passionate emphasis on culture (Leone 1988: 236-237)—just as Charles Orser might substitute the social relations of capitalism for culture (Orser 1998).

Despite this scholarship in Annapolis and the regional approach of James Delle in Jamaica or the somewhat geographic influenced “city-site” approach of Alexandria Archaeology, most landscape studies are still confined to one primary domestic site. At Mount Vernon, Dennis Pogue conducted an exemplary study of the design changes implemented at the home of George Washington. With a dual track approach of archaeology and documentary research, Pogue documented architectural, agricultural, and design changes that Washington implemented at his Potomac plantation. Pogue identified three distinctive phases: an initial episode of consolidation and regularization succeeded by a time of production changes that made the plantation more self-sufficient finally followed by a phase of extensive refinement. Pogue concluded that Washington's constant development was evidence of his attempt as his own architect to intentionally and symbolically display his power, knowledge, and authority amongst the gentry (Pogue 1994).

CHAPTER II
THE LANDSCAPE OF SECRETARY NELSON

Close by those meads, forever crowned with flowers,
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,
There stands a structure of majestic frame,
Which from the neighboring Hampton takes its name.
Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom
Of foreign Tyrants, and of Nymphs at home;
Here thou, great Anna! Whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes tea.

Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* Canto III:1-10, (1712)

Origins, 1744-1755

Adjoining the eastern edge of town, Secretary Nelson's house was the centerpiece of a unique urban plantation unlike any other in eighteenth-century Yorktown. Secretary Nelson sited his estate across the York-Hampton Road from the easternmost lots of Yorktown's original 1691 plat (Figure 9)—legally placing him “outside” of town (York County Deeds 1841:232), but still within the functional confines of the town.

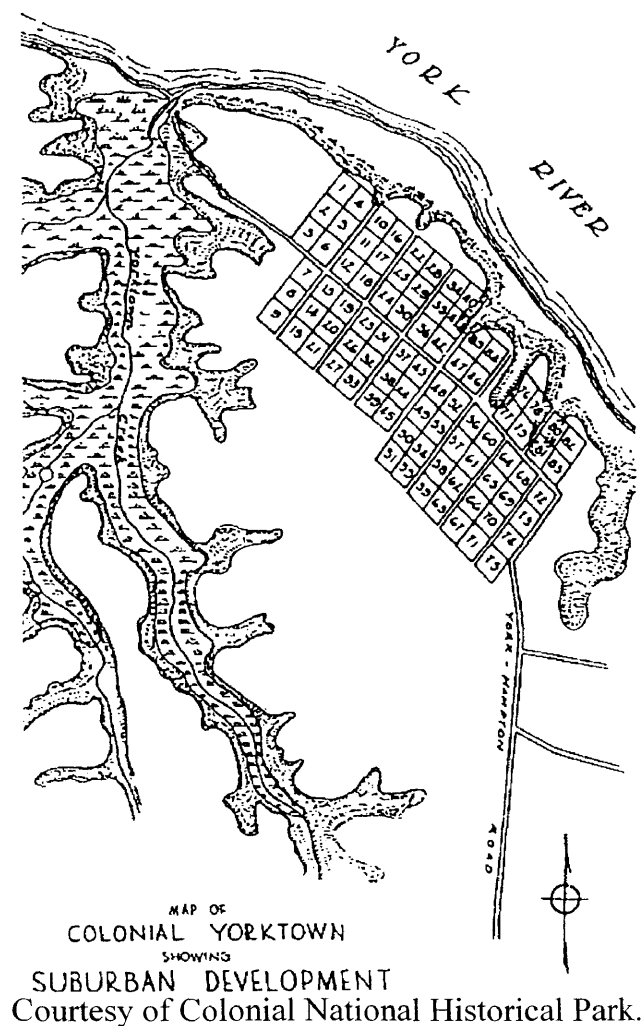
Unconstrained by the boundaries of half-acre lots and streets of the town grid, Secretary Nelson fashioned a large, sprawling, conspicuous estate.

Like his prominent colonial post (with which he is forever associated), Secretary Nelson acquired his Yorktown property because of the intervention of his father, “Scotch” Tom Nelson (Fishburne 1971:356-357). On September 27, 1744 “Scotch” Tom purchased a 15-acre parcel adjoining Yorktown for £95 of Virginia currency from Dr. John Dixon. A prosperous Bristol doctor and merchant, Dixon operated stores and

thriving medical practices in Yorktown and Williamsburg (York County Deeds, 18 November 1738; *Virginia Gazette* 19 October 1751:4, Column 1). Although the original deed was recorded with the General Court (and later incinerated in Richmond in 1865), a subsequent deed confirms that Nelson purchased the original 15 acres that Dixon acquired in 1738 from Robert and Margaret Reade of Gloucester County (York County Deed Book No. 5, 1741-1754:327).

FIGURE 9

THE ORIGINAL YORKTOWN LOTS PLATTED IN 1691



Before his death less than a year later, “Scotch” Tom transferred this 15-acre parcel to his youngest son, Thomas (Hatch 1980:155). In his will, “Scotch” Tom bequeathed £4,000 sterling to the young Secretary and stated, “this is all I intend my said son Thomas, having already given him the estate in King William county, which I purchased of Colo Thomas Jones; and the houses, Lots, and plantations bought for him of Doctor John Dixon” (York County Wills, 6 August 1745). Because young Thomas Nelson also wed Lucy Armistead of Caroline County that same year, Nelson scholars and Yorktown historians have interpreted the purchase of the former Dixon property by “Scotch” Tom as a wedding gift for his son (Evans 1957:36; Hatch 1969:17; Riley 1942:87).

FIGURE 10

YORKTOWN AS VIEWED FROM THE RIVER IN 1755



John Gauntlett's *A View of the Town of York Virginia from the River* depicting Secretary Nelson's estate. Courtesy of the Mariner's Museum.

The exact date of construction of Secretary Nelson's opulent mansion remains unknown. Since the first documentation of the house was not recorded until 1755, construction could have occurred anytime between the initial Nelson acquisition of the property in 1744 and the 1755 depiction of the Secretary's house (Figure 10). When the APVA marked the site in 1930 and again in 1933, both plaques erroneously stated the house was erected in 1725. This beguiling date of construction was often repeated in tour books of the day (Kibler 1936:86)—an absurd claim since in 1725 the Reade family still owned the undeveloped property, the nine year old Secretary Nelson was many years from requiring a marriage gift, and "Scotch" Tom Nelson had not yet constructed his own stately home in Yorktown. Several historians postulated that Secretary Nelson constructed his Georgian mansion shortly after gaining his inheritance in 1745 (Hatch 1969:17, 1980; Riley 1942:87). They argued that Nelson was almost certainly living in Yorktown in order to satisfy his residency requirements as a York County justice and to be conveniently situated to perform his duties as deputy secretary in Williamsburg. By 1746, Nelson was undeniably living in Yorktown, for he advertised a half pistole reward for the return of a gelding (*Virginia Gazette*, 29 May 1746); however, this does not constitute evidence that Secretary Nelson had constructed his mansion.

Instead of immediately erecting his great house, Nelson may have waited several years. When installed as deputy secretary in 1743, Nelson busied himself solidifying his political position and the prerogatives of his office (Fishburne 1971:359). Between 1743 and 1752, Secretary Nelson not only administered one of the busiest colonial offices in Virginia but undertook crucial roles in the codification of Virginia law, the design and construction of a new Public Records Office (Figure 11), the resolution of the divisive pistole fee controversy, the reception of a new colonial governor, the construction of the

lighthouse at Cape Henry, and the execution of additional duties created for his office by the General Assembly (Fishburne 1971:359-365). During this same time, Secretary Nelson was married, appointed to the elite Governor's Council, became intimately involved with his brother in political maneuverings, and also buried his father. Nelson likely had little time to embark on such an ambitious scheme as designing and overseeing the construction of his mansion so early in his career. Tellingly, a decade passed between the acquisition of the property and the earliest documentary evidence that validates the existence of the Secretary's brick mansion.

FIGURE 11

THE PUBLIC RECORDS OFFICE FOR THE COLONY OF VIRGINIA



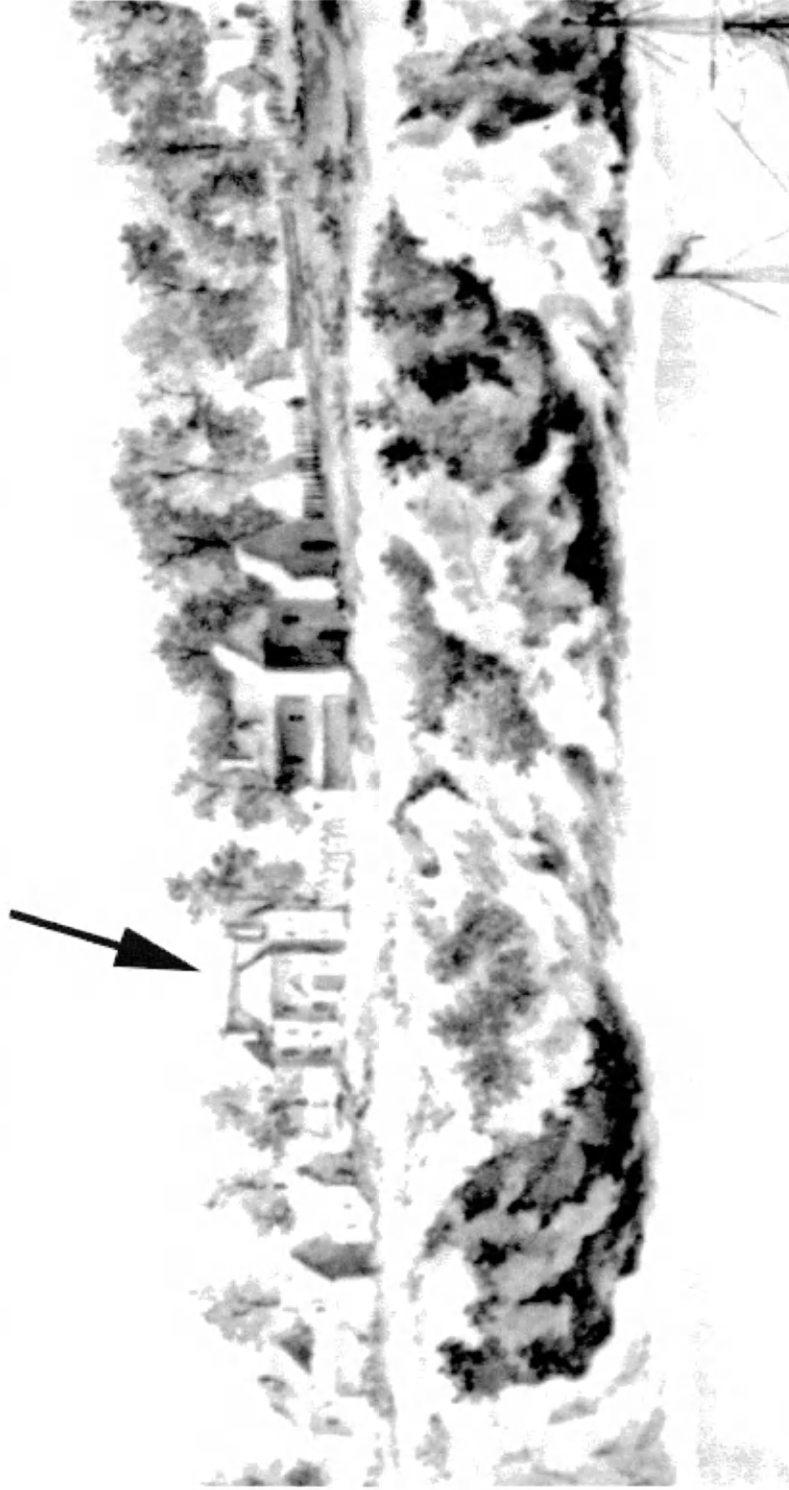
Commonly referred to as “the Secretary’s Office”, this separate fireproof structure was constructed (1747-1748) in Williamsburg at the insistence of Secretary Nelson. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

While he consolidated power and designed his new home during his first years as Secretary, the young Nelson probably occupied the structures formerly inhabited by the affluent Dr. Dixon (Evans 1957:36; Lutton 2003:22-23). Little is known about how Dixon utilized the property; however, advertisements in the *Virginia Gazette* and the will of “Scotch” Tom suggests that Dixon maintained a store, office, and dwelling on his Yorktown property (Lutton 2003:21-22). Although Dr. Dixon’s dwelling and structures are virtually enigmatic today, the same 1755 watercolor that first documents the Secretary’s brick mansion may record their location as well. Located at the far left hand side of John Gauntlett’s *A View of the Town of York Virginia from the River*, at least four earthfast structures—as of yet unidentified by the research of Yorktown historians (Edward Ayers, personal communication, 3 February 2003; Hatch 1980; Riley 1942)—are situated northeast of Secretary Nelson’s brick mansion (Figure 12). These one-and-a-half-story, wood frame structures appear to be located either on a promontory overlooking Tobacco Road or immediately east of Lots 82 and 83. These possible locations are unmistakably within the confines of Secretary Nelson’s 15-acre tract (Figure 13), and were no more than 17 years old—within the lifespan of well-maintained earthfast structures—at the time that Gauntlett recorded them.

FIGURE 12

DETAIL OF GAUNTLETT WATERCOLOR

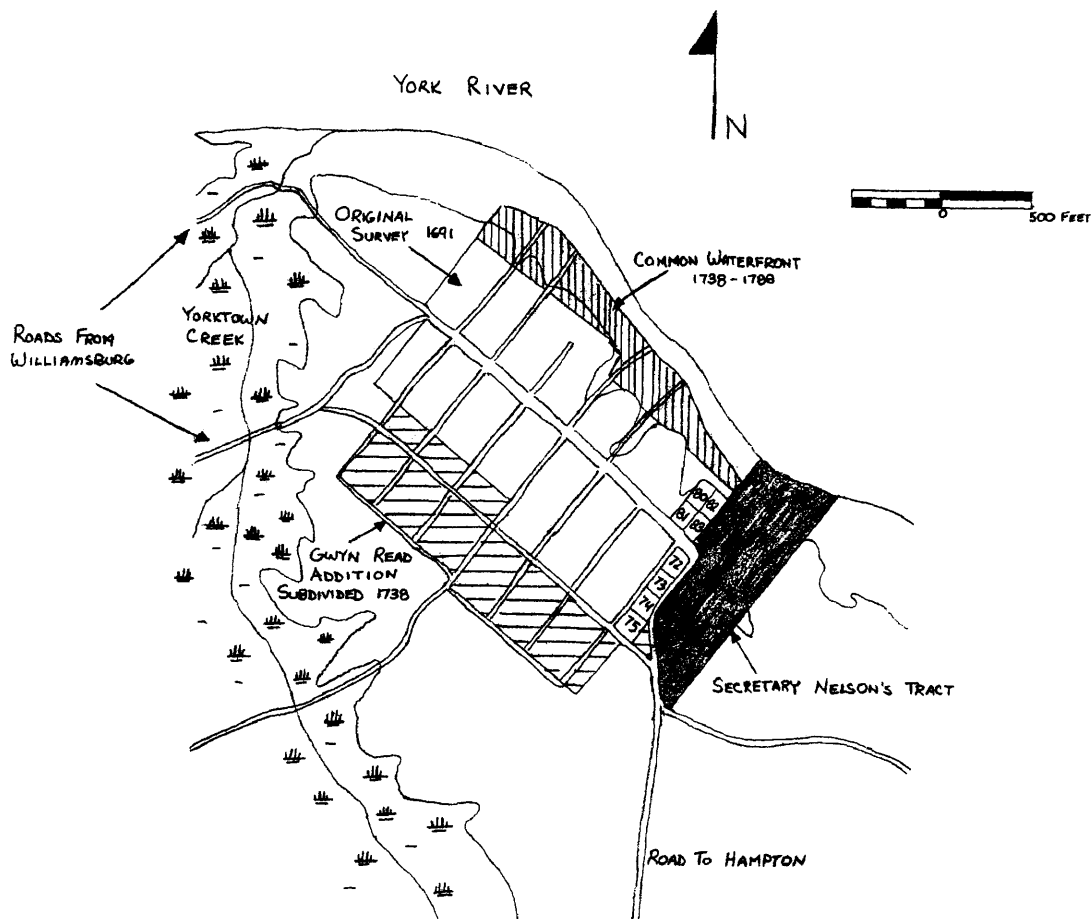
Secretary Nelson's House



Secretary Nelson's estate in 1755 with probable Dixon structures.

