

# The History and Importance of Rustic Roads: Allnutt Road

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## Abstract

The goal of this project was to prove the importance of rustic roads when documenting local history, especially when globalization is threatening worldwide homogenization. In our society that is changing and adapting constantly it is important for people to have a sense of place in their communities, which can be provided by an understanding of the history of the area. This research was focused on analyzing the importance of Allnutt Road in Poolesville, Maryland, and specifically on the history of two homes and one Civil War encampment site and their importance in shaping the physical landscape. After researching at government facilities, interviewing local community members, attending local preservation and historical meetings, and conducting independent research, the information found was compiled and given to the Rustic Roads Advisory Committee in order to have a more thorough and interesting documentation of the information, which will hopefully promote further research and interest.

History is often thought of solely as a topic taught in school, something that needs to be memorized quickly and learned in order to “prevent the past from repeating itself.” In reality, history is significantly more immediate than it is believed to be, as it impacts the everyday lives of people in different regions around the world. The history of a region, town, road, or even home contributes to mankind’s overall sense of place, which is crucial in the ever-changing global society of today. Rustic roads are significant in the overall understanding of a region’s history and evolution, and are important for a community’s sense of place, which I explored through the study of Allnut Road in Montgomery County, Maryland.

In Montgomery County, there are ninety eight rustic roads that have been selected by historians and the community due to their beauty, cultural significance, and pleasing character for restoration and preservation (Montgomery Planning). By recognizing rustic roads, communities are actively working to preserve their local history and create an environment that emphasizes local values in the context of global values, which are becoming more dominant. It is important to consider the value of local historic areas, especially when globalization is currently combining cultures and skewing a community’s sense of self in terms of its environment. It is common to go to a street in your hometown and not recognize any of the foreign shops, and although this globalization is incredibly beneficial in terms of the economy, worldwide connections, and overall cultural acceptance (Wong), it is crucial to appreciate the opportunity that is provided in Montgomery County. Due to the existence of the Agricultural Reserve, members of this rural community are able to visit a rustic road and see the houses that stood during the Civil War, see the fields where people camped, and see the homes of town founders that have been preserved or rebuilt through local organizations like the volunteer based Historic Medley District in Poolesville, Maryland. There is a desire in this community to

preserve the past, and that is often a topic focused on in small towns all around America. However, Poolesville has been growing rapidly due to the recently constructed developments and top ranking high school, so new members are entering the community that do not have cultural ties to the region. These migratory populations that lack cultural connections are slowly turning the town away from its cultural heritage due to lack of awareness, but through the preservation movements and the involvement of the organizations in the community, attempts are being made to make the history of the area interesting for people from all over the country that have moved to this historically significant area. With the Rustic Roads Advisory Committee (RRAC), I attempted to preserve the history of Allnut Road, and in the process attempted to save the history of such an interesting part of the town from the destruction that our current global community is threatening. This stability and preservation that the RRAC facilitates reminds us of who we are as a people, not in the new world environment but in terms of our local culture that defines who we are.

When studying a town and its history, there are two audiences that need to be considered in order to accurately deliver information about the area to people who are unaware. One of these audiences is the portion of the population that has lived in the area for their whole lives. These people have their roots in the town, have heard stories growing up about their ancestors in the same town, and may or may not have a complete understanding of the historical significance, but regardless still have personal connections. The other audience that must be considered is the newcomers. Town populations are not comprised solely of people that have lived there their whole lives, but more a mix of people from all over the county, state, country, and world, reflecting an increasingly global community. These people each have their own individual family histories, home towns, and culture, but they are placed in a society that already

has its unique culture. A lot of the time, the new population is not aware of the past of the area they move to, and that can make them feel separated from the preexisting society. Personally, when I moved from Bloomfield, New Jersey to Poolesville, Maryland, I did not have any sense of connection to this new community. This lack of a sense of place made me feel somewhat lost in my new surroundings and almost like an outsider looking in. However, during my high school experience I got involved with the Historic Medley District and the RRAC, and this newfound knowledge of the town I live in has made me feel significantly more at home and accepting of my community.

