

A Prominent Summer Resident: J.J. Darlington

By Barbara Glakas

Conveniently located just 21 miles outside of Washington on the rail line, the town of Herndon often served as a summer destination for Washingtonians. One of the most prominent Washingtonians to come to Herndon was Joseph James Darlington. He not only visited Herndon but ended up investing here, buying land and creating a large summer estate that many Herndon residents remember well.

J.J. Darlington was born in South Carolina in 1849. He graduated from Erskine College and then came to Washington to study law at the law School of Columbian University (now George Washington University), graduating in 1875. He began practicing law, working on Fifth Street, becoming a prominent attorney and a highly respected member of the D.C. Bar Association. He was considered a brilliant lawyer with deep professional integrity. He was appointed to the faculty of the Georgetown Law School where he served from 1881 – 1896. He also argued (and won) cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

He became very active in the Washington community. He was a member of the Fifth Baptist Church and served on the Boards of Directors of the Washington Loan and Trust Company and the Federal National Bank. He was also a member of the Joint Citizens Committee on Suffrage, the Southern Society of Washington, and was President of the City Orphan Asylum.

In 1885 he married Elizabeth Rachel Meador, daughter of the pastor at the Riverside Baptist Church in Washington (then known as the Fifth Baptist Church). The Darlington's lived in a row house in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington. The row house has since been converted into a restaurant/bar called The Darlington House, formerly the location of a long-time restaurant called the Childe Harold. The Darlington's had three children, although one died as an infant. Sadly, Mrs. Darlington also died young in 1890 at the age of 32.

Local lore says that Darlington boarded a train one day, looking for a location for a summer residence for rest and relaxation and found what he was looking for in the town of Herndon. Darlington bought various pieces of land around Herndon in the 1890s and the early 1900s. But the property that made Darlington the most remembered was the nine-acre triangular lot he bought from A. J. Downing in 1893. This property was in the vicinity of the land now surrounded by Elden Street, Monroe Street, the W&OD trail and Van Buren Street (now the general location of Walgreens and the Angeethi Indian Cuisine Restaurant). The property included a large Victorian house that had been built by A.J. Downing. (Darlington sold about 2.6 acres of that land at the corner of Elden and Monroe Streets to the trustees of the Herndon Baptist Church for \$1. The church was built using donated stone quarried from Darlington's property.)

In 1895 Darlington purchased additional acreage. His land stretched from Elden and Monroe streets, eastward to the town boundary line. His estate would commonly be referred to as Darlington's Grove.

Darlington added on to the existing house. According to Charles Mauro's book, "Herndon, A Town and its History," the house would eventually boast 25 rooms, five baths and several sleeping porches.

The surrounding property had a grove of oak trees and many out buildings, including a wood shed, barns, carriage house, smoke house, well house, caretaker's house and servant quarters. The land also had a quarry and a section of Sugarland Run. The kitchen was set apart from the main house. Close by was the laundry area and a water pump.

Darlington turned his property into a farm where he kept pheasants, chickens, duck, geese, horses and goats. He also bred boars and sows. Some of his registered sows were given the names Bessie, Miss Highclere, Pocahontas and Rolfe.

The Darlington's employed a large African American staff to manage the house and property. A gentleman named Aaron Lewis was the overall caretaker. One of his primary jobs was to tend to the horses, saddles, carriages and wagons. A gentlemen named John Lewis was the main chef who primarily cooked the meats (pigs, lamb and ox) in a big pit that was dug out in the woods. Several females, including members of the local Simms family, served as cooks, laundresses, nurses, and nannies for the Darlington granddaughters, Frances and Betsy.

