

## **Remembering Herndon's History: How the Town Got Its Name**

By Barbara Glakas

You may know of the man the town was named for—but do you know how and why he was chosen as its namesake?

Many people know that the Town of Herndon was named after William Lewis Herndon, the Virginia native and brave Naval officer who went down with his ship in 1857.

That ship was the *SS Central America*. It carried mail, passengers, and 15 tons of California gold that was being transported to New York via Panama.

Commander Herndon died when the ship sank during a hurricane off the coast of Cape Hatteras. About 575 passengers and crew were on the ship, and his efforts resulted in saving the lives of 152 women and children and a few men who manned the lifeboats. He was a revered Naval hero.

But how exactly did our town end up with the name Herndon? There are many things we know, but some details still remain a mystery.

In the mid-1800s, and prior to the arrival of the railroad, the town had no name. First-hand accounts of people who lived in Herndon during that time period referred to the area as “the village,” or they referred to the names of property owners.

One of those people was Kitty Kitchen, who said, “How did this town gets its name? It didn’t have one before the railroad come through. We used to say, ‘goinin’ to Cockerilles’ or to Purdies’ or Colemans.’”

Kitty Kitchen’s memories of the Town are chronicled in the book, *Reminiscences of an Oldest Inhabitant*, by Virginia Carter Castleman. Published by the Herndon Historical Society, it is available in the Depot.

During the same time period that the *Central America* sank, the railroad arrived, the depot was built, the railroad station became a center of the community, and the people of the village requested the establishment of a post office at the railroad station.

The first two names for the post office that were proposed by the residents were rejected due to conflicts with names of post offices that were already used within the state. In addition, the Post Office Department insisted that post offices not be named after local families.

Kitty Kitchen went on to say: “When the first depot was build, jes’ after Purdies lef’, there was much talk an’ choosin’ of names, an’ many a name was spoke of by one another; but Mr. Hollin’sworth, him married a Dunn – her father’d bought the millworks – Mister Hollins’worth chose the name an’ it stuck to the place ‘midst all the changes, even when the people that named it’s dead an’ gone.”

William W. Hollingsworth was Herndon's first postmaster, serving in that position until 1865. But did he just select the name out of the blue and on his own? Not quite.

At a meeting of village residents, held to select an acceptable name for the post office, there was—according to some accounts, including that of Kitty Kitchen—a man who was present by invitation, presumably a resident of an adjacent county, who had just arrived by train. He was also, according to the story, a survivor of the *Central America* shipwreck. This man told of the Captain's heroism in staying with his ship and ensuring that others had disembarked. The stranger explained how the Captain threw his watch to a sailor in the nearest boat with instructions to deliver it to his wife. Then, bidding the sailors Godspeed, he remained on deck and went down with his ship.

The stranger also relayed that this same Captain, as a Lieutenant in 1850-51, had performed a dangerous and difficult mission of exploring the tributaries in the Valley of the Amazon for the purpose—as stated in a report the Captain had written—of ascertaining “the benefits might accrue to its [United States] citizens by the establishment of commercial relations with the people who dwell on its banks.” That interesting and extensive report was published as a Senate document that later became a best-seller.

The people at the meeting were profoundly impressed with the stories about Commander Herndon, and they decided to bestow his name on the village's new post office, a name of which Mr. Hollingsworth no doubt approved.

Kitty Kitchen explained: “It was the story of the brave Captain who went down with his ship after savin' so many lives that won all hearts. So 'twas Herndon the town's called.”

The name was accepted by the Post Office Department, and the Herndon post office was established on July 13, 1858. Herndon was incorporated as a town 20 years later, in 1879.

Who was the visitor who allegedly told the story of Commander Herndon at the meeting of residents? His name was never recorded. However, it is easy to find lists of the 152 survivors of the *Central America*. Many of these lists, but not all, indicate the survivors' home of record.

A list on Ancestry.com and from an article in the September 21, 1857 *New York Daily Times* shows one survivor as being from Virginia. His name was Robert Hutchinson.

Another article, from the October 24, 1857 *Sacramento Daily Union*, describes a survivor named Mr. Hutchinson as a resident of Nevada City, California. That article says Hutchinson was bound on a visit to Virginia and quotes him as saying, “The Captain's conduct, from first to last, was worthy of all praise. He was very active in the beginning and very self-denying in the end.... Every man felt encouraged continually by the Captain's untiring devotion. He has left a fine example.”

There is no real way to know if Mr. Hutchinson attended the meeting in Herndon on the night the name for the post office was being decided. That part of the story will remain a mystery.