

CAROL STUART WATSON

*The Beall-Dawson House, c. 1815
home of the Montgomery County Historical Society
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THE TOWN OF SOMERSET

by Dorothy O'Brien and Helen H. Jaszi

In the shadow of the high-rise apartments and the busy commercial establishments along Wisconsin Avenue just north of the District Line lies the Town of Somerset. Because of the continuing concern of its residents for preserving their way of life, Somerset, founded in 1890 by five government scientists, remains today the tranquil community envisioned by its founders.

The land which comprises the Town of Somerset was originally part of the "Friendship" tract containing 3124 acres, which was patented in 1711 by the fourth Lord Baltimore to Colonel Thomas Addison and James Stoddart.¹ This patent was

1. T.H.S. Boyd, The History of Montgomery County, Maryland, from Its Earliest Settlement in 1650 to 1879 (Baltimore, Maryland: Regional Publishing Company, 1968), p. 32.

triangular in shape and extended from near the Potomac River west of the District Line southeast to what is now known as Wisconsin Avenue and north to where the Bethesda Post Office now stands. For at least 100 years prior to the development of the community of Somerset, the land within the present boundaries of the Town was recorded as a unit. A map in a Philadelphia Atlas dated 1801 shows "part of a tract of land known as 'Friendship'" as belonging to Richard Williams, farmer and patron of the Bethesda area. The farm contained 211-1/2 acres, and its boundaries as shown on the Atlas map are almost exactly those of the present Town of Somerset. In 1815 the property was purchased by Henry Dellinger of Berkeley County, Virginia.² On March 6, 1818, Henry Dellinger sold the 211-1/2 acres to Daniel Renner of Georgetown for \$9000.³ Yet local maps for 1863 and 1878 show the Williams family as farmers still living on the acreage.

Williams was only one of many farmers whose acreage lay along the Rockville Pike. More than a dozen 100-acre farms flourished to the north and south of the Williams farm between Bethesda and the District Line. To the west along River Road lay the Loughborough property, which consisted of one-half the original Friendship grant. It, too, had changed hands but remained intact until 1810 when it was acquired by the Loughborough family and became their residence for more than 100 years thereafter.

Although up until the final decade of the nineteenth century the atmosphere had remained predominantly rural, with wide fields on all sides, many of which were still planted to tobacco, the beginnings of change were to be seen. The large estate of more than 230 acres on the east side of the Pike across from Friendship was about to become the first suburb of the city of Washington. Since 1815 this estate had been the home of the Bradley family; it was part of a tract which had been named "Chevie Chace" another hundred years earlier. The Chevy Chase Land Company, which had been incorporated in 1890, had been steadily acquiring farms for nearly seven miles beyond what was then the city boundary. The Bradley estate, then the site of the Chevy Chase Hunt Club, marked the outer limits of the Company's holdings. It was between there and Chevy Chase Circle that the Company laid out macadam streets, proper sidewalks, and landscaped parkways, provided a water supply and sewage system, and built the substantial homes which still stand there. To further encourage their bold venture, the Company proceeded to build a trolley line to connect their holdings with the center of the Federal City miles away.

The plans of the five men who in 1890 purchased the 50 acres in Friendship to the west were equally attractive, if somewhat more modest, than those of the Chevy Chase Land Company. For one thing, trolley transportation already was assured from Georgetown, the nearest city, through the area then called Tennyaltown and the countryside to their suburb. The Georgetown and Tennyaltown Electric Railway Company had been organized in the 1880's by General Richard C. Drum, who lived on his farm, Langdrum, north of Friendship. By 1895 the trolley line extended up the Pike to Rockville.

Somerset Heights Colony Company was the name given to the venture by the five partners. The price of the 50 acres, as recorded in Rockville on June 26, 1890, the date of sale, was \$19,000.⁴ Covenants placed and recorded on the land

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2. Montgomery County Deeds, Liber S-19, folio 330.
 3. Montgomery County Deeds, Liber U, folio 115.
 4. Montgomery County Deeds, Liber JA-19, folio 489.

prohibited "road access (alleys) to the back or rear of the properties" and required a 30-foot setback from the front property line. The covenants further required the partners "to build five or more private residences to be occupied by them or their tenants and to cost not less than \$2000 each." Five short streets were laid out and named for the English counties of Dorset, Warwick, Surrey, Cumberland, and Essex.

