

Youghiogheny River Towns Submerged

Written by: **Mary Reisinger**



Today, homeowners are “underwater” when they owe more on the mortgage than the market value of the house, but in the 1940’s, in the mountains of Pennsylvania and Maryland, a dam was built that literally put a cluster of town sites under water. Places with fascinating histories—Somersfield, Thomasdale, Jockey Hollow, Watsondale, Guard Mill Run, Geise, Kempton, Sloan’s Ford, and part of Selbysport—were demolished and flooded by the construction of the Youghiogheny Reservoir.

These communities, which ranged from tiny hamlets to thriving towns, had developed near the Youghiogheny River. The name Youghiogheny, meaning “the river that flows in a contrary direction,” has had many variations of spelling and pronunciation over the years. Today, “Youghiogheny,” often shortened to “Yough,” is pronounced “Yock-uh-GAIN-ee.”

The region was occupied for thousands of years by prehistoric indigenous groups dubbed the Monogahela People by Dr. Mary Butler. These inhabitants of the land along the river practiced agriculture in villages surrounded by stockades. From about 1740, members of the Shawnee, Seneca, Delaware, and Erie tribes camped and hunted there. Archeologists, at a dig near Somersfield in the 1930s, found evidence of the ancient Monogahela dwellings below more recent Native American villages. Potsherds found at the site show that the local deposits of clay supplied Native American potters, just as, in the 1800s, the same clay supplied the Black family potteries.

Early inhabitants frequently traveled on the Youghiogheny River. In *Indian Blood*, author Evelyn Guard Olsen tells an anecdote about the Friend family of Friendsville, Maryland, who traveled downstream to visit a relative at

Town of Thomasdale, PA,
early 1940s.



Youghiogheny River Lake with the current Route 40 bridge.
The area is a popular location for outdoor recreation such as boating, water sports, fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, picnicking, and more. PHOTO BY LANCE BELL

Turkeyfoot. They paddled canoes or rafts in the summer and skied or skated in winter. During the Revolutionary War, a young man of the family skated down the river alone to visit his uncle. On his return trip, he was shot at by Native Americans, but he was able to escape on his skates.

In addition to the river, many traveled on foot or horseback through the wilderness. The local Native American trail called the Buffalo Trail or the Nemaocolin Trail developed from footpath to paved road. George Washington travelled over this trail with his frontier guide Christopher Gist in 1753 to negotiate with the French military at Fort LeBoeuf. Washington returned with a party of soldiers in 1754. He searched by canoe for a water route, but decided the river

was “too swift and dangerous,” so the group continued west by land. In 1755, General Edward Braddock’s forces camped at the same spot on the way to oust the French from Fort Duquesne. This campsite on the banks of the river came to be called Great Crossings and the trail, widened by the military convoy, was renamed Braddock Road.

In 1816, the National Highway was constructed over much of this trail, opening easier access to the West. Uriah Brown, school teacher and surveyor, had high praise for the new road. In his journal, he speculated that “the goodness of God” must have inspired Congress to order the building of this “good,” “handsome,” and “elegant” road free of toll. This road, now generally known as Route 40, is still well-traveled today.

As Uriah foresaw, the National Highway greatly expanded opportunity in the region where Washington and Braddock had camped. Jacob Speers was the first permanent settler. In fact, it is claimed that George Washington spent the night at his cabin. Philip Smyth bought the Speers property about 1816 and opened and operated a tavern, calling the town Smythfield. Uriah stayed at the tavern and characterized Smyth as a “proud, empty, ignorant, rich Dutchman.”

The building firm of Kincaid, Beck, and Evans completed an impressive triple arch stone bridge at Great Crossings, using native sandstone. It was opened with fanfare on July 4, 1818. President James Madison and members of his cabinet attended, along with veterans of the Revolutionary War and crowds of citizens from the region.