FIGURE 13

PLAN OF YORKTOWN, CIRCA 1781



Secretary Nelson's 15-acre tract and adjoining lots of Yorktown.¹

Construction, 1755-1770

When constructed circa 1755, Secretary Nelson's house was a striking seven-bay brick Georgian edifice with four internal chimneys, an English basement adorned with a cliquish vaulted cellar, and was capped by a fashionably distinctive M-shaped roof. The

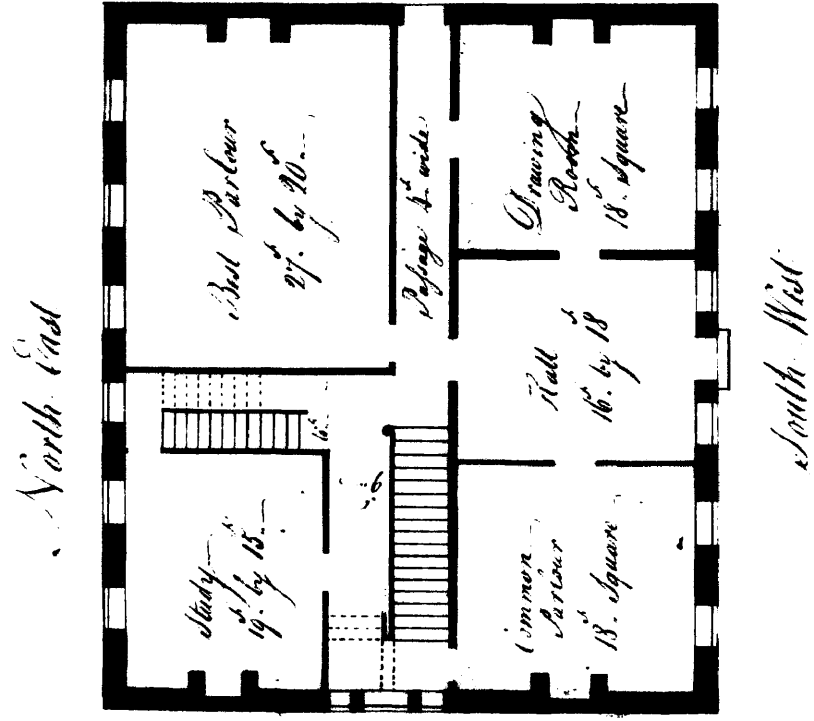
¹ The depicted roads are compiled from various siege plans of Yorktown (particularly Anonymous 1781d; Hayman 1782; Hills 1785; LaCombe 1781) and a highly-detailed reconnaissance map (Anonymous 1781b). Because of the destruction of the original deed, the boundaries of Secretary Nelson's estate are conjecturally mapped from several alternative sources. Limited boundary information was extrapolated from deeds (York County Deeds, 18 November 1738; York County Deed Book No. 5, 1741-1754:327) and combined with the well-documented town limits to determine the north, west, and south boundaries of the

FIGURE 14

FLOORPLAN OF SECRETARY NELSON'S HOUSE

*The Plan of the Parlor Floor of a House...
 now building by the Hon. the Hon. Nelson Capt. in
 in York Town, Virginia, designed by himself.
 It stands in his garden about 200 Yards from
 the River bank & commands a great Prospect
 of York River, the Ships, & the other Town,
 of the Opposite shore. It is an unbounded
 one both up & down the River; inasmuch
 that by the help of a good glass in clear
 Weather a person can see every Ship bound
 to any part of Chesapeake Bay above the
 Mouth of York River.
 The long Passage leads to the Kitchen &c.,*

*10. The above Account is taken from his Letter to
 J. R. dated 28. Sept. 1765. as is the Plan
 from his description of it in words —
 The Parlor Floor is 16. 5. high in the Clear
 Chamber 12. 11.
 The best Parlor is divided into two Rooms
 above stairs.*



1765 Floor plan and architectural notes of Secretary Nelson's house. Courtesy of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

footprint of Secretary Nelson's home measured an imposing 56.9 feet (east-west) by 40.6 feet (north-south)—approximately the same size as the surviving house “Scotch” Tom constructed and in which the young Secretary spent his adolescent years (Lutton 2003:67). Perhaps intentionally, the new home of Secretary Nelson was only slightly smaller than the original 54 feet by 48 feet core mansion of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg (Hood 1991:39). Conspicuously fixed atop the highest ground in Yorktown, this luxurious and prominently situated mansion was often noted by travelers. While campaigning with Rochambeau in 1781, de Chastellux detailed that Secretary Nelson:

lived at York, where he had built a very handsome house, from which neither European taste nor luxury was excluded; a chimney piece and some bas-reliefs of very fine marble, exquisitely sculptured, were particularly admired....His house, which was built on an eminence...in the most agreeable situation in the town. It was the first object which struck the eye when approaching the town [de Chastellux 1963:385].

The floor plan of Secretary Nelson's Yorktown home suggested that he endeavored to control access (Figure 14). In contrast to homes constructed earlier in the eighteenth century—like the Governor Thomas Nelson House (constructed circa 1730 by “Scotch” Tom) whose center hall forms a continuous passage through the heart of the house from front to back door—the abbreviated center hall of the Secretary's house, restricted visitors by discouraging their access to other portions of the house until invited.¹ The doorways and obstructed hall vantages of the floor plan also contributed to

¹ Secretary Nelson selected a variant of the “Annapolis plan”—a floor plan design popular in Annapolis (Carl Lounsbury and Willie Graham, personal communication, 29 January 2003). Like the homes constructed by wealthy merchants, planters, and administrators in Annapolis, Secretary Nelson's home utilized a standard Georgian center passage and double pile plan with four flanking rooms; however, the key element of the “Annapolis plan” is a pair of entertainment rooms—often overlooking a formal garden—with an abbreviated entry. Although the first houses in Annapolis to utilize this arrangement were constructed as early as 1739-1742, the floor plan of the Secretary Nelson House most closely resembles the

confine visitors until the host segregated the guests “according to their rank and mission” (Hood 1991:43).

At a time when most Virginians lived in small, unpainted earthfast frame houses comprised of wood chimneys and timber weatherboards (Wells 1993:7-9), Secretary Nelson constructed in brick—an indication of considerable wealth in eighteenth-century Virginia (Upton 1990:1). The sheer scale that he selected made his choice of building materials even starker. In a colony replete with one-and-a-half story structures typically one room deep, Secretary Nelson erected a two-storied mansion two rooms deep. While many Virginians utilized subfloor pits for storage in their confined dwellings, the Secretary constructed a vaulted brick cellar. Functionally associated with the storage of wine and spirits (Edwards 1999:17), vaulted cellars are encountered not uncommonly in taverns such as the Jamestown ordinary of Colonel Swann. Outside of this context, vaults are found most frequently in the houses of the gentry where they were not only employed for functional purposes, but also as symbols of prestige (Carl Lounsbury, personal communication, 2 September 2003). The opulent mansion fashioned by Secretary Nelson like its great brick contemporaries—such as Carter’s Grove, Mt. Airy, and Rosewell—represented the homes of the narrowest sliver of the population—perhaps the wealthiest.5 percent to 3 percent of Chesapeake society (Kelly 2003:2; Land 1965). Although few in number, these brick great houses fashioned in the Georgian style—expressing the

Annapolis homes constructed after the 1760s: Upton Scott House (1762-1763), Chase-Lloyd House (1769-1774), John Ridout House (1764-1765), and Hammond-Harwood House (1774) (Chappell et al 1998). This striking similarity with the floor plans of the elite administrators of Maryland’s capital city suggests that Secretary Nelson was keenly aware of social and architectural developments in Annapolis. His astute interest in Annapolis was likely one of the topics during frequent dinners with his neighbor, young William Reynolds, a Yorktown merchant who often traveled to Annapolis (Reynolds 1772-1783; Norton 1968:202). Secretary Nelson may have sought to identify with and emulate the prosperous administrators of the rapidly expanding capital city.

economic power, social superiority, and cultural ambitions of gentry society—were conspicuous monuments on the landscape (Hood 1991:48).

Topography

Yorktown is situated on an elongated plateau traversed by narrow ravines. Confined by the encircling coils of Yorktown Creek on the west and south, the plateau gently rises eastward. The original 1691 survey fixed the easternmost boundary of Yorktown just below the highest topographic form in the vicinity. Like the British and Confederate engineers who later erected their most formidable hornworks near this feature, Secretary Nelson constructed his house on the highest ground in or immediately around Yorktown (Department of Interior 2002; U.S. Geological Survey 1984) (Table 1). Although it appears to have vanished from the local vernacular, as late as the early twentieth century inhabitants of Yorktown still referred to this high ground once occupied by Secretary Nelson as “Secretary’s Hill” (Page 1881:808; Smith 1920:21). Like planters who rode out on horseback, Secretary Nelson perceived the landscape differently because of his higher vantage, and, too, was perceived differently by those looking up (Isaac 1982:53).

Secretary Nelson’s house dominated the east end of town. De Chastellux observed, “It was the first object which struck the eye when approaching the town” (de Chastellux 1963:385). Whether by the York-Hampton Road or the York River, Secretary Nelson’s house was the first to appear to travelers approaching from either the east or south. At a distance of between one and two miles, the house was only intermittently visible as the York-Hampton Road meandered, rising and falling over small ravines and

knolls. Variations in vegetation and topographic contours probably revealed the home of Secretary Nelson only fleetingly before temporarily obscuring it again. But for the last mile travelers entering Yorktown along the York-Hampton Road had an unimpeded view of the Secretary's house (Anonymous 1781d; Department of Interior 2002; U.S. Geological Survey 1984).

TABLE 1

SIGNIFICANT YORKTOWN STRUCTURES ARRANGED BY TOPOGRAPHICAL ELEVATION

Structure	Date of Construction	Lot Location	Topographic Elevation (in feet)
Secretary Thomas Nelson House	ca. 1755	N/A	68
Victory Monument*	1881-1884	80-84	64
"Poor Potter" Kiln Complex	ca. 1720	51	64
Dudley Digges House*	ca. 1760	77	62
John Ballard House*	ca. 1727	54	62
Edmund Smith House*	ca. 1750	53	62
Mathew Pope/Shield House*	ca. 1766	56	60
Governor Thomas Nelson House*	ca. 1730	52	58
President William Nelson House	ca. 1755-1766	47	54
Second York County Courthouse	1731-1733	24	54
Philip Lightfoot House	ca. 1724	23	52
York-Hampton Parish Church* (Grace Episcopal Church)	ca. 1697	35	52
Mungo Somerwell House*	ca. 1707-1716	36	52
Custom House*	ca. 1720	43	50
Cole Digges/Thomas Pate House*	ca. 1726	42	50
William Reynolds Storehouse	ca. 1765-1770	31	50
Swan Tavern	1720-1722	25	50

*Denotes extant structure.

As the York-Hampton Road neared the outlying homes of Yorktown, it intersected with at least two local roadways forming "Secretary's Corner" (York County Deeds, 18 November 1738; York County Deed Book No. 5, 1741-1754:327)—the southeast corner of Secretary Nelson's 15-acre tract. The Road then abruptly veered

toward the York River to parallel the easternmost town lots and to climb up the high ground toward Secretary Nelson's house. The alignment of the house paralleled this crook in the York-Hampton Road. As travelers crested the knoll they were nearest to Secretary Nelson's house. Surprisingly, only approximately four feet separated the southwest corner of the brick edifice from the edge of the road. Such an alignment created an optical illusion: as travelers drew nearest to the house at its southwest corner, they were already being drawn further away from the front door. The placement of the house so close to the roadway insured that travelers on the York-Hampton Road dramatically passed through the shadow of the Secretary's great looming house in order to enter Yorktown.²

After construction of encircling fortifications in 1781, Secretary Nelson's house rose above even the works that physically concealed so much of Yorktown (Figure 15). Throughout his detailed journal of the siege, St. George Tucker—once a frequent guest of the Secretary's before Nelson appointed him deputy clerk in Dinwiddie County (Hamilton 2003:28-29)—constantly referred to the Secretary's house as a principal landmark and described the events of the battle in relation to its location (Tucker 1948). Like the orangery of the Calverts in Annapolis, the significance of the topographic elevation rests less on the pleasurable vantage or the summer breezes it may have afforded, and more on its perceived role in maintaining the status and authority of Secretary Nelson (Yentsch 1997:121).

² Based upon descriptions of ceiling heights provided in the Thomas Hunt floor plan, Carl Lounsbury estimated that the exterior walls were minimally 26 feet to 27 feet high from the ground surface to the eaves—a wall height comparable to the George Wythe House in Williamsburg (Carl Lounsbury, personal communication, 29 January 2003). This calculation does not account for the additional height of the roof.

FIGURE 15

APPROACH TO YORKTOWN ALONG THE YORK-HAMPTON ROAD



Yorktown, in Virginia, April 23, 1791 by John Trumbull. Courtesy of The Frick Collection and Frick Art Reference Library.

Orientation

If the size of the house and the materials from which it was fabricated did not indicate the wealth and social status of Secretary Nelson, then the orientation of his home did. Like Williamsburg, all the structures within the half-acre lots of Yorktown—save for the York-Hampton Parish Church—were aligned either parallel or perpendicular to the street grid. Yet Secretary Nelson rotated the footprint of his house approximately 15 degrees east from the alignment of Yorktown’s north-south cross streets (Lutton 2003:48). By intentionally placing his estate askew to the town, Secretary Nelson conspicuously asserted a claim of authority so comprehensive that no other institution (or member of the gentry) aside from the ordained church dared to make it.

Like Nathaniel Burwell of Carter’s Grove (Martin 2001:109), Secretary Nelson oriented his mansion house deliberately to take the greatest possible advantage of the river course. This placement purposefully sought to incorporate the spectacular vista of the York River at its widest section flowing into the even more expansive Chesapeake

Bay. In 1765 an English merchant commented on the astonishing vantage afforded by the siting of the house and garden:

It [the house] stands in his Garden about 200 Yards from the River bank & commands a fine Prospect of York River, the Ships, and Gloucester Town, of the Opposite Shore & also an unbounded one both up & down the River; insomuch that by the help of a good Glass in clear Weather a person can see any Ship bound to any part of Chesapeake Bay above the Mouth of York River [Thomas Hunt Papers 1765] (Figure 14).

The angled orientation of the house atop the highest eminence in town observable so far down the York-Hampton Road were unmistakable symbols employed by Secretary Nelson to express his wealth and indisputable role as a colonial administrator. By placing himself on an elevation above the town, Secretary Nelson conspicuously expressed that he possessed privileges unafforded to townsmen—that he symbolically asserted his position within the hierarchy of colonial government and society.

Garden

Surprisingly little is known about the eighteenth-century gardens of Yorktown (Martin 2001:132). Despite the fact that Secretary Nelson's garden is probably the best documented in eighteenth-century Yorktown, it nonetheless remains ambiguous. If the much-touted zeal of his father and brother for gardening is an indication, then Secretary Nelson was likely a diligent gardener, too (Evans 1964; Norton 1968).

FIGURE 16

DETAIL FROM THE CONDER SIEGE PLAN

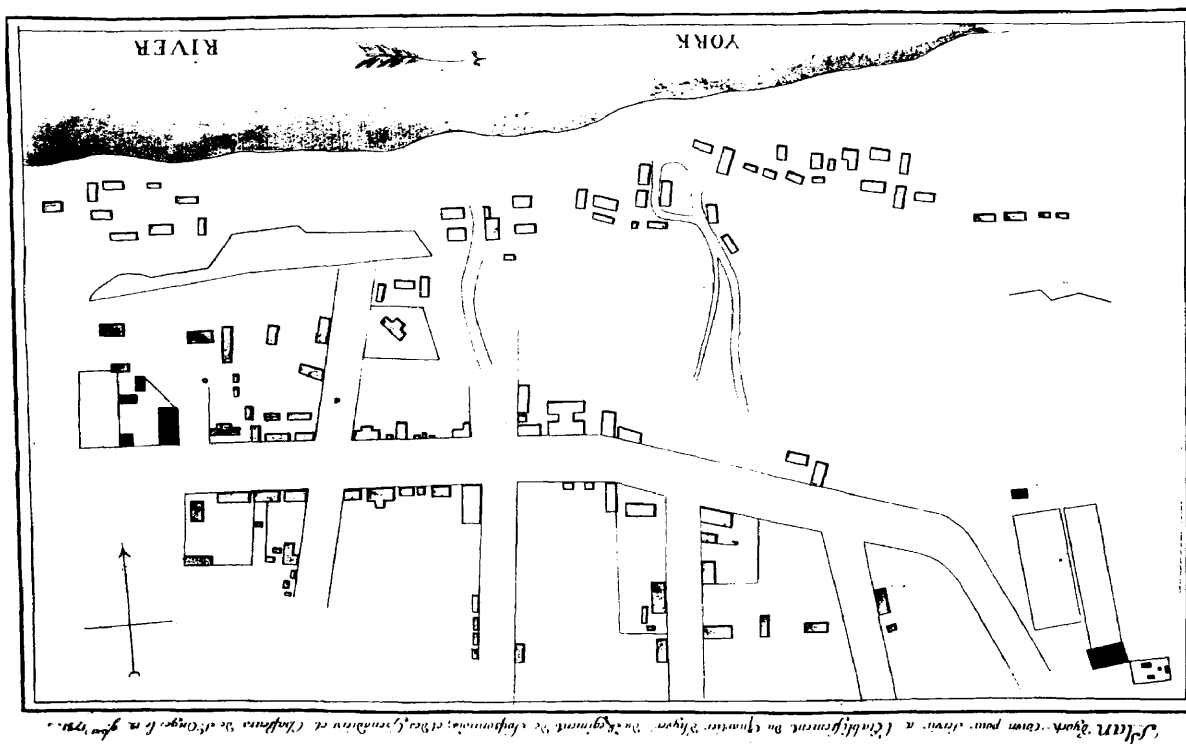


Secretary Nelson's house and expansive garden are depicted between military features 2 and 9. Courtesy of Maryland State Archives.

