

# A Brief History of 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 Dogue Creek, *etc.*). Their main village, called Tauxenent, was located on or near the Occoquan, and was home for 135 to 170 Indians. Three smaller 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.





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.



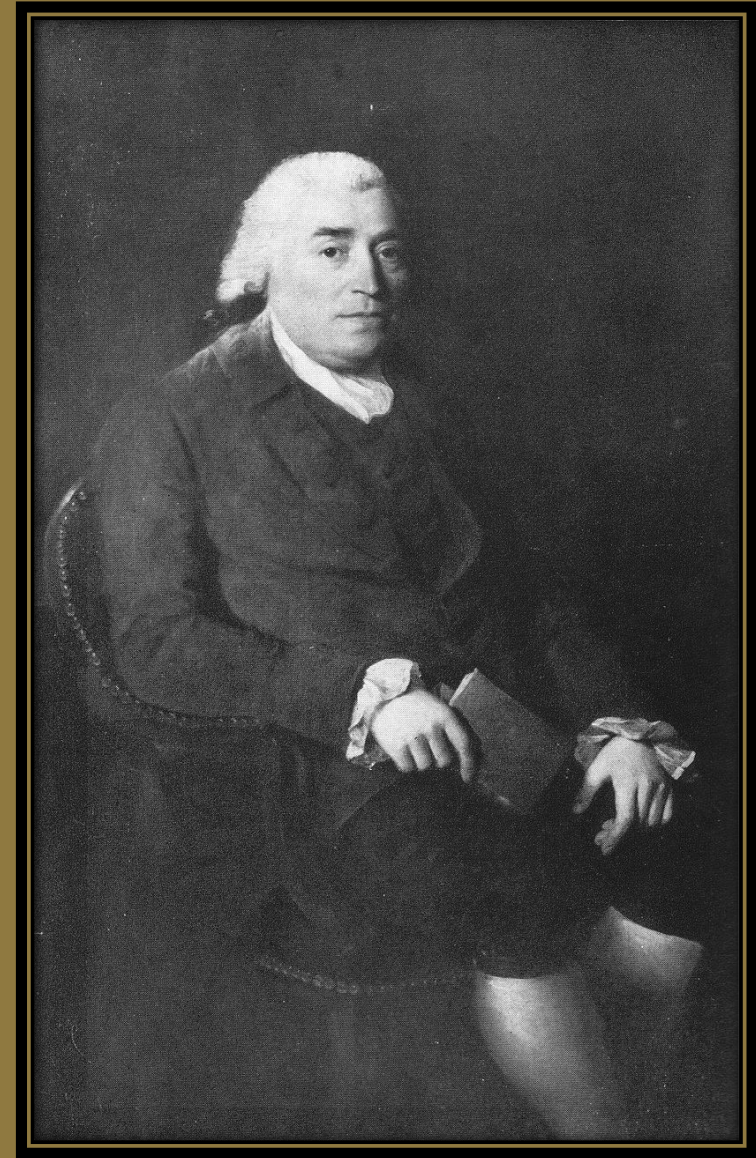
Virginia House of Burgesses



Map of the Eight Shires or Counties of Colonial Virginia



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.



Thomas, sixth Lord Fairfax

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.



Belvoir Mansion



William 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.

