

America's Routes Project

Group Forms To Protect Critical Loudoun Equine Industry Asset By Mitch Diamond

Just two years ago, members of Loudoun County's equine industry were engaged in a fierce struggle to protect an important part of Loudoun's infrastructure. Trail riders, fox hunters, riding instructors and local farm owners were trying to convince local officials that Greggsville Road, an historic unpaved rural road, was essential to their activities.

Greggsville, and other connecting unpaved roads,

offered a lovely, winding and tree-lined loop for riders. Kids learning to ride at a well-known farm bisected by Greggsville were often on the road with their ponies. This old road, dating back to the turn of the 19th century, was a foundation for the area's equestrian activities.

Many local people wanted it preserved as a gravel road. But residents of a suburban subdivision on the same road were strongly advocating for the paving of the old road. They saw it as a dusty and bumpy old relic, impeding their travel, and they fought hard to get it "modernized."

The battle raged for months until a compromise was reached. The part of the road where the subdivision was located would be paved, but the remainder -- the section most essential for equestrian activities -- would remain gravel.

This battle is one of many being fought in Loudoun County to try to protect these important resources for our local equine industry.

Loudoun is home to over 14,000 horses, the largest equine population of any county in the state. The county's equine industry has an annual economic impact of over \$180 million (according to a 2015 survey by UVA's Weldon Cooper Center) and is a key element in attracting tens of thousands of visitors to the county. Horse farms make up a large part of Loudoun's beautiful and historic rural landscape and equine activities are a large part of the local culture.

A key asset underpinning this important rural industry is the large network of unpaved roads. These hundreds of miles of gravel and dirt roads were originally laid down more than three hundred years ago to support the growing agricultural economy based in the rich soils of western Loudoun County. They represent our history and our culture, but they are still in use and essential today.

These roads provide opportunities to exercise and train horses, to easily move them from one farm and pasture to another, and allow the hunts and pleasure riders to enjoy the countryside and trail ride with friends and neighbors.

But this critical resource is threatened. As traffic increases and more suburban-style housing developments dot the countryside, pressure to pave and "improve" the old roads is increasing. Just a few decades ago, Loudoun had almost 500 miles of historic old unpaved roads -- today there are under 300 miles. As this resource diminishes, it makes equestrian activities more difficult and the area less attractive to horse owners, threatening this crucial industry.

Now a new group has formed to raise awareness about these wonderful old roads and to help preserve them. "America's Routes" is the name chosen by this alliance of journalists, photographers, historians and preservationists to symbolize the strong connection of this unique network to the history of our nation, and its value to today's residents and today's economy.



PHOTO COURTESY: DOUGLAS GRAHAM

Riders on Quaker Lane, near Unison, Va. Unpaved roads are essential to Loudoun County's equestrians.

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The America's Routes group, established as a committee within the Mosby Heritage Area Association, intends to showcase the beauty, history and significance of these old roads through photographs and videos, historic research and official designation, stories of the people who live and work on them today, and travel guides inviting people to experience their special charm themselves. They hope that through this raised awareness, local officials and residents will appreciate the special character and importance of this unique and authentic resource.

America's Routes has been featured in several news publications, including a TV news production (WJLA's "The Long Road Home"), has established a website and social media presence, and will be conducting events at local equestrian and other venues in the coming months. Follow and support their work at AmericasRoutes.com.