

## **How the Railroad Came to Herndon**

By Chuck Mauro

No doubt a number of Herndon residents can remember that day in 1968 when the last Washington and Old Dominion train pulled out of Herndon. How many, however, know the story of how the railroad came to Herndon to begin with?

In the 1840s, because of its port and the turnpikes that linked the city to Virginia's farmlands, Alexandria was an important center of commerce. Its dominance was threatened, however, by competition from the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad, which pushed west from the port at Baltimore to the fertile valleys of the Ohio River Valley.

On March 15, 1853, a new railroad—the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire (AL&H) Railroad—was chartered to compete with the B&O. It would run west from Alexandria past Leesburg, through Clarke's Gap in Loudoun County, and continue into Hampshire County, Virginia (today's Mineral County, West Virginia). Construction began in 1855 and the grading reached Leesburg three years later, in 1858.

Since the village that would become known as Herndon had not yet received its name, the AL&H railroad referred to the farmland through which the railroad would run as "the valley of the Sugar Land run about three miles to the south of Dranesville."

The railroad paid a total of \$2,006 for the rights of way from five landowners whose property was located in what would eventually become Herndon's incorporated limits. The payment also included reimbursement for the loss of "good and substantial" fencing that served the landowners but would impede the movement of the trains.

Traveling west from land owned by Benjamin Thornton in what is now Reston, the railroad first ran through land belonging to Jane Farr, who was paid \$556 for 10.42 acres. The next piece of property belonged to Thomas Cox, who was paid \$150 for 2.31 acres. James Miller received \$400 for 4.80 acres. The fourth plot of land belonged to Henry Kipp, who was paid \$450 for 4.68 acres. The fifth and final portion of land before entering Loudoun County belonged to Joseph Orrison, who received \$450 in compensation for his 7.59 acres. Three commissioners who were appointed by the Fairfax County Circuit Court in 1854 determined the amount each landowner received. There was no dispute from any of the landowners, and the land was conveyed to the railroad in 1855.

The reason for locating a train depot in Herndon was not specifically stated. Sixteen station houses were built along the 54.4 miles of the line, at an average of 3.4 miles apart. The railroad's philosophy was that, "Turnouts and station houses will be provided in due time at every point where trade or travel will require them. As our road crosses several important thoroughfares, these will be more numerous than would otherwise appear expedient." Each mile was given a section number indicating the number of miles from Alexandria. What would become Herndon was designated as Section 23.

The 20 x 55 feet train depot at Section 23 was built in 1857. In 1858, when a name was needed for the post office to be located in the depot, the name Herndon was suggested. William Lewis Herndon was a naval hero and sea captain who recently had gone down with his ship in a storm off the coast of Cape Hatteras. He was hailed as a hero in the news of the day because, although most of the crew and the male passengers also were lost with the ship, Herndon had ensured that the women and children on board would be safe. Local legend holds that the name Herndon was suggested by a stranger—a survivor of the shipwreck—who happened to be at the meeting where the name for the post office was being discussed.

The AL&H railroad officials recognized the impact the line would have throughout the sparse countryside:

The importance of this portion of our road to the people of Fairfax and Loudoun cannot be overestimated. The value of their lands has already been enhanced by it, and will continue to advance as the benefits of the road shall be developed and felt. Considering the healthfulness and beauty of the country, and the excellent markets which we will open to it, the prices of land are still low enough to invite settlement; and there can be no doubt that its population and trade will rapidly increase when it shall be brought within the distance of an hour or two of Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington.

This proved to be the case, as the new depot provided a convenient way for the local dairy farmers to ship their milk to Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington—just as predicted—and the businesses that grew up around the depot to service the farmers stimulated broader development of the area that would eventually become the Town of Herndon.