

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

IV. The History and Character of Laurel

“LAUREL, 44.2 m. (25 alt., 2,277 pop.), at the head of navigation on Broad Creek, was laid out in 1802 and named for the laurel bushes growing thick on the banks of the stream. Thousands of crates of cucumbers and cantaloupes are shipped annually from here by truck, rail, and diesel boats. Other industries are basket making, canning, and fertilizer mixing. The town is too busy and “modern” to permit the survival of many old houses, but the tempo of living never suggests hurry or anxiety. Cooking is a fine art here; the broiled partridges (quail) and fried oysters served in the private homes of Laurel are not surpassed elsewhere.”

- From **Delaware – A Guide to the First State**, American Guide Series, 1938

“LAUREL (**Population:** 3,668) Founded in 1683 and incorporated in 1883, Laurel is host to more buildings on the National Historic Record than any other town in Delaware - 800. Laurel was plotted in 1802 after the sale of an Indian reservation on Broad Creek and named for the abundance of laurel growing along its banks. Nearby is the historic Old Christ Church, which features an unpainted heart-of-pine interior, close to Chipman’s Pond. Trap Pond State Park and Trussum Pond are both east of Laurel, and are home to the northernmost natural stand of bald cypress trees in North America. The two largest trees in Delaware, a pair of bald cypresses, are located here. Forestry officials estimate the age of the larger tree at 750 years.”

- **Sussex County Profile 2002**, Independent Newspapers and Laurel Chamber of Commerce.

In order to plan for Laurel’s future, it is important to understand its past, which, as Shakespeare said, “is prologue”. Laurel’s known roots are those of a Nanticoke Indian community and European settlement of the 17th and 18th centuries. An effort to understand the power and strength of the community’s location, without which it would not have become a growing town, is also essential for planning. Laurel’s history has specific implications for the following elements of the Comprehensive Plan:

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

- ❑ Designating Laurel’s Historic District as a full-fledged local Historic Preservation District with a Historic Preservation Commission;
- ❑ Expanding the Laurel Historic District in accordance with prior studies and investigations by the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office;
- ❑ Developing Design Standards for new development in the Town Center and Broad Creek area and in adjacent neighborhoods such as West, East or North Laurel;
- ❑ Creating Streetscape Design Projects for streets and intersections within or adjacent to the Historic District;
- ❑ Embellishing the Gateways of Laurel, including possible material which could be used for Gateway and Welcome Signage at key intersections along US Route 13, and
- ❑ Identifying themes from Laurel’s history for additional research, cooperation with other interested groups, creation of exhibits, establishment of a Laurel Historical Museum in the restored Train Station, development of additional historical plaques and interpretive signage, banners and brochures and press releases for general publicity.

The following description of Laurel’s history is based on several sources, including an interview with Kendall Jones, past President of the Laurel Historical Society, review of the excellent Laurel history submitted with the 1988 nomination of the Laurel Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places and a discovery by the Chamber Of Commerce of a copy of the brochure for the 1952 Laurel Sesqui-Centennial Celebration. The following text has used material directly from the December 7, 1988 National Register of Historic Places Registration Form as prepared by Dr. Susanne Fox, Professor of History, Wesley College, for the Delaware State Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

Laurel lies at a strategic “drop” in Broad Creek as it runs its course westward and falls to join the Nanticoke River just west of Phillips Landing. The Town is an integral part of the Nanticoke River Watershed, which in turn is part of The Chesapeake Bay. No place is more central to Laurel’s founding than “the Wading Place”, a ford of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, which lies between today’s Central and Delaware Avenues.

According to Dr. Thomas E. Davidson and Helen C. Rountree in their 1999 Eastern Shore Indians of Virginia and Maryland, the Broad Creek area had been occupied by the Nanticoke Indian people, a branch of the Algonquin tribes, for at least one hundred years before the coming of Europeans in the mid seventeenth century. Broad Creek and its tributaries (Rossakatum Creek is named after a Nanticoke Chief), The Wading Place and

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

probably Old Sailor's Path along the north bank of the Creek, were features of their transportation system.

In his 1983 book The Nanticoke Indians – Past and Present, C. A. Weslager writes that on November 3, 1711, the Maryland General Assembly adopted legislation providing 3,000 acres (approximately 5 square miles) on Broad Creek, then in Somerset County Maryland, now part of Sussex County, Delaware, as a second reservation for use by the Nanticokes 'so long as they shall occupy same.'

Davidson and Rountree also state that “. . .the creation of the Nanticoke reservation on Broad Creek . . . (which followed by 30 years the creation of the Chicone Reservation near present-day Vienna, Maryland) was prompted by a desire to quiet the Nanticoke Indians at a time when Maryland feared trouble from 'foreign' Indians, in the latter case the Tuscaroras.”

Based on a written record by a southern Delaware clergyman in 1722, Davidson and Rountree estimated the number of Nanticokes living on Broad Creek at 100 persons.

Weslager also points out that “The historian (Thomas) Scharf notes that the Nanticokes had a burial ground in the vicinity of Laurel, Delaware (probably the place of final interment for those living on the Broad Creek reservation). Before leaving this area (for their migration north to live with the Iroquois) they assembled at this spot, according to the memory of old settlers, brought additional bones, and buried them with the others.”

