

BATTLE LINES

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY IN THE CIVIL WAR

*Lines of Protection, Spies, Freedom and Assassination
from 1861 to 1865*



INTRODUCTION

The Civil War (1861–1865) divided America

Lines were drawn throughout the country – separating state from state, family from family and brother from brother. There is little disagreement that this was one of America’s most divisive periods of history.

The country was less than 100 years old and faced a serious challenge to how it was going to grow and change in the future. Maryland, in many ways, was one of the most divided states.



Gun Crews of Company H, Mass. Heavy Artillery at Fort Lincoln (LOC)

The state split on the issue of slavery. In the western portions of the state, strong alliances with the Union cause were formed. The more agrarian southern part of the state supported the Confederacy. Right in the middle was the Federal City – Washington D.C. – surrounded by communities which aligned with the Confederacy. Resistance against the Union was strong and strengthened when President Lincoln declared martial law in the state to keep it from secession.

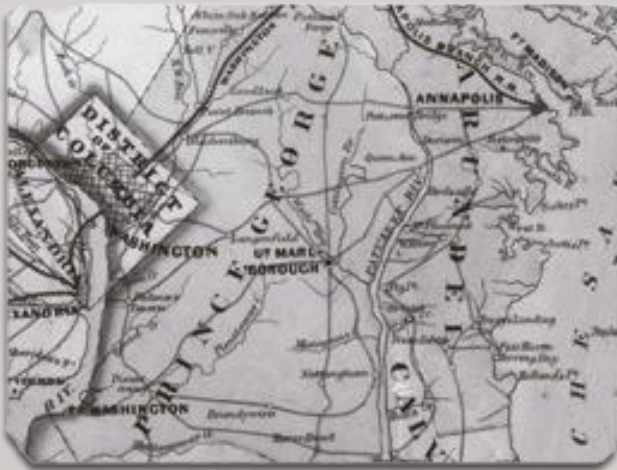
No greater evidence of Maryland as a divided state can be found than by viewing the Civil War through the historical eyes of Prince George’s County and its residents from 1855–1865. With an economy based on tobacco cultivation through slave labor, the turbulent decade before the war placed many of the county’s citizens at odds with areas to its north and west. In the 1860 election, only one man in the county voted for Abraham Lincoln.



DEFENDING THE LINE

While Maryland and Prince George's County did not secede from the Union, many of its citizens slipped across the Potomac River to join Confederate military forces, developed a smuggling and spy line to the South, or engaged in underground activities. The U.S. Government's Potomac Flotilla patrolled the County's shorelines and inlets, while the government established a line of forts around Washington D.C. and attempted to keep transportation and communication lines open. The U.S. government established a line of forts around the Federal City and attempted to keep transportation and communication lines open. However, above all were the many African Americans in the County seeking their freedom from slavery. All over Prince George's County, lines were drawn to defend, free, and undermine. In the end, however, there was one more line – a line of escape after the assassination of President Lincoln.

The four descriptions that follow detail areas of interest in Prince George's County during the Civil War. However, the stories and experiences in the county are many and varied. This publication is intended to be a starting point to lead the visitor to discover the varied facets of this conflict. Come and explore the lines of battle as they connect the places throughout Prince George's County!



G.M. Hopkins Map showing Prince George's County, 1861 (LOC)

Protection for the Federal city

In the northern part of Prince George's County and around Washington D.C. lines of travel and communication had to be kept open to protect the city. A series of forts were established around the District border. Fort Washington, on the Potomac, was one of the only defenses of the city until the Civil War and saw little action.



Interior view of Fort Lincoln (LOC)

Fort Foote, just north of Fort Washington, was one of the largest forts in the area and was used to defend the city against attacks via water. On the northern edge of Washington was Fort Lincoln, straddling the Maryland/DC border in Bladensburg. This fort, constructed where the Washington Turnpike crossed the district line, was built at an older fortification called Battery Jameson. An account of the Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery, which manned Fort Lincoln, speaks of the construction method:

"The fortifications consisted of a series of forts erected on every hill and connected by a ditch called a covered way . . . They all had large cannons mounted in them, and a magazine for ammunition . . . Each tent would accommodate eight or ten men, and had a stove in it. The size of the tent was doubled by making a stockade about six feet high for the base and the tent mounted on that . . . Special details of men were made daily to patrol the country thereabouts, including Bladensburg, for guerillas, bushwackers and such, many of which were known to be hovering about that section of the country, and several of which were picked up and turned over to the authorities."

