

Ladies Auxiliary of the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department

By Barbara Glakas

In the early 1900s, before Herndon had electricity, heat was primarily provided by coal or wood stoves and light was provided by oil lamps. Most of the buildings in Herndon were wood frame and had wood-shingled roofs as well, which provided plenty of tinder for accidental fires.

One March evening in 1917 a fire broke out in Harrison's livery stable on Station Street in downtown Herndon. This resulted in what is called "The Big Fire," an unbridled fire which destroyed many homes and businesses along Station and Pine Streets. This is the event that prompted the organization of the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department (HVFD).

After the fire, the Herndon Town Council started discussing fire prevention codes, they appointed a fire chief, and they collaborated with the Herndon Citizens Association to purchase and chemical fire engine. The endeavor was costly and it took quite a while, but by early 1921 Herndon had its new fire engine. A temporary wooden shelter was built for the fire engine.

A more permanent fire house was needed. The Citizen's Association played a major role in fundraising, organizing fireman's carnivals and selling bricks to help pay for a new building.

By 1929 a new fire engine was purchased and a brick fire station was built on what is now Station Street, across the street and to the west of Herndon's train depot and Town Hall. That same year the HVFD was officially chartered with the Commonwealth of Virginia. Soon after, the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department's Ladies Auxiliary group was formed.

The first meeting of the Ladies Auxiliary occurred on April 1, 1930, with eleven ladies attending: Mrs. Russell Lynn, Mrs. Eudora Armfield, Mrs. Florence Taylor, Mrs. Cora Hurst, Mrs. Henry Moffett, Mrs. Ernest Duke, Miss Duke, Mrs. Agnes Chappelle, Mrs. Holden Harrison, Miss Majorie Reed and Mary Hurst. They elected officers, with Mrs. Armfield elected President, Mrs. Taylor elected Treasurer, and Mary Hurst elected Secretary. They established a Publicity Committee and then agreed to meet again the following week.

At the second meeting 23 ladies attended. They elected two Vice Presidents – Mrs. Russell Lynn and Mrs. Arthur Buell – and then went on to set up a Membership Committee, a Laws Committee, and a Ways and Means Committee. Annual membership dues were set at one dollar.

By their third meeting they approved their first fundraising event, a dance at Herndon High School. Looking ahead, they also decided to plan a minstrel show of local talent once school was out.

The Auxiliary President, Mrs. Eudora Armfield (1889-1962), was a seamstress who lived on Jefferson Street and was an active Herndon citizen. She was an officer in the Order of the Eastern Star, a voter registrar and an officer on the Herndon Citizens Association. The new Ladies Auxiliary group she led played a vital role in the success of the HVFD. While the

volunteer firemen fought fires in Herndon and all around western Fairfax County, the Ladies Auxiliary group was responsible for fundraising to pay for the fire equipment. In addition to trucks and other large equipment the Auxiliary also raised money for other items such as helmets and boots. In 1940 the Ladies Auxiliary presented the fire department with its first ambulance.

Through a strenuous fundraising campaign the Ladies Auxiliary paid off the debt on the new station and equipment. For many years social activities in the Town revolved around the activities that were planned by the Ladies Auxiliary. In addition to a carnival, the Ladies Auxiliary sponsored dances, Bingo nights, vaudeville shows, plays, card parties, dinners and food sales.

In addition to fundraising for fire equipment, the Ladies Auxiliary also supported the firefighters with food when they were working at a big fire or other disasters. When the ladies became aware that the firemen were out on a long-term call, they would go to the site of the fire and provide the fire fighters with sandwiches and drinks. The Ladies Auxiliary was always appreciated for their care of the firefighters.

The small brick firehouse on Station Street was replaced with a new firehouse on Spring Street in 1950. Once again, the HVFD and their Ladies Auxiliary group had to pay for the new building and continued their energetic fundraising efforts.

A poem entitled "Little Ole House," written by W.S. Thornberry, a former co-chairman of the HVFD sales committee, describes his call for support for a fundraising auction that would be held on the front pad of the fire house:

Little Ole House.

There's a little ole house,
On a street named Spring,
With a siren on top,
The firemen to bring.

Like any little house,
On any given street,
There are bills to pay,
And a mortgage to meet.

So once every year,
As the trees turn pale,
This little old house,
Has an auction sale.

That lamp in your attic,
Or that discarded dish,

A fireman will come get it,
As soon as you wish.

A lot of old articles,
You may think of as trash,
The firemen will take them,
And turn them to cash.

So if you will look around,
And give us a call,
You'll be helping the firemen,
Bring better service to all.

Herndon Vol. Fire Dept.
Phone – Herndon 100.

By the mid-1970s it was determined that the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department would be incorporated into the Fairfax County Fire Department. The Ladies Auxiliary had discussions about how to distribute their equipment. They inventoried their property and then decided to allow the Auxiliary members to take what they wanted. Remaining equipment would be offered to the local churches. Items that were distributed included kitchen equipment, a stove, metal cabinets, uniforms, draperies and other décor. It was also determined that any Auxiliary member who wanted to keep her uniform could do so, and remaining uniforms would go to Good Will. One such uniform is currently on display in the Herndon Depot Museum.

Some of the HVFD firemen applied and were hired by the County and became known as “paid men.” Some of the volunteers continued to work fires alongside the paid men for a while. In the meanwhile the volunteer firemen and the Ladies Auxiliary continued to pay dues in order to maintain their group life insurance policy. At some point, however, the volunteers stopped working and all operations were handled by the County.

Although the Ladies Auxiliary voted to retain their officers for the 1977-1978 year, the last set of minutes found in Herndon Depot Museum was dated November 7, 1977.

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.