

Windows of Herndon's Past

By Barbara Glakas

What's the story behind the old stained glass windows that two Grace Street residents recently found in their garage? We may never know for sure, but the mystery is an intriguing one.

While I was acting as a docent in the Herndon Depot Museum one recent Sunday afternoon, two Town residents—Phil Jones and Aubrey Stokes—walked in and inquired about the significance of the stained glass windows in the transom above the depot doors. They were plastic, I explained. The originals were colored glass, but I did not know when the change occurred.

Jones and Stokes, who live in an old brick home on Grace Street, told me they had been working on their garage recently, cleaning off old shelves and removing some wooden boards from the rear wall. They were surprised to find some stained glass windows underneath the wood, windows that looked a lot like the ones in the depot.

I flipped through the historic photograph collection in the museum, looking for old pictures of the depot. I saw a photo, dated circa 1905, which showed two rectangular windows and a door with a transom on the east side of the building facing the old town green. Sure enough, colored glass was in all three of those windows, the same colored glass design that appears in Jones' and Stokes' garage—a clear pane in the center with multi-colored squares around the perimeter. In later pictures of the depot, the colored glass windows on the east side were no longer there.

Could it be that Jones and Stokes actually have some of the original depot windows in their garage?

The wooden frame depot was built in 1857, and it has undergone many changes since then including an additional waiting room that was built on the east end in about 1890. I found an 1890 picture of the depot, but it is not clear if the picture was taken before or after the addition. It showed the east side of the depot with two windows and one door, all with colored glass. In two other pictures, dated pre-1912, the building appears longer; the east side has only two windows but no door, and the colored glass no longer appears in the windows. Three of the windows on the north side of the building (facing the trail), however, did feature three colored glass transom windows.

After passenger service was discontinued in 1951, the trains that came through Herndon carried the supplies needed to build Dulles Airport. The last train ran in 1968. The Virginia Electric Power Company (VEPCO), which is now Dominion Virginia Power, acquired the depot and the land that is now the W&OD trail, and for several years during the late '60s and early '70s the building was empty and boarded up. Richard Downer, a founding member of the Herndon Historical Society, remembers that railroad memorabilia hunters took the colored glass windows

and a number of other depot relics during the time when the depot was vacant. The Town of Herndon acquired the building from VEPCO in 1979.

Was it when the depot was empty that the colored windows somehow got to the garage on Grace Street?

Some people in Herndon saw no value in the abandoned building and wanted it demolished to make way for a parking lot. In response, in 1971, Downer and others formed the Herndon Depot Society (later the Herndon Historical Society), with the purpose of trying to save the structure. Pictures from a 1970s *Herndon Tribune* newspaper showed residents helping with restoration efforts and volunteers scraping the east side of the depot in preparation for painting. In those pictures, the east side of the depot had only one window and one door, with no colored glass.

Minutes from the fall 1973 meeting of the Society describe discussions about depot renovations. An 18-foot section of the west end of the depot was to be cut off to accommodate the extension of Station Street, and an exit was suggested for the south side of the building in order to meet code. A \$3,007 contract was awarded for a variety of work to the building, which included restoring two windows to the east end, eliminating a door on the east end, re-installing one original window on the east end, making three windows to match the others, and using “stock” windows on the west end to reduce the price. After the renovations, the Town—needing office space—moved the Department of Public Works into the building. Public Works was eventually relocated and, in 1981, the Historical Society opened the doors to the museum.

Could it be that the colored windows ended up on Grace Street after the renovations in the 1970s?

Fairfax County records show that the brick house on Grace Street where Jones and Stokes now live was built in 1948. Its stand-alone garage was built later, sometime in the mid-1950s. The original owner of the house was a man named Jimmy White. Jimmy’s brother-in-law, Haley Smith, was a person whose name will be familiar to many long-time Herndon residents. Smith, who was a former Town Council member and an active supporter of youth sports (Haley Smith Park is named for him), happened to live next door to Jimmy White on Grace Street. Smith was described by many as “quite the character,” and also as a “scavenger” and “recycler” of sorts.

Could it be that Haley Smith got hold of some of the original colored glass windows from the depot and “recycled” them by allowing Jimmy to put them in his garage?

The garage has some more history to it as well. Gene Suarez and Bill King were the owners of S&K Industries, a wholesale tortilla-making business that later became a retail business when they added sauces and lunches to go. They operated a carryout business from the rear of what is now the Zeffirelli’s restaurant building. The business became so popular that they split the two

operations, with Bill King and Ronnie Fox joining forces to open The Tortilla Factory Restaurant, which remained at its original location in the Pines Shopping Center until closing its doors last winter. Fox continued to operate the restaurant with a new partner, Chuck Curcio, until his retirement several years ago. Suarez moved the S&K Industries wholesale tortilla plant to a former C&P Telephone Company building on Grace Street, where the Herndon Senior Center now sits. It was just yards away from Jimmy White's brick house. At some point Fox bought the Grace Street house from White and used the garage for storage. Later, tenants who were renting the house ran an illegal catering business out of the garage for a time. Stokes noted that it took months to get rid of the smell of chilies.

Could it be that the colored glass windows appeared in the garage during the time that the catering business was in operation? As I later found out, probably not.

According to his widow, Jimmy White returned to Herndon in 1945, after he was discharged from the Army. He bought the then-vacant land on Grace Street so he could build his dream house. The only thing that stood on the property was an old wooden shack. A few years after building the house, Jimmy tore down the shack and built a cinderblock garage. It was then that he found the colored glass windows, but he had no knowledge of where they came from. He never chose to use the windows and simply put them in the garage. So, it appears that the windows were already on the Grace Street property by the 1940s.

When were they put there? Did they get there after the late 1800s renovation of the depot?

Of course, the possibility remains that the windows in the garage did not come from the depot at all. The window design was in vogue and was once common around Town, so they may have come from some other Victorian-style house in Herndon.

Driving around Town, I discovered that the same style of colored glass that was in the depot windows also is found in the windows of a historic home at 763 Monroe Street and another such home at 825 Elden Street; both were built circa 1900. Additionally, the old stone Carroll House on the north end of Runnymede Park, built circa 1909-10, also once had the same design of colored glass in some of its doors and windows.

Looking at a website about the W&OD railroad system, I saw several old pictures of other depots along the railroad line that also had colored windows just like the ones in Herndon. These include the depots at Leesburg, West Falls Church, and East Falls Church.

We may never know how the windows in the Grace Street garage got there. In the meanwhile, Jones and Stokes will be taking care of their newly found windows and relishing the knowledge that they represent a piece of Herndon's past.

