City of Alexandria

Office of Historic Alexandria

Alexandria Legacies

Oral History Program

Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *First Interview with Howard Truslow Beach*

Date of Interview: *December 14, 2005*

Location of Interview: *Alexandria, VA, in the home of Mr. Beach*

Interviewer: *Susan Callegari*

Transcriber: *Susan Callegari*

Abstract: Mr. Howard Truslow Beach was born in 1920 and has lived in Alexandria for 86 years. Topics discussed include Mr. Beach's childhood; his positions at Potomac Yard from 1941 to 1982; training, benefits and opportunities at the Yard; a work day, and a description of the Yard and its history.

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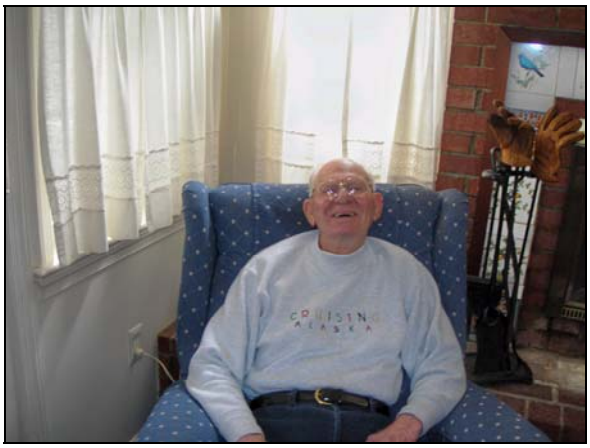

Howard Beach, 2005

INTRODUCTIONS	
Susan Callegari:	This is an interview with Mr. Howard Truslow Beach of Alexandria, Virginia. Mr Beach, just for the record, when and where were you born?
Howard Beach:	Alexandria, Virginia, April 9, 1920.
CHILDHOOD	
SC:	Where did you go to school as a child and for how long?
Howard Beach:	I went to elementary school at Lee School; it was located on Prince Street. And from there I went to Alexandria High School until the New George Washington High School was built, and I finished my high school education at George Washington.
SC:	Did you have any other jobs before working for Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	Yes.
SC:	Can you tell me what they were?
Howard Beach:	My very first job was delivering telegrams for Western Union, riding bicycle. Then I was a truck driver for a grocery store delivering groceries for orders that had been called in. And from there, I went to Potomac Yard, and I didn't move again.
SC:	Were you interested in trains as a child?
Howard Beach:	Yes, I was, very much so.
SC:	Did any of your family members work at the Railroad or on a railroad before you? Your father, mother, sisters, brothers?
Howard Beach:	No, the closest to the Railroad would have been my father, and he was a conductor on the old Alexandria Street Car.
EARLY YEARS AT POTOMAC YARD	
SC:	When did you first start working at Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	1941.

SC:	And how did you get that job at the Yard?
Howard Beach:	I went to the main office while I was actually working delivering groceries and made application. At that time they were hiring what they called messenger boys and call boys, and of course I was just 18 years old at that time. They accepted my application, sent me for a physical exam, I passed that, and I was hired as a messenger/call boy.
SC:	Did you enjoy that job?
Howard Beach:	Well, yes to an extent. The job entailed carrying way bills from the main office down to the two forwarding yard offices; one was the Four Mile Run Office, the other was known as Forty-One, which was the Southbound Office. These were down in the forwarding yards and the only way to get the way bills to the road conductors was to carry them by hand.
SC:	Can you show me on the map where this was that you took...this is the map of the Potomac Yard. These places that you carried the way bills to, are they on the map?
Howard Beach:	Here's the office right here.
SC:	Potomac Yard office.
Howard Beach:	And the way bills had to be brought down to just about this area right here...just, just on the north side of the highway bridge.
SC:	Uh-huh, just above the bridge.
Howard Beach:	Uh-huh.
SC:	Can you tell me what way bills are?
Howard Beach:	It's a document that accompanies each car, and it's folded like this. It has all the information about the contents of the car itself, the car initials, number, its destination, its origin, and the shipper and receiver, and the contents of the car. And that has to accompany each loaded car through Potomac Yard. If the car was empty, they used a cardboard card about 5" wide and 6 or 7" long. It was already embossed at the car and had the initial and number on it. That served as a bill for the empty car.
SC:	Interesting. What did you know about or think of Potomac Yard before you got the job?
Howard Beach:	I didn't know much of anything about Potomac Yard when I first got there. All I knew was that my father-in-law worked there and he used to keep after me all the time. He was in train service. I was not interested in train service. I wanted the transportation department, but in the clerical part of the transportation department.
POSITION CHANGES	
SC:	How long did you have this position that you just described?
Howard Beach:	Gee, it's hard to say, but I would say probably three months, and then I was promoted to what they call 'extra' clerk. And I went on what you call the extra list, which moved first in and first out as vacancies occurred in the clerical department - people being off sick, vacation, things like that. And that was the

