Site of the 2nd Prince William County Courthouse (44PW9), 1742-1759

Poster and Narrative by
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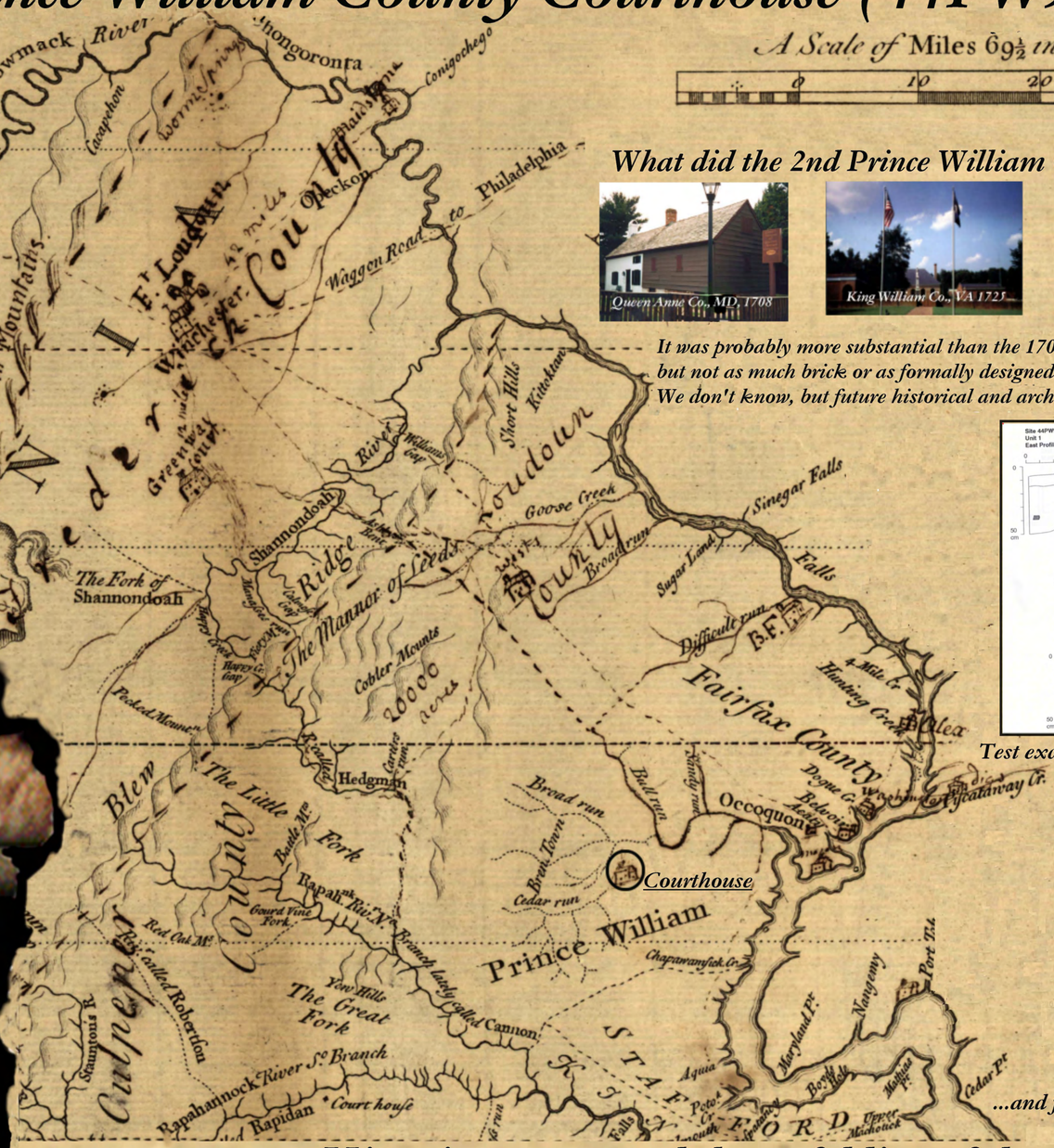
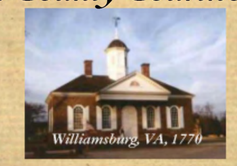


What did the 2nd Prince William County Courthouse look like?

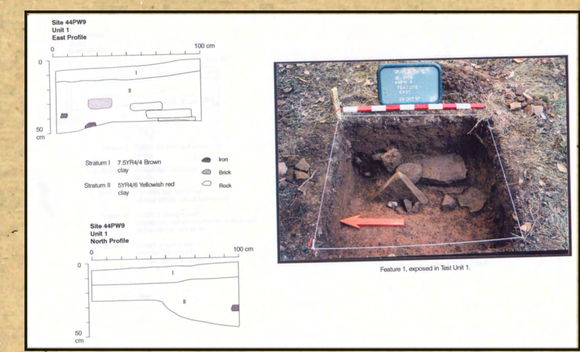
Queen Anne Co., MD, 1708

King William Co., VA 1725


Williamsburg, VA, 1770

Green Co., PA, 1797

It was probably more substantial than the 1708 courthouse in Queen Anne County, Maryland but not as much brick or as formally designed as those in King William and Williamsburg. We don't know, but future historical and archaeological research may show us more.



