The History of Sandston

The following text is adapted from the National Park Service/National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, prepared for the County of Henrico in September 2021 by Hanbury Preservation Consulting.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Prior to 1918, the area of the Fairfield-Sandston Historic District consisted of an open rural landscape about seven miles east-southeast of downtown Richmond. A half-mile to the east was the small crossroads community of Seven Pines at the intersection of Nine Mile Road and the Williamsburg Road (predecessor of U.S. Route 60), the main road leading down the James-York Peninsula. Running parallel to these two roads, the Richmond City and Seven Pines Railroad provided access to laborers from Richmond along an electric railroad that terminated at Seven Pines, the site of a major Civil War battlefield of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. The trolley line, chartered in 1888 and in operation the next year, extended to this rural location in order to transport visitors to the battlefield and to the National Cemetery, established on the battlefield in 1866. This extension of the streetcar system passed through the burgeoning suburb of Highland Springs, three miles to the northwest. In addition to this local rail service, the area benefited from close access to the Southern Railroad line, which ran between the port of Newport News at Hampton Roads and the national railroad hub at Richmond. The closest stop was the depot at Fair Oaks, less than a mile north of the present district.[1]

With a 570-acre tract available for purchase near multiple transportation corridors, the site of the present district proved ideal for establishing a munitions plant.[2] The site benefited from efficient access to a large urban labor force and transportation of raw materials and finished products. On the other hand, the location was not close to a densely populated area and thus avoided collateral damage in case of accidental explosion.

Seven Pines was one of three settings in central and eastern Virginia where the E. I. DuPont de Nemours Company established munitions plants just prior to and during World War I. The company's operation in Hopewell, initially established in 1912 to manufacture dynamite,

[1] G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co., Map showing the proposed Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia Railroad (New York: G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co., 1893); Carlton Norris McKenney, *Rails in Richmond* (Glendale, CA: Interurban Press, 1986), 107; U.S. Geological Survey, Richmond quadrangle, 15-minute topographic series (Washington, D.C.: USGS, 1894).

[2] Paul E. Nauman, "A History of the Origin and Growth of Sandston Virginia," Honors Theses, Paper 276, 1938. University of Richmond, UR Scholarship Repository. http://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses.

converted to guncotton or smokeless gunpowder production to supply the allied armies in 1914. Penniman arose from woods and fields along the York River over the course of a few months as an enormous facility employing 15,000 workers in the dangerous task of filling artillery shells with TNT.[3] Seven Pines attracted a labor force with a large proportion of women. The main operation at the plant was sewing silk bags and filling them with smokeless powder.

DuPont had played a crucial role in supplying munitions to the Allied Armies since the beginning of war. One British government official went so far as to credit the company for "saving the British Army." Responding to the surge of demand from Europe and Russia, DuPont required immense capital investment well beyond the capacity of a private firm in order to convert factories such as those at Hopewell or to build new plants. DuPont refused to assume an undue amount of investment risk in production capacity given that demand would surely plummet at the end of the war. At the insistence of its executives, Allied governments made 50 percent advance payments on powder and TNT at the marked up price of $1 per pound."[4]

This experience with large government contracts for munitions prepared DuPont for a second surge in munitions demand when the United States entered the conflict. In early October 1917, the federal government requested a proposal from DuPont in October 1917 to provide enough production capacity to supply a million pounds of gunpowder per day. The contract called for $90 million in construction costs for new plants and expansions/adaptations of the existing one, plus $180 million. The contracts covered the costs of additional plants near Nashville, Tennessee, (the vast Old Hickory Plant); at Penniman; in Racine, Wisconsin; in Tullytown, Pennsylvania; and at Seven Pines. [5]

In order to accommodate large influxes of laborers in former small towns or rural areas, the planning for each plant involved construction of company housing. To manage this part of the mobilization plan, Congress passed "An Act [To] Authorize The President To Provide Housing For War Needs." To implement this bold initiative of building whole villages and hundreds of houses within a few months, the Department of Labor organized the United States Housing Corporation (USHC).[6] At Seven Pines, as in other locations, the corporation was responsible for planning a whole community with street layout, houses, dormitories, cafeterias, a restaurant, a school, clubhouses, other support buildings, and transportation options.

