

Cabin John History

Building a Community

The Early Years

As a recognized place, Cabin John emerged only in the 19th century but of course there were inhabitants long before then. When the first European explorers appeared in the early 17th century, the Native Americans living in the area were the Susquehannahs. Later the Piscataways, and still later, the Senecas occupied the land.



School on Macadam Road, Tract No. 2 circa 1912

<http://glenecho-cabinjohn.com/CJ-02.html>

By the middle of the 17th century, Maryland was becoming a settled colony, and Lord Baltimore, proprietor of the colony, was making land grants along the Potomac River. Several of these grants embraced what is now Cabin John. During the 18th century, farming predominated, particularly of tobacco. In the 19th century, the building of the C & O Canal in the 1820's and 1830's brought settlers to the Cabin John area, and the population further increased with the construction of the Washington Aqueduct in the 1850's and 1860's. Land ownership remained concentrated, however, and at the end of the century, three families owned virtually all the property in today's Cabin John.

Cabin John Takes Shape In 1912 the American Land Company, represented by J. S. Tomlinson, bought up a large tract of land in Cabin John, divided it into residential lots, and began a vigorous sales campaign of what it called Cabin John Park. Although many of the new owners built houses for summer occupancy only, the town's year-round population grew steadily and a sense of community began to appear. A significant event was the founding, in 1919, of the Cabin John Park Citizens Association which immediately began to work for improved amenities for the community-better mail delivery, better street lighting, and better telephone service. The 1920's and 1930's also saw many other community endeavors-the Cabin John Home Demonstration Club, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and, most visibly, the Cabin John Volunteer Fire Department.

How Cabin John Got Its Name There are several stories about the origin of the name "Cabin John." According to one of them, it was named for a hermit named John who had a cabin near the present Union Arch Bridge. Some versions say that the hermit was the husband of the "female stranger" whose tombstone is in Alexandria, Virginia. Edith M. Armstrong writes in her Cabin John history: "Another story makes the mysterious John a pirate who eluded his own crew and made his way up the Potomac to bury his treasure. This interpretation was also held in good faith by the American Land Co., which put in many deeds the intriguing provision that 'The Party of the first part reserves the right to one-half interest in any treasure or articles of special value which may have been hidden on said lot or parcel by John of the Cabin. However, in many old records, as far back as 1715, the creek is referred to as Captain John's Run or Branch. Thus it would seem that Cabin John is a corrupt spelling of Captain John.'" And who was "Captain John"? He could well have been Captain John Smith, founder of Jamestown and the first man to map the Potomac River near Cabin John. The following is a description of the Cabin John area as recorded by Captain Smith in 1608: "The river ... maketh his passage downe a low pleasant valley overshadowed in manie places with high rocky mountain from whence distill innumerable sweet and pleasant springs ... Having gone so high as we could with the bote, we met divers savages in canowes well loaden with flesh of beares, deere, and other beasts whereof we had part. Here we found mighty rocks growing in some places above the ground as high as the shrubby tree." <http://glenecho-cabinjohn.com> by Richard A. Cook