

The following series of history vignettes were researched and compiled by our unofficial resident historian, Fred Hunt. These stories have not been 100% verified by any other authority, but they do make good reading!

10,000 Years of History in Our Neighborhood & Creek South River Park, Anne Arundel County & Warehouse Creek of South River

By neighbor Fred Hunt – January 2018

Introduction & background: *In 2014, I gave a brief talk at a community meeting about some neighborhood history I had learned from some leading archaeologists & experts in local history. That triggered other information to come my way, and my neighbor audience raised important key questions. I have retold the whole story here in the context of the added details. The story sounds unbelievable, but I have cross-referenced sources & information to have the most accurate telling of an amazing trail of history, often from people with first-hand knowledge. So, enjoy the story. South River Park and Warehouse Creek have longer and sometimes more-crucial history and “almost-happened” history than many officially-designated historical sites. History definitely lives here. This story is told in chronological order from ancient to modern. At the end is a timeline overview of early key owners and names of the area + the strange history of the various names of the creek.*

>> 10,000 years ago, a Native American gathering ground here

In the period 5,000-10,000 years ago, native Algonkian tribes would travel to meet in large gatherings here. The natural question is why did the natives only visit our area (like you go somewhere for vacation) rather than establish permanent settlements? Answer: This part of Maryland was a disputed no-man’s land between the warring Susquehannock tribes from Pennsylvania vs. the Patawomeck tribes from Virginia. So, any permanent settlement of any tribe would find itself raided often by one tribe or the other.

How did I learn this? Answer: In the late 1990’s, when a group of top regional archeologists & historians were studying Londontowne (which has had variations of the London name used), I was asked to come to share my 2 cents worth of insight, since I am one of the few people who remember the location as the county Almshouse. It was hoped that I could help identify and describe identifying shapes of what might be Almshouse-era structures & uses, versus the search for colonial structure locations. My grandparents lived a few doors away, and I would walk over to buy fresh eggs from one of the residents (who were allowed to grow crops and make side money). Also, my grandmother had been one of the first “believers”, since the 1930’s, that there had been an actual town in colonial times. The county & state officials at the time had scoffed at any such

notion. The realization that the county had several “lost towns” that had simply disappeared & been forgotten did not take hold until about the 1960’s. So, in my youth in the 1950’s, everyone assumed the Almshouse (now London Town) area had a much lesser historical role than we realize today. The assumption was that the brick house had been pretty much all there was. My grandmother’s belief was verified by my father, who was a diplomat in London, England in the 1930’s, and had been able to review ample official trade records there of our local “London”. (My father tried to find the records again after WWII in order to get copies, but they seem to have been destroyed in the WWII blitz.)

In my 1990’s meeting, I quipped to the archaeological experts that we had just bought a house in South River Park on the point at the bend of the creek, and every time I put a shovel in the ground, it seemed to clunk on something. Also, things would not grow in certain areas. The lead archaeologist chuckled and said, “I know your place well. We did a major dig there.” An earlier owner of my place, had suspected something because of things that turned up when he built things on the property. So, before building a new house (about 1958), which might have broken or buried artifacts, he had a full study & dig done by the archaeological authorities. The artifacts found proved the area’s ancient uses. The homeowner told the researchers to take the artifacts for research & display, but their location today is unknown.

Where was the center of this native activity in the neighborhood?

Answer: The community beach/park was probably the water-access point for the natives as well as later pirates. Based on artifacts found, the gathering area seems to have been mainly the private yards uphill on the plateau to your left as you stand at the community beach area looking out. By water, it is the point where Warehouse Creek does a turn from the round section to the more narrow upper part of the creek. (The point has eroded back significantly over the centuries and also the opening of the creek is now wider.) The native gatherings seem to have been large, thus needing broad camping area, so much of the current neighborhood area was probably used to some extent. Over the years, there have been stories handed down of artifacts at other parts of the neighborhood (but no record of which other precise sites in the neighborhood).

>>The Pirate Crew headquartered here, 1700-1707

From 1700-1707 young pirate Richard Clark(e) led a small band of pirates in the South River/Annapolis/Chesapeake area. The headquarters/base for the pirates seems to have been the same as the natives before...water-access via what is now the community beach + the plateau to the left of that beach, on the point where the creek turns. An internet search gives details of the record of Richard Clark(e) and his pirate crew. One “fact” often mentioned is incorrect. Several records list him as being from Beard’s Creek instead of Warehouse Creek? Reality check: Why Beard’s Creek? Because that is where his mother lived, and he & his crew did visit her often (probably walking a path that is now roughly Riverside Road towards the school and then across (now) Rt. 2 to

Beard's creek at the other end of the airport runway. So, the authorities at the time assumed his mother's house was his base. Authorities made a few fruitless raids there. So, the misinformation is like many young adults today who still have their parents' home as last-known-address on file. However, Richard Clark(e)'s pirates' base was on the same point in (now) South River Park as the natives had used thousands of years before.