Documentary evidence indicates that Secretary Nelson's formal garden was situated between his house and the river bluff, and aligned axially with the house. Archaeological testing of this area recovered evidence of eighteenth-century gardening: bell jar fragments and probable garden cultivation layers (Lutton 2003:64-66). Many military maps from the 1781 siege represent the garden as rectangular (Berthier 1781; Conder 1788; Hayman 1782); however, specific organizational details vary by document. While Conder's siege plan presents a rectangular garden of four uniform quadrants and a central hub (Figure 16), two others present longer, linear sections subdivisions comprising the garden (Figures 17 and 18). Because of the prevalence throughout the Chesapeake of the classic, rigid, flat-quadrangle garden in even the grandest river-view plantation gardens (Kryder-Reid 1994:135; Martin 2001:131), it is likely that Secretary Nelson utilized this design scheme, too.

FIGURE 17

1781 BILLETING MAP BY ALEXANDRE BERTHIER



Secretary Nelson's house, garden, and outbuildings are depicted at the bottom right hand corner. Courtesy of Princeton University.

All the maps consistently indicate that the planting beds did not extend to the edge of the river bluff and probably comprised an area of at least one acre—the equivalent of two lots across the street in Yorktown. In the space between the planting beds and river bluff, Secretary Nelson may have extended the garden by fashioning a manicured lawn that contained walkways and a garden house since at least two siege maps indicate structures, possibly summer or garden houses, located in this vicinity (Figures 16 and 17). If this space was utilized as an element of the greater garden, then the formal garden may have approached two acres in size—the equivalent of four lots. At a time when the majority of Yorktown lot holders owned only a single half-acre lot (Richer 1989:46), the sheer size of the Secretary's garden must have been startling. Despite its ostentatious size

in Yorktown, a two-acre garden was comparable to other elite, urban gardens in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. The St. Mary's garden of Charles Carroll encompassed 2 acres (Kryder-Reid 1994:134). William Paca and Secretary John Ridout, two of Secretary Nelson's political contemporaries in urban Annapolis, both maintained 2-acre quadrangle gardens overlooking river ways (Leone 1987:615).

FIGURE 18

DETAIL OF LIEUTENANT HAYMAN'S SIEGE PLAN



Lieutenant Hayman depicted Secretary Nelson's house and garden. Courtesy of Colonial National Historical Park.

Despite assertions otherwise (Riley 1942:87-88, 1952:534-535), there is no evidence that Secretary Nelson terraced the Tobacco Road ravine or the river bluff. Even if uncultivated, the slopes of the Tobacco Road ravine served Secretary Nelson as a crucial tool in his manipulation of the local landscape and declaration of his personal

power. Despite two small promontories that bulged eastward, the edge of the Tobacco Road ravine gradually turned westward as it approached the River. This significantly constricted and reduced the usable space available to Secretary Nelson on which to construct his gardens. The Secretary responded by deliberately siting the angle of his house and the axially aligned garden beds to face the larger promontory. The lines of sight created by the street to the west and the larger promontory on the east of the garden converged to create an optical illusion that the garden and property of the Secretary was larger than their actual size. Like Paca and Ridout in Annapolis, Secretary Nelson used converging lines to create the illusion that the focal point of the garden—in this instance, the York River and its confluence with the Chesapeake Bay—was further away and that his garden stretched out over the increased distance to meet it (Leone and Shackel 1990:163).

The promontory that helped to frame the vantage from the Secretary's garden also served another subtle purpose in his exploitation of topographic features. Although barely perceptible at first, the ground level (and presumably garden beds) gradually descends toward the promontory—nearly 10 feet lower in elevation than the house (Department of Interior 2002). Topographically lower than the house, the promontory helped to create the impression of terracing overlooking the ravine. Because Secretary Nelson was educated in England, it is feasible that he was influenced by the emerging fashion to construct more “natural” gardens (Leone 1987:610). This subtle change in grade may have been an attempt to display the knowledge and fashion he had acquired in England.

Shortly after the Siege of Yorktown, a French general and nobleman visited Secretary Nelson at his Hornquarter plantation on the Mattaponi River. Baron von Cloisen observed: “The house is not remarkable; the garden is rather pretty. But the walks along

the Mattaponi, which flows one-quarter of a mile behind the house, are charming” (von Closen 1958:209). This account suggests that the Secretary like other elite, Tidewater gentry appreciated “the artful orientation of houses to command the best possible prospects of the surrounding countryside” (Martin 2001:131). Whether overlooking the York or the Mattaponi, the deliberate placement of his house and orientation of his garden demonstrates Secretary Nelson’s ability and penchant for incorporating river vantages into the presentation of his articulated landscape.

Symbolism of Self

Like many of his peers among the Chesapeake gentry, Secretary Nelson designed and, in time remade, his home himself (Hunt 1737-1818). And like his fellow gentry Secretary Nelson deliberately selected and intentionally incorporated symbols within his estate intended to convey undeniable statements of material wealth, ostentation, demonstration of Baroque principles of sight and perspective, and claims to civil authority (Leone 1988, 1996; Leone et al 1989; Leone and Shackel 1990). Even though Secretary Nelson utilized many of the same methods, materials, and techniques as other gentry, the scale and magnitude of his symbolism combined with his unique role as an administrator conveyed an inherent political statement (Kryder-Reid 1994:136).

Although Secretary Nelson was a member of the traditional and highly influential Tidewater gentry, he was an elite member within even that cadre.³ Educated in England

³ Secretary Nelson was foremost an administrator. While he raised cash crops and livestock on his Virginia holdings like most gentry and occasionally dabbled as a merchant and slave importer, these activities were always secondary. Secretary Nelson concentrated his efforts on administering his office. Not surprisingly, Secretary Nelson utilized petitions, patents, and deeds filed with his office to direct his financial activities on land speculation and development. Even after the upheaval and destruction of the War, Jackson T. Main estimated that Secretary Nelson remained one of the wealthiest Virginians (Main 1954:379).

at the Inner Temple and admitted to the English bar, the young Thomas Nelson was appointed in 1743 to the much-coveted and highly lucrative office of deputy secretary of Virginia at the age of only 27. In sharp contrast to the traditional “pathway to power” (Sydnor 1965:100-106) taken by the sons of wealthy planters, Thomas Nelson began his political ascent with one of the most powerful offices in the colony before he had even served as a county justice!⁴

Well versed in law and with one of the most comprehensive legal libraries in Virginia, Secretary Nelson understood the integral link between power, nature, and civil society espoused by John Locke and Thomas Hobbes—the crucial basis of political thought in England and the American colonies. Locke and Hobbes stated that men forged an implicit compact when they left the state of nature and entered society; the basis of rule and governance was founded on this voluntary surrender of individual rights that existed in nature (Hobbes 1985; Locke 1988). As historian Bernard Bailyn observed, power in colonial America was derived from this and “was explicitly the control of some people over others” (Kryder-Reid 1994:136).

Secretary Nelson understood that in colonial Virginia power “proceeded from the top downward—from the king to the governor to the Assembly to the county...” (Bridenbaugh 1963:16). He also recognized that he and his office occupied a unique position in that hierarchy. Most of the traditional gentry of planters achieved office because of their involvement and acceptance of the social and political status quo. They participated first at the county level and eventually reached the House of Burgesses;

⁴ Only after his appointment as deputy secretary did Nelson join his father and brother as York County justices. In 1746 Secretary Nelson headed the York County Court and was elected to the House of Burgesses. He joined the exclusive Governor’s Council in 1749. Upon the death of his brother, President William Nelson in 1772, the Secretary also became President of the Governor’s Council.

however, aside from those who achieved a seat in the Governor's Council, most gentry occupied offices awarded by the vote of their peers. This distinction was not lost upon Secretary Nelson. Undoubtedly, he was aware that he had not been elected by the governed but selected by the governing. As secretary and a member of the Council, Nelson was appointed by the Crown⁵. Much more than one of the faceless and powerless who had yielded individual rights, Secretary Nelson perceived himself as an instrument of the Crown—and after the governor, the embodiment of the Crown in Virginia. In 1756 a contemporary found him “except the Governour...the greatest Man in this Country...” (Fishburne 1971:370). After meeting Secretary Nelson during the Yorktown campaign, Baron von Clofen wrote, “He is regarded as one of the most learned men in his country in all fields of knowledge; he is generally revered and esteemed” (von Clofen 1958:180-181).

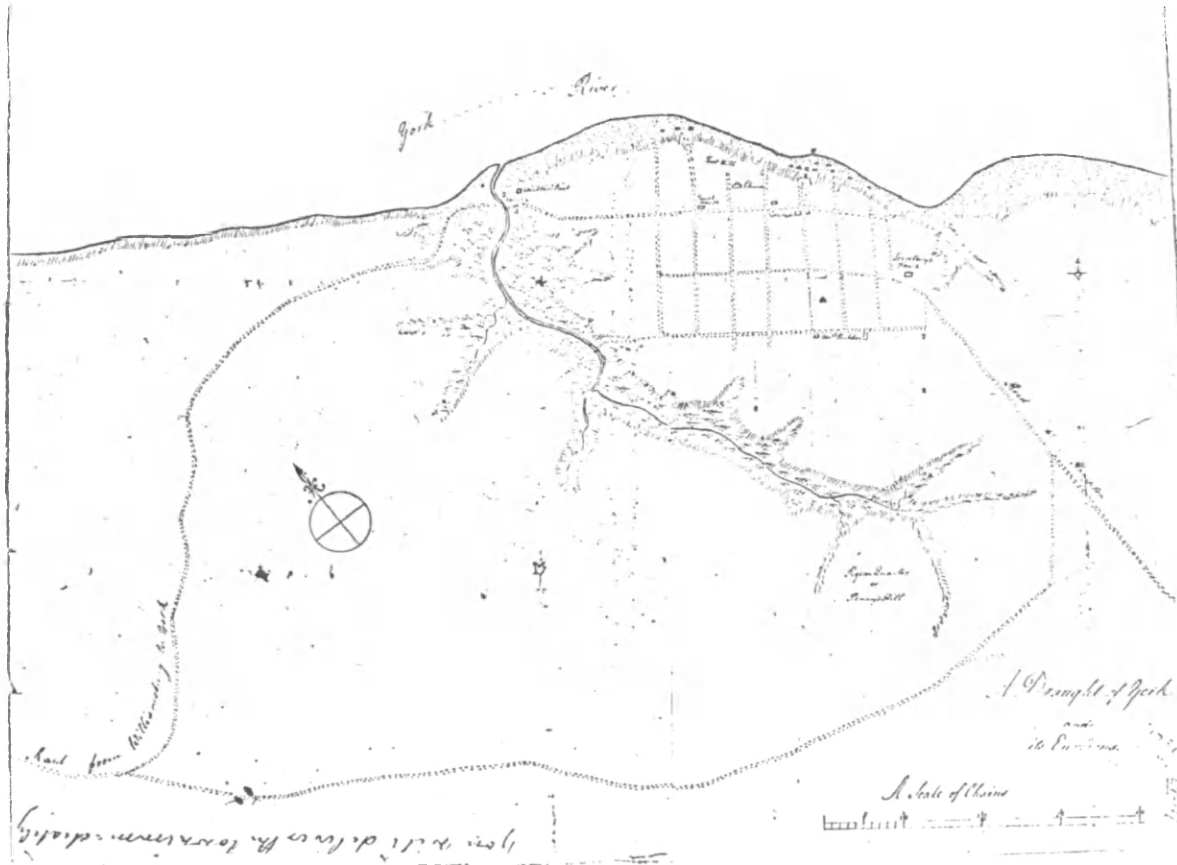
Secretary Nelson understood that like the governor, he was not only a person, but an office (Hood 1991:48; Sydnor 1965:62). Like the royal governors, Secretary Nelson expected to be shown deference. In 1782, Marquis de Chastellux described Secretary Nelson as an “old magistrate, whose white locks, noble figure, and lofty stature command respect and veneration (de Chastellux 1963:384). Like the royal governors of eighteenth-century Virginia who employed the Governor's Palace and its lavish garden to physically symbolize their irrefutable status as personal representatives of the Crown (Hood

⁵ The office of secretary of Virginia was administered in England by the Secretary of State as a lifetime sinecure under the patronage system. After the death of John Carter, a royal warrant bestowed the office of secretary upon William Adair on January 7, 1743. Adair, who bid in excess of £2,000 for the post, remained in England. On April 16, 1743 Thomas Nelson was sworn in as deputy secretary. Presumably, “Scotch” Tom Nelson, too, bid in excess of £2,000 for his son to acquire the deputyship. Nelson sent Adair £600 per annum from fees paid to the deputy secretary, estimated at £1,800 per year. In addition to this revenue, the Deputy Secretary served as the keeper of the colonial seal and ex-officio clerk of the Governor's Council and General Court. He issued all land patents and executive papers, and appointed all county clerks (Fishburne 1971:356-357).

1991:48), Secretary Nelson used his Yorktown estate and separate Records Office to convey his political status and authority. Whether or not they consciously realized it, his contemporaries defined him by his office. As an individual he was most often referred to as “Secretary Nelson” or simply “the Secretary”. His Williamsburg office was known locally as “the Secretary’s Office” and even Yorktown landmarks were identified with his office—“Secretary’s Hill” and “Secretary’s Corner”. In 1781 before Lord Cornwallis occupied Yorktown, an unidentified agent for General Henry Knox reconnoitered and mapped the town (Figure 19). Efficiently, the cartographer reproduced only key elements of the topographic and constructed landscapes. After carefully recording the approaches to Yorktown, its street system, and the ravines of the constricting creek, the agent recorded the cardinal structures within town—including a large structure on the east side he labeled “Secretary’s House”.

FIGURE 19

A KEY LANDMARK ON THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE



A Draught of York and Its Environs, 1781 identifies Secretary Nelson's house. Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society.

The Secretary Nelson Estate in Context

The case of Secretary Nelson is extraordinary because of the scale on which he articulated his symbolic statement for it far exceeded any other such attempts in eighteenth-century Yorktown. By acquiring a 15-acre tract adjacent to the eastern town limits, Secretary Nelson was able to erect a rural-styled plantation with a river front vantage and sprawling gardens on a spatial scale akin to rural plantations. By contrast,

other gentry in Yorktown (and Williamsburg)—such as the Amblers, Lightfoots, and even other Nelsons—were incapable of making such immense landscape statements. Hindered by the street grid of the town and a system of half-acre parcels, those living within the original plat could never accumulate a block of contiguous lots large enough on which to execute the design of Secretary Nelson. Throughout the eighteenth century, the largest uninterrupted domestic block of Yorktown lots was located on the west side of town, Lots 1-6. As a whole these six lots comprised only three acres⁶—a mere fifth of Secretary Nelson’s estate.

The gentry adapted to their urban environment by constructing smaller, confined urban complexes (Samford 1996) with dispersed outbuildings on other lots, obstructed vantages of the river, and significantly reduced gardens. Secretary Nelson’s nephew, Thomas Nelson, who served as Governor of Virginia in the eventful year of 1781, lived primarily on an L-shaped configuration comprised of Lots 48, 49, 50, and 52 in Yorktown. Within an acre formed by the two lots fronting Main Street, Governor Nelson maintained a brick house—approximately the same size as Secretary Nelson’s—in addition to a garden and at least six outbuildings (Barka 1978; Riley 1940: 74-75). When Yorktown expanded southward into the land sold by Gwyn Reade in 1738, many wealthier Yorktown families relocated their stables or carriage houses onto those more distant properties (Richter 1993). Archaeological evidence from the Chiskiack Watch excavations of the late 1980s indicates that the Lightfoots maintained a variety of support structures—buttery, well, probable kitchen, quarter, and kitchen garden planting beds

⁶ Major William Buckner acquired Lots 1-6 by the time of his death in 1716. The property passed in succession as a block to John Buckner, Griffin Stith, Nathaniel Littleton Savage, and Captain Thomas Lilly. In 1793, Lilly conveyed the lots to Dr. Corbin Griffin.

(Nicholas M. Lucchetti, personal communication, 18 March 2004)—across Ballard Street from their brick mansion, the largest in eighteenth-century Yorktown.

