

The Carroll House of Runnymede Park

By Barbara Glakas

The Carroll House, located in Runnymede Park, has an interesting history that includes, possibly a murder mystery. To learn more about the park, join the Friends of Runnymede Park for their annual meeting next Sunday, March 11, from 7-9 pm at ArtSpace Herndon. The meeting, which is free and open to the public, will begin with a wine and cheese reception and a slide show of photos taken in Runnymede Park by Herndon High photography students.

Runnymede Park, the Town's 58-acre natural park, contains heavily wooded areas and a large meadow. It boasts over 450 native plant species, diverse wildlife habitats, the Sugarland Run stream, and Native American artifacts that date back several thousand years.

If you have ever travelled along the eastern portion of Herndon Parkway, you probably have noticed the entrance into the park. There is a small parking lot, a picnic shelter, and a two-story brick home—known as the Atkins House—that is named after the family who built it in 1956. That house, which also is owned by the Town, is currently occupied by tenants (the Alger family) who keep a watchful eye over the property.

But if you have never walked deeper into the park you may not have yet discovered another little jewel, an old stone cabin built in 1909, and referred to as the Carroll House.

Since the 1800s, the land that encompasses Runnymede Park has been owned by a variety of well-known Herndon residents and property owners, from Richard Coleman (son of Colonel John Coleman, a Revolutionary War veteran who built the first house in Herndon); Charles Ratcliffe (a relative of Civil War spy Laura Ratcliffe, whose house still remains on Centreville Road); William Barker (after whom the Barker Hill area was named); and his daughter, Catherine Poole.

According to the Friends of Runnymede Park website (www.frpweb.org), J.H. Bicksler purchased 130 acres of what is now Runnymede Park from Catherine Poole in 1905. The Bickslers sold 50 acres of their land to Harry E. Van Duessen of Washington. This land included the area where the Carroll House now stands, but in 1907 there were no records of any buildings on this lot. The Van Duessens sold 30 acres of their lot to J. Albert Hawkins for \$300.

There were no personal property tax records for Mr. Hawkins in 1909, but the 1910 tax records show that Mr. Hawkins paid property tax on 20 acres of land and 1 cow @ \$25, 1 watch @ \$25, 1 musical instrument @ \$5, 1 firearm @ \$1, household/kitchen furniture @ \$100, all other @ \$15, and a building valued at \$600. This is the first mention of a building within the park's current boundaries. Later that year the land was purchased by W.F. Middleton. That deed noted that the land had been "improved by a stone dwelling."

The Friends of Runnymede Park website notes that, “It is possible that Hawkins built this cabin to enjoy on a part time basis. It was not uncommon at the turn of the 19th century for people to ‘escape’ the city by traveling to a weekend home along one of the westerly railroads such as the W&OD station, which opened in 1859.”

By 1956, Franklin L. Carroll and his family, including his son, Franklin Jr., were living in the stone cabin that had (most likely) been built in 1910 by J.A. Hawkins. That year, Mr. Carroll borrowed \$4,000 to build a cinder block addition, on the southern side of the cabin, to create more room for his family. A small brick section also was added to the northeast side while the Carroll family was there, although the exact year it was built is not known. This addition was used as a laundry room.

According to long-time Herndon residents John DeNoyer and Ann Csonka, Frank Carroll’s son, Frank Jr., lived in the house full time. Although Frank Jr. tended to be quiet and somewhat reclusive, he took people on discovery walks around the property. When people trespassed on his property without permission, however, he was known to run them off with his gun in hand.

According to oral history, Frank Jr. was told by his father that Mrs. Sarah Martz, who owned part of this lot in 1912, lived alone in the cabin after her husband died. When people did not see her for a week or so they went looking for her. They found her drowned in the nearby cistern. It was unclear if she fell in and drowned by accident or if she was murdered, as some thought.

Frank Carroll Jr. sold his property in 1986 to the Rehabilitation and Development Corporation, with the provision that he be allowed to continue living in the house until they built him a new home. The Corporation had intended to build a multi-home development on this property.

In 1987, a bond referendum was approved for the Town that provided funding to create the aquatic facility at the Community Center and to purchase land for a park, “to help preserve open space...and meet future recreational needs.” In 1988, the Town purchased the land where both the Carroll and Atkins houses sit. That land, along with 3.2 acres of floodplain that the Town already owned, was referred to as the Northeast Herndon Park. Later that year it was renamed Runnymede Park, in honor of Herndon’s Sister City, Runnymede, England. Frank Jr., under an agreement with the Town, continued to live in the house for several years before moving to Colorado.

In 1995, C. Richard Bierce completed a historical assessment of the Carroll House for the Town. In his report he hypothesized that the original stone portion of the house may have been constructed as a “summer house away from the city” because it is “atypical in its basic configuration, plan and scale” for year-round use. He felt the house was “cottage style and form...consistent with some of the more romantic ideals of the Arts & Crafts movement.” Mr. Bierce photographed and documented the floor plan of the house as well as a wooden shed that appeared to have been built at about the same time as the cabin. The shed, which had once been used as a carriage house, was removed a short time after Mr. Bierce’s report was completed.

DeNoyer and Csonka recall that the house was made with stone found in the park. It had a fireplace, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. The living room was later divided to make a second bedroom. There was a cellar, which measured about six by eight feet, with a boiler for steam heating the house. There were oak floors and a low-hanging ceiling that was finished in oak. The interior walls were plaster, measuring about 18 inches thick. There also were artistic details such as colored glass panes in the door windows and a heraldic shield design above the doors and windows.

The next time you visit Runnymede, park your car or bike by the Atkins House and walk northward on the gravel trail that will eventually open up into a picturesque grassy area surrounding the Carroll House. Seeing it is like peeking back into time.