

## 250<sup>th</sup> Comm. Summary County History

Mathews County, a maritime community, is bordered on the east by the Chesapeake Bay and has an estimated 214 miles of shoreline. Established in 1791 from the northeastern part of Gloucester County, Mathews is named after Thomas Mathews, a key sponsor of the legislation that had led to the new county's formation.

Although Mathews is Virginia's second smallest county, it has a lengthy and distinctive history. Settled during the 1640s by European colonists who displaced the Chiskiack Indians, it became the home of seafarers, shipbuilders, and tobacco planters who farmed with indentured servants and slave labor. By 1675 the county's first known shipbuilder, Edward Lassells, had begun building seagoing vessels and the shipbuilding tradition persisted until the late nineteenth century.

Mathews County was the home of botanist John Clayton, whose famous garden included plants from other colonies and from European countries. By 1739, a tobacco inspection warehouse had been built at Williams Wharf, where local planters could have their casks of tobacco readied for shipment overseas. Later, a customs house was there. Close at hand was the Kingston Parish church, located on the grounds of today's historic Christ Church.

During the American Revolution, local patriots rallied to the cause. Combat came to Gwynn's Island during the summer of 1776 when Lord Dunmore's massive fleet arrived offshore. Aboard were numerous people infected with smallpox, who had been evacuated from Norfolk. The British built fortifications overlooking Milford Haven and Hills Bay, at the western end of the island. On the opposite shore, a relatively small group of American militiamen erected the line of earthworks that became known as Fort Cricket Hill. An unknown number of enslaved people seized the opportunity to flee to British ships while they lay at anchor. On July 9, 1776, the Americans defeated the British at the Battle of Cricket Hill, forcing Lord Dunmore and his troops to flee and ending the Royalist presence in Virginia for the first time since 1607.

The New Point Comfort Lighthouse is the third oldest in the Chesapeake Bay. Its lamp was first lit on January 17, 1805. Among Mathews County's other architectural treasures are the historic Courthouse square, ca. 1820 Tompkins Cottage, and the Thomas James Store, one of oldest surviving mercantile establishments in the American Southeast. Mathews also has an abundance of antebellum homes that have been lovingly preserved by their owners.

In 1862, Confederate military leaders, who expected the Union Army to mount an overland invasion of Mathews, had earthworks erected overlooking a main entrance road. Those fortifications, dubbed Fort Nonsense because they never saw military action, are at the intersection of State Routes 3 and 14 and are now the focal point of a county-owned park.

Today, visitors flock to Mathews County during the summer months to enjoy fishing, boating, water sports, camping, and antiquing. There also is a thriving arts community. Historic tourism plays an important role in a unique area that has been called the Pearl of the Chesapeake. Information is readily available at Sibley's General Store, home of the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center.