

## **The First Baptist Church of Herndon**

By Barbara Glakas

At the end of the 1800s, the town of Herndon already had a Methodist church, an Episcopal church, and a Congregational church. Next came the First Baptist Church of Herndon in 1899.

Details on the church's beginnings are sparse, due to a fire which destroyed early church records. One source said that the early records of the church's organizational years and pastors were "destroyed by a fire in the home of one of the members who was clerk of the church at the time." Regardless, here is what is known.

According to the church website, the First Baptist Church congregation was established in Herndon in 1899. Long-time congregant, Linda A. Soller, who wrote a 2011 paper entitled, "A Condensed History of the First Baptist Church of Herndon," said, "The first meeting place was in a store located where Zeffirelli's restaurant now stands." That restaurant is at the northeast corner of Pine and Station Streets. However, in 1899 another building sat on that corner that housed the William I. Robey & Son drug store.

Despite the burned records, a partial list of some of the people who became the nucleus of the church were known to be Nelson Potter, Mr and Mrs. Curtis E. Gresham, Mr. and Mrs. John W. Kephart, Thomas J. Maffett, Charles Kendrik and Mrs. J. W. Wildman. Some of these same names also appeared on the church's land deed as church trustees as well.

The stone church was built in 1900 at the southeast corner of Elden and Monroe Streets. A 1949 book compiled by Herndon American Legion Post 91 entitled, *Service Record of the Men and Woman of Herndon, VA, WWI and WWII*, said,

"The Herndon Baptist Church was built and dedicated in 1900. The church was organized two or three years prior to this date and services were held in one of the store buildings in town until the church was completed."

Joseph J. Darlington was a wealthy and prominent attorney from Washington, D.C., who had a large summer estate in Herndon in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was a member of the Fifth Baptist Church in Washington. Darlington bought a summer home and many acres of land in Herndon in 1893. The home was formerly located near the present-day location of the Walgreens store at Elden and Van Buren Streets. Soller said,

"When [Darlington] heard of the intentions to build a church, he donated the land and offered to supplement the money contributed so they could build a church that would stand through the years."

Former Herndon resident, Lottie Dyer Schneider (1879-1967), also wrote in her memoir, *Memories of Herndon*, that, "Mr. Darlington gave the land for the new stone church and contributed substantially to the erection of this fine edifice."

According to Donald LeVine's land records, *Herndon, The Land: 1649-1900*, Darlington donated a parcel of land to the new Baptist congregation in 1902. LeVine said,

"Darlington very rarely sold land; in one of these rare instances, he sold approximately 2.6 acres to Thomas J. Moffet, J. Wesley Kephart and Curtis E. Gresham, trustees of the Herndon Baptist Church, on 26 September 1902 for \$1. The land was sold to 'permit the said, Herndon Baptist Church to occupy the said land and premises for the purpose of religious worship in accordance with the tenets, faith and doctrine of the religious denominations or body known as Baptist . . .'"

The church's new lot abutted the west side of Darlington's land. An inconsistent aspect of this story is that the church says the building was built in 1900, while the land deed says that the land was not donated to the church until 1902. However, it is likely that the deed was not registered until two years after the informal gift of the land, a technicality we may never know the details of, given the burning of the early church records. Nevertheless, one significant thing that confirms the construction date of the church is the cornerstone that is located high up on the northwest wall of the building, above the large original stained-glass window. The cornerstone says, "1900."

The church is included in the Town of Herndon's Historic District which is on the National Registry of Historic Places. At the time the registry application was written in the early 1990s, the church was described as:

"681 Elden Street: Church; 1900; stone; I-story; 3 bay; asymmetrical; decorative stained glass windows; stone buttresses; pointed-arched windows and transoms; vernacular Gothic Revival."

Steam heat was approved for the church in 1914. And according to an older congregant, the original church had outdoor toilets, as late as the 1930s.

The stone that used to build the church was from a quarry located on Darlington's land. The quarry has been described as located "near Sugarland Run," and "down Elden Street."

According to Rita Shug, who wrote a manuscript in 1973 entitled *The Town of Herndon*, "The church was built with stone quarried on his property near the eastern town line between the railroad right of way and Washington Street." (East Elden Street used to be called Washington Street). Shug's reference was from an interview she conducted with Reverend Leland Wyatt in 1973. Wyatt was a long-time pastor at the church.

Darlington and his family spent summers in Herndon. The church had two-week meetings every summer, which Darlington allowed to be conducted on his estate land in an area commonly referred to as Darlington's Grove. In 1963, Frances Darlington Simpson (1914-1998), granddaughter of Joseph J. Darlington, wrote a book entitled *Virginia Country Life and Cooking*. She wrote of her summers at her grandfather's estate in Herndon. She said:

“Besides the ‘home’ place there were several tenant farms, a stone quarry and several acres of woods where picnics were held and where one could swim in Sugar Land Run. My grandfather gave a piece of land adjoining the home place to the Baptists of Herndon who, at the time, had no church, and a beautiful little church was built out of the lovely grey stone from his quarry. Once he made the remark that he wouldn’t mind a bit if the original house burned down, as he would like to rebuild it with this same grey stone.”

