

My Hometown

by Jess Munley

2023

I take the knitted blanket off the back of the couch to throw over my legs. I haven't gotten used to the cool temperature of the townhouse yet, and miss the warmth of previous homes.

My mom turns on the first episode of the newest season of *Hell's Kitchen*. In just a few minutes, we find a chef to root for – someone from my hometown.

23-year-old Ileana appears on the screen. We must've gone to high school together, but I don't remember her.

"I've never really been away from home before," she says. "I'm from little Gloucester, Virginia, out in the middle of nowhere."

Early 1600s

Gloucester County was carved out of a section of flat land bordered by the York river to the south and the Chesapeake Bay to the east. Its forests are full of white-tailed deer and its waters are full of blue crabs.

It was previously inhabited by the Werowocomoco, including possibly Chief Powatan and Pocohontas. Captain John Smith said of it, "Heaven and earth never framed a better place for man's habitation."

Most of the Werowocomoco were forced out by the 1640s, opening up the land for new settlers.

These newcomers brought daffodils with them to remind them of home.

2023

I break up with my boyfriend of six years over the phone, severing my ties not only with him but with my hometown. My parents haven't lived there for the past few years, not since my mom moved out and my dad sold my childhood home.

Without the boyfriend, I no longer have a reason to keep visiting Gloucester.

No more speeding down winding backroads posted with signs reminding me "JESUS LOVES YOU". No more making fun of the wannabe rednecks with their lifted trucks and Confederate flags. No more going to Walmart for fun at 10pm because there was nothing else to do on our side of town after the local movie theatre was abandoned and the bowling alley was turned into an Ace Hardware.

I'm not sure that I'll miss it that much, anyway.

1651

George Washington's great-grandfather received a patent in 1950 for York County, and Gloucester was formed from that land a year later. Some believe that it was named after a county in England, but the front-running story claims that it was named in honor of Charles I's third son, the Duke of Gloucester.

Of the eight churches in colonial Virginia, one was located here. Abingdon Episcopal Church was visited by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, or so they like to say.

Jefferson's close friend John Page lived nearby at Rosewell, the Page family mansion. Rosewell was also home to 28 slaves, most of whom worked in tobacco fields.

2020

It's 10am but the sun and the humid June air already have us sweating through our black clothes.

200, maybe 300 of us have gathered in the library parking lot this Saturday. I've come with a friend, but in the crowd I find my boyfriend's mom and my 9th grade English teacher.

A few individuals take turns standing in the bed of a pickup truck to give speeches before we start marching. "This county does not have a problem with police brutality," one says. "But this county does have a problem with racism."

Our march went largely unnoticed, but the march that evening included thousands of people and made local news. My father makes a post on Facebook: "There are good cops in Gloucester."

He's missed the point.

1861

Confederates built a star-shaped fort at Gloucester Point, directly across the river from where Cornwallis surrendered to Washington 80 years prior.

The Union sent a converted steam tugboat called the USS *Yankee* down to investigate. The fort shot cannonballs at the *Yankee*, forcing it to turn around. This interaction became known as the Battle of Gloucester Point, and was one of the first naval "battles" of the war.

The engagement claimed no lives. The fort was abandoned a year later, when the Confederates moved troops to Yorktown. The Union claimed it and held it until the end of the war.

2019

My father and stepmother marry in a place we call the courthouse circle. It is a small circle of land in the middle of Main Street, with the street splitting around it on either side.

It has a few small brick buildings, like the old jailhouse and a little museum.

The grass is brown this time of year. The gray of the sky matches the monument in the middle of the circle. It spikes into the sky a few feet higher than the buildings, bearing the names of fallen

Confederate soldiers.

Their ceremony is a small one, including only close family members. I wear a nice sweater and a burgundy scarf my aunt lent me for the occasion. My brothers look strange to me in slacks and

button-downs.

Before we head back to my aunt and uncle's villa to celebrate and eat the cake I decorated, my stepmom quickly hugs me and my brothers.

She gives a low, mischievous laugh. "I'm your stepmonster now," she tells us.

1926

The first ever Daffodil Festival was just a garden party for a couple to show off the yellow sea of daffodils on their land. It inspired an annual tradition that later earned Gloucester the title of

"Daffodil Capital of America".

It was put on pause during World War II, and later COVID, but has been going strong otherwise.

It turned into one of the largest events of the county. It started to include a parade, vendors, pony rides, live music, and an annually crowned Daffodil Queen.

