

Somerset: One Hundred Years a Town

Written by Lesley Anne Simmons with Donna Harman for the Town of Somerset centennial in 2006

Introduction

Originally set down among Maryland tobacco fields, the Town of Somerset now rests like an oasis of tranquility between the bustling apartments, shops, and restaurants of Friendship Heights to its south and Bethesda to its north. The Town retains an image of gentility, with swathes of parkland and green space buffering it from its more developed neighbors; narrow, tree-lined streets; a little red Town Hall; and a warm and neighborly atmosphere. But that gentility belies a century of effort – first to develop the Town and bring its citizens the services that modern-day living required and later to stem the tidal waves of urban development that periodically threatened to overtake it.

Five Department of Agriculture scientists purchased Somerset Heights in 1890. They each built a home, subdivided the remaining lots, and built on them for speculation. By 1905, thirty-five families lived in the community, but only about one-third of residents were contributing toward the common good. A Town citizen association therefore petitioned the State of Maryland legislature for municipal powers to enable them to levy taxes. The Charter was issued on April 5, 1906, and the community of Somerset Heights, along with some surrounding farms and land, became the Town of Somerset.

Today the Town of 413 houses is home to some 1,100 people. Somerset has a Mayor and a five-person Town Council, a Town Hall, its own flag, a swimming pool (and winning Swim Team the Somerset Dolphins), tennis courts, a batting cage, and significant parks and green space. It has been called the agriculture department colony (in 1890), an artistic garden spot (in 1914), and a Freudian village (in 1980 a resident used this phrase to a journalist because there were sixteen psychiatrists living in Town; it stuck for a long time). It also has been called a haven for professionals, one of the country's safest communities, a genteel Town full of fighters, and a village of rare vintage.

Four major building periods illustrate the Town's development, and outstanding examples of homes from each period are still standing today. Between 1890 and 1904, wood-frame two-and-a-half-story Victorian structures with Italian or English picturesque influence were built on large lots. Between 1900 and 1915, Richard and Alphonso William Ough (pronounced Oh) built two-and-a-half-story wood-frame standardized houses on smaller lots for speculation. Between 1915 and 1940, more compact brick one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half story houses in the Colonial Revival style were built. More prevalent is the two-and-a-half story side-gabled Georgian Revival, but there are also Dutch, federal, Cape Cod, and some eclectics. From the late 1940s to 1960, the Town would triple in size with development of

previously-undeveloped land, which brought new street names and interesting modern architecture. These included charming, livable ramblers, mostly built of brick, and some with Colonial features and decorative shutters. Also included were stylish post-and-beam, split-level ranch houses, many with their beams left exposed, which were considered very bold at the time they were built.

The growing Town shrunk in size in 1988, when the Town de-annexed the eighteen acres on which the first of three high-rise condominium towers was erected. The townsfolk, all of whom lived in single family residences, feared that the tower residents, who would eventually be in the majority, would have different priorities that they could implement by taking over the Town government.

Women have always been the movers and shakers in Somerset, and many of them feature in our history. Women organized themselves somewhat informally into the Wednesday Club in 1902. By 1916, the club was formalized and became part of the Federation of Women's Clubs. Although they could not vote in Town elections until 1921, women were to take on many civic and social causes and have significant impacts on the way the Town was to develop. It did not take them long after gaining the right to vote to become politically involved; the first woman to hold a Town post was Dr. June Hull, who was the Town's health officer in the mid-1920s. Shortly thereafter, Edna Miller Gish became the first woman elected to the Town Council in 1928; she had earlier spearheaded the effort to get the school built in the Town.

Through the years, Somerset's government and people have ensured that their community is firmly rooted in the modern day, providing residents with services - from street cleaning to winter flu shots and sports and leisure opportunities - undreamed of one-hundred years ago. At the same time, they retain the traditions of those who came before. The hill on Cumberland Avenue still remains unplowed after snow so that kids and adults alike can sled down its steep slopes only to make the slippery climb up again for the joy of speeding down one more time. Hundreds of neighbors visit each other for trick-or-treat on Halloween night. The Town meets in the grounds of the little red Town Hall building to celebrate July 4th with friends and neighbors and state and local politicians. For decades the *Town Journal* has shared news - good, bad, and sad - and offered tips about everything from surviving a snowstorm to recycling, opportunities to buy, sell, rake leaves, or shovel snow for a neighbor, or simply share an opinion. Somerset's history is illustrative of many American communities that have come together under the flag of incorporation to bring about growth and change while maintaining community and neighborhood.

