

A Brief History of Hancock, Maryland

Provided by the Hancock Historical Society

Hancock is an ancient settlement that was once on the frontier edge of Maryland. Early maps done by Winslow and Mayo show European settlers here by the 1730's. One of the most noted of these was Charles Polke, "Indian Trader of the Potomac." Polke's great-grand-nephew James Knox Polk would later become the eleventh President of the United States.[1] Charles Polke's trading post was located in an area that is now a part of the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historic Park, just south of West Main Street in Hancock. It is currently a park area and boat ramp maintained by the U.S. Park Service called "Little Tonoloway." The site of Polke's post is believed to have been in an area just to the west of this park.[2]

Like any colonial village worth-its-salt, we also had our visits from George Washington. In his journal written at age fifteen, while he was learning the trade of surveying, we find these entries recorded during March of 1747:

Sunday 20th, finding y. River not much abated we in y. Evening Swam our horses over and carried then to Charles Polks in Maryland for pasturage till y. next morning.

Monday 21st, We went over in a canoe and travell'd up Maryland side all y. South Branch about 40 Miles from Polks I believe y. Worst Road that was ever trod by Man or Beast. [2]

Washington, whose family owned property in nearby Bath, VA (now Berkeley Springs, WV) was a visitor again according to his journal entry of August 30, 1769: *Old Mr. Flint dined with us*, and again on September 4th: *Rid to Potomac where my horses were from thense to Mr. Flint's and the Pennsylvania line, and returned to dinner.* Joseph Flint was also an Indian trader. The original log structure known as "Flint's Chance," that was visited by George Washington, has been embellished by additions through the years and now stands as a stately manor house owned by the Cohill family. The home is open to the public as the Cohill Manor Bed & Breakfast. Twentieth century President Franklin D. Roosevelt is reputed to have also been a guest of the Cohill family hospitality. [3]



Main Street circa 1920 - Monterey Hotel on the Left

As an outpost on the frontier, the area known as "Tonoloway Settlement" was subject to the ravages of Indian raids. At the height of these raids, Maryland Provincial Governor Horatio Sharpe ordered a series of forts to be built along the Potomac. In 1755, Lt. Thomas Stoddert, with a crew of 15-20, was sent out to build a stockade fort in the "Tonoloways" (now Hancock). It was completed by July of 1755. In 1756, the stone fortress "Fort Frederick" was completed twelve miles to the east, and Fort Stoddard was abandoned. Letters preserved from the era depict a gruesome picture of the massacres that occurred in the areas surrounding these forts. [4]

By the time of the Revolutionary War, the settlement boasted some twenty odd houses. Many names have been associated with the general area - Tonoloway Settlement, Northbend, and William's Town among them.

It is generally held that the name Hancock derived from Edward Joseph Hancock Jr., who operated the ferry here prior to his enlistment in the 8th Pennsylvania regiment. After the war, Hancock migrated to Wayne County, Indiana.

As the National Pike was extended westward (circa 1818) the town boomed as stagecoach inns, liverys, and blacksmith shops dotted the Main Street. One inn, The Barton House, was host to such notables as Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay and Davy Crockett, according to a Harper's Weekly article.



The Barton House in Hancock

The next growth spurt came with the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which ran from Georgetown in Washington D.C. to Cumberland, MD, a total of 184.5 miles. It reached Hancock by 1839. Hancock boasted two business districts, one on Main Street (or Baltimore Street) and the other on Water Street. Wharves extended from the various warehouses to take trade directly to or from the canal boats. P. T. Little's warehouse was one of the largest of these. While digging the C&O Canal, argillaceous magnesium limestone was discovered about three miles west of Hancock. A mill was constructed on the site (circa 1838-39). It operated as Shafer's Cement Mill, and later as Round Top Cement. By the Civil War it was Hancock's largest employer. There were eight kilns built into the side of the mountain that were used to burn the limestone to powder. The kilns and the foundations of the mill are still visible from the C&O Canal towpath and the new Western Maryland Rail Trail. [5]

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Hancock was greatly affected because of the main arteries of travel transecting at this junction: the Bank Road, the C&O Canal, and the B&O Railroad on the banks of the Virginia side of the Potomac River at Alpine Station (now Hancock, WV). Troops were stationed here at various points to safeguard these supply lines.

