

Taxes, Tramps, and Houses of Ill-Repute

By Carol Bruce

This is the third in an occasional series of columns that looks at some of the interesting—and sometimes amusing—insights into Herndon’s past that can be found in the old Town Council minute books.

It was the American scientist, inventor, statesman, printer, and philosopher Benjamin Franklin who said, “...in this world nothing is certain but death and taxes.” We all pay them. Many of us complain about them. Some politicians today argue against them. Taxes have always been a certainty in the Town of Herndon, although by today’s standards they were slightly less than negligible in years past.

For example:

- On October 25, 1879, the Town Council voted that “persons having less than \$100 valuation in real estate or personal property should pay a tax of 10 cents.”
- On August 23, 1881, the Town began taxing 5 mills on the dollar; 3/5 of this amount would go to schools, and 2/5 was used to defray the “necessary expenses of the town.” This rate remained the same for at least a few years, as it was reaffirmed at the meeting of September 6, 1884.
- Twenty-seven years later, taxes had more than doubled, from 5 mills on the dollar to 11.5 mills. On August 31, 1911, the Finance Committee’s resolution for revenue was passed: “2 mills for roads; 2 mills for Corporation; 5 mills for school; 2 ½ mills for school construction.” There also was a dog tax: \$1.00 for male dogs, \$2.00 for female dogs.

Note: Millage is based on a Latin word that means thousandth. So, one mill is equivalent to 1/1000th. Applied to taxes, that means one mill is equivalent to \$1 per \$1,000 in taxable value.

And lest one consider not paying one’s property taxes: On June 13, 1924, the Town Council passed a motion to post a list showing all delinquent taxes at the post office and carry a notice that after 30 days the property would be sold for taxes due.

The list of items to be taxed was growing as well:

- On July 11, 1924, “Mr. Sims, from the Chamber of Commerce, appeared before the Council and stated that he had been requested by the Chamber to suggest to the Council the advisability of levying a tax on automobiles to raise funds for the town roads. After discussion, the Council passed a resolution that a special tax be assessed on all automobiles, trucks and motorcycles—the rate of charge as follows: Motorcycles—\$1.50 per year; passengers automobiles—\$3.00 per year; trucks one ton or less—\$5.00 per year; trucks two to three tons—\$10.00; and \$15.00 on all trucks over three tons.” The ordinance was later revised to have a January 1, 1925 effective date.
- On May 14, 1928, the Town Council passed a corporation license tax on movies, bowling alleys, and poolrooms of \$1.50 each per year, paid in advance July 1. Tax

from this source each year “to be applied to equip and maintain the Herndon Fire Department.”

- On August 30, 1933, the Town Council passed an ordinance that levied a \$5.00 license for the sale of beer in Herndon.

Tramps, Beggars, and the Town Jail

There’s been a lot of conversation in Herndon in recent years about people loitering on the sidewalks as they look for work. The following action—taken 102 years ago this week—brings to mind that old saying, “The more things change the more they stay the same.”

Ordinance No. 34, passed on August 22, 1910, focused specifically on tramps: “Any person found loitering or loafing about the corporation without any visible means of support, or found sleeping in outhouses, or on public or private porticoes without permission shall, for said offense, upon conviction pay a fine of not less than one dollar nor more than five dollars, or be imprisoned not more than ten days in corporation jail.”

Another ordinance, passed that same day, said that any person found begging on the streets could be fined \$1.

Speaking of the jail, on December 10, 1915, the Town Sergeant reported that, “the jail is in very bad condition and not at all fit to incarcerate any prisoner.” (We’re unsure if anything was ever done to correct this situation.)

And, last but not least...

Ordinance No. 8, adopted on August 22, 1910, addressed houses of ill-fame: “Any person keeping a house of ill-fame, shall upon conviction, be fined not less than Twenty Dollars, nor more than Fifty Dollars, and the inmates of said house or other persons therein shall be liable to a fine of not less than Five Dollars nor more than Twenty Dollars.”

Once again, thank you to Town Clerk Viki Wellershaus and her staff for their assistance in compiling the information we’ve used in these columns. And—speaking of the professional and hard working staff in the Clerk’s office—here’s something that has most certainly *not* stayed the same: On November 11, 1910, the Mayor was instructed “to urge the Clerk of the necessity for more regular attendance and to insist that the minutes be kept up to date.”