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The Unfinished Manassas Gap Railroad

by William Page Johnson, II



Did you know that Fairfax could have been a railroad town? In the mid-1840's a small group of enterprising businessmen from Alexandria and farmers from outlying counties sought a cheaper, more efficient alternative to roads and turnpikes for moving goods to Alexandria. At the time, there was tremendous competition between the port towns of Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond and Baltimore for the wheat, flour, corn, livestock, apples, and butter of the upper piedmont and Shenandoah Valley farms in Virginia. Up to this time, all goods from Virginia farms were shipped by road.

Orange and Alexandria Railroad

Under the leadership of John Strode Barbour (1790-1855), these entrepreneurs and farmers from Culpeper and Orange counties conceived the idea of constructing a railroad from Alexandria to Gordonsville.¹ John S. Barbour was a veteran member of the Virginia General Assembly (1813-1823) and a five-term United States Congressman (1823-1833). His grandson, John S. Barbour (1866-1952), a lawyer, built the *Barbour House*, which still exists in the City of Fairfax.²

A southerly route through Fairfax County was selected. With the assistance of Barbour as its President, the Orange & Alexandria Railroad Company (O&A) was chartered in 1848. Construction began in early 1850. By late 1851, the railroad had reached Tudor Hall (now called Manassas), and was completed to Gordonsville in early 1854. Along the way new stations and towns and were established: Springfield, Burke, Sideburn (abandoned), Fairfax Station, Devereaux (now Clifton) and Sangster (abandoned).³

Alexandria became the headquarters for the O&A. A roundhouse, repair shops and rail yard were built there to operate the railroad.

Manassas Gap Railroad

At about the same time, another group of businessmen, under the leadership of Edward Carrington Marshall (1805-1882) of Fauquier County, were seeking to link the fertile Shenandoah Valley with a faster, more reliable transportation system. Marshall was a member of the Virginia General



A remnant of the Unfinished Manassas Gap Railroad on the Higgenbotham Property (near Main St. & Judicial Drive)
 Photo credit: Page Johnson

Unfinished Railroad... - continued from pg. 1

Assembly (1836-1838)⁴ and the son of famed Chief Justice John Marshall (1755-1835).

With Edward C. Marshall as its president, the Manassas Gap Railroad (MGRR) was chartered in early 1850, just as the O&A began construction. A route was planned from Tudor Hall to the Town of Strasburg in the Shenandoah Valley. In order to reduce the expense of laying track, the MGRR chose to link with the O&A at Tudor Hall. The junction of the two railroads became known as *Manassas Junction*. The MGRR agreed to pay a rental fee to the O&A to operate on the O&A track between Manassas and Alexandria. By 1854, the MGRR had extended its line from Manassas to Mount Jackson.⁵

Strasburg became the headquarters for the MGRR. Substantial facilities including a roundhouse, repair shops and rail yard were built there to operate the railroad.

Unfinished Line of the Manassas Gap Railroad

The Manassas Gap Railroad was profitable, however, the annual rental fee of approximately \$30,000 to the O&A was a major expense. In 1853, the company received permission to establish an independent line from Alexandria to Gainesville. At a meeting in Fairfax that same year, MGRR President Edward C. Marshall urged the citizens of Fairfax to contribute capital to the completion of the extension. If \$30,000 were raised, Marshall stated:



A "cut" in the line of the Unfinished Manassas Gap Railroad. Higginbotham Property, City of Fairfax.
Photo credit: Page Johnson



Rails for the Manassas Gap Railroad at Alexandria, VA, Waiting to be Delivered.

Photo credit: J. Paul Getty Museum, All Rights Reserved

*"I warrant that in less than eighteen months the Iron Horse will be seen prancing in your midst."*⁶

A 35-mile route was planned. The new line would run from Jones Point through the Cameron Valley in Alexandria, passing near Annandale and through Fairfax Court House (now the City of Fairfax) in Fairfax County, through Sudley Mill at Bull Run and on to Gainesville in Prince William County.

