

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Disney's America

BY KARL RHODES

A local zoning issue ignited a national firestorm when Disney tried to build a theme park in Virginia

Nick and Mary Lynn Kotz declared war on the Walt Disney Co. in the spring of 1994. They were sitting on the porch of their home near Broad Run, Va., reading the *Washington Post* and savoring their unspoiled view of the mountains that separate rural Fauquier County from suburban Prince William County.

The afternoon sun warmed the porch and illuminated the mountains, but the newspaper reminded them of what Disney was plotting on the other side of those bright blue ridges. The company had announced plans to develop 3,000 acres near the tiny town of Haymarket in the northwestern reaches of Prince William County. Phase one featured Disney's America, a history theme park and recreation area. Long-range plans called for a golf course, houses, hotels, and other unspecified mixed-use development.

Nick looked up from the newspaper and gazed at Thoroughfare Gap, the pass that Stonewall Jackson traversed to raid the Union supply depot at Manassas Junction in 1862.

The Disney invasion, Nick remarked, seemed like "a surprise attack."

"We've got to get the historians involved," Mary Lynn suggested. "Let's get in touch with Shelby Foote right now!"

Foote was a Southern author and historian whose fame had mushroomed after he appeared in Ken Burns' popular PBS documentary series about the Civil War. Mary Lynn did not know Foote, but she knew someone who did, and by afternoon's end, she had Foote's phone number. Networking was second nature to Mary Lynn, an accomplished writer and public relations pro. Nick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, also maintained an impressive list of contacts. Together, they marshaled a nationwide army of writers and historians to fight Disney's America at every tactical turn.

Despite their enthusiasm, the writers and historians — joined by preservationists and environmentalists — seemed no match for Disney, which enjoyed strong support from the Virginia governor, the Virginia General Assembly, and the Prince William Board of Supervisors. But in the final analysis, the pen, amplified by media relations expertise, proved mightier than the mouse.

The Debate Continues

Nearly two decades after Disney scrapped plans for Disney's America, the debate continues — both in Prince William County and across the country. Who should influence land-use decisions? In addition to local residents, should people

in adjacent counties have a say? What about state and national governments?

One modern-day blog commenter described the 1990s confrontation as a "battle between Disney and almost everybody living in Virginia."

"Uh, no," a second commenter shot back. "It was really a battle between Disney and a very small, but very rich and influential group of Virginians."

The breadth and depth of opposition among Virginians at the time is still being debated, but there is little doubt that the anti-Disney movement emanated primarily from Fauquier and Loudoun counties. Three years after Disney backed down, Nick Kotz co-authored an article with fellow journalist Rudy Abramson titled "The Battle to Stop Disney's America." Their story focused primarily on Protect Historic America (PHA), the nonprofit organization that Nick and Mary Lynn started to fight Disney. The co-authors listed the PHA's initial organizers as residents of Fauquier or Loudoun. None of them hailed from Prince William.

"I would say that about 80 percent of the opposition came from outside the county," recalls Kathleen Seefeldt, who chaired the Prince William Board of Supervisors at the time. Inside the county, most residents welcomed Disney, and a clear majority of supervisors would have approved the project, she says. "We thought we saw a very good opportunity for nonresidential growth."

Prince William had been struggling for decades to diversify its real estate tax base. In the 1970s, when Northern Virginians started rezoning their dairy farms, "Fairfax County got the cream, and Prince William got the skim milk." That's how *Virginia Business* magazine described the situation in 1988. Fairfax attracted upscale malls, hotels, and office buildings, while Prince William became a bedroom community for people who could not afford to live closer to their jobs in Washington, D.C. Prince William's tax base was further constrained by large swaths of land that could never generate revenue: Nearly 19 percent of the county's acreage is owned by the federal government, most notably Marine Corps Base Quantico, Prince William Forest Park, and Manassas National Battlefield Park.