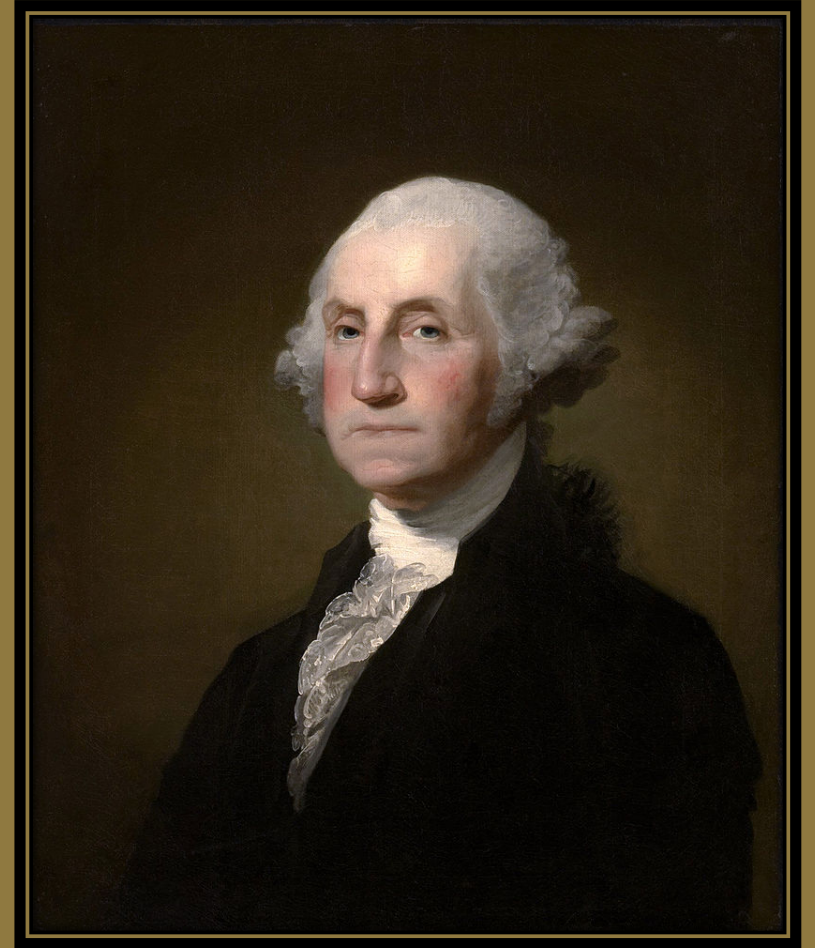


Fairfax County Courthouse



George Washington's Mount Vernon

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.



George Washington



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. 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.)



Gunston Hall



George Mason





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.



