

Hamilton

by John Bruce Johnson

The community of Hamilton could have been and perhaps should have been called Tamesville and might have been called Caugheyville instead of Hamilton. In 1900 it was usually known as North Lauraville. Frank Purdum, a local druggist with a store in what was then called Lauraville Hall, suggested to Baltimore postmaster S. Davies Warfield that the community around the hall had grown large enough for its own post office. Warfield agreed and a suitable name had to be found.

The business center of the community was Tames Brothers' General Store, a painted clapboard structure, typical of the general stores in America at the turn of the century. There was a hand pump and trough for travelers and their horses and a hitching rail in front. Local farmers could tether their horses while they stepped inside to transact business (cash or "on the books") and swap news and information. The merchandise in the store ranged from calico to crackers to farm equipment to eggs (12 cents a dozen) to pork chops (10 cents a pound). Naturally, there was a pot-bellied stove and, in the back, a desk from which the Tames brothers transacted most of the business on the pike north of Markley's. The store stood on the northeast corner of Harford and Hamilton, where "Youngs" is today. Hamilton Avenue on the east side of Harford Road was called Tames Lane and it ran for a short distance past the old log cabin where the Tames brothers had been born around the middle of the 19th century.

Directly across the pike from Tames Brothers was Fair Oaks Farm, the estate of retired sea captain Hamilton Caughey. He had given land on the southern fringe of his property to

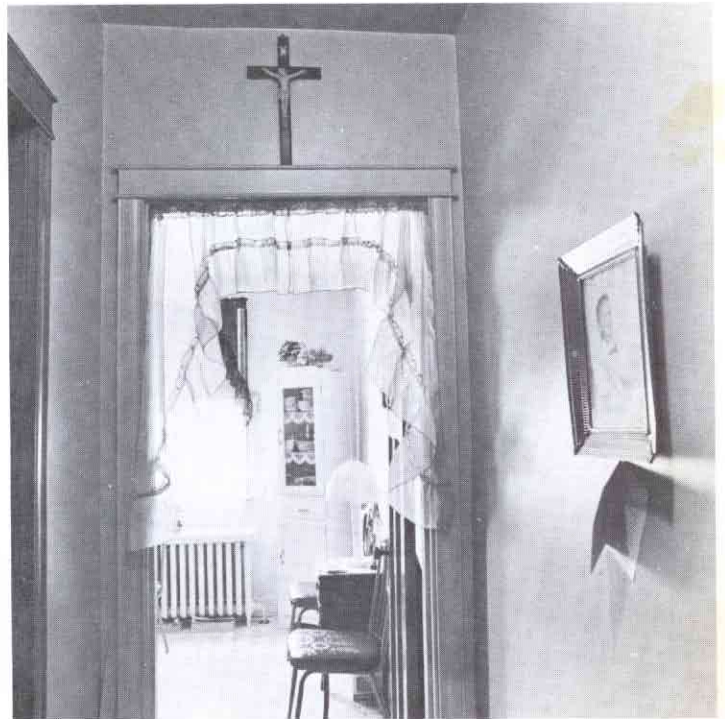


Photo by Elinor B. Cahn

Baltimore County so that they might build a road to Towson from the Harford Turnpike with the understanding that it be named for him. So the section of the road from the turnpike to Hillen Road was called Hamilton Lane. Eventually, it and Tames Lane on the east became Hamilton Avenue, and Postmaster Warfield chose Hamilton as the name for the new post office. Down came the sign on Lauraville Hall. A community was officially born.

If Tames Brothers' was the business center of Hamilton, the social center was most definitely Hamilton Hall, built and owned by Jerry Norwood just across from the general store and facing on the turnpike. Norwood's harness business occupied the prime intersection corner of the grand old building and, in a day when everything was horse-drawn, Mr. Norwood did a thriving business. Rentals for the other space along the porch and for the second floor hall must have made him very comfortable indeed. The building

fronted about 40 feet along the turnpike and ran back Tames Lane about an equal distance. The peaked roof above the mansard with its sunburst decorated louver gave the building a handsome, distinguished, old-fashioned flavor, as did the fountain and horse trough on the corner, and the life-sized wooden horse that advertised Norwood's trade.

The second floor was the pride of the area. It was a spacious hall that echoed on countless evenings with small bands playing dance music and children racing up and down the porch. The Hamilton Athletic Basketball Club performed there during the World War I era. And, of course, it was also the scene of countless oyster suppers and bazaars. In addition, it served as a meeting room and most of the churches of the area held their first meetings through the door and up the steps at the end of the long porch on the pike.