During this period the Nanticokes, feeling the pressure of advancing English settlement on their hunting grounds and way of life, were beginning to migrate northward along the Susquehanna River into the vicinity of present-day Binghamton, New York State, where they lived under the protection of the Iroquois Confederation.

Davidson and Rountree indicate that by June 1742, after a last attempt by the Nanticokes to resist further encroachments into their territory, a Dorchester County, Maryland official was reporting that the entire population of the reservation at Broad Creek had departed for the north.

It was at The Wading Place that people could safely cross Broad Creek from north and south - by foot, horseback or wagon. Upstream the creek lent itself to damming and the creation of millponds and downstream to open navigation as far as the Nanticoke River, the Bay, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to Halifax and Havana. Many a canoe, raft, shallop and sailing ram connected Laurel's site with trade on the Nanticoke River and beyond.

The 1952 Sesqui-Centennial booklet says of Laurel's site:

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

“All the cleared land of today was then covered by a primeval forest that had never known an ax. The rotted leaves that had fallen for thousands of years had produced a deep rich soil. Trees rooted in this fertile soil had reached eternally upward for air and sunshine. This produced mighty oaks sixty to eighty feet high before a single limb thrust out. Pines straight and tall, chestnuts, hickories, maples, buttonwoods, poplars, silvered beeches and ash trees covered this land as a jungle.”

By the 17th century, the Laurel site had long been occupied by the Nanticoke Indians who lived throughout their home, the Nanticoke River Watershed. Until the 1764 survey of the Mason-Dixon Line, the area was seen as part of Old Somerset County, Maryland. Its first European settlers migrated north from Old Somerset, having first come north from Northampton County on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. The Broad Creek and Little Creek Hundreds, early administrative units north and south of the creek, were formed at this time. In 1683, James Wyeth and Marmaduke Master patented “Batchelor’s Delight”, a 250-acre tract south of the “Wading Place”. In 1711, several square miles north of the creek were reserved as a Nanticoke Indian Reservation by an Act of the Maryland Legislature.

Old Christ Church on Chipman Pond was built as a Chapel of Ease, a satellite chapel to the Anglican Church at Old Green Hill on the Wicomico River. The stage road known as the “Kings Highway” ran along today’s County Road 461 from Salisbury to St. Johnstown.

In that age of waterpower and water transportation, John Mitchell established a mill at the Mill Dam on Records Pond by 1760. The Nanticoke Indian Reservation was closed in 1768, as the Indians clearly felt crowded out of their natural habitat. After 1775, the boundary dispute between the Lords Baltimore and William Penn was finally settled, and it became clear that Laurel was part of the three lower counties of Pennsylvania, which would become the State of Delaware once the American Revolution was decided.

A village known as “Laurel”, named for the flowering plant growing naturally on the banks of Broad Creek, was in existence as early as 1799. Laurel quickly developed into an important shipping and manufacturing town in Southwest Delaware. The home of a number of Delaware’s governors, the Town exerted an influence over Delaware far greater than its size would suggest. Originally oriented to the Chesapeake Bay market, its market orientation shifted to Philadelphia when the railroad came through at mid century. After that the important industries were the manufacture of lumber products and the shipping and canning of fruits and vegetables. The growth and prosperity of Laurel is reflected in its architecture. While none of Laurel’s eighteenth-century buildings are known to survive, the range of nineteenth and twentieth-century architecture is a reflection of the prosperity of the Town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

Logging was a major industry. Lumber, including cypress, pine and other hardwoods, was shipped along Broad Creek to the Nanticoke River and Chesapeake Bay by 1800. The principal agricultural products were corn and wheat.

The founder of Laurel was a Dorchester County, Maryland resident named Barkley Townsend. A wealthy merchant and ship owner, he bought land at the former Nanticoke Indian reservation site, which by this time was known as "Broad Creek Wading Place". He laid out 32 lots and sold them to tradesmen and merchants. The first lot was leased to Henry Edger, a blacksmith, in 1789. By 1803 the lots were owned by nine individuals.

By 1810, Laurel had become “. . . a small post town, situated on both sides of Broad Creek . . . it contains about 40 houses, a Presbyterian and Methodist church.” At that time the population of Little Creek Hundred was about 2,300 and that of the village of Laurel about 350. Delaware law required public schools after 1821. Warehouses were built along the creek. In 1830 state lottery funds were used to dredge Broad Creek and better connect Laurel with the Nanticoke. Businesses grew from 4 in 1832 to 41 in 1850. By 1850 shipbuilders were building three-masted Chesapeake Bay schooner rams on the banks of Broad Creek. These cargo ships plied the Atlantic Coast and Inland Waters from Halifax to Havana. Victorian mansions were built as wealth increased and neighborhoods began to take their present forms. Local inventions and industrial patents arising from the business of agricultural and lumber processing and distribution became numerous.

