

# The Story of Falls Church

The community located just 10 miles from the nation's capital and today known as Falls Church boasts a history rich in culture and diversity.

## The People to 1700

### Native Peoples and Their Land



Great Falls of the Potomac, 1802. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division



Typical settlement ca. 1585. [Library of Virginia](#)

For thousands of years, native peoples lived in the Falls Church vicinity including a tribe called the Dogue near the Potomac River. They were aligned with the Powhatan Confederacy, led by Chief Powhatan (Wahunsenacawh), father of Pocahontas (Matoaka). The people in this area grew corn, beans, squash and tobacco, collected wild plants, and fished for sturgeon and other migratory species. They hunted deer, bison, bears, wild turkey, small game and birds. They traded with other tribes and later, settlers, traveling via waterways and connecting trails, which were the earliest routes and became integral to the region's history.

### European Colonists

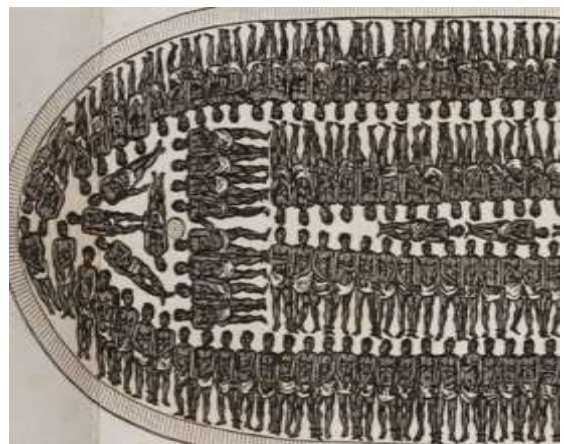
By the late 1600s, increasing hostility and conflict caused by European settlement drove the native peoples from their traditional lifestyle and lands. Some assimilated into the community. Many moved and settled in other locations. The Europeans used the same water routes and the extensive trail system established by the natives as their basic means of travel, commerce and settlement. The newcomers first settled near the larger rivers and creeks. A log cabin with two large brick chimneys was likely built in Falls Church in 1699 by an independent farmer. Known as "Big Chimneys," the house was the first known European structure in the area. It stood until the early 20th century near today's Big Chimneys Park, located at Annandale Road and Maple Avenue.



Big Chimneys, artist rendering. Mary Riley Styles Public Library (MRSPL)

### Africans In Virginia

In August of 1619, a British ship sailing under a Dutch flag brought the first Africans to North America. Originally captured by Portuguese traders and held in Angola, roughly twenty Africans, from west-central Africa, were forcibly abducted and transported to what is now Hampton, Virginia. The tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade continued for centuries. Early records of Falls Church and nearby areas document that both free men and women of color and enslaved people of African descent were part of the Village of Falls Church as early as the mid-1700s. These early African Americans were skilled in farming, weaving, metalwork and other crafts, making them valuable contributors to the local economy.



Plan of an African Ship's Lower Desk. Portion of engraving Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

# Settlement 1700-1815

## Tobacco and the Early Economy



Tobacco-rolling road, Painting. MRSPL

Native people introduced tobacco to the Europeans soon after their 1607 settlement in Jamestown, Virginia. As the English tried various means to sustain their new colony, the plant became a popular cash crop. Tobacco was used as currency to pay taxes collected by local churches. Cutting, curing and transporting tobacco for shipment was labor intensive, fueling the transport and sale of enslaved African people as field workers. Away from the rivers, “rolling roads” of wood slabs allowed large barrels or casks called hogsheads to be pulled by oxen to the warehouses, inspectors and ports. Enslaved Africans and indentured Europeans often built the ox roads that were used throughout the area. A historic sign on Annandale Road marks the remains of one such road.

## The Falls Church and Community

The Falls Church Episcopal. MRSPL



Most Virginia colonists were members of the Church of England, also known as the Anglican or Episcopal Church. In 1724, the first church in the area was established near the Potomac River at Pohick, followed in 1734 by a second church near the Potomac River Falls, soon known as “The Falls Church.” In 1748, the influential George Mason was named a vestryman, and in 1762, 30-year-old George Washington was also named to the vestry. Washington and his neighbor George William Fairfax led efforts to replace the wood structure. The current church, built between 1767-1769, was designed by James Wren. Both churches were likely built with enslaved labor. The church that gave the City of Falls Church its name was the center of local life and served as a Revolutionary War recruiting station. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence was read from its steps.