The protection that forts provided would be tested by the Confederate States of America infrequently. However, in July of 1864, Confederate General Jubal Early began his raid on Washington. He pushed in from the west, threatening the forts in Montgomery County and caused panic in the Federal City. Additionally, his troops also created havoc in Prince George's County.



Brig. Gen'l. Bradley T. Johnson
(William Emerson Strong Photograph Album,
Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections
Library, Duke University.)

Brigadier General Bradley T. Johnson, born in Frederick, MD and reporting to General Early on orders of General Robert E. Lee, was asked to move his troops north of Frederick, then begin moving east toward Baltimore, cutting railroads and telegraph lines along the way. He was then to swing around the city, cutting the Baltimore and Ohio Washington Branch near Laurel, finally pushing toward Point Lookout – a U.S. Government prison – to release Confederate prisoners.

" . . . I was pressing in hot haste through Howard and Montgomery counties . . . Thence I moved to Beltsville, on the railroad between Baltimore and Washington. There I found about one thousand cavalry . . . They were mounted on green horses and we drive them after a short affair, down the road toward Bladensburg . . . I moved down the Washington road to the Agricultural College and thence along the line of the Federal pickets, marching all night, occasionally driving in a picket and expecting at any moment to be fired upon from the works within range of which I was moving. I reported to General Early after a mid-night and found the whole army in retreat . . . "

This Beltsville raid occurred roughly where modern U.S. Route 1 intersects Powder Mill Road. The Agricultural College is now the University of Maryland and the "works within range" reference Fort Lincoln and the fortifications along the border. Johnson had moved south to Beltsville because he encountered a large Union presence in Laurel, a significant manufacturing center with Northern ties.

Laurel, known at the time as "Laurel Factory," was home to several Union units, including the 141st New York and the Ninth Corps of the 109th New York Volunteer Regiment, guarding the railroad beginning in 1862. One soldier noted in April of 1863 that they were the only regiment between Baltimore and Washington and that the engineers would not run a train if the guards were taken off.



Laurel Cotton Mill, circa 1870s (Laurel Historical Society, Laurel, MD)

A hospital matron that traveled with the 109th, Mrs. Sarah Palmer, wrote an account of her experiences in “Aunt Becky’s Army Life”. She was first at a hospital in Beltsville for four months before it moved to Laurel in January of 1863. She describes that hospital as an “old store and a two story dwelling house,” a building that still stands at the intersection of Main and Avondale streets. She wrote about supplies sent from the Abolitionists in Sandy Spring, the pigs that the “boys” captured and hid in the basement, the panic caused by a rumor that General Lee’s army was near and always about her compassion for the sick, wounded and dying.

For such a center of Union presence, one must recognize how the county was split. The family which built the mill, upon which Laurel is based, supported the Confederacy. Lt. Nicholas Snowden was grandson of Major Thomas Snowden of Montpelier in Northern Prince George’s County. In late May of 1860 Nicholas along with two friends, William K. Howard and Mason E. McKnew traveled for several days to Harpers Ferry to join the Confederate Army. Nicholas took the oath of allegiance on the 1st of June 1861, earning the rank of 3rd Lieutenant in company ‘D’ under the command of Captain James Rawlings Herbert of the 1st Maryland Infantry Battalion also known as the Maryland Line. On June 29th, 1862 in a letter to her mother, Henrietta Stabler Snowden expressed her sorrow and dismay on losing her husband. At the age of 32, he lost his life at the Battle of Port Republic, Harrisonburg, Virginia on June 6th, 1862.

