



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Second Interview with Howard Truslow Beach*

Date of Interview: *February 21, 2006*

Location of Interview: *Alexandria, VA, in the home of Mr. Beach*

Interviewer: *Susan Callegari*

Transcriber: *Susan Callegari*

Abstract: This is the second interview with Mr. Howard Truslow Beach. Mr. Beach was born in 1920 and has lived in Alexandria for 86 years. The interview continues the discussion of Mr. Beach's memories of working at Potomac Yard Railroad. Topics discussed include social life and minorities at the Yard, railway terminology, and changes to the Yard over time.

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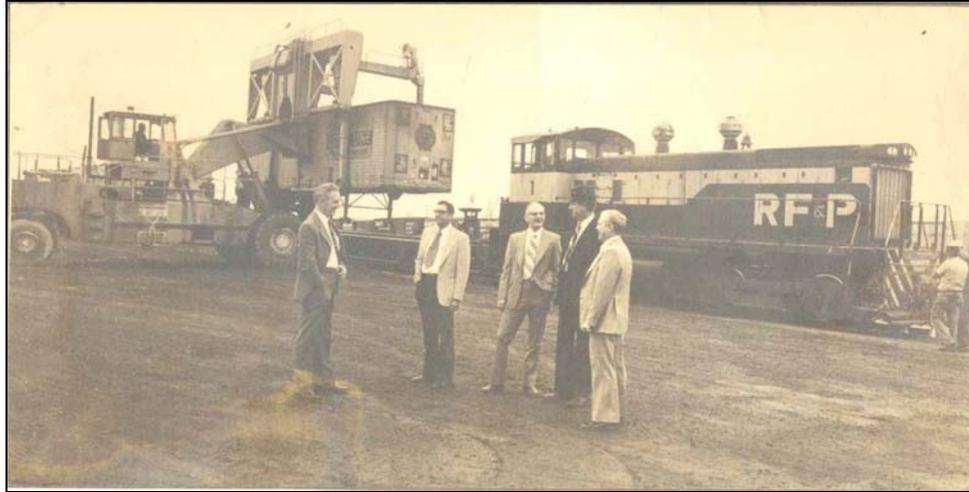
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*At Potomac Yard, date unknown
(courtesy of Howard Beach)*

SOCIAL LIFE AT POTOMAC YARD

Susan Callegari:	Today is February 21, 2006. This is the second interview with Mr. Howard Truslow Beach of Alexandria, Virginia.
SC:	Mr. Beach, were the railroad workers in your group at Potomac Yard a close-knit group, and if so, how?
Howard Beach:	Yes, my group was very close-knit.
SC:	Was there much socializing with fellow workers and their families after hours or on holidays?
Howard Beach:	I myself didn't do too much socializing except with two of my close buddies on a relief day... off day. Three of us would always go fishing. As far as the rest of the organization, we had about a dozen women clerks who, like any organization, paired off. They would go to lunch together and things like that. But other than that, I didn't do much fraternizing except with my two buddies to go fishing, so I can't answer for the rest of the Yard.
SC:	Did you know if there were get-togethers—dances or picnics—that were sponsored by Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	No, I don't ever recall of any parties or dances that were sponsored by Potomac Yard—but company picnics, yes. Company picnics

	were usually held in Richmond [VA] at one of the amusement grounds, and everyone from Potomac Yard was invited, as well as RF&P employees from Fredericksburg, Quantico, and on down into Richmond. So it was a combined party of RF&P employees and Potomac Yard employees. The RF&P furnished the transportation—they furnished a special train—they took all the Potomac Yard people up at this end down by train and returned them by train, fed ‘em lunch, and paid all of the expenses to the park. It was a family affair.
SC:	Were there any restaurants and bars in the vicinity of the Yard that people went to?
Howard Beach:	Oh, yes, you didn’t have to look far to get a beer or a cocktail, or anything like that. It’s a lot of Potomac Yard people lived in Del Ray; that was their home, and they could walk to work. I would think that a great number of ‘em were practically neighbors.
SC:	Do you remember the names of any of those restaurants or bars in the vicinity?
Howard Beach:	No I don’t.
MINORITIES	
SC:	You just mentioned women who worked in your department. Were there many females who worked at the Yard during the time you were there? Did the number grow as you were there?
Howard Beach:	It remained fairly steady, mostly male employees, male clerks, and there were some women clerks. But during the war years—as the male clerks were going into the services—then there was a tremendous amount of women clerks.
SC:	Probably a majority, would you say?
Howard Beach:	I would say at times there would have been a majority, yes.
SC:	Do you remember if there were any women in higher positions [who] moved up higher in the ranks?
Howard Beach:	I don’t recall...
SC:	So then after the war... the men came and took the jobs?
Howard Beach:	If they wanted to. Any male employee that was inducted or enlisted in any of the services was guaranteed the job back when he returned. ‘Course there were some males that did not go into the services, and if they were hired for a job that one of the male employees had left by enlisting or being drafted, when the original

