

The Untimely Death of Mrs. Martz

By Barbara Glakas

Herndon resident, Mrs. Sarah “Sallie” V. Martz, lived in a stone house on a grassy knoll that is still located in Runnymede Park - the town of Herndon’s 58-acre nature park - about 500 feet from Sugarland Run, the stream that flows along the east side of town. In December of 1952 her lifeless body was found in the cistern on her property.

Sarah “Sallie” Miley was born in 1870 in Loudoun County. Her father was a farmer and she had two siblings. By 1900 she was thirty years old and still single, living with her sister and brother-in-law in Loudoun. She made her living as a seamstress.

In about 1909, Sallie married Cornelius F. Martz. They married somewhat late in life, both being about 39 years old at the time. Similarly, Cornelius was also born in Loudoun County in 1870. His father was also a farmer and Cornelius had at least seven siblings.

It was shortly after they got married, between 1910 and 1912, that the Martz’s bought several acres of land where the stone house is located in what is now Runnymede Park. The house is believed to have been built c. 1909 and previously occupied by James A. Hawkins, his wife, Georgette, and his step-son, Marcel.

Cornelius and Sallie Martz had no children. In the early years Sallie’s mother, Sharlotte Miley, lived with the couple. In 1910 Cornelius was a clerk at a retail furniture store in Herndon and, like many people of that time, he farmed as well. Sallie continued to be a dressmaker.

A teenaged nephew, Ernest Martz, lived with Cornelius and Sallie in the 1920s. Ernest would go on to attend the University of Maryland and become a long-time Herndon pharmacist who worked in a drug store in downtown Herndon. From the 1930s on forward, Sallie and Cornelius lived alone in their stone house. Cornelius would go on to do full-time farming.

By 1940 the Martz’s were both 70 years old and their house was worth \$500. The house measured 15 feet by 38 feet, with 18-inch thick stone walls. It had three chimneys and the roof had diamond shaped terracotta colored cement shingles, capped by clay tiles on the roof ridge. A cellar could be accessed from a hatch in the kitchen floor. Floors and ceilings were made of sturdy tongue and groove boards. A 10’ by 12’ shed was also located on the north side of the house, considered by architects to be similar age as the house. A cistern was located on the north side of the house.

A cistern is an underground tank or receptacle to store water. Some cisterns collect rain water and some are fed by underground springs. This water can be used for either drinking water or for common household tasks, such as for washing clothes.

It is unclear when the cistern at Mrs. Martz's house was first built. A sketch that accompanied an assessment of the house that was conducted in 1995 by a historic architecture and preservation consultant depicted a "concrete cistern." However, the report otherwise remained silent on the cistern.

Some Herndon employees recall that the cistern was a rectangle shape, measured about 6 feet by 4 feet and was about 10 to 12 feet deep. It had a hinged lid on the top and some recall that it had cinder block walls all the way down.

In 1947 Cornelius died of heart disease. Sallie continued to live alone in her stone house after her husband's death.

A 1952 *Fairfax Herald* newspaper article reported how Sallie had last been seen by a neighbor on Monday, December 15. The neighbor had taken Sallie back home to her house after a trip to the grocery store where Sallie had purchased several groceries. Sallie was 82 years old by then and the neighbor offered to help Sallie carry the groceries into her house, but Sallie declined the offer.

The following Saturday Sallie's brother, Robert Miley, visited Sallie's house but was unable to find her after "searching vainly." Robert contacted the Herndon police. They found Sallie's body in about two feet of water in the cistern and it was reported that the cistern itself was about ten feet deep. Exactly how long she had been in the cistern was unknown. Sallie Martz's death certificate says she died of "exposure to wet and cold... some debris in her lungs." Her cane and a candle were found on the ground next to the cistern. The police surmised that Mrs. Martz must have fallen through the top of the cistern while she was bringing her bags of groceries into the house. The police also concluded that the death was accidental since they found \$300 on her. To some her death would remain a mystery. She is buried in Herndon's Chestnut Grove Cemetery.

After Sallie died her stone house passed down to heirs, who later sold it to the Carroll family in 1953. The Carrolls lived in the house until the late 1980s. The Town of Herndon later bought the property. In its later years the cistern was covered with plywood. The plywood cover was constantly being removed by vandals with trash thrown in it. Eventually, the Herndon Department of Public Works filled the cistern with gravel rock and nailed down the plywood cover. Recently, the top of the cistern was completely removed and the land on the north side of the stone house was covered over with sod. There is no longer any visible evidence that a cistern was once there.

The Town of Herndon now owns the stone house and renovated its exterior in 2018. Mrs. Martz's former unique stone home, in the beautiful natural surroundings of Runnymede Park, is now considered one of Herndon's historic sites.

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.