All of Main Street is decorated in yellow, from the library down to the churches and the

Pocohontas statue.

Along the sidewalks, vendors sell carnival food, artwork, jewelry, toys, and, of course, bouquets

of all kinds of daffodils.

It becomes the kind of event everyone talks about months in advance, and for weeks afterwards.

2017

At lunch I sit at a table set up in the open common space of my high school. The cafeteria can't fit us all, and even converting this space into a seating area hasn't entirely fixed the problem.

I sit with a girl named Macy because I don't have anyone else to sit with.

A black boy sitting behind me turns around to face us.

"Do y'all like black boys?" he asks.

Macy says "No."

A month or so after that, I walk to class with Cameron, a friend of Macy's.

Students nearby discuss the recent lawsuit against the school regarding bathrooms and gender identity. Cameron says, "I just think if you're a girl you're a girl, and if you're a boy you're a boy."

Later that year, a boy in my World History II class faces a week's suspension for writing "White Power" on a lunch table. When he comes back, the teacher announces how much we all missed him while he was gone.

1935

Robert Russa Moton, a notable black leader, author, and teacher, built a retirement home in Gloucester called Holly Knoll. It is a two-and-a-half story brick house with single-story wings on either side. The six white columns in front give it a typical colonial home look.

During his active years, Moton advocated for accommodation. He never challenged segregation, preferring to prove his worth to whites through his behavior and accomplishments.

After his death, Holly Knoll was renamed the Robert R. Moton House. It was repurposed into a conference center, then into The Gloucester Institute.

The Institute has provided generations of African American students with leadership training and education, but a white person could live their whole life in Gloucester and never hear of it.

2013

I've been coming to Burke's Mill Pond for a few summers now for Girl Scout Camp. It is set on 37 acres of forest around a large pond at the edge of the county and includes a lodge, eleven wood-floored canvas tents, a pool, a boathouse, and a bathhouse.

I like the land, with its butterflies, turtles, and spiders. I like the other girl scouts, and the troop leaders, and the songs we sing about the sky and the birds and each other.

I know a few of the girls from previous years, but many of them are from different elementary and middle schools than me. I enjoy making new friends of them.

The older girls roast marshmallows for us over a fire pit and we perform skits for one another. The frogs and the crickets grow louder as the sun sets. When we march through the path in the trees back to the parent pick-up field, I'm never ready to leave.

1952

The George P. Coleman Memorial Bridge was named for a previous head of the Virginia Department of Highways and Transportation. It was built across the York River, near Cornwallis' surrender and the Battle of Gloucester Point.

It is a double-swing span bridge. Traffic backs up for a couple of miles when the bridge opens to allow ships to pass through. These ships are often sailing to or from the Yorktown Naval Base upriver.

The bridge's opening correlated with a noticeable population increase in Gloucester, and the toll booths on the Gloucester side helped pay for its renovations decades later.

A program that supported habitats for peregrine falcons in Virginia used the bridge to encourage nesting.

2009

Vacation Bible School is always one of my favorite weeks of the summer. I get to see quite a handful of my classmates I haven't seen since school, and I get to learn more fun stories from the Bible.

My family doesn't attend church regularly, but I wish they did. I am a deeply religious child, and

I want to be like my friends' families who all go to church each and every Sunday.

I make the most out of our craft times, story times, and snack times.

A man gives us all little stones from some river or lake where some man from the Bible apparently did something important. I cherish my pebble with all my heart for the time I have before I lose it.

We watch *The Prince of Egypt* and it becomes my favorite movie for the next year.

1990

Beaverdam Park encompasses a man-made reservoir spanning 635 acres. It was created to provide water to local residents and businesses.

Constructing the dam meant displacing residents from their homes on that land, but a new water source took priority over them.

Its miles of woodland trails became popular for running, hiking, dog-walking, and horse riding.

Some bike enthusiasts regularly drive an hour to come explore the winding, tree-rooted paths. It has a playground and a sandy volleyball court. There is always someone to be found fishing on the pier.

Eagle Scout ceremonies are annually held in the log cabin by the water.

A certain Venture Crew troop sets up a replica of a teepee on a stretch of open field, and every summer it's pointed out that it isn't geographically correct.

At Halloween, various groups of Gloucester's young adults sign up to participate in the annual Haunted Trail. For \$10 you can be walked through the trail and be subjected to whatever scary thing each group prepared for you. Common recurring scares are dirty men with chainsaws, "dead" bodies floating in the water, and clowns.

It's the largest Halloween event in the county.