



Virginia bluebells bloom in abundance along Bull Run and Cub Run in spring.



In 1789 the Virginia General Assembly chartered 'Centreville,' where people traveling from Washington or Alexandria to Leesburg, Winchester, Warrenton and other towns stayed overnight. George Washington rested there, as did Thomas Jefferson on his way from Charlottesville to his presidential inauguration in 1801.

Centreville, Virginia

This Fairfax County community is a Virginia-history crossroads.

Centreville, Virginia, thrives today as a fast-paced suburb of Washington, D.C.

But dotted among landscaped malls, modern office buildings and homes, historic markers indicate something important happened here years ago.

It did.

If land radiating out from its crossroad center at Lee Highway (Rt. 29), Sully Road (Rt. 28), Braddock Road, and I-66 could talk, it would say, "Let me tell you about founding fathers, Civil War battles, spies in hoop skirts, and electricity." This "census-designated place" in Fairfax County sits at a Virginia-history crossroads, and is worth a visit.

COLONIAL 'MELTING POT'

At a spot on a bluff, with vistas of mountains and valleys carved by fresh water runs, 17th-century settlers established a crossroads village. By the 18th century, landowners, tenant farmers, slaves, and convicts from English prisons worked together from dawn to dusk. Michel Jean de Crevecoeur, a French nobleman who came to the British colonies in 1755, observed: "Here there are no great lords with everything and a horde of common

people with nothing. ... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labor and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

FROM COLONY TO COUNTRY

Also in 1755 British Gen. Edward Braddock led his troops west through the village to fight in the French and Indian War. Mud hampered his military caravan. To lighten the load, legend says Braddock's men buried two brass cannons and \$30,000 worth of gold coins in the village. Braddock died from battle wounds. No one found the treasure.

Ultimately, the British received Canada from France and Florida from Spain, but at a cost England's King George III thought the colonists should help pay. His "taxation without representation" ignited the American Revolutionary War in 1775 and caused the colonists to declare independence in 1776. Despite few supplies and funds, Gen. George Washington's Continental Army and French forces defeated the British at Yorktown in 1781.

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Above: Color lithography of the First Battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861; Right: Fife and drum band at the Manassas National Battlefield Reenactment.



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ROLLING THROUGH CENTREVILLE

Centreville grew. The *Gazette* wrote in 1835: “Centreville Post Village ... is elevated and highly picturesque, affording one of the best mountain prospects in the state of Virginia. It has always been remarkable for the salubrity of its air and the health of its inhabitants.”

Wealth came from exporting crops, including “King Tobacco.” Oxen-pulled rigs rolled tobacco hogsheads through the village on Braddock and Union Mill roads, then onto Rolling and Ox roads to Potomac River ports.

EXPLODING INTO CIVIL WAR

The American Civil War, 1861-1865, embroiled Northern Virginia, particularly Centreville where its high plateau and proximity to Washington, D.C., made it strategic. Roads that brought travelers also brought Union and Confederate troops.

First Manassas

In mid-July 1861, 37,000 inexperienced federal soldiers headed for Centreville. Union Major Sullivan Ballou wrote to his wife:

My very dear Sarah:

... I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing — perfectly willing — to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt. ... Sarah, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield. ...

After a hoop-skirted spy tipped off the Confederates, guns and cannons started firing in Manassas near Bull Run on July 21.

So assured were Washingtonians of a Union victory that ladies with parasols and gentlemen in top hats watched the first major battle of the war.

The federals overwhelmed the Confederates initially, but when southern soldiers started to retreat, one soldier shouted to his fellow southerners to look at Gen. Thomas Jackson, sitting resolutely on his horse “like a stone wall.” They turned and fought with such renewed fury that Union soldiers retreated right into ladies and gentlemen throwing picnic baskets into their buggies. The Confederates let out a high-pitched “Rebel Yell” as

they chased scurrying Northerners in “the great skedaddle.”

Chaos ensued in Centreville. A Massachusetts soldier wrote: “The wounded had been gathered and here likewise the dead were buried. It would seem that in a well-known Virginia town on the high road, only miles from the capital, boards enough might have been found to make into rude coffins ... but they could not be; and as it was necessary to bury them immediately, they were wrapped and covered with their own blankets, and thus consigned to the earth.”

Major Ballou was one of the Union dead.

Encampment

In October, 40,000 Confederates arrived at Centreville about midnight. A veteran wrote: “The boys threw their tired frames upon the ground and slept soundly. ... The hills and valleys around the little village of Centreville were occupied by Regimental and Brigade camps. As the darkness increased, the skies above were lighted with the glimmer of a thousand camp fires.”

The soldiers spent the harsh winter building one of the largest military earthworks ever constructed. They fooled Union scouts by placing Quaker guns — logs shaped like cannons and painted black — in embrasures. Soldiers built 1,500 log huts and scrounged for food and firewood.



Civil War Reenactment in Manassas — the 150th Anniversary

In spring 1862 the Confederates departed. They left behind what a Pennsylvania soldier described as “one vast barren waste.” He wrote, “The timber was all cut off last winter and used for fuel.”

