Colonial Cities

**A new town in a “new” land**

In 1607 Jamestown, Virginia, became the first permanent English settlement in America. The site of Jamestown was located on an island in the James River about five miles from present-day Williamsburg. Life at Jamestown proved difficult for the new colonists. Most were young white men who worked as indentured servants*.* The settlers were often hungry, and struggled to adapt to the different environment. Native Americans in the area were sometimes helpful; at other times, angry with the colonists. Although many of the settlers suffered and died from illnesses and the difficult conditions, more settlers arrived from England to maintain the colony.

**Leaving Jamestown**

After the initial struggle to survive in the new colony, the settlers discovered the rich soil of Virginia allowed them to make money. People in Europe clamored for imported tobacco from Virginia. More settlers came, and now there were families and shopkeepers. By the late 1600s, most settlers had moved inland from the marshy area around Jamestown to an area called the Middle Plantation. The Middle Plantation was a more elevated area about five miles inland, and the colonists desired their capital city near their tobacco fields.

In 1699 the new capital was named Williamsburg in honor of King William III. When the city plan was designed, only two things had been built in the area of Williamsburg, a church and the College of William and Mary. Around them was an expansive area to build the new capital city. It would become one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the British colonies in America.

**The Plan for Williamsburg**

Williamsburg’s design was organized according to two traditional British ideas about cities:

1. A city should be the center for trade, education, religion and politics;
2. Large spaces around the public buildings provide a place for public gatherings and make the city look grand.

As the city of Williamsburg grew, many wooden and brick houses were built. Houses were surrounded by gardens to make the city more beautiful. Stores and shops increased as trade with England grew. Some stores sold their own local goods, while others specialized in imported goods from England. Soon the streets were filled with people buying and selling products. Large government buildings made of brick and surrounded by large lawns were placed near the city center. On the borders of the city, large houses and slave quarters were built on tobacco plantations.

**Travel and Connections**

In the beginning, both Jamestown and Williamsburg relied on connections to England by ship. Essential goods like tools, clothing, and even food came from England. Products made or grown in Virginia were exported to England. But over time, Williamsburg began to depend on trade with other settlements in Virginia. Travelers from western settlements brought furs and agricultural products to sell. They came to do government business. The Virginia colony continued to grow towards the Appalachian Mountains and the Shenandoah Valley. Roads and rivers connected Williamsburg to settlements to the west.