Some old vestiges of the church remain today. According to the church website, the church bell was a gift of a Darlington family friend. Soller’s paper indicated that the donor was “A Catholic friend of the Darlington’s, Mrs. Louise Beauchamp Hughes,” a wealthy widow who had a home in Washington. An old oak lectern remains in the church today. The plaque on the front of the lecture says, “A gift made by William Harmon Kephart, cabinet maker, and charter member of the First Baptist Church, 1920.” William Harmon Kephart was a Herndon resident and a brother of one of the original church trustees, John Wesley Kephart. The *Service Record* book also says that William Kephart did the wood work, making the door and window frames, and his brother, J. Wesley Kephart, donated the lumber used in the new church. The original church pews continued to be used in the church until it was renovated in the 1980s.

A list of pastors provided by the church indicated that first pastor who served at the church was George W. Popkins (1855-1931). The *Service Record* book also said,

“The Reverend George W. Popkins, who was pastor of the Baptist Churches at Mt. Hope, Farmwell and Sterling, did much of the organizing of the church and was greatly responsible for its early growth.”

The second pastor on the list was John E. Bailey. A short article found in a September 11, 1903, *Fairfax Herald* newspaper, reported:

“Rev. J.E. Bailey, of South Carolina, who has been pastor of the Baptist church at Herndon, has tendered his resignation and it has been accepted by the charge. Rev. Mr. Bailey resigned to further pursue his theological studies at the Baptist Seminary. His action comes as a surprise to many of Mr. Bailey’s friends.”

Older congregants say the church was mostly served by interim and visiting pastors in its early years. This is confirmed by the church’s list of pastors which shows that many of them served for one to three years. The 1949 *Serve Record* book acknowledged that an accurate record of all the pastors and their service years were not available due to the fire, but they listed the ones they knew about up to that point:

“...a reasonabl[y] accurate list of the pastors since its organization is as follows: Reverend Goerge W. Popkins, Reverend J.E. Bailey, Reverend Williams, Reverend Phillips, Reverend George Waite, Reverend B.W.N. Sims, Reverend F. J. Lukens, Reverend H.M. Fallow, Reverend John R. Fizer, Reverend F.M. Clay, Reverend C. N. Brown, Reverend Owen P. Lloyd, Reverend Emmett Snelling, Reverend D. E. Willis, and the present [c. 1949] pastor, Chaplain Harris Howe.”

This list closely matches the church list, with one discrepancy – “Reverend Williams” was likely J. W. Wildman.

Frances Darlington Simpson wrote about Reverend Brown, saying,

“Mr. Brown was a Baptist minister. He was a former Navy chaplain, young, big and robust, genial, wholesome and had a delightful sense of humor. He dined with us frequently and was adored by young and old alike. Mr. Brown had his own ideas but he respected the ideas of others, undoubtedly one of the many reasons for his great popularity. He often gave parties for us children at the parsonage and from the large number of always present, it was obvious that Mr. Brown’s popularity extended far beyond how own congregation.”

Soller said the Sunday School was organized in 1899 with an enrollment of 67 students. It was also noted that in 1915, Russell A. Lynn served as the Sunday School Superintendent and served in that position for 32 years. Lynn was the Town of Herndon’s Mayor from 1937 to 1945.

The longest serving and a much-loved pastor was Reverend Leland Wayne Wyatt, who served from 1951 to 1988. Upon his departure the church formed a search committee to find a replacement. The committee worked for two years to find his replacement, Dr. Raymond Spears.

Over the years the church has had three parsonage buildings. The original parsonage building is still standing today at 730 Jackson Street, near the intersection of Adams Street, about 250 yards from the church. This building is no longer the parsonage. Over the years it became known as Harding Hall and is currently a Montessori school.

The land on which the original parsonage was built was part of John H. Barker Sr.’s subdivision. Barker died in 1893 and the land went to his heirs. In 1901, Charles F. Cummins bought a few lots of Barker’s land. In 1902, Cummins and his wife, Edith, sold one of their lots for \$1 to the Baptist church trustees: Thomas J. M[a]ffet, Wesley Kephart and Curtis E. Gresham. The description of the lot matches where the parsonage was later built. It is unknown if the Cummins were charter members of the Baptist church or simply made a generous donation.

In 1903, Henry Simms and his wife, Anna, sold an additional 5,115 square feet of one of their lots to the same church trustees. This small piece of the Simms’ land abutted the south end of the Cummins land, where the parsonage would later be built. Simms was one of the town of Herndon’s earliest blacksmiths.

