

CHAIN BRIDGE
A HISTORY OF THE BRIDGE AND
ITS SURROUNDING TERRITORY
1608 — 1991

By

Jim Fearson

Most modern day Arlington commuters who use Chain Bridge in their daily trek to and from the District would be astonished to learn how prominent the area at Pimmit Run at the Virginia end of the bridge was in the early days of our fledgling country.

At the mouth of the Pimmit was an early river crossing; two Indian trails from the interior country met at this spot and it is believed there was an Indian settlement and fishing ground here.¹ This spot, the first break in the palisades below Little Falls supported among other endeavors: Indian gatherings, taverns, ferries, a tobacco warehouse, the first industrial park in Northern Virginia, an extensive stone quarry operation, a Civil War outpost in the defense of the City, a sleepy crossroads settlement that came alive each spring during the herring and shad runs, and finally a high volume traffic artery to the City. It is also the site of a proposed town that failed to materialize.

The area on the Virginia side of the river at Chain Bridge is rich in history, its past now noted only by a small roadside historical marker.

The area was explored as early as 1608 “as high as the Falls” by Captain John Smith. An Indian settlement was believed to be at Pimmit Run with two trails that correspond approximately to the Fairfax Road (Route 123) and the other following Pimmit Run turning south and joining what is the present day Glebe Road at Walker Chapel.²

The first public ferry in Virginia north of Great Hunting Creek was established near the site³ and an early Lee, (Philip Ludwell Lee) in 1772 laid out a town there on one hundred acres.⁴ His father Thomas had earlier established a gristmill and official tobacco inspection warehouse at Pimmit Run⁵ which continued to operate until 1792.

During the evacuation of the city of Washington prior to the British burning of public buildings including the White House in 1814 the area may have provided refuge for the Declaration of Independence.⁶ And during the Civil War the organizer of the Aeronautical Corps of the Army directed the movement of his inflated balloon across the upper trusses of the then wooden bridge⁷ — and the first Union Army sentinel to be court marshalled for sleeping at his post during the war — was at the bridge.⁸

The Bridges

There have been eight bridges crossing the river at this location including the present one (which is supported by the same stone piers constructed in 1850 for the sixth bridge).

“The oldest Potomac River bridge in the Washington area is Chain Bridge at Little Falls.” . . . “The First Little Falls Bridge over the Potomac was built in 1797, preceding the development of the Capital City by several years.”⁹

The first bridge was a covered timber structure built at a site chosen . . . “because the river was narrow enough in that particular area to make bridging relatively inexpensive.”¹⁰ It was built by the Georgetown Potomac Bridge Company through a 1794 charter. The bridge opened as a toll bridge in 1797 with charges of three cents for a pedestrian, eight cents for a man and a horse.¹¹ The following is an observation made by a traveler in about 1801 and documented on page 134 in “Latrobe’s View of America, 1795 — 1820”:

“Three miles from Georgetown, just at the head of tide water, and at what are called the little falls, a bridge of single arch crosses the Potomac. It is composed of wood; erected by one Palmer, from Connecticut. I was told that it was formed by him in Connecticut and shipped in pieces. The abutments are a huge pile of massy square stones bolted together with great iron pins, and melted lead, a novel sight to me, and I take it, capable of resisting the most swollen floods of water. The Virginia side a high bank, Maryland side, low base of immovable, large and deep rocks. The fact is, here the Potomac is narrow and deep . . .”

The first bridge collapsed in 1804 and a second structure was destroyed by high water within six months of its completion.

The third bridge was built in 1820 and gave the name Chain Bridge to itself and all subsequent bridges. It was constructed as follows: “Two chains made from one and one quarter inch wrought iron bars were suspended from massive stone towers at either shore and supported a wooden slab deck. Each link in the chain was four feet long.”¹² (In June 1938 a link of the old chain was presented to the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia which organization was conducting a dedication ceremony for the present bridge).¹³

This third bridge and first “Chain” bridge was destroyed by high water in 1812 and a fourth bridge was built which was of similar design. The fourth bridge was heavily damaged in 1815 and the owners turned to the federal government for financial assistance to repair the structure.

The fifth bridge was built in 1840 lasting until the early 1850s.

The sixth bridge built in 1852 was built adjacent to the site of the previous structures and was supported on tall stone piers which remain until this day as supports for the present bridge. This bridge was destroyed by the river in 1870.

The seventh bridge was built in 1874 by the Army Corps of Engineers and was of a wrought iron truss construction. This bridge lasted until 1938; it was closed for a year in 1927 to allow repairs and a concrete pier to be constructed on the Virginia side.¹⁴

In 1939 the present bridge was opened and although it has in recent years been widened it still rests on the stone piers that originally were built to support the 1852 bridge.

Early Settlement

The first development in the area of the bridge crossing had its beginnings in 1719 when Thomas Lee, (1690-1750) the fifth son of Richard Lee, II, who was resident agent for Lady Catherine Fairfax, proprietor of the Northern Neck grant of 5,000,000 acres, obtained the Langley tract of 2,862 acres on the Potomac River between Great Falls and the Little Falls¹⁵ (which included land on the river well below the present day bridge).

