

The Henderson House

By DONALD A. WISE

The continuing process of urbanization is rapidly changing the landscape in Arlington County. Progress is the name of the game, but sometimes through the united efforts of the local citizens, the rich heritage of the past has been preserved for the appreciation of our present and future generations. In other cases, the local historian can only attempt to collect the miscellaneous bits of information and thereby preserve the past through the publishing of his research findings.

The Henderson House, which was located at 4811 Third Street, North, has long disappeared from the landscape of Arlington County. Its site is better known today as the Lubber Run Recreation Center and Playground. This article will concern itself primarily with the Henderson family and the old Henderson House in Arlington County.

JOHN B. HENDERSON, SENIOR

The Hendersons were a prominent family in Washington, D.C. John Brooks Henderson was born at Danville, Virginia, November 16, 1826. In 1832 the Hendersons moved to Missouri and in 1842 James Henderson, John's father, was accidentally killed. John, the oldest, and the other three Henderson children were given homes with the neighbors by the Court. John worked on a farm until he was eighteen; then he taught school while studying law. He was admitted to the bar before he was twenty and opened a law office in Louisiana, Missouri. When John was 23 years old, he was elected as a Representative to the State Legislature. In 1860 John Henderson was a candidate for Congress as a "Douglas Democrat," but was defeated. He was known as a "claybank." A "charcoal" favored immediate emancipation of the slaves in the state; a "claybank" favored gradual compensated emancipation; and a "snowflake" was opposed to emancipation in any form. John Henderson was a state-rights Democrat, but when the issue was drawn in 1861, he strongly opposed the secession of Missouri. He became a Union delegate to the convention and was one of the most influential forces in keeping the State of Missouri in the Union. He was opposed to the coercion of the seceded states and was bitter against the North and the Abolitionist element of the Republican Party. The fall of Fort Sumter and the call for troops changed his opinion as to coercion, and he raised a brigade of militia of which he became brigadier general, but saw no action.

In 1862, the two Senators representing Missouri in Washington, D.C., were Trusten Polk and Waldo P. Johnson. Both Missouri Senators were expelled from the Senate because of disloyalty to the Union. On January

17, 1862, John Henderson was appointed U. S. Senator to replace Truett Polk. The following year he was elected for a full term. He served on a number of important committees, including finance, foreign relations, and Indian affairs. John Henderson and President Abraham Lincoln were reported to be good friends. Henderson was the author of the Thirteenth Amendment in Congress and an advocate of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. His alignment with the Radical Republicans came to an abrupt end when he refused to cast a vote of "guilty" against President Andrew Johnson during the latter's impeachment proceedings in 1868. His stand brought an end to his career in the Senate. On June 25, 1868, John Henderson married Mary Newton Foote, a daughter of Judge Elisha Foote of New York. John Henderson returned to St. Louis in 1868 and resumed law practice. The John Hendersons had one son, John Brooks Henderson, Jr. John, Sr. was chairman of the Republican national convention that nominated James G. Blaine for the presidency in 1884. In 1889, John Sr. retired from law practice and moved to Washington, D.C. where he became active in real estate development. He was appointed chairman of the American delegation to the Pan American Congress held in Washington, D.C., 1889-1890. From 1892 to 1911, he served as a regent of the Smithsonian Institute. John, Sr. wrote numerous articles for newspapers and magazines. John Brooks Henderson, Sr. died April 12, 1913, after a long illness.¹

JOHN B. HENDERSON, JUNIOR

John Brooks Henderson, Jr. was born at Louisiana, Missouri, in 1870. He graduated from Harvard in 1891, and the Columbian University, now George Washington University, in 1893, with a LL.B. degree. He took up a diplomatic career and was secretary to John W. Foster, while serving as a diplomatic adviser to the Chinese government. He was later attached to the suite of General Miles in Europe on an Army inspection tour in 1897. Henderson was a Republican nominee for Congress from Virginia in 1906.

In 1911 he was appointed regent of the Smithsonian Institute and later became a member of the executive committee. Although he was a practicing lawyer in Washington, D. C., his main interests were in marine biology. His life was devoted to the study of deep sea growth and his specialty was conchology, dealing with shell fish. He made a number of explorations in his yacht, *Eolis*, collecting specimens from the ocean floor from Maine to the West Indies, and as far west as Hawaii.

¹ *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961*, p. 1039; *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Volume XIII, 1906, pp. 49-50; *Dictionary of American Biography*, Volume IV, 1931, pp. 527-529; David P. Dyer, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 1922; *Alexandria Gazette*, April 14, 1913; *The Sunday Star*, April 13, 1913; *The Washington Post*, April 13, 1913.