With new populations moving into communities due to the pull factors of jobs, educational opportunities, and cost of living (Rubenstein), the traditional community that was once prevalent shifts into a more disconnected community. As people move away or as they age, specific aspects of the history of an area are lost forever. Organizations like the Historic Medley District and the RRAC have recognized the importance of documenting history before living sources disappear, and that is done through communicating with older, long term town residents. When generations pass away, an entire era of history is lost if it is not documented, and the older populations had that sense of place that needs to be passed down to future generations. Personal accounts of events and first person stories make history come alive and make it more relatable to a somewhat disconnected audience. There is always a reason for why things are the way they are, and even though historians can speculate, it is more reliable and interesting when the reasoning is taken directly from the source, in this case long-term residents. For example, the Allnut Road community, which is further explored in this study, was built for a specific reason, and the homes along the road each have their own unique histories and significance, which I will discuss later on in the paper. I worked to document and

preserve the history of this unique road in Montgomery County in the hope of providing future generations the same sense of place that I gained through learning about the history of my new home.

This project that I undertook was complicated, as it did not have a specific path to follow in terms of research and documentation. The RRAC wanted me to find any reliable information I could about Allnut Road, and they wanted a more in depth documentation to hopefully appeal to more people in the community and those visiting from out of town that want to explore the local culture. I approached this somewhat broad task with the goal of documenting the history of my specific road and presenting the information in a way that was easily accessible and understandable to the public. However, the complicated part was actually obtaining the information, because there were no clear sources for this obscure road, and information could be pulled from both documents from the past and living people in the community.

With this project I worked with Jane Thompson, a member of the RRAC and a citizen in the Poolesville area for much of her life. She has done similar research for West Harris Road in Dickerson, and was incredibly helpful with connecting me with local historians and prominent members of the Poolesville community. Based on her own experience with West Harris Road, Jane gave me some ideas as to how to go about actually obtaining the information I needed. To understand the history of Allnut Road, I conducted research with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), interviewed members of the community who either live on the road or have family history along the road, attended the meetings of local historical and natural preservation committees, and researched on the internet to find any additional information or previous studies of the surrounding area that would supplement my research.

One of the ways I researched Allnut Road was through reading documents at the M-NCPPC. Jane is friends with Leslie Saville, who is employed there, so I was set up with a meeting relatively quickly. In October, Jane and I traveled to Silver Spring and met up with Leslie, who introduced us to Clare Kelly, an architectural historian with M-NCPPC Historic Preservation. I was not sure what to expect from this meeting, but through email correspondence prior to the meeting Clare asked me what region I was interested in focusing on. I told her that I wanted to research the area around Poolesville, possibly a road that has not been researched too thoroughly in hopes of learning new information and piecing together pieces of history on my own, and she responded by telling me she would use what I told her to prepare for our meeting. When Jane and I arrived at the office, Clare had already pulled out dozens of maps and documents relating to my area of interest. Clare, Leslie, Jane, and I spoke briefly about what they wanted the final project to look like, the benefits of historic preservation, and the fact that they were excited to see a young person with an interest in preservation, and then Leslie had to leave for a meeting. Clare presented me with the documents she found and then let me begin my research. I was not expecting to begin researching that day, nor was I expecting to be able to just browse through folder after folder of original documents, but I was there for four hours doing just that. Jane and I had a great time researching and asking Clare different questions about the area at that meeting, and I learned a lot of valuable information about the history of Allnut Road after just four hours at the M-NCPPC.