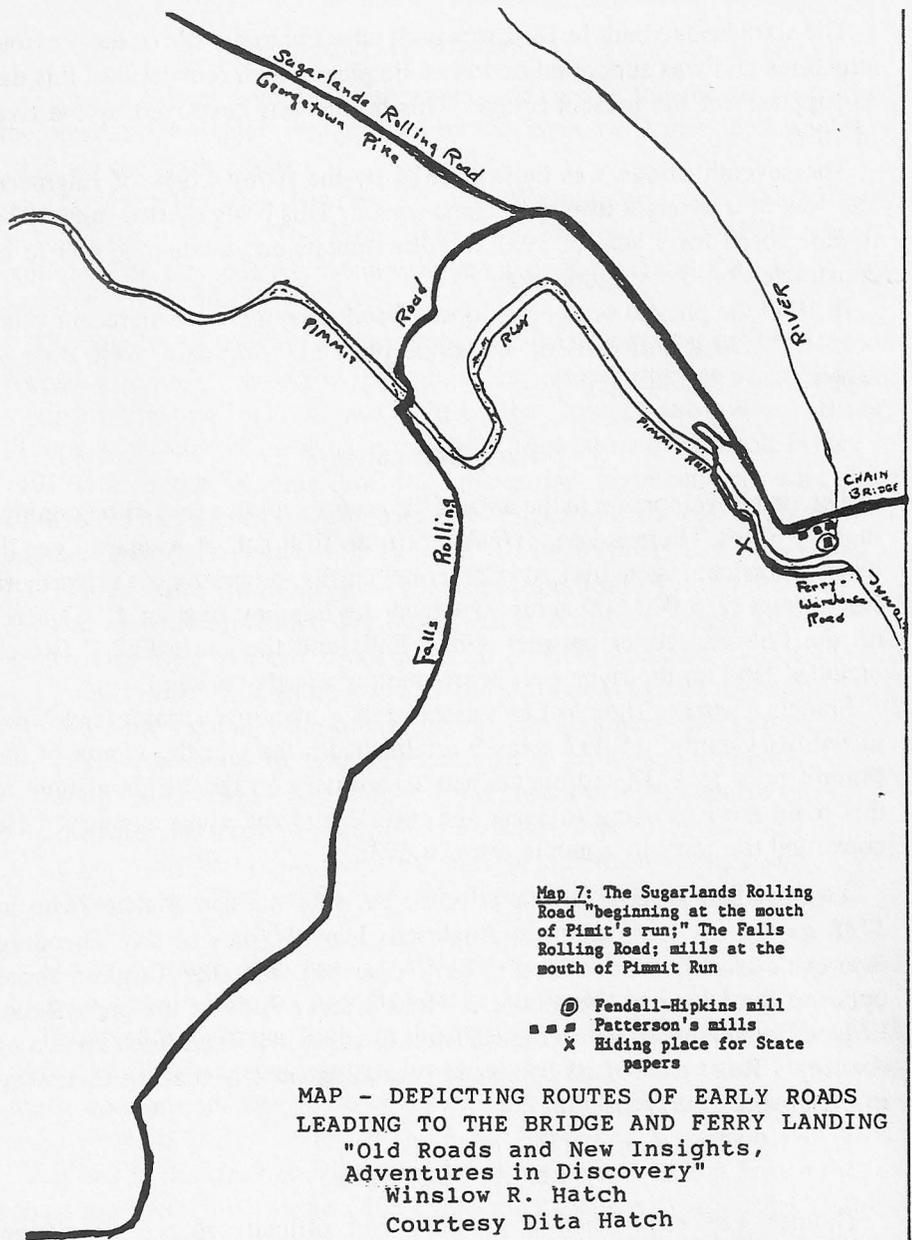
Francis Awbrey, Thomas Lee's associate¹⁶, at the time a major landowner in Fairfax County¹⁷ (5,497 acres¹⁸) established a ferry at the mouth of the Pimmit prior to 1737 and maintained an ordinary on the Virginia shore at this main river crossing to serve the travelers to the upper country.¹⁹ He converted the ferry to a public ferry in 1738.²⁰

Awbrey died in 1741 and left the property to his son Richard who in 1748 moved his ferry south to Analostan Island²¹ (present day Theodore Roosevelt Island). The relocated ferry operated from the Virginia shore opposite the Island to the mouth of Rock Creek. Parts of the present-day Wilson Boulevard, formerly the Ballston-Georgetown Road, then known as Awbrey's Road were used by inland plantation owners making their way to the Awbrey Ferry Landing.²²

Lee At The Pimmit

Thomas Lee established a gristmill and official tobacco inspection warehouse at Pimmit Run. Thomas died in 1750 but his warehouse continued to operate until 1792.

An interesting sidelight was Thomas Lee's blocking of Robert "King" Carter's plan to build a road from his copper deposits in western Fairfax to the Little Falls to ship to the Tidewater. Certain that he had a rich deposit of copper bearing ore on his holdings at Fryling Pan Creek (present day



Floris) King Carter and his sons planned to build a road from there to the Little Falls crossing as the shortest route from the mine to tidewater.

Lee entered a hasty survey claiming all available landing places at Little Falls thus obtaining a monopoly at the headwaters and foiling Carter.

Carter later decided to ship from the Occoquan and to do so, opened and

extended an old Indian trail from Frying Pan past the site of what became the Fairfax Court House clear to the Occoquan, the present day Ox Road (Route 123).²³

The Town That Never Was

In 1772 Philip Ludwell Lee (son of Thomas) laid out a proposed town on one hundred acres at the Little Falls on the Potomac to be named Philee²⁴. The town never materialized. Philip Ludwell Lee died in 1775.²⁵

Following Philip Ludwell Lee's death his property was divided between his two daughters Matilda and Flora. Flora married Ludwell Lee of Belmont in Loudoun County.²⁶

The Industrial Complex

On July 25, 1794, Ludwell Lee conveyed to Philip Richard Fendall and Lewis Hopkins²⁷ two-thirds and one-third interest respectively in the property. Fendall and Hopkins erected a merchant mill, distillery, and brewery and made many other improvements.²⁸

Before Fendall died in 1805 his establishment near Pimmit Run included a granary, gristmill, brewery, cooper's and blacksmith's shop in addition to cottages for the laborers and artisans.²⁹

On November 15, 1815, Edgar Patterson a merchant of Georgetown obtained the property and holdings from Joseph Dean who had acquired the combined properties of Fendall and Hopkins in July 1806.³⁰

Patterson's Mills ". . . In the few years between 1816 and 1821, this may have been among the busiest 200 feet of shoreline on the Potomac, with ships from Liverpool taking on tobacco and scows moving out 300 barrels of flour every two days. Consignments of woolen goods and three-point blankets from the mills — considered better than English woolens — were going aboard scows for the Georgetown market . . ." ³¹

On December 29, 1821, an extended advertisement appeared in the *Daily National Intelligencer* offering Patterson Mills for sale.³² The advertisement reprinted below shows the extensive operation then existing at the foot of the Bridge:

"To Manufacturers

"Paper Mill, Flour Mill, Wool Factory, Stone Quarries and
Land for Sale.***

"The Flour Mill

"Is a large three story stone building, having three runs of
burrs, with all the necessary machinery to manufacture flour.
It is situated at the Little Falls Bridge, on the tide water of the

Potomac in the District of Columbia, and only 3 miles from Washington and Georgetown. The turnpike road leading from these places to Leesburg and the Western Country passes by the door. The river at this place is from forty to sixty feet deep. This is considered the most profitable milling establishment in this part of the country there being no necessity to keep a team a plenty of wheat being brought to the door from Loudoun county and the upper part of Virginia. Three hands can load 300 barrels of flour on board a scow, bring it to town, have it inspected, and put into store in one day, and, being so near market, all the offal can be disposed of without expense and at retail prices.