Henderson wrote a number of scholarly essays on shell fish and the fauna and flora of the sea. He contributed numerous articles to newspapers, magazines, and technical journals. During his official career, he wrote a book, "American Diplomatic Questions." In 1903 he married Angelica Schuyler Crosby of New York, and they had one daughter, Beatrice Van Renasalaer Henderson, born in 1905. John B. Henderson, Jr. died on January 4, 1923, at the Emergency Hospital in Washington, D. C. His wife had died a few years earlier. At the time of his death, John, Jr. was considered one of the three top authorities in the country on marine biology.²

MARY F. HENDERSON

Mary Foote Henderson, wife of John Brooks Henderson, Sr., survived both her husband and son. Mrs. Henderson was born in New York State in 1842; was president of the Women's State Suffrage Association of Missouri in 1876; organized the St. Louis School of Design in the same year, and the St. Louis Women's Exchange in 1879; studied art four years at Washington University, St. Louis, from 1881 to 1885, and published "Practical Cooking and Dinner-Giving" in 1876, and "Diet for the Sick" in 1885. When the Hendersons returned to Washington, D. C. in 1889, they bought many acres of land in the barren upland section of Northwest Washington, on what was to become the famous "Avenue of the Embassies." "Henderson Castle," one of the most famous structures in Washington, with its rambling wings of red stone and its precipitous forbidding walls, was built on the vantage spot of the entire tract. Mrs. Henderson built quite a fortune on Washington real estate, but she was also very active in social affairs in the Nation's capital. When her son, John, Jr., married Angelica Schuyler Crosby, daughter of one of the aristocratic families of Washington, the wedding was said to be one of the most brilliant in the annals of the city. In 1923 and again in 1931, Mrs. Henderson offered to donate to the United States a \$500,000 mansion for its Vice President, or for \$1 if a gift could not be accepted. Congress refused the generous gift since the Vice President was then making only \$15,000 a year and they did not think he could maintain such a palatial mansion. Mrs. Henderson died July 16, 1931, in Washington, D. C., and was buried at Brooklyn, New York.

THE HENDERSON HOUSE

On December 30, 1893, John B. Henderson, Jr., bought 98.4 acres and a house from Thomas H. Sypherd and Annie R., his wife, for \$12,500.³

² *Evening Star*, January 4, 1923, p. 21; *Washington Post*, January 5, 1923. Missouri Historical Society Archives; *Post Dispatch*, February 22, 1931; *Globe Democrat*, May 23, 1931; Missouri Historical Society *Bulletin*, Volume XXIII, 1966, Number 1, page 76.

³ Arlington County Deed Book Liber O, No. 4, page 308.

On May 1, 1894, John B. Henderson, Sr., purchased a 38 acre tract from the Carlin Springs Cooperative Association for \$4,750.⁴ John B. Henderson, Jr., also purchased another 97.56 acre tract adjoining his property to the west of Lubber Run on April 16, 1894.⁵ The 1900 Map of Alexandria County shows the three tracts of land owned by the Henderson family.⁶ In 1920 John B. Henderson, Jr., bought the Industrial Research Farms, Inc. (A Delaware Corp.) of some 234 acres from Glenwald on January 8, 1920.⁷ This would indicate that the Henderson Estate in Virginia included a total of some 467.96 acres.

In 1894 John B. Henderson, Jr., built a two-story structure⁸ of wood and plaster with a Swiss architectural design on the newly acquired tract of land in Virginia.⁹



The Henderson House, 1951.

⁴ Arlington County Deed Book Liber O, No. 4, page 450.