## Near the Nation’s Capital

The history of Falls Church has close ties to the nation’s capital. After the American Revolution, a capital city was planned along the Potomac River, near the home of George Washington. Major Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker, a free African American mathematician and astronomer, surveyed the boundary in 1791, placing the west corner stone for the District of Columbia on Meridian Street. A second stone stands on what is now Van Buren Street. During the War of 1812 with the British, American gunpowder and arms were moved from Washington to the Dulany family farm in Falls Church for safe keeping. President James Madison and his wife traveled separately on congested local roads to escape the burning of Washington by British troops. Dolly Madison’s carriages held the White House silver and George Washington’s portrait, saved with help from Paul Jennings, an enslaved servant. President Madison stayed at Wren’s Tavern in Falls Church.



Portion of U.S. Government map showing hills, fortifications, roads and villages significant during the Civil War. MRSPL



# Virginia Village 1815-1861

## Turnpikes and Tolls

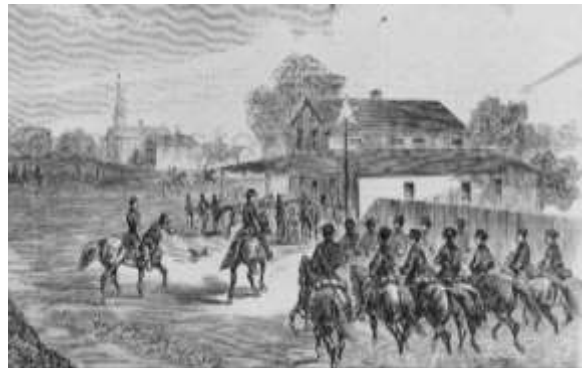
Falls Church's location was not only close to the nation's capital, it was also an important stop along the route from Alexandria's port on the Potomac River to Leesburg and the western mountains. The Leesburg Turnpike Company was established by the Virginia General Assembly in 1809 to construct a road from Leesburg to "a point on the Little River Turnpike" to improve travel and commerce. In 1818, merchants in Washington City won the right to connect a second pike to Georgetown via the present-day Chain Bridge. The Leesburg Turnpike – now State Route 7 – was later paved through Falls Church, and finally opened in 1838. One of its six toll gates was built in Falls Church near Wren's Tavern.



Leesburg and Alexandria Turnpike tollgate, 321 East Broad Street. MRSPL

## The Village Grows

By the 1830s, Falls Church was a growing, prosperous village, a marketplace and a service stop for travelers. Blacksmiths and wheelwrights were numerous, and by 1828, Falls Church was home to five inns and ordinaries, including Wren's Tavern, dating to circa 1785. Providing food, drink and lodging, the inns and taverns were centers of political discussions and social gatherings. The village became a hub for commerce, with farms and orchards providing produce for the local market, Alexandria and Washington City. Northerners attracted by the cheap farmland and warmer climate moved to the area. Cherry Hill Farmhouse (1845), the Lawton House (1854), the Birch House (1840s), and several other homes built along the turnpike still stand today. Better roads also improved regional communication, earning Falls Church a post office, located in the Star Tavern.



Star Tavern with Union Cavalry 1861.MRSPL

## Church and Community

From its earliest days, Falls Church has been a welcoming place for people of many beliefs. In the 1770s, Methodist church members established the Fairfax Chapel (site is in Oakwood Cemetery). Bishop Francis Asbury, founding father of the American Methodist Church, and Harry Hoosier, the first African American Methodist minister, visited Falls Church often. By the 1800s, Methodists replaced the Anglicans as the area's largest congregation. During these years, Presbyterians met in private homes. The Civil War brought many changes to the village, including damages to The Falls Church and the destruction of Fairfax Chapel. Columbia Baptist Church, established in 1856, allowed people of color to worship in the balcony. Abolitionist leaders encouraged the establishment of the African American Galloway Methodist Church (1867) and the Second Baptist Church (1871). The war split the Methodists into separate Southern and Northern congregations. St. James Catholic Church began in 1874, followed by the Congregational Church in 1885.



