NASSAWADOX

Nassawadox was born in 1884, with the coming of the railroad.

. . . A fact misunderstood by some writers from off the Shore, confused, apparently, by its name. "Nassawadox" is an Indian word that is said to mean "place between two streams," and the name appears throughout the records of the Shore beginning in the 1600s. Across most of those centuries, however, the name referred not to the present town but t a much larger region to the west that bordered Nassawadox Creek. Thus the "Nassawadox Meetinghouse" built by the Quakers in the 1660s and the "Nassawadox" tobacco warehouse of the 1700s were located in what we know as Franktown. It was only with the comin of the railroad that the old Indian name become attached to this specific town.

When the New York, Philadelphia & Norfolk Railroad laid its tracks down the backbone of the Eastern Shore in 1884, spacing its stations out evenly along the route, Nassawadox was little more than a stand of pine tree . Since it was located almost squarely between two of the new stations—Exmore and Birdsnest—the railroad had no plans for this pa icular section. Instead, it was through the efforts of John T. Rogers (1851-1907), who lived just west of the tracks, that the town came nto being. Hardly had the first express train headed north up the NYP&N in November 1884 than Rogers was building a big new store on his land just east of the tracks. His store still stands today, abandoned but dignified, at 10223 Rogers Drive. Under various owner hips it remained in operation for fully a century, and became the nucleus around which the town gradually took shape.

When the railroad began publishing its schedule in the local papers in January 1885, Nassawadox was not yet listed among the stops. But by 1886 there was a depot and the village was known as Upshur's Station, aft r the large estate of the Upshur family (Brownsville) which lay just to the east. The name of the new village was changed to Nassawad x when the post office began operation and took that name on March 17, 1886. Not surprisingly, the post office was located in R gers' store, and Rogers was the first postmaster.

Over the years a bustling little village sprang up along the old country lane that ra from the Seaside Road over towards Franktown, today's Rogers Drive. A "building boom" in 1888 added "several handsome hous s," and within a few years homes and businesses stretched from the tracks east to Seaside Road, then south to Franktown Road. The house immediately north of 7755 Seaside Road is said to be the oldest in town, and 10258 Rogers Drive almost certainly dates fr m these early years. A small one-room school was built at the southern end of the village, facing Seaside Road, in 1887.

At least one business still operating in Nassawadox dates from the earliest years of he town. There was a sawmill, located just east of the tracks, that was churning out lumber as early as 1894. After several changes in wnership, the mill was reorganized as

the Northampton Lumber Company on March 1, 1903. Its owners later added a lumber store, and that retail business, still functioning, is the oldest continuous business in town.

Most of Nassawadox lay, originally, east of the railroad, and most of its businesses clustered near the tracks. Adjacent to the Rogers Store another was built in 1897 (today's Little Italy Restaurant), next to it a bank in 1906, and next to it a drugstore in 1914. Across the street sat another little store in the yard of 10258 Rogers Drive until 1911, when it was moved to Railroad Street; today it houses the Northampton Free Library. By 1908 Nassawadox could boast three general stores, two hardware/farm implement stores, a gristmill, a bank, a sawmill, and a hotel.

The hotel was one of the first businesses west of the railroad, on the north side or Rogers Drive right at the tracks. It catered mostly to the "drummers" who came in on the train to peddle their wares, and it was in operation as early as 1902. In the days before automobiles every hotel needed a livery stable, and Nassawadox's was located across the street from the hotel. Just west of the livery stood the Strand, a small movie theatre opened by Isaac D. Jones in 1914. The westernmost business in town was the brick store that Ralph Ross built in the early 1920s, still standing at 10083 Rogers Drive.

At the opposite end of Rogers Drive, where it meets Seaside Road, sat another cluster of businesses. Here was the general store opened by C. T. and R. D. James in 1906, another store run by Jack Nottingham, and yet another store-and-gristmill belonging to W. M. Tilghman. The longest-lasting business in this end of town was located in the corner of a yard on the south side of Rogers, in a little building that for 53 years housed the Hat Shop of Mildred Mapp; it alone of the store buildings at this end of town is still standing, for it was moved to Brownsville in 1990, and is used by the Nature Conservancy in its programs there.

All of this was white Nassawadox. There was also, from its earliest years, a significant African American population, drawn by the many jobs available at the lumber company. Here, just west of the railroad on Franktown Road, was yet another cluster of homes, and businesses that included grocery stores and a shoe shop. Here, also, was another one-room school, built and operated at first not with public but with private funds; it stood on the corner of Giddens and Franktown Road and functioned from about 1920 until 1953.

In 1920 the local hotel was purchased by J. T. Hambrick, who is remembered chiefly for insisting that Nassawadox was the perfect kind of town: " no church, no jail, no school." Hambrick arrived too late to remember the two saloons, one at the railroad, the other at the eastern end of town, that vied for customers, and whose customers sometimes vied against each other with hands and fists in the streets. The fact that there was no (white) school in Nassawadox by his time was because the little one-room school of 1887 had been abandoned for the new, consolidated Franktown-Nassawadox School, which opened a mile west of town in 1903. The fact that there was no (white) church in town by Hambrick's time indicates that the Nassawadox Methodist Episcopal Church, South, founded in

1908, was by then virtually defunct; its property was mortgaged in 1924 and sold in 1928, and its little chapel, now a private home, still stands at 7813 Seaside Road.

Two events of the 1920s permanently changed the face of Nassawadox. The first was the building of Route 13 through the town, paralleling the railroad tracks. Until that time only the railroad ran north-south straight through town; once the highway, also, took that route businesses inevitably began to migrate towards it.

The second owes its birth to Dr. William J. Sturgis (1878-1960), a physician who began his medical practice in Nassawadox in 1903 and who began "almost immediately" to promote the idea that the Eastern Shore should have its own hospital. By 1920 his idea had generated excitement and interest among the townsfolk, and at a public meeting in Rogers Store it was decided to issue stock for the venture at $50 a share. The stock idea was soon abandoned, but not before the women of the community organized the Franktown-Nassawadox Ladies Auxiliary and pledged $5,000 towards the hospital. Their first fund-raiser was a luncheon at which a menu of chicken salad, ham biscuits, and all the trimmings cost 45¢. A lot for the hospital was purchased in 1924, and after much hard work, including uncounted numbers of bazaars, bake sales, luncheons, and promotions, construction began four years later. The Northampton-Accomack Memorial Hospital cost $25,840, and when it admitted its first patient on August 17, 1928, had three doctors, three nurses, and beds for 25 patients. Federal funds made possible its expansion to 72 beds in 1945. The Nurses' Home dedicated next door in 1951 is a memorial to Bessie Badger Anderson (1876-1950), founder of the Ladies' Auxiliary and a tireless advocate for the hospital.

By the time the incorporated Town of Nassawadox came into being in 1958, Nassawadox had a population of 650, and had grown far beyond its original nucleus. Most of the incorporated town now lay west of the railroad, where handsome new homes lined the streets near the hospital, the town's largest employer (particularly after the sawmill fell silent in 1955). In 1971 a new hospital building was occupied; expanded in 1982, the present facility now accommodates 145 patient beds. The original hospital building of 1928, all 150,000 bricks, was demolished in 1973.

At first glance the Nassawadox of today does not look particularly old. But look again: The original store still stands where it was built by John Rogers in 1884. And at 10005 Rogers Drive is the old farmhouse where Rogers himself lived, long since moved from back in the field up into town. It is the one building in Nassawadox that is older than the town itself.

What changes it has seen!