

Incorporation Day and the First Town Council

The Town of Herndon's Incorporated Beginnings

By Barbara Glakas

Herndon officially became an incorporated Town on January 14, 1879 -- Incorporation Day! In the year 2017 the Town celebrates its 138th birthday.

Prior to becoming an incorporated Town, Herndon was but a small, un-named village within the Dranesville District of Fairfax County. One of the first signs of settlement in Herndon was the construction of homes that date back to the late 1700s.

The coming of the railroad and its Depot in the late 1850s stimulated greater growth, including the construction of a mill. The Depot became the center of the village, with homes and businesses popping up all around it. The Depot also got a new post office in 1858, named the Herndon Post Office.

By 1878, schools, churches, general stores, a blacksmith shop, a wheelwright shop and a Good Templar Hall dotted the downtown area. The businesses around the Depot supported the local farmers and their families. Milk was shipped into Washington via the rail. Village commuters also used the rail to travel to Washington for work and for cultural opportunities. Conversely, Washingtonians used the rail to travel out to the village for a summer respite away from the city heat.

By 1879 the village had about 400 inhabitants. Most of them were farmers and laborers, while many others had occupations such as wheelwrights, millworkers, railroad workers, carpenters, blacksmiths, doctors, clergymen, shoemakers and government workers.

At some unknown point in time, the village people decided to increase their self-determination by becoming incorporated. As an incorporated town, the village – which adopted the name of its post office – was allowed to become a municipality within its defined geographic limits and was authorized to govern itself. The grant of these powers, and the authorization for a Town Charter, was provided by an act of the Virginia General Assembly on January 14, 1879.

Specifically, Herndon's original Town Charter explained:

“Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia, That the following described territory in the County of Fairfax shall be and the same is hereby declared a town corporate, under the name and style of the Town of Herndon and by that name and style shall have and exercise the powers hereinafter granted.”

The original boundaries of the town were described in a very lengthy way, using the names of resident's properties to describe its boundaries. An excerpt of the boundary description is as follows,

“Beginning at the southwest corner of William Urich’s farm, on the county road, and running thence southeasterly on the line between Urich and Coleman; also, on the line between Williams and Webster farm, and across the land of C. H. Bliss to the Thornton tract...”

As a result of incorporation, a Town Council was formed – elected men who would govern the town by a system of ordinances. The council had the authority to levy road and corporation taxes, mark the boundaries of the streets and sidewalks, regulate large animals, provide trees, establish a fire department, adopt health regulations, provide for order and quiet, and punish those who violated ordinances.

The original town charter provided that the Town have a council of seven, elected annually, with the mayor to be elected from and by the council for a term of one year. Later, the town charter was amended to provide for the popular election of the mayor and council every two years. The Mayor was to be the presiding officer of Town Council meetings but was to have no vote except in the case of a tie. The Mayor would also have the jurisdiction and authority as a justice of the peace within the town limits.

On February 8, 1879, about one month after incorporation, a group of men met in the station house (Herndon Depot) for the purpose of organizing a board of Councilmen for the newly incorporated Town of Herndon.

It is not clear how these seven men – along with the Town Clerk and the Town Sergeant – came to be selected as the first official officers of the Town. Presumably an election had been held amongst the Townspeople sometime after the January 14th Incorporation Day, but such an election was never mentioned in the Town minutes. The first Town Council minutes were taken on February 8th – not on January 14th -- when these men gathered to be sworn in. They took an oath of office that is similar in part to the one that is used today:

“...declaring ourselves citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia and do solemnly swear that we will support and maintain the Constitution and laws of the United States and the Constitution and the laws of the state of Virginia; that we recognize and accept the civil and political equality of all men before the law; and that we will faithfully perform the duties of councilmen, Clerk, and Sergeant according to the act passed and approved January 14, 1879 to incorporate the Town of Herndon to the best of my ability, so help me God.”

Richard Coleman was the Fairfax County Justice of the Peace who swore in the councilmen. The seven councilmen were Isaiah Bready, Ancel St. John, William Urich, Stephen Killam, William D. Sweetser, Lawrence Hindle, and C. H. Hathaway. The first Town Clerk was H.W. Blanchard, and the first Town Sergeant was C. M. Burton.

Once the men were sworn in, Mr. Killam was selected as the President of the meeting. The men then proceeded to the business of electing their Mayor. Mr. Sweetser was appointed as the teller. The ballots were counted and Ancel St. John was duly elected Mayor. However, Mr. St. John immediately “respectfully declined” the job. The meeting minutes only say that he gave his reasons but, unfortunately, the minutes did not specify what those reasons were. As a result, Mr. Bready was then next elected and he became the Town’s first Mayor.

The meeting was then adjourned and they planned to meet the next time in the school house on Center Street on February 22. The first and only order of business at that meeting was to “borrow five dollars on six months” time to pay expenses of “Stationery & C.”

