

The Herndon Fortnightly Club and Library Association

The Founders of Fairfax County's First Lending Library

By Barbara Glakas

The Herndon Fortnightly Club is the oldest women's club in Virginia's General Federation of Women's Clubs. It started in the summer of 1889, with a small group of eleven women who met at the Castlemen Seminary on Grace Street. They formed a study club "for the mutual improvement of its members in literature, art, science and the vital interests of the day." They decided to meet every two weeks and, thus, they called their group The Fortnightly Club.

It was the club's passion for education and reading that ultimately led them to form Fairfax County's first lending library. In addition, the club members participated in many philanthropic, patriotic and community events over the decades, through two World Wars, the Depression and the Town of Herndon's growth. The club's 128 year history is recounted in the booklet, "The Herndon Fortnightly Club, A History, 1889-2014."

The eleven charter members of The Fortnightly Club were Mrs. John Barker, Miss Maria Bready, Miss Ida Castleman, Miss Lulu Castleman, Miss Virginia Castleman, Mrs. Florence Duffy, Mrs. J.W. McKeene, Miss Lillie Shear, Miss Ann Thornton, Miss Catherine Thornton and Miss Ellen Thornton. Forty books were initially collected and by the year 1900 they had collected more than a thousand books.

After club member Virginia Castleman finished taking a course in library science at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, she offered to do the cataloguing for the club. She also suggested that they start a public library for the people of Herndon and the surrounding area. A room for the library was rented in Herndon's downtown area. A 1900 *Fairfax Herald* newspaper article said that the library was located "on the second floor of the Detwiler office building, room #4." The library, sometimes referred to in the newspaper as the Herndon Reading Room, was widely supported by the town residents and business owners. Mr. Taylor, the town jeweler, donated a calendar clock. Mr. Mason donated a stove and a set of book shelves. Dr. Edwin Detwiler and Mr. Buell donated fuel.

In November of 1909 the club rented part of their reading room to the Herndon National Bank. They also decided to start a library building fund. By 1911 problems had arisen with the library's "half room." The club decided to rent a room from Mr. Minor Crippen who had a store on Station Street.

The club continued to meet every two weeks for business meetings and by 1912 the club joined the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

Housing of the library continued to be an ongoing problem. Expenses mounted for rent, for the acquisition of books and for heating wood. In 1917 a disastrous fire occurred in downtown Herndon that wiped out a significant portion of the buildings along Station and Pine Streets. Unfortunately, the library – then housed in the Crippen building – lost its entire collection of books. Undaunted, the ladies immediately began collecting books again, and by 1918 they had a thousand books.

Luckily, the ladies were forward-looking and had purchased fire insurance before the 1917 fire. A portion of the insurance money was set aside in a building fund.

Mr. A.T. Walker's large building at the corner of Station and Pine Streets was one of the buildings wiped out in the 1917 fire. At an effort to recoup some of his losses he sold to the Fortnightly Club a 2,250 square foot parcel of land which fronted Station Street for \$200.

That same year World War I broke out and the club ladies directed their energies to the war effort. They worked in government offices, acted as switchboard operators and assumed positions behind store sales counters.

In the early 1920s the club's collection of books had reach 3,300 and the readership was 226. The club started to actively engage in preparations to build a permanent home for the library. It was also about this time that the club started meeting monthly.

In 1924 the trustees of the Sweet Home Lodge of Good Templars at Herndon offered the club a lot on which to build a library. The one-acre lot was located on Spring Street at the east end of Locust Street. Acceptance of the lot meant the club had to incorporate and elect trustees. The club was incorporated in 1925 as The Herndon Fortnightly Club and Library Association of Herndon. That same year the club passed a motion to build a suitable library building. It was decided that the building would be made of tan or cream colored brick. They also agreed to sell the former Walker lot.

All members, as well as local businessmen, were solicited for donations to help pay for the construction of the library. By 1926 the building fund had reached \$1,000. Later that year a special meeting was held to execute a promissory note for \$2,000, payable in three years.

