

“There is but one entrance by sea into this country, and that is at the mouth of a very goodly bay, 18 or 20 miles broad. The cape on the south is called Cape Henry, in honor of our most noble Prince. The land, white hilly sands like unto the Downs, and all along the shores rest plenty of pines and firs. . . Within is a country that may have the prerogative over the most pleasant places known, for large and pleasant navigable rivers, heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man’s habitation. . .”

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH

Smith's Journey Begins

EXCURSIONS ON THE JAMES RIVER

When the Jamestown colonists arrived in Virginia in late April of 1607, they looked for a site that was:

- Uninhabited,
- Easily defensible from attack,
- Safe for the ships in bad weather, with deep water close by for mooring,
- Supplied with adequate fresh water, and
- Far enough up a river to avoid attracting the attention of other ships, especially Spanish naval vessels.

After their first landing at Cape Henry, the colonists explored the first large river they found, named Powhatan, the same as the paramount chief of the region. The English re-named the river after King James I. They traveled it all the way to its head of navigation at the present site of Richmond, Virginia, where they found a village ruled by one of Powhatan's sons.

After some debate, the colonists settled on apparently uninhabited land they named Jamestowne Island, about halfway downriver between the falls and the river's mouth (today's Hampton Roads). The island offered a marshy isthmus at its western end, making it easy to defend. The river out front and the creek out back, today named for Powhatan, offered fresh water. The island was far enough up the winding James to avoid easy detection, and its riverbanks were steep, allowing the ships to tie alongside on high tides.

Their choice was flawed, however. First, although the island had no permanent dwellings, it was territory of the Paspahegh, whose members did not take kindly to the intrusion. Second, though the James River was fresh at Jamestown in spring, the colonists had unwittingly come to Virginia during a severe five-year drought. This reduced the river's flow in summer and fall to the point that the English were drinking brackish water, which made them quarrelsome at best and very sick at worst. Third, the surrounding marshes and woods harbored massive populations of biting insects that certainly toughened their hides.

Even so, the English endured. Captain John Smith got to know the surrounding waters well, especially the adjacent Chickahominy River, the Nansemond River downstream on the south side, and the Indian town of Kecoughtan, just inside Hampton Roads and (Old) Point Comfort. Smith made three trips up the Nansemond to trade for (and take) corn. Kecoughtan became a regular way-station on any trip to the Bay, because the Indians there welcomed the English and fed them well on the bounty of the surrounding waters, especially their oysters.

RESOURCES & CONTACTS

John Smith's Adventures on the James River, an interpretive water trail and auto tour guide produced by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, covers about 100 miles of the James River from Richmond to Newport News.

Available online from the Virginia Tourism Corporation:

www.virginia.org/johnsmithtrail

Print copies may be purchased at a nominal fee by selecting "Contact Us" and searching the online store for "John Smith Trail Maps."



PHOTO BY BILL HALEY

Statue of Captain John Smith at Historic Jamestowne overlooks the James River.

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Sunset along the James River
PHOTO BY BILL PORTLOCK

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION *Chesapeake Bay Gateways*

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is part of a much larger story of the Chesapeake Bay—a story with rich historical, natural, and environmental chapters for your discovery and enjoyment. Throughout the Bay watershed a variety of parks, wildlife refuges, maritime museums, historic sites, and trails tell their part of the Chesapeake story. These special places are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Visit them to experience the authentic Chesapeake.

Many of these Gateways to the Chesapeake are located along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Those with boating access to the water trail are noted throughout this Boater's Guide. Others await your exploration by land. You can make virtual visits via the Gateway Network's website at www.baygateways.net where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel the James River, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE JAMES RIVER

Nauticus: The National Marine Maritime Center
• Norfolk, VA

Elizabeth River Trail • Norfolk, VA

Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve • Portsmouth, VA

Mariner's Museum • Newport News, VA

Virginia Living Museum • Newport News, VA

Fort Boykin Historic Park • Isle of Wight, VA

Historic Fort Huger • Isle of Wight, VA

Chippokes Plantation State Park • Surry, VA

Powhatan Creek Blueway • Williamsburg, VA

Jamestown Island • Jamestown, VA

Lawrence Lewis Jr. Park • Charles City, VA

Dutch Gap Conservation Area • Chester, VA

Lower James River Water Trail • Richmond, VA

EXPLORING THE JAMES RIVER TODAY

The nonprofit James River Association calls its namesake waterway “America’s Founding River.” Jamestown remained the center of the English presence in Virginia until the end of the 17th century, when the capital moved a few miles inland to Williamsburg, making Hampton, at (Old) Point Comfort, the longest continuously occupied English community in North America.