The line entered the City of Fairfax from the present day Mantua neighborhood, running parallel to Little River Turnpike (Main Street) just to the north. It passed south of the tank farm and continued through the Little River Hills, Fairview and Farrcroft neighborhoods into downtown Fairfax. North Street in downtown Fairfax was the right-of-way. From North Street, the MGRR crossed over Little River Turnpike, passed behind the courthouse and continued out of the city in a southwesterly direction.

Construction of the independent line began in 1854, but was quickly slowed by the costs of land and the necessity of making substantial "cuts" and "fills" to create a level grade.

*"The amount of work to be done is large, the line for its whole extent through Fairfax, passes upon a rolling broken surface, involving deep excavations and heavy fills to maintain a proper grade."*⁷

Unfinished Railroad... - continued from pg. 2

John McD. Goldsborough
Chief Engineer, MGRR

All of the work was done by hand with local people supplying the bulk of the labor. The Panic of 1857 significantly reduced available capital. The growing secession crisis and talk of hostilities produced labor shortages and slowed progress further. By 1858, the MGRR was deeply in debt. One year short of completion, with the rails for the new line waiting in Alexandria, but with no money to lay them, work on the new line stopped.

Civil War and the Aftermath

Although no track was ever laid, the unfinished portion of the MGRR did play an important role during the Civil War. The "cuts and fills" of the line served as earthworks, battle and skirmish sites and as little-known transportation routes for both Confederate and Union soldiers. The MGRR figured prominently in the 2nd Battle of Manassas when Confederate forces, under Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson, used a "cut" in the unfinished line near Sudley as a defensive position.

*"The troops were disposed in rear of Groveton along the line of the unfinished branch of the Manassas Gap Railroad, and extended from a point a short distance west of the turnpike toward Sudley Mill...."*⁸

Gen. Robert E. Lee
Report on 2nd Battle of Manassas
June 8, 1863

Locally, in the City of Fairfax, at least one skirmish occurred on the unfinished line near the Courthouse. On June 27, 1863, the 11th New York Cavalry engaged an advance guard of Stuart's Cavalry in a "ravine" behind the Courthouse. The New Yorkers charged and a running battle to Fairfax Station ensued.

"I asked [Major Remington] to let me lead C company up the ravine in the rear of the Court House so as to get between the Johnnies and the woods.... With a mighty yell...down our side and up their

*side of the ravine, but they did not wait for us. They broke into a dead run in the direction of Fairfax Station."*⁹

Capt. George A. Dagwell
Co. C, 11th New York Cavalry

After the war, the Manassas Gap Railroad attempted to rebuild, but with most of its track torn up and nearly all of its rolling stock destroyed, it simply could not continue. In 1867, the MGRR merged with the O&A to form the Orange, Alexandria and Manassas Railroad. With this merger, the original reason for creating the independent line ceased to exist. As a consequence, the Independent Line was abandoned with much of the right-of-way being sold and the railroad bed plowed under for farming.

Remnants

In some places, however, where there were deep cuts or high fills, the right-of-way has survived. One such place is a high cut and fill in Annandale. The Annandale remnant is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the City of Fairfax, small remnants remain on Maple and Chestnut Streets in the Westmore neighborhood and immediately behind the Fairfax Presbyterian Church on Main Street.

The largest and best-preserved remnant in the City of Fairfax is located behind the Fairfax Presbyterian Church, extending onto the Higginbotham property (Main Street & Yorktown Drive) and across Judicial Drive into the city cemetery. The Higginbotham property has recently come under threat from a condominium development. The Board of Directors of Historic Fairfax City, Inc. has written to the City of Fairfax Planning Commission and City Council to request that this remnant be preserved in its entirety.

"The MGRR ROW on the Higginbotham property is a thoughtful reminder of the carnage of the Civil War. In addition, the remaining right-of-way offers tangible evidence to the energies, dreams and hard work of those who came before us. That is history! This section also presents a dramatic example of railroad engineering of the mid-19th Century because of the transition from a "cut" to a substantial "fill" more than 20 feet high. This is the

Fairfax, Virginia, March 2004-

Message from the President:

On March 21, Historic Resources and HFCI were hosts to 150 members of the Virginia Association of Museums (VAM) for a tour of the Museum and a reception. VAM's yearly conference was held at Tyson's Corner this year and it was an honor to be asked to participate with all the wonderful historic sites in this area. Susan Gray, Curator of the Fairfax Museum, was also asked to speak at one of the sessions. We were indeed proud to show off our newly renovated Museum and the Civil War Exhibit. And – if you haven't visited the Museum lately please do – in addition to the exhibits, there are some unique items for sale in our store.