As in all history, it is the labors of everyone who ever lived in, went to school in, or otherwise touched the community that has made our Town what it is today. Because of the efforts of Town historians who have gone before us, we know a lot about some of them, particularly our founders and Mayors, who had great impact on the development of the Town. This volume mentions only a small group of those who have

been important to our Town, but we celebrate each and every person who has touched us.

As the Town moves into the twenty-first century, change continues. One trend is common to many communities: tearing down or adding onto the small houses built in the mid-twentieth century and replacing them with larger homes that better meet the needs of today's families. More specific to Somerset is the increasing development of Friendship Heights, which lies less than a mile to our south, and the unknown impacts that may have on the Town. As with the changes we have faced in the past, not everyone agrees on whether this will be bad or good for the Town. Only history will tell us.

Chapter One: A Suburb to be Fashioned After the Very Pleasant Ones of Boston 1890-1906

The land on which Somerset is built had long been a unit. It was part of the original Friendship Tract containing 3,124 acres, which was patented in 1711 by the fourth Lord Baltimore to Colonel Thomas Addison and James Stoddart. An early Philadelphia atlas map, dated 1801, shows a 211 acre tract of land known as Friendship that belonged to farmer Richard Williams. One of the most important transactions, as far as the Town is concerned, was in 1890, when entrepreneur John Beall and his partner Dr. Ralph Walsh, who then owned some 217 acres of the southwestern part of Friendship, sold 50 acres to five gentlemen for the princely sum of \$19,000. Their plans for the land were described in the *Washington Evening Star* of May 17, 1890:

The scientific men of the Department of Agriculture... selected a tract consisting of 50 acres of rolling land adjoining the property of General Drum just across the District line in Montgomery County. The company will begin operations by providing the property with a good system of sewerage, a bountiful supply of water and electric lights for the Georgetown and Tenallytown Electric Railway Company. The lots are to contain no less than one acre, with a view to insuring the building of... a suburb fashioned after the very pleasant ones of Boston and other northern cities.

The Town founders, all with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, were Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, Dr. Charles A. Crampton, Dr. Daniel E. Salmon, Miles Fuller, and Horace Horton. Together they formed the Somerset Heights Colony Company, and four of them built a large home on a large lot. Mr. Horton did not build; his interests were taken over by Dr. E. A. deSweinitz, who built his home on Essex Avenue, which was destroyed by fire shortly after its completion in 1895. Not only did the founders want to provide pleasant homes for their families, they also fully expected to make money on their venture. They subdivided the remaining land, split it between themselves, and began building homes for speculation.

Life was not easy or pleasant. Montgomery County was sparsely settled at that time, and no services of any kind were provided. Sylvia Carrigan Smith, who grew up in Somerset, describes it:

There was no electricity or gas, no street lights, and a boardwalk up Dorset Avenue. When my parents went to Center Market downtown on Saturday nights, they carried a lantern and hid it in the bushes before they took the streetcar and later picked it up to light their way home. But they had two modern conveniences that they did not enjoy in Baltimore City, where they had lived most of their lives... an indoor toilet and a telephone next door.

Indeed, by 1905, the broad avenues were still only dirt roads. A citizens association built and maintained the wood sidewalks to protect shoes and clothing from the ever-present mud and filled a great many of the holes in the streets. Wastewater was drained by gravity to low ground. Residences either used outhouses or were connected to cesspools, and nearby streams received the effluent from these arrangements. The Somerset Heights Water and Power Company supplied water to households for a \$200 connection fee. A windmill on the hill pumped water from the deep wells on West Cumberland Avenue up to the holding tank. From there it ran by gravity through shallowly laid pipes to nearby houses. During freezing weather, drinking water often could be had only in buckets. Fire protection was minimal, both because of the nature of the water supply and because the nearest fire-fighting equipment was housed a half-hour away at Tenleytown. The nearest county public school was at Rockville, which was some eight miles away. Children attended classes in a rented house between the Offutt and Davidson farms at first, then at the E. V. Brown School in the District of Columbia near Chevy Chase Circle - a one-mile hike across fields and an open stream.

In 1902, Somerset's women had joined together in the Wednesday Club to provide a regular social meeting place for tea, friendship, and an exchange of ideas. One of their community efforts was the purchase of a pressure cooker to share among themselves. This was more than a social club. Members soon pressed for civic improvements and inspection of the dairy farm on Dorset Avenue.