	first clerical position that I had at Potomac Yard. And it also served as a learning ground to several clerical jobs, and...
SC:	Several other clerical jobs...
Howard Beach:	Oh, yes, there were many clerical jobs.
SC:	Uh-huh, can you describe what the different clerical jobs were?
Howard Beach:	Well, there was one clerical job that I worked for a long, long time called crew dispatcher, whose duty was to maintain a crew board with little wooden blocks with names on 'em and to call the trainmen and the engine man when they were needed for work, and to keep a record of the crews, by shift, and the road crews. We had a long pad and one pad was RF&P's, and then there was another one for Pennsylvania Railroad, and B&O Railroad, and we also kept those records here.
SC:	You mentioned three; were there four, or five [railroads]?
Howard Beach:	Yes, there was C&O and the B&O, but between the two they only ran about... seven trains a day.
SC:	And how many did the others run?
Howard Beach:	The RF&P would be running 15-20 trains a day, and Conrail about the same, and we didn't keep any records of the Southern crews because they kept the record of their own crews over at the Alexandria Railroad office. I worked that job for many, many years.
SC:	So, did the job change at all over the time that you worked there?...so you worked there from...
Howard Beach:	[19]41 to [19]82.
SC:	[19]41 to [19]82...did the job change technologically?
Howard Beach:	You mean during the whole forty some odd years I was there?
SC:	Uh-huh.
Howard Beach:	Oh yes, it did, there were numerous changes.
AC	Can you describe some of those?
Howard Beach:	Well, most of the changes that occurred in the first fifteen to twenty years I was there were... they were involved in transportation, but not my department, so it was mostly mechanical, and the track people, such as installing new trackage, installing car retarders... but in my department, in the department that I was in, things were pretty much the same until about, I would say probably in the 60's, and then things started taking off in the transportation department clerical end of it, such as the installation of computers and things like that. But the jobs, essentially, each clerical position, essentially, remained the same, the duties remained the same, and with the installation of up-dating... see, when I first was hired, most of the records in the transportation department involving the receipt, classification and dispatch of traffic were all hand written. But over the years that was upgraded, and when the electronic age began to assert itself, various machines were installed, and that part of the clerical work - and the clerk who did that work was called book clerks - but it all hand written,

