

Herndon's 1936 Mill Fire

A Destructive Mill Fire Endangers Elden Street

By Barbara Glakas

Many have heard about the 1917 "Big Fire," which wiped out a significant portion of Herndon's downtown business district along Station and Pine Streets. However, there was another large fire that occurred in Herndon in March of 1936 which also caused significant losses and threatened the whole downtown area.

It started in the old feed mill owned by the Herndon Milling Company, formerly located in what is now the municipal parking lot and Ice House Café area, near the northwest corner of Elden and Station Streets. The mill caught fire as a result of an explosion inside the mill. A mill engineer named Claude Jenkins lit a gas torch which exploded and caused other mill materials to quickly catch on fire.

The furnace in the mill then exploded sending hot embers high into the air, carried by a southwesterly wind, endangering several nearby buildings. It was reported that leaping flames and billowing smoke could be seen for miles around. When the fire threatened several high tension wires, PEPCO officials ordered the power cut off.

Not only did the large mill burn down, but so did two small frame houses and a barn. It also badly scorched the back of a building that housed a barber shop. The fire also threatened Herndon's fire station building on Station Street that had just been built a few years prior. No doubt its new brick construction helped protect it from the threatening fire. The roof, however, did sustain some damage.

The fire endangered the nearby Horn Motor Company, owned by Robert Horn, then located on the north side of Elden Street, near Center Street. There was an above ground gasoline storage tank on wooden supports next to the Horn building. The loading platform had already caught fire. As later explained by Robert Horn's son, Norman,

“My father went up there with buckets of water and watered it down so it wouldn't blow up.”

Newspaper articles further explained how Horn had put out a small fire that had developed on the wooden platform near the gas tank, saving the town from another potentially large explosion. Norman continued,

“It was a raging fire. I remember it as a child. My uncle lived right on the corner of Center and Elden on the South side and we were on the porch there watching the fire and could feel the heat from there, a ways away.”

Local historian, Chuck Mauro, once interviewed Emma Ellmore, a former teacher at Herndon High School on Locust Street. Mauro recalled that Ellmore had told him,

“...on the day of the fire, the principal had let school out early and she said the kids had got out and were able to see the fire. And then the principal got in trouble because they said, ‘Why did you let the kids out when this fire was going?’ I guess [the principal] got criticized for letting the kids out while this fire was going. She told me for some reason he had already let the kids out that day for something, it was just coincidence.”

The school had closed early for a teacher’s meeting which happened at about the same time that the fire broke out.

Luckily, by that point in time, Herndon had its own Volunteer Fire Department. Two fire engines arrived within minutes but flames were already shooting out of the top of the building.

The *Herndon Observer* newspaper reported, that the torch explosion,

“... ignited the surrounding material so rapidly that he [Mr. Jenkins] and Mr. Trenary barely had time to get out of the building. Although the two engines were on the job in scarcely five minutes, flames were already shooting out of the top when water began to play on the blaze. A general alarm had been sounded and the following fire companies responded: Vienna, McLean, Fairfax and two companies from Alexandria. [Herndon Fire] Chief Walter Farr stationed his two pumpers on Elden Street and the other companies fell to as rapidly as they reported.”

Realizing that the mill was doomed, the firemen concentrated their efforts on preventing further spread of the fire. Fireman quickly built a dam across a small nearby stream which ran through downtown Herndon, which allowed them to pump water into the fire area. Water was trained on nearby buildings, such as the Herndon Theatre, the Eastern Star Hall, the Herndon Barber Shop and the Horn Motor Company.

The Town of Herndon had previously experienced significant fires, including the 1917 Big Fire, which wiped out half of the Town’s business district along Station and Pine Streets. There was also a 1927 fire which destroyed Herndon High School on Locust Street. Chief Farr remembered both of these fires. Ironically, the large old three-story mill building, which carried no insurance, had been condemned by state officials just months before the 1936 fire.

The estimated loss for the 1936 mill fire was between \$50,000 and \$75,000. Various newspaper articles reported that anywhere from seventeen to nineteen firefighters were injured, either from burns or smoke.

Chief Farr's frustration with the matter was obvious, given he had made numerous requests of the Herndon Town Council to have the mill removed after it had been condemned months earlier. He hoped that the mill fire would provide sufficient evidence that Herndon needed to eliminate its fire hazards. In a newspaper interview, Chief Farr said:

"I've made several attempts to have these fire hazards corrected by Council. As for the mill, I appeared before the Council several times and pointed out the grave danger existing therein. Of course it's too late now to remedy this particular situation. It is not too late, however, to eliminate other dangerous hazards here, and I intended to use this costly fire as an example to persuade Council to take immediate action to eliminate fire hazards in Herndon."

About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.