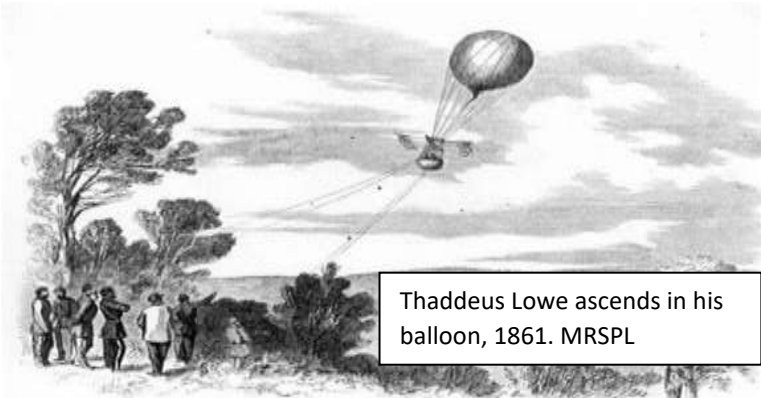
Sermon by Harry Hoosier in 1781 outside Fairfax Chapel. MRSPL

# Civil War 1861-1865

## A Village Divided



Harriet Foote Turner 1865.  
Henderson Collection

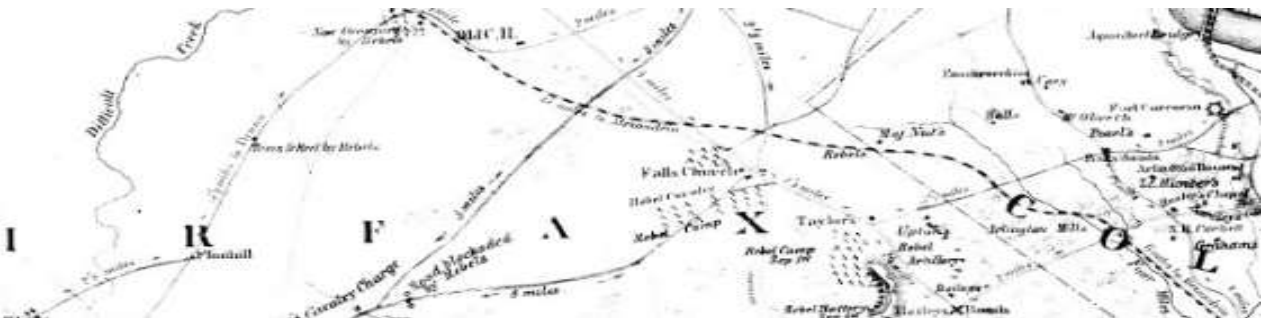


Thaddeus Lowe ascends in his balloon, 1861. MRSPL

Thaddeus Lowe ascends in his balloon, 1861. MRSPL

National politics influenced Falls Church. In 1858, Harriet Foote Turner, a local free woman of color, led 12 enslaved people to freedom in Canada by posing as their owner. In the 1860 Presidential election, some residents voted for Abraham Lincoln, rare in Virginia. During the 1861 referendum to leave the Union, more than a third of the local citizens voted secession despite intimidation. After Virginia joined the Confederacy and Union troops “invaded” the commonwealth, friends and neighbors were forced to choose sides. Black and white Union supporters formed a local Home Guard. Some African Americans joined the U.S. Colored Troops. In June 1861, Thaddeus Lowe used a hot air balloon to report Confederate troop movements in Falls Church, the first such U.S. military use. In November 1861, Julia Ward Howe was inspired by a visit to Union Army camps near Falls Church to write the words to the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

## Between Two Armies



Portion of map tracking Union and Confederate troop movements, 1861. MRSPL

Falls Church lay just outside a line of forts protecting the Union capital. In July 1861, thousands of Union soldiers marched through the village to engage Confederate forces who won the first battle at Manassas along Bull Run. Seeing so many Union soldiers retreating in disarray through the village unnerved some residents, who quickly fled. Roughly 20,000 Confederate troops occupied Falls Church for the rest of the summer. In late September, the Confederates pulled out, and Union troops regained control of the area. After a second battle at Manassas in August 1862 and the September battle at Antietam, Maryland, hundreds of wounded and sick soldiers were brought to makeshift hospitals in churches and barns. Tent camps sprouted up and fences became fuel for campfires. The graveyard at the Falls Church became the final resting place of soldiers from both sides.

