

Worship as you please, or not at all

From its inception, Prince William County was a leader in the effort to bring religious freedom to America

By **Martin Jeter**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Europeans first settled in the area that became Prince William County and for many years thereafter, there was only one church allowed: the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church.

Three Anglican Churches were in or near today's Prince William County: Pohick Church in Lorton, which was then part of Prince William, Quantico Church and Aquia Church. All three were established in 1667, when today's Prince William and Fairfax counties were part of Stafford County. Two of the three still exist: Pohick Church's current building was constructed in 1774, and Aquia Church, which was reconstructed in 1757 after a fire damaged the 1751 building. (There were previous structures at both locations.) George Washington and George Mason were members of Pohick Church.

Anglican Church operations

Virginia was divided into church parishes (similar to counties) that not only served religious purposes but also provided governmental oversight. The Anglican Church was responsible for caring for the poor, overseeing the conduct of parishioners, setting and overseeing land boundaries, setting the tax rate for church support, and establishing church-operated plantations, known as "glebes." Church attendance was mandatory and was enforced with fines, and everyone had to pay taxes to support the church.

The church was even responsible for building roads, in particular those leading to parish churches, county courts, the colonial capital and connecting counties. All males (including slaves) were required to take part in building these roads. Each individual was required to provide six days of labor each year with a system of fines to ensure compliance. These roads were essentially just cleared equestrian and pedestrian paths, since nearby waterways provided transportation for commercial purposes.

One of the first and most historic of these early roads was the "Potomac Path," which U.S. 1 generally parallels today. The route of the Potomac Path passed very closely to the Pohick and Aquia Anglican churches. It also provided access to an English fort built on Neabsco Creek in 1679 that was one of the earliest forts constructed in Virginia and to Quantico Church.

Change comes to the Anglican church

In the mid 1500s, the Church of England split from the Catholic Church and the pope, and King Henry VIII became head of the Anglican Church. There were further reforms by other English monarchs through the 1600s, resulting in somewhat of a middle position between Protestantism and Catholicism in many respects. The Anglican Church in Virginia generally was reformed along with the English version, but while the English church retained direct royal control, things evolved differently in Virginia.

In Virginia, oversight of the church initially came from the Bishop of London, but gradually more local control became the norm. This was partially due to how hard it was for the monarchy to get clergy from England to come to America. Early settlers who came to Virginia had to deal with conditions



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Aquia Church, in Stafford County, was built in 1757 and is one of the oldest churches in what was then Prince William County.

that included long ocean journeys, primitive living conditions and Indian attacks. They were willing to do this because many were looking to improve their financial condition in the new world. Church leaders didn't need the same financial incentives, so it was harder to entice them to make the journey to America, and thus the church hierarchy became more localized. This shortage of leadership also resulted in the church in Virginia being less able to perform some of its civic responsibilities, which were slowly taken over by civil courts.

The Baptists assert themselves

Even so, there were those who wanted complete autonomy from the Anglican Church and its practices, and the Baptists were prominent here. Pre-revolution, early Baptist churches were considered outlaw sects, and their members were persecuted. Baptist reverends were even arrested for preaching without permission.

One of the first Baptist churches in Virginia, and the first in Prince William County, was variously known as the Occoquan Church, Bacon Race Church or Oak Grove Church. This church stood near the intersection of Davis Ford and Bacon Race roads. The last Bacon Race Church building collapsed on Christmas eve in 1987, but the site remains as it was, including the historic cemetery.

Colonial-era Baptists took advantage of sentiments in favor of political freedom and petitioned the government for complete separation of church and state and freedom to worship as they pleased. The Occoquan Baptist Church was a leader in this effort and sent their petition to the Committee of Religion, Convention of Virginia, on May 11, 1776. The petition had three main conditions: to be able to worship as one pleases without interruption; to have one's own ministers and no other; and that one may be married, buried, etc., without paying the Parsons of any other denominations. (The complete petition as written is in the text box).

The passing in Virginia of Thomas Jefferson's "Establishing Religious Freedom" bill of 1785, placing Virginia in the forefront of religious freedom, was in part a result of the lobbying of the Occoquan Baptist church.