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[3]. Mark St. John Erickson, "Penniman, the lost Williamsburg-area WWI boom town" *Daily Press,* June 16, 2018.

[4] William Dutton, *Du Pont: One Hundred and Forty Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 221, 226; Mark St. John Erickson, "Penniman, the lost Williamsburg-area WWI boom town," *Daily Press,* June 16, 2018.

[5] Dutton, *Du Pont,* 233, 247.

[6] Nauman, "A History of the Origin and Growth of Sandston Virginia," 3; United States Housing Corporation, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation,* Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), http://archive.org/details/cu31924061770651, pp. 342-344.

DuPont began construction of the bag-loading plant in the spring of 1918, with the intent of having it ready for production by September that year. The plant would require a labor force of approximately 3,000 women and 1,000 men. Richmond was the closest population center that could supply such a large labor force. Even though the Richmond & Seven Pines electric line appeared promising as a means for workers to commute, the USHC found it "inadequate." To expedite improvements, the corporation purchased the railway and contracted its operation to the Virginia Railway & Power Company. In addition, the corporation added a special commuter service to the plant along the Southern Railroad and built a spur for commuting workers and freight connecting the main track at Fair Oaks Station directly to the plant. The plan for the community called for a varied layout of streets extending between Fair Oaks and Seven Pines, and south beyond the Williamsburg Road. Despite improving commuter links from Richmond, multiple shifts and 24-hour production necessitated on-site worker housing. The plan envisioned accommodations for approximately 3,000 of the workers. Three-quarters of the work force was female and many of these were young, single women. Rather than occupying individual houses, most of the female employees would live in dormitories. The 500 single-family dwellings planned for the community would house "foremen, Government inspectors, and the higher class of skilled workers." [7]

Underscoring the importance of female workers at Seven Pines, the Commonwealth formed a quasi-military organization called the Women's Munitions Reserve. Virginia's First Lady, Marguerite Davis, served as president and volunteered at the factory, sewing silk powder bags. By August 1918, there were 500 women and girls in the Reserve. That month, the first workers began training and commuted to the plant by "automobile truck" from the corner of Third and Broad streets in downtown Richmond. Female workers in the reserve received two uniforms, one for required wear at the factory and another optional one for street dress, "a privilege which will be allowed all who have been called for active duty." Instead of the customary skirt, worn almost ubiquitously during the era, the female workers wore more functional long pants known as "trouserettes" or "womanalls."[8]

The USHC made a distinction between temporary housing, built for the high capacity needed during the war, and permanent housing. The latter was under consideration because the Ordnance Department intended to continue using Seven Pines as a permanent operation after the war. In fact, most of the house construction completed or underway before the war ended was temporary. A postwar report of its projects across the nation by the U.S. Housing Corporation

[7] USHC, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation*, Vol. II, 342-344.
[8] *Times-Dispatch* "Mrs. Davis Will Head Munition Reserve," 8/21/1918; Jennifer Davis McDaid, *Virginia Women and the First World War: Records and Resources at the Library of Virginia* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2002).

tallied the construction "undertaken" at Seven Pines, even if some of it was not completely finished by the end of the war:

> 375 bungalows and 24 supervisors' houses…10 large dormitories, housing 95 each, men's hotel with 60 rooms, large cafeteria, short-order restaurant, quartermaster's shop for general village repairs, and a retail commissary for general village use, 8 five car garages, 1 post office, 1 drug store, Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A. for recreation purposes, and an 8-room schoolhouse….[9]

Other temporary buildings included bunkhouses and a mess hall built for the construction workers building the plant and village. All but one of the non-residential buildings were later moved or demolished. The only survivor is a plant building that residents converted into a community center in the 1920s; it now serves as an American Legion post (21 J.B. Finley Road, 043-6238/043-6271-0002).[10]