After the meeting, Jane and I drove back to Poolesville and decided to visit Allnut Road, or at least what is considered to be Allnut Road. Even though it is classified as a rustic road, there is no sign indicating it and on most maps it is considered to be a private driveway. Because we knew that this road was in fact a rustic road, owned by the county, we drove down the windy

path. What amazed me was the fact that the houses along the road were the exact same ones I was just viewing pictures of in documents from the 1800s. We continued driving down the road and eventually got to the final house, which used to be owned by one of her childhood friends and still remains in the family. We spoke to the current resident of the house, inquired about the whereabouts of her friend, and found out that his family still owns the house and is currently living nearby, so close that on a winter day when the leaves are not on the trees the new residence can be seen from the farmhouse. After these interactions, Jane told me she would contact her old friends and some more long-term members of the community so I could conduct interviews and get a more thorough understanding of the family histories of the area. This was another way I conducted research on Allnutt Road, through firsthand accounts from the older Poolesville population.

Another method of research that I used was attending local historic and conservation meetings. On November 2, 2015, I attended the Sugarloaf Citizens Association board meeting, and was given the opportunity to hear about local problems and policy dealing with environmental preservation. I live in a unique area that highly values the environment and historical importance of the community, so it was interesting hearing about policy issues and environmental concerns that the citizens of the area have. One of the women at the meeting, Tina Thieme Brown, was interested in my research, and provided me with insight as to how to approach this topic of historic and environmental preservation that I further explored through my rustic road research. She is an artist in Barnesville, and she focuses her art on nature in the Agricultural Reserve. One area that she thought was important for me to consider was the importance of preserving the roads not only for their historic relevance, but also for their natural importance and beauty that they provide to the community. Through these meetings with the

local community I was able to broaden my research and understand the importance of the road in the wider context of the Agricultural Reserve, and these different perspectives benefitted my future research of Allnut Road.

These three methods, working with the M-NCPPC, talking to older members of the community, and attending Sugarloaf Citizens Association meetings, provided the core information I needed to complete my thorough analysis of Allnut Road and the families living upon it. In addition, I conducted some of my own independent research on the internet to supplement my findings, which ended up being very beneficial to my research and validating my beliefs in the importance of Allnut Road to the history of the region. The research I conducted led to many interesting discoveries about the Poolesville community and its importance during the Civil War, and I also gained a more personal and human perspective on the history of the road and the families that have lived on it from Clifton Williams, a member of the local community and past occupant of Allnut Road. However, due to the large number of houses and centuries of history along just this small road, I decided to focus on the Richard Walter Williams house, the Williams farmhouse, and the field next to the farmhouse that was the location of Camp Benton during the Civil War. I was able to gather preliminary research on these locations, and mainly factual data about the homes and Williams family, from the M-NCPPC.

The Williams family has been a consistent part of the community since the beginning of this region's settlement. Some of the earliest Maryland settlers were of the Williams family, and Thomas Williams established the family in the area in 1665. The family owned much of the land along the Potomac River near Edwards Ferry, including the land on which Allnut Road and the houses along it were constructed. As the older members of the family had children, the land was split up and given to each of the children so they could farm, which explains why many of the



houses are located within close proximity to homes that were owned by the older members of the community.

The Richard Walter Williams house was constructed between 1841 and 1863 as one of two houses John McGill Williams built for his two sons, Richard Walter Williams and John T. Williams. Richard Walter Williams lived in the house until 1890, when he passed away, and conveyed the property to his wife and son. After a few years they decided they could not run the farm effectively, and gave the land to the daughter/sister, Lucy, and her husband, Joseph N. Allnutt, in 1902. In 1933 they conveyed the land to two brothers in the family, Joseph Kenneth Allnutt and Richard Walter Allnutt. Richard passed away in 1982, and now the property belongs to his wife, Elizabeth Allnutt. The history of ownership of this home explains the introduction of the Allnutt family into the previously Williams community along the road.

