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VIRGINIANA FILE

Name belies the quiet atmosphere

Thoroughfare is bustling word, but life is easy in community

By HOWARD BROWN
JM Special Writer

Thoroughfare. The name might bring to mind a sleek modern highway sweeping off into the distance, but in Prince William County Thoroughfare is a small quiet community on John Marshall Highway just west of Haymarket that has been purposely bypassed by modern highways.

Thoroughfare is located along a once well-traveled highway, but before the village and the highway were developed there was Thoroughfare Gap which allowed easy passage through the Bull Run Mountains to Fauquier County and beyond. First to use this pass were the Indians who beat paths through the area in search of game at least as early as the 16th Century, and then settlers came looking westward for land. According to local history the road through the pass became part of the Dumfries Road in the mid-18th Century and by that time there was a settlement there.

During the War Between the States southern armies would pass through Thoroughfare to the battlefields of Manassas and beyond. Stonewall Jackson's "Foot Cavalry," as his infantry troops were called, would march through the pass several times and during the maneuvering that took place before the Battle of Second Manassas in 1862 Confederate troops would form battle lines near there temporarily. Later in the war Confederate partisan John Mosby would annoy union forces in the area who were using the railroad through Thoroughfare to supply troops.

After the Civil War the area again returned to its quiet agricultural identity with area farms providing grain, milk and other goods for consumption. Farmers took grain to nearby Beverly's Mill on Broad Run where it was ground into flour and meal.

"I can remember my father loading up the wagon and taking grain to the mill on Broad Run," said Isabelle Tibbs, an elderly lifelong resident of western Prince William and Fauquier Counties. "The mailman would come to our house by horse and buggy . . . and he might carry a little whiskey with him to keep him warm when it was cold, she said laughing. Tibbs father, Robert Gaskins, owned a farm in the area before the turn of the century.

Today Beverly's Mill, first known as Chapman's Mill, sits abandoned in a parklike setting alongside Broad Run. Fruit trees and a well clipped lawn surround the splendid stone walls that once resounded with the voices of community and activity. Slave



Howard Brown—for Journal Messenger

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labor was used to build the impressive six-story structure in the 1850s from stone quarried from the nearby mountains. Now despite its being emblazoned with no trespassing signs and some spray painted graffiti, the mill site is still inviting on a quiet sunny afternoon.

"All you need is a good book, a thermal container filled with coffee and a sunny day to enjoy this place," one recent visitor said as she watched Broad Run flow by the mill. In nearby woods stand the ruins of many of the buildings that made up the tiny community that once surrounded the mill itself including another mill and several plantation homes.

Jane Strong, who grew up in Thoroughfare, remembers riding with her grandfather on regular trips to Chapman's Mill to have the grain from Cloverland and Walnut Farms ground into flour.

"Some was sold to the miller and some was taken back to the farm," she said.

Strong said that it had always been her dream to see someone turn the old mill into a restaurant. "There's so much history there and think what an atmosphere it would be," she said.

During the Civil War Confederate soldiers turned the mill into a meat storage and curing facility. But, southern soldiers finally were forced to burn the mill, and much of the two million pounds of stored meat, to prevent it from falling into union hands when

southern forces withdrew from the area in 1862. However, the stone outer structure survived and the interior of the mill was rebuilt after the war. Local records show that as late as the 1940s the mill could produce 75 barrels of flour and 150 bushels of meal daily.

"Thoroughfare was a little more active when I was growing up than it is now," said Quinton Lawler, Strong's brother, whose family lived in the area for generations. "We had a good size railway depot, post office and railway agent," he

said.

Since then both the train station and post office have moved. The train depot moved to The Plains, in Fauquier County, and the post office moved to Haymarket. The depot building was located for years across the street from what is now Tim's Market, and later was moved and turned into an antique store. Lawler said.

"Farming has always been the main interest of people around Thoroughfare, but there was a gentleman who owned the store

and spent most of this time operating a one-man gravel quarry near Silver Lake," he said. Lawler's grandfather, Richard T. Carter, managed Cloverland and Walnut Farms, both large farms located on John Marshall Highway near Thoroughfare. At one time

Carter also owned the town store. Standing abandoned and nearly fallen down on the south side of John Marshall Highway near the railroad tracks is what was once Robinson's store, according to Strong.

Local legend boasts ghost haunting highway

By HOWARD BROWN
JM Special Writer

"I remember when I was a child I would go over to Robinson's and buy a big loaf of bread for a dime," Jane Strong reminisced. Although there were only six houses or so in what would be considered town, there were many surrounding farms that made up the community.

According to local legends there are a few ghosts that haunt Thoroughfare Gap. One is the ghost of a man called "Old Mike" who frequently stopped at a Thoroughfare store for a few glasses of rum. One evening he drank a little too much and managed to have his head severed by a passing wagon. Today

Old Mike might be seen walking the roads and fields carrying his head under his arm, perhaps trying to find someone to attach it to his ghostly body. Another ghost is that of a white calf seen near a spring on one of the local farms.

The highway that once carried Indians, pioneers and armies was widened and hard surfaced in the 1930s as were many roads at that time, and houses in Thoroughfare were literally pushed back for this, Quinton Lawler said.

"They tell me they moved our house back while my mother and I were inside the house," he laughed.

"Before the widening and surfacing I was told it was little more than a rutted farm road," he said.

Although trains seldom pass through Thoroughfare now they were a common sight when Lawler

and Strong were growing up. Passenger trains as well as freights traversed the tracks which junction from the main line in Manassas and lead to Front Royal and beyond. "Two trains a day picked up passengers to take them to Alexandria and Front Royal," Strong said.

The passing of the age of railway transportation took much activity from Thoroughfare, but the biggest change has been the building of Route 66 nearby, Lawler said.

"That has to have been the biggest change that will take place in the area in my lifetime," he said.

"Before the interstate was built there was so much traffic and not much reason to go that way," Lawler said. "Why drive down 55 when you can get on 66 and make better time."