West Laurel as a neighborhood began to form before the Civil War and grew rapidly thereafter. The Railroad reached Laurel from the north in 1859, connecting the village with Wilmington, Philadelphia and northern cities. By 1860 the Town population was 1,200. Marvil Packaging, basket manufacturers, became the biggest business in Laurel.

The various census and tax lists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century do not separate Laurel from the surrounding Hundred. The 1800 population census showed 1,909 free individuals and 255 slaves in Little Creek Hundred. The town of Laurel was described in the 1807 edition of Scott's Geography as having 40 houses, which indicates that Laurel had grown to about 150-200 people within its first two decades.

Almost all of the grain and lumber from the surrounding area was processed locally. The number of saw mills and grist mills was high, especially considering the slow moving nature of most of the streams in the Laurel area.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Laurel was important politically. Four Laurel men were elected Governors of Delaware between 1805 and 1855. The first, Nathaniel Mitchell, was an original settler of Laurel. Trained as a lawyer, he also had interests in a number of mills. He was elected as a Federalist in 1805 and served until 1808. The second was John Collins, a miller who was elected as a Democrat-Republican

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

in 1821 and served one term. William Barkley Cooper, a grandson of Laurel founder Barkley Townsend, won the 1841 election as a Whig and served until 1845. The fourth Laurel governor was William Ross. He was elected in 1851, several years after moving north to Seaford.

Laurel continued its steady growth during the first half of the nineteenth century. Roads and transportation had been concerns from the beginning. In 1798 and again in 1810 the town petitioned the state legislature to authorize bridges over Broad Creek. The bridges were to be public and high enough for boats without masts to pass beneath. In 1822, pigs running through town were a problem that was addressed. During this period, roads were officially laid out and in 1830 the town's boundaries were established.

Laurel's industrial base grew with the town. The iron industry was present. Established in the early eighteenth century, it continued into the nineteenth century near Laurel using bog iron as a source of raw material. Tanning and wool carding were other important industries. The abundant surrounding forests encouraged cabinetmakers, chair makers and shingle makers to locate near Laurel. The enterprises were not large, most employing only a few men, a classical harbinger of the small-business emphasis in today's American economy.

With the coming of the Delaware Railroad, the geographic orientation of Laurel's economy changed from the Chesapeake Bay to the railroad's service area to the north, including Philadelphia and Wilmington. There existed ready markets for the corn and lumber products collected and processed in Laurel. Seaford to the north competed for the trade.

The railroad also brought new consumer goods in Town including hardware, drugs, package goods, and clothing. Books, magazines, and newspapers also arrived on the railroad. Laurel residents were able to travel widely and in new directions.

The same year that the railroad arrived, the Delaware State Directory listed the occupations of the town's inhabitants; including a boat and ship manufacturer, a guano dealer and several lumber dealers, carriage builders and grain and flour dealers. There was a daguerrotypist. Five country stores supplied general merchandise. To service the building needs of the inhabitants there were three carpenters, two cabinetmakers, one painter, and one sash, door, and blind manufacturer working in the town. In 1860 about five million board feet were shipped by rail or steamer from Laurel. One of the largest suppliers was John S. Bacon whose family remained in the lumber business until the early 20th century.

On the eve of the Civil War, the population of Laurel was 1,200 white persons, approximately 500 free Blacks and about 200 slaves. The Civil War, which began in April of 1861, divided Laurel. There were two militia companies: one fought for the

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

North and the other for the South. Many Laurel residents supplied the South with goods and others supplied the North.

Shallops carried goods and passengers to Bethel or Portsville after the Civil War. They connected with steamers that carried their cargos to Baltimore. More and more of Laurel's transportation focused on the railroad. After the Civil War, local farmers began shifting their crops to berries, peaches and melons, although corn remained a principal crop.

In 1867, the Delaware Tribune, a Wilmington newspaper, ran an article announcing that three large fruit canneries had been established along the Delaware Railroad at Seaford, Princess Anne and Laurel. All of the canneries were owned by Abraham Anderson of Camden, New Jersey, who later formed a partnership with Joseph Campbell. Their company became the Campbell Soup Company. The Laurel cannery was most likely located on rented land as there is no record of Anderson's having purchased land in the town. Because he had business connections with the Dashiell family, it is possible that this first cannery was located on their land.

From time to time after the Civil War, attempts were made to dredge Broad Creek to allow better access for shallow draft boats, but the attempts were never completely satisfactory. However, exportation by rail gradually led to increased wealth for the town.

In 1868, when the Beers' Atlas of Delaware was published, the streets had names reflecting the economy of the town, including Wheat, Corn, Rye, Cedar, and Pine Street. Only Pine remains as a name today. According to the Atlas, there were two hotels in the town: the Cannon Hotel on the west side of Wheat (Central Avenue), on the site of the Rigbie Hotel, and the Planter's Hotel at the southwest corner of Wheat and Back (Market) Streets.

Four churches were shown on the town map at this time: the African Church (Mount Pisgah) west of Back Street (West Street); the Methodist Episcopal Church at the southwest corner of Corn (Poplar Street) and Back Street on the site of Centenary Methodist Church; the Methodist Protestant Church where a later church now stands, and St. Philips Episcopal Church also on the site of the present church.