On January 5, 1862, Hancock was laid siege to by Major General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Coming up from Winchester, VA, Jackson drove troops of the 39th Illinois stationed in Bath, VA north across the Potomac River into Hancock on January 4th. On the 5th, after his demand for surrender was denied, he began shelling from Orrick's Hill (VA) toward Hancock. Union troops were positioned on a ridge behind St. Thomas Episcopal Church and St. Peter's Catholic Church. A first hand account from local canal merchant James Ripley Smith states:

Jan 5, 1862 - Sunday - The citizens of Hancock left by orders of the Southern General Jackson. 1 1/2 hours to leave, at one o'clock they came cannonading but we replied which silenced them before night. About 100 shots were exchanged, one part of a shell hit my house and smoke house, a ball lodged in the garden in the ground and many other places in town.

You'll note that it was a Sunday attack, which for "Stonewall," a devout Presbyterian, was almost unheard of. It was reported that the attack was in retaliation for the Union shelling of civilians

at Shephardstowns (West Virginia) while there were no Confederate troops there. Through the night of the 4th, and into the 5th, Union forces were reinforced by forces from Hagerstown and Cumberland, MD. The weather turned bitter cold and Jackson withdrew his army of 8,500 men to their winter headquarters in Winchester, VA. But before leaving, Jackson's forces plundered a large catch of rifles, ammo, blankets and other bounty from a supply train that had come into the Alpine Station directly across the River from Hancock. It was estimated that the supplies taken might have had a value of up to half a million dollars.

According to a report submitted to Secretary of War Stanton by Acting Quartermaster A. S. Kimball on January 21, 1867, we learn that St. Thomas Church requested \$1662.00 in War reparations. The report states:

Possession was taken of the Church by the troops of the United States on the 2nd or 3rd day of Jan. 1862." "The command of Brig. Gen. A. S. Williams was stationed at Hancock and occupied under his auspices. The former part of the occupation was for barracks and quarters, but latterly it was occupied for hospital purposes. The parsonage was used wholly as a hospital. The Church was vacated by the troops in March 1863, thus making a period of about 14 months, during which time it was in possession of the troops.



St. Thomas Church - Photo taken shortly after the Civil War

Other damage claims were presented from an extensive area of the town.

The next major incursion on Hancock's tranquility occurred on July 31, 1864. This is an account from the journal of Hancock resident James Ripley Smith:

31 Sunday Rebel General McCouslin & B. L. Johnson made a raid on this place. Arrived about 12 m. and was whiped out about 6 P.M. They burned boats, robbed and destroyed stores. I lost about 2000 dollars in goods and money. left me no clothing to ware. Took the hat off my head, but Gen. Averel made them leave in a hurry. The Rebs burned all the Bridges on the Pike between this place and Flintstone and cut trees along the road. One cannonball passed thru my store within 3 feet of my head. Bullets flew thick. Jacob Hammann Boat, Liberty was burned in front of my store.

The following is a portion of a field report by Confederate Brigadier General Bradley T. Johnson on August 10, 1864:

At sunrise next morning, Sunday July 31 we moved on Hancock, we in the rear. Brig. Gen. McCausland directed me to send cavalry by way of Bedford towards Cumberland to arrest hostages. I ordered Col. Dunn to make the movement, but returning to McConnellsburg he found it occupied by Federal Cavalry and returned to his command. I reported the fact to Brig-Gen McCausland. Reached Hancock about 1 P.M. and stopped to feed, while Brig. Gen. McCausland demanded of the town authorities a ransom of \$30,000 and 5000 cooked rations. I explained to him that the whole population of the town was only 700 and without moneyed resources, which made that amount absolutely impossible to be collected. I am colonel, very respectfully, your obedient servant: Bradley T. Johnson, Brigadier-General