A Huguenot haven

Another early chapter in the quest for religious freedom in early America was also an example of land speculation and development so familiar to today's county residents. King James wanted to

A petition from Occoquan

In May 1776, the Occoquan Baptist Church sent this petition to the Committee of Religion, Convention of Virginia.

To the honourable Speaker; and other Members of the honourable Convention of Virginia, the petition of a Baptist Church at Occoquan, Pr. William County, hereby sheweth:

That whereas this Colony with others, is now contending for the civil rights and liberties of mankind against the enslaving schemes of a powerful Enemy. We being convinced, that the strictest unanimity among ourselves is very necessary in this most critical conjunction of public affairs; and that every remaining cause of animosity and diversion may if possible be removed, have thought it our duty as peaceable Christians, to petition for several religious privileges which as yet, we have not been indulged with in this part of the World. Viz.

1. That we be allowed to worship God in our own way, without interruption.
2. That we be allowed to maintain our own Ministers &c. and no other.
3. That we and our friend who desire it, may be married, buried and the like, without paying the Parsons of any other denominations, and to the utmost of our ability promote the common cause of Freedom, always praying for our welfare & success.

In behalf of the Church, this 19th day of May 1776.

expand settlement into the western areas of Prince William County, so he formed a partnership with George Foote, Nicholas Hayward, George Brent and Robert Bristow to create a haven for Huguenots in a 30,000-acre tract they named Brent Town in the Brentsville area.

The Brent family was Catholic and came to Virginia in the late 1640s, establishing the first Catholic settlement in Virginia. Huguenots were French Protestants who broke away from the Catholic church and were persecuted in France and later England. Brent Town was a real estate venture designed to lure Huguenots to settle there and be protected from persecution.

The concept failed, as few Huguenots actually came.

A later effort to make Brent Town a Catholic refuge also failed, but the effort adds to Prince William County's noteworthy record of pioneering religious freedom in America. Prince William is now incredibly religiously diverse, with local religious communities practicing every Christian denomination as well as Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism, to name a few. And just as importantly, Prince William, and America, became a place where we not only have freedom to choose a religion to follow, we're also free to not be part of any religion and to not be penalized or persecuted for it.

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How Prince William grew and grew

Highways, cheap housing fueled explosive growth

By Martin Jeter
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In 1600, around the time of the arrival of the first Europeans, it is estimated that between 14,000 and 25,000 American Indians lived in eastern Virginia. It's not clear how many actually lived in the area that's now Prince William County, but it was surely fewer than 10,000. The Doeg Indians hunted, fished, grew corn and other crops and lived in villages, and their local one was located just off of U.S. 1 near the now closed Lazy Susan dinner theater.

Early European settlers gained a lot from their relationship with the Doegs, from adopting their agricultural practices and place names (Quantico, Marumscoc, Occoquan) to using their roads to even inhabiting their villages once they were gone. Europeans also learned Indian battle techniques, using them to great advantage against the British during the Revolutionary War.

The other tribe in the Prince William area was the Manahoacs, who were nomadic hunters and didn't stay in one location for long. As more settlers came to the county, the Indians died of European diseases or moved from Prince William further west or south, mostly to get out of the way of the settlers.

Consequently, by the late 1700s after the native peoples were mostly gone from Prince William, a population of about 10,000 people remained. These were mostly immigrants from Europe and enslaved

people from Africa.

From this point, believe it or not, the overall population of Prince William didn't really change much for the next 140 years. Between 1790 and 1930 there were ups and downs to be sure, but the total population remained fairly close to 10,000. There was a downward trend at the turn of the 16th century due to westward migration. The soils in the east were depleted and harbors silted in due to farming practices, so settlers were looking for better farming and mining opportunities, among other things. In 1790, the Prince William population was 11,615, and in 1800 it was 12,733. After this it steadily dropped until 1850 when it was down to 8,129.

Parsing the numbers

When looking at early population numbers, we need to keep a few things in mind. Only free heads of households were counted in the census until 1840, with others, including slaves, being noted statistically under heads of household. The 1870 census was the first to include African Americans by name. Native Americans weren't counted throughout the country until 1890. All this, plus subjectivity on the part of the counter, makes one wonder how accurate the counts really were.

