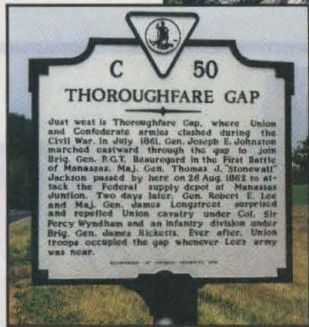


# Thoroughfare, Virginia — Steeped in History, Rich in Ideals

by Contributing Writer Jean R. Gardner

Just off Route 55, outside of Haymarket, is a small enclave of civilization known as Thoroughfare. Here resides a group of people whose roots can be traced to pre-Civil War times. Although builders have infringed on adjoining areas in Haymarket and Gainesville with residential and business development, Thoroughfare remains unique and true unto itself. The efforts of its dedicated and like-minded populace make it one of the more successful forces in Virginia interested in limiting urban development and congestion.

Up the road a few miles is a low pass in the Bull Run Mountains called Thoroughfare Gap, once known as "the gateway to the west," a short mountain range that extends from U.S. 50 at Aldie to U.S. 211 at New Baltimore. It is crossed by the John Marshall Highway, a branch of the Southern Railway, and the south fork of Broad Run. The 384-foot-high Gap was often called "The Thoroughfare" in the 19th century, with its most prominent feature "a spring issuing from under a great rock." Nestled under the mountain (called Mother Leathercoat — so named for a long-ago proprietor of a popular roadside tavern near the Gap) a community arose as Thoroughfare around 1828, and came to be known as a bustling little farming community that more than provided for the bread-and-butter needs of its roughly 200 residents. Around 1835 it was noted as having 12 dwelling houses, one mercantile store and a mill. Later, the village grew to three general stores, a community hall, a two-story clapboard school, a depot with passenger trains each day to Washington and Harrisonburg, and a post office. The railroad was an important part of its early history. Farmers marked time by whistles from the four passenger and two freight trains that rolled through daily. The depot and its store were the



**The Gap played a significant role for early settlers as a key trade route connecting the fertile Shenandoah Valley to the bustling colonial ports of Dumfries and Alexandria. It appeared on Virginia maps as early as 1731.**

community's heart well into this century. 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, bought chewing tobacco and picked up their mail. Because of the railroad's location at Thoroughfare, the area figured prominently in the Battles of First and Second Manassas during the Civil War and was the site of many skirmishes. During the last two years of the war, Colonel John S. Mosby played a game of hide and seek in and out of the Gap while the Union army used the Manassas Gap Railroad.

Today, Thoroughfare's population is approximately 75. For the last 130 years or so, about half of the Thoroughfarers have left the area seeking jobs and training in bigger cities. The one remaining convenience store located next to the railroad tracks has been closed since 1998, but there is still a post office, located up the road about three miles at Broad Run. Elaine Wiser, postmaster since 1967, greets customers and curious passers-by smack in the middle of the pass. Note: although area residents refer to their

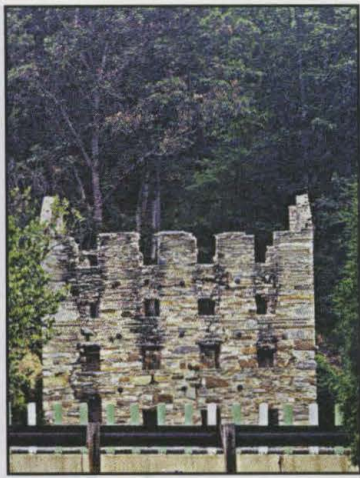
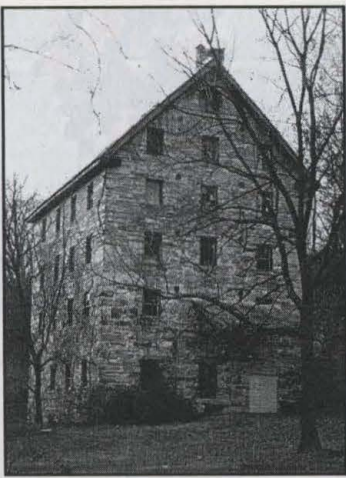
residence as Thoroughfare, the actual mailing address is Broad Run, Virginia. According to Wiser, the names are considered interchangeable.

