

## **The Rail Comes to Herndon**

### *The Evolution of the WO&D Railroad*

By Barbara Glakas

The beginning of the Washington and Old Dominion (W&OD) Railroad came about as an effort to connect the Alexandria port with points west for the purpose of commerce. Specifically, the idea was to connect the Alexandria ports to the coal mines in West Virginia, but that full dream was never realized.

The once popular Alexandria port was stagnating in the mid-1840s, over shadowed by port competitors to the north and south, including Washington D.C. and Baltimore. Alexandria lived off the turnpike system, which was becoming obsolete. While Baltimore made the bold move to commit to rail -- building the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad -- Alexandria and Washington preferred using a canal system. Georgetown started the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal. However, beaten to Cumberland, Maryland, by the B&O Railroad, the effort on the C&O Canal stopped.

By 1847 a group of local merchants and bankers chartered the Alexandria and Harper's Ferry (A&HF) Railroad. The plan was to build the rail through Fairfax and Loudoun Counties, through Leesburg and up to Harper's Ferry, where it would link with the Winchester and Potomac (W&P) Railroad. But in 1848 the B&O Railroad got control of the W&P, dashing the hopes of the A&HF.

Next, investors incorporated the Orange and Alexandria (O&A) Railroad, which would run from Alexandria through Culpeper to Orange, where it would link to another railroad line to Richmond and Charlottesville. That railroad reached Orange County by 1853.

Some earlier promoters of the A&HF then reignited a new scheme to connect the O&A with the Shenandoah Valley by going through the Blue Ridge and linking with the Manassas Gap Railroad. Now under a new name -- The Alexandria, Loudoun and Hampshire (AL&H) -- the plan of the new company was to go west to the coal fields in Hampshire County, Virginia (now Mineral County, West Virginia), to meet with the B&O Railroad main line at Wheeling. From Alexandria the railroad would go along Four Mile Run, through Fairfax and Loudoun Counties, and then directly west through the mountain to Winchester and westward.

In 1854 condemnation commissioners, who had been appointed by the courts of Alexandria and Fairfax Counties, met to set compensation for the landowners whose property was taken for the railroad. As part of the "just compensation," the Fairfax commissioners also included an amount for construction of "good and substantial fencing" that would run along the owner's footage of land parallel to the railroad right of way. The Herndon land owners who were compensated were

Jane Farr, Thomas Cox, James Miller, Henry Kipp and Joseph Orrison. Compensation for the land ranged from \$150 to \$556, while compensation for the fences ranged from \$87 to \$415.

Construction for the first section of the AL&H started in Alexandria in 1855. Construction crews followed surveyors and by 1859 the grading of the railroad beds reached Clarke's Gap (just west of Leesburg) and a single track of 52-pound rail had been laid from Alexandria to Herndon.

Kitty Kitchen Hanna was a long-time Herndon resident who was born in 1830 and who lived in Thorntonville for a short while as a newlywed. Thorntonville was about two miles east of Herndon in what is now the Wiehle/Sunset Hills/Reston area. Kitty watched the railroad track being built. In the book Reminiscences of an Oldest Inhabitant, Kitty said:

“While we were living there [in Thorntonville], the railroad was commencing to come through the woods, leastways, it begun to come through in '55, but didn't entirely come through till the spring of '56, an' it was a long time gettin' thro' the cut at Thorntonville. Shall I tell you the names of the engineers? There was three that built this railroad, I remember them well. They was George Baxter, an' Cal Powell, an' Jones – his first name I disremember, but he was a slender built young man from South Carolina. By the time they got the railroad through Purdie's cut here, we'd moved from Thorntonville an' had a part of Mr. Purdie's house in this place, a little village it was then becoming.”

The Purdie house was located on Elden Street in the yet unnamed little village of Herndon.

Donald Levine's book, Herndon: The Land, 1649-1900, indicates that approximately one-half to three-quarters of an acre of land was sold by Herndon land owners, Daniel and Maria Calyer, to the Alexandria, Loudoun and Hampshire Railroad. That land was described as adjoining the Station House and is a triangular piece of land that is the present day location of the train depot and the Town Hall.

