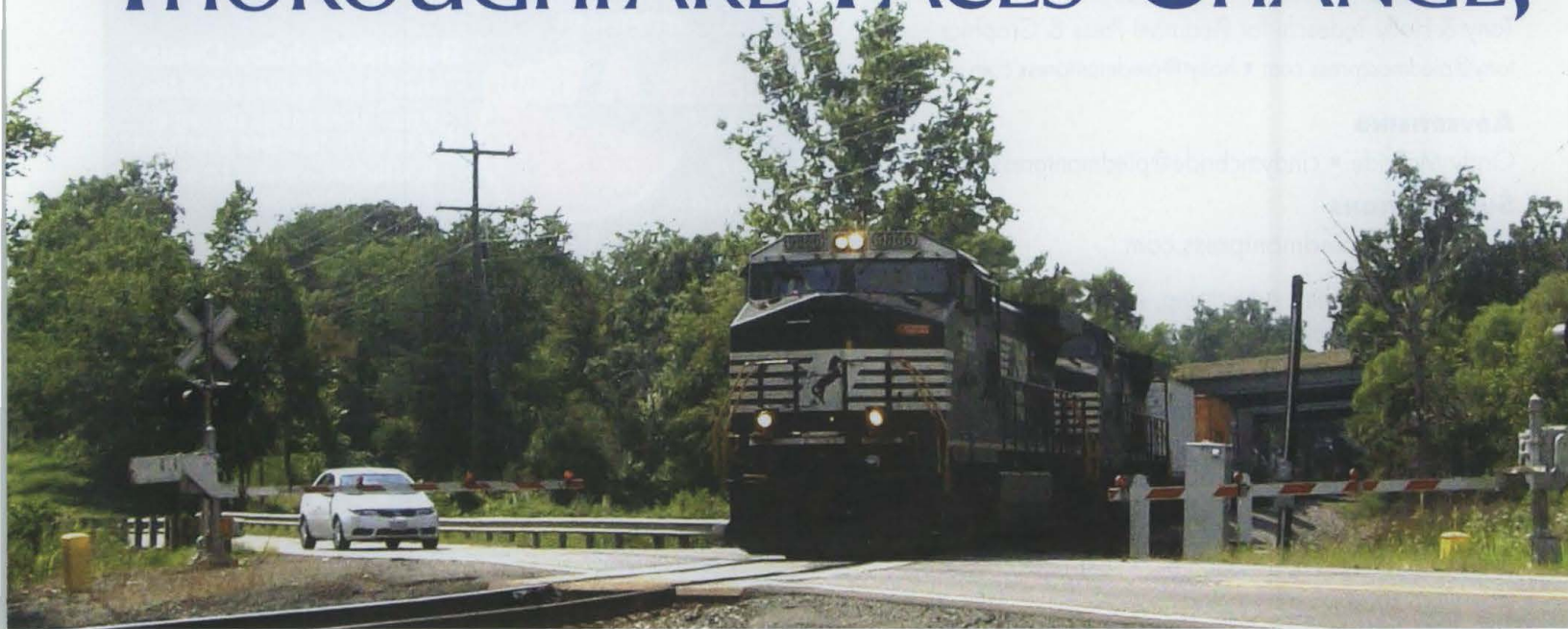


THOROUGHFARE FACES CHANGE,



The Manassas Gap Railroad first came to Thoroughfare in the 1850s. Today, Norfolk Southern freight trains pass through the village every day.

Residents of the village have deep roots, great pride in their community

by John T. Toler

The earliest references to the settlement that became Thoroughfare date back to the late 1820s, when the gap in the Bull Run Mountains west of Haymarket was known as “The Thoroughfare.”

At the time, the turnpike between Winchester and Dumfries ran through “The Thoroughfare,” and had to be maintained from May 1 to October 31. Tolls were collected at gates spaced five miles apart. It is likely that the settlement that became Thoroughfare was started as one of those tollgates.

Like most of the small villages in western Prince William County, Thoroughfare was a farming community, with most of the residents involved in agriculture, or providing supplies or labor to the area farms.