Beverly Mill, located across the road from the post office, on the other side of Route 66, was an impressive structure with its two-and-a-half-story height. Built in 1742 by Jonathan Chapman and his son Nathaniel on the line between Prince William and Fauquier counties, it was instrumental in the development of the Shenandoah Valley as a corn and wheat-farming region. The first use of the mill was to crush limestone into plaster, but it was later converted to a gristmill. During the Civil War, the Confederate Army stored salted meat in the mill until March 1862. Forced to retreat with Union forces advancing, they set fire to the mill because they did not want the meat falling into the hands of the northern forces.

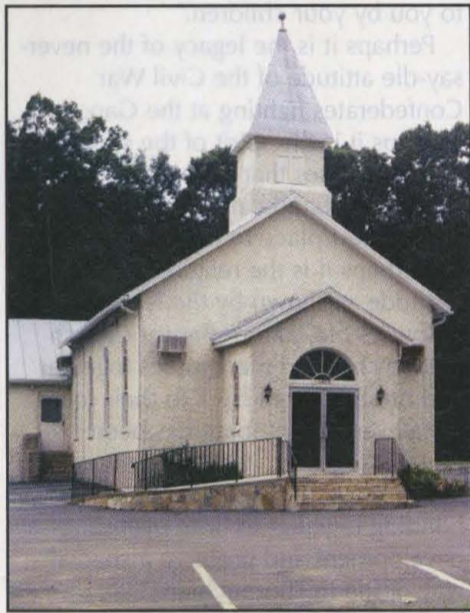
In 1863, William Beverly bought the mill from the Chapman estate, hence its name today, and restored it. The mill changed hands three more times, then closed in 1951. Engineers proposed demolishing the mill to make way for the I-66 expansion in the 1970s, but

**HISTORIC SITE FILE: *Thoroughfare Historic District***  
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM

**Beverly Mill as it looked before and after arsonists almost destroyed it in 1998.**



shifted the route when Thoroughfare residents rose in protest. A private foundation purchased the mill in 1976, but kept it boarded up. It was frequently assaulted by vandals and tragically, a vandalism attack almost completely burned down the structure in 1998. Currently, local residents are raising money for its restoration. The "Turn the Mill Around" campaign, a non-profit organization that now owns the mill, has been awarded a \$300,000 grant from the Virginia Department of Transportation that will be used to stabilize and rebuild the structure. The site has been declared a historical district, and campaign members hope to someday rebuild the old mill store and also develop a public park to interpret the history of the mill in a living history setting.



**Oakrum Baptist Church in Thoroughfare, Virginia.**

**Religion Plays Major Role in Thoroughfare History**

Organized religion has been present in Virginia from the first day English colonists landed in 1607. Its growth, trials, tribulations and reorganization are a very vital piece of local history. By the end of the war in 1865 and after the Emancipation Proclamation, the original Thoroughfare village became settled by freed slaves.

Also, in 1865, the Rev. Thornton Johnson, his brother George Johnson, and Thomas Primas organized Johnson's Church — now the forerunner of Oakrum Baptist Church in present day Thoroughfare. In 1883, the church was reorganized and named Little Zion. It was later renamed Oakrum Baptist and its first pastor was the Rev. James Robinson. (The name Oakrum is derived from the word oakum, which was a coarse fiber binding the 1865 brush arbor at the original Thoroughfare settlement.) Negro children went to school at Johnson's Church until the Thoroughfare School was established in 1885.



**Pastor Marcus Fields, his wife Robin, and daughter Meesha (The Fields' also have three sons: Marcus Jr., Michael, and Mitchell.)**

**Church and Community Bond to Preserve History**

In 1993, Marcus Fields, Sr., became the pastor of Oakrum Baptist. In addition to his pastoral duties, Pastor Fields is also an avid activist and crusader for preservation of the historic Thoroughfare area. A major example of this preservation is directly across the dirt road from the church. Workers with bulldozers are clearing trees in order to develop wetlands and to build a facility that will be used by the Boy Scouts as a training center. The wetlands will also be a haven for wildlife and vegetation. Pastor Fields and other congregation members were instrumental in getting petitions signed and attending City Council meetings to bring about this decision. Asked what has kept him in Thoroughfare, Pastor Fields said, "This is and will always be my home. 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 overdevelopment. We need to be an example to others to not sell out to more building and mass development. Our efforts here at the church are to maintain our quality of life and simplicity. We are not against controlled growth as that is inevitable. We are interested in stopping displacement and destruction of the integrity of the land."

