

Burnt Ordinary—
Toano; Center of Trade
and Industry



The Friends of Forge Road and Toano (FORT) are pleased to offer this pamphlet containing a brief history of commerce and industry in our area. There has been documented evidence of retail merchants, industrial ventures and agri-business here for centuries. In the early 1900s, Toano's prosperity rivaled that of the City of Williamsburg.



Photo Courtesy of : Emily Krapf; the "Welcome to Toano" sign was part of the 2006 project with the county supervisors.

In 2005, a community character corridor study was done for Toano. Approved by the county Board of Supervisors in 2006, it is our hope that the business area will be redeveloped. In a small step to start the momentum, FORT had “Welcome to Toano” signs erected and added plantings in the median. In the summer of 2012, with support from a VDOT grant, new sidewalk was laid between Depot Street and Toano Drive. We hope that from this modest beginning, some of the former glory of Toano will be recaptured.

**Front Cover: Businesses on the west side of Richmond Road that were removed when the road was widened coming through Toano.
Photo Courtesy of: David Ware.**

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The area formed by the crossroads of the old stage road between Williamsburg and New Kent (present day Richmond Road) and Old Forge Road has a long history as a center of trade. Beginning as early as the 1760s, John Lewis operated an ordinary at the intersection of these roads, and he and David Lewis operated a mercantile business nearby. The ordinary, an inn where meals were served to wayfarers, was later sold to Benjamin Fox. After the ordinary burned during the American Revolution in 1780, the crossroads became known as Burnt Ordinary, a name that endured until approximately 1881.

There were some business interests in the area from the time of the revolution onward. Stage coaches provided transportation for the inhabitants, their mail, and news. Merchants offered staples to the local consumers. Although the early merchants' names are now lost, some records that remain validate that trade was active in the area.

This location grew to be a hub of activities in this part of James City County. Robert Morris, a school teacher who lived near present-day Croaker, kept a diary during 1845, and recorded numerous visits to Burnt Ordinary. Without stating the name of the store(s), he made purchases of nails, a shovel, garden seeds, sugar, quinine, tobacco plugs, powder and shot (for his musket), and pencil points.

There were several purchases of sewing supplies: cloth, thread, a thimble, and buttons. Other entries referred to picking up his newspapers and magazines, undoubtedly brought in by the stages, which, according to the diary, made regular stops there.

In April, he went to Burnt Ordinary to an election fraught with fights and rowdy behavior between candidates and their supporters, and in May, he went to a militia muster there.

John T. Martin, a resident of Old Forge Road, kept copious journals throughout his adult life. In 1857, he listed numerous purchases from S. & G. Slater's Store in Burnt Ordinary. During the Civil War, the area remained in Confederate territory throughout most of the conflict. Supplies became limited and prices escalated. Local young men were off fighting the battles, and the enslaved labor forces disappeared from the farms. Provisions were in constant demand for military troops as well as the local families. This, undoubtedly, interrupted normal trade in the area.

After the war, the soldiers, who had survived the war, returned to their families and their farms. With the reduced labor force, new sources of income needed to be developed. Getting products to market was a major concern. Shipping by water was still a mainstay. Considering that wood was an important source of heat, the Wares, the Warrens, and several other local families cut and shipped many cords of wood to cities like Richmond and Norfolk, and even Baltimore.

The wood was carted to the Chickahominy River where the ships were loaded. Then the ships sailed out to the James River and on to the markets. As farming methods improved, truck (vegetable) crops were also shipped by way of river routes.

However, the time involved in getting these crops to market was not always favorable for perishable commodities. A major change in transportation came in 1881 when the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad tracks were laid from Richmond to Newport News, running through Burnt Ordinary. And this is when the name was changed to Toano.



**Photo Courtesy of: C & O Historical Society Collection.
Eastbound Passenger Extra Passing Station at Toano, VA.**

The crew that laid the tracks had been working on the Union Pacific Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains before coming to this area. As they laid the tracks from Windsor Shades toward Burnt Ordinary, they realized that the land went uphill.

From this point south, the land ran downhill. The word "toano" is a Paiute Indian word meaning "high ground" which seemed applicable to the terrain as they laid the tracks. And thus, the railroad crew re-named the village Toano.

Under "Postal News," *The Daily Dispatch*, a Richmond newspaper, reported on April 18, 1883, that the name of Burnt Ordinary had been changed to Toano with George W. Geddy as Postmaster. Two years later, the *Richmond Dispatch* reported a robbery at R. H. Slater's Store at Toano depot. Thus the new name was well established by 1885.

