

If Walls Could Talk: The Tale of the Herndon Depot

By Virginia Clarity

If walls could talk, the Depot would certainly have a lot to say. Much has happened in and around the building throughout the 150 years that it has stood in the midst of downtown Herndon.

Constructed in 1857 as a stop on the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railroad, the building consisted of two rooms—the waiting room and the adjoining freight room. The route of the line through the rural area enabled farmers to ship goods to market and resulted in the establishment of a thriving community.

In 1858, a post office was needed for the area. Herndon was chosen as the name not only for the post office, but also for the surrounding community. The Depot was a hub of activity, as farmers congregated to ship produce and receive goods from Washington, 21 miles away.

The spring of 1861 brought about great change to the entire country. The Civil War touched everyone and everything, including Herndon and the Herndon Depot. The rails were torn up by both the northern and southern troops to disrupt transportation of supplies. No trains were able to run and the Depot stood idle.

Kitty Kitchen and her husband Nathaniel Hanna not only ran a general store, but also lived for a short while in the Depot. Nat had a pass that allowed him to go through the Union lines and he was able to obtain supplies from Washington. This enterprise did not last long, however. The war activity in the area escalated and the Hannas decided to leave. (For more about Kitty Kitchen, see our September 16 column, “Servin’ the Pies.”)

The area returned to normal after the hostilities ended, and the Depot was expanded at some point around 1870. The station master’s office and an additional waiting room were added.

In 1879, Herndon became an incorporated town. The business district expanded but the Depot remained the center of activity. The first Town Council meeting was held in the Depot, and the area farmers made Herndon their market center for shipping milk and receiving goods. By 1907, according to the Industrial and Historical Sketch of Fairfax County, “no point on either the main line or Bluemont branch of the Southern Railway ships more milk than Herndon.”

A brick booster station to furnish power to electrify the rail line was completed at the east end of the Depot in 1912, and the modern Washington and Old Dominion Railway brought an increased number of passengers to the area to live. By 1928, according to the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, Herndon was the second largest town in the county, and many residents commuted daily to Washington.

In the 1960s, passenger usage dwindled and service was discontinued. The Depot served the freight line that continued until 1968, when all operations ceased.

As the railway died, the Depot took on another life. The Virginia Power Company owned the right of way and the town leased the building. When the possibility arose that the Depot would be torn down so the land could be used as a parking lot, several townspeople got together to save the structure. One result of this activity was the establishment, in 1970, of the Herndon Historical Society.

Efforts to save the structure were successful, and the town began making renovations. Many ideas were advanced for its use, including a coffee house, a teen center, and a museum. At the time none of those uses came to be. Instead, a portion of the freight room was removed to allow for the extension of Spring Street from Elden Street to intersect with Lynn and Station Streets, and the town—needing office space—moved the Public Works Department into the Depot.

The Public Works Department eventually was relocated and, in 1981, the Historical Society opened the doors to the long-awaited museum. More renovations to the building took place in 1992, with the installation of a new roof, rebuilt chimney, floor refinishing, and new paint. More recently, the Society had the semaphore restored and fitted with a new, electrified lamp.

The Depot has now been home to the museum for more than 25 years. For a portion of that time the Chamber of Commerce had an office in the east waiting room; now that room is used as a Visitors Center.

The Depot is a well-known landmark in the center of town, giving the community a real sense of history and contributing to the town's character and sense of place.