Only about one-third of the thirty-five families who lived in the community could be relied upon for cash or work contributions for the common good, so, in 1905, the citizens association decided to petition the legislature of the State of Maryland for municipal powers to enable

them to levy taxes in order to equalize the burden of providing essential services for all.

**Chapter Two:
Not So Pleasant Yet
1906-1918**

The Charter was issued in 1906, and the community of Somerset Heights, along with some surrounding farms and land, became the Town of Somerset.

The first Town Council was elected on May 7, 1906, and Dr. Charles A. Crampton became the first Mayor. Meetings of the Town Council were held in the Mayor's home or the home of the Town Clerk-Treasurer. The most pressing task was to develop an orderly and fair way of assessing taxes on property within the Town boundaries. A Board of Assessors soon achieved this, and the tax rate was set at 50 cents on each \$100 of taxable property. The total expenditures for 1907-1908 were to be \$511, of which \$350 was for maintaining and lighting streets and sidewalks. This soon proved to be inadequate, and the subject of a general reassessment was heatedly debated over several months. The attempt failed, although selected properties were reassessed. A more modest revenue-raising measure, a \$2 per head tax on dogs, was established instead.

Sanitation received immediate attention. The main sewer, a large terra-cotta pipe that emptied directly into Little Falls Run, was broken and was a health hazard. Another, smaller pipe, which drained into a cesspool west of Town, was blocked. The recommended remedy was to extend the pipe past the cesspool location down a gully where it could flow into an open field.

The Town was gaining its identity. It requested that the name Somerset replace West Chevy Chase on railroad cars of the Rockville and Georgetown Line. Street signs were completed and house numbers ordered. A Town Marshal enforced the ordinances, one of which was that "it shall not be lawful for any animal of the goat, horse, cow, or hog kind, or any fowl such as geese, ducks, turkeys, or chickens to go at large within the limits of the... Town... Provided that this... shall not... interfere with the driving of such animals or fowls through the streets, roads, or avenues." Signs forbidding hunting were ordered.

The first bond issue, in the sum of \$3,000, was approved in 1908 to improve streets and walks. Granolithic sidewalks were laid in place of the wooden slat sidewalks, with half of the costs assessed against abutting properties. The Town bought the stone from the old Glen Echo Railway. Traffic was already a concern, and a speed limit was set at 12 miles per hour. The deteriorating frame trolley station was condemned and demolished in 1913, and a little entrance was erected over the sidewalk. The Town assumed the title to an unclaimed lot on Cumberland near Rockville Pike on which it planned

to build a school.

For the most part, Somersettters traveled across the D.C. line to shop. Amelia Davis ran a little store that sold tobacco, candy, bread, and kerosene on the north side of her house on the northwest corner of Warwick Place and Dorset Avenue. The first telephone exchange was later located in the rear of her house.

During this period, Somerset women got together at their Wednesday Club; women still could not vote in Somerset. Through World War I, the club formed a busy Red Cross unit and folded thousands of bandages and knit countless sweaters as their contribution to the war effort. In 1916, they founded the Woman's Club of Somerset to provide for wider community service. It was later to become a member of the Montgomery County Federation of Women's Clubs.

Jesse Swigart was elected the Town's second Mayor in 1910 and Warren W. Biggs the third Mayor in 1912. Biggs owned a steam heating business and had the first house in Somerset to have radiators and central heating. He is the only Mayor of whom we do not have a photograph. He had acted as the first Clerk-Treasurer and was elected to the Town Council in 1909. He was followed by Charles S. Moore, who was elected Mayor in 1916.

Chapter Three: Between The Wars 1919-1940

Somerset was still a very small Town in 1919. Its population would double to 399 by April 1940, and progress in infrastructure and services was to proceed at a rapid rate under Major J. William Stohlman. In 1924, a \$40,000 bond issue funded street paving, and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) began installing water connections to houses. The streets were paved in 1925, and a carnival organized by the Woman's Club celebrated the achievement. In 1296, mail delivery to residents' homes replaced delivery by horse and buggy to a cluster of mail boxes at Surrey and Dorset. A new firehouse in nearby Bethesda was completed in 1926.

All these initiatives made for tight budgeting, and, in the early 1930s, when Mrs. Bergdoll, owner of many undeveloped acres, failed to pay taxes on her property for two years in a row, the tax rate had to be increased. Property owners who were delinquent on taxes risked their properties being put up for sale at auction, and the Town purchased several of Mrs. Bergdoll's lots at such tax sales. The Town successfully applied for a public works grant to help pave those streets as yet unpaved and repave those in need of repair in the late 1930s. Subsequently, several loans were taken out to help meet those costs.

