

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Origin of First Stores

Today we are surrounded by hundreds of shops and stores selling all manner of goods and services. This is a relatively new phenomenon and is far different from the situation in Stafford even 25 years ago.

From Stafford's earliest settlement in the 1650s until around 1960, this county was almost completely an agricultural area. Most people had enough land to grow gardens and crops to feed themselves. They often made their own clothes, sometimes even making the cloth with which to do it. Scattered over the county were a few country stores that provided staple items that ranged from flour and cornmeal to farm tools, sewing supplies, candles, paint, nails, kerosene, and window glass.

When the Brent family settled in the Wide Water area of Stafford in the 1650s, they quickly established a little town on Aquia Creek. This village was known both as Aquia and as Woodstock. One or more stores operated here from that time until the town died in the mid-1800s. Prior to the American Revolution, Staffordians were able to purchase a variety of manufactured items imported on ships from Europe and the islands and stocked in little stores that existed in the port towns. Many of the merchants who operated the stores were also involved with the shipping of tobacco. The ships that brought goods to Virginia from Europe and other overseas countries carried out the tobacco grown by Virginia planters. Thus, the earliest stores were usually in towns that became established on navigable water.

In the northern end of Stafford there were early stores at Aquia/Woodstock, Coal Landing, Sandy Level, and Thorny Point, all of these being located on Aquia Creek. Coal Landing is just a short distance downstream from the town of Aquia (which is now part of Aquia Harbour subdivision) and was a major commercial and industrial center from at least the late 1600s until about 1930. A store at Sandy Level, just downstream from Coal Landing, was operated in the mid-1700s by the Waller family. Like Coal Landing, Thorny Point was an early commercial shipping point that operated from the mid-1700s until around 1840 or so. Other 18th century stores existed at Marlborough; the town of Falmouth had a variety of stores and shops from the 1720s until the early 1900s.

During the 1700s and 1800s, people rarely paid cash for their goods. There were no such things as credit or debit cards, but customers maintained credit accounts with individual merchants, craftsmen, and shop keepers. Once or twice a year, when crops or livestock were sold, customers would visit their creditors (merchants or other commercial establishments) and pay off their accounts. Sometimes they did so with cash, but often they bartered with the merchants, paying the account with some type of valuable goods, such as tobacco, wheat, vegetables, or livestock that the merchant could, in turn, sell to someone else.

As the population moved inland away from navigable water, small stores were established in each community. These provided not only store goods, but often served as

post offices. Some of them even rented ox carts and oxen for hauling or had a blacksmith on premises who could shoe horses or repair tools. These little stores were the centers of their communities and people gathered there to make purchases, pick up their mail, and share news. Quite a few of these old stores remain dotted around Stafford today, though not all of them now function as stores. People now prefer shopping in the huge Wal-Marts and Targets and rarely grow enough vegetables to feed themselves.



Falmouth