

## EARLY DAYS OF DAHLGREN AND BEFORE

by  
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A Naval base was established in King George County, Virginia in 1918. The base was later named Dahlgren for John Adolphus Dahlgren, the famous Naval Ordnance scientist. The Federal Government did not get around to this most appropriate name until 1921. The purpose of this paper is to provide some insight into early Dahlgren and also some insight into the community Dahlgren displaced. In the early years, Dahlgren was the home of the Naval Proving Ground. The function of the Naval Proving Ground was to test all guns and ammunition components of interest to the United States Navy. Originally Dahlgren owned only the property enclosed by the heavy lines in Figure No. 1. Figure No. 1 shows the names of the 1918 property owners and their holdings, the Commanding Officer's quarters, Potomac River, Williams Creek, Machodoc Creek, Gambo Creek, my homes, the Hoge and Berry properties, the only road in or out of this area at the time, post offices, Berry's wharf, Hoge's store and the base dock and flag pole.

I don't think that the community Dahlgren displaced was an affluent one, but it may have been before the Civil War. You may remember that the South did not receive the kind of treatment after the Civil War that Germany and Japan received after World War II. As a matter of fact, the South received just the opposite. The Federal Government had beaten the Confederacy and, as customary in that day, the victor demanded his pound of flesh and collected. The South was still in bondage. This is all water under the bridge, but it supports the case for the economy of the area being in ruins.

This community was as rural as can be imagined. King George was rural but the area now bounded by Route 301 on the north, Potomac River on the east, Machodoc Creek on the south and Williams Creek on the west was even more so because anywhere you had to travel by road was difficult. Dahlgren was about 15 miles from King George with at least two very bad places in the road in wet weather in any direction you traveled.

To orient you, I will enumerate some of the conditions under which we lived prior to 1918, as follows:

- a. The primary industries were farming, fishing and canning.
- b. The roads were passable only in dry weather.
- c. There were no automobiles to my knowledge.
- d. There was no plumbing, no electricity, no telephone, no railroad, no airplane, no radio, no TV.

Can any of you imagine people of the United States living under such conditions? Well, before allowing readers to dissolve into tears let's see some of what we did have:

- a. Enough reasonably fertile land for needed crops;
- b. Plenty of woodland to provide firewood and enough to sell to sawmills;
- c. The river and creeks to provide all the seafood we needed;

- d. Chickens, hogs, turkeys, etc., raised on our farms, to provide meat for our tables;
- e. Cows to provide fresh milk, cream and butter;
- f. Steamboats and horse and buggy to provide our travel and horses to pull our wagons and plows and to do other useful work;
- g. Freedom the best part of it all. It was the kind of freedom of which a person born within the last fifty years has no concept. We were completely responsible for ourselves, for our own families and to a lesser extent for our neighbors. There was no BIG BROTHER in Washington to look after us and no one to tell us how to run our lives. We might see our sheriff once in six months or might not see him until election time and there were no other officials to annoy us. IT WAS GREAT!

We raised everything we ate except sugar, flour, salt, pepper and the like. Sometimes at Christmas one of the stores would get tropical fruits and nuts, a real treat. The Potomac River and the creeks provided plenty of sea food and probably of a better quality than the same waters do today. In the summer and fall we canned vegetables and fruits for the winter. In the spring a barrel or two of herring fish would be cured, enough to last a year. Our main meat supply was the hogs we killed and cured in the fall for the following year. This was a community project; neighbors went from one place to another helping kill and preserve the meat. Any time farming proper didn't demand our presence, there was firewood to gather. Wood stoves and fireplaces were our only forms of heat for cooking and keeping warm. When the ice was thick enough in the winter, the icehouse was filled with ice and insulated with straw and any other insulating materials that were available. If we had done a good job we had ice through the next summer. Washington, Norfolk and Baltimore were easily available by steamboat with dozens of stops along the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. By water we had access to the world. From Washington, Baltimore and Norfolk ships traveled the seven seas. I had lots of relatives in King George County and in Washington, D.C., and it was much easier to visit my relatives in Washington than those in King George. My home was about a mile from the steamboat wharf and you had a leisurely trip from there to Washington. To get to King George you drove a horse and buggy ten to twenty miles but under much much worse conditions.

The Navy's original plan was to include all the land bounded as follows: on the east by the Potomac River, on the south by Machodoc Creek, on the west by Williams Creek, and on the north by a meandering line starting at the present Williams Creek Bridge on Route 206 and moving in an easterly direction to the Potomac River. This plan included my home, Mr. Berry's and Mr. Hoge's properties (see Figure No. 1). My Father had a story about why the government didn't take our land. It went something like this: One morning, after the government had been surveying our property for about six months, Mr Russell, the chief surveyor stopped by our home and said, "Mr. Payne I have observed a burying ground on your property. This makes no difference, the government will move it anywhere you desire". My Father replied, "I would like it moved to South Africa. I am disgusted with

having our property taken from us, my wife has been crying for six months". Mr. Russell acknowledged the request and left. The same afternoon he was back and stated that the government was no longer interested in our land. All negotiations ceased as of that time. I am sure that conversation had nothing to do with the government's decision, but the coincidence of these actions was so remarkable that they gave my Father a good story.