In the late 1980s, a developer acquired land adjacent to the battlefield park and proposed William Center, a 542-acre project that would have included a 1.2 million-square-foot mall. The county enthusiastically supported William Center, but local and national preservationists rallied against building a mall near a Civil War battlefield. Eventually the

This rendering of Disney's America shows replicas of the Monitor and Merrimac battling in the middle of a man-made lake flanked by a mocked up Civil War fort and a building resembling the Ellis Island Immigration Station.



federal government purchased the site, via “legislative taking,” for \$134 million (\$249 million in today’s dollars). The acquisition generated a huge profit for the developer, but it made Prince William’s tax base even smaller.

Seefeldt recalls discussing the William Center project with Sen. John Warner shortly before Congress purchased the land. “I believe it was he who said, ‘Can’t you just move this project five miles down the road? Then there probably wouldn’t be any problem.’”

Down the Road

Five years later and about four miles down the road, Disney assembled 3,000 acres to build its first theme park in the United States beyond the sunny climes of California and Florida. Disney’s America would have been closer to Disneyland than Disney World in size, but opponents of the project associated Disney’s America with the sprawling Disney World complex south of Orlando.

Disney’s think-big approach had worked well in Florida, but in the early 1990s, the company was struggling to replicate that success with its new Euro Disney theme park in Paris. “Chastened by the rising costs of Euro Disney, we began to look for ways to develop smaller-scale theme parks,” wrote CEO Michael Eisner in his memoir, *Work in Progress*. (He declined to be interviewed for this story.) After visiting Colonial Williamsburg and reading books about John Smith and Pocahontas, he became passionate about building a theme park based on American history.

When Eisner unveiled Disney’s America in 1993, he said the company would “create a totally new concept using the different strengths of our entertainment company ... to celebrate those unique American qualities that have been our country’s strengths and that have made this nation a beacon of hope to people everywhere.”

According to Disney’s press release, the theme park would include a Civil War fort and village with nearby re-enactments of the battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* on a man-made lake. The release also named five other themed sections: Presidents’ Square would celebrate “the birth of democracy and those who fought to preserve it.” A section called “We the People” would interpret the

American immigrant experience “inside a building resembling Ellis Island.” Native America would pay tribute to the continent’s first inhabitants with “a harrowing Lewis and Clark river expedition.” Enterprise would highlight American ingenuity with a thrill ride called “Industrial Revolution.” And Victory Field would let guests “experience what America’s soldiers faced in the defense of freedom.”

Disney projected that the theme park and recreation area alone would create nearly 3,000 jobs and generate \$500 million in tax revenues for Prince William over 30 years. State and local officials were thrilled. Steady streams of tourists seemed like the perfect way to bolster the county’s tax base. Tourists would generate more traffic, but they would spend their money and go home without requiring as many local services as residents do. Most of the Prince William supervisors enthusiastically supported the project, as did Gov. George Allen. The Virginia General Assembly even agreed to provide \$163 million for transportation improvements and worker training to help seal the deal.

National Outcry

Soon after Disney announced its plans, leaders of the nonprofit Piedmont Environmental Council started looking for ways to scuttle the project. Based in Warrenton, Va., the council works to protect the historic and rural character of Virginia’s upper piedmont region. The council focuses on nine counties, including Fauquier and Loudoun, but Prince William is just outside the organization’s core territory.

Even so, the council has been engaged in land-use issues throughout Northern Virginia, including Prince William, says Council President Chris Miller, who coordinated the organization’s opposition to Disney’s America. The council produced “an alternative location map” with more than 20 potential sites where the council would have supported the theme park. Miller focused on land-use arguments against the Disney’s America site, but he quickly realized that the PHA was helping the council’s cause by portraying the theme park as a bastardization of American history. So the council helped raise some initial funding for PHA.

