History of Prince William County

HISTORY

Captain John Smith first discovered Prince William County during an expedition up the Potomac River in 1608. Smith found the region inhabited by Anacostan, Doeg, Iroquois, and Piscataway Indians. The first known colonial settlement was founded in 1722. In 1730, the Virginia General Assembly carved out an area approximately 2,000 square miles in size and named it Prince William County, after the second son of England's King George II. At that time Prince William County comprised all of “Northern Virginia” but by 1759, the General Assembly substantially reduced the County's size. Fairfax County was formed in 1742 and Fauquier County was formed in 1759, both from the original Prince William County area.

In 1730, the Dumfries area was prominent in the County and may have been the location of an official Tobacco Inspection Station due to its close proximity to the Potomac River. This is important because the Potomac River was a major regional route used to export tobacco to England, which was profitable for the southern colonial regions. The Tobacco Inspection law, passed in Virginia in 1730, required all exported tobacco shipments to bear an inspection certificate. Dumfries officially became a town in 1749 and in 1763 it reached an economic milestone by exporting more tobacco tonnage than the colony of New York.

Economic and political displeasure with the British government reached the breaking point for Prince William colonists in 1773. Pro-colony groups such as the Prince William Resolvers voiced protest against the erosion of colonial liberties. As England had ordered all colonial governors to cease granting lands, except to veterans of the French and Indian War, further financial strains were wrought against the colonies through taxation, including the infamous Tea Act and Stamp Act. In 1774, under ever-mounting pressure, the Virginia Convention adopted resolves against the importation of British goods and the importation of slaves. The Virginia Convention also required each county to form a volunteer company of cavalry or infantry. Prince William had already formed a volunteer unit a year before. The Independent Company of Prince William, under the leadership of Captains William Grayson and Philip Richard Francis Lee, was a volunteer unit comprised of 40 plus infantrymen. Many troops from the Independent Company of Prince William joined others from around the state to form two [Colony] regiments sanctioned by the third Virginia Convention in 1775. After the start of the Revolutionary War, the remaining troops of the “Company” became known as the Prince William District Battalion in 1776. In June of that year, Captain Grayson was appointed Assistant Secretary to General George Washington.

The war ended and news of the ratification of the Treaty of Paris between the United States and Great Britain reached Virginia on February 3, 1784. Prince William County soldiers from the Virginia regiments returned home to their families. Although there was heavy troop movement through the County from all sides, it escaped the massive destruction leveled against Richmond. The County wasn't as fortunate, however, during the Civil War.

Before the Civil War, the population of Prince William County reached 11,000 and the African American population was 43.4 percent. Many African Americans in Virginia at this time were free from slavery and indentured servitude. Virginia legislators passed a law in 1782 permitting the freeing of slaves, however, colonies further south did not participate in similar legislation. Haymarket emerged as a large population center in 1799, with Occoquan following in 1804 and Brentsville in 1822. The County thrived through the early and mid 1800's. The railroad era began in Virginia around 1811 and in 1851 the railroad reached Manassas. Manassas Junction brought a new form of shipping and travel to the area. It also became a crucial stratagem for cutting off supplies to either side throughout the War. The first threat to the railroad junction was the Battle at Blackburn's Ford after Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861. Although the Battle at Blackburn's Ford was short-lived, it was a prelude to the First Manassas battle three days later. First Manassas at Bull Run was the first major land battle of Union and
Confederate armies in Virginia after the Confederate takeover of Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The Union objective was to seize the Manassas Junction Railroad. Thomas J. Jackson earned his very famous nickname “Stonewall” Jackson towards the end of this battle.

Many lesser-known battles were also fought in the County; they include Cockpit Point, Manassas Station, Chapman’s Mill, and Bristoe Station. Cockpit Point, a stretch of shoreline along the Occoquan River, is where the Confederate army formed a blockade at the Potomac River to cut off supplies to Washington. The Battle at Manassas Station was a Confederate victory where the Union supply depot at Manassas Junction was destroyed. The skirmish near Chapman’s Mill ensured another Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run; a swift Union retreat allowed two Confederate battalions to join together. This single seemingly inconsequential action virtually ensured the Union Army defeat during the Second Battle at Bull Run. The last battle fought in Prince William County was at Bristoe Station in 1863. A Confederate corps happened upon a retreating Union army at Bristoe Station and attacked. Other Union soldiers in the area countered the small corps and captured the Confederate battery of artillery.