The other structure I focused on, the Williams farmhouse, was constructed shortly after the Civil War, replacing the Zachariah Williams home that had fallen into disrepair during the war. All that remains of the original structure that was on the property is the log meat house, which is still standing today. The home is Victorian style, which was a common architectural choice in this region during the nineteenth century, and no changes have been made to the exterior of the house since its construction except for the addition of a bay window in 1903-1904. The size and style of the home is indicative of the wealth of the family, especially during that time period when homes were typically smaller and less complex in terms of architectural features (Whittenburg), so it is clear from both the standing structure and the documentation of the Zachariah Williams house that the Williams family was a family of wealthy farmers. The home was built by Richard Walter Williams for his son, Charles, who lived in the home until his death in 1924. It was conveyed to his son, Charles M. Williams, Jr., and then immediately

conveyed to his sons, Dorsey and Roger Williams. This was also the home lived in by Clifton Williams, and is still owned by him even though he rents out the home now.

This information, although interesting in terms of family lineage and home ownership, can be somewhat dull to the average reader or community member, and that is something the RRAC wanted to change. It is important for history to have a more personal approach because the current government documentation is very factual, which often makes people consider history to be a boring topic. In reality, history was created by actual people with actual human emotions, and this human perspective is what truly gives character to a town and community. The history of the community should be interesting and easily understood by the public in order to preserve the local culture that is so crucial in determining sense of place in our globalized society. The information that I gathered from the M-NCPPC is crucial in the analysis of the history and importance of Allnut Road, but I decided to supplement my book research with face-to-face interviews and meetings. Jane remembered that her childhood friend, Clifton Williams, had lived in the farmhouse at the end of the road when they were in high school, so she found his phone number and gave it to me. After a few days I was able to contact him, and he was excited to talk to me about the history of his family and what he knew about the house, so we set up a meeting on Sunday, February 14, 2016 at the farmhouse itself.

I was initially nervous to talk to Clifton, mainly because my past experiences with documenting oral and family history have not been met with enthusiasm. A couple of years ago I attempted to record my grandfather as he talked about his life as a child and growing up in Frederick, but he refused to let me record him. People are sometimes hesitant to allow their stories to be documented, and people are typically wary of allowing documentation of personal family stories, so I was worried about that when I approached Clifton. Luckily, he was very

willing to talk about his family and share the history of his old home. Jane, Clifton, and I spent four hours discussing his family heritage and stories passed down from past generations, and we visited his old home, the foundation of a schoolhouse located near the home that once was connected to the property with another road, and his current home so we could see maps and drawings of the land owned by the Williams family.

One area of interest for me that I wanted to discuss with Clifton was the history of the road during the Civil War. During my time researching at the M-NCPPC, the Union encampment, Camp Benton, came up a few times in my readings. There was nothing too detailed in the description of the camp, so I was not sure how important it really was due to the vague documentation. Regardless, I decided to ask about it even if it was seemingly irrelevant, in case it was significant to the family or to the war effort due to its close proximity to the Potomac River and therefore Virginia, which was Confederate territory. Clifton asked me what questions I had for him after he gave me a brief summary of the family lineage and home ownership, so I decided to ask about Camp Benton and find out if there was anything to really discuss or if it was just a regiment of troops that happened to be on the land for a period of time. I was shocked about the scale of what I discovered about this encampment, and the prominence it had during the Civil War.

In the year 1861, troops came through the town of Poolesville due to its strategic location so close to the Potomac River. This area was an important region for the Union Army because there was only a short distance of water separating the two foes, the Union and the Confederacy. Maryland was a border state and some citizens were Confederate sympathizers or had Confederate leanings because of their close proximity to the South and similar complaints about the federal government, so it was crucial for the Union to ensure that the Confederacy did not

