

A Poem for a Soldier of the Sea

By Barbara Glakas

Found in the storage closet of the Herndon Depot Museum was a framed poem entitled “Herndon,” written by Silas Weir Mitchell (1829 – 1914). The framed poem was donated by the wife of Brodie S. Herndon (a member of the family of Commander William Lewis Herndon).

Mitchell was a prominent physician, scientist, novelist and poet from Pennsylvania. Mitchell studied at the University of Pennsylvania and the Jefferson Medical College. He later served as an army surgeon during the Civil War. He wrote 170 medical essays on various topics. He also published short stories, poems, children’s stories and novels. Some of his poems were praised by Edgar Allen Poe.

His poem, “Herndon,” was written in 1857 and can be found in the book, *Complete Poems of S. Weir Mitchell*.

The year 1857 was the year that Commander William Lewis Herndon’s ship sank in the Atlantic Ocean at the hands of a horrendous hurricane. Approximately 152 out of the 575 passengers aboard his ship survived. Commander Herndon went down with his ship and, later, many of the survivors spoke of his calm and bravery during the disaster, including the survivor who later happened into an unnamed village in Fairfax County and suggested that their new post office be named after the brave sea captain, Herndon. Both the Commonwealths of Virginia and Pennsylvania have towns named after Commander Herndon, as well as several other small unincorporated places around the United States.

The framed poem was donated to the Herndon Historical Society by Mrs. Brodie S. Herndon in 1981. Brodie Strachan Herndon IV was a native of Fredericksburg, Virginia, who was born in 1901 and died in 1977. His ancestor, Dr. Brodie Strachnan Herndon, Sr., was the brother of Commander William Lewis Herndon, the namesake of the Town of Herndon.

S. Weir Mitchell prefaced his poem with this statement:

“On September 12th, 1857, the [S.S.] *Central America* was lost at sea in a great storm off Cape Hatteras. Captain William Lewis Herndon of the Navy was in command. His tranquil courage preserved discipline up to the last, and until his passengers, officers and crew were all in the boats. Seeing that the last boat was already overloaded, Captain Herndon refused to add to its danger, and ordering it off down with his ship.”

Mitchell’s poem, “Herndon,” is reprinted below in full:

Ay, shout and rave, thou cruel sea,
In triumph o’er that fated deck;
Grown holy by another grave,
Thou hast the captain of the wreck.

No prayer was said, no lesson read,

O'er him, the soldier of the sea;
And yet for him, through all the land,
A thousand thoughts tonight shall be.

And many an eye shall dim with tears,
And many a cheek be flushed with pride;
And men shall say, There died a man;
And boys shall learn how well he died.

Ay, weep for him his noble soul
Is with God who made it great;
But weep not for so proud a death,
We could not spare so grand a fate.

Nor could humanity resign
That hour which bade her heart beat high,
And blazoned duty's stainless shield,
And set a star in honor's sky.

Oh dreary night! Oh grave of hope!
Oh sea, and dark unpitying sky!
Full many a wreck these waves shall claim,
Ere such heart shall die.

Alas! How can we help but mourn,
When hero bosoms yield their breath!
A century itself may bear
But once the flower of such a death.

So full of manliness, so sweet
With utmost duty nobly done;
So thronged with deeds, so filled with life,
As though with death that life begun.

It HAS begun, true gentleman!
No better life we ask for thee;
Thy Viking soul and woman heart
Forever shall a beacon be.

A starry thought to veering souls,
To teach it is not best to live;
To show that life has naught to match
Such knighthood as the grave can give.

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.