



HERE'S HISTORY—Showing its age, the old tobacco inspector's office at Dumfries, Va., is the only early building still standing. Mrs. Wilbur Brawner, who owns the site, talks with Harry R. Parks, conservationist for Prince William and Fairfax Counties.—Star Staff Photo.

Dumfries, Va., Is Relic Of Once Major Seaport

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DUMFRIES, Va., Nov. 25. — The motorist who travels No. 1 highway south towards Richmond would hardly believe that this broad spot in the road in southern Prince William County once was America's second seaport.

Dumfries today has little resemblance to the Dumfries of pre-Revolutionary days. A village of 100 persons, it is bisected by heavily traveled U. S. No. 1, and lies close by Triangle and the great Quantico Marine Base.

Soil Eroded Away

Dumfries failed to live up to its early promise because of a system of tobacco agriculture on a highly erodible soil, say technicians of the Soil Conservation Service. They like to point to Dumfries as an example of what can happen when the farm lands are left unprotected from heavy rains.

According to Harry R. Parks, conservationist for Prince William and Fairfax Counties, it took only two floods to blight the future of Dumfries.

Mr. Parks, who has studied old records, said the first flood came in the late 1700s. This one silted in the channel of Quantico Creek. A second flood a few years later silted in a canal that had been dredged out so barges could be used to load the ocean-going vessels.

Got Charter in 1749

Dumfries received its town charter on May 11, 1749, and at that time was considered the second most important port of entry in the United States, based on the volume of shipping.

By 1762, Dumfries had become the county seat of Prince William County. Records show it contained a market, 11 public

and a number of private warehouses, a grain storage warehouse, a tobacco inspector's office, which still is standing, and a printing office and a race track.

The settlement boasted a population of 3,000, and by 1777 the port traffic has become so great that a ship chandler's store was in operation.

Dumfries owed much of its prosperity to the very thing that killed it. The land along the Quantico Creek watershed was cleared for growing tobacco and grain. This is a light soil, easily washed, and by the late 1700s enough land lay unprotected to threaten the welfare of the port.

The first great flood, according to historical records, silted in Quantico Creek and cut Dumfries off from the Potomac River.

Docks where boats once unloaded at the foot of the town were left high and dry, and the city fathers began the task of dredging a canal out to another dock area nearer the Potomac.

But another flood silted in the canal almost before it was completed, and Dumfries as a port of entry was a thing of the past.

Soil Lost Fertility

And meanwhile, something had been happening back on the land. The soil had been exhausted by too much tobacco and grain culture. Yields went down and so did production. And the importance of Dumfries dwindled.

There is a story that one of the early businessmen of Dumfries once advised an English acquaintance to invest his money at Dumfries, rather than invest in the budding port of New York.

The future of Dumfries is certain, he is reported to have told his young friend, while there are few indications pointing to an outstanding future for New York.

That letter was written before the first flood.