

# How the Hume School Historical Museum Happened

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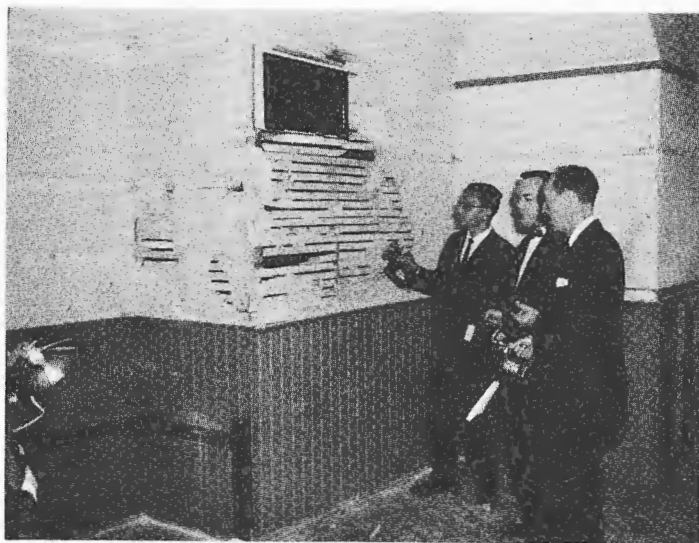
"If we owned the property today, it would be ten years before we could get the money needed to put the building in shape for a museum." This was the not unrealistic view of one member of the small group to which the proposal was broached in late December 1959 that the Hume School, no longer used for school purposes, be acquired by the Arlington Historical Society for use as a museum and community center.

That the Arlington Historical Society was able to hold its annual meeting in May 1963, only a little over three years later, in the Hume School Historical Museum was due to the hard work and devotion of many people, and widespread community support as well as to the generosity of the descendents of Frank Hume for whom the school was named.

Built in 1891, the three room, two-story brick building stands on an L-shaped 122' x 97' x 60' lot on the high ridge overlooking the Potomac River in south Arlington. In 1958, it, the oldest surviving school building in the County, was closed by the County School Board, partly because the Fire Department had required extensive repairs to reduce fire hazards, and partly because of the construction of other more modern schools in the area. A strip of adjacent ground fronting on South Arlington Ridge Road and running 296 feet down the steep hillside to Lynn Street had been deeded to the School Board in 1892 by Frank Hume, prominent civic leader and philanthropist of Arlington during the latter part of the last Century and the early years of this. The deed carried the proviso that the land revert to him or his heirs should the school cease to be used for educational purposes. This had come to pass, and plans were well advanced for the trustees of the estate in conjunction with the School Board to sell the two parcels for private use. A variance had been secured from the Board of Zoning Appeals permitting resubdivision into three lots, and bids had been advertised for. These were formidable obstacles in the way of the success of the Museum project.

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HUME SCHOOL BEFORE REMODELING

THOMAS W. RICHARDS AND LEO URBANSKE, JR. OF THE COUNTY BOARD EXAMINE CONDITION OF THE SCHOOL WITH KENTON D. HAMAKER, ARCHITECT. LIGHTS WERE NEEDED AS THE SCHOOL HAD BEEN BOARDED UP FOR PROTECTION.

Obviously the first thing to do was to make sure that the building was susceptible of renovation at a reasonable cost. Three members of the Society made an inspection early in January 1960. The brickwork appeared sound under the dingy yellow paint which was flaking off. The partly excavated basement, reached by a narrow, curved stair, contained a pile of coal (7 tons as it turned out), and an antiquated furnace in a pit. Animals had entered through the broken cellar windows, and bones and other refuse were scattered about. The first floor, with two rooms and a small office, could not be viewed carefully as the space was piled to the embossed sheet-iron ceiling with broken school desks and other discarded furniture. The narrow wooden steps to the second floor were in poor condition but not so bad as the scene they led to of walls stripped of plaster, a floor covered with broken window glass, and ample evidence that birds were much at home. All in all, it was a most discouraging sight.

Beneath the surface, however, the essential soundness of the building could be discerned. The joists and studs were not rotted nor termite-riddled, the roof was tight except where vandals climbing up the rickety rear fire escape had pulled off the flashing in one area, and above all, the adaptability for the

Society's use challenged the imagination. Before deciding to undertake the project, the Board of Directors of the Society sounded out sentiment of community leaders and received an enthusiastic response.

Mrs. Margaret Cooke Birge, granddaughter of Frank Hume and originator of the Museum idea, secured the consent of Mr. Hume's seven surviving children to the donation of their land to the Arlington Historical Society in memory of their father if the building could be acquired from the County. The next step was to get the mutual agreement of the trustees of the estate and the School Board to turn down any bids received in response to the advertising. A committee waited upon the trustees and secured agreement conditional upon similar action by the School Board. A delegation attended a School Board meeting and persuaded that body to take the necessary action. One hurdle had been passed.

