

INTRODUCTION

AT THE INTERSECTION of Main Street and Alexandria Pike in Old Town Warrenton, Virginia, stands Fauquier County's historic 19th century courthouse. Modeled on the Parthenon, the Classical Revival structure exemplifies architectural grandeur on a small-town scale. A broad staircase on the front of the building



beckons visitors upward to a colonnaded porch furnished with a wooden bench and vintage chairs. Overhead, the structure's substantial clock tower juts well above the streetscape, supplying Warrenton's hilly skyline with its most readily recognizable (and photographed) feature.

Only the most harried passerby could hurry down the sidewalks of Main Street in Old Town and not cast at least a quick glance at the stately old structure. But even those who stop to admire the building's elegant proportions are apt to overlook one pragmatic, if subtle, aspect of its design: the Courthouse's location at the geographic center of the county it serves. In one spot on Warrenton's highest hill, beauty and practicality have dovetailed neatly for generations.

Much the same can be said of Fauquier County itself. Like the courthouse, the county has legions of admirers, many of whom take particular delight in its pastoral charm. Fauquier's 666 square miles of rolling Piedmont terrain have inspired rhapsodic descriptions since at least 1670, when German explorer John Lederer first waxed poetic:

To heighten the beauty of the parts, the first springs of most of these great rivers which run to the Atlantic Ocean, or Chesapeake Bay, do here break out, and in various branches interlace the flowery meads, whose luxurious herbage invites numerous herds of red deer to feed.¹

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Less obvious to the casual observer is the significance of Fauquier County's location. At times a boon, at others a bane, Fauquier's position between the mountainous Blue Ridge (and Shenandoah Valley further west) and the low-lying Tidewater region to the east has been a major factor in its evolution. From its earliest service as a primeval grazing ground for native fauna to the present day, Fauquier has its prime Piedmont location to thank for much of its history.

Part of Fauquier County's historical trajectory can be attributed to its geology. The county's 420,000 acres lie in the Piedmont Plateau—in geologic terms, the oldest land in Virginia and some of the state's most fertile ground.

Another factor in the county's evolution has been its topography. Much, but not all, of

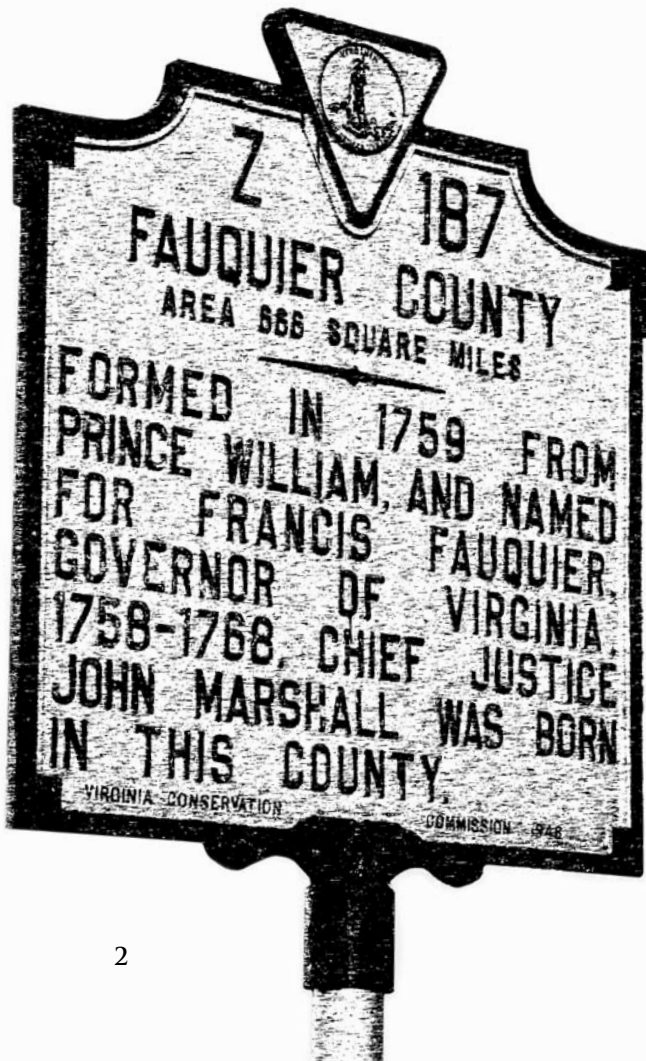
Fauquier's landscape is composed of the low, rolling hills that the word Piedmont calls to mind. Only in the northwest corner of the county does the gently undulating terrain take on truly rugged character as it merges into the Blue Ridge proper. To the east, the smaller Bull Run Mountain chain offers peaks slightly less dramatic. For centuries, four natural mountain gaps—Ashby's, Hopewell, Manassas and Thoroughfare—have provided travelers with the means for entering and exiting the county through its roughest natural boundaries.

