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History of Virginia Beach

(Virginia Beach, Va., 2009) — For more than 115 years, Virginia Beach's balmy temperatures and invigorating ocean beckon to visitors. Even in the 19th century, warm sandy beaches and a boardwalk were key elements of a beach getaway. Today, Virginia Beach invites visitors to relive old memories and create new ones along its shores.

Historic Sites

History comes alive in Virginia Beach where, on April 26, 1607, three British ships, captained by John Smith, weighed anchor near the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. The first permanent English settlers landed in what is now Cape Henry in Virginia Beach. This was the first time the explorers set foot on what is now American soil. The settlers later erected a cross at their original landing site and named the site Cape Henry, in honor of Prince Henry of Wales, the son of King James. They stayed four days at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, and then the three ships departed for a journey up the James River. They later landed on what would become Jamestown Island.



At this same site in 1791, the **Cape Henry Lighthouse** was built – the first federally-funded lighthouse under the constitutional government. Ships bound for trade at northern ports depended on the Cape Henry Lighthouse for safe entry into the Chesapeake Bay. The stone structure was operated until 1881, when its cast-iron replacement was built across the dune line. The new Cape Henry Lighthouse is still in use, and visitors can see both at Fort Story. The old Cape Henry Lighthouse is open year-round.

With more than 18,000 acres of state parks and national wildlife refuges in Virginia Beach, certain areas remain almost identical to what the first permanent English settlers viewed when they first set foot on North American soil. **First Landing State Park**, the most visited state park in Virginia, contains 2,700 acres of protected salt marsh habitat, bay and dune maritime forests and freshwater ponds. A registered Natural Landmark, it fronts the Chesapeake Bay.

First Residents and Historic Homes

One of southeastern Virginia's first permanent residents was Adam Thoroughgood, a former indentured servant, who prospered as a result of his astute business sense. In 1635, he petitioned for a grant of more than 5,300 acres based on a 50-acre "headright" for each of the 105 men and women he transported from England. Adam Thoroughgood's sprawling farm, situated on the Lynnhaven River, was an inspiration to other hard-working colonists. Today, the **Adam Thoroughgood House**, (circa 1680 and probably constructed by his grandson), stands on property that was part of the original land grant. Other historic homes include the **Lynnhaven House** (1725), the **Ferry Plantation House** (1740) and the **Francis Land House** (late 1700s). All homes are open to the public for tours and host special interpretative programs.



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Virginia Beach's Resident Witch

In 1706, people who lived in Virginia Beach's Pungo area noticed something unusual about their neighbor, Grace Sherwood, and a jury later accused her of practicing witchcraft. A trial by "ducking" ensued, following a belief that guilty persons bound and thrown into water would float and the innocent would drown. Sherwood was pronounced guilty after she surfaced, apparently unharmed, on the Lynnhaven River. She served a seven-year jail sentence for witchcraft. Ever since, that point of land on the river's western branch has been known as **Witchduck Point**. Today, a busy thoroughfare in Virginia Beach also is named for Virginia Beach's "Witch of Pungo" — Witchduck Road.

Early Resort Community

For more than 100 years, tourism has been a major industry in Virginia Beach. It began with the construction of a rail system in 1883 that brought visitors to the oceanfront from Norfolk and points north. A year later, the **Virginia Beach Hotel** opened, offering the first overnight accommodations. With such modern amenities as gas lighting and indoor lavatories, the three-story luxury hotel attracted an affluent clientele who traveled to Virginia Beach for the fresh air and saltwater, thought by some to be medically beneficial. Summer vacation cottages became popular along the oceanfront as early as 1888, the same year the original **Virginia Beach Boardwalk** was built. By 1907, Virginia Beach was becoming a well-known oceanfront resort.

Improved roads and bridge construction made the beach even more accessible in the 1920s. A new grand hotel, **The Cavalier**, opened in 1927 that drew such national celebrities as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Will Rogers, Bette Davis, Jean Harlow, Mary Pickford, Betty Grable, and the infamous Fatty Arbuckle, as well as seven U.S. presidents. Hank Ketchum drew several "Dennis the Menace" cartoons based upon his family's stay at The Cavalier. During the 1930's through the 1950's, The Cavalier was the largest hirer of big bands in the world. Tommy Dorsey, Frank Sinatra, Benny Goodman, Xavier Cugat, Cab Calloway, Glen Miller, Lawrence Welk, and Bing Crosby were among the many who played at the Cavalier Beach Club. The Cavalier hotel is still in operation today at 42nd Street in Virginia Beach.