The James has been a busy river ever since, carrying steamboats until the 1930s, sailing ships until World War II, and large commercial ships today to port facilities at Hopewell and just below the falls at Richmond’s Deepwater Terminal. Local traffic includes tugs and barges carrying sand, gravel, fuel oil, and even garbage; commercial workboats fishing for crabs and catfish; recreational anglers seeking bass, catfish, and rockfish; and folks just out for a boat ride. Public access is widely available, though access points are not yet as evenly-spaced as paddlers in kayaks and canoes would like.

From the time that colonist John Rolfe first began raising export-grade tobacco on the James in 1620, the river has suffered from a heavy human footprint. Unlike the corn, beans, and squash crops that the Indians had been raising along the James, tobacco farming depleted the soil of essential nutrients and minerals. As settlers pushed west to the red clay soils of the Piedmont and the mountains at the river’s headwaters, the James began to carry a consistent load of sediment that still colors the river red at times.

Richmond and Lynchburg added significant loads of raw sewage and factory wastewater, especially during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Both cities have struggled to reduce the amount of pollution they send to the James. Mandatory pollution reduction under the Clean Water Act of 1972 began to improve the river in the 1980s and ’90s. In this first decade of the 21st century, both cities have accelerated their progress. They still face challenges, especially against the tide of population growth. Sediment remains a serious problem, but today the James is cleaner than it has been for at least 150 years. Organizations such as the James River Association and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation continue to work with state and federal agencies for full restoration of the river.

At Jamestown today, the National Park Service offers a great visitor center on the island with wonderful educational exhibits. You can also enjoy trails out to Captain John Smith’s statue and the site of the original Jamestowne Fort, as well as a beautiful wooded, paved, four-mile circuit around the island that is suitable for driving, biking, or hiking.

After exploring the island on foot, get a good look at its river shore and Powhatan Creek, a little jewel tucked away on the busy outskirts of Williamsburg. Its headwaters north of Jamestown Road are fresh and the color of iced tea, tinted by the cypress trees that protrude from the water. It develops into a broad brackish marsh creek as it flows down to the island. The contrast is striking, making the creek a good place to see how most Chesapeake waterways develop from fresh headwaters to salt downstream. Seeing the brackish marshes around the island may make you cringe for the the colonists who drank the river’s water before they dug a well 400 years ago.

Good Vessels for Exploring the James River



PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

Some creeks and protected shores of the James are made to order for exploring in self-propelled vessels. The river itself is large and powerful, with frequent heavy traffic—including deep-draft shipping—and strong currents. If you're an experienced and physically fit sea kayaker, by all means explore any of it, but take precautions to stay safe.

If you're a novice or intermediate paddler, keep to shorter trips inside waterways such as the upper Nansemond River, Powhatan Creek, and the marsh creeks of Farrar's Island, behind Henricus Historical Park. There's plenty to explore, especially if you're interested in the Powhatan Indian stories along the Captain John Smith Trail.



SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS

Skiffs and runabouts make great vessels for day trips exploring the James and its tributaries, such as the Hampton River, Powhatan Creek, the Nansemond, Powells Creek, and the Farrar's Island creeks. They'll also serve well in side creeks, provided they're equipped to deal with mud flats and submerged logs. This is a big river and its main stem can kick up rough. Deep draft ships use its channel all the way up to Richmond.

If you're going to explore the James, maintain your boat carefully, equip it properly with safety and emergency gear, plan your itineraries, and leave a float plan with family or friends. There are plenty of marina facilities with service shops, tow boat companies, and emergency services. However, it pays to be prepared and to keep your itineraries within your skills. Even short trips can reveal beautiful, fascinating places here.

CRUISING POWERBOATS AND TRAWLERS



Cruising powerboats such as trawlers and cruisers with Chesapeake or Downeast workboat hulls are excellent choices for exploring the James, especially if the vessels are equipped with seaworthy dinghies, canoes, or kayaks.