With the coming of the railroad, the old transportation problem was solved. Getting commodities to market was no longer the main issue. Cary C. Branch, who lived on Old Forge Road, is credited with starting and promoting the trucking business to his neighbors around 1893. Truck farming increased substantially, bringing new demands for commerce and industry into the area. Originally, a depot was built on Chesapeake Street with the tracks crossing Richmond Road near the middle of the village. By 1906, this location of the tracks proved problematic, and the right-of-way was purchased to locate the tracks as they are today, and to build a new depot along the tracks at the end of Depot Street.

Industry was already a stable part of the economy in the Toano area. In addition to cordwood, a new demand for railroad ties presented itself to enterprising timber men. There were several saw mills in the surrounding area at the turn of the century.

In 1900, several small parcels of land were sold to R. H. Richardson, a contractor from Hampton, for the purpose of opening a brick yard to serve his building supply needs. One of the parcels on Hog Neck was a half-acre lot that included the docks on the Chickahominy River. The seller, Enoch T. Martin, in the deed, reserved the right to continue to use the docks to ship "timber and lumber" from his saw mill. Undoubtedly, lumber from local mills and bricks from this nearby brick kiln were used in the development of the homes and retail buildings in Toano.

By the early 1900s, the village of Toano became a thriving community. The crops brought buyers who needed accommodations. The hotels needed supplies, the residents needed professional services, and the farms needed shipping containers for their products. Even a newspaper was needed to keep up with all the local news. *The Peninsula News*, first published in 1901 as a four page newspaper, was expanded to an eight page paper in 1902. W. Walker Ware was the editor and publisher, and D. Warren Marston was the business manager. It has not been determined how long this paper was published, but in 1910, the *Virginia Gazette* announced that it was establishing a branch office in Marston's store.

In addition to local personal information, family and church events, the early editions carried advertisements for retail merchants, D.W. Marston, R. E. Richardson and George W. Jones, all of whom had stores within the village. Jones also offered blacksmithing and horse shoeing services.

M. G. Davis advertised as “The Practical House Painter,” and B. H. Ratcliffe, proprietor of the Toano Livery, offered “teams furnished on short notice.” Laundry left at Marston’s Store would be sent to the Richmond Steam Laundry. Marston would also telegraph orders to Mrs. W. H. Braithwaite, “Furnishing Undertaker” in Williamsburg, who would supply coffins, hearse, and embalming services very promptly. In 1915, Marston’s store was sold to Roscoe Wilkinson and Bertrand Geddy, who operated the store well into the 1960s. It is not known when the Hotel Felix originally opened in Toano. The business was offered for sale in the *Virginia Gazette* in June 1901: “Wanted—Purchaser of Hotel Felix. Situated 100 yards from the Toano Depot; has telephone connection, 20 rooms furnished with new furniture. Can give possession at once. Terms easy. Apply to D. W. Marston, Toano, Va.” One of Marston’s many hats was that of a real estate agent.



**Wilkinson & Geddy Store;
Courtesy of Bert Geddy**

By January 1902, J. G. Carlton was the proprietor who served a scrumptious Fox Hunters Banquet. Hosted by Dr. Hack U. Stephenson, local devotees of fox hunting gathered to swap tales and enjoy a cup of eggnog before a roaring fire in the hotel lobby. At 9:00 PM, dinner was served. The menu consisted of oysters, raw and steamed; roast turkey with cranberry sauce, old Virginia ham, cole slaw, potato salad, fruit, cake, coffee and cigars. "Riding to hounds" continued as a favored pastime in the area for many decades."

Two other hostelries in Toano offered accommodations to a steady stream of visitors. The Wayside Inn was open at least by the early 1900s. The names of guests staying at the hotels were often included in the social notes in the *Virginia Gazette*, a common practice of the day.



**Photo Courtesy of: Jackie Moody McSherry;
the Wayside Inn**

Several references to dances held at the Wayside were also included in the notes. The third hotel, the Green Shingle Inn, seems to have been opened in the 1920s , and was in operation until Richmond Road was widened in the 1960s.

In addition to providing overnight accommodations, meals, and venues for dances and receptions, the hotels also provided some office space. Norvell L. Henley, a Williamsburg attorney, advertised that he would meet clients at Hotel Felix on Thursday afternoons. Likewise, Cyrus A. Branch, Commonwealth Attorney, maintained a part time office in Toano.