“The Wool Factory

“Adjoins the flour mill. It is a two story stone building, 110 feet in length, containing carding machines, billes and jennies, 12 broad and a number of narrow looms, and all other necessary machinery for manufacturing blankets and cloth. A stone fulling mill, with 2 pairs of stocks, a stone dye house, and stone beach house are attached to the factory. This establishment, including the flour mill cost me about \$40,000. I will not sell it for a much less sum. The stone quarries on this tract have yielded me a rent of \$1500 a year, and I was offered a rent of \$1500 per year for the flour mill before I erected the wool factory. There is also on this tract a valuable unimproved mill seat. The fall is 27 feet on tide water.***

Edgar Patterson” [sig]

There were several other mills at the mouth of Pimmit Run near or where Patterson’s Mill stood: Burnt Mill which is shown on Civil War era maps and Hill’s Mill which was operational into the 1890s.³³

The British Are Coming

It was during this period that a series of events occurred that to this day remain unclear; the circumstances regard the removal and temporary storage of government records including the Declaration of Independence during the British burning of Washington.

Not in dispute is that Stephen Pleasanton, a government auditor for fifty years through twelve presidential administrations,³⁴ removed from the City for safekeeping government books and valuable papers including the Declaration of Independence, fleeing with them into the Virginia countryside.

What remains unclear is where he stored those most precious writings.

One account has Stephen Pleasanton on August 23 taking his treasures to an unnamed mill three miles beyond Georgetown where they were concealed while he spent the night at Salona. The next day he is reported to have continued on to Leesburg with the documents.³⁵

Another account has Pleasanton on August 22 conveying the government's papers to a gristmill two miles above Georgetown in Northern Virginia, thought to be Adams' Upper Mill. Samuel Adams' Upper Mill was located at the Langley Farms Ford of the Pimmit.³⁶

The most definitive account is the one written by Mr. Pleasanton himself wherein he says the documents were stored in Edgar Patterson's mill:

"Whereupon I proceeded to purchase coarse linen and caused it to be made into bags of convenient size, in which the gentlemen of the office, assisted by me, placed the books and their papers, after which I obtained carts and had them conveyed to a grist mill, then unoccupied, belonging to Mr. Edgar Patterson, situated a short distance on the Virginia side of the Potomac, beyond the Chain Bridge, so called two miles above Georgetown."³⁷

Unfortunately Mr. Pleasanton penned the account in 1848 — thirty-four years after the event and in his seventy-second year. Was it an accurate account or did his memory play tricks?

An on-site investigation of the mystery of the mills was undertaken and described by the "Rambler" in the *Sunday Star*, August 9, 1914. The conclusion — the documents were stored in the "First of Nelsons mills which stood at the bottom of Slades Hill." — (where Pimmit Run crosses Kirby Road)

Winslow Hatch, in his writings, makes the argument for the hiding place of the papers in the foundation of a mill seat whose ruins are on the Pimmit just where the first iron bridge carrying Glebe Road crossed.³⁸

There are many accounts of where these most important documents spent the first night on the flight from the British in August 1814. The confusion is magnified by the differences in reported distances from Georgetown (two miles versus three miles) and the possibility of the hiding place being in Adams' upper or Adams' lower mill or in Patterson's mill(s).³⁹

Dueling Ground

A dueling ground was located near the Virginia end of the bridge in a secluded meadow on Pimmit Run. The one duel of note took place in 1826 between Henry Clay, Secretary of State, and the Senator from Virginia, John Randolph. Neither was hit and both appeared to be relieved at the outcome.⁴⁰

Civil War At The Bridge

At the outbreak of the Civil War the first defenses of bridgeheads were concentrated at the Aqueduct and Long Bridges and the heights overlooking both. Congress believed the war would be of short duration and was mostly concerned about the amounts of monies being spent on defenses.⁴¹

Following the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run, priorities changed and a proper system of defense was begun which eventually became a loose ring of fifty-three forts around the City: twenty-two within the boundaries of present-day Arlington with two, Fort Marcey (in Fairfax County) and Fort Ethan Allen (in Arlington) defending Chain Bridge and the main route west, the Georgetown-Leesburg Pike.⁴²

The two forts were connected by auxiliary batteries and lines of trenches. A strong stockade was built across Georgetown Pike near the fort to guard against a cavalry dash. Also each night part of the flooring of the bridge was removed.⁴³ Earlier at the bridge itself, a barricade was placed over the first pier from the Virginia side with a movable staircase so the defenders could retreat over the flat below, leaving the bridge open to the fire of howitzers on the heights above.⁴⁴

A road connecting the defenses at Chain Bridge to Fort Strong (between present-day Cherrydale and Rosslyn) was constructed which in part is the route of present-day Military Road. The amazing thing, it reportedly was laid out through wooded country for three miles and completed in three days.⁴⁵

During the war Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, who was empowered to organize the Aeronautical Corps of the Army, was the first to use a balloon for military purposes.⁴⁶ Lowe used his balloon for military observation inflating it in the City, the only source of gas, and towing it to the sites where he ascended to the height necessary for viewing the opposing lines, using a tether to secure it in place.

During one of his trips from the City to an outpost in Virginia where he was to ascend he arrived at the Washington end of Chain Bridge with his balloon to find the bridge filled with troops and artillery moving into Virginia. Unable to secure a place in the lines moving across the bridge, he directed the moving of the balloon by having his men climb up onto the overhead truss-works and make their way across the eighteen inch wide stringers towing the balloon with the troops on the bridge below them and the river far below that.

The upshot of this particular adventure was that after having left the City at 9:00 PM, and having spent all night traveling with an inflated balloon, after the extremely hazardous Chain Bridge crossing and his arrival in Lewinsville at daybreak, a strong windstorm broke the balloon loose and carried it clear into Delaware where it was later retrieved by Lowe.⁴⁷

Electric Power At The Bridge

Twenty-six years after Thaddeus Lowe's bridge adventure electricity came to Chain Bridge. The Columbia Light and Power Company constructed a building with generators in it at the bridge and beginning in 1890 supplied electricity to light both the bridge and the Canal Road until 1894. The generators were powered by waters from Pimmit Run; the millrace was on the western side of the run.

The generating plant was located at Chain Bridge just between the old Georgetown-Leesburg Pike and the Pimmit Run (a little greensward, perhaps as much as an acre of ground all covered with grass). Later the generating plan fell into disuse and was taken down. The lumber and machinery was bought by the District of Columbia government and taken to Occoquan.⁴⁸



Virginia end of bridge — Circa 1874-1890. *Artist's Proof*

Later Structures

The G.M. Hopkins Atlas of Fifteen Miles Around Washington D.C. 1878, pg. 66-67 shows only one structure at the Virginia end of the bridge: E.D. Woody's Store. The *District of Columbia Directory of 1880* lists Edward Woody — grocer Canal Road; again in 1906 the directory carries the same listing.