Second Manassas

That summer, U.S. forces prepared to march to Richmond. Antonia Ford, a beautiful 23-year-old, overheard Union plans in her parents’ Yankee-occupied Fairfax home. With Ford’s alert, the Rebels rushed to Centreville to stop President Abraham Lincoln’s army.

More than 120,000 soldiers from both sides made camp in or near the village before the Second Battle of Manassas began on Aug. 28. Two days later, the South won again after the blood of 17,500 dead, dying and wounded soldiers soaked the battlefield.

Several months later, William Knight, a U.S. soldier, wrote:

Centerville Dec 14th/62

Dear wife, We started from Fairfax Court House yesterday at eight o’ clock and moved towards Centerville. The road all along we found strewn with broken muskets, knapsacks &c. ... The men on our side appeared to be buried well but those that appeared to be on the rebel side were scarcely covered up. ...

This looks rather hard to a green Vermonter. ... I tell you Jane when I think of those old farmers up there in Vermont sitting in their easy chairs beside a comfortable fire & grumbling about the hard times I wish they could take our places through one march such as we have just had. A march of 26 miles in two days, half fed ... seventy lbs. on their backs through mud & mire & then let them talk about hard times.

Mosby’s Rangers

John S. Mosby and his band of Confederate “rangers” harassed, sabotaged and captured Union soldiers throughout the war. They hid in Centreville and in Loudoun and Fauquier County dens. Mosby’s tactical brilliance, speed and cool bravery earned the University of Virginia lawyer the moniker “the Gray Ghost.”

Donald C. Hakenson and Charles V. Mauro describe in *A Tour Guide and History of Col. John S. Mosby’s Combat Operations* how five “New Yorkers attacked Mosby’s party” in Centreville in 1864. The rangers shot the horse out from under a U.S. private. While trapped under his horse, the private returned fire. His revolver’s bullet glanced off Mosby’s pistol and into the ghost’s groin. The rangers escaped. Mosby returned to bullying Union soldiers two weeks later.

CENTREVILLE’S DEATH

After four brutal years Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. More than 600,000 Americans had died; so had Centreville. An observer wrote: “Centreville is even more of a desert. Once a village of rare beauty, ... its ruins lie about, invested with all the saddening influences of perfect desolation.”

Fighting destroyed so many trees that even in the late 1880s people in Fairfax could see the newly completed Washington Monument.

Not much improved 50 years after the war. *The Washington Sunday Star* wrote in 1914:

Centreville is not a stirring place. It does not feel a single busy throb. ... Some men say “it’s dead.” If ever a village was killed in war it was Centreville. Perhaps it was choked by smoke of burning powder or smothered by the sulphurous gas from guns; perhaps it was blighted by the rain of shell or overcome by the horrors that it saw. Today it bears wounds and scars. ... Its scars are sunken graves and vine-veiled redoubts.

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St. John's Episcopal Church



Mt. Gilead House

Scenic Centreville Sites



The Winery at Bull Run



Old Stone Church



Fall at The Winery at Bull Run

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REVIVED BY ELECTRICITY AND AUTOMOBILES

Centreville remained a farming village largely removed from the rest of the world until Tri-County Electric Cooperative — a predecessor of the Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative — brought electricity in 1941.

That same year, the U.S. entered World War II. The federal government needed more workers. With automobiles and new roads, Centreville workers could commute to Washington. In time, developers pulled out the village's rural roots and planted suburban houses, schools, churches and businesses.

Today, approximately 72,000 people live in Centreville's 12 square miles. And because of beautiful trees that have grown since the Civil War, the village is — except during allergy season — “remarkable for the salubrity of its air and the health of its inhabitants.” ■

Attractions In and Around Centreville

- **Centreville Historic District** — Old Braddock Road, near Rt. 28/Rt. 29 intersection.
- **Cub Run Stream Valley Park** — Near Rt. 29 and Stone Road, Centreville. See miles of bluebell-lined woodland trails.
- **The Winery at Bull Run** — 15950 Lee Highway, Centreville.
- **Manassas National Battlefield Park** — 6511 Sudley Road, Manassas.
- **Ellanor C. Lawrence Park** — 5040 Walney Road, Chantilly. Includes 18th-century Cabell's Mill and Walney Visitor Center.
- **Sully Plantation** — 3650 Historic Sully Way, Chantilly. 1799 home of U.S. Rep. Richard Bland, Gen. Robert E. Lee's uncle.
- **Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center | National Air and Space Museum** — 14390 Air and Space Museum Parkway, Chantilly. ■

Sources include: Fairfax County Office of Planning, *Centreville, Virginia: Its History and Architecture*; Netherton, Nan, Ross, *Fairfax, Virginia: A City Traveling Through Time*; Burns, Ken, *The Civil War*; Robison, Debbie, *The History and Significance of Centreville, Virginia*; *Cooperative Living* thanks Greg E. Mathieson Sr. for contributing his photos.