The Herndon train depot was thought to have been built circa 1857. The original station was much smaller than what we know today. An 1860 AL&H engineer report said Herndon had a “passenger and freight house, 20 X 55 feet.” Photos show it was a very simple and utilitarian looking building, a one-story wood board and batten structure. It had a ticket office and a freight room. A sketch dated 1887 shows a proposed enlargement plan, in which an additional reception room was added on the east end of the building. Either one or two additions were ultimately made to the east side of the building, but it is not exactly clear when the addition was made.

According David Guillaudeu's book, Images of Rail: Washington & Old Dominion Railroad, a bay window had been added at some point before 1912 for the station agent to be able to look up and down the railroad track. A 1930s era photo shows that yet another extension had been made to the building, this time to the freight room on the west side. That same west end would later be shortened by several feet in the 1970s to accommodate the extension of Station Street.

In the early years the depot building had a variety of uses. In addition to the housing the station master, it also sometimes housed a post office and a general store.

While the railroad workers continued their grading work west of Leesburg, a ship delivered the first locomotive to Alexandria from Massachusetts, a wood-burning 8-wheeler from Mason Machine Works. It was named the "Lewis McKenzie" after the railroad's president. Two more locomotives (the Manning and the Clarke) arrived in 1859. All three original locomotives were 4-4-0 locomotives, referring to its wheel arrangement -- four leading wheels, four driving wheels and no trailing wheels. An office building, passenger station, roundhouse and turntable were built in Alexandria near the water. Rails were spiked down and by March of 1859 the McKenzie was placed into the tracks.

By August of the same year, limited freight and passenger service was running to Vienna. By January of 1860 regular daily round trips were being made out to the Farmwell station (now Ashburn). By 1861 trains ran between Alexandria and Leesburg, with ten station stops along the way, including a stop in Herndon. Stagecoaches picked up passengers at Leesburg to transport them to Winchester.

Some sources indicate that sometime between 1859 and 1867, a railroad turntable may have been installed in Herndon adjacent to the railroad track. While Herndon was not the end of the railroad, a source said the turntable was installed "pending further completion of the railroad," which suggests it might have been temporary. One source said it was located in the triangular railroad park behind the Depot, however, no evidence of this can be found. Some town employees and local construction company workers, who were present in the 1990s when the land for the new Town Council Chambers was being excavated on Lynn Street, say they found a deep 15 to 20 foot hole that was either stone-lined or cut into the rock. Some speculated it could have been a remnant of a turntable, while others speculated it could have been an unfinished well or a cistern. The hole was filled with concrete for one of the columns of the Council Chambers. No verifiable documentation has been discovered to confirm the presence of a turntable in Herndon.

There was, however, documentation of a wye in Herndon. A rail wye is a triangular configuration of railroad tracks that can be used to allow trains to pass from one line to another or used to turn railway equipment around, much like a three-point turn. Land records, and a right-of-way and track map dated 1916, shows Herndon's wye located just northwest of Center Street, in the vicinity of the current Fortnightly Square neighborhood.

The Civil War interrupted further expansion of the rail line west of Leesburg. In 1861 Virginia seceded from the Union and the AL&H was caught between factions trying to take control of the rail lines. General Robert E. Lee took two of the AL&H locomotives to be used on the O&A in the south for the Confederacy. The Confederates also destroyed many of the railroad cars and ravaged the railroad tracks west of Vienna, including those in Herndon. Railroad bridges had

also been destroyed, including the 110-foot span over Difficult Run. Kitty Kitchen Hanna recalled:

“The next thing was when the Unions took Alexandria in ’60...an’ the railroad was tore up by the Southerners so it couldn’t come beyond Vienna. Yes, rails all scattered from here to Leesburg.”

After the war, in 1865, the damaged railroad property was returned to the Virginia Board of Public Works. The state then turned it back over to McKenzie and its original managers. The rail line was slowly patched up.

