

Durbin Van Vleck's Subdivision

By Barbara Glakas

One of Herndon's early subdivisions is the Van Vleck subdivision, which includes the land that is generally surrounded by Monroe Street, Park Avenue, Dranesville Road and the Herndon Parkway.

Durbin Van Vleck (1833 - 1898) was born in New York and was an artist/wood engraver by trade. Van Vleck moved to California early in his life, spending much of his time in San Francisco. According to Edan Milton Hughes in his book, "Artists in California, 1786-1940,"

"Van Vleck exhibited at the American Institute in 1851 and the following year settled in San Francisco where he was associated with Charles Christian Nahl. He lived at 10 Sutter Street and had his wood engraving shop at 611 Clay Street where he was a partner of [William] Keith from 1864-68. Keith named his only son in his honor."

William Keith (1838-1911) was a Scottish-American painter known for his California landscapes. The California Artist Research Archive of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, describes Keith as so:

"California early days painter-poet and mystic, is still a favorite with lovers of California landscape. His great Canvases and small sketches are today true interpretations of the snow-clad peaks and rocky gorges of the High Sierras. Even his home was in the midst of live oaks trees, in quiet Berkeley, across the bay from his studio in San Francisco's lively artist colony."

In an article entitled "Art Beginnings on the Pacific," which appeared in an 1868 San Francisco periodical called the "Overland Monthly," Van Vleck is described as the "one of the best known wood engravers and draughtsman in the city." Van Vleck is credited with the California grizzly bear woodcut depicted on the label of the Anchor California Lager®. First published in 1856 in San Francisco, it was a rendering of an original illustration by Charles Christian Nahl (1818–1878).

It appears that Van Vleck may have come to be associated with Herndon via some family connections, although it is not clear exactly how long he may have lived in Herndon. It appears he may have simply invested in Herndon land and possibly lived here for only a few years.

What is known, however, is that Van Vleck's sister – Sarah – once lived in Fairfax County's Dranesville District (of which Herndon is a part), according to the 1880 census. As a housewife, she lived with her husband, Reverend L.T. Burbank, who was associated with Herndon's Congregational Church that used to be located on Pine Street in downtown Herndon. In their home with them were their five children, ranging in age from three to eighteen years old. Also living with them was Sarah's and Durbin's mother, Catherine F. Van Vleck.

Land deeds show that Durbin Van Vleck bought two acres of Herndon land from Curtis Burton in 1871. This lot was located just south of the W&OD railroad track, near the old – and now vacated - Coral Road (near the present day location of Autohaus repair shop).

Deeds also show that Durbin Van Vleck and his mother, Catherine, bought approximately 151 acres of Herndon land from Austin and Clara Brown in 1872. This is the land that encompasses the current Van Vleck subdivision. At this time Van Vleck would have been 39 years old. In 1882 Catherine sold her interest in the land to Durbin. He was still living in San Francisco at that time. Durbin began selling off a few acres of his land to different individuals in 1888.

Van Vleck is found in San Francisco City directories and voter registrations up through 1883. Census documents from 1890 do not exist. But it appears, based on land deeds, that he may have spent some time moving around the country in the late 1880s and early 1890s. An 1888 deed described him as being “of Georgetown, Nebraska.” An 1893 deed described his as being “of Arapahoe County, Colorado.” Finally, an 1896 deed described him as being “of Fairfax County.” Therefore, it appears that he may have moved to Fairfax County sometime between 1893 and 1896.

By 1895 Van Vleck had surveyed his Herndon land and created a subdivision. Avenues A, B and C within his subdivision would later be re-named Van Buren Street, Grant Street and Tyler Street.

Durbin died in 1898 at the age of 65 and is buried in Herndon’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery, the only Van Vleck buried in Herndon. Durbin left all of his land to three of his siblings. These heirs were listed as the sellers on all of the subsequent land deeds, who sold the remaining land with the assistance of an attorney, D.W. Montgomery.

Mr. Montgomery placed an ad in 1900 to promote the sale of the Van Vleck lots, saying, “We hope to have many more houses erected on the tract and stimulate building and business, and materially add to the growth of the town.” He also noted, “...our lots are better and cheaper than other similarly located in suburban places.” At the time the ad was placed about one-third of the Van Vleck land had already been sold and eight homes had already been erected. The two-acre lot by Coral Road was sold to Harvey C. Wiley in 1903.

Today the Van Vleck subdivision currently boasts both large and small beautifully landscaped lots, with many charming historic and modern homes alike. The location of the oldest homes in the subdivision are marked with asterisks on the 1895 map (annotated and published in 1900) entitled, “D. Van Vleck’s Addition to the Town of Herndon.”

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.