By rejecting this form of smaller, urban estates typical in Yorktown and Williamsburg, Secretary Nelson intentionally set himself apart from the town. As his symbolic political statement differentiated him from society, so the presence of his estate created explicit distinctions from Yorktown. By the late eighteenth century, gentry estates similar to Secretary Nelson's such as Tazewell Hall and Greenhill Plantation had developed along the periphery of Williamsburg (Samford 1996:70-71; Samford et al. 2001:1-6); however, Secretary Nelson's predates the earliest of these.

The fact that Secretary Nelson attempted to differentiate himself from Yorktown—and may have established this precedent imitated in the colonial capital—suggests that the urban landscape of Yorktown was much more complex than previously represented by scholars. The most popular and persisting interpretation of Yorktown's landscape is that the town was comprised of two discreet, homogenous levels: an orderly, Georgian enclave of fashionable gardens and stately brick residences concentrated along Main Street overlooking a chaotic, bustling waterfront constructed of wood and populated by the rowdier and less respectable members of society (Noël Hume 1963:154; Richards and Alblinger 2000; Richards and Moyer 2001:24-27; Yentsch 1997:20-21).

Such simplistic interpretations persist despite the data of more than 150 archaeological excavations in Yorktown (Grzymala 1998[1]), and compelling research by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation that suggests identifiable “neighborhoods” only developed gradually in Williamsburg beginning at the end of the eighteenth century (Samford 1996:70-71). Even a cursory examination of deeds, insurance policies, archaeological reports, and damage claims suggests that Yorktown did not contain such

easily defined (and static) homogeneity. Such simplistic notions of urbanity in Yorktown probably owe more to the tidy appearance of restored eighteenth-century structures on Main Street today (such as the Custom House gentrified during renovations by architect Duncan Lee in 1929) and Sydney King's fanciful 1956 depiction of Yorktown that hangs in the CNHP Visitor Center—and less with a thorough examination of the archaeological and documentary record.

Since focused documentary scholarship of the town began in the 1940s, scholars have never comprehensively investigated Yorktown as an entire community. The scope of research—whether executed by the historian's thumb or the archaeologist's Marshalltown—has always been arbitrary and incomplete. Virtually all previous studies conveniently fragmented Yorktown into “manageable” portions: Main Street (Hatch 1980), waterfront (Hatch 1973; Richards and Moyer 2001), Gwyn Reade “Subdivision” (Metz and Richter 1996; Riley 1952), battlefield (Greene 1976; Thompson 1976), and Windmill Point (Hatch 1980). The result often has been a fragmentary and biased depiction of Yorktown's urban landscape within an incomplete framework.

Archaeology and documentary evidence irrefutably agree that some rather substantial and “permanent” structures occupied the eighteenth-century waterfront. The remains of carefully constructed warehouses—erected in Flemish bond—have been identified (but only partially excavated) along Great Valley Road (Sasser 1974; Edwards et al 1998) and at the foot of Comte de Grasse Street (Nicholas M. Lucchetti, personal communication, 23 March 2004). Similarly, historical documents indicate that additional homes, storehouses, and warehouses were either built entirely of brick or with the “permanency” of brick and stone cellars (Richards and Moyer 2001: Appendix A-C). The absence of surviving waterfront structures, undoubtedly, is the result of catastrophic fires,

the wanton destruction of military occupations, and the ravages of hurricanes rather than an indication of the materials selected by the builder.

To characterize Main Street as a Georgian ideal is to ignore the dynamic nature of eighteenth-century urbanity in the Chesapeake. Like structures in Williamsburg, those of Yorktown—regardless of building material—functioned to serve the changing needs of the proprietor or leaser. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, two of Yorktown’s great Georgian symbols located in the heart of town—the Lightfoot Mansion on Lot 23 and the Ambler House on Lot 37—were converted for use as taverns (*Virginia Gazette*, 22 August 1777; Hatch 1980:14). Warehouses, storehouses, and taverns were common not only on Main Street, but all across the town overlooking the waterfront (Hatch 1980; Riley 1940, 1942). Edward Riley’s compilation of eighteenth-century taverns in town indicates that a majority were actually located “on the hill” (Riley 1943:24-26). All the bustle of warehouses and the commotion of taverns on the waterfront were present “on the hill”—particularly on the south side of Main Street at William Reynold’s storehouse and the Ambler Customhouse. One of the wealthiest Virginians, “President” William Nelson operated a complex of stores and warehouses along the periphery of his Main Street estate—including a wood frame store, granary, and warehouse situated mere feet east of his massive H-shaped brick mansion (Evans 1957; Hatch 1963). And for at least 20 years beginning in 1720, Yorktown’s most famous legacy after the 1781 battle—the kilns operated by William Rogers on a knoll (Barka et al 1984)—spewed noxious smoke that, undoubtedly, hung like a pall over the western (and topographically lower) lots of Yorktown.

CHAPTER III
CHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE

At the political center of any complexly ordered society...there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing.

Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (1983)

Challenge from Below (and Above), 1760-1775

Beginning in the 1760s a series of turbulent political and economic events transpired within the Chesapeake that combined to undermine the confidence of the gentry and directly contest the authority of the gentry's leadership. Over the next tumultuous decade, the Stamp Act, declining tobacco prices, unprecedented indebtedness to trade houses, an evangelical insurgency within the Anglican Church, consumer boycotts, and repeated shortages of currency exacerbated tensions and impaired the confidence of the gentry (Hood 1991; Holton 1999; Isaac 1982). Throughout the eighteenth century, the gentry had utilized material culture to accentuate economic disparities and reify social distinctions. A consumer revolution characterized by dramatic increases in material consumption by most segments of Chesapeake society partially negated many of these distinctions (Breen 1986, 1988, 1993). In Virginia, a new political reality complicated these tensions: the political and economic center of gravity had shifted from the Tidewater. A new generation of western planters—with loose and ever lengthening connections to the Tidewater—were ready to compete “for a share in

governing the Old Dominion with the Old Guard and, it should be added, for its share in offices and the other fruits of political power” (Bridenbaugh 1963:49).

This crisis of power and security profoundly impacted the confidence of Secretary Nelson. Perhaps more than others, Secretary Nelson was personally beset by these untenable forces. As Fishburne observed:

Throughout his career he had attempted the two-sided role of serving both King and colony, but...he was to find this dual role of service more and more unacceptable as his fellow Virginians began to find their allegiance to a distant monarch more distasteful (Fishburne 1971:370).

Increasingly, Secretary Nelson found himself pressed on both sides to choose between the Crown—in the person of Lord Dunmore—and the disaffected planters seeking greater self-governance. As tensions mounted, both these factions became less patient with the Secretary and more suspicious of his attempts at reconciliation.

The Chiswell Affair of 1766 indisputably marked the most open and assertive challenge to the traditional hegemony of the Tidewater gentry, and ushered in the beginning of the pre-Revolutionary turmoil (Hood 1991:283). That summer, Colonel John Chiswell of Williamsburg was taken into custody for the public murder of an intoxicated merchant. Without a formal hearing and in contradiction of Virginia law, three judges of the General Court intercepted Colonel Chiswell before his incarceration and, unprecedentedly, released him on bail. The public outcry of favoritism and injustice by discontented planters and an increasingly disaffected populace overwhelmed the gentry. Only Colonel Chiswell’s suicide in his Francis Street home the day before the trial prevented a direct political and legal confrontation. Undoubtedly, the political opposition and ramifications of this incident disturbed Secretary Nelson. During sessions

of the General Assembly and other extended meeting periods for the Council and General Court in Williamsburg, Secretary Nelson lodged at the Francis Street house of his brother, William. The home of Colonel Chiswell (Chiswell-Bucktrout House in Colonial Williamsburg) is located immediately southwest across Francis Street from the Nelson home (Nelson-Galt House in Colonial Williamsburg). Considering the amount of time that the Secretary resided on Francis Street, he undoubtedly knew Colonel Chiswell, and may have been in residence at his brother's house awaiting the trial at the time that the Colonel took his own life.

By the end of the 1760s, Secretary Nelson probably observed a change in the composition of Yorktown. Since he had returned from his education in England, ownership of the half-acre lots in Yorktown had gradually increased (Richter 1989:16). By the 1770s, the sheer number of lot holders and the percentage of Yorktown residents who owned their own lot was higher than at any time since the first decade of the town's existence (Richter 1989:16). Within his lifetime, Secretary Nelson witnessed the demise of the old town when only a few families such as the Lightfoots and Nelsons controlled the lots and resources (Riley 1942; Richter 1989). With an ever-increasing propertied population—and disruptions by unruly refugees and soldiers during the American Revolution (Creswell 1968:206-207; York County Petition 1780)—the populace of Yorktown increasingly demanded a role in its political decisions and contested the traditional leadership of those like Secretary Nelson.

But two events in particular exposed Secretary Nelson to a torrent of unparalleled challenges: a new royal governor envious of his prerogatives and the sudden death of his brother, William Nelson. Less than six months after his arrival and installation as governor of Virginia in 1771, John Murray, Lord Dunmore, initiated an unrelenting

assault upon Secretary Nelson's power of appointment of county clerks. Lord Dunmore aggressively petitioned home authorities to transfer this highly coveted and long established power of the office of secretary to the governor. Despite repeated and firm rebuffs from Lord Dartmouth and Lord Hillsborough, Dunmore doggedly continued to appeal for the Secretary's privilege (Fishburne 1971:378-381). As late as 1773, Governor Dunmore reiterated his protests to England. In time, Lord Dunmore relied less upon the council of Secretary Nelson, who attempted to act as a moderating influence to ease tensions between the governor and the gentry. During the tempestuous year of 1775, Lord Dunmore assessed his Council and in his appraisal found only three or four loyal members. Lord Dunmore censured Secretary Nelson for being "very unfit person in any difficult time" (Fishburne 1971:384), and in a letter to the Secretary of State, Lord Dunmore harshly rebuked Secretary Nelson, writing:

the Secretary...had shown nothing but a Care to avoid giving offence either way, and is, from his capacity and undetermined character, utterly incapable of giving assistance to his Majesty's Government [Evans 1964:72; Fishburne 1971:384].

Amidst these tensions with the Lord Dunmore, William Nelson—president of the Council, closest political ally, and elder brother of Secretary Nelson—died in November 1772. Aside from the traumatic personal loss and grief over the death of his brother with whom he was so close, the death of President Nelson politically impaired Secretary Nelson. Together, the substantial financial resources of William Nelson—successful merchant, gentry planter, president of the Council, member of the House of Burgesses—and the political prerogatives and legal knowledge of Thomas Nelson—deputy secretary, councilor, member of the House of Burgesses—had formed a powerful and virtually irresistible duo. Noted historian Emory Evans concluded that strategically located just

twelve miles from the capital, “the Nelsons were a potent and positive force in Virginia governmental affairs for two decades” (Evans 1964:70-71).

The death of President Nelson and the unabating attempts by Lord Dunmore to reduce the privileges of the Secretary marginalized the political influence of Secretary Nelson. Although the political potency of the Nelson partnership was based primarily on the economic prowess of President Nelson (Evans 1957, 1964:72), a considerable amount of their success must be attributed to the personality of President Nelson, and how well the two brothers complimented one another. The outgoing, elder brother, President Nelson was the more visible of the two—the leader to whom other members of the Council and the House of Burgesses naturally gravitated. A quieter, behind-the-scenes operator, Secretary Nelson never effectively filled the leadership role vacated by the death of President Nelson.

Response, 1770-1781

Secretary Nelson responded by attempting to bolster and reaffirm his political and social position in the colony. Like other Chesapeake gentry assailed by these events, the Secretary responded by looking “for proof in material things” (Hudgins 1990:63). Just as prey responds when threatened by a predator, a vulnerable and isolated Secretary Nelson enhanced his appearance to convey a symbolic message of greater prestige, authority, and prowess. Secretary Nelson, as other eighteenth-century Americans, communicated important political and social messages with material culture (Deetz 1988, 1996). In the words of T. H. Breen:

Eighteenth-century Americans...communicated perceptions of status and politics to other people through items of everyday material culture, through a symbolic universe of commonplace "things" which modern scholars usually take for granted but which for their original possessors were objects of great significance [Breen 1988:75].

From its mid-century origins, Secretary Nelson's estate conveyed overt statements of his political authority, ostentation, and hierarchy. In the face of this onslaught of changing social values and increasing political and economic disarray, Secretary Nelson chose to more fully reiterate his expression of symbolism and Georgian ideals. In so doing, Secretary Nelson participated in a cultural transformation that involved a profound departure back towards the English cultural sphere (Deetz 1977:61-62). Like George Washington's extensive refinement of Mount Vernon in 1774 (Pogue 1994) or the "power gardens" that Marylanders fashioned shortly before the outbreak of the Revolution (Leone et al 1989)—William Paca (Leone 1996), Charles Carroll (Kryder-Reid 1994), and John Ridout (Leone 1987)—Secretary Nelson undertook renovations during a period of increasing strife and diminished confidence.

As Christopher Matthews's research in pre-Revolutionary Maryland indicates, this presentation of Georgian designs in architectural renovation was all too often a weapon in factional warfare amongst the gentry (Matthews 1998). It is likely that Secretary Nelson crafted his statement of authority not only to impress those who entered town through the shadow of his great house or envied his expansive gardens, but to remind combative peers among the gentry—such as Lord Dunmore or those planters challenging the traditional rule of the Tidewater elite—of his extraordinary resources and means. Like his house which dominated not only the River approach but also the landward, Secretary Nelson intended his symbol to be seen not only from below but above.

These renovations explicitly asserted a Georgian worldview by presenting balanced, symmetrical facades symbolically imposing an inherent hierarchical order upon nature as well as the governed. Ironically as the Revolution loomed and many Americans demanded increased self-governance, the modifications that Secretary Nelson and other gentry implemented on their estates expressed their English refinement and Georgian worldview (Breen 1986; Deetz 1977; Greene 1988; Isaac 1982).⁷ James Deetz, the first to comprehensively apply this concept to material culture, wrote that: “This ‘re-Anglicization’ of American culture meant that on the eve of the American Revolution, Americans were more English than they had been in the past since the first years of the colonies” (Deetz 1997:60-61).

Without more extensive archaeological investigations, the extent to which Secretary Nelson reordered his domestic seat may never be fully understood because of the loss of Nelson family papers (Evans 1978a, 1978b). Before 1781, Secretary Nelson razed the former Dixon structures (Berthier 1781). After completing his house, the Secretary probably continued to utilize these older structures as outbuildings (Gauntlett 1755). He consolidated the new outbuildings on a natural terrace and slope immediately east of his mansion. Within this centrally located support complex for his household—now deliberately delineated by an enclosing fence line (Berthier 1781; Lutton 2003:72-75)—the Secretary also increased the amount of outbuildings. Instead of the four structures, Secretary Nelson constructed no less than 11 outbuildings by the time of the

⁷ Hood (1991:281-283) offers a behavioral variant to partially explain localized Georgianization in Virginia. Hood suggests that the widely admired and venerated Governors, Fauquier and Botetourt, personally exerted an enduring cultural influence amongst the gentry of Virginia. Because they were perceived as proper models of English gentlemen above personal enrichment, genuinely concerned with the welfare of the colony, and advancing principles of the Enlightenment, the Virginia gentry endeavored to emulate these ideal Englishmen through the purchase and display of material culture.

1781 siege: 1 kitchen, 2 dairies, 1 granary, 1 quarter, 2 lumber houses, 1 hen house, 2 stables, and 1 store house (Executive Papers 1789) not including his cellared store house with two floors located on the waterfront (*Virginia Independent Chronicle* 1788).

Secretary Nelson probably completed these modifications during or before 1770. Martha Goosley, a feisty town gossip, lived immediately south of Secretary Nelson (Barka et al 1984:[1]66-67; Evans 1957:109; Norton 1968; Reynolds 1772-1783; Ritcher 1993:58-59; *Virginia Gazette*, 22 November 1770:3, Column 1). Because Goosley lived down slope and on the opposite side of the York-Hampton Road, the angle of Secretary Nelson's house with its newly aligned outbuildings obstructed her former vantage. On September 1, 1770 Goosley angrily penned John Norton, her merchant landlord in England of the recent changes:

the Secretary has quite stopped us up in front we have no view but his Back sd & I was going to say all his out Houses are Placed Just before our windows have a great mind to set up a Coffee House before his front Door, he is at Present laid up hand and foot with the Gout doing Penance for past folly (Norton 1968:145).

Though seemingly minor, the relocation of the outbuildings east of the mansion created a more unified, symmetrical configuration that greatly enhanced the vista from the house and garden. Previously, the outbuildings had skirted the garden's edge and partially obstructed the superb view of the confluence of the York River and Chesapeake Bay. At this time, the Secretary may have erected a summer or garden house at the north end of the garden to exploit this vista (Berthier 1781; Conder 1788). From the water, the reconfiguration not only removed aging outbuildings that cluttered the view of the mansion, but their removal also created an unimpeded vantage of the waterway.

