A Brief History of Fairfax County*

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Before Fairfax County

By the time the Englishman Captain John Smith explored and mapped the lands bordering the Potomac River in 1608 local Indians had been a settled agricultural people for almost two-thousand years. They lived along the many streams and rivers in Fairfax, especially the Occoquan and the Potomac. The major tribe living in what is now Fairfax was the Dogue (from which we get DogueCreek, etc.).

Colonization

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.

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.

Birth of a County

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.

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 GunstonHall, the home of George Mason. Mason, a prominent man, also owned much land and many slaves. Mason, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, fearing the power of the federal government, was one of only three men who refused to sign the finished constitution when it was sent to the states for ratification objecting that the new constitution included no guarantee of the rights of individual Americans. The Virginia Constitutional Ratifying Convention, in June 1788 after prodding 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.)

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 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.

Fairfax County 1800's

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.

By the 1840s, several changes took place in Fairfax County. Most important, northern farmers, many from New York, began to immigrate to Fairfax County and to buy up the old abandoned farms. These farmers brought with them new agricultural practices to the worn-out Fairfax soil.

They planted wheat, not tobacco, and got good crop yields. They also 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.

Mount Vernon and Vicinity mid 1800's

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

The Twentieth Century

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.

The Twenty-First Century

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 one of the highest in the country.