Pictures taken of the Virginia end of the bridge in 1889, 1890, 1900, and 1901 show a frame two story structure having a wide first floor roofed porch, located on the upper side of the bridge approach road in the same location as Woody's store shown on the 1878 map.⁴⁹

In 1915 the "With the Rambler" column gave the following description of the Virginia end of the bridge: "After crossing the water span and coming to the gray-dust road on the Virginia side, wooden steps lead down to a rocky ledge, and from that improvised steps of rough and irregularly placed stones will carry you down, if you are sure-footed, to the waters edge. It is a favorite place with fisher people, and a popular place with swimmers, though here among the rocks and the swift current and the eddies a good many men and boys have lost their lives. Here Pimmet (sic) Run rushes into the river. . . . The Palisades have been gouged out here so there is quite a space between the river and the tree-topped cliffs. Among the quarry debris are the ruins of the foundation and piers formerly supporting a big stone-crushing plant. Down through the quarry and over the loose but heavy rocks Pimmet (sic) Run foams.

If you will climb back to the gray-dust road you will note the steep high hill on the right, and past the first bend in that gray road, which is the beginning of the Leesburg Pike, a road, a-grown in grass and weeds and small shrubbery leads up the hill. On the top you come upon the ruins of a building that was a landmark for a good many years. It was a hotel, or a road-side resort, and, like so many places of that character, it had its golden days and its days of repentance and shabbiness. Its prosperity waned, it became a dilapidated old building, and then it fell prey to a fire."⁵⁰

This ruin was the site of High View Hotel built in the early 1890s on the remains of Civil War outposts of nearby Fort Ethan Allen. The hotel operated as a deluxe gambling resort until the county was "cleaned up" in 1904.⁵¹

A picture in the Columbia Historical Society archives taken in 1861 during the Civil War from the Washington Palisades looking toward Virginia and the bridge shows an encampment of tents on the hotel site. This same location may also have been the site of a dwelling that was part of the industrial complex constructed by Philip Fendall. A description in 1796: ". . . Upon the top of the hill, and about 20 yards from the Mill is a stone Dwelling house, large enough for the accommodation of a family, also, a kitchen, dairy, smoke house, etc. and a garden enclosed and in cultivation, . . ."⁵²

The Twentieth Century

Growth was slow and the area remained isolated through the end of the nineteenth century with only two structures at the end of the bridge through 1916.⁵³ "After the turn of the twentieth century, settlement intensified in the vicinity of the bridge, and stone was quarried along the Potomac south of Pimmit Run. Two gasoline stations were eventually built at the foot of the bridge along with several other buildings possibly related to them."⁵⁴

There must have been commercial activity of a different sort in the early years of the twentieth century; Winslow Hatch in his recordings of the history of the area: . . . "The local and state authorities sat idly by for years, up into the 1920s while the area was made into a red-light district."⁵⁵ Local lore had it that the tavern at the end of the bridge was a drop-off point for rum-runners during prohibition. Supposedly, they came up the river and put into Pimmit Run which joins the river directly behind the tavern.

In 1924, William N. Doak (1882-1933) who began his career in 1900 with Norfolk & Western Railroad and in 1930 was appointed U.S. Secretary of Labor by Herbert Hoover⁵⁶ purchased the property that had been the site of the High View Hotel and constructed the home that is there today. The house was named "Notre Nid" (our nest) and it was there the Doaks entertained many national figures including President Hoover and members of his cabinet and later President Roosevelt, who came to view the 1936 flood.⁵⁷

The early gateway to Virginia was witness to yet another historic event in Arlington: the introduction of public water distribution that would replace wells and ultimately lead to development in areas not fed by springs or where well-supplied water was not available.

In 1926 the question of a public water supply system for Arlington County was examined; the decision was to buy from the existing District of Columbia waterworks. In the spring of 1927 construction began that eventually drew from the Dalecarlia Filter Plant in the District and supplied water to a 1.5 million gallon reservoir and 260,000 gallon water tower near Old Dominion Drive and 24th Street North. The first public water in Arlington was transported in a large water main that crossed the river under Chain Bridge.⁵⁸

"The Army Corps of Engineers built the seventh bridge, an iron truss bridge, in 1874, but structural weakness in the light-weight iron trusses proved incapable of handling increased automotive travel. In July 1927 travel was restricted to pedestrians . . ."⁵⁹ A story in *The Evening Star*, Wednesday, July 13, 1927, reported that after limiting vehicle weight to four tons and speed to 8 mph for a month, the bridge was closed to all but pedestrian traffic. The closing was not due to motor traffic but deterioration in the stone abutment that supported the Virginia end of the bridge. A picture and accompanying story in *The Evening Star* dated March 1928 showed the first span from the Virginia side weighing 40 tons lifted from the abutment by an A-frame arrangement while work went on to repair the abutment.⁶⁰ In May of that same year *The Evening Star* reported the bridge was reopened to traffic part-time while the finishing repairs were completed.

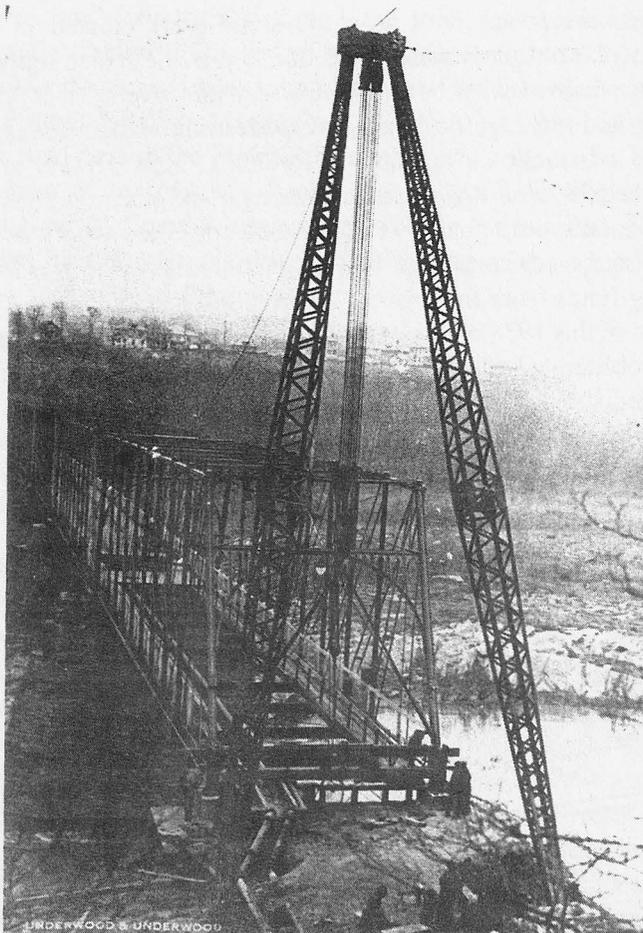
A detailed 1936 map of the area shows a structure at the end of the bridge, identified as a filling station on the upper side of the road in the same location where a building stood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Woody's store). Also shown is a series of buildings on the lower side of

