



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Counties in Chaos: The Formation of Counties in 18th Century Virginia by Katherine Hughes

The origins of modern-day Fairfax County can be traced back to 1649, when the exiled King Charles II of England granted northern Virginia to seven English noblemen. As proprietors, these noblemen could freely sell, lease, or transfer property, and could manage the creation of towns and schools. With a distance of two thousand sea miles between them and their property, however, the English proprietors showed little interest in their holdings in the new world, and by the late 17th century the land had not been significantly developed, mapped, or surveyed. Through property transfers and marriage alliances, the original seven grants eventually came into the possession of the Culpepper and Fairfax families, culminating in the sole possession of Thomas, 6th Lord Fairfax in 1719.

In 1735, Lord Fairfax traveled to Virginia to arrange a survey of his property. Lord Fairfax had hopes of settling a long-simmering boundary dispute with the Virginia Assembly, which had been attempting to establish control over the valuable territory since the 1660s. The Virginia Assembly had several times unsuccessfully petitioned the king to annul the proprietary grants altogether. Meanwhile, the Assembly was re-granting tracts of the land, often granting the same land to several different people. A famous example of such an overlap comes from the City of Alexandria. Robert



The first courthouse in Fairfax county was constructed in 1742 near present-day Tyson's Corner. In 1752, the courthouse was moved to the City of Alexandria, in a building built at the city's own expense. Finally, the courthouse seen here was built in 1800 in present-day Fairfax City.

Howson was long thought to be the first owner of the land on which Old Town is located, having received the land from the Royal Governor in 1699. Howson immediately sold the land to John Alexander, whose heirs discovered that a woman named Margaret Brent was the true owner, as she had received a grant for the land fifteen years before Robert Howson. In order to untangle the disputed claims, Alexander's heirs were forced to purchase the land from Brent's heirs for five times the amount their father had paid Howson.

Lord Fairfax argued his case before the Privy Council and won his claim to the most extensive estimate of his property. In 1737, with the survey of his territory completed, Lord Fairfax returned to England, leaving his cousin and agent, William Fairfax, future father-in-law of John Carlyle, to manage his affairs in the colony.

The case had confirmed Lord Fairfax's ownership of the land, but authority over the

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Thomas, sixth Lord Fairfax of Cameron

inhabitants of northern Virginia had always belonged to the Virginia Assembly. In 1649, the Assembly designated the northern region of Virginia “Northumberland County.” This district would provide the basis for several of Virginia’s modern-day counties, as the Assembly repeatedly divided its vast expanses

into smaller jurisdictions in order to accommodate the rapidly increasing population of the region. By the time Fairfax County was created in 1742, it had, at one time or another, been part of Northumberland, Westmoreland, Stafford and Prince William Counties.

In the 18th century, residents of a county could petition the Assembly to create a new county as local conditions required. This was not always a smooth or speedy process, however. Beginning in 1730, the Assembly reversed the old process of requiring county courts to create parishes after the formation of a new county, and instead the courts formed parishes as a preliminary step to the creation of new counties. Two years later, following the creation of Prince William County from Hamilton Parish, the Assembly cropped the northern portion of Prince William to form the parish of Truro. Truro Parish was to be everything “north of the river Ockoquan, and Bull run (a branch thereof) and a course from thence to the Indian Thoroughfare [Ashby’s Gap] of the Blue Ridge of Mountains.” Fairfax County was finally established using these same boundaries in June 1742, long after the need for an independent county was evident to everyone who lived there. The records of the Truro Parish vestry book show that between 1733 and 1748, the population of the parish increased from 2,110 to 5,167 – a boost of 144 percent. Even at this early date, the region was beginning to deal with one of its signature modern-day issues – rapid population growth.