It is with regret that we say farewell to David Bates, a member of the HFCI Board for 8 years. David held the position of Treasurer for HFCI and his work throughout the years was invaluable. We bid goodbye also to Alan Glenn our other retiring Board member whose employment became more demanding. We wish both David and Alan the best of luck. Welcome Patricia Fabio, John E. Petersen, Bonnie McDaniel and Ellie Schmidt our newest Board members. We are privileged to have their expertise to help us accomplish our many goals for the upcoming year. Events coming up:

April 1: 2005 Homes Tour Committee Meeting
 May 1-2: Civil War Days at the Blenheim Estate
 May 19: HFCI General Mtg. at Old Town Hall

Please call me if you are interested in working as a committee member on the Homes Tour Committee or as a docent for the 2005 Homes Tour or at Blenheim on May 1-2. We use about 90 volunteers for each of these functions so your help would be greatly appreciated. The Bicentennial Committee is also busily working on projects in conjunction with the City to make our 200th birthday a very special event. Volunteers for this committee are also needed.

Our Capital Campaign Project Committee is busy selecting benches and planters for the garden at the Museum. It's NOT TOO LATE to be a part of this memorial garden. If you would like you and your family to be remembered in the City's history, you can purchase an engraved family or corporate brick for \$500.00 and a sidewalk brick for \$250.

For information on all of the possible memorial objects, please call Bill Jayne at 703 352 1534.

Welcome, also, members who sent in your membership dues for the 2004 and new members joining us. Your membership dues provide us with the funds to assist us with the work of preservation in the City of Fairfax. If you haven't sent in your dues please use the attached form and join HFCI's mission. Thank you to you donors who generously provide us with additional funds for special projects.

Work at the Ratcliffe and Blenheim cemeteries is in full swing. It's an exciting time to be on the verge of identifying our City's founder's family at the Ratcliffe cemetery. The Blenheim cemetery houses several of the family's markers; however, there is evidence of more graves on the site.

I would like to publicly thank all the Board members for their hard work on HFCI's projects. We have 14 active committee's and 7 City delegates. The participants are extremely active, energetic and eager to continue to make this City the best it can be. Volunteers for any of the committee's is welcome.

Hope to see you on April 1st for the Homes Tour Committee meeting – don't miss Civic War Days at Blenheim or our General Meeting on May 19th. Come and introduce yourself to us and if you have any questions feel free to call me at 703 591 5305 or e-mail me at hilcarn31@aol.com. Check out our website for HFCI news.



Plan on attending Civil War Weekend May 1st & 2nd at Blenheim Estate! Historic fun for the whole family!



Visit us on the web:

<http://www.ci.fairfax.va.us/Host/hfci/index.htm>

Getting To Know You

HFCI Board Member Edward Coleman Trexler, Jr.



Ed joined our Board only one year ago but his interest in the City's history has been an ongoing project for the 40 years he has lived in the City. Ed came on the Board "running" – he volunteered to Chair the Historic Properties Register Committee and began compiling the historic properties in the City – a job that takes much research and investigation. He also became involved in researching the Ratcliffe Cemetery project as well as serving on the Collections Acquisition Committee, and just recently spurred a new committee "Historic Markers."

Ed is a native born Virginian and descends from Virginia families who first settled the Virginia Colony. Ed has written a book "Descendants of Conquest, Families of the James River Valley of Virginia" which describes the lives of his early Virginia families. His book "Endowed by the Creator: Families of Fairfax Court House, Virginia" has just been published and is an excellent accounting of early Fairfax and the families that built it. (Ed's book is for sale at the Museum).

Ed is retired from his vocation as an Engineer where he participated in space science exploration studies and worked on the SKYLAB and APOLLO projects and others, during his career. He is married and lives with his wife, Anne, in Fairfax. They have three children and six grandchildren who all live in the general area.