## Fear and Resistance

The Union Army occupied Falls Church from fall 1861 to the end of the war, but residents also feared Confederate partisans. By 1864, Confederate Col. John Singleton Mosby’s Raiders were actively staging night raids while an interracial Home Guard of Civilians kept watch over the village. On October 2, 1864, 75 Raiders rode down the turnpike after dark, killing two Home Guard members, including freedman Frank Brooks, a free African American. They took two captives, including John Read, an abolitionist Home Guard member who with his daughter Betsy ran an informal school for African Americans. Read and Jacob Jackson, a free African American, were tried for spying and insurrection that night and shot. Jackson survived and walked 10 miles back to report the incident. Falls Church residents suffered losses of buildings, fences, livestock, crops and other property. After the war, the Southern Claims Commission processed requests for payment of damages to Union loyalists including several free African American families.



John Singleton Mosby on left and John D. Read on right. Library of Congress and MRSPL



# Rebuilding 1865-1890

## Coming of the Railroad

TIME TABLE--NO. 1, Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railroad Company, To take effect on and after MONDAY, January 15, 1866.				
TRAIN NO.	STATION	TIME	STATION	TIME
1	ALEXANDRIA	7:00	WEST FALLS CHURCH	7:25
2	WEST FALLS CHURCH	7:30	ALEXANDRIA	8:00
3	ALEXANDRIA	8:15	WEST FALLS CHURCH	8:40
4	WEST FALLS CHURCH	8:45	ALEXANDRIA	9:15
5	ALEXANDRIA	9:30	WEST FALLS CHURCH	9:55
6	WEST FALLS CHURCH	10:00	ALEXANDRIA	10:30
7	ALEXANDRIA	10:45	WEST FALLS CHURCH	11:10
8	WEST FALLS CHURCH	11:15	ALEXANDRIA	11:45
9	ALEXANDRIA	12:00	WEST FALLS CHURCH	12:25
10	WEST FALLS CHURCH	12:30	ALEXANDRIA	1:00
11	ALEXANDRIA	1:15	WEST FALLS CHURCH	1:40
12	WEST FALLS CHURCH	1:45	ALEXANDRIA	2:15
13	ALEXANDRIA	2:30	WEST FALLS CHURCH	2:55
14	WEST FALLS CHURCH	3:00	ALEXANDRIA	3:30
15	ALEXANDRIA	3:45	WEST FALLS CHURCH	4:10
16	WEST FALLS CHURCH	4:15	ALEXANDRIA	4:45
17	ALEXANDRIA	4:55	WEST FALLS CHURCH	5:20
18	WEST FALLS CHURCH	5:25	ALEXANDRIA	5:55
19	ALEXANDRIA	6:00	WEST FALLS CHURCH	6:25
20	WEST FALLS CHURCH	6:30	ALEXANDRIA	7:00



Railroad schedule 1860. MRSPL      West Falls Church Railroad Station. MRSPL

Railroads began to spread across the eastern seaboard in the 1830s, providing fast and reliable transportation for goods and passengers. The local railroad received its charter in 1847, and by May of 1860, trains ran between Alexandria and Leesburg, including a station at West Falls Church. A trip that required a half-day's journey by horse took only 35 minutes by train and cost 50 cents. The line closed during the Civil War and later reopened, with a second local station built at East Falls Church in 1870. The line was renamed the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad. The W&OD ceased operations in 1968 and its right-of-way is now a recreational trail stretching 45 miles from the Potomac River to Purcellville, Virginia.

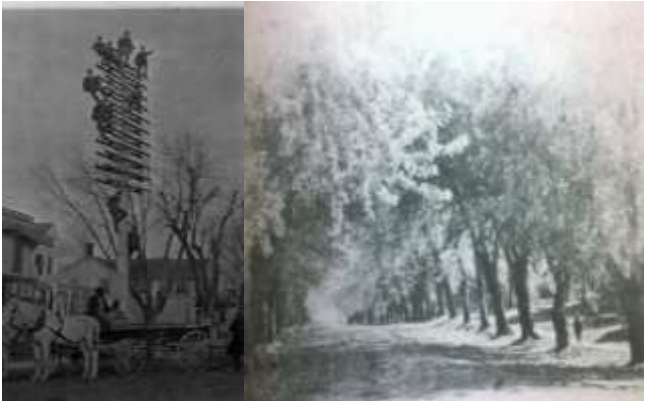
## Reconstruction and the Town

Following the Civil War, black and white residents rebuilt their lives. Many who fled during the war returned, and newcomers arrived seeking cheap land, a better climate and government jobs. African Americans created a thriving community by purchasing land despite price gouging, successfully fighting for and gaining municipal services to establish businesses and churches. Through the leadership of Joseph Riley, the Town of Falls Church was incorporated in 1875, enabling local control of taxes, roads and schools. A school for white children was built in 1882, but the Falls Church Colored School was not built until 1888, and then only after a determined appeal by African American civic leaders. Frederick Foote Jr., a respected black merchant, was elected to the town council for four terms (1880-1889). One year later, the town council voted to eliminate the influence of black voters by giving up one-third of the town to Fairfax County.



