

Ball's Cross Roads

By PERCY C. SMITH

Ball's Cross Roads and the surrounding area have had a part in many important and historic events. This intersection of two roads—one that led from the ferry to the west, from Georgetown to Fairfax Court House and Warrenton, and the other, the Glebe Road, that connected Alexandria with the Leesburg Pike to Georgetown Turnpike to the northwest—was first called Birch's Cross Roads after Joseph Birch, who had acquired part of the Breckin patent (adjacent to the Glebe lands) in 1798. John Ball, another forerunner of distinguished citizens of our section, acquired another part of this parcel.

In the early 1800's, a Ball, perhaps one of John's grandsons, built a two-story log tavern on the southwest corner of the Cross Roads. It was an excellent site, for it lay on two roads to market. The traffic count, by which many businesses pick locations, was high. The nearby country, as well as that to the north and west, was farming land. They hauled or drove their wares to market over these roads.

Of this tavern there is not too much really known, but I do have a description of the comparable old Dranesville Tavern, which is of almost the same period. This description is derived from stories told me by my grandfather, who as a young man drove cattle from near Waterford to the Georgetown markets. To him it was the Old Tavern, as the mill on Colvin Run a little nearer Leesburg was the Old Mill. On Sheet 1 of a Survey for Military Defenses dated August 1, 1862, it is also listed as an old mill.

The first floor was one large room, the ceiling showing the log beams and the flooring above. At one end was a type of bar, something like the small bars that are today installed in recreation rooms. The one in Alexandria's Gadsby's Tavern is more elegant, shall we say, but is about the usual size. Tables and benches were scattered around, and in one end of the room was a fireplace; in fact, the fireplace took up nearly all the space at one end of the building. Sleeping accommodations were on the second floor or loft. There were accommodations for horses, and at Dranesville there was a sort of corral where cattle or other stock could be bedded overnight.

Naturally, as Ball's Tavern was a community center where the burning issues of the day could be argued over a rum punch, the Cross Roads was soon called Ball's Cross Roads.

Each tavern keeper was required to post on the door or nearby a copy of the rates for the various services supplied, and I would like to be able to show such a menu or price list from Ball's Tavern, but unfortunately I cannot. However, here is a copy of an earlier list from an order entered at a court held for Fairfax County on March 20, 1755:

	<i>shillings</i>	<i>pence</i>
For a gill of rum and so in proportion	8	
Nank brandy	10	
Virginia peach or apple brandy	6	
New England rum	2	
Virginia brandy from grain	4	
Arrack the quart made into punch	8	
For a quart of red or white wine	2	6
For a quart of Madeira wine	2	6
For all and other low wines per quart	1	6
English strong beer pr. do.	1	3
London beer called Porter pr. do.	1	
Virginia strong beer pr. do.		7½
Cyder the quart bottle		4
English cyder pr. do.	1	3
For a gill of rum made into punch with loaf sugar 6d with fruit		7½
For do. with brown sugar		4½
For a hot diet with small beer or cyder	1	
For a cold diet		6
For a gallon of corn or oates		4
Stableage and fodder for a horse for 24 hours or one night...		6
Pasturage for a horse for 24 hours or one night		4
For a night lodging with clean sheets 6d, otherwise nothing.		

Out of 22 items, 16 were liquid refreshment.

Prices increased as time went on, and I remember that Grandfather quoted the tavernkeeper at Dranesville as saying, "Corn bread and common doings, twenty-five cents, but white bread and chicken fixings is half a dollar."

Around the time of retrocession, most of the area was farmland and timber. (The Glebe estate was purchased as a hunting preserve.) There were several mills to handle the grain, and in Alexandria, Georgetown, and the Federal City were customers for their cattle, hogs, and farm produce. Advertisements of the period speak of good prices for telegraph poles and other wood products. Then, too, most of the local steamboat lines used wood for fuel.

