

The remnants of the 'wealthiest secondary school in America'

Memorial Hall

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PORT DEPOSIT — As time passes, the story of what was originally known as the Jacob Tome Institute of Port Deposit, which grew to add the now defunct Tome School for Boys and later became The Tome School in North East, has become cloudy and overlapped.

But 112 years ago this week, when The New York Times sent a special correspondent to Port Deposit to cover the dedication exercises for the Tome School for Boys campus on the bluff above Port Deposit, the legacy and history of the school was distinct and celebrated. The correspondent for Times wrote in an article of May 16, 1903, that the school was, at the time, “The wealthiest secondary school in America.”

Times have certainly changed for the once vaunted campus. The Jacob Tome Institute of Port Deposit was chartered in 1889 by the State of Maryland with Jacob Tome as the founder and funder behind the school. A construction period followed and the school was formally opened on South Main Street in Port Deposit in September 1894. Expecting about 250 students, the school welcomed over 400 that first day, despite the uppermost floor of the building still being under construction.

Tome would not live to see the first class graduate at “Dear Old JTI” as it came to be called, for he died in March 1898 from pneumonia. He did, however, leave the school an endowment valued at an estimated \$3 million, so that it would continue to serve the children of Port Deposit in perpetuity.

Over time, the charter was changed — including during Tome’s lifetime — and it came to serve Cecil County’s students. The school facilities themselves were also moved to their current location in North East in the 1970s.

However, the massive endowment — worth \$85.7 million today — would be used to found a college preparatory school for boys and a boarding school campus on 200 acres on a bluff above Port Deposit. The JTI Board of Trustees, under direction of Tome’s widow, Evalyn Nesbitt Tome, hired James Cameron Mackenzie, one of the most important late 19th century secondary school educators, to guide the new direction for the school.

Mackenzie brought in the equally esteemed Robert Peabody, of the prominent Boston architectural firm of Peabody & Stearns, to oversee design of the school,

while Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park in New York, would serve as the consultant for landscape design. A design competition was immediately held in 1900 under Peabody's watchful eye and the firm of Boring and Tilton was selected, specifically William Boring and Edward L. Tilton, who had recently designed and completed the main buildings of the Ellis Island Immigrant Station in New York.

Over the next five years, buildings of dressed Port Deposit granite — quarried locally — were erected on the bluff of what had once been the Abrahams and Gottlieb Gehrung farms. After nearly three years of construction, sufficient structures were complete for a dedication ceremony to be held in mid-May 1903. At that point, Memorial Hall, named in honor of the founder the late Jacob Tome, was complete and open to students. Also completed were the infirmary, power plant and five of the teacher's residences: Monroe House, Madison House, Jackson House, Van Buren House and the Headmaster's Residence. Yet to be completed was Harrison House, a later dining hall to the rear of Van Buren House, the football field, golf links, tennis courts, batting cages, trail, record rock and hillside terrace.

Be that as it may, when the last plantings were installed at the formal Italian Gardens in front of Memorial Hall by landscape architect Charles W. Leavitt, a media blitz went out proclaiming dedication ceremonies would take place not only on the bluff, but also for the pre-existing buildings on Main Street in Port Deposit. It was at that time that the first building, known simply and ignobly as "Building No. 1" was dedicated as Washington Hall. Across the street, where a new town school gymnasium was erected — currently serving as Port Deposit's Town Hall — the structure was named Adams Hall. On North Main Street, the circa 1834 old bank building, with wings added prior to 1900 and turned into an elementary school, was dedicated as Jefferson Hall. The rest of the buildings on the hill were each named after former American Presidents, save for Memorial Hall, of course, named in honor of the school's founder.

Today, Washington Hall is just an arch in a parking lot with the visage of Jacob Tome and his wife, Evalyn, on either side of the arch. Adams Hall is now the Town Hall for Port Deposit, after the structure was gifted to the town by the extinct Wiley Manufacturing Company in the early 1980s. Jefferson Hall is now known as Jefferson Hall Apartments, after it was brought back to existence from a disastrous fire in the early 1970s.

On the bluff above Port Deposit, where once trod great intellects and the young minds they would educate, such as members of the Mellon and Carnegie families, R.J. Reynolds Jr. and others of distinguished note, are once grand structures. Some are mere shells, all condemned due to demolition by neglect, arson, vandalism and the ravages of time — but all are the crumbling legacy of some of America's greatest architectural and educational lights of the turn of the century, who joined to bring to reality the "wealthiest secondary school in America."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CECIL COUNTY – Memorial Hall
Memorial Hall, shown here in a historical photo, was the centerpiece of the Tome School for Boys at Bainbridge. It was designed by the same architects as the Immigration Station at Ellis Island, N.Y.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BDC – Memorial Hall

Memorial Hall is seen on the left among the other buildings on the former Tome School for Boys property.



CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY CHERYL MATTIX – Memorial Hall
Damage from last year’s fire at Memorial Hall on the former Tome School for Boys property is still visible from the outside.



CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY CHERYL MATTIX – Memorial Hall

One side of what's left of a winding staircase inside the entrance to Memorial Hall at the Tome School site in Port Deposit is seen here.