

West Point

The town of West Point, situated on the peninsula at the convergence of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers, grew and became historically important as a result of the shipping and railroad industries of the second half of the 19th century, but it traces its roots further into the past. These roots can be traced back at least 400 years.

The first settlement on the site of what is now called West Point was the Indian village of Cinquoteck used by the Powhatan Confederation. This village was ruled by the Indian Chief Opechancanough and was used as a staging ground for the 1622 uprising at Jamestown by the Powhatan Indians.

On March 6, 1653 John West was granted 3000 acres including the Indian village of Cinquoteck at the present location of West Point. John West received the land in appreciation of his services to the colony of Virginia as Governor from 1635 to 1638. The area was called West Point Plantation, deriving its name from John West.¹ Towards the end of the 17th century the royal government began to establish towns in Virginia to serve as tobacco ports where taxes could be collected. In April, 1691, an act required that a town be built at the site of West Point. This town was established in August of 1701. The town was named Delaware Town in honor of Thomas West, Lord Delaware, the older brother of Governor John West.

Delaware Town was situated on 50 acres at the tip of the peninsula. Although ferries crossed to the point from both rivers, it remained a small trading port isolated by the rivers. The town never developed, although thirty-two lots were sold. The number of inhabitants of the town dwindled as the West family sold their plantation to Carter Braxton. He began to absorb lots in Delaware Town. The plantation was then sold in 1810 to John Taylor, who transferred it to his son William Penn Taylor in October, 1811. Taylor acquired all the remaining lots in Delaware Town in 1839. At this point West Point plantation, once again intact, was now known as the Taylor Farm.

As early as 1832 the Virginia General Assembly recognized the need for a railroad line to be built to the York River. The General Assembly granted a charter to build such a railroad but it was never carried out. During the early 1850s residents of King William and King and Queen Counties revived the idea and the Richmond and York River Railway Company was established.²

On 18 and 19 January, 1855, stockholders of the Richmond and York River Railroad company met to select the route and eastern terminus of the railroad. At this meeting West Point was chosen. With its harbor deep enough to accommodate any merchant ship in the country, it was situated at an excellent location. As in the words of Lt. Matthew Fontaine Maury, U.S.N.:

"West Point, with its accommodations and capabilities, stands, in the language of your engineer, 'preeminent,' and would be a singular oversight to ignore those capabilities of meeting all of the emergencies which its own success and the

business of trade may call for."³

The decision was made to establish West Point as the eastern terminus of the Richmond and York River Railroad and the West Point Land Company was formed. The directors of the company held their first meeting in March, 1856. They decided that 500 acres of land would be purchased from the owner William Penn Taylor and lots sold to incoming settlers. The plan of the town as it exists today was laid out in 1860 by James M. Daniel.⁴

The Richmond & York River Railroad line from Richmond to West Point was completed in April 1861. The railroad briefly prospered until destroyed in 1863 by the Union Army. West Point was captured in the Peninsula Campaign in 1862 by Union Major General George McClellan. During the war West Point was used as a Union camp.⁵ When the Union Army moved onward to Richmond, much of West Point was burned and very few buildings were left.

Four buildings remain in West Point today that are known to have existed before the Civil War. The brick house at 429 Fourth Street was probably built around 1860 and has been used as a residence since in varying states of disrepair. The brick walls may be the only parts of the house dating back to 1860. At 303 Main Street stands a home built sometime in the 1850s. The "Mayo" House at 323 Sixth Street was built in 1853. Its elevated brick basement makes it one of the more unique houses in West Point. The Treat Post Office remains as the left wing of the Treat-Medlin House at 1023 Lee Street. The Post office was built around 1861 with the coming of the railroad. The adjacent house was built in 1898.

The railway was rebuilt in 1868. The railroad terminal and port rapidly promoted West Point's growth. On July 11, 1870, West Point was incorporated as a town. The population grew rapidly. The population stood at 75 in 1870. By the 1880 census, it had increased to 650 and by 1885 there were 2,000 residents.

The railroad was reorganized as the Richmond, York and Chesapeake Railroad in 1873 due to the bankruptcy of the Richmond and York River Railway. Later the railroad was purchased and incorporated into the Southern Railway system. This railroad company consolidated with the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Richmond Steamship Company. West Point connected with Baltimore and other Chesapeake ports. International exports boomed as well. Huge wharfs were built and cotton was shipped to international ports. Foreign ships deposited cargo at West Point before loading cotton. At the height of West Point's railroad and shipping industry it was the fifth largest cotton port by volume in the United States. Many goods directed south from northern cities such as Baltimore, New York, Boston and Providence passed through the port.⁶ The railroad and shipping industry abruptly halted when the railroad terminal shifted to Portsmouth, Virginia, on 1 January 1896. The only services remaining were passenger services by both rail and steamship. This shift caused a severe economic depression resulting in widespread financial difficulties in West Point. Property values fell as much as 50% and the only bank closed. The population fell by 30%.⁷

