

Herndon Firsts

By Barbara Glakas

In this article we will be recapping some of the “firsts” in the town of Herndon.

- First Mayor – Ancel St. John was the first elected mayor in 1879. At that time, the town council, of which St. John was a part, elected amongst themselves who would serve as mayor. But for unknown reason, which was not explained in the meeting minutes, St. John declined the job. We suspect that the reason may have been age, given that St. John was almost 80 years old by then, at a time when the average life expectancy was about 40 years old. As a result of St. John declining the job, the mayorship went to Isaiah Bready, a dairy farmer whose family had come to Herndon from Pennsylvania in the 1850s.
- First Female on Town Council – The first female to be elected to the Herndon Town Council was Hilda Peck Gillette who was elected in 1953. One notable thing about her election was that she refused to campaign and was elected as a write-in candidate.
- First Female Mayor – Carol Bruce was the first female to serve as Herndon’s Mayor. She had been serving as the Vice Mayor when Mayor Rust stepped down at the end of 2001 to run for state delegate. As a result, Bruce temporarily served as mayor for six months, from January to June in 2002. The first female mayor to be elected was Lisa Merkel, who served from 2012 to 2020.
- First School – In the earliest years, schooling occurred in people’s homes. However, there were two “first” public schools that came about at about the same time in 1868 – The Herndon School for White children on Center Street, and the Oak Grove School for Black children located in the vicinity of the north end of the present-day Artic Quill Road. The Oak Grove school was a combination church/school. There is some limited information that says there might have been another public school on Monroe Street prior to the Herndon School being built, a school that supposedly burned down shortly after it was built; we have little information about it. Fairfax County Public Schools was not founded until 1870; therefore, the schools in Herndon pre-dated the county’s public school system.
- First Church – In the earliest years, people who lived in Herndon worshipped in people’s homes, in groves, or in temporarily buildings, such as an old cheese factory. The first church building to be built in town is commonly considered to be the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church at the corner of Elden and Center Streets, built in 1872. However, as mentioned above, the Oak Grove School that was built in 1868, also served as a church.
- First Library - The Herndon Fortnightly Club started Fairfax County’s first lending library. The club started in 1889 as group of eleven women who met every two weeks to read and educate themselves. Soon after, they started cataloging their books and lending them out to the townspeople. They stored them in various buildings around town. They also rented rooms to be used as reading rooms. In 1927 they built their own library building on Spring

Street, where they operated the library for four and a half decades. The Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) system was not founded until 1939. The Herndon Fortnightly Library was absorbed into FCPL in 1972.

- First School Lunch Program - It was Herndon High School that had the first school lunch program in Fairfax County, which started in 1942. At the time the school was located on Locust Street and housed all grades, elementary through high school. The creation of the school lunch program was credited to Adelaide Adamson, a Herndon resident and a Home Economics teacher at the school. She later became Fairfax County's School Lunch Director and was widely credited as the originator of Fairfax County's school lunch program. She retired as the Director of Fairfax County Public Schools Food Service Department.
- First Home – The first home to be built in what is now the incorporated limits of the town of Herndon was built by a member of the Coleman family, probably James Coleman. It was built in c. 1776 and was located in the area behind Herndon Middle School, in the present-day vicinity of the Lifestyle Condominiums. Over the years, the ownership of the home changed hands many times. By the mid-late 1800s, the home became known as Elden (or Eldon), or the Elden Plantation House. The home was torn down in the 1960s to make way for new apartments and condos.
- First Mill – The earliest known mill in Herndon was located in what is now Runnymede Park, along the Sugarland Run Stream. It was built c. 1820s/30s. It was possibly built by Samuel Coleman, but by the 1830s it belonged to Charles and Ann Ratcliffe. Later it belonged to William Barker who owned it until he died in 1863. Two other early mills in Herndon included Carlin's steam mill, located between Elden and Locust Street (behind the present day Aslin Beer Company and Jimmy's Old Town Tavern), built in the 1850s, and Taylor's grist and sawmill built in c. 1878 on what is now the site of Herndon's town green and library.
- First Indoor Plumbing - The house that is said to be the first in Herndon to have indoor plumbing is the old Hutchison-Steele house at 652 Spring Street. The house was built in 1908. The house belonged Dr. Hugh Barbour Hutchison who married Helen Steele in 1900. A windmill in the yard over a well pumped water into a large wooden tank located in the attic, with gravity feeding the water into the plumbing.
- First Shopping Center – The first shopping center built in Herndon was The Pines Center on Elden Street, built c. 1965. Prior to the shopping center being built there, a big home with apartments was located on the lot. It belonged to the Barker family and the house was called The Pines, due to all the loblolly pine trees on the lot.
- First ABC Store – The first ABC store was established in Herndon in 1936. In 1933 the 21st Amendment repealed the 18th Amendment which had created nationwide prohibition on alcohol. Soon after, business owners sought permission from the town council to sell beer in town, and later alcohol. There was a big battle over this because there was a big temperance movement in town. That conflicted with the interests of business owners who

wanted to be able to sell alcohol in town. The business owners won out and the first ABC store was established in a room on the west end of the Horn Motors building (later the Subaru dealership) which was located near the intersection of Elden and Center Streets.

