

The Bronzed Man Who Named the Town

By Barbara Glakas

In 1858, Herndon's first post office, initially located in the railroad Depot, was named after Commander William Lewis Herndon. Herndon was the captain of the *S.S. Central America*, a steamship which fatefully sunk off the Carolina coast in a monstrous hurricane in 1857. Commander Herndon, who went down with his ship, was considered a hero for saving the lives of 149 people – mostly women and children – and for all his valiant, calm and professional efforts to keep the ship afloat for as long as he could until help arrived.

It has long been local legend that our town's name, "Herndon," was the suggestion of a stranger, who happened to be passing through our yet-to-be-named village in 1857, on the night that the townspeople were voting on a name for the village's new post office. The legend has it that the passerby was coincidentally a survivor of the sinking of the *S.S. Central America*. That legend, however, has never been indisputably proven.

Recently found in a storage closet in the Herndon Depot Museum was a paper that was written by an unknown author. The paper recounts the story of the Town of Herndon's beginnings. Although the story about the naming of the town is very similar to other such stories, this particular paper added more detail. Moreover, this paper's provenance is more substantial, due to its association with the family history of William S. Blanchard.

This typed paper is entitled, "Herndon – Virginia, Past, Present and Future." On the cover it also said, "Preliminary Draft, July 24, 1948." As mentioned – and unfortunately – no author's name was on the paper. There was, however, a hand written note on the back page, written in 1993 by former Herndon Planning Commissioner, Edward N. Stirewalt. It said,

"This document was given to me around 1955-57 by Mr. William S. Blanchard, a Herndon native and former Town official, himself elderly at the time. He told me it had been prepared by a man whose name he did not recall who stayed for some time 'in the rest home on Monroe Street.' April 21, 1993."

William S. Blanchard would have been 77 years old in 1955, the year he handed this paper to Mr. Stirewalt. Mr. Blanchard had once served as the Town Manager and he also served on the Town Council from 1940-42. He also happened to be the son of Howard W. Blanchard, who was the first Town Clerk when the Town was incorporated in 1879.

To add another piece of provenance to this story, it is also known that Howard W. Blanchard happened to be the nephew and son-in-law to two other former Town officials – William Drinkwater Sweetser and Stephen Killam – who both served on the first Town Council in

1879. Additionally, William S. Blanchard's middle name was "St. John," no doubt a connection to Ancel St. John, another original town councilmember in 1879 and good friend to Howard Blanchard. All these family and friend associations are not surprising, given that the Town of Herndon's population was 422 in the year 1880.

In the 1850s, the villagers had twice tried to name their new post office, with no success. Part of the story recounted in the paper that William S. Blanchard passed along to Mr. Stirewalt went like this:

"As more homes were built, and the settlers were thrown more together, they began to talk about a post-office and a name for their hamlet. A railroad had come near their farms, but troublesome days coming on when a brother was arrayed against brother in daily strife, the rails were not carried farther than the outskirts of this yet unnamed community. Finally, the farmer folk gathered and took a vote upon a name, which was submitted to the authorities in Washington, but was rejected because there was another post-office of the same name in the state. Again a name was selected, only to meet the same fate, and the people were almost at a loss what name to choose."

The author then went on to describe the sinking of the *S.S. Central America* and its brave captain, an event that occurred in 1857, the same year the villagers were attempting to select a name for their post office. The author continued:

"On a fateful night, in the little village in Fairfax County, the men of the community were gathered to choose for it a name. At that moment a worn-out and bronzed man alighted from the train and announced his intention of remaining until morning in the village, until he could continue his journey. As the men were lingering before the door of the house in which the meeting was held, the stranger sauntered up, and with true Southern hospitality the farmer invited him into the meeting.

"There is always curiosity aroused when a stranger arrives in a place, and that time those people were no exception to the rule. We surmise that questions were asked the stranger, as to whence he came and whither he was going, and his answers brought out the fragments of a remarkable story of shipwreck, suffering, bravery and such virtues in one who went down with his ship, that as with one voice the farmers said, 'We have our name – it shall be Herndon.' "

Although the story about the stranger – like all the other similar stories that have been written and told over the years – cannot be indisputably proven, this particular paper, with its connection to early Herndon founders, gives us pause, and reinforces that this "legend" must have a good level of truth to it.

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.