Similarly, travelers approaching Yorktown on the York-Hampton Road saw clustered below his mansion the numerous outbuildings that bespoke the accumulated wealth and resources of Secretary Nelson (Isaac 1982:118). Like George Washington and other planters who sought to reaffirm their claim to gentry status on the eve of the Revolution, these modifications were a well-conceived plan by Secretary Nelson to regularize the diverse and earlier elements of his property.

The extent to which Secretary Nelson succeeded may never be ascertained. Certainly the challenges borne by the coming war years undoubtedly brought confrontations and affronts to his authority that Secretary Nelson never anticipated or had encountered previously. As the effects of the King's navy suffocated Atlantic trade and displaced populations, refugees joined ill-equipped militia in Yorktown, and an English visitor wrote in 1777:

Close to town there are several very good Gentlemen's houses built of brick and some of their gardens laid out with the greatest taste of any I have seen in America, but now almost ruined by the disorderly soldiers, and, what is more extraordinary, their own soldiers, the guardians of the people and the defenders of their rights. Houses burnt down, others pulled to pieces for fuel, most of the Gardens thrown to the street, everything in disorder and confusion and no appearance of trade. This melancholy scene fills the mind of the itinerant traveler with gloomy and horrid ideas [Cresswell 1968:206-207].

CHAPTER IV

DESTRUCTION AND SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION

And on the pedestal these words appear:
 “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias* (1818)

FIGURE 20

DETAIL OF LIEUTENANT HILL’S SIEGE PLAN



Secretary Nelson’s house labeled as the “Head Quarters” of Lord Cornwallis. Courtesy of Colonial National Historical Park.

The Siege of Yorktown

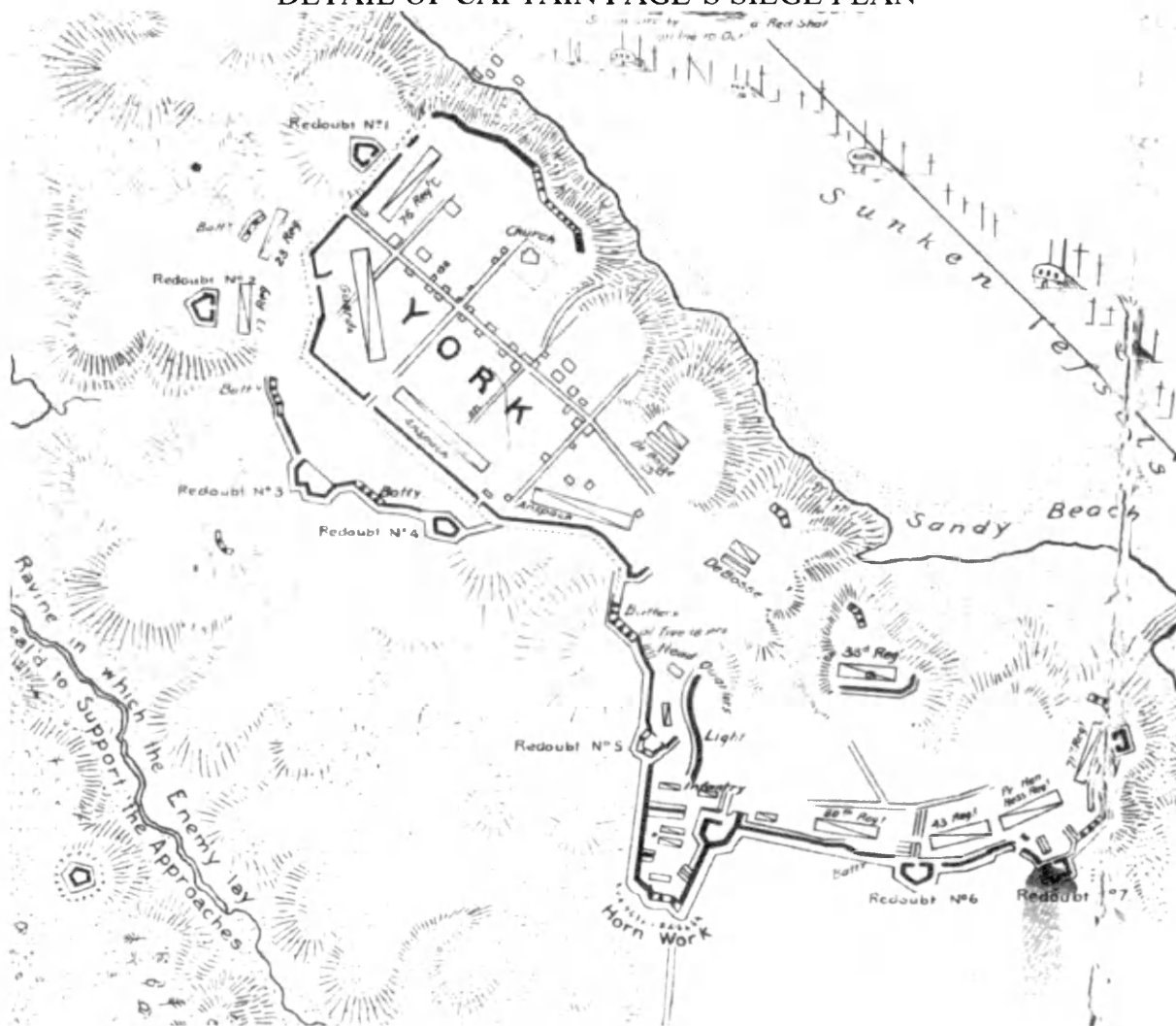
In the summer of 1781, Lord Cornwallis occupied Yorktown and prepared to fortify the port as his base of operations for the winter of 1781-1782. At some point after the British occupation of Yorktown, Cornwallis established his headquarters in home of Secretary Nelson (de Chastellux 1963:385; Latrobe 1977:[1]86; Tucker 1948:386-387). More than half a dozen surviving siege maps identify Nelson's home as "Head Quarters" (Figure 20) or "British Hd Qrs" (Hatch 1980:14). Because of the close proximity of Secretary Nelson's house to the Hornwork, the strongest point of the British defenses, his home was particularly susceptible to Allied artillery—not only from the French Grand Battery but also from American gun emplacements on the right flank. In order to afford the headquarters some protection from enfilade, a traverse was erected immediately east and southeast of the house (Figures 18 and 21).

Despite the protective traverse, on October 9 when the very first Allied cannon discharged, Secretary Nelson's house was struck by that projectile (Hatch 1969:78). Recording his experiences as a soldier in the American Revolution, Joseph Plumb Martin wrote near the end of his life:

It was said that the first shell sent from our batteries entered an elegant house formerly owned or occupied by the Secretary of State under the British government, and burned directly over a table surrounded by a large party of British officers at dinner, killing and wounding a number of them [Martin 1998: 233-234].

FIGURE 21

DETAIL OF CAPTAIN FAGE'S SIEGE PLAN



Captain Fage identified Secretary Nelson's house as "Head Quarters" and depicted the traversing earthwork intended to protect it. Courtesy of Colonial National Historical Park.

After only one night of bombardment, both Lord Cornwallis and Secretary Nelson abandoned the shattered mansion. At noon on October 10, firing ceased and Secretary Nelson left Yorktown beneath a flag of truce. Badly stricken with gout, the Secretary was assisted to the American lines by two officers. Greeted by his three anxious sons—Major William Nelson and Captain Thomas Nelson, artillery officers with the Seventh Virginia Regiment, and Captain John Nelson, commander of the Sixth Troop of Horse—Secretary

Nelson was taken immediately to confer with General Washington. The next day the Secretary dined with St. George Tucker, translator and aide de camp to Governor Thomas Nelson and once one of Secretary Nelson's protégés. Tucker later reported:

He [Secretary Nelson] says our Bombardment produced great Effects in annoying the Enemy & destroying their Works — Two Officers were killed & one wounded by a Bomb, the Evening we opened — Lord Shuten's Cane was struck out of his Hand by a Cannon Ball — Lord Cornwallis has built a kind of Grotto at the foot of the secretary's Garden where he lives under Ground — A negroe of the Secretary's was kill'd in his House [Tucker 1948:386-387].

The bombardment continued for another week devastating Yorktown and its inhabitants until Lord Cornwallis requested a parley on October 17. While witnesses at Yorktown recount that a lone drummer boy bravely stood atop a parapet during the bombardment to beat out the request, *The Patriot* depicted the incident transpiring on the roof of Cornwallis' headquarters. When the firing ceased and St. George Tucker peered over the earthworks towards the British lines he saw:

The Secretary's house with one of the Corner's broke off, & many large holes thro the Roof & Walls part of which seem'd tottering with their Weight afforded a striking Instance of the Destruction occasioned by War—Many other houses in the vicinity contributed to accomplish the Scene [Tucker 1948:391].

In the aftermath, those few fortunate enough relocated to escape the devastation and the French troops who garrisoned in every structure until the next summer. Secretary Nelson took up residence at Hornquarter, his plantation in King William County. There is no evidence that he ever attempted to re-inhabit his Yorktown estate. Despite the destruction of his primary residence, Secretary Nelson was far from destitute (Table 2) and continued to speculate heavily in western lands and development of the Great Dismal Swamp.

TABLE 2

ESTIMATED WEALTH OF SECRETARY NELSON IN VIRGINIA, CIRCA 1787⁸

County	Acres of Land	Slaves	Horses	Cattle
King William	4097	145	35	146
Hanover	680	39	11	86
York	366.5	30	8	17
Warwick	100	0	0	0
Totals	5243.5	214	54	249

Either late in the autumn of 1787 or early in the new year, Secretary Nelson died—presumably at Hornquarter. The exact date and circumstances of his death remains unknown just as his place of interment and will remain to be discovered (Evans 1957:370; Lee 1988:521). Tax assessments provide what little is known about the distribution of his property in King William County—that it was divided amongst his three sons (Evans 1957:370). Ironically, the colonial administrator who for 33 years was responsible for recording and preserving the records of the General Assembly, who trained and appointed numerous county clerks, championed a separate fire-proof Records Office, and approved proprietorship for hundreds of thousands of acres, in the end, vanished from legal documents.

⁸ These figures were compiled by Jackson T. Main (Main 1954:379), and do not include Secretary Nelson's extensive holdings in what are now the states of West Virginia, North Carolina, and Ohio.

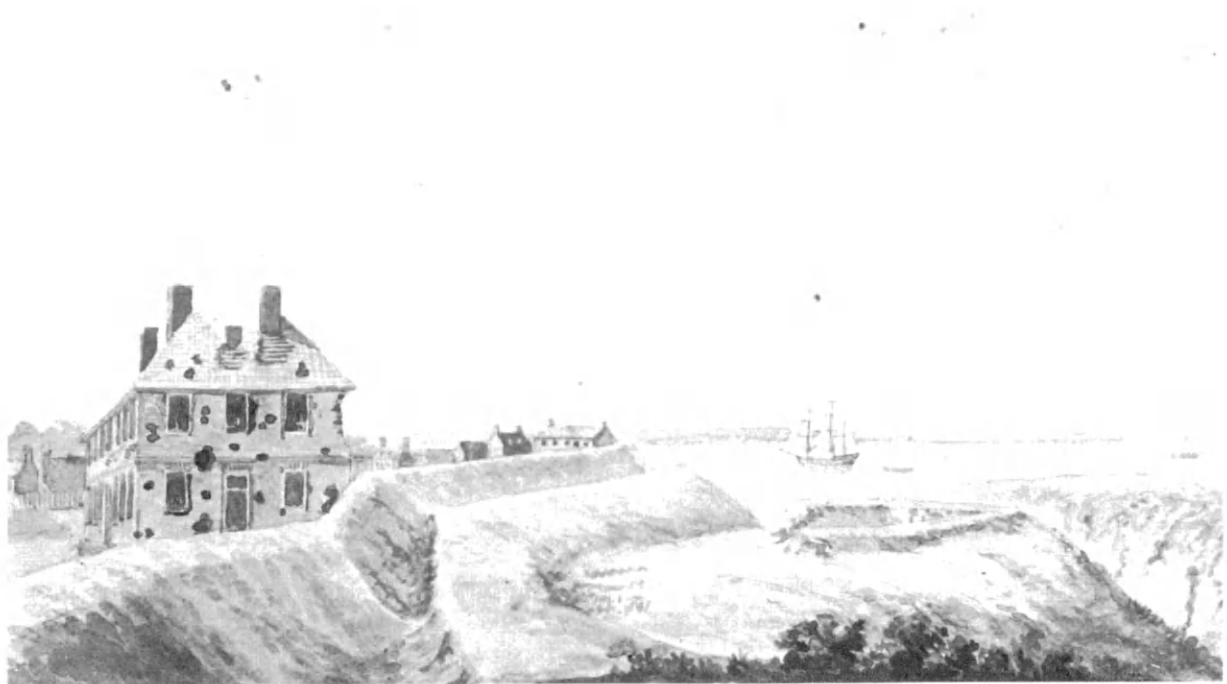
“That Colossal Wreck”

The Secretary’s ruined and shattered mansion remained unrepaired, an object of tremendous curiosity. Traveling through Yorktown in 1796, Isaac Weld, Jr. observed:

There is one house in particular, which stands in the skirt of the town, that is in a most shattered condition. It was the habitation of a Mr. Neilson [Nelson], a secretary under the regal government, and was made the head quarters of Lord Cornwallis when he first came to the town; but it stood so much exposed, and afforded so good a mark to the enemy, that he was soon forced to quit it....the house was still continually fired at, as if it had been headquarters. The walls and roof are pierced in innumerable places, and at one corner a large piece of the wall is torn away; in this state, however, it is still inhabited in one room by some person or other equally fanciful as the old secretary. There are trenches thrown up round it, and on every side are deep hollows made by the bombs that fell near it. Till within a year or two the broken shells themselves remained... [Weld 1807:[1]164-165].

FIGURE 22

“THAT COLOSSAL WRECK”



Benjamin Latrobe’s 1796 *A view of Yorktown* prominently features Secretary Nelson’s shattered house. Courtesy of Virginia State Library.

That same year, Benjamin Latrobe, the noted architect, visited Yorktown and depicted Secretary Nelson's forlorn home in a watercolor (Figure 22). He later recorded a curious narrative:

A Gentleman who was present during the siege, observing my original drawing, told me the following anecdote of the hole in Secretary Nelson's house, which appears between the window and door on the left hand. The duke de Vioménil came into the American lines and visited a Battery. He observed an American canoneer who appeared to point his Gun with great care. "Sir," said the Duke, "I will give you a Dollar if you at the first attempt throw a Ball to strike the fascia that runs round that house." (The fascia is a string of projecting Brickwork between the first and second stories.) "Will you give me a dollar," replied the American, "for every Ball I throw to strike the fascia, and I will give you two for every miss." It was agreed. The American then threw thirteen successive Balls, and made the hole in question without missing once. The Duke paid his 13 Dollars, and begged to be excused any more experiments [de Chastellux 1963:385].

The ruins of the house stood into the first decade of the nineteenth century. Several undocumented accounts from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suggest the Secretary's house stood for about 15 years after the battle (Anonymous 1881:336; Kibler 1936:86). The 1796 description by Weld and Latrobe's watercolor are the last known representations depicting the house. Unable to sell their father's house (Figure 23), the sons of Secretary Nelson—William, Thomas, and John—extracted as much value from the estate as possible. Thomas petitioned King William County for reimbursement of damages sustained by the estate during the siege (Figure 24). Before John Nelson conveyed the property in 1813 to Peyton R. Nelson, who subdivided the land into half-acre lots for resale, the house was probably dismantled. Archaeological evidence excavated from the cellar suggests that the structure was dismantled and reusable elements were salvaged. Unrecycled components were backfilled into the cellar (Lutton 2003:69).

Although dismantled, residual evidence of the house undoubtedly lingered on the landscape. In 1837 Charles Campbell observed: “The house of Governor Nelson stood just within the British lines; it was riddled by the American shot. Nothing remains of it but some scattered brick bats” (Hatch 1980:16). Campbell confused Secretary Thomas Nelson with his nephew whose imposing brick house still stands in Yorktown. His 1837 description obviously refers to the remnants of Secretary Nelson’s ruined house. In 1846 another traveler recorded: “Cornwallis’s head-quarters were originally in a splendid brick house, belonging to Secretary Nelson, the ruins of which are now visible in the large and continuous redoubt constructed by the British at the E. end of the town” (Howe 1846:530). Three years later, David Hunter Strother visited Yorktown and remarked: “In the village were the ruins of Gov. Nelson’s house and other houses still bearing the marks of cannon shot, the perforated walls unrepaired and the brick and mortar rubbish lying where it fell” (Hatch 1980:16). Like Charles Campbell before him and countless others since, Strother mistakenly misidentified the rubble of Secretary Nelson’s house as Governor Nelson’s.⁹

⁹ Even among their eighteenth-century contemporaries, Nelson men from Yorktown were often mistaken for one another. James Abercromby, an agent for an English merchant, frequently confused the Nelson brothers—President William and Secretary Thomas—in his correspondence. In February 1773, he penned a brief note of sympathy upon learning of the death of William yet mistakenly addressed the letter to the deceased (Abercromby 1991:453).