Laurel's Train Station was south of where it is today, located just north of W.W. Dashiell's Fruit Packing House. An Academy was shown at the far east end of Mechanic Street (6th Street). Also shown were the J.B. Lewis Grist Mill and his house, still standing today on the south side of Cooper Street just east of Willow Street. There were four lumber dealers and grain buyers and ten general merchandise dealers. In addition there were two carpenter-contractor-builders. Among the names listed were the Bacons, Dashiells, Horseys, Hearn, Cannons and Fooks. All were prominent residents during the second half of the century.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

In 1869, the Delaware Tribune published an article about Laurel which described its surroundings as good farmland. It also described the farmers as lagging behind the more progressive farmers in other areas in that they were still mainly growing corn. By the 1870s, however, this emphasis on corn had shifted to fruits and berries, which became the new basis of the community's prosperity.

Concurrent with the gradual change from corn to fruits and berries was the arrival of an entrepreneur who amassed a fortune with his basket and container business. Joshua H. Marvil, a former shipwright, manufacturer of agricultural equipment, carpenter, and cabinetmaker, was one of the most important and colorful of the residents of Laurel in the 19th century. Besides being an entrepreneur, he was an inventor who received seventeen patents in eighteen years. Most were for fruit baskets and containers.

Around 1870, he built a basket factory on the west side of West Market Street and used the Gothic Revival house across the street as his office. During his first year of operation he manufactured 600,000 baskets. Thereafter he expanded his business to include wharves and warehouses along the river and the railroad. By the 1880s, he was producing 2,000,000 baskets and crates annually; one of his workers could make a basket in two minutes. He also developed a network of agents, subagents, and contractors. He expanded his business to Sharptown, Maryland. In 1894, he was elected Governor of Delaware but died shortly thereafter. He was the fifth Delaware Governor to come from Laurel. He and his family were responsible for many of the Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses in the town, including two houses on the west side of West Street.

After his death in 1895, his company was taken over by his son Joshua Dallas Marvil who continued to expand the business to include baskets and packages for tomatoes, apples, and potatoes as well as half barrels for beans and onions. When he feared the supply of wood was diminishing in the area, he purchased timberland along the Roanoke River in North Carolina. In 1903, the business became the Marvil Package Company and remained in operation until 1957. Some of the original warehouses survive along the west side of the railroad and along Broad Creek.

The same year that Marvil first opened his basket factory, the Delaware Gazette reported that business in Laurel was in a slump. The town had a private school for 50 students and another school was under construction. That same year Adams & Company, owner of one of the largest mills near town installed a new turbine waterwheel making it one of the finest in the state. There were also two mills on the other side of the dam from the Adams mill. One had a large circular saw and the other a smaller one.

By 1873, the town included ten ship captains, grain merchants, lumber dealers, fruit basket and crate manufacturers, flour and lumber millers, and fertilizer and phosphate dealers. To aid in new construction there were three carpenters, one bricklayer, one

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

plasterer, two sash door and blind dealers. A chair maker and cabinetmaker were also operating in Laurel.

The following year, Milford's Peninsular News and Advertiser published an article about Laurel that stated that the town did not provide a welcome environment for strangers. Another drawback to the community, the article stated, was that the individualistic farmers refused to join organizations that would benefit them such as The Grange, a Fruit Grower's Association, or an Immigration Society. Milford and Laurel, along with other Delmarva towns were competing for new residents from New York and New England. The benefits of moving to Delmarva were widely advertised and each section claimed to have the cheapest and best land and the most convenient transportation system.

Laurel Academy was described in the article as being very prosperous under the direction of Professor Thomas N. Williams and his assistant M. Thomas Beerwood of Cambridge, Maryland. The academy offered a classical education to 50 students each year. Public examinations were given twice a year. There was another private school under the leadership of Robert B. Beerwood that had 50 students.

The article concluded that there was some industry such as the Marvil Basket Factory and the Adams Mill, but what was needed was enterprise and increased population. Over the next two decades Laurel received both.

By 1878 The Delawarean reported that business was improving in Laurel and that house carpenters and mechanics were very busy. The following year there was an act passed to incorporate Lodge #1528 of the Grand Union Order of Odd Fellows, showing that Laurel inhabitants could organize and join organizations. Thereafter the number of men's groups grew.

In the 1880s, the new business of fruit drying or evaporating came to Laurel. In 1882, a Laurel physician, William Short Hitch, purchased a Williams evaporator machine for drying fruits. He employed 75 people, mostly women, whom he paid between \$1 and \$3 per day, who could dry 700 baskets of fruit daily. This company continued until 1888 when Joshua Marvel bought the building and used it for storage.

