

Elisabeth Leonhardt and the Navy's "Sacred Twenty"

A Famous Herndon Veteran

By Barbara Glakas

Herndon resident, Elisabeth Leonhardt, was among the Navy's "Sacred Twenty," a group of female nurses who were the first females to formally serve in U.S. Navy during World War I. She was the Chief Nurse of the United States Navy.

Elisabeth Leonhardt was the daughter of Henrich Jacob and Mary E. Leonhardt. Jacob was born in Germany and was a naturalized citizen, immigrating in 1831. Mary was born in Maryland. Together they ultimately settled in the Herndon area and had nine children.

Jacob served as a private in the Civil War, an infantryman a unit in the District of Columbia. He was a lumber dealer by trade. The location of his business is clearly marked on Herndon's 1878 map, drawn by cartographer G. M. Hopkins. According to records of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Jacob was a vestryman. Mrs. Mary Leonhardt -- along with two other Herndon residents -- Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Castleman -- were credited with the idea of building a larger, permanent Episcopal Church in Herndon, which had previously operated out of a mission building. The new church, built at the corner of Elden and Grace Streets, was consecrated in 1881.

Prior to the establishment of St. Timothy's, the Leonhardts were also known to support Herndon's first church -- the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church, located at Elden and Center Streets and built in 1872. When the church was initially furnished the pulpit was given by Jacob Leonhardt. The first Bible was given to the church by Mary Leonhardt. Mary was also a Sunday school teacher there. The Leonhardt's son, John, was the Sunday school librarian. And one of their daughters, also named Mary, married Joseph North in the church, the first recorded marriage there.

St. Timothy's Church records indicate that the Leonhardt family lived "up Lynn Street." Early members of the Herndon Historical society confirmed that the Leonhardts lived in a large house that used to stand near the corner of Elden and Lynn Streets, at what is now considered Elden and Monroe Streets, and whose address was once 704 Elden Street.

Elisabeth Leonhardt was the sixth child of Jacob and Mary Leonhardt's nine children. Different documents mark her birth year as being either 1867 or 1868. A grave registry website said,

"Although her grave marker states 'Elisabeth,' her birth certificate states 'Elizabeth.' She may have made that name change during her lifetime and never registered the change."

We speculate the name "Elisabeth" may have been her middle name. The 1880 census document showed that the Leonhardt family had no daughter named "Elisabeth" that year, but there was a

daughter listed named Minerva who had been born within the same year that Elizabeth had been born. Later, in a 1900 census, she was listed as “M. Eliza. Leonhardt.”

Elizabeth never married and little is known about her youth. It is assumed that she attended the Herndon School on Center Street, as a Herndon School picture dated c. 1888 shows her younger brother in attendance, Charles Elbert Leonhardt, who was born in 1874.

The 1900 census for Washington, D.C., showed Elizabeth rooming with several other nurses on Connecticut Avenue, N.W. Not too far away was the Naval Museum of Hygiene, which later became the Naval Medical School. Nurses had already been working aboard Navy ships and in Navy hospitals prior to being formally accepted into the Navy.

In 1908, Congress approved, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed, a bill which established a Navy Nurse Corps. The Bureau of Medicine and Surgery implemented the legislation and selected the Navy's first female nurses. That year, at the age of forty one, Elizabeth was selected as a member of this initial group of Navy nurses, called “The Sacred Twenty.” The women were required to be between the ages of 22 and 44, could not be married, and had to be citizens of the United States.

The Sacred Twenty were chosen from various nursing schools and had training across a wide range of nursing skills. They were first assigned to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Washington, D.C., for initial training. The Navy did not assign these early nurses any rank, nor did they provide them with quarters, so the nurses rented their own house and provided their own meals.

By 1909, the nurses were assigned to other hospitals in New York, Norfolk, and Annapolis. Some of the Sacred Twenty also served in U.S. Hospitals overseas in Guam, Samoa, and The Philippines. One nurse at each station was appointed as Chief Nurse, who had additional responsibilities and pay. In addition to training other local nurses, some of the Sacred Twenty also implemented a number of new programs and later provided medical care on the battlefield.

Chief Nurse Elizabeth Leonhardt arrived at the Naval Hospital in Guam in 1911. In addition to normal nursing duties, she provided training and supervision for hospital apprentices and native nurses. While in Guam, Leonhardt created a successful training school for the local women. Training classes included topics such as tuberculosis, massage therapy and midwifery. Leonhardt remained the Chief Nurse in Guam until 1914.

The Navy Nurse Corps gradually expanded to 160 nurses by the beginning of World War I. In 1919 Leonhardt was the Chief Nurse of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps and was assigned to the Naval Hospital in Norfolk, Virginia. In 1920 she served temporary duty aboard the hospital ship *U.S.S. Mercy* during its voyage from New York to San Francisco. She then promptly returned to her regular duty as Chief Nurse. In 1922 she was ordered to the Naval Hospital in Puget Sound in the state of Washington, where she held the position of Principal Chief Nurse until 1926.

Upon retirement in 1928, she held the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade, a rank she had held since 1911.

Old newspaper articles give hints about how Leonhardt involved herself in Herndon, especially after her retirement from the Navy in 1928. In the 1920s she joined the Herndon Fortnightly Club, serving as a club officer and donating many books to the library. She was also member of the Order of Eastern Star, was a member of the Herndon Citizen's Association, served on a committee for Herndon's Firemen's Carnival, and was a member of the Corban Club, a women's club associated with the Herndon Congregational Church. She hosted bridge club meetings and quilting parties. She served on a P.T.A. committee and she catalogued books at the school library. As she got older, Leonhardt would sometimes spend the winter months in Washington.

A long time Herndon resident recalled that, as a little girl, she used to visit Miss Leonhardt at her nearby home. She said Miss Leonhardt "was a nice lady who made good cookies."

In 1953 Elisabeth Leonhardt died in the Leesburg Hospital after a long illness at the age of 84. Her death certificate indicated that her home was in Herndon. She is buried in Herndon's Chestnut Grove Cemetery, alongside other members of the Leonhardt family. Miss Leonhardt served the Herndon community well, as she did her country.

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.