Much of the current layout of the streets in the district dates from the initial work of the U.S. Housing Corporation. Around the framework of Williamsburg Road, Ordnance Road, and the railroad and spur, the planners built a street plan of short streets "because [long, straight streets] gained nothing in general directness of access from the site to the plant, and because, especially with the simple bungalows, the long, open vistas would be very monotonous." The site layout also involved the installation of a community-wide water and sewer system, with two large wells, since the flat, poorly drained land made individual wells and septic systems less effective. The planners were also careful to incorporate open spaces and to vary groupings of houses and dormitories.[11]

The houses built at Seven Pines during the war consisted of modest buildings made of precut lumber supplied by the Aladdin Company of Bay City, Michigan. Although the corporation made final revisions to house plans, the preliminary plans "were submitted by the DuPont Co."[12] It is clear from the USHC report and other sources that DuPont employed its own house designers and used proprietary plans for some of its projects. The company's vast scale of operations created a need to customize its worker housing options before the war, at new plants such as the one at Hopewell, for example. In two blog articles, kit house expert Rosemary Thornton identified several examples of DuPont designs at Sandston. These may include the Arlington (two-story, side-gabled with full-width, shed-roofed front porch); the Ketchum (one-and-a-half-story with two-bay shed dormer and full-width, shed-roofed front porch); and, most commonly, the Six Room Bungalow (one-story, side-gabled, with three rooms on the front and three main rooms plus bathroom on the rear surrounding a small central corridor, and a two-bay shed-roofed porch centered on the façade). Thornton supplies catalog-type pages with

[9] *Ibid.*, 343.
[10] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 22-23, 57-58.
[11] *Ibid.*, 343.
[12] USHC, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation,* Vol. II, 53.

photographs, floor plans and brief descriptions, although she does not reference their source.[13] The bungalow closely resembles the USHC plan for Standard Type H Six Room Bungalow, which included a similar arrangement of rooms but had a hipped roof and a one-bay porch on the front and could feature an alternate arrangement with the entry porch on one of the side elevations.[14] Thornton's discussion of another model in a separate blog article adds further evidence of house design by DuPont's own staff. The Haskell (two-story, two-bay, front-gabled) is a DuPont design that she identified in the Larchmont neighborhood of Norfolk. Several examples of this model had been floated by barge from Penniman after the DuPont company village was dismantled and sold off after World War I.[15] Architectural historians researching DuPont housing in Hopewell identified a possible association of the model's name with J. Amory Haskell, a DuPont executive active in the company from 1902 to 1923. They also cite a 1958 interview with Robert E. Pyle, a former DuPont employee who noted that his first work at DuPont was to prepare "drawings of houses" for the Hopewell facility.[16]

On August 8, 1918, DuPont requested that USHC provide "100 temporary ready-cut bungalows…for immediate use." The USHC issued a request for proposals for construction on August 23 and awarded the contract to Owen-Ames-Kimball, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, on September 11.[17] By the end of the war, the rapid construction methods had allowed the contractor to erect 230 houses.[18]

Specific information about the individuals employed at the DuPont plant and occupants of the government-built housing has not yet been found. Construction of the legal framework that permitted and justified Jim Crow segregation was well under way by World War I. The federal government's role in perpetuating segregation during the early 20th century was mixed, in large part due to two late 19th century U.S. Supreme Court decisions. In 1883, a U.S. Supreme Court decision concerning five consolidated cases, collectively known as the *Civil Rights Cases*, struck

[13] Rosemary Thornton, "One Word for Sandston-Oopsie," 2014. http://www.searshomes.org/index.php/2014/06/09/one- word-for-sandston-oopsie/; Thornton,. "Sandston, Virginia: Another DuPont Town." 2013. http://www.searshomes.org/index.php/2013/11/10/sandston-virginia-another-dupont-town/. One model in Sandston that Thornton identifies with DuPont, however, is more likely an Aladdin model, the Denver (later known as the Edison), which appears in an order for whole kits that DuPont order in 1914 from Aladdin for its village at Hopewell (Debra A. McClane and Kristin H. Kirchen, "Reconnaissance Architectural Survey of 'A Village,' Hopewell, Virginia" [Submitted to Virginia Department of Historic Resources and City of Hopewell by Iron Dog Preservation, LLC, 2019], 2.).