One of the most important assets in the Thoroughfare area was the nearby Chapman-Beverley Mill on Broad Run, where local farmers brought their grain to be ground. First built in 1742 as a plaster mill by Jonathan Chapman and his son Nathaniel, it was later converted to a gristmill, and over the years expanded to be one of the largest mills in the region.

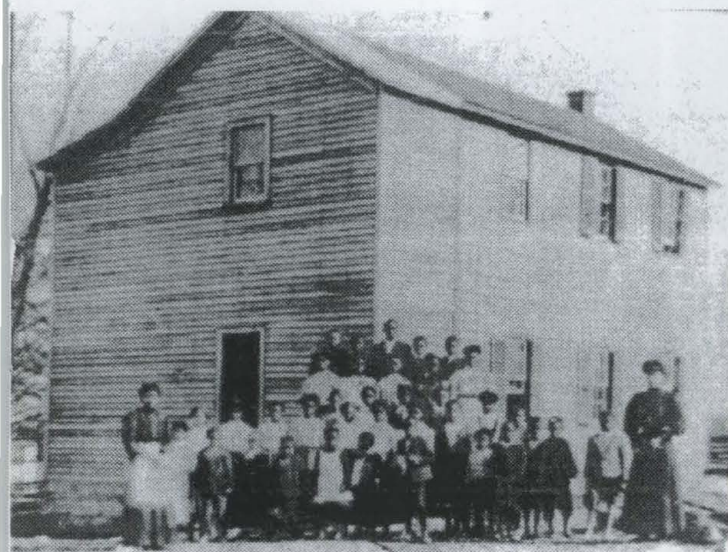
By 1835 there were twelve homes and one store in the village, and the population of the community and surrounding area had grown to about 200.

With the coming of the Manassas Gap Railroad in 1852 and the building of the first depot in Thoroughfare, commercial activity increased and the village grew to three general stores, a community hall, a post office and a school.

According to Jean R. Gardner in an article published in 1999 in *Northern Virginia Electric Co-op* magazine, “Farmers marked time by whistles from the four passenger and two freight trains that rolled through daily. The depot and its store were the community’s heart. In the store, residents bartered eggs, butter, huckleberries and chickens for sugar, coffee, canned salmon and mincemeat. They lounged on the counters, played cards, traded gossip and picked up their mail.”

Because of its strategic location near the gap and the presence of the rail line, Thoroughfare was the scene of many troop movements – both Union and Confederate – during the Civil War. But the village was

STAYS THE COURSE



The North Fork School, built by members of Thoroughfare's African-American community, was opened in 1885 and closed in 1935.



The general store in Thoroughfare operated for years by Edward J. Lawler, and later by Charles Chambers and others, is currently closed.

spared the destruction Haymarket suffered in November 1862, when rampaging Yankees burned the town. Col. John S. Mosby was a frequent visitor to Thoroughfare, harassing Union forces at every opportunity and maintaining a secret prisoner-of-war camp in the Bull Run Mountains.

There were a significant number of freed African-Americans living in Thoroughfare before the Civil War, and when the war was over, they played a significant role in the community. A sign on Route 55, erected by Prince William County, tells their story:

FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR AT THOROUGHFARE

The Allen, Berry, Fletcher, Nickens and Peyton families, along with former slaves of this area, acquired parts of former plantations, built homes and established the farming community of Thoroughfare, which prospered through the 1940s. Many of the "Free People of Color" who settled here were illiterate, but their families were not accepted into schools and churches of their white neighbors.

"In 1885 the North Fork School was built by local labor, with county funding, on

land donated by the Primas family. In 1889, community growth compelled the families to construct a second floor room and hire an additional teacher at their own expense. Also, in 1909, members of the community built the Oakrum Baptist Church on donated land, and selected their own ministers.

Born in slavery and remaining in the area after they were freed, members of the Primas family, who lived on the south side of Route 55 west of the railroad tracks, played a great part in the history of Thoroughfare.

While many of the descendants of these early families no longer live in the area, their ancestors remain, buried in the small family cemeteries around the village.