Now how to acquire the building, so narrowly saved from destruction? The Arlington Historical Society was young (founded in 1956) with only a little over 200 members and very limited resources. It would never have dared to undertake a project of such magnitude if the opportunity had not thrust itself upon the Society, along with the realization that, in view of the rapidly changing face of Arlington, such a chance was not likely to be repeated.

It happened that just at this time the Society had arranged a week-long exhibit of items associated with Arlington history, in the auditorium of the Hecht Co. department store. Petition forms were prepared reading:

#### TO THE COUNTY BOARD OF ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

We the undersigned, support the efforts of the Arlington Historical Society to acquire the Hume School for use as an historical museum and center. We urge the Arlington County Board to further this project in the interest of the entire community.

The petitions were signed in good number by the many drawn to the exhibit. Then members of the Society took forms to meetings of other organizations to which they belonged: civic groups, P.T.A.'s, professional and service clubs. They told of the project and added more names to the petition. Some organizations adopted resolutions supporting the project. In the end over 2,000 names were on the list, not counting those who had signed twice in their enthusiasm.

Officers and members of the Society attended a meeting of the County Board in May 1960, and presented their case. The County Board agreed to buy the building from the School Board (which itself was legally unable to donate it) and turn it over to the Society. The County Board is authorized by law to donate property to non-profit organizations engaged in commemorating historical events. Members of both Boards favored the idea.

A price of \$17,500 was set after appraisal, and agreed to by the School Board. This negotiation, however, took several months and in the meantime the precarious health of some of Mr. Hume's heirs made it desirable that the deed from them to the Society be signed. This was done, the signing in one case requiring approval of a District of Columbia Court, and the deed placed in escrow to be released when the deed from the County Board was signed.

Finally, in the fall of 1960, the School Board deeded the property to the County Board and the County Board in turn to the Arlington Historical Society; each transfer required approval of the Circuit Court. In the last week of the year, just twelve months after the idea was first put forward, the Arlington Historical Society became the owner of the Hume School site and building. Haste was made to get the Hume deed recorded to avoid real estate tax liability on January 1, 1961. A previously arranged for insurance binder went into effect the minute the Chairman of the County Board signed that deed.

In retrospect a year seems like a short time in which to have untangled so many legal intricacies. At the time, the delays seemed endless.

Parenthetically, it had been deemed advisable during this period to incorporate the Society against the day when it should become a property owner. This was done, with the first five Presidents of the Society as incorporators. Subsequently, tax exempt status was granted by the Federal Internal Revenue Service. Both steps were not accomplished without a good deal of paper work.

Now that it had possession, the Society was faced with the necessity for rounding up the money necessary to renovate and convert the building. How much would be needed? The Society is blessed with members of widely diverse talents. Drawing upon some of this group, even before the deeds were signed, a Building Committee headed by L. E. Berkey, construction engineer with experience in restoration, Kenton D. Hamaker, Arlington architect, Leslie L. Shelton, County Fire Marshal, and William H. Macomber, architect and specialist in historic restoration had been appointed. This Committee had made an expert inspection of the building and confirmed the first cursory investigation as to its basic soundness. It now met to draw up plans. These were done in the first instance by Mr. Hamaker, modified in accordance with suggestions of the Board of Directors, and at last approved. Mr. Lee Kendrick contributed his expert design of the heating plant.

After the plans were final, specifications were drawn by the Committee and tentative prices secured. Based on these an estimate of \$45,000 was reached, considerably above earlier guesses. This was set as the goal of the Hume School Historical Museum Building Fund.

Now it was necessary to organize a fund drive. Again members of the Society pitched in. The drive was headed by Jack R. Jones and Eleanor Lee Templeman as Co-Chairmen, and Mrs. Birge as a valuable member of the

Fund Committee. All expenses of the drive were donated; all money received went into the Building Fund. Solicitation was carried on by letter, personal contact, and appearances at meetings. Several interested organizations held benefits, white elephant or bake sales, and contributed the proceeds. The printing of an attractive leaflet which told the story of this community project was donated by L. B. Prince & Co. In the fall of 1961, a drive was conducted among certain grades in the Arlington Public Schools. Milk cartons to receive contributions, banded to identify the purpose, were distributed then collected by a special group, and the coins and bills counted by still another. All contributions were acknowledged by individual letter.

To act as a spur, the idea of a bronze plaque on which the names of donors of \$100 or more would be placed was conceived. This plaque hangs in the Museum today with the names of 82 individuals, 19 business firms, and 36 organizations. A generous gift from Mrs. Lynn Hornor, daughter of Frank Hume, gave the Fund a much needed boost. For while literally thousands of people contributed support, the average donation was modest.

As the goal was approached, and confident of eventual success, the Board of Directors decided that enough money was in hand to start construction. The Atlantic States Construction Co. agreed to a contract, which included a token sum for supervision, under which the work would be done at cost and guaranteed not to exceed \$40,000. In fact, the final total, exclusive of furnishings, fell below that sum. In September 1962, the work began. Delayed somewhat by the serious illness of Mr. Berkey, it was finished in time for the annual meeting of the Society in May, and with what happy result all those who have seen the Museum can attest.

