

A HISTORY OF SHARPSBURG, MARYLAND

Long ago, the land which is now Sharpsburg and the surrounding area was a vast forest known as Absalom's Forest, where lived an abundance of many kinds of animals. Delaware Indians and other Indian tribes hunted here, and fished in the Antietam Creek and Potomac River. They got their water from the Great Spring and other springs nearby. Many arrow heads, tomahawks, knives and flints were found in and around the town, as well as other evidence of their lives, such as pottery fragments, pipes and human skeletons.

Joseph Chapline laid out the town of Sharpsburg on July 9, 1763 on land called Joe's Lott, the part of his land where he had grown tobacco. He chose this site for the town because of the "Great Spring," and named it for Horatio Sharpe, the proprietary governor of Maryland at that time. The first 7 lots, most likely sold in 1763, were recorded on January 24, 1764, making Sharpsburg the oldest town in Washington County.

The lots for Elizabethtown (name later changed to Hagerstown) were not recorded until 1768, although Jonathan Hager obtained the land in 1762. The first settlers in and around Sharpsburg were an industrious and thrifty people, mostly of German and English descent.

Construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal began in Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, on July 4, 1828. The canal reached Sharpsburg around 1836, and Sharpsburg quickly became a "canal town." According to Jerome Mose, who had worked on his father's boat from the time he was a young boy, "The biggest part of the boatmen was from Sharpsburg." When Jerome was ten years old he was driving the mules, and by age 12 he was steering the boat. Whole families lived and worked on these canal boats from the end of March to the end of November or the first week in December, when ice started to form and the canal was no longer passable. It was hard work and a hard life for very little money. In the early summer of 1889 a flood destroyed the canal and it had to be rebuilt. In 1924 another flood seriously damaged the canal and it was abandoned. By then the railroad had taken over a lot of the canal's business.

On September 17, 1862, the Battle of Antietam took place, and tragically disrupted people's lives. Many would never recover financially from this terrible assault. When the people knew that war was imminent, most of them evacuated the town the day before the battle. About one third went to Boonsboro and Hagerstown; 200 hid in the Kretzer's cellar; another third headed for the Killiansburg Cave out along the Potomac River and the C&O Canal; still others fled to the Antietam Furnace area and down toward Dargan.

Soldiers on both the Confederate and Union sides confiscated horses, food, clothing and anything else they could use from the farmers. They killed chickens and cows to augment their meager rations, and tore down farm fences to use for fuel. A few of the houses were used as headquarters for officers on both sides. Most of the other houses and buildings were needed to serve as hospitals. Bandages were sorely needed as well, and when the women returned to their homes after the battle, they gathered what supplies were left (including bed sheets to use for bandages) and went to the makeshift hospitals to offer their services. The men first worked on burying the dead. Once this was accomplished they began cleaning up and repairing the damage from the battle. The residents of Sharpsburg never let their sentiments affect the treatment of the dead and wounded. The Union and Confederate troops received equal treatment and accommodations.

As the 1700's drew to a close and the 1800's opened, the town began to provide business and services to match the increasing number of residents and the many travelers who came here on their way west. Stores, taverns and inns were springing up. Many new homes were being built, some of wood and some of stone.

Today, the area looks very much as it did in the 1800's. The town is still surrounded by farms and open space, and houses that were here during the Battle of Antietam are still standing, carefully renovated and preserved by history-minded owners. However, there are far fewer businesses now than there were in the past. Until about the middle of this century, there were many shops in town, but gradually most of them have closed and few others have opened to replace them.

Jan Wetterer, Sharpsburg, Maryland
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Sources:

"Reminiscences of Sharpsburg" ~ John Philemon Smith; "Drums Along the Antietam" ~ Rev. John Schildt
"The History of Sharpsburg, Maryland" ~ Lee & Barbara Barron; Historian John Frye