EARLY SCHOOLS AT THOROUGHFARE

The original North Fork School was built on a knoll along the North Branch of Broad Run, on the south side of Route 55 near the center of the village. It measured 18 ft. by 28 ft. with a 10-foot high ceiling, and had three large windows on each of the long sides, and one door. Later, the second story - like the original building - was built and

paid for by the African-American citizens of Thoroughfare.

By the mid-1930s the school was in disrepair, and the number of students attending the school had declined. In December 1935, a joint delegation from North Fork School and the Antioch School (located on Jackson Hollow Road, in the area known as Bridgetown) proposed to the School Board that the North Fork School be closed, and consolidated with an enlarged Antioch School.

The School Board agreed - with the stipulation that the \$400 previously raised by the Thoroughfare Community League be used to help build the expansion. "The money was to be paid as soon as the roof of the addition was completed," according to Lucy Walsh Phinney in *Yesterday's Schools*.

The North Fork School was closed at the end of the 1936-37 school year, and in September 1937, the building was sold for a mere \$40. According to School Board minutes, the schoolhouse was gone by May 1939, and the lot it stood on sold to Mr.

Thoroughfare Continued on Page 8



(Left): Purchased by Quentin Lawler Sr. many years ago for \$600, this home in Thoroughfare is now owned by his grandson, Quentin Lawler III. (Right) This hand-made dollhouse stood on the porch of the Quentin Lawler Sr. house in Thoroughfare for more than 50 years. Mr. Lawler's daughter, Jane Lawler Strong, of Gainesville, has the old dollhouse and plans to restore it.

Thoroughfare Continued from Page 7

Robert Fletcher for \$21. No trace of the school remains today.

White students attended another school in the village, which opened for the 1880-81 school year. It was located on a lot on Route 55 that was purchased from Thomas and Cornelia Smith of Washington, D.C. for \$1.00. Since a contract amount of only \$125 was authorized, it is likely that the school occupied an existing building, and the funds were used for remodeling.

Records regarding details of the transaction no longer exist, but according to Mrs. Phinney, "An undated Prince William County School Board inventory from the early 20th century lists a Thoroughfare School for white children which was built in 1900 for \$1,500, and had two rooms connected by a porch... a twin gabled metal roof three doors and five windows. At some point the Thoroughfare schoolhouse was moved from the south side of the road to the north side, where it remained until its closing."

There is no record of a white school in Thoroughfare after the early 1920s, and nothing is left of the building.

OAKRUM BAPTIST CHURCH

For nearly 150 years, Oakrum Baptist Church on Thoroughfare Road has been the religious center of the village. According to the church history, former slave Alexandra Johnson started the church in a brush

arbor shortly after the end of the Civil War. Later, a permanent building was erected on property given to the church by Mr. Johnson and Moses Morrison. Rev. James Robinson of Washington, D.C. was the first pastor.

In 1883, the church was reorganized and named Little Zion. It was later renamed Oakrum Baptist Church, in reference to "oakum," the coarse fiber used to bind the branches together in the original brush arbor. The church was rebuilt in 1909, and modernized in 1955.



Mary Washington Fields has been a devoted member of Oakrum Baptist Church for 71 years.

Mary Washington Fields was born on June 28, 1911, was born in Washington, D.C. She was baptized at Oakrum Baptist Church in 1940, and has been a devoted member of the church for 71 years, serving in many ways, including church secretary.

Mrs. Fields was married to the late Ernest Fields, and her family grew up in the church. Her son, Marcus Dulaney Fields Sr., of Fauquier County, was ordained in the church and served as pastor for over a decade. Her uncle was Rev. Peter G. Berry, pastor of Olive Branch and Mount Calvary Baptist Church, and her aunt, the late Betty V. Berry, was a deaconess at Oakrum. Mrs. Fields moved from Thoroughfare to a home on Old Carolina Road, where she has lived for the past 55 years.

In addition to preaching the gospel, members of the church have taken on the roles of community activists. In addition to gaining recognition for the African-American heritage at Thoroughfare, the Oakrum congregation strongly opposed the establishment of a landfill on the Cloverland property, the proposed Colonial Downs Racetrack, and the Disney's America Theme Park project, all of which would have changed the character of Thoroughfare forever.