the road, two at the edge of the road and four identified as summer cottages further down closer to the mouth of Pimmit Run. Also depicted is the house on top of the palisade (Doak property) and further up the Great Falls Road (present-day Route 123) after it turns and heads upriver a second house on the palisades. Directly across the road from this second house and between the road and Pimmit Run are four houses: one at the edge of the road and three in a row running toward Pimmit Run.⁶¹ Also up Glebe Road to 41st Street North right-of-way is a house and further up Glebe Road on top of the hill out of sight of the bridge running from Randolph Street to beyond and along North Military Road is a large well-established community.

A map of this same area dated 1938 shows one less structure on the lower side of the road at the bridge and identifies the second of these from the bridge as a gas station. The structure on the upper side of the road at the bridge is still identified as a gas station. The two houses on the palisades are still present, the first identified as Emma M. Doak, the second as A.M. King. On this map there are now only three houses between the road (Route 123) and Pimmit Run; the one closest to the road on the 1936 map is gone. The map identifies the owner of all the property on the immediate lower side of the bridge running between the road and Pimmit Run up to and including the three houses between Route 123 and Pimmit Run as Crandal Mackey. The house on 41st Street North is identified as F.F. Ballard property.⁶²

Flood waters continued to be a problem at the bridge. In March 1936 a picture and story in *The Washington Star* show debris from the flood waters caught in the overhead structure of the iron trussworks.⁶³ Also in the picture is the gas station on the upper side of the road at the Virginia end of the bridge. It is a story and a half structure with cinder block walls built in a cape cod style with dormer windows in the roof. Mr. Guy Harmon, a long-time caretaker for the Doaks, remembered that the building housing the gas station once had living quarters on the second floor. (In later years the dormer windows were gone and the building had a tin-covered pitched roof.)⁶⁴ This flood closed the bridge to traffic for repairs until May 29, 1936. When the bridge re-opened the vehicle weight limit was 6,000 pounds.⁶⁵ In March, 1937, another flood hit and the damage caused this bridge to permanently close on August 18, 1937. This steel bridge that had been completed in 1874 at a cost of \$94,000 was to make way for a new bridge authorized at a cost of \$393,000. The authorization came after a fight between the State of Virginia and the House Sub-Committee—District Appropriations. A member of that committee, the Honorable Mr. Collins, proposed a one-way toll from Virginia to force Virginia to share in the cost.⁶⁶

A September 1937 picture of the demolition of the iron-trussed bridge taken from the Washington side looking toward Virginia shows two buildings at the Virginia end of the bridge. The building on the upper side of the road

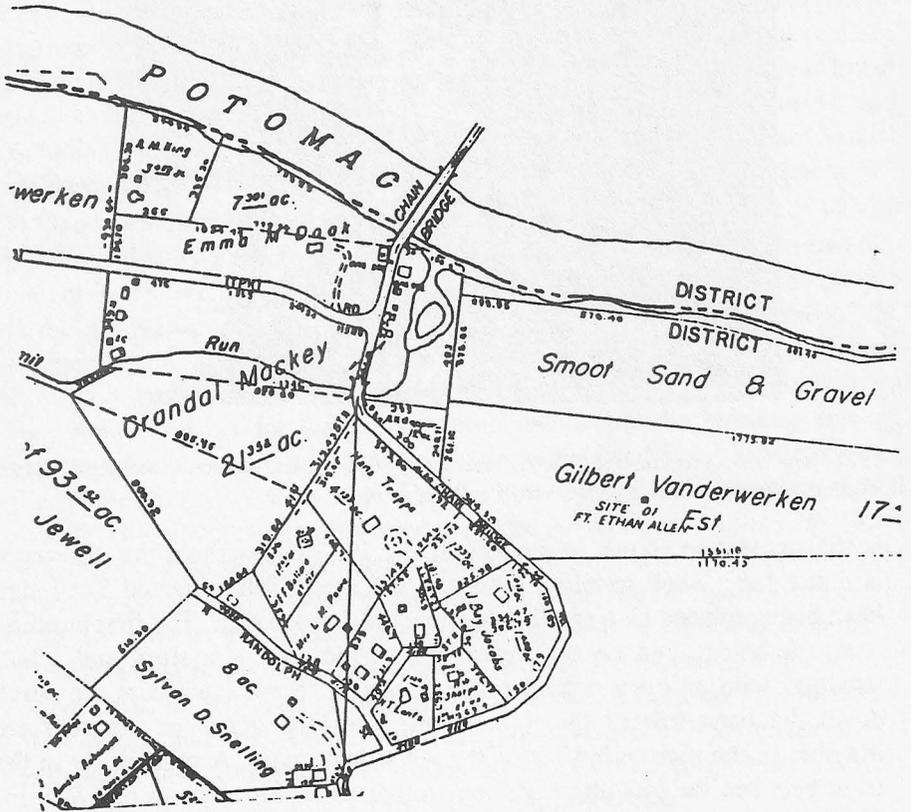


1927 Repairs — Virginia end. The A-frame hoist lifted the bridge section weighing 40 tons while the abutment was repaired. *Artist's Proof*

is the gas station shown in the March 20, 1936 photograph; the difference is that a large Shell gasoline billboard and small pole-mounted Shell sign have been replaced by a small pole-mounted Amoco sign. The first building from the bridge end on the lower side of the road is a story and a half structure with an open porch on the river side. Steps lead from the porch down the bank toward the river edge. Two large signs on the roof are illegible in the picture but are of the advertising type. A parking lot in the front between the building and the road has room for autos to pull face in. There is a small addition on the back that appears to hang out over the steep slope. A small open-sided roofed structure is on a ledge part way down the slope facing the water between the building and the river edge.⁶⁷