In April 1903, a branch office of the Peninsula Bank headquartered in Williamsburg was opened in Hotel Felix. The following month, contractor R. K. Taylor was busy securing lumber and bricks for the new Toano bank building. In October, the *Virginia Gazette* announced that “a neat and modern bank building, with a pretty young lady as cashier, something no other bank has, is now open for business.”

Another large brick building was erected on the south side of the bank building in 1906. In September, Farinholt & Martin, a general merchandise store, opened for business in this building. The first floor of the building next door housed the Toano branch of the Peninsula Bank. The second floors of these buildings were utilized as office spaces and social halls. Dr. B. E. Kilby had his office upstairs over the store at one time.

He, Dr. Stephenson, and Dr. Albert Micou Snod, all served the medical needs of the community over a number of years. There are also references to the Toano German Club holding dances in the Farinholt & Martin Hall upstairs over the store.

Immediately to the north of the bank building stood W.R. Branch's store and north of that, approximately in the parking lot of the present Toano Post Office, was Harry Clay's Store. In 1910, Chickahominy Lodge Number 286, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, moved their meetings from Lanexa to Toano, initially holding their meetings in rented space above Martin's store. In 1945, the Lodge purchased what was once W.R. Branch's store, which the Lodge continues to occupy today.



Photo Courtesy of: The Meadows Family; Saturday afternoon around 1910. W.R. Branch's Store, Bank Building, and Martin's Store in center.

Competition is good in any business up to a point. Would the impressive big brick store draw patrons away from the several established smaller frame stores? Perhaps loyal customers would remain with their familiar store keepers. However, the demand was on the upswing, and there appears to have been enough business to support all of these merchants. Not so in the banking business.

In September 1906, an article in the *Virginia Gazette* announced that a branch of the Southern Interstate Bank based in Richmond would open an office in Marston's Store until a building could be erected. In the article, it was lamented that all of the funds deposited would be transferred out of the community to be invested in Richmond. Ultimately, favor was given dealing with the Peninsula Bank.

In October 1903, the *Virginia Gazette* referred to Dr. Stephenson's "neat little drug store." By July 1906, the Toano Drug Company was operating in a two story brick building located on the west side of Richmond Road. Knowing that sales are necessary to promote business, the company held a reduction sale that month offering twenty percent off purchases and, according to an article in the *Virginia Gazette*, was meeting with much success. The same article suggested that the village was booming, and the time was right to start some sort of factory.



**Photo Courtesy of: The Branch Family; Potato Harvest—
Branch Farm—Old Forge Road**

A week later, in another article, a local gentleman “who is an intense believer in the future of Toano wants the businessmen of that place to organize an association—an organization of the business interests of that thrifty town would be a long step toward the upbuilding of that place.” Sound advice at any time, the business interests could band together even today to promote the area.

Other than weather factors that plague all farmers, the local truckers were very successful in producing huge crops. Potatoes, both Irish and sweet, were the main crop, followed closely by melons, sweet corn, beans and tomatoes. This success prompted two industrial ventures.

As early as February 1902, it was publicized that someone was looking at the feasibility of opening a canning factory.

Harry Stansbury from Baltimore came and operated the factory seasonally. The exact date that it opened is unknown. However, there are numerous references to production at the Stansburg Canning Factory. On August 24, 1907, the *Virginia Gazette* reported: "The receipts of tomatoes at the canning factory are increasing daily, and the factory men have to work overtime everyday." In October 1908, it was noted that the canning factory was running regularly. For reasons not known, the factory seems to have shut down for several years. By 1912, it was known as the D.W. Marston and Sons Canning Factory. Early that spring, they were looking for canning contracts with the local farmers. Again in December, they were advertising for growers for the following season so that the factory could be put back in operation.

The other major container need was barrels to ship the potatoes to market. There were several small cooperage operations in the area, but they could not produce the required quantity of barrels. After much consideration of location, in 1908, the Toano Truck Package Company built a plant near the *new* depot. C.C. Branch was president of this company, and Paul R. Driscoll was the first manager. Shipping crates to accommodate various crops were manufactured here. Always thinking of new ways to boost the local economy, in 1911, Branch suggested shipping evergreens to the northern Christmas market. Of course, his company provided the shipping containers for what became a lucrative seasonal enterprise.

In February 1909, the warehouse and the cooperage department of the company moved to a new facility located on the right side of Church Street, below Mt. Vernon Methodist Church and joining the Toano High School property. Thousands of barrels were constructed to meet the local demand. In March 1909, the *Virginia Gazette* stated that the company was producing one thousand barrels per day.