SC:	Tell me, what were the different kinds of clerks' titles. There was a book clerk...
Howard Beach:	Well it was... first of all there was a chief clerk... then there was a book clerk and a classification clerk and, did I mention crew clerk, crew dispatcher?... interchange clerk, whose duties were to use the typewriter that each car received and forwarded had to be interchanged from one railroad to another. And then over in the agency, which had, I think, about four clerks whose duties were to peruse the way bills, check to see if the routing was correct, the rate was correct and things like that, which pertains almost strictly to the way bills themselves. And then later on we had key punch operators, and, 'course there were several stenographers spread between the groups. But that's about it as far as clerical assignments were concerned. We didn't have any more messenger boys like I used to do because hydraulic tube lines were installed from the main office down to the Forty-One Office in the Southbound Yard and the Four Mile Run Office in the Northbound Yard. And you put... you just rolled up the bills, stuffed them in a brown leather container, put them in the tube and hit the button for compressed air and shot 'em down to the proper station they were intended for, which was either Forty-One or Four Mile Run.
SC:	So, are they all on this map? I see the Potomac Yard Office...
Howard Beach:	Four Mile Run is...
SC:	Not on the map...
Howard Beach:	Let me see if I could pin-point it for you. Southbound Receiving Yard, Northbound Classification Yard…it would be in this area right here...the Northbound...at the end of the Northbound Classification Yard.
SC:	Okay, and the third one is this one above the over-bridge?
Howard Beach:	Um-hum, that was Forty-One, and this would be Four Mile Run.
SC:	Great, thank you. When did you...did you yourself start using computers, at all?
Howard Beach:	No, I was not involved in the actual computer work. The company gave me an opportunity, but at that time I had gone up through the ranks and I was then chief clerk to the Superintendent. I loved the job and wasn't too interested in anything else.
POSITION AS CHIEF CLERK	
SC:	Right, right. So as chief clerk, what were your specific duties?
Howard Beach:	Chief clerk was... it was sort of a semi-managerial job, over the clerical ranks, answering to the superintendent, issuing all kinds of instructions to the various clerical organizations. And just, I guess now a-days, you might just call that the head clerk, that's all I can tell you.
SC:	Uh, huh.
Howard Beach:	But the duties were varied and broad.
SC:	Do you know what year you were made chief clerk, or approximately... how long you'd been there, risen in the ranks, before you became clerk?
Howard Beach:	No, but I could probably answer that by getting some of my records out, if you

	don't mind.
SC:	Not at all...
RF&P AND POTOMAC YARD HISTORY	
Howard Beach:	The RF&P was really a builder of Potomac Yards. They took over a small railroad, I can't remember, I think it was Western, something or another, in 1905. And they started Potomac Yard in the following year - now this is from my memory, it may not be all correct, but it's correct as far as I can remember, because I was very... very proud to work at Potomac Yard and I was very proud to be called an RF&P employee - I think in 1906 there was a gathering of five different railroads, I believe: the RF&P, the Pennsylvania, the B&O and C&O and, what's that, four?...and the Southern, but the Southern Railroad right away did not immediately enter into the agreement.
SC:	[Southern was] there at that meeting, but they choose not to enter in it right then?
Howard Beach:	Well, I don't know because I wasn't at the meeting... You see this was long before I was even born!
SC:	Right!
Howard Beach:	But I read quite a lot of history of the RF&P... but the Southern Railway did change their mind and eventually joined the contract. And, as I recall from reading the history of the Potomac Yard, the contract provided for each of these railroads to use Potomac Yard, bring in their in-bound traffic into Potomac Yard, and Potomac Yard's handling the traffic both in and out. And each railroad paid their own part of the expense involved in handling their traffic. And as far as I know, when I was there, working at Potomac Yard, that contract was still in effect. However, while I was employed at Potomac Yard, and it was... Southern Railway was still a tenant line, and shortly after I retired in '82 there was a controversy involving the Southern Railway and the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was no longer called Pennsylvania... the two railroads, because of, I'm not sure - they apparently became dissatisfied with the service at Potomac Yard, or thought they could do much better somewhere else - they wanted to succeed from the original contract and interchange their traffic at another interchange point, which I believe was Hagerstown. The Southern Railway had taken over the Norfolk and Western, and the Norfolk and Western had a yard at Hagerstown, where they connected with the - at that time it was called Penn Central. At first they were thinking about interchanging down at... around Norfolk using the ferry, which was a route that was in use even when I was working, 'cause we used it... if we'd get a car too big going north to negotiate the B&P Tunnel in Baltimore...
SC:	Ah.
Howard Beach:	We would reverse its route and send it back down to Newport News and... which we used to call, 'this one will have to go to the Nipping end!' And they were floated across on the car floats and then run up the Delmarva Peninsula.

