The History of the Prince William County Waterfront

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Introduction
The shores of Prince William County are located some 25 miles south of Washington, D.C. The County is now the home of about 270,000 people. One might assume that Prince William’s entire history was influenced by its proximity to the nation’s capital. But viewing Prince William County from inside the beltway is only a fairly recent practice. In fact, for most of its history, the County’s strongest influence has been felt from its eastern waterfront along the Potomac River. Population migrated north, by boat, from the lower Tidewater area as well as directly from Europe.

Prince William abuts the navigable waterways of the Occoquan River to the north, the Potomac River to the east, and Chopawamsic Creek to the south. In addition, four principle creeks - the Marumsco, Neabsco, Powell’s, and Quantico -- flow through eastern Prince William to the Potomac. These waterfronts directly influenced the development of the County over the past 200 years and continue to be a defining characteristic of the community. This paper will describe the general history of the area from earliest times to the present.

I. Prince William County before European Settlement

Scholars estimate that ancient hunters and gatherers lived in Prince William County as early as 9,500 B.C. Very little original archaeological work has been performed that documents this period within the County. It is believed that most of the sites are now underwater and therefore not available for research. Research that has been completed indicates that the early residents were nomadic hunters and gatherers; early villages were established between 500 and 900 A.D.¹

By 1500 A.D., the County’s eastern shores were inhabited by the Doegs, one of the Algonquin tribes of the Powhatan confederacy.

At that time, the eastern portion of Prince William consisted of very deep creeks that cut across wide portions of the land and drained into the Potomac River. The

Figure 1: Map of Early Virginia
peninsulas were hilly and wooded. Buffalos roamed around the hills and forests. Indian villages would have been located at the shores near good fishing spots.²

Figure 2: Early Native American Farmers

The Doegs maintained stable and prosperous villages. They were fisherman and farmers, being prosperous enough to barter corn and other agricultural products with early European explorers. The Doegs, although members of the Powhatan confederacy, did not support all of the edicts of the confederacy. The Doegs welcomed the early European settlers, despite or perhaps because of Powhatan’s opposing views.

However, the Doegs were not the only Indian tribe who frequented the County. The Manahoac tribe inhabited the western portion of the County.³ They were nomadic hunters who were, unfortunately, wiped out by expanding European settlement and Indian wars by the early seventeenth century. Finally, members from other Indian tribes often traveled into Prince William to search for additional hunting grounds and to conduct intertribal warfare.

II. Early European Explorers

The earliest European explorers are not well documented. Some writers report that several Catholic missionaries from Spain had visited part of the County’s waterfront in the late 1500s.⁴ All but one were killed by Indians. Some 30 years later, an early explorer of this area was Captain John Smith, who first sailed up the Potomac and Occoquan Rivers in 1608. Smith initially landed in the area now known as the Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge. Over the next few years, he led a number of excursions through the entire area, resulting in the publication of Smith’s 1612 map of the region. His descriptions excited the imagination of other Europeans, who proceeded to explore the
region. It is doubtful, however, that these early explorers ventured farther west than the Old Carolina Road, which still remained a major Indian road.

John Smith and succeeding explorers usually arrived to this area (including Prince William County as well as the entire Northern Neck) from Jamestown or other settlements in the Tidewater area. Initially, visits to the Prince William County area from the Tidewater area were motivated by trade. For instance, the Jamestown colony bartered for corn with the Dogue tribe through 1623. However, this area was not yet recognized as part of the Virginia colony. Instead, it was considered Indian territory. In the early 1600s, the York River in Tidewater was the northern boundary of Virginia.

Early explorers and settlers were independent men who often did not recognize the existence of government. It was not until 1648 that all of the land in the Northern Neck, including Prince William County, was incorporated into the County of Northumberland. By that time, population in the entire Northern Neck started to increase. Plantations were established along the low grounds of the waterways, with land closer to the Tidewater area settled earlier.