West Point exploited many natural resources such as its navigable rivers, forests of lumber and rich seafood to house many industries in its early days. Lumber and seafood were two of the most important early industries.⁸ West Point was home to sawmills as well as oyster houses, and the town also housed a cotton hosiery factory, a broom factory, a shingle factory, a marl fertilizer factory, brick yards and a canning factory to can locally grown vegetables. One of the most unusual industries of West Point was the "cornstalk" factory.⁹ Cornstalk was produced from a combination of cornstalks and marsh grass. It was used to fill bullet holes in sinking ships.

The years following the incorporation of West Point and its shipping boom witnessed the building of many new churches. Before the construction the different denominations would worship in varied places from homes to railroad tool sheds.¹⁰ The first church built in West Point was known as the "free church" located on Main Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets. This was believed to be the location of a colonial Episcopal church and tombstones dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries were found there.¹¹ The "free church" was built in 1870 by the Methodists and used by different denominations as well. This church was replaced in 1927 by the present day First Baptist Church.

Many churches were built following the "free church" and still exist today. In 1882 the Episcopalians erected the wood framed church that stands at 916 Main Street. The church was named after the colonial church, St. John's in King William County, ten miles north of West Point. The black congregation which had previously worshiped in a railroad tool shed built Mt. Nebo Baptist Church at 1224 Kirby Street in 1887. The Methodists also built a church at 1024 Main in 1889, where they continue to worship. On the corner of Main and Fifth street stands the Disciples of Christ Church built in 1906. This church has been enlarged but its core remains today. At 1216 Lee Street stands the Miracle Revival Church. It was built around 1920 as a public hall for blacks and has since found use as a church.

In 1896, West Point redirected its resources to exploit its recreational merit. This was done by building many new hotels. West Point became an important summer resort after its incorporation as a town in 1870. People enjoyed its scenic location at the head of the York River as well as its delicious seafood and artesian spring wells. West Point's unending supply of artesian drinking water was very popular, as it was believed to be good for dyspepsia and many other ailments.¹² Visitors ate and drank at the 15 bars that were very popular in town. West Point enjoyed having a liquor license during a time when they were rare in Virginia. The transportation system necessary to bring visitors was already in place. Visitors were brought on an overnight steamship from Baltimore or on an afternoon train from Richmond.

The Grove Hotel was the first of the important hotels. It stood on Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets. The building was one of the few in existence dating back to the time West Point was known as Delaware Town. Today no buildings in West Point date back to this era. It was built before 1777. Carter Braxton used the building as his home from 1777 to 1786. After West Point's incorporation, the building became known as the Grove Hotel. It served as an

integral part of the community. The Hotel was a public gathering place, a place of worship before churches were built and as a post office.¹³ This served as a center of recreation until it was destroyed by a devastating fire that swept through the waterfront business area on 3 May 1903. Fifty-one structures were lost to this fire.¹⁴

The other center of recreation was the Terminal Hotel. It was built in 1887 and stood on the water at the head of Main Street. The Terminal Hotel accommodated 200 guests and was centered in the Beach Park overlooking the York River.

The Beach Park offered many activities such as dancing, dining and other amusements to entertain the town's guests. The Beach Park was also home to the Beach Park Hotel adjacent to the Terminal Hotel. It was destroyed by fire on 27 July 1910 and replaced by a 100 X 150 foot swimming pool in 1911. The swimming pool collapsed in the unstable beach floor but still remains as a reminder of West Point's previous use as a resort town.

Other hotels from that period include the Central, the Commercial and the Exchange. Three hotels still exist today in different forms of use. These include the O'Connor Hotel on Fifth Street. Its three guest cottages, known as the O'Connor Hotel Annex, remain in use today as homes. The Trice Hotel stands at 505 Main Street and the Royal Hotel at 902 Main Street.¹⁵

This period witnessed the emergence of the downtown business district between Sixth and Ninth Streets. Most of the business buildings in this area were constructed at the turn of the century. These buildings remain today as the downtown core of West Point.

Recreation in West Point reached a turning point in 1910. The fire on 27 July 1910 destroyed much of the Beach Park, causing the number of visitors to decline. Tourism continued to decline to such small numbers that the Terminal Hotel was sold in 1913. After this it became an apartment house until its destruction in 1926 by fire. West Point lost its privileged liquor license in 1913.

