

Petersburg Harbor and Port: Where Commerce Began in America!

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 founding of a settlement on the south side of the Appomattox River in the 1630s, the building of Fort Henry there in the 1640s, and the initial planning for the city of Petersburg there by William Byrd II in the 1730s were all based on one geographical reality: the presence of the falls of the Appomattox River. The falls marked the farthest point upriver that waterborne transportation could reach. Ships and boats could sail up the James and Appomattox Rivers to the falls and pick up tobacco and other produce brought there from southern Virginia and northeastern and north central North Carolina.

From the earliest days of English settlement, navigation on the Appomattox supported extensive commercial activity. Oceangoing ships, normally of about 70 tons, docked in the Petersburg harbor to carry the cargo sent there by planters in surrounding regions. Between 1730 and 1842, approximately 21 tobacco warehouses were built in Petersburg. By the 1820s, canals along the river enabled points west to send agricultural products to Petersburg on canal boats called "bateaux." Bateaux were flat boats invented in the early 1770s to transport cargo, primarily hogsheads of tobacco, to ports east of the fall line such as Richmond and Petersburg. The Upper Appomattox Canal, now Dominion Power Company, was one of the most important canals in the United States. From Farmville, to the west, to Petersburg, the canal's locks lowered the bateaux 44 feet and raised them 33 feet.

A brisk, waterborne commerce occurred in Petersburg before and even during the Revolutionary War. In the 1770s, goods were imported directly from France and were sold in Petersburg stores. The adjacent town of Pocahontas exported much tobacco in the 1770s and 1780s. Pocahontas contained many warehouses, and numerous sloops and schooners berthed there.

Advertisements from the *Virginia Gazette* attest to the extensive trade passing through Petersburg and Pocahontas. For example, one from November 6, 1766, notes:

“Just imported from BRITAIN in the ship *Spiers*, CAPT. LUSK, and to be sold at PETERSBURG, upon the lowest terms, AN assortment of European GOODS, to the value of about 1000 l. sterling, consisting of the following articles, viz. Osnaburgs [a coarse cotton fabric used as sacking, draperies, and upholstery], German rolls, twills [a cloth woven with parallel slanting lines or ribs], Irish linens and sheetings, dowlas, plaid, yarn and worsted [firm-textured, compactly twisted woolen yarn] hose, half thicks, duffils, bearskins, friezes [a band of designs, drawings, or carvings used as a decoration along a wall or around a room], flannels, calamancoes [a glossy woolen fabric with a checked pattern on one side], durants, German serges [hard, strong cloths, usually wool, with a twill weave and used for suits and coats], blanket and bed rugs, Negro cottons, mens and womens shoes, stationery, tin and hard ware, nails, hoes and axes, iron pots, with many other goods not mentioned. For particulars inquire of Mr. George Purdie, merchant in Smithfield, or Mr. Richard Taylor, merchant in Petersburg, with whom invoices of the same are lodged.”

Another from that same date advertises:

“To BE SOLD, THE LOTS and HOUSES whereon the subscriber lives, adjoining the town of Petersburg, near the warehouses, consisting of a large commodious dwelling-house... The houses are... well situated for business and would answer for any person to carry on a large trade that requires much room. As Petersburg is a place so well known for its great trade, having such an extensive back country, make it unnecessary to say anything of its situation. As I intend for Great Britain as soon as I can settle my affairs... I hope regard will be paid to this advertisement, as many bonds and accounts have been long standing.”

This advertisement was placed by Mr. Richard Hanson, an English tobacco merchant. He operated the largest tobacco-exporting business in colonial America and lived in the Golden Ball Tavern at the southeast corner of North Market and Old Streets. He remained loyal to the

Crown and returned to England in 1776. A historical marker is on the site of the Golden Ball Tavern, which was razed in 1944.

In the *Virginia Gazette* of April 4, 1777, Birchett, Oldhan & Co. advertised the sale at Petersburg of the schooner *Marnex* from St. Croix in the Caribbean. Also for sale was its cargo of “salt, gunpowder, fine linens, cambric [a thin, fine, light cloth of linen or cotton] nuns thread, canvas, thread stocking, white hum bums, superfine broadcloth [a fine, smooth cotton or silk cloth, used for shirts, pajamas, etc.], calamanco shoes, calclaval wine, brown sugar, hyson tea [a Chinese green tea with curled or twisted leaves]...”