Population low point

In any case, by 1870, after the Civil War, the county population had further declined to 7,504. After the war, the southern economy was



COURTESY

Virginia's first limited access freeway, the Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway, was completed in 1952. It was 17.3 miles long and stretched from Woodbridge to the 14th Street Bridge over the Potomac River. Upgrades and expansions have continued since about the mid-1960s, as Washington, D.C.'s outer suburbs grew.

decimated, the way of life changed and many folks left, including some former slaves. It's also important to note that more than a few came in to help rebuild and also take advantage of cheap land. But overall, the population dropped. Think about this: The population of the entire county in 1870 was about the same as that of Dumfries today.

After that came a long, rollercoaster-like increase in county population that continues to the current day. There were huge increases in some decades and less in others, but the trend was always upward. The number of people living in Prince William County grew to 9,180 by 1880; 9,805 by 1890; 11,112 by 1900; 12,026 by 1910; 13,660 by 1920; and to 13,951 by 1930. As noted earlier, our population didn't change much between 1790 to 1930, but after 1930 things really began to happen. According to the 1940 and 1950 census, the population grew by about 27% each decade.

A new cash crop: Housing

But the huge increase in folks coming to Prince William started to show in the 1960 census. From 1950 to 1960, the population more than doubled, and from 1960 to 1970 it more than doubled once again, increasing by over 121% each decade. A major factor in this growth was the extension of Shirley Highway to Woodbridge in 1952.

Shirley Highway -- a precursor to Interstate 95 -- was the first limited-access highway in Virginia, and it suddenly made Woodbridge and Prince William County very attractive as a bedroom community for folks who worked in Washington, D.C. and other northern locations. After World War II, the requirements for dairy production changed, and many dairy farms in Prince William couldn't keep up with the new standards, but they could grow homes on the land as a cash crop.

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Annaburg Manor placed on Register of Historic Places

Staff Reports

The National Park Service has officially listed Annaburg Manor, located on Maple Street in Manassas, on the National Register of Historic Places. The historic house was built in 1892 as a summer retreat by Prussian-born entrepreneur Robert Portner and named for his wife Anna.

The City of Manassas bought the house, which sits on 3.65 acres, in 2019 and opened the grounds for use as a park. City staff and consultants worked together on the nomination process to recognize the historic importance of the home, according to a City of Manassas news release.

The city has been renovating the 35-room house over the last year. Significant repairs were needed due to water damage, structural issues and age.

Over the past year, restoration efforts included replacing the Annaburg's original slate roof, metal cornices and wood box gutters. To remedy moisture problems, layers and layers of paint added to porous surfaces on the outside of the house 234 The city also plans to replace the windows in the house.



SUBMITTED

A recent photo of Annaburg Manor in Manassas.

The foundation of Annaburg's stone tower, which was torn down in the 1980s due to structural integrity issues, was uncovered during an archaeological excavation performed on the property, the release said.

Portner was an Alexandria-based "beer baron" who is said to have paid more than \$50,000 for the main house -- a massive amount of money in

the 1890s. Portner also designed artificial cooling machines, and Annaburg is thought to be the first home in the United States that had mechanical air-conditioning.

After the Portners passed away, the house was no longer occupied and fell into disrepair. While it sustained extensive damage during the many years, it was unoccupied, a previous incarnation of Novant Health UVA Health System took it over in the 1960s, and Annaburg became a nursing home and rehabilitation center.

Annaburg has long been a leisure destination, frequently used as a place to enjoy nature, take walks and even ice skate on frozen ponds during wintertime. The city plans to hearken back to those times with the addition of park amenities planned for this year. The Annaburg lawn is already available for special event rentals, the release said.

Annaburg joins Liberia, the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth, Cannon Branch Fort, Mayfield Fort, the Manassas Water Tower and the downtown national historic district on the National Register of Historic Places.

The many twists, turns of the Occoquan Reservoir

Over the past 100 years, it's provided both electricity and drinking water while averting an environmental disaster. Can it handle what's next?

