

## **A Little Lump of Coal**

By Carol Bruce

The Historical Society is proud to have several very special items relating to William Lewis Herndon on display in the depot.

There's an interesting story in the connection between the town's namesake and a little lump of coal that is on display in the museum.

The Town of Herndon is named for William Lewis Herndon, a naval hero. He was born in 1813 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Orphaned at an early age, he entered the Navy when he was 15. In 1851, he was assigned to lead the first scientific expedition to explore the Amazon River Valley. Three years later he published his findings in a popular book, *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon*.

In November 1855, having reached the rank of Commander, he was given command of the sidewheel steamship, the *SS Central America* (then named the *George Law*). This appointment was in accordance with a congressional requirement that all steamships carrying U.S. mail be captained by a naval officer.

Herndon's first 18 voyages aboard the *Central America* were uneventful; his nineteenth voyage would end in tragedy. It began on September 3, 1857, when the ship left Panama en route to New York City. It was carrying some 15 tons of gold coins and ingots, 474 passengers, and 101 members of the crew. Six days later the ship encountered a powerful hurricane. After fighting to ride out the storm for several days, finally—on September 12—Herndon realized that the badly leaking ship was doomed. He fired the ship's guns to summon aid. The West Indian brig, *Marine*, arrived to help.

Herndon supervised the loading of the women and children passengers into lifeboats and watched as they were taken to safety aboard the other ship. A few additional survivors were plucked from the water by ships that arrived later. Herndon—along with the remaining passengers and crew—went down with the ship. Of the 575 persons on board, only 152 survived. The sinking of the *SS Central America* was one of the country's greatest maritime disasters, and Herndon became a national hero as a result of his actions.

Not long after the tragedy a meeting was called at the depot for the purpose of finding a name for the area's new post office. Although unconfirmed, legend holds that a stranger stood up at that meeting and suggested the name Herndon. That stranger, the story goes, was a *Central America* survivor.

The Historical Society is proud to have several very special items relating to William Lewis Herndon on display in the depot. They include a first edition of Herndon's

book and an exact scale-model replica of the *SS Central America*. There also is a life size model of the Commander himself.

Which leads us to that little lump of coal...

In 1985, a young engineer from Ohio named Tommy Thompson organized what would be known as the Columbus-America Discovery Group. His goal was to locate, explore, and recover the remains of the *SS Central America*. Members of the group conducted an extensive amount of research in preparation for the effort—research that included visiting Herndon to study and photograph the Historical Society's model of the ship. Thompson was successful. In 1988, his group located the wreckage and its treasure trove of gold, estimated at the time to be worth as much as \$200 million.

The Town of Herndon was well represented when the Columbus-America's *Arctic Discoverer* arrived in Norfolk in 1989 after salvaging the gold and other items from the wreckage. Herndon's Mayor, Rick Thoesen, was on the dock to welcome the members of the crew and the 140 members of the Herndon High School Marching Band played as the ship sailed into port. As a token of gratitude for its help, the Columbus-America Discovery Group presented the Historical Society with a lump of coal recovered from the wreckage of the ship.