

Town of Somerset History - Beginnings
by Helen H. Jaszi - for the Diamond Jubilee in 1981

Set down at the turn of the century around an unpaved crossroad in the midst of Maryland tobacco fields, the cluster of new residences there bore little resemblance to the Town of Somerset of today. That crossroad now is known as the intersection of Dorset Avenue and Surrey Street. In 1906, it was merely the center of a fifty-acre parcel of farmland which five government scientists had purchased in 1890. Their plans for the land were described in a story which appeared 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 waste and electric lights for the Georgetown and Tenalytown 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 land had been part of the original Friendship Tract of over 3,000 acres, a gift in 1713 to two early Maryland colonists. Subsequently, the Tract, which lay to the west of the Rockville Pike, often changed hands. However, a particular unit of land within the Tract remained intact, and early maps show that as early as 1801, and as late as 1878, that particular 211 acres which was known as "Friendship" was the property of a farmer, Richard Williams and his descendants, who continued to live on the acreage.

The price of the fifty acres which was acquired in "Friendship" by the Somerset Heights Colony Company was \$19,000. Five short streets were laid out, named for the English counties of Dorset, Warwick, Surrey, Cumberland, and Essex. Covenants required thirty-foot setbacks from front property lines and that partners "build five or more private residences...to cost no less than \$2,000 each." The first was occupied in 1893 by Dr. Charles A. Crampton. Several more large frame houses were completed soon at the intersection of Dorset Avenue and Surrey Street. In 1895 the partners subdivided the rest of the tract into one-acre lots, which they distributed among themselves by lot. A promotion brochure prepared by the Company described a unique opportunity for families to live in "tranquility and refinement"

on Somerset Heights. By 1905, thirty-five residences had been built and occupied there.

The broad avenues described in the brochure were, however, still only dirt roads. Nor was the "good system of sewerage...bountiful supply of water and electric lights..." yet a reality. The strenuous efforts of the homeowners themselves could remedy some, but not all, of these shortcomings. A Citizens Association built and maintained wood sidewalks to protect shoes and clothing from the ever-present mud, and managed to fill a great many of the holes in the streets. This unevenly shared effort could alleviate part of the problems, but it was impossible by this means to deal with the inadequate surface drainage, improper sewerage, a makeshift waste supply, the need for education and fire protection, not to mention livestock which wandered freely over lawns and gardens. Waste water was drained by gravity to low ground; for sanitary sewerage, residences either used outhouses or were connected to cesspools. Nearby streams received the effluent from all to these arrangements. The Somerset Heights Water and Power Company supplied water to households for a \$200 connection fee. A windmill on the summit of 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.

Public School

The nearest County public school was at Rockville, although Somerset children at first attended classes in a rented house northward between the Offutt and Davidson farms. When, a year or so later, they entered the E. V. Brown school near Chevy Chase Circle, they had to walk for a mile across farm field and an open stream.

The women of the community both managed their households and conducted the children on their walks to and from school. In 1902, they organized the Wednesday Club to which they brought their mending, their children and their concerns about community problems. By 1905, thirty-five families lived in the community, but only about one-third of them could be relied upon for cash or work contributions for the common good. During that year 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. The Charter was issued in 1906, and the community of Somerset Heights, along with some surrounding farms and land, became the Town of Somerset.

First Town Council

The first Town Council was elected on May 7, 1906, and Dr. Charles A. Crampton became the first mayor. The first and most pressing item on the agenda of the council was to provide a base for a property tax by assessing in an orderly and fair way all the property within the Town boundaries. On June 11, a Town Board of Assessors completed the assessments to the satisfaction of the Council, and the tax rate was set at fifty cents on each \$100 of taxable property. A budget for 1907-1908 was approved: total expenditures were to be \$511, of which \$350 was to be spent for maintenance and lighting of streets and sidewalks.

Sanitation in the Town received immediate attention. The main sewer, a large terra cotta pipe which emptied directly into Little Falls Run, was broken, was a health hazard and needed repair. Another smaller such 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 "outlet into an open field." The two repairs would cost a total of \$74.

A Town Marshal enforced the ordinances. Breaking street lights or defacing property were to be sternly dealt with and could result in commitment "to the jail of Montgomery County" if fines were not paid. To deal with a long standing problem, it was ordained 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."

The condition of the Somerset trolley station at Dorset Avenue and the Pike continued to trouble. At the January, 1907, Council meeting, it was decided that as a "means of keeping the station in a clean and decent condition, a strong padlock be placed on the door...and donations amounting to \$1.00 were made for the purchase..."

The same council dealt with fire protection.. After "going over the ground with the Captain of Station No. 20 at Tenallytown" and the Chief of the D. C. Fire Department, a "Committee of One" was informed that both "are disposed to offer us fire protection if we supply them with water facilities without which their apparatus would not be of much assistance."

Having devoted much time, ingenuity, and energy to arranging repairs for streets and sidewalks, the Council after several months realized that the \$350 authorized for a year's lighting and maintenance of streets and sidewalks would be inadequate. Some means was to be found, therefore, to increase Town revenue, and the subject of a general reassessment was heatedly debated over several months. Eventually the attempt failed, although selected properties were reassessed. A somewhat more modest revenue raising measure, a \$2 head tax on dogs, was introduced and subsequently passed in the Council. June, 1907, marked the end of the first year for the Town government, during which it has successfully negotiated a fast and precarious course of action. The report of the Treasurer showed a cash balance of \$81.70, with no bills outstanding.

**First written in 1981 for the Town of Somerset Diamond Jubilee
Updated from the original with minor edits**

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