

## OPINION

# World Focus: The rise and fall and rise again of Toano

By Frank Shatz  
Virginia Gazette

Oct 10, 2022 at 8:14 pm

According to the website of the Toano Historical Society, “The area formed by the crossroads of the old stage road between Williamsburg and New Kent (present-day Richmond Road) and Old Forge Road has a long history as a center of trade.”

Beginning as early as the 1760s, John Lewis operated an ordinary at the intersection of these roads. The ordinary, an inn where meals were served to wayfarers, was burned during the American Revolution in 1780, and the crossroads become known as Burnt Ordinary.

In 1881 the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway expanded and laid tracks through the center of Burnt Ordinary. The crew that had been working on the Union & Pacific Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains before coming to this area. They noticed that the land ran uphill from Windsor Shades to Burnt Ordinary.

In 1883, the village was renamed Toano, named for the Paiute Indian word meaning “high ground.”

The railroad brought new economic opportunities to the area. Toano became the largest shipping point for local crops, especially potatoes, between Newport News and Richmond, surpassing Williamsburg in truck farming, industry, education, banking, politics and mercantile business.

By the 1950s and 1960s Williamsburg had more modern grocery and clothing stores, shops on Duke of Gloucester Street and a new hospital. The locals started to go there. Alas, in 1966, Richmond Road (Route 60) was expanded to four lanes, and 14 of Toano’s historic buildings were demolished. It lost much of its visual and historic character over next several decades and became another small town in decline.



*Amidst of the revitalization of Toano, hohl restaurant opened in August in Toano. Courtesy of Jack Wray*



*Jack Wray. Courtesy of John Wray*

In 2012, Jack and Jeff Wray, who grew up in Toano, began acquiring a few of the blighted properties in the village center to keep them from being developed by someone not interested in Toano's history. The most important acquisitions were five Toano founder homes and two historic commercial buildings. These have become the center of the revitalization effort. In 2019 they demolished four blighted buildings, which became the new Village Green space where Toano Open Air Market takes place each Saturday morning from 9-1.

In 2018, Jack Wray and his wife, Rena, chartered the Toano Historical Society, an organization created to be an advocate for the un-incorporated town. The organization's board meets monthly and has nine talented members that work hard promoting the mission to inspire a sense of community spirit, promote interest in Toano's history and preserve its small-town character.

Two notable achievements have been the designation of the Toano Commercial Historic District in 2018-2019 and becoming a Virginia Main Street Affiliate member in 2020

Wray, a graduate of the University of Richmond, together with his brother, Jeff, owns and operates a development company. They developed properties in Charlottesville and currently are restoring properties they own in their hometown of Toano.

I asked Wray, how did he get involved in the effort to revitalize Toano?

"Having grown up here and witnessing its decline firsthand, I wanted to restore the town to its rightful place in Upper James City County. People love to reminisce about the past," he said. "They want their history and their historic buildings preserved. They also want authenticity where they live, work and raise their family.

"There is so much interesting history in Toano. Back in its heyday in the early 20th century after the C&O Railroad came through, it was not unusual to see 400 or 500 people in Toano on weekends. We had three hotels, a couple of taverns, a canning factory, two drugstores, two barrel factories, two banks, several general merchandise stores, doctor and dentist offices, a local newspaper and a high school. We even had a circus that came through town once a year."

The Wrays restored their grandparent's home, a 1920 landmark in the center of town. Along the success of the Toano Open Air Market, other progress is happening. In August a new café, "[hohl](#)" opened in the restored historic Travers House (built in 1910). It has quickly become a popular gathering spot. The restoration of the Farenthold House (a 1901 Victorian) started in June and it promises to be another handsome reminder of Toano's past.



*Farinholt House, 1901 Victorian currently under going restoration by Wray Bros. Courtesy of Jack Wray*

Other long-time Toano businesses and organizations continue to support the vitality of the town. Wray and the Toano Historical Society have researched other small town revitalization programs, teaming up with architect John Hopke to create a new concept for Toano Station. They hired Allison Platt, a renowned urban designer, to develop a master plan for the Village of Toano. In addition, Greg Payne with Economic Leadership is providing market assessment of Platt's master plan.

The revitalization of Toano is underway.

*Shatz is a Williamsburg resident. He is the author of "Reports from a Distant Place," the compilation of his selected columns. The book is available at the Bruton Parish Shop, and [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).*