“Money just seemed to fall from the sky,” Mary Lynn

recalls. More importantly, she and Nick enlisted the help of many well-known academic historians — including C. Vann Woodward of Yale, John Hope Franklin of Duke, and James McPherson of Princeton. They also recruited many famous writers, including Foote, David McCullough, William Styron, Roger Wilkins, and Tom Wicker.

While the PHA founders had strong NIMBY (not in my backyard) motives, some of the better-known historians and writers they enlisted opposed the project's theme as much, if not more, than its location. They expressed grave concerns about the "Disneyfication" of American history that they had witnessed in the company's movies and theme parks.

"Anything Disney has ever touched — whether it's fantasy or fact, whether it's Davy Crockett or whoever — has always been sentimentalized," Foote said in a 1994 interview with *Naval History Magazine*. "And every good historian, every great artist, knows that sentimentality is the greatest enemy of truth."

In his memoir, Eisner confessed that Disney's "first important misstep was the decision to call the park 'Disney's America.'" The possessive name "implied ownership of the country's history, which only antagonized our critics," he explained. "That was unfortunate because we were never interested in a park that merely reflected a Disneyesque view of American history."

Filmmaker Ken Burns had no objections to Disney's popular history theme. "I am in the same business," he wrote in the *Potomac News*. "Many in my generation have been drawn to history in part through the films of Walt Disney." Burns opposed the project because "it is in the wrong place. It will distract visitors from the real places of history, and it will damage the beauty and character of the area."

Edge City Averted?

So did Prince William County drop the brass ring of economic development or dodge the brass knuckles of suburban sprawl?

The project's opponents and proponents agreed on one thing. Disney's America would have transformed the town of Haymarket (population 460 at the time) and the county of Prince William (population 239,000 at the time). The PHA commissioned a study that predicted Disney's America would spur the development of a new edge city "equivalent to 17 others in the Washington area combined." The study also estimated that the project would attract 230,000 new residents who would overwhelm the region's existing infrastructure.

The edge city prediction was vastly overstated, Seefeldt says, and most of the projected population growth was going to happen with or without Disney's America. A theme park would have generated more traffic, she admits, but Disney would have contributed to building the necessary infrastructure. "All those transportation improvements have pretty much been put in place without any private sector assistance, and what we have out there now is a sea of rooftops," which created demand for several new schools.

Prince William residents will never know which vision of Disney's America was more realistic because in September 1994, the company abruptly abandoned the project. In his book, Eisner noted several issues that factored into the decision. He was devastated by the death of Disney President Frank Wells in April and distracted by the tumultuous departure of Disney Studios chief Jeffrey Katzenberg in August. Eisner also underwent bypass surgery. While he was recovering, the theme park's projected startup costs and revenues took a turn for the worse, but Eisner made it clear that widespread opposition to the project — mustered mostly by the PHA and the council — was the underlying reason for pulling the plug.

"I still believed that it was possible to get Disney's America built, but the question now was at what cost," he wrote. "The issue was no longer who was right or wrong. We had lost the perception game. Largely through our own missteps, the Walt Disney Co. had been effectively portrayed as an enemy of American history and a plunderer of sacred ground."

Prince William may have dropped the brass ring of economic development, but it did not dodge suburban sprawl. The sacred ground that preservationists saved from Disney's America instead became a golf course and country club along with several upscale subdivisions and retirement communities. Haymarket's population nearly quadrupled to 1,800, and Prince William's population grew to 419,000. As for the real estate tax base, commercial and industrial properties accounted for only 14.1 percent in 2011 — down from 16.7 percent in 1993.

Fauquier County has grown as well, but the county retains its rural and historic character. Nick and Mary Lynn Kotz still enjoy their unspoiled view of Thoroughfare Gap, and Mary Lynn bristles a bit when she recalls *Washington Post* stories that portrayed opponents of Disney's America as wealthy NIMBYs protecting their horse farms in Fauquier County. Nick and Mary Lynn don't raise thoroughbreds, they raise cows. "But mostly," she says, "we raise Cain." **EF**

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