After the building was cleared—the School Board removed their debris, the coal for which no buyer could be found given away, the forbidding chain link fence about the former playground taken down—the brick was steam cleaned to reveal the interesting patterns in which the plain and molded brick is laid. Further excavation was done and a curtain wall built in the basement to provide an eventual work space for study groups. The flooring on the first floor was torn out and steel beams put in place. The stairways were widened and made fireproof, and new ceilings were placed. The two downstairs rooms were thrown together to make a large meeting room. A new heating plant and lighting were installed. Restrooms replaced the existing inadequate toilet facilities. A coffee bar complete with sink occupies one corner of the meeting room. Details of color schemes and lighting fixtures were worked out with great charm.

While all this was going on, plans were being made for the use of the building and details of operation were being settled. Not the least of the problems to be solved was that of a name. That chosen recognizes the in-

ability to change the habit of reference to a long-time County landmark at the same time that it serves to honor the Hume name. The meeting room is conceived of as a community center. In accord with this concept, the permanent collection of the Art League of Northern Virginia now adorns its walls. This room is already in use for the meetings of various organizations paying a nominal sum toward the cost of operating the building.

A Museum Exhibit Committee began working on displays for the second floor exhibit room. Cases had been donated by Swiller Bros. Music Store; not all can be used to advantage but they provide a good beginning. During the first days of May, after the building was turned over by the contractor to the Society, members of the Exhibit Committee worked late hours to put displays in place. The concept of having limited displays which are not just collections of objects but which "tell a story" is best conveyed in this statement which is distributed to Museum visitors:

#### HUME SCHOOL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Exhibits in the Museum are intended to preserve evidence of Arlington's past and relate the present day to by-gone eras. The initial displays are limited in scope but give some idea of the objective. Additions to the collection, and new displays, will be arranged as time goes on. Some of those now in place will indicate the scheme.

The U. S. Geological Survey map of the Arlington area gives some idea of its topography. This will be supplemented at a later date by a display to be prepared by the Arlington County School Children. A semi-petrified log from the Four Mile Run valley is the oldest Arlington link with the past in the Museum. The petrified mammoth tooth, gift of a member of the Society but *not* from Arlington, is on display because the younger generation believes that no museum is complete without a fossil!

The development of Arlington's boundaries since 1800, and the outline chart of the present form of government, are the nucleus around which a display of the development of County Government will be built.

The Indian artifacts are from two sites on the Arlington bank of the Potomac. Most of this material dates from the late Archaic and Early Woodland periods when the bow and arrow was replacing the atlatl (spear thrower) and clay pottery was replacing soap stone dishes; much of it may be as much as 2,000 years old. Very little appears to be of as recent origin as the arrival of the white man. Yet Captain John Smith found an Indian village, Namerough-quina, in what is now Arlington in 1608. A scale model of what such a vilage might have looked like has been made by a member of the Society.

The Civil War period in Arlington was one of the most important in its history. The Museum exhibit contains copies of contemporary pictures and

prints of sites and scenes in the County. Never before exhibited are some original manuscript maps prepared for the U. S. Army in Virginia by the Coast Survey.

A hint of the story which can be told about the increasing urbanization of Arlington is given by the globe of the first (kerosene) street light in Clarendon contrasted with a picture of a modern street light. A chart shows the growth in number of light in the County since 1930, and their increased power.

To recapture a bit of the flavor of the Hume School when it was first in use in the 1890's, a framed set of "mottoes" and an engraved copy of the Declaration of Independence such as used to be found in every school room are hung on the wall. There is a McGuffey Reader, a slate, and slate pencils, and desks, one over 100 years old.

The charming mantelpiece was salvaged from Blair House at the time of its renovation. Three of the prints about it show views of Washington from the Arlington shore of the Potomac. The last display is of some of the lovely and interesting homes of Arlington, the chief of which, of course, is Arlington House, the home of Robert E. Lee whose portrait hangs over the fireplace.

The small library room will house the archives of printed material relating to Arlington. On display are a few of the newspapers and booklets in the Society's collection.

Finally, on May 10, 1963, the Society held its Annual Meeting in the Hume School Historical Museum with David Mays, President of the Virginia Historical Society as speaker at the dedication. The following morning, the flag donated to the Society by the Washington-Lee Chapter of the Children of the American Revolution was raised with appropriate ceremonies in which the Fife and Drum Corps of American Legion Post #139 took part. Open house was held that day and the next. The Museum is now open for a limited number of hours weekly with the aid of volunteer help.

Although the Arlington Historical Society spearheaded the work of providing Arlington with a Museum of local history (the only such institution in the area), and accepted responsibility, it has done so as a trustee of the public interest. The endurance of this project as a worthwhile part of the County's life will depend upon a continuance of the widespread community support which it has received in the past.