

Ferry Hill

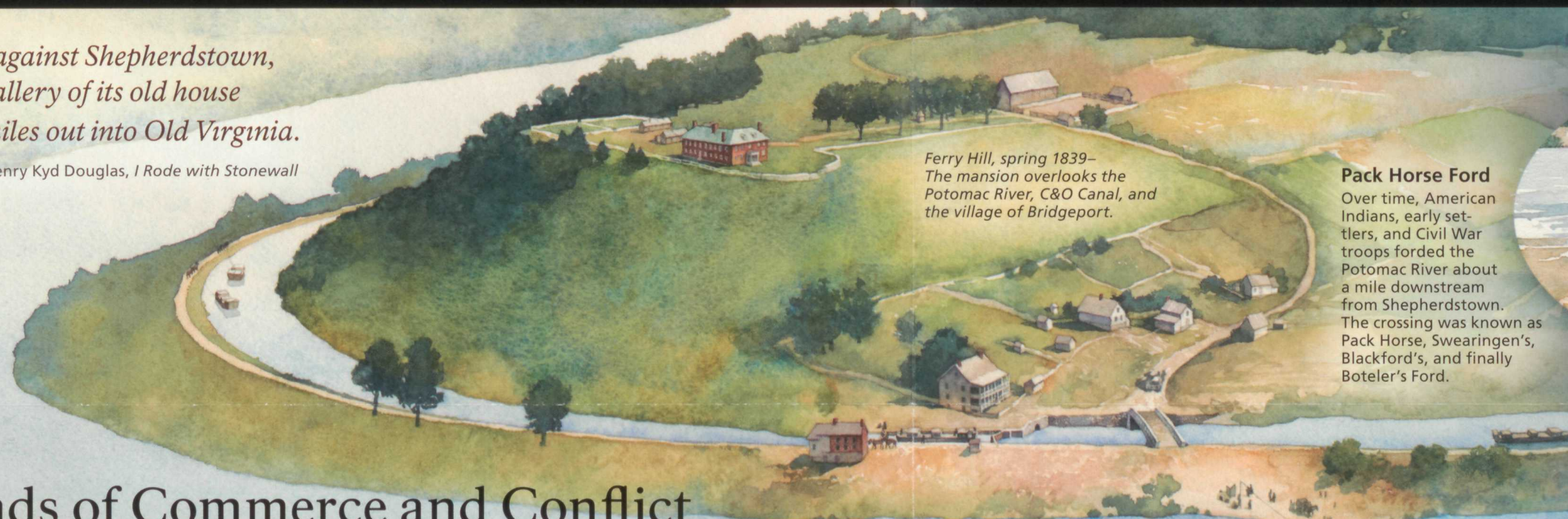
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park
Maryland

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



... on a hill over against Shepherdstown,
where from the gallery of its old house
I could look for miles out into Old Virginia.

—Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*



Ferry Hill, spring 1839—
The mansion overlooks the
Potomac River, C&O Canal, and
the village of Bridgeport.

Pack Horse Ford

Over time, American Indians, early settlers, and Civil War troops forded the Potomac River about a mile downstream from Shepherdstown. The crossing was known as Pack Horse, Swearingen's, Blackford's, and finally Boteler's Ford.



Crossroads of Commerce and Conflict

More than 200 years of American determination and innovation have converged at Maryland's Ferry Hill—where people and the Potomac have shaped the character of the land and the prospects of the nation. Once a flourishing farm and shipping hub on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the plantation suffered the ravages of the Civil War, only to be preserved by subsequent decades of stewardship.



John Blackford
NPS

Ferry Hill's success stemmed from its location at a critical Potomac River crossroads between Maryland and Virginia. Thomas Van Swearingen began operating a ferry in 1765 between the Maryland shore and Shepherdstown. In the early 1800s John Blackford, who married Van Swearingen's descendant, Sarah, built Ferry Hill plantation and managed the ferry. Blackford shipped his

produce and timber overland to Harrisburg and Baltimore and via the C&O Canal to Georgetown. Like other canal communities such as Williamsport, Hancock, and Cumberland, Bridgeport also blossomed as farms and mills sent products up and down the canal.