After retrocession, Ball's Cross Roads, being the most important settlement, became a voting precinct. Part of the Act of the Assembly reads: "Furthermore, in all such elections (for Assembly, House of Representatives, and for electors in presidential elections) a separate poll shall be taken at the tavern house of Thompson, at Ball's Cross Roads." In the Acts of 1850-1851, the polling place was called "Thompson's Cross Roads, formerly Ball's Cross Roads."

A short article in the *Richmond Enquirer*, reprinted in the *Alexandria Gazette and Advertiser* for November 24, 1846, gives some light on how the new area was regarded at this time:

At the moment of our warmly advocating the re-annexation of Alexandria to the Old Dominion, we predicted that her sons would do their duty as good citizens, having entered into the alliance "for better or worse" prepared to enjoy the benefits and share the responsibilities of the new connection. At the first call of their country they stepped

forward as citizens of Virginia to meet her engagements. We do not know what may be the decision of Governor Smith, but, if it is compatible with his opinions and duty, we should be glad to see these "ardent young Virginians" enrolled among the troops of the state.

This article referred to the formation of a company of Alexandria Volunteers for the Mexican War. Montgomery D. Corse, who afterward commanded the 17th Virginia Regiment, was elected captain, and Turner W. Ashby was first lieutenant.

In the poll for retrocession, there were present and voting (though not the same way) 5 Veitchs, 5 Balls, 3 Donaldsons, and 13 Birches. Only one Shreve is listed, but the old Shreve place is in Fairfax County. There is one William Minor, evidently from Minors' Hill. As this vote was taken only 15 years before the outbreak of the Civil War, maps of that period (1861-1865) show about the same distribution.

At the beginning of hostilities, and the movement of Federal troops into the area, the Cross Roads assumed possibly even more importance. A road junction has great tactical importance, particularly when supplies and artillery are horse-drawn and infantry-walked. The nearly level farmland around the Cross Roads made excellent camp sites which were immediately taken advantage of. These installations were camps in the true sense and not fortified positions. There were several of these camps around the County that served to hold a reserve force ready for rapid employment.

The one near Ball's Cross Roads was called Camp Union. Col. G. A. Armes (*The Ups and Downs of an Army Officer*, p. 44) wrote, "On the afternoon of May 30, 1861, while visiting the camps on the Virginia side, I called on Lieutenant Charles H. Thomkins, Second Cavalry (afterward Assistant Quartermaster-General U.S.A. now retired) who was in camp near Ball's Crossroads." Because he had lived near Annandale, Colonel Armes, at that time a civilian and a messenger in the State Department, was used occasionally as a guide or scout, and he accompanied Lieutenant Thomkins on a scouting trip to Fairfax Court House. The following is a copy of the report submitted:

Camp Union Va. *June 1, 1861*

Sir—I have the honor to report, pursuant to verbal instructions received from the Colonel commanding, that I left camp on the eve of the 31st of May in command of a detachment of Company "B" Second Cavalry, consisting of fifty men, with Second Lieutenant D. S. Gordon, Second Dragoons, temporarily attached, for the purpose of reconnoitering the country in the vicinity of Fairfax Court House. Upon approaching the town, the picket guard was surprized and captured. Several documents were found upon their persons. On entering the town of Fairfax, my command was fired upon by the rebel troops from the windows and house tops. We charged on a company of mounted rifles, and succeeded in driving them from the town. Immediately two or three additional companies came to their relief, who at once

commenced firing upon us, which fire I returned. Perceiving that I was largely outnumbered, I deemed it advisable to retreat, which I did in good order, taking five prisoners, fully armed and equipped, and two horses. Nine horses were lost during the engagement and four wounded. The force actually engaged at the commencement of the engagement were two companies of cavalry and one rifle company, but reinforcements coming in from the camp adjacent to the Court House, which, I hear on reliable authority, increased their force to upwards of 1000 men. Twenty five of the enemy were killed and wounded. Captains Carey and Fearing and Adjutant Frank, Fifth New York S.M. accompanied the command as volunteers and did very effective service. I regret to say that Captain Carey was wounded in the foot. Lieutenant Gordon of the Second Dragoons, temporarily attached to Company "B" Second Cavalry, accompanied me, and rendered me valuable service. The prisoners, horses, arms and equipments taken have this day been turned over to the proper authorities.