	And I think several government agencies made a extensive survey of that route and they found that they couldn't improve the service because it took so long to float the traffic across the bay. And I am not aware at this time whether they are still floating across, but I do know they have some traffic in the Delmarva Peninsula.
SC:	Once they were floated across, where did they end up in Delmarva?
Howard Beach:	I don't know what the... point of where they float across is... I don't recall what they call that. But there was a small railroad that operated on the Delmarva Peninsula, and 'course I haven't been over that way for years and years, but I'm pretty sure that some part of the railroad is still active over there. But I was called to give a deposition during that particular time. I was retired, of course, but also had a vast knowledge of Potomac Yard and the classification work. In fact there wasn't many jobs in Potomac Yard Transportation Department when I retired that I could not work, if needed in an emergency. But I had to go to the law offices that were in DC and give my deposition, and that was, oh, about the middle 80's.
SC:	Remind me, this deposition was with regard to...?
Howard Beach:	Conrail and Southern wanted to leave the contract at Potomac Yard and interchange their traffic at Hagerstown. I have a copy of my deposition if you'd like to see it. [Beginning of side B:] Part of the traffic also was interchanged at Hagerstown.
TRAINING	
SC:	Did the Potomac Yard provide training courses for workers?
Howard Beach:	As far as my knowledge is concerned, most Potomac Yard workers were trained right at Potomac Yard, as I was...Yard locomotive engineers were trained there, mechanical department, as far as I know. I was at one seminar, and it was given by a gentleman whose name was Powell, and it had to do with the effort that one himself, or herself, put forward, how they felt about their job, what they could do to help the company succeed, and I - course this has been many, many years ago - but there is one thing that Mr. Powell said, and he was a professional lecturer, the reason the dinosaur is not here today is that it couldn't change with the times. I have never forgotten that. And it's been so true. If Potomac Yard had stayed the same it was when I was first hired it probably wouldn't have been there long enough for me to make a career of it. So I've always remembered that. There are or were a number of people who always fought against change, because they're always used to doing it one way, and they didn't want to change. But it was inevitable that change had to take effect. But I have never forgotten what Professor Powell said about the dinosaur, and that's about the only thing that I really remember!
SC:	Was there a lot of other training as the new technology came into being?
Howard Beach:	Yes, as things became upgraded, everyone was retrained right at the Yard, and I don't remember a lot from other departments... the transportation department

	was my territory!
SC:	I was thinking... what you said earlier about the five different railroads keeping their own books, financially... is that why there were five separate pads to record everything on...
Howard Beach:	That was just a transportation record of crews in and out of the Potomac Yard. It had no bearing on anything else.
BENEFITS	
SC:	Did the Yard provide benefits of any sort to the workers? Health, pension...
Howard Beach:	Most of Potomac Yard was unionized. There was... the clerks, they belonged to the Transportation Clerks Union, the yard engineers to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and that held true with the track people and the mechanical people.
SC:	They received all their benefits through the unions?
Howard Beach:	Most of the benefits from the unions.
	And nothing directly from Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	When I was clerking at Potomac Yard, I don't recall any benefits such as sick leave, things like that, being offered by the company. But the day that I was appointed as chief clerk, and every promotion thereafter, I became what is known among the railroad people is as a non-union employee, and those employees began to receive company benefits, such as free medical exams for yourself, the wages were somewhat higher, and we were enabled to enjoy other company benefits including a pension. Also a thrift plan, whereby we could designate what we wanted to save, and the company would match it. But these are for the accepted, or non-union, employees. I was always treated very good, myself, I tried to do every job that I worked to the best of my ability, and I just loved Potomac Yard and railroading. I was really a born railroader, as far as what I knew at that time. I have many fond memories of Potomac Yard
SC:	Would you describe one of your favorite fond memories of Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	Ya, the date my application was accepted!
SC:	That's wonderful!
Howard Beach:	One of my fondest days at Potomac Yard was my final promotion to assistant to the superintendent because I had often thought that many, many years ago I came over here to get a job as a messenger boy, and when it came time to retire, I had just gone about as far as I could go. That's about all I can tell you, dear...
SC:	Back to the health benefits, when you said they paid for your medical visits, did they pay for all doctor visits?
Howard Beach:	No, they had a doctor Sutphin in Richmond, he was the RF&P doctor.
SC:	What was his name?
Howard Beach:	Andy Sutphin, his picture is probably in the magazine I gave you. We were required to go see Dr. Sutvan once a year for a complete physical exam.
SC:	And if you were sick, you would see him?
Howard Beach:	No, not unless you lived in Richmond you might have gone to see him if you

