

# In the Divots of History

Colonial Williamsburg balances animated history and modern recreation – with a portfolio of great golf courses to boot.

BY RAY TENNENBAUM

**I**n 1775, Patrick Henry mustered 150 armed militiamen to march from Hanover County to Williamsburg to force the British governor's hand in a dispute over the colony's store of gunpowder. A year later, the Virginia Convention of Delegates met in the Capitol building to draw up a resolution that proved to be a first draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Heavy weaponry sits ready to repel invaders alongside the 17th hole at Kingsmill Resort.



The Governor's Palace was home to Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson during their post-colonial terms in office.

Since the 1960s, golfers have trekked along the eastern seaboard to experience a recreation of life in colonial times, and to play some exceptional modern creations in this place of considerable beauty and charm. Less than a half-day's drive from the Met Area, Williamsburg offers a destination diversion for lovers of history and the links alike.

Golf fits in well here where the British first settled the New World, halfway down the peninsula formed by the York and James rivers in coastal southern Virginia. Williamsburg, for a time the capital of the Virginia colony, may have played a vital role in the Revolution, but it has also long fostered a wealthy, conservative tradition, redolent of prosperity and rectitude, hearkening

back to the original aristocrats' loyalty to the Stuart monarchy. Kings and dukes still live on in street names, if not in the corridors of power.

Reclamation of the birthplace of our independence didn't just happen. Williamsburg was a drowsy, half-forgotten old village when, at the height of the Roaring Twenties, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., followed the lead of a local minister named W.A.R. Goodwin and set to work preserving what was left of the colonial-era buildings, and reconstructing what time had erased.

Thoughtfully laid out by the governing assembly according to a zoning plan in 1699—one of the first instances of urban planning in America—the original Williamsburg possessed a simplicity and elegance

that helped shape its destiny: at one end of the village is the stately old Capitol building where Henry served; at the other, the picture-book College of William and Mary. Three centuries later, shrewd planning is likewise the earmark of the Colonial Williamsburg recreation: If you stay at the handsome, washed-brick Williamsburg Inn, where spacious rooms are meticulously appointed in luxurious English country style, you're within a five-minute walk of everything there is to enjoy. Just two blocks from the front door is the Revolutionary City, centered around wide, stately Duke of Gloucester Street, main thoroughfare of the historic area, where period-dressed performers engage visitors and re-enact seminal events and mundane chores alike. Or you can follow a convenient brick pathway off the veranda behind the lobby, past a bowling green and an area for garden parties, turn towards the large, graciously-appointed spa and fitness club, to reach the Golden Horseshoe Gold Course clubhouse.

If you're only here for the golf, you've come to the right place. Robert Trent Jones was at the peak of his career when he completed the Gold Course in 1963, and it's fitting that a place which exists to celebrate what's most precious about our past contains the best work of an architect whose designs have stood up to time and fashion. It is no easy task to create a woodland golf course at one with its surroundings, but Jones was celebrated for his landscaping genius, and the acclaimed Gold vindicates his own description of it as "a natural arboretum upon which a great golf course

## Rees's Gold – and his father's

In early May 2016, the Gold Course at Golden Horseshoe closed for a year to allow Rees Jones to perform a complete renovation of his father's layout. A handful of greenside bunkers will be replaced with grass chipping areas, and all the rest will be rebuilt using the latest technology. Tees will be reshaped, and the entire golf course will be regressed (Bermuda fairways, bent greens). Four greens will be flattened slightly—in Rees's words, "With the newer technology making for faster greens, we wanted to take the severity out, but keep the Robert Trent Jones characteristics."

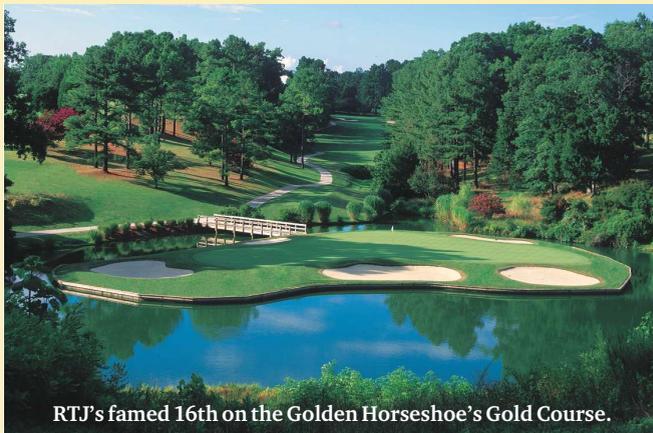
Rees brings a special kind of

expertise to restoring his father's work. "He spent a lot of time on it—it wasn't as long as his normal golf course, it's more of a finesse

course, with smaller greens. It was also one of his favorite golf courses because the site was so pristine." Having renovated the Gold

once before, in 1998, Rees is well aware of what needs work and what doesn't; contrasting the task at hand with other RTJ redesigns he's done: "This is a real restoration unlike some of them where he didn't have the revenue to do what he wanted, like Congressional, which was a complete redesign.... In this case the Rockefellers funded it and they did it right the first time."