Maintenance worker Henry Genus began working for the Town two days a week in 1937, and Clark C. Banes's garage was rented to

store the Town tools for \$2 per month.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission tentatively zoned Somerset Residential A, which the Council approved, but at the same time, the Council presciently protested any industrial development adjacent to the Town.

In 1921, women won the right to vote in Town elections. In 1928, Edna Miller Gish became the first woman to be elected to serve on the Council and, in 1940, Lou Prentiss Childs the second.

In early 1928, a school committee under the leadership of Mrs. Edna Miller Gish pressed for a school in Somerset. Until then, most Somerset children walked more than a mile across fields and creek to get to Mrs. Givens's Chevy Chase School on Connecticut Avenue. By May 1928, the school board had purchased the Callahan land from Grace Meadows for \$38,500 and in June let the contracts for school construction and furnishing for a total of \$40,849. Parents registered their children on the front porch of Mrs. Merchant's house, and, in October, 138 students began working in the still-unfinished eight-room building with their six teachers and 15-year-old teacher-principal Kathryne Bricker.

By the 1930s, most homes were connected to a sanitary sewer, although as late as 1932, the health officer, Dr. June Madison Hull, reported unsanitary conditions in Little Falls Creek and Willet Creek resulting from sewage being dumped into them. It was found that four houses in Town were not connected to the new sewer, but that their lines were emptying into the creeks. Within a month of that report, all Town houses were connected to the new lines.

In 1935, Wisconsin Avenue was widened, triggering the need to replace the stone pillars that guarded the Dorset Avenue entrance to Town.

Traffic remained a perennial problem. In response, in 1931, a policeman was assigned to the Town to stop cars for speeding. Seven years later, thirteen residents of Dorset Avenue called attention to the danger of heavy traffic, speeding, and reckless driving on Dorset Avenue, and a special officer was employed to enforce the speed laws. When the Marshal undertook a survey of stop signs on Warwick and Dorset Avenues, he found them to be poorly observed.

In 1940, a number of citizens petitioned the Council to take action to "prohibit the harboring of cows, horses, and ponies within the limits of the Town." A referendum showed voters preferring, by sixty-six to twenty-two, an amendment to Ordinance 66 prohibiting such animals, and the following month the ordinance was so amended.

Chapter Four:
A Town Grows and Adds Green Space
1941-1968

The war years seemed to have little effect on Town business. In 1942, Henry Genus, the Town laborer, reported that he would be unable to get to work because of lack of gasoline, and the Clerk was instructed to notify the Rationing Board that, "the Council recommends favorable action on Henry Genus' application for additional allotment of gasoline."

Also that year, fifty residents attended a meeting at which a moving picture entitled *Fighting the Fire Bomb* was shown. Councilmember Lou Childs presented a report on air-raid wardens in the Somerset era and what women could do to assist. A County air-raid warden system was established, and Town resident and syndicated columnist Marquis Childs was designated senior sector warden for Somerset and Drummond. Part of the Town lot was given over to a victory garden.

In 1944, the Council briefly considered adopting an ordinance requiring residents to obtain Council approval to sublet or rent rooms in their homes, but the minutes of the Town Council meeting note that "with the housing authorities in Washington begging everyone who has a spare room or an unoccupied part of his house to take in strangers, even if it has not been his habit in the past" the Council decided against it.

The first inkling of the encroachment of development came in 1943, when owners of the Bergdoll tract petitioned for a zoning change to allow them to build apartments within the Town boundaries. The Town fought that more vigorously and effectively. The Bergdoll Estate sold off much of its land in three auctions over 1946 and 1947, and plans for new houses in what was to unofficially become known as new Somerset began to appear before the Council with increasing frequency.

Then a rezoning application threatened development of a medical clinic with parking for eighty-four cars at the corner of Dorset and Wisconsin Avenues. It and a similar application for a department store were vigorously opposed. All this was just the run-up to decades of fighting to resist the encroachment of commercial and high-rise apartment development. *Washington Post* columnist, Town Councilmember, and later Vice President of the Council Hobart Rowen later described these years as "a time when the sheer determination of a number of citizens... overcame tremendous pressure by developers and their high-priced lawyers that would have transformed our still-tranquil community into something like the chock-a-block high-rise clutter of today's Friendship Heights."

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Town would fight bitter legal battles that were supported by aggressive community action. It would win time and the 12 acres that now constitute Vinton Park, as well as the land on which the Town pool now sits. Indeed, Vinton's prescient actions in winning this space and purchasing other parcels as they became available - often acquiring grants to help purchase them - gave

the community the buffer of green space from nearby development that it enjoys today.