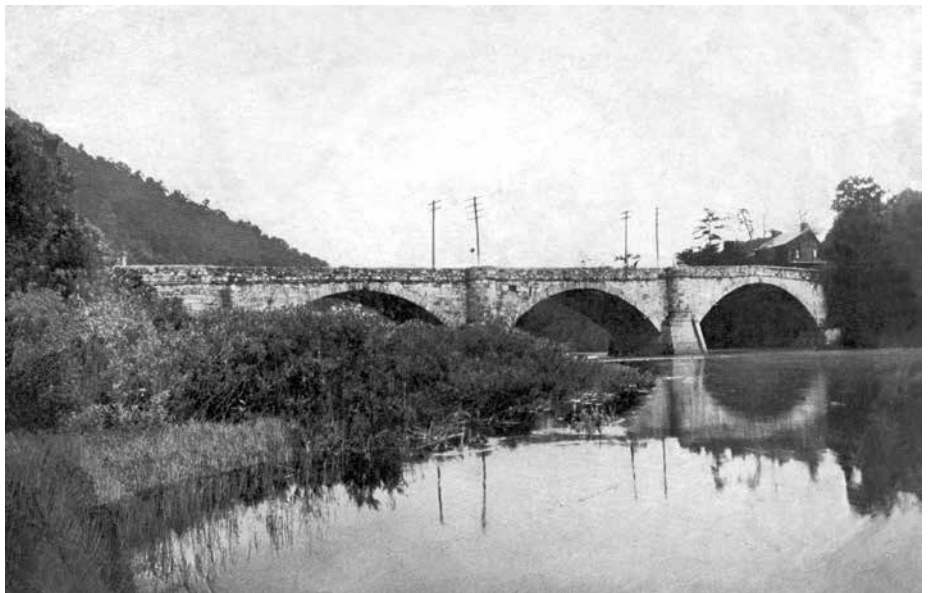


Dam site. Across this valley will be thrown the massive rock and earth filled dam. Almost completed is a diversion tunnel cutting through the hill on right. The river will be diverted through the tunnel while the dam is being built and afterwards the tunnel will serve as an outlet. In the distance is the town of Confluence which is enjoying a minor boom through the 250 jobs provided by the dam.

Photo and caption from The Pittsburgh Press, November 9, 1941.

**Somerfield Bridge, early 1940s,
before the dam was built.**

Photo provided by Virginia Clister



By 1830, an application for a post office had revealed that there was already a Smithfield in the Commonwealth, so the new name Somerfield, in honor of a minister of that name, was adopted. Somerfield was on one side of the Great Crossings Bridge and the smaller village of Thomasdale on the other. Jockey Hollow, named for the horse racing held there, was also nearby. The area depended on travel and trade. Somerfield and Thomasdale provided services for those who traveled or shipped products by stagecoach, train, and car. The towns were home to inns, liverys, blacksmith shops, mills, drugstores, general stores, banks, doctors' offices, schools, churches, and many other establishments.

The advent of automobiles made Somerfield a popular tourist attraction. The town became a favorite spot for activities as disparate as high stakes card games, sales of "white lightning," church group meetings, and Boy Scout and Girl Scout camps. Several U.S. Presidents visited, including Zachary Taylor and Herbert Hoover. President William McKinley spent six weeks in Somerfield each

summer, staying at the Youghiogheny Hotel, because he had relatives nearby. His niece Mabel McKinley was playing in the hotel with the son of the owner when she threw a ball that went through a window above the door.

The prosperity of the town ebbed and flowed over the years, but many families lived there for generations. One prominent family was the Endsleys, early residents and owners of the Endsley House, where President McKinley stayed. A later member of the family, James William Endsley represented the town as its first Burgess and served in the State's General Assembly in 1904 and 1906. He ran the Listonburg Coal Mine Company and directed the Somerset County National Bank of Somerset.

The Springer family took over the Endsley House in 1904, renaming it the Youghiogheny House. The Cornish family purchased it in 1938 and called it the Cornish Arms. This



The old Somerfield Bridge became visible in October 1991 when the water level was its lowest in 25 years. In the above photo, vehicles and people are seen on the bridge.

Inset: Arches of the bridge, which are typically underwater, remain sturdy but the side blocks and roadway have deteriorated.

Photos provided by Virginia Clister



establishment was famed for its Sunday dinners. Frank Wright Springer remembers being responsible for cleaning 50 chickens each weekend in preparation for the Sunday crowds who came from miles around for chicken and waffles with pure maple syrup. When the building was due to be demolished, Jack Cornish kept the window that had been broken by Mabel McKinley.