“I cannot help still hoping for the best while I am trying to be prepared for the worst. I felt when Nicholas left home that he was lost to me. I have felt for a year past that our domestic life together was broken up for ever – and always thought it a mere chance if he ever got home again, but I never thought it would have been such a shock to me when the news did come.”

Henrietta, like many women with husbands at war, had to be strong regardless of the circumstances. Despite her sorrow, Henrietta is well aware that in comparison to other women widowed by this conflict, she is fortunate,

“... when I reflect upon the many widows and orphans who are left destitute & entirely dependent upon strangers I know I ought not to murmur – tho it is a heavy, heavy, trial I used to think I never knew what trouble was until this war broke out ...”

The importance of keeping the lines open – travel and communication along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and defenses around the District line – was critical to the Federal government remaining effective during the war. Of course, the issues of Maryland and Prince George’s County’s participation during the war only strengthened the importance of keeping these lines free. Meanwhile, many were working hard to subvert this effort. This spy network is our next line of history.



Montpelier Mansion, Laurel (MNCPPC)

SECRET LINES

Spies in Plain Sight

Those that sought to undermine the Union cause, worked hard throughout the county to create spy networks that linked the information from the capital city to Richmond. This line ran through the Northern Neck of Virginia, into Charles County, Maryland, through southern Prince George's County, and into the Nation's capital.

Villages such as Woodville (now Aquasco), T.B., Piscataway, Surrattsville (now Clinton), Upper Marlboro, and others had active agents supporting the Confederate cause. These same places had plantations and homes subjected to frequent raids by Federal forces searching for weapons and other supplies intended for shipment south. *Mount Auburn*, the home of Bennett Gwynn near Surrattsville, was caught up in a nighttime cavalry raid of over 200 troopers early in the war. Legend has it that Gwynn's brother's home near T.B. was set on fire by a slave, who was paid to do so because the federal government believed that the mistress of the house was involved in secret mail movements while her husband, Andrew Jackson Gwynn, was fighting for the Confederacy.

What is now the National Colonial Farm on the banks of the Potomac River in Accokeek, was once the home of E. Pliny Bryan, well-known as a staunch Confederate supporter and active in espionage activities. His talents sent him to Charleston to work with mining the harbor there with torpedoes. While there, he contracted yellow fever and died in that city in 1864.

One of Prince George's best secret agents and partisan rangers was Walter Bowie of Collington (now Bowie), whose exploits were chronicled in several books of the era. Born in 1835, Walter "Wat" Bowie, son of one of the County's largest slaveholders, was staunch in his support of the Confederate cause. As soon as war began, Wat headed for Richmond. He was awarded a captain's commission; his first assignment: undercover agent in the Confederate Secret Service.



Walter "Wat" Bowie (Surratt House Museum/MNCPPC)

Daring and knowledgeable about the Washington area, Wat became a valuable spy. He was captured and escaped twice. His clandestine activities continued, throughout Maryland and Virginia. As the war progressed, he became too well known to continue undercover activities, but continued to be a threat. He and his spy network nearly kidnapped the Governor of Maryland in October 1864. The plan failed, and Wat, along with his men, was followed to Rockville by a posse. In the skirmish that ensued, Wat was struck by a shotgun blast to the face. He died shortly thereafter. Originally interred at the family Plantation, *Willow Grove*, Wat Bowie's remains rest today at Holy Trinity Cemetery in Glenn Dale.

LINES OF FREEDOM



Thomas Harbin, Confederate Spy
(Surratt House Museum/MNCPPC)

Thomas Harbin, who resided for awhile in Piscataway, was heavily into secret work as was Augustus Howell, who often escorted female couriers between Richmond and the “Confederate Cabinet” in Canada. Both would later be involved with the most famous agent - John Surratt, Jr., whose skill in eluding Union troops led to an introduction to John Wilkes Booth and involvement in a plot to kidnap President Abraham Lincoln.

The Surratts’ home and tavern (now a historic house museum in Clinton) served as a safehouse on the espionage route and is specifically named as such in a Confederate report for the last quarter of 1864.