Why was Warehouse Creek a desirable pirate hangout? Answer: It had 5 very important advantages. First, anchoring in the round section of the creek had deep water, and the high hills would hide a ship and its masts from anyone looking from South River for a suspicious ship. Second the "hill" section of our neighborhood was a perfect place for lookouts to hide...not only to spot anyone who might be looking for the pirates, but also for the pirates to see any tempting shipping or even ferry cargo. The pirates could also see from the hill all the way across the Bay for possible ships to chase. Third, The flat plateau area on the point gave an excellent view of what was going on in that part of South River. Fourth is a life & death factor. Warehouse Creek is very rare for such creeks, in that it almost always has a good wind blowing in, or more commonly, out of the creek. So, if pirates had to get out quickly or fight their way out, they could do so under full sail...not be sitting ducks being towed by rowers in one of their longboats. There is some mention of other pirates besides Clark(e) using the creek occasionally, but no firm information.

The fifth pirate incentive was that Warehouse Creek was also a convenient location to hear of incoming or outgoing cargoes of ships and the timing. How? They'd visit the London town pub. On a tour of the big red brick main house, take a good look at the tavern area. If you were a pirate just "hanging out" in the tavern, you'd pick up all sorts talk about cargoes & sailing/arrival times. The same is true of visiting taverns in convenient Annapolis. The pirates would then come back to the base camp, and go out and intercept the desired vessels & cargoes...knowing exactly what/where/when they'd find their prey.

Should you grab a shovel and dig for buried pirate treasure in your yard? Alas...no such luck. Pirates burying treasure or in any way saving for old age is a myth created by later writers of pirate fiction stories. The life expectancy of pirates was extremely short, so their credo was get it & splurge it. That's not what you wanted to hear...but whenever I dig in my yard, I confess to also doing some wishful thinking.

>> The epicenter of an "almost" Civil War key battle in 1864

This could have been a national historical battle park today instead of your yard.

In mid-July 1864, Warehouse Creek (then called Lee's Creek for the then-owner) and both shores would have been a key location in what was

expected to become a history-shaping battle of the Civil War. Confederate General Jubal Early was leading a surprise raid toward Washington DC. He did capture Silver Spring, and fought the famous Battle of Ft. Stevens within DC. It turned out that last minute re-enforcements saved DC. However, the assumption & near-probability was that Jubal Early would still then steer his troops towards Annapolis for much-needed medical & other supplies at St. Johns College, and then head south to free throngs of much-needed Confederate-soldier POWs at Point Lookout to add to his army. The (now Rt 2) bridge over South River (then, as now, located near the mouth of our creek) would be the vital point (and presumed battleground) for access to Annapolis.

In Annapolis, US Navy & Union authorities had to plan defensively in advance. They felt under-manned & very worried. The USN gunboat USS Vicksburg, under the command of Lt. Cmdr. Braine, was ordered to destroy all means of potential southern sympathizers in south county and/or Confederate troops from crossing South River to reach Annapolis. The USS Vicksburg ran into the shallow entrance to South River, so the captain sent a longboat with an expedition of sailors under the command of Acting Ensign Francis C. Osborn to search every inch of every creek on both sides of South River. Union officials assumed virtually all south-county residents and many on the north shore of South River were southern sympathizers, so destruction of all boats & piers was the order. The Navy found no hidden troops, but they confiscated or burned boats & piers. To make sure the Confederates would not have easy access via the bridge, it was also burned by the Navy crew.

That meant the only remaining efficient (narrow) way for Jubal Early's large Confederate army to cross South River (and thus what would be the focus area of a major battle by Union defenders to prevent that) was via our Warehouse Creek. Since Jubal Early was less successful than he expected in raiding Washington DC, and since he learned that the Confederate prisoners at Point Lookout would be a sickly burden instead of a boost in fighters, he decided, after failing to capture Fort Stevens, not to go to Annapolis & Point Lookout, but, instead, head back south. So, the neighborhood & creek is an important "what if" of history that could have changed the course of the Civil War if Early had not changed his battle plan about capturing medicines & supplies in Annapolis, and freeing POWs at Point Lookout..

>> When JFK almost died in Warehouse Creek

During the political maneuvering leading up to the 1960 Democratic Presidential primaries, one of the several prospective candidates, Senator John F. Kennedy, was having secretive meetings with various respected opinion-leaders in the Democratic party to seek at least their quiet support as the field of candidates narrowed. He had an appointment for such a meeting with Maryland Governor Tawes. The plan was for JFK to quietly arrive unnoticed by plane at Lee airport as the first stop of flights to several other campaign conversations.

