

Highlights of Petersburg History

by Marv Broyhill

Our Nation's Beginning

The first English colonists came to North America in 1607 in three small ships. Captain Newport commanded one of them. He wrote in his journal that on May 8th, they first dropped anchor “in the country of the Appomattux [sic].” The natives resented the intrusion. Newport described them as being “fierce in demeanor and countenance.” The English were intimidated, got back on their ships and sailed down the James River, where they built Jamestown. The history of the United States actually began on the Appomattox River.

Our Nation's First Boundary

In 1644, the various tribes of Virginia tidewater Indians launched a major attack on the English, usually described as a massacre. In response, the House of Burgess established a line of four forts stretching from Richmond to Petersburg. All Indians were forced to live west of it. The English claimed the land to the east. This was our first national boundary.

Our Nation's First Explorations

The forts were expensive to maintain so were closed after a year. Three disappeared from history. The southernmost fort, Fort Henry, was commanded by Abraham Wood. Among his many accomplishments he was a very successful trader in furs. The English wanted all he could provide. This prompted him to lead expeditions into the wilderness to find new sources. He discovered the New River and the Roanoke River. By 1660, he was sending trains of 50 to 100 pack horses heavily laden with trade goods as far south as Augusta Georgia, 600 miles away. He sponsored the 1670 expedition that covered 3,300 miles and discovered 12 future states. This was 130 years before the famous Lewis and Clark expedition.

After Wood's death, his son-in-law, Peter Jones, continued the business near a point of land that jutted into the Appomattox River. It was called Peter's Point and the nearby area evolved into Petersburg.

Our Nation's Largest Trade Center

Tobacco was the most extensively exported commodity. It thrived in central Virginia. Between 1710 and 1720, cousins John and Robert Bolling established warehouses to collect it at the falls of the Appomattox River. Some planters packed inferior tobacco and even stalks in the hogsheads (casks) of tobacco. The Bollings set up an inspection system. The tobacco was unpacked, inspected, then prized (repacked) into new hogsheads. The Bolling label ensured quality. The system was so successful that it resulted in the Tobacco Act of 1730 that required the inspection of all Virginia tobacco. Several more tobacco warehouses sprung up nearby, resulting in many new people moving into the area. To accommodate them, Petersburg was subdivided into building lots in 1734. In 1750, Petersburg was the largest trade center in the colonies.

Revolutionary War Heritage

Petersburg was occupied twice during the American Revolutionary War. The first time, the colonists placed an artillery battery on top of a large hill located on the north side of the river. They bombarded the city. One of the British soldiers yelled, “It's the colonials up on the heights.” This was the origin of the name for our neighboring city. Not long after that, the Battle of Blandfort was fought on the shores of the Appomattox. The British withdrew and, after some wandering around, ended up in Yorktown where they surrendered.

Gateway to the West

In the wake of the Revolutionary War, the Virginia legislature rewarded its veterans with free land grants in its most western county, Kentucky. This sparked a mass westward exodus. Petersburg was the last city encountered by the pioneering settlers. Our merchants provided them with tools, wagon parts, equestrian equipment, food and a host of other things. Petersburg was still the “Gateway to West,” as it had been since the days of Abraham Wood over 125 years earlier.

A Cosmopolitan Community

The rapidly growing Petersburg economy attracted many ambitious people who wanted to take advantage of the opportunities. A visitor to the city wrote in 1800, “That scarcely a single person living here was born here.” Most of the merchants were from Scotland, but there were also ones from Ireland and England. There was a small French population. Many people moved down from the north because of the many economic opportunities and the warmer weather. One historian estimated that 10% of the city's population was from Haiti, having fled that island during its bloody revolution.

Our Nation's First Free Black Community

In the wake of the Declaration of Independence's stating "all men are created equal," a spirit of Jefferson idealism swept Virginia and many owners freed their slaves. Slaves were a form of property and this was accomplished through a deed of emancipation. The city's court house is filled with them. Cosmopolitan Petersburg had great racial tolerance compared to other American cities. It became a Mecca for freed slaves. They established the nation's first Free Black community in the town of Pocahontas.

Our Nation's First Black Organization

On its web site the NAACP states that it is the nation's oldest civil rights organization. It was established in 1909. Petersburg was the home of the Beneficial Society for People of Color. It was established in 1815, almost a hundred years earlier. Freedom did not mean equality and the organization was confronted with the problem of gaining recognition from the white community without appearing to be a threat. Most Petersburg slaves served in a domestic capacity and when they died their owners buried them in the back yard. The new society established the nation's first black cemetery. Its offer to move the bodies at no cost endeared the society to the white community.

Our Nation's Only Colony

The Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America was founded in 1816 to support the return of free African Americans to what was considered greater freedom in Africa. During the 1820's Petersburg sent two ships of colonists to the new land, which became known as Liberia. It was the first republic established in Africa. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, a Petersburg cabinet maker, was its first president.

Industrial Center

The south is so largely agricultural that it is often regarded as one vast plantation. Petersburg was a notable exception. In the late 1700s, tobacco companies were formed. They processed the leaf into chewing tobacco which was then extremely popular. The invention of the cotton gin made the crop profitable to produce. It was grown throughout central Virginia and Petersburg soon had cotton mills to spin it into thread and yarn, which was then woven into fabric. There were many other local industries..

Railroad Heritage

The Petersburg Railroad was chartered in 1830. It was the nation's third railroad, the first in the South and the nation's first interstate railroad. It was followed by four more railroads. During the Civil War, the U.S. Military Railroad supplied Union soldiers. Petersburg then had six railroads, more than other city in the world. The Petersburg railroads used every type of locomotive, passenger car and freight made during the first thirty years of railroading. They represent our nation's early railroad heritage.

Appomattox Locomotive Works

Iron monger Uriah Wells migrated to Petersburg from Pennsylvania in 1830 and established the Petersburg Iron Works. Among other things, it built many cars for the railroads. In 1850, Wells started the Appomattox Locomotive Works, one of the very few such companies in the south.

Battle for Petersburg

Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy. When General Grant took command of all Union forces, he tried to capture it by direct attack, but was repulsed in a series of very bloody battles. He decided to starve it into submission by capturing the Petersburg railroads that supplied it. This resulted in the 10-month "Siege" of Petersburg, the longest battle of the war. When Petersburg fell, the Confederacy fell with it. The Petersburg Railroads were the most expensive in history in terms of human lives, as over 10,000 men died tried to capture or defend them.

The World's first Modern Rapid Transit System

George Beadle established a horse-drawn streetcar system in Petersburg in 1882. On March 1, 1886, the city passed an ordinance permitting him to electrify it. The technology did not yet exist. While Beadle was trying to raise money, Richmond businessmen rushed to see Thomas Edison to have him invent such a system. He turned it over to Raymond Sprague, who developed the new technology and quickly put the Richmond Street Railroad into operation. It was the first modern (non-horse drawn) rapid transit system in the world. The Petersburg Electric Streetcar Company began operations a year later. However it was the first to be chartered.

No other city in the United States can come even remotely close to matching the long, diverse and colorful history of Petersburg, Virginia. Everything that happened anywhere in our country during the 17th, 18th, and 19th century happened here, often on a grand scale. Petersburg is home of many "firsts."