	were sick, but probably on your own.
SC:	So you paid your own medical if you were sick?
Howard Beach:	No, the company had their own medical plan. In fact, when the Yard shut down around '91-'92, and CSX took over, they just swapped the RF&P plan into the CSX plan. And it was a plan whereby you, your wife and the children you might have were entitled to medical care.
SC:	Were you then specifically employed as an RF&P employee or were you employed by the whole yard?
Howard Beach:	No, I was an RF&P employee, because RF&P owned the Yard - lock, stock and barrel, as far as the property and everything on the property. But I was always an RF&P employee.
SC:	How about the wages? How did they compare to other companies and industries in Alexandria?
Howard Beach:	Well I can't say anything about the other industries because I never worked any other place. I remember my first clerical assignment at Potomac Yard was extra clerk, which involved number checking and way bill carrying, was four dollars and sixty-five cents, something like that. And the clerical jobs like crew clerk, classification clerk, interchange clerk, if I remember, paid eight dollars a day. That's from my memory.
SC:	Yes... but you felt as you were promoted your pay...
Howard Beach:	As you were promoted your pay went up also.
SC:	And you felt it was fairly reasonable?
Howard Beach:	It's far more than I made delivering groceries!
SC:	...but it was a living wage?
Howard Beach:	Yes it was a living wage.
A DAY AT THE YARD	
SC:	How did you get to work, and can you show me on the map where you lived?
Howard Beach:	Yes, I lived on Fairfax Street, 200 block. I lived at 224 N Fairfax, and when I was first employed I used bus transportation and I walked to... Queen Street and then west on Queen Street to Washington Street, and caught the bus to Potomac Yard. I used the same route on the way back. I'd catch a bus at the front entrance of Potomac Yard and come back the same way. Later on as I was promoted to various jobs and earned a little more money, I was able to get my wife and I a car, and then I essentially used the same route when I had the car.
SC:	How long did it take you when you went by bus?
Howard Beach:	Counting the time I left home, till I got to Potomac Yard, was about 20 minutes.
SC:	And by car?
Howard Beach:	About the same, 'cause Washington Street was a very busy street and it led to the Jefferson Davis Highway traffic. But 20-25 minutes, provided that the bus was on time. If I had to wait 5 or 10 minutes for the bus, in either direction, it just extended the time. But with an automobile I didn't have to wait for the bus, so I was home in 20-25 minutes.