In The Evening Star of May 17, 1890, there appeared a report entitled "The Agriculture Department Colony" which read: "After considering various propositions made by land owners the committee representing the scientific men of the Department of Agriculture, who have in view the establishment of a suburban colony, have selected a tract of rolling land on Tenleytown road, adjoining the property of Gen. Drum, just across the District line in Montgomery county, owned by John E. Beall, esq., and Dr. Ralph Walsh. The tract is a part of the so-called 'Somerset Heights,' and consists of fifty acres sloping to the south. The company will begin operations by providing the property with a good system of sewage, a bountiful supply of water and electric light from the Georgetown and Tenleytown Electric Railroad Company. During the coming summer and autumn active steps will be taken in preparing the property for building. Mr. Beall, through whom the property was purchased, will build a broad avenue from the pike along the border of the property, plant shade trees and lay a sidewalk. The initiatory steps in house building will be taken by Dr. D.E. Salmon, Dr. H.W. Wiley, Dr. C.A. Crampton, Mr. H.E.L. Horton, Mr. Miles Fuller, and others. The lots are to contain not less than one acre, with a view to insuring the building of a cluster of villas, forming a suburb fashioned after the very pleasant ones of Boston and other northern cities."

The founders of the Town were men of exceptional accomplishment and ability. Harvey Wiley was Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry in the Department of Agriculture. He is best known as the father of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. However, Dr. Wiley never lived in Somerset. His personal papers in the Library of Congress reveal that he built 4722 Dorset Avenue hoping to bring his parents there from Indiana. This plan did not materialize, and he eventually sold the house and extensive grounds.

Charles A. Crampton was Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry under Dr. Wiley. Dr. Crampton graduated from Iowa State College and later earned a B.S. degree at the University of Michigan and an M.D. at Columbian College, now George Washington University. Dr. Crampton was a man of many "firsts." In 1893 the Crampton home at 4805 Dorset Avenue was the first house to be occupied in the new development. A year later a Crampton infant was the first child born in Somerset. Dr. Crampton was elected first mayor in 1906. In addition, he owned the first automobile in the Town.

Daniel Salmon was a brilliant scientist of international repute. He was Chief of the Bureau of Animal Industry in the Department of Agriculture, and the first steps leading to the eradication of Pleuropneumonia and Texas tick fever, both major killers of cattle, were taken under his direction. In recognition of his work he was made an honorary associate of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in London, England. He had been a member of the first class to graduate at Cornell, where he earned both a B.A. and a Ph.D. Later he studied at the Alfort Veterinary School in Paris. Dr. Salmon built 4728 Dorset Avenue.

Little is known of Miles Fuller except that he resigned his position as Chief Clerk in the Bureau of Animal Industry in 1889. Later he operated a business school at 11th and New York Avenue where the Greyhound Bus Terminal now is. The school trained secretaries for government service and was delightfully called "The Drillery." Miles Fuller built 4723 Dorset Avenue where he lived with his family

until his death in 1902. He handled the business details for the partnership and built several houses in the Town on speculation.

No trace remains of Horace Horton except the early records which show that he did not build in Somerset. His interests were taken over by Dr. E.A. deSweinitz, Chief of the Biochemistry Division in the Bureau of Animal Industry. Dr. deSweinitz built his home at 4721 Essex Avenue about 1895. The house was completely destroyed by fire shortly after completion.



Entrance to the Town of Somerset at Dorset
and Wisconsin Avenues in 1906

Note the street railway (trolley) tracks in
the foreground, which at the time ran from
Georgetown to Rockville.

And so the four spacious white frame houses at Dorset and Surrey became the nucleus of the Somerset Heights Colony. The founders intended not only to provide pleasant homes for their families but also fully expected to make money on their venture. About 1895 the partners subdivided the remainder of the 50 acres into building lots of more than one acre each, and each of the partners drew shares by lot. A fancy brochure was printed telling of the tranquility and refinement of Somerset Heights. Special emphasis was placed on its accessibility to the District of Columbia via electric railway. Soon speculative builders and others seeking the seclusion of a life in the country erected numerous comfortable homes with high ceilings and wide front porches and broad shady lawns.