My recollections are that we had very little ready cash, were probably very poor but we worked so hard, enjoyed a clean healthy environment and were so happy with no one to run our lives but ourselves that we didn't worry about being poor - we firmly believed we were completely responsible for our livelihoods. At least, I don't remember any complaining about our status.

In 1918 the base was established. Most people and equipment came by water but some of the Marines came by road in their huge trucks. I was five years old at the time and the cargo that came by road made a big impression on me. We lived just outside the base and our home was about 150 yards from what was then the only road in or out of the area. The Marines would occasionally stop for a drink of water and to rest in our yard. They were, of course, nice to a five year old - I was in seventh heaven.

Almost immediately the base started doing what it had been conceived to do - FIRE GUNS (see Figure No. 2). With the firing of guns came the need for personnel and their habitation. Within the next three or four years Dahlgren became a community - more so, I think, than it is today. Though the Navy built the required physical plant: military and civilian quarters, school, store (this was a civilian operated concession prior to World War II), post office, recreation hall (currently the movie hall with its elevated floor), industrial plants, etc. it was still an isolated community because there had been little, if any, improvement in the roads. Therefore, people were more interested in each other than they are today with all of their travel and communication possibilities. (See Figure Nos. 3 through 7). There were no gates (see Figure No. 8). You just walked or drove onto the base, even the restricted area. The base would put up barricades when a dangerous test was being conducted. The purpose here is to show that a much more informal and tighter knit community existed before World War II than has ever existed since between Dahlgren and the immediate area outside the gate. For instance, by 1920 Dahlgren had a base school and the off-station children attended it just as did those children who lived on-station, the children for whom it was maintained. There were no school buses in King George County in those days. I attended the Dahlgren School for eleven years and we had a high school graduating class of three. I am aware of two more Dahlgren graduating classes by 1940. Dahlgren teachers were paid Federal teacher's salaries, higher than any other nearby jurisdictions and; therefore, we had an excellent school. The school is only one example of how the base worked with the off-station residents. We could purchase at the store; use the base post office; attend the base school; use the base medical facilities; had full use of the recreation hall with movies for a nickel, dancing, parties, church, etc.; swimming at Shell, our swimming hole; golf; tennis; everything that the base

personnel had was available to the off-station people until 1941 except the commissary and ship service. The recreation hall in which a dance was held once a month is possibly a better example of the concern the base had for their neighbors than is the school. Everyone from Fredericksburg to Waldorf who wished attended these dances, officers, enlisted men, base professionals and technicians, other Civil Service employees, and anyone from Virginia or Maryland who so desired could do so. The original floor of the recreation hall was level which permitted dancing and almost any other activity, including church worship. A favorite dance was the PAUL JONES. Given such a cross section of society, it would be difficult to imagine being more democratic than participating in these dances but, believe it or not, most people did participate. Before Dahlgren, the closest doctor was approximately fifteen miles away and you sent him a message if you needed him. He almost always got to see you within a week. You went to Washington if you needed a hospital. This all changed with the coming of Dahlgren. The medical officers at the base serviced the whole community and performed simple operations. This was probably the most important service we received from the base. With the coming of World War II most of this changed. The Dahlgren gate was built in the thirties and the fence was constructed after additional land was purchased in the 1940's. Almost nothing was available to the non-Dahlgren people and the Dahlgren employees were severely restricted in their use of facilities that had been available for twenty-three years. Although this was difficult for the local residents to accept at the time, with the coming of the war the problems of managing the base were many times greater than in the early days, and management had no choice.

In 1918, Mr. Hoge had a store with a post office across the marsh from Caffee Circle that was within fifty yards of the base. Although, Hoge's store had been primarily to service watermen before Dahlgren, it immediately became the store for the base. And Mr. Hoge had a great opportunity to become independently wealthy but I don't think he took advantage of his opportunity. In the days before Dahlgren and well into the thirties, the OYSTER FLEET would come into Machodoc Creek during oyster season because it was a good harbor. Hoge's store served these people. These boats were all sail boats and they were a beautiful sight coming in the late afternoon, hundreds of them. They were usually gone by sunup, so you missed the sun shining on their sails on their departure. In real stormy weather they would anchor in Williams Creek, opposite my home. Of course, Dahlgren was establishing its own store and post office, as fast as possible. A temporary complex was established in the immediate vicinity of the flag pole at the dock (see Figure No. 3); and then a permanent facility was built at the location of the present commissary (see Figure No. 6). With the coming of World War II and the fence around Dahlgren, the post office was moved to the Main Gate area, half inside and half outside the fence, in order that off-station personnel could use it. In that day the post office was just across the road from its present location; the building still stands.

