

Who Named Frying Pan?

By Barbara Glakas

Many people wonder: Where did the name “Frying Pan” come from? Frying Pan is a historic unincorporated area that is located about 1.5 miles south of the town of Herndon along Centreville Road. The vicinity now includes Frying Pan Farm Park, the Frying Pan Baptist Meeting House (church) and cemetery, another old church, and several homes. Although this unincorporated area was originally called Frying Pan, after many years, its name changed to Floris. That may lead to another question: Where did the name Floris come from?

Historically, Floris and the town of Herndon had many connections and the inhabitants were well acquainted with each other. Although there were large farms in the Floris area, the town of Herndon was the commercial hub of the area. Farmers would come to Herndon to buy supplies, such as farming equipment, tools, grain, and feed. Grocery and dry goods stores were in Herndon, as well as a harness shop, a pharmacy, and a confectionary store. Farmers would travel to Herndon to bring their products to the train station. And many Frying Pan and Herndon families went to school and church together.

The name Frying Pan dates back about 300 years, to the time that Robert “King” Carter (1663-1732), an early land baron, formed a company to mine copper in our area. Regardless, no one is sure of the origins of the name Frying Pan.

However, Robert Edward Wagstaff (1897-1970), a local historian and former curator of Sully Plantation, once wrote about this subject in his recurring column, “Historically Speaking.” Wagstaff put forth many hypotheses. One popular theory is that it probably originated from the 1720s when two of King Carter’s surveyors were camped in the area by a stream. In the morning, they smelled smoke and found four Senaca Indians cooking horse meat nearby. The surveyors killed two Indians and the other Indians fled. Then the surveyors had their breakfast of horsemeat. The Indians had supposedly obtained the meat and the pan from a raid in Alexandria. The incident, Wagstaff said, was apparently significant enough to justify the name of the location of the occurrence. There is no documentation to support the validity of that story but it was widely used.

Another theory involves how settlers would often walk along small streams in Virginia looking for a suitable area for a cabin and a clearing, and the name may have been related to the shape of the stream. When a small stream had a pond at its mouth, the pond was sometimes called a “frying pan” type of stream. The small stream leading back onto the woods was considered the handle of the pan. Currently, a small stream called the Frying Pan Branch, runs along the north side of Frying Pan Farm Park, and connects with Horsepen Run, not far from Carter’s copper mine.

Another theory came from a story that a man named John Davis recounted. Wagstaff said in 1801 Davis was on a long hike from New Jersey to Portici (near Manassas, Virginia), where he had school. However, the book, *Stories from Floris*, said Davis was walking from Great Falls to Newgate (Centreville), which seems to be the more likely version. Along the way, Davis said, “I

met a boy sauntering along and whistling, probably for want of thought. 'How far, my boy', said I, 'is it to Frying Pan?' 'You be in the pan now' he replied." Davis wrote that Frying Pan was composed of four huts and a Meeting House. His story goes that some Indians encamped there on the Run and "missed their frying pan in the morning," hence the name. It is not really clear what is meant by "missed their frying pan."

The historians with Fairfax County Public Schools have a similar story about the Frying Pan name. They explain that when English colonists were first exploring the area, they came across a frying pan that had been left on the banks of a small stream and, therefore, named the creek Frying Pan Branch.

In yet another story it was said that General Braddock - a British officer and commander-in-chief for the thirteen colonies during the start of the French and Indian War - left a frying pan at the spring when he camped there on his way to Fort Duquesne. It appears that a lot of people lost their frying pans over the years.

Similarly, some would say that the men in Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby's Ranger unit washed their frying pans in the spring during the Civil War and left one behind. That story is not likely since the Frying Pan name had already been used for well over 100 years prior to the Civil War.

