

# The rise and fall of

By **ANDREW CAIN**

Journal staff writer

Picture a thriving port, with a teeming shipyard, a racetrack, five hotels, a dance hall and a theater that presents operas and plays.

Welcome to Dumfries, circa 1762.

Within 60 years, Dumfries was dead, a victim of the Revolutionary War, a lessening demand for tobacco and poor planting techniques that filled Quantico Creek with topsoil.

"It's one of the 'ifs' of history," said Doug Harvey, curator of the Manassas Museum. "If the farmers had not silted in that creek, Dumfries probably would have grown like Philadelphia and New York."

The rise and fall of Dumfries is one of the great stories of Prince William County's history. It is a story that many county residents have never heard.

Prince William's history always will be linked with Manassas and the Civil War battles that give the city its soul.

Yet, 100 years before the Confederate victories near Bull Run, a century before Abraham Lincoln visited Liberia Mansion, county residents were making history 30 miles east of Manassas.

"This was the second leading port in Colonial America at one time," said Jean Hochmuth, a tour guide at the Weems-Botts Museum in Dumfries. The town's rich history "has really been overshadowed" by the lore of Manassas, she added.

"The tangible history [of Dumfries] has just disappeared over

time," Harvey said. "It's out of sight, out of mind."

Several of eastern Prince William's remaining Colonial structures are privately owned. These include Bel-Air Mansion, a stone structure at Minnieville that dates to the 1740s, Rippon Lodge at Garfield and The Henderson House, a red brick Dumfries residence built in 1756.

Although few reminders remain, Dumfries and the towns on its borders were frequented by some of the most powerful men in Colonial America.

George Washington recorded in his diary that on Jan. 7, 1771 he attended a play called "The Recruiting Officer" in Dumfries.

In 1774, Dumfries lawyer William Grayson founded one of Virginia's first companies of Minutemen.

Williams Ordinary, a Dumfries Inn, hosted Lafayette, Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other dignitaries who passed through Prince William en route to Williamsburg, the colonial capital.

Dumfries and Alexandria were both chartered May 11, 1749. Dumfries was "undoubtedly the more important place" during the town's first 30 years, wrote historian Fairfax Harrison in "Landmarks of Prince William."

The Weems-Botts Museum, a small wood-frame building at Duke and Cameron streets, is a reminder of Dumfries' storied Colonial past. The 1 1/2-story house dates to the late 18th century.

Mason Locke Weems, a minister who bought the house in the 1780s, was the first biographer of Washington. Weems fabricated the myth

of young George cutting down the cherry tree. He also embellished a tale about Washington throwing a rock across the Rappahannock River. In the book, Washington tossed a silver dollar.

Weems' "Life of George Washington" was first published in 1801. The museum has a worn copy published in 1808.

The book's owner, John M. Branden, scrawled an eerie ode to future generations on a page in the slim brown volume:

"When this you see, remember me unless I should be forgotten when I am dead and in my grave and all my bones are rotten."

Benjamin Botts, a Dumfries lawyer, bought the house from Weems in 1802, according to "This Was Prince William," by R. Jackson Ratcliffe. Botts was the youngest defense lawyer at the 1807 treason trial of former Vice President Aaron Burr.

Dumfries' shipping heyday lasted about 15 years prior to the Revolutionary War, Hochmuth said. Farmers from Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun, Culpeper and the Shenandoah Valley drove tobacco to Dumfries, where it was placed on ships for export.

Trouble is said to come in threes, and three calamities, agricultural, economic and political, killed the thriving port.



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# f Old Dumfries

Farmers overplanted their tobacco crops and the topsoil washed into the creek. Ocean-going ships could no longer ply the waters that led to the wharves at Dumfries.

At the same time, the tobacco trade waned as interest grew in other commodities like wheat and sugar. Alexandria flourished by converting to flour. Dumfries failed to adapt.

Merchants of Dumfries, Scotland, who bought much of the tobacco loaded at the port, were thwarted by the Revolution and ordered sugar from the West Indies instead, Harrison wrote in "Landmarks of Prince William."

By the 1820s, Dumfries was a ghost town, Harvey said. Harrison quoted a letter from a bishop who visited Dumfries in 1819.

"Once the mart, the scene of gaiety and fashion, the abode of wealthy merchants, all is now in ruins."

Dumfries was mostly dormant until the late 1800s, when mining brought the area renewed prosperity.

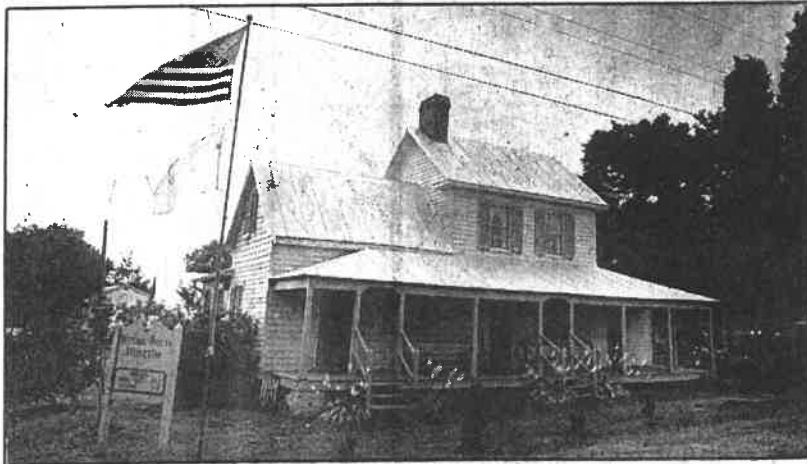
Sitting in the Weems-Botts Museum recently, Hochmuth glanced at the narrow wooden stairwell and gray-brown floorboards that have withstood 200 years of Dumfries history.

"It's too bad they couldn't talk," she said.



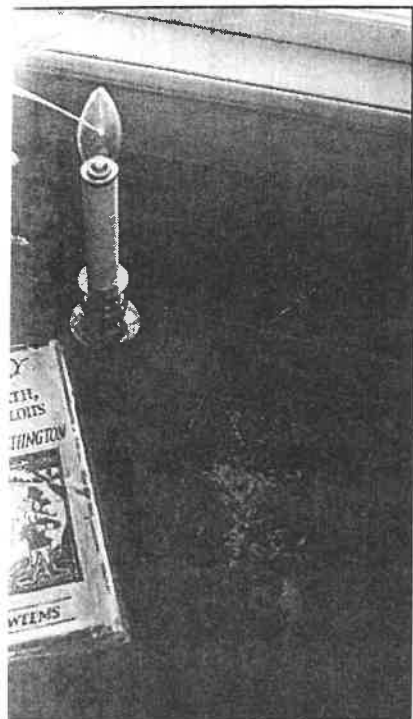
Paul Bates/Journal

**This is an oil portrait of Mason Locke Weems by an unknown artist in the Weems-Bott Museum.**



Paul Bates/Journal

**The Weems-Botts Museum is loaded with the town's rich history formed during the late 1700s and early 1800s.**



Paul Bates/Journal

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