Whether you cruise at 7 knots or 16, make sure to look actively at the river and don't let the boat insulate you from its waters, shorelines, and wildlife. Even if your boat can cruise faster, don't. As one wise builder of cruising boats once said, "Over 15 to 16 knots, you miss too much."

If you navigate carefully, you'll find that the James offers a wide enough channel that you can cruise relatively close to shore, keeping you in close touch with what's on shore as well as out in the water. But watch your wake; keep it low to protect sensitive shorelines and avoid disturbing people in small boats.

CRUISING SAILBOATS



Among the Chesapeake's rivers, the James is one of the few large enough to offer consistent winds and maneuvering room for cruising sailboats, as well as multiple secluded but deep, secure anchorages. Also, below Richmond, the three bridges (Interstate 295, Benjamin Harrison, and Route 258) are high enough to allow most cruisers underneath.

This river is the third-best river in the Chesapeake Bay system to explore under sail as Smith did—after the main Bay itself, and the Potomac. The James is a beautiful river, and plenty of boats sail it today, but its strong currents in narrow channels will make a modern skipper appreciate the skills of those who have sailed it before. Upstream of Hopewell, the James narrows considerably into long, looping meanders, two of which also have shipping bypasses cut through their bases (Presquile and Dutch Gap) to shorten the passage to Richmond.



PHOTO BY DAVE FUSS

Powhatan Creek Park, a county facility near Williamsburg, VA, provides a small boat/canoe launch, parking area, and fishing piers for the scenic Powhatan Creek Blueway.

Trip Itineraries

HAMPTON ROADS/HAMPTON RIVER TWO-WAY, 9–10 MILES



Hampton Roads is one of Earth’s great natural harbors. When the Jamestown colonists arrived, they saw its potential and would not be surprised to see how busy it is today with commercial and Naval shipping, though they would be astounded by the technology exhibited here.

At the time of Smith’s explorations, the Kecoughtan people were concentrated primarily along Hampton Bar, which was then a huge oyster reef along the north side of the harbor, and the Hampton River, with its woods and marshes offering other resources. This tribe appears to have welcomed the English, who stopped there periodically as they journeyed up to Powhatan’s headquarters of Werowocomoco on the Pamunkey (today’s York River) and during Smith’s exploratory voyages in the summer of 1608.

In October 1609, about the time Captain John Smith left Virginia for England, the Jamestown colonists established Fort Algernon, a satellite colony, at (Old) Point Comfort. This fort would become part of present-day Hampton, making that city the oldest continuously-occupied English community in North America.

Peterson Yacht Basin’s launch ramp and the soft landing just outside its inlet provide access to the north side of Hampton Roads for paddle craft and trailer boats. From there, it’s a 3.5-mile trip along the shore to the mouth of the Hampton River. The area looks very different today than it did in the 1600s, so it takes imagination to see it as Captain John Smith, his crew, and the Kecoughtan did. Note that this is wide-open water with lots of traffic of all sizes. Exercise appropriate caution.

NANSEMOND RIVER TWO-WAY, 2–35 MILES



The Nansemond is a great river to explore by canoe, kayak, or skiff. Paddle craft can launch from Constant’s Wharf in Suffolk; trailer boats launch from Bennett’s Creek Marina downstream. Larger powerboats can follow the channel all the way up to the transient slips at Constant’s Wharf.

When Smith visited, the Nansemond was a great resource. Its lower reaches, around the “front village” of Mattanock on the west bank opposite the mouth of Bennett’s Creek, were full of oysters, crabs, and fish. The town where the Nansemond leader lived lay at the upper end of the brackish water, on the outside (west) bend around the mouth of Cedar Creek, just above today’s Route 125 bridge.

In April 1608, Smith visited here to meet the Nansemond leader and trade. He planted a cross upriver at the town of Teracosick, on the west bank just above the mouth of the Nansemond’s western branch. From here up, the river is fresh, with lush marshes on the insides of its deep meander bends and good soils for corn, beans, and squash on the higher lands.

RESOURCES&CONTACTS

JAMES RIVER ASSOCIATION
804-788-8811
www.jamesriverassociation.org

Contact the association for maps to the Lower James River Water Trail, covering 110 miles of the Lower James River from Richmond, Virginia, to the Chesapeake Bay.

