History of Davis Ford and Yates Ford Roads

By

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Today's nearly 5-mile long Davis Ford Road is well known for its traffic bottleneck as Prince William County residents seek one of three crossings into Fairfax County, particularly in the morning and evening rush hours. But over the past 150 years various roads called Davis Ford, or the "Road to Davis Ford" have stretched over 15.5 miles through the county, from the Town of Occoquan to Tutor Hall[1] (now called the City of Manassas).

Over the decades parts of Davis Ford Road have also been known as Routes 641, 642, and 663. Today those same routes are now known as Minnieville Road, Elm Farm Road, Pennington Lane, parts of the Prince William Parkway, and Yates Ford Road. But at one time all of these routes were known as "the Road to Davis Ford", or Davis Ford Road. Figure 1 shows the path that Davis Ford Road took through the county, with that section in green the only remaining part bearing the original name. Before the 1960s nearly all roads in the county were

Figure 1

known by their State Route number, but this was changed by County Surveyor R. Jackson Radcliff when he moved most of the roads from a numbering system to road names.
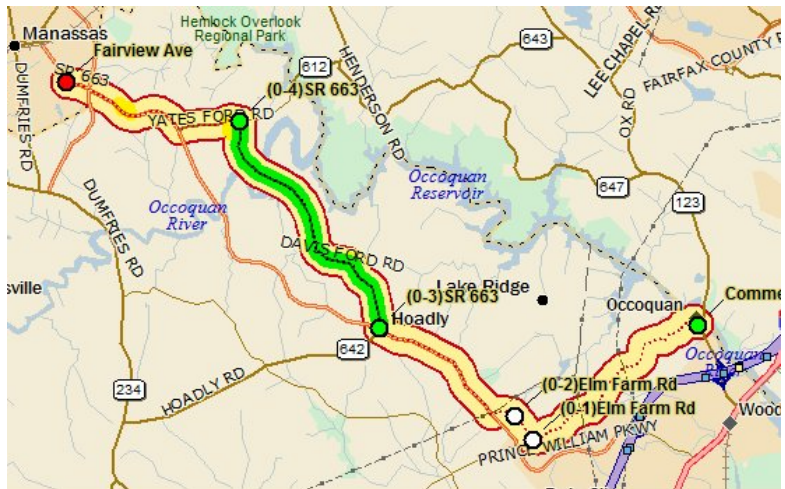
The creation of the Prince William Parkway caused some significant changes to the old Davis Ford Road. Originally coming out of the Town of Occoquan and following what is now Minnieville Road, the older Davis Ford Road turned right on what is now Elm Farm Road and continued along Pennington Lane before it merged back into the

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[1] Tutor Hall, a plantation set up in the early 1800s, was located just south of the train station at the area known as Manassas Junction. The actual building housed a village store, which by 1861 had a postal facility counter that handled the mail for the growing number of Confederate troops in the area. Confederates retreated to south of the Rappahannock River in March, 1862 and Union forces took over the area, renaming the post office as Manassas Junction and finally Manassas.

current Parkway location at the intersection with Haversack Lane. From that point back down to current Minnieville Road was all forest land before the Parkway was put into existence.

The Parkway also led to a major redirection of Old Bridge Road where it joins the current Parkway at Merchant Plaza. The original Old Bridge Road actually followed what is now Old Bridge Lane on the back side of the Glen Oaks Condos and went through the area of the Chinn Library and Recreation Center. Members of the Historical Commission recently found a historic road marker in the woods not far from the new Chinn Library sign (and hidden cell tower).

The old Davis Ford Road led to the loosely organized community of Hoadly, complete with a Post Office, that was situated around the area where Hoadly Road intersects with the current Parkway, as well as where the current Government Center is located. At one time, the community of Hoadly formed a significant cross-point in the county where the pathways between Woodbridge and Manassas met with the trails that ran from Wolf Run Shoals to Independent Hill and ultimately Brentsville. Until the Parkway was built in the 1990s, that area due west of Hoadly to the Occoquan River was just forests, hills and streams.