At potato digging time in the late spring and early summer, the barrels were hauled out to the fields on wagons and later on trucks. This lucrative business came to an abrupt halt when it was determined that potatoes could be shipped in burlap bags at a considerable savings.

As noted previously, the railroad tracks crossed Richmond Road near the center of the village. This proved unsatisfactory, and plans to relocate the tracks as they run today began in 1906. The right-of-way was purchased to allow for a double track to be run around the north end of the village crossing Richmond Road there.

In August 1907, an article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* stated that the double tracking project was being pushed ahead on the peninsula, and that the new depot at Toano would be among the first to be completed. This depot was located at the east end of Depot Street with the new tracks running behind the station.

As technology changed, so did Toano. The livery stable gave way to several Model-T Fords that provided jitney service.

As automobiles became the norm, R.K. Taylor, who had formerly repaired farm equipment, operated Taylor's Garage to keep the cars running.

And, of course, gasoline was required. Wilkinson and Geddy had Purol gasoline pumps in front of their store. In 1926, James E. Banks, whose store faced Depot Street, sold a portion of his land to the Standard Oil Company, and an Esso filling station was built on the corner of Richmond Road and Depot Street. In time, there were more places selling gasoline and oil to a society transitioning to automobiles for its principal form of transportation. Home heating was also moving away from wood and coal. Branches of Topping Oil and Hornsby Oil companies operated near the depot, and later, Rosser Moody operated Moody Oil Company.



Photo Courtesy of: David Ware; Barksdale Drug Store on the west side of Richmond Road.

In addition to having gas pumps, Moody provided fuel oil to the area, as well as delivering gasoline to farms for agricultural equipment. Eventually, the James City-Bruton Volunteer Fire Department was organized in 1948, and at first, was located in a building on the west side of Richmond Road. This station was torn down during the road widening project and a new fire station was built in 1966 on part of the former Toano school site.

The 1930 census for Toano indicated that there were at least six retail merchants plus proprietors of a feed store, a gas station, a drugstore, a restaurant, and a tea room within the village area. In 1929, W.G. and Mary A. Farinholt sold the Toano Drug Company, "building and equipment on a triangular lot," to Robert N. Barksdale. The sign was changed to Barksdale's Drug Sundries, Soda Fountain, Sandwiches & Grill. The barrel factory and the brick yard were still in operation, though it seems that the canning factory had closed down by then. Truck farming was still the mainstay of the area.

The end of World War II brought change to the area. In 1946, Bertrand and Trittie Geddy sold land in the village area to the Sheldon family who opened a large lumber business. Their timing for opening the mill was fortuitous, for after the war was over, there was a huge building boom on the peninsula. At a time when labor intensive truck farming was giving way to grain production, the mill offered jobs for former farm laborers.

By this time, there was a shift away from shipping crops by railroad freight; more by motor freight. As farming technology improved, less manpower was required on a year-round basis, and migrant workers became the workforce for harvesting the crops.

Long a center for education, the Toano High School was closed at the end of the spring semester, 1955, when Williamsburg and James City County schools were consolidated and James Blair High School was opened. Perhaps this was an early warning sign that Toano was losing its prominent place in the county. While most of the established businesses continued on for a while, they faced competition with more modern stores located in shopping centers, a relatively new concept, at least in this area.

However, one new business became an institution for the area around this time. Mrs. Moseley's Diner started up about 1956 in an old bus. She and her husband operated a gas station and produce stand, to which she added the diner for takeout orders. She served hot dogs topped with cole slaw, something new to the area, and hamburgers made from freshly ground beef that she purchased from Wilkinson & Geddy up the street. As time went on, she moved the food operation into the service station, offering southern home cooked meals with sit-down service. The diner served the community well into the 1970s.

With a long social history of entertainment including German club dances, church picnics, school ceremonies, fox hunters' banquets, and afternoon teas, a new cultural venture came to Toano in 1962.

A group of five enterprising young thespians, Carolee Silcox, Charles Bush, Sandra Wade, and Paul and Claudine Iddings, rented the old canning factory and set about to open the Wedgewood Theater. With much sweat equity, they transformed the factory into a dining room with a commercial kitchen, and a separate auditorium where the shows were performed. With permission from the school board, they removed 295 seats and stage curtains from the abandoned Toano High School auditorium, as well as doors and other items needed for the transformation. They opened with their first show, "Drink To Me Only," on April 27, 1963. The theater closed in 1971 after a final two year run in Hampton.