KINGSMILL MARINA
757-253-3919
www.kingsmill.com.recreation/marina.asp

JAMES RIVER PLANTATIONS
www.jamesriverplantations.org



Much of the Nansemond still looks as it did when Smith explored it, though if you go up its several branches, you'll find large dams enclosing water-supply reservoirs for the City of Suffolk. Try to figure out where the river's Indians would have set up their towns and fishing camps and where Smith would have interacted with Nansemond leaders.

POWHATAN CREEK ONE-WAY, ABOUT 4 MILES



Launch canoes and kayaks at the James City County soft landing with floating dock on the creek to access the Powhatan Creek Blueway. The landing and parking lot lie just above the Jamestown Road bridge, on the east side. Be sure to explore above the bridge as well as below. You can launch and return here, but if possible, use two vehicles or a vehicle and a bicycle to set up a shuttle between the bridge and the Jamestown Yacht Basin Marina, near the mouth of the creek.

Be sure to visit the 400-year-old bald cypress tree growing in the middle of the creek about 100 yards below the bridge. If you visit in late summer, you'll see acres of wild rice ripening in the upper marshes.

JAMESTOWN ISLAND CIRCUMNAVIGATION ABOUT 7 MILES



Caution: Landing is not permitted on Jamestown Island.

Be careful if you choose to circle the island in either outboard or paddle craft, for the James is a mile-and-a-third wide here, with long fetches from the southeast and the northwest that can make it kick up rough. If the weather is fit, by all means circumnavigate, slipping through the slot under the causeway to the island. Be careful at the sharp turn into Powhatan Creek on the backside, because there is a large chunk of concrete on the southwest corner of the turn.

Exploring Jamestown Island will give you a sense of how the colonists saw it the first time. Much of Powhatan Creek still looks the way it did then, especially the ancient cypress tree that Captain John Smith probably first viewed when it was a sapling. Don't miss either one!

For Cruising Boats

TRAVELING THE JAMES

The James and the adjoining Chickahominy are off the beaten track for cruising sail and power boats, but much of the river system is lovely, and there are plenty of facilities, as well as secure and attractive anchorages. In Hampton Roads, the Hampton River on the north side and the Elizabeth River on the south are worth exploring, though it takes imagination to see them as Captain John Smith did. Upstream, the Nansemond and Pagan rivers (the latter the site of an Indian leader's town named Warraskoyac in Smith's time) will take cruisers up to Suffolk and Smithfield, respectively. Both are lovely today but narrow and best suited to power vessels.

Traveling up the river is a challenge, with channels winding back and forth around meander bends, and a good opportunity to contemplate the challenges that captains of 17th-century ships faced in fluky winds and strong currents. Jamestown is easy to visit with a dinghy, tying up at Jamestown Yacht Basin. However the most secure port for a deep-draft vessel is Kingsmill Marina, about three miles above Jamestown on the north side.


For now, pass by the Chickahominy—it is a story in itself and well worth several days' exploration. (See section on Exploring the Chickahominy). Above the mouth of the Chickahominy River, the James winds past a dozen large, old plantations that retain their grand houses. Several, like Sherwood Forest, Evelynton, Westover, Berkeley, and Shirley, are open to the public. These plantations are representative of the culture that evolved along the James as a result of Captain John Smith's map and the dispersion of English colonists from Jamestown in the 17th century.

The James narrows considerably above Hopewell, with swift currents and deep channels. For cruisers so inclined, this part of the river offers lovely views mixed incongruously with a power plant, abandoned gravel pits, the Port of Richmond's Deepwater Terminal, and other evidences of industry. Be aware that around any bend in this narrow channel, you might find yourself confronted by a ship up to 600 feet in length, so operate with appropriate care. As the condition of the James improves, Richmond is gradually renovating its riverfront. The new marina at Rocketts Landing is a good example.