In addition to his work on the HFCI Board, Ed is active in other church and civic activities, is a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, The Descendants of Valley Forge, the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Military Order of the Stars and Bars. We are fortunate to have Ed as a Board member – his expertise in history his energy, and dedication to our mission is invaluable.



The HFCI Board meets on the 2nd Wednesday of each month in room 306, at City Hall, Fairfax, Virginia. Visitors are welcome!

Unfinished Railroad... - continued from pg. 3

only known example where both cut and fill can be seen. The site offers great potential for interpretation."

In addition to the historical interpretive value, the site, if preserved, is valuable as open and recreational space.

The construction of the Orange & Alexandria and Manassas Gap Railroads was one of the greatest advancements in this area's history. Both still exist today as part of the Southern Railway system. In addition to the towns and stations that were established, stores, blacksmith shops, and other businesses grew. Growth, that continues unbroken to this day.

The remnants of the unfinished MGRR stand in mute testament to hard work, skill and daring of those who came before us and are a perfect place to look back on how historical events converged to create the treasured place we now call home.

Primary Sources

Remnants of the Independent Line of the Manassas Gap Railroad, Susan Jane Nobel, Echoes of History, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 1975, Virginia Room, Fairfax City Regional Library, Fairfax, VA.

The Unfinished Independent Line of the Manassas Gap Railroad, H.H. Douglas, Echoes of History, Vol. 5, No.4, November 1975, Virginia Room, Fairfax City Regional Library, Fairfax, VA.

History of the Manassas Gap Railroad, City of Fairfax Planning Department, © 1976, Fairfax, VA.

Endnotes

¹ Congressional Biography. U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC.; <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>

² Obituary of John S. Barbour, Proceedings of the Sixty-Third Annual Meeting of the Virginia State Bar Association, 1953, Richmond Press, Inc., Richmond, VA.

³ Sideburn Road in the City of Fairfax once connected with this now extinct station.

⁴ Edward Carrington Marshall was President of the Manassas Gap Railroad. He was a graduate of Harvard College (1826) and was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates (1834-1838).

⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, October 20, 1854, p. 3.

⁶ *Alexandria Gazette*, October 25, 1853, p. 3.

⁷ *Alexandria Gazette*, October 20, 1854, p. 3.

⁸ Official Records of the War of The Rebellion, Series 1, Vol. 12 (Part II), p. 555, 1880, Washington, DC.

⁹ Smith, Thomas West, Story of a Cavalry Regiment, 1901, Veterans Association of the Regiment, NY.

Meet The First Lady!

Historic Fairfax City, Inc. invites you to attend its *Spring General Meeting and Program*, featuring Abigail Adams as portrayed by Phyllis Verhalen.

Please join us Wednesday, May 19th, at Old Town Hall for a fun and fascinating look at this remarkable woman who was the wife of the second president of the United States and mother of the sixth, and who in 1776 made one of the earliest known arguments for women's political rights in U.S. history.

The evening begins at 7:30 PM with a short general meeting of Historic Fairfax City, Inc. followed by the program and light refreshments. This event is free and open to the public. For more information, please call the Museum and Visitor Center at 703-385-8414



Advertisements

MANASSAS GAP RAIL ROAD.



To Merchants, and Forwarding Agents in Alexandria.

ON AND AFTER Monday, the 27th of September, the following articles only, will be received for transportation, loaded on Union street, (viz:) Guano, Plaster, Coal, raw-hides, Lumber (not less than three tons,) Hogs-heads of Sugar, Molasses, Bacon, (not less than 1000 lbs. each) Chartered cars contents unknown. All articles weighing less than 1000 lbs each, must be delivered to the Agent at the Depot, accompanied by a duplicate statement specifying the number, description, marks, destination, Consignor, and Consignee. And if articles weighing less than 1000 lbs. each, are found loaded in cars on Union street, they will not be forwarded, but stored at the expense of the Consignor. By order: M. M. WELSH, sep 24—1f Superintendent.

Source: *Alexandria Gazette*, October 22, 1852, p. 1.

