

OLDEST HOME IN UNITED STATES PREY TO FLAMES

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HISTORIC HOUSE NEAR HAMPTON CONSUMED BY FIRE  
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Residence of George Wythe  
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Supposed First Dwelling Erected in America is Destroyed -  
Gasoline Stove Cause  
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Four massive blackened walls, surrounding a smouldering heap of debris, are all that remain of "Chesterville," the home of George Wythe, First Virginia Chancellor, signer of the Declaration of Independence, jurist and writer, claimed by local historians to have been the oldest residence in America, which was located in the Back River section, about eight miles from Hampton.

The old structure fell victim to flames which started from the explosion of a kerosene stove Sunday afternoon, and before the neighbors could subdue the flames the entire dwelling was destroyed, save the walls. The walls are of four brick thick, thus, showing the great difference between the single brick walls of today and the manner in which houses were erected more than a century ago.

The fire was fierce, and as the walls of the house refused to give to the heat, the time consumed in eating the framework away was considerable. Mrs. Robert S. Hudgins, Jr., who, with her husband and son, occupied the famous house, had started to prepare tea.

This was about 6:30 o'clock. She lighted the kerosene oil stove, placed a kettle of water on one of the burners, and then left the room for a few seconds.

Hardly had Mrs. Hudgins gotten from the kitchen when she was startled by an explosion and soon flames were issuing from the windows of the kitchen.

The fuel was added to by reason of a five-gallon can of oil being kept in the room. Mrs. Hudgins never attempted to enter the burning room after the explosion occurred.

"Chesterville", according to the best obtainable information from local historians, was erected for George Wythe in the year 1745, or between that time and 1760. It is said that the plans for the dwelling were drawn by Thomas Jefferson, who had been a pupil under George Wythe, and were fashioned after Jefferson's ancestral home in Italy.

However, Mr. Wythe never completed the plans first adopted, and the building was never finished as at first outlined.

George Wythe occupied the building until about 1800, when he went to Richmond, and died in that city in 1805. He sold the property in this county to Robert S. Hudgins, father of Capt. Robert R. Hudgins, and grandfather of R. S. Hudgins, who was occupying it when the fire laid the structure to ashes.

When the elder Mr. Hudgins died he left the property to his daughter, Mrs. Winder, the wife of Dr. Lawrence Winder, a physician of note in his time.

Dr. Winder mortgaged "Chesterville" for \$2000 and when the Civil War broke out he lost all of his property and finally "Chesterville" was sold to satisfy the mortgage.

### Home of Schmeiz Family

The late Francis Anton Schmeiz, father of Henry Lane Schmeiz, Mrs. Fannie A. Hudgins and Mrs. Howard B. Cottler, became the purchaser of the house, and upon his death he willed the property to his eldest daughter, Mrs. Fannie Schmeiz Hudgins, who still owns the farm.

Robert Hudgins, Jr. has resided in the dwelling since his marriage to Miss Grace Cosby, three years ago.

According to the historians of Hampton, Chesterville is the oldest dwelling house in America, and with the exception of St. John's Episcopal Church, it is the oldest building in Elizabeth City county.

The reflection of the fire illuminated the heavens for miles away and people of Hampton, York county and Warwick county west to Back River, when it became known that "Chesterville" was being devoured by the flames. A large boat load of York county people reached "Chesterville" just before the building crashed in and offered assistance to the owners. ← west

### Sketch of George Wythe

George Wythe was born in Elizabeth City country in 1726. Henry Howe, in his historical collections of Virginia, gives the following sketch of George Wythe.

"George Wythe, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was born in this county in 1726. His education was principally directed by his mother. The death of both of his parents before he became of age, and the uncontrolled possession of the large fortune, led him for some time into a course of amusement

and dissipation. At the age of 30, however, his conduct underwent an entire change. He applied himself vigorously to the study of law, and soon after his admission to the bar, his learning, industry and eloquence made him eminent. For several years previous to the revolution he was conspicuous in the house of burgesses, and in the commencement of opposition to England he evinced an ardent attachment to liberty. In 1764 he drew up a remonstrance to the house of commons in a tone of independence too decided for that period, and was greatly modified by assembly before assenting to it. In 1775 he was appointed a delegate to the continental congress in Philadelphia. In the following year he was appointed, in connection with Mr. Jefferson and others, to revise the laws of Virginia - a duty which was performed with great ability. In 1777 he was appointed speaker of the house of delegates, and during the same year judge of High Court of Chancery. On a new organization of the Court of Equity in subsequent year he was appointed sole chancellor - a station which he filled for more than twenty years. In 1787 he was a member of the convention which formed the federal constitution and during the debates acted for the most part as chairman. He subsequently presided twice successively in the college of electors on Virginia. His death occurred on the 8th of June, 1806, in the eighty-first year of his age. It was supposed that he was poisoned, but persons suspected were acquitted by the jury. In learning, industry and judgment Chancellor Wythe had few superiors. His integrity was never stained, even by suspicion,

and from the moment of his abandonment of the follies of his youth his reputation was unspotted."

It was said the George Sweeny, a grandson of his sister, was the man that is alleged to have attempted to murder George Wythe in "Chester ville" by administering poisoned coffee, in order that Sweeny might inherit the estate, which Mr. Wythe had willed to him. Mr. Wythe changed the will later and left the property to other relatives.

If local historians are correct it was George Wythe who designed the present seal of Virginia.