	jobholder came back, he was entitled to his own job back.
SC:	What about minorities? Was segregation evident in the Yard in the types of jobs available?
Howard Beach:	We had a mix of races in the Transportation Department which included clerical, train service, both brakemen and conductors, and in the locomotive engineers... sure, we had a mix of all of them. In fact, some of the African train service employees got so familiar, that when they would come in my office they'd call me brother Beach, "How're you doin', bra? How you doin' brother Beach?" And as far as I know and can recall, I don't remember any oddball feelings between the two, white or black, they all worked together, they all understood that they were their brothers' keeper, because they were working a job where you had to be on your toes, and your mind had to be working at all times, and...
SC:	So you don't recall...
Howard Beach:	I don't recall of any instance of any rivalry between the two, because the work was the same whether you were white or black, and depending on how well you did it, if you started off as a train service employee, and you wanted to be promoted to a yard conductor, then you showed your ability to be a yard conductor by how you performed your work as a trainman.
SC:	So there was no competition for [positions]?
Howard Beach:	No competition whatsoever, not that I can recall, in all the years I was there.
SC:	Were there blacks who were promoted to high positions? What was the highest position you can remember?
Howard Beach:	As far as the clerical section of the Transportation Department... I don't recall of any blacks going higher than the highest clerical position, and when I speak of the highest I'm talking about the highest <i>paid</i> clerical position, because the rate of salary varied with each clerical position, and the higher you went, or the more responsibility you undertook as part of your clerical assignment, you were compensated with a higher salary...
SC:	Was the amount of salary affected by performance at all?
Howard Beach:	Well, yes, see, we worked around the clock twenty-four hours a day, three eight-hour shifts, and the same job on each shift was paid the same money. If you were a crew clerk, regardless whether you worked 8-4, 4-12 or 12-8, the job itself paid the same. And it was the same thing with other clerical positions...key punch

	operators, the same thing, interchange clerks, same thing.
SC:	Did blacks ever become non-union employees at the level where they received company benefits, as opposed to union benefits?
Howard Beach:	I really don't know... I couldn't answer that question. All I can tell you is that they had every opportunity.
SC:	How about segregation during lunch-hour, bathroom facilities?
Howard Beach:	No, no segregation.
RAILWAY TERMINOLOGY	
SC:	We're interested in Railway terminology and the layout of Potomac Yard ...if you could show me on this map, while we're talking about these, where each section of the Yard was and what happened, where?
Howard Beach:	This map must be real, real old. For instance, Washington and Virginia railway car barns... that must have been back in the 1900s. And when I worked at Potomac Yards the passenger tracks were adjacent to number 1 highway and did not come through the Yard. So... this is correct, Southbound classification Yard, Round House, that's okay, machine shop, inspection pits—that's where the old coal tipple used to be, but it's not shown on this map...
SC:	Okay, would you explain "piggybacking"?
Howard Beach:	When piggybacking became part of the railroad, a facility was built just north of the traffic bridge over the Yard. It would be on the south end of Potomac Yard. And the various hauling companies would bring loaded trailers by highway into the piggyback facility and a giant crane would pick up the trailer and place it on an empty piggyback flat car, tie it down—usually it would be two trailers to a car—and when everything was in and loaded, then the yard engine would go down and bring them up and put them into whatever track designation where they were going. And the same thing happened on in-bound piggyback trains that already had the trailers loaded, and they came in and we would cut 'em out and take them down to the piggyback. And the piggyback crane would unload them from the car, and they were moved the rest of the way by highway.
SC:	And the piggy-packer?
Howard Beach:	The piggy-packer is the crane that picks up the trailer and places it on the flatcar, [where] the mechanical people tie it down, onto the fifth wheel. If a shipper in Jacksonville, Florida has a load the he wants to go to Baltimore, they load it down in Jacksonville, and

