

Parksley

This first history of Parksley is reprinted by permission of Kirk Mariner from his seller publication, '*OFF 13*', published 1987

"Parksley is a nice place to live, but you probably wouldn't want to visit there. Not unless, that is, you are one of those who can appreciate the virtues of small town America, of which virtues Parksley has more than its share.

Parksley is a planned community, a rarity on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The town father was Henry R. Bennett, a traveling salesman from Delaware who, when the railroad was being built in 1884, envisioned the possibility of a thriving town at this point. With friends and relatives Bennett formed the Parksley Land Improvement Company, purchased 160 acres from farmer Benjamin Parks, and laid out a completely new town around the railroad.

Henry Bennett did everything in his power to make his little town a model community. He wrote into its charter a clause to the effect that if alcoholic beverages were ever sold on any lot in town, that lot would revert to the Company (they did not live to see the state owned liquor store on the street that bears his name). All stores/businesses were gathered into a commercial district in the center of town near the railroad. Blocks of land were set apart for schools, parks, acres for churches. Streets, well before the advent of the automobile, were made wide, laid out in regular patterns. Blacks were segregated into their own section on the southern edge of town, where one street was named for abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Not everyone appreciated such efforts, however. Benjamin Parks, the original resident, soon quit his home for a new farm on the Seaside.

Parksley was planned and settled by northerners - Bennett's associates were from Dover, Philadelphia, Boston- even the street names seem a little foreign to the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Dunne, Patton, Cassatt were named for railroad

executives, the last of them for Alexander Cassatt, brother of artist Mary Cassatt. Several streets were named for members of Bennett's family-Catherine for his mother, Jones Maxwell for brothers-in-law. Two streets were named for Mary Cooke, a fiancée who died before she could marry Bennett. When Bennett finally did marry a New Yorker named Phoebe Bell, someone asked her what she thought of Mary Cooke's streets; replied Phoebe, "She got the streets, I got the man."

As Bennett had foreseen, Parksley grew rapidly, and within a short time was one of the major towns on the peninsula. When it incorporated in 1904 the town fathers drew the boundaries so as to exclude the black section, known today as Whitesville, it boasted a hotel, banks, numerous stores businesses, a school, several churches, a local newspaper. The town was by then one of the most up-to-date places around, its homes admired for the latest in architecture style, its people prosperous and well-traveled. Parksley was the first town on the Shore whose homes were lit by electricity, one of the first places on the peninsula to see automobiles, indoor bathrooms, and permanent waves.

Parksley has never ceased to grow, and now after a century boasts a population just short of 1,000. It is the closest thing the Eastern Shore of Virginia offers to a Victorian town. Large handsome houses line its tree-shaded streets. Though Victorian styles were always used with restraint on the Shore, many of Parksley's older homes are admirable examples of the Victorian railroad era (Mary Street near the railroad offers a nice cluster of them). The downtown section on Dunne Avenue is still vibrant, but has lost much of its older facade, in the Farmer's & Merchants Bank can be seen a large mural by a local artist depicting downtown Parksley as it appeared in 1920. The specific sights of Parksley are few, the town itself its own best attraction. Almost like a scene from an earlier era, Parksley is the kind of place where kids gather to play baseball in the schoolyard, families chat at evening on the front porch swing. Not the most exciting place in the world to see, but - - as Henry Bennett wanted it to be - - a very nice place to live."

The following comes from the University of Virginia Record Extension Series:
An Economic and Social Survey of Accomac County
Vol. XIII, No. 9, March, 1929 pp 5 - 6. Chapter II.
Chapter II has short sketches of the development of some of the towns in Accomac County.
The following sketch is about Parksley Va. and was written by H. R. Bennett.

PARKSLEY By H. R. Bennett

The town of Parksley was founded in February, 1885, the year after the completion of the New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad to Cape Charles, by Henry R. Bennett and Samuel T. Jones of Dover, Delaware, and Rev. J. A. B. Wilson of Philadelphia, who bought the Benj. F. Parks' farm and on this site laid out the town. Later, surrounding lands to the extent of 400 acres were bought at a cost of \$16,000, and these individuals joined by several others formed the Parksley Land Improvement Company.

Parksley is located in the approximate geographical center of Accomac County five miles from Pocomoke Sound and seven miles from Atlantic Ocean and at an elevation of forty-four feet above sea level. Here was located the courthouse before the laying out of Drummond town, the present county seat. The surrounding lands are of a good loam soil with red clay subsoil, well drained and underlain with pure water easily tapped by wells.

At the time this town site was laid out the founders had a topographical survey made which established the streets, sidewalks and drainage lines. The streets are sixty feet wide. Additional foresight was shown in the reservation of a five acre site to be maintained as a park on the west side of the railroad and a one acre lot on the east side to be used as a playground. An additional five acres were reserved for school buildings and two choice lots were granted to each church, which applied for the same. The Methodist Episcopal Church, under the presiding eldership of Dr. J. A. B. Wilson, was the first to take advantage of this offer and to build in Parksley. It is interesting to note that the deed for this land

was the first to be recorded in this County, and it is believed to be the first in the state of Virginia, which contained an absolute forfeiture clause which provided for absolute forfeiture of property rights if intoxicating liquors were made or sold on the premises or if gambling was permitted.

Lying in the center of a rich agricultural and sea food section embryonic Parksley rapidly became a business center. Today [1929] it is connected with the main state highway by a hard surfaced road and contains a high school building valued at more than \$80,000, two banks equipped with first-class buildings and with resources of more than \$2,000,000, four high grade department stores drawing a large trade from all over the Shore, three general hardware and agricultural supply stores, two chain grocery stores, four ladies hat shops, two men's clothing stores, six general grocery stores, a well equipped hotel under competent management, two good restaurants, electric light and water service and an ice plant, two wholesale grocery houses, one gasoline distributing agency, one woodworking plant, two cold storage warehouses, one grist mill, two saw mills, three machine shops, seven garages, four gasoline and oil supply stations, three barrel factories, one manufacturing plant for the production of oyster dredges and tongs and sweet potato vine cutters, three blacksmith shops, four general dry goods stores, one furniture store, two drug stores, a new government post-office completely equipped, one marble works, one wholesale bottling works, one wholesale ice cream plant, two dairies, three coal yards, one wholesale feed store, one mortuary establishment, three produce exchanges and a beauty shop. The health of the residents is well taken care of by four physicians and two dentists while recreation and beauty are added by the local theatre and a monument commemorating the Confederate dead. The present population is estimated to be more than 800 and the value of real estate is conservatively estimated at more than \$3,000,000.