

Dr. Ernest L. Robey

Pharmacist, Banker and Exceptional Herndon Businessman

By Barbara Glakas

In Herndon's earlier years, mothers treated their family's ills with home remedies. Occasionally doctors would be called upon, travelling many miles by horse to reach their sick patients. Herndon also saw its share of "medicine men," strangers who would sometimes wander into town, standing on boxes as crowds gathered around, pitching the miraculous qualities of the dark liquids that they would sell in little bottles.

Modern pharmacies started emerging in America in the mid-19th century, with apothecaries or druggists becoming a distinct profession. It was during that same general time period that the Town of Herndon was also coming into being. One of Herndon's earliest druggists was Ernest Lee Robey, an accomplished man who was not only the town's druggist, but who was also a man who played many vital roles in Herndon's blossoming business community.

The Robey family had long roots in Fairfax County. Ernest was the son of William Isaac Robey (born c. 1832), and was the grandson of William F. Robey (born c. 1785), having ancestors whom had fought in the American Revolution.

William Isaac Robey was a Civil War veteran, having served from 1861 to 1863 with Company E of Virginia's 8th Infantry Regiment. He was wounded in the Battle of Chancellorsville. Shortly after the war, in 1867, William married Mary Ellen Kidwell. In 1881 William bought a half acre lot in Herndon on the north side of Pine Street.

Church records from Herndon's St. Timothy's Episcopal Church indicate that William – a church Vestryman, Senior Warden and Trustee – owned a grocery store on Lynn Street, in what is now known as the Nachman building at 718 Lynn Street. Census documents list his occupation as "General Merchant." Lottie Dyer Schneider, who lived in Herndon between 1879 and 1920, recalled in her memoir how, "Bill Robey kept a grocery store which was a place the men liked to loaf and talk, sitting on kegs or boxes." She also recalled, "I can remember how my mother...would buy eggs at Mr. Robey's for ten cents a dozen."

William and his wife had several children. Their first child died at the age of one. The next in line was Ernest Lee Robey, born in 1869.

Ernest went to school at Mary Castleman's Herndon Seminary on Grace Street. At age 16 he worked as a clerk for a drug store in Falls Church, Virginia. Next he worked at Wehrley's Drug Store in Washington, D.C., for three years, while learning to be a pharmacist. One source said Ernest attended the College of Pharmacy at Howard University (established in 1868) while clerking. Ernest passed his Virginia State Pharmacy Board examination before turning 21.

In 1896 Ernest married Edith Bready, the daughter of Herndon's first Mayor, Isaiah Bready. That same year Ernest bought part of his father's lot on the north side of Pine Street where they would have their residence and the Robey pharmacy store. Ernest and Edith had no children, but reared a young cousin, Sadie Kidwell, who lived in their home with them.

Ernest and his father, William, started a drugstore in Herndon called "Wm. I. Robey & Son" in about 1888. By November 1900 William left the drug store in the hands of his son, refocusing his full attention to his grocery business.

Ernest opened another drug store in Fairfax in about 1902. Ernest managed the Herndon store himself while another man managed the Fairfax store. In March of 1911, Robey opened a third drugstore in Washington, D.C., at North Capitol and H Streets, NW. At some point the Washington store was taken over by his younger brother, Frank A. Robey, who was also a pharmacist.

Large ads in the *Fairfax Herald* newspaper said, "Ernest L. Robey, Everything in Drugs, Herndon VA, Fairfax VA, and Washington D.C." In 1902 Ernest was the President of the Virginia Pharmacists Association.

Over the course of the late 1800s and the early 1900s, William and Ernest Robey -- and other members of their family -- bought and sold many pieces of land around Herndon, including lots on Pine and Station Streets, lots within the Van Vleck subdivision, lots within Bready's Eldwardstone subdivision, as well as about three acres of land known as the Robey subdivision, its boundaries generally surrounded by Station, Jefferson, Monroe and Madison Streets.

William Robey died at his home in 1906, his obituary describing him as a "genial, kind-hearted gentleman who was warmly esteemed by all who knew him."

