

## History of Norfolk

Norfolk was established in August 1682 after a 1680 British Act ordered the establishment of a port town of 50 acres in each Virginia county. The “Towne of Lower Norfolk County” was bounded on the east, west and south by the Elizabeth River; and on the north by what is now City Hall Avenue. Norfolk was granted Borough status in 1736. It grew steadily and had a population of 6,000 by the eve of the American Revolution (1775).



On January 1, 1776, British forces bombarded Norfolk from ships anchored off shore. Patriot factions completed the destruction so the British could not house their army here. Only the walls of the Borough Church – today’s St. Paul’s Episcopal – remained standing. But citizens returned and began to rebuild. By 1800, Norfolk’s population numbered 7,000 and Norfolk was the eighth largest town in America.

The 1807 attack on the USS frigate Chesapeake by the HMS Leopard offshore was a contributing factor in President Thomas Jefferson’s decision to ask Congress to declare war on Great Britain, the War of 1812. The ensuing British Navigation Acts and Jefferson’s Embargo Act closed the port and all but crippled the local economy. There was a gradual return to prosperity, leading to Norfolk’s incorporation as a city in 1845.

In 1855, one-third of Norfolk’s resident population died during a yellow fever epidemic. Just seven years later, one of the most famous naval battles in history was played out within view of the city by the first two ironclad battleships – the USS Monitor and CSS Virginia (formerly the USS Merrimac). Two months later, in May 1862, Norfolk was surrendered to Union forces and was under Federal occupation for the remainder of the Civil War.

The world came to Norfolk in 1907 when the Jamestown Exposition, commemorating the 300th anniversary of the first permanent English settlement in America, was held at Sewell’s Point. In 1917 the Exposition grounds became home to the US Naval Operating Base, today’s Naval Station Norfolk. Two World Wars more than doubled the city’s population and a series of annexations ending in 1959 brought Norfolk to her current size.

In recent years revitalization programs have led to changes throughout the city. Our vibrant downtown commercial hub mixes with a menu of cultural offerings, educational opportunities, diverse neighborhoods and a comfortable blend of the old and new. From a tiny town of 50 acres, Norfolk has grown to 61.86 square miles and a population of more than 245,000.