Photo by Gilbert Witten

On Tames Lane along the porch, there was a barber shop where a child's reward for a quiet 10-cent haircut was a ride on Jerry Norwood's wooden horse. There was also a Chinese laundry run by old-fashioned Chinese. There was a grate in front of the counter which, legend said, could be sprung by a movement of the slippered toe behind the counter, dropping the luckless victim into a pit below and everlasting captivity. Behind another door on that porch was the first Hamilton telephone exchange, which opened on August 10, 1906 with 69 customers from Hall Springs (now Herring Run) to Parkville, using its 41 lines.

When Frank Purdum and his brother Bradley moved into Hamilton from Western Maryland, old-timers sniffed and thought that they were nouveau meddlers. But their opinions changed. Bradley Purdum became an educator and was teaching principal at the Garrett Heights School which was built at the turn of the century. He also had his hand in many other commercial and community projects. Frank helped organize the community's first church,

Hamilton Presbyterian, and, in 1901, a volunteer Fire Department. In 1908, Hamiltonians raised enough money, through carnivals and suppers and such, to build the first fire truck south of Boston with a gasoline engine. It had solid rubber tires, two cylinders, and was cranked on the side. It wasn't totally dependable but it could speed along the rutted and pot-holed turnpike at 25 miles an hour and was the pride of the neighborhood.

Looking around that dusty intersection at the turn of the century, one might catch a glimpse of some farming on Phillip Goeb's place across from the hall or watch fields of daisies bowing to the summer breeze on Fair Oaks Farm.

Either Royal Phelps or Dan Dolan, constables, would be standing on the corner or close about somewhere in their high-starched collars, high-crowned bowlers, 14-button coats which went to their knees, and a badge that was at least 3" x 3"—showing where their hearts were. Most certainly, they didn't have much crime fighting to do. In 1944, Patrolman John Hickey said he hadn't arrested anyone during his ten-year tour on the

Hamilton beat.

The most exciting thing that could be depended upon to happen regularly on that corner was the arrival of the streetcar, which had been extended to Hamilton from Hall Springs in 1895. Every 12 minutes in peak hours, it would come clanging over the hill from Echodale. The conductor of the city trolley would walk through the car and push the seat backs so that they faced south for the return trip and then move the cow catcher from the north end to the south end of the car. There was some time left to stop in at Greasy Brown's for coffee and possibly a sandwich before, with a clang of the bell, he set out on the rickety trip to the Clifton terminal of the inner city trolleys.

Walking down the four steps in the shade of maple and oak trees along Tames Lane in those early years, one could stop by the Volunteer Fire Department if he had a mind to. There was generally somebody there to chat with. Prior to 1912, the Hamilton Presbyterian Church was next to the firehouse. The church moved and was replaced by the Avon movie theatre and, as progress goes, it was eventually replaced by a parking lot. Before the Avon was built, the church building was used as the Community Motion Picture Theatre, one of the first movie houses in Maryland and probably the only one with a belfry. It is fondly remembered as a place where, for 10 cents, you could spend an afternoon on a wooden bench thrilling to the exploits of the silent stars.

The Community Theatre gave way to the Avon, a \$130,000 brick structure with a bowling alley in the back. Into the 1950's it showed almost every movie made by Vera Hruba Ralston, the Bowery Boys and Republic Pictures, leaving the glamour of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Warner Brothers to the palatial

Arcade, which was built on the Goeb property across Harford Road in 1928.

Hamilton Hall was eventually torn down and was replaced by Bradley Purdum's Hamilton Bank, which was, in turn, replaced by Union Trust. The Tames Brothers building lasted beyond World War II, housing—toward the end—a cleaning establishment and a fine old hardware store. It is amazing how much of "old" Hamilton still stands. Most of the houses that were built as part of Dr. Wegefath's Evergreen Lawn development still stand; the three houses that William White had built for his three daughters before the turn of the century are still on the west side of Harford Road; and echoes can sometimes still be heard in the dale across Harford Road from St. Dominic's. And there are still many residents of "old" Hamilton that remember the Purdum brothers, Dr. Morris Green, William McAllister, and Father Manley, who was responsible for the three Catholic Churches along Harford Road.

Before she died, Dr. Theresa Wiedefeld told this writer a story which sums up the development of the sleepy community. Five mornings a week, Dr. Wiedefeld would walk up the muddy or dusty land that ran next to the van Reuth land called Echodale. When she got to Harford Road, she would deposit her galoshes in the bushes and catch the number 19 trolley car in the fashionable shoes of the day. When she returned in the evening, she would don the galoshes for the trek back across the land. Hamilton has always been like that—a living community within sight of the City, and, somehow, far away and detached from it.

Photo by David Lavigne