advance on Maryland and in turn Washington DC. On September 15, 1961, Union troops of the Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts approached the Williams farmhouse along Allnutt Road and noticed Mrs. Williams through her kitchen window. She was baking pies, and when they asked her if they could stay on the land she gladly obliged and made more pies for the troops (Williams). The Williams family was very welcoming of the Union regiment and clearly supported the war effort by providing the land that was described as a large wheat field on the slope of a hill, surrounded by a “beautiful running stream of clear, cold water” (Bruce). The encampment consisted of multiple regiments, including First Massachusetts, Nineteenth Massachusetts, Brigade B, First Rhode Island Artillery, and many others that circulated through the region (Bruce). After six months, the troops left the property and continued onward to fight for the purpose of restoring the Union, but they still left their mark on the land. As a child, Clifton remembers finding bullets in the field while farming, and remembers how his family would let interested people onto the property who had metal detectors and the hope of finding some remnants and artifacts from Camp Benton. The family eventually stopped allowing this due to the disruption it caused to their farming, and the occasional issue of cows running loose when somebody searching the property forgot to close the gates properly. The troops did not just leave material items on the property as proof of their being on the land, they also left their mark on the landscape of the farm. There is a spot in the field to this day where crops refuse to grow and that is barren, and Clifton’s father attributed this strange phenomenon to the idea that the Union troops constructed an oven on that spot that, due to frequent use, made the land infertile. Considering family history alone this area has historic importance, but this encampment and the area around the Williams farmhouse is also featured in a Winslow Homer oil painting of Captain William Francis Bartlett and Lieutenant Colonel Francis Winthrop Palfrey that was created in

1881 as part of his documentation of the frontlines of the Civil War. This painting is now displayed in the Boston Public Library as part of their Twentieth Regiment Collection. The fact that Winslow Homer created a painting featuring this property, and the fact that multiple historical novels include information about this encampment, emphasizes the importance of the region during the Civil War.

After discovering this information and linking it to the Williams property, I began to get a more vivid idea of the history of the Williams farmhouse. With the factual information from the M-NCPPC I was able to have a shallow understanding of the history, but as I did more research, talked to Clifton, and found accounts from troops that occupied Camp Benton, I began to truly picture the life and the atmosphere of the bustling encampment that is now a field in a sleepy town near the river. With the firsthand accounts, and with the family stories provided by Clifton, I was able to compile a more holistic understanding of the road and its importance to the family and to the Union Army.

Once I understood and compiled key facts and information about the Richard Walter Williams house, the Williams farmhouse, and Camp Benton, I began to question why the road was there in the first place. Even then, this area was very rural and sparsely populated, so why was a legitimate road required in the first place? Through my research, I came to the conclusion that the road was created to connect the Williams family, who built their first home along Allnutt Road, to the small community and cattle herding locations that were necessary for their farm. As time passed, the road evolved and grew into its current shape as the land was divided between the children of the previous Williams, and as new homes were built for these new adults located near the original home. The Richard Walter Williams house was built by John McGill Williams for his son, and the Williams farmhouse was constructed to replace a home that had been built

for a similar purpose. The road shape was determined by the construction of the homes and the need to travel to the growing town that evolved with the increasing population. The road could also have been shaped and connected to the main road at its current location because of a Baptist church located at the end of the lane on the other side of the main road. Due to insufficient documentation, there is not much information to be found about the church and when it was created, but the Williams family could have been part of the congregation and needed a direct route to the church from their homes along Allnut Road. It was standard for homes during that time period and before to be located near churches because religion was such a fundamental aspect of the society of the past, and people would need to be relatively close to the church to attend services and stay involved in the religious and social community the churches provided. During the early period of American history, churches were the main location of community interaction and acted as the glue that held society together, so naturally people wanted to be able to physically travel to the church in a reasonable amount of time. One extreme case of the desire to live in a home where a church was easily accessible is Christ Church in Virginia, completed in 1735, where Robert Carter, the richest man in North America in the eighteenth century, built the front entrance of the church so that it directly lined up with his plantation and created a road that connected the two buildings (Whittenburg). The presence of the Baptist church at the end of Allnut Road could have had a similar impact on the way the road evolved, but this cannot be truly proven with the documentation currently available.