But life was not easy for the pioneer. No services of any kind were provided in sparsely settled Montgomery County. The broad avenues described in the brochure were still only dirt roads. Nor was the "good system of sewage, ... bountiful supply of water and electric lights" yet a reality. Some, but not all, of these shortcomings could be remedied by the strenuous efforts of the Somerset homeowners themselves. They formed a Citizens Association which built and maintained wooden sidewalks to protect shoes and clothing from the ubiquitous mud. Residents also managed fairly well to fill mud holes in the streets. But, although it was possible through this unevenly shared effort to alleviate some of their problems, it was impossible for the community to deal by such means with inadequate surface drainage, improper sewerage, a makeshift water supply, and the need for education and fire protection, not to mention the livestock which wandered freely over lawns and gardens. Surface and household waste water was conducted or drained by gravity from higher to lower ground; for sanitary sewerage, residences used either outhouses or were connected to cesspools. Nearby streams, particularly Little Falls Branch, Willow Creek, and Willett Brook, eventually received the effluents from all these arrangements. Water for household use was supplied by the Somerset Heights Water and Power Company from deep wells which had been drilled in the woods at the foot of West Cumberland hill. From them a windmill on the summit pumped water up the hill to a storage tank there. From there it could flow by gravity to the individual kitchens nearby. At times during the winter the shallowly laid pipes froze, and drinking water could then be gotten only in buckets. Yet the demand for the piped water was always larger than the supply, and the \$200 connection fee must have been considered worthwhile. Fire protection was minimal, both because of the nature of the water supply and because the nearest fire-fighting equipment was housed a half-hour away by either trolley or horse-drawn vehicle at Tenleytown. Nor was education for the children close by. The nearest county public school was at Rockville. Children from Somerset Heights at first attended classes in a rented house northward between the Offutt and Davidson farms. A year or so later they entered the E.V. Brown School in the District of Columbia near Chevy Chase Circle. Attendance there entailed a one-mile hike across the fields of the Charles Counselman farm on the east side of Rockville Pike as well as across Falls Branch, an open stream. The present Somerset School was built in 1928.

By 1905, thirty-five families lived in the community, but only about one-third of them could be depended on for cash or work contributions for the common good. By that time both men and women of the community were ready to take common action. During that year the Citizens Association decided to petition the State Legislature for municipal powers which would enable them to levy taxes in order to equalize the burden of providing essential services for the community. In 1906 a charter was issued, and the community of Somerset Heights became the Town of Somerset. The enlarged boundaries of the Town, as they were described for the charter, almost exactly corresponded to those of the Richard Williams farm, Friendship, of 1801 - Wisconsin Avenue on the east, Little Falls Parkway and River Road on the west, Cumberland Avenue on the north, and Friendship Heights on the south. The enlarged area included not only the 35 houses on the small network of streets which radiated from Dorset Avenue and Surrey Street, but also the houses, barns, and farmyards of several small farmers and settlers who were established in the area. Included, too, was a large area of fields and woodlands which had for many years been the property of the Bergdoll family of Philadelphia.

The first Town Council was elected on May 7, 1906, and Dr. Charles A. Crampton became the first mayor. The agenda for the Town's new government was clear. The first and most pressing need was for an orderly and equitable system of property assessment extending to all property within the Town boundaries so as to establish a base for taxation. No time was lost. The report of the Town Board of Assessors

was completed ten days after the Board was formed. The Council ordered 100 copies of the issue of the Montgomery Advocate in which the charter of the Town and the notice of assessment appeared. Both personal and real property were to be taxable. However, a report, dated May 23, 1906, of the committee appointed to review the assessors' report had this to say: "Your committee believes that the Board of Assessors ... made a hasty appraisal of the taxable property of the town. The report is incomplete, unsatisfactory and unreliable, and it is recommended that the report be received without the approval of the Council, (and) the Board discharged ..." On June 11, the assessments having been completed to their satisfaction by the members of the Council, the tax rate was set at 50 cents on each \$100 of taxable property, the upper limit specified in the charter, and a revised budget for the fiscal year 1907-1908 was approved. Total expenditures were to be \$511.00 of which \$350.00 was to be spent for maintenance and lighting of streets and sidewalks. Taxes amounting to \$81.49 were received from twelve citizens during July, the first month.

The state of the sanitary sewerage in the Town received priority attention. A special survey committee reported that the main sewer, which was little more than a large terra cotta pipe that emptied directly into Little Falls Run, was found to be broken in numerous places, a health hazard, and in need of repair. Another smaller such pipe, which drained into a cesspool to the west, was found blocked and overflowing. It was recommended that this be remedied by extending the pipe northward past the cesspool location down a gully beyond the line of the Drum property where it could "outlet into an open field." The two repairs were budgeted to cost a total of \$75.00. The same concerns also prompted the immediate appointment of a health officer whose first task was to inspect the dairies within the Town limits for cleanliness and purity of their products.

