

Historical and Physical Context: Mathews County

Mathews County is located at the eastern tip of the Middle Peninsula of Virginia. It is bounded on the north by the Piankitan River and the Chesapeake Bay, on the east by the Chesapeake Bay, and on the south by Mobjack Bay. Mathews is a rural county of 87 square miles, with a population of approximately 9,500, and is the smallest rural county in the state.¹

The county seat and center of commerce in Mathews County is the village known as Mathews, or Mathews Court House. It is located in the center of the county at the intersection of Rt. 14 and Rt. 198, at the head of Put-In Creek. This downtown commercial area covers only a few blocks, with most buildings located on Main Street (Rt. 14) and a few on the intersecting Church Street. At the center of the downtown area is the Courthouse Green, which houses several county buildings including the historic courthouse. A majority of the buildings downtown are commercial or governmental, although some historic residences remain on the fringes of the village.

Mathews County was originally known as Kingston Parish, and was the eastern part of Gloucester County. Kingston Parish was prosperous, and in 1704 116 landowners were recorded with total landholdings of 46,537 acres.² In 1790, Kingston Parish citizens petitioned the General Assembly to separate them from Gloucester, arguing that the size of the county made it difficult for residents of the lower section to travel the forty miles to Gloucester Court House. Speaker of the House of Delegates General Thomas Mathews supported the petition, and the county was divided on May 1, 1791. In gratitude for General Mathews' interest in their cause, the citizens named their new county Mathews.³

In 1792, construction began on the first of the brick county buildings located on the courthouse green at the head of Put-In Creek. By the mid-nineteenth century, several more county buildings had been erected on the green, including two jails and a clerk's office. The area surrounding the courthouse became the central marketplace of the county, and was originally known as Westville. In *A New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia and the District of Columbia*, published in 1835, Joseph Martin states that there were "about 30 houses, 4 mercantile stores, 1 tanyard, 3 boot and shoe factories, 1 tailor, 2 blacksmiths, 1 saddler, 1 carriage maker, and 1 tavern...population 150, including 3 regular physicians."⁴ Westville gradually evolved into the Mathews commercial district that exists today.

The economy of Mathews County has always been closely tied to the sea, with commercial fishing and shipbuilding historically being two of its largest industries. Shipbuilding was the main trade in the county from as early as the American Revolution, with timber being harvested from across the county. One-third of the ships constructed in Virginia between 1790 and 1820 were built in Mathews; by the mid-nineteenth century, the shipbuilding industry in the county had declined as sea vessel industry sprang up in the Norfolk and Baltimore areas. During the 1800s and first half of the 1900s, Mathews was a steamboat port for boats carrying both passengers and cargo. Fishing industries have also long been an important trade, with crabbing, oystering, and fishing being the main source of income for many Mathews families. The seafood industry peaked around 1920 and then declined due to a lessened market and general resource depletion in the Bay.⁵ This lack of sustaining industry resulted in little population growth within the county since the mid-nineteenth century and slow commercial growth in the downtown commercial district, which has been beneficial in preserving the rural historic character of the village.

Thomas James and the James Store in the Historic Record

Thomas James, the original owner of the Thomas James Store, was born on February 24, 1777 in Kingston Parish of Gloucester County to Matthias James and Elizabeth Davis.⁶ He was married in c.1815 to Frances Lewis, and had three sons and three daughters. James was a merchant, with retail licenses recorded in the Mathews Land Tax Records between 1815 and 1820.⁷ It is likely that he continued to hold a license after 1820, but that was the last year that retail licenses were recorded in the local land tax records. In the census of 1820, Thomas James was listed as the head of a household that included five children under the age of ten, one child under the age of sixteen, and one female and one male aged 26 to 45. Two of these family members were stated as engaged in commerce, with the second likely being James's eldest son, who may have apprenticed with his father in anticipation of one day taking over the family business.⁸ James was a prominent citizen of Mathews County; he was also a postmaster at Mathews Court House in 1810⁹ and a recorded Justice of the Peace from 1819 to 1821, as well as in 1824.¹⁰

Thomas James first appears in the Mathews County Land Tax Records in 1807, owning 76 acres of land in an unlisted location. These 76 acres were later listed in the 1814 Land Tax Records as being located in "Milford Haven," which also listed another 16 acres of land at "Pudding Creek." In 1815, James purchased 54 acres of land in Mathews Court House from John Patterson. This purchase included the property upon which the Thomas James Store stands. By 1819, the buildings standing on these 54 acres were valued at \$630.¹¹ Although it is likely that the Thomas James Store had been constructed by 1819, it is impossible to tell from the Land Tax Records which building values signify the James Store, so we must rely on architectural evidence to determine a construction date for the building. Thomas James's family home was probably also located on this property in the Court House, with the store being one of several outbuildings.