This spy network was seeking to support the work of the Confederate States of America. Many of its connections were via the owners and families of large agricultural farms or plantations. These plantations, which relied on slave labor, became the crossing points between Confederate agents and enslaved African Americans. The story of the African American experience in the Civil War is another line to follow in the history in Prince George’s County.

Breaking the chains of slavery

While the battles raged throughout the U.S., in Prince George’s County, a different type of struggle was taking place. The economy of Prince George’s County, was built on the back of enslaved labor. By 1860, more than half the population of the county was of African descent, and more slaves lived in Prince George’s than in any other county in the State of Maryland. Although large plantations throughout the county held significant numbers of slaves, most labored on small farms, whose owners generally held less than ten slaves. While the cultivation of tobacco was the chief product in the utilization of slave labor, those in bondage also provided skilled labor such as blacksmithing, coopering, weaving, tailoring, and cooking. Because of their talents, these people could also be “rented” to others in the community.

Slave auctions were conducted in the county in such towns as the county seat of Upper Marlboro, Queen Anne or Nottingham, and villages along the Patuxent River. The town of Piscataway also had an auction site. However, most of the slaveholders depended on the large auctions held in the state capital of Annapolis or in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. Of course, the story of slavery in Maryland was a complex and multi-layered issue. Freed slaves – generally by purchase or by “manumission” (or granted freedom by owners or through a will) – were a major segment of the population. By 1810, Maryland had one of the largest free African American populations in America. These “freedmen” built small pockets of African American lives – in places like Oxon Hill or Rossville – on unwanted land with small plots of arable land. As the Civil War endured, other slaves gained freedom by serving the Union Army – slipping across the D.C. line. These soldiers, such as the District of Columbia, Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, made up of freed African Americans fought with distinction and were trained in places like Fort Lincoln near Bladensburg.



Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, Fort Lincoln (LOC)

Even prior to the war, the goal of freedom welled up under those still enslaved. Slave resistance and opposition was prevalent in the county as indicated by many advertisements in newspapers such as *The Maryland Gazette* and Upper Marlboro's *Planter's Advocate* for the capture and return of runaway slaves from Prince George's County. One such advertisement reads:

\$100 Reward – Ran away from the subscriber on Saturday night, Negro Man JIM BELLE. Jim is about five feet ten inches high, black color, about 26 years of age; has a down look; speaks slow when spoken to; he has a large thick lips, and a mustache....His wife lives with her mother, Ann Robertson, in Corn Alley, between Lee and Hill streets, Baltimore city, where he has other relations, and where he is making his way. I will give the above reward, no matter where taken, so he is brought or secured in jail so I get him again. Zachariah Berry of W., near Upper Marlboro', Prince George's county, Md.

Another escape involved Emily Plummer, a house servant at Three Sisters, a plantation in the area of present-day Lanham. Emily and her husband, Adam, from Riversdale plantation, planned to head for Canada, using their marriage license as “free papers” once they reached safety. Unfortunately, Emily divulged their plans to a favorite aunt, who stole the license and reported the couple to their

\$100 REWARD.
 Ranaway from my residence in Upper Marlboro', Prince George's County, Md., on Wednesday morning, the 25th instant, my negro man
JOHN DENT.
 He is about 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, about thirty years of age, dark complexion. He is a likely gentle negro, pleasant when spoken to, and is acquainted with all garden and stable work, and has been in the habit of driving my family to Washington. His clothing is not known, and no marks recollected, except I think he has a red speck in one of his eyes. I purchased him at the sale of Mrs. Elizabeth Waring at Nottingham some ten or eleven years ago.
 I will give the above reward, if taken beyond Pr. George's, Anne Arundel or the District of Columbia, and \$50 if taken within these limits—in any case to be brought home or secured in jail so that I get him.
HORATIO C. SCOTT.
June 25, 1856.

LINES OF ESCAPE

owner. As part of her punishment, Emily became a field hand. She and three of her children were later sold to a new master at Meridian Hill in Washington D.C.

