

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PROPERTIES NOW INCLUDED IN THE WEST AREA  
OF LANGLEY RESEARCH CENTER, NASA

(Compiled by the LRC Historical and Archeological Society)

The property presently known as the "West Area" of Langley Research Center, NASA has an interesting and significant history dating from the early settlement of America. Of primary interest is that it includes the homesite, and probably the birthplace, of George Wythe, Signer of the Declaration of Independence and a member of the Virginia Delegation to the Constitutional Convention. This important historic site has been intensively researched by the LRC Historical and Archeological Society. This research provided historical data which supported the nomination of the site as a Historical Landmark in late 1971. The site was designated a Virginia Historical Landmark in 1972 and was assigned to the National Register of Historical Places in 1973. The area so designated is indicated on the attached map. The history of this area and its adjoining properties is briefly review herein. Source material for this review is available from the archives of the Society.

Aside from the Indian inhabitants (Captain John Smith indicated a number of Indian villages in this general area on his early maps), the first settlers of whom we have record came in the 1620 to 1636 period. Among these were the Moore, Laydon, Thompson, Garnett, and Christmas families and one Benjamin Syms. By 1636 most of these landowners had obtained "patents" or grants to their lands from the Kings of England through the Royal Governor at Jamestown. The largest of the early landowners were John Laydon, 500 acres; George Hall, 340 acres; and John Moore, Thomas Garnett, and Benjamin Syms, 200 acres each. Of these, Laydon, father of the first child of English parentage

born in Virginia (1609), and Syms, founder of the first "free school" in America, were probably the most historically significant, but Moore was to have the most lasting influence, as his decendants were still living on his original patent some 250 years later.

The period from 1640 to 1690 is characterized by a dearth of local public and church records. However, one existing document, a re-patent of John Moore's land by his son Augustine Moore in 1676, has particular significance because it mentions "the land of Mr. Tho. Wyth" as adjoining his property on the northwest. This is the first known mention of the Wythe family which was to have such a significant impact on the history of Elizabeth City County (now Hampton), the Commonwealth of Virginia, and 100 years later, the founding of the United States of America. This Thomas Wythe, the great-grandfather of George Wythe, was a representative for Elizabeth City County in the House of Burgesses in 1680. This political entry marks the beginning of a record of public service by the Wythe family that endured over a period of 125 years.

In 1676 the "land of Mr. Tho. Wyth" is believed to have included the 200 acre plantation originally patented by Thomas Garnett in 1635 and a number of other properties not yet identified. This property is referred to as "the plantation where we now live" in Thomas Wythe's will made in 1693. In addition to this land, Wythe had purchased 204 acres along what is now known as Wythe or Brick Kiln Creek in 1691 from Edmund Swaney for 50 pounds Sterling. Originally part of John Laydon's patent, this property had been repatented by John Howitt in 1648, and had then passed through a number of owners before Swaney acquired it. Called "Oares Plantation" in

1697, this land was inherited by George Wythe's father, Thomas, in 1694. It is this portion of the Wythe plantation that is of the greatest historical interest, as it is most probably the birthplace of George Wythe in 1726. Included in this area are at least five sites of historic importance: (1) A house site (stone) believed to be part of the "Buildings, Edifices, and Houses" described by Swaney in his deed; (2) A house site (brick), the remains of an imposing house, believed to have been built by George Wythe circa 1771, which burned in 1911; (3) A brick kiln probably associated with the construction of the brick house; (4) The remains of a granary and wharf known to have been in use in 1795; and (5) A family cemetery.

Upon the death of George Wythe's father in 1729 the plantation, then consisting of approximately 800 acres, was inherited by George's older brother Thomas. George Wythe lived there until, at about age 16, he was sent to his uncle's to study law. He returned many times to the plantation to visit his family, finally returning there to live after the death of his first wife in 1748. When his older brother died in 1755 without issue, the plantation passed into George Wythe's possession. Although he spent much time in Williamsburg attending to his law practice and serving as Burgess and Clerk of the House of Burgesses, this was his primary place of residence until 1775 when he and his second wife Elizabeth inherited what is now designated the "Wythe House" in Williamsburg from her father Richard Taliaferro. In 1792 Wythe, who had by then moved to Richmond, sold the plantation to Daniel L. Hylton of Richmond. However, Hylton defaulted on the payment and Wythe sued to recover the property. In 1801 Wythe bought the plantation back at public auction, and then sold it again to Houlder Hudgins of Mathews County; the deed being dated December 6,

1802. Thus ended over a century of Wythe ownership of land that is now incorporated in the West Area of Langley Research Center, NASA.

During the early period of Wythe ownership the plantation was primarily used for growing tobacco, and during the later years grains such as corn, wheat, and barley were evidently the primary crops. Livestock included cattle, sheep, horses, hogs and oxen; each being mentioned in wills of various periods. Some attention was given to "the produce of Certain Orchards" which evidently were mostly apples and pears. Some very ancient pear trees can still be found in the woods adjacent to the Vaughan Cemetery behind the Activities Building.

Landowners who were contemporaries of the Wythes, in addition to the Moores, included the Ross, Francis, Parsons and Tabb families, as well as Thomas Harwood, who married the widow of the first Thomas Wythe, and the Reverend James Wallace, who married the widow of the second Thomas Wythe. The children of these families were probably educated at the Syms Free School which was located on a half acre in the southwestern corner of the 200 acre "School Land" (presently on the Langley Air Force Base). The balance of this property was usually leased by the Wythes. The income from the lease was used to support the school-masters and maintain the school building.

During the nineteenth century there were three primary plantations which between them included almost all of the land that is now known as the West Area of Langley Research Center, NASA. These were Chesterville (700 acres), the old Wythe plantation (George Wythe used the name Chesterville in a letter to his friend Thomas Jefferson in 1781); Cloverdale (600 acres), a composite of a number of small properties; and Moorefield (225 acres), the

hereditary Moore Patent.

After George Wythe sold Chesterville, it was owned and farmed in turn by the Hudgins, Haller, Winder and Schmeltz families. During the late period of the Civil War the area was occupied by Federal troops who ransacked the main house and left it badly damaged. In 1878 Chesterville was reacquired by the Hudgins family which retained ownership until its approximately 300 remaining acres were purchased by NACA in 1951 (see attached map).

Cloverdale was originally formed from the Ross and School Land properties, along with portions of Chesterville (100 acres) and Moorefield (50 acres) by Houlder Hudgins (1802-1815), and later by James M. Vaughan (1817-1850). After 1850 this property was for a time split between the Vaughan and Smith (later Chiles) families, but it was reunited by F. A. Schmeltz (who also owned Chesterville) during the period 1875-78 and bequeathed to his daughter Nannie B. Collier. The Colliers retained ownership until the land was acquired by NACA in the early 1940's.

Moorefield, which had 285 acres in 1676, had been reduced to 225 acres by 1817. This was further reduced by sale to 162 acres in 1853, and by the time the Sinclair, and later the Collier families acquired it, only 100 acres were left. The U. S. Government purchased these 100 acres from the Colliers in 1916 as part of a 1659-acre purchase for an "Aviation Experimental Station and Proving Grounds", which became Langley Field in 1917.

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