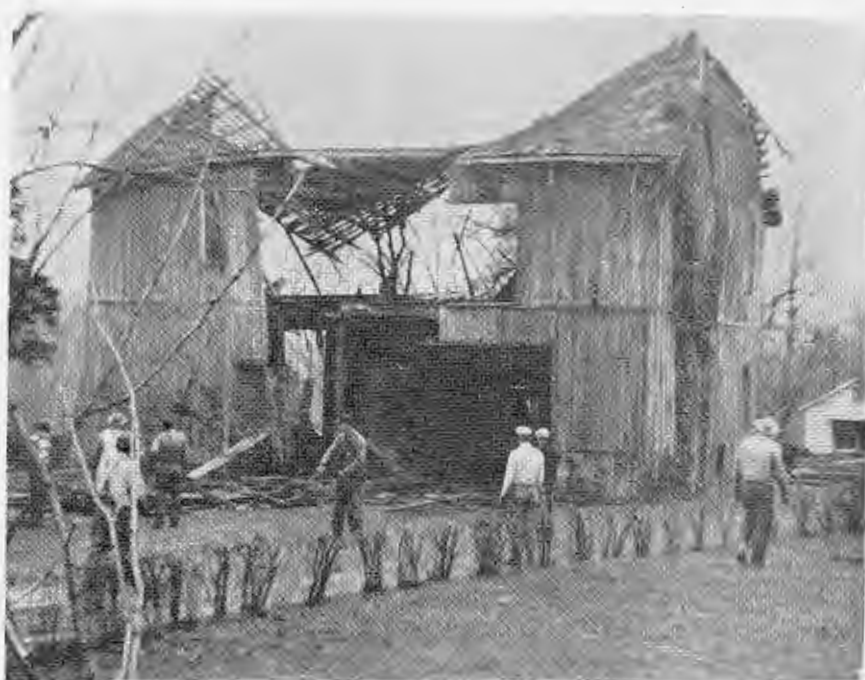
⁵ Arlington County Deed Book Liber O, No. 4, page 413.

⁶ Map of Alexandria County, Virginia, prepared by Howell and Taylor for the Virginia Title Company, 1900. A copy of this map is in the Hume School Historical Museum.

⁷ Arlington County Special Book 2, page 140.

⁸ "Recollections of a Native-Born Glencarlynite," Constance Backus, 1952, pp. 25-32.

⁹ *History of Alexandria County*, 1907.



The Henderson Barn After a Fire, 1952.

Other buildings on the estate included a barn, which burned in 1952, a caretaker's house, carriage house, and a number of other miscellaneous structures. Apparently the Hendersons never made their country estate a regular place of residence except possibly during 1905 to 1906, but usually lived at their "castle" at 2200 16th Street, N.W. in Washington, D. C. However, since John B. Henderson, Jr. was a Republican nominee for Congress from Virginia in 1906, he must have used this place for his official residence outside of Washington, D. C. The author was fortunate enough to locate and interview one person who actually lived on the Henderson Estate. Mr. Julian N. Walton, 84 years old, of Catlett, Virginia, once lived in the Caretaker's house with a relative in 1897. He never met any of the Henderson family, but does remember the Henderson House as not being occupied and the first floor windows were boarded up during this time. (Author's note: This was the time that John, Jr. was serving overseas in Europe.) In fact, many of the neighbors considered the Henderson House as being a haunted house because of its abandoned look during this time.¹⁰

There was a drive leading from the front of the Henderson House to a road now known as Henderson Road which connects Glebe Road to Arlington Boulevard. The drive running from Henderson Road to the

¹⁰ Personal Interview, Julian N. Walton, Catlett, Virginia, July 26, 1969.

house was a stone driveway lined with trees. The author has an aerial photograph of 1937 vintage obtained from the National Archives which verifies this statement. Various persons interviewed have indicated that the trees along the Henderson driveway were either sycamore, cottonwood, or hawthorn. One of the residents along Henderson Road has reported that while digging in his backyard, he ran into the old Henderson driveway of stone composition about two feet below the present surface of his lawn.¹¹ The old Henderson driveway apparently ran approximately under the present boundary fence separating the Kate Waller Barrett school yard from the residences along Third Street, North and the house fronting on Henderson Road.

One interesting story connected with the Henderson House goes as follows: A few years after the John B. Henderson, Jr. were married, their friends heard that they were expecting an heir. The couple slipped quietly out of Washington to the Henderson country home in Virginia, and presently returned with a baby girl, who was named Beatrice Van Renasalaer Henderson, amid much rejoicing in the "castle." Only a few very close friends had been permitted to visit the Henderson home in Virginia, and the only attendants were three trusted servants and a physician. Beatrice, or "Trixie" as she became known, was raised in the austere old fortress on 16th Street, N.W. in Washington, D.C. Beatrice went to school abroad and did extensive traveling in Europe with her grandmother. All of the friends of "Trixie" were debutantes and all of the parties which "Trixie" attended were debutante parties, but Mrs. John, Sr. would have no "coming out" party for her granddaughter, "Trixie." In fact, Mrs. Henderson was quoted as saying, "Debutante parties? I don't believe in them. They are nothing but auction blocks, where young girls, carefully reared, are placed on the marriage market. No! There shall be no debutante parties in my family." Again she is supposed to have said, "They are hussies, these modern girls. They drink and smoke, and they wear gowns that are utterly shocking. My granddaughter is different. Her skirts are to her ankles. She is a lady." Mrs. John, Sr. discouraged young women and men from calling on "Trixie" in the Henderson Castle. One day a young man called at Henderson Castle in the bold hope of selling the aged dowager a Rolls Royce automobile, for which he was a salesman. Beatrice met him and they fell in love. They met secretly and finally told Mrs. Henderson that they wanted to marry. Mrs. Henderson was opposed to the marriage, but finally consented to a quiet wedding. Mrs. Henderson settled \$400,000 on Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Wholean as a wedding present. She arranged for Wholean to become a trade commissioner for the Government and he and his young wife went to live in Rome. When Mrs. Henderson in 1931 offered to give the U. S. Government a \$500,000 mansion on Fifteenth Street N.W. as a Vice Presidential residence, Mrs. Beatrice Henderson Wholean