III. Early Settlement of Prince William County

The first land grant within the County was issued in 1651 to Richard Turney for 2,109 acres referenced as Doeg’s Island. Land grants were appropriations of large parcels of land, ranging in size from 500 to 3,000 acres from the crown or its agent. In most cases, the holder of the land grant did not emigrate immediately to his new holdings. According to local historian Fairfax Harrison, land grants were acquired for speculation.
Thomas Burbage acquired one of the first land grants within present day Prince William in 1653, which included some 3,000 acres extending from Neabsco Creek to the Occoquan River. A 534-acre plantation along the southern shore of the Occoquan was cut from the initial 3,000 acres. This plantation was owned by the George Mason family, and is now identified as Belmont. The Masons were a prominent family for generations. The most famous member was George Mason, who built Gunston Hall in Fairfax and was one of the influential writers of the Bill of Rights. Belmont was originally established by Col. Mason, who was George Mason’s great-grandfather.
A ferry across the Occoquan was begun in 1684 by Col. Mason. Figure 5 at left shows how the Belmont ferry area appears today.

As Indian uprisings continued up through 1677, not many people maintained permanent residence in this area. Also in 1684, the General Assembly funded a military installation along the Occoquan near the ferry’s location. The Occoquan fort contained two structures, a large 60-foot by 22-foot storehouse and a smaller 100-square-foot hut for ammunition storage. Since the local Indian tribe had been driven away, four Indians were hired from the Mattawomans tribe in Maryland to perform security patrols. Col. George Mason supplied the shot, powder, and 100 yards of trading cloth as payment to the Maryland Indians. The first use of the ferry, in fact, was to transport militiamen. The military importance of this type of transportation is indicated by the exemption of ferryman from militia duty.

The need for frontier security often served as an impetus for early population growth. In 1686, four men obtained a land grant near Brentsville, to provide religious freedom for French Protestants (known as Huguenots). In return, the French families agreed to safeguard the frontier and monitor the Indian traffic along the Carolina Road.

Significant settlement, however, did not occur anywhere in the area until 1722, when the Treaty of Albany required the Indians to reside west of the Blue Ridge mountains. One of the earliest houses constructed in the area was the Bel Air Plantation. At the time it was built, the colonial government constructed forts to protect settlers against Indian raids. No historical documentation exists concerning whether Bel Air first served as a fort, but its lower story is the same size that is typically required for forts. There is also evidence that prisoners were kept within the building. One of the clues was the shackles found attached to the wall.

Settlement may have been encouraged by a change in Virginia law in 1669, requiring actual possession to perfect property ownership. The rise of local government
paralleled the population increase, as the new community became more concerned with civil defense issues, including protection against Indian raids.\textsuperscript{14}

IV. Establishment of the Waterfront Area as the Main North-South Transportation Corridor

The major transportation route was the Potomac Path, which generally ran north-south along the waterfront approximately paralleling present day Route 1. Colonel Mason’s ferry at Belmont was considered part of the route of the Potomac Path. Because it was used as an early mail route, it came to be known as the King’s Highway. In 1691, David Strahan was the first ferryman to transport civilians as well as militia.\textsuperscript{15}

Skipping ahead in time to 1791, history records that George Washington once met with near catastrophe at this site. While crossing on the ferry in a four-horse carriage, one of the horses became loose, succeeding in pulling all four harnessed horses and the carriage overboard some 50 yards from shore. A number of local folks waded into the water and successfully unharnessed the horses, saving horses, carriage, and indeed, even the harness.

The ferry continued to operate at this site until 1795, when it was replaced by a wooden bridge.\textsuperscript{16} The adjacent present day community of Woodbridge continues to remind us of the early importance of transportation along this corridor.

V. The First County Courthouse

Prince William’s first courthouse was located along the waterfront, near present day Belmont Bay. It was chartered in 1731, one year after Prince William County was chartered. At that time, Prince William County contained all of Fairfax, Arlington, Loudoun, and Fauquier Counties. Historians have determined that the courthouse complex included a jail, pillory, and stocks.\textsuperscript{17}
VI. Prince William’s First Growth

After the Indian wars ended in 1722, population rapidly increased along the waterfront. A land grant customarily contained large estates containing thousands of acres. Plantations specializing in tobacco cultivation were already well established in the Tidewater area. However, many of these planters were seeking fresh land, and emigrated northward into Prince William County. These wealthy plantation owners secured large land grants and then paid for the passage for European emigrants, to encourage settlement on the new plantations. Under the system known as head rights, a person could receive 50 acres of land for each immigrant whose transportation costs they paid. Many of the early settlers were religious dissenters or political refugees from England, Scotland, or France. The early settlers served as indentured servants or tenant farmers. The plantation owners also used slave labor.