Over the next 25 years, Thomas James's landholdings in Mathews Court House gradually rose; in 1820, he owned 74 acres, in 1824 he added an additional 18-acre property in the Court House, and by 1840 his Mathews Court House holdings totaled 129 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres. The building value on the James Store Court House property fluctuated as well, presumably as new structures were built and older ones destroyed or moved, and by 1845 James owned \$2000 in buildings on the property. He owned other properties in the county as well; between 1819 and 1827, James acquired land in Reade Swamp, Milford Haven, East River, Bandy Ridge, Pudding Creek, and Mathews Court House. By the time the James Store lot was sold in 1846, Thomas James owned approximately 317 acres of land, with buildings valued at \$2,150.¹² It is apparent that James was wealthy enough to be able to gradually increase his landholdings, and to build and pay taxes on these highly valued buildings. In addition to land and buildings, Thomas James owned a large number of slaves, particularly considering his comparatively small landholdings. In the 1820 census, James was listed as owning ten slaves; by 1830 he owned fifteen slaves, and by 1840 he was listed with sixteen slaves. Since James's landholdings were too small to be involved in large-scale agriculture, his profession in commerce must have proven a lucrative one. By 1840, the census lists six members of the James family occupied in agriculture, and none in commerce.¹³ It is possible that upon retirement from commerce, James used his accrued lands to pursue agriculture for the remainder of his life.

Significance of the Thomas James Store

The Thomas James Store is significant historically for the part it played locally in the Mathews County community, as well as architecturally as a rare surviving example of an early nineteenth century commercial building type. Due to sparse historic records regarding the store or Thomas James, our knowledge of the store itself is very limited. However, we can look at the role that other southern country stores played in local economic and social history to gain a better understanding of the James Store.

By the time the Thomas James Store was built, the architectural style of the southern rural store had been established as a vital part of local communities across the south. Colonial stores were operating as early as the mid-eighteenth century, once the demand for local goods began to grow with increased settlement. By the end of the eighteenth century, these country stores had become one of the most common non-domestic buildings in Virginia. Stores or storehouses could be found in towns, at country crossroads, or on plantations and farms. They were used as a place for the purchase and trade of crops and other goods. In addition to foodstuffs, stores often also sold tools and other necessary provisions, as well as excess goods produced by the plantation's slave artisans. The storehouses often imported and exported goods, selling imports to local residents and storing materials awaiting export; in Mathews, the exported goods were likely food crops, tobacco, and cotton. Southern stores like the Thomas James Store were the center of economic and social activity in the community, linking residents to one another and to the outside world through the importing and exporting of goods.¹⁴

Small southern stores are also significant for the role that the storekeeper generally played in the community. He collected crops from small farmers and arranged for their sale in his store, or for their export. He acted as a banker for farmers, allowing them to purchase goods from the store with credit against their future crop sales. Because storekeepers were such important and well-known figures in their communities, they often held other prominent offices, such as Justice of the Peace as in the case of Thomas James. Storekeepers also often held the office of postmaster, allowing them to easily send and receive correspondence, and to attract trade.¹⁵ As postmasters would have access to newspapers and magazines, the storekeeper was often more linked with events outside of the community than the average resident.

Architecturally, the Thomas James Store is significant as it is one of only a handful of surviving southern antebellum commercial buildings. It follows the general floor plan of most stores from its time period¹⁶, having only two rooms on the ground floor: a larger retail room and a smaller counting room. As in the James Store, the basic store plan would have a main entrance into the retail room, as well as a back door leading from the counting room. The James Store has a third exterior door, which is interesting as a testament to the rising popularity of a loading door in the early to mid-nineteenth century. On the traditional store, windows were generally located only on the front wall of the building to maximize wall space for shelving, and there was a counter in the sales room to separate the customers from the goods on the shelves. There was usually living space for the storekeeper on the second floor of the store, which could be reached by a staircase that rose from the counting room. The James Store is unusual in that the second floor appears to have been used for storage only rather than a living area.

Chain of Title and Subsequent Uses of the Building

In 1846, John Dixon Jarvis and Elijah Barnum purchased the one-acre property fronting Main Street that contained the Thomas James Store and other outbuildings, together valued at \$350. By 1859, the building value on the land had diminished to \$300, and then rose again to \$400 in 1872 as improvements were made to the property.¹⁷ It is unknown whether the Thomas James Store was still being operated as a retail store at this time, but records show that the land was still used commercially. Elijah Barnum was listed as a merchant in the 1850 census¹⁸, and the property was recorded as "Store Lot" in the Land Tax Records in 1859. The James Store itself may have still been used as a retail establishment, or it may have been utilized as a storage building for a new store.