Elsie Spurgeon, who grew up in the area, and taught for 48 years in Somerset County, described Moses Ross Thomas, member of the family for whom Thomasdale was named. Each year M.R. Thomas decorated a beautiful sleigh, dressed up a horse with antlers and treated the children of Jockey Hollow, Thomasdale, and Somerfield to a visit from Santa Claus and his reindeer. He also appeared as Santa Claus in Elsie's classroom when she became a teacher.

By the 1930s these towns saw a significant downturn in prosperity. Roads that had been gravel were paved, enabling people to travel faster and further to other vacation destinations. Soon, the plan to construct a dam as part of a flood control project spelled the end of several area towns, including Somerfield and its neighbors, much to the dismay of the people who lived there. When Mrs. J.W. Endsley was interviewed by a newspaper reporter, she said that being forced to leave her long-time home would be the death of her, and, sadly, she did die while preparing to move.

Another town in the flood area was Selbysport, but only part of the town was flooded. This first settlement in what is now Garrett County, Maryland, was named Shelby's Port for Captain Evan Shelby, who made the first land purchase there. After a stint of fighting in the French and

Indian War with Washington and Braddock, Shelby arranged for the 1772 survey of 149 acres near the mouth of Buffalo Run. His “patent” was originally in Frederick County, but the area became part of Washington County (1776), then Alleghany County (1789), and finally Garrett County in 1872. Shelbysport (later modified to Selbysport) was built on the site of a Native American village; with good access to water and trails, it grew rapidly. By 1800, 54 families lived there. Shelby later sold the property to a family named Frazee and moved to Tennessee. His son, General Isaac Shelby, served as the first governor of Kentucky.

This town figured in the life of Meshach Browning, the famous hunter of Garrett County. During the War of 1812, Browning, a federalist, was attacked at Selbysport by a group of Democrats. With the help of his wife’s brothers and the local miller, he survived and wrote about this incident in his memoir.

A wooden bridge spanned the Youghiogheny at Selbysport as early as 1807. It was replaced with a new covered wooden bridge in 1869 at the cost of \$3000. Twenty years later, this bridge was replaced by a new metal bridge. Selbysport, called the “big town,” remained Garrett County’s largest town until after the Civil War. A log cabin school was built in 1824. The town also boasted a post office, a grist mill, shoemakers, tanners, stores, and a doctor who split his time between Somerfield and Selbysport. The octagonal “Carpenter Gothic” church building called Mercy Chapel, built near Selbysport in 1874, still holds worship services today.

These communities continued to adjust to changing conditions. The neighboring section of Virginia became West Virginia. Transportation, housing, and businesses modernized, and World War I was fought, but the greatest change came with the decision to build the Youghiogheny River Reservoir. Families scattered. Buildings to be flooded were bought by the government and demolished. The dam at Confluence was begun in 1939. Despite being slowed by World War II, it was complete by 1944, and the valley filled with water.



Virginia Woods Clister



Elaine Jenkins Imber

Now, nearly eighty years later, not many people remain who remember these places, but two local women, Virginia Woods Clister, 94, and Elaine Jenkins Imber, 88, vividly recall their days in Somerfield, Thomasdale, and Selbysport.

The Woods family moved to Thomasdale when Virginia was 9 or 10. Her father worked in road construction and coal mining. Her mother waited tables at the Cornish Arms Hotel. Virginia, as the oldest, was responsible for seeing that her three younger sisters were safe and home by dark. Children swam and roller skated in the summer. They “ice-skated,” skidding around on their boots without blades, in the winter. Children from Thomasdale and Jockey Hollow went to a school midway between the two villages. Virginia and her sisters went to Sunday School at the Somerfield Methodist Church, which had beautiful stained glass windows. Locals said that Tiffany himself had had a hand in making these windows.

Virginia recalls a family who came in the summer and lived on a nearby island accessible only by swinging bridge; the children sometimes explored this island when the family was not in residence. She remembers the area around Somerfield and Thomasdale as a wonderful place in

which to grow up. When the news came that their homes would be demolished, everyone grieved. Virginia felt it was “mean” to force these people, many of whom had lived here all their lives, out of their community. Her family moved to the other side of Uniontown in 1941. Her mother made each of the girls a framed collection of pictures and newspaper articles about the towns and the dam being built.