Examples of Pastor Fields' involvement in this preservation effort were the "Stop Disney" project and the Colonial Downs Racetrack project. In their attempt to stop the Colonial Downs Racetrack, concerned Thoroughfare citizens (led by enduring resident and spunky figure in Gap history, 87-year-old Marie Primas) and other groups in the area attended and addressed civic meetings, wrote letters, prepared forceful presentations and approached other church and community leaders including the Virginia State Racing Commission. As a result, a major campaign was mounted and a petition was presented to the Prince William County Board of Supervisors.

In discussing her efforts to help save Thoroughfare from overdevelopment, Primas stated, "Having repudiated



**Pictured from left are: LaTisha Tibbs, Rose Marie Tibbs, and Kristina Harris at a recent Oakrum church service.**



**Mrs. Marie Primas.**

moves to place a dump on Cloverland, or a race track, or nearly a Disney World, with God's blessing, Thoroughfare shall endure! An African proverb, often quoted these days, states that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Similarly, it takes a group of families of like mind, spirit, and aspirations to create a special place like Thoroughfare. Through observation and association, I know and appreciate the worth and work of many Thoroughfare families."

Primas was born in Wilson, North Carolina. She taught school in the south and in the public school system and Howard University in Washington, D.C. In 1938 she wed Walter Primas. They subsequently purchased and moved to the property that belonged to Mr. Primas' ancestors in Thoroughfare, where Mr. Primas designed and constructed the home in which Mrs. Primas currently resides. There is a family cemetery on the property where Mr. Primas, his parents and many relatives are buried. The earliest dates on markers are Thomas Primas (1830 to 1880) and Elizabeth Virginia Berry Primas (1833 to 1920), Mr. Primas' grandparents. In speaking of the grandparents, Primas said, "They were ex-slaves of exemplary character and worth, married in 1848 at ages 18 and 15 respectively. Of their 13 children, 11 reached adulthood. They have achieved outstandingly, their spouses, their children, and their children's children." Asked why she continued to stay in Thoroughfare, Primas said, "My husband thought of Thoroughfare as



**The Primas Family Cemetery, one of the oldest family owned cemeteries in Virginia.**

'the nearest place to heaven on earth.' For generations, this extraordinary, blessed spot has been cherished by its residents. Newcomers have found it the answer to their dreams. Many changes and historical events have formed it, as the years have passed from pre-Columbian days to the present. Noteworthy in its history have been a vast plantation, known as the Chew Farm or Cloverland; the Beverly Mill, to which the farmers carried their corn to be ground into cornmeal; Haymarket, to which the farmers drove their cattle for sales; and the battles of the Civil War."

Another active proponent of preserving the integrity of the land is Victoria Price from an organization known as "Friends of Bull Run." In a speech presented in 1997 during the "Stop Disney" effort, Price stated, "This is a historical area which must not be lost or buried under subdivisions or a theme park with a pretense of history. I would like to see the Town of Thoroughfare become a designated

historical site, protected from excessive invasion. There are very few districts founded by freed slaves that still remain in the memory of America. Here lies American history, not just in the local family burial grounds, such as the Primas and Allen cemeteries, but in those of us who were taught and who remember how the cultures respected the land, how the African and Native American allied against those who would steal their lands. This is my people's history and in the history of many who remember the words of the Native American, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations, and in the African — take good care of the Earth; she is not given to you by your parents; she is lent to you by your children."

Perhaps it is the legacy of the never-say-die attitude of the Civil War Confederates fighting at the Gap; perhaps it is the spirit of the strong-willed families that have made Marie Primas' husband call Thoroughfare — "the closest place to heaven on earth;" or perhaps it is the religious faith and fortitude as shown by the founders and followers of Oakrum Baptist Church that has melded the families together and brought them back to their roots. Whatever fervent force has been brought together, it is felt and experienced by the evidence of bonding together to limit over-development and preserve a special way of life in Thoroughfare.