A 1907 edition of the journal, "The Western Druggist," included a letter from Ernest Robey who called for laws to regulate drug prescription practices. He argued that doctors did not often carry a sufficient stock of drugs in their offices, which could be at the expense of their patients. He also commented that doctors sometimes bought the cheapest grade medicines and, at an effort to save money, may mix them into weaker forms. He argued that it was much better for patients to get a prescription from a doctor and take it to the druggist for filling. Robey urged examination of the current practices and for new laws to regulate those practices.

In March of 1917 Herndon's "Big Fire" burned large parts of Station and Pine Streets, including the Robey residence and store. Robey built a new residence on Elden Street. What happened to his store after the fire is not fully clear. One source said he reestablished his business in the old mill building belonging to Hutchinson and Mitchell at the northwest corner of Station and Lynn Streets. Another source said he would later build a new store in what is now the building that houses Zeffirelli's Restaurant, located at the northeast corner of Station and Pine Streets. Both

could be true, as he could have temporarily taken up in the Hutchinson & Mitchell building until the new building on Pine Street was finished.

Nevertheless, an August 1917 edition of a journal called “The Practical Druggist” reported that Ralph V. Chamblin, who had been a manager for Robey, purchased Robey’s business, saying it would be conducted under Chamblin’s name in the future. Chamblin’s Pharmacy was located for many years in the old Hutchison and Mitchell building at the intersection of Station and Lynn Streets.

Robey sold his Fairfax drug store in 1927. By 1930 he left the drugstore business and went into the insurance business. Although Robey was known predominately as a pharmacist and drugstore owner, he was also known as one of Herndon’s leading citizens for a variety of reasons.

In addition to being a pharmacist, Robey was also a farmer, specializing in Holstein cattle. He served as Herndon’s Town clerk for 21 years, and served on the Town Council from 1909 to 1915. He also served one term as Mayor beginning in 1911. Interestingly, in a close contest between three councilmen for Mayor in 1911, it took the town council 22 ballots over the course of two meetings to select their Mayor, with Ernest Robey finally earning the majority of votes cast. At that time the town council was made up of half farmers and half businessmen. The farmers felt they were slowly losing influence in the town’s political affairs. That year they made a compromise with the selection of Robey, who was both a farmer and a businessman.

Robey served as a director of the Peoples Bank of Leesburg until he organized -- and became President of -- the National Bank of Herndon in 1910. A 1933 newspaper article reported,

“Any area is as strong as its bank and ... this has been true here in Herndon. The National Bank has provided a correct and conservative banking service for the benefit of its depositors. The bank was established in 1910 with Ernest Robey as President ... and today he is still president, carrying on in the modern manner and rendering service that is approved by all.”

By 1933 Herndon’s bank was the second largest in Fairfax County, serving customers from all around the county. However, the bank abruptly closed in 1935 due to the discovery that the cashier had embezzled about \$60,000 over an 18-year period.

Regardless, the newspapers continued to recognize Robey’s banking contributions, reporting,

“By wise investments and sage advice to citizens he was able to assist in the business growth in the town in an unequalled way by any other citizen. His office witnessed meetings and completion of plans that helped give the town its deserved appellation ‘the metropolis of Fairfax County.’ ”

Robey held innumerable leadership positions in many important Herndon organizations, such as the Director of the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department, the first President of the Herndon Chamber of Commerce in 1921, the Vice President of the Herndon Water Company, and the President of the Herndon Citizens' Association. Old newspaper articles also show that he was also a member of the Fairfax Dairyman Association, was an officer in the Herndon Masonic Lodge, chaired Liberty Loan drives, was a Shriner, was among the first group of Herndon men to subscribe to Herndon's early telephone service, and was an active member of Herndon's Congregational Church.

Ernest L. Robey died of heart disease in 1938. *The Herndon News Observer* newspaper dedicated an unusually long tribute to Robey on the front page of their newspaper. In part it read:

“We are sincerely grieved. Born in this town, he was constantly on the alert to further any church or civic project... This doctor had faith in his town [news]paper and all of his town's institutions, and he never wearied of trying to do something for any and all of them, even in his failing health of recent years. Men of Dr. Robey's stamp are an asset to the community. They try to see ahead and, in simple faith of the fellow man, they try to do right by everybody, at home and abroad. His life is a sermon for the young people of the town. We hope that it will live with them.”

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.