By 1866 the Difficult Run bridge span had been rebuilt and daily freight trains were running out to Thorntonville. Once the deep railroad cut west of Thorntonville had been cleaned out, the rail was clear to Herndon. By 1867 the trains returned to Leesburg.

Finally, by 1900 the railway extended to its last stop, Bluemont (then Snickersville). The dream to go to the coal mines in West Virginia never came to fruition but the railway companies compensated with the use of mail service, passenger service and freight.

The railroad was key to the vitality of the Herndon community. A National Park Register of Historic Places report said that “no point on either the main line or the Bluemont branch of the Southern Railway ships more milk than Herndon.” The Depot was not only a hub for shipment of dairy products but also for many commuters to Washington. The thriving small dairy community of Herndon grew around the railroad and the depot.

Lottie Dyer, who was born 1879 and grew up in Herndon, recalled in her memoir:

“Hundreds of gallons of milk were shipped daily on express cars, and I seem to hear even today, the noisy banging of cans which resounded far and wide both morning and evening when they were loaded or unloaded at the big platform across the road from the depot.”

During the post-war period, various acquisitions of the rail road caused the name to change from AL&H to the Washington and Western (W&W) Railroad, to the Washington, Ohio and Western (WO&W) Railroad, and to the Southern Railway.

In 1911 a corporation called the Washington and Old Dominion Railway was formed, leasing the Southern Railway’s Bluemont branch. It was during this time period that the railroad went electric. In 1912 a brick substation was built along the east side of Herndon’s depot to provide power to the newly electrified trains. Trolley service was established with 45 minute express service from Herndon to Georgetown.

Yet another corporation was formed in 1936, similarly named the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad (W&OD), which ultimately acquired ownership of the rail line between Potomac Yard and Purcellville.

In 1938 the Southern Railroad Corporation sold about one-quarter acre of land to the Town of Herndon, a space on the south side of the depot, where the Town Hall was built that year.

The railroad, however, eventually lost out to more modern modes of transportation. As automobiles became popular in the 1920s, the railway business waned. Freight revenues outpaced declining passenger service. Slowly the passenger routes and the electric passenger cars were put out of service. In the 1940s the electrical wires were taken down in stages and diesel trains took over. Mail and passenger service officially stopped in 1951.

In 1956 the W&OD was sold to the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Railway, but the W&OD kept its name. One of the last uses of the railroad was to haul materials for the construction of Dulles Airport. Town employees remember a raised railroad siding (or side track) and its tall piers, just north of the main W&OD track line in the vicinity of Center Street. That structure was built for off-loading sand and gravel for the old concrete plant (Sterling Concrete) and for the construction of Dulles Airport. Bottom dump hopper cars would be pulled out onto this raised side track and dump gravel out the bottom into bins below where a loader could scoop it up and load it into trucks or on the conveyor that fed the concrete plant. The piers were later buried in the embankment adjacent to the W&OD Trail and Center Street.

Once the airport opened in 1962, the railroad's profits dropped and deficits accumulated. The railroad ceased operations in 1968 and went into disuse. The brick substation next to the Herndon depot was subsequently torn down in 1969.

The Virginia Electric and Power Company (VEPCO) bought the railroad right-of-way for its electric power transmission lines. Soon afterwards public sentiment grew in Fairfax and Arlington for a hike and bike trail. In 1977 the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority reached an agreement with VEPCO to acquire the railroad right-of-way in stages for use as a hike and bike trail, to be paid off over time. The purchase was completed in 1982.

Also in 1977, VEPCO came to an agreement with the Town of Herndon to give the abandoned depot building to the town. Paving of the trail was completed to Herndon in 1981 and later to its terminus in Purcellville in 1988.

Today the old W&OD Railroad is a very popular hike and bike trail and still runs past Herndon's former train depot which now houses a town museum, sponsored by the Herndon Historical Society.

*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](http://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](http://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](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*