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Deep in Tidewater History

Life in the slow lane of Virginia's Tidewater area begins at dawn at the North River Inn. A purple haze hovers over the river beyond a three-horse pasture. Shower, dress, and then time-travel to Gloucester, five miles down the road. Here the courthouse dates to a pre-Independence 1766, while the debtors prison and the Clayton Building's clerk's office have roots in the early 19th century. Even the flora is historic: In the 1930s and '40s, Gloucester, with its booming bulb industry, was known as the Daffodil Capital of America.

A spin through tiny Irvington, 28 miles on, brings modern whimsy. Giant toothbrush columns support a dental office, while a rooftop dog bone icon identifies the hip Trick Dog Café. But this is water country, best experienced by boat, namely the 1926 yacht *Miss Ann*, moored at the Tides Inn. Choose a dinner cruise or the Saturday morning "whiskey run" to Urbanna, a nod to Prohibition. (Today, Urbanna is all about antiques). For the golf-inclined, the Tides Inn is the spot, with a public course that has attracted the likes of Bill

Clinton, Steven Spielberg, and Tom Cruise.

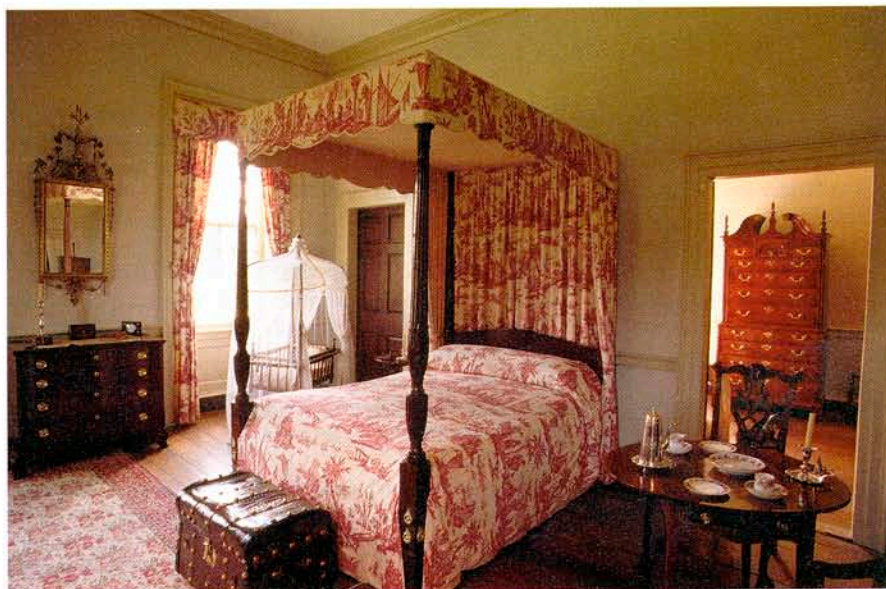
But let's get back to the past. You'll find lots of it in the 1735 Christ Church, in Irvington. Marvelously designed and preserved, it's the best of its kind in colonial Virginia. Drive 54 miles northeast to Stratford Hall, home to the Lee family, with seriously grand views of the Potomac River. Here, portraits immortalize Lee diplomats, Declaration signers, and Revolutionary

and Civil War heroes. The 1,900-acre plantation has reconstructed slave quarters, all manner of dependencies, gardens, and one heck of a geological surprise: Miocene-era cliffs. Nine miles away is George Washington's idyllic birthplace, Popes Creek, named for a Potomac River tributary. With its blooming

flowers, all seems right with the world here. —ANN COCHRAN



LOGISTICS: The Tidewater is about a three-hour drive south from Washington, D.C. Here the Potomac, Rappahannock, and York Rivers run parallel through eastern Virginia to the Chesapeake Bay. North River Inn, 804-693-1616, www.northriverinn.com; from \$145. In Gloucester Point, for waterside dining, try River's Inn, 804-642-9942; more down-home is the all-you-can-eat buffet at Carolina BBQ, 804-684-2450.



Too bad you can't spend the night in a four-poster at Stratford Hall Plantation, birthplace of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. But you can dig into a River's Inn order of fried shrimp (top).