



**Friends of the Shepherdstown Riverfront**  
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# Friends of the **Shepherdstown Riverfront**

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## Shepherdstown and the Potomac River in the Eighteenth Century

BY **KEITH ALEXANDER**

I've often wondered why Shepherdstown seems to have turned its back to the river. Early in Shepherdstown's history, residents and leaders viewed the Potomac as playing a key part of their town's future. Today, aside from hosting a few businesses, the river is primarily something that we cross on the way to Hagerstown, supplying our water while taking away our liquid wastes. It's so easily crossed today that it's easy to forget that it once represented a formidable barrier. At the same time, highways have become such a common means of transportation that we no longer remember how important the river was for transportation. I hope to get people thinking again about what the river has meant for our town, and what it can mean for its future.

Shepherdstown would not be where it is if not for the Potomac. In fact, Shepherdstown is here because its location is a venturi: places where people, traffic, or information are forced to pass through a narrow opening in the same way. We happen to be located at what was historically a giant venturi. The town also was located just upstream of what is known as Pack Horse Ford, an ancient crossing place of the river. This ford was the route for thousands of settlers moving to the south settling the Shenandoah Valley.

Another function of the Potomac was that of highway. Even before the mid-eighteenth century, the Swearingen family residing near Shepherdstown was using the Potomac to ship products like flour, tobacco, wheat, and so on to merchants downstream, all the way to Alexandria and Georgetown.

Finally, the Potomac itself formed a fall line for several streams, most notably Town Run. This lent itself extremely well to harnessing water power to drive grist mills and saw mills nearby. The Shepherd grist mill is the best known of these mills, but there were over twenty identified in 1809 in Jefferson County, most on or near the Potomac. According to the National Register, the region served as "a 'bread basket' for the growing nation.

Probably the most significant event yet to occur on Shepherdstown's waterfront happened in 1787, with James Rumsey's successful demonstration of the steamboat to a crowd of dignitaries. His test held on Dec. 3, 1787 on Shepherdstown's riverfront was very successful. He was twenty years ahead of Fulton's steamboat.

Finally, there's the tobacco warehouse. In November 1788, the Virginia assembly passed an act that established the inspection of tobacco on the lands of Abraham Shepherd to be known as the Mecklenburg Warehouse.

There's a tremendous wealth of history and nature along our waterfront, and I'm very excited about recently announced plans to revitalize the waterfront. I believe that the relationship between the town and the river is at the beginning of a new phase – one where the river benefits the town through its combination of rich history and natural beauty, and where the town works more actively to promote and preserve both.



Shepherdstown in the Eighteenth Century

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### 'Our Vibrant Riverfront



in the 21st Century'

### FRIENDS OF THE SHEPHERDSTOWN RIVERFRONT

Support revitalizing the warehouse and the surrounding area as a vibrant place in the life of the community. Our vision includes the possibility of the warehouse becoming a cultural center housing a museum, offices and public meeting rooms.

## Book Notes



BY **SANDRA OSBOURN**

If it's spring, it's time for shad. Fish markets should be displaying boned and filleted shad along with sets of the roe. In the past, fishermen would be reeling them in from the lower Potomac, where George Washington started a commercial fishery at Mount Vernon. Today, shad from the Potomac are again available in fish markets.

Two books shed light on this fascinating and delicious fish.

John McPhee's book *The Founding Fish* focuses on the natural history of the American Shad which is a member of the herring family, and its contribution to American history and gastronomy. Every year at this time, shad leave the Atlantic Ocean in hundreds of thousands and run thousands of miles up river to spawn. McPhee focuses on the Delaware River,

near which he lives, but has fished for shad in many rivers. He has interviewed ichthyologists (one shad scale can reveal the birthplace of any given shad), fishermen whenever shad are found, historians who provide new information on the role of shad in saving Washington's Army at Valley Forge, as well as cooks who provide recipes for the roe and fillets.

Sandy Burk's book *Let the River Run Silver* focuses on efforts to restore American shad to the Potomac River. Burk points out the river's bald eagles depend on the fish for food, as many people do. The book reports on the efforts of student scientists and their teacher to raise and release shad into the river. Among other things, they succeeded in installing fish ladders at Little Falls and at Pierce Mill in Rock Creek. Efforts continue, so that once again the word can go out that "They're in the river."



# Historic Structure Report, Mecklenburg Warehouse

## PROJECT DATA:

**Name of Building:** Mecklenburg Tobacco Warehouse  
**Location:** North Princess St., Shepherdstown, Jefferson County, WV  
**Owner:** Corp. of Shepherdstown WV  
**Date of Construction:** ca. 1797  
**Historic District:** Contributing Structure to Shepherdstown National Register  
**Historic District (Boundary Increase 1987)**  
**Period of Significance:** 1797 – 1920  
**Building Footprint:** 71' x 35' – 4", 2,007 square ft.  
**Preparer:** Charles Belfoure, Architect

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Mecklenburg Tobacco Warehouse is an extremely unique example of American vernacular architecture. Very few buildings like this still exist in such a complete form. Despite the threat of 100 year flooding, the Mecklenburg Tobacco Warehouse is too valuable an historic resource to remain unused. Because of the outstanding stabilization program by Friends of the Shepherdstown

Riverfront, the building is in excellent condition given its age and period of long neglect. But while the shell of the building is relatively sound, its original interior structure that was removed by a waterworks company and replaced with new floors is now dangerously unsound. The roof structure was also altered, and it is structurally deficient. It must be investigated and repaired at once. In its present state, the building does not conform to any building code, fire safety code or handicapped accessibility code.

