

An Historical Snapshot of Georgetown Pike and Cornwell Farm

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GEORGETOWN PIKE

For more than two centuries the Pike has served as the main road in Great Falls. During that time a lot of history has passed over its surface.



In the late 1700s, farmers from Virginia's Piedmont and Shenandoah regions used the rugged and muddy forerunner to the Pike (some of which was in the area that later became the Pike, but much was not) to move agricultural products bound for the tobacco warehouses in Alexandria and, later, to the one at Little Falls.

In 1813 a group of investors from Georgetown and Virginia chartered the road as the Falls Bridge Turnpike. Their goal was to build a good road to attract farmers from the western counties to haul produce to the Georgetown markets and docks. The Falls Bridge (now Chain Bridge) over the Potomac River opened in 1797, but lacked a good road in Virginia to access it.

The turnpike was designed and engineered to provide the most direct way from the Alexandria Leesburg Pike to the Falls Bridge. Difficult terrain and lack of funding caused many problems during construction and delayed its completion until 1827. It was then opened as a toll road paved with gravel and two auxiliary unpaved dirt roads on either side known as "summer roads." These side roads were used in dry weather to pass slower vehicles.

Unfortunately, the Falls Bridge Turnpike Company was not financially successful and the road often fell into extreme disrepair. When the original company went bankrupt, another was formed to take over the turnpike.

The road suffered from much hard use during the Civil War. Thousands of U.S. Army troops used it throughout the four years of the conflict leaving it severely damaged. After the war, the ownership of the road was turned over to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and it returned to being a farm to market road.

Keeping the road in good repair proved to be too expensive for Fairfax County. In 1910 it was turned over to one more private company to operate as a turnpike. This company paved the Pike for automobiles and maintained it until 1934 when, like all their predecessors, they too were bankrupted.

The road was then sold at auction. The Madeira School purchased it in order to donate it to the Commonwealth of Virginia and added it to the newly formed Virginia Road system.

Today the Pike is one of only four major Northern Virginia turnpikes built in the early 1800s to remain on its original roadbed. It has been recognized and designated as the first Historic and Scenic Byway by the Virginia Commonwealth in 1974 and later, in 2012, the National Park Service added the Pike to the National Register of Historic Places, deeming it a valued roadway to protect.

Pictured below is the Commemorative sign, located at the western entrance of the Pike near Rt. 7 and Seneca Road.



CORNWELL FARM

This historic home has overlooked Georgetown Pike almost from the beginning of the road. Its construction started in 1828, but took some years to complete. Originally sited on 200 acres called the Mine Ridge Tract, this grand Georgian house was built by John Jackson as a wedding gift for his daughter Julia. While homes of this style were common in other Virginia areas, it was very unique in the Georgetown Pike corridor. There was none other like it.



The property and house suffered much damage when Union troops were camped and quartered there during the Civil War. But the house survived and was repaired by the next owners, Benjamin Franklin and Phoebe Cornwell who bought it in 1868.

They raised their five children there and farmed the 200 acres for the next fifty years. The house by then was a very distinctive landmark on Georgetown Pike and locals referred to it as “Old Brick”.

After the Cornwells died the property was again sold. Several owners later the farm was purchased by the Pells in 1936. They did a complete renovation of the house and added electricity, plumbing and bathrooms. They also built the wing on the east side to add a modern kitchen and servants’ quarters.

In 1973 the farmland was sold for development but 13 acres remained with the historic

house. Donald and Sis Opstad bought the house and listed it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.



The lovely photograph, at left, by Walt Lawrence, captures the significance once held by this historic landmark on Georgetown Pike.