The lines to freedom – now called the “Underground Railroad” – often ran directly through Prince George’s County from Southern Maryland. Many of the slaves slipped to Washington which had a large, free black population. In 1862, slavery was abolished in the nation’s capital, and the exodus from Prince George’s into the city increased until a new state constitution outlawing slavery went into effect in Maryland on November 1, 1864.

Despite emancipation, the complexity of the issue continued. A provision in the constitution allowed for “apprenticeships” of black children without consent of their parents – thereby keeping upwards of 10,000 children in slavery for several more years. Not until the 1870s were more than 1500 black residents registered to vote and some basic rights established. In 1865, Congress established a “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands.” This “Freedman’s Bureau” was instrumental in the construction of schools throughout the county, including in Bladensburg, Rossville, Upper Marlboro, Oxon Hill, Woodsville, Piscataway, Forestville, Nottingham, and Laurel.

Adam Plummer remained at Riversdale as the paid foreman and the family was reunited in 1866. The Plummers, settling in modern Edmonston/Hyattsville area, became a well known family in the area. However, other families, torn apart over the decades, often did not reconnect. Families stretched from their former homes to new lives in the North.

These new lines of freedom crisscrossed the country, many unsettled until well into the 20th century. But one more line of anger and confusion ran through Prince George’s County – the line of escape for John Wilkes Booth and the Surratt family.

The Assassins flee

Finally, Prince George’s County had one more brush with history during the Civil War. After the defenses of Washington began to be relaxed, after the spy networks were brought down and after the Emancipation Proclamation, there were still many in the region which looked to Abraham Lincoln as a threat to the lives of those living in the U.S., including the Surratt family from southern Prince George’s County.



Surratt House (MNCPPC)

The family of John and Mary Surratt was typical of middle-class slaveholders of the county in their support of the Confederacy. The oldest son left the area on Inauguration Day in 1861, and would fight throughout the war with a Texas cavalry unit. Following

Mr. Surratt’s death in the summer of 1862, the youngest son would become a Confederate courier, carrying secret mail between Richmond and Confederate exiles in Canada. The Surratts also maintained a tavern and post office in what is now Clinton. It became a popular gathering place for men of the area to discuss the major issues dividing the State of Maryland and the country.

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 did not free the slaves in Maryland; but slaves were freed under the new state constitution enacted on November 1, 1864. This enraged the people of Southern Maryland; and, by the fall of 1864, the Surratt family would be involved in what would become one of the greatest crimes in American history – the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. On December 23, 1864, young John Surratt was introduced to the popular actor, John Wilkes Booth, by Dr. Samuel A. Mudd. He and others planned to kidnap Lincoln, transport him through southern Prince George’s County and Charles County, and then across the Potomac River and on to Richmond.



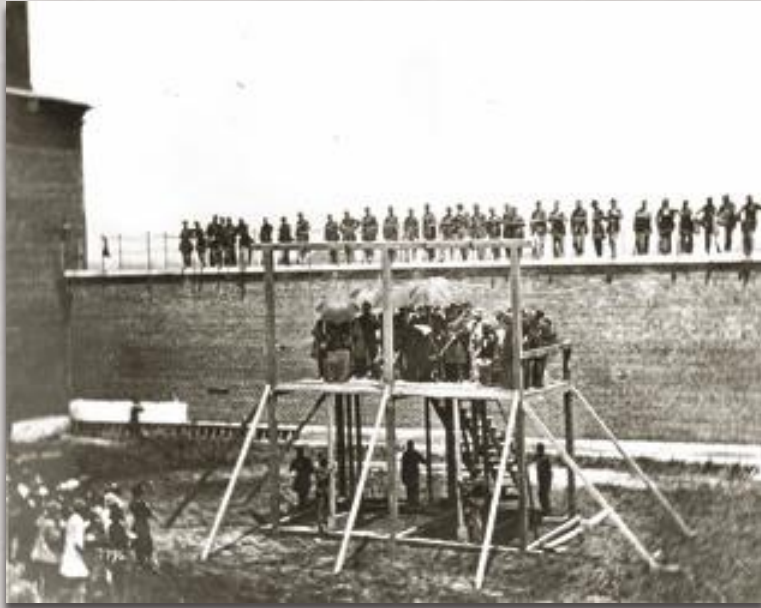
Mary Surratt (Surratt House Museum/MNCPPC)