Frederick Forrest Foote, Jr., Ca. 1885 Henderson Collection

## Modern Conveniences



Telephone Service in Falls Church 1910, MRSPL      100 block of E. Broad St., Ca 1910. MRSPL

The late 1800s was a time of modernization. The center of town was made up of thriving businesses owned by black and white residents and patronized by all. During this period, Village Improvement Societies (VIS) were formed in many places, including Falls Church in 1885. The community celebrated the first Arbor Day in Virginia in 1892, prompting residents to plant a canopy of trees along paved roads. The Falls Church Telephone Company began operations in 1888, and electric trolley service reached East Falls Church in 1897. Residential development increased, with the first subdivisions constructed in 1891, followed by electricity in 1898. Educator Mattie Gundry formed the Virginia Training School in 1899, where she taught mentally disadvantaged students skills to enrich their lives. The same year, the Falls Church Library Association created the first public library under the leadership of Mary Riley Styles.

# Turn of the Century 1890-1920

## The Spanish American War



First Rhode Island Volunteers, Camp Alger, 1898. MRSPL

The sinking of the *USS Maine* at Havana, Cuba, ignited the Spanish American War in 1898, dramatically changing life in Falls Church. Southwest of town, Camp Alger was built to train 30,000 troops, including African Americans of the 10th Cavalry Buffalo soldiers. The East Falls Church train station became a bustling center full of recruits, camp suppliers and visitors. Crowded army trains, drum noise, wagon and carriage traffic and carousing soldiers disrupted local life. Among the visitors was President William McKinley, who arrived with an entourage of cabinet officers and foreign dignitaries to review 15,000 troops. They rode 200 horses into town, creating a cloud of dust that rendered visibility nearly impossible. In July of 1898, an outbreak of typhoid prompted the closing of Camp Alger by September.

## Civil Rights and Segregation

By 1900, Falls Church was the largest town in Fairfax County. A 1904 map of the town shows 125 homes, 55 stores and offices, seven churches and 38 properties that could support farms and orchards. In many ways, Falls Church was progressive. But in 1912, Virginia passed legislation allowing communities to impose segregation. In 1915, the town council proposed an ordinance mandating African Americans live in specific confined areas of town. Local black citizens E.B. Henderson, Joseph Tinner and seven other men formed the Colored Citizens Protective League to object. The group ultimately became the first rural branch of the NAACP in the nation. They strategized and hired legal counsel to establish the unconstitutionality of the ordinance. Although they were successful in preventing its implementation, many public facilities remained segregated.



Tinner Hill Civil Rights Monument, John Ballou

## The Great War and Postwar Progress

When the nation entered World War I, local officials pushed for the reopening of Camp Alger near Falls Church, but the War Department selected land south of Alexandria that became Fort Belvoir. Five of the 314 men from Falls Church who were drafted died in military service. The war ended in November 1918 coinciding with the outbreak of the Spanish Flu, which infected 500 million worldwide and killed 531 in Fairfax County. With men at war, women in Falls Church took on new roles, joining the women's suffrage movement, and eventually earning the right to vote. In 1921, Falls Church elected two women to town council: Mrs. P.H. Smyth and Mattie Gundry, who served three terms and was the first woman to serve on the board of directors of the Falls Church Bank. Mary Ellen Henderson and Viola Hudson were civil rights activists and women's rights reformers whose efforts resulted in achieving equal facilities for black students at the Falls Church Colored School and public services for the black community.