Online county tax records – which can sometimes be inaccurate - say the parsonage building dates to 1920. However, Soller’s document says the parsonage was occupied in 1904. Soller’s information is a much more likely scenario, given the Cummins and Simms sold their land to the church trustees in 1902 and 1903, respectively.

Soller explains that the second parsonage building was purchased in 1941 on Wood Street and the third and final parsonage was built in 1956 on Van Buren Street by Graham James, a former

Herndon Mayor. That house was sold to pastor Wyatt's family, who occupied it until he retired in the 1980s. The church no longer owns a parsonage.

The church building went through many physical changes over the years. In 1951 the sanctuary was refurbished and a fellowship hall was added onto the rear, east end of the church, making it a T-shaped building. The fellowship hall was paneled in pine and included a kitchen and a library, with classrooms underneath.

A long-time congregant, who is now in her 90s, recalls that before the interior of the sanctuary was renovated, the interior walls were stone, and the floors were made of marble slab that were obtained from the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., which was being rebuilt in 1900-1901. The *Service Record* book said that the marble was donated by Darlington. During the renovation it was discovered that the timbers under the marble floor were badly rotted, therefore, a more extensive renovation of the sanctuary was required. The sanctuary no longer has marble floors but a memento piece of the marble floor has been kept by the church.

By 1965 an education building was added onto the fellowship hall at the rear, east end of the church.

The most interesting change to the church building came in 1986-1987 when the original sanctuary was dismantled, stone by stone, and then rebuilt with the same stone. The point of this renovation was to enlarge the church to accommodate its growing congregation.

According to a *Herndon Observer* article dated January of 1987, the decision to enlarge the church was made in 1985. "The reconstructed church would look nearly identical to the original except it would be larger scale, adding five feet of height to the vaulted ceiling and bell tower, and pushing the walls out to widen the building." Although an additional adjacent narrow strip of land was purchased by the church in 1955, it was not possible to build another addition, due to parking restrictions. Therefore, a plan was devised to widen the existing church instead.

A groundbreaking service was held in February of 1986. Church services began being held in the fellowship hall. During the re-construction, the original front wall of the church with the original front door and the bell tower, which faced the corner of Elden and Monroe Streets, was left intact. The side walls of the sanctuary of the church were taken down. The blocks of rough-edged bluestone, in hues of rust, grey and sand, sat in piles next to the church. The dismantling of the building was done by Miller Brothers Construction and began in May of 1986, "leaving the old structure looking like as if it had been struck by a bomb." A former Herndon resident, Warren Cowles of Harper's Ferry, was the project superintendent, and took great care with the newly built sanctuary. It was reported to be "tricky business" to buttress the stone bell tower and dig out the cavity beneath it so that the space could be filled with solid mortar. Fearing a possible cave-in of the bell tower, Cowles said, "I would not let anyone near the area. This was the hardest part of the whole job."

Four stone masons worked on reconstructing the stone walls, in order to make them structurally sound and artistically pleasing. One of those stone masons was Bob Neal of Sterling who said,

“A great big old puzzle, that’s what it is.” Neal also commented that the hardest part of the job was the physical work, “Picking up the stones – that’s the worst of it.”

A new basement was added underneath the church, and the southwest wall of the church was extended, making the church wider. The original stone was re-used to reconstruct the church. The original stained-glass insets were also placed back into the arched windows. One congregant remembered that “added” stone for the expanded southwest wall was obtained by splitting some of the original stones in half, thus using stones that were half the width was the originals. However, one *Herndon Observer* article mentioned that Cowles was able to match the original bluestone quarried on Darlington’s property with bluestone from the Loudoun Quarries on Sterling Road. Both scenarios are likely true. The new sanctuary was dedicated in September of 1987. When it was all done, the inside layout of the church had been reversed. The alter that had formerly been located on the east side of the church was now repositioned to the west side of the church.

A later *Herndon Observer* article dated 2007 indicated that work on the stained-glass windows was done that year. The 100+ year old windows were removed and restored by a company called Russell’s Studio. The project took about a month and the windows were covered by plywood while the work was being completed. The windows were disassembled and any pieces that were damaged were either replaced or repaired. They also repainted and fixed the window frames.

When in Washington, Darlington was active in his Fifth Baptist Church and took a particular interest in missions. His mission-oriented philosophy seems to have been carried on by the First Baptist Church of Herndon. The church has conducted many missions spanning the years, as well as other philanthropic activities. Long-time congregants indicate that the church’s membership has varied in size over the years, sometimes having a very large membership, while other times having a very small membership. Nevertheless, as one current congregant said about the church: “It just endures.”

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*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](http://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](http://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](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*