	bring it up by rail through the piggyback facility. The piggy-packer would then lift it off the flat car, put it on the ground, the truck driver will hook it up to his tractor and go to Baltimore by road. At the ports, they have huge, overhanging cranes—not like this—that go under the loaded trailer, and it’s lifted right off the flat car and put right on the boat.
SC:	What happened to the merchandise that was unloaded at the Yard for recombination in other trains?
Howard Beach:	No, nothing was unloaded from the trailers at the Yard.
SC:	Then what were the ice houses were for...places for leaving livestock or vegetables temporarily, for transfer...
	No, no, the ice house you’re talking about is Neutral Ice Company.
	So there was no exchange of goods at the Yard?
Howard Beach:	No. On the map... the transfer shed—the 800-foot long shed where LCL [Less Than Carload] freight was transferred from car to car—is visible just beyond the classification yard, right there. Now, when I worked at Potomac Yard, there was no LCL transfers, but as I understand the history of Potomac Yard, the letters LCL mean “Less Than Carload.” And if you could visualize Partial Post, UPS trucks running around here, they’re loaded with small packages... these cars containing LCL freight, contain smaller packages that was less than a carload and they were brought in to Potomac Yard, placed at the transfer shed, and then the people who handled them would transfer them depending on their destination. But that was time consuming.
SC:	And after you were there?
Howard Beach:	After I was there, LCL freight, if we got any—and we got quite a bit, the way bill would have been marked “LCL merchandise”—it would go right straight on through... But it’s all been modernized now.
SC:	Okay, what about a hump?
Howard Beach:	A hump is a build-up hump, like... you would build a ramp, say for instance you had an unmovable object that was 15, 20, 35 feet high, that you wanted to get by, but you couldn’t move it—it was too expensive to move it—so on both sides of it you built a ramp going up to it and then you built a ramp going down from it. If you can visualize, that’s what a hump is, a short hill. See the south-bound receiving Yard [on the map]? When the trains from Conrail, or the Pennsylvania Railroad—it’s changed names three or four times,

	<p>you know—and the B&O Railroad—would bring their trains into Potomac Yard into the south-bound receiving yard...while they were in the receiving yard, the mechanical department would inspect them, car for car, and tag any bad orders that they saw in the mechanical part of the car itself, which would be from the outside of the floor including the wheels and axles and stuff. Once that inspection was complete, and while they were doing that, the classification clerk, in this building here, would be working with the way bills.</p>
SC:	<p>That's in the Potomac Yard office—where the classification clerk was?</p>
Howard Beach:	<p>Yes. And he would be preparing a classification guide for each car according to the way the way bill is routed, and what track would be assigned to that particular destination. And when both jobs were complete, the hump conductor, or the hump yard-master, would notify the yard locomotive that was being used as a hump-engine—he'd give him something like, "Okay, Joe, number two is ready, you can go on down and get behind number two, and watch for the green", which was a signal that he could start shoving. And then, when everything was in place, and the classification guide was in the office of the hump conductor, they would start shoving this entire train off of number two track. And they had what they call a car-cutter, who would uncouple the cars; he has the classification guide, which would say "ABCT 1230 track 17"; the next one behind might say the same thing or might say "track 20," but that tells him where to cut the cars loose. While they're on the upgrade, up the hump, he can then pull the cut lever; but once they get to the top and get over the top of the hump, you can't cut 'em loose, so this one particular employee, who is the car-cutter, would walk along the upside of the hump and at the right moment, just before it went over the crest, he would pull the cut lever and cut that car loose. Or if it was three or four cars destined together, for the same track, then he would cut the third one loose, so all three of them would run over together without being uncoupled.</p> <p>So what you're saying is that... the trains [are sent] to different destinations... not necessarily straight down one line—one car would go here, one there, and one there...</p> <p>Right...whatever destination in whatever track that the classification clerk has already gone through the bills, worked them up, got a classification guide, and sent 'em up to the hump.</p>
SC:	<p>And the northbound receiving yard, was there a hump?</p>

