

## Commander William Lewis Herndon

By Barbara Glakas

The town of Herndon was named after Commander William Lewis Herndon, the accomplished Navy officer who went down with his ship in a horrendous hurricane in 1857. But who was William Herndon exactly?

William Lewis Herndon was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1813. He was the grandson of Joseph and Mary Herndon. Joseph was born and died in Spotsylvania County, just a short distance from Fredericksburg. During the American Revolution, in 1775, Joseph was a signer of the Fredericksburg Resolutions and served on the patriot's Committee of Safety.

William was the son of Dabney Herndon, Sr., and Elizabeth Hull Herndon. In the 1820 Fredericksburg census, just seven years after William was born, Dabney had 19 people listed in his household, ten of which were enslaved. Amongst William's siblings were Ann Hull Herndon, Dabney Herndon, Jr., and Charles Herndon. William's father died in 1824.

An 1828 midshipmen register of the Navy indicates that William entered service on November 1<sup>st</sup> of that year as an Acting Midshipmen, although his duty station was listed as "Leave of absence." According to the Naval History and Heritage Command, William Herndon, accepted his appointment on December 1<sup>st</sup> of that year. He was a Warranted Midshipman from 1828 through 1834. In 1834 he became a Passed Midshipman (i.e., he had passed the lieutenant's exam and was eligible for promotion). He was promoted to Lieutenant in 1841. In 1855 he reached the rank of Commander.

William's sister, Ann, met Matthew Fontaine Maury at an uncle's home in Albemarle County when she was a young teenager. She would later marry Maury when he returned from his extended voyages in 1834. Maury was an astronomer, meteorologist, cartographer, geologist, and educator. He would become known as "the Father of Modern Oceanography and Naval Metrology." He became the first Superintendent the Naval Observatory. Maury argued against succession. But when the Civil War broke out and his home state of Virginia succeeded, Commander Maury resigned his commission and joined the Confederacy.

William married Frances Elizabeth "Kit" Hansbrough in Culpeper, Virginia, in 1836. They would go on to have one daughter, Ellen Lewis "Nell" Herndon, born in Fredericksburg in 1837. In 1859, Nell married Chester A. Arthur, who would later become President of the United States. The Arthurs had three children, but Nell did not live to see her husband become president. In 1880, at the age of 42, Nell Lewis Herndon Arthur died of pneumonia. Arthur became president the following year in 1881. Arthur's sister, Mary Arthur McElroy, served as the unofficial First Lady for his social activities as president.

Over the course of his career William Herndon served on many ships. His first service was on the USS *Guerriere* in Norfolk, Virginia. He later served on the *Constellation*, the *Fairfield*, the *Independence*, the *Jefferson*, the *Cumberland*, the *Iris* and the *Vandalia*. During these years he was in Brazil, Florida, Alabama and back to Washington at the Naval Observatory. While on the *Cumberland* and *Iris* he was serving duty during the Mexican War from 1847-48.

While aboard the *Vandalia*, he served in the Pacific Squadron where his orders sent him to Lima, Peru, where he was to collect authentic source information about the head waters of the Amazon and

Peruvian tributaries. He was assigned to obtain permission from the Brazilian government to explore the Valley of the Amazon in South America. He was eventually detached from the *Vandalia* and ordered into special service in South America, where he and Passed Midshipman Lardner Gibbon embarked onto the exploration expedition.

The exploration party left Lima in May of 1852 and set off into the interior. Lieutenant Herndon followed the main trunk of the Amazon to its mouth. By July of 1852 he was back in Washington, where he remained until 1853 as he prepared his report. That report -- which was published by the Navy Department and submitted to Congress -- was entitled *Report of the Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon*. An early copy of Herndon's and Gibbon's report is displayed in the Herndon Historical Society's Depot Museum.

In 1854 Herndon was assigned to the USS *San Jacinto* in which he travelled to England, France, Spain, and the West Indies. After this he briefly served on the *Potomac* in the Home Squadron.

It was from here that he was ordered to command the SS *George Law*, a Pacific Mail Steamer. Steamers that carried U.S. mail were required to be commanded by Navy officers. The *George Law* later changed names to the S.S. *Central America*. Herndon travelled several times between the Panama Isthmus and New York, carrying mail, passengers, and millions of dollars of gold from the California gold rush.

On his last voyage he had 575 passengers on board. In September of 1857 the *Central American* sprung a leak after being battered by a horrific hurricane. Herndon, an experienced seaman, was able to keep the ship afloat for two days, and got most of the women and children off the ship – 152 people – but he could not keep the ship from sinking.

As one of the last life boats left the sinking ship, Herndon handed his watch to a passenger with a request to deliver it to his wife. The only words he could say were, "Tell her---," and then he turned and went to his state room where he put on his uniform. He then stood on the wheel house of the ship where he shot off a final flare rocket. The ship then went down, taking Commander Herndon and over 400 others with it.

Herndon's brother-in-law, Matthew Fontaine Maury, wrote a report on the sinking to the Secretary of the Navy which said in part:

"The law requires every Commander in the Navy to show himself a good example of virtue and patriotism; and never was example more nobly set or beautifully followed. Captain Herndon, by these noble traits which have so endeared his memory to the hearts of his countrymen, and won the respect and admiration of the crew and passengers of that ship in a such a degree as to acquire an influence over them that was marvelous in its effects.

"After the boat which bore Mr. Payne – to whom Herndon entrusted his watch – had shoved off, the captain went to his state room and put on his uniform. The gold band around his cap was concealed by the oil-silk covering which he usually wore over it. He took the covering off and threw it on the floor; then, walking out, he took his stand on the wheel-house holding on to the railing with his left hand. A rocket was set off, the ship fetched her last lurch and as she went down, he uncovered.

“[Commander William Lewis Herndon] went down with his ship, leaving a glowing example of devotion to duty, Christian conduct, and true heroism.”

In commemoration of the bravery and heroism of Commander Herndon, the Commonwealth of Virginia ordered a medal to be struck which was presented to Herndon's widow. Mrs. Frances Elizabeth Herndon died in 1878. The medal later came into the possession of her great-grandson, Chester Alan Arthur III.

In 1860 Annapolis's Herndon Monument was erected in Herndon's honor on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Academy. A miniature version of the obelisk monument is on the town of Herndon's town green, next to the Municipal Center. The U.S. Navy later named two ships after Commander Herndon, one that served in World War I, and a second one that served in World War II.

To learn more about why the town of Herndon was named after Commander William Lewis Herndon, see this previous article: *The Bronzed Man Who Named the Town, and The Bronzed Man Who Named the Town, Part 2*: [Remembering Herndon's History: The Bronzed Man Who Named the Town, Part 2 | Herndon, VA Patch](#) .

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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).*