These landowners soon built huge fortunes, combining the large amount of productive land with cheap labor and cheap transportation. Tobacco was the crop of choice, and it was the one factor which most influenced the growth of the Prince William waterfront. The cultivation of tobacco determined how roads were built, how taxes were collected, and where towns were established.

Tobacco was cultivated along the banks of the riverfront and shipped to England to be sold. Every plantation had its own port, which could be reached by a sailing vessel. Typical local homes with water access included Rippon Lodge and Leesylvania (both discussed below).

At first, ships stopped at every plantation. This practice increased transportation time and costs, but the lack of urban development prevented centralized pick-up points. In addition, it did not serve those few tobacco plantations located further inland.

VI. Early Plantation Homes

Rippon Lodge was one of the first homes constructed on a high point overlooking Neabsco Creek. Built by Richard Blackburn in 1725, it featured an expansive view of all of the adjoining waterways. It was said that one could see the distant shores of Maryland. The plantation originally extended from Neabsco Creek to the east to the present day Potomac Hospital property to the west.

Leesylvania Plantation was another early home that abutted the waterfront. Patented in 1658, Leesylvania was the site of
a large tobacco plantation and the home of the Lee family. General Robert E. Lee, who led the Confederate Army in the Civil War, is possibly the most famous member of the Lee family.

General Lee’s father was Light Horse Harry Lee, who was born at Leesylvania in 1756. Light Horse Harry served under George Washington as an officer in the Revolutionary War. He was one of the few commanders awarded a gold medal by the Continental Congress. He was later called upon by George Washington to quell the civil unrest in Pennsylvania known as the “Whiskey Rebellion.” Harry Lee later returned home to serve as Governor of Virginia and as a member of the U.S. Congress.23

VII. Plantation Transportation

Tobacco was shipped to Europe in round casks called hogsheads, which weighed between 90 and 150 pounds empty. Hogsheads stood about 5 feet tall. When filled to capacity with 1000 pounds of tobacco, the hogsheads were heavy, cumbersome, and difficult to carry. The plantation owners devised an innovative way to transport these hogsheads to market. Rather than lift these casks atop carriages, the individual casks were rolled. Large pegs in each end of the cask were attached to a yoke, hitched to a horse, and rolled to the market.24

Planters utilized existing Indian paths as roads, and soon these travelways were known as “rolling roads.” One of the biggest rolling roads in the area was Dumfries Road. began at the intersection of the Potomac Path (the north-south road). The intersection of Dumfries Road and the Potomac Path was soon an important crossroads near the waterfront. The Williams Ordinary, below, in Dumfries was one of the inns that served this road. The development of the rolling roads encouraged the population to emigrate westward.

Figure 10: Williams Ordinary, Dumfries, Va.
VIII. Advances in Tobacco Export Spurs Early Waterfront Development

By the early 1700s, tobacco served as the main currency of the Prince William residents.\textsuperscript{25} Tobacco was used to pay taxes, church levies, and the salaries of public officials.\textsuperscript{26} However, the purity or quality of 1000 pounds of tobacco packed in a 150-pound cask is not as easily evaluated as, say, a gold ingot. The value of tobacco declined as increasing problems with its purity arose. In 1713, Virginia passed the Tobacco Act, which required all tobacco to be inspected before it was used for overseas shipment or as payment for public taxes. This act established public warehouses for tobacco inspection, and one early warehouse was established in Dumfries. The picture below illustrates the early Dumfries tobacco inspection office.

Thus, an organized method of inspecting and storing tobacco arose. Plantation owners delivered their tobacco to the warehouse, where it was inspected by government agents. Before tobacco could be sold, the inspector’s stamp of approval was required to be on the cask. When the tobacco container was stamped, it was stored in the warehouse for eventual shipping. The plantation owner received a numbered receipt, known as a note of demand, which indicated the amount of tobacco that had been received, inspected, and approved. These notes soon became a form of currency. The noteholder could then return to the warehouse and retrieve the tobacco for shipment.\textsuperscript{27}

The method for selling tobacco also changed about this time. Traditionally, tobacco was sold on consignment. That is, the individual ship transporting the tobacco would accept it for sale on consignment from the plantation owner, and use the proceeds to pay for the European goods ordered by the plantation owner.\textsuperscript{28} This system worked best for the large Tidewater plantations, and approximated the system used in England. However, the waterfront area had many Scottish immigrants, who diverted much of the trade to the Glasgow merchants and adopted Scottish methods. Instead of consignment, the Scottish merchants purchased the tobacco directly from the plantation owners at the point of shipment as the agent for the Glasgow firms. The tobacco broker also maintained a store of European goods which catered to the needs of the plantation owner.\textsuperscript{29}

