

The Brookdale Gatepost

BY MARY HASSLER MCCONNELL

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to become reacquainted with long time friends and the wonderful Ashton Heights and Lyon Park neighborhoods in which I had spent my childhood. During conversations with others who grew up there, one memory that often came up concerned a concrete structure, presumably a gatepost, that once stood on the southeast corner of North Irving Street and 2nd Road, North. Neighborhood lore had it that the structure might have been part of a back gate to Arlington House. That seemed plausible, since we knew of no other estate that had existed in the area. As time went by, I became increasingly skeptical of the local legend from the 40s and 50s. It had never seemed to be more than an assumption, so I started to look for some answers.

Books about Arlington history gave no information as to who had owned the land prior to the houses that exist today. Research in the Virginia Room of the Central Library did eventually provide many answers to what I was looking for. Dorothea Abbott's "The Hunter Family and Its Connection with Arlington County," in the 1982 *Arlington Historical Magazine* (Vol. 7, No. 2) provided a wealth of information. Among other things, I learned that in 1851 Lt. Bushrod Hunter bought a large tract of land, of which the areas now known as Lyon Park and Ashton Heights were just a portion. Except for a period of time during and following the Civil War, Hunter, and later his daughter Fannie B. Hunter, owned at least some of that tract into the twentieth century. They called their land "Brookdale," although "Brookvale" was recorded in the deed. Present-day 1st Street North was called Brookvale Avenue prior to the standardization of street names in 1935.

There were also some articles about Brookdale in the Ashton Heights vertical file. There was no mention in any of the articles of the Hunters having a residence on their land. Despite the lack of evidence, I still felt that something must have existed at one time that our neighborhood landmark had been part of. I also knew that there were not many of us left to remember it and pass on a small piece of Arlington history.

A big piece of the puzzle fell into place in March 2000 following a visit to the Arlington Historical Museum. Bette Clements was most helpful when she called Sara Collins who directed me to the Historic Homes/Brookdale file in the Virginia Room. There I found documented evidence of the Hunter family having a residence on their Brookdale property. Alexander Hunter, Bushrod Hunter's

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son, authored a book called *Johnny Reb and Billy Yank* (New York and Washington: Neale Publishing Co., 1905). On pages 40-41 of that book, Hunter wrote, "...my father owned a second plantation called Brookdale, but a few miles away [from Abingdon], and adjoining Arlington, General Lee's estate. It was the custom of our family to spend the summer months at Brookdale, so as to escape the ague and fever that attacked everyone who lived on the banks of the Potomac..."

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Well, perhaps a gatepost or two survived.

This information gave me the impetus to search for the general location of the Hunter's home.

The first map that I found showing Lt. Bushrod Hunter's name regarding property he owned in what is now Arlington County was Corbett's 1861 "Map of the Seat of War" which appears on page 67 in *Arlington County in Virginia: A Pictorial History* by Nan and Ross Netherton (Virginia Beach: The Donning Co., 1987). However the map is very general and it is difficult to determine where his house was. Arlington House is listed directly above Lt. Hunter's (and quite a distance from the Potomac River). There is just one little mark to designate a house for the two properties.

The book *Mr. Lincoln's Forts: A Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington* by Benjamin Franklin Cooley III and Walton H. Owen II (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Co., 1988) has a map on page 82 that shows Lt. Hunter had a residence on his property. The detail is better, showing the house to the west of a stream and north of one lane or road and west of another.

When I was in Arlington in July 2000, I found two more copies of maps in the Virginia Room that show the location of Lt. Hunter's property. One, titled "Environs of Washington 1862," very clearly shows a house, lanes, orchards and/or gardens, a stream, and surrounding roads. Columbia Pike is to the south and what is now Glebe Road is to the west of Hunter's land. Fort Craig is southeast of the property. This map is very detailed and even indicates lines of

latitude and longitude. A current day map of Arlington County showing latitude and longitude could be a great help in determining just where the Hunter's residence was located [Ed. note: The map location, 38° 52' 22" N 77° 5' 26" W, is at the southwest corner of Arlington Boulevard and Fenwick Street, the present location of the Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Congregation].

Knowledge of the origin of the stream to the east of the house also would be very helpful in pinpointing where it stood. Some maps show it south of Arlington Boulevard. A drawing based on G.P. Strum's 1900 map and printed on page 42 of the 1982 *Arlington Historical Magazine* shows it just north of the boulevard and labels it "Mineral Spring." I do know that there was a stream or spring on the north side, because in the 1940s children in the neighborhood (myself included) went there to catch tadpoles. There was a small farm east of Irving Street and north of Lee Boulevard, as Arlington Boulevard was named then.

Finally, in the book *The Cartography of Northern Virginia* (Fairfax County: Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1981) on page 71 I found General John G. Bernard's 1865 map that showed Bushrod Hunter's house and property and the surrounding roads in all directions. There are no roads on that map that run from the Ashton Heights/Lyon Park area to Arlington House.

With the above information, I feel there is a good possibility that the gatepost was a part of the Hunter's estate and had nothing to do with Arlington House.

After having owned the home at 3116 2nd Road, North since 1943, my family sold it in 1999 following the death of my mother. The old gatepost, if that indeed was what it was, is gone from the neighborhood, too. At some point it was knocked down and eventually removed, probably when houses were built on that lot in the mid-fifties.

My brother, Tom Hassler, and I agree that it was about six feet tall and perhaps three feet wide on each side, hollow, and the gray surface rough. Tom remembers a bowl on top, as do others. It appeared to be quite old, and its condition deteriorated during the years it remained there during our childhood. I have two pictures taken by my father sometime in the forties in which the gatepost is in the background. They are not very good, but are all that I have [Ed. note: No details of the gatepost can be discerned in the pictures].

I also feel that I should include another memory that goes back to the Arlington House theory. A friend and former neighbor remembers a book, a red one that she checked out as a child from the branch library that was on North Irving Street in Clarendon. She said that she remembers a picture in it of two gateposts, like the one in our neighborhood, and that the caption said they belonged to a back gate to Arlington House. Perhaps someone knows of such a book?

Mary Hassler McConnell now lives in Memphis, TN. She writes, "It has been very interesting to research the history of the neighborhood in which I was lucky enough to grow up. It also led to further reading and to joining the Arlington Historical Society through which I am learning about the history of the whole county.

"Perhaps there are people who know more about this. If so, I would be interested to hear from them. A better picture of the gatepost may exist. Perhaps, somewhere, there are even pictures of the Hunter's residence.

"The Arlington Historical Society states its mission: '*to research, discover, collect, preserve, restore and disseminate.*' This project has given me the opportunity to do the first three. This essay is the only way that I know to do the last."
