

## Mrs. Stearns's Dynamited Home

By Barbara Glakas

On a March evening of 1917 a fire started in Harrison's livery stable on Station Street, a wooden building that formerly sat on the lot of 845 Station Street (now The Closet thrift shop lot).

Although the fire was quickly discovered by a few people at around 10:30 PM, Herndon had no fire department or alarm system at that time, and the fire was unable to be contained. Within minutes three buildings along Station Street were fully engulfed. The intense heat and the hot embers that floated through the air helped spread the fire to other buildings along Station Street, as well as across the street to buildings along the north side of Pine Street.

Buildings on the north side of Pine Street included the Walker Building (then the tallest building in Fairfax County), Robey's drug store and residence, Oliver's harness shop and residence, and a home owned by Mrs. Florence Irene Stearns, which was then being occupied by Cable C. and Mabel C. Stephens. Next to the Stearns home, at the corner of Pine and Monroe Streets, was the Congregational Church, built c. 1873.

The *Herndon Observer* reported that it was feared that if the church burned down, then several homes that were along Monroe Street might also be consumed by the fire. It was decided that the Stearns home would have to be dynamited in order to create a fire break and stop the fire from spreading to the church and beyond.

A 1917 news article from *The Washington Times* reported:

“A committee of citizens decided drastic action must be taken. The committee composed of Dr. Ernest Robey, W. [R.] Harrison, H.A. Gifford, and B. [S.] McGuire, called in Mrs. Stearns. ‘We can save the residential section,’ said Dr. Robey, the spokesman, ‘if you will permit your home to be destroyed.’ The flames were very, very near, and it was impossible to save any of the chattels, which represented practically all of Mrs. Stearns worldly goods. ‘If you can save the town,’ replied Mrs. Stearns, ‘do what you need to with my house.’ ”

Realistically, the fate of Mrs. Stearns's home was doomed. It would either be destroyed by the fire or by the dynamite. A charge of 35 pounds of dynamite that had been brought up from Mc Nair's quarry at Floris, and was immediately placed under the foundations of the house and set off, bringing the house to the ground. Water was then poured onto the ruins.

According to Charles Mauro's book, *Herndon, A Town and Its History*,

“The explosion could be heard for a mile around and broke windows within a radius of several blocks. It completely wrecked the dwelling and effectually stopped the progress of the flames in that direction.”

This fire would become known as the Big Fire of 1917 and ultimately destroyed a significant part of Herndon's business district, including the livery stable, a telephone office, a drug store, a newspaper office, a grocery store, a furniture store, a jewelry store, a blacksmith shop, a harness shop, and several residences.

Within a few years following the fire, the Town of Herndon established a Volunteer Fire Department. The Herndon Town Council also passed an ordinance requiring new buildings to be constructed with fire-proof materials, such as brick or stone. Buildings along Station and Pine Streets were eventually re-built. The buildings we see today along the north side of Pine Street, and along Station Street between Pine and Center Streets, are all post-fire rebuilds.

Mrs. Stearns initially bought the home on Pine Street in 1906. That same year she had sold 27 acres elsewhere in Fairfax County's Dranesville District. A handwritten note on the deed indicated that the deed was mailed to Mrs. Stearns in Floris, Virginia. Soon after, tax bills were being sent to her in Herndon. In 1916, tax bills started being mailed to her in Washington, D.C.

The 1910 Herndon census showed that Mr. and Mrs. Cabble Stephens, a young couple from Maryland in their 20s, were renting Mrs. Stearns's home on Pine Street. Ironically, Cabble Stephen's occupation that year was a keeper of a livery stable.

After the fire, Mr. and Mrs. Stephens rented a home on Elden Street. Cabble Stephens later became a mail carrier – a job he would have for the rest of his life. The Stephens remained in Herndon and ultimately bought a home on Elden Street. Cabble and Mabel died in 1948 and 1961, respectively, and are buried in Beallsville, Maryland.

It is not known what became of Mrs. Stearns in the immediate years after the fire. However, we do know that she sold the Pine Street lot where her house once stood to Albert Page Wrenn in 1920, with the deed indicating that Mrs. Stearns was now "of Washington, D.C." She sold the lot for approximately \$450. This represented a great loss for Mrs. Stearns, for she had initially bought the property in 1906 for approximately \$1,400. Mrs. Stearns died in 1948 and is buried in Alexandria, Virginia.

The Wrenns sold the Pine Street lot to James E. Wilkins in 1921 who, in turn, sold it to James A. Smart in 1923. The 1923 transaction was priced more expensively than in 1921, and Smart started being taxed on a \$500 building in 1924. This indicates that the current building at 714 Pine Street was likely built by Wilkins in 1923.

Over the years this building has changed hands several times. It was a residence for many years, belonging to James and Lillian Smart, and later to George and Guy McGlincy. In more recent years it has housed various businesses such as a law office, a real estate office, a wellness center, and the Elden Street Tea Shop.

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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).*