

II. HISTORY


This chapter presents the history of Hillsboro up to the early 20th century. The chapter begins with an aerial map of Hillsboro from the Loudoun County Office of Mapping. Buildings are highlighted and the property boundaries and corporate limits are defined. The next section, History of Hillsboro, is reprinted from Hillsboro's Comprehensive Plan, completed in 2004.

II.1

AERIAL MAP OF HILLSBORO



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Loudoun County Office of Mapping
and Geographic Information



II.2 HISTORY OF HILLSBORO

Early History

European exploration and settlement provide the earliest documented history of the Hillsboro area. Indians known to live and hunt in the area in the 1600s and 1700s were of western Siouan origin and primarily nomadic. To encourage the growth of vegetation attractive to the large game such as elk, buffalo and deer, the Indians periodically burned large swaths of land in the area. Thus, early settlers found much of this country in dense growth of saplings. Settlement led to the disappearance of much of the large game. Deer, bear, wild turkey and small game remained plentiful in the 1700s.

The 1722 Treaty of Albany prohibited Indians from hunting east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and therefore the early settlers in the Loudoun and Hillsboro area had few confrontations with the Native Americans. As they were forced by treaty to abandon the region, organized bands of Indians were unusual in the area. However, it was not uncommon for friendly Indians seeking to conduct trade with the settlers to wander into the settlements.

According to an account by Joseph Nichols, one such Cherokee first appeared in Hillsboro in 1790 and would work for local farmers for a few days, then go off to hunt and fish. During one such expedition, the Cherokee came upon a mulatto slave woman named Cassie working on a Wheatland farm. Charmed by her, the Indian bargained with her master for her freedom and married her. With her, the Indian, who later acquired the surname of Redman, built a log cabin on the Short Hill south of Hillsboro. Redman, known as Indian John, went on to become a respected member of the community with many descendants in the area. His Short Hill mountain lot contained fine sandstone, which he dressed and sold for the construction of many of the homes still standing today in the Hillsboro area. Descended from the Redman family was a substantial community that grew on the Short Hill Mountain and beyond that included many of the old black families long associated with Hillsboro, including the Browns, Ferrells, Mahoneys and Motens.

The development of Hillsboro and its environs was determined by the forces that governed the early land sales of this far western section of the Northern Neck Proprietary, which was inherited by Thomas, sixth Lord Fairfax, in 1710. Lord Fairfax, a friend and patron of the young George Washington, lived much of his life near Winchester. Land values grew with the population of Virginia and speculators, such as Thomas Awbrey, Catesby Cocke and John Colvil, took great interest in what is now western Loudoun. In 1740, John Colvil bought out his partners and conveyed some 46,000 acres to Lord Fairfax heir, William Fairfax. William envisioned two great manors to be administered according to traditional English laws, to be named Shannondale (29,000 acres) and Piedmont (17,000 acres). To the east, Colvil retained some 16,000 acres along Catoctin Creek to create a Catoctin Manor. Today, Route 611 traces the boundary between Catoctin and Piedmont manors. The evolution of the democratic spirit and subsequent American Revolution ended the manor plans.

A wagon road leading from Clarke's Gap to Vestal's Gap at the present-day West Virginia boundary traversed the route of today's Charles Town Pike (Route 9). This path, dating back to at least the 1730s, is the oldest wagon road passing through what would become Leesburg, Winchester and of course Hillsboro, originally referred to as "The Gap." Among the many illustrious travelers of the Vestal's Gap Road was George Washington, who often patronized the tavern run by Edward Thompson in The Gap as he traveled to survey land and visit his many relatives in the region.

Early settlement in this area was stimulated by the growth of population in Pennsylvania of Germans and Quakers seeking religious freedom to be found in the land of William Penn. Looking south for new, fertile lands to farm, many Quaker families migrated to the Loudoun area and had a significant impact on the development of the Hillsboro area.

The first record of settlement in the Hillsboro area, when still referred to as The Gap shows that in 1746 David Potts leased 866 acres on "Kittocktin Run" from Catesby Cocke. The present Potts home and family cemetery are located on this original grant. Records of twice monthly meetings of the Gap Quakers, held at the David Potts home, date to 1755.