A Town Marshal was designated and subsequently qualified by the County authorities to enforce ordinances having to do with public safety and order. Breaking street lights and defacing public and private property were to be dealt with sternly and could result in commitment "to the jail of Montgomery County" if fines levied were not paid. An attempt was soon made to deal with a long-standing problem when the Town government ordained that "It shall not be lawful for any animal of the goat, horse, cow or hog kind, or any fowl such as geese, ducks, turkeys or chickens to go at large within the limits of the streets, roads, avenues or grounds in the town ... Provided that this ... shall not be construed to interfere with the driving of such animals or fowls through the streets, roads or avenues." Fines collected for violations were to be divided equally between the Marshal himself and the Town treasury.

A continuing problem was the condition of the Somerset trolley station at Dorset and Wisconsin Avenues and "means of keeping the station in a clean and decent condition." At a January 1907 Council meeting it was determined "that a strong padlock be placed on the door - keeping the same securely locked - and donations amounting to \$1.00 were made for the purchase of lock and hasp."

Fire protection also came before the Council. After "going over the ground with the Captain of Station No. 20 at Tennalytown" and the Chief of the D.C. Fire Department, a "Committee of One" was informed that both "are disposed to offer us fire protection if we supply them with water facilities without which their apparatus would not be of much assistance." A handwritten note appended to the report continues: "I recommend that we confer with the Drummond people regarding the matter with a view to taking united action on the subject of water supply."

During its first year, the Town government devoted much time, ingenuity, and energy to arranging for repairs to streets and sidewalks. Over the months it became

increasingly clear that the \$350 budgeted for the year's lighting and maintenance of streets and sidewalks would be inadequate. Some means was to be found, therefore, for increasing the revenue of the Town. A general reassessment appeared to be the remedy, and the subject was heatedly debated for several months. Eventually the attempt failed, although selected properties were reassessed. A somewhat more modest revenue-raising measure, a \$2.00 head tax on dogs, was introduced and passed in the Council.

At its June 1907 meeting, at which time the Town government had for one year negotiated successfully a fast and precarious course, the report of the treasurer showed a cash balance of \$81.70, with no bills outstanding.