The library was constructed and on January 5, 1927, all the books were moved over to the library's new cream-colored building at 660 Spring Street. Again, many townspeople assisted

with the opening of the library, lending a truck for the move, donating wood and a stove pipe, and donating more books, a table and chairs. The library now had 4,250 books.

The club members next concentrated on paying off the mortgage as well as running the library. Membership dues were increased and it was decided to increase membership to 50 members. Year and after year fundraising events were held, including food sales, tea, dinners and soft drinks sales at July 4th Herndon Day celebrations. They continued to get donations from various town groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Herndon Chapter of the Eastern Star.

The club decided to sell a portion of their one-acre lot. Mrs. Florence Taylor bought all but 18,000 square feet of the lot for \$525. The money was promptly applied to the mortgage. Nevertheless, small expenses kept cropping up, such as having the stove “blackened” and paying someone to make the fire and clean the library each Friday.

By the end of 1929 the debt on the library had been reduced to \$1,200. By 1931 they sold the former Walker lot for \$250. Their membership increased to 34 and they continued to do fundraisers, such as ice cream festivals, anagram and bridge parties, and suppers.

Hard times were evident during the Great Depression. The club treasury could no longer support mowing the lawn. The Boy Scouts took on that job as a project. The cost of fire insurance was increased, necessitating members to pitch in more money to help defray the costs.

The library had no walkway from the front porch to the street. Again, citizens and business owners helped. Mr. C. M. Lawrence donated sand and gravel for the walkway, and Misters Ralph Chamblin and Henry Moffett donated coal and wood to help defray the club’s other monthly expenses.

From the beginning the Library had been staffed with volunteers and an elected librarian, Mrs. Russell Lynn. Mrs. Lynn had filled that job for many years, but stepped down in 1935. A committee of twelve was appointed to carry on the work of the librarian.

The library building had no electricity and, therefore, could only be used in the daylight hours. In 1936 the club decided to modernize. The Buell family donated the light fixtures and Clyde Greear did the electrical work. The front steps and walkway were finished that same year. The locust trees on the property proved to be quite useful. The ladies made and sold locust jam and used that money to buy some new book shelves.

In 1939 the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors authorized a County Library System. The Fortnightly Club was very active in this effort and club member, Mrs. Kathryn Robinson, was appointed to the first Library Board of Trustees.

Also in 1939 the Fortnightly Club sponsored a new junior woman's club. It was known as The Young Women's Club of Herndon. In 1946 it was renamed The Herndon Woman's Club and continues to be a club of great service to the community today.

By the 1940s the country was engaged in another war. The Fortnightly Club continued to run the library but also became more involved in public affairs. Virginia Delegates were contacted whenever issues came before the General Assembly involved libraries. The club also invested in \$1,890 worth of War Bonds. The ladies got involved in Civil Defense activities, taking turns manning the Civil Defense Control Center in the Town Hall and practicing black-outs. The club members furnished cookies and flowers each month for the Ft. Belvoir Hospital, knitted clothes for European children, and helped area churches fill boxes for overseas relief and reconstruction. The club members also made donations to local causes, such as donating money for band instruments when a local group of citizens started raising money to start a school band.

All the while the club continued with fundraisers for the building fund and by the end of 1943 the note on the library building had finally been paid.

In the early 1950s the library was cramped for space and the club started making plans for an addition to the building. In 1953 the club contracted with Graham James for \$11,000 for the library addition which would include a meeting room, a small kitchen, a stage, and much needed shelf space. The building would also be re-roofed. The club borrowed \$7,500 from Citizens National Bank, continued their fundraising, and started renting the library's new room to other organizations to hold receptions, dinners and meetings.

Other Herndon organizations, such as The Herndon Woman's Club, the PTA, the American Legion, and other users of the library, contributed funds to help the club pay off its loan.

Back in 1939, when the Fairfax County Library System had first been established, Herndon's library entered into a cooperative venture whereby books would be exchanged between facilities. By 1956 dissatisfaction had arisen in the club about the quality of books being received and the lack of newly published books. The club communicated with the County librarian and by 1957 the Herndon library was allowed to be made a Deposit Station (as opposed to a Substation) of the County system. This gave the Herndon library more control over their hours and enabled the library to be loaned 100 books from the County each month.