HFCI MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/ RENEWAL

HISTORIC FAIRFAX CITY, INC. is a non-profit corporation (501©(3) organization)

Membership Classifications:

- Class A Individual\$25.00
- Class A-1 Additional Household Member\$10.00
- Class B-1 Non-profit Organizations\$35.00
- Class B-2 For profit Organizations\$50.00

Enclosed is my tax-deductible membership application and check made out to Historic Fairfax City Inc. for: \$_____

Name or Organization: _____

Telephone #: _____

Contact name: _____

e-mail: _____

Address: _____

Return to: Historic Fairfax City, Inc.,
Attention: Membership Committee
10209 Main Street
Fairfax, VA 22030



Did You Know?

Did you know that Daniel's Run, Daniel's Run Park and Daniel's Run Elementary School could be named *O'Daniel's Run*?

Daniel's Run takes its name from William & Francis *O'Daniel* who., in 1717, settled on the 300 acres where the creek, park and school are now located! Fairfax County had yet to be formed and the area was then part of Stafford County.

HFCI CAPITAL CAMPAIGN

The Board of Directors of HFCI urges members to consider donating to the Historic Fairfax Capital Campaign for preservation of City-owned historic properties. Your gift is tax-deductible and it will be especially meaningful now as the City is moving toward three historic mileposts:

In 2005 the City will celebrate its bicentennial. On January 14, 1805 the Virginia legislature approved the establishment of the Town of Providence on 14 acres of land “at the courthouse of Fairfax County.” Most people knew the village at the crossroads of Little River Turnpike and Ox Road as “Fairfax Court House,” but the formal establishment of what we now call the City of Fairfax dates from 1805.

As the City notes the achievements, the triumphs and the tragedies of 200 years of history, it looks forward to a vibrant future built on that notable past. The City Council has approved agreements to redevelop Old Town, the core of the City of Fairfax Historic District. Most of the City’s historic sites are located within the historic downtown area. In 1987, the City of Fairfax Historic District was named to the National Register of Historic Places.

Thirdly, the City has contracted with an architectural and planning team to prepare plans for the next stage of the preservation and interpretation of Blenheim. The pre-Civil War home of the Willcoxon family is nationally significant for the 100+ signatures, art, and poetry created by Union soldiers during their occupation of the Fairfax Court House area in 1862-1863. The house contains one of the most voluminous and best-preserved examples of Civil War graffiti in the nation, a “diary on walls” providing insight into typical soldier life during the Civil War. Situated on a 12-acre remnant of the estate that once covered much of the land along Old Lee Highway, the property is an “island in time” that offers visitors a direct connection to the founding of our City and the stirring times of the Civil War. The design work now underway will lead to construction that will make the site open and informative to all.

All these activities and many more deserve your support:

- Continued development of the Fairfax Museum and Visitors Center into one of the best municipal museums in the Commonwealth.

- Investigation and preservation of the Ratcliffe Cemetery.
- Enhancement of the Kitty Pozer garden.
- Preservation and interpretation of the Ratcliffe-Allison House.

The Capital Campaign Recognition Program honors individuals through nameplates and engravings on landscape architecture in City public spaces, parks, and custom-designed projects for historic properties. Sponsorship of benches, planters, and engraved sidewalk bricks will focus on the Fairfax Museum and Visitor’s Center and the Old Town Fairfax redevelopment area.

Amount	Memorial Object
\$15,000-\$25,000	Memorial Garden
\$5,000	Wooden Bench
\$750	Planter
\$250	Engraved Corporate Brick
\$100	Engraved Sidewalk Brick
Varies	Custom Historic Projects

For more information, contact the City of Fairfax Office of Historic Resources at (703) 273-5452 or (703) 385-8415.



DUES ALERT

If you have not paid your annual Historic Fairfax City, Inc. dues they are now *past due*. Please remit based on the schedule below. Annual dues payments should be made out and sent to: **Historic Fairfax City, Inc.**, 10209 Main Street, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Your annual dues help HFCI to continue to meet its basic goal of preserving the unique history of the City of Fairfax. Tax deductible donations over and above dues payments are encouraged.

Membership Classifications:

- Class A Individual\$25.00
- Class A-1 Additional Household Member...\$10.00
- Class B-1 Non-profit Organizations\$35.00
- Class B-2 For profit Organizations\$50.00

"Committed to Excellence"

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