

Herndon's History, In Brief

By Barbara Glakas

The town of Herndon is located on the northwest side of Fairfax County, Virginia. Handmade arrowhead points were once uncovered on the property of the Herndon Centennial Golf Course and in Herndon's 58-acre natural park, Runnymede Park. These arrowheads are thousands of years old, indicating the long-ago presence of Prehistoric Indians, possibly attracted by the abundant wildlife and plant life, as well as the nearby water sources, Sugarland Run and the Folly Lick stream branch.

It is believed that the first home in the area that we now consider the incorporated limits of the town of Herndon was possibly built as early as the 1770s, near the present location of Herndon Middle School. That home was torn down in the 1960s. Another early home, thought to be built c. 1783, still stands on Dranesville Road. Between the 1700s and 1840 there were only a small handful of homes built in the yet-to-be-named village of Herndon. It was not until the 1850s that the growth of the village started flourishing, marked by the coming of a steam sawmill located near the present-day block surrounded by Elden, Spring and Locust Streets, as well as the coming of the railroad, initially called the Alexandria, Loudoun and Hampshire Railroad. (The name of the railroad would change many times over the years). At that time the village area was predominantly a dairy farming community and the rail helped the farmers bring their products more efficiently to market to places such as Washington, D.C.

Businesses and residences started popping up around the train station when it was first built in c. 1857. Within twenty years – especially in Herndon's downtown core area along Elden, Station, Lynn, Center, Spring, Grace, Monroe and Pine Streets – buildings dotted the village landscape. In addition to residences, these buildings included churches, schools, grist and saw mills, a blacksmith shop and general stores. Soon after would come other businesses, including a butcher shop, a jewelry store, a pharmacy, a doctor's office, a harness shop and a livery.

The train depot became the center of the village and a post office was established inside the building in 1858. The depot also housed a small supply store. The post office was named the Herndon Post Office in honor of the brave Commander William Lewis Herndon, a Virginian who was the captain of the *S.S. Central America*. Commander Herndon died at sea after his ship encountered a disastrous hurricane and sank in the Atlantic Ocean in 1857, the year before the post office opened. Although the village was not yet incorporated or named, the area was sometimes referred to as "Herndon Station," after the post office in the new depot station house.

There was a limited amount of military activity in the village (of Herndon) during the Civil War. Military units and individual troops sometimes passed around and through the village. On March 17, 1863, a raid was conducted in the village by Confederate Captain John Singleton Mosby and his Rangers at the sawmill that was mentioned earlier. Although individual village

residents were known to have varied allegiances during the war, they generally supported and respected each other as members of the same community.

After the Civil War the population of the village continued to grow, partially attributed to northerners who came south to invest in Virginia's affordable land and to take advantage of warmer climates. The first public schools in town were established in the late 1860s.

The majority of the members of the first town council were northerners who had transplanted to the Herndon area. In 1879 the village was formally incorporated as the Town of Herndon, establishing its boundaries measuring a little over four square miles. In the town's first Federal census in 1880 the town's population was 422. The Herndon area soon became known as the capital of Virginia's dairy farming industry, with downtown Herndon becoming its commercial center, where local farming families could come to buy farming equipment and supplies, groceries, dry goods, pharmaceuticals and other needed merchandise.

Through the world wars, Herndon continued to thrive as a close-knit farming community. Herndon residents communicated via letters or the telegraph in the Herndon depot. Telephone service first came to Herndon in the 1890s. By the early 1910s gas lights were installed in downtown Herndon and the railroad went electric. In the 1920s the town's volunteer fire department was established, and residents started slowly replacing their horses and wagons with automobiles. The town established its own water system in the 1930s.

By the 1950s, passenger service on the railroad eventually waned and was replaced by freight. In the 1960 census, the town's population was coincidentally 1,960 people. Finally, the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad stopped service in 1968.

The 1962 opening of the Dulles International Airport - located about one and a half miles outside of Herndon's corporate limits - caused significant growth in the town. The growth brought new residential subdivisions and shopping centers, such as The Pines Center, The Dulles Park Shopping Center and the Chandon neighborhood. The once small farming community eventually developed into a vibrant suburban community. By 1970 the town population had doubled from the previous census.

In the 1970s the old railroad track bed started being converted into a hike and bike trail. The paving of the trail out to Herndon was completed in 1981.

In the early 21st century, as part of the vibrant Dulles Technology Corridor, the town continued to grow, with more residential neighborhoods, retail stores and office buildings. Today the population of the Town of Herndon is approximately 25,000 people and Herndon will soon have its own Metrorail stop. Nevertheless, the Town is still known for its small town feel with its accessible Town government, its many community and entertainment activities, its many volunteer opportunities, and its historic district which protects historic structures, such as the original train depot, which now houses a town museum.

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.