

Dr. Detwiler's Safe

By Barbara Glakas

A large black safe – weighing about 750 pounds – sits in the Herndon Historical Society's depot museum. The safe once belonged to Dr. Edwin Detwiler, a prominent Herndon citizen and doctor. The safe was not always in the museum, however. From Dr. Detwiler's office it moved around from place to place until it finally landed in the museum.

Dr. Edwin Landis Detwiler – known as “Dr. Ed” around town - came to Herndon in the 1880s. He initially lived on Monroe Street and had a doctor's office at 711 Pine Street, now home to Brush Strokes Salon. Years later he built a house at 800 3rd Street, large enough to accommodate his family as well as space for his practice. Newspapers report that Dr. Detwiler moved into this new home in 1911. He installed a private telephone on the front porch of his Pine Street office that connected to Summit home, so that patients could contact him if needed.

In 1916, Dr. Detwiler died in an untimely and shocking manner. While on a home visit to check on the welfare of a female patient on Dranesville Road, Dr. Detwiler was shot and killed by the woman's unstable son.

After Dr. Detwiler's death, his safe was owned by Robert “Eddie” Wagstaff (1897-1970), who was instrumental in saving Sully Plantation as a historical site. According to a *Herndon Observer* newspaper article, Wagstaff's 1968 notes indicated that the safe was located “in the Sherriff's Office at Sully.”

Carl Stutzman, formerly of Herndon, was a longtime friend of Mr. Wagstaff and worked closely with him to save Sully. When Mr. Wagstaff died in 1970, Mr. Stutzman purchased the safe from Wagstaff's estate. Stutzman took the safe with him when he and his wife retired to Woodstock, Virginia.

In 2000, Mr. Stutzman and his wife were getting ready to move to a retirement home in Harrisonburg, Virginia. On short notice, Stutzman called Richard Downer, a member of the Herndon Historical Society, and asked him if the Society would like the safe. Downer eagerly accepted the offer and recalled that they were told “it didn't weigh much.”

Downer and his wife, Linda, drove to Woodstock in their Subaru station wagon and met the moving company that was in the process of moving the Stutzmans. Downer's company – HRI Associates Insurance Agency – paid to have the moving company men load the safe onto the Downer's Subaru. Richard recalled, “We were quite surprised when we saw it, found out what it really weighed and watched our Subaru sink when the movers moved it into our car.” Linda said she was horrified and unhappy about loading the heavy safe into their brand new car and could barely watch.

Once back in Herndon, a group of men at Herndon's Department of Public Works used a forklift to remove the safe from the vehicle and store it at the Town Shop. While in the shop the safe would be restored before being placed in the Historical Society's depot museum.

Downer said, "Although the exterior of the safe had been painted over, you can still make out the outline of the name 'E.L. Detwiler, MD,' along the top above the door. The safe is in working order and we have the combination." Detwiler's name was repainted onto the safe.

Once restored, the safe was moved into the depot museum. Due to its enormous weight a cement pad had to be built to ensure that safe would not fall through the old wooden floors of the museum. Since then, Dr. Detwiler's safe has been displayed in the museum.

At some point the safe's combination had been misplaced and the safe remained closed. For many years members of the Historical Society and their museum guests had never seen the interior of Dr. Detwiler's safe. One day in 2017, Barbara Glakas, a Historical Society member, found the combination while cleaning out some old files in the museum. Excitedly, she tried using the newly found combination to unlock the safe, but was unsuccessful. Not a simple "left-right-left" combination, the more complicated combination was hand written on a faded sheet of paper, making it hard to decipher. The paper also said, "The things in the safe belong to R.E. Wagstaff."

Glakas gave the combination paper to various Historical Society members who all took a "crack" at it. Finally, it was Society Board member Scott Tilton who was able to get it open. As various Historical Society members hovered around Scott, eager to see what was inside, the safe door was slowly opened. Inside the safe was – *nothing!* Everyone laughed at their own unrealistic high expectations of what may be inside. Nevertheless, all appreciated that Dr. Detwiler's safe was not only finally open, but also secure, intact and back home 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.