The modern day Davis Ford Road starts at Hoadly and the current Prince William Parkway and goes past the location of the Bacon Race Church and Cemetery. This location has been variously known as Occoquan or Bacon Race Meetinghouse, Oak Grove Church and Bacon Race Church. The first church was built on the site around 1774, with the last church built around 1836. Figure 2 shows that last church, before it fell down on Christmas Eve, 1987. The area was a significant location during the early part of the Civil War and used as a supply depot for Wade Hampton's Confederate Brigade.

Figure 2

Several Confederate regiments camped in the vicinity of the Church (likely across the street from the Church location and where current Trunnion Trail is located) and called it Camp Griffin and later Camp Butler.   These troops supported the blockade operations along the Potomac River during the winter of 1861-1862, as well as supplied pickets that guarded the crossing of Occoquan River at Wolf Run Shoals, just to the north.

Wolf Run Shoals was a major crossing point between Fairfax County and Prince William County during the Civil War. Numerous skirmishes occurred between Union troops who occupied the northern bank of the river and Confederate forces on the south bank. Jeb Stuart's cavalry used that crossing to get to Gettysburg in 1863 and then one

of the last skirmishes of the war occurred when troops of John Singleton Mosby escaped Union troops by crossing Wolf Run Shoals.

The crossing at Wolf Run Shoals was first created during the Revolutionary War. It provided a better pathway for French and American wagons supporting the troops of French General Rochambeau and American General Washington on their way to Yorktown to battle the British.

Between Bacon Race and the Occoquan River, the current Davis Ford Road generally follows the path of the older route, but there are several instances where the current road diverges and the older road can still be seen. One instance is the bend in the road just past the community of Malvern Chase and is shown on maps as "Old Davis Ford Road". Old Davis Ford Road did go behind the house that exists on the east side of the road and made a much sharper bend in the neighborhood called Occoquan Oaks. Another instance is between the neighborhoods of Running Creek and Crooked Creek on the west side of current Davis Ford Road. One can still see the path of the old road in the trees and below the telephone poles. Imagine as you drive along that Confederate and Union troops were right next to you as they marched to Manassas Battlefield. Both of these instances can be seen on the 1937 aerial image with the current roads as an overlay, in Figure 3.
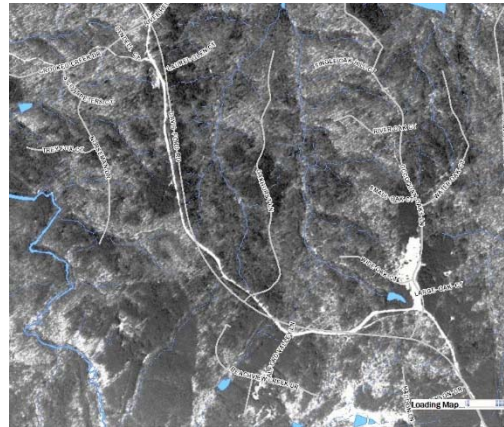

Figure 3

The location where a road crosses the Occoquan River was marked as "Davis Ford" in the oldest known map of Prince William County, which was surveyed and

Figure 4

drawn under the direction of John Wood in 1820 (see Figure 4). This same map shows the Bacon Race Meetinghouse (it later became the Bacon Race Church) and where Wolf Run Road crossed the lower portion of Occoquan River at Wolf Run Shoals.   It should be noted that the Occoquan River starts at Lake Jackson and flows easterly to the county boundary where it joins with Bull Run. From that junction, it flows southeasterly to pass by the Town of Occoquan and ends by dumping into the Potomac River. The crossing called Spriggs Ford (at the bottom of the map) is approximately at the current day location of where the Prince William Parkway crosses the Occoquan River. One of the oldest Mills in the county (Peaks Mill,

sometimes called Priest Mill) also shows up on this map, which is situated behind the current day water treatment plant on Davis Ford Road.

The Davises are one of the county's oldest families dating back to 1720 when they either received land grants or bought land along the Occoquan and Bull Run from Robert (King) Carter. Carter had received one of the original land grants from the King, and ultimately accumulated nearly 300,000 acres in Virginia, including much of present day Prince William and Fairfax Counties. Revolutionary War pension records include Hugh Davis and William Davis and some historians have speculated that Davis Ford Road was named after Hugh who may have owned a house near the Ford.   This is the only indication on that 1820 map about a Davis Ford.