During the 1880s, there was a building boom in Laurel. In February of 1881 the Morning News reported that many new houses were being built and that older ones freshly painted. That same year the Delaware State Journal reported that Laurel had the largest lumber market on the Peninsula and that there was much new construction taking place. The following year, The Morning News reported that a law had been passed in Laurel to protect shade trees, and thus citizens were placing hitching posts in front of their homes. The streets were improved with the laying of oyster shell in front of homes. According to the article, more building and repair was continuing and the town's mechanics and laborers were busy.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

In 1882, the Peninsula Directory included an article about Laurel which it described as a poorly-planned town. The author felt that the streets were too narrow and the architecture needed much improvement; however, the paper saw improvements occurring in the town. In 1883, the Morning News reported that Joshua Marvil was building a - "fine residence" for his youngest son and that William W. Dashiell was building a "commodious mansion" for his son-in-law, Dr. Joshua Ellegood. In 1885 the Morning News reported that Marvil was erecting a windmill to supply water to his son Dallas' home which had rooms warmed by heated air and bathrooms with hot and cold water on the first and second floors. Later in the 1890s Dallas Marvil added statuary to his front yard, including statues of dogs and angels, one of which remains today after having been saved from the fire which destroyed the mansion in 1918.

In 1883, Laurel received a charter and organized a town government. The new government contracted with George Parsons to build an iron bridge over Broad Creek and began to pave streets, which gave the town a "neat appearance".

In 1885, the Morning News reported that Henry Bacon's planing mill was useful to many builders and that Selby Lowe's planing mill five miles away supplied most of the good quality house frames used in the area. By 1886, Harry Bacon had built another planing mill near the railroad station and planned to build a phone line from the mill to the town. Thomas Bacon was also building a planing mill on his wharf below the pivot bridge.

In 1889, another cannery was established in town. Originally called Wright & Smith, it became known as the Laurel Canning Company and operated until the early part of the 20th century.

During the 1880s, newspapers carried accounts of the opening of a grocery and confectionery shop on the corner of Wheat (Central Avenue) and Front Streets by Stanford Parker, a black man. His business, which included ice cream and peaches, was very profitable for someone who began with \$40 and was making \$6,000 at the end of two years.

By 1893, brick sidewalks were replacing plank walks in town and it had hired a bailiff, lamplighter, and street repairer. Street crossings were made of "good white oak lumber". In the Minutes of the Laurel Town Commissioners there are numerous references to people being ordered to repair their brick pavements.

In 1894, the city government allowed a merry-go-round to operate in town. Other leisure activities included bicycling which became very popular in the late 1890s and early 20th century. In September of 1896, the Town Commissioners passed an ordinance forbidding bicycle riding on sidewalks. At night bicycles were required to have a lamp and bell

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

which had to be rung three times at each crossing. One of Laurel's residents, Eugene Fowler, received a patent for a bicycle stand in 1899.

By 1894, there was a marble works in town named the Laurel Marble Works. Not only did they make marble and granite monuments, head, and footstones, but they also made stone, granite, and marble sills and coping as well as marble and slate mantels and galvanized iron fencing. The business was located on Market Street.

That same year a local directory listed 16 carpenters, 4 builders, 2 paper hangers, and 5 painters in addition to Samuel Bacon & Sons, who still produced building materials. The marble works was also listed. The Every Evening newspaper reported that S. H. Bacon & Company was adding a wing for the production of window sashes and that it was enlarging its lumber, sash, and door factory as well as starting a branch in Seaford. The Bacon firm sold framing, flooring, siding, moldings, boxes, sashes, doors, laths, and shingles.

In 1895, there was a Chinese laundry in town run by a man by the name of Jack Lee; this laundry, however, only remained for about a month. Perhaps Lee was attracted by the town's attractive offer of a ten-year tax exemption for new businesses. The Odd Fellows also offered to donate manufacturing sites along the railroad to any new businesses. A pickle factory and a hosiery and underwear factory were two businesses that were persuaded to come to Laurel.

At this time Daniel J. Fooks built a cannery at the foot of Central Avenue. He was a wealthy local landowner, ship owner, large fruit grower, and the first President of the Sussex Trust, Title and Safe Deposit Company. Fooks brought in George W. Stradley, a canner from Bridgeville, to run the cannery. The Fooks family, including his son Harry K. Fooks, remained in the canning business until the 1920s. It was Harry K. Fooks who built the large Colonial Revival house on West Street, one of the most impressive houses in town. Stradley lived on Pine Street in a smaller, but very interesting house with decorative fleur de lis brackets and shingle work

Many cannery workers lived along 10th Street in the many simple gable front Queen Anne houses or along 5th Street.

Many of Laurel's men joined fraternal lodges. By 1896, there were seven including the Improved Order of the Red Men, the United American Mechanics, the Improved Order of Heptasophs, the Brotherhood of Union, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, the Improved Order of the Odd Fellows and the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons. The Odd Fellows and several other groups met in the Odd Fellows Hall on the east side of Poplar Avenue. The Masons had their meeting hall on the south side of 6th Street, and the Red Men met in the wigwam over the Sussex County offices on the north side of Market Street.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

By 1896, the Dover Telephone Company was given a franchise to come into town with its poles and wires.

That same year the Wilmington newspaper, Every Evening reported that houses in Laurel were in such demand that many people could not find housing and were forced to sell their possessions and board with families despite the fact that in one month sixteen dwellings had been built. The housing shortage was caused by a business boom in the gristmills and basket factories.

The population of Laurel had grown to nearly 3,000 by 1897 and there were fourteen carpenters, four builders, three painters and a marble works.