The tobacco warehouses and brokers transformed the development of the waterfront, and continued to exist even though the Tobacco Act was disallowed by Britain in 1717. The warehouse system fostered the development of early towns near the tobacco warehouses. It also encouraged the development of centralized ports. With tobacco stored at warehouses, it was no longer reasonable for ships to visit each plantation. Instead, time and money could be saved by loading all tobacco shipments at an established port.
The flourishing trade and development of commercial ports also spurred growth in outlying areas. For instance, local merchants financed and maintained Dumfries Road, which ran about 50 miles west and crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains. This provided the outlying settlers with the means to transport their crops to the port, in turn increasing the port’s business.

IX. The Establishment of Dumfries

The town of Dumfries was established in 1749 by the Scottish merchants who had settled in the vicinity of the Dumfries tobacco warehouses. It was a prosperous harbor whose total shipping rivaled the port of New York. Some of the early Town Trustees included John Graham, who was originally from the town of Dumfries in Scotland, Richard Blackburn, the architect of the oldest part of Mount Vernon, and George Mason.

Dumfries grew rapidly, and had other industries, including a granary, five hotels, three grist mills, a bakery, a shipyard, and a ferry to Maryland. Horse racing was popular, and a theater was built where George Washington attended a play called “The
Recruiting Officer.” George Washington was also said to have practiced law in Dumfries, specializing in divorce and debt collection cases. If so, he would have visited the County’s courthouse, located in Dumfries from 1762 - 1822.

Below is a drawing of the probable design of the Dumfries Courthouse.

One of the area’s early ironworks was located about five miles north of Dumfries. The Neabsco Ironworks operated from 1738 until the end of the eighteenth century. It produced iron for all types of ship fittings. Nails, spikes, angles, bars, anchors, and other gear were forged by the foundry. Thomas Jefferson has recorded that the foundry supplied equipment to the revolutionary forces. The ironworks served the entire Tidewater area, reducing the area’s dependence on England for manufactured goods. It exemplifies how slave labor was utilized in industrial settings. The illustration to the right shows the working foundry.
The history of Dumfries allows us to imagine how early citizens experienced rule by England before the Revolutionary War. As with other eastern seaboard ports, the port of Dumfries was impacted by British taxes on exports. On June 6, 1774, shortly after the Boston Tea Party, citizens met at the Dumfries courthouse and drafted a resolution which opposed taxation without representation, foreshadowing the sentiments within the Declaration of Independence. This document was known as the Prince William Resolves, and was transmitted for publication in the newspapers of Williamsburg, Annapolis, and Philadelphia. Figure 15 is a picture of William Grayson, who helped write the resolution.

X. The Demise of the Port of Dumfries

The cultivation of tobacco was very hard on the land. It traditionally was planted near the waterfront. However, rainfall caused the topsoil to wash off steep slopes into the water. Over time, the soil was depleted, and the waterways were clogged with silt. By the early eighteenth century, the siltation was causing changes in the waterfront throughout the County. As the harbor filled with silt, the navigable waterways shifted further out and away from the existing towns.

After the Revolutionary War, the Dumfries economy collapsed. Because of siltation, ocean-going vessels could no longer enter its harbor. Instead, ships were forced to anchor in the river, and have smaller boats ferry the goods from shore.

The original Dumfries wharf is now almost three miles upstream from waters navigable to ocean-going ships. In 1822, the County’s courthouse was relocated to Brentsville, as the area population shifted westward.

XI. The Establishment of Occoquan

Another early waterfront town was Occoquan. Although its settlement began in 1753, the town was officially established in 1804. It soon became a prosperous harbor. However, Occoquan did not grow as fast as Dumfries. It was characterized by Fairfax Harrison as a little town which provided convivial restaurants and meeting places for neighboring planters, with the local inns keeping up a high reputation for their cooking.
and wine cellars. It also served as a residence for many of the doctors and lawyers that practiced in neighboring towns.

The town’s economy was more diversified than Dumfries, and included industries such as cotton, flour, and grist mills. Also, the town was part of the mail route south from Washington, D.C. These industries continued to thrive even when Occoquan’s harbor, like Dumfries, silted up and could no longer provide access to ocean-going vessels.