Howard Beach:	Yes... east and a little south of the southbound one. And they used the same procedure, only it handled incoming traffic from the south going north, where the southbound handled incoming traffic from the north going south. And that's why Potomac Yard was called "The Gateway to the South!"
SC:	Of course, right! Now, what was a roundhouse?
Howard Beach:	That's where they brought the locomotives from the inbound trains. After they disconnected from their trains, they would come up, go over the hump, and down a special track for 'em, down into the northbound class yard, and then reverse and come back to the roundhouse [to go in the opposite direction].
SC:	What is a coal tipple?
Howard Beach:	A coal tipple used to be right in this area here, where you see inspection pits and ash pits; that's where the coal tipple used to be. And a coal tipple was a great big, high building...it wasn't big as far as being wide, it was mostly narrow, and mostly high, and when a steam engine needed fuel, one of the employees at the round house would run the locomotive up to the coal tipple which also, underneath of it, contained an ash pit where they could dump the ashes from the previously burned coal, and—you know what a locomotive coal car looks like, the car behind is the coal car—they would maneuver the locomotive under the coal tipple to the coal car, and then they would release coal from the coal tipple into the locomotive's coal car.
SC:	And it would open up and drop the ashes into the bottom....
Howard Beach:	It was an ash pit, 'bout half-way filled with water, and I can vouch for that because before I knew what an ash pit was, I thought was ground. And I stepped into an ash pit—this when I was working as a number clerk—and from then on I knew what an ash pit was.
SC:	How far down did you step into it?
Howard Beach:	Oh... down to my waist.
SC:	That's a long way!
Howard Beach:	Not too much! [laughter] It was filled with water and floating ash, and stuff like that. I climbed out—but I wouldn't tell anybody what happened! So that's what a coal tipple was. Now, in one of the magazines I gave you, I think there was a picture of them blasting the coal tipple—they had to blast it like a building to tear it down. They weren't needed any more; we weren't running any steam

	locomotives.
SC:	Ya. Can you tell me about the stock pens?
Howard Beach:	We used to great carloads of stock. The law says that livestock has to be fed and rested at least every twelve hours. So whenever we got a load of livestock, whether it be cattle, hogs, what have you, and depending on the destination, if we couldn't get it in and out of Potomac Yard in time for it to make its destination before the hour law caught up with us, we would take them down to the stock pen, we would unload them, feed them and rest them, reload them and ship them to their next destination. But that also became obsolete. People weren't shipping livestock cattle cars any more, or pigs or hogs.
SC:	Do you remember when the stock pens became obsolete?
Howard Beach:	No, I don't. I know that they were discontinued while I was working at Potomac Yard, but I don't remember the year...
SC:	So when you were there after [19]41, this is the only good that you knew to be taken out of the cars and put back in?
Howard Beach:	Yes.
SC:	Can you tell me more about what happened in the classification yard?
Howard Beach:	<p>When I first went to work at Potomac Yard we had what you call hump-riders. And depending on the amount of traffic available, we'd have as many as fifteen to twenty, twenty-five train-service employees who would board the cars as they were cut off at the hump, ride 'em down to the classification yard, and control them... you've seen a boxcar where the wheel is at one end of the car? And the brakemen have the big break clubs, and they would wind them up to control the speed of the car as they left the hump? When it got to the classification yard that's where it stayed until that particular track was due to be part of a train. And then here again the mechanical department with their car inspectors would inspect the cars and the yard crew would take care of re-coupling any of them that needed re-coupling.</p> <p>But during Dave Hastings' tenure as superintendent—I'm pretty sure it was Dave Hastings—car retarders were installed on the southbound hump. And there was... I think it was two towers on the southbound, and car retarders were put into service on the south bound, and car retarder operators in their towers, also in the class yard, could control the cars—there were no more hump riders.</p>

	<p>What a car retarder is, and I'm no expert on this, but the car retarders are placed into a pit dug between the rails, and they're about... I don't know... thirty, forty, forty-five feet long, and they're operated by compressed air, and the car retarder operator operates the car retarder, and when the cars go in to the retarder, and he uses the handle for compressed air, almost the same thing happens as happens with your car brakes, these shoes close in on the wheels of the car—on the flange of the car—and either brings it to complete stop or slows it just enough to keep it rolling through.</p>
SC:	<p>And the retarder operator towers?</p>
Howard Beach:	<p>That's where the car operator was.</p>
SC:	<p>What other kind of freight came through Potomac Yard beside livestock?</p>
Howard Beach:	<p>I wouldn't even attempt that! Just imagine, everything you pick up and use...came through Potomac Yard.</p>
<p>CHANGES AT THE YARD</p>	
SC:	<p>Can you describe the changes that took place in the Yard over time? Something built?</p>
Howard Beach:	<p>Yes, when I first went to Potomac Yard they only had one office building, a large brick building with two floors. Later on, particularly when the electronic age was beginning to arise, they built a new building right in this area right here, right next to the round house. And...when they finished building it, the old building was for a while... I believe it was just used as a storehouse, and all the clerical force moved down to the new building. Also in this section here, which is not shown on the map at all, was the bunk house. The bunk house was a huge building</p>
SC:	<p>Now that's east of the ash pits and the machine shop?</p>
Howard Beach:	<p>Yes.</p>
SC:	<p>[The tape ran out here and we ended the interview.]</p>