With all the building there was a demand to improve public services. The Town Commissioners investigated the possibilities of developing a town water system, which subsequently was built. A lot was purchased from Dr. Edward Fowler on Poplar Street for the water plant and locations for fireplugs were chosen. The town clerk also ordered illustrated catalogues for hose carts and trucks for the fire department.

By 1898, the Laurel Shirt Factory was located on the north side of Market Street near 4th Street. It was employing a full force and plans were being made to enlarge it. Later it was reported that it was running night and day. In a similar manner, the local basket factories were working eleven hours daily to keep up with the large number of orders.

In June of 1899, a fire destroyed several blocks of the business district. The result of the fire was increased building, but with a new emphasis. Almost all of the commercial buildings constructed after the fire were made of brick. Thus along Market Street today there are many good examples of Italianate and Colonial Spanish Revival brick commercial buildings. There was also a concerted effort made to finish the town's water system and to create a permanent fire company.

On July 4th, 1899, Laurel hosted a celebration honoring business in the town. Wagons ere displayed and paraded for each of the major businesses including the Bacon Planing Mill, Adams and Company, J. H. Marvil Basket Company, Windsor Bricks, Laurel Marble Works and others. This celebration of business was occurring all over America at that time as the country approached a new century.

Also in 1899, Laurel completed construction of a new graded public school, which was to be heated by steam, and which would employ five teachers. That same year, the town dredged Broad Creek again and established a county trolley line.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

By 1900, Laurel had grown to a city of about 4,000, a population which remained stable until after World War II when the population declined to 3,000. In 1900 a Delaware newspaper characterized the town as a "thriving manufacturing city."

At the turn of the century, Laurel was still experiencing rapid house and commercial development, partly related to rebuilding after the fire and partly answering the demands of growth. There were twelve carpenters employed in the town as well as plasterers, painters, builders, masons, brick makers and cabinetmakers.

In the summer of 1900, the newspapers reported that members of the Fooks family were spending the hot summer in Fenwick Island and in Atlantic City. The J. Dallas Marvil family was summering in Rehoboth at their summer cottage. Having summer or vacation homes became popular among the upper class during the 1890s and early 20th century. By 1907, the Pennsylvania Railroad was running special trains to Rehoboth for which a round trip ticket cost \$1.80.

In 1901, F. H. Small was advertising that he was selling furniture, carpets, wallpaper, and paints at his store on Central Avenue. The following year S. L. Parker advertised that he had the best sweet potato house in the area at the rear of his Egg and Poultry business. The potato building measured 28 by 40 feet and could hold 10,000 bushels of sweet potatoes. He bought potatoes from local farmers and stored them year round.

During the early twentieth century, Laurel was a distribution center for Southwestern Sussex County as well as a manufacturing center with canneries, basket and crate factories, planing mills, shirt factories and other businesses.

In 1921 the DuPont family made a major contribution to the Laurel Public Schools and helped found the Laurel Public Library. DuPont came to Seaford in 1939, creating many well-paying industrial jobs filled by Laurel residents. The DuPont Company apparently had wished to come to Laurel, but interest was low. With the massive construction for the new DuPont Nylon factory in Seaford, many workers sought rental housing in Laurel. This marked the beginning of significant rental housing in Laurel. US Route 13, "the dual highway", also called the "Ocean Highway to Florida", opened for travel in 1925.

During the Depression, the Federal Works Progress Administration provided funding for a municipal water and sewer system. After World War II, suburbanization began in earnest in Laurel.

Some decades prior to the Civil War, probably in the 1820's, but perhaps even earlier, a group of free African Americans took up residence on the west edge of the village. It would require more research to know why West Laurel, called "The Suburbs" prior to its annexation in the late '80's, took root on the west side.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

However, one important clue comes from a 1998 book, My Business Was To Fight the Devil – Recollections of Rev. Adam Wallace, Peninsula Circuit Rider 1847-1865, by Joseph F. DiPaola. These are the reminiscences of the famous Methodist Circuit Rider Adam Wallace, who served as Minister in Salisbury and then at Laurel's Centenary ME Church.

In one striking passage called "Masonic Connections", Wallace says

"At Laurel, Delaware, fifteen miles north of us, there was a Colored Masonic lodge. How it became instituted was only a matter of conjecture. Many of its members followed the vocation of sailors, and in city ports doubtless found the Fraternity in full possession of the ancient and honorable symbols."

The reference to the "vocation of sailors" perhaps suggests the answer. West Laurel was located on the bank of Broad Creek, where there were jobs as sailors, watermen, carpenters, mill workers, blacksmiths and shipbuilders. The products of these enterprises were shipped by barge and Schooner Ram down Broad Creek. West Laurel was also next to the site of the Marvil Box Company, which provided many jobs for both men and women from West Laurel.

In Harold Hancock's 1982 The History of Nineteenth Century Laurel, it says, "In 1860, the population of Little Creek Hundred totaled 2,779 white inhabitants, 462 free blacks and 220 slaves." Most likely, the greatest proportion of the 462 lived in West Laurel.