A crowd pleasing buffet dinner was prepared each evening by Chef Willie Jones, and served by the actors. Famous for their spoon bread and fried chicken, the menu often included ham, steamship round of beef, or seafood accompanied by salads, vegetables, pickles, other breads, and desserts; a true southern feast. A wide variety of shows, including "Mary, Mary," "Bus Stop," "Tobacco Road," "Gigi," "Spoon River Anthology," "Riverwind," "110 In The Shade," and many others were presented over the years.

In time, a summer resident company was established. Each actor/worker was paid \$35.00 a week plus two meals a day. The old Wayside Inn was rented to house the company during the summers, and was dubbed "Tarantula Arms," after a boarding house in a Tennessee Williams play. The theater was widely acclaimed and a welcomed addition to night-life in the peninsula area.

In addition to the departure of the Toano High School, the widening of Richmond Road in the 1960s also adversely affected the commercial area. The right-of-way required to make a four lane highway necessitated the removal of most of the businesses on the west side of the village. Additionally, when the curve at the intersection with Forge Road was improved, the Green Shingle Inn was torn down on the east side of the road. These businesses were never relocated in the village. The old school itself was demolished in 1966, making way for a new fire station, and eventually the county EOC building. In 1977, Malcolm Industries built a carpet plant at the north end of the village. Today, this is the location of Greystone, offering combined precision machining and plating capabilities.

There was a little spurt of building with the construction of the Burnt Ordinary apartments, and the gradual development of Hankins Industrial Park and the Toano Commerce Center, in the 1980s. In 2005, the county formed a task force to complete a community character corridor study in an attempt to preserve the village atmosphere that had existed for so long in Toano, but had slipped away.

Adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2006, a master plan was created for merged retail, office and residential occupancy that would emulate the village of a century ago. Just as the village had provided retail space with offices, living quarters, and social halls above, interspersed with residences, the thought was that the area could be revitalized for this very popular use today.

A decade into the twenty-first century, the old bank building provides offices for an attorney, an accountant, and a landscape design business. The W.C. Martin store building is home to “Everything Vintage,” an antique shop. The store building on the other side of the bank building now houses the Masonic Lodge. The former Esso filling station is now a hair salon; Powers Store is now the Corner Tack Shop; Banks Store is now a thrift shop; the Roscoe Wilkinson residence has recently been a restaurant; and Mrs. Moseley’s Diner currently houses an arts and crafts shop. The old canning factory has housed Charlie’s Antiques for a number of years. Several other businesses including a grocery store, a gas station, and a restaurant have been built on the west side of the road.



Photos Courtesy of Gretchen Nurnberger. Pictured from left to right: The Corner Tack Shop, formerly Powers Store and Bonnie’s Cut-N-Up, formerly the Esso Filling Station are original buildings that still remain on Richmond Road today.



Photos Courtesy of Gretchen Nurnberger. Pictured from left to right: Charlie's Antiques which was originally the old canning factory. "Everything Vintage" which is located in the old W.C. Martin Store Building. The Masonic Lodge can be found next to the Old Bank Building.

In addition to Hankins Industrial Park, there is Luck Stone at the southern end of the village as well as Bryant Contracting Inc., a bridge and heavy highway contractor, and James River Equipment, a lawn and farm supply business. The Sheldon Family sold the lumber company to Roper Bros., and more recently the site houses ProBuild. Magnolia Place was recently built to provide office space, and there are still several residences within the mix.

Perhaps the economy in recent years has been detrimental to development in Toano. The concept envisioned by the study group can work once again. It will take business and professional interests working together over a period of time to see the fruition of the plan. A century ago, the village of Toano was a thriving community of residential and commercial entities with support from industry in the surrounding area. As population increases in the upper end of James City County, opportunity awaits for a well-planned revitalization of downtown Toano.

Friends of Forge Road and Toano Association, hereafter referred to as FORT, is a group of concerned neighbors and users of the road, who are joined in the common goal of protecting, preserving, and enhancing the tranquil beauty and peaceful character of our rural byway, the village of Toano, and adjacent neighborhoods within this area. Toano is designated as a Community Character Corridor and Forge Road will be proposed for scenic by way status.



Neighbors living on and near Forge Road and in Toano share concerns for the future of its rural character. We are concerned, that without proactive intervention on the part of residents and other concerned citizens, mismanaged growth will occur. We are organizing to inform the community at large about the importance of preserving these precious and limited resources.