TRAILHEADS ON THE JAMES RIVER


HAMPTON ROADS

Peterson Yacht Basin, Newport News, VA
36° 59' 03" N, 76° 23' 53" W
(launch ramp inside inlet,
soft beach landing on outside shore)




NANSEMOND RIVER

Bennett's Creek Restaurant and Marina
36° 51' 54" N, 76° 28' 41"
757-484-8700, www.bennettscreekrestaurant.com
(ramp fee)



Constant's Wharf, Suffolk, VA
36° 44' 22" N, 76° 34' 52" W
757-514-7250, www.suffolk.va.us/parks/cw.html
(canoe and kayak launch,
transient slip rentals for larger boats)




JAMESTOWN

Powhatan Creek Blueway
37° 14' 15" N, 76° 46' 06" W
www.jccgov.com/recreation/parks-trails/powhatan-creek.html




Jamestown Yacht Basin Marina
37° 13' 34" N, 76° 46' 45" W
757-564-7714
(parking fee)



MID-SECTION

Jordan Point Yacht Haven
37° 18' 45" N, 77° 13' 18" W
804-458-3398, www.jordanpoint.com
(ramp fee, transient slips)




UPPER RIVER


Deep Bottom Park and Boat Landing
37° 24' 26" N, 77° 18' 19" W




Dutch Gap Public Landing
37° 22' 55" N, 77° 22' 36" W



Osborne Pike Public Landing
37° 24' 03" N, 77° 23' 09" W




Ancarrow's Public Landing
37° 31' 11" N, 77° 25' 07" W



Henricus Historical Park
37° 22' 32" N, 77° 21' 34" W
804-748-1613, www.henricus.org



Rocketts Landing Marina
37° 30' 58" N, 77° 24' 59" W
804-222-3555, www.rockettsvillage.com/marina.asp
(transient slips)



NOTE: Trailheads indicate access points for the suggested itineraries. River maps indicate trailheads as either private or public. All launch sites are open to the public. Those listed as private are part of privately owned businesses. Public trailheads are located on local, state, or federally managed properties. Fees may be charged at any of the launch sites and are subject to change. Contact the site directly for the latest information.

JORDAN POINT/POWELLS CREEK TWO-WAY, 5–12 MILES



Jordan Point Yacht Haven is a good jumping-off point for exploring the mid-section of the James. If you're paddling, explore the islands just downriver that separate the main river from Tar Bay, on the south side. Juvenile bald eagles frequent the islands.

If the weather, your skills, and your energy are up to the task, keep going downriver, around Coggins Point, and head up Powells Creek. This creek is part of the James River National Wildlife Refuge, prime habitat for eagles, ospreys, great blue herons, and, in cold weather, migratory waterfowl. The marshes here are loaded with wild rice and other seed-bearing plants that sustain the waterfowl during winter.

The run down to Powells Creek is also great for trailer boats equipped to prowl narrow, winding creeks. For these boats, another great destination is Herring Creek, on the north bank. Mind the channel at the mouth, though. It swings hard to the east bank. Watch your depth sounder as you go up the creek. You'll be surprised at how deep it is further up.

HENRICUS HISTORICAL PARK AND FARRAR'S ISLAND TWO-WAY, 2.5–8 MILES








Farrar's Island is the site of Henricus Historical Park, which offers living history programs and a dock on the James for visiting boaters. The old oxbow slough around the south side of the island offers interesting marshy channels to explore in paddle craft and skiffs. The easiest access point is Dutch Gap Public Landing.