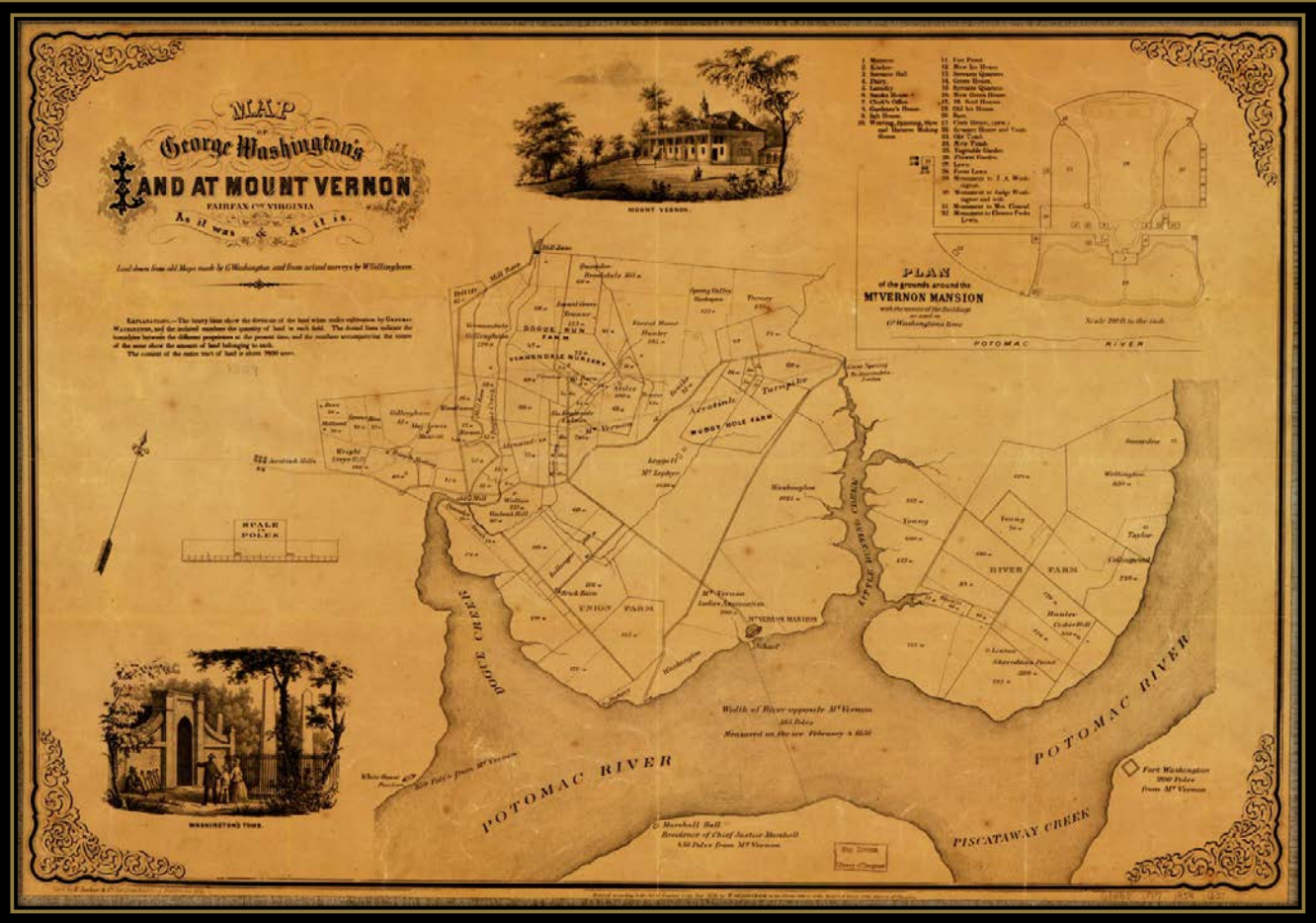
AFTER 1800, with both George Washington and George Mason dead, with its river town of Alexandria no longer the county seat, and with the national economy changing, Fairfax County went into a long decline. The soil in Fairfax County was exhausted and unfertile from the overplanting of tobacco. Many fields 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.



Fairfax County 1800's



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. The land in Fairfax sold for less than a quarter the price per acre that land sold for in the north. 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.

