

# **The View from Richmond Hill and the Naming of Richmond**

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6-1-2007**

“When we got home, we laid the foundation of two large cities. One at Shacco's, to be called Richmond, and the other at the point of Appomattox river, to be named Petersburg. These Major Mayo offered to lay out into lots without fee or reward. The truth of it is, these two places being the uppermost landing of James and Appomattox Rivers, are naturally intended for marts, where the traffic of the outer inhabitants must centre. Thus we did not build castles only, but also cities in the air.”

William Byrd II 1733

The statement above is one of the most quoted paragraphs in Richmond, Virginia's history and constitutes the extent of William Byrd II's recorded remarks on the founding of Richmond. The brevity of the statement reflects an apparent ambivalence on the part of Byrd towards the establishment of Richmond. According to Virginius Dabney William Byrd II was “Richmond's reluctant founder,” who established the new town to satisfy a term of his family land grant and was pressured by the Virginia House of Burgesses to comply with the terms of the grant.

Byrd's succinct passage begs the question: why did Byrd so name the new town? The answer given by Mr. Dabney, that “Byrd named the new town Richmond because its situation and surroundings reminded him of Richmond on the Thames,” constitutes the conventional wisdom of Richmonders and Richmond historians down through the ages on the matter.

To more fully understand why Byrd would name Richmond after an English town it is necessary to understand something of the history of that place and the relationship of Byrd to it. Richmond on the Thames was and remains a beautiful town surrounded by hills in the Thames Valley west of London. The English Richmond became a popular summer retreat for Londoners following the construction of Richmond Palace by King Henry VII in 1503. As time went by many Londoners followed the royal example and built summer homes in Richmond on the Thames' attractive and healthy environs.

Richmond Hill, a large hill adjacent to the town, provided a significant attraction to visitors with one of the most majestic views in England. It

became a noted destination for tourists and prompted reactions such as those of Charles Moritz, a German who climbed the hill in 1782. Moritz proclaimed: "The terrace at Richmond does assuredly form one of the finest prospects in the world." According to Janet Dunbar, a modern Richmond historian, the "glory of the Hill has always been the wonderful view from the crest, a view which has inspired poets and artists throughout the centuries."

Prints and paintings of the hill are numerous and the poet James Thomson penned these lines extolling the scenery:

Heavens! What a goodly prospect spreads,  
Of hill, and dales, and wood, and lawns, and spires  
And glittering towns, and gilded streams till all  
The stretching lanskip [sic] into smoke [the smoke of  
London] decays.

William Byrd II's long residence in London undoubtedly familiarized him with this famous spot. Byrd lived in London between 1680 and 1696, again from 1697 to 1698, and finally from 1715 through 1719. During these periods of residence in England Byrd extensively toured the country. During the final period he maintained a coach and six for touring the countryside around London. Byrd's friend the Duke of Argyll knew the Richmond area well, eventually building a large house not far from Richmond Hill. Jane Dunbar maintains that Byrd knew Richmond Hill intimately and quotes a source as saying he spent many happy days visiting the popular spot.

As noted earlier Byrd does not explicitly state his inspiration for naming Richmond on the James. Local historical evidence suggests a strong connection to the naming of Byrd's Richmond to the prospect of the English Richmond Hill. "Richmond Hill" was the common name for the area which today is known as Libbie Hill in particular and Church Hill in general. St. John's Episcopal Church was in the eighteenth century commonly referred to as the Church on Richmond Hill.

The noted British born and trained architect B. Henry Latrobe explicitly made the connection of the view from the English Richmond Hill to the naming of the town and hill of Richmond in Virginia. Latrobe devoted a lengthy section of his 1796 journal to comparing the English and Virginia Richmonds. He noted that when American places were named after "towns, places, or counties in old England" in only a "few cases has similarity of situation had the smallest influence upon the sameness of name." However Richmond Hill in Virginia was in his estimation "an exception to this remark."

Latrobe stated that the landscapes of the “two Richmond-hills are so similar in their great features, that at first sight the likeness is most striking.” The similarity was in his opinion sufficiently similar that “if a [person] could be imperceptibly and in an instant conveyed from one side of the Atlantic to the other he might hesitate for some minutes before he could discover the difference.” He noted “the windings of the James river have much the same cast with those of the Thames, ” and that both Richmonds consisted of an “amphitheatre of hills covered partly with wood partly with buildings,” and that the view over the James of Manchester, Virginia resembled the view over the Thames of Twickenham, England.

He did concede that the detail of each place “of course must be extremely different,” and enumerated the relatively minor differences between the two views. However, the closeness of the two views in inspiring the founder of Richmond, Virginia was obvious to Latrobe. The familiarity of William Byrd II with Richmond on the Thames, the references to “Richmond Hill” on both sides of the Atlantic, and knowledgeable assessments such as those of Latrobe all strongly validate the assessment that William Byrd II named his town after the similarity of the two Richmond hills.

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