The Boardwalk

First constructed in 1888, the Virginia Beach Boardwalk has received national acclaim in recent times as one of America's favorite boardwalks by the *Discovery Channel*, and in magazines such as *Coastal Living*, *Southern Living* and *National Geographic Traveler*. In its various forms, the thoroughfare has seen it all: Prohibition and German U-boats, Big Bands and surfer girls, shag contests and roller blades. Throughout time, the Boardwalk has remained an enduring symbol of Virginia Beach. Built from wooden planks during the nation's "gilded age," the five-block boardwalk promenade attracted thousands of Victorian vacationers. At the famed Peacock Ballroom, couples swooned to the music of legendary artists such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Tommy Dorsey. Today's Boardwalk is now a 28-foot wide and three-mile long concrete promenade.



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Role of the Military

As America entered World War II, Virginia Beach's role as a strategic military presence began to emerge. **Fort Story**, a coastal artillery post since 1917, became headquarters for the Harbor Defense Command. Today, the installation is a training and test site for the Army's Joint Logistics-Over-the-Shore (J-LOTS) operations. Its two historical lighthouses, First Landing Cross and Battle of the Capes Monument make a popular stop for visitors. The State Rifle Range was renamed **Camp Pendleton** in 1940 as the federal government assumed operations. The U.S. Navy, based in nearby Norfolk, purchased property in Virginia Beach for **Naval Air Station Oceana**. This auxiliary airfield is now one of the U.S. Navy's largest Master Jet Bases and hosts the F/A 18 Super Hornet fighter jets. The Navy Training Center at **Dam Neck** opened the same year. Two other military bases in Virginia Beach are the **Little Creek Amphibious Training Command** and the **Fleet Combat Training Center, Atlantic**, at Dam Neck. The installations provided new jobs for residents and incentives for workers to relocate to Virginia Beach, both during and following the war.



Agricultural Center

In addition to tourism, agriculture has contributed significantly to Virginia Beach's economy. Blessed with a mild winter climate, long growing season and fertile soil, the area has been under cultivation since the earliest colonial days. In the mid-1800s, a local horticulturist brought the progressive farming concept to southeastern Virginia, and in 1907, the Virginia Truck Experiment Station began operation on a 58-acre tract in the Diamond Springs section of Virginia Beach. This experimental station, dedicated to providing farmers with demonstration plots, soil testing and introducing new developments in horticulture, was the first of its kind in the U.S. For many years, fresh produce from Virginia Beach supplied some of the finest markets in the Northeast. As of the last Census of Agriculture in 2002, more than 170 working farms in Virginia Beach cultivate approximately 28,000 acres of land. "Pick-your-own" apple, blackberry, peach and strawberry farms are popular, especially in the Pungo section of Virginia Beach. The **Farmers Market** offers locally grown produce and flowers.



Virginia Beach Today

For an area that acquired such a wealth of history, Virginia Beach is relatively young. The city's current boundary was formerly Princess Anne County, named for Princess Anne of England at the time the county formed in 1691 (during the reign of her brother-in-law and sister, William and Mary). The Virginia Beach oceanfront area received town status in 1906. And in 1963, the General Assembly approved the merger of county and town into the city of Virginia Beach, marking 2003 as the city's 40th birthday. Today, with nearly half a million permanent residents, Virginia Beach is the most populous city in Virginia and the 34th largest city in the United States — a far cry from when Adam Thoroughgood settled here in 1635. Yet the city retains much of its early charm, especially in the southern section, which is still quite rural. Most people relocate to Virginia Beach for its superior quality of life, growing labor force and reputation as a safe place to live, work and visit.

Virginia Beach entices visitors to "Live the Life" every season of the year! Located in the southeastern corner of the state, Virginia Beach is four hours southeast of Washington, D.C. by car and within a day's drive or less from two-thirds of the U.S. population. For visitor information, call 1-800-VA-BEACH (800/822-3224) or visit the Web site www.vbfun.com for online trip planning and more information about Virginia Beach's new \$202.5 million convention center. For media information and digital images, click on www.vbpressroom.com.