

# Bristow: Smalltown Flavor

## But Rich in Local History

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Among the small towns of Prince William County, Bristow enjoyed brief recognition during the Civil War as the site of a tragic loss for the South and later became a flourishing town on par with Manassas.

Bristow lies on Va. 619 between Brentsville and Va. 28. Little activity is noticed in driving through the town. The county's smallest Post Office still is active there and is the social center of the community now that the general store has closed. The White Elephant Antique Store, a large gray house with white trim, lies close beside the railroad tracks and advertises that it "buys junk and sells rare antiques." The toilet seat beside the door is closed, indicating the shop is not open for business. It is raised during business hours.

Bristow lies in the Bristow quarter of what was carved from 30,000 acres of the backwoods of what was then Stafford County. His Majesty, King James II of England granted the land upon petition by George

Brent, who envisioned the tract as a sanctuary for persons of all religions.

"Right Trustee and well beloved wee greet you well," wrote King James in granting the land to his "trustee and well beloved George Brent of Woodstock in our County of Stafford in that our Colony of Virginia, Richard Foote and Robert Bristow of London Merchants and Nicholas Haward of London Notary Public." The land was purchased from Lord Thomas Culpeper. King James decreed that all settlers on the land be free to exercise their religion "without being prosecuted or molested upon any penal laws or other account... provided they behaved themselves in all Civill matters so as to become peaceable and loyal subjects."

The religious sanctuary was duly undertaken, but with little success.

Only a few families who felt persecuted because of their religion took residence and eventually the land was divided among the descendants of the four original owners. Robert Bristow, who inherited a share of the property from

his father, was judged an alien enemy in 1779 and his land from the Brent tract was escheated to the state. It was on this tract of land that Bristow was established.

During the Civil War the town was known as Bristoe Station in recognition that a railway depot had been built there on the Orange & Alexandria Railroad. During the Battle of First Manassas many women and children were left in Bristoe Station by combatants on the Confederate side. An empty train was made available to move them further from the battle should the Yankees break through, but the offer was refused. Later in the war, the Battle of Second Manassas was triggered when Stonewall Jackson swung through Bristoe Station and overpowered the Union forces stationed there.

Bristow's brief moment in history lasted little over an hour and had tragic results for the Confederates. Corps Commander General Ambrose Powell Hill mounted an attack on Yankee soldiers moving along the railroad tracks. Thinking he was

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Scott Blaser—For The Journal Messenger

### Smallest Post Office

The Bristow Post Office, above, may be the smallest in the county, but it serves about 300 residents in the Bristow and Nokesville area.

## Bristow History

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attacking an inferior force of stragglers, Hill mounted his attack hurriedly and his men began moving on the Union forces before the Confederate artillery was set up to provide support. The Confederates moved in from the north of town down a long slope without cover toward the railroad depot. The ragtag Union force turned out to be General G.K. Warren's Second Corps, which was adequately supported by artillery. Though greatly outnumbered, the Union force was covered by the railroad embankment and poured a telling fire into the Confederate ranks. The Southern attack broke down because of the crippling losses and the few men who arrived at the bottom of



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After the turn of the century, Bristow flourished. By the 1920s it boasted up to four general stores, and a lumber yard owned by a former mayor of Manassas that provided much of the lumber used to build Manassas. A car dealership also was among the later businesses of the town, as was a hotel for railroad travelers. Bristow enjoyed approximately equal status with Manassas at the time, but parity would not last long. The county seat in the 1920s and 1930s was in Brentsville, but was moved to Manassas shortly afterwards. Manassas' fortunes began to pick up then and Bristow's began to decline.

The four general stores decreased to one run by the Joseph Rollins, who had taken over the business in 1924. It was a true general store, offering hardware, horse harness, baling wire, groceries, clothing, and at one time even coal. As in most small towns, the store was the cultural and social center of activity. The Rollins Store stands today near the antique shop, but has been closed since the fall of 1985. Economic conditions and loss of population resulted in its closing. The other businesses have gone too. A number of empty buildings remain among the few occupied ones, monuments to better days. The Post Office now is the social gathering place and still serves the nearly 300 families in the Bristow-Nokesville area. And every holiday the Rollins brothers still raise the flag in front of the Post Office.

the slope unscathed were taken prisoner. The Yankee counterattack routed the remaining Rebels and captured the five Rebel artillery pieces. All in all, during the hour, the South suffered 2,000 casualties, including 450 captured and more than 1,000 killed.

The battle of Bristoe Station was strategically and tactically of no consequence to either side. Hill admitted his error in attacking without knowing the circumstances of the enemy. Upon reviewing the battle scene, Robert E. Lee listened to his general and then said, "Well, well, General, bury these poor men and let us say no more about it." Somewhere in the vicinity of Bristow lie 1,000 Confederate dead, about whose sacrifice little more has been said.