FIGURE 23

SECRETARY NELSON'S RUINED HOUSE AND YORKTOWN ESTATE FOR SALE

F O R S A L E,

In the town of York, on the third Monday in May, being court day, the property in the said town, belonging to Thomas Nelson (late of King William)

CONSISTING of several LOTS, some of which are agreeably situated.— On one are the remains of a large BRICK HOUSE, which with some repairs, may be made habitable.— A STORE HOUSE at the water side, with a cellar and two floors— One hundred and ten acres of LAND, within a mile of the town— Also a FARM, at the distance of two miles, containing two hundred acres, part of it very valuable meadow; it having yielded in one year, from sixty to seventy tons of excellent hay.— Within three miles of the farm, are one hundred acres of WOOD LAND which will ever furnish a sufficiency of timber for enclosures and other purposes.

10 ads WILLIAM NELSON, }
THOMAS NELSON, }
J. NELSON, }
1788

King William, March 30, 1788. (89-99)

I have two very valuable high booded MARES, which I wish to exchange for two strong useful Geldings.

WILLIAM NELSON.

Caroline, March 30, 1788. (89)

Advertisement announcing the sale of Secretary Nelson's ruined house in the *Virginia Independent Chronicle*. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

FIGURE 24

AN ACCOUNT OF SUNDRY PROPERTY BELONGING TO THOMAS NELSON
SENIOR, TAKEN AND DESTROYED AT YORK TOWN, BY THE BRITISH
ARMY¹⁰

One large brick dwelling House	3000
A Kitchen	150
Two Dairys	60
A granary	32-10
A large Quarter	50-00
Two lumber Houses	40
A Hen house	20
Two Stables, one containing eight Stalls and handsomely finished, with a Coach House under the same Roof, the other with 12 Stalls	75
A Store House, and [] ditto	100
A Valuable negro Man, about 45 years old	60
One elegant marble chimney piece and eight plain	173-6-8
Two compleat sets of Table China, besides parts of others	8
Six dozen ivory handled Knives and Forks	12
Four handsome looking Glasses of a large size, and two smaller	45 6
A Clock	25
One Desk, one finely finished ditto and Bureau	35
One other Desk, and bookcase with glass Doors	20
One plain, ditto, ditto	12
Three Beds with [] Blankets, and counterpanes	48
Two trunks containing household Linnen of every kind – some costly - a large ditto with goods of different kinds	75
[] large Mahogany Table, 2 black Walnut ditto, 2 smaller Tea Tables	14 6
One [written over Two?] sets calico Curtains	25
A valuable well-chosen Library	300
Two handsome wall Lanterns, with Mirrors for the Backs	15
A Quantity of Kitchen furniture	10
	£4416-16-8
A Young Negro Fello aged 20 Years	80
20 Han[]	40
	£4546

¹⁰ In 1789 Secretary Nelson's son submitted a damage claim for losses incurred at his father's Yorktown estate during the 1781 siege. A comparison of these petitions submitted by Yorktown residents indicates not only the widespread devastation endured by the community, but the considerable wealth of Secretary Nelson. His claim was not only the most expensive in Yorktown, but his "well-chosen" library alone was appraised at more than twice the monetary value of two unnamed individuals enslaved in his household who were killed during the siege. Comparatively, his library was appraised at a higher value than most of the dwellings lost by Yorktown residents.

Symbolic Transformation

By the time that the tottering remnants of Secretary Nelson's house were hauled off in salvage carts and the residual debris cast into the cellar, the symbolism and landscape once so carefully contrived was already being transformed and redefined. For at least a quarter of a century, Secretary Nelson intentionally imbued his mansion and grounds with symbolism intended to bolster his claims of hierarchical authority. Never static, his estate changed during that time to reflect its builder and, when necessary, was remade to confront emerging challenges, political and social. The destruction of his estate during the Siege of Yorktown transformed Secretary Nelson's Georgian landscape from a local symbol of his individual privilege, power, and role as an elite colonial administrator into a potent, nationalistic icon for the newly independent nation. Increasingly, the abandoned ruins were identified less as the home of the deputy secretary of Virginia, and more as the headquarters of the doomed Lord Cornwallis.

In travel narratives after the siege, Cornwallis' headquarters is conspicuously depicted as a symbol of the demise of English rule and the triumph of the young egalitarian Republic. In the early nineteenth century, travelers recording their visits to Cornwallis' headquarters carefully crafted images of ruin, devastation, and defeat juxtaposed to the Allied victory (Hatch 1980:16; Howe 1846:530; Latrobe 1977; Weld 1807:[1]164-165). By in large, these travelers journeyed to Yorktown to experience the battlefield first hand. These early visitors often misidentified the former owner of the house, but never who made his headquarters there; and the accounts always emphasize English defeat and American victory. Typical of this phenomenon, Charles Campbell wrote in 1837: "The house of Governor Nelson stood just within the British lines; it was

riddled by the American shot. Nothing remains of it but some scattered brick bats” (Hatch 1980:16). Campbell not only mistakes the former owner, but inadvertently suggests that little of the house survives because of the accuracy of the artillery. More importantly, Campbell credits the destruction of the house to American gunners and entirely omits the substantial contribution of the French Grand Battery.

But no one single handedly embodied and contributed to the transformation of Secretary Nelson’s estate more than John Trumbull. A former aide de camp to George Washington and a political prisoner in England during 1780-1781, John Trumbull became the foremost painter of the American Revolution. In 1789, Trumbull wrote Thomas Jefferson and explained:

The greatest motive I had or have fore engaging in or for continuing my pursuit of painting has been the wish of commemorating the great events of our country’s Revolution [Selig 2000:74].

As early as 1786, Trumbull began studying the Siege of Yorktown and making preliminary sketches (AmericanRevolution.org 2003). Traveling across Europe and America, Trumbull interviewed and painted portraits of all the principle American, English, and French officers who participated in the surrender. In his quest for authenticity, he visited Yorktown in 1791 to sketch the landscape. Trumbull’s *Yorktown, in Virginia, April 23, 1791* unmistakably depicts the derelict home of Secretary Nelson dominating the approach along the York-Hampton Road (Figure 15).

After years of painting and revision, Trumbull sold what remains one of his best known works, *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, October 19th, 1781* (Figure 25) to the United States government in 1820. Rather than depict actual combat with the English actively resisting, Trumbull decided to focus instead of the

humiliation of the English army. Trumbull replicated the somber march of the defeated English—denied the Honors of War in retribution for the treatment of the American garrison at Charleston—advancing with furlled banners between the ranks of the victorious Allies. Similarly, the decision by Trumbull to portray General O’Hara, who surrendered the sword of Cornwallis, on foot rather than horseback accentuated the absence of Lord Cornwallis and reinforced the utter defeat of the English (AmericanRevolution 2003; Selig 2000).

FIGURE 25

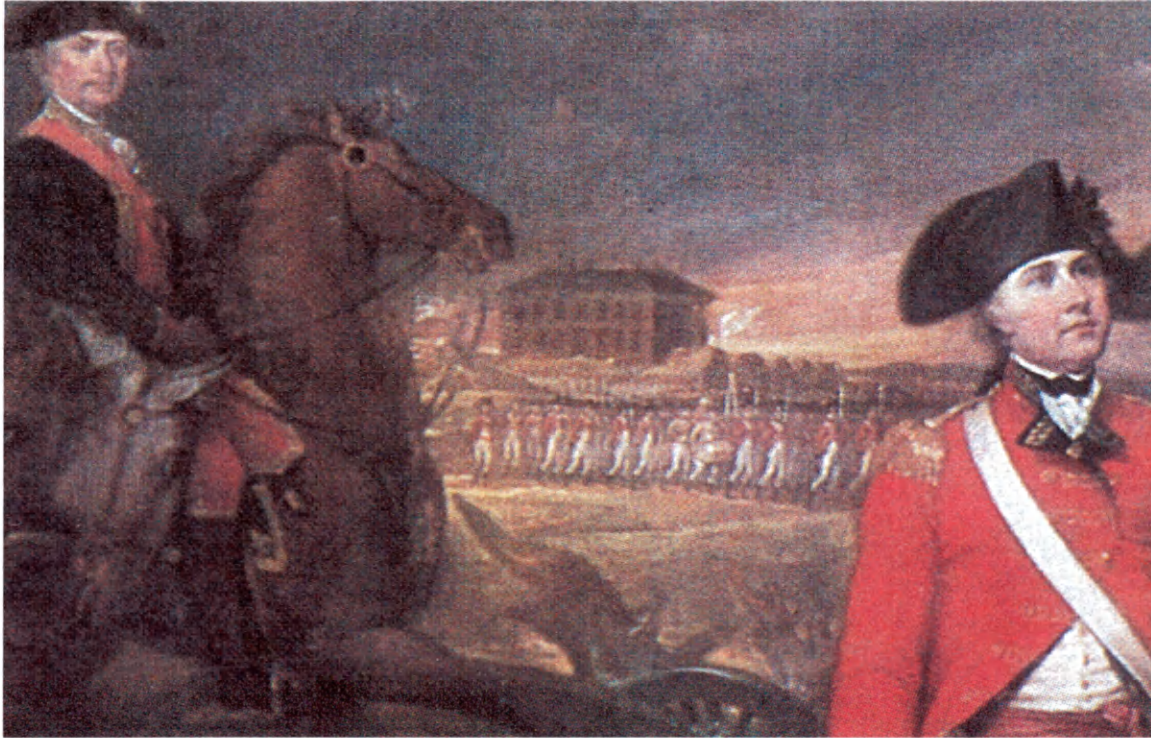
VICTORY AT YORKTOWN



The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, October 19th, 1781 by John Trumbull. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

To complete this scene of defeat and capitulation, Trumbull included the battered home of Secretary Nelson because of its use by Cornwallis as his headquarters. He positioned the house left of the center just beyond the central action: General Lincoln receiving the sword of Cornwallis from General O'Hara. Although in the background, the house, nonetheless, is a prominent element of the painting (Figure 26). Trumbull utilized three techniques to insure that the headquarters would not be overlooked. First, the overall vantage from the head of the French and American lines creates a converging axis that channels the attention of the viewer toward the center of the painting. Secondly, the house is partially framed by the head and neck of General Rochambeau's horse. The ranking French commander, General Rochambeau was painted conspicuously and balanced opposite of George Washington lending more emphasis to the headquarters. Lastly, Trumbull enshrouded the headquarters in the dark, ominous smoke of destruction. The Cornwallis' headquarters was depicted against this smoke billowing eastward from the ruins of Yorktown—effectively symbolizing the potency of the Allied bombardment and the reduction of the English army.

FIGURE 26

DETAIL OF TRUMBULL'S DEPICTION OF LORD CORNWALLIS'S
HEADQUARTERS

Trumbull stripped the house of its Nelson landscape—numerous outbuildings, sprawling gardens, angled orientation, riverfront vista—and redefined its symbolism. But Trumbull retained one crucial element—the Georgian symmetry—to represent the inequality and privilege inherent in English society. As the gentry of Virginia, including Secretary Nelson, had intentionally fashioned their homes in imitation of Georgian styles to lay claim to its symbolic pronouncements, so did Trumbull embrace it and use it to differentiate the victorious and the defeated. No longer perceived as the home of an elite colonial administrator, it was now the refuge of a defeated English lord who sent a proxy to surrender his sword. Like Secretary Nelson, Trumbull sought to articulate a political statement. Instead of the hierarchical authority and privileges reserved for an individual,

Trumbull forged a nationalistic statement about the triumph of republican ideals—the victory of many individuals sacrificing and working in concert for the greater good (Gislason 2003).

Almost as soon as news of the English capitulation reached the Europe, a flood of Yorktown paintings inundated the European and American markets (Selig 2000:75). Often quite fanciful with European styled fortresses and other grave inaccuracies, these works soon gave way to Trumbull's. In America, it became the standard for depicting the defeat of the English and ultimately American independence. Displayed in the Capitol rotunda since 1826,¹¹ Trumbull's quintessential work redefined how Americans and most of the world perceived the surrender of Lord Cornwallis (Selig 2000:75) and Secretary Nelson's Georgian house. Throughout the nineteenth century, *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, October 19th, 1781* remained the standard by which depictions of the siege and surrender were measured (Selig 2000:75). During the nineteenth century, the Siege of Yorktown remained a wildly popular theme appearing as engravings, etchings, paintings, sketches, and on commemorative ceramics and medallions (Figure 27). From Currier & Ives to local artists, most nineteenth-century depictions borrowed extensively from the perspective and symbols employed by Trumbull, particularly the inclusion of Cornwallis' headquarters. Only one of many, a circa 1870 lithograph by Chapin and Hinshalwood (Figure 28) illustrates the similarities so common in nineteenth-century depictions of the surrender. Almost uniform among them is the depiction of the headquarters of Cornwallis overlooking the surrender scene

¹¹ *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, October 19th, 1781* was the second painting hung in the Capitol rotunda. Ultimately eight paintings chronicling paramount events in the formation of the American nation were selected to adorn the rotunda. The subject of these consequential events include the: landing of Columbus, discovery of the Mississippi by de Soto, baptism of Pocahontas, embarkation of

although the topography is typically distorted to dramatically site the headquarters on a high hill (Figures 27 and 28).

FIGURE 27

1881 COMMEMORATIVE MEDALLION



Surrender at Yorktown medallion minted for the 1881 Centennial Celebration (bronze, 50mm, Baker Number 452A). Scan by Jerry Karwac.

the Pilgrims, Declaration of Independence, surrender of General Burgoyne, surrender of Lord Cornwallis, and General Washington resigning his commission.

FIGURE 28

TYPICAL NINETEEN-CENTURY DEPICTION OF THE SURRENDER



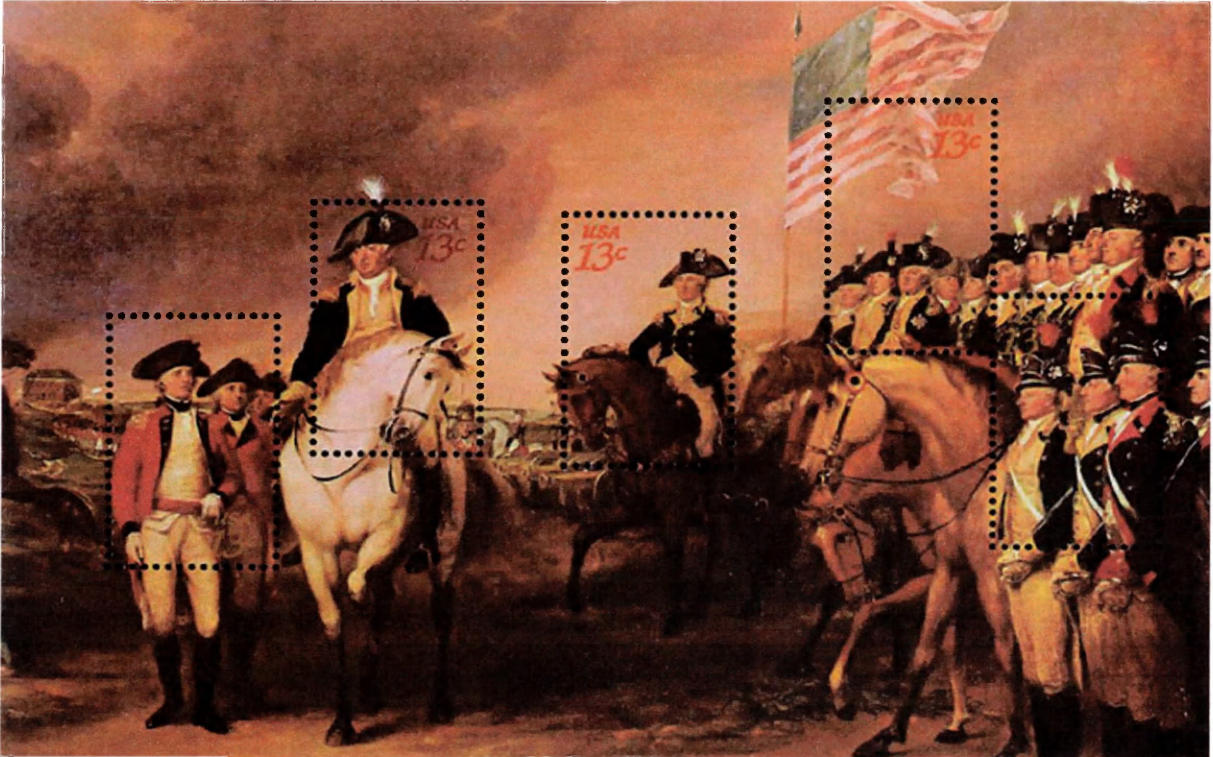
This Chapin and Hinshalwood lithograph depicts the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis surmounting a distorted landscape. Courtesy of *Teaching Politics*.

