

Ballston's Beginnings*

By ELEANOR LEE TEMPLEMAN

Although Arlington County has no incorporated towns or cities within its borders, certain areas have retained the names of early villages which have since merged into a great metropolitan unit. One of these is Ballston, at the intersection of Glebe Road and Wilson Boulevard. It is the site of the County's earliest hamlet, which was first called Birch's Crossroads and later Ball's Crossroads. Since shortly after the Civil War, it has been known as Ballston. Many Arlingtonians feel that it is unfortunate that the tremendous shopping center which was opened in 1951 at the southeast corner of the intersection was given the name of "Parkington" instead of the historical name which honors one of the earliest pioneer families, the Balls who became residents of the County before 1735 and of the Crossroads area before the Revolution.

The central and eastern portions of Ballston were part of the tremendous acreage which was acquired by Joseph and Janet Birch in the 1700's. The Birch family came from England and settled first in the "Northern Neck" of Virginia, where they owned land prior to 1690. Their home was near the headwaters of Tindall Creek, north of the York River. This was the birthplace in 1680 of John Birch, Sr., who died in Westmoreland County in 1729. His son, John Birch, Jr., moved to Stafford County, where he died in 1746. His will was probated there June 9, 1747.

Joseph Birch of the next generation lived at his townhouse in Alexandria but owned a large plantation in Fairfax County. He married Janet Bowmaker Robertson, daughter of James Robertson, who also owned extensive tracts on the north side of Four Mile Run, adjacent to Abingdon Plantation and extending through the present Lyon Park area. The Northern Neck Land Book shows that James Robertson received 800 acres in 1729 and 629 acres the following year.

James Robertson died in 1769, and his estate went to his son John Robertson and daughter Janet Robertson Birch. Interesting data on the family were given in a suit, "Alexander vs. Birch." Both families claimed title to acreage along present Shirley Highway, which was awarded to the Alexanders in 1790 by the Virginia Court of Appeals.

Joseph Birch and his wife Janet continued to add to their lands; in November 1798 he acquired with John Ball part of the Breckin patent of 1716 adjacent to the Glebe Lands. On July 15, 1799, he was appointed to the important position of tobacco inspector for the Town of Alexandria, which carried a bond of \$4,000.

I find Birch history all over Arlington County, but that is not surprising, as Joseph and Janet bought, patented, and inherited vast acreage. Seven of

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their eleven children were sons who married and had families, most of whom lived on their inheritances. That portion of the estate which included the crossroads and extending easterly through Lyon Park was inherited by the son, John Thornton Birch. Some of his descendants still reside in the area.

Another early resident of Ballston was Samuel Shreve (1750-1815), a Revolutionary officer from New Jersey who settled in Virginia in 1780. In 1791 he secured title to nearly 260 acres adjacent to the west boundary of the Birch tract, extending roughly from Lubber Run to Four Mile Run, and between Wilson and Washington Boulevards.

This tract was first owned by Col. John Colville of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in England. By 1755 he had become a resident of Fairfax County and drew his will in May of that year. He bequeathed to "the present Earl of Tankerville," among other tracts, the one later purchased by Samuel Shreve. John Colville's will was probated in Fairfax January 20, 1756, with Thomas Colville and the Earl of Tankerville as executors. The Earl himself drew up a will on August 13, 1762, and devised the property to his eldest son, Charles, the "present Earl of Tankerville," and an interest to his second son, the Hon. Henry Astley Bennett. A deed was drawn October 1, 1791, by "The Right Honourable Charles, Earl of Tankerville, and the Honourable Henry Astley Bennett, both of the Kingdom of Great Britain," confirming the title to the tract of land in Samuel Shreve, reciting as consideration 340 pounds, 11 shillings, 10 pence, half-penny.

