

Herndon's Sears Houses

By Carol Bruce

The older neighborhoods throughout Herndon boast a wide array of historic homes—everything from 19th century farmhouses, to cozy bungalows, to sturdy American Foursquares, to ornate Queen Anne Victorians. And at least a few of those homes were ordered as kits from the Sears and Roebuck catalog.

You may think of Sears today as the go-to place for power tools and home appliances. But for years, beginning with its establishment back in 1889, the Sears catalog was the source for much of what a person might need from cradle to grave—including everything from baby diapers to coffins, and eventually even cars. Every year from 1908 to 1940—with the exception of 1934, when the Great Depression caused sales to come to a virtual standstill—Sears also published a catalog of kit houses.

The houses were shipped in stages, and the kits contained everything—the blueprints, the pre-cut and numbered pieces of lumber, the kitchen cabinets, the hardware, and even the paint and the nails. In the early years, from 1908 to 1912, Sears even supplied the brick or concrete mix for the foundation.

Sears wasn't the only company that offered kit houses—or even the first—but it was arguably one of the most successful. One of the reasons was convenience. Beginning in 1911, Sears began financing the homes, offering reasonable interest rates and low down payments. The company offered variety, as well. When most people think of Sears houses they think of bungalows, but hundreds of different styles and floor plans were offered throughout the years. There were even several apartment houses, including a four-family unit called the Atlanta.

The kits were shipped by rail, which explains why Herndon boasts a number of Sears houses. The railroad had been running to Herndon for almost 50 years before the first kit was sold, and the Depot—as it is today—was situated right in the middle of town.

In 2001, at the invitation of the Historical Society, Kathryn Holt Springston—an expert on Sears houses from the Smithsonian—visited Herndon. (We should note that Kathryn is the sister of celebrated local artist Pat Macintyre.)

During her visit, she was able to positively identify four Sears houses. (It's generally not possible to tell from the street if every house that looks like a Sears house actually is one, because a contractor often would build one Sears house and then use the plans and other lumber to build what Springston calls “pseudo Sears houses.”) The surest way to tell is to find the numbers Sears stamped on the ends of the wood, and the best place to look for those numbers is on the exposed beams in the attic.

The houses that Springston identified here in Herndon include the Maytown model at 1010 Grant Street, built in 1908, and the Lewiston model at 644 Spring Street, built in 1934. And, she said, she's certain there are many, many more.

Check out the possibilities for yourself; visit the Sears Archives (www.searsarchives.com/homes/index.htm) and take a look at the pictures. Then, as you drive around town, see how many potential Sears house candidates you can spot!