- First Speed Limit Ordinance – In c. 1917 the town's first speed limit ordinance was passed. It was set at 12 miles per hour. It was during the period when automobiles were first starting to show up in town, with cars sharing the road with horses.
- First Fire Truck - Herndon's "Big Fire" occurred in 1917 which burned down about 18 homes and businesses in the vicinity of Station and Pine Streets. After that event the town council decided to form a volunteer fire department and to buy a fire truck. The Herndon Citizen's Association agreed to furnish the money for the truck. By 1921 Herndon had its first fire truck which was a Model T chassis with a chemical pump on the back.
- First Black Police Officer - When the town was incorporated in 1879, it had a Town Sergeant, which was the town's lone law enforcement officer. It stayed like that until c. 1950s when the town finally got a police department. The first Black police officer to serve on the force was Darryl Smith who began his law enforcement career with the Herndon Police Department in 1973 at the age of 22. He served 32 years on the Herndon Police Department, rising to the rank of Captain. After retiring from Herndon, he became the Police Chief in Purcellville, Virginia.
- First Public Water System - The town of Herndon's first public water system was completed in 1938. It was a Federal Emergency Administration project, part of the New Deal. Prior to that occurring, town residents used private water, or water from wells and cisterns.
- First Town Hall – Herndon's first official Town Hall was built in the former railroad park, between Elden and Lynn Streets, next to the Herndon Depot. It was completed at the end of 1938 and dedicated in early 1939. It was also a Federal Emergency Administration project, part of the New Deal. Prior to the Town Hall being built, the town council rented spaces in various buildings around town to have their meetings.
- First Holiday Homes Tour – Herndon's first Homes Tour started in 1979 as part of the Town of Herndon's 100th anniversary celebration. It was one of several celebratory events that were held that year. The homes that were selected for the tour were a representation of various houses that had been built over the previous 100 years, to show how the town had changed over time. The homes on the first tour were 808 and 825 Elden Street, 1020 and 1000 Monroe Street, 953 and 951 Locust Street, 431 Van Buren Street and 744 Dranesville Road. It was meant to be a one-time event. Several years later some of the volunteers who were involved in the 1979 tour thought it would be nice to have another tour. It was also planned as a one-time event in 1986. It was named "Victoriana" and highlighted many of Herndon's historic homes. After that it was decided that the tour would be an annual event. In 2006 the tour came to a halt due to a lack of volunteers. In 2008 it was revived

again as the Holiday Homes Tour of Herndon by a group of volunteers called the Cultivating Community Initiative, and it has been carrying on ever since.

- First Car – The first Herndon resident to own an automobile was Dr. Edwin Detwiler. We do not know the exact year that he bought his car, but we have a photograph of him in front of his new home that he built in 1911 and, in that photo, you can see him sitting by his Model T.
- First High School Band – Herndon High School had the first high school band in Fairfax County. It was formed in 1947 and served as a model for other schools. The band was established by parents and citizens who recruited Vladimir Johnson, a Russian interpreter and part-time music teacher in Washington, D.C. The band started with about 15 students.
- First Federal Pensioner - Edwin Simonds was a Vermont Union veteran from of the Civil War who moved to Herndon around 1870. He lived on Monroe Street. He worked in the Pension Office in Washington, D.C., and was employed there when the federal government first established the federal pension system, in the form of the Civil Service Retirement Act of 1920. In 1920, at the age of 89, Edwin was the first person to retire from the federal government and receive a federal pension.
- First Herndon Festival - Outdoor festivals in Herndon date back to the 1920s, called “Herndon Day.” Early carnivals of that same period were often used as fundraisers for the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department. But the modern Herndon Festival we know today started in 1981. It was organized at the prompting Arno Randall, an officer in the Herndon Jaycees, at an effort to create a town activity that would bring together local businesses, civic organizations, residents, and shoppers. Arno met with Mayor Rust and said: “Do you know what this town needs? This town needs a good party!”

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.