Another story came from a book entitled, *Then We Came to California: A biography of Sarah Summers Clarke*. Sarah was born in 1844 and lived just south of Centreville, along what is now Route 28. In this biography she recalled how the Frying Pan Church (or, Meeting House) received its name. She said that during the War of 1812, British soldiers were on their way to Washington, when they stopped to cook and eat their breakfast in their frying pans along a creek in western Fairfax County. They were surprised by American troops early that morning and the British referred to the encounter as the Frying Pan skirmish. The community eventually adopted the name as did the church, which was built in 1791. Again, like the Mosby story, the name of the Frying Pan stream branch, which runs right next to the church, was already noted on maps and deeds dating back to Carter's time in the 1720s. Therefore, the 1812 story is not likely.

A librarian at the Fairfax County Regional Library recounted similar stories. She said,

"The first is that a group of people were camped by the water, and in their haste to leave the next morning, they left their frying pan behind. Depending on when the story is told, the 'group of people' were American soldiers from the War of 1812, copper miners from 1728, or Indians even before that. The second story is that the shape of the run emptying into a round pool suggested the name."

The name Frying Pan first pops up in Virginia records in a 1728 deed from Lord Fairfax, when Robert "King" Carter bought the land to build a copper mine. Therefore, the librarian said, "some stories have it that these miners were the ones to leave their frying pan behind," but the miners could not have been the ones to originate the name of the area, because the name Frying Pan was already in use before they got there.

A National Register of Historic Places form said:

“In 1728, Robert Carter, Sr., sons Robert Carter, Jr. (1704-1732) and Charles Carter, and son-in-law Mann Page, formed the Frying Pan Corporation to operate a copper mine and shared the cost of supplies, including enslaved labor.”

That further supports that the name Frying Pan was used as early as the 1720s. The *Stories from Floris* book says that maps as early as 1725 showed a stream branch named Frying Pan. It seems it will always remain a mystery as to the exact origins of the name Frying Pan. The name may have originated in the 1720s, but why it was named that is not fully clear. However, the origin of the name Floris is somewhat easier to determine.

The Fairfax County Public School historians say that by the late 1800s, the Frying Pan village had become a summer retreat for Washingtonians. Local tradition said that a boarding house guest thought the community should have a more genteel sounding name. According a Floris School history video, “In 1892 the village and its post office were re-named Floris, which means flower in Latin.”

The *Stories from Floris* book said,

“By 1900, three churches had been built, Mount Pleasant, the Presbyterian, and the Methodist. The community name had been changed and a Post Office had been re-established.”

The National Register of Historic Places for the Floris Historic District says:

“The Frying Pan post office was established in 1889. By this time, Frying Pan had become a rural vacation destination for residents of Washington, D.C. Some attribute a c. 1892 change in the village's name from Frying Pan to Floris to the dissatisfaction of visitors with the settlement's original name.”

These time frames are confirmed by post office records in the National Archives. A Post Office Department memo requested the establishment of a post office named Frying Pan in 1889. An 1892 Post Office Department memo was written to the Postmaster at “Floris (Late Frying Pan).”

Peggy Vetter, a staff writer for the *Herndon Observer* newspaper, said in 2000,

“The more modern name of Floris was chosen when a post office was opened at the turn of the century in the general store, now Bowman’s. Supposedly the name was suggested by a summer boarder from ‘the city’ who thought the community should have a more ‘genteel’ name than Frying Pan.”

Bowman’s Store was originally built by the Walker family in c. 1893 and, over the years, served as a home, a store, and a post office. It was once located on Centreville Road in Floris. According to an article by Debbie Robison on the website, *Northern Virginia History Notes*, George A. Albaugh was the postmaster when it was the Frying Pan Post office, and Clarence Walker was placed in charge of the Floris Post office in 1900 when the post office began its operation inside the store.

Robison sourced the following information from former Floris resident, M. Franklin Ellmore (1916-2002), quoted in the *Stories from Floris* book:

“The Walkers used their home as a summer retreat for Washingtonians who objected to having their mail delivered to a post office named Frying Pan, so the Walkers used their influence to have the post office address changed to Floris, Virginia.”

It appears that somebody did not think that the name Frying Pan was very pleasing. Those who lived in the area must have agreed or were, at least, agreeable to the name change.

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.