

# Fact Sheet: Rename Falls Church to Little Falls

## Indigenous History:

- Before Falls Church was established, the area was inhabited by the Iroquois Confederacy, including the Tauxenents, Patawomekes, and Matchotics<sup>1</sup>.
- The Little Falls of the Potomac River were highly significant to the Native American peoples, marking the first barrier to navigation on the river and serving as a gathering place for trade and communication<sup>2,3,4</sup>.
- Native American trails connected the area to Little Falls, which later became major colonial transportation routes<sup>5</sup>.

## Colonial History:

- English colonists arrived in the area as early as 1699, disrupting the lives of the native inhabitants<sup>6</sup>.
- The Falls Church was founded in 1734 at the intersection of the Native American trails, serving as a place of worship and an outpost of the colonial government<sup>7,8,9</sup>.
- George Washington and George Mason were vestrymen of the church<sup>10</sup>.
- Architect James Wren designed the current brick Falls Church, built in 1769. Records indicate Wren owned slaves and likely used enslaved labor to construct the church<sup>11</sup>.
- The Falls Church served not only as a place of worship but also as an outpost of the colonial government, with the church vestry acting as a local governing body<sup>12</sup>.
- Broad Street, Lee Highway, and Little Falls Street, which intersect at the location of The Falls Church, were originally important Native American trails that were later paved and named by the colonists<sup>13</sup>.

## Enslaved Labor:

- Both the original wooden church and the current brick Falls Church were built using enslaved labor<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Falls Church. About Falls Church. <https://www.fallschurchva.gov/758/About-Falls-Church>

<sup>2</sup> Little Falls Watershed Alliance. The Potomac River and the Little Falls. [<https://www.lfwa.org/>]

<sup>3</sup> How the Potomac River Shaped the Settlement of Northern Virginia [<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/regions/16potomac.html>]

<sup>4</sup> Bradley E. Gernand and Nan Netherton, *Falls Church—A Virginia Village Revisited*. Virginia Beach: The Donning Company, 2000. Page 13, citing interviews with Fairfax County archeologists Michael Johnson and Martha Williams. Via Wikipedia [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Falls\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Falls_Church)]

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Department of Education. Virginia's First People. <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/k-12-standards-instruction/history-and-social-science/virginia-s-first-people-past-and-present/history>

<sup>6</sup> The Little City. History. <https://thelittlecity.org/fallschurch-history/>

<sup>7</sup> Mary Riley Stiles Public Library

<sup>8</sup> Gernand and Netherton, *Falls Church*, p. 13, citing Fairfax Harrison, *The Landmarks of Old Prince William*, pp. 143, 148. Via Wikipedia [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Falls\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Falls_Church)]

<sup>9</sup> Gernand and Netherton, *Falls Church*, p. 21, citing Harrison, *Landmarks*, pp. 285–287. Via Wikipedia [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Falls\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Falls_Church)]

<sup>10</sup> The George Washington Foundation. (n.d.). George Washington's Role at The Falls Church.

<sup>11</sup> The Falls Church History. [<https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>]

<sup>12</sup> The Falls Church History. [<https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>]

<sup>13</sup> City of Falls Church. About Falls Church. <https://www.fallschurchva.gov/758/About-Falls-Church>

- The Falls Church maintained a segregated seating arrangement for enslaved individuals and free Black people in the church, with a separate gallery reserved for them<sup>14</sup>.
- The Falls Church congregation today acknowledges its past use of enslaved labor and has made efforts to address this history by creating a memorial for the enslaved people who contributed to the church's construction and by participating in educational programs to raise awareness about their role in the church's history<sup>15</sup>.

### **Inclusivity and Religious Plurality:**

- Today, Falls Church is home to a diverse population with various religious affiliations, as well as non-religious individuals<sup>16</sup>.
- Renaming the city to "Little Falls" would remove the connection to a specific church and religion, making the city more welcoming to people of all faiths, beliefs, and non-believers.
- The change would also foster a greater sense of unity and inclusivity by acknowledging the city's diverse history and its evolution from a single colonial church to a community encompassing various denominations and secular perspectives.

