



The Hidden Gem of Carson, Virginia: A 'Lightning Slinger's' Words Live On

If you've ever tried prospecting, washing gravel and mud through a sieve in search of a little gem, then you've experienced the feeling you get driving down Route 301 in Prince George County.



A short ride up a hill leads you to a railroad crossing that divides the area into two counties. The east side of the tracks is located in Prince George County. Property on the west side of the tracks is in Dinwiddie County.

You pass shells of long-abandoned motels, gas stations and restaurants. At first glance it may seem there is not much left to see. But slow down just south of the interchange at Route 35 and Route 301. Look to your right and you'll find a sign welcoming you to the unincorporated Village of Carson, population "around 300," according to local resident and history buff Robert Hawks.

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Traffic through Carson is very light on

a Saturday afternoon, but then you hear the thunder of a locomotive. The crossing arms come down and one of the 30- to 40-odd trains that travel through this little hamlet daily passes by.

Across the tracks is an open park area beside a beautiful white Victorian house built in 1898 by Peter Bernard (P.B.) Halligan. Another, smaller, dependency sits to the left of the house.

"Mr. Halligan was the commissioner of revenue for Dinwiddie County for a time," explains Hawks.

"Back in the day, they could have an office where they wanted, so he had an office built beside his home," he adds.

To the right of the park is the headquarters of the Bank of Southside Virginia. P.B. Halligan was instrumental in the mergers of the Bank of Stony Creek, Prince George County Bank and the Bank of Carson to form BSV, which now has 15 branches around southside Virginia.



Upper left: This Victorian house, built by P.B. Halligan, was originally four rooms – two up and two down with a kitchen on the back. To the left is the Dinwiddie County Revenue office he had built. Upper right: This restored red caboose is now part of the library. Lower left: Local resident Robert Hawks with Sherry Chappell, library assistant at the Carson Depot Library. Lower right: This authentic train depot was moved from a rail siding and restored to serve as the permanent library.

Like most of rural southeastern Virginia, this area was primarily farmland worked by generations remaining in one place. When the railroad was built, there was an opportunity to have a depot where farmers could bring their wares to sell. Evidence of the agricultural heritage is easily seen in the very tall silos standing like sentinels alongside the train tracks, testaments to farming methods of days gone by.

One of the general merchandise stores that began around that time was P.B. Halligan's General Store, selling everything "from groceries to coffins." This was a hub store with clothing items, tools, food, and an adjoining post office. General merchandise stores were the original "one-stop shopping" businesses for a community. Halligan's was incorporated in 1923. The store and post office structures were made of wood and were destroyed by fire in



1985. The bank and family home were saved. The cause of the fire was never determined.

The public school in Carson for grades K through 12 was built around 1912. A fire destroyed the school in March 1927, but it was rebuilt and in session by September of that same year.

Hawks says, "The Carson Volunteer Fire Department started in the school bus garage in 1962 before moving to the current location near the main road and railroad crossing. The school was closed in 2003 and the building was razed in 2014, but is fittingly the site of the new fire department complex and community center."

Halligan Park — Site of P.B. Halligan Co., Inc., a general merchandise store, established in 1900 and destroyed by fire in 1985.



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To your left is an attractive gray building that houses the books and materials of the Carson Depot Branch Library of the Appomattox Library System. The building is a renovated 1888 train depot that was obtained and donated by John Halligan Clements, grandson of P.B. Halligan, for this purpose in 1991. The area had been served by a bookmobile from 1975. Bookmobiles were a way to make reading available to children and adults who lived in more remote areas without easy access to a centralized library. Many people's lives have been enriched by the twice-a-month visits of the bookmobile.

Behind the library is the red caboose of every child's train story. The caboose was originally sitting on rail tracks and was moved, restored and added to the library in 2002.

Oh, the name? Well it seems there was a train wreck in the area in the late 1800s. As was the custom, the lightning slinger (telegraph operator) at the time sent the message, "Cars Off, Cars On." And the name Carson stuck.

To the side of the library is a railroad line house used as a residence to this day. These houses were provided to the men who were assigned a designated section of rail to inspect and maintain for the railroad company.

If you want to visit this little gem of a community, set your GPS for 16101 Halligan Park Rd. Look for the Welcome to the Village of Carson sign.

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So who was the lightning slinger who sent that fateful message? Well, some say it was P.B. Halligan, of course! ■