Even today, Trumbull's classic work remains the standard by which artistic representations of the surrender are compared. Like his other works commemorating the American Revolution, John Trumbull's images not only satisfied a crucial need for the Early Republic, but continue to be fixed in the collective memory of the nation. To commemorate the Bicentennial, the United States Postal Service issued numerous stamps depicting decisive events of the American Revolution. On May 19, 1976, Trumbull's iconography was replicated on a souvenir sheet of five stamps (Figure 29). With technological advancements, Trumbull's work has been reproduced onto virtually every available medium. From 100 percent cotton throws (Figure 30) to plates (Figure 31) and jig saw puzzles, Trumbull's iconography remarkably endures in the commemorative

material culture of Americans. Rather than diminish with the passage of time, it has persisted. And in its most recent manifestation in *The Patriot*, the icon was presented with much less subtly than even Trumbull intended.

FIGURE 29

BICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION



Souvenir sheet of postage stamps issued to commemorate the Bicentennial. French troops—but not the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis—are cropped from Trumbull's famous depiction. Courtesy of the United States Postal Service.

FIGURE 30

100% COTTON THROW



Courtesy of Dannick, Inc.

FIGURE 31

BICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATIVE PEWTER PLATE



Courtesy of GoAntiques.com.

CHAPTER V
COMMEMORATION

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

Laurence Binyon, *For the Fallen* (1914)

The Nineteenth Century

As the nineteenth century wore on time, fires, rough treatment, and another military campaign exacted a harsh toll on Yorktown and “relics” of the siege. Earthworks were ploughed under or gave sprout to pine, and the memory of Secretary Nelson’s house diminished. Those who came to celebrate the siege were more fascinated by physical, extant structures. And locals were all too accommodating to point out (then charge to admit them to) Cornwallis Cave, the Governor Nelson House whose east wall bears cannon-pocked bricks to this day, and the Augustine Moore House where the Articles of Capitulation were drafted. Local tales of the siege—intended to awe visitors and warrant admission prices—abrogated interest and awareness of Secretary Nelson’s house. Although lacking convincing eighteenth-century documentation, Cornwallis Cave and the surviving Nelson House emerged with unsubstantiated claims as having served as subsequent headquarters after Lord Cornwallis abandoned his first (Evans 1957; Hatch 1969, 1980). As was often the case, locals and visitors, referred simply to these structures with the misnomer “Lord Cornwallis’ headquarters.” One local legend even absurdly

claimed that the cave and the Governor Nelson House—although separated by a distance of hundreds of feet through natural marl—were connected by an escape tunnel for Lord Cornwallis (O’Hara 1981:14).

While writing his wildly popular *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, Benson Lossing visited Yorktown in 1848. Lossing was guided about town by a well informed resident, the grandson of Governor Nelson. Whether or not Lossing visited the site of the Secretary’s house is unknown for he failed to mention the Secretary in this account despite a detailed discussion of the landmarks of Yorktown. Thousands of enthusiastic readers, however, learned of the “lofty patriotism” of Governor Thomas Nelson and that Lossing surrendered nine Virginia pence to enter Cornwallis Cave (Lossing 1850).

During the pageantry and festivities of the 1881 Centennial Celebration, thousands of visitors arrived in Yorktown by rail and steamer. Despite the commemoration, Secretary Nelson and the shattered headquarters of Lord Cornwallis virtually escaped notice. Literature produced for the Celebration barely referenced Secretary Nelson and typically misidentified the tangible Governor Nelson House as the site of the headquarters (Fisk and Company 1881; Laid & Lee 1907, Stevens 1881; Yorktown Centennial 1881). It is not surprising then that the location of the Secretary Nelson house site was conspicuously absent on maps produced for the four-day event. Even after the end of the Second World War, travel pamphlets excluded the house site from detailed maps of Yorktown (American Automobile Association 1946).

FIGURE 32

LOOMING OVER THE TOWN



Victory Monument dominating the landscape of Yorktown in the 1920s. Courtesy of United States Army.

Like their predecessors in the days of the Early Republic, these celebrators of American independence wanted to experience tangible evidence of the past. Because so many of the principle earthworks—particularly the Allied siege parallels and English Redoubts 9 and 10—had been razed (Greene 1976, Hatch 1980), the participants laid the cornerstone for a new monument. Commissioned by the Continental Congress in October 1781, the cornerstone was finally laid by President Chester A. Arthur. Originally intended to designate the location of the surrender site, an alternative location on Lots 80-84 was selected near Secretary Nelson's former estate. Confederate earthworks on the site were razed in preparation. Nearly 100 feet high when completed, this grandiose column of Maine granite topped by the figure of Liberty commemorates the victory won by the American and French troops. In 1930, the author of a local guidebook fittingly

observed: “This imposing shaft commemorates much, but marks little” (Goodwin 1930:55). Although it marked little, the Victory Monument radically altered the meaning of the local landscape (Figure 32).

Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities

In the first year of its existence¹², the Yorktown Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) received a \$1 donation to establish a fund to mark the site of Secretary Nelson’s home. Despite claims that the donor was a descendent of Secretary Nelson, the chapter received no additional contributions or interest (Hatch 1980:152). In 1924 after a brief discussion of the “advisability of uncovering [the] foundations of Secretary Nelson’s home,” the Yorktown Branch acknowledged John F. Braun “for his splendid work of uncovering the foundation of Secretary Nelson’s home and placing a sign thereon” (APVA: Branch Meeting Minutes, 1924).¹³

For several years, the Yorktown Branch took no action on the site. In 1928 the Yorktown Branch learned of a proposal by the Virginia Department of Highways to

¹² Founded on February 18, 1921, the Yorktown Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) contained 76 members by the end of the year (APVA, First Years: 1, 14). With strong leadership and swelling numbers, the Yorktown Branch was particularly energetic during the 1920s. From the first meeting, the chief priority for the chapter was the “marking of historic spots in Yorktown” with especial concern for determining the exact location of the surrender (APVA, First Years: 2-5). The members expressed considerable concern with identifying “authentic” sites and recording “notable” locations. During the first years, the Yorktown Branch financed the photography and binding of the oldest York County records, successfully prevented several developers from misappropriating or altering historic place names, published information aids for visitors, and assembled a valuable collection of historic maps. The branch was particularly devoted to “restoring” and placing tombstones. In addition to repairing the grave of Governor William Gooch, Nelson graves at Grace Church, and family graves at local plantations such as Bellfield, the Branch also marked French and Confederate graves on the battlefield.

¹³ Because he resided in Philadelphia and was a trustee for the owner of the site, it is likely that Braun contracted local workers. Unfortunately, the APVA papers do not indicate the extent to which the site was “uncovered” or the language of the sign. During this time, it is likely that the top of the cellar was fully visible displaying architectural elements such as walls and bulkheads although the author has not yet been able to locate a photograph of the site before the application of the concrete coping.

reroute Monument Avenue (now Zweybrucken Road) through the foundation.

Alarmed, the Yorktown Chapter resolved:

to protect against the destruction of the sacred relic even if it interferes with progress. No amount of money could ever restore the foundation, nor make the history with which it is saturated. We want the road and by placing it a few feet to the side all would be well [APVA: Branch Meeting Minutes, 17 January 1928].

In an appeal to H. G. Shirley, State Highway Commissioner, the Regent reminded him, “A land without ruins is a land without memories” (APVA: Branch Meeting Minutes, 17 January 1928). Sympathetic to this appeal, Shirley suggested several alternatives. Eventually, the foundation and a five-foot margin was gifted to the APVA in April and the highway was rerouted southeast of the site. The next year under the supervision of Rev. A J. Renforth, Chairman of the Landmark Commission, the brick remnants of Secretary Nelson’s house were exposed and a coping of concrete applied “on the top of the old foundation to make its outline more distinct and to safeguard it from weather decay and souvenir collectors” (APVA: 1929 Annual Report).¹⁴

In July 1930, a granite marker with a bronze plaque was placed at the site that stated:

Foundations of the home of Thomas Nelson, Secretary of the Colonial Council, erected for him by his father in 1725.

Cornwallis’ Headquarters during the Siege of Yorktown 1781.

¹⁴ Stratigraphic excavations at the Secretary Nelson site suggests that “uncovering” the foundation consisted of digging a bowled robber’s trench—approximately 1.80 feet wide and less than one foot deep—around the outside of the cellar foundation. A coping of concrete—varying in depth between 1-5 inches and 1.80-2.13 feet wide—was applied directly to the brick (Lutton 2003:66-67). This was a popular technique utilized by the APVA through the 1930s to “permanently” mark brick foundations. It was employed on other sites, most notably the Statehouse complex in Jamestown and the Capitol in Williamsburg (before its acquisition and restoration by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation).

Butler killed here while serving dinner. Demolished during the Siege never rebuilt.

Secretary Nelson, a Tory, was escorted within the American lines under flag of truce by his three sons [Hatch 1980:154].

Almost immediately the public expressed objections with the language on the plaque. In particular, a letter published in the *Richmond News Leader* from Dr. W. G. Stannard raised questions about the facts, particularly the assertion that Secretary Nelson was a Tory (Hatch 1980:154). Following discussions within the Yorktown Branch, the Regent coolly decided “not to be in a hurry about a change if one is to be made” (Hatch 1980:154). Almost three years passed before a replacement was agreed upon. On May 6, 1933 the Yorktown Branch hosted a luncheon (Figure 33) and officially unveiled the replacement plaque that remains to this day (Figure 34). By the time of this dedication, the National Park Service had acquired the land encompassing the house foundation making it quite literally an island within Colonial National Historical Park (CNHP).

FIGURE 33

1933 INVITATION TO COMMEMORATE THE SITE



APVA invitation for the dedication of the second bronze plaque. Courtesy of the College of William and Mary.

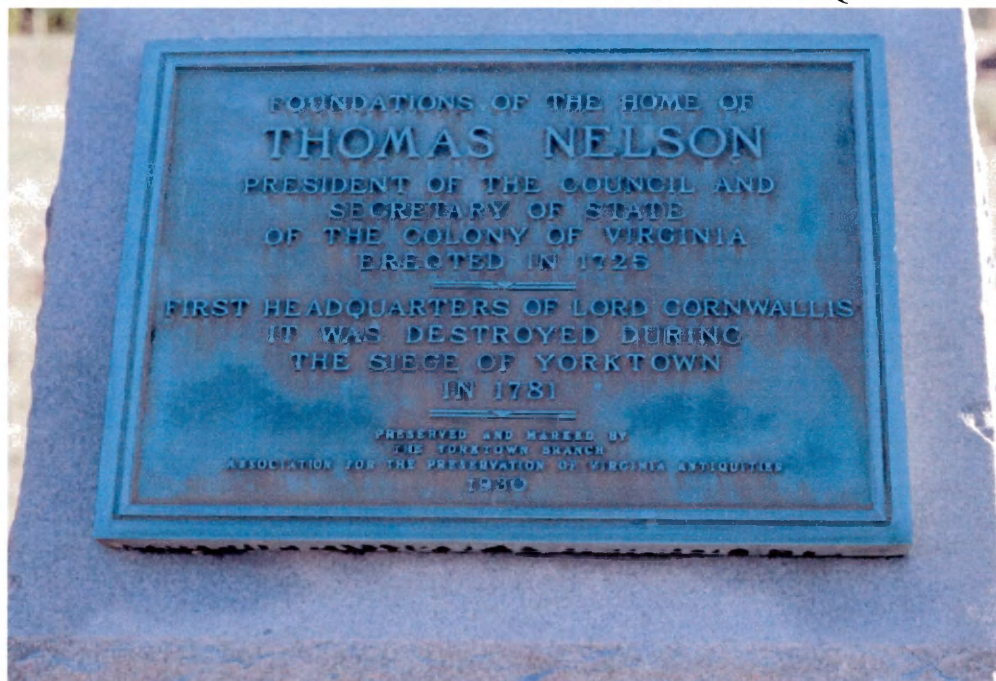
Ascertaining the motivations of the Yorktown Branch is difficult. Robert Schulyer wrote, “In truth, no society carries out restorations for purely scholastic reasons, nor frequently for scholastic reasons at all, but rather for contemporary practical and ideological goals” (Schuyler 1976:34). Unmistakably, the Yorktown Branch ultimately preserved and venerated the foundations of Secretary Nelson’s house because of the threat posed by highway construction. The official papers of the chapter, for the most part, strictly document actions and rarely explain how or what history “saturated” the foundation and deemed it worthy of preserving. Nevertheless, a resolution passed at the time the site was donated offers the most evidence:

The foundation of Secretary Nelson's home is historically important because this house was Cornwallis' Hq from the first to the 10th of October, during the siege of Yorktown in 1781, and because it was the home of the Secretary of the Colonial Council of Virginia and the most pretentious residence in the place at the time [APVA, Resolution: 19 April 1928].

The composition and arrangement of this statement suggests that the use of Secretary Nelson's home by Lord Cornwallis was the primary and, presumably, most noteworthy reason why the house should be saved from destruction. The placement of a comma after explaining its military function suggests that its role as the home of Secretary Nelson and opulence were secondary justifications. The language of the first bronze plaque seemingly confirms this assessment by assigning three of its four sentences to detailing the role of house during the siege.

FIGURE 34

APVA GRANITE MARKER AND BRONZE PLAQUE



Inscription of the replacement plaque dedicated in 1933. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

As the first plaque indicates, the Yorktown Branch overwhelmingly sought to preserve the site because of its participation in the 1781 siege. In all likelihood, the Yorktown Branch only acquired the site only as a means of preserving it from destruction. Interestingly, the chapter never debated reconstructing the headquarters despite the organization's record of "restoring" other structures like the church on Jamestown Island or selling the Capitol in Williamsburg (Figure 35) for that purpose. Reconstruction of the building imperiled their military interpretation of the site. The mere existence of a tangible, reconstructed headquarters actually diminished the symbolic, nationalistic statement that the chapter wished to convey: that the accuracy and potency of the American artillery had utterly destroyed the headquarters of the doomed Cornwallis. During the 1930s reconstruction was widely employed as a device in the Historic Triangle to inform the public about colonial society, institutions, and everyday life. Virtually all the reconstructions occurred on sites such as taverns and shops that were not interpreted exclusively as event-based. For the APVA, erecting a plaque over the cement outline was more patriotic. Subconsciously, the absence of the walls of the headquarters conveyed the most powerful statement possible about what Thomas Nelson Page described as "where tyranny was smitten down" (Lingren 1993:52).

Perceiving Secretary Nelson's house site as only the location of a military event significantly discredited his character. Over a century of influence of Trumbull's battered Georgian headquarters and wayward assumptions as to why Secretary Nelson remained in his house during the siege combined with the nationalistic pride of the 1881 Centennial to absurdly label Secretary Nelson a Tory. Even before the placement of the first plaque, accounts of the siege began to identify Secretary Nelson as unpatriotic:

This secretary of the King's Council was called Tory Nelson, because of his friendliness to the English, and it was because of this sympathy with the enemy that Cornwallis selected this place for his headquarters [Smith 1920:21].

While Secretary Nelson was not as rabidly devoted to the cause of independence as his youthful nephew, Governor Thomas Nelson, he certainly was not a Tory or sympathetic to the enemy. Having served as the nominal governor of Virginia after the flight of Lord Dunmore, Secretary Nelson was defeated by Patrick Henry 60 votes to 45 to serve as the first elected governor. During the bombardment, Secretary Nelson was a 65-year old man who had suffered from severe gout for at least 15 years. Largely retired, he provided assistance and sons to the cause of American independence. In 1777, he lent £545 to a state loan office established to borrow money for Virginia (Evans 1957:254). That same year, during an outbreak of smallpox among militia troops garrisoned in town, Secretary Nelson supervised the removal of infected soldiers and was selected as one of three appointees who licensed inoculation facilities (Fishburne 1971:390). In 1781, he contributed four cattle to the public service (Fishburne 1971:391). And all three of his sons participated in the Siege of Yorktown as officers: Major William Nelson and Captain Thomas Nelson served with the Seventh Virginia Regiment, and Captain John Nelson commanded the Sixth Troop of Horse.

As cultural historian James Lindgren noted during the past decade, much of the activities and motivations of the APVA stemmed from a conservative, reactionary attempt to hinder social change. According to Lindgren, traditional, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants endeavored to stabilize their position and insulate their values from further inundation during the uncertainty of the post-Civil War era. In their battle against perceived threats from immigrants, freed blacks, and New Englanders, the APVA

celebrated “traditional values, capitalist economics, and conservative politics” (Lindgren 1993:242-243) and molded them to reflect their contemporary world. Attempting to “win through monuments and pamphlets what Lee had lost at Appomattox” (Lindgren 1993:9), the APVA attempted—in much the same way as the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation—to utilize the past as a guide for the present in uncertain times. As Richard Handler has observed in his work, culture and history are amongst the most valued possessions and when jeopardized, groups hold fast to their version of the truth or they risk losing their identity (Handler 1988).