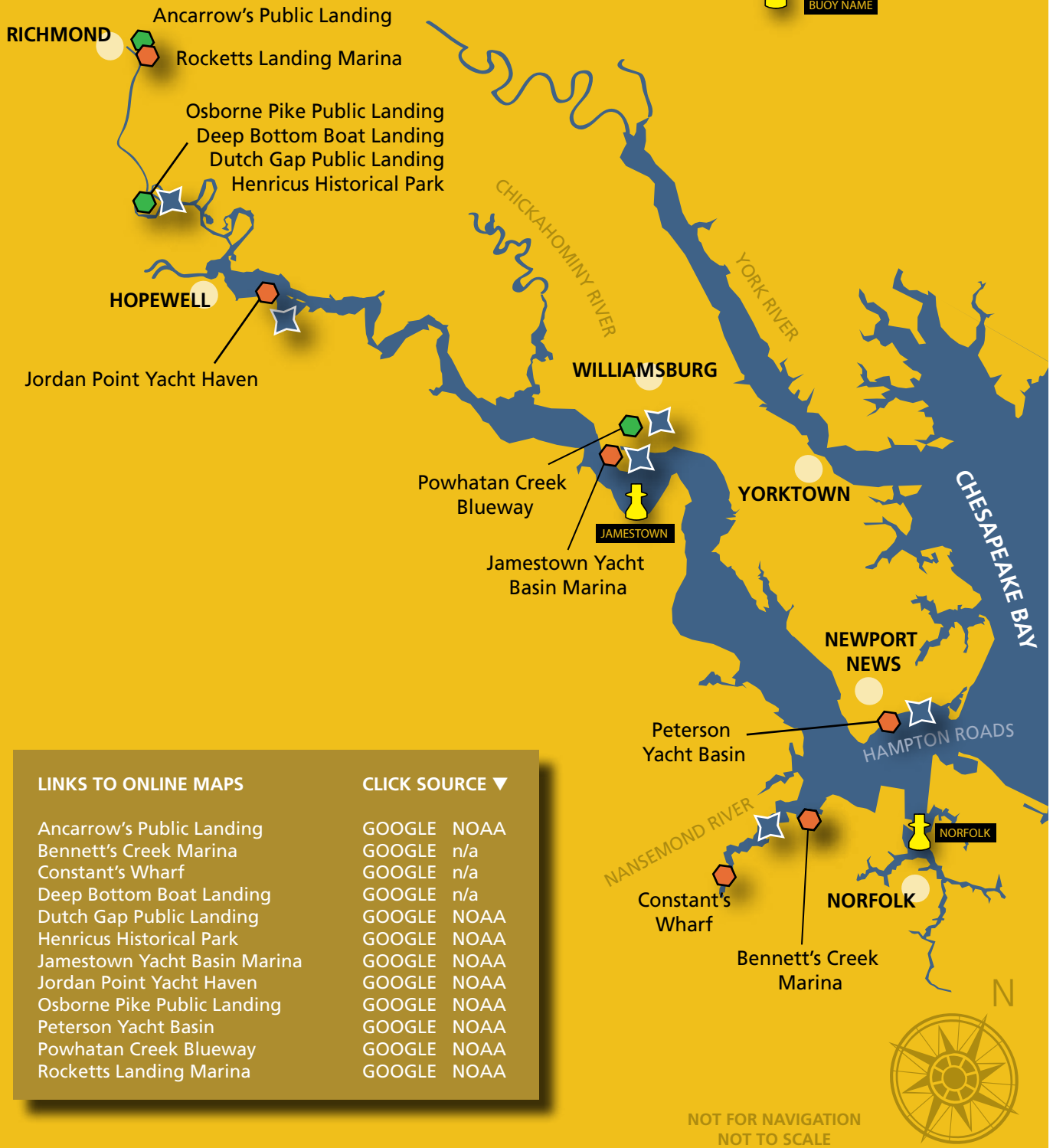
In 1611, two years after Captain John Smith left Virginia, the English Governor Sir Thomas Dale established the "Citie of Henricus" on a wide meander bend about 12 miles downriver from the Indian town at the falls of the James. The English believed this site would be healthier than Jamestown and envisioned it becoming an important port, with a thriving town and even the colony's first university.

The Indians' attacks against illegal English settlements in 1622 caused the English to abandon the town and those grandiose plans. William Farrar, who had come to Virginia in 1618, settled there and began farming the land. His family continued to live there until they sold the island in 1727.

James River

SECTION MAP

-  TRAILHEAD (PUBLIC)
-  TRAILHEAD (PRIVATE)
-  TRIP ITINERARY
-  CBIBS (NOAA BUOY)
-  BUOY NAME



LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS	CLICK SOURCE ▼
Ancarrow's Public Landing	GOOGLE NOAA
Bennett's Creek Marina	GOOGLE n/a
Constant's Wharf	GOOGLE n/a
Deep Bottom Boat Landing	GOOGLE n/a
Dutch Gap Public Landing	GOOGLE NOAA
Henricus Historical Park	GOOGLE NOAA
Jamestown Yacht Basin Marina	GOOGLE NOAA
Jordan Point Yacht Haven	GOOGLE NOAA
Osborne Pike Public Landing	GOOGLE NOAA
Peterson Yacht Basin	GOOGLE NOAA
Powhatan Creek Blueway	GOOGLE NOAA
Rocketts Landing Marina	GOOGLE NOAA