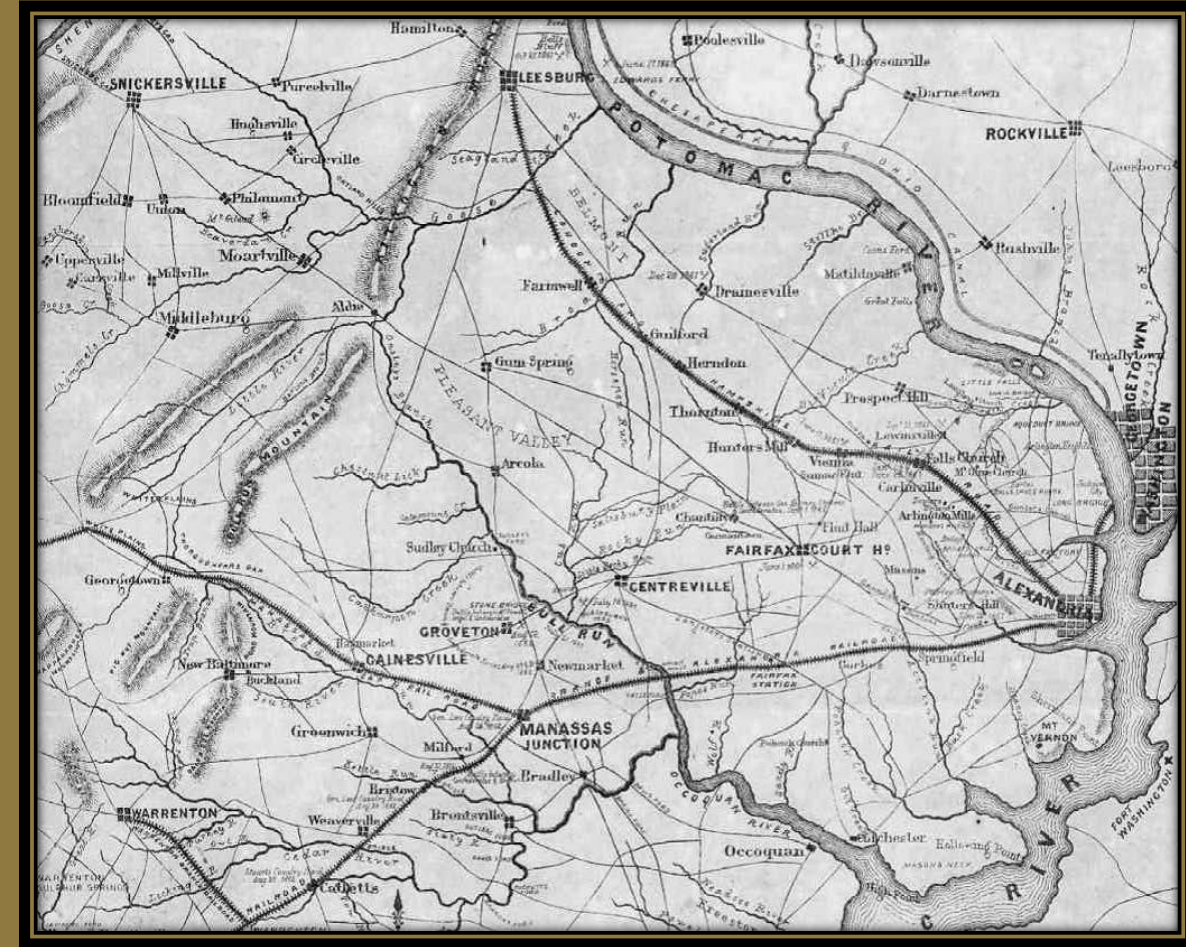
Mount Vernon and Vicinity mid 1800's



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. 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.



Fairfax County Major Roads and Railroads Mid-1800's





Maj. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson at The Battle of Ox Hill



Clara Barton



St. Mary's Church

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.



Laura Ratcliff



Major John Singleton Mosby



**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.



Vale School – An early Fairfax County Public School



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.



Terminal at Mount Vernon plantation of the Washington, Alexandria, and Mount Vernon Railway (1892-1932)

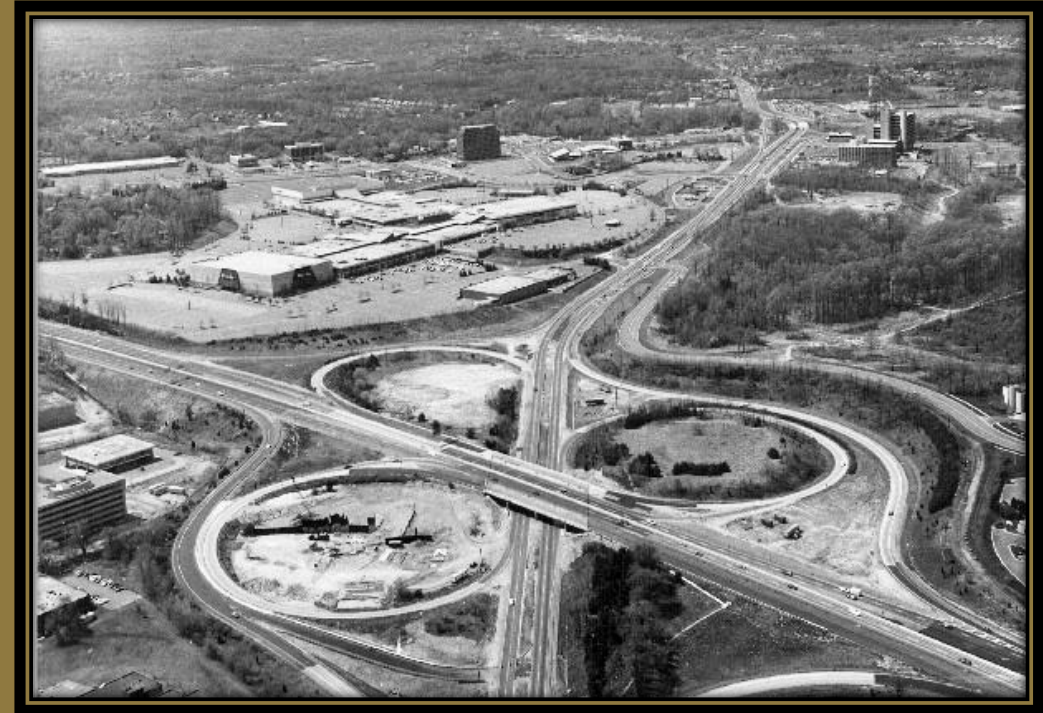
Many of these passengers were destined for the District of Columbia schools, as there was no high school in Fairfax County until that same year. This railroad and others, also gave Fairfax County dairymen reliable access to the Washington market for their perishable dairy products. The Great Falls and 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.