The next bridge was built atop the stone piers erected in 1852. The shoulders of the old piers were filled out to provide wider supports for the new bridge which was to be ten feet wider and twenty feet higher. This new bridge had three traffic lanes, two pedestrian walks; it was erected by the Tuller Construction Company of Redbank, New Jersey, at a contract cost of \$342,529. The dedication ceremony took place on June 17, 1938, with a series of speakers, one, Virginia Senator Glass who was a surprise, not being listed on the program. It was Senator Glass who was instrumental in acquiring funds from the District Appropriations Committee.⁶⁸ It was the construction of this 1938 bridge and the re-aligning and raising of the approach roads that obliterated much of the remnants and foundations of structures that preceded it.⁶⁹

At the bridge in 1938 the main structures were a tavern-store, two gasoline stations (one on the upper side of the road, one on the lower side beyond



1938 — Structures and property owners near the bridge. Detail from 1938 Arlington County Franklin Survey — Plate 20, Arlington County, Department of Libraries, Virginia Room Collection.

the tavern), and four cottages below the tavern between the road and the mouth of the Pimmit. The tavern was owned by the Mackey family who also lived in the three houses around the bend between the road (Route 123) and the Pimmit.⁷⁰ Lillian Mackey ran the tavern and lived in the third house from the road next to the Pimmit. The other two houses also were occupied by members of the Mackey family; one, Mary Lou Mackey Madden, a granddaughter of Crandal, remembers waiting for the school bus on Route 123 across from the King's driveway at the top of the steep road from her house on the banks of Pimmit Run.⁷¹

Living On The River

On the Virginia side of the river very few people actually lived at the river bank. Some lived up on the palisades and others lived on the banks of the Pimmit. A colony of summer houses and quarry workers' shacks were on the river edge just above the present Key Bridge known as Sandy Beach. It was reached via an unmarked road near the Cherry Smash building in Rosslyn.⁷²

Closer to Chain Bridge up on the Virginia palisades at Windy Run was "Little Italy," a settlement of the quarry workers who produced from the cliffs stone which was barged down river and used in many Washington buildings.⁷³ Chain Bridge pictures taken in 1890 showed houses on the Washington side close by the C&O Canal both to the left and right of the bridge. One of the people who lived on the D.C. side from 1935-1938 in a house at river's edge was O.T. Carter; his house built during 1932-1934 was midway between Chain Bridge and Georgetown (4215 Canal Road). It was on the river side of the canal right next to the railroad tracks. One had to take a boat across the canal to get to it and enter at the second floor which was level with the railbed.

The Carter house was an up and down terraced building built hard by the river with large doors and windows on the upriver and downriver sides of the second floor. The first floor (actually the basement) had large double doors on the upriver side that swung in and large double doors on the downriver side that swung outward. The large windows and doors would be removed and the basement doors opened during times of high water and floods and the Carters would move everything to the top floor and the rising waters would swirl through the lower floors. After the waters receded the lower levels would be scrubbed and the windows and doors restored to their proper setting, the furnishings put back, and at next high water do it all over.

The Carter house water was supplied by a pump. After each period of high water there was no drinking water so water had to be carried from a spring further up on Canal Road.

The winters along this stretch during Carter's boyhood were cold and icy. Ice would dam at the Aqueduct Bridge and the ice-break in the spring was frightening. The people along the river were always alert for changes; people talked up and down the river constantly on the lookout for danger. Tugboats from the Smoot quarry operation traveling this stretch of river were part of the warning network.

Carter remembers a large colony of houseboats moored on the D.C. side of the river above Georgetown that would suffer some losses to the river during every flood.

A Mr. Crampton, who owned a nearby boathouse, delivered goods by barge to the people living on the river. The Carters received their coal for heating by this method. Crampton also had a barge equipped with a dance floor that in summer was a popular gathering spot.

Mr. Carter remembers there were houses on Canal Road from Chain Bridge to Key Bridge — the kids who lived along the river were known as "River Rats." The only houses during the 1930s and 1940s on the Virginia side of the river close to Chain Bridge were some shacks on stilts occupied by laborers and fishermen.

The Carters moved out in 1938-1939. The house survived until 1941 or 1942 when all but the basement walls and the outdoor fireplace disappeared. (Demolished or flood?) If one looks closely from the George Washington Parkway at Spout Run directly across to the D.C. shore the outdoor fireplace is still visible.⁷⁴

The Last Entrepreneurs At The Bridge

During the late 1940s and through the 1950-1960 period the tavern and the gas station, on opposite sides of the road, right at the bridge were the only businesses still in operation and the small one room cottages behind the tavern were rented out to full-time tenants.

The tavern during this period was a different appearing building than in the mid-1930 picture. It now was a two-story (second story at road level) brick and block structure with a flat roof. The tavern interior was typical of the time. One large room with a counter on the left where beer, light food, candy, fishing hooks, etc. were sold. The majority of the room was filled with tables and chairs.⁷⁵ The tavern was run by Lillian Mackey; Darlington Mackey, who was blind, lived in the lower level; Argyle Mackey lived up the hill on Route 123.⁷⁶

The gas station was operated beginning in the early 1950s and through mid-1950s by John K. Hayes, who leased from Amoco, who in turn leased from the owner, Mrs. Doak, who was still living in the large house on the palisades.⁷⁷ The gas station was primitive even in the 1950s. The grease rack was outside and oil was kept in large drums and sold by the quart bottle



Virginia end of bridge — Circa 1930. 1927 abutment visible. Picture taken from Mackey Tavern parking lot. *Courtesy Commission of Fine Arts, Donald Myer*

(installed for twenty-five cents a quart). Kerosene and white gas for heaters and lanterns were big sellers, especially during the spring herring and shad runs when large supplies of hooks, lead sinkers, sandwiches and soft drinks were for sale in the tiny gas station office.

The place was always bustling during spring fishing; in addition to the fishermen, there were gas buyers, river watchers, regular carpoolers who changed rides there and used the station as a waiting room. The Metropolitan Police patrols came across the bridge regularly and stopped in.

Across the road behind the tavern a steep path led down to the one-room cabins located on the banks of the Pimmit. These cabins were heated by kerosene stoves and did not have running water. Several regular occupants would go to the gas station each evening to fill their water jugs and occasionally buy kerosene for their stoves. Their bathing facility was a fairly deep pool located about a half-mile upstream in Pimmit Run.

Then And Now

A visit today to the bridge finds no buildings at all (the last listing in the Arlington County Directory for a business at the bridge was in 1955 for Chain Bridge CALSO service station). The approach road and bridge both have been widened even further than in 1938. There does not appear to be



Virginia end of bridge taken from same spot as 1930 picture — 1988. Note marker at right.
Author's Collection

room on either side of the road to put any kind of structure — the only thing there to remind of days past is a historical marker describing the early settlers at the mouth of the Pimmit.