In contrast to its fights against encroaching development, the Town Council otherwise dealt mainly with commonplace issues such as garbage and leaf collection, replacement of dying trees, ever-problamatic drainage and flooding, and constant complaints of speeding traffic. By 1957, William Tillman replaced Henry Genus as the Town laborer.

The Town remained a rural suburb; residents complained of excessive blowing of whistles, especially at night, by engineers on the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad while passing Somerset on the site of the present-day Capital Crescent Trail. But development was increasing nearby. Friendship Heights became increasingly visible, as high-rise apartments began to loom above the trees. In 1952, the Town's street numbering was changed from three digits to four to match those of the surrounding area. In new Somerset, California-style and split-level homes sprung up on woods and fields that formerly had been the playgrounds of many a Somerset child. The Woman's Club, prodded by the growth of new Somerset (from 1950 to 1960 the Town's population grew from 430 to 1,444 residents) pushed for a new Town entrance on Greystone Street. Designed by well-known local architect Francis D. Lethbridge, it was completed in late 1965.

The year 1956 saw the fiftieth birthday of the Town's incorporation, and Woman's Club member Dorothy O'Brien wrote an eight-page booklet outlining the Town's history. Without her early work, this book would not have been possible.

Chapter Five: A Genteel Town Gets Up to Fight 1969-1986

As Chapter Five opens, the Town had some 1,300 residents within its borders, and its genteel ways continued. At least on the exterior. The opening of a swimming pool in 1971 gave Somerseters a greater sense of community, as its cool waters brought residents of all ages together to enjoy hot summer days. The pool gave birth to the Somerset Dolphins Swim Team, which was to become a highly successful competitor in the County league and the pride of the Town.

Undeveloped lots purchased by the Town, often with the help of State open-space grants, now provided buffers between the rapid high-rise development in nearby Friendship Heights as well as space for kids to play and nature to abound. July Fourth still saw residents picnicking together, Halloween brought kids out trick-or-treating, the snow brought them to Cumberland Avenue to sled, and, for the children who studied there and their parents, the school continued to be the heart of the community.

Despite the growing population and increased service provision, Somerset still had no Town Hall. Meetings of the Town Council took place sometimes at the Perpetual Building Auditorium in Bethesda, sometimes at the Somerset Elementary School, sometimes on the second floor of the swimming pool bathhouse, and, on some occasions, at the Chevy Chase Village meeting room. Some meetings attracted considerable numbers. For example, when the State Highway Administration proposed to expand River Road, 175 residents of Somerset and nearby streets convened. (That fight was won by the residents, and the road was not expanded.) Space for Town Staff and an administrative center were becoming increasingly necessary. Mayor Warren Vinton had purchased the Red House in 1965, earning a grant under the Federal Green Space Program to fund it. Rented to a school for autistic children for some years, the Town began to use it for office space, and, on July 4, 1982, it was dedicated as Somerset's Town Hall.

Beautification efforts continued with the Woman's Club offering some \$300 toward plantings to beautify the pool area if the Town were to match it. The Council agreed, but as had been the pattern with the Woman's Club initiatives over the years, by the time the landscaping was complete, the total costs were some ten times the amount of the club's donation, most of which was paid by the Town. The Somerset Garden Club, under President Eleanor Weinstein, began working on a census of the Town's more than 700 trees, which included the location, species, size, condition of tree, and growing space.

But amid this genteel exterior, tumultuous events were rocking the Town as loudly as the explosions that were heard and felt up to 10 o'clock at night as Metro blasted a tunnel for the Red Line. The early 1970s saw the Town and its elected officials facing a number of lawsuits, including several from the Dorset Corporation and another for \$10,000 damages for injuries sustained by a child while playing with a tennis net mechanism. The courts ruled in favor of the Town in all cases, but the Town incurred considerable legal costs over a number of years as the cases dragged on, which also consumed many long hours of the Town's elected officials' time.

Development of parts of the Bergdoll Tract by its owners, Community Builders, was in contention throughout this period, as it had been on and off for more than twenty years. As the 1980s were drawing to a close, the builders tried to get approval for three twenty-six-story buildings.