Tysons Corner 1936



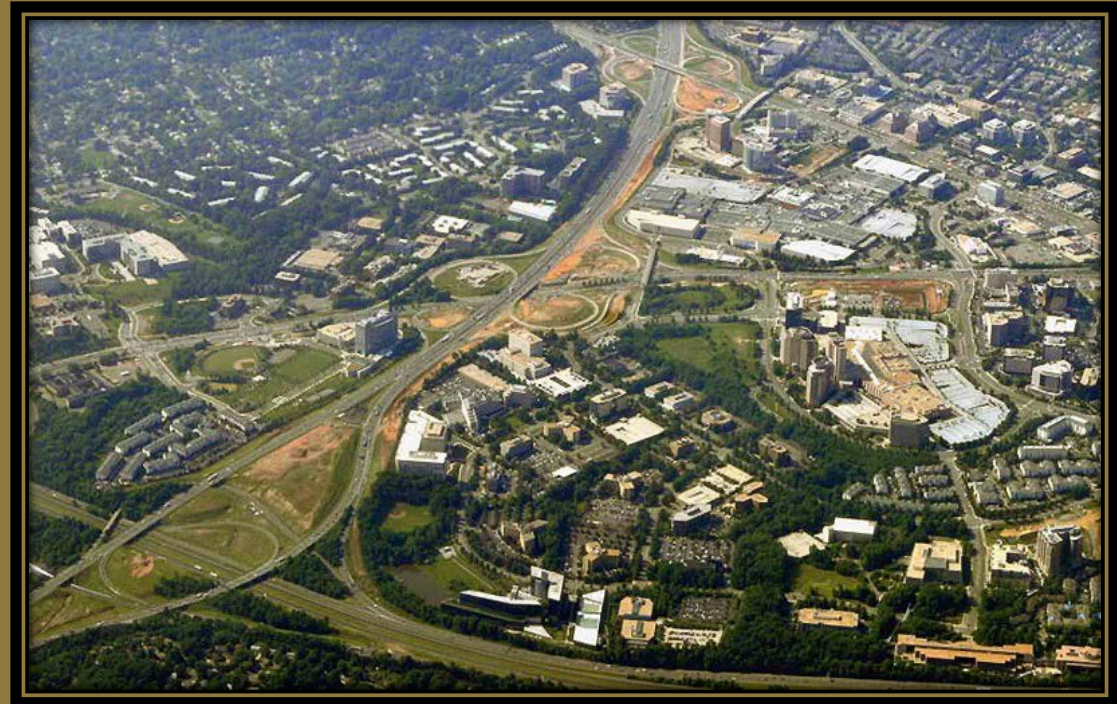
Tysons Corner 1970's





Fairfax County Present Day

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.



Present Day Tysons Corner





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