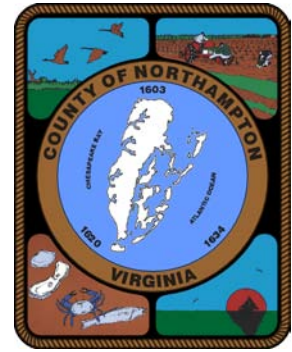# Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

2 History, Geography & Community Character

2.1 Geography

2.1.1 The Delmarva Peninsula

The Delmarva Peninsula on the east coast contains land within three Mid-Atlantic States: Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. It is bounded by the Chesapeake Bay to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Northampton County is located on the southern part of the Delmarva Peninsula, which is known as the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Virginia's Eastern Shore includes Accomack County to the north and Northampton County to the south. The southernmost tip of Northampton County is connected to the Virginia mainland via the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel.

2.1.2 Northampton County

The County is approximately 35 miles in length with an average width of 6 miles. According to the Census Bureau, the County contains 795 square miles. The total land surface area is estimated to be 207 square miles and the remaining 588 is water.

The County has six incorporated; they are, in order from north to south, Belle Haven (part of), Exmore, Nassawadox, Eastville, Cheriton, and Cape Charles. The County seat is located in the town of Eastville, which is 125 miles from Richmond and 30 miles northeast of the Norfolk and Virginia Beach area. Northampton is one of 95 counties in Virginia and is part of the Tidewater region.

Figure 2.1 shows the location of Northampton County within the Commonwealth of Virginia. It also shows the location of the six incorporated towns and the location of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel off the southern tip of the peninsula connecting the County to the Tidewater area and the mainland of Virginia.

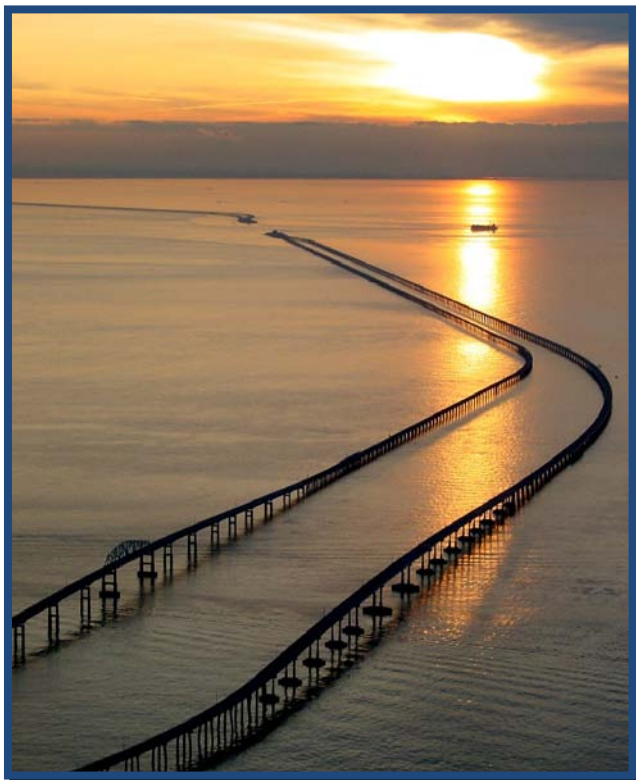## Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