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Rockledge, shown above, is one of Occoquan’s early houses which overlook the waterfront. Built in 1760, it sits above the town upon a rock ledge which has provided it with flood protection through the years. It was originally owned by John Ballendine, who owned local mills and iron mines in the area. The structure’s early history parallels the history of the town of Occoquan. Ballendine was a creative entrepreneur who conceived many innovative technologies and businesses. Rockledge is built out of stone from the nearby Occoquan quarry, which was unusual for Tidewater homes of that era. Ownership of the house shortly passed to John Semple, who also acquired all of Ballendine’s business holdings. Semple closed the forge and concentrated his energies on milling wheat. Ownership of Rockledge then passed to Nathaniel Ellicott, who operated one of the main mills in Occoquan.

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XII. The Essential Connection Between Industry and the Waterfront

Mills were commonly located adjacent to the waterfront, harnessing the power of the water to operate the machinery. In addition, its proximity to the waterfront reduced transportation costs, allowing ships to pull alongside to load the finished product for transportation to market.
One of the first mills to utilize an automatic process was the Ellicott flour mill, operated in Occoquan from 1759 - 1924. Shown below is an artist’s rendering of the probable design of Ellicott Mill in its heyday. The mill, which fronted the street, allowed the grain to be received from a truck or wagon, to be processed and then loaded upon a ship.\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure_17_Elliot_Mill_Rendering.jpg}
\caption{Artist’s Rendering of Ellicott Mill, Occoquan, Va.}
\end{figure}

Indeed, the mills created a memorable first impression of the waterfront, which differed from the one received by early explorers. One early visitor described the noise of the mills as being similar to the noise heard at Great Falls or Niagara Falls.\textsuperscript{40}

Another example of an early mill at Occoquan was a cotton spinning mill run by Nathaniel Janney. Established in 1828, this spinning mill used 1000 spindles.

\section*{XIII. Post-Revolutionary War Changes to the Waterfront}

After the Revolutionary War, tobacco production decreased, as plantation owners moved south in search of fresh soil. Northern farmers replaced the plantation owners. In fact, according to Prince William historian Don Curtis,\textsuperscript{41} an active advertising campaign was conducted in the 1840s in New Jersey and New York, promoting agricultural opportunities in Northern Virginia.\textsuperscript{42} The northern farmers typically farmed...
tracks smaller than the original plantations, and were most often corn, wheat, and dairy farms. These farms were less dependent on slave labor.

These farms shipped most of their produce by land, first by carriage and then by train. By the mid-nineteenth century, the agricultural economy was assisted by transportation improvements in highways and railroads, which meant that the area was no longer dependent on shipping trade with the Tidewater area.

The first railroad in the County was the Orange and Alexandria Railroad (now part of Norfolk Western), which ran from Alexandria through the Manassas area towards Charlottesville. The project was begun in 1848 and was funded primarily by Alexandria merchants seeking to provide new transportation for western trade.

A railroad was also planned to parallel the King’s Highway and run parallel to the waterfront. However, it was completed much later than the railroad in the west. By 1842, the RF&P Railroad came only as far north as Aquia Creek in Stafford County.

In order to take the train, County residents would take one of four steamboats from Washington, D.C. to Stafford County to connect to the train. Eastern Prince William
County was able to enjoy rail connection only after the Civil War. By 1872, the RF&P Railroad expanded its Richmond line from Stafford to Quantico.

The railroad connection from Richmond was ultimately expanded to Washington, D.C. by 1900, with the tracks passing by the old ferry terminal on the Occoquan.

XIV. The Waterfront and the Civil War

The Prince William County waterfront played a crucial but little known role in the Civil War. During the Civil War, the city of Washington, D.C. was the center of the North’s war preparation. The principal route of supply and communication was the Potomac River. Any ship arriving or departing Washington, D.C. traveled past the County’s waterfront during its voyage.
Within two weeks of the start of the Civil War, the Confederate Army established gun batteries atop the hills of the waterfront in order to fire at the Union’s supply ships. Four major batteries were installed on bluffs located at Freestone Point (now Leesylvania Park), Cockpit Point (Cherry Hill), Shipping Point, and Evansport (the latter two now within the Quantico Marine Base). By early 1862, there were approximately 37 heavy guns and many smaller ones installed at these batteries. In addition, the steamer George Page was stationed in Quantico Creek, and was used to intercept small ships and to shell the Maryland shore.

