

History Tour – Far Side of Park(Bellona Gunpowder Works, Hollins Station, Railroads)

The majority of this area was in an original patent **300 acres** called Hector's Hopyard, patented in 1694 by Hector McClane. Sections of it were sold through the years and/or were passed down through families.

Bellona Gunpowder Works

In 1801 Michael Young sold 14 acres along Jones' Falls containing his grist mill to (Alexander McDonald, Nicholas G. Ridgely and Noah Nelms) what would become the Bellona Gunpowder Works. Other transfers of property occurred from the Young family to BGW in 1803, 1817, 1819 and the largest piece of 196 acres in 1827. By 1810 it was providing 1/5 of the gunpowder used in the nation and was giving serious competition to the DuPont family. There were many explosions, one in 1817 was said to have rocked downtown Baltimore. In 1846 the paper reported "James Beatty's powder mill six miles out on Falls Road blew up completely destroying that building and killing five men." Another one was said to have been felt as far away as Washington DC. A very dangerous business.

Not all of the land BGW owned was used for manufacturing gunpowder – some of it was also mined for chrome and copper.

In 1853-1857 Baltimore City purchased some land from the Bellona Gunpowder Works to turn into a lake for Baltimore City water supply. The BGW still had land Ruxton for producing gunpowder as well as on Liberty Road and continued in business.

Railroad

Around 1830 (or just before) the Baltimore and Susquehanna Railroad planned to build a railroad from Baltimore to York, PA. However, they could not initially get approval to go into PA so they decided to build a road from Baltimore to this point and then take a route to go to Westminster and possibly Hagerstown. The BGW was against this as early locomotives were known to cause sparks and fires and that was not what they needed with their explosive business. When the proposed path of the road bed was moved even closer to BGW, they took them to court, won, and the original path was taken. This would be known as the Green Spring Branch.

July 4, 1831 the first run of the B&S to Relay House was made with horse drawn cars taking passengers to see the scenery and the new railroad. Relay House was not quite completed but would be shortly, completed enough to serve refreshments before the return trip the Baltimore. 5/26/1832 – line completed to Reisterstown – 6/14 regular passenger service began. That July a steam locomotive, the Herald, was imported from Liverpool and put into service on August 8, 1832. By October the Herald, built to run on 4 wheels, had been reengineered to run on six wheels to be able to handle the very short curves safely in the road. On 10/20/1832 the Niles Register reported that the Herald now made two trips a day with a train of cars attached with a speed of one mile per minute on

the downhill portions. The rest of the trips were still by horse drawn cars. Routine speed averaged about 20 mph.

Around 1833(?) permission was granted to go into PA and the B&S began to neglect the Green Spring branch and their plans to be all steam on it by 1833. This was still a horse car route as locomotives were too heavy and tore up the iron track capping on the wooden stringers causing it to go through the floor of the cars causing injuries. Freight was only handled in summer as horse cars could not go through the snow and B&S could not financially clean the tracks. Little maintenance was done over ensuing years and it fell into disrepair.

By August 1838 the main line had been opened as far as York, PA.

The Green Spring Branch however, by 1845 had amassed great debt, as the roadbed was poorly built and the stringers were wooden and only horse cars could run on it. In 1857 it was sold to the Western Maryland Railroad who was looking to build a line into Baltimore. NCR continued operating horse cars on it until 1858 when WMRR began rebuilding of the track, and by 1859 it had reached Owings Mills and by 1872 Hagerstown. Under the terms of the original agreement, the line was returned to its original owner in 1874 once WMRR had made an alternate line into Balto along the Gwynns Falls. The Green Spring Branch continued to run to stops such as Rockland, Brooklandville, Lystra, Chattolannee, etc (Brooklandville? station still there) and on west. In 1916/17 during work on the B&P tunnel(Union Station & Fulton Junction) in downtown Baltimore, trains were routed through the Green Spring Valley Branch tracks at Hollins and many did not make the curve at Powder Mill Curve and derailed

Service west of Rockland was terminated in December 1959 and service from here to Rockland was terminated in 1961.

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Sorrento

In 1892 William Stork advertised in the Sun a development to be called Sorrento. One hundred ninety-nine lots covered the remaining area of the old Bellona Gunpowder Works, south of the Green Spring Valley Railroad. Initially lots were to be given free to induce buying of other lots. A railroad station “Sorrento”, basically just a platform (a 100/200’ x 8’ platform), was built. Ads selling lots were again placed in 1893, but I find nothing after that. William Stork, the developer, did have financial problems in the 1890’s, which may have contributed to its failure.

Baltimore City eventually purchased the property (with Eliz. Garrett White’s money?) become Robert E. Lee Memorial Park.

Relay House

Located in the triangular area - The Relay House (named for where the horse teams were changed) opened shortly after that first July 4, 1831 run of the B&S train. It was called a

“public house” under the charge of Mr. J. R. Thomas of “The Globe Inn”. It was not owned by the railroad, but privately owned and was on the land of Robert S. Hollins.

Between 1832 and 1869 it was referred to as (train station, post office, general store, hotel, tavern, boarding house). It was abandoned during part of this period and picked up again in 1851 by Mr. Thomas King.

During the Civil War the bridge was burned by confederate sympathizers to prevent Union troops from moving south. It was quickly replaced and soldiers were stationed there to protect it. **They were said to have frequented the general store and tavern, but brawls soon put a stop to that.** The bridge was again replaced in 1924.

On 9/23/1869 the Relay house was destroyed by fire. It was occupied by Roebuck Russell who kept a tavern in it, possibly also a hotel as the census reports have him listed as a “Hotel keeper”. On November 1, Charles Buchanan, then owner of the land, leased the land to George W. Smoot “being all that lot of ground and premises on which the “Relay House” recently destroyed stood, supposed to contain one-half acre of ground.” The provision was that within one year Smoot was to build a substantial building costing not less than \$2,000 and shall carry fire insurance on it.

In May 1876 an article in the newspaper reported that the Northern Central Railroad had purchased “Smoots Hotel” formerly known as the Relay House and would make considerable improvements to it, including sodding the ground at side and front of the station. It would later be changed to Hollins Station. A 2 storey frame building of Italianate design, 49’ x 40 1/3’. Also in this area was a turntable and single-stall engine shed behind the station, a water tank, NCR tool shed.

The station was closed in 1926 and burned on February 3, 1933.