By **Martin Jeter**

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The name Occoquan, meaning "at the end of the water," comes from the Indians who lived along it for many generations. The river was at the center of their lives, providing food, transportation, drinking water, recreation and more for hundreds of years.

The Occoquan Reservoir has been through lots of changes in its history, including being part of the first system in the country to turn sewage into drinking water. Many Prince William residents take part in the "closed system," meaning the water they drink from the reservoir comes in part from water treated after being flushed down their toilets.

The reservoir has had three dams built on it over the years. The first was constructed by Lt. Col. Fred Butterfield Ryons to generate power. Ryons served in World War I as a military engineer and also saw a tour of duty in Panama on the Panama Canal project. This likely provided him with valuable experience for his Occoquan Hydro Electric Company, which built the dam and owned the reservoir and the land bordering the reservoir.

The old hydropower dam, now mostly underwater, is about a half-mile upstream from Fairfax County's Fountainhead Park boat launch. Construction of the dam and power-generating equipment began in 1928 and was completed in 1935. The dam's construction provided badly needed employment and income for a significant number of area residents. The property acquisition agreement Ryons struck with the landowners along the reservoir allowed the residents to remain on the land for life. Ryons built a home for his family and cottages for his daughters near the dam. He operated the power company until his death in 1946 at the age of 69.

In 1947, Alexandria Water Company, another private entity, acquired the Occoquan Hydro Electric Company's property. They then created the Occoquan Reservoir to provide drinking water for the City of Alexandria. They had been using Lake Barcroft in Falls Church since 1915 to supply the City of Alexandria, but the supply was no longer adequate for the fast-growing post-WWII population. Lake Barcroft was sold for the



STAFF PHOTO.

Near the town of Occoquan, downriver from the reservoir, the river has become a popular spot for kayakers and stand-up paddle boards.

eventual development of 1,000 homes in 1950.

Alexandria Water built two dams near the Town of Occoquan to create the reservoir; one was built in 1950, the other in 1957. The 50-foot dam constructed in 1950 impounded 55 million gallons, and the 1957 dam was 70 feet high and impounded about 10 billion gallons. That's a lot more water for 20 feet!

By the 1950s, the Fairfax County Government needed more water for its burgeoning population. After forming the Fairfax County Water Authority, it acquired the Annandale Water Company in 1959. In 1967, the water authority decided it needed the extra capacity of the Occoquan Reservoir, so it notified Alexandria Water that it intended to acquire the reservoir. The problem was, Alexandria Water didn't want to sell its successful operation. Fairfax County resorted to eminent domain and acquired the land and facilities for the almost \$50 million price set by a court during a legal proceeding.

The land along the reservoir was eventually sold to the Occoquan Land Development Company, but the two counties differed on developing

About the Occoquan Reservoir

The Occoquan Reservoir is 14 miles long and has a maximum depth of 65 feet and a mean depth of 16.7 feet. It takes about 20 days for water to travel the length of the reservoir. Its watershed is 570 square miles, which includes parts of Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun and Prince William counties. It holds about 8.3 billion gallons of water and serves as a source of drinking water for 800,000 residents of Prince William and Fairfax counties.

Source: Northern Virginia Regional Commission.

land around the reservoir. Fairfax County mostly preserved its side as parkland and large residential lots, while Prince William developed its side with a mix of housing types.

Once Fairfax Water owned the reservoir, it had a big problem to deal with: pollution. There were 11 sewage treatment plants in the watershed area of the reservoir, and high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous in their outflows resulted in cyanobacteria at high levels. Cyanobacteria are microscopic organisms that use up the oxygen in the water. This was a huge problem because it caused oxygen levels in the reservoir to drop so low that life was almost unsustainable. It was becoming a dead lake.

The problem was so severe that the state had to step in. The General Assembly adopted the Occoquan Policy in 1971, which set very strict effluent limits from sewage treatment plants, restricted the number of treatment plants to three and established a monitoring program for pollutants. This was before passage of either the federal Clean Water Act or the State Water Control Laws, so the law was quite innovative for its time. The regulations resulted in the creation of the Upper Occoquan Sewage Authority (UOSA) and the establishment of one high-quality treatment plant to replace all older facilities.

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An aerial photo of both dams on the Occoquan Reservoir.

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