By 1869, the property was solely owned by Elijah Barnum, and remained in the possession of him and his family until 1893, when it was purchased by William Northam Trader and John W. Dixon, Jr.¹⁹ At this time, the property became dubbed the "Barnum Store House Lot" in the Mathews Land Tax Records. It appears that the land was still being used commercially, as Trader and Dixon were involved in a mercantile partnership. In 1899, a lawsuit over the partnership resulted in a settlement that transferred full ownership of the property containing the James Store to William Northam Trader.²⁰ By 1898, the property had diminished to ½ acre of land with buildings valued at \$250.²¹

In May of 1899, Trader sold the ½ acre containing the James Store to brothers Henry Sibley and Francis Joseph Sibley, grandsons of Thomas James.²² Henry and F. Joseph had already established their retail business, Sibley Bros. General Store, by the time they purchased the property. It is unknown whether they operated their store elsewhere in Mathews prior to 1899, or whether they rented one of the buildings on the property from William Northam Trader. What is certain is that by 1900, the Sibley brothers had constructed a new 2 ½ story building fronting Main Street from which to operate their business, and the building value on the property rose to \$1100.²³ By this time, The Thomas James Store was almost certainly used as a storehouse rather than a retail location.

The property remained in the Sibley family for nearly a century; with the death of Francis Joseph Sibley, the property and business was passed to his son, Cecil Miller Sibley, on December 13, 1945.²⁴ Sibley's continued to operate until Cecil's death in 1987, when the property transferred to his wife, Mary Virginia Shinault Croft Sibley.²⁵ In 1989, she sold the property to Jerry and Carol Fruehbrodt, who reopened the general store.²⁶ By this time, the land had been reduced to 0.1268 acres, containing the Thomas James Store, Sibley's General Store, and a third building that was likely utilized as a store at one time, but had been used for storage since the construction of Sibley's. The Fruehbrodts owned the property until 2003, when they sold it to Michael and Lisa Brown.²⁷ The property changed hands again in September 2008 with its sale to the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center. However, Brown had agreed to donate the Thomas James Store to the Mathews County Historical Society prior to the sale, so the building itself is currently owned by MCHS.

Footnotes

1. Mathews County Visitor and Information Center, "Mathews History and Statistics," Mathews County Visitor and Information Center, <http://www.visitmathewsva.com/statistics.html> (accessed March 10, 2009)
2. Polly Cary Mason, "Records of Colonial Gloucester County Virginia," Volume I, pp.84-85.
3. Mathews County Historical Society, "History and Progress: Mathews County, Virginia" (Mathews County, Virginia: Mathews County Historical Society, 1982), 4.
4. Joseph Martin, ed., "A New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia and the District of Columbia" (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2000), p. 228-229.
5. Mathews County Visitor and Information Center.
6. Emma R. Matheny and Helen K. Yates, ed, "Kingston Parish Register Gloucester and Mathews Counties 1749-1827."
7. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1815-1820, Mathews County Courthouse, Mathews, VA.
8. Stephen E. Bradley, Jr., "Mathews County Virginia, Censuses 1810, 1820, 1830, 1840" (Self-published, 1992), p. 15-16, 45, 58.
9. Receipt dated May 30, 1810, Richard Billups papers, Box 4 Folder 1, Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.
10. Mathews County Virginia Executors' Bonds, 1795-1825, and Guardian Bonds, Book B, 1806-1822.
11. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1807-1819.
12. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1820-1846.
13. Bradley, 15-16, 45, 58.
14. Carl L. Lounsbury, "An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture & Landscape" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 355-356.
15. Lewis A. Atherton, "The Southern Country Store, 1800-1860" (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).
16. Lounsbury, 355-356.
17. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1846-1872.
18. 1850 Federal Census, Mathews County Virginia.
19. Deed of sale from Commissioners of the Circuit Court to William N. Trader and John W. Dixon, Jr., 1893, Deed Book 10, page 403, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
20. Deed of sale from John W. Dixon, Jr. to William N. Trader, 1899, Deed Book 12, page 193, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
21. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1898.
22. Deed of sale from William Trader to Henry and F. Joseph Sibley, 1899, Deed Book 12, page 231, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
23. Mathews County Land Tax Records, 1900.
24. Deed of sale from F. Joseph Sibley to Cecil Sibley, 1945, Deed Book 40, page 361, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
25. Will of Cecil Sibley, 1987, Will Book 17, page 537, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
26. Deed of sale from Mary Sibley to Jerry Fruehbrodt, 1989, Deed Book 148, page 812, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.
27. Deed of sale from Jerry Fruehbrodt to Michael J. Brown, 2003, Deed Book 295, page 299, Mathews County Clerk's Office, Mathews, VA.