

Herndon's Most Prominent Summer Resident

By Chuck Mauro

Around 1888, a busy Washington DC lawyer boarded the train and rode out into the Virginia countryside to find a summer residence. Precisely one hour later he stepped off the train and found what he was looking for in the new Town of Herndon. In a grove of oak trees not far from the station, Joseph J. Darlington found a rambling, cream color Victorian house with green shutters, gingerbread railings, and a wrap-around porch. It was for sale.

He bought the house and eventually purchased 500 acres of adjacent land. He turned the property into a farm with chickens, ducks, geese, pheasants, and for a while peacocks that were forever getting drowned by summer thunder storms or run over by the trains. His farm also had cows, horses, pigs, and even angora goats. In addition to Darlington's farm, the property included several tenant farms, a stone quarry, and several acres of woods. In time the area came to be known as Darlington's Grove.

Darlington gradually added onto the house until it consisted of 25 rooms, including 5 sleeping porches and 5 baths. The house was located just west of Van Buren Street, between what is now the Resource Bank at 625 Elden Street and the Herndon Post office on Grove Street.

In 1899, he donated the land for the First Baptist Church, which was built with gray stone from the quarry, which was located on the eastern side of his property.

The way of life at Darlington's Grove must have been a constant source of amazement and fascination for the town folk. The kitchen was set apart from the main house by a long porch to keep the heat away. There were servant's quarters, a caretaker's house, two barns, a carriage house, a smokehouse, a dairy, an engine house, a well house, and an ice house.

Beyond the barns and the barnyards was another grove of oak trees known as the barbecue grove that featured a Victorian style pavilion. At the far end of the barbecue grove was a large pit where meats were roasted, and nearby was a small, screened structure where the food was assembled and made ready to serve. This pit was located in what is now the rear parking lot of the post office.

Darlington had numerous weekend gatherings. He once invited more than 100 lawyers and doctors from Washington for a barbecue and a subsequent baseball game. Another time he invited three Scotsman. They arrived at the train station wearing their traditional kilts and carrying bagpipes. "Herndon was appalled at the sight of these men in skirts, short ones at that. The barbecue was a huge success but Herndon was suspicious of us for some time," his granddaughter Frances later wrote while recollecting life with her grandfather Herndon.