

# Fifty Years of the Arlington Historical Society

BY RUTH PRESTON ROSE

The decision to form an historical society in Arlington County was made at an informal meeting at the Glebe, the home of State Senator and Mrs. Frank L. Ball, Sr. An organizational meeting followed at the home of Laszlo Ecker-Racz and Cornelia B. Rose, Jr. on September 14, 1956, presided over by the first president of the Society, C. Harrison Mann, Jr. Other officers elected at this meeting were Senator Ball, Robert Nelson Anderson, Jr., Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., and Ashton C. Jones, Sr. Anderson was appointed chairman of a committee which would draw up a constitution. A county-wide meeting was held two months later at the Custis-Lee Mansion (now Arlington House), where a candle-light tour was led by Agnes Downey, historian of the site and a founding member of the Society.

Subsequent meetings were held at schools, churches, and other sites in the area. Members donated documents and articles of historic interest and wrote articles for the first of the Society's annual magazines, which appeared in January 1958. As a contribution to the celebration of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement at Jamestown, Robert Nelson Anderson, Sr. made a scale model of an Indian village such as John Smith would have found when he visited this area in 1608.

When Arlington County was planning a central library in 1958, the Society requested that there be a local history room where documents from the Arlington Historical Society's collection might be housed. As the collection of artifacts grew, it became increasingly necessary that a building be found for their storage and display. After the closing of the 1891 Hume School in 1958, the Society requested, and was granted, the building to be used as a museum. Named for the civic leader and philanthropist Frank Hume, the school was deeded to the Arlington Historical Society in December 1960. A fund-raising effort for its restoration brought in over \$40,000 by September 1962, and the first meeting was held there in May 1963. In September of that year, it began opening to the public on Sunday afternoons. An endowment fund for the work of the Society was drawn up by Jack Jones and Chester Brasse and presented to the membership in 1966. The initial trustees were Laszlo Ecker-Racz, Jack Jones, and Joseph L. Fisher.

In addition to the annual historical magazine, the society has published a regular newsletter and has sponsored or encouraged the writing of a number of

books on Arlington history. Included in that number were *Arlington Heritage*, by Eleanor Lee Templeman; *Arlington County, Virginia: A History*, by Cornelia B. Rose, Jr.; *Arlington County in Virginia*, by Ross and Nan Netherton; and *The House that John Built*, by Martha B. Orth.

The Ball-Sellers House, the subject of Martha Orth's book, is believed to be the oldest house in the county. The 18<sup>th</sup> century log house with a 19<sup>th</sup> century addition was given to the Arlington Historical Society in 1975 by Mrs. Marian Sellers. The house was restored by the Society and opened to the public. Both the Hume School and the Ball-Sellers House are on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

Throughout its 50 years of existence, the Arlington Historical Society has operated from membership dues, donations, and funds raised by the organization. Grants from the state, county, or various foundations have helped pay for special projects such as major repairs for the museum and publication of the magazine. An annual Historic Arlington Day began in 1965 and has helped bring about awareness of Arlington's history as well as raise funds for the operation of the Society.

The Arlington Historical Society has presented special exhibits, sponsored tours and lectures, and encouraged student awareness of the county's history. In 1993, a monthly meeting known as "Arlington Reunion" was begun, co-sponsored by the Society and the Central Library's Virginia Room. These and the Society's regular meetings, now held at the library, are filmed by Arlington's Channel 74.

A highlight of each year is the Society's banquet, where the speaker is often a national figure. Among those so honoring the Society have been television personality Roger Mudd, columnist David Broder, General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist.

The Glebe House meeting that led to the foundation of the Arlington Historical Society was made up of intelligent, dedicated, and capable individuals who laid a strong foundation for an organization that has thrived with distinction for 50 years.

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Ruth Preston Rose is a long time member of the Arlington Historical Society, and served as its president during the 1978-79 term. She has previously contributed a number of articles to the Magazine. This article was specially prepared for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the founding of the Society, and is reprinted here by permission.

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