In a 1999 interview, Pastor Fields explained his position on these issues:

"My roots go back to pre-Civil War times, and I felt I owed it to my family to make people aware of what's going on with the mounting campaign of over-development. Our efforts here

Thoroughfare Continued on Page 10

at the church are to maintain our quality of life and simplicity. We are not against controlled growth, which is inevitable. We are interested in stopping displacement and destruction of the integrity of the land."

The present pastor of Oakrum Baptist Church is Rev. Michael E. Tinsley, of Culpeper.

RECALLING THE OLD DAYS

Like her long-time friend Mary Fields, Jane Lawler Strong, of Gainesville, also has deep roots in the community. She was raised in the house that her father, Quentin F. Lawler Sr. bought many years ago for \$600. Coming from Haymarket, it is the third house on the left, just before crossing the railroad tracks.

A hand-made dollhouse, given to Mrs. Strong's mother as a child, sat on their front porch for over 50 years, becoming a Thoroughfare landmark. "Everybody would say, 'Yes, we know that house. That's the one with the dollhouse!'" Remarkably, after several changes in ownership, it is now the home of Mrs. Strong's nephew, Quentin F. "Trey" Lawler III.



First organized in 1883, Oakrum Baptist Church at Thoroughfare has always played an important role in the community.

She also recalls the days when the train depot sat along the tracks, just below her father's house. "My grandmother and I rode that train to Danville, to visit my aunt."

Mrs. Strong notes that the first of the three houses in the village on the south (left) side of Route 55 was once owned by Thoroughfare's postmistress, Daisy Douglas, who ran the post office in a small building on the corner of her property. "When the post office in Thoroughfare was closed, we got our mail from Broad Run," said Mrs. Strong.

Mrs. Strong's maternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Carter, once owned the second house, now owned by Jack Repass Sr. and his wife Catherine. Her paternal grandfather, Edward J. Lawler, lived in the house on the other side of Route 55, next to the last existing Thoroughfare store, which he ran for many years with her aunt, Iris Ashby.

On the same side, back toward Haymarket, was a home occupied by an African-American family she remembers as Uncle John and Aunt Mariah. A third house occupied the corner lot

at the corner of Route 55 and Thoroughfare Road, but it is now long gone.

On the south side of Route 55 across the tracks, Mose Robinson, an African-American entrepreneur, operated a small general store. It was closed when Mr. Robinson moved away, and after standing empty for several years, it was demolished.

Some long-gone buildings are sadly missed. Antioch-Macrae Elementary School on Thoroughfare Road was built in 1953 to consolidate the small African-American elementary schools in the area. A sturdy structure built of cinderblock faced with brick, the school had five classrooms, a kitchen, cafeteria, an office and two bathrooms.

Antioch-Macrae was integrated in 1965, and remained an important part of village life until it was closed in 1982, due to falling enrollment and the opening of the new George C. Tyler Elementary School.

Mrs. Strong's first grandchild was a student at Antioch-Macrae, and she was very familiar with the school. "I hated to see it closed, and it was terrible when they tore it down," she said. Louse Lightner Jamison of Haymarket, who once taught there, echoed this sentiment. She described the school as "a country club" before it was closed. Only an empty field remains where Antioch-Macrae once stood.

AND FOR THE FUTURE...

For the time being, development pressure on the area around Thoroughfare appears to have diminished. The establishment of a large wetlands reserve along Route 55 and Thoroughfare Road provides a permanent easement, as do Camp Snyder, a large Boy Scout Camp, and the recently opened Silver Lake Park.

In addition, area residents still support historic preservation, borne of their opposition to the mega-projects proposed for the area over the last 30 years. Will Thoroughfare someday become a designated a protected historic site? Only time will tell.

See related article on the Thoroughfare Train Station on page 12

Author John Toler is a writer and historian and has served Fauquier County for over 50 years, including 4 decades with the Fauquier-Times Democrat. He has written and lectured about many legendary characters in Fauquier County's history. Toler is the co-author of 250 Years in Fauquier County: A Virginia Story, and author of Warrenton, Virginia: A History of 200 Years.