By the March meeting, conducted in Councilman Hindle’s home, they prepared a bond in the sum of two hundred dollars to pay the Town Sergeant. They next voted on a committee of two, appointed to recommend ordinances to the council.

The council had no official location to meet, so for the next many meetings they met in various places, such as in homes, in the Herndon School and in the Depot. By late March, the first ordinance had been drafted. This ordinance directed the opening of certain streets for public use by the 15th of May. The streets mentioned in the ordinance were parts of Adams, Madison and Jackson Streets.

The men serving on the first Town Council were all prominent men and/or land owners. They were all Northerners who moved to the Herndon area sometime between the 1850s and 1870. Below is a short description of the seven men who served on Herndon’s first Town Council.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1830, Isaiah Bready’s family had already come to the Herndon village sometime in the 1850s, investing in land. Bready was a dairy farmer. After his father died in 1859, he was left with the land that is now Herndon’s Centennial Golf Course as well as additional land that lay east of the golf course up to Grace Street. His home was the grand stone house at the northwest corner of Vine Street and Main Drive, which still stands today. He had several children and he continued serving as Mayor until 1882. He died in 1913.

Ancel St. John – the oldest of the councilman – was born in 1799. We speculate his age may have been a possible reason why he did not accept the position of Mayor, given he was 80 years old at the time of incorporation. He tended to be a transient person, born in New York and spending his later life in New Jersey, Washington D.C. and Herndon. St. John was a broker and took advantage of good post-war land prices. In 1865 he, along with another friend, bought 400 acres in the central part of Herndon. He played a very significant role in mapping, parceling and selling lots; those lot boundaries still remain true today. He was instrumental in establishing some of Herndon’s first churches and schools. He resigned from the Town Council in April of 1880 and returned to New Jersey where he died in 1883.

William Urich was born in Pennsylvania in about 1832. The townspeople often referred to him as “Colonel” or “General,” but military service record evidence has yet to be found that substantiates that rank. He lived in the stately square white house at the north east corner of Elden and Grace Streets, later owned by the Sasher family. He was a farmer and his farm was located in the vicinity of the current Chandon subdivision. He and Mayor Bready served on the sub-committee that started forming the town’s first ordinances. Urich was later elected as the Town’s second Mayor, after Isaiah Bready. He served in that position until 1886.

Stephen Killam was born in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1811. He was known to have lived on Monroe Street. He was a retired merchant and later a railroad agent. He served as the town’s postmaster from 1868-1882 and, for a while, he operated a store in the railroad station. He served on the council until 1880. He became the first president of the Cemetery Association, a group of citizens who established and cared for the local cemetery, now known as Chestnut Grove Cemetery. Former resident, Lottie Dyer, once commented that she revered his memory because “he had done so much in planning the town, in planting trees and helping to beautify the community.” He died in 1888.

William D. Sweetser was born in Maine in about 1824. Sweetser lived in a house on the west side of Station Street – now the parking lot between the Great Harvest Bread Company and the Dominion Animal Hospital. Looking out his front window he could see directly up Pine Street. Lottie Dyer, described him as being “straight and tall.” Before moving to Herndon he was a house carpenter and joiner. He was known to be one of the town’s early teachers, teaching at a little school on Monroe Street, which later burned down. He served on the council until 1880. He served, off and on, as the town’s postmaster between the years 1882 and 1901, and he also kept a store in the station house. He died in 1902.

Lawrence Hindle was born in Lancaster, England in 1809. He was a farmer. He lived in New York before the Civil War. He started buying land in Herndon in the 1860s. He was a member of St. Timothy’s Church and he was also a trustee for the Herndon School Association in 1871-72. He owned land in various spots around town, including land on Lynn Street. An 1878 map of the Town showed his store on Lynn Street, which is now known as the Nachman building. At one point he transferred a piece of his land to the town for public use which ultimately became the town “plaza,” the parking area in front of the stores on Lynn Street. He served on the council up to 1882. He died in 1886.

C. H. Hathaway was the least known of all the first councilmen, with no census documents placing him in this area. However, some Fairfax County birth and death records show that a Charles H. and Hellen C. Hathaway had one baby who died in 1875 and two others who were born in 1877 and 1879. This is the time frame that the Town was being incorporated. Charles was born in 1843 in Massachusetts and owned a farm. He spent most of his life in New England and a census document dated 1880 placed him back in Massachusetts. Town Council minutes

also show that he served on the Town Council up until March of 1880. Clearly, Mr. Hathaway did not spend much time in Herndon. He died in 1903.

Many of these men presumably came to the village of Herndon out of opportunity. Some of them ultimately returned to their northern homes, but many stayed in the Town of Herndon, and remained there for the rest of their lives, putting down family roots and helping the Town grow, prosper and thrive.

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.