[14] USHC, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation*, Vol. II, 53.

[15] A Penniman Bungalow – In Larchmont!; "Virginia's Very Own Ghost Town: Penniman." 2012. https://searshomes.org/index.php/2012/01/31/virginias-very-own-ghost-town-penniman/; Thornton, "Virginia's Very Own Ghost Town: Penniman." 2012. https://searshomes.org/index.php/2012/01/31/virginias-very-own-ghost-town-penniman/.

[16] McClane and Kirchen, "Reconnaissance Architectural Survey of 'A Village'," 4.

[17] United States Housing Corporation, Vol. II, 341.

[18] Nauman, "A History of the Origin and Growth of Sandston Virginia," 6.

down parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that prohibited racial discrimination in public spaces.[19] In the *Civil Rights Cases*, the Supreme Court declared that the U.S. Congress could not pass or enforce laws meant to protect the civil rights of Black citizens. The Court further found that the 13th and 14th amendments to the U.S. constitution could not be invoked to protect African Americans from discrimination.[20] This decision, coupled with the "separate but equal" doctrine enshrined in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, provided the legal basis and justification for the Jim Crow-era laws that were enacted across the United States. The *Civil Rights Cases* decision removed from state and local governments the obligation to assure that Black and other minority groups had equal access to such places. The "separate but equal" doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* permitted segregated public spaces such as parks, libraries, and schools on the basis that a local or state government could provide a set of facilities for White residents and another for Black or other minority residents. Due to these two decisions, furthermore, state and local governments were left to their own devices when it came to permitting or tolerating discriminatory practices by private parties, such as owners of stores, restaurants, streetcar and bus systems, hotels, and places of employment such as manufacturing facilities.[21]

In addition to the federally-financed housing built in Fairfield-Sandston, an apartment complex, Riverside Apartments (NRHP 1983; DHR #121-0039) in Newport News is known to have been constructed by the federal government to provide housing for World War I defense workers. Hamstrung by the *Civil Rights Cases* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* decisions, the federal government did not overtly endorse segregation in its housing projects, but, in general, it also did not oppose state and local practices (public and private, including social customs and coercion) that required segregation and endorsed discriminatory practices. Furthermore, private contractors that provided materiel for the war effort were free to use discriminatory hiring practices, which meant that only Whites were employed at a particular facility. Consequently, while the federal government may not have built housing such as Riverside Apartments with the intention that it would be set aside only for White workers, neither could the government object if only White workers were permitted to take occupancy.

[19] Melvin I. Urofsky, "Civil Rights Cases," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Civil-Rights-Cases, Accessed August 18, 2021; Matthew D. Lassiter and Susan Cianci Salvatore, *Civil Rights in America: Racial Discrimination in Housing* (Washington, DC: National Historic Landmarks Program, National Park Service, March 2021), p. 6-7. The *Civil Rights Cases* decision's evisceration of the 13th and 14th amendments was not overturned until the Supreme Court upheld the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
[20] Urofsky, "Civil Rights Cases."
[21] Lassiter and Salvatore, p. 7.

Another example of the period's discriminatory employment practices was widespread use of a hierarchy that placed White male employees at the top, followed by White female employees, then Black male and Black female employees. The highest status and best-paying jobs were reserved for White men. White women were expected to seek "respectable" employment as a teacher, nurse, sales clerk, or clerical staff and then only until marriage. Working-class and poor Whites were not held to quite this standard but still were regarded as superior to Black employees. Middle class Black men had some options, such as being a teacher, pastor, funeral home director, or other skilled position that served Black residents; middle class Black women, similar to their white counterparts, could seek "respectable" employment. For working class and poor Black men, the most difficult and dangerous jobs typically were among their limited options and they could expect to be paid less than White men. Working class and poor Black women were limited to only a handful of low-paying options such as laundress, domestic worker, seamstress, or, occasionally, factory worker. Such hierarchical and discriminatory employment practices have been documented in recent nominations for the Dewitt-Wharton Manufacturing Company Building (NRHP 2021; DHR #118-0103) and in the Schoolfield Historic District (NRHP 2020; DHR #108-5065) which began as a company town for Dan River Mills Inc. In Norfolk, the American Cigar Company (NRHP 2009; DHR #122-0658) provided a rare chance for Black women to seek industrial positions in the areas of "rehandling" tobacco – sorting, stripping, stemming, and hanging tobacco leaves. But this most physically demanding aspect of tobacco processing also was the lowest paid. The employment hierarchy was no longer openly used after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but discriminatory employment practices in numerous places and employment sectors have persisted up to the present day.