The first post office on the property the base acquired in 1918 was named Dido. This post office was established in 1888

and the first postmaster was Charles E. Davis. Mr. Davis also operated a store and canning factory on his property (the property purchased by the government from Mrs. Lilla Bayne in 1919). The Post Office Department's historical records shows that the Dahlgren Post Office has been in continuous operation since 1888. The name was changed from Dido to Dahlgren in 1919.

In 1922 Burgess and Bozwell purchased a piece of land from my parents and built a store. This store was acquired by the father-in-law of Burgess, who continued it until 1960. This was known as Shelton's Store. This store was the beginning of the community immediately outside the base. My parents sold the land for a large portion of that community.

I have stated, in my early years we had travel by commercial steamboat. Very soon after Dahlgren was established she had her own steamboats that traveled to Indian Head, Maryland and the Naval Gun Factory in Washington, D.C. This facility was also available to the off-station people, free of charge. This made it uneconomical for the commercial steamboat companies; therefore, they stopped providing service to the Berry wharf, our previous point of embarkation. The Dahlgren steamboats were named Porpoise and Grampus. I made a number of trips on those boats.

The other improvement in travel was limited to the Officers' wives, and also limited to the very early period (1921-1926). An official car was sent to Washington and/or Fredericksburg from time to time on official business. One or two Officers' wives were usually allowed to make the trip. They would get orders from all the other wives and purchase for everyone. The road out of Dahlgren was so bad in those days that the official car would take pigeons along, and if they got stuck a pigeon was released to notify the base that their car was in trouble; the base would send out a team to pull them out. I didn't know much about this arrangement but I remember reading Admiral Braun's article in the DAHLGREN history describing it. The steamboat and the official car together very much improved the travel for the base as well as for the rest of the immediate community.

A little later a commercial ferry started operating among the Berry wharf, Potomac Beach and Morgantown, Maryland. I think this was about 1928. It provided enhanced transportation not only to Colonial Beach and the rest of the Northern Neck but also to Washington, D.C. and points north. There were two main reasons for this being a successful operation, namely: there were many times as many cars by 1928 as in the early days, and Maryland had built an excellent concrete road between Morgantown and Washington. The road to Washington followed Route 301 to T.B., and Route 5 from T.B. to Washington with some meandering from the road today. Including ferry time, it was a much shorter trip to Washington by ferry and Maryland than by Fredericksburg.

During World War II, Dahlgren purchased land and built a railroad between Dahlgren and Fredericksburg primarily to handle the large increase in freight, but a strong secondary reason was to transport the huge increase in personnel to and from work. Again this service was available to off-station residents.

A couple of personal tidbits about this area:

a. After Booth had killed President Lincoln, he moved into

the area immediately across the Potomac River from what became Dahlgren and stayed approximately 10 days until a Mr. Tom Jones, who was assisting him, considered it safe to cross the river. When Booth left Mr. Jones, Jones told him to contact a Mrs. Quesenberry for assistance. After Booth and his accomplice, Herold, arrived at a walnut tree on Gambo Creek, Booth sent Herold to Mrs. Quesenberry's for help. She gave him some food in something that supposedly had her name on it. When Booth was shot over in Caroline County he had this article with him. The Federal troops came in a warship and took Mrs. Quesenberry (my great grandmother) to Washington for trial. She had three children under ten years of age and the troops wouldn't let Grandmother go into the house to look after their welfare and to tell them good-bye. Her husband had died two years before. They took my Grandmother's deposition but she was either not tried or was acquitted; I am not sure which. My Mother died convinced that Grandmother didn't know to whom she was providing help. I have found, since Mother's death, evidence that does not make me so sure. However, I am very grateful they didn't hang my Grandmother as they did Mrs. Surratt!

