

Early Reston History

By Barbara Glakas

We thought we would briefly digress from Herndon history to talk a bit about our neighbor, Reston, and its early history. At one time, Reston was just a short five to six-minute train ride away from Herndon on the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad.

Early on, the Fairfax family owned most of Virginia. In the 1850s a man named Benjamin Thornton, who was a British owner of Montpelier, bought over 8,000 acres of land in what is now Reston from the Fairfax family. Thornton's brother managed the land and when the rail came through the train station was called the Thornton station. The small train stop building is still located at the intersection of the Washington and Old Dominion trail and Old Reston Avenue, not too far from Plaza America.

The Thornton's unfortunately came into financial difficulties. In 1886 Dr. Carl Adolph Max Wiehle bought 3,228 acres of the Thornton tract on the north side of the railroad tracks, now the Washington and Old Dominion trail. Eventually Wiehle built a summer frame home, a hotel, a post office, a combined town hall and church, and the gazebo that is still present off of Old Reston Avenue. He also had lakes hand-dug on the property. The framed home, built in the 1890s, eventually passed down to his nephew, Robert, and is still present today at 1830 Old Reston Avenue. In 1887 Wiehle persuaded the government to change the name of the post office at the train stop to the name of Wiehle.

In 1892 Dr. Wiehle hired a German surveyor, Joseph Berry, for the purpose of planning a little town which he would name after himself, the Town of Wiehle. The design included plans for 800 residences along a grid of streets that would accommodate a population of 4,000. He imagined that his town would have entrepreneurs who would open businesses and factories in which residents would work, allowing the town to be completely independent. A family-held company, the Virginia Lumber and Manufacturing Company, was set up in 1893. In addition to marketing timber, the timber was also used to provide materials for the town buildings. The Maryland and Serpentine and Talc Company of Baltimore built a mill on the Wiehle property and became one industrial component of the new town.

Wiehle built the large Aesculapian Hotel, a vacation spot for visitors from Washington, D.C. It was originally designed for use as a sanitarium and located near the springs on the property, a place where those with chronic illnesses could convalesce. It was formerly located near the present-day Stratford House apartment building. The Town of Wiehle was officially incorporated by the Virginia General Assembly in 1898.

Ultimately, only twelve of Wiehle's lots were sold and even fewer homes were built on those lots. At that time, the town of Herndon was not too far away and was already thriving, possibly contributing to some peoples' lack of desire to live in the woods of Wiehle.

In 1899 Wiehle started building a large 25-room classical revival style mansion for his family, but he died of pneumonia in 1901 at the age of 54, before it was completed. The large white mansion is still present today behind the gazebo. Wiehle never got to see his vision of a new town fulfilled. The town never really flourished and by 1900 only about 50 people had settled there.

In 1909, the Wiehles and the Virginia Lumber and Manufacturing Company sold their land to local dentist, Dr. Hugh Hutchison, and William Crighton, both of Herndon. Hutchison was interested in large scale farming. Timber continued to be cut and about 550 acres were cleared for cultivation. He did dairy and poultry farming on the property and had a very successful business. Hutchison built a number of farm buildings, including a 200-cow dairy barn, a 2,000-hen poultry plant, horse barns and residences for tenants. In 1923 Hutchison had the post office name changed from Wiehle to Sunset Hills. In 1924 Hutchison died of a heart attack at the age of 54 while on an ocean trip. His body was sent home to Wiehle and he was buried in Herndon's Chestnut Grove cemetery.

In 1927 a wealthy Kentucky-born entrepreneur, farmer and distiller - A. Smith Bowman Sr. - bought the Sunset Hills property from the Hutchison heirs. The Wiehle mansion then became the Bowman family residence. In 1929 Bowman founded the first fox hunt in Fairfax County. His land became the home of the Fairfax Hunt. The old Aesculapian Hotel became the site of hunt breakfasts and balls.

Bowman did farming and did not start his distillery business until 1934, after prohibition was repealed. He shifted many of his farm workers at Sunset Hills into distillery work. The steeple was removed from Wiehle's former town hall and church building, converting it into a distillery warehouse. This building still stands on Old Reston Avenue today. Grain grown on the farm was used to make bourbon whiskey, sold under the names of "Virginia Gentleman" and "Fairfax County." The first shipment of the bourbon left the Bowman Warehouse in 1937.

Mr. Bowman died in 1952. Bowman's mansion and land later passed down to his eldest son, A. Smith Bowman Jr. For many years the Aesculapian Hotel continued to be successful. It was later torn down, around 1956.

In 1960 A. Smith Bowman Jr. and his brother, E. DeLong Bowman, decided to sell all but 60 acres to a land development company. The following year that company sold the former Bowman land to Robert E. Simon who had a vision of a planned community - a town with preserved green space, a mixture of commercial uses along with clusters of various housing types, and pathways. Notably, Simon's vision for a community where people could live, work and play seemed very similar to Wiehle's original philosophy for his town. Simon's community would ultimately be called Reston, named after his initials, R.E.S. His community flourished and became a homeowner's association.

In 1990 the Virginia General Assembly repealed the Town of Wiehle's charter, a little town that never really actualized in Wiehle's time, but eventually came to fruition as an unincorporated planned community under Simon's leadership. Simon died in 2015 at the age of 101.

More information about the history of Reston can be found at the Reston Historic Trust & Museum located on Lake Anne Plaza. <https://www.restonmuseum.org/>

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.