

West Point's Lost Mayor

by

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On July 11, 1870, West Point was granted a charter of incorporation by the Commonwealth of Virginia, and on September 3 of that year held its first municipal election. Operating under rules that governed Virginia's post-Civil War reconstruction, voters chose a mixed ticket of Democrats and Republicans to fill the two-year terms of mayor and a five-member Town Council. Among the Council's Democrats were Alex Cavan, a 32-year-old merchant, born in Virginia; William E. Hart, a 35-year-old lawyer, born in Maryland; Bolivar Stark, a 40-year-old retail merchant, born in Virginia, whose store and home had been commandeered by Union troops to serve as a hospital following the 1862 Battle of Eltham's Landing; and Charles T. Whiting, a 30-year-old physician, also born in Virginia. The Council's lone Republican was Edward W. Massey, a 35-year-old railroad clerk. Massey was a Virginia Unionist who had worked with the Freedmen's Bureau and taken the lead in lobbying the legislature for West Point's incorporation as a town. His Republican ally was the town's first mayor, John Whitbeck.

Whitbeck is a somewhat mysterious figure. He was born in upstate New York, where his surname, of Dutch origin, is encountered more often than anywhere else in the country. In partnership with his son, William, John Whitbeck appears to have operated a foundry in New York State, supplying "spikes, iron, bar lead &c." to the Canal Department. During the early 1850s, the Whitbecks evidently considered moving their business to Richmond or at least pursuing a business opportunity in Virginia. Lists of hotel guests in Richmond show that the father and son visited the city on no fewer than three occasions in 1853 and 1854. The Whitbecks also seem to have become involved in the newly organized Republican Party at about this time.

The Civil War put an end to the Whitbecks' ambitions to extend their business southward but it did not end their connection to Virginia, a dropped skein they picked up following Appomattox. Undoubtedly because of their political connections, William F. Whitbeck was appointed United States Postmaster for West Point on July 6, 1868. It must have been at this time that his father John, mother Rachel, wife Emma, and three-year-old son William made the move from New York State to West Point.

What happened next, however, is something of a mystery. Although the tenures of West Point's postmasters during this era tended to be brief, William Whitbeck's term was unusually so, lasting less than a year. David J. Nevins took over as postmaster on May 22, 1869. The 1870 United States Census shows 28-year-old Emma Whitbeck and her five-year-old son living in West Point with her in-laws. William Whitbeck has disappeared from the record. Unfortunately, the 1870 census does not indicate marital status, but a decade later the census finds the widow Emma Whitbeck and her now 15-year-old son boarding with former West Point

neighbors Edward and Bettie Anderson in Baltimore. The likelihood is that William Whitbeck's brief tenure as West Point's postmaster was the result of his death.

The Republican Party connections that undoubtedly played a role in William Whitbeck's appointment as postmaster also must have been at work in his father's election as West Point's first mayor. Yet even amid the strictures of Reconstruction, the election of a majority-Democrat Town Council assured that the mayor and his lone Republican ally would face a rocky road. No doubt still mourning the death of his son, the 64-year-old Whitbeck must have been unusually stressed by the strains of the Council chamber. By March 1872, Whitbeck offered his resignation. Another mystery is what ultimately kept him in office. Perhaps it was the encouragement he must have received from Massey, who was in danger of losing his only Republican ally. Perhaps the arrival of new voters in the growing town offered a potential challenge to the Democrats' bloc. Whatever may have been going on behind the scenes, Whitbeck somehow was convinced to stand for reelection, and on September 7, 1872, he won a second term with a margin of 21 votes.

More impressive, however, was the vote for Town Council. All four Democrats were swept out of office. Massey was reelected, along with Hansford Anderson, a 35-year-old retail merchant who had been serving as the town sergeant; Haley Coles, a 33-year-old house carpenter; and two African Americans: Beverly Allen, Sr., a 44-year-old oysterman, and George Washington, a 52-year-old retail merchant and restaurateur. David S. Treat, a Connecticut-born sawmill worker, replaced Anderson as town sergeant. This Republican sweep at the polls was short-lived, however. Whitbeck declined to run in 1874, and all the councilmen elected with him in 1872, except for Massey, were turned out by voters who restored both Bolivar Stark and Alex Cavan to their seats on the Town Council.

Despite the Democrat–Republican, Confederate–Unionist, and “Been here”–“Come here” political battles in West Point during the 1870s, John Whitbeck continued to play an active role in town affairs. He died in 1879, just as the mayor and Town Council elected in 1878 were taking upon themselves a matter of significant concern for the community.

Prior to this time, deceased West Pointers still were being laid to rest in what had been the churchyard of the long-gone colonial-era Pamunkey Chapel between Fourth and Fifth streets. The growing community needed a new burial ground, so on August 16, 1879, the Town Council voted that no further interments be made within the corporate limits. Ten acres already had been purchased at the northern limit of the town in February 1878 for a new cemetery, which eventually would come to be called “Sunny Slope.”

On February 12, 1880, the West Point Town Council passed the following resolution:

Whereas the late John Whitbeck departed this life in our County and is now buried in the regular laid off sections of the West Point cemetery, and in and for consideration of the fact that the deceased was the first Mayor of this Town and having served without compensation, therefore be it enacted by the Town Council that a certificate of ownership of the section in which he is buried be presented to the family of the deceased.

The resolution was signed by Councilmen David S. Treat, John S. DeFarges, James S. Briant, and Walter E. Lipscomb.

By the time the resolution was adopted, however, no Whitbecks were left in West Point. As noted above, the former mayor's widowed daughter-in-law and grandson already were living in Baltimore. Whitbeck's widow, now 70 years old, had returned to Durham, a small town in New York's Catskill Mountains, where she no doubt had relatives. Unmarked and quickly unremembered, the gravesite of West Point's first mayor was lost. No surviving cemetery record shows its location. It is likely to be in what now is the back part of the cemetery, where some of the oldest interments are being overtaken by the encroaching forest. In that anonymous and shaded spot, some distance from recent graves still adorned with flowers and washed with tears, lie the mortal remains of John Whitbeck, West Point's lost mayor.