### **Name Origin:**

- The name "Falls Church" originates from the church's location near the Little Falls of the Potomac River.<sup>17</sup>
- The church was founded in 1734, and its name was later adopted for the surrounding community and, eventually, the city.<sup>18</sup>
- The colonial road that connected the church to the surrounding area was called "The Falls Church Road" or "The Road to the Falls Church," which further linked the church's name to the community<sup>19</sup>.
- The name "Falls Church" was informally used for the community even before it was officially incorporated as a city in 19484.
- The city's proximity to the Little Falls of the Potomac River and the importance of the falls as a meeting point and trading area for the Native American tribes that inhabited the region before European colonization provides historical context for the proposed name change<sup>20</sup>.

### **Boundaries of Falls Church:**

- The City of Falls Church has official boundaries, as it is an independent city and not part of Fairfax County.<sup>21</sup>
- The term "Falls Church" has historically referred to more than just the current boundaries of the city.<sup>22</sup>
- From 1875 to 1887, the Town of Falls Church included what is now the City of Falls Church, South Falls Church, and East Falls Church.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Falls Church Episcopal. [<https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>]

<sup>15</sup> City of Falls Church. About Falls Church. <https://www.fallschurchva.gov/758/About-Falls-Church>

<sup>16</sup> Who Practices What Religion Where in Virginia? [<https://statchatva.org/2021/06/08/who-practices-what-religion-where-in-virginia/>]

<sup>17</sup> The Falls Church History. [<https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>]

<sup>18</sup> The Falls Church Episcopal. [<https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>]

<sup>19</sup> City of Falls Church. Historic Preservation. [[www.fallschurchva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/696/Chapter-9?bidId=](http://www.fallschurchva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/696/Chapter-9?bidId=)]

<sup>20</sup> Encyclopedia of Virginia. [<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/indians-in-virginia/>]

<sup>21</sup> City of Falls Church. About Falls Church. [<https://www.fallschurchva.gov/758/About-Falls-Church>]

<sup>22</sup> Where is Falls Church, exactly? [<https://ggwash.org/view/43792/where-is-falls-church-exactly>]

<sup>23</sup> City of Falls Church. About Falls Church. [<https://www.fallschurchva.gov/758/About-Falls-Church>]

- In 1890, the Town Council of Falls Church voted to cede its other majority African American districts to Fairfax County.<sup>24</sup>
- The boundaries of the City of Falls Church have changed slightly in recent years due to a deal involving the transfer of the Falls Church City water system to Fairfax Water.<sup>25</sup>
- The term "Greater Falls Church" is often used to describe the City of Falls Church and its surrounding areas, but there is no formal boundary definition.<sup>26</sup>
- Some physical features, such as I-66, the Beltway, and Holmes Run/Columbia Pike, have been proposed as potential boundaries for Falls Church.<sup>27</sup>

**Notable Residents and Community Engagement:**

- Falls Church has a history of civic engagement and activism, with residents often participating in discussions and decision-making processes.<sup>28</sup>
- Prominent figures from Falls Church's past, such as George Mason, a Founding Father and author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, and James Wren, an architect who designed the current brick church and owned slaves<sup>29,30</sup>
- The Rename Falls Church to Little Falls movement actively encourages residents to engage in meaningful conversations about the city's history and future, fostering a sense of community and promoting democratic values.

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<sup>24</sup> The City of Falls Church. Planning commission. [<https://www.fallschurchva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/852/Background>]

<sup>25</sup> The Water War Between Fairfax County and the City of Falls Church. [<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/watersheds/fairfax-fallschurch.html>]

<sup>26</sup> Where is Falls Church, exactly? [<https://ggwash.org/view/43792/where-is-falls-church-exactly>]

<sup>27</sup> Where is Falls Church, exactly? [<https://ggwash.org/view/43792/where-is-falls-church-exactly>]

<sup>28</sup> Falls Church News Press. [<https://www.fcnp.com/2015/02/26/guest-commentary-civic-engagement-hallmark-falls-church/>]

<sup>29</sup> Episcopal News. [<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2017/02/17/virginia-congregation-honors-slaves-who-built-church-offers-gratitude-and-repentance/>]

<sup>30</sup> Tinner Hill Heritage Foundation and the George Mason University African and African American Studies program. [<http://100yearsblackfallschurch.org/>]