Darlington held numerous weekend gatherings at his estate. He had over one hundred Washington lawyers and doctors for a barbeque and baseball game. On one occasion, when he invited the Washington City Orphan Asylum, he had as many as 500 people. In 1910 he hosted a Confederate reunion for Colonel John S. Mosby's Rangers. He hosted the Ambassador of Korea and his family, as well as three Scotsman who brought their bagpipes. Foreign guests would sometimes come dressed in their colorful native garb, much to the delight of Herndon residents as they watched Mr. Darlington's guests disembark the train at the Herndon Station. Darlington also enjoyed having house parties for his two daughters. He hosted an annual Labor Day party as well, to which he invited all the town residents.

Frances Darlington Simpson spent her summers in Herndon. She later recalled how her grandfather enjoyed entertaining informally on the spur of the moment. Nobody at the Darlington house knew when he returned from Washington if he would be alone or have guests with him. His daughter would stand on the front porch to watch the 7:00 PM train arrive. Frances said, "If grandfather was alone he would wave his hat, if he had guests he would wave his handkerchief." Nearly every Sunday Darlington would invite friends to spend the day in Herndon.

Frances recalled the thrill of watching the meat being cooked on the barbecues during the evening.

“The only light in the grove was a faint glow from the red hot ashes in the large pit... At barbecue time, long narrow tables, covered with white cloths, were placed around this [screened] outdoor pantry and everyone pitched in to help serve the guests.”

The Darlington house did not have a telephone as it was considered a nuisance after a long day’s work in Washington. Only rarely was it necessary to send a telegram, dictated to Mr. Cooper, the Station Master at the Herndon station.

Frances enjoyed her summers in Herndon. But she knew it was an ominous signal to soon return to Washington and school when the pears on the tree behind the kitchen started to ripen as the fall approached.

“As the seckel pears ripened, I knew that soon we would be going back to town, for another long winter, the formality of city life, and worst of all... SCHOOL! I always thought what a paradise life would be with no winters at all but only long, warm, beautiful, lazy summers under the tall oak trees at my beloved Herndon.”

Joseph James Darlington passed away in 1920 at the age of 71 and was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Following his death his friends got together and lobbied Congress for a memorial in Washington to honor Darlington’s memory. In 1922 a resolution was adopted, which said that a statue could be erected, but it could not be on the National Mall or Capitol grounds, and no appropriations were to be provided for the statue.

A Darlington Memorial Committee was formed and then the process was handed over to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. Sculptors were invited to submit designs and Carl Paul Jennewein’s design was chosen unanimously.

In 1923 the memorial was erected at Judiciary Park, at 5th Street and D Street, Northwest. It consists of a gilded nude “Maiden and Fawn” standing atop a marble water fountain. The side of the marble base says: “This monument has been erected by his friends with the sanction of Congress in memory of Joseph James Darlington, 1849-1920, counselor, teacher, lover of mankind.”

Many praised the sculpture. Executive committee member Frank Hogan said,

“It was decided that a memorial symbolical and beautiful would not only serve to commemorate Darlington, but would be an adornment to one of the parks in the Nation’s Capital long after those whose good fortune it was to know him and what he looked like has passed away.”

However, the memorial also received some criticism. Another well-known sculptor named Ulric J. Dunbar said the statue was:

“... [an] inane representation... Works of art, and especially memorials, should symbolize the outstanding characteristics of the person commemorated and should carry these characteristics so plainly told that the ordinary passerby could interpret them. I knew Mr. Darlington very well and the statue, as it stands, is meaningless, so far as this able lawyer and kindly gentleman is concerned.”

Back in Herndon, the farm portion of the Darlington estate was sold in 1921, but the house continued to be used by members of the Darlington family for a while. The land on which the house sat was sold in 1946. Longtime Herndon residents believe the Darlington house was torn down sometime in the 1950s. Eventually, a new section of Van Buren Street was extended between Coral Road and Elden Street, which cut through Darlington’s old property. In 1961 a new post office was built in the vicinity of where the Darlington house used to sit, at 645 Elden Street (now the home of Angeethi Indian Cuisine Restaurant). In the 2010s a new subdivision was built across the W&OD trail from where the Darlington house once stood. The new subdivision is named Darlington Oaks.

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.