2.1.3 The Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay has always played a major role in the lives of County residents and remains a key factor influencing growth and development in the county and the lifestyles of the county's citizens. In early times, people and commerce were transported by boats throughout the Bay and the Tidewater area of Virginia.
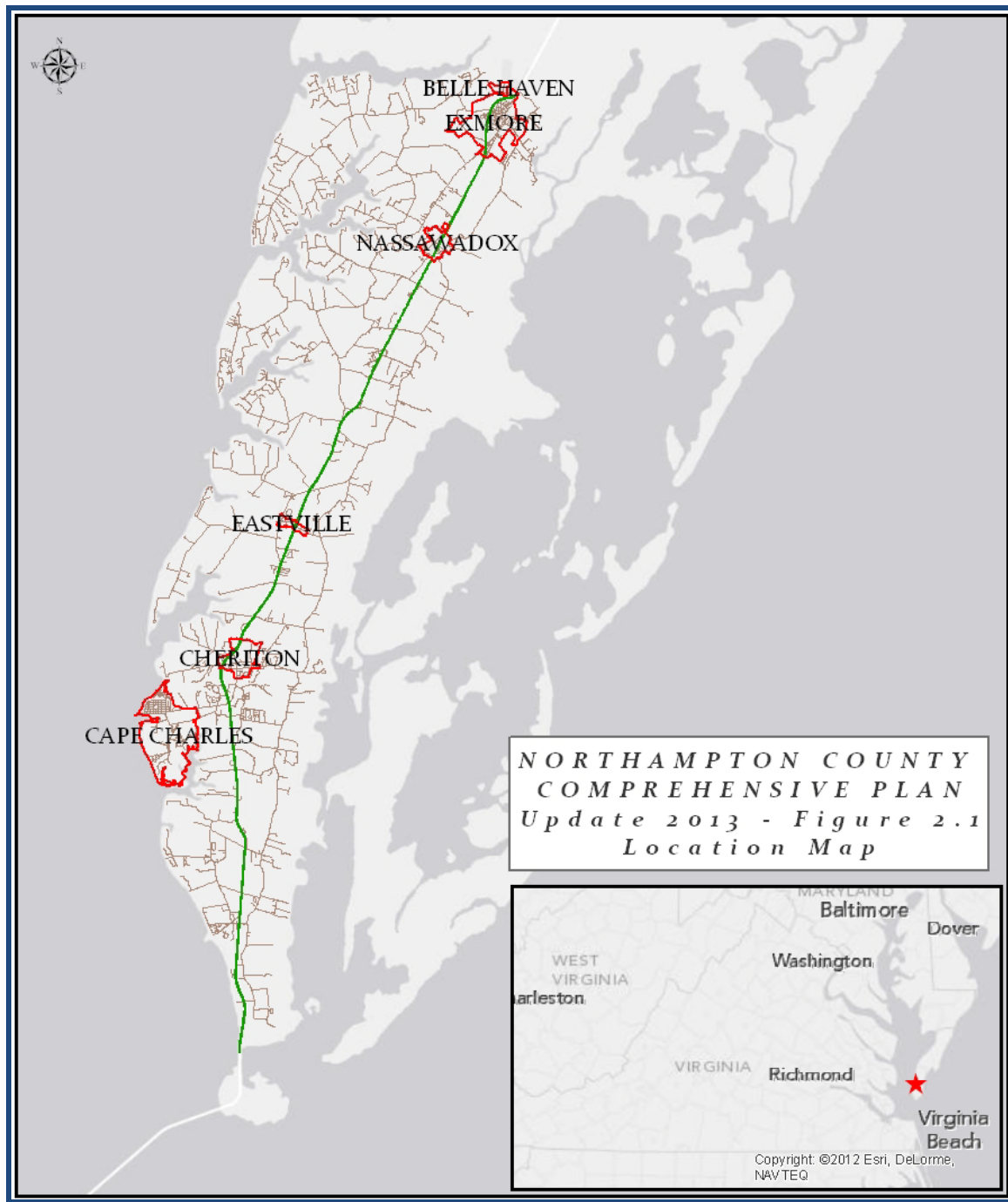

Chesapeake Bay

Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel

Today the products of the Bay, principally crabs, shellfish and fin fish, are of considerable economic importance. The recreational and aesthetic values associated with the Bay and its scenic creeks and beaches attract visitors, developers, retirees, second-home buyers and permanent new residents.

Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

Figure 2.1 Location Map

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
Update 2013 - Figure 2.1
Location Map

Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

2.2   History & Culture

2.2.1 Native American Inhabitants

The first inhabitants of the Eastern Shore were tribes of Native Americans thought to be numbered about 2000 around the turn of the 17th century. They lived in small settlements scattered along the peninsula. All of the villages were located close to the water as it was of major importance to their existence. In addition to living off the bounty from the sea, they hunted game and tended fields. They migrated among several locations along the coast as the supplies of natural resources fluctuated.

A southern portion of the Shore from Cape Charles north to Hungars Creek was largely occupied by the Accomack Indians, who were the first Native Americans encountered by the English upon their arrival. The Accomacks were related culturally to the Native Americans across the Bay near Jamestown, and spoke the same language. Also in the territory of the Accomacks lived the Magothas and the Mattawomans or Matoones.

North of the Accomacks lived the Occohannocks, who were of the same culture and language. Noting the similarities between the two tribes, the Occohannocks were considered a "sub-tribe" to the Accomacks. The Bayside Occohannocks included the Nanduas or the Nassawadox Indians. The Seaside Occohannocks included the Machipongos and the Wachapreagues.

The Native Americans of the Eastern Shore did not survive long after the onset of English settlement. The spread of disease brought by the Europeans was the major contributing factor to their demise. Less than a century after their introduction to Europeans, the Native American population on the Eastern Shore dwindled down to just a few villages inhabited by just a handful of people.

Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

2.2.2 English Settlement

Although there had been landings and some exploration of the Eastern Shore as early as the 1500's, it is generally accepted that the first settlement was in 1614 when a detachment of men was sent from Jamestown to establish an outpost. When the English first arrived on the Eastern Shore, King Debedeavon was the chief ruler of the Indians. Debedeavon warned the Jamestown settlers of events leading to the Indian massacre of 1622.

Land patents were first issued from The Virginia Company of London in the early 1600s and Northampton County became populated. As noted in James Perry's book, "The Formation of Society on Virginia's Eastern Shore", the original division of Virginia into counties listed the land on the Eastern Shore as one county, and it was called Accomack. In 1643, it was renamed Northampton; and in 1663, it was divided into the two counties, Accomack and Northampton, as they remain today.

Most Africans in colonial Virginia at this time were slaves, with some working as indentured servants. According to Northampton County records, there were approximately 101 Africans and African Americans living in the County between 1664 and 1677. Thirteen of those were free householders. County records also indicate African American families owning large tracts of land and slaves during this time period.

2.2.3 Historic Resources

There are numerous sites of historic significance and interest throughout the County. Northampton County is fortunate to have a proportionally larger number of old structures compared to other Virginia localities and there are a number of especially significant dwellings and sites included on the National Register of Historic Places. Figure 2.2 shows the sites in the County that are listed with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. See Table 8.6 in the Transportation Data Section for a list of Historical Markers.

Cape Charles, one of the largest towns in the County, offers a commercial center with shops, restaurants, antiques, a museum, hotels, bed and breakfasts and the last remaining rail-barge in the country which regularly crosses the Chesapeake Bay to Norfolk. At the end of S.R. 644 is the burial place of Major General John Custis, who was a scholar and served on the Governor's Council for 22 years in the early 1700's.

Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

Governor William Berkeley made his headquarters here during Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

The Town of Eastville was established around 1715 as the County seat. The oldest continuous court records in the nation (dating from 1632) are preserved at the new courthouse and can be viewed by visitors. There are also bed and breakfast accommodations and a restaurant available. Additional points of interest in Eastville include Christ Church (c. 1828), the Clerk's Office (c. 1830), the Confederate monument (c. 1914), the debtor's prison (c. 1743), the Eastville Inn (c. 1780), the monument to Indian Chief Debedeavon, and the old Courthouse (c. 1731). The town of Eastville's Historic District includes many period homes as well as historic government buildings located on the Courthouse Green.

Eastville Courthouse circa 1900

Eyre Hall (c. 1750) has beautiful boxwood gardens open to the public. The family graveyard and the ruins of an orangery are here. The historic home is open during Garden Week in April.

Hungars Episcopal Church (c. 1742) is a congregation that still uses the communion service that was presented by John Custis IV of Northampton County and Williamsburg.

Smith Island, named by Captain John Smith in 1608, is now the site of the Cape Charles Lighthouse, which is the most powerful of the Virginia lights.

2.2.4 The Culture of Northampton County

The combination of Northampton County's unique geography and its rich historical heritage has created a distinctive lifestyle highly valued by many of the county's residents. This lifestyle has been shaped essentially by the natural resources in which

Section 2: History, Geography and Community Character

the County is so rich: surrounding waters with tidal marshes abundant in seafood; richly productive soils; woodlands; a long growing season for agriculture; and clean air. The availability of these resources has produced an economy historically based on agriculture and seafood production with people living on farms or in low-density residential patterns consisting of small towns, hamlets, and villages. The rural setting has allowed easy and open access to the high quality natural environment which supports facets of both economic and recreational needs of the community.

The social structure tends to be closely knit, but during the last several decades retirement and second-home purchases have added a new dimension to the community. With new residents comes increased demand for government services, including improvements to the school system, as well as recreational and shopping alternatives. Cultural offerings, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 in this part of the plan, have continued to expand and offer greater variety in arts and entertainment.   Many of the newcomers are eager to find ways and places to volunteer their time and talents in the community. The local economy continues to be based predominantly in the agricultural, seafood and tourism industries as well as entrepreneurial pursuits. Other major employers include government, health care services and research activities. As has been the case across the United States and particularly other rural areas during the last decade, national economic upheaval and population shifts have resulted in recognition that Northampton County should examine more critically ways to leverage the county's assets, not the least of which is her people. Nevertheless, visitors can still share the County's natural habitats, scenic environment and a more tranquil way of living while enjoying fishing and hunting, boating and beaches, birding, golf and a glimpse of history.

Figure 2.2 Historic Architecture

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
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Historic Architecture

Legend
- Historic Architecture
- US Rt 13
- Roads
- Bodies Of Water