In the early days the roads and river banks were much different than today. On early maps the road that goes straight up the hill from the bridge (present-day Glebe Road) used to follow the Georgetown Turnpike (Route 123) for a short distance then turned to the left and became Falls Rolling Road, crossed Pimmit Run and went through a valley eventually joining present-day Glebe Road near Walker Chapel.

The early road to the Sugarlands (Sugarlands Rolling Road) left the ferry landing at water's edge on the lower side of the Pimmit Run mouth and crossed the Pimmit upstream from the present and earlier Glebe Road bridges. This road that now turns and goes straight up the hill toward Fairfax (Route 123) has over the years had the following names: Sugarlands Road, Sugarlands Rolling Road, Georgetown Pike, Leesburg Pike, Georgetown-Leesburg Pike, Great Falls Road, Chain Bridge Road, and Route 123. The other road leaving the bridge into Arlington has been named The Falls Road, Little Falls Road, Falls Rolling Road, and Glebe Road.

The building and rebuilding of the bridges and continuous raising the widening of approach roads changed the appearance of the bridge head, eventually erasing almost all trace of what was there. The bridge approach

from the D.C. side was via a causeway across the flats to a ramped incline leading up onto the bridge. It was not until the construction of the sixth bridge in 1852 which used all stone support piers that the bridge carried all the way from the Virginia shore to the north bank of the canal on the D.C. side.⁷⁸

The most dramatic change in the topography was caused by the extensive quarrying operations on the southern palisade at the mouth of Pimmit Run. A 1789 sketch of the first bridge shows a large outcropping of rock that had disappeared in views of later years, removed by quarrying.⁷⁹ These palisades were first quarried commercially as early as the Patterson ventures prior to 1821.⁸⁰ In 1851 the Vanderwerkin-Grunwell family(s) had a commercial quarry on the palisades followed by a succession of companies: Potomac Stone Company, Columbia Sand and Gravel Company, and Smoot Sand and Gravel Company — quarrying ceased in late 1938.⁸¹

Some of the houses built in the 1920s and 1930s are still there, including the Doak House "Notre Nid." They have been joined by structures, some very elegant, built along both sides of Route 123 as one travels up the hill toward Fairfax, including a group of townhouses right on the palisades. A substantial number of houses have been built on the land atop the Glebe Road hill as well as along 41st Street North. A major road, the George Washington Parkway has been constructed along the ridge just beyond the Pimmit and crosses over Glebe Road on high bridgeworks that dominate the scene as one approaches Virginia on the bridge from the D.C. side.

A walking trip along the banks of Pimmit Run reveals little of what was there: a few possible foundation stones near the bridge, the early abutment, further upstream the abutment of an early bridge that used to carry Glebe Road over the Pimmit; a large depression and stones that may have been a building site, a solitary utility pole at the location of the three houses — nothing of substance to indicate more than two hundred years of man's involvement.

Notes and References

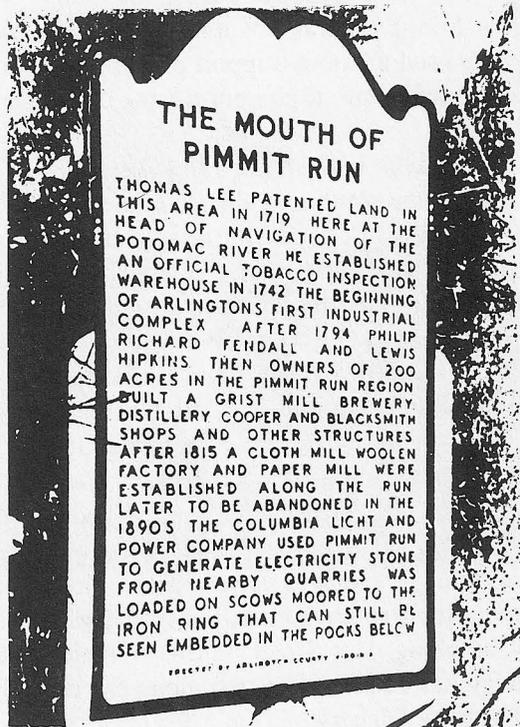
Jim Fearson is a native Arlingtonian who now resides in Herndon. A local history buff, he worked as a teen-ager in the gas station at Chain Bridge. He was guided through this research by Sara Collins, whose help is greatly appreciated.

¹Charles H. Lee Decker, *Archaeological Investigation of National Park Service Lands in the Vicinity of Chain Bridge, District of Columbia and Virginia*, (Alexandria, Virginia: Professional Service Industries, 1983) *Final Report*, pp. 10-11.

²*Ibid.*, p. 11.

³*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Washington, D.C., (Washington, D.C.: The Society, 1930), Volume 31-32, p. 69.

⁴Ellen Anderson, *Salona-Fairfax County Virginia*, (Fairfax, Virginia: Fairfax County Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1979), p. 6.



Roadside marker at Virginia end of bridge. Erected by Arlington County. *Author's collection*

³Decker, *Archaeological Investigation, Final Report*, p. 12.

⁶*Records Columbia Historical Society*, p. 111.

⁷Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage, Vignettes of a Virginia County*, (Arlington, Virginia: The Author, 1959), p. 118.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 54. Private William Scott (3rd Vermont Volunteers) had the misfortune of falling asleep while on duty at the D.C. end of Chain Bridge, thus becoming the first Union Army sentinel to be court-martialled for sleeping at his post. His death sentence was pardoned after being appealed to President Lincoln.

⁹Donald Beekman Meyer, *Bridges and the City of Washington*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, reprinted 1983), p. 3.

¹⁰Jean Geddes, *Fairfax County, Historical Highlights from 1607*, (Fairfax, Virginia: Denlinger's, 1967), p. 24.

¹¹Meyer, *Bridges and the City of Washington*, p. 3.

¹²C.B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County Virginia: A History*, (Arlington, Virginia: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), p. 73.

¹³*Arlington Heritage*, p. 54.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵Anderson, *Salona-Fairfax*, p. 5.

¹⁶Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William, Volumes I and II*, (Baltimore, Maryland, The Prince William County Historical Commission, 1987), p. 148.

