

Discoveries at The Herndon School

By Barbara Glakas

This story is about The Herndon School and different discoveries and artifacts that have been found there.

The School Building:

One of Herndon's earliest schools – The Herndon School – was formerly located at 725 Center Street. That school operated there from 1868 to 1912. After the school building on Center Street was vacated, it was sold to Russell Lynn in 1912. Soon after he sold it to Herndon resident and businessman, Orland Chamblin. Chamblin renovated the school building to make it into a home as a wedding gift for his daughter, who married in 1915.

The original school building, constructed in 1868, was a simple rectangular building, positioned on an east-west axis. Sometime later, possibly as early as the 1870s, an addition was constructed onto the east end of the building which included a new front porch and a steeple on the roof. That resulted in the school becoming a T-shaped building, with the new addition on a north-west axis, facing Center Street. The school was originally positioned on the far west end of the lot, but was later moved forward (or eastward) to the center of the lot. This gave the house both a front and a back yard.

Discoveries Inside the Building:

The Herndon School was first organized by a group of Herndon citizens who formed the Herndon School Association, prior to Fairfax County Public Schools being formed in 1870. Over the years, different school artifacts have been found inside the house, including the original minute book of the Herndon School Association, dating from 1868 to 1875. Also found in the attic of the house was an old school desk from the early 1900s and a set of six school books that date from the 1880s. All these items are now in the Herndon Historical Society's Depot Museum on Lynn Street.

Additionally, seen inside the unfinished attic were some names that were chalked onto the thick oak beams. Those names were identified as school children's names, some of whom were known to have attended the Herndon School in the 1890s. The chalk writings included "J.E. Feltner," (James E. Feltner, b. 1883, son of a minister); "W.A. Ball," (believed to be William A. Ball, b. 1879, also son of a clergyman); and "Charley Garrett," (Charles Aaron Valentine Garrett, b. 1883, son of a Herndon mayor).

Changes to the School Property:

In late 2021 members of the Herndon Historical Society, with the permission of the resident who lives in the old school house, started investigating the back yard of the house, looking for evidence of the original position of the school building on the lot, as well as for any school-related artifacts.

The answer to the original position of the house was evidenced in various ways. The back yard has a slope across the width of the yard that indicated where the front edge of the building may have originally been located. However, even more telling were historic aerial photographs dating to the 1930s, and a LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) photo of the lot found on Fairfax County's Geographic Information System (GIS) page. LiDAR shows the topography of the ground, stripping away any vegetation. The LiDAR map of the school lot showed faint T-shaped symmetrical lines that could be seen on the west end of the lot, corresponding to the shape of the building. We could also see where the slope in the yard corresponds to where the front (east) end of the building would have once been located. All of this supported our hypothesis about the original position of the old school house.

Artifacts Found in the School Yard:

The Society did a detailed metal detection search of land in the back yard of the old school house. In addition to the expected trash found on a lot that has had many owners over the last 153 years, many very old nails were found, likely once part of the school building. Some of the other artifacts that were found include old bolts, a Boy Scout belt buckle, a thumb press oil can, a garden tool handle, an antique barn door roller device, and a 1920s lady's compact case.

One of the most interesting artifacts that was found in the back yard of the former school was an old, heavy, two-piece medal that someone would wear on his/her chest. The scalloped top piece of the medal measured about two inches and said "Portland, Maine." The smaller bottom piece was a round disc with an organizational emblem in the center that said, "Woman's Relief Corps, 1883."

As with any found unusual piece such as this, we had to ask ourselves – what is this? And why is it here?

First, we looked into the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC). We discovered that it is an auxiliary organization to the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The GAR formed near the close of the Civil War. It was a fraternal organization of mostly Union veterans, to promote fraternity, charity, and loyalty, and to aid and comfort their unfortunate comrades. Women's groups stepped in to assist the GAR. Women had always helped with relief during the war, including relief in battlefield hospitals for the wounded and sick, raising money for hospital supplies, and relief in homes for the widows and orphans of those soldiers who fought in the war and never returned.

Several local auxiliaries and leagues united and chartered a national organization in 1883 under the name of Woman's Relief Corps. Although the main criterion to become a member of the WRC was loyalty to the Union cause, membership was not restricted to residents of Union states. The WRC engaged in activities such as supporting the GAR, fostering patriotic education, promoting and running Memorial Day events, and petitioning the federal government for nurse's pensions.

After a search on the Internet, we found an exact copy of the medal we found in the back yard of the old school house. We discovered the medal was from a WRC national convention that was

held in Portland, Maine, in 1929. A yellow ribbon – now long gone from the medal we found in the ground – would have been attached to the medal and would have said, “47th National Convention, Woman’s Relief Corps, Sept., 8-13, 1929.” But again – why was this medal in the back yard of the school property? Was someone who once lived in this house a member of the WRC?

Who was Mary North?

Looking at old online journals of WRC National Conventions we were able to find the name of a Herndon resident named Mary M. North (1852-1953). She was mentioned in a 1902 WRC journal as the National Junior Vice President. In the 1904 journal for a national convention held in Boston, she was listed as the WRC’s National Press Correspondent. We also found online a patriotic book that Mary M. North wrote for the WRC in 1909. It was entitled, “Patriotic Selections for Memorial Day, Flag Day and other Patriotic Anniversaries.” In the preface of the book, she signed it as the WRC’s National Patriotic Instructor. She also wrote an introduction to the history of the WRC, sourced from a 1912 document, which is on the WRC’s website today. In this document it mentions a monument that was erected in Andersonville Park in Georgia in memory of one of its members. On the tablet of the monument, it also said: “Upon the tablet are the names of the incorporators of the Woman's Relief Corps...,” listing ten names, including that of “Mrs. Mary M. North.” In 1914 she was still signing documents as the National Press Correspondent, from Herndon, Virginia.