If the work installed by the waterworks is removed and two floors and an attic loft can be installed, the building can be readily adapted to a new use, most likely a commercial – office space. Whatever the reuse, the building must retain its historic character and adhere to the Secretary of Interior's Standards for rehabilitating historic buildings. To insure the best reuse of the building, the Corporation of Shepherdstown should seek an experienced developer of historic structures by issuing a request for proposals. Developers who have dealt with buildings of this size will offer options for reuse and a financial / leasing arrangement that will benefit the Corp. of Shepherdstown, which will no longer have to maintain the building. The newly renovated building can be an important catalyst for the rediscovery of the town's Potomac Riverfront.

# Shepherdstown River Gauge Disabled, Shut Down

BY DANE KONOP

The Shepherdstown Potomac River flood gauge, located at the Princess Street landing, is no longer in operation, leaving area residents, police and emergency responders, and others who live and work downstream to "guesstimate" flood conditions on the river.

The gauge, which was funded by the Corps of Engineers and operated by the U.S. Geological Survey, was disabled in 2005 during the construction of the new Rumsey Bridge and, according to an Associated Press report in the Journal, was taken out of operation completely on Oct. 1, 2008, when funding for it and seven other gauges in West Virginia was cut from the federal budget. Each gauge costs \$13,300 a year to operate.

Before the orifice line to the gauge was cut by the Rumsey Bridge construction crew, the public could access a National Weather Service web page and get current readings and a flood forecast for our section of the river. This was particularly important for folks who live at Pack Horse Ford, McShane's Landing, Riverbend, Glenn Haven and other developments along the river in Jefferson County. It's also locally important to those who use River Road, including school buses, because of the frequent flooding of the road.

To make matters worse, the next gauge upriver from Shepherdstown at Williamsport, which is still operating and could provide some level of flood guidance, does not provide forecasts and has been plagued with operating problems of its own.

The situation is an accident waiting to happen, as it's a rare flood that doesn't result in at least one stranded car on a flooded River Road.

The loss of the Shepherdstown river gauge to funding cuts is of particular concern to the hydrologists and forecasters at the regional Weather Service office in Sterling, Va., which has responsibility for our area. As a retired employee of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency of the Weather Service, I have some background in this area. For the past few years, I have been in contact with hydrologists at the USGS regional office in Baltimore and my former colleagues at the Weather Service about the problem. The NWS forecasters at Sterling consider the Shepherdstown gauge to be an integral part of their flood forecast system for the entire Potomac River basin and would sorely like to see it and the other gauges reactivated. This past September, NWS hydrologist Rich Hitchens, who has been communicating with me about the problem and who says he "wants this gauge back bad," informed me that the USGS had apparently come up with funds to repair the Shepherdstown gauge, but that neither agency could find local funding partners to operate the gauge.

It seems to me that because flood protection in the Potomac River basin and in the other multi-state river systems across the nation is the responsibility of the Corps of Engineers, this is a federal problem that can only be solved with federal funding. No local jurisdiction should have to pay to operate a gauge that benefits everyone who lives or works in the river basin, which in our case includes millions of people.

The Associated Press report mentioned earlier also pointed out that the USGS had notified West Virginia's U.S. congressional delegation about the river gauge funding cuts. Perhaps it is time to revisit the problem with our representative. If you are interested in helping, you can contact me at 304-876-3628 or at dkonop@aol.com.

# President's Corner

I am happy to report that we had a nice turnout for our Annual meeting on October 31, 2009. Thank you all for coming.

We were pleased to have Lois Turco and David Humphreys as speakers before the meeting began. Lois gave some insights on the whys and wherefores of seeking National Heritage Area status and the many contacts she has met along the way. Dave spoke about the Potomac River Frontage Revitalization Project and the receipt of a grant from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service. Their expertise in design and knowledge of possible funding sources will go a long way in making our dreams for the riverfront a reality.

The Friends of the Shepherdstown Riverfront and the town of Shepherdstown now have a Historic Structures Report on the Mecklenburg Warehouse. The Executive Summary by Mr. Charles Belfoure, RA, is reprinted in this newsletter. Also included in his report are recommendations for adaptive reuse of the building with schematic drawings of two possible uses – Office space and/or apartments. This document will be very helpful for any developer interested in the project. Let us know if you are interested in seeing the full report. The full report can be seen on our Website: [www.shepherdstownriverfront.org](http://www.shepherdstownriverfront.org).

There is a lot of talk going on about our Shepherdstown Riverfront at this time. If you would like to be a part of these plans contact us at [info@shepherdstownriverfront.org](mailto:info@shepherdstownriverfront.org)

—DALE WALTER

# RTCA Works to Protect Shepherdstown

Recently, the National Park Service through the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) began work with the Town of Shepherdstown and the Shepherdstown Rotary Club on a Riverfront Revitalization Project. This community and partner led effort will focus on preserving and protecting Shepherdstown's significant historic and natural community resources along the riverfront including the Mecklenburg Tobacco Warehouse, Rumsey Monument Park and Cullison Park while also working to provide improved access and infrastructure improvements.

With input from community members, partner groups and Shepherd University three areas of focus will be looked at – the development of an overall plan for the riverfront, finding partners who can assist in this effort and locating sources of funding for the improvements that are needed to carry out the plan. The RTCA Program supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects and helps implement the natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation mission of the National Park Service in communities across America.

**For more information contact Chris Niewold NPS RTCA at 202-690-5153.**



The Mecklenburg Tobacco Warehouse