The blockage effectively halted navigation by Union ships. It took the fastest ship at least an hour to pass by these gauntlets, which was spread over some six miles of waterfront.

A correspondent associated with the New York Herald described the Confederate’s batteries as “gems of engineering skill.” From atop the batteries, a soldier had a clear view for miles in all directions. Unfortunately, soldiers stationed atop the batteries also were subjected to extreme winds and temperatures. One soldier reported:

“The wind along and across the river had full sweep, as cold as the north pole, and it set in every night about time for the tide to rise...It was our custom for the messmate who went on guard to put on all of the spare clothes in the mess (four to six men were in a mess), sometimes two or three shirts, as many drawers, coat and trousers, and this was the only way we kept from freezing. If the “Yanks” had landed, we, with all those clothes on, would have made an awkward effort in giving the alarm.”
The Confederate batteries were manned by thousands of troops, quartered in large camps located near Telegraph Road. Hospitals for the sick and wounded were set up in at least four houses in Dumfries.\textsuperscript{49}

The Union Army formed a Potomac flotilla to control the river and keep it open for shipping. The Union Army's original goal was to destroy the batteries as they were being built. However, disagreement among Union officers prevented early action. General McClelland, Commander of the Union Army, wanted to delay action until other Federal offensives had interrupted the Confederate railroad communication and supply network.\textsuperscript{50} As President Lincoln increased the pressure to end the blockade of the Potomac River, McClelland assigned General Hooker to formulate plans for capturing and disarming the Confederate batteries. Hooker employed several innovative means as part of the surveillance used to determine the size and strength of the Confederates stationed at the batteries. The drawings below illustrate the use of balloons and calcium lights.

![Figure 21: Illustration of a Union ship using a calcium light to view the Evansport Battery at night](image-url)
Freestone Point, located at Leesylvania Plantation, was the northern-most battery built by the Confederates. Built in September, 1861, it was situated atop a 95-foot-tall cliff where the Potomac River and Neabsco Creek meets. The Confederates built Freestone Point, together with all of the other batteries secretly, carefully leaving a screen of trees in front of the batteries to obscure the construction. Each of the trees were partially cut, to allow troops to speedily cut them down at the start of hostilities. The Freestone Point Battery was discovered by the Union army earlier than the other batteries. The Seminole, a Union ship, fired upon the battery at 9:30 a.m. on September 25, 1861. The Confederates immediately returned fire, thus confirming the existence of the battery.

The Freestone Point Battery was not built as well as the other batteries, and was located at a more noticeable location. Historians hypothesize that its location was intended to distract the Union Army from the other, better built batteries located to the south.\textsuperscript{51}

President Lincoln ordered the Union Army to remove the Confederate batteries on March 8, 1862. Before the Union troops could act, the Confederate forces evacuated their positions, destroying many of the batteries as they departed. The federal troops subsequently found evidence of hasty departures by the Confederates, including housing with tables still set for uneaten meals.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure22.png}
\caption{Illustration showing the Union balloon Constitution conducting night observations of the Confederate Batteries using a calcium light.}
\end{figure}
After the Civil War, growth was slow along the waterfront, as the area’s economy rebounded from the effects of the war. By the turn of the century, however, the area’s economy had rebounded. Agriculture still remained the primary occupation, with the railroads providing additional links to markets for the produce.

For instance, the Maromsco farm (not Marumsco) stretched for hundreds of acres from the present Marumsco Village to the present-day Belmont. This parcel held at least three dairy farms, which shipped their milk to D.C. on a train up through the late 1940s.53

Occoquan remained a bustling community that served the entire area. Residents of Hoadly, Minnieville, and even Fairfax County visited Occoquan to shop. The grist meal ground meal, flour, and buckwheat that was used to process feed for the dairies.

