

More Than a Local Landmark

Herndon's Red Caboose

By Carol Bruce

The big red caboose that sits between the Herndon Municipal Center and the W&OD trail is more than a local landmark. It is a symbol of the railroad that for so many years was the heart of our town.

What eventually became known as the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad had its origins more than a century and a half ago, in Alexandria. In 1853—after an earlier effort to establish a railroad foundered—a group of businessmen formed the Alexandria, Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad. The plan was that the line would run from Alexandria to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Unfortunately, financial problems intervened and the line never went beyond Snickersville (now Bluemont).

The Herndon Depot was constructed in 1857, in anticipation of the railroad's arrival, and the community that would become the Town of Herndon grew up around it. The first train passed through town on May 17, 1860, on its run from Alexandria to Leesburg, which at that time was the end of the line.

Herndon was a farming community, and its dairy industry thrived because the trains provided an efficient means of transporting milk to the processors and distributors in Washington, DC. The railroad also carried mail, provided freight service to and from the many communities springing up along the line, and furnished passenger service. The railroad also became a popular means of travel for city dwellers wanting to escape Washington's heat and humidity and visit the "resort" towns along the line, including Herndon.

After a series of owners—and names—the line became the Washington & Old Dominion Railway Company on July 1, 1912. (The name was changed for the final time on April 16, 1936, when it became the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad Company.)

The line, which began with steam engines, was electrified late in 1912. At that time, the company published a brochure that promoted "the cooling breezes, the quality and abundance of the meals provided by the hosts of the many boarding houses along the line and the home-like atmospheres of the various establishments." Along with weekend visitors, commuters—who now found it possible to live in the clean, quiet countryside while still working in the city—began arriving in Herndon.

The railroad was only modestly successful throughout its life, although it experienced a boom during World War II, which also was the time when diesel power replaced electricity. Business declined quickly after the war ended, falling victim to the development of better roads and more dependable trucks and cars. Although the railroad continued hauling freight for a number of years (the last big job it handled was hauling the sand used in the concrete mix for the runways at Dulles Airport), passenger service

ended on May 31, 1951. Freight service ceased and the last train ran through Herndon on August 27, 1968.

The Virginia Electric and Power Company (now Dominion Virginia Power) purchased the abandoned right of way, and in 1978, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority bought the section from Shirlington to Purcellville from the power company. The W&OD Regional Park that so many of us enjoy today was completed in 1988.

In 1989, Herndon resident, Historical Society member, and train aficionado George Moore—who was determined to memorialize the Town’s railroad heritage—was almost single handedly responsible for finding a surplus caboose, securing its donation, and having it relocated to Herndon. The plaque that is displayed at the caboose says it all:

**In Memory of George Moore
1939-2003**

George thought Herndon should have its own caboose.
In 1989, he made it happen.