The heyday for foreign travel and commerce from the Petersburg harbor was in the first half of the 19th century. Wholesale merchants in Petersburg supplied retail stores in towns and cities in southern Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The commerce between Petersburg’s flour mills and the vessels plying the James River between Petersburg and Norfolk and beyond was extensive. In addition to grain and flour, other items such as corn, bread, tobacco, sugar, rum, nails, iron, Irish linen, and hemp were shipped from Petersburg. Merchants in both Petersburg and Norfolk sold goods throughout Virginia, along the eastern coast of the United States, to Britain, and to a lesser extent to other European countries.

The first steamboat arrived in the Petersburg harbor in 1819, a mere 12 years after Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston’s successful inaugural steamboat voyage in the *Clermont* on the Hudson River in New York. In September 1858, the 700-ton *Southern Star* entered the Petersburg harbor. It was the largest steamboat to dock at the port of Petersburg.

Many African-Americans worked in the mills lining the Appomattox River and as boatmen on the vessels transporting goods from and to Petersburg. There are numerous accounts in both Petersburg and Norfolk newspapers of slaves who ran away from their masters and were presumed to make good their escape on ships plying the waters of the Appomattox and James Rivers. Many of these were watermen (or boatmen), and this eased their escape.

By 1850, most of Petersburg's boatmen were free blacks and some owned their own vessels. Richard Jarrett was a black boatman who was born about 1779 in Pocahontas. His house, built on or before 1820, still stands on Pocahontas Island at 808-810 Logan Street. It is the only brick building extant on Pocahontas Island. John Updike, a free mulatto, owned several sloops and schooners between 1824 and 1862; they were built in several locations, including Petersburg; Mathews County, Virginia; and New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Perhaps the most famous black boatmen in Petersburg history were the Roberts brothers. John Wright Roberts was a free black boatman, and an elder in the Methodist Church. His older brother, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, was also a free black (mulatto) boatman in Petersburg. He later became the last Governor and the first President of the nation of Liberia in Africa. He traveled to Europe in 1848 to obtain recognition of the new republic of Liberia and was well received by the courts of Queen Victoria in England and Emperor Napoleon III in France. A historical marker about his accomplishments is located at the northwest corner of West Wythe and South Sycamore Streets.

The current Petersburg City Hall, at the corner of West Tabb and North Union Streets, was built by the Federal Government in 1858 as a customs house and post office. The size of Petersburg's extensive trade required a large customs house. In the next year, a news account described the harbor scene in Petersburg. "Yesterday there were some twenty or thirty vessels in port, mostly first class schooners, decked out in their Sunday suits, and presenting a rare spectacle for the wharves of Petersburg. The vessels represented six of the first Atlantic cities—New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Portland, Baltimore, and Charleston. Besides pleasing to the vision, such a display is most gratifyingly suggestive of something like future greatness." On the eve of the Civil War, Petersburg boasted 39 commission merchants who sold agricultural products for planters. They also sold fertilizer and other commodities to planters and purchased items for them from distant suppliers.

After the Civil War, in 1869, the Petersburg City Council provided \$200,000 to help pay for dredging a 12-foot channel in the Appomattox River. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assumed control of this project in 1871. Keeping the Appomattox River channel dredged was a

continual concern, and it still is today. In 1883, 980 ships came to the port of Petersburg and the total tonnage was over 4.6 million tons. Much lumber was being shipped out of Petersburg, and much guano (the excrement of primarily seabirds and cave-dwelling bats that is a very effective fertilizer) was coming in. From the 1880s through the early 1900s, the harbor was dominated by three-masted schooners.

By 1917, most freight carried by water landed at City Point to the east of Petersburg where the Appomattox enters the James and was forwarded by rail to Petersburg. The Petersburg harbor remained vibrant into the 1920s and 1930s. In the late 1930s, both sides of the Appomattox River were still lined with factories and wharves, where barges laden with lumber mingled with pleasure craft.

Little physical evidence of the vibrant, commercial activity that emanated from the harbor and port of Petersburg for three centuries is visible today. Nonetheless, this is “WHERE COMMERCE BEGAN!”