



Unison Preservation Society
NEWSLETTER
Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

Unison Road photo courtesy of Dara Bailey.

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Summer

Unison, Virginia

Local Groups Team Up to Protect Our Historic—But Threatened—Rural Roads

By Mitch Diamond

The network of historic roads in and around the village of Unison is a prominent feature of our landscape. They form the Beaverdam Creek Historic Roadways district created by Loudoun County several years ago to recognize their historic importance. But the quality of the old roads has deteriorated significantly in recent years. Now a group of friends and neighbors is working to ensure that our roads get the care and attention they need while preserving their scenic charm.

Loudoun County is one of the nation's fastest growing areas, and one of its wealthiest. But Loudoun also offers spectacular rural landscapes, a rich and accessible history and a thriving rural economy. One of the least heralded assets underpinning our wonderful rural character are Loudoun's 300 miles of unpaved rustic roads and bridges—the most of any county in Virginia. Most of these old roads follow routes laid out almost two centuries ago. They follow winding courses, lined by mature trees and stone walls and afford views of old farmsteads, open fields, and woods. They cross numerous streams over old and historic bridges. They are key parts of our pristine Civil War battlefields and connect our historic villages.



Above: Standing water on Millville Road near Unison after heavy rains shows the need for greater attention to maintaining and preserving our rural roads.

These extraordinary roads support a wide variety of users—local motorists and Loudoun's farmers, sightseers and visitors, but also equestrians, carriage drivers, bicyclists, and hikers. Their rough surface provides natural calming making the roads safer for all users.

But, this countywide, historic and unique network of roads is threatened. When properly maintained, these gravel roads provide safe and comfortable

travel and are an important part of our overall transportation system. But, limited maintenance funding has forced crews from the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to focus on repairs and reaction to storms and other problems. Routine care and reasonable preventive steps have been difficult to undertake. As a result, some sections of these old roads have erosion damage, suffer in heavy rainstorms, are plagued with potholes, have a washboard surface, and offer narrow passage between deeply rutted ditches. And, while the roadways in the historic district that surrounds Unison are protected from significant alteration, they still suffer from lack of maintenance like the rest of Loudoun's unpaved rural roads.

Trips to view old Civil War battlefields, visit a local winery, enjoy the scenery, or just to shop, go to work, school, or church can be difficult, slow, and unpleasant. And, when new development occurs, VDOT policies often create incongruous stretches of wide sections with curbs, turn lanes and other improvements that destroy old banks, eliminate trees and stonewalls, stick out in a rural setting and damage the rural scenic appeal of those roads.

VDOT estimates that just an additional \$1 million yearly would allow them to carry out the pro-active maintenance and spot repairs on the hundreds of miles of rural unpaved roads needed for adequate maintenance. In comparison, Loudoun's current Transportation Plan

projects the cost of paving an unpaved road at \$3 million to \$4 million per mile. Based on these figures, the cost of adequately maintaining our existing gravel roads is a very tiny fraction of the cost of paving them (even if the cost of maintaining paved roads was zero). And, with adequate maintenance, the unpaved road network can, as it has for many years, provide good transportation along with major contributions to our heritage, our unique sense of place, and our appeal to visitors and residents.

Under the sponsorship of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition (made up of 27 regional and local organizations), a group of local residents from the Unison Preservation Society, the Goose Creek Association, the Piedmont Environmental Council, the Mosby Heritage Area Association, the Snickersville Turnpike Association, and the Friends of the Blue Ridge has formed a committee to press VDOT and our elected officials to preserve and care for this essential network of roads. This core committee is working with members of other interested groups including the County Historic District Review Committee and the Rural Economic Development Council.

Working for the better part of a year, the committee and its allies already have had some success:

- A publicity campaign focused on the roads have led to numerous articles and columns in local newspapers and in *The Washington Post* raising public awareness of this major part of our rural and historic landscape

- The group has published a well-illustrated, multi-page policy report entitled “The Rural Road Network of Loudoun County—a Proposal for Maintenance” providing background information and policy recommendations for officials

- Discussions with local and state elected officials have led to state legislation supporting Loudoun’s unpaved roads and requiring annual reports from VDOT on their program for these roads

- At the group’s urging, VDOT has sent its local staff to special training programs and is adopting new and better practices for the proper care of the rural roads

- VDOT has hired new, experienced staff and applied additional funds to improve the maintenance of the unpaved roads

- VDOT and Loudoun’s rural Supervisors have recently announced a multi-year

plan for addressing some of the most problematic segments of the rural roads while maintaining their rural and historic character. These improvements should stabilize these areas and free up maintenance resources to apply to the balance of the roads.

Many people have commented that the roads in the area around Unison, and in other parts of rural Loudoun, seem to be in better shape than they have been in recent years—but this is a work in progress, and much more has to be done.

The Rural Roads Committee is continuing to work for the care of our roads. It is in discussions with VDOT, our county Transportation Department staff and our rural supervisors to identify issues and develop programs for the better care and preservation of our rural road network. It also is talking with our state-level elected officials to encourage future legislation for the preservation of our roads, and for the proper funding needed for their maintenance. And, the committee is exploring additional steps to help build awareness and recognition of the historic road network, including:

- Creation of several state sponsored Heritage Trails, featuring the old roads and key sites along the roads which would illustrate important elements of our history, and

- Listing of all or major parts of our area and its old roads on the National Register of Historic Places. This step would not limit anyone’s private property rights, but would bring important recognition as well as tax benefits for restoration of historic properties on and near the old roads.