At the opposite end of the county, in the south and southeast, the land is comparatively flat; just a few miles beyond Fauquier's boundary with Stafford County to the southeast is the fall line of the Rappahannock River—the demarcation that distinguishes Piedmont from Tidewater.

Fauquier's favorable position between mountain and coast is also reflected in its watercourses. Covering much of the county are the heavily veined watersheds of the Rappahannock River, Goose Creek, Broad Run and Cedar Run, all of which originate within Fauquier's borders. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Fauquier's plentiful and strong natural waterpower kept dozens of mills in operation. Today, the mills are silent or gone, but the rivers and streams still figure prominently in county life.

More than a hundred small communities, from Ada to Zulla, dot Fauquier's landscape. Six major thoroughfares criss-cross the county: U. S. Routes 15, 17, 29, 211, Route 55 and Interstate 66. Small farms, large estates, and hundreds of miles of fencing ramble across the terrain, too. Some land parcels have changed hands frequently, but others have stayed in families for generations.

Signs of modern life are joined in the landscape by the ghosts of much earlier inhabitants. More than one official state highway historic marker on Fauquier's byways signals the location of towns or activities that no longer exist, and the ruins of mills and mill-





aces can be found along dozens of small streams. Pastures and plowed fields still turn up spent ammunition and other signs of the Civil War.

The area's original Native American tribes—first, the Manahoacs; later, the Iroquois—decamped by the early 1700s, overlapping only slightly with the first white settlers. But arrowheads, pottery shards, or other remnants of early habitation still turn up, usually along the banks of the Rappahannock and other streams, to remind present-day inhabitants of their indigenous forerunners.

With the arrival of European settlers, the county's location was once again a factor. Tidewater ports to the east beckoned to farmers on both sides of the Blue Ridge who were eager to move goods as expeditiously as possible to coastal markets and across the Atlantic. Routes connecting mountains and upland to shoreline were highly desirable.

Among the first byways to develop were crude tracks called "rolling roads" or "rowing roads" to move hogsheads of tobacco by oxen past the fall line and on to navigable water.²

One of the oldest and most heavily used long-distance roads entered Fauquier through Ashby's Gap in the craggy northwest corner of the county and proceeded 45 miles (as the crow flies) to the warehouses of Dumfries on Quantico Creek. A supplementary route developed to carry traffic to Alexandria, when that port eclipsed Dumfries in the late 1700s.

As the county's road network grew, so did commercial establishments to provide food and lodging. Where the county's small road network intersected, "ordinaries" or taverns beckoned to weary travelers. By the time Fauquier was officially carved out of Prince William County in the spring of 1759, the county's travelers could get about the countryside reasonably well—not in comfort, certainly not in style, but conveniently enough to get business done.

As Fauquier's status as a convenient Piedmont transportation hub increased in the eighteenth century, enthusiasm arose to add the Rappahannock River to the county's commercial thoroughfares. Little in the way of real progress was seen, however, until the 1820s when a building program finally got underway. But the Rappahannock Canal was barely in serious business before it was overtaken, overshadowed and ultimately overwhelmed by the arrival of the railroad in the county in 1852.



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The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 soon demonstrated that Fauquier County's berth next to the Blue Ridge was a mixed blessing. One of the principal geographic gateways to the strategically important Shenandoah Valley, Fauquier found itself cast in a key role in a bloody four-year struggle between Union and Confederate forces, as the two sides vied to control access to and through the mountains that lay between Washington, D.C., and the Great Valley of Virginia. Railroads and bridges in the county were destroyed—not once, but repeatedly. Warrenton changed hands 67 times, a record surpassed only by Winchester.