Mary Surratt had left her country home in the care of a tenant in November of 1864, and had moved into Washington City, where she opened a boardinghouse. Members of Booth's cabal frequented the boardinghouse during the winter and spring of 1864-65. After an aborted attempt to kidnap the president in March of 1865, weapons and other supplies were hidden at the tavern in Surrattsville. When the plan changed to murder, the Surratt Tavern was the first place that the fleeing assassins stopped as they headed into Southern Maryland.



John Surratt (Surratt House Museum/MNCPPC)

John Surratt was on Confederate assignment in New York at the time of the assassination and quickly escaped into Canada – leaving his mother to deal with the consequences. Mrs. Surratt was arrested on April 17, 1865, and taken to the infamous Old Capitol Prison. She was later transferred to the Washington Arsenal Penitentiary (now Ft. Lesley J. McNair), where she and seven other conspirators went on trial in May. The lady and three men would be found guilty by a military court and condemned to death.



Hanging of the Conspirators (LOC)

Mrs. Surratt went to the gallows on July 7, 1865, becoming the first woman to be executed by the United States government. Her guilt or innocence continues to be debated, thus keeping the historical spotlight focused on Prince George's County into a new era.

As the last Confederate forces surrendered in the summer of 1865, the United States of America would re-unite under a troubled period of Reconstruction. In Prince George's County, many men returned to find a changed way of life. Large farms had become unproductive without slave labor, huge debts and taxes loomed, and many former plantations would be broken up and sold off in smaller parcels. An influx of immigrants, especially of German descent, would take advantage of purchasing land in the county, industry would increase, and the powerful central government in Washington City (which the Civil War had spawned) would attract more workers and bring about the creation of suburban areas in Prince George's County during the decades following the conflict.

For those to whom the Civil War had brought freedom, many returned to their old farms, but as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. Those with skills became their own bosses in small businesses.

African American families established new communities, often around black churches. These communities included Rossville in the northern part of the county; Chapel Hill, near Fort Washington; and small towns near Woodville (now Aquasco), Queen Anne, and Upper Marlboro. With the help of the Freedmen's Bureau, black schools were established as early as 1866 in Bladensburg and a few years later in what is now Clinton. In fact, one acre of the old Surratt farm was designated for the establishment of a Freedmen's school. Although freed from the chattel bondage, segregation became the next struggle to overcome.



Abraham Hall, Rossville (Aaron Marcavitch)

WHERE IT HAPPENED

1. City Of Laurel (Laurel Historical Society)

817 Main Street, Laurel, MD

<http://www.laurelhistory.org> | 301-725-2975

2. Montpelier Mansion

9650 Muirkirk Road, Laurel MD

<http://www.pgparcs.org> | 301-377-7817

3. Rossville & Abraham Hall

7612 Old Muirkirk Road, Beltsville, MD

<http://www.pgparcs.org> | 240-264-3415

4. Beltsville & Agricultural College (UMD)

Location has no markers. Contact Anacostia Trails Heritage Area.