I am sir, very respectfully

Your obedient servant

(Signed) CHARLES H. THOMKINS

First Lieut. Second Cavalry, Commanding Co. "B"

Col. DAVID HUNTER

Commanding Brigade.

As an incident of this foray, Colonel Armes says, "Lt. Thomkins had one horse killed under him and another shot in the neck, which he afterwards presented to a beautiful country girl who lived near Ball's Cross Roads."

One reason for keeping a large mobile force in this area was the position of the Confederate troops and the lack of knowledge about their intentions. Then too, those troops were close. Gen. J. E. Johnston, in a letter to President Jefferson Davis after the First Battle of Bull Run, says in part. "To the second question I reply that it has never been feasible for the Army to advance farther than it has done—to the line of Fairfax Court House, with its advanced posts at Upton's, Munson's and Masons' hills." The distance from the Williston water tower (Upton's hill) to Hecht's (Ball's Cross Roads) was too close for comfort.

Lt. Col. Willard Jones, in an article published in the Washington *Evening Star*, gives an interesting account of a balloon ascension at the Cross Roads on August 29, 1861. There had been a balloon ascension at Fort Whipple (now Fort Myer) the day before, but still trying to find out what General Johnston was up to General McClellan sent Prof. Thaddeus S. C. Lowe and his crew outside the fortified area. As the gas-filled bag ascended above the Cross Roads and above the trees, the professor realized suddenly that all was not well.

Over on Munson's Hill, General Johnston's troops were digging fortifications and preparing artillery emplacements. Soldiers in general, and artillery-

men in particular, don't approve of Peeping Toms. When Lt. Thomas L. Rosser (later Major General), a recent graduate from West Point, commanding a section of the 2d Company, New Orleans Washington Artillery, saw the balloon gradually ascending and realized that some inquisitive person was in the basket, he reacted as a good soldier should. The fact that his weapon was not equipped for the traverse and elevation of high-angle firing did not dampen his enthusiasm. Although the balloon was not hit, the proximity of the misses caused Professor Lowe to be winched down in a hurry. In a later report of the balloon corps activities, he stated that "those shots were the nearest to the United States capital that had been fired by the enemy."

So from a historical standpoint, we may say that the first combat use of aircraft by the United States Army and the first use of anti-aircraft artillery, took place at Ball's Cross Roads, for although the battery was on Munson's Hill, the target was over the Cross Roads.

As the neighborhood became more settled after the hostilities, the tavern became a general store, and in 1896 a branch of the Georgetown Post Office was located in the store building.

Across from the tavern was Mortimer's blacksmith shop. I had often wondered what he did besides shoeing horses and mules and repairing wagons. Senator Ball tells me that as a side line Mr. Mortimer made coffins in the loft above his forge. He did not, as far as I have been able to discover, make or repair firearms as some of the smiths did.

In the 1890's the settlement became known as Ballston.

For a hundred years this Cross Roads was the focal point for much of the drama of that time. There was the excitement of elections, the discussion about the merits of certain horses over a friendly glass, the meeting of friends and neighbors. Situated on the fringe of picket skirmishes between outposts on the encircling hills, it was the scene of historic happenings.

It leaves me with a feeling of sadness, that, after all this, Ball's Cross Roads should end as a parking lot. Even the historic name is no longer in existence.

I am indebted to Mrs. Eleanor Lee Templeman for a great deal of the information on the early history of the County here included and to Harrison Mann for the names of the voters on retrocession.