The Davis family greatly expanded in the County and local historian Ron Turner has identified 19 different cemeteries located throughout the county containing members of a Davis family. At the time of the Civil War another crossing of the Occoquan River, to the southeast of Wolf Run Shoals, was also identified as "Sally Davis' Ford". Two Davis families lived across the river from each other (one in Prince William County near what is now Occoquan Club Drive and the other in Fairfax County in what is now Fountainhead Regional Park). While this crossing continued to appear on turn-of-the-century maps, it was flooded out when the Occoquan Dam was built in 1957 and the Occoquan Reservoir was created.

An early Confederate map of the Fords on the Occoquan and Bull Run shows the crossing at Davis Ford (shown at the bottom of Figure 5), and identifies the current day
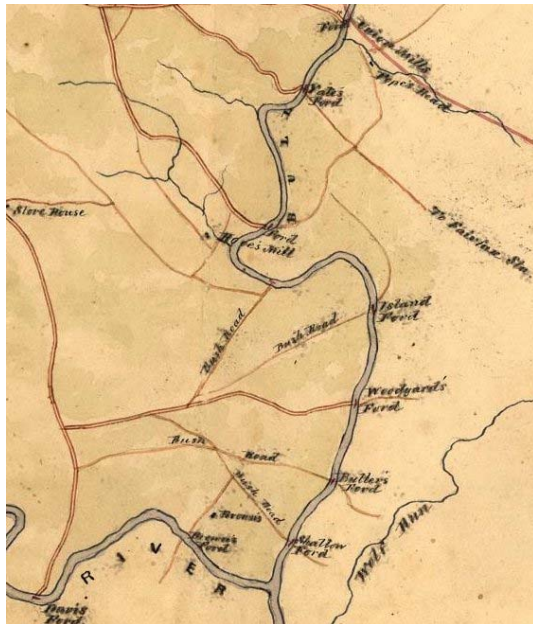

Figure 5

Yates Ford Road crossing as Woodyard's Ford. The old bridge abutments can still be seen in Bull Run on the north side of Yates Ford Road at the bridge. Originally the road to Fairfax County led into the area that is now the rowing club house and its parking lot.

While there was a Ford called Yates Ford, which is identified in Civil War records as a crossing of Bull Run that led to Fairfax Station, this crossing was further north, located near where the railroad crossed into Prince William County at Union Mills. Interestingly, the Confederate map identifies three other Fords south of Woodyard's Ford in the community that is currently formed around Lake Occoquan Drive. Two of the current roads off Lake Occoquan Drive. are called Shallow Ford Road and Shallowford Road, which correspond to the Shallow Ford on the Confederate map. The County's current Mapper system identifies this area as a Historic Sensitivity Area.

While these early maps seemed to show the "Road to Davis Ford" relatively straight coming from the Bacon Race area, it wasn't until true topologically correct mapping efforts came into existence in the early 1920s that the true route of Davis Ford Road is depicted. The 1927 Army topo map (see Figure 6) shows how Davis Ford Road actually went into what is now the Occoquan Forest community before it turned south to cross the Occoquan river (shown in blue circle). This route is also shown in the first aerial image of the county, done in 1937 (see Figure 7). Historical information indicates that the older Davis
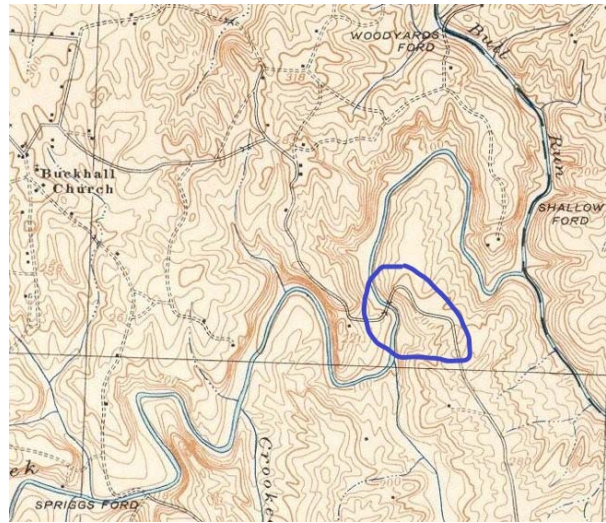