- ¹⁷Awbrey's land grants were in the fork of the Pohick, on the Horsepen of Broad, on Cub, on the branches of Four Mile, on Catoctin and Goose and on Potomac above Goose Creek. Awbrey was well connected in the area. On the organization of Prince William in 1731 he was included in the first commission of the peace and the next year became the inspector of the Pohick warehouse and a member of the Truro vestry. In 1739 he served the office of Sheriff of Prince William. He built a chapel above Goose Creek between 1733-1735. At the end of his life he lived beside the "Big Spring" near the site of Leesburg. Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, pp. 153-154.
- ¹⁸Beth Mitchell, *Beginning at a White Oak . . . Patents and Northern Neck Grants of Fairfax County Virginia*, (Fairfax, Virginia: Fairfax County, 1979), p. 117.
- ¹⁹Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, p. 148.
- ²⁰Decker, *Archaeological Investigation, Final Report*, p. 11.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ²²Dorothea E. Abbott, "The Roots of Clarendon," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, (The Arlington Historical Society, Inc., Volume 8, No. 2, 1986), p. 48.
- ²³Geddes, *Fairfax County, Historical Highlights From 1607*, pp. 55-57.
- ²⁴Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, p. 663.
- ²⁵Anderson, *Salona-Fairfax*, p. 6.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²⁷*Records of the Columbia Historical Society — Washington, D.C.*, Volumes 31-32, published by the Society, on page 110, refer several times to Lewis Hopkins and to the Fendall-Hopkins properties. In *Old Roads and New Insights, Adventures and Discovery*, author Winslow R. Hatch refers to Lewis Hipkins as well as the Fendall-Hipkins Mill.
- ²⁸*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, p. 110.
- ²⁹*Archaeological Investigations, Final Report*, p. 12.
- ³⁰*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, p. 110.
- ³¹Winslow R. Hatch, *Old Roads and New Insights, Adventures in Discovery*, (McLean, Virginia: Dita K. Hatch, 1985), p. 47.
- ³²*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, p. 109-110.
- ³³Louise C. Curran, *McLean Remembers Again*, (McLean, Virginia: The Sound Publications, 1976), p. 40.
- ³⁴*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, p. 112.
- ³⁵Anderson, *Salona-Fairfax*, p. 18.
- ³⁶Curran, *McLean Remembers Again*, p. 40.
- ³⁷*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, p. 111.
- ³⁸Hatch, *Old Roads and New Insights . . .*, p. 50.
- ³⁹It is unfortunate that accounts of the events are not specific as to the place where the Declaration of Independence and other important papers spent the first night on the flight from the burning City. Maps of the time show mills and mill locations at Chain Bridge and on the Pimmit and Little Pimmit, all within range of the first night travel. It is a mystery which may never be resolved, but as this author found: "The fun is in the search."
- ⁴⁰Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 54.
- ⁴¹Rose, *Arlington County Virginia: A History*, p. 102.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ⁴³Curran, *McLean Remembers Again*, p. 36.
- ⁴⁴Rose, *Arlington County Virginia: A History*, p. 103.
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ⁴⁶June Robinson, "The United States Balloon Corps in Action in Northern Virginia During the Civil War," *The Arlington Historical Magazine* (The Arlington Historical Society, Inc., Volume 8, No. 2, 1986), p. 5.

- ⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 13-15.
- ⁴⁸Harry E.A. Gutshall, "Reminiscences of Walker Chapel Area," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, (The Arlington Historical Society, Inc., Volume 5, No. 2, 1974), p. 21.
- ⁴⁹John Clagget Proctor* Collection — The Columbia Historical Society, 1307 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. *Wrote the "Rambler" column 1928-1952, *The Evening Star*.
- ⁵⁰J. Harry Shannon*, "With the Rambler," *The Washington Star*, June 27, 1915, Washington, D.C. *Wrote the "Rambler" column 1912-1927.
- ⁵¹Eleanor Lee Templeman, "The New G.W. Parkway Route Unites History With Beauty," *The Washington Post and Times-Herald*, November 27, 1958, Washington, D.C.
- ⁵²*Columbia Mirror and Alexandria Gazette*, August 16, 1796.
- ⁵³Decker, *Archaeological Investigation, Final Report*, p. 16.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁵⁵Hatch, *Old Roads and New Insight*, p. 45.
- ⁵⁶*Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 79.
- ⁵⁷Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 112.
- ⁵⁸Rose, *Arlington County Virginia*, p. 177.
- ⁵⁹Decker, *Archaeological Investigation, Final Report*, p. 15.
- ⁶⁰*The Evening Star*, March 29, 1928, Washington, D.C.
- ⁶¹Map — *Alexandria and Arlington — 1936*, Sanborn Insurance, p. 60, Arlington County, Department of Libraries, Virginia Room Collection.
- ⁶²*Franklin Survey — 1938, Arlington County Plate 20*, Arlington County, Department of Libraries, Virginia Room Collection.
- ⁶³*The Washington Star*, Friday, March 20, 1936, Washington, D.C.
- ⁶⁴Interview — By Author, (telephone), Arlington, Virginia, John K. Hayes, April 1987 and March 1991, (Mr. Hayes leased the gas station at Chain Bridge from the early 1950s through the mid-1950s).
- ⁶⁵*The Washington Daily News*, May 29, 1936, Washington, D.C.
- ⁶⁶Notes in Proctor Collection, Columbia Historical Society.
- ⁶⁷*The Washington Times*, September 22, 1937, Washington, D.C.
- ⁶⁸Notes in Proctor Collection, Columbia Historical Society.
- ⁶⁹Decker, *Archaeological Investigation, Final Report*, p. 19.
- ⁷⁰Interview — By Author (telephone), Vienna, Virginia, Mary Lou Mackey Madden, April 25, 1987, (Mrs. Madden is a granddaughter of Crandal Mackey).
- ⁷¹Mackey interview.
- ⁷²*Cultural Resources Mgt. Report*, National Park Service, April 10, 1989, Interview — Bernie Fearson, by Jim Putman and Paul Cissna, Arlington, Virginia.
- ⁷³Templeman, *The Washington Post and Times-Herald*, Thursday, November 27, 1958.
- ⁷⁴Information supplied to Author by O.T. Carter during interview at McLean, Virginia, November 1988, and to Author in telephone interview, McLean, Virginia, March 1991.
- ⁷⁵Hayes Interview.
- ⁷⁶Mackey Interview.
- ⁷⁷Hayes Interview.
- ⁷⁸"With the Rambler," June 27, 1915.
- ⁷⁹*Latrobe's View of America, 1795-1820*. (New Haven and New London, Connecticut: The Maryland Historical Society, 1985), p. 134.
- ⁸⁰*Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, pp. 109-110.
- ⁸¹Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 142.