Scotts emigrant John McIlhaney, a Stuart fleeing his homeland after the defeat of Prince Charles by King George II at Culloden, arrived in Virginia in 1745. McIlhaney eventually settled on a large tract of land just east of Hillsboro. A prominent citizen, he was commissioned as High Sheriff of Loudoun in 1768. His sons James and John were both officers in the Revolutionary War. James became a large landholder, owning some 9,000 acres from Hillsboro to near Lovettsville and another 4,000 acres around the village of Lincoln. James' death in 1804 dissipated the family fortunes and all descendents migrated away from the area.

As early as 1758 a house and mill in The Gap are noted on a plat of "Tayloe's Kittocktin Lands," probably the old Bucher's Mill on the site of the later Gaver Mill on the eastern fringe of today's Hillsboro. Thomas Purcell leased 150 acres from John Tayloe in The Gap along the south side of Catoctin Creek. Purcell's heirs purchased this parcel in 1790 with the intent to build a mill on the creek at about the location of today's Gaver Mill Road. This gristmill burned and was rebuilt in the early 1800s. In 1850 the Purcell heirs sold the mill and adjoining land to Henry Gaver, who converted it into a woolen mill.

Also in the late 1700s John Hough built The Gap Mills on 150 acres near the west end of Town he had purchased from William Fairfax in 1759. He willed this gristmill and land in The Gap to his son Mahlon in 1797, one of Hillsboro's original trustees. At that time, today's route 690 was referred to as "the road to Mahlon Hough's mill." Before its relocation, that road passed the Purcell-Gaver mill along the south side of Catoctin Creek upstream, crossing the creek at Zilpha's Rock to join the Vestal's Gap Road (today's Charles Town Pike). Mahlon Hough lived in the stone house that was formerly the Catoctin House Bed and Breakfast and is now a private residence.

Homes and mills were built in The Gap in the late 1700s but the Town of Hillsborough was not formally established until December 31, 1802, by act of the Virginia General Assembly. Because of its location on Vestal's Gap Road and the Catoctin Creek, the Town grew quickly into a leading trade center for western Loudoun. Hillsboro was becoming an important mill town, with as many as five mills operating at the same time.

In the late 1700s Mahlon Hough began to sell much of his original 150 acres in The Gap in small lots. Hough sold his mill and house in 1814 to David Janney, who operated the mill until 1837, when the original log mill was either destroyed or abandoned, as that year James and Aquilla Janney built a large stone mill upstream near the current Town boundary. This mill gained fame for its fine flour and meal, serving the local farmers and the entire region of consumers.

Further upstream, E.D. Potts built another gristmill in 1842, whose ruins remain standing on the land today. Purchased by Nathan Neer in 1848, it operated until burned by Union troops during the Civil War, becoming known as the "Old Burnt Mill." Just west of Hillsboro, on Route 751, was a cider mill that operated into the early 1900s attracting great wagons of apples for grinding each fall. Much of its foundation and walls remain standing.

A pure water source was critical to establishment of Hillsboro, especially when the Catoctin Creek was utilized to such an extent to power the Town's mills. Short Hill's influence and importance to the Town is further evident in Hill Tom Spring, which has served the community for nearly 175 years. Named for a free black man who lived in a cabin near the large sandstone spring above the Town, the spring supplied the first gravity water system in Loudoun. Before the Civil War, Samuel Clendening, Jr., used hollowed out pine logs as a conduit from Hill Tom Spring to the tanyard in the center of Town. By the 1850s the logs had deteriorated and citizens organized a water company and installed iron pipes to carry water to Town pumps at several locations along the road. This unique water system still serves most of the homes in Hillsboro. Supplemented by a well dug in 2002 and optimized by storage tanks and a small treatment facility, the Hill Tom Spring is a vital link to Hillsboro's past and its protection and continuation is a community imperative.

In the first half of the 19th century, Hillsboro was a bustling and prosperous town, serving the needs of the local farming community, traders and travelers. Shops, stores and craftsmen occupied virtually every house in the Town. During this period there typically were three or four doctors in Town, five or six general stores, a large tanyard and cooper shop, two shoemakers and three taverns. Two blacksmiths, two saddle and harness makers, two wagon makers and a livery stable tended to the needs found in the horse-powered era. Seamstresses and tailors made clothes from the yarn goods produced by the Gaver woolen mill. This prosperity stimulated the construction of and additions to many of the Town's stone houses and, to supply those and outlying households, were a joiner's shop and furniture factory.