I find by checking into the Bennett genealogy that the Bennetts of Tankerville were of the same family which produced Richard Bennett, Colonial Governor of Virginia, and also the Earl of Arlington, for whom the County was indirectly named. The latter traces to an event in 1663 in the Court of King Charles II when he raised Henry Bennett, a successful adventurer, to peerage with the title of Baron, afterward Earl, of Arlington. He was the patron of John Custis II, who built a mansion before 1676 on Old Plantation Creek in Northampton County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and named it for his friend. When George Washington Parke Custis built his home in 1802 in our County, he named it Mount Washington because of the Mount Vernon heirlooms. His bride two years later persuaded him to call it Arlington House for his own ancestral home.

Samuel Shreve's granddaughter Julia married William Randolph Birch (1816-1916), who enlisted when 18 years old to fight the Indians in the Southwest. Both Samuel Shreve and William R. Birch are buried near their homesites, in the family graveyard between 829 and 839 North Abingdon Street. William Birch's son-in-law, George Washington Veitch, was a lieutenant of the 6th Virginia Cavalry during the Civil War. His forebears are documented in the County records as early as 1805. Of these early families, there is not one original homestead still standing.

However, the gracious residence built in 1904 by Judge Harry Randolph Thomas at 920 North Jefferson Street is on land inherited by Mrs. Thomas.

She was Julia Veitch, the daughter of George Washington Veitch, and directly descended from John Thornton Birch and Samuel Shreve. Judge Thomas recently retired as President of the Arlington Trust Co.

His great-grandfather, John Birch, acquired the farm where the Iwo Jima Marine Memorial now stands, from the bankrupt Mason estate in the 1830's. This was the birthplace in 1877 of Judge Thomas. He recalls that when he was a boy and his grandfather was farming Analostan Island, he saw beautiful frescoes on the walls of the ruins of John Mason's mansion. Judge Thomas's paternal great grandfather, Henry Lee Thomas of Forestville, Fairfax County, had moved to Capital Hill as a federal employee.

In the early 1800's, one of the Ball family, probably a grandson of either John or Moses Ball, erected a two-story log inn, "Ball's Tavern," at the southwest corner of Birch's Crossroads which soon became known as Ball's Crossroads. The tavern was an important gathering place for the community. After recession to Virginia in 1846, it became a voting precinct. It later became a general store, and by 1896 a branch of the Georgetown Post Office was located therein. Across the road was Mortimer's Blacksmith Shop. Meanwhile, the settlement had become known as Ballston.

Nearer to the site of Clarendon, John Ball (1748-1814), son of the pioneer Moses Ball, erected a sturdy log house at the time of his marriage in 1773, and then went off to fight in the Revolutionary War. The house stood on the south side of Washington Boulevard until 1955. Directly across the Boulevard, back of the present house numbered 3427, is the old Ball family burying ground. Ensign John Ball and also his son, Horatio Ball (1785-1872), are buried there. Horatio's son, William Ball (1842-1920), erected a home about 1890. It is behind the new American Legion Headquarters.

Among the children of William Ball who have had particular influence locally were E. Wade Ball, who died in 1954 and who had been County Treasurer for about 20 years; and Frank Livingston Ball, Sr. The latter, born on October 4, 1885, was Commonwealth's Attorney 1916-1924, State Senator 1924-1932, and served on the Constitutional Convention in 1946 and 1956. He is today an active leader in Arlington's civic and historical groups.

The Central Methodist Church at the northeast corner of Fairfax Drive and North Stafford Street was erected close to the Robert Ball, Sr. (1776-1861), family graveyard. Five stones are beside the east wall, and Stafford Street makes a slight curve in order to leave the graves undisturbed.

There is a Donaldson family burial ground on the south side of 1012 North Quincy Street. Beneath a lone tree are two stones. One is inscribed "H. F. Thompson, Co. D., 3 Pa. Cavalry, born Feb. 22, 1843, died Jan. 16, 1864, at Warrenton, Va." The other is to Robert R. Skinner who died July 11, 1872, at the age of 3 months and 3 days. A number of burials are unmarked.

The John Mills family cemetery was on Glebe Road opposite Carlin Springs Road, in a grove of trees. It disappeared during construction (1949-1951) of the Parkington Shopping Center.