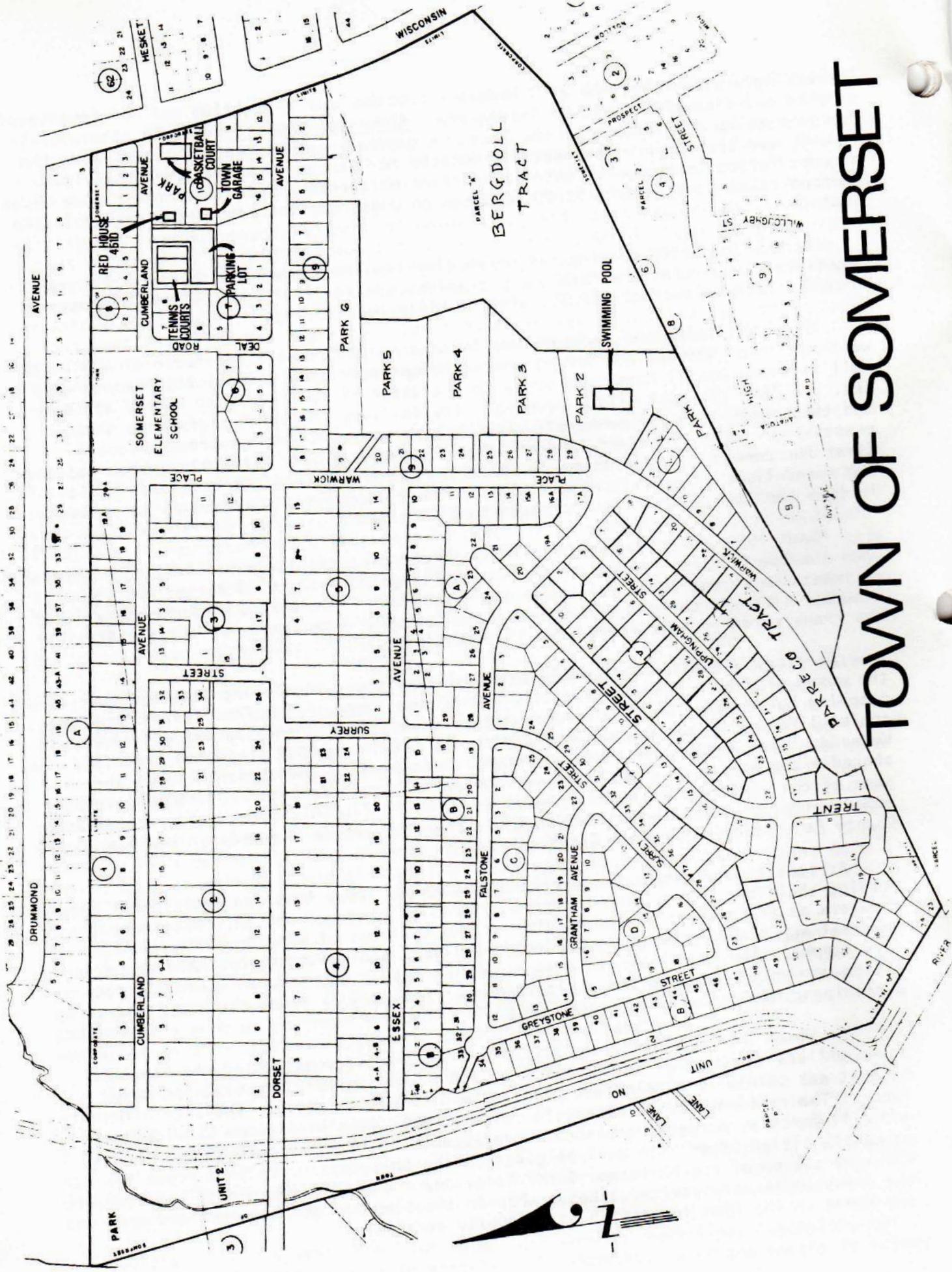
The first telephone exchange was located in the rear of the house at the northwest corner of Warwick and Dorset where the operator kept a small notions store. Mail delivery was by horse and buggy to a cluster of mail boxes at Surrey and Dorset. In 1916 the Post Office promised city delivery if street signs were erected and the houses properly numbered. In the same year the Town government took possession of the unclaimed land on Cumberland Avenue near Wisconsin, which was used first for community gardens and on which Town tennis courts now have been built. The speed limit originally was 12 miles an hour, and Dorset Avenue was so posted. In 1916 the Town budget was increased to \$1425.

About 1920 the influence of the Department of Agriculture was felt once more when the Bee Culture Station moved into the large house at 4823 Dorset Avenue. Experimental work was done here under the direction of the Bureau of Entomology, and a number of research scientists made their homes in Somerset until the Bee Station was transferred to Beltsville some 15 years later.

No story about Somerset would be complete without mentioning the important role the women played in the early development of the Town. A few families owned high-stepping horses and fancy carriages, but transportation generally was not easy and social life was where they could find it - at home. In 1902 the women organized the Wednesday Club and for many years brought their mending and their children and shared a cup of tea as they discussed Town problems in each other's homes. In 1916 some of the civic-minded women founded the Woman's Club of Somerset to provide an opportunity for wider community service. The club became a member of the Montgomery County Federation of Woman's Clubs.

At that time women were concerned about child labor laws and legislation benefiting their sex. They also folded thousands of bandages and knit countless sweaters as their contribution to the serious business of winning World War I. Somerset homes were graciously opened to soldiers stationed on the American University campus. The Fourth of July was a genuine patriotic occasion upon which the entire community gathered for a picnic supper followed by fireworks and a speech by a prominent national figure.

The Woman's Club also raised the money for and had constructed the handsome stone pillars standing at the entrance to the Town. In 1925 the Club sponsored a huge Street Carnival to celebrate the paving of the Town roads. The invitation read: "The residents of Somerset, in costume, will form in line on Warwick Place and will march by Dorset Avenue and Surrey Street to West Essex Avenue where a pageant entitled 'Somerset' will be given by the Children." The Club began the pleasant custom of the Christmas Carol Party and the June Garden Party to which all the townspeople were invited. Membership in the Club was and has remained open to any woman in the Town interested in community service.