Similarly, we find Adam Wallace referring to another aspect of West Laurel history, the Underground Railroad and its opposite, kidnapping. Judging from the dates and facts that Wallace presents, the following is a story that begins in West Laurel in the 1830's.

"One morning a rather bright, promising little Negro girl was not to be found at her usual home in the suburbs of Laurel. Every sort of inquiry set on foot failed to find the remotest clue to her whereabouts. Thirty years passed away. Gunboats were bombarding the batteries below New Orleans. The forts were passed, the U.S. men of war lay alongside the levee. Butler entered that proud city, and taught its people some wholesome lessons of propriety. The 'old flag' went up over its government buildings, and the sailors of the Powhatan were frequently granted leave to take a turn on shore. One of these was a colored man from Laurel. He was addressed one day by a benevolent old colored preacher, a Baptist, and invited round to meeting. The sailor didn't care much for meeting, but the good old man impressed him.

'Where might you be from?' asked the preacher.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

‘State of Delaware,’ replied Jack. ‘Delaware’ said the old man. Do you know of any such place in Delaware, as the ‘Suburbs?’

‘No sir’, said the sailor. ‘That is only the name of a part of the town of Laurel, where I was raised.’

‘Well’, continued the grayheaded old minister, I have a lady in my church who would like to see someone from Delaware. She often speaks of it, saying she only remembers a place called the Suburbs. Come and see her.’

The sailor consented, and who did he find but the long lost girl from Laurel. She was the slave of colonel somebody, who was off fighting in the rebel armies. Her mistress was a cultured and kind lady, and she herself was married and had a couple of children growing up in slavery with her. The identification was complete.”

West Laurel has been a community of strong institutions and land and home ownership. Several historic churches are located here, including the Mt. Pisgah AME (soon to celebrate its 120th Anniversary) and New Zion United Methodist churches. Methodist Camp Meetings were held regularly in the open lot next to Mt. Pisgah AME. The largest community facility in the West Laurel neighborhood is the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Elementary School on 6th Street, where Mayday programs were held. Morningstar Lodge #10 of the Prince Hall Masons is located on Crockett Avenue.

The intersection of 6th Street, Townsend Street and Belle Avenue, between the Mt. Pisgah AME and New Zion United Methodist Churches and the Dunbar School, was the main commercial center of the neighborhood. A second commercial center was at the intersection of Belle Avenue and West 7th Street. These were the vital points of business and community life in earlier times. There were some 15-20 businesses located around 6th Street and Belle Avenue. These included the Walies Grocery Store, owned by Pete and Lillie Wailes, Randolph’s Hotel with its restaurant and barber shop, a pool hall, Jim Wilson’s shoe repair shop, the Rev. Frank Thomas’ Funeral Home, Louis Robinson’s Florist Shop, Larry Brown’s Barber Shop, the Horseshoe Inn, The Paradise with its dance floor, pinball machines and pool tables, Harvey Hyland Plumbing and Bill Brown’s Cleaners. The Horseshoe Inn, a dance hall, and several small stores were located on Center Street. The section west of the school was called Sunset Heights.

There were several midwives to help with new births in the neighborhood. Bacon Town, parts of which still exist today, was a second African American neighborhood located on Wolfe Street near Bacon’s Switch along the railroad south of Laurel. It is centered on the St. Matthew’s First Baptist Church and its cemetery.

Several African American leaders from West Laurel occupied positions of prominence in Town affairs. These include Roger Fisher who served on the Town Council from 1973 to 1987, becoming Council President in 1978 and Mayor in 1987-89. He was a 33rd Degree

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

Mason, the first African American Mayor in Sussex County and President of the Lower Eastern Shore Mayor's Association. A good baritone and a family man, Mayor Fisher worked hard to make the annexation and Wexford Village projects a success. Once when asked whether he would like to be remembered as a colored, Negro or black Mayor, he replied: "Just remember me as the Mayor". As President of the Town Council in the early '70's, Chester A. Waller became the first African American to head a municipal government in Delaware. Albert Jones, a guidance counselor at Del Tech, served on Council for many years. Lavanion Bell and Marshall A. Greene served with distinction on the Town Council. Hanson Gibson was the first African American policeman in Laurel and in Sussex County. He also promoted home ownership, buying and selling twenty or more houses. Reginald Brewington became a Laurel policeman and Chief of Police in the 1980's.

Chester Waller led the initiative to annex West Laurel into the Town of Laurel in the 1980's. The annexation effort included a determination to correct housing and sanitary deficiencies. The Town enacted Laurel's first Building code at this time. Code enforcement was begun and applied to deteriorated structures in West Laurel. Sidewalks were installed. A Federal grant was obtained and the funds used to extend water and sewer lines into West Laurel. At the time of annexation older deteriorated houses were demolished. Residents were temporarily housed in trailers. New ranch-style houses were built and Wexford Village was begun as a planned new residential development.