<http://www.anacostiatrials.org> | 301-887-0777

5. Riversdale House Museum

4811 Riverdale Road, Riverdale Park, MD

<http://www.pgparcs.org> | 301-864-0420

6. Bladensburg & Fort Lincoln (Waterfront Park)

4601 Annapolis Road, Bladensburg, MD

<http://www.pgparcs.org> | 301-779-0371

7. Bowie (Collington) & Belair

12207 Tulip Grove Drive, Bowie, MD

<http://www.cityofbowie.org> | 301-809-3089

8. Surrattsville & Surratt House

9110 Brandywine Road, Clinton, MD

<http://www.pgparcs.org> | 301-868-1121

9. Fort Washington & Fort Foote

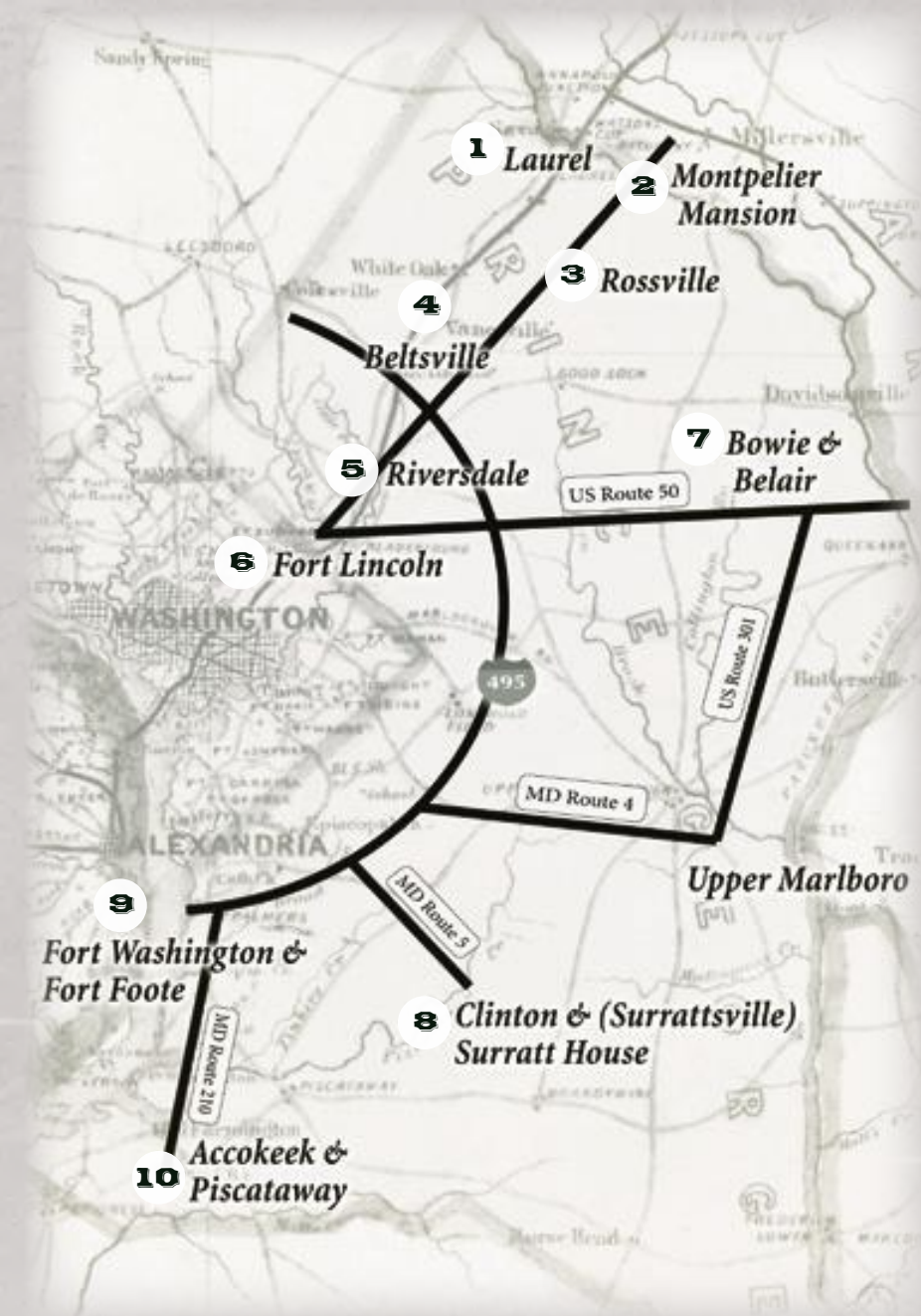
13551 Fort Washington Road, Fort Washington MD

<http://www.nps.gov/fowa/index.htm>

10. Piscataway & Accokeek

3400 Bryan Point Road, Accokeek, MD

<http://www.nps.gov/pisc/index.htm> or <http://www.accokeek.org>



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- Aaron Marcavitch, 2011

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