

# **The Impact of the American Adventures Historic Theme Park on the Residents of Pocahontas.**

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Operation Bootstrap is an economic revitalization plan for the City of Petersburg that calls for a complex of historic theme parks called *American Adventures*. It will cover most of the area known as Pocahontas Island. Residents have expressed concern about the impact that the parks will have on their lives. The purpose of this report is to address those concerns.

## **Pocahontas Island History**

Around 1749, Richard Witton laid out lots on the north side of the Appomattox River. Residents referred to the area as Wittontown. It was incorporated as the City of Pocahontas in 1752. The name change was almost surely the result of the influence of John Bolling. He owned most of the property that is now Roper Lumber and he was very proud of being descended from the famous Native American princess.

In 1757 Petersburg built the first of many bridges that linked the two sides of the river. It was constructed at Peter's Point, the most narrow point of the river. Pocahontas was incorporated into the City of Petersburg in 1784.

The Appomattox River continually silted up. In the 1870's the City of Petersburg asked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the harbor. In its report, the Corp concluded that it would be impossible to keep the harbor clear of silt and proposed digging a diversion channel to carry the river around the north side of Pocahontas. The City of Petersburg purchased the necessary land and sold it to the government. The small bridge that connected Petersburg and Pocahontas was replaced with a rock dam. (This area has since been greatly enlarged by dumping the spoils from later dredging on both sides of the dam.) A new, much larger and longer bridge was constructed between downtown Petersburg and what is now Colonial Heights.

## **What's in a name?**

The diversion channel resulted in an island, which it bounds on the north. The harbor is its southern boundary. This island runs roughly two and half miles from the Martin Luther King Bridge to the Temple Avenue Bridge. It appears under the name "Halls Island" on deeds from the United States government, on tax maps, on tax records, on National Geodetic Survey maps and the various dredging plans developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It is a very clearly defined piece of land.

Residents have long referred to area as "Pocahontas Island." The online encyclopedia Wikipedia identifies "Pocahontas Island" as a peninsula on the north side of the Appomattox River within the limits of what is now Petersburg, Virginia. It is not a peninsula, but rather the west end of Halls Island. Prior to completion of the diversion channel, the area was simply referred to as Pocahontas. The term "island" could have only come into use after the diversion channel was completed in 1909. The term "Pocahontas Island" is a slang name used by locals. It is not a legally recognized entity. Most people think of it as being bounded on the north and west by the diversion channel and on the south by the former harbor, but there is no clearly identified eastern edge. The name is generally applied to the land west of the Interstate-95 bridge, but the term is also used to describe the location of the waste treatment plant on east side of the bridge.

The term "Pocahontas Island" refers to a physical area, not a residential one. The residential area is essentially that laid out by Richard Witton. The west side of the island is dominated by a large tract of land that once served as an Atlantic Coast Line freight yard. The former Roper Lumber property covers the south side of the island. The large wooded area on the north side is 300 feet wide and a half mile long. Parts of it are owned by the City of Petersburg. The land closest to the diversion channel is owned by the U.S. government.

The residential area covers no more than 30% of the island depending on where you place the eastern border. Operation Bootstrap refers to the residential area as "Pocahontas Village" simply to distinguish it from the other parts of the so-called island.

## **Economic Situation**

The City of Petersburg is in very precarious economic situation. It is barely breaking even and often has to resort to expensive short term borrowing in order to meet payroll. It has no cash reserves. It has lost a great many of its retailers as demonstrated by the many empty buildings on Sycamore Street. It has lost almost all of its industries. Property values have declined and unemployment is at an all time high. City employees have not received a raise in five years. Largely due to lack of money to spend on schools, the test scores for city students are the second lowest in the state. The economy is in desperate straits and every year it gets worse. The city

must turn this situation around or it will go bankrupt.

## **Future Development**

City leaders have long recognized that the city has two important assets: a great location and a remarkable history. They have long wanted to develop these assets as a means of generating income for the city, its businesses and its residents.

