

**A BRIEF HISTORY
OF
FAIRFAX COUNTY**

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THE FIRST PEOPLE to set foot upon what is now Fairfax County were native Americans, whom the Europeans later called Indians. Ice Age hunter-gatherers passed through or lived in the Fairfax area at least 12,000 years before the first white men arrived.

The Indians of Fairfax lived very differently than people do today. They altered and adapted their way of life as the Ice Age passed (11,000-5,000 B.C.) and the environment became more habitable. By the time the Englishman Captain John Smith explored and mapped the lands bordering the Potomac River in 1608, the local Indians had been a settled agricultural people for almost two-thousand years. The Indians encountered by Smith grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco; they also continued to hunt, to fish, and to gather nuts, berries, roots, and shellfish for subsistence. They lived along the many streams and rivers in Fairfax, especially the Occoquan and the Potomac.

In 1608, the major tribe living in what is now Fairfax was the Dogue (from which we get Dogue Creek, *etc.*). Their main village, called Tauxenent, was located on or near the Occoquan, and was home for 135 to 170 Indians. They lived in longhouses, arbor-like structures of bent poles covered with bark or reed mats. Three smaller Dogue

villages were also in Fairfax: Namassingakent, situated on the north bank of Dogue Run; Assaomeck, on the south side of Hunting Creek, and Namoraughquend, near present-day Roosevelt Island. These people had come from the west, probably in about 1,250 A.D. Soon after the first Europeans settled in Fairfax, the Indians moved elsewhere. The English took over the village sites and fields; and practiced the new agricultural, hunting, and fishing skills the Indians had taught them. The native Americans had gone, but their heritage remained.

AFTER THE INITIAL ENGLISH SETTLEMENT OF VIRGINIA, two other events occurred that were to affect the land that is now Fairfax County. First: In 1634, the Virginia House of Burgesses divided the colony into eight shires or counties for convenience in the administration of colonial law. As the population increased and spread north and west from the settlements on the James River, the original large counties were divided into smaller ones. Fairfax was first part of a district called Chicacoan. It later became part of several counties as the divisions continued: Northumberland (1645), Westmoreland (1653), Stafford (1664), Prince William (1730), and finally, in 1742, Fairfax County, much larger than we know it now. Second: In 1649, the future English king, Charles II, was driven into exile in Europe by the English Civil War and the beheading of his father, Charles I. While in exile, he granted to seven of his loyal supporters all the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers in Virginia as a proprietary. By 1690, this land had come into the control of the Fairfax family. Thomas, sixth Lord Fairfax came to Virginia in 1737, installed his cousin, William Fairfax, as his land agent, and returned to England to defend his right to the land in the proprietary. By 1745, the English Privy Council had confirmed to Lord Fairfax the full extent of his proprietary, some 5,282,000 acres.

It was William Fairfax who built the great Belvoir mansion

(on land that is now the U. S. Army's Fort Belvoir) in 1741. The following year William arranged to have Fairfax County created from the northern portion of Prince William County and named for Lord Fairfax. At the time of its formation, Fairfax County included all of what are now Loudoun and Arlington counties, and the cities of Alexandria, Falls Church, and Fairfax. The first courthouse was located near the present Tysons Corner (Routes 7 and 123). In 1752, the court moved its business to a new courthouse in the recently founded town of Alexandria (1749), where it remained until 1800. In that year it was moved to its present site at the corner of what is now Routes 123 and 236, in Fairfax City.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FAIRFAX was an agricultural society based on raising tobacco with the labor of black slaves. In 1749, seventy years after the founding of the county, 28 percent of its population was slaves; by 1782 this proportion had increased to 41 percent. Although the masters of the great plantations owned large numbers of blacks, most of the slaves were held in small groups by less wealthy farmers.

In 1748, George Washington, then only sixteen years old, came to live with his half-brother Lawrence at Mount Vernon on the Potomac River. After his brother's death in 1752, George rented, and later purchased the estate. By the time of his death in 1799, George Washington had increased his Mount Vernon lands to about eight-thousand acres, and held over three-hundred slaves. He was the most famous man in America, as well as much of Europe.