Figure 6

Figure 7

Ford Road bridge across the Occoquan was a single lane bridge that lasted until it was replaced in 1957 with the straightening and widening of Davis Ford Road. The foundations for the bridge can still be seen in the river and shore line and the original roadbed can be observed coming down the hill and to the left of the house that caught fire in 2011 and is now being rebuilt. I have not been able to find any pictures of the original bridge, but am certainly interested if anyone has such a picture in their family history.

Modern mapping systems (called Geographic Information Systems or GIS) can overlay current streets over older aerial photographs, such as in Figure 8. One can see

Figure 8

how Davis Ford Road was straightened where current day River Forest Drive and Occoquan Forest Drive meet. Once across Occoquan River the old road bed of Davis Ford Road can still be seen behind the water catchment area on the south side of modern Davis Ford Road. It appears the original road bed is now someone's driveway at the top of the hill. Historians have said that an old dance hall was located on the old road where current Ravenwood Drive joins the straightened Davis Ford Road.

The old Davis Ford Road generally followed what is now Davis Ford up to where the road to Woodyard's Ford (current Yates Ford) met Davis Ford. The older aerial photographs show that Davis Ford made a gentle left bend and then continued down to approximately where the Parkway exists today. Therefore, anyone coming up from the Parkway would have had to turn left to go onto the road to Yates Ford. That's not hard in a horse and buggy, but one can understand why county engineers made the intersection a true "T" when they created the current Yates Ford Road.

In older times Davis Ford Road did a gradual right bend near where the Parkway

Figure 9

exists today. In fact, current aerial photographs of the area show the route of the older roadway, now hidden behind the trees north of the intersection with the Parkway (as shown on Figure 9).

The modern Parkway generally follows the route of older Davis Ford Road between now Yates Ford Road and the City of Manassas border at

Liberia Avenue, with one exception. As shown in Figure 10, the old road turned southward to go to the community of Buckhall (located at the current intersection of Moore Drive and Jasper Branch Court). The area of Buckhall was established before the Civil War and

Figure 10

supported a one-room school house until the 1930s (reported to be the first public school in western Prince William County). The school building was purchased by William Davis at auction in the 30s and then the Buckhall Civic Association restored the building in 1965. The building still sits next to the Buckhall Store, built in the 1940s. This older image of the area (Figure 10) has the current path of the Parkway shown in red.

Most old maps indicate Davis Ford Road ended at the boundary of the City of Manassas, at the current day intersection of Liberia Avenue and the Prince William Parkway, fittingly at Davis Ford Crossing Shopping Center.

So, if you are stuck in traffic on Davis Ford Road or Yates Ford Road one morning, look around, history is all around you. And consider yourself lucky that you don't have to navigate a narrow one lane bridge or a left turn.

Resources:

http://www.pwcgov.org/government/dept/library/pages/relic-programs.aspx -- Relic Room at Bull Run Library

http://gisweb.pwcgov.org/webapps/CountyMapper/ -- County's GIS system

http://www.historicprincewilliam.org/county-history/maps/ -- Historic Prince William's website containing a number of historical maps of the county.

http://www.midcopw.net/mid-county-history.html -- Mid County Civic Association of Prince William

http://www.pwcvirginia.com/ -- Website on history of Prince William County, maintained by Ron Turner

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The Prince William County Historical Commission is composed of 16 citizens appointed by the Board of County Supervisors. The Historical Commission advises the Board in its efforts to identify, preserve, protect and promote Prince William County's historical sites, artifacts, buildings and events.

Members review land development applications and make recommendations regarding their impact on cultural resources; produce publications related to local history; provide input on the installation of historical highway markers; propose properties to be classified as County Registered Historic Sites; conduct tours; and award community service certificates.

The Historical Commission usually meets on the second Tuesday of each month usually at the Development Services Building at 5 County Complex Court, Prince William, VA.