

Tracking British Naval Activity on the Chesapeake Bay from the Pleasure House Tavern

As the Virginia Colony mobilized for the American Revolution and set upon the path to independence, the Virginia Committee of Safety stationed militia patrols along the coast. The patrols were to protect against British incursions, prevent supplies from reaching the British, and prevent enslaved persons from escaping or fleeing to the British side.

Colonel William Woodford's May 2, 1776, letter to Major General Charles Lee indicated he had stationed "from the Pleasure House Tavern on the Bay side to the Sea Board 100 militia." The troops were under the command of Lt. Col. Frances Eppes who reported "many slaves had run off; but hope when these different partys [sic] come to be subdivided they will effectually put a stop to their escaping."

The Pleasure House was ideally situated to track British naval activity on the Chesapeake Bay. (It was located near where the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel access ramp is located in Virginia Beach.) Overlooking Lynnhaven Bay, an observer would not only see activity in that immediate location of the bay, but vessels entering at Cape Henry, and those coming down the bay would be visible as well. A road connected the Pleasure House with Kemp's Landing and New Town further connecting to Norfolk. British movement on the bay could be reported to military officials quickly and efficiently over a very secure route. Maintaining a military presence at Kemp's Landing was critical in this juncture as well. Based on Woodford's letter, it appears that the Pleasure House was used to both house troops and act as the headquarters for that section of patrol.

During this time the Pleasure House was under the ownership of William Thorowgood. Thorowgood had a front row seat to the action on the bay. He could easily observe ships entering and leaving the bay and hear the fights in the bay between the Royal Navy, merchant vessels, privateers, and later vessels of the Virginia Navy. He would then bear witness, along with his neighbors, to many of the events throughout the war. Having a front row seat did not always result in an enviable position. The Pleasure House was a fixture on the official navigation charts used by the Royal Navy where it was called the "Watering Place." As such it was one of the first targets for British "visitation" when they entered the bay.