

Old Towne Petersburg

This article is one of a series of articles developed under the editorship of LTC (Ret.) John R. Kennedy, III as part of Preservation Petersburg's Peter Jones Trading Station Initiative, 2012-14. Many of the articles served as source materials for the "Petersburg Moments in Time" broadcast series produced by Professor Dan Roberts.

The establishment of Fort Henry at the Falls of the Appomattox in 1645 expanded the English settlement that began in the previous decade south of the Appomattox River. The founding fathers of Petersburg, Abraham Wood and Peter Jones, were military and trading leaders at the Fort Henry complex during the 17th century. At least four exploratory parties departed and returned to Fort Henry between 1650 and 1674, documenting the geography and Indian tribes to the south and southwest of the frontier outpost. William Byrd II laid out the foundation of a city near the Fort Henry site in 1733 and named it Petersburg; he also laid out and named the city of Richmond in the same year.

Old Towne was the core of what became by the mid-19th century a leading manufacturing and transportation center in Virginia and the South. It still possesses a rich diversity of historical residential, commercial, and industrial architecture including structures in late Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne, and Colonial and Georgian Revival styles. According to the Old Towne Historic District Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, "Virtually every late 18th and early 19th century style of architecture popular in the United States is represented in the Old Towne historic district."

Petersburg in the first half of the 20th century was a vibrant industrial and commercial city. People from all over Southside Virginia (which is that part of Virginia south of the James River) came to shop in the city, especially along North Sycamore Street and in the Halifax Triangle. To address the frequent Appomattox River floods, the river channel was diverted to north of what is now known as Pocahontas Island in 1909. As late as the 1930s, the Petersburg harbor boasted substantial freight and passenger traffic. In 1915, the top four Petersburg exports were tobacco, cotton yarns, luggage,

and peanuts. The Seward Trunk and Bag Company made Petersburg the largest producer of trunks in the world in the early 20th century. Seward produced foot lockers for soldiers in World War I. Its buildings on East High Street have recently been adapted to house loft-style apartments.

During the first half of the 20th century, the city hosted a president, both supported and benefited from the formation of the Army's Camp Lee on the eastern border of the city, and made significant contributions in two world wars. President William Howard Taft visited the city on May 19, 1909. He witnessed the unveiling of a tablet at Civil-War era Fort Stedman and dedicated the Pennsylvania Monument in honor of the miners who dug the tunnel before the 1864 Battle of the Crater. Thousands witnessed a parade in honor of the president, and hundreds of invited guests enjoyed lunch on the grounds of the Centre Hill Mansion.

Petersburg fully supported the establishment of Camp Lee in the summer of 1917. Many citizens and organizations volunteered to serve soldiers in the 80th Infantry Division and other units that trained at Camp Lee. However, the devastating Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918 reached Petersburg in October of that year. A total of 7,000 citizens contracted the disease, and 140 died. A total of 84 servicemen from Petersburg died in World War I.

Camp Lee was demolished after World War I but re-established in the fall of 1940 in the lead up to World War II. Many citizens made apartments within their homes to house soldiers from the post. A company from Petersburg landed at Omaha Beach as a part of the Army's 29th Infantry Division during the June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion. Native sons General Leonard Townsend Gerow and his brother Brigadier General Lee Saunders Gerow fought in World War II. Eighty-nine servicemen from Petersburg died in World War II.

In this period of progress and economic vitality, many historic buildings in town sadly were demolished. In 1902, Jarratt's Hotel, at the southwest corner of Washington and Union Streets, was razed, followed in 1911 by Mechanics Hall, which stood at the

northwest corner of North Sycamore and West Tabb Streets. The second Bollingbrook home fell to the wrecking ball in 1925, and the 1828 Bollingbrook Hotel at the northeast corner of Bollingbrook and North Adams Streets was demolished in 1932. In 1944, the 1760s Golden Ball Tavern was razed. British officers had frequented this establishment during their occupations of Petersburg in 1781, and in May 1784 an assembly met at "William Durell's Tavern" (probably the Golden Ball) to incorporate the expanded borough of Petersburg. Revitalization and historic preservation efforts within Old Towne and throughout the city have increased since the Historic Petersburg Foundation, Inc., was founded on September 22, 1967.

Old Towne today is an inviting culinary and shopping destination, with almost all of its restaurants and shops in historic structures. Its numerous individually owned quality restaurants offer Italian, Greek, Latin American, tea room, British pub, Southern soul and comfort food, coffeehouse, American, deli sandwich, BBQ, German, and Sushi Fusion dining options. Old Towne also boasts approximately a dozen antique shops, primarily on West Old and North Sycamore Streets but also on North Market, Bollingbrook, and West Bank Streets.

Among the most historic sites surviving in Old Towne are the Peter Jones Trading Station at Short Market Street and Grove Avenue; the Siege Museum at 15 West Bank Street; the Farmer's Bank at 19 Bollingbrook Street; St. Paul's Church at 110 North Union Street; the Farmer's Market at Rock, East Old, and River Streets; the South Side Depot on River Street at Rock Street; the Centre Hill Mansion at 1 Centre Hill Avenue; and the Petersburg Hustings Courthouse on Courthouse Square at 150 North Sycamore Street.

Old Towne's greatest asset is its variety and quantity of historic buildings. Steven Spielberg recognized this fact when he chose to film much of his award-winning movie "Lincoln" in Old Towne Petersburg in December 2011. In fact, President Abraham Lincoln spent three of the last four weeks of his life in City Point (now Hopewell), Prince George County, Dinwiddie County, Richmond, and Petersburg. On April 3, 1865, the President met with the commander of the Union Army besieging Petersburg, Lieutenant

General Ulysses S. Grant, at the Thomas Wallace House, located at 204 South Market Street. Upon his return to Washington, President Lincoln had one week left to live.

The adaptive reuse of many industrial and commercial buildings, primarily on North Sycamore Street, and the restoration of homes on Grove Avenue and High Street have contributed to the revitalization throughout Old Towne. A large number of loft-style apartments have been built over the last few years in Old Towne, and more store owners are reverting back to the historical concept of living above their retail stores. For over 10 years, Old Towne has come alive on the second Friday night of each month with its celebration of Friday for the Arts. There are multiple arts venues, with live music inside and outside, and Old Towne's shops and restaurants stay open until 10pm.

Old Towne Petersburg is a charming place that has drawn many to live in historic Petersburg and many more to visit to dine, shop, enjoy its cultural events, admire its historic architecture, and visit its many historic sites. It is "Where Commerce Began." Don't take my word for it-- you must see it for yourself!

Source: National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form