Virginia married the “wonderful young man” she had met in the church youth group, and moved to his family dairy farm, where they sent their products to market on the train. Later her husband became a plumber, and they gave up dairy farming, but Virginia still has a stoneware crock from the feed store that M. R. Thomas owned. Virginia has since returned to visit and photograph what can be seen at Thomasdale and Somerfield when the water is very low.

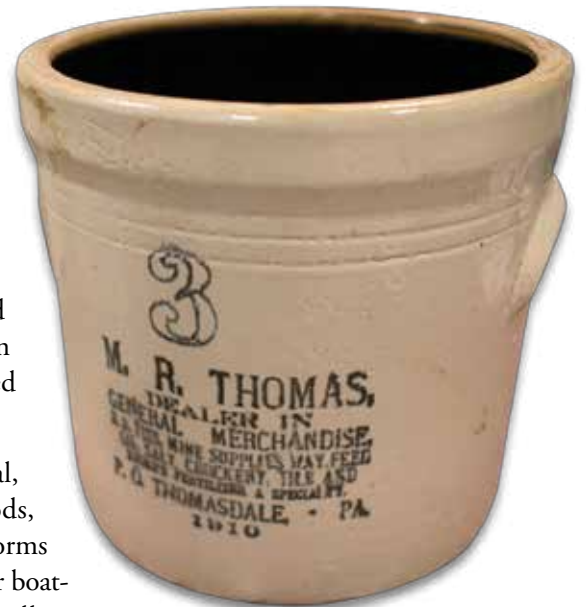
Elaine Jenkins' family spent one year in Selbysport, while her father helped build the road that replaced roadways to be flooded. They rented a house that the owners had to leave because it would soon be under the reservoir. To Elaine, the house was beautiful, with its carved doors and moldings, but it was not modern. They used an outhouse, pumped water in the kitchen, and lit the home with oil lamps. Up the hill from their home, a woman Elaine often visited owned a lovely home that did have indoor plumbing and electricity. Elaine went to Sunday School and grade school, where she remembers swinging on grape vines during recess. She loved listening to the river flowing by at night; she credits this as the beginning of her love for being near water. Like Virginia, Elaine felt that it wasn't right to ruin that little village. She was sorry for the people who were going to lose their homes; this didn't seem like progress to her.

After that year, Elaine's family moved to Terra Alta, West Virginia, for her father's next employment. Later, they moved back to Meadow Mountain in Garrett County, where they settled. Elaine herself went to Cumberland, Maryland, and then to Washington, D.C., for jobs. She married and lived in New Jersey before retiring and moving back to her family home in Garrett County.

Elaine and Virginia's memories serve as windows into the experiences of the many people whose homes vanished under the water. There are still some remnants of these bygone places. The original dedication stone from 1818 and the stone placed on the Great Crossings Bridge in 1912 were moved to the historic stone tollhouse in Addison, Pennsylvania. Inside the tollhouse are some furnishings that were saved from the flooded towns. The Somerfield church's stained glass windows along with the Jockey Hollow church building were moved

to the intersection of U.S. Route 40 and Mae West Road to become Grace United Methodist Church, now no longer used as a church. Mercy Chapel and many cemeteries can still be visited. Information about all the flooded towns was compiled by the Old Petersburg/Addison Historical Society, and printed in 1995.

When the water level is normal, in addition to preventing floods, the Youghiogheny Reservoir forms a large lake that can be used for boating and swimming. Occasionally, when the water level recedes, due to preparation for winter/spring run-off, or to drought, the old stone bridge at Great Crossings and the foundations of the demolished buildings are visible. At these times, people flock to see the ghostly remains of houses,



This three gallon stoneware crock, owned by Virginia Clister, is from M. R. Thomas' General Merchandise and Feed Store, Thomasdale, PA.

sidewalks, roads, and bridges that give viewers a glimpse of the once-thriving villages along this river.

Garrett County Historical Museum
 107 South Second Street, Oakland, MD
 301-334-3226
www.garrettcountrymuseums.com
Transportation Museum
 Liberty Street, Oakland, MD
 301-533-1044

Both Museums Open During Autumn Glory!
 Hours: Monday - Saturday 10 am - 3 pm
 See website for Winter Hours