

## A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF FAIRFAX COUNTY

People first walked this land some 12,000 years ago; archaeological evidence of Ice Age hunter-gatherers demonstrates the presence of the earliest inhabitants in the region. By 1608, when English Captain John Smith explored and mapped the lands bordering the Potomac River, the American Indians had been a settled agricultural people for almost 1,500 years, living in the stream valleys and along rivers such as the Occoquan and the Potomac. Their crops included corn, beans, squash and tobacco; they also continued to hunt, fish and gather nuts, berries, roots and shellfish for subsistence.

In 1608, the major tribe living in what is now Fairfax was the Moyumpse (or Dogue as they became known to the colonists). Their main village, **Tauxenent**, located in the vicinity of Mason Neck, was comprised of longhouses, arbor-like structures of bent poles covered with bark or reed mats. Two smaller villages have also been documented within Fairfax: Namassingakent, situated near present-day **Mount Vernon**, and Assaomeck, on the south side of Hunting Creek. In 1675, the Moyumpse present sided with the Susquehannocks during the Susquehannock War. When the Susquehannocks were driven from their fort on the Maryland side of the Potomac, opposite the future site of Mount Vernon, the Moyumpse also left northern Virginia. English colonists took over the village sites and fields, assuming some of the agricultural, hunting and fishing ways they had learned from the American Indians.

Following the initial English settlement of Virginia, two other events occurred that were to affect the land that is now Fairfax County. 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, spreading north and west from the settlements on the James River, these jurisdictions were further subdivided; Fairfax County was designated in 1742. The county name reflected the second occurrence to affect this area. In 1649, the man who eventually was to ascend the English throne as King Charles II was driven into exile in Europe by the English Civil War. While in exile he granted to seven of his loyal supporters all the land in the Virginia colony which lay between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers 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, by 1745, had confirmed the full extent of his proprietary at 5,282,000 acres.

William Fairfax built **Belvoir mansion** in 1741 on land now incorporated into the U.S. Army's Fort Belvoir. It was he who arranged the creation of Fairfax County in 1742, cutting it away from Prince William County and naming it for Lord Fairfax. At its formation, Fairfax County included all of what are now Loudoun and Arlington Counties and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax and Falls Church. The first courthouse was located near present-day Tysons Corner; in 1752 the function was moved to Alexandria; and, finally, in 1800, it was transferred to present-day Fairfax City.

Eighteenth century Fairfax evolved as an agricultural society. Tobacco "quarters" were planted by African-American slaves. Plantations echoing their tidewater predecessors were built on the Potomac, mills and small homesteads were cut out of the forests and rocky soil in the northwest nearer the piedmont and taverns were established at crossroads as the colonial period in Fairfax County ended with revolution.

In mid-century George Washington came to live with his half-brother, Lawrence, at **Mount Vernon** on the Potomac River. By the time of his death in 1799, Washington had increased his Mount Vernon lands to almost 8,000 acres, farming them with over 300 slaves. South of Washington's seat at Mount Vernon was George Mason's **Gunston Hall**. Mason worked long and hard to ensure that the principles he first set forth in the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) and the Virginia Constitution were translated into the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution that guarantee the civil rights most valued by Americans.

By 1790, at the time of the first federal census, Fairfax County held a population of over 12,000, white and black. (By 1782, 41% of the population was in slavery.) In 1791 the Virginia General Assembly ceded a portion of Fairfax County to the new federal government to create the District of Columbia, originally laid out in a perfect square, 10 miles on a side. Sandstone monuments, including the **West Cornerstone**, were placed to mark the boundaries. When Virginia's portion of the ceded land was returned in 1847, it became Arlington County and a part of the City of Alexandria.

After 1800, with both Washington and Mason dead, with the port of Alexandria no longer the county seat, with the soil exhausted from the ruinous growth of tobacco and with the national economy changing, Fairfax County went into long decline. Fields lay fallow, and many planters and farmers left with their families and slaves for new land in the south and west. Some Fairfax slaves, perhaps as many as 4,000, were sold to interstate slave traders and shipped to the deep south.

By the 1840s, the slave sales had largely stopped, and Northern farmers began to buy up the worn out land in Fairfax. The "Yankees of Fairfax" farmed multiple crops with free, largely white labor or slaves hired out by their owners. They

fertilized the soil and rotated plantings; by the 1850s they were claiming top prizes at agricultural fairs. An economic recovery was underway. It was cut short by the Civil War.

The war years of 1861-1865 devastated much of Fairfax County. Union and Confederate troops marched to and from battle across the farmland. They built winter and summer camps, took over farm and plantation homes, cut down the trees, built fortifications, burned barns, tore down fences, and foraged for themselves and their horses. Several Union forts comprising the defenses of Washington were located in Fairfax, including **Fort Marcy**. The First and Second Battles of Manassas (Bull Run), fought in Prince William County, in aftermath spilled across **Bull Run Creek** into Fairfax. In 1862, casualties from the **Battle of Ox Hill (Chantilly)**, as well as Second Manassas, were cared for in **St. Mary's Church** at Fairfax Station. Throughout the war, Confederate Major John Singleton Mosby and his band of rangers operated almost at will in Fairfax County, harassing Union Camps, lines and supplies, skirmishing near **Frying Pan Meetinghouse**, even capturing Union General Edwin H. Stoughton in his bed near **Fairfax Courthouse**. The Confederate spy, Laura Ratcliffe, also lived and operated in Fairfax County. Almost without exception, the historic structures throughout the county which pre-date 1861 have Civil War episodes as part of their pedigree.

Following the Civil War, Fairfax County remained economically depressed for several decades as farmers attempted to reclaim war-damaged lands. The local populace was joined by freed slaves and Union soldiers who had seen the area during the war and returned to settle with their families. Dairying, stock and poultry farming, grist milling, fruit, vegetable and flower growing increased to meet the needs of Washington, D.C. Some city dwellers began to look at the Fairfax countryside as a place to escape the summer heat. By 1870, a new Virginia Constitution established a Board of Supervisors system to govern the county, replacing government by county court. This system continues to this day.

With the new century the local economy continued to grow; dairying, with trains taking fresh milk into Washington, became a primary livelihood for many in Fairfax County. By 1925, Fairfax was first among all 100 Virginia counties in value of dairy products. The **Great Falls Grange Hall**, completed in 1929 as a community gathering place for farmers, was one of the first built in Virginia.

Electrification came to the farms with the New Deal in the Depression years of the 1930s. Roads were also improved, and, as World War II led to the growth of the capital city, Fairfax began its evolution from farming to "bedroom" or suburban community. By the 20th century's end, the county has become an area with numerous urban centers as well. Population in 1940 was 40,000; population in 1980 was almost 600,000; population in the late 1990s nears 1,000,000.

Fairfax County now includes residents with widely diverse cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Highways, skyscrapers, an international airport, shopping centers, "new" towns, universities, apartments and large residential developments stretch across the 400 square miles within its boundaries. But the county also has miles of stream valleys and thousands of acres of parkland, including lakes, streams, woods and wetlands. Within those natural areas are archaeological remains of the American Indians who once claimed these lands. Numerous historic sites and structures, preserved through public and private efforts, survive as visible reminders of almost 400 years of exploration and settlement which have occurred in Fairfax County. George Washington was a 'gentleman farmer' here; George Mason was a landed family man whose sons and grandsons also built homes in the county. Their heritage is our heritage -- and yours.