For the past quarter century, the city has been systematically acquiring land around the former harbor to use for development that will revitalize the city's economy. It now owns 149 acres. This includes all of the land on all four sides of Pocahontas Village and land along River Street. The city has spent a lot of time and money doing this, so the development will surely take place. The only questions are when, who will do it and the nature of the development.

The city has received a proposal from one developer who wants to turn the area into a music resort similar to that in Branson, Missouri. That will result in a great deal of very loud music. Another has proposed a "Mini-America" that wants to build miniatures of American cities and landmarks. It is not inconceivable that a developer will want to use the land for a thrill-ride amusement park, similar to King's Dominion and fill it with roller coasters.

On the other hand, Operation Bootstrap calls for the American Adventures theme parks and they will utilize a living history presentation that will be far less obtrusive to residents. The plan calls for them to be owned, built and managed by the city. The city council will be required to approve all plans. This provides local residents with the opportunity to express their comment and criticisms, thus exercising far more control over development than if it were privately developed. As long as development will take place, "American Adventures" offers the most advantages and least number of disadvantages to Pocahontas residents.

The American Adventures theme parks will have an impact on Pocahontas residents. The entire purpose of Operation Bootstrap is to help the city and its residents. It certainly does not want to cause any harm. Its goals include minimizing the impact on residents and to provide them with benefits they do not now have.

## **Development Concept**

A theme park is any park that uses buildings, landscaping and other resources to convey a theme. Although the terms are often interchanged, a theme park is different from an amusement park, which is characterized by thrill rides. Kings Dominion, with its 13 roller coasters, is an amusement park. Colonial Williamsburg and Jamestown Festival Park are classic examples of historic amusement parks. Everything that happened in the United States during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> century also happened in Petersburg. Our city's history is a microcosm of our nation's history. is represented happened. American Adventures will utilize "living history" where costumed interpreters play the role of those of yesterday.

## **The Concerns**

### ***1. The parks will put us in a cage.***

The fact is that the City of Petersburg now owns 149 acres of land that completely surrounds the residential area. Any development of this property will probably utilize all of this land. The cage comparison is not applicable because residents are free to come and go any time they want. In fact, the parks make that easier by the construction of a new access road.

### ***1. The parks wants to use us as an exhibit.***

*American Adventures* will contain a number of historic parks. One of them was conceived to commemorate the city's remarkable Free Black heritage. In order to distinguish this living history theme from the residential area, it was named *Freedom Village* to distinguish it from the residential area which will continue to be called Pocahontas.

The report, Introduction to *Operation Bootstrap* notes the important of involving Pocahontas residents and local Afro-American historians in the development of this park. This report can be downloaded from [www.Petersburg-Parks.com](http://www.Petersburg-Parks.com)

*Freedom Village* is totally separate and apart from the residential area. In fact, the plan stresses the importance of protecting the privacy and way of life of residents and suggests a number of ways that this can be accomplished. In short, everything is designed to protect Pocahontas residents from unwanted intrusions. This is the exact opposite of wanting to use them as part of the exhibits.

## **2. *There will be a lot of noise.***

A major purpose of the *American Adventures* theme parks is to provide visitors will an escape from the noise, traffic, advertising and fast-pace that characterizes modern society. The parks will be magnificently landscaped and everything in them is designed to provide a quiet, peaceful retreat. Noise is defined as loud and obnoxious sound. It is the very last thing that the parks want.

It is highly doubtful that there will be any problems with noise. Sounds should not be objectionable and they will be of such low volume that residents will probably not be able to hear them from inside their house. But if this not be the case, then the Petersburg Parks should provide soundproofing at no cost to the property owner.

## **3. *I'm concerned about access.***

This is a valid concern. The main entrance into the theme parks will be the Pocahontas off ramp of the Martin Luther King Bridge as the main parking lot will be the former Atlantic Coast Line lot on the west side of the island. On busy summer weekends, the ramp may be so clogged up with traffic it will make access difficult.

