

# Gloucester's Historic Courthouse Buildings

A Self-Guided Tour

### COLONIAL COURTHOUSE



The Colonial
Courthouse was built
in 1766 and is one of
the oldest
Courthouses in the
country still in use.
While court is no
longer held here, it is
used regularly by

county government and the community for meetings.

As you approach the building, you may notice the original roof line of the front portico. The current roof was added to the structure some time in the early 1900s.

When you enter the Courthouse, you will see that it has been 'modernized.' In its original state, the wall directly in front of you did not exist. As you came through the door, you would be facing the judges. The side 'wings' would have been for the judges' chambers on one side and jury deliberation on the other side. There were fireplaces at each end of the building. Other changes have been made to the structure such as the addition of two windows on the south wall, and the addition of the annex building on the north side. This annex was added in 1954 and is currently used as the Gloucester Visitor's Center and Gloucester Tourism office.

Please take your time and read some of the interesting plaques on the walls. There is also a photo album on the table at the south wall of Gloucester notables.

Please do not take food or drink into any of the buildings.

**DEBTOR'S PRISON** 

This tiny building was constructed around 1810 over a portion of a much earlier structure. It is the next building in the Court



Circle to undergo an interpretive restoration.

Recently, under the guidance of an architectural historian, samples of the modern interior walls were removed to reveal the

original interior. Two layers of sheetrock were removed to reveal 1 1/4 inch planks laid horizontally. The planks vary in width between 7 and 10 inches and have several layers of whitewash. The studs are quite close together and laid flush against the bare brick of the exterior wall. This same pattern was used in the ceiling. The placement of the boards on the walls and ceiling kept prisoners from picking away at the mortar to escape. Few examples of this construction method remain today.

The floor and the fireplace are original. The window to the left of the door was added in more modern times. Furnishings would have been very sparse; most likely a straw mat for bedding, a table and a few eating utensils.

Debtors who were incarcerated here were allowed out during the daylight hours for exercise. Boundaries were usually marked with whitewashed stones and the 'prisoner' could go anywhere within those boundaries... except into a building where there was a billiard table.

# **CLAYTON BUILDING**

The building you see before you was built in 1823 on the foundation of a 1770 Clerk of the Courts office. The earlier



building burned in 1820, and with it all of Gloucester's records were destroyed.

An interpretive restoration now depicts a Clerk of the Courts office from the early 1800s. Beneath

the brick is the original stone floor. The very large stones probably were used as ballast in the ships coming to America from England. Because the stones had begun to deteriorate, a protective cloth now covers them and the bricks are set in sand. The herringbone pattern is typical of the period.

Furnishings in an early clerk's office were usually 'hand-me-

downs' from the family and community. We chose the furniture for the large room based on research and visits to the clerk's office at Colonial Williamsburg.

John Clayton served as Clerk of the Court in Gloucester for 53 years. However, he never worked in this building - instead he worked from his home as was customary for clerks in this period. In 1976, the building was named in his honor.

Clayton was best known for his contributions as a botanist. An exhibit honoring John Clayton is planned for the smaller side room. Artifacts found at the site and an illustration of his home are most fascinating.

Please ask the docent at the Visitor Center to open the building for you.

### ROANE BUILDING

This 1896 Clerk of the Courts office was built to comply with the State's rigid fire codes. After having lost precious county records on several occasions, officials weren't taking any



chances. Each
of the rooms
can be closed
off from the
remainder of
the building by
a heavy iron
door. The walls
are fire proof
and the
interior of the

roof is cement. In theory, if a fire began in any room, it would not spread to the remaining building.

B. F. Smith designed the building and traveled throughout the region selling his buildings from a design catalog. A marble plaque just inside the front door, commemorates the construction and the county officials serving at the time.

The building was named for Basil Bernard Roane, Deputy Clerk and Clerk for 59 years.

In 2008, a considerable renovation project was undertaken. Drop ceilings were removed to expose the original metal interior. Tile floors were laid in the same pattern as the original floor, paneled walls were removed to expose the plaster, and lighting was installed to reflect the type used in the early 1900s.

Currently, the Roane Building is the home of Gloucester's Visitor Center. It previously served as the Museum of History

and headquarters for Gloucester's 350th Anniversary Celebration.

