

Important Water Features of Virginia

1. Water features were very important to the early history of Virginia. As settlers moved west across our state, many traveled by ship. They sailed from the Chesapeake Bay toward the Piedmont region on the four major rivers of Virginia: the James, the York, the Rappahannock, and the Potomac. Regardless of the river they chose, they soon arrived where the flat land of the Coastal Plain meets the rolling hills of the Piedmont. The land began to rise sharply and the rivers became more shallow, rocky, and rapid. Before long their ships could go no farther. Some settlers turned back and returned down river, but some went ashore and built homes, planted crops, and started new communities. Many of these early Fall Line communities became the major cities of present-day Virginia. It is clear that the rivers of Virginia influenced the development and settlement of the state.
2. The main water features of VA include the Atlantic Ocean, the Chesapeake Bay, the James River, the York River, the Rappahannock River, the Potomac River, Lake Drummond and the Dismal Swamp. The Atlantic Ocean was important to the history and settlement of Virginia. It provided a route from the continent of Europe to the North American continent for early explorers, and continued to provide transportation links between Virginia and other places such as Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.
3. The Chesapeake Bay is a water feature that is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a peninsula of land called the Eastern Shore. A peninsula is a piece of land bordered on three sides by water. The Chesapeake Bay provided the early ships a safe harbor from the crashing waves of the ocean. It was also a source of food and transportation.
4. The James River is located in the southern part of the state. It has its source in the Blue Ridge Mountains. As it flows towards the east, it crosses the Piedmont region, crashes over the rapids of the Fall Line into the Coastal Plain and eventually empties into the Chesapeake Bay. Like all rivers, the James flows downhill towards the sea. Richmond, the capital of Virginia, and Jamestown are two major cities located along its shores.
5. The York River is located north of the James. It is separated from the James River by a narrow peninsula. The York River also flows downhill into the Chesapeake Bay. The historic city of Yorktown is located along its shores.
6. The Rappahannock River is located north of the York River. These two rivers are also separated by a peninsula of land. The Rappahannock, like the James and the York, flows downhill into the Chesapeake Bay. The bustling city of Fredericksburg is located on its shore.
7. The Potomac River is located in the northern part of the state. It is separated from the Rappahannock by yet another peninsula of land and flows downhill into the Chesapeake Bay. The beautiful city of Alexandria is located along the Potomac.
8. Lake Drummond is located in the Coastal Plain (Tidewater) region. It is a shallow, natural lake surrounded by the Dismal Swamp. The Dismal Swamp is home to a variety of wildlife. George Washington explored and surveyed the Dismal Swamp.
9. Each of these important water features was a source of food and a pathway for the exploration and settlement of Virginia.