Manassas became a town in 1873. In 1892 Manassas became the County Seat for Prince William. Rebuilding the area to its former glory was almost an impossible task for locals. Grand manors and local businesses blighted during the War were replaced by modern inventions and post war architecture. The railroad was reconstructed and expanded westward. Education became more important and schools sprung up - almost overnight. Ironically, a former Union Army Officer, George Carr Round, relocated to Manassas and helped to build its first public school. He later served on the Town Council and was a member of the Virginia General Assembly. Many schools and colleges opened in the County including the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth and Eastern College. The Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth was founded by Jennie Dean in 1894. The purpose of the school was to improve the moral and intellectual condition of the youth placed under its care. Eastern College attracted students from over 22 states and 2 foreign countries. Eastern was transformed into a military academy and later closed in 1935. Other academies and military schools opened in the area in the early 1900’s. The ultimate military training academy of a sort was founded on a peninsula southwest of the Town of Occoquan, on the Quantico River in 1917. The Quantico Marine Base became an official training facility for the Navy before World War I, and was one of the first Marine training centers not housed on a Naval base. The Town of Quantico, surrounded by the training center, was incorporated in 1927.

After two World Wars and the incorporation of the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park in 1975, present day Prince William County is a thriving and diverse community. The County has a population of 364,734 people and boasts a median household income of $88,724 as indicated by the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey (2008 ACS). It is also a “young” County with 29.3% of its population below eighteen years of age as of the 2008 ACS. Prince William County was the birthplace or home of many notable personalities including George Mason II, Henry Lee III (the father of General Robert E. Lee), William Grayson, John Ballendine, Parson Mason Locke Weems, Benita Fitzgerald-Brown, the Chinn Family, Simon Kenton, Jennie Dean, James Robinson, Wilmer McLean, and many more. From pre-colonial times to modern day, Prince William County is a dynamic community continues to be.

**REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Prince William County is located in Northern Virginia, approximately 30 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. The County encompasses an area of 348 square miles, 18.8% of which is federally owned land.

Prince William's location in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. area and the availability of excellent transportation in the region is a catalyst for growth in the County which continues to provide numerous economic advantages. Interstate 95 and U.S. Highway 1 connect the County with Washington, D.C. to the north and Richmond, Virginia to the south. Interstate 66 connects the western portion of the County with Washington, D.C. to the east and Interstate 81 to the west. The Route 234 Bypass
links Interstate 66 in the west with 7,000 acres designated for industrial and commercial growth. Prince William Parkway includes a new interchange on Interstate 95 and prime development locations through the eastern portion of the County.

The County has a number of freight and passenger rail service alternatives available to its citizens and businesses. CSX and Norfolk Southern Railway provide freight service to the County. Amtrak passenger trains provide inter-city service to points up and down the Eastern seaboard from stations in the Town of Quantico and the City of Manassas. The Virginia Railway Express provides passenger service thirty-two times a day to and from the District of Columbia from four stations within the County.

Dulles International Airport, Reagan National Airport, and Manassas Municipal Airport, a regional facility, provide air transportation within easy access of Prince William County.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
For 277 years, Prince William County Government has exercised local governing powers granted by the Virginia General Assembly. Since 1972, Prince William County has had the County Executive form of government. Under this form of government, an eight member Board of County Supervisors has full power to determine the policies covering the financial and business affairs of the County government. The Board appoints a County Executive to act as the County government’s chief administrative officer and to execute the Board’s policies. The Board also appoints a County Attorney, an Audit Services Director and several separate Boards and Authorities to administer the operations of certain services. The County provides a full range of local government services including police, fire and rescue, court services, education, development administration, library, water and sewer services, park and recreational services, health and social services, public improvements, planning and general administration.

Did you know?
The County Seal commemorates the most important cash crop of the colonial period. It depicts a hand holding scales evenly balanced over a stalk of tobacco.