FIGURE 35

BEFORE EXCAVATION AND RECONSTRUCTION



Similarities with the Secretary Nelson site—concrete coping applied to the foundations of the Williamsburg Capitol by the APVA. Courtesy of the APVA.

Perhaps no example of this is as apparent as the decision by the Yorktown Branch to include on the first plaque an “account” of the death of an enslaved individual in the Secretary’s household. The most reliable accounts of the incident are those recorded by St. George Tucker and Marquis de Chastellux, both of whom were directly informed by Secretary Nelson. Tucker wrote in his journal that during the siege, “A negroe of the Secretary’s was kill’d in his House (Tucker 1948:387) which is remarkably similar to “Mr. Nelson was still occupying it [the house] when our batteries, trying their first shots, killed one of his Negroes at a very short distance from him” (de Chastellux 1963:385). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a traveler to Yorktown recounted that Secretary Nelson “absolutely remained till his negro servant, the only person that would live with him in such a house, had his brains dashed out by a cannon shot while he stood by his side...” (Weld 1807:164-165).

Throughout the nineteenth century—when the very name of Secretary Nelson was often omitted and the exact location of his house transferred to other structures—this element of the story persisted, but was grossly embellished. By the end of the nineteenth century undocumented accounts had transformed the incident into: “The butler was killed in the act of placing a dish on the dinner-table” (Page 1881:809) and “The butler was killed while serving the general” (Smith 1920:21). Another account states that “the butler”—hardly a hired domestic hand but a man held in bondage against his will—was killed while helping Secretary Nelson into bed. Regardless of semantics, these accounts stress the loyal devotion of his slave—usually emphasized with the verb *servicing*—even in the face of mortal danger. Conveniently, the accounts omit the fact that at least one other member of Secretary Nelson’s enslaved household was killed during the siege (Figure 24). Unfortunately, these accounts provide more information about the time in which they

were recounted—a tense time in which traditionalists in Virginia were attempting to remind African-Americans of racial hierarchy and paternalism (Lingren 1993:182-183)—than they do of the Siege of Yorktown.

By the time the second plaque was dedicated, the Yorktown Branch had lost much of its initial momentum. With “Rockefeller’s corporate takeover” in Williamsburg and the arrival of the National Park Service in Yorktown and Jamestown, the APVA largely lost control of historic preservation in the Historic Triangle (Lingren 1993:232-233). As time went on active APVA stewardship diminished at the Secretary Nelson site. Since the 1930s the APVA has not reassessed its preservation strategy or interpretation of the site, and the thinly applied concrete coping—poured in 1929—is beginning to fracture and chip (Lutton 2003:83). Along a portion of the east wall, eighteenth-century brick of the *in situ* foundation remains unprotected because it was never copped. Currently, the Secretary Nelson house site is even omitted from the list of APVA properties at the official APVA website (APVA 2004). Other than the bronze plaque, the site appears to be part of CNHP and, in fact, that’s who cuts the grass.

Colonial National Historical Park

Like its inhabitants, cultural landscapes are never still, but dynamic and ever changing although to a degree virtually imperceptible to us. Cultural landscapes are accumulations of human activity interacting with the natural environment, but defined by the myriad of meanings given to it through time. Like those bestowed to it by John Trumbull and the APVA, the Secretary Nelson house site was again redefined by the influence of CNHP. Although the deed for Secretary Nelson’s brick foundation and an

encompassing 5-foot margin is owned by the APVA, CNHP has emerged as the dominant influence on the property. Like an island, the Secretary Nelson house site is defined by the landscape surrounding it.

FIGURE 36

PASTORAL PRETENSIONS



North view from the Secretary Nelson site toward the Victory Monument. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Like the Jamestown component of the park, Yorktown is a distorted landscape with a mosaic of lingering elements from numerous landscapes unified by a veneration for and expression of patriotic sacredness (Horning 1995:56-59). Serene and pastoral, CNHP maintains a bucolic landscape of carefully manicured lawns and neat fields containing earthworks and cannons marking locations of patriotic service and sacrifice (Figure 36). But on inspection the landscape is comprised of other elements—Confederate earthworks atop those of the Revolution; a blinding, white marble Victory Monument constructed of towering Victorian optimism and self-assuredness; bamboo so

invasive that it has consumed scores of acres of the Park; and graceful, mature trees planted in the early twentieth century to front homes, churches, and businesses long ago razed from the landscape (Figure 37). Despite this, visitors to CNHP and most battlefields “often use religious language to express their awe, having stood on ground sanctified by the ‘blood of our fathers’” (Linenthal 1993:3,215).

FIGURE 37

LINGERING ELEMENTS OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE



Approximately the same vantage as painted by John Trumbull—but with a Civil War cemetery and Mansard-roofed keepers house, reconstructed Allied siege lines, dense undergrowth, Confederate earthworks beyond the terminus of Cook Road, and the towering Victory Monument on the horizon.

The Yorktown component of CNHP suffers from what Michael Kammen termed the “heritage syndrome”—the oversimplified, highly selective presentation of a cultural landscape “which means both warping and whitewashing a fenced-off past” (Kammen 1997:220-221). The emphasis on patriotic service at one of the most sacred and fundamental events in American history (as represented by the presence of John Trumbull’s art in the Capitol rotunda) diminishes the interpretation and maintenance of all other landscapes—even the substantial Civil War components of Yorktown. Many visitors pass the APVA plaque and CHNP signage without ever realizing it (Figure 38); even many long-time residents of Yorktown fail to recognize the existence of the site because of the encroaching bamboo and soaring Victory Monument (Figures 39 and 40). Persisting confusion between Secretary and Governor Nelson as well as a current emphasis by CNHP on interpreting the extant home of the “patriotic” Governor Thomas Nelson dangerously convolutes lingering confusion about the roles and sacrifices of the Yorktown Nelsons during the siege.¹⁵

¹⁵ Today confusion still persists between Governor Thomas Nelson and his uncle for whom he was named, Secretary Thomas Nelson, as well as the fates of their brick Yorktown homes (Behrend 1998:159-161). Even nationally syndicated political and social commentators such as Paul Harvey and Rush Limbaugh perpetuate these muddled, misinformed waters by misidentifying the destroyed house as belonging to the “more” patriotic Governor Nelson (Elbrecht 2000a, 2000b) whom legend claims ordered gunners to fire onto his own house when he thought that Lord Cornwallis might find refuge there.

FIGURE 38

THE SECRETARY NELSON SITE TODAY



The gradual accumulation of organic matter in the topsoil and encroaching grass are gradually obscuring the concrete coping intended to designate the house foundation. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The lack of visibility of Secretary Nelson's house site and the current military-patriotic landscape of CNHP emphasizes a nationalistic interpretation, relegating the site to little more than military history (Figure 41). In essence, CNHP has reduced Secretary Nelson's stratified landscape of inequality in favor of a public landscape based upon republican ideals cast in militaristic and nationalistic hues. The current landscape is at odds with its past as revealed by archaeology and documentary research. Since its completion in 1884, the Victory Monument has rivaled Trumbull's image of the battered Georgian house shrouded in smoke as the ultimate symbol of victory at Yorktown (Figure 42).

FIGURE 39

EASILY OVERLOOKED BY MOTORISTS



Visually obscured by earthworks on the crest of “Secretary’s Hill”, the site is quickly passed by most motorists who often do not recognize the signage and wayside.

FIGURE 40

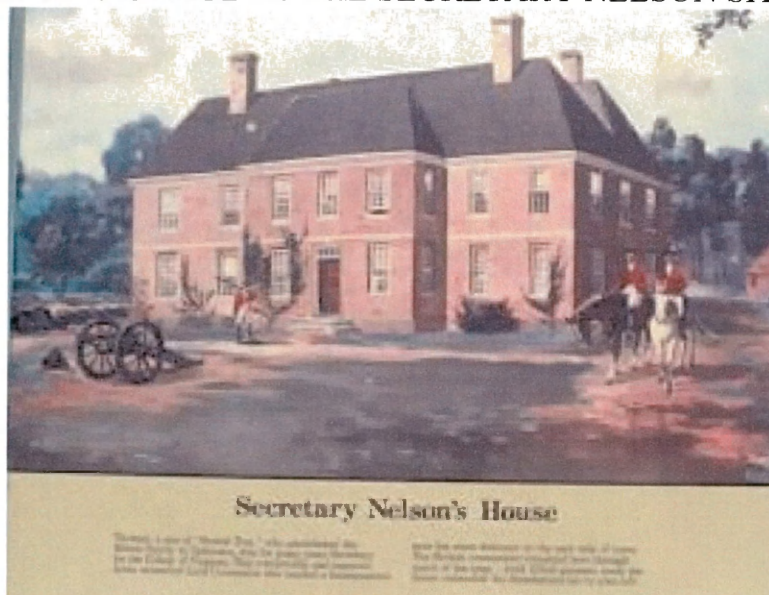
DROWNED BY A CHORUS OF COMPETING LANDMARKS



While conducting archaeological excavations at the site, most visitors on foot walked past the APVA marker and CNHP sign without reading them in order to examine and marvel at the exotic bamboo.

FIGURE 41

CNHP SIGNAGE AT THE SECRETARY NELSON SITE



Despite the abundance of historical depictions of the house, CNHP selected a conjectural image painted by Sidney King that emphasizes the occupation of Lord Cornwallis.

FIGURE 42

AN ASSORTMENT OF YORKTOWN MEMORABILIA



In the twentieth century, the Victory Monument symbolically supplanted the headquarters of Cornwallis as the triumphant image commemorating victory. Photograph by Jerry Karwac.

At one time, Secretary Nelson's house casts its hulking shadow across all those entering Yorktown. For those who disputed or resisted Secretary Nelson's symbolic claims, it was virtually impossible to deny the magnitude of his expression. Today, the remains of Secretary Nelson's home cast no shadow, and multitudes pass it to enter Yorktown without even observing the concrete coping or APVA marker. In the early morning light, the sun extends the distorted shadow of the encroaching bamboo across the already obscured site and, near the foot of Secretary Nelson's garden, the Victory Monument rises high above every structure in town (Figure 43).

FIGURE 43

LOST ON THE LANDSCAPE



The Secretary Nelson site and APVA marker. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

While it is undoubtedly true that the town [Yorktown] grew during the entire colonial period, its growth was much slower than that of its rivals, and its loss of prestige very rapid. This slow deterioration was suddenly accelerated by the Revolution, which completely disrupted the trade of the town, sending it into new channels. The part played by the town and its inhabitants during this struggle, however, made its doom a glorious destiny.

Edward M. Riley, *Suburban Development of Yorktown, Virginia* (1952)

A man of extraordinary resources and political power—even by gentry standards—Secretary Nelson fashioned a conspicuous estate adjoining the eastern boundary of Yorktown in the mid-eighteenth century. By employing overt techniques of landscape manipulation and ostentation commonly implemented by elite Tidewater gentry, Secretary Nelson symbolically expressed his claim to hierarchical authority over even the elite planters of the colony. Raising himself to the highest possible elevation in Yorktown, Secretary Nelson symbolically demonstrated his inherent authority as an elite administrator at the pinnacle of colonial government. And in the decade before the American Revolution—when his authority was challenged by economic uncertainties, social turmoil, changing attitudes towards the cadre of traditional Tidewater leadership, and even by the royal governor—Secretary Nelson responded by redefining his estate to reiterate his Georgian and authoritative claims.

The destruction of the Secretary's estate during its use as the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis forever transformed the symbolic landscape and interpretation of the house.

For John Trumbull and the citizens of the young Republic, the Georgian mansion in which Lord Cornwallis established his headquarters represented the hierarchy and inequality from which they had recently won independence. The Allied victory transformed the home of Secretary Nelson from a local symbol of his individual privilege and political power into a potent, nationalistic icon for the newly independent nation. Increasingly, Secretary Nelson's shattered and abandoned house was redefined as the headquarters of the doomed Lord Cornwallis. In art and travel accounts after the siege, Cornwallis' headquarters is depicted as a symbol of the English defeat and the triumph of the young egalitarian Republic. Travel narratives often omit or misidentify who lived there, but never overlook who headquartered in the house.

In 1928, the APVA acquired the house site to prevent its destruction, but continued to emphasize its role during the Siege of Yorktown. Likely influenced by a century of Trumbull's classic depiction and local misrepresentations of the events, the APVA misidentified Secretary Nelson as "a Tory". Since the arrival of CNHP, the APVA site role has increasingly diminished—all but rendering the house invisible on the landscape. Without adequate signage or an active role in interpretative tours, the current landscape of the CNHP—comprised of nineteenth-century earthworks, invasive bamboo, a towering Victorian-styled Victory Monument, and a current emphasis on the extant home of the "patriotic" Governor Thomas Nelson—physically and interpretively obscures the house site. This lack of visibility and the current nationalistic landscape of CNHP reinforces the brief military role of Secretary Nelson's house. By emphasizing its fleeting, three-week role in the siege, the APVA and CNHP have relegated the site to little more than military history.

Although vicious battles were waged on the western frontier after 1781, the expression “Yorktown” serves as a collective metaphor for the attainment of American independence from Britain. In 2006, CNHP will celebrate the two hundred, twenty-fifth anniversary of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. For more than a quarter of a century, Secretary Nelson symbolically defined his house, but in the almost two hundred twenty-five intervening years since, the symbol of his house and its landscape has been appropriated, transformed, and redefined by others. Like trovers, those who came after Secretary Nelson tumbled, cut, and reset the ashlar of his ruined house, and began anew its symbolic reconstruction, “taking and leaving at pleasure the gifts of the humble dead” (Kipling 1989:383). So complete has been the transformation that even today forms of popular culture such as *The Patriot* replicate and convey the same icon crafted by Trumbull from the ruins of Secretary Nelson’s house. When the character of Lord Cornwallis uttered, “Everything will change. Everything has changed” (Emmerich 2000), he spoke not only of the American colonies, but the shattered home of Secretary Nelson.

Like most cultural landscapes, Secretary Nelson’s site is multivalent. This landscape—and how it relates to Yorktown—offers the potential to significantly enhance our notions of urban landscapes of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. The most successful and important town to emerge from 1691 legislation designating 15 ports (Reps 1972:81), Yorktown emerged as one of Virginia’s largest and fastest growing urban centers by the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The lack of traditional, densely populated urban centers in colonial Virginia is distinctive and as yet barely addressed by historical archaeology. The extraordinary combination—enviable in so many communities—of well-preserved archeological deposits, public veneration of the

site, and the survival of public records makes Yorktown (and Gloucester Town) an ideal community for the exploration of landscape research.

Only when we no longer call the destruction of a community, the creation of refugees, and the deaths of hundreds of non-combatants “a glorious destiny” (Riley 1952:536), can we begin to document and analyze the landscape that was razed by British troops and obliterated by the Franco-American bombardment. Remembrance and veneration of one of the seminal events of American history is essential; however, the commodification of Yorktown as a sacred site of national independence must not preclude the interpretation and analysis of this extraordinary, complex urban center. The town of York was not only physically sacrificed during the 1781 siege, but continues to be each year if commemoration of the siege can not accommodate and recognize the perdition of Yorktown. Each Yorktown Day—as the ill-named anniversary of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis is known—the participants inadvertently celebrate the destruction of the town with parades and patriotic speeches, and sanctify its sacrifice without understanding the impact, either upon individuals within the town or the cataclysmic implications the battle wrought upon this unique community.

Despite archaeological evidence of thousands of years of human habitation on the bluffs overlooking the York River, the Siege of Yorktown—an event that endured for only three-weeks—dominates the interpretation of the landscape, and shuns the many other voices of the land. Chillingly, this implies that what was in the eighteenth century one of Virginia’s largest urban centers and its largest port of slave importation is not worthy of note. A nationalistic, celebratory landscape must allow for additional perspectives and alternative commemorations. If not, then it only serves to perpetuate traditionally simplistic notions of Yorktown’s urban organization, to deny the unique

cultural heritage of the town, and to hinder the examination of how Secretary Nelson's unique estate functioned within and without the community.

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Hank Dean Lutton was born in Steubenville, Ohio on May 9, 1970, the eldest of three sons of Wayne and Sherry Lutton. Following graduation from Springfield High in 1988, Hank was admitted to the George Washington University in Washington, DC. He selected an interdisciplinary curriculum largely composed of political science, history, international relations, and literature. Awarded a B.A., 1992, Hank worked in public relations and development for several non-profit Washington-based institutions, including the Brookings Institution.

In 1999, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation employed Hank as a field archaeologist, and since that time he has excavated primarily in Williamsburg and Yorktown. Hank began his M.A. coursework in the autumn of 2000 in the Anthropology Department, College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Since 2002 he has worked as a project archaeologist for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and, currently, the James River Institute for Archaeology. Presently, Hank lives in Yorktown on Lot P and frequents the Yorktown Pub.