

The Fortnightly Library

By Barbara Glakas

The history of the Herndon Fortnightly Library started in 1889, with the forming of the Herndon Fortnightly Club. That year marked ten years after the town's incorporation, when the town's population was about 800. The club started with a group of eleven Herndon women who decided to get together every two weeks, calling their group "The Fortnightly Club." The club collected forty books for research and to read and educate themselves about such topics as literature, art, science and other "interests of the day."

The eleven charter members of the club came from the Herndon, Thornton Station (now Reston) and Sully areas. They were Mrs. John Barker, Miss Maria Bready, Miss Ida Castleman, Miss Lulu Castleman, Miss Virginia Castleman, Mrs. Florence Duffy, Mrs. J.W. McKeene, Miss Lillie Shear, Miss Ann Thornton, Miss Catherine Thornton, and Miss Ellen Thornton. According to past club president, Virginia Clarity, the club met in the homes of each member.

There were no public libraries in the county at the time. And given that books were not necessarily easy to obtain in rural Herndon in the 1880s, the club women decided to start lending their books to the townspeople. Club member, Virginia Castleman, had graduated from Drexel's library school in 1899 and offered to catalogue the club's books. By 1900, the club had collected over 1,000 books. The club, in effect, started Fairfax County's first lending library.

The club women did not have a hardstand library building, however. They rented rooms in various buildings in downtown Herndon, including in Dr. Detwiler's office, in the Herndon National Bank, and in Mr. Minor Crippen's furniture store on Station Street. They set up what they called "reading rooms." Their efforts were supported by residents and various Herndon business owners, who donated supplies such as shelving and a calendar clock.

The housing of the expanding library was an ongoing problem. Expenses mounted for rent, for the acquisition of books, and for heating wood. All that changed in 1917 when The Big Fire occurred in downtown Herndon. The library's book collection – then housed in the Crippen building – went up in smoke.

Luckily, the ladies were forward-looking and had purchased fire insurance before the 1917 fire occurred. A portion of the insurance money was set aside in a building fund. The club continued to collect books and by 1918 they again had a thousand books. By the early 1920s their collection had reached 3,300 books.

In 1924 the trustees of the Sweet Home Lodge of Good Templars at Herndon offered the club a lot on which to build a library. That lot was located on Spring Street, near the intersection of

Locust Street. The club became incorporated as The Fortnightly Club and Library Association of Herndon and passed a motion to build a suitable library building.

The new cream-colored library building was built at 660 Spring Street in 1927. It is a one story, brick, Classical Revival style building. Again, many citizens and businesses assisted the effort by lending a truck for the move, and by donating wood, a stove pipe, a table and chairs, and more books. The ladies of the Fortnightly Club operated the library on a volunteer basis for decades. They elected Mrs. Russell Lynn as their first librarian.

Over the years the club held fundraising events, including food sales, ice cream festivals, anagram and bridge parties, suppers, teas, soft drinks sales at July 4th Herndon Day celebrations, and other benefits in order to raise money to support the library. The club slowly made improvements to the library building over the years, adding electricity, new shelving, a front walkway, and trees. By the end of 1943 the note on the library building had been paid.

In 1939, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors authorized a County Library System. Mrs. Kathryn Robinson – a Fortnightly Club member – was appointed to the first Library Board of Trustees, serving there from 1939 to 1955.

Fairfax County's website says, "The very first library of the Fairfax County Public Library system opened in Fairfax, Virginia. It consisted of a small 14" x 24" cinderblock building at 143 Court House Drive and contained a garage for the WPA Bookmobile." That was the first library that opened *after* Fairfax County Public Library system (FCPL) was created in 1939. However, the Herndon Fortnightly Library had already been in existence for many years, just not under the auspices of FCPL.

After the county's library system was first been established, Herndon's Fortnightly Library entered into a cooperative venture whereby books would be exchanged between library facilities. However, dissatisfaction arose in the club about the quality of books being received and the lack of newly published books. The club communicated with the County librarian and by 1957 the Herndon library was allowed to be made a Deposit Station (as opposed to a Substation) of the County system. This gave the Herndon library more control over their hours and enabled the library to be loaned 100 books from the County each month.

One unfortunate aspect of the Herndon Fortnightly Library is that it, along with many other libraries during the Jim Crow era, was segregated. According to the Fairfax County website:

"Several whites-only libraries existed in Fairfax County before FCPL was founded in 1939. From its inception, FCPL agreed to serve the county's Black residents. However, this service was initially limited to segregated bookmobile deposit stations and partnerships with existing whites-only community libraries."

The book *Desegregation in Northern Virginia Libraries* stated that when the Herndon Fortnightly Club and Library Association incorporated in 1925,

“...its charter made no mention of segregationist policies. However, when the library partnered with FCPL as a community library, FCPL circulation reports dating the 1940s confirm that the Herndon Fortnightly Library maintained a ‘whites only’ policy.”

A senior African American Herndon resident who attended the segregated Oak Grove School in Herndon in the 1940s was asked if she ever used the Fortnightly Library when she was in school. She said, “We knew not to.” The Fairfax County website said, “It was not until 1954 that the system was fully integrated.”

A population boom occurred in the town of Herndon in the late 1960s, causing the library to increase service. Over 3,400 books were being circulated in 1968. Feeling the library service should be expanded, the Herndon Town Council and the Herndon Citizens Association wrote to the County Library Board, asking to consider opening a library branch in Herndon. The Library Board was agreeable but had no space. The Fortnightly Club discussed the issue and decided in 1970 to offer its building to the county, resolving that “it has always been the Club’s policy to do what is was thought best for the Town.” A rental agreement was drawn up in 1971 and the new county branch opened at the Spring Street location in 1972. The County Board decided to name it The Herndon Fortnightly Library to honor the club that had operated the library for over eighty years through volunteer service and local fundraising. As a result of this change, The Fortnightly Club members were no longer involved in running the library and turned their energies to other philanthropic activities.

By 1990 plans were underway for the construction of a new public library in the center of downtown Herndon. The club members started a vigorous campaign to petition the Fairfax County Library Board to retain the name “Herndon Fortnightly Library.” The club obtained a resolution of support from the Town Council and appeared before the Library Board armed with petition signatures and numerous letters of support from Herndon businesses. The Library Board agreed to retain the name.

The new library opened in 1995 and continues to operate in the heart of Herndon today. That same year, the club accepted an offer for the old library building on Spring Street by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) to be used for their Meeting House. When the ownership of the old library building was transferred to the Friends, the club changed its name back to The Herndon Fortnightly Club.

The Herndon Fortnightly Club, which now has about 30 members, continues to meet each month in the library. According to the library’s website:

“Members of the Fortnightly Club continue to maintain a close relationship with the library and its staff, supporting the library and its services with volunteer labor, gifts, and donations. The Fortnightly Club is a sponsor of the library's annual Open House, a tradition dating back to the branch's Spring Street days, as well as other library activities throughout the year.”

One of the oldest organizations in the town of Herndon, the hard work and forethought of the club ladies resulted in the creation the Fairfax County's first lending library - The Herndon Fortnightly Library.

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.