And next summer, golfers can see what they did right in its modernized—but still classic—form.



RTJ's famed 16th on the Golden Horseshoe's Gold Course.

has been built.”

Resolutely challenging, the Gold’s distances and lies are calibrated precisely to force a golfer to make very careful decisions – as on the par-five second, reminiscent of the 15th at Augusta, where a solid drive lands you with a downhill lie to an uphill green 240 yards away over water – while the sensation of fairways unrolling amid the flowering trees and bushes of Virginia forest provides a constant source of calm and inspiration. The small, amoeba-like greens are surrounded by bunkers carved into kidneys, boomerangs, and ovals, which nowadays pleasingly evoke the casual post-war modernism of the Space Age. A string of linked ponds comes into play on four holes, including Jones’s most celebrated par-3, the beguiling 169-yard 16th, the first island green of the modern era; surrounded by five bunkers, it’s considerably more playable than Pete Dye’s later version at Sawgrass.

Going hand in hand with the venerable Trent Jones design is son Rees’s Green course, completed in 1991, which presents the same Virginia forest in softer edges. Wider dogleg elbows and lines of bunkers and mounds rescue or curb errant tee shots;



Mike Strantz’s bold approach and extravagant contouring are on full display at Royal New Kent.

though it’s longer than the Gold, the Green gives more ample opportunity for aggressive lines without exacting punishment. Still, the Green will bare its teeth, as on the long par-four 14th with water left all the way to the green: a run-up approach is worth considering.

The Williamsburg experience benefits

from a comforting level of service: employees are friendly, helpful, and courteous, as New Jersey residents David and Claudia Hesk, members of Echo Lake in Westfield, discovered when they first visited back in 1995. Originally from York, England, David, a research chemist by profession and a passionate history buff, had only recently taken



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up golf when Claudia set out to find a vacation spot rich in the same kind of history she'd found when they visited his family. It was love at first sight. "I'd never seen such perfect 18th-century architecture, it's just so well done," he recalls. "It's also very authentic, the way the whole town was reconstructed, but I love that because I'm a history nut." The pair visit at least twice a year, usually together, though David made the drive down I-95 alone to attend an "Ales Through The Ages" conference earlier in the spring.

Even for the only casually curious visitor, Colonial Williamsburg is an endless source of historical fascination. You will be as entertained and engaged as your kids by the performers in the streets, but the most exceptional exhibits here are the real-life artifacts in the collections of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum and the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum. Countless priceless relics, artifacts of enterprise and struggle from days of yore, are on display: a map presenting an imaginatively crude notion of the Atlantic seaboard, the carved figure of a grinning cigar-store down, a bittersweet epigram on a 19th-century sampler, an early pewter tea-set, an



Autumn maples provide a dramatic setting for the displays of living history.

angry political broadsheet, a magnificent 18th-century schooner rendered in a razor-sharp oil painting, a clavier from the late 1700s, a rack of early American firearms – each conveys something of what our New World was like when it was two or three or four hundred years newer. The items on permanent display or specially exhibited are a small fraction of the collections' holdings, housed in the nearby research facility, where

state-of-the-art restoration and conservation efforts are continually underway.

The Inn offers all the comforts a traveler might want, including spacious rooms with separate bath and shower. The Spa employs restorative therapies culled from historical reports of herbs and body treatments going as far back as pre-colonial Native American times; the exercise facility is comprehensive with plenty of machines, plus a lap pool and whirlpool area. Lodging options abound: if you desire the full 18th-century experience, you may opt for one of the Colonial Houses, located in the Revolutionary City, with a canopy bed and a fireplace (and two TV sets). The Williamsburg Inn is ideal for a casual getaway or a conference attendee (its excellent new restaurant, Sweet Tea and Barley, specializes in robust American fare); budget-minded families or golf buddies can find cheerful accommodations at the Williamsburg Woodlands.

Down the road, The Kingsmill Resort, originally developed by Anheuser-Busch in the early 1970s in an arrangement with Winthrop Rockefeller, takes a different tack. Overlooking the breadth of the James River, Kingsmill places sports and outdoor activities in the forefront, with a special emphasis on golf headlined by Pete Dye's River Course, which offers the opportunity to play a layout familiar from its thirty-five years hosting PGA Tour and LPGA events. Conditions here are as good as you'll find on any golf vacation, with velvet fairways, slick greens, and thick rough to tempt, reward, and exact vengeance in equal measure. The nifty par-five third measures only 518



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yards from the tips, but the shallow, elevated putting surface is set alongside a watery inlet. A trio of excellent holes ends your round on an exclamation point: after the 458-yard sixteenth with its shallow elevated green, the dramatic 177-yard par-three seventeenth alongside the James presents a club choice conundrum; and the long eighteenth, a Cape hole, will make you think carefully about how far left to place your drive.

The Palmer/Seay Plantation course is more typical of a resort course, with generous fairways and large, recovery-friendly green complexes; it's great for a tune-up – or if you're reeling from your baptism at the River.

