

Loudoun's Unpaved Roads Win Historic Designation

Lifeline for Equestrians Recognized By State

By Mitch Diamond



For top-level combined driving competitor Paula Bliss, Loudoun County's unpaved roads provide the necessary space and surface for conditioning her horses. These rural roads have been named a "Most Endangered Historic Place" by Preservation Virginia.

Loudoun County's unique interconnected network of old unpaved roads dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries is under threat from increasing traffic and development. On May 19, Loudoun's rural road network was officially named as a "Most Endangered Historic Place" by Preservation Virginia, the state's leading preservation advocate, because of its great historic significance and the imminent threat of losing it to pressures for widening, straightening and paving.

Loudoun's nearly 300 miles of dirt and gravel roads have been an essential resource for the county's economically important equestrian industry for generations. It is not a coincidence that Loudoun has the State's largest equine population and also has the largest network of unpaved roads in the state. These historic roads provide critical space for equine exercise, trail rides, carriage rides and support Loudoun's foxhunting tradition.

Over many decades Loudoun's \$180 million equestrian industry

has benefitted from the well-preserved network of old roads. The Loudoun County Equine Alliance (LCEA), which advocates for the horse industry in the county, has described the value of the road network to local politicians.

"Our unpaved road network is vital to the equestrian community because it provides places to ride and drive horses, both for recreation and conditioning," according to the LCEA. "The unpaved surfaces offer natural traffic calming, which is essential for the safety of horses in the road, and a surface that provides the necessary traction for horses as well. They are an important feature of our equestrian heritage, an essential part of Loudoun's identity, and a key component of its strong rural economy. Loudoun's six-billion-dollar tourism industry depends on drawing visitors to its beautiful rural vistas, of which the roads are a part."

A 2015 survey of the economic impact of the horse industry

in Loudoun found that 78,000 people attended equestrian events in the county in the year surveyed, additional evidence of its reputation as "horse country."

Loudoun's gravel roads are essential for foxhunters. The northern Virginia rural countryside has earned a worldwide reputation among the sport's enthusiasts. An avid foxhunter and Loudoun resident from Unison points out that "Gravel roads allow horses and hounds to be exercised in a safe environment year-round but they are especially valuable on the many winter days when the fields and trails are frozen." She also notes that when soft ground would make it destructive for a hunt to cross a landowner's fields, riders can follow on the gravel roads and stay in touch with hounds. "Without gravel roads we would have to cancel many days of hunting and would be hard pressed to deliver sport at the highest level," she says. "We are incredibly fortunate to have kept intact as many gravel roads as we have, and it makes us the envy of visiting foxhunters who have not been so lucky."

In addition to foxhunting, Loudoun is home to a vibrant carriage driving community.

Douglas Kemmerer gets "personal pleasure" from taking people who have never ridden in a horse-drawn vehicle out for rides in his four-in-hand carriage on the unpaved roads, delighting in what he describes as a "Disneyland experience" for his guests. He tells the story of taking a former ambassador from the United Kingdom out for a coaching drive and was told by his guest "We have nothing like this in England. He became like a little boy," remembers Kemmerer, recalling the ambassador's excitement. "And I thought, here's a guy who's travelled the world and he had that reaction" to a carriage ride on Loudoun County's unpaved roads, he says.

Loudoun's unpaved road network is unique enough to attract horse driving enthusiasts to locate in the County. Flora Hillman and her husband Owen Snyder moved to Bloomfield in southern Loudoun from Chester County, Pa. 30 years ago,

specifically for the gravel roads on which to drive their Welsh ponies. Chester County also has a reputation as a horse-friendly locale, but, according to Hillman, it didn't compare with Loudoun. "We grabbed a map and started looking and we were astonished at the gravel roads in Loudoun," she recalls of their search for a new home.

So why does this unique and rare network of unpaved roads exist?

According to Richard Gillespie, Historian Emeritus of the Mosby Heritage Area Association, the early settlers of Loudoun "staked out this rich land with a purpose... trade." On the verge of the Civil War, Loudoun was Virginia's richest county, but "the Civil War played out on this land with a heavy hand," says Gillespie. "There was little money for public or private investment in road infrastructure well into the third decade of the 20th century. The existing roads, patched and repaired from time to time, would just have to do. In this sense, they were preserved, or at the very least, not modernized or replaced."

But this critical resource is threatened. Pressure from rapid population growth, increasing traffic and suburban style development prompt calls to pave them over, straighten them and widen them. Paving even small segments of the network can diminish the roads' usefulness to equestrians.

Hunts encountering slippery sections that have been tar and chipped or covered with asphalt (often put on sloping sections) find those dangerous. For many riders, the ability to have a continuous loop to ride on is essential, and the equine industry was among those fighting hard to preserve the famous "Philomont Loop" on Greggsville Road several years ago.

The America's Routes project (<https://americasroutes.com>) works to inform and educate the public, political leaders and government decision makers about this unique heritage resource, and was responsible for nominating the roads to the "Most Endangered Places" designation this year.