Numerous businessmen rose to positions of prominence in the community. Harry Crockett's Concrete Company was located in a still-standing concrete house on Route 13A north of Bethel Road. Harvey Hyland established the plumbing company of that name. Reginald Brewington was also a businessman who operated an ice plant on 10th Street. Albert Greene was a mason who with his sons Marshall and Grover Greene founded the Albert A. Greene and Sons Company. The company specialized in concrete work, serving as contractors for major projects at Dover Air Force Base, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, the DuPont Highway, the DuPont Nylon Factory in Seaford and elsewhere. Marshall A. Greene participated in the construction of the large concrete-block home located on the north side 6th Street just east of Little Creek.

Professor James R. Webb was a graduate of Morgan College and a professor of education. He worked closely with Governor Elbert Carvel to create the William C. Jason High School in Georgetown, which later became Del Tech. Webb Avenue in West Laurel, which was the location of his home, was named in honor of him and his work for education in Sussex County. Ruth Webb, Professor Webb's wife was also an educator. Cora Selby, who taught in area schools over a forty-year period, starting in a one-room schoolhouse, still teaches today. George Crockett, Jr. moved to Detroit where he became a United States Congressman in the 1980's. He is buried in the New Zion United Methodist cemetery. Crockett Avenue is named for him.

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

In 1921, Laurel's schools were consolidated into one district. A bus station located on Market Street. Motels began to develop on the dual highway. The Laurel Farmers Market, or Auction Block, became a very active place and in 1952 moved from the town center to Route 13, becoming a southern Delaware tradition. In 1978, Bargain Bill's Flea Market and Johnny Janosik began to join the Auction Block as anchors on Route 13. The Divided Highway was becoming a unique and active place. The Town Center was busy with drugstores, department stores, bus stations, a theater, four ladies clothing stores, banks, five and dime stores and sporting goods shops. Laurel High School and the adjacent Village Drive-In became a strong social center, to be remembered for decades by patrons and students.

Some observers of Laurel in general thought there was a need to "spruce up". Harold Hancock said this in The History of Sussex County:

"Laurel is one of the old and comparatively large towns of Sussex County. It is in the same County, has about an equal population, is solid, but rather slow, and in some other respects, reminds one of Georgetown. The streets, however, are not so broad, and there is less taste perhaps, in the houses. In fact, the great need of Laurel is to 'brush up'. Paint, glass and putty, and a little more taste in the architecture and general style of their houses, would improve the place wonderfully. They could thereby not only improve the looks of their houses, and the general appearance of the place, but increase the value of all their real estate more than twenty-five per cent."

- From The History of Sussex County, Delaware, by Harold B. Hancock, a project of the Sussex County Bicentennial Committee, 1976.

In 1988, the Laurel Historic District was established as Delaware's largest. In response to businesses departures from the Town Center, the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation began a redevelopment program for the revitalization of the Town Center and the Broad Creek area.

In his interesting book Back to the Basics, Johnny Janosik comments on why bigger businesses needed to move to new suburban locations for reasons of visibility, high traffic and room to grow:

"Some people felt we were abandoning the town of Laurel by considering a move out to the highway, even though it was less than two miles away. It was, however, a survival move for the business, plain and simple. We had outgrown our downtown location, and it was becoming more and more difficult to pull motorists off the highway and bring them to the downtown district to investigate shopping opportunities."

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

- ❑ Back to the Basics – The Johnny Janosik Story, by Johnny Janosik with Tony Windsor, page 47.

The USGS map makes it vivid that Laurel is at the center of a natural system of greenways and waterways. It is also the gateway to the Nanticoke River in a green and historical corridor defined by special places such as Bethel, Portsville, Phillips Landing and Woodlawn Ferry on the west, and Records, Chipman, Trussum and Trap Ponds on the east. US Route 13, less than a mile to the east of the Town, is one of Delaware's burgeoning highway commercial environments.

In addition to the general directions cited at the beginning of this section, the following specific project ideas have been identified as a result of the historical review:

- ❑ Build a replica of a Chesapeake Bay Schooner Ram (or find one if possible) and exhibit it on the bank of Broad Creek. A possible site for this would be the creek front in the "Old Town" area. It should be an exhibit that is lively, animated, interactive and highly educational, with moving parts.
- ❑ The relationship between a Schooner Ram exhibit and the history of box making on Broad Creek should be stressed, perhaps by salvaging the remaining Box Factory building located at Market Street and the railroad tracks. This building connects to the waterfront in a direct, visual manner.
- ❑ Stress the Norfolk and Southern Railroad Trestle in this working and moving exhibit of Laurel's "industrial" heritage. This can be done by creating a waterfront promenade beneath the trestle. The piers supporting the trestle, and its steel under story, are magnificent granite and steel survivals of an earlier age of industrial and railroad architecture. There are also great pedestrian use potentials for these promenades, which should be 50' in width. The northern promenade would connect the new development area on the fertilizer site and part of the Laurel Gardens site with the Broad Creek small boat harbor. The southern promenade would connect the Old Town area and the Town Center in general with the Laurel River Park.
- ❑ Means should be developed to commemorate the Nanticoke Indian presence and way of life along Broad Creek. A first step toward this goal would be to include a commemoration of this presence on the "Wading Place" historical marker now being designed by the Delaware Archives.
- ❑ Historical research should be done on the history of West Laurel and the role of its watermen and sailors in the early civic, commercial and industrial life of Laurel.