As soon as World War I ended, DuPont shut down production and conveyed all of its interests in the plant to the federal government.[22] In turn, government agents began efforts to sell off plant buildings, houses, and other infrastructure after the cancellation of plans for a permanent facility. In 1919, the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* reported that the government had arranged to sell 80 percent of the houses to a company from New York and that removal was imminent.[23] This deal fell through, however, and the houses remained in place for the time being. The government of the Commonwealth acquired most of the plant buildings in August 1921 and moved them onto the grounds of the state penitentiary in Richmond to store state-owned vehicles.[24] It was also in 1921 that the Richmond Fairfield Railway Company (RFRC) purchased the village tract and its

[22] USHC, *Report of the United States Housing Corporation*, Vol. I, 23.
[23] *Times Dispatch*, September 5, 1919.
[24] *Times Dispatch*, August 4, 1921.

230 houses. The USHC had compelled the sale of the houses by bundling them with the government's control over the electric railroad in a package-only deal for just over $191,000.[25]

At the time of the purchase, the railway's president was Oliver J. Sands. This visionary business figure had begun his career in banking and had contributed to establishing banks and giving access to credit in rural areas, which served as a boost to economic growth in Virginia in the early twentieth century. Leadership roles of this dynamic figure included organizations such as the International Chamber of Commerce, the Tobacco Growers' Cooperative Association (general manager); the Red Cross; the 1922 Virginia Historical Pageant (president); and commuter transit. [26]

Under Sands' leadership, the railway company undertook to transform the former company village into a desirable commuter suburb with affordable housing for working class families whose wage earners commuted to jobs in Richmond. Many of the houses built by the USHC had been finished in the most rudimentary way. According to one early resident, "the floors were of soft wood, the walls of tongue-and-groove wainscoting five feet from the floor and plaster board from there to the ceiling….They were…never intended to be durable, life-time dwellings of great beauty. The railway company began renovating the existing houses." [27] Whereas the USHC had arranged many of the houses around courts in groups of six, in 1921 the RFRC began configuring the current street plan. The company also moved the houses from the court groupings into linear arrangements along existing and newly laid out streets. The company also platted individual lots, and expanded the water/sewer systems built by the USHC. The grid of streets honored Civil War officers, with names from the Union forces on east-west streets and those of Confederates on north-south streets.[28]

Initially, the railway company's suburb was known as Fairfield, given its location in the Fairfield magisterial district and proximity to the Fairfield Civil War battlefield. When seeking to open a post office for the village in 1923, the name was not acceptable because another town of that name existed in Rockbridge County, Virginia. To honor the railway president and his founding role, residents voted at a civic association meeting for the name Sandston.[29]

Improvements to the village under four years of the railway company's stewardship had led to a permanent population of 800 by 1925. In addition to renovations by the company to spur sales, individual homeowners gradually beautified the appearance of the old plant houses with shingle

[25] *Times-Dispatch*, July 31, 1920; Nauman, "A History of the Origin and Growth of Sandston," 4-5.
[26] *The Richmond Planet* 1923; *The Sunday Star* 1929; *The Times-Dispatch* 1917, 1922a, 1922b; Lyon G. Tyler, *Men of Mark in Virginia,* vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Men of Mark Publishing Company, 1907), 344–348
[27] Nauman, "A History of the Origin and Growth of Sandston," 6; Evans.
[28] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 17, -18.
[29] *Ibid.,* 9, 14.