Test excavations have revealed remains of the structure...

Plate 3. Representative ceramics from Site 44PW9. Top (L to R): Delft (four sherds), Scratch blue white saltglazed stoneware, possible Whieldon Ware (two sherds); Bottom: Oriental export porcelain, Nottingham ware, Brown saltglazed stoneware, Coarse lead glazed earthenware.

...and fragments of everyday life around the courthouse.

As the frontier of the Royal Colony of Virginia expanded in the 17th and 18th Centuries, and the countryside became more populated with colonists, new political jurisdictions were needed. Colonial settlement on the north half of the Potomac River estuary began in the 1650's. These settlements remained, for the most part, close to navigable waters until the second quarter of the 18th Century. During the 18th Century, as the population, roads, and markets grew, the settled area reached further and further inland.

Understanding the selection of this site for the courthouse, and why it was shortly moved, is aided by looking at the development of counties in Northern Virginia as the colonial frontier unfolded. Northumberland County was formed in 1645, encompassing an enormous area which included the Northern Neck and lands west and south of the Potomac far into the mountains, and even contemporary West Virginia and Kentucky. Shortly afterwards, in 1653, Westmoreland County was created. It included land on the Potomac side of the Northern Neck, as well as the south side of the Potomac drainage in Northern Virginia. Just ten years later Stafford County was formed from western Westmoreland, and a piece of Northumberland County along the Rappahannock, as settlement had begun along these river shores. Settlement expanded slowly, with quarrelling Indian nations in and near the area. It was not until 1731 that Prince William County was formed. By this time local tribes - the Piscataway, Pamacocack (Pomunkey), and Manahoak had been diminished by allying and merging with other tribes, moving on to other places, or being absorbed in various ways by colonial society.

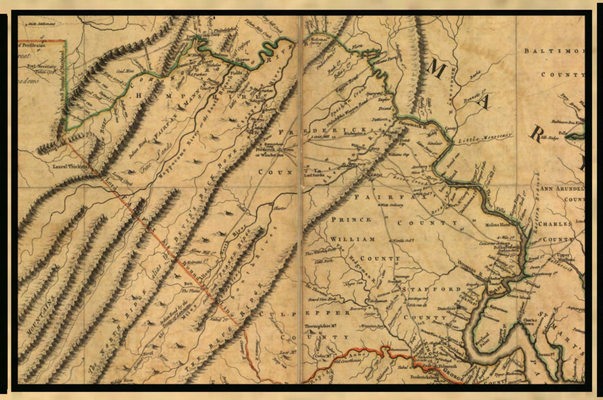
The Treaty of Albany of 1722, in which, the Six Nations of the Iroquois accepted colonial jurisdiction in prosecuting the killing of an Indian by two colonists in Northern Virginia opened the area for more settlement. The Five Nations were then, as now, primarily resident in upstate New York, but at that time were closely allied with local tribes, as well as travelers in and temporary residents of the region themselves. The treaty marked a period of peace and civil relations, and set precedent for the authority of the colonial governors. The treaty reduced resistance to settlement, and the expanding demand for tobacco propelled it. As a result, Northern Virginia enjoyed a period of expanding settlement and a booming agricultural economy.

So it was that Prince William County was formed in 1731. With trade and transportation still focused on the river, the first courthouse was located in the Woodbridge area. Only ten years had passed when the needs of the expanding population brought about the formation of Fairfax County in 1742. This partitioning left the first Prince William County courthouse in a corner of the county. A more central location made sense, and this site was chosen. By the same token, as westward expansion continued, the population in western Prince William County grew to the point that their own jurisdiction, Fauquier County, was partitioned in 1759. Once again, the Prince William County courthouse would be left seated at the margin of the county's territory. Dumfries was selected as the site of the third Prince William County courthouse, which opened by 1761.

County historians erected a marker in 1974, and the U.S. Marine Corps sponsored archaeological surveys of the site in 1992 and 1998. As a result of these studies the site has determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The architectural form of the courthouse and many details of daily life in and around this frontier civic building may yet be disclosed by future archaeological investigations – but only if the site and its artifacts remain undisturbed. They will be:

By order of the Commander, in upholding the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, which provides for criminal and civil penalties against persons disturbing archaeological sites or removing artifacts from them on federal property. 29 September 2007

Historic maps record the unfolding of the frontier.



Herman 1670 | **Fry 1751** | **Jefferson 1787**

background: Warner 1737, with amendments ca. 1747 and 2007

Orginating as part of Northumberland in 1645, this area was made part of Westmoreland in 1653 then Stafford in 1663. Prince William was carved out of Stafford in 1731, and whittled down by Farifax and Fauquier in 1739 and 1759, when it arrived at its present boundaries. In the process, the courthouse was moved three times in less than three decades.