TOWN OF SOMERSET

Until the end of World War II, the 100 families living in the Town of Somerset were surrounded on the south, east, and west by open fields and woodland. This was the unimproved property owned by the Bergdoll family of Philadelphia. Obtained by a foreclosure in about 1885, it had been held by the Bergdoll estate for more than 60 years. During much of this time the property was involved in litigation. In 1946 the property was sold at auction to private developers, and, since then, its use has continued to be controversial. There have been numerous proposals for development - a medical clinic, high-rise apartments, and a department store - all of which were opposed by the residents of Somerset. However, after lengthy negotiations and with the overwhelming support of the citizens of Somerset at a public meeting on November 10, 1969, an agreement was reached between the landowners and the Mayor and Council. In exchange for a gift from the developers to the Town of 12 acres of the undeveloped land at the rear of the residences on Warwick Place and Dorset Avenue and other considerations - including no access to the development from Dorset Avenue or Warwick Place as well as limitations on density, setback, and height - the Mayor and Council agreed to support for five years the builders' plan for the development of the 18 acres with a combination of apartment, office, and commercial space.

The 12 acres which the Town received has been preserved in its natural state as Vinton Park and serves as a buffer between the Town and nearby commercial areas. A small parcel of land on the northwest corner of Dorset and Wisconsin Avenues subsequently was purchased by the Town for its park holdings as were the two acres known as the Parreco tract at the end of Warwick Place.

The Charter issued to the Town of Somerset by the State of Maryland in 1906 has been periodically revised but it is still in effect. It allocates certain powers to a Town government which consists of a Mayor and five Council members. Open meetings, at which the Mayor and Council both hear advice and complaints from citizens and legislate, ordinarily take place on the first Monday of each month. In deliberations of the Council, each member has one vote. The Mayor votes only to resolve a tie. He may veto legislation passed by the Council, but his veto may be overridden by vote of four Council members. The Mayor acts as executive officer of the Town and carries out the mandates of the Council and the Charter. The Mayor and a Clerk-Treasurer, who is appointed by the Council, are both part-time salaried officials. They share the day-to-day administration of the Town and oversee the work of contractors and Town employees.

The following have served as mayors of Somerset:

Charles A. Crampton	1906-1910
Jesse E. Swigart	1910-1912
Warren W. Biggs	1912-1916
Charles S. Moore	1916-1919
J. William Stohlman	1919-1938
William B. Horne	1938-1940
Irving M. Day	1940-1954
William F. Betts	1954-1956
Frederick W. Turnbull	1956-1958
Warren J. Vinton	1958-1969
Jerald F. Goldberg	1969-1975
Walter Behr	1975-

The Town government assumes responsibility for a variety of community services such as street surfacing and maintenance; sidewalk construction and maintenance; storm drainage; street lighting; removal of garbage, trash, and garden refuse; regulation of traffic and parking; provision and administration of Town parks and recreation facilities; and issuance of permits for construction within the Town. Fire and police protection and public education are provided by Montgomery County; and sanitary sewer and water service, by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission on a fee-for-service basis.

Under the powers granted by the Charter, the Town levies a tax on real property within the Town based upon the State assessment. Tax bills are mailed to property owners by the Clerk-Treasurer annually during the month of July. A proportion of the State of Maryland individual income tax is remitted to the Town, as well as smaller amounts of other State taxes. Federal revenue sharing and fees received from users of the Town swimming pool are additional sources of revenue.

A variety of recreational facilities enhance the quality of life in Somerset. Cumberland Park, a level tract of 1.6 acres, is located at Wisconsin and Cumberland Avenues and is maintained as a playground area. The Park and the Town-maintained basketball court are open for use by the public as well as by Somerset residents. The "Red House" on the same property is leased by the Town for a nominal fee to the American Foundation for Autistic Children for use as a training center. Tennis courts, adjacent to Cumberland Park, are maintained for the use of Town residents and their guests. Vinton Park is a rugged, wooded tract which lies behind Dorset Avenue and Warwick Place. A rocky stream, Little Falls Branch, runs the length of the Park. The Park is named for Warren Jay Vinton, who was Mayor of the Town from 1958 to 1969. Somerset swimming pool, a large municipal pool which was built in 1971 for the use of Town residents and their guests, is located on three acres at the south end of that park.

Between 1946 and 1956 the Town of Somerset tripled in size. The difference between the old and new sections of the Town is not as striking as is their similarity. Styles of architecture have changed, but the character of the people who inhabit Somerset has remained much the same. The scientist is still there, together with the lawyer and the diplomat. Government officials and successful men in many areas of contemporary life continue to find in the Town what the founders intended more than 80 years ago - a congenial atmosphere and an agreeable environment for family life.