Camp Benton would have also been an influence on the route of the road. Before the arrival of the troops, the Edwards Ferry community was a quiet town that consisted mainly of agriculture. After the troops arrived, however, “a storehouse, some stores, and other buildings were erected and the landing of men and all sorts of supplies by the canal gave unusual life to the

scene” (Bruce). The troops were stationed at Camp Benton for six months, which is a significant amount of time, and they needed to have access to supplies and provisions while on the farm property. Allnut Road was altered to accommodate the troops and was more heavily trafficked during this period of time because of the increase in people living on the land, the arrival of supplies, increased numbers of horses using the road, and other activities of high impact.

Through my research, I was able to analyze the impact of events and cultural influences on the physical landscape of the area, discover the family history of Allnut Road, and understand the history of Camp Benton on the Williams farmhouse property, which I compiled into a single document for the RRAC. My final project for the organization included photographs of the houses both in the past and present, pictures of maps to provide some context for my research, and any important information I could find. This information will go into the RRAC documents, and hopefully in the future more people will be interested in the topic and continue doing research like this in order to make the history of rustic roads a more prominent part of the community’s celebrated cultural heritage.

Researching rustic roads, especially Allnut Road, has solidified my belief that it is crucial to keep local history alive in our increasingly globalized society, and that rustic roads serve in that mission. Poolesville has a very involved community that supports preservation, which most likely has to do with the fact that we live in an Agricultural Reserve and a small town that encourages preservation of both the environment and history of the area. Allnut Road, although preserved through the Agricultural Reserve, faces the threat of its culture being lost due to new people moving to the area that are not aware of its historical importance. Even though it has such significance and is part of the fabric of the community’s history, there is no indication of the presence of Camp Benton or the older homes at the entrance to the road or on the property,

let alone a proper street sign indicating the road at all. It took serious research and multiple sources to piece together the information I ended up presenting to the RRAC, which indicates the way the community can easily forget about the history of the area due to the somewhat inefficient past documentation. With this project, I hope to have raised awareness about the importance of the area and the overall importance of preserving community history to provide citizens with a sense of place. So many places both in the United States and all over the world are experiencing cultural homogenization, and this takes the special feeling and unique environment away from places that have evolved and developed in their own ways, creating distinct cultures that in the past have defined regions. This is changing due to the ignorance of relocated people that are not native to the specific region, along with unaware existing members of communities, and this is creating a more uniform global society where people do not connect to their cultural roots as easily because they are more difficult to define. People need to have a sense of place to feel truly at home in their communities, and this is becoming more and more difficult in the modern era.

Another important factor to remember about historic preservation is the fact that real people created the history we research today, and projects like mine keep their memories alive centuries after they pass away. Through my research of letters from the Civil War that mentioned Camp Benton, and through my conversations with Clifton Williams, I was able to keep the memories of the men living at Camp Benton alive and tell their story, which should never be forgotten. Another interesting aspect of my project was the fact that I used living sources to obtain information, and this is important because when older generations pass away, so do the family history and folk stories they remembered that have been passed down for



generations. Documenting oral stories, like I did with Clifton Williams, saves history from being completely destroyed and preserves entire eras of history that would otherwise be forgotten.

I will admit that my project did not cover all of the history of Allnut Road due to time restrictions and the sheer quantity of information required to successfully document the history, but overall the research I conducted will help the community in the future. By doing this project, I was able to introduce the idea of historic documentation and preservation to future seniors at Poolesville High School who will hopefully do similar projects in the future. I was also able to piece together a significant amount of family history and information about the region during the Civil War which alone solidifies the importance of Allnut Road as a rustic road in the county, but also confirms the idea that the history of these roads is what makes a community unique in a changing society.

Through my research I was able to document the history of Allnut Road, the history of the Williams family, and contribute to local historical preservation. Rustic roads are crucial aspects of our changing society that provide both old members and new members of the community with a sense of place. Without a sense of place, people can feel disconnected and isolated in the unfamiliar community. Once historic information is intriguing to the public, and once people truly appreciate the amazing opportunity provided in Poolesville to trace the town's heritage, the community will feel a greater connection and sense of place in this community that has grown from forest into farmland into a town that has survived the constantly changing world and what that threatens.

## Citations

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