Upgrades and repairs to the building were ongoing. In 1958, steps, iron railings and a canopy were added to the side door. The trim and lattice work below the porch was repaired. Termites were discovered in some of the building's timber, which needed to be replaced. Calendar sales, luncheons, and meals served to the Rotary Club covered most of the costs.

Throughout, the ladies continued to participate in events at the State Federated Women's Club Conventions and weighed in on issues of the day.

Once again, problems arose between the Herndon library and the County library system. More red tape and requirements placed burdens on the club's ability to run the library. The club decided to discontinue Deposit Station status and go it alone.

The library continued to be used heavily and was run primarily by volunteer club members. High school students were trained as aides to work during the summer months. The only workers who received token pay were the Librarian and her assistant.

Members of the community asked that the library be open more often, so in 1965 Mayor Griffiths suggested monetary help from the Town of Herndon so that the library hours could be extended. After much discussion the club agreed and the Town budgeted \$50 per month for "cultural improvement." This enabled the library to be open for at least two hours per day, except on Wednesdays and Sundays when it remained closed.

In 1965 the loan for the addition was retired. The club continued its involvement in Town and charitable activities as well as continuing to run the library.

A population boom occurred in Herndon in the late 1960s, causing the library to increase service. Over 3,400 books were being circulated in 1968. Meanwhile the club ladies also continued to show interest in local issues, such as contacting state representatives to urge stricter gun control, holding programs on drug abuse, providing clerical help at Fairfax Hospital, and preparing food baskets for the Salvation Army.

In late 1969, feeling the library service should be expanded, the Herndon Town Council and the Herndon Citizens Association, wrote to the County Library Board, asking to consider opening a library branch in Herndon. The Library Board was agreeable but had no space. The Fortnightly Club discussed the issue and decided in 1970 to offer its building to the County, resolving that "it has always been the Club's policy to do what is was thought best for the Town." A rental agreement was drawn up in 1971 and the new county branch opened at the Spring Street location in 1972. The County Board decided to name it The Herndon Fortnightly Library to honor the club that had operated the library for over eighty years through volunteer service and local fundraising.

As a result of this change, The Fortnightly Club was no longer involved in running the library and turned their energies to other activities. The club decided to award a scholarship in library science. The first scholarship was awarded in the 1972-73 school year. One \$500 scholarship

would be awarded each year to a Herndon High School graduate who was to major in library science. The first scholarship recipient was Cindy Woodruff.

In the mid-1980s Mayor Richard Thoesen and County Supervisor Nancy Falck, approached The Fortnightly Club, asking members to give their support for a new library building. The club supported the recommendation. It was then suggested that the club might sell their property to the County so that the lot might be used for a parking area for the County Fire Department next door. After much discussion the club decided that the library would not be for sale.

By 1990 plans were under the way for construction of the new library in the center of downtown Herndon. The club members started a full blown campaign to petition the Fairfax County Library Board to retain the name "Herndon Fortnightly Library." The club obtained a resolution of support from the Town Council and appeared before the Library Board armed with petition signatures and numerous letters of support from Herndon businesses. The Library Board agreed to retain the name.

In 1993 ground was broken for the new library on Center Street and the club members started considering the future of the old library building. The new library was ready to be occupied in May of 1995. That same month the club accepted an offer for the old building by the Religious Society of Friends to be used for their Meeting House.

When the ownership of the old library building was transferred to the Friends, the club changed its name from The Fortnightly Club and Library Association to The Herndon Fortnightly Club.

For years the club held their meetings in people's homes. In October of 1995 they held their first meeting in the new Herndon Fortnightly Library. The focus of the club now shifted to the scholarship program. Due to lack of scholarship candidates who planned to study library science, the club changed its policy. A club scholarship committee was formed that established new policies by which scholarships would be awarded. Slowly the amount of the scholarships awarded increased over the years. As of 2013, \$184,000 had been awarded to deserving students and adults who wish to further their education.

One of the oldest organizations in the Town of Herndon, the hard work and forethought of the ladies of The Fortnightly Club resulted in the creation the Fairfax County's first lending library and a distinguished 128 year record of service to the Town of 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.