Occoquan also remained a successful harbor. One local resident has described Occoquan in the early 1900s in a letter to a local newspaper:

“(Occoquan) was considered a small seaport then. From September until April oyster boats came to Occoquan loaded with fresh oysters that you could buy for 50 cents per bushel at the wharf. Long boats came in and tied up at Lynne’s Wharf, which extended down river further than it does now, and loaded up with railroad ties and lumber....When the river was not frozen over there was so much business at that one wharf that it kept one man, Dick Dean, busy stacking and grading railroad ties and lumber. ...Also on holidays an excursion boat used to come to Occoquan and make a trip to Colonial Beach and different resorts. I think it was named Mary Washington. ...Before prohibition there were two or three bar rooms in Occoquan. You could bring your own pint bottle and buy the whiskey out of a barrel for 25 cents a pint. And bonded whiskey was 50 cents.”54

The Featherstone area on the waterfront also held a huge dairy farm. Historical records indicate that a 440-acre farm was established there in the early 1900s by a New Yorker named Frank Chambers. One legend provides that the name “Featherstone” derived from the two ponies Chambers bought for his children - one named Feather and the other named Stone. Other sources dispute this legend, claiming the ponies were named after the existing Featherstone area. Chamber’s dairy produced “Kumiss”-- a fermented milk drink that was popular in its day and sold in tall green bottles.55 Other sources report that the milk drink was delivered in a fancy Model-T Ford panel truck, with all of the employees dressed in white uniforms.56

Other waterfront areas were known for their fishing and recreational amenities. The present day Leesylvania Park was long used as a weekend retreat for affluent Washington, D.C. families, boasting diverse hunting and fishing. By 1926, the Freestone Hunt Club was established on land that is now the site of the Possum Point Virginia Power Plant. It operated until the late 1940s. One of the most popular activities was duck hunting. One of the duties of the hunt club manager was to keep the duck “blinds” in repair (little cubicles on stilts in the marshlands upon which hunters
stood when stalking game). Statistics showed that hunters killed 1,544 ducks in 1928 at Freestone Hunt Club.57

Unlike the recreational fishing at Freestone, Cherry Hill was the site of commercial fishing. Local residents supported sometimes meager incomes by fishing carp, bass, catfish, and rockfish. Another fishing village was Quantico, but its growth was stimulated by the construction of the RF&P railroad lines and depot at Quantico in 1872. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Quantico was being advertised as a recreational day trip. Tourists were brought from Washington and Richmond by the steamer St. Johns. A beach was developed with dressing rooms and refreshment stands. In one week in 1916, Quantico was visited by 2,600 visitors who came by steamer or train.58

![Quantico shipyard in 1916, located at present day Hospital Point](image)

In 1916, one of the biggest industries was the Quantico Shipyards, located near the present day Naval Hospital.59 It was advertised as one of the largest shipyards in the Western Hemisphere. The shipyards planned to build ocean-going freighters and tankers.

Development of Quantico as a complete industrial city was being promoted by the new town developers, aptly called the Quantico Company. It had laid out the town and was offering real estate for sale.60
At the same time, the Marine Corps was looking for a location to place a new training facility, with the start of World War I in 1917 increasing the impetus for establishing a new location. By this time, the Quantico Company was having financial trouble, having more land than could be sold. The Marine Corps leased the property in 1917, and one year later Congress acquired the land and established a permanent base at Quantico. The Quantico Land Company was paid $475,000 for land that extended east to the waterfront as well as 1,200 acres west of Route 1.\textsuperscript{61}

Other major industry also existed on the waterfront. A garbage disposal plant operated on the Cherry Hill peninsula from the early part of the century until the 1950s. This plant converted table scraps and dead livestock into soap. The plant furnished work for many of the community’s residents, and provided a few side benefits. Fishermen noted that the size of the catfish increased, having apparently fed on the grease being dumped into the river. But the plant was a mixed blessing. The area was known for the smell generated by the plant, which sometimes could be detected up to 15 miles away.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{XVI. Waterfront Development After World War II}

After World War II, activity around the waterfront changed. The dairy farms slowly ceased operations, as new government regulations on milk production made smaller dairies unprofitable. The dairies around Belmont and Featherstone were developed into residential subdivisions and used to house the growing number of workers commuting into Washington, D.C. The areas around Cherry Hill and Neabsco developed more slowly. Industrial development had hurt the natural resources in the area. There were fewer birds to hunt, as the North American flyway moved east, away from the pollution caused by industrial development.\textsuperscript{63} In the 1940s and 1950s, many Cherry Hill residents supported themselves by manufacturing illegal whiskey -- also known as moonshine. Long-time residents indicate that strict rules were followed that prohibited selling the moonshine to villagers or teenagers.\textsuperscript{64}