Filling out the activities are a large tennis center and several pools, including The River Pool, which boasts a fun and relaxing "lazy river" for kid-friendly tubing. Guests enjoy the privacy and convenience of condominiums equipped with full kitchens, laundry machines, and separate dining and living areas, giving them the option of preparing their own meals or taking advantage of the resort's dining options.

Of course if 60-degree flop shots over

sand and long putts over tricky, undulating greens aren't thrilling enough for you, nearby Busch Gardens offers awesome rides in a European theme park setting (Apollo's Chariot gets lots of positive reviews), with specialty fare to match.

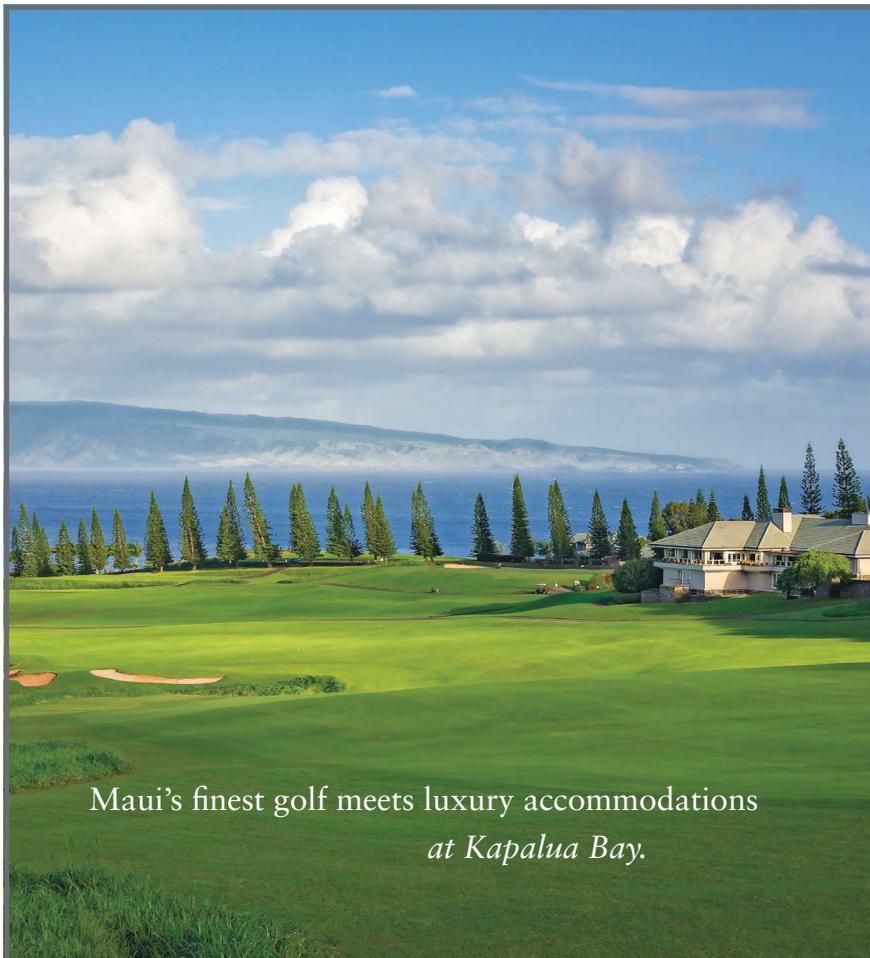
As long as you're in the general vicinity, another golf-course option to consider is Royal New Kent Golf Course in Providence Forge. The scorecard doesn't say which member of the British royal family bestowed its honorific upon this 1995 Mike Strantz design, but as long as Prince Andrew and the rest of the Windsors haven't called them on it, we won't question it.

Though Strantz completed only nine courses before his untimely passing in 2005 – including Tobacco Road in North Carolina's Sandhills, and True Blue and Caledonia Golf and Fish Club in Myrtle Beach – his legacy has a cult following. Strantz stands opposite the famous minimalists (and fellow former Pete Dye apprentices) Tom Doak and Bill Coore; "maximalist" might be the best way to describe his bold, imaginative designs, which involved moving massive amounts of earth to create dramatic features: sweeping landing areas hovering above

yawning bunkers; shallow, elevated greens saddle-backed perpendicular to fairways.

At Royal New Kent, Strantz took his inspiration from the hilly Irish links courses Royal County Down and Ballybunion – hence the high cost of construction (\$14 million) and the buoyant rhythm of elevation changes, starting with the opening hole's downhill, twisting, vortex-like fairway, where a wise fairway-wood tee shot leaves a mid- or short-iron to an uphill green on your left. The second is a beauty of a horseshoe-shaped par-five, which should tempt only the longest hitters to cut off any portion of the distance. From there, the course wends into an unspoiled, scrub-forested wilderness; the back nine, alas, weaves through backyards and alongside the streets of a housing complex, but you won't really mind, so captivating is the invigorating difficulty of the holes – starting with the par-5 10th, with a cluster of bunkers set into a berm pushed up into the right-hand edge of the fairway. The long par-four sixteenth sets up an exciting finish to a design that's genuinely noble – if not exactly technically Royal – in spirit and execution.

Don't tell Andy and Kate. ■



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