The constant movement of military forces across the landscape of Fauquier during the Civil War has been described by the colorful phrase, "The Debatable Land." The county was also part of "Mosby's Confederacy," the name given to territory traversed by Confederate Col. John Singleton Mosby from 1863 to 1865. The hills, hollows and homes of Fauquier provided Mosby and his partisan guerillas cover as they moved about the countryside, harassing Union forces.

For about 40 years after the war ended, Fauquier was ruled by the relatively quiet rhythms of rural life. Industrialization and

urbanization—two of the major national trends of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—were distant phenomena geographically, economically, and psychologically. Fauquier County might well have remained a fairly quiet backwater well into the 20th century, if not for its discovery by Northern fox-hunting enthusiasts and industrialists, attracted by the county's natural beauty, traditions and open space. The nostalgic image of "Old Virginia" as an aristocratic arcadia of gentility and manners was being heavily promoted at the time by the state's old guard, only adding to the area's allure.³ By the 1920s, Fauquier was well established in its new role as Virginia's "Hunt Country."

The next group to find Fauquier's geography and location compelling was the U.S. government. The attraction was not the beauty of the land, but a quirk of topography. The site of Vint Hill Farms, nine miles east of Warrenton, was allegedly well suited by atmospheric conditions for international radio transmission interception. The U.S. Army bought the 700-acre farm in the summer of 1942, and transformed it virtually overnight into Army Signal Security Agency Monitor Station One, a closely guarded "listening post" and cryptology center.⁴

Vint Hill Farm's military intelligence mission was national and international in scope; its impact on Fauquier, simultaneously mundane and profound. The station's fast-paced opening brought a sudden influx of hundreds of soldiers and civilians from elsewhere to a quiet rural county the population of which hovered around 21,000—roughly one person per 20 acres. Until permanent housing could be built, many residents in the area of Vint Hill Farms opened their homes to one or more of the station's recruits.⁵

The absorption of so many newcomers to the county was a patriotic gesture made under wartime conditions. It was also a glimpse of the future. As World War II gave way to the Cold War, the nation's capital to the northeast began



The Warrenton-Fauquier Visitors Center is located on Calhoun Street in Warrenton, behind Brentmoor, the Spilman-Mosby house.



Main Street, Warrenton—Fauquier County's county seat.

to expand its geographic reach further into the Maryland and Virginia countryside, gobbling up farmland to create suburbs to house a growing urban population.

Forty miles distant from the nation's capital, Fauquier did not feel the pressure of Washington's suburban expansion immediately. "Close-in" counties such as Arlington, Alexandria and Fairfax were more logical locations for development in the immediate post-war years. But by the late 1960s, it became obvious that large-scale development was arriving on Fauquier's doorstep—whether the county was prepared, or not.

More than three decades later, the issue is as timely as ever. In the intervening years Northern Virginia has expanded steadily

toward outlying counties such as Loudoun, Fauquier, Prince William and Stafford. All have had to grapple with the prospect of major change; each has felt to differing degrees the impact of development on their infrastructure and local economies.

The debate in Fauquier County—regardless of which "side" one is on—is laced with varying perceptions of the "right" balance between maintaining the status quo and embracing change. As Fauquier County celebrates its 250th anniversary, discussion about both the pace and the place of growth in the county's future will continue, and once again, geography will play a central role in whatever unfolds. The location at the foot of Virginia's Blue Ridge—which at times has proved to be Fauquier's greatest asset, and sometimes its greatest challenge—will continue to shape and guide the county's destiny.

Introduction Endnotes

¹Fauquier County Bicentennial Committee, *Fauquier County, Virginia: 1759–1959* (Warrenton, Virginia, 1959) 12.

²Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William: A Study of Origins in Northern Virginia in Two Volumes*, 2nd ed. (Berryville, Virginia: Chesapeake Book Company, 1964), 234.

³Old Virginia: The Pursuit of a Pastoral Ideal. Exhibit at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. February 8, 2003–June 8, 2003. <http://www.va-historical.org/ov/oldvirginia.htm>. Accessed December 19, 2005.

⁴Author's conversation with C. Hunton Tiffany, September 22, 2005. A Fauquier County native and retired banker, Tiffany headed the Vint Hill Farms Economic Development Authority at the time of the base's transfer to civilian ownership in June 1997.

⁵Author's conversation with C. Hunton Tiffany.