The Leesylvania area was acquired in 1957 by developer J. Carl Hill, who envisioned creating the Washington area’s first luxury vacation and recreation resort there. Named Freestone Point, Hill drew up plans that included a beach, a 2-mile boardwalk, a 600-room hotel, a yacht club, an 18-hole golf course, an amusement park, and a floating casino.\textsuperscript{65}
In fact, only the beach (with some amusement rides) and the casino materialized.\(^6\) The ship S.S. Freestone was moored at the pier from 1957 to 1958 and featured liquor “by the drink”\(^7\) and gambling, which were both illegal in Virginia at that time. The activity was permitted because the Virginia boundary ended at the shore line; boats moored in the water were considered within the jurisdiction of the state of Maryland. Political pressure, however, led to the revocation of the gambling license in 1958, and the facility was forced to close. The owners of Freestone Point tried unsuccessfully to operate the site as a family resort thereafter.

In 1978, the site was purchased by a combination of state, federal, and private funds and converted to the Leesylvania State Park.\(^8\)
XVII. The Waterfront Today

The waterfront today continues to define and influence its adjoining community. In addition to the older residential developments in Featherstone and Belmont, new mixed communities featuring combinations of residential, office, and commercial uses are being built in Cherry Hill and Belmont Bay. These newest communities are orienting their design around the water, reminiscent of the early towns and plantation houses which prospered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a sense, the waterfront area is returning to its roots.

Wildlife is once again prospering. Fisherman report that the numbers of fish have greatly increased, due to water quality improvement efforts. The Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge has been established near the site where John Smith first landed. This 643-acre tract on land located at the mouth of the Occoquan River was used as a communications facility by the U.S. Army in the 1940s and was later used in the Army’s Harry Diamond Lab for research. Bald eagles now build their nests and feed their young in the same paths traveled by Indians, merchant ships carrying hogsheads of tobacco, and Union ships transporting wartime supplies.

Figure 26: The town of Occoquan, Va. today: a prosperous community on the waterfront
Prince William County’s waterfront has a rich history that has and will continue to contribute to the beauty and heritage of Northern Virginia.

2 Ibid.
5 Harrison, p. 287.
6 Harrison, p. 38. Also see Wilstach, p. 47.
7 Wilstach, p. 53.
8 Harrison, p. 45. Although originally located in Prince William, this patent contained land in the Colchester area now located in Fairfax County.
9 Harrison, p. 41.
10 Harrison, p. 46.
11 Harrison, p. 496.
12 Harrison, p. 149.
14 Harrison, p. 50.
15 Harrison, p. 496.
18 Harrison, pp. 314-315.
19 Wilstach, p. 48.
20 Evans, p. 19.
23 Curtis, p. 36.
24 Thrall, pp. 31-32.
25 Using tobacco as money did not originate in the new world. British currency, in fact, was based on the weight of tobacco. The British pound originally equated to a pound of tobacco.
26 Harrison, pp. 381-383.
27 Thrall, pp. 27-29.
28 Harrison, p. 383.
30 Thrall, p. 6. Also see Harrison, p. 387.
31 Thrall, pp. 49-51.
32 William Hampton Adams and Carl R. Lounsbury. Archaeological Testing of the Dumfries Courthouse Site, Prince William County, Virginia. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, (1984), p. 13. The actual drawing was reprinted from Robert Morris’ Architectural Remembrancer. No records have been found which document the exact design of the Dumfries Courthouse. Some historians suspect but have not verified that the courthouse may have been designed by noted architect William Buckland.
36 Harrison, p. 425.
Don Curtis was a local historian who originally from the Minnieville area. Curtis actively researched many of the local sites, and was the leading force behind the development of the Leesylvania property into a public park. He served for many years on the Prince William County Historical Commission, until his untimely death in 1984.

The newspaper reporter wrote “On entering one of them you descend an inclined plane, and after advancing about four feet you find yourself in a passage barely wide enough to admit a man. You turn within to the right or the left, still going underground, to the distance of from fifteen to twenty feet, when you come to the magazine itself, which is filled with shelves of cedar plank, on which shot and shell and other ammunition are stowed. The passageway is lined with cedar planks, to prevent the earth from caving in.”

Mary Alice Wills, The Confederate Blockade of Washington, D.C. 1861 - 1862, McClain Printing Company, Parsons (1975), pp. 117-118. McClellan subsequently wrote in his book McClelland’s Own Story, that “he did not regard the inconveniences resulting from the presence of the enemy’s batteries on the Potomac as sufficiently great to justify the direct efforts to dislodge them.”