

IV. Brief History of the Survey Area

Founded in 1734, Shepherdstown is the oldest community in what is now West Virginia.

Colonial settlers began their migration into the northern reaches of the Shenandoah Valley in the early 1700s. Many forded the Potomac River at Pack Horse Ford, near the site of what would become Shepherdstown. In 1727, German settlers from Pennsylvania crossed the river and established the settlement of New Mecklenburg, honoring Charlotte of Mecklenburg, King George II's queen. The Virginia Colony began issuing land grants in the 1730s, including two 10,000 acre tracts which were granted to John and Isaac VanMetre in the area which would eventually become Jefferson County. Land grant boundaries were vague and sometimes overlapped. The VanMetres sold portions of their grant to Jost Hite, even though some of that tract was also part of the grant made to Thomas Shepherd by Virginia Lt. Governor Gooch.

In any case, in 1734 Thomas Shepherd assembled 222 acres on the south side of the Potomac, along the waterway known as Falling Spring Branch, now known as Town Run. Shepherd erected a substantial mill along the stream; the mill is extant within the survey area and was listed individually in the National Register in 1971. Shepherd eventually selected 50 acres from his grant and laid out a town, known variously as Shepherd's Town and Mecklenburg. In 1762, the Virginia legislature chartered the town, with Thomas Shepherd as the sole trustee. Shepherd owned the town and was responsible for its government.

About 1734, Thomas Shepherd, a native of Western Maryland, received a land grant from King George II, the same containing 222 acres south of the Shenandoah River. Thomas Shepherd was founder of Shepherdstown where he settled in 1732. Approximately two (2) years later the Thomas Shepherd Grist Mill was built; the largest milling facility in the area. People came from Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia to grind their grain. During the high time of milling, the mill most likely had five (5) burr wheels operating at the same time. There is one (1) burr wheel in the mill at this time. All the gears on the bottom level area (some which are from 1738) are intact so much so that with the installation of a few belts, the mill could grind grain once again. The structure, made of the finest stone work in the state of West Virginia, is perfectly maintained.

The Thomas Shepherd Grist Mill was the reason Shepherdstown came into existence; to support this new technology that launched the industrial age. The flour was exported to Europe and was highly prized because it did not turn rancid on its journey on the high seas. The Thomas Shepherd Grist Mill is also individually listed on the National Register May of 1971.

The original town contained 96 lots and was generally bounded by Shoe Lane on the west, Rocky Street on the north, and Back Alley on the south. In 1764, Shepherd began transferring lots to other owners, with the stipulation that those who purchased the lots would build "one good dwelling house 20 feet long by 17 feet with a stone or brick chimney." It is likely that many of the log houses (nearly all of which are covered in historic and/or non-historic siding) date from the earliest decades of development in the community.

Although there was a settlement at the site of Shepherdstown prior to its development by Thomas Shepherd, there are no known remaining structures representing that period. Thomas Shepherd, who acquired the town site in 1734, began selling lots in 1734. He took fifty (50) acres of the land grant and gradually continued building over thirty (30) year period. Most lots were 103 feet by 206 feet and were sold with the stipulation that a structure of at least 16 feet in width with a stone or brick chimney had to be built within a year. A few buildings remain from the third quarter of the 18th century. Log structures, many showing Germanic influence, such as asymmetrical plan, concentrated massing and central chimneys, reflecting the ethnic background of a substantial portion of the earliest settlers. Other early buildings from the third quarter of the 18th century have been incorporated into larger, later structures. Thomas Shepherd applied for a charter before the House of Burgesses in November 1762 and became law in December 1762 to make Mecklenburg a bona-fide town in the colony of Virginia. When granted, the charter gave the residents the right to establish a formal town government.

A series of natural springs feeds Town Run as it courses through the community, crossing back yards, flowing beneath houses, commercial buildings, and beneath five streets. This setting was conducive to millers, tanners, potters, brick makers, and others who settled here to ply their craft. By 1775 the settlement had a population of about 1,000.