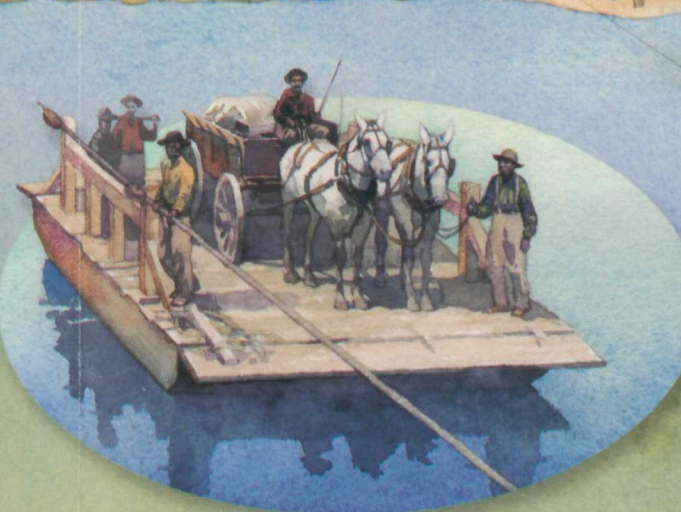
Robert and Helena Blackford Douglas moved into the mansion with their four children in 1850. Robert, a minister, conducted services at churches in the area and hired someone to manage the plantation.

During the Civil War Ferry Hill frequently served as a headquarters and encampment site. Both Union and Confederate troops used the grounds before and after crossing the Potomac at Boteler's Ford during the Antietam, Gettysburg, and Monocacy campaigns. After the Battle of Antietam, Confederates cared for their wounded at Ferry Hill. Federals then occupied the farm and restricted the Douglasses to the mansion. After suspecting Helena of signaling Confederates across the river, the Federals imprisoned Robert.

Henry Kyd Douglas, Robert's son, enlisted as a private in the Confederate Army in 1861. He served as an aide to Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and ended the war as a colonel. In his book, *I Rode with Stonewall*, he noted Ferry Hill's condition after the Battle of Antietam: "... the barn was a black mass of ruins ... a beautiful farm was laid waste, its fences disappeared up to the doors of the mansion house, artillery parks filled the wheat fields; ..." After the war Robert and Helena Douglas remained at Ferry Hill. By the mid-1900s the property was owned by descendants, the Beckenbaughs, who opened a restaurant in the mansion. The Beckenbaughs sold the property in 1948, ending an era in which six generations of the Van Swearingen, Blackford, Douglas, and Beckenbaugh families were associated with Ferry Hill.



Henry Kyd Douglas
NPS



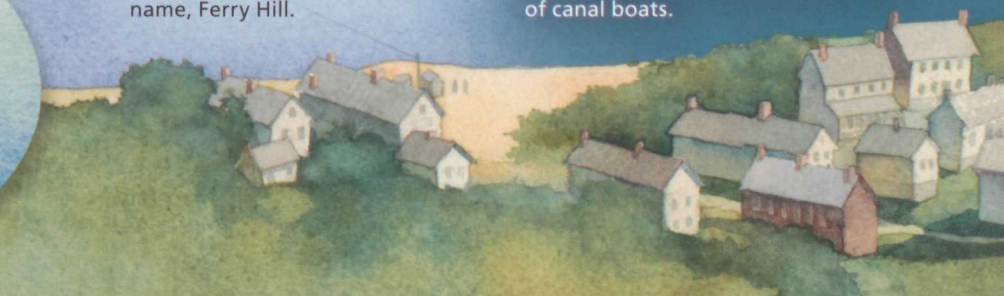
Ferry

In the 1830s two slaves, Ned and Jupe, operated the ferry across the Potomac River for the Blackfords without close supervision. The ferry and the house above on the bluff provided the plantation name, Ferry Hill.

A Progression of Water Routes

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal added another link in the ford-ferry-bridge-turnpike crossroads complex and elevated the stature of Ferry Hill and Bridgeport as a commercial transportation hub.

John Blackford bought stock in the C&O Canal Company and sold land for building the canal and Lock 38 at the bend in the river at the base of Ferry Hill. His son Franklin invested in a line of canal boats.