b. In 1918 Rousby Quesenberry (my uncle) and his family lived where the Commanding Officer's quarters are today. As a boy, Otis, Rousby's oldest son, planted a walnut tree in their yard. In 1918 Otis volunteered for service in World War I; he died of influenza on his way to Europe. After the Navy took over the Rousby Quesenberry property Aunt Belle, Uncle Rousby's wife, wanted her son's tree to be a memorial to him. She was a tiny, lovely lady but one who had never backed away from a fracas in her life. When the Navy Department gave her some trouble she went to her Congressman for help and got her wishes. I do not know all the details but the above is something like the way it happened. Anyway, Aunt Belle and her family had moved to Washington, D.C. before the erection of the memorial was started. On a trip to Dahlgren to observe the base's progress with the memorial, Aunt Belle stayed at our home. The evening after she had seen the Commanding Officer, my Father arranged for a friend to give Aunt Belle and my Mother a trip around the base after quitting hours. Some of Mother's children got to make this excursion, I for one, and I have never forgotten it. Just beyond the Administration building we were stopped by a Marine guard. Our driver and tour guide stammered and was having difficulty explaining our mission. So, Aunt Belle took over and was telling the guard that she practically owned the place and had lived there until just recently. The guard responded, "I know Madam, but we have to be mighty careful, there was some OLD WOMAN around here just today trying to dig up her son's grave or something". Aunt Belle rose to her tallest stature and replied, "Sir, I am that LADY". As I remember the guard was so embarrassed he let us continue on. Poor guy! The memorial was a bird bath with an appropriate plaque under Otis's tree and it was there the last time I visited the area.

As the Federal establishment was evolving, the community

outside the base was growing. It started, as I have said, with Shelton's store and spread out from there. I don't think my parents wanted to sell my Mother's inheritance or had any intention of starting a small town. They knew most of the people who came to the base and occasionally someone would request a piece of land. My parents would think about it for a while and decide one more house won't ruin the place. After about a dozen houses were erected under this kind of arrangement, they were more or less in the real estate business. John Berry had sold a couple of pieces of land for houses by 1940. During and right after World War II, the Berrys and Paynes did a lot of selling and people did a lot of building. Most of the village or town of Duclos was built by the early fifties. Duclos (the Payne's place) and the Cottage (the Berry's place) with the Federal establishment make up what is now generally called Dahlgren. The Cottage was already named when my Great Grandfather purchased the property in 1835 (comprising the Payne, Berry, Hoge and Quesenberry properties). My Grandfather's aunt was visiting him when the name Duclos was selected. She was reading a French novel at the time and it contained the word Duclos which intrigued her; she suggested it and Grandfather agreed.

In my introduction I described what we didn't have and what we had when Dahlgren was established. Now I wish to briefly cover the evolution that moved us from the primitive living of 1918 to our present state, as follows:

- a. Dahlgren quickly became the principal employer in the immediate area' and during and after World War II the principal employer of surrounding areas. Fishing was still an important industry but farming was soon unimportant.
- b. Almost immediately there were some automobiles and by 1926 they were by far the primary mode of transportation.
- c. Roads gradually improved, by 1925-6 the area had dependable gravelled roads. In 1933 Route 206 was opened up with an asphalt surface, and in 1940 Route 301 was opened to travel. These two highways were very instrumental in opening up the King George-Dahlgren area.
- d. Plumbing had an evolution of its own. The base had its own permanently installed generators for electricity by 1919 and; therefore, the means to install plumbing in the first permanent houses on the base, which they did. The Duclos and Cottage areas were using lamps, wood stoves and outhouses until 1929-30, except for Shelton's; they had a Delco plant (some other Delco plants may have been around; I don't remember any others). Sometime before 1956 Sydnor Well and Pump installed wells and piping for a central water system. In 1967-8 the current water and sewage systems were installed for the two communities, Duclos and the Cottage.
- e. In 1929 Virginia Electric and Power Company started furnishing electricity to Dahlgren and to all the people between Fredericksburg and Dahlgren who wanted it.
- f. Telephones came to King George in the 1950's. Dahlgren had had telephones by the time the base was in operation.
- g. The only railroad this area has ever had was the line Dahlgren built during World War II. It was still operating in 1952 but I don't think it lasted much after that.
- h. Roland Burgess had a Piper Cub by 1937. So, we could say

we had an airplane. Otherwise, it was about like it is today, you would go to Washington to catch a plane.

i. Radio was no novelty very soon after the base started operating. People on the base had city power, people outside used battery powered sets.

j. TV came to all about the same time, we all had electricity by the time TV was generally available.

Over the years, Dahlgren has evolved from a proving ground to be THE NAVAL SURFACE WARFARE CENTER; one of the largest and most important research laboratories in the Naval establishment. Today Dahlgren is bounded on the north by Route 301, on the east by the Potomac River, on the South by Machodoc Creek and on the west by a meandering line beginning at Hoge's old store and following in a northerly direction to the intersection of Route 301 and Route 614. The laboratory also has other land holdings in King George County plus numerous satellite stations over the United States.

In summary, the Dahlgren Naval base has grown and prospered in its seventy years in King George County. And the county is a lot closer to belonging to the twentieth century than I believe it was in 1918. However, the glitter and gold Dahlgren brought with its dollars has to be weighed against the lovely and serene rural setting that was our heritage before Dahlgren.