A few miles down the Potomac in Fairfax is Gunston Hall, the home of George Mason. Mason, a prominent man, also owned much land and many slaves. Yet his very important place in America's heritage is often forgotten.

Mason was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in

Philadelphia in 1787. He was one of only three men who refused to sign the finished constitution when it was sent to the states for ratification. His major objection was that the new constitution included no guarantee of the rights of individual Americans. Without these rights protected, Mason feared the power of the federal government. He took his fight for individual rights to the Virginia Constitutional Ratifying Convention, which met in Richmond in June 1788. That convention, constantly prodded by Mason, instructed its representatives to the new federal Congress to work for amendments to the constitution to protect basic civil rights.

Congressman James Madison, acting on these instructions, was successful in getting such amendments passed in the First Congress and sent to the states for ratification. Thus, it is to Mason that we owe a debt for the Bill of Rights, (the first ten amendments to the federal constitution that guarantee the civil rights most valued by Americans today.) Indeed, Mason had first set forth these principles in his Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) and embodied them in the Virginia constitution of the same year.

By 1790, the total population of Fairfax was over 12,000; about 42 percent of those were slaves. The following year the Virginia General Assembly ceded a portion of Fairfax County to the new federal government in order to create the District of Columbia, originally laid out as a perfect square, ten miles on a side. The national capital developed almost entirely on the Maryland side of the Potomac River, however, and the land on the south side was returned to Virginia in 1847 to become what are now Arlington County and a part of the City of Alexandria.

AFTER 1800, with both George Washington and George Mason dead, with its river town of Alexandria no longer the county seat, and with the national economy changing, Fairfax County went into a long

decline. The soil in Fairfax County was exhausted and unfertile from the overplanting of tobacco. Many fields lay fallow, and many planters and farmers left with their families and slaves for new land in the south or west. Some Fairfax County slaves, perhaps as many as 5,000, were sold to interstate slave traders in Alexandria and shipped to the deep south, to labor on the cotton and sugar plantations of Louisiana, Mississippi, and east Texas.

By the 1840s, several changes took place in Fairfax County. Most important, northern "Yankee" farmers, many from New York, began to immigrate to Fairfax County and to buy up the old abandoned farms. The land in Fairfax sold for less than a quarter the price per acre that land sold for in the north. The Yankees brought with them new agricultural practices to the worn-out Fairfax soil. The original Virginians had only surface plowed with a light plow and a single horse. The northerners began to deep plow, ten to fifteen inches, with a team of four horses. They planted wheat, not tobacco, and got good crop yields. The Yankees rotated crops, planted clover to enrich the soil, and applied lime, ashes, and manure as fertilizer. Grazing cattle, sheep, and horses on a clover field rested the soil, while the clover and animal droppings enriched the land.

Northern Quakers purchased over two-thousand acres near Mount Vernon, and cut the white oak forest on the land for lumber to sell to northern shipbuilders. The Quakers also hoped to demonstrate that Virginia farms could be operated profitably with free white, rather than black slave, labor.

FAIRFAX UNDERWENT AN AGRICULTURAL REVIVAL, spurred on by both the new northern immigrants and old Fairfax families. Agricultural fairs and societies sprang up to exchange information and to exhibit their successes. By 1847, some two-hundred northern families, over one-thousand people, had moved to Fairfax County. By 1850, one in three adult white males had migrated from the northern states or a

foreign country. Skilled craftsmen, business men, and professionals settled in Fairfax as well. The sale and export of slaves nearly stopped. Surplus slave labor was often hired out, usually to local families.

The first half of the nineteenth century also saw new roads (the Little River Turnpike, Columbia Turnpike, Leesburg Turnpike, and Falls Bridge [now Georgetown] Turnpike) built in, through, or to Fairfax County. The Orange and Alexandria Railroad and Alexandria, Loudoun and Hampshire Railroad were also constructed in the county before the Civil War.

With all this economic success came population increase as well. Fairfax population increased 26 percent from 9,370 in 1840 to 11,838 in 1860. The white population increased 45 percent during the same period. Even so, Fairfax County remained a rural and agricultural society. Unfortunately, this great recovery in Fairfax County was cut short and stopped by the Civil War.