War, technological and transportation advancements all contributed to a decline in the importance of Hillsboro and, as a result, its prosperity. Prior to the Civil War, the advent of the railroad and the development of new turnpikes ultimately bypassed Hillsboro, drawing trade and commerce away from the town. With the devastation wrought by the Civil War to the area, Hillsboro never regained its prominence and this decline contributed to its relative isolation—and to its preservation.

Just beyond the Town limits at the southernmost crest of Hillsboro's Short Hill Mountains was the site of an African-American community for more than 150 years. Descended from slaves and free blacks, the families of Short Hill Mountain owned property, farmed the land, built a schoolhouse and church in the 19th century, and forged their lives amid some of the darkest periods in American history. Their history is intertwined with that of the Town, their stories buried within the remaining foundations of old log homes that stud the mountain and in a long-forgotten black cemetery alongside Charles Town Pike near the Methodist Church. This area represents one of Loudoun County's richest in black history.

Forrest Griffith was a slave owned by one of the oldest and first landowning families in Loudoun County, the McIlhaney's. Emancipated in 1839 by Mortimer McIlhaney, Forrest Griffith purchased 15 acres on Short Hill Mountain in 1847. Other free blacks living in the area before the Civil War included Zilpha Davis, who was a laundress and preacher, silver miner John Burns and a bearded trapper living on the north Short Hill who also did odd jobs for townspeople, known as Hill Tom. The legacies of these individuals have lived on, as Hill Tom shared the spring with the Town in the early 1800s that to this day supplies Hillsboro. The general store has long been known as HillTom Market. "Zilpha's Rock," reportedly where Zilpha Davis did her laundry, is still a prominent landmark situated in Catoctin Creek.

Although it was forbidden by law, local blacks in Hillsboro would gather secretly to worship separately from whites just south of Town on the Short Hill at a spot that came to be known as Pulpit's Rock.

Forrest Griffith's daughter Francis, a slave until her father bought her freedom, married Elzy Furr. The Furrs and their three children were registered as free blacks in Loudoun's 1853 Registry of Free Negroes. They purchased a half-acre of land on Short Hill Mountain from Forrest Griffith for one dollar in 1855. The Furrs later sold a portion of that land to the newly formed Asbury Methodist congregation so that a church could be built. At the end of the Civil War, the Hillsboro blacks established their own Asbury Methodist congregation, worshipping at Pulpit's Rock as well as the "white" Arnold Grove church and a log schoolhouse established in conjunction with the Freedmen's Bureau. The Asbury Methodist Church, built of fieldstone by the congregants in 1887, still stands today at the base of Short Hill. Lying beside it is a large, weathered stone that is reputed to be Pulpit's Rock.

The Short Hill schoolhouse and church formed the center of a larger African-American community in Hillsboro. Descendants and written records frequently mention family names such as the Furrs, Mahoneys, Gaskins, Ferrells and the Redmans, among

others, living on or very near Short Hill Mountain. Many of these families intermarried giving way to a complex web of relations.

The Thomas Balch Library in Leesburg houses Asbury Church records from the late 19th century and early 20th century, which reveal how large and integrated the Short Hill community must have been. The Asbury Church congregation merged with Hamilton's Mount Zion Church in the 1960s. While still standing, the Asbury Church is in a state of serious disrepair.

Fully understanding and appreciating this part of Loudoun's African-American history will involve additional historical research, archaeological excavation around the remaining foundations on the Short Hill and collection of oral histories. Clearly, residential development on the Short Hill would not only have negative environmental and aesthetic impacts, but would irretrievably erase much that history and the ability to explore it.

During the post-Civil War period, Hillsboro began its transformation from a busy commercial center to a primarily residential community. Homes formerly housing taverns, shops and stores gradually became residences. With the turn of the 20th century, virtually all of the existing structures within the Town had been built and little has been altered in the majority of the structures.