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Company Houses in "Kolonias" An Article about Whitney Pier by Joe Black The following article is about Kolonias (the Colony), a portion of Sydney's Whitney Pier bordering on the steel plant. Joe Black's research uncovered unusual information about the origin of some of the houses here. This article helps explain why these particular company houses do not all look alike. The Dominion Iron and Steel Company (DISCO) was established by an Act of Canada's Parliament in 1899. The construction of the Steel Plant began in the Fall of 1899 and Sydney became a "Boom Town." (See "The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney. 1899" in Issue 39 of CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE.) As C. W. Vernon pointed out in 1903: "The eyes of the world were on Sydney, and it experienced a development unknown and unheard of among eastern Canadian cities." Along with its economic growth, Sydney experienced a phenomenal growth in population • from 3,200 residents in 1899 to 9,999 in 1901 and up to 22,000 by 1913. Whitney Pier saw some of the greatest increases. Prior to construction work at the Steel Plant, there were only a few residents in this area, but by 1903 the population of Whitney Pier was approximately 4,000. Vernon took note of the cosmopolitan character of Sydney's populace in 1903: "Besides the Canadian-born inhabitants, there are numbers of Americans, many English, Scotch, and Irish, quite a number of French, scattered representatives of Germany, Norway, and Sweden, a strong Italian Colony, a number of Hungarians in the Whitney Pier district, not a few Jews, numbers of Negroes from Alabama employed at the furnaces, and the now ubiquitous Chinese laundry man." In short, Sydney experienced the rapid growth of a diversified ethnic population. With DISCO still actively recruiting workers, it was expected that the population would continue to grow. In many parts of the world, newspaper advertisements extolled the virtues of Sydney. The Steel Plant used some of the early Eastern European immigrants as agents. These men, such as M. Fedora, a Ukrainian, would return to their villages in Eastern Europe and try to convince their fellow villagers that their future lay with DISCO. The small town of Sydney was ill-equipped to provide accommodations for the hundreds of workers arriving daily and for the hundreds more who were expected. It was apparent that a steel company with the capacity of employing 4,000 full-time staff would require a huge amount of permanent housing for its workers. The Steel Plant would also need temporary accommodations in close proximity to the construction sites, to house the hundreds of construction workers involved in the building of the coke ovens and the blast furnaces. One short-term solution to the Steel Plant's dilemma would be the erection of boarding houses and hotels. This is probably the origin of Hotel Breton (or Briton), built adjacent to the coke ovens sometime prior to 1901. A building that could house 1,000 construction workers on site would provide a great service for the home of the Dziubeks on Ferris Street, Whitney Pier. The steel plant is nearby, seen to the left. the Dominion Iron and Steel Company. At first reading, the idea of such a large structure may seem exaggerated, but enough evidence is available to prove the existence of this hotel. Albert Almon's 1900 map of Sydney



shows a large structure, clearly marked "Hotel," just west of the newly built coke ovens. A telephone directory for 1901 lists under the heading Dominion Iron and Steel Company, the "Coke Ovens Hotel." And an advertisement in the local newspaper in January, 1901 states: "FOR SALE: The entire contents of the Hotel Briton (sic), consisting of Beds, Beddings, Table Linen, Cutlery, Crockeryware, Chairs, Bureaus, etc., etc., are offered for sale, either in one lot or in lots to suit purchasers. For full information apply to Boarding House Department of the Dominion Iron & Steel Co., Limited, Sydney, C.B." What became of this hotel/boarding house after 1901? A 1902 map obtained from the City of Sydney's Engineering Department is almost a duplicate of Almon's 1900 map. However, there are variations. For instance, the hotel, formerly shown at the Coke Ovens, is no longer in evidence. In tracing this mystery a little further, this 1901 newspaper account was discovered: "THE PASSING OF HOTEL BRETON 'The Hotel Breton is being removed from the Coke Ovens down to near the yards of the D.I. & S. C. at the pier. The building has been broken up into 42 sections, and the sections removed one at a time to the pier on cars. The Hotel Breton had accommodations for over 600 people and during the construction work of the Coke Ovens, had about a thousand boarders. Each section will now be converted into a dwelling and will be occupied by men in connection with the works." And in August, 1901, another newspaper item reads: "AT WHITNEY PIER 'There are upwards of forty-five buildings now in course of construction at the Whitney Pier. Some of these are among the finest cottage residences in town. 29