THERE WAS MUCH MILITARY ACTIVITY IN FAIRFAX COUNTY during the Civil War, 1861-1865. Several of the Union forts comprising the defenses of Washington were located in Fairfax, and thousands of troops were stationed in or passed through the county during the war years. The First and Second Battles of Manassas (Bull Run) were fought in neighboring Prince William County. In September 1862, the Battle of Ox Hill took place at Chantilly along route 50, just west of Kamp Washington. During the fighting, Union Generals Stevens and Kearney were killed. The casualties from Second Manassas (August 1862) and Ox Hill were moved to St. Mary's Church at Fairfax Station, where Clara Barton, later the founder of the American Red Cross, helped care for the wounded.

Throughout the war, Confederate Major John Singleton Mosby and his band of rangers operated almost at will in Fairfax County, harassing the Union camps, lines, and supplies. In 1863, they captured Union General Edwin H. Stoughton in his bed at the town of

Fairfax Courthouse. The Confederate spy Laura Ratcliff also lived and operated in Fairfax County.

FOLLOWING THE CIVIL WAR, Fairfax County residents returned to primarily agricultural pursuits. Union soldiers and freed blacks, many of whom had seen northern Virginia during the war, returned to Fairfax to settle and farm the land. From 1870 to 1900, Fairfax exhibited neither total stagnation nor great progress. It was a time of peaceful serenity and some suggestions of the new directions that would transform Fairfax in the twentieth century. Local farmers engaged in dairying, stock and poultry farming, flour milling, and fruit, vegetable, and flower growing, all of which was increased to supply the needs of nearby Washington, D. C.

In 1870, under the new Virginia constitution, local control in Fairfax changed from government by county court, which had existed since 1742, to the board of supervisors system, which continues to the present. The county also began its public school system in 1870. The population in 1870 was at about 12,000, just a few hundred more than in 1790. This was to change significantly in the next fifty to seventy-five years.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Fairfax County again began to prosper, much of it on the wheels of new railroad and electric trolley lines. By 1906, perhaps one-million passengers or more were carried in a year on the Washington, Alexandria, and Mt. Vernon electric railway, which ran thirty trains a day. Many of these passengers were destined for the District of Columbia schools, as there was no high school in Fairfax County until that same year. This railroad and others, also gave Fairfax County dairymen reliable access to the Washington market for their perishable dairy products. The Great Falls and Old Dominion Railway was soon opened between Rosslyn and Great Falls. In 1904, the Washington and Falls Church Electric Railway was extended to Vienna and Fairfax Courthouse. In 1911 the Washington and Old Dominion electric railway was

established on the tracks of the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railroad. Each day numerous Fairfax County residents boarded the electric trains to travel to government jobs or schools in the District of Columbia. Fairfax County was becoming a residential as well as a dairying community. By 1930, the population was at 25,000; twice what it had been in 1870.

THE FINAL AND MOST SIGNIFICANT economic and population growth in Fairfax County began after the Great Depression, and continued through the Second World War to the present. Fueled by vast increases in the size and scope of the federal government, and facilitated by ever more and better transportation — especially new roads and bridges across the Potomac — Fairfax County changed from a rural agricultural, to predominantly residential, and finally to an increasingly complex and populous commercial and residential community.

Shirley Memorial highway (now Route 395) was opened from the Pentagon to Leesburg Pike (Route 7) in 1944; it was extended to Woodbridge in 1951. The great Capital Beltway, opened in 1964, helped transform Fairfax County into the bustling society it is today. The Beltway changed Tysons Corner from a quiet sleepy crossroad of two 2-lane roads into the fifteenth largest central business district in the entire nation. Fairfax's population grew from 40,000 in 1940 to 98,000 in 1950, 248,000 in 1960, 454,000 in 1970, and increased even further to nearly 890,000 in 1995.

Today, Fairfax County has an affluent, well-educated population, and although many still commute to jobs outside the county, an increasing number both live and work within Fairfax. Fairfax is now the richest and most populous political subdivision in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The median household income is the highest in the country.

The citizens of Fairfax County can be proud of their long and varied heritage. From the days of national leadership in the 1790s, Fairfax has declined, changed, and grown again to a bustling community, which — once again — has national and international importance. ♦

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