

Now quiet byroad village bustled in former life

THE TIMES-HERALD, Newport News, Va., Thursday, July 1, 1976

By Brett Averill Times-Herald Staff Writer

The sun rising above the trees across the road throws its light onto the cupola of Denbigh Courthouse. The second floor windows glint with orange. It's a new day. Wind sweeps through the gigantic oak trees in Courthouse Square. A pigeon flies in a short, graceful arc around the front corner of the building and flutters into a nook under the high eaves.

It has been peaceful in the square for a long time – especially since July 1, 1958.

That's the day Warwick merged with Newport News. Warwick County Courthouse ceased being a courthouse and the clerk's office next door became just another old building.

Denbigh was the Warwick County seat from 1809 until 1952, except for a four-year lapse beginning in 1891. In 1952 Warwick incorporated itself into a city.

The original Denbigh Courthouse was built in 1810 and became the clerk's office when a two-story court building was erected in 1884.

The two buildings, along with the 30 prisoner county jail that was built in 1899, served as heart of Warwick's government until the 1958 merger with Newport News. When the two cities became one, all government offices moved downtown or to Hilton. The county jail, built in 1899 and demolished in 1960, stood in the right rear of Courthouse Square

several yards behind the library. Cars park there now.

Vernon S. Briggs, Warwick City's first vice mayor, recalls that it was not the most secure of jails.

"I went by the old jailhouse one day and saw a rope hanging out a second floor window. After a while it started going up, and there was a can of beer tied to the end. (A prisoner's) friend had left it for him."

George S. DeShazor, Jr. clerk of courts in Warwick from 1924 until the merger, said because the jail was built during a very cold winter and the cement didn't mix properly, *"You could ... (paraphrase - chip away at*

the mortar with a spoon and easily take out bricks to escape – story of prisoner who made his way out of a cell in this manner and left a note for his jailers that he had gone home... When the sheriff tracked the man down) {section illegible} ... [ap]prehended the man, who was by then quite drunk, at his home.

The jailbreak proved to be good luck for the county, however: The mason re-laid the hole he had broken out *“a whole lot better than the old section,”* DeShazor said. Prisoners forced out the bricks so often that officials lined the inside walls with steel plates.

Conditions at the jail were poor. A 1953 newspaper story said the building, designed for 30 prisoners, was operating at 500 per cent capacity. It had only four main cells.

In various reports made in the 1950s, (sic) and the ancient clerk’s office was turned into Virgil I. Grissom Public Library.

The 1,800-square-foot library has a capacity of about 25,000 volumes but is now holding 49,500, said Miss Lottie Driver, Newport News library director. *“It’s awful crowded,”* a librarian said. It was an understatement.

Books are stacked everywhere in the building – on carts, tables, chairs, windowsills, steam radiators and the floor.

However, a new library is under construction a few hundred feet from the present structure.

In sharp contrast to the 1810 officials cited the inadequacy of the building.

The director of the state Division of Corrections said in November 1954 that there was *“no valid reason”* to delay condemnation of the facility. It was razed in 1960.

DeShazor said that when he started working at Denbigh in the early 1920s, *“We held court every two months (usually*

for one week). We didn’t have any heavy dockets. People behaved better.”

“We didn’t have many lawyers, and not too many cases, either.”

The retired official recalls things were more easygoing then. *“It was real quiet, peaceful.”*

Most of the prisoners in the jail during the 1920s had been caught for bootlegging, DeShazor said.

It was common for them to sit out on the lawn, cut the grass or walk down the hill to the creek and fish for their supper.

Nancy Garrow, daughter of a Denbigh merchant, in 1966 remembered, *“All the lawyers and judges would get off at Oriana Station (on the C&O tracks just south of where Denbigh Boulevard is now) and they stayed for two weeks; they would have the grandest time. It seems they looked forward to the long spells in court, just because Mr. Smith’s hotel*

(across old Rt. 60 from the courthouse) *was the home for some of the biggest poker games around, and the food in the hotel dining room was the best.*"

DeShazor said when court was in session *"the hotel housed the judge, the juries, the witnesses and the lawyers, and it was a case of doubling up in the 16 rooms."*

Briggs said, *"On court day everyone would ride up to the courthouse and sit in. Of course, if it was a murder case or a violent crime, there'd be more interest."*

The courthouse *"wasn't used much between sessions,"* DeShazor noted.

In the early 1960s, the courthouse became Denbigh Recreation Center[.] (sic) building's weathered bricks, slate shingles and three chimneys, the new library will be of modern design with a partially glass roof.

It will have 15,900 square feet – eight times as much as the present

library – with space for 76,000 books. Though December is set as the completion date, Miss Driver said it will probably not be finished until early 1977.

The city planning office said no use has been planned yet for the old library, but about half a dozen agencies are interested in it.

The courthouse is still operating well under full capacity. It underwent a complete renovation in 1973 when the interior walls were ripped out and replaced.

The landmarks interior was altered slightly to meet new needs, but the exterior was preserved in its original state. The job took six months and cost \$170,000.

Ed Elliot of the city's recreation department said that with 1,500 people using it every week, the Denbigh center is *"definitely"* the busiest in the city.

Private groups may also rent the facility when it is not in use. The Church of God-Denbigh meets there twice every Sunday.

Is the courthouse adequate?

"It is for what we are using it for," Elliot says. Except for the gymnastics held in the old second floor courtroom, the building is used for instruction only. No athletic activities are allowed.

Almost all the landmarks of old Denbigh are gone now.

The poorhouse, located a half mile north of the Courthouse Square; Smith's general store opposite the square, and Oriana Station have all burned.

Garrow's store, located beside the square was razed a few years ago.

Brigg's grocery, a row of houses and a country store-post office have been replaced by the sterile looking rear of

Warwick-Denbigh
Shopping Center.

The neighborhood is
not dying, however. Far
from it.

The new library,
increasing construction,
the Denbigh police and fire
stations and a spiraling
population all promise to
keep the area healthy.

At Denbigh Courthouse
the sun has set on one era,
but rises daily on another.