At the WRC’s 43rd convention in Michigan in 1925, Mary North – who was then a member of the Flag Extension Committee - presented a flag to a Sunday School at a church in Grand Rapids. Her remarks were recorded:

“It is my privilege this morning to represent nearly two hundred thousand loyal women of the Woman’s Relief Corps, the Auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic, which Organization 40 years ago began Americanization work in many States, particularly stressing the teaching of patriotism in schools, beginning with the Pledge to our Flag, placing Flags in school rooms, and having laws passed providing for the flying of Flags over school buildings. Flags now have been given to Sunday Schools to the number of nearly 8,000. Their latest work is giving Flags to Boy Scouts. This morning I am pleased to present to the Sabbath School of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, on behalf of the Woman’s Relief Corps, the beautiful Flag – the Flag of our country – upon whose folds the sun never sets. It goes with the Bible and civilization. We place it in your keeping, Mr. Superintendent, and trust you to impress its worth and glory upon the children of your school.”

Another interesting find was how Mary North’s younger sister, Elisabeth Leonhardt (1867-1953), was listed in the 1904 22nd convention notes as a convention delegate. Given the WRC’s work in petitioning for nurse’s pensions, this would make sense. Elisabeth was one of the Navy’s “Sacred Twenty” nurses who were the first females to formally serve in U.S. Navy during World War I. Elisabeth was the Chief Nurse of the United States Navy.

Mary M. North was the oldest daughter of Jacob (1828 – 1905) and Mary (1833-1899) Leonhardt. Jacob was a German immigrant who came to America in 1831, got married, started a family, and settled in Herndon. He had previously served as a private in the Civil War, in Company G of the 6th District of Columbia Infantry. Jacob was a lumber dealer by trade. The location of his business is clearly marked as “Leonhardt Store” on Herndon’s first 1878 map drawn by cartographer G.M. Hopkins, located at the northwest corner of Station Street and the railroad track. According to records of St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church, Jacob was a vestryman. Mrs. Mary Leonhardt -- along with two other Herndon residents, was credited with the idea of building a permanent Episcopal Church in Herndon. The new church, which still stands at the corner of Elden and Grace Streets, was consecrated in 1881.

Mary M. [nee Leonhardt] North married Joseph B. North (1848-1928) in Herndon in 1873. Reverend Joseph B. North was a clergyman. Mary became an active Herndon resident, a Chairwoman of the local Red Cross, a President and trustee of the Herndon Fortnightly Club and Library Association, and an honorary member of the Order of the Eastern Star.

It was Mary North, as member of the Fortnightly Club and Library Association, who arranged the purchase of a 1-acre lot of land on Spring Street from the Herndon Good Templars, so that the club could build their new library building in 1927. That building at 660 Spring Street is now the home of the Herndon Friends Meeting (Quakers).

A *Herndon Observer* newspaper article, dated September 19, 1929, said: “Mrs. Mary North returns from Portland, Maine.” That bit of information convinced us that this WRC medal must indeed belong to Mrs. Mary M. North, a prominent WRC member who evidently travelled to Maine that year to attend the WRC’s national annual convention. But that still does not answer the question: Why was this medal in the back yard of the old school house?

Looking at old census documents, we found that the Norths were living in Herndon in every census year from 1880 to 1930, except in 1900 when they lived in Maryland. Early census documents rarely indicate street names. But we decided to look at deeds to track the ownership of the old school house at 725 Center Street. Sure enough, we found that Mary North and her husband, Rev. Joseph B. North, and her dentist son, Joseph Beverly North, owned the school house property from 1918 to 1926. However, the Norths sold the property to Harry and Alma Breckenridge in 1926. That could mean that Mary may not have lived in the house in 1929. Or did she? Could it be that the property was sold to the Breckenridges in 1926 but Mary continued to rent the home for a while after it was sold? The Norths were seniors by then. Mary was 74 and her husband, Joseph, was 78 years old. And Mary – still dedicated to the WRC – attended the National conference in 1929.

According to Donald LeVine, owner of the school house in the 1970s, one of the Ellmore sisters, who lived on Grace Street, once told him, “*Thea and her husband lived in the building (meaning the school house) for some time – exactly when is not certain; Mrs. [Alma] Breckenridge also said that a minister had lived in the house until she moved in.*” Thea – or Theodora – was the daughter of Mary and Reverend Joseph North. The “minister” may be a reference to Reverend Joseph North, who died in 1928.

Mary died in 1933. We think it is very probable that the WRC medal once belonged to Mary North, given her long-time and active participation with the WRC at the highest levels, given her known attendance at the WRC's 1929 national convention in Maine, and given her association with the old school house.

Regardless as to why the medal was found in the old school house yard, the bigger story may be about a Herndon woman who lived through the Civil War, was the daughter of a Union soldier, who grew up in the southern state of Virginia, and who became an active and high-ranking member of the Woman's Relief Corps, dedicating her life to promoting patriotism and the principles of Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty. A little medal – as well as other artifacts - can sometimes tell a big story.

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.