

# Onrush of Change Disquiets Village Settled by Ex-Slaves

## Disney, Racetrack Proposals Worry Residents

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From her front porch, Marie Primas can see the graveyard where her husband's relatives are buried, on a hill beneath a lone pine tree.

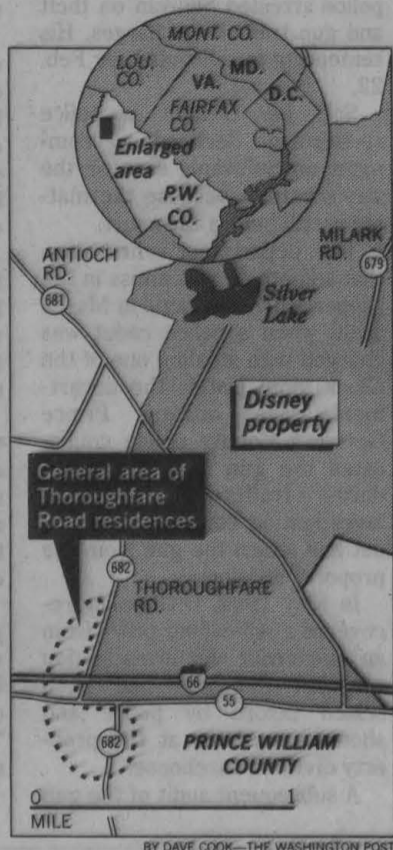
To her right, amid the cornfields, creeks and woods about 1,500 feet away, the Walt Disney Co. has assembled the land for its third U.S. theme park. To her left, behind a screen of trees 100 feet away, investors hope to build Virginia's first horse racing track with betting.

All her life, in a tiny, historically black Prince William County community called Thoroughfare, Primas has watched as suburbia spread into rural Northern Virginia.

Now she believes that the future of the village, founded by former slaves at the edge of a plantation, is threatened by the racetrack proposal and a theme park based on American history, which is to include, ironically, an exhibit on slavery.

"I think it's going to be a tragic situation for all of us who live in the area," said Primas, 76, whose husband

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# Village of Thoroughfare Ponders Life in Fast Lane

THOROUGHFARE, From C1

band's family bought land in Thoroughfare in 1872.

"You mark my words. If this racing track comes to be and Disney too, to a lesser extent . . . that's going to make all the difference in the world."

About 100 people live in Thoroughfare, at the crossroads of Route 55 and Thoroughfare Road. Many are retired, left behind as their children went elsewhere for jobs.

Now, they face the possibility of being wedged between Disney's America, with up to 30,000 visitors a day after its scheduled 1998 opening, and the racetrack, which could draw 3,000 people a day as early as 1996 if the site is chosen over five others. They fear that crime, traffic, pollution, rising property taxes and condemnation of their land for roads will wipe out the community.

"All of a sudden, your whole world will turn upside down," said Betty Duley, a 57-year-old Manassas civic activist who fought against earlier development efforts in the area. "The problem that I see is, where can you relocate? It's very difficult for elderly people."

Seven weeks ago, a Disney real estate executive said the company hoped to build an attraction that could "make you feel what it was like to be a slave." The remark, since disavowed by Disney Chairman Michael Eisner as "presumptuous," nonetheless contrasts how the company plans to represent the past with Thoroughfare, a living piece of history.

Originally part of the Cloverland plantation, the area includes a five-story, pre-Civil War flour mill, a black church founded in 1865, an early segregated elementary school and cemeteries for slaves and manor residents.

Primas, a former schoolteacher and a descendant of slaves, said her husband Walter's grandfather bought the land where her white wood-frame house now stands from the owners of Cloverland. The Primas property became the

center of the neighborhood and contains the burial ground for more than 25 people on the highway frontage next to the house.

"This area is the oldest still-surviving African American community in Prince William County," said Elizabeth Nickens, another Thoroughfare resident. She said the area has produced generations of "stable, healthy" citizens, including physicians, teachers, dentists and ministers.

The Primases and others bitterly resent plans for the racetrack—promoted by James Wilson and his son, Thomas, developers and horse breeders in Middleburg—and fret about the Disney project.

"How do they expect this is going to be a crime-free area? How do they expect it will not be overwhelmingly congested? It's hard enough driving as it is," Marie Primas said.

Across the street are Charles and Margaret Chambers, 78 and 72, who have lived in Thoroughfare since 1948 and ran the local grocery store for 25 years. Unlike about 70 percent of Thoroughfare residents, they are white. They have seen Interstate 66 come through the area, successfully fought plans for a county dump nearby and witnessed the gradual integration of the community.

Now they worry that their last years might be spent fighting rising tax bills as land values increase. They worry that their home will be condemned to make way for the widening of Route 55.

"You put Disney in, you put a racetrack in and there's no roads" to serve them, Margaret Chambers said in her small sitting room.

Spokesmen for Disney and for the racetrack investors say their projects have potential benefits for Thoroughfare.

"We expect our park will help bring history to life and inspire and spark interest in historic areas and historic landmarks," Disney's Jane Adams said.

As for residents' fears that the Disney project might cause the condemnation of their land and make property taxes unaffordable, she said, "We

would expect to be able to make a positive contribution to the tax base, which could possibly lead to lower taxes for residents."

Greg TenEyck, representing the track investment group, the Virginia Jockey Club, said, "We feel our racetrack fits in real well with the tradition and heritage of that area."

"If the land values rise . . . as everyone expects them to, [local residents] may have hit the lottery."

Some residents also are optimistic. Next to the railroad tracks that cut through the town, Tim Thompson, a 37-year-old Illinois native, now runs the town grocery store.

"I feel bad for the Primases and the other people if taxes go up, but I feel that would have happened anyway," said Thompson, who owns a home nearby. He believes his two-room, flagstone-faced grocery, where the biggest-selling items are beer and cigarettes, would do more business if the projects bring more people to the area.

"It's sad that a person can work 30 years, 40 years, pay taxes on their house, then retire and be taxed out of their home," Thompson said. "But I really think it's not going to be as drastic as they think."

Ethel Johnson, for one, certainly hopes so. Cleaning up her modest two-story house after Christmas with relatives last week, she took a break to think about the future. A 66-year-old widow and former domestic worker who lives with her daughter and granddaughter, Johnson said that no matter what Disney and the racetrack may bring to Thoroughfare, "I'll stick it out."

She feels she has no choice. In a parlor filled with family silver, china and a small Christmas tree, she said she fears that the two projects will make life more hectic, a big change from the days when her children played in the surrounding fields and woods.

"Housing prices are just too expensive," Johnson said. "There's no way in the world I could go anyplace else."

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