*Operation Bootstrap* foresaw this and the impact that it would have on residents. It recommended a new access road that is shown on the site plan. Crater Road presently ends at Bollingbrook Street. It would be extended to the sewage treatment plant. This road should be installed in any event, because large sanitation trucks now drive through the residential area and are a threat to small children that may be playing in the street. The new road eliminates that problem

Witton or Rolfe Street will be extended to connect to the new access road. This will provide Pocahontas residents with quicker and easier access to Crater Road, downtown and Interstate 95. This will not be a public street, but rather it will be owned by the Petersburg Parks. Use of it will be limited to sanitation trucks, park employees and Pocahontas residents. This will result in improved access.

This road will have controlled access. It can only be by Pocahontas residents, the theme parks and the waste treatment plant.

## **4. *The parks will tear out the playground.***

Yes, and it will be replaced with a huge new playground that can be freely used by residents.

## **5. *The parks will take our land, bit by bit.***

Absolutely not true. The development plan utilizes only the 149 acres now owned by the city and does not require one inch of privately owned land. A city can take land by public domain only if it is for the public use and then it has to pay fair compensation to the owner. The theme parks are planned as a profit making operation and they will charge admission. Thus they do not meet the public use requirement, so the city is prohibited by law from using public domain to acquire land. If the parks should ever want to acquire a parcel, then it would have to negotiate a price with the owner. Of course, the owner can always refuse to sell. The important thing is that no owner can ever be forced to sell.

The *Introduction to Operation Bootstrap* report recognized that no matter what the parks may do that some residents may not be happy. It recommended that if any resident wanted to leave, then the parks should buy their property from them at a price equal to twice of its tax assessed value.

It is important to realize that the parks do not require one inch of this land and that this policy was recommended in recognition of meeting moral responsibilities. Under the American legal system, a person who suffers damages can bring a law suit to recover the loss. This program recognizes that some people may maintain that *they might be damaged*, so it precludes the need for lawsuits. The amount to be paid is twice the just compensation required by law. What could be more fair than that?.

Scattered lots will be of no use to the theme parks, but the purchased land will not represent a financial loss. The parks will eventually employ over 500 people and the parks can lease the houses to employees.

## **6. *Our real estate taxes will increase.***

If the parks are as successful as anticipated, then park employees will certainly want to live close to work. This will result in a great demand for housing. Value is largely determined by supply and demand. Real estate assessments are based on prices and Pocahontas prices are now very low because there is little demand for the land. That will change. Values will soar and it is not inconceivable that they may increase as much as 500% in five years. This is good for the property owner, because if the owner wants to sell the property, he or she will make a huge profit that can be used buy a much larger and better home. Of course, the property owner can also benefit from the demand by renting the house to park employees, but these actions are solely at the

option of the property owner. He or she remains in control of their property.

There will be residents who will want to remain on the island and they should not be penalized because of the success of the parks.. The City of Petersburg should set up a system whereby current residents are “grand-fathered” in regard to property taxes. In short, their taxes will not be increased because of the parks. However, once they sell the house, the new owner will have to pay the taxes based on the new assessed value.

### **Benefits**

The parks are not an end in themselves, but rather the means to an end. The primary goal is attract a great many visitors into the city so that they can spend money. This will help to restore the prosperity of the retail community and the parks can do much to encourage new businesses and new industries. The parks will require over 500 employees and the expanding economy will require far more. Petersburg will once again be seen as a dynamic city that offers opportunities and this will attract even more businesses. Property value and retail sales increase plus the 5% admissions tax becomes quite important. The city receives much greater tax revenues. Everyone benefits. These subjects are discussed in the report, “Fostering Economic Revitalization” that may be downloaded from [www.Petersburg-Parks.com](http://www.Petersburg-Parks.com)

The financial projections show that the theme parks will provide the City of Petersburg with substantially higher revenues. As the city is now breaking even financially, once it sets aside the long needed cash reserve, the additional money is “discretionary income” that can be used to improve the infrastructure and schools. It is not unreasonable to assume that taxes could be lowered.

Pocahontas residents should be given permanent passes to the parks at no charge. This provides parents and grandparent with a wonderful place to take children. Lake Petersburg will be well stocked with fish and many may enjoy that activity. They will have free admission to all entertainment events.

If they are so inclined then Pocahontas residents will greatly profit from the properties. There is a great deal to gain and nothing to lose.