JFK was delayed in Washington, so at the last minute, it was decided he would travel to Annapolis by car, and the plane would fly to Lee Airport and await him. The plane came in low over the dock at the point where Warehouse Creek turns from the round section to the narrow section of the creek. Looking to the right from the SRPCA launching ramp & dock, there is a short grey dock house and small trawler (named ZAZU, if you are passing by water.)

JFK's plane approached too low, and struck the outer end of the boathouse destroying the outer half of the boathouse, dock, and demolishing the plane. The pilot (and anyone else who would have been aboard) was instantly killed. That other person would have been John F. Kennedy, if he had not, by a fluke, been delayed and come by car. There would have been no Kennedy Administration & Camelot.

Joseph Kennedy, the Kennedy campaign, and Gov. Tawes all had political reasons to minimize that anything had gone on or that Kennedy was going to have a secret meeting with Gov. Tawes. So, neighborhood old timers said that all evidence disappeared very quickly and everything was hush-hush.

It could have been worse. The then-owner of the dock usually kept his high-powered boat in the boathouse, which would have led to a massive gasoline explosion. He reportedly had moved the boat to another dock just hours before. Alas, the damaged part of the boathouse was never replaced, so the stubby grey dock house and rearrangement of the slips is what you see today.

There are also stories of another hush-hush plane crash in Warehouse Creek a few decades ago. Reportedly, the pilot mistook the sparkling creek surface with the Lee Airport runway. The background legend is that it was an Air Force small plane diverted from Andrews AFB because of rain or fog. So, the pilot had never been to Lee Airport and did not know the approach. Neighborhood old-timers also reported that who/what/why of that Air Force crash was also very hush-hush.

So, American politics & world history almost took a big change on a point & dock of our neighborhood and Warehouse Creek.

>> Historical names & owners of your property & creek

From the 1600's to early 1900's, the land was part of estates, belonging to mostly London(towne) merchants & sea captains, many of whom lived on estates outside of the town, and, subsequently, to other local landowners when Londontowne became the Almshouse in 1865.

Puddington's Gift (the land) & Puddington's Harbor reported a population of 700 in 1663, and orchards. I don't know that anyone has identified where such 700 people lived and no stories of evidence in the neighborhood. However, there are some hand-me-down stories of some very old orchard trees that used to be in the neighborhood. Estates were gigantic in the old days, so perhaps the

residents lived further inland. There is a Puddington Road in the pie-shaped neighborhood across Rt. 2 from the K-Mart shopping center. The Puddington name for our creek was supplanted by various other names, but still appeared on some maps as late as 1922.

When Mr. Lee became a large landowner on the creek in the 19th century, it was commonly called Lee's Creek. In the early part of the 20th century, Shelter Cove (the round part of the creek) & Barn Creek (the upper part of the creek) were used.

So, where did Warehouse Creek come from??? There was apparently a warehouse at the head of the creek about where the brick sewer-pumping building on Mayo Road now is. That now-silted part of the creek was deep then and had easy loading directly from Mayo Road to/from boats & barges. Some neighbors remember barge traffic as late as the 1930's. So, the waterway was often descriptively nicknamed "the warehouse creek". The story goes that the actual designation was done by a frustrated low-level road map person who needed a name for the body of water on a new map. On his own, in about the 1950's, he put the name Warehouse Creek on a state roadmap, and that became the "official" name. However, as late as 1997, the USGA database did not show the name "Warehouse Creek". If names for the creek have come & gone over the centuries, some neighbors today would like to return to the more attractive name Shelter Cove. So, that may be the future story in creek-naming.

In 1921, South River Park is believed to have been the first community in the county specifically subdivided to be a summer-home community (or some such "first"). This set a pattern for the next quarter century for similar summer communities in the region as getaways for mostly wealthy families from Washington DC & Baltimore. The community had a very active social life. Old-timers say it was a totally-deserted ghost town of unwinterized cottages in the cold months. Housing shortages of WWII, and better roads led people to buy the houses as year round residences, and that trend has continued.

Welcome to our neighborhood, where history lives.

Nearby South River history: Londontown is a gem of historical reclamation & colonial-era education for all age groups. And...of course, the tavern room is a must-see to envision the pirate role in our neighborhood history.

In World War II, in the area near the bend of Londontown Road, there was a small air raid spotter tower manned by two local volunteer ladies. And, because of the prodding of one of the ladies who was a longtime friend & advisor to FDR, it is probably the only air raid spotter tower in which President Roosevelt specifically suggested it to the doubtful authorities. Also during WWII, USNA YP ships patrolled South River in groups. The turn-around area was when they passed the red brick Almshouse (now London Town). So Warehouse Creek can

not claim to have had WWII naval patrol ships....but the ships were near the mouth of the creek.