A citizens association founded in 1973 provided leadership and manpower to deal with many planning issues that might potentially impact the Town. More than 150 members actively participated in the association's heyday when, through diligent efforts, it helped defeat many proposals, including one to widen Dorset Avenue and another to develop a major commercial/office/apartment complex on the Community Somerset property. The association also participated with other local municipalities to downzone the Friendship Heights Central

Business District (which was contested all the way to the Supreme Court). Bill Spitzer, chair of the association, wrote in 1981, "Continuous, active citizen involvement has contributed significantly to maintaining the Town's character."

James Capello, longtime Somerset Clerk-Treasurer, suffered a mild stroke and resigned after thirty-six years of service. Capello Park was named in his honor. Sadly, Mayor Goldberg died in office in 1976. Council Vice President Walter Behr finished the unexpired term, was subsequently elected, and went on to become the longest-serving Mayor in Somerset history, serving from 1976 to 1982 and then again from 1986 until the time of writing.

Chapter Six: The Town Shrinks, Disasters Hit, the Charm Remains 1986-2006

As Chapter Six opens, the first of three condominium towers was under construction on the former Bergdoll Tract, culminating three decades of struggle, often of litigious nature, over the disposition of that parcel of land. In a record turnout, Somerset voters decided on March 21, 1988, to shrink its borders and de-annex the property. The Somerset De-annexation Initiative (SDI) had a huge impact on this outcome: it raised funds, hired an attorney, educated citizens, and acquired the legal number of signatures to sponsor a referendum - while the developer hired a public relations firm to try to win citizens over. Fay Cohen later wrote, "Finally, the tail wagged the dog into action. A citizen-activated grass-roots movement (SDI) had legally and convincingly preserved the security of the Town of Somerset for future generations. In this case - smaller is better!"

Eight years later, ground was broken for construction of the third and last of the high-rise condominiums.

Somerset's largest-ever public works project was completed in 1989. The storm drain system was improved, streets were paved, handicap ramps were installed, and sidewalks and curbs were repaired. To address the perennial problem of speeding, speed humps were put into place.

A storm on Flag Day in 1989 toppled hundreds of trees, damaging dozens of homes and knocking out power for six days in some cases. A 1999 winter storm left Somerseters in the freezing cold without power for three to four days. In September 2003, the remnants of Hurricane Isabel deprived the Town of power again for several days.

A new Town Code adopted in 1989 was the first recodification since 1920. The Code no longer carries articles regarding hogs, cattle, chicken, ashes, and privies but has added new ones pertaining to such things as the Town Hall, speed humps, swimming pool, tennis courts,

recycling, and cable television.

In 1990, fifty-four homes within Old Somerset were officially designated as a Montgomery County Historic District. Thirty-one of them, built before 1915, are considered primary resources. This does not mean that homes in the district may never be changed, but that the streetscape is maintained with special care and attention paid to ensuring houses are preserved rather than demolished, and that modifications, renovations, and additions are appropriate.

A 1986 addition to the Town Hall provided meeting space, but as the Town entered the new millennium, the building was showing signs of structural defects and was no longer adequate for the Town's administrative and meeting needs. A Town Hall renovation committee made what turned out to be a controversial recommendation to substantially renovate or rebuild the facility.

In 1997, the annual pool membership fee was eliminated at a cost of some \$45,000 per year in income. Pool use flourished and the Swim Team with it. A pool heater was purchased the next year. A water slide was installed and a picnic area was created (for which the Town won a 13th-annual "Keep Montgomery County Beautiful" award). The energetic swimming pool committee added more and more events to the Town's social calendar, including the first of what was to become an annual dog swim on the last day of pool season.

Somerset School was the top elementary school in Montgomery County in 1997 and again in 1998. A tally of its students revealed its continued international character: more than one-quarter - 121 children - represented forty-five countries. Modular classrooms were added in the 1990s, and in 2003, the old building was demolished to make space for a larger, more modern structure with up-to-date facilities.

Some things were new: the Town got its own flag, began to administer annual flu shots, set up a Y2K committee, which adopted an "optimistic but cautious and be prepared outlook," led recycling efforts, attempted to initiate a neighborhood watch network, and set up a website (www.townofsomerset.com). Some things were not so new: a 1993 committee exclaimed street and traffic safety conditions, noting "flagrant disregard for speed limits, stop signs, and slowdown devices."

Washingtonian Magazine author Diane Granat summed it up in her 1993 "Great Neighborhoods" article: "Somerset preserves a village favor and a child-centered spirit... While the Town government is a focal point for Somerset's citizen activities, what really pulls the community together are school and pool."

Somerset: One Hundred Years a Town is available for purchase from Arcadia Publishing at <http://arcadiapublishing.com>.