C&O Canal

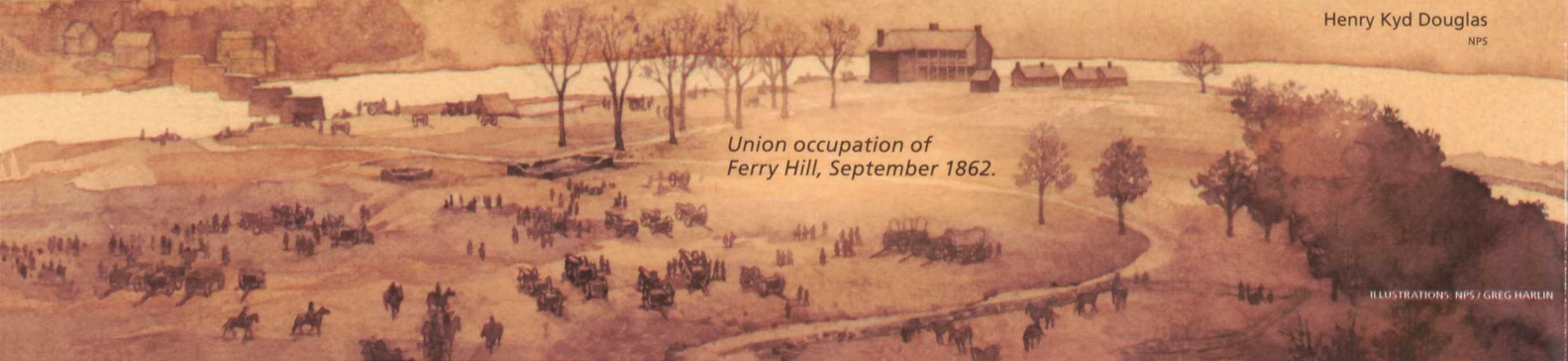
The C&O Canal reached Ferry Hill in 1835. Mules walked along the canal towpath as they pulled cargo boats. Journal entries and newspaper accounts suggest enslaved African Americans used the towpath and river crossing as routes to freedom.



I was with the company that set fire to [the bridge], and when, in the glare of the burning timbers, I saw the glowing windows in my home on the hill beyond the river... I realized that the war had begun.

—Observations by Henry Kyd Douglas, 1861

Union occupation of
Ferry Hill, September 1862.



Plantation Life Along the Potomac

Adley resumed the fence. . . Will and Enoch sowing & plowing in Rye in the cornfield. . . I have been writing in my Books. . . Murf has been plowing in the field in front of the Barn.

—John Blackford's journal, September 25, 1838

A Diversified Farm

Ferry Hill was a classic Western Maryland plantation that produced a wide variety of crops. During Blackford's ownership, only about 18 enslaved workers and some part-time laborers worked on the farm.

John Blackford assigned duties and allowed his workers to go about their chores with little or no supervision. Harvests included wheat, rye, barley, corn, potatoes, and other crops. Laborers raised cattle, sheep, horses, and hogs; cut timber, tended orchards; and made cider.

The duties of most slaves varied. In his journal for 1838 Blackford mentioned Murf threshing wheat, cleaning stables, sowing seeds, plowing, hauling ice and wood.

Some slaves had specific duties and responsibilities. In the mansion enslaved women and children labored cleaning rooms, making beds, and preparing meals for the family and a steady stream of relatives, friends, and business acquaintances. Ned and Jupe operated the ferry, collected the fees, and gave them to Blackford.

As needed Blackford hired local laborers to saw timber, shave shingles, split rails and firewood. Sometimes these part-timers joined the slaves—including women—on tasks like planting corn.

Blackford became known as a progressive farmer who rotated crops; fertilized fields with manure, ashes, and limestone; and used the latest in farm machinery. He was successful and turned Ferry Hill into a 700-acre farm.

During Robert Douglas' tenure, his farm manager directed a similar diversified enterprise for about 10 years. Although later owners maintained Ferry Hill's character, the farm declined over time. Today the mansion alone embodies American ingenuity and endurance as it remains poised above the Potomac and the C&O Canal at a historic crossroads of the nation.



Ferry Hill mansion with one-story porch, 1945.

Changes to the House

Structural changes and additions made to the mansion over the years offer opportunities for future restoration projects. The mansion had a one-story front porch when Nannie Cowen Douglas Beckenbaugh—Henry Kyd Douglas' sister—and her family operated a restaurant in the house. The porch was replaced with a two-story portico in the 1950s after the Beckenbaughs sold the property.

Prototypical Mansion

The two-story brick house, built between 1812 and 1817, is a fine example of a Western Maryland plantation mansion. The National Park Service has preserved the property since 1974. The cutaway illustration shows the mansion's interior during the Douglas years in about 1860.

. . . the mansion . . . lacks nothing to render it a paradise; it is well built, of brick, and magnificently finished. . .

—Anne Royall, journalist and travel writer, 1829

ILLUSTRATIONS: NPS / GREG HARLIN



MAPS: NPS / MATTHEW FREY

Visiting Ferry Hill

Ferry Hill is located at 16500 Shepherdstown Pike (MD 34), Sharpsburg, MD 21782. The house is open on weekends during the summer or upon request for tours. The grounds are open from dawn to dusk. Besides using the entrance road, you may reach Ferry Hill via the Ferry Hill Trail that meets the C&O Canal Towpath directly under the MD 34 bridge at Canal Milepost 72.7. Call 301-582-0813 for more information.

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