

## Historic Port Royal and the National Wildlife Refuge-- A View From the River

With more than a dozen historic buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the well preserved old Rappahannock River town of Port Royal—founded in 1744—is a fascinating place to visit by car or on foot. A walking-tour guide is available on-line here at [www.historicportroyal.com](http://www.historicportroyal.com).

But Port Royal can also be seen from the river. Right at the northern edge of the town is Buster's Place, a riverfront restaurant that has both a wharf from which canoes and kayaks can be put in the water and a boat ramp for larger craft.

Your visit to Port Royal actually begins even before you arrive, because the two large chimneys on your left as you enter Buster's parking lot are all that remain of the home of Dorothy Roy, one of the first notable woman merchants in colonial America.



When you launch your boat at Buster's, you are just upstream from the James Madison bridge over the Rappahannock. Only a few hundred yards farther upstream, on the other side of the river, is Belle Grove, the birthplace of James Madison, Father of the Constitution and fourth U.S. president. The mansion house is easily visible from the river in the fall, winter, and early spring, but is hidden behind trees during the late spring and summer.



About 300 yards upstream on the Port Royal side is the entrance to Goldenvale Creek, which can be explored by canoe or kayak although it is too shallow for motorboats.

The more interesting voyage, however, is downstream, past the Port Royal waterfront. Those in motorboats should be aware that lurking beneath the surface of the river, often exposed at low tide, are many pilings remaining from pre-Civil War wharfs that jutted out a hundred yards or more into the river.

Under the foundations of the modern bridge are the remains of the wharfs used by the ferries that took travelers across the river here from the late 1600s until the first bridge was built in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for this was the main route from Williamsburg, Richmond, and points south to Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, many of the

Founding Fathers passed this way, often eating a meal or spending the night in one of the many taverns that Port Royal boasted at that time.

About a hundred yards farther downstream you arrive at Port Royal Harbor, the main reason for the town's existence. Until the arrival of the railroads in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, water was the primary means of commerce, and the harbor at Port Royal was the major port for what later became Caroline County. The first commercial structures here were tobacco warehouses, and growers brought their tobacco along the rolling road—now Route 301—from the interior of the county to be shipped abroad. The town swarmed with sailors, who often brought in diseases such as smallpox, resulting in the establishment in Port Royal of Caroline County's first hospital.



King Street runs through Port Royal and ends at the harbor, where a small park now exists. During the Civil War, after the Battle of the Wilderness, Port Royal served briefly as the Union Army's primary supply center and the harbor was usually choked with ships. The permanent wharf had been destroyed, so the Army built a floating wharf of pontoons.

Until the 1930s, Port Royal continued to be served by steamboats that tied up at the wharf—including the James Adams Floating Theater, the showboat that was visited by Edna

Ferber in 1924-25 and served as the inspiration for her novel and later the Broadway musical "Showboat."

A little farther downstream you pass St. Peter's Church (1835) and its rectory (1740). St. Peter's has just received a new belfry to replace the one destroyed by lightning in 1868. The belfry houses a Black Meneely bell, cast in Troy, New York, and presented to Saint Peter's in the 1840s. Unlike many other church bells, the St. Peter's bell escaped being melted down during the Civil war.

Another hundred yards downstream you will pass Riverview—the large house facing the river above several terraces.

Built in 1846 by Bernard Lightfoot, a Port Royal merchant, the house was damaged by gunfire from Union gunboats before the Battle of Fredericksburg. From 1895 to 1906 the house was







owned and occupied by Captain Sally Tompkins, the “Nurse of the Confederacy” and only woman commissioned officer during the Civil War.

Just beyond Riverview you can see Townfield (1745), set farther back from the river across an expansive lawn. Both Riverview and Townfield are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Shortly after passing a large modern house overlooking the river, you reach the Port Royal Unit of the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Much of

the Refuge is closed to hikers during the spring and early summer to avoid disturbing the bald eagles that nest here, but the borders of the Refuge can be seen from the river and then by turning up Roys Run, which forms the eastern edge of the Refuge. The creek is navigable for canoes and kayaks for about a half mile until you reach a beaver dam.

Intrepid paddlers can return to the river and head downstream past the green channel marker #75 and explore Mill Creek, or continue down river (about 1½ miles from the bridge) to Camden, an Italianate mansion built shortly before the Civil War. The house was fired upon several times by Union gunboats, badly damaging a tower that existed at that time. Fortunately the main house, which is now on the National Historic Register, was not harmed too badly.



The Rappahannock River is always beautiful and any opportunity to sail its waters and watch the bald eagles wheel overhead is a treat. Nevertheless,

we hope this brief description of the sights to be seen along this stretch of the river has enhanced your visit, and we hope you will return to Port Royal soon.



If you have questions or comments about this brochure, please e-mail Jim Heimbach at [jh@jheimbach.com](mailto:jh@jheimbach.com).