VDOT has limited resources. It is essential that our local and State officials and our local VDOT team are aware of our love for these old roads and our desire to see them well cared for. It also helps if they hear about specific problems—and when things seem to be going well too. To contact the VDOT about a road problem or to give a thumbs up, call 1-800-FOR ROAD (1-800-367-7623).



Left: Road conditions on Poor House Road after flooding.

Above: Gravel run-off on Millville Road after heavy rains spill into grassy areas and streams.

Road photos courtesy of Bonnie Mattingly, Goose Creek Association Loudoun President, and Member of the Rural Roads Committee.



Above: In the 1830s, Mt Gilead Road, near Leesburg, carried patrons to Eaton's Spa atop Catocin Mountain. The spa is long closed, but the scenic road now leads to Willowcraft Winery.

Photo courtesy of Michael Simpson.



Above: An 1854 map of Loudoun County shows the homes, farms, churches, and roads around the Unison (Union) area. Many of these roads are still used today.

Courtesy of Mitch Diamond.

If you want more information or want to participate in this important work, please contact UPS Board members Mitch Diamond (mdiamond9@earthlink.net), or Douglas Kemmerer (kdougk@aol.com). ■

Unison Well Water Quality Q and A with the Loudoun Health Department

Compiled by Jerry Franklin, Yvonne Hershberger, and Juan Reyes of the Loudoun County Health Department

How can you tell if your well water is okay to consume?

Analysis of a water sample provides only a snapshot in time. This is why it is important to periodically sample and analyze your well water quality. The quality of well water varies over time and with weather and groundwater conditions. The best protection against contamination is having a well that is located safely away from sources of pollution, constructed according to regulations, and protected from surface water influences.

Testing for pathogens is usually done with a coliform bacteria test. Coliform bacteria are indicator organisms showing that biological contamination exists. Fecal coliform indicate that bacteria and likely viruses from animals or humans are present in the water supply. Additional tests are available if other types of contamination are suspected. Please contact the Health Department at 703-777-0234 for more information.

What are the different ways a well can become contaminated?

Wells that are hand dug, or not cased and sealed properly, may allow surface water to directly enter the well. This may result in immediate contamination. Properly constructed wells still may be subject to the influence of surface water depending on the geology of the well location. Storing, applying, or spilling chemicals, fuel, pesticides, fertilizers or manures near a well also can result in contamination. Improperly installed or operating onsite sewage treatment systems may also be a source of contamination.

Are there warning signs that a well may be "going bad?"

Typically contamination cannot be detected except by testing. If chemical odors are detected, usage should be suspended and the Health Department should be contacted immediately.

Is a homeowner/landowner solely responsible for ensuring their well water is safe to drink?

After initial permitting, inspection, and testing for new wells, the owner is responsible for maintaining their private well water system and conducting periodic monitoring. Generally, testing is done by a private company hired by the owner.

However, if water-borne illness is suspected, the Health Department can test the well at county expense if requested by a physician with a written prescription.

How can I find out the names of companies that are approved for testing my well water for all possible contaminants?

The Loudoun County Health Department (LCHD) maintains a list of local labs for bacteriological sampling: <http://va-loudouncounty.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/88469>.

For a complete list of approved laboratories that perform chemical analysis visit: <http://va-loudouncounty.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/88469>.

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How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.



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Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. This includes not only stories, photographs, family histories and diaries of long past Unison residents but also what is happening in today's Unison. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.



Newsletter Design:

Dara Bailey • Bluemont, VA
darabaileydesign@gmail.com

If your neighbor's well water is contaminated, does that mean yours is as well?

No, not necessarily. It depends on the well construction, proximity to pollution sources and hydrogeology. Typically contamination cannot be detected except by testing.

How often should you have your well water tested?

In order to help prevent illness, the Health Department recommends that well water be tested for bacteriological quality annually and for chemical contamination if it is suspected. In addition to regular tests, water should be tested immediately if there is any change in its clarity, color, odor or taste, or if there has been a change in the surrounding land use. Through regular assessment and testing, the microbial and chemical quality of your well water can be determined, and addressed if warranted.

If you see one of these signs, what's the first thing you should do?

Stop using the water and then contact the Health Department as soon as possible for advice.

If you think you have a problem with your well, who should you contact in the county government?

If you have any questions regarding your private water supply well please contact the Environmental Health Section of the Loudoun County Health Department at (703) 777-0234.

Can you decontaminate a well yourself or do you need a professional to do it?

If a water sample collected from your water supply is unsatisfactory for coliform bacteria (bacteria not normally found in groundwater) one can use a chlorination procedure to disinfect their water supply. This procedure can be done by a licensed well driller or the homeowner.



Above: The quality of well water varies over time which is why it is important to check it periodically.

Chlorination procedures can be found at: <http://va-loudouncounty.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/88469>.

Other forms of contamination are likely to require more extensive treatment systems.

What are the other, more extensive treatment options?

There are a variety of individual home treatment systems that can be installed by private companies. They are designed to reduce specific pollutants and some can treat for a number of different types of contaminants. Almost all of these require periodic maintenance to ensure they operate effectively.

If your well is prone to stop producing water (as some wells in Unison are), are there measures to take when the well comes back on line?

Protecting the pump by turning it off when no water is available and restricting water use are typical emergency procedures. When pressure is lost, leaks in the water line can allow contamination into the supply system. It is recommended that if leaks are suspected and pressure is low or lost, the system be disinfected before use. You can contact a licensed well driller for information on improving water production or disinfection procedures. ■

Unison Preservation Society
P. O. Box 606
Middleburg, VA
20118

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U.S. Postage Paid
Mr. Print
Purcellville, VA
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