

The Herndon Veterans Memorial

By Barbara Glakas

The Veterans Memorial on the Town Green provides a link to Herndon's namesake—and to the U.S. Naval Academy.

If you have ever wandered around the Town Green behind the Herndon Municipal building you have probably noticed the tall grey obelisk, Herndon's Veterans Memorial. It is a half-size replica of the famous Herndon Monument located on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

The Annapolis monument was dedicated in memory of Commander William Lewis Herndon, the Town of Herndon's namesake. Herndon was known for courageously going down with the ship he commanded, the *S.S. Central America*, during a three-day hurricane off of Cape Hatteras. He ensured the rescue of all 152 women and children on board, as well as many of the men, before the ship sank on September 12, 1857. It was considered the largest loss of life in a commercial ship disaster in U.S. history.

Erected on June 16, 1860, the Herndon Monument is now the center of much reverence and tradition. A metal plate on the monument reads:

Commander William Lewis Herndon 1818-1857

Naval Officer – Explorer – Merchant Captain

In command of the Central America, home-bound with California gold seekers, Captain Herndon lost his life in a gallant effort to save ship and lives during a cyclone off Hatteras, September 12, 1857.

“Forgetful of self, in his death he added a new glory to the annals of the sea” – Maury

One notable tradition that surrounds this monument is the plebe recognition ceremony, also known as the plebes-no-more ceremony. At the end of their first year at the Academy, plebes work together to climb to the top of the monument to replace the white plebe dixie cup hat with an upperclassman's hat. The date of the first climb was never documented, but the upperclassmen soon began smearing lard on the monument to make the climb more difficult. The Academy began recording the time it took to climb the monument in 1962. The fastest recorded time was 1 minute and 30 seconds, in 1969. The slowest recorded time was 4 hours, 5 minutes, and 17 seconds, in 1995. (It took so long because the upperclassmen had glued and taped the dixie cup hat to the monument.)

During the 1990s, in the Town of Herndon, the Wayne M. Kidwell American Legion Post #184 began raising funds to erect a memorial in honor of all Herndon war veterans. The memorial would be a 10-foot granite replica of the one at the Naval Academy.

After years of raising money, with donations from many local individuals and organizations, Herndon's Veterans Memorial was dedicated on May 27, 2002. It is located on the Town Green between the Municipal Building and the Fortnightly Library. A circular border of shrubbery and flowers surrounds the obelisk, and three brass plaques commemorate the veterans and the major sponsors. One of the plaques reads:

This memorial is dedicated in honor of the valiant men and women of the Town of Herndon, Commonwealth of Virginia, who rendered unyielding service to the cause of liberty in declared and undeclared wars to keep America a free and great nation.

The Town's Veterans Day Ceremony takes place at the Veterans Memorial each year.