The Old Dominion Industrial Corporation was formed in 1910 to boost industry and increase the population of West Point. One of its first points of business was to connect West Point with land across the Mattaponi and to bring a pulp and paper mill to town.¹⁶ This was done in 1914 with the opening of the Gresham Bridge. The bridge across the Pamunkey was not built until 1927. The corporation also gave significant amounts of timber lands to a paper mill constructed where the old "cornstalk" factory once stood on the Pamunkey River.

The threat of another depression in West Point was short lived with the arrival of the pulp and paper mill in 1914, which economically revived the town from its declining resort industry. West Point was an ideal location for the paper mill due to its railway accessibility to the Midwest and the area's forest resources.¹⁷ The paper mill was the Fox Paper Company, a subsidiary of the Chesapeake Pulp and Paper Company. The mill grew and expanded quickly. It was bought in 1918 by Elis Olsen and became part of the Chesapeake Corporation as it is today.

Ship building was another industry to surface after the decline of the resort industry. This began in 1916 when the United States War Shipping Board commissioned the York River Shipbuilding Company to build wooden cargo ships to replace those lost during the war effort of World War I. Production was slow and the war ended before any ships were completed. Two ships were finally produced. Only one of the two ever saw use. The other rotted in the shipyard unused.

Through the following decades the mill continued to grow, providing the town with the catalyst needed for growth. Other industries sprang up as a result of this new growth. These new industries that operated during the 1920's and 1930's included a pickle factory, a furniture factory, a glove factory and a miniature pool table factory.¹⁸ This caused the population to increase and many new homes were built as a result.

An evaluation of insurance maps made of West Point by the Sanborn Map Company show that the town grew and prospered during the 1920s and 1930s. There are many notable buildings built during this period. In the downtown blocks on Main Street, two new banks were built in the early 1920s. These banks are the Citizens and Exchange and the Farmers and Mechanics Bank. West Point's Post Office during the 1920s was housed in the right of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank building. A new Post Office was built in 1931 in the 900 block of Main Street and is still in use today. Several houses were built during this time. Most of these remain today. These houses include two Sears Roebuck Company homes. These homes were pre-manufactured and assembled at their present locations in West Point. The Crescent at 511 Lee Street was assembled in 1928, and the Avoca at 921 Lee Street was assembled some time between 1907 and 1912.¹⁹ Schools were also built. One of these remaining today is the building at 206 Thirteenth Street. It was used as the Beverly Allen Elementary School for black children. The school was constructed during the 1930's and is presently used as a Civic Center.

The town of West Point has remained mostly intact as it looked fifty to seventy years ago. This is mostly due to the close proximity it shares with the Pamunkey, Mattaponi and the York Rivers. These rivers have limited West Point's expansion only to the north. The Chesapeake Corporation's pulp and paper mill remains today as a permanent industry. Through the years it has become fully modernized and still operates on its original site on the Pamunkey River north of Fourteenth Street. Daily steamers and passenger trains continued service until World War II. The steamers were then put to use by the War Shipping Administration in support of the war effort. The railway terminus remains today in use by the Chesapeake Corporation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Elizabeth S. Gray, "West Point's History Begins Almost With the Founding of a Nation," *Two Hundred-Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of King William County*, (*Tidewater Review*, West Point, VA, 1952), p.6.
- ² Alonzo T. Dill, *York River Yesterdays: A Pictorial History* (Donning Company Publishers, Norfolk-Virginia Beach, VA. , 1984), p. 57.
- ³ Lt. M.F. Maury, U.S.N., "Report," *Prospectus of the Terminal Improvement Company*, (1888) p. 15.
- ⁴ Gray, "West Point's History Begins," p.9.
- ⁵ Dill, *York River Yesterdays*, p.62.
- ⁶ *Prospectus of the Terminal Improvement Company*, (1888), p.7.
- ⁷ Gray, "West Point's History Begins," p.11.
- ⁸ Alonzo T. Dill, *Tidewater Town*, (West Point Centennial Corporation, West Point, VA, 1970), p.16.
- ⁹ Mary Lipscomb, *Recollections of Early West Point*, (1931) , p.17.
- ¹⁰ Dill, *Tidewater Town*. p.13.
- ¹¹ *King William County Virginia*, (Garrett and Massie, Richmond, VA, 1925), p.51. ,
- ¹² Dill, *Tidewater Town*, p.15. . - ,
- ¹³ Gray, "West Point's History Begins," pp. 10-11.
- ¹⁴ Dill, *Tidewater Town*, p. 17.
- ¹⁵ Sanborn Map Company Insurance Maps, *West Point VA.*, (1895, 1902, 1907, 1912, 1921, 1929, 1943).
- ¹⁶ Gray, "West Point's History Begins," p. 12.
- ¹⁷ Dill, *Tidewater Town*, p.18.
- ¹⁸ Gray, "West Point's History Begins," p. 13.
- ¹⁹ Sanborn Map Company.