or board cladding and coats of paint. The company had added streetlights to every intersection. Telephone service began in 1923. Trolley service ran to Richmond every 40 minutes and the Williamsburg Road had been paved with concrete. With these improvements and conveniences, Sandston became attractive to buyers, especially as the demand for housing increased after the war. To meet the demand, the railway company expanded construction north of Williamsburg Road. This expansion included a new development of bungalows along Federal Street as well as a group of ten two-story houses ranging in price from $5,300 to $6,500 on North Confederate Avenue. With the growth of the population, churches for three congregations had opened to meet the needs of the community by 1926.[30] The next year, the Sandston Credit Union opened as the first in the state with local residents serving as its officers.[31] Other community institutions emerged as well. In 1925 a lot was donated for a library. Various clubs such as the Sandston Civic Association, Boy and Girl Scouts, and sporting leagues were organized. An adapted munitions plant building on J. B. Finley Road served as the Sandston Community Hall, used for social and civic events.[32] Notices for the Sandston Masonic Lodge appeared in local newspapers as early as 1932.

In response to population growth, a local commercial district began to develop. Rather than depending exclusively on Richmond for shopping and various services, local residents also patronized businesses along Williamsburg Road. The orientation of the district along this thoroughfare in the 1920s and 1930s marks the community's transition to automobile transportation. In 1933, commuter service on the electric trolley line ended.[33] This area remains the commercial core of the district, with several buildings dating to the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1927, a group of local investors chose a site southwest of Sandston (now encompassed by Richmond International Airport) as the site of an airfield that would bring airmail service to the Richmond area. In October, the two runways and a support building to accommodate visiting aviators were dedicated as Richard E. Byrd Flying Field. By the late 1930s, the airfield also offered passenger service.[34]

During World War II, the Army established a base for its 1896th Engineering Aviation Battalion at Byrd Airfield. One of the tasks of this unit was to build a decoy airfield about five miles southwest of Sandston, an area known as the Elko Tract. This decoy airport included a large

[30] *Ibid.,* 15-16, 18.
[31] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 47; Danae Peckler, "Fairfield-Sandston Historic District" Preliminary Information Form (Fredericksburg: Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2020; on file Virginia Department of Historic Resources), 6.
[32] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 21.
[33] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 25; Peckler, "Fairfield-Sandston Historic District," 6.
[34] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia,* 45-46.

network of fake runway strips cleared out of the woods, canvas hangars, and light plywood decoy airplanes. Its purpose was to confuse German bombardiers in the event that the Luftwaffe developed aircraft with sufficient range to threaten Richmond.[35]

Due to a shortage of housing provided by the military at Byrd Field, many members of the battalion roomed in Sandston. Local residents welcomed the service members and offered some volunteered personal services such as sewing. The Sandston Community Hall became a social club for both civilians and military and was often the venue for dances and other social occasions. In 1943, the Federal Works Association constructed a United Services Organization (USO) building on the lot immediately south of the Sandston Community Hall. After World War II, Henrico County purchased this building (11 J. B. Finley Road, 043-6237/043-6271-0001) for use as a recreation center. It continues in use as the Sandston Memorial Recreation Center. The former Community Hall on the lot to the north later became home to the local American Legion post (21 J.B. Finley Road, 043-6238/043-6271-0002).[36]

Additional growth continued in spurts through the 1930s, during World War II, in the 1950s and through the early 1960s until the areas platted by the RFRC in 1921 and 1951 were filled in, mostly with residential development. The period of significance for the district ends in 1966 with the expansion of the fourth-grade post office (043-6271-0019) to a building double in size.[37] This reflects the growth of the community through suburban developments on the outer boundaries of the district.

[35] Nick D'Alto, "In 1942, the Army Built a Decoy Airfield in Virginia to Fool the Luftwaffe - Henrico County residents came to call it 'The Lost City,'" *Air and Space Magazine* (2015). https://www.airspacemag.com/history-of-flight/army-built-decoy-airfield-virginia-180955980/
[36] Evans, *Sandston, Virginia*, 59.
[37] Henrico County Real Estate Assessment Division, Parcel data, property information, and subdivision plats, 2021. https://realestate.henrico.us/ords/cam/; Peckler, "Fairfield-Sandston Historic District," 6.