Out of one of Hancock's most illustrious families came one of the war's most notable warriors, Major James Breathed, M.D. The Breathed family was instrumental in the founding of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Hancock. His sister, Pricilla Breathed Bridges, was the wife of Robert Bridges, co-owner of Round Top Cement Mill. Breathed graduated from the University of Maryland medical school. As the war was breaking out he had a chance meeting on a train with James Ewell Brown Stuart (a.k.a. "Jeb" Stuart). Breathed enlisted in the 1st Virginia Cavalry, again meeting up with Stuart who commissioned him "Lieutenant of Stuart's Horse Artillery." He distinguished himself at the Battle of Spotsylvania, Yellow Tavern (where Stuart was killed), and Gettysburg. After the surrender at Appomattox, Breathed returned to Hancock where he made his home with his sister Pricilla's family on the N.E. corner of Main Street and Church Hill. He practiced medicine at the top of that hill on the S.W. corner of Main & High Street. Upon his untimely death on February 14, 1870 (at age 31), he was laid to rest in St. Thomas Cemetery directly behind the Church. His tombstone bears the following quote from General Robert E. Lee: "The hardest artillery fighter the war produced." [6]

As to James Breathed's character, I cite the words of Henry Kyd Douglas of Stonewall Jackson's staff:

He was noble as well as a gallant fellow. Quick handed and warm hearted with courage as keen and at the same time as polished as his sword, generous, without guile and without malice, he was all together a trusty and true gentleman. The popularity of Jim Breathed was not only martial - all who knew him loved him. [7]

After the Civil War, the town continued to thrive as a commercial center. Around 1891 a bridge was constructed over the Potomac River and in 1904 the Western Maryland Railroad reached the town fueling a building boom.

One of the major industries for many years was fruit production. In 1886, Edmund P. Cohill began the planting of commercial orchards. Other orchardmen followed, and by 1925 over 5,000 acres of land were devoted to commercial fruit production. At one point, Maryland produced over two million bushels of apples, 25% of which were produced in Washington County.



C&O Canal boat in operation.
Water tanks served the Western
Maryland Railroad in Hancock.

Situated on the Potomac about ten miles to the west of Hancock is a huge game conservation preserve of about 8,000 acres with a massive lodge that was known as the "Hunting Club of the Presidents." A large rocking chair at the lodge has been occupied by Presidents James Garfield, Chester Authur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Organized in 1870 as a private hunting club, it was frequented by "Who's Who" of American government, leaders of twentieth century industry and notables such as Babe Ruth and Amos & Andy of radio fame. It is now the property of the State of Maryland, Department of Natural Resources and is sublet to the Izzak Walton League for a portion of the year. The DNR sponsors some public events at the Woodmont Lodge, and details of such events can be obtained by contacting Fort Frederick State Park. [8]

In this fourth century in which Hancock has existed, she continues her long tradition as a center for hosting travelers and a place to escape from a fast paced world.

SOURCES

- [1] *Charles Polke, The Indian Trader of the Potomac* by John S. Kester.
- [2] *ibid.*
- [3] *Cohill Manor, Circa 1752* by John and Deborah Cohill
- [4] *Tonoloway Fort, Stoddert's Fort at the Tonoloways* by Gerald Seward
- [5] *Round Top Cement Mill* by C. Kinneary
- [6] *Washington County Has an Unsung Confederate Hero* by Richard E. Clem
- [7] *Gallant Pelhan's Gallant Breathed* by Robert J. Trout
- [8] *The Woodmont Story* by Henry P. Bridges

OTHER HANCOCK, MARYLAND PHOTOS



Early photo of the P.T. Little
General Merchandise Store



The Roundtop Cement Company - The stack to the
left can still be seen today from the C&O Canal
towpath and the Western Maryland Rail Trail



The Western Maryland Railroad Station - Now
at the location of the Rail Trail Parking Area



Early postcard of the Woodmont Rod & Gun Club
now owned by the State of Maryland