SC:	Did you commute with friends, fellow workers?
Howard Beach:	No. No one lived in my particular neighborhood.
SC:	Could you describe a typical day at Potomac Yard?
Howard Beach:	You'll have to put a date on that, dear, or a particular year - because there was no one typical day at Potomac Yard.
SC:	What time did you start in the morning?
Howard Beach:	8 a.m., or if I was working 4-12, or midnight to 8 o'clock... it all depends. See, I worked all three shifts.
SC:	What was it like...working at night?
Howard Beach:	Well, I didn't particularly like it because I couldn't sleep in the daytime, and working the midnight shift... once I got off at 8 a.m. in the morning I'd stay up until about 4 o'clock. My wife would fix an early dinner and I would go to bed, and that's when I'd get my sleep. I'd sleep 'till about 10 or a 10:30.
SC:	When was lunch? Did you bring a lunch?
Howard Beach:	I always brought my lunch 'cause most every job in transportation had a twenty minute lunch period... so I always brought a bag lunch.
SC:	What did you often eat?
Howard Beach:	Well, when I was working 4 to 12 or 12 to 8, my wife would pack me a lunch and it contained the usual sandwiches - peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and bananas, bologna, and that's about it... She always put a piece of fruit in there, and I always drank water with it.
SC:	Was there a break room available for workers to eat lunch, or where did you eat lunch?
Howard Beach:	No, I ate at my desk.
SC:	How many days a week did you work at the Yard?
Howard Beach:	When I first started I was working six days a week.
SC:	Sunday off?
Howard Beach:	No. Sunday off? That's unheard of... at that time. Because all of the older employees always asked for Sunday, so the new employees, they worked every Sunday.
SC:	So at what point did you start having Sundays off?
Howard Beach:	When the various labor organizations initiated the five-day week, and every time a job was advertised, it gave the rest days. In other words, if you were a crew clerk, if it was a daylight job, you probably had Saturday and Sundays as rest days. But if it was 4-12 or 12-8, it'd be [something other than Saturday and Sunday]?. So I started having... really started having Saturdays and Sundays off when I was promoted to chief clerk. And then I worked a half a day on Saturday, and that's it. I'd come to the office and work till about noon, and that was it, that half a day; the rest of Saturday and all day Sunday off
SC:	Can you describe the general aura of the Yard, the sounds (such as whistles, clanging), and the smells (fruit on the cars or the coal yard), sights?
Howard Beach:	Well, I can't describe the smells unless I was outside working as a number

	clerk, which was what I did when I was first hired. You could hear the old steam engines chugging, and bells clanging, and whistles blowing. But as I progressed up the ladder most of my duties were inside the building, and we didn't have too much noise in there.
SC:	Were there many non-Potomac Yard folks around, such as hobos, freight train riders?
Howard Beach:	Not to my knowledge. We had a Yard police who patrolled the Yard... and it wasn't strange for one of the officers to bring some poor guy in the office as a trespasser and call the Alexandria police to come and get him. The only other time where we had a whole lot of non-railroaders was when they were routing the troop trains - the prisoners they brought back to the States - and removed them to various places and states for safe keeping. And we had many hundreds of thousands of those, but they were all on troop trains, and they were confined to the trains.
SC:	Did they stop at the Yard and go through interchange and...
Howard Beach:	Yes, lots of times the locomotives had to be serviced and the cars might have needed water and things like that. But the prisoners were never allowed to get off the train.
SAFETY CONDITIONS	
SC:	What were safety conditions like at the Yard? Were there particular safety rules and standards that workers had to follow?
Howard Beach:	It was always... safety was preached continuously, in every department, regardless of what your position was, safety was preached and preached and preached. There were always safety meetings among the departments, and I think we had a pretty good safety record. We had some very bad accidents, but I think..
SC:	Could you describe one of those accidents?
Howard Beach:	Well, I kind of hate to, because when I was chief clerk, and later as... the job I had when I retired... I had to help investigate several very serious accidents. And I would rather not talk about them... it's very numbing to see someone mutilated by a box car. So...
SC:	Let's go back to the rules and standards the workers had to follow. What would happen if the rules weren't followed? What were the repercussions?
Howard Beach:	Well, initially they received a reprimand, and if there was no improvement, they'd be charged with violation of a certain rule, and maybe given a certain number of days suspension. And if it was something so bad, and the employee did not show the right intent and caused a real serious accident, he probably would be discharged. [End]