

## **Railroad Infrastructure**

By Barbara Glakas

The Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad started running through the town of Herndon in 1860. The railroad would go through several name changes over the years, finally becoming the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad in 1936.

The railroad, however, was not simply made up of a train and railroad tracks. The railroad infrastructure included several pieces of large-scale devices, equipment, and buildings, that would help the railroad run efficiently. Specifically, the infrastructure in Herndon included a depot (or train station house), auxiliary buildings, sidings, wyes, turntables, and whistle posts. Herndon is fortunate to have some of that original infrastructure, although there were a number of changes over the years.

All of the auxiliary buildings are gone. Remnants of the wye -- a triangular arrangement of three pieces of track where locomotives could turn around - could still be seen in Herndon on aerial photographs up to about 1940. The wye used to be located in what is now the Fortnightly neighborhood.

The railroad stopped operating in 1968 and the track was taken up after that for the construction of the W&OD hike and bike trail. Paving of the trail was completed to Herndon in 1981. The 1860 Herndon Depot and an 1890s era whistle post still remain.

The railroad track was built out to Herndon in the late 1850s. An engineer's report dated November 1, 1859, stated:

“The rails are now laid over the whole of the division, with the exception of the sidings at Lewis Johnston's, at the beginning of section 17, and at Herndon, Section 23.”

This confirms that that railroad track had been laid in Herndon by November of 1859, but was still missing its siding, a second short piece of track that ran parallel to the main track where locomotives could pull off to the side in order to allow other trains to pass. Ultimately, a siding would be constructed in the area adjacent to the depot, although we are not sure of the date that occurred. We see in a later track map dated 1916 that another siding appeared west of the depot, in the vicinity of Center Street.

Regarding the depot building, the engineer indicated in his November 1859 report that only one brick and two wooden station houses had been finished. In a previous report he indicated that the Falls Church and Vienna depots were “nearly finished” and so we conclude those were the two wooden depots that had been finished in November. There was no mention of Herndon's depot until his report dated October 1860, in which he said, “Depot buildings have been erected at Herndon, Guilford, Farmwell, and Leesburg stations.” We surmise that the Herndon depot was built sometime in early 1860, as the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad's first

timetable – dated January 16, 1860 – listed Herndon as one of the stations. The railroad started running a full schedule out to Leesburg in May of 1860.

The engineer mentioned the size of the Herndon depot, saying, “At Herndon, a passenger and freight house, 20 by 55 feet.” The earliest known photograph of the Herndon depot is estimated to be dated circa 1890. However, we do not believe that the photo depicts the original configuration of the depot. A diagram dated July 1887 shows the “proposed change at Herndon” station house. This diagram showed a new floorplan and a sketch of the north side of the depot, with a new addition on the east side labelled “Reception Room.” There were two other rooms in that sketch: a small office and a larger freight room. Another undated floor plans shows the same configuration, comprised of a 23.5’ x 18.5’ freight room, a 11.5 x 10’ office, and a 18.5 x 14.5’ waiting room. The depot was a board and batten wood frame building with a tin roof. Both floorplans show two freight doors on the north and south sides, two exterior doors on the north and east sides, seven windows and an eight-foot wood platform that ran around the east, south and west sides. This is the same configuration as shown in the c. 1890 photo; therefore, the original Herndon depot may have been smaller than what is shown in the c. 1890 photo.

Another early photo of the Herndon depot is dated c. 1905. In that photo the depot appears to still have the same configuration as in the 1887 proposed plan and the c. 1890 photo.

The Herndon depot continued to go through changes over the years. In the Interstate Commerce Commission valuation records of 1918, there is an indication that several depots along the railroad may have gone through some structural changes including, “Herndon, January 14, 1904.” It is at this time that we believe another extension may have been made to the east side of the depot. In addition to a bay window on the north side, there were additional doors and windows on the east end, and a second chimney. A 1907 photo that the Herndon Historical Society has on file shows that the bay window was present that year. It is commonly known that the addition of a second waiting room in the railroad depots provided for separate waiting rooms for White and Black passengers.

By 1912 the railroad had electrified, providing for electric trolley cars. A brick electric substation was built onto the east side of the Herndon depot. A 1947 photo of the Herndon depot with the brick substation, also indicates that yet another addition had been made to the west side of the Herndon depot, as evidenced by an additional freight door and roofing tiles on the west end that appear to be a different color. We are not sure when the west side addition occurred.

At some unknown point in time, the floor of the freight room was elevated. The 1887 sketch of the north side of the depot shows the freight door being at ground level. But later photos show that the sill of the freight door is higher. This resulted in three steps inside the depot to get up into the freight room. The elevated freight room floor made it possible to roll freight out of the door, onto a ramp, and directly into a railroad boxcar door.

Alas, the west addition of the depot did not last. In the 1970s, when the north end of Spring Street was being extended in order to allow it to be connected to the south end of Station Street, a few feet of the west end of the depot needed to be cut off in order for that street improvement to occur.

According to Virginia Clarity, an early Herndon Historical Society member, "More renovations to the building took place in 1992, with the installation of a new roof, rebuilt chimney, floor refinishing, and new paint."

That is what we know about the changes that occurred to the Herndon depot building over the years. There were other nearby buildings in our downtown that used to be associated with the railroad company. For instance, some held overflow freight and some held railroad tools and equipment. Those buildings no longer exist.

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*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](http://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](http://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](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*