So sit a while on the front porch, enjoy stepping back in time...and imagine what the Court Green may have looked like on Court Day.

# JAIL



In 1870, the Board of Supervisors decided to build a new jail, after an earlier prison on the same site was burned by Federal troops during the War Between the States. The building was completed in 1873

and consisted of four rooms, each 16 x 16 feet in size.

The upstairs floors were made of 6 inch thick North Carolina Pine spiked together to form a solid floor. One room up and one down were constructed as iron cages covered with bricks. The building's walls are 18 inches thick.

You will notice that the two 'wings' on the building are newer brick. These additions were built in the early 1900s and were segregated bathrooms. They have been modernized and made handicapped accessible.

In 1952, the building was converted to office space until 2004. It is not currently open for public viewing; however, our hopes are to have use of the building some time in the next several years.

## **BOTETOURT BUILDING**



Across Main Street from the Court Circle is the Botetourt Building. This Gloucester landmark was built in the late eighteenth century as a roadside tavern

or ordinary and was known as "John New's Ordinary." It is one of the largest, as well as one of the few, brick taverns surviving from the pre-Revolutionary period. The building is believed to have been named for Lord Botetourt Norborne Berkeley, Baron of Botetourt, and sent from Gloucester, England to be Governor of Virginia. Sisters, Misses Emily and Ada Cox, assumed operation of the hotel in 1906 and served local residents and travelers in grand style. They purchased the

building in 1915 and began renovations which brought many changes to the building.

In 1971, Gloucester County received the first Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities Award for Historic Preservation for restoring and finding a functional use for the building.

The building became office space for county administration and was used for this purpose through 1999.

Gloucester Museum of History opened here in the Spring of 2000. Please visit the Museum to enjoy changing exhibits and permanent displays focusing on Gloucester's past.

Open: Monday - Saturday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Winter hours may differ, call 804-693-1234

COURT DAY was held once a month and lasted from one to several days, depending on how many trials were held. It was a time for socializing, auctioning livestock, and catching up on the latest news. Only men came to town for Court Day. The court green was once surrounded by a rail fence with a brick stile for entry and to keep the livestock out. The brick wall was built in the 1930s, probably as a WPA project.

The Confederate Monument was unveiled in September, 1889, in honor of Gloucester men who lost their lives in the War Between the States. It contains 134 names. Two names were added in 2005.

James D. Gardner Memorial - Pvt. Gardner, a Gloucester resident, was the only Gloucester citizen to ever receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. This honor was bestowed for his bravery at the Battle of Chapins Farm, September 29, 1864.

# Other Places of Interest

While you are in Gloucester, we hope you will add these sites to your itinerary:



### ROSEWELL RUINS -

One of colonial America's grandest mansions built between 1725 and 1738; gutted by fire in 1916. These beautiful ruins, carefully preserved,

will certainly spark your imagination. Visitor Center and Ruins open Monday thru Saturday 10 am-4 pm, Sunday 1 pm-4 pm, Admission.

### WALTER REED BIRTHPLACE - A small mid-19th century



building,
authentically
furnished. Dr.
Walter Reed,
credited with
discovering the
cause of the
dreaded yellow
fever, was born
here. Although
the building is
open only a few

times each year, stop by and look around - then try to imagine seven people living there.

### ABINGDON EPISCOPAL CHURCH - A rare cruciform (Latin



Cross) colonial church which was completed in 1755 and underwent major restoration in 1986. It is one of eight churches of colonial Virginia remaining.

**EDGE HILL HOUSE** - This is believed to be the first established shopping place for travelers going along the old Indian Road.



**WARE EPISCOPAL CHURCH** - This early 17th century structure served as encampments for federal and confederate soldiers. It is surrounded by a colonial brick wall and an interesting graveyard with beautiful plantings.

**WARNER HALL GRAVEYARD** - Colonial family cemetery where ancestors of George Washington, Robert E. Lee and Queen Elizabeth II are buried.

IF you have questions or comments please contact us at 804-693-0014 or tourism@gloucesterva.info. For more info on Gloucester please visit our website www.gloucesterva.info or visitgloucesterva.org updated 7/3/14 drc.