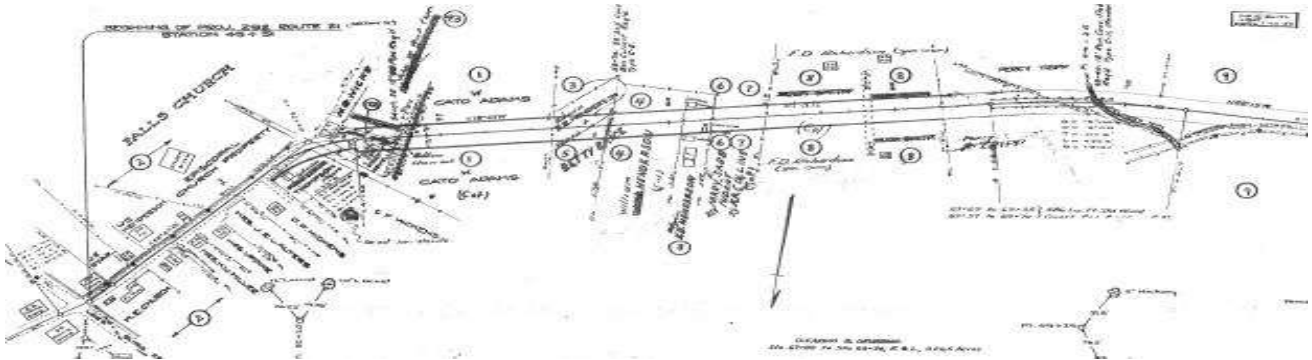


Mattie A. Gundry, 1946. MRSPL

Falls Church colored School, circa 1920s. MRSPL

# The Emerging City 1920-1950

## From Horses to Highway



Plans for Lee Highway, ca. 1922. VDOT

Local roads were winding and narrow, cheap to build and maintain as they followed the contour of the land for horses and wagons. Automobiles required straighter, paved roads to allow for their increased speed, safety, visibility and mechanical vulnerability. In 1919, the association for planning national highways proposed Lee Highway as a coast-to-coast road. The first portion was completed by 1928 and provided a paved road from southwest Virginia to Washington, D.C. A local businessman, Merton E. Church, whose company paved the road with concrete from Falls Church to the Fairfax courthouse, was largely responsible for routing the highway through town. It improved the regional transportation network and benefitted development, but its construction disrupted businesses and bisected the property of many residents, including the thriving African American community.

## Growing Pains

Between the two World Wars, and in spite of the Great Depression, Falls Church prospered. It grew in population as a suburban community for the nation's capital, with many residents working in government-related jobs. In 1924, Virginia established a separate school district for the town. Two years later, Madison Elementary School opened, and the Jefferson Institute became a four-year high school. Both schools were for white students only. It was not until after World War II that modern schools were built for black children. In 1930, the town built a municipal water system to serve the growing community. East Falls Church residents, dissatisfied with the town's priorities, and voted to rejoin Arlington County in 1936. That same year, the air-conditioned State Theater opened, making the town a popular local destination. Increasing car ownership helped end local trolley service in 1939.



Falls Church Trolley 1100 W Broad St. 1922. MRSPL

## World War II and City Status

During World War II, 25 Falls Church servicemen died or went missing. In 1945, Virginia abolished the independence of the town's schools, placing them under Fairfax County jurisdiction. This decision, along with concerns about property taxes, municipal water, transportation and town planning, led to a drive for independent status. Falls Church became a city in 1948, with the population topping 5,000 and rising due to the postwar "baby boom." Civic and social organizations flourished. In 1949, the City once again operated its own school district with 927 students. That same year, James Lee Elementary School for African American students was built in Fairfax County. Like most of American society, the community and schools remained largely segregated, excluding blacks from social and cultural services. African Americans founded their own service groups, such as the Mother's Council, Masons and Eastern Star.



Falls Church City Seal



# 1950 And Beyond

## A Small Independent City

By the end of the 20th century, the City's population had tripled. Its housing and neighborhoods have become a notable mix of preserved pre-1910 houses and newer residential construction with affordable housing as a continuing challenge. Commercial development and transportation improvements from the 1950s to the 1980s (Seven Corners, Tyson's Corner, Capital Beltway, Metro and Route 66) have emphasized Falls Church's links to the greater area. These changes also enhanced the community's vitality and improved residents' access to shopping, businesses and cultural institutions.

Continuing the struggles and successes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American residents led efforts to obtain full civil rights. In 1961 for example, a diverse coalition of City activists successfully ended segregation in Falls Church schools, becoming only the second Virginia community to do so. The City's cultural diversity broadened in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as peoples from Asia, Central and South America, many seeking refuge from wars and other conflicts, became the latest neighbors in the area. In 1964, Eden Center, the largest Asian-themed shopping complex on the East Coast, opened in Falls Church.

The City has been recognized as an All American City by the National Civic League in 1962 and continues to be named a state leader in Tree City USA recognition annually through the National Arbor Day Foundation. During unprecedented growth and change, the City continues to maintain its identity and provide high quality schools, environmentally friendly greenspaces, quality housing and small-town character.