¹¹ Personal Interview, Mr. Robert C. Huston, Arlington, Virginia, August 31, 1969.

asked the District Supreme Court to restrain Mrs. Henderson from giving away the mansion and requested that she be removed as trustee of the Henderson estates valued at (\$6,000,000) because of infirmities of age. Then the dowager cast her bombshell to the public about her supposed granddaughter's place in the Henderson family. She told this story:

"When the wife of John Henderson, Jr. retired in 1905 to the Henderson country home in Virginia, presumably to await the birth of a child, she was attended by a prominent Washington obstetrician, who was connected with a large foundling home in Washington, D. C. and a similar home in Charles Town, West Virginia. The young Mrs. Henderson and her husband made a trip to Charles Town and selected a girl, before returning to their home in Virginia. Young Mrs. Henderson and her husband died without having told anyone of a visit to Charles Town.

"One day an old servant in a heated moment made a strange remark. Beatrice had scolded him, and in reply he said: "What right have you to give me orders? I'm as much a member of the Henderson family as you are." Beatrice apparently didn't think anything of it, but Mrs. Henderson hearing it, questioned the man closely. He told her, she later said, he had been serving at the estate in Virginia at the time Beatrice was supposed to have been born and learned that young Mrs. Henderson was going to adopt a child from the doctor's home for babies in Charles Town. He said he was let in on the secret and sworn to silence. Only three other persons knew of the plan, he said—the doctor and two others who since have died. When Beatrice was married, it is said, Mrs. Henderson told her of the facts, and said not to worry about them, that everything would continue just as it had always been."¹²

According to the District Court Records in Washington, D. C., Mrs. Henderson did adopt Beatrice Van Renasalaer Henderson on December 30, 1924.¹³ However, due to some misunderstandings between Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Beatrice Henderson Wholean, on November 17, 1930, Mrs. Henderson made Miss Frances and Henry N. Arnold, niece and nephew, of New York, chief heirs and left Mrs. Wholean with "the nominal sum of \$100."¹⁴

When John B. Henderson, Jr. died in 1923 and his estate was settled, Mrs. John Sr. became the trustee since her granddaughter, Beatrice, was a minor. The Henderson Estate in Virginia was sold on July 24, 1925, to Percy W. Pickford for \$70,000.¹⁵ On March 4, 1927, Thomas H. Pickford purchased the property from Percy W. Pickford and his wife, Florence.¹⁶ On May 15, 1931, Herbert H. Porter purchased the Henderson House and

¹² Missouri Historical Society Archives; *Post Dispatch*, February 22, 1931.

¹³ *Post Dispatch*, February 22, 1931.

¹⁴ Missouri Historical Society Archives: *Globe Democrat*, May 23, 1931.

¹⁵ Arlington County Deed Book 316/511.

¹⁶ Arlington County Deed Book 262/358.

4.012 acres of land from Thomas H. Pickford for \$22,000.¹⁷ Mr. Porter lived on the place and his activities are described in a previous issue of the Society's periodical.¹⁸ During the period of 1941 to 1950, the old Henderson House was used by the U.S. Army as an officer's club and billeting by the military units assigned to nearby Arlington Hall.¹⁹ On June 4, 1951, Arlington County agreed to purchase from Mr. Porter and his wife, Frances A., four parcels of land over a four-year period. The old Henderson House was included in Parcel A which was purchased on August 30, 1951, by Arlington County for \$16,875. The other three parcels of land were rented by the County and purchased individually during the next three years.²⁰ The appraisal on the 6.76 acre Porter tract came to \$71,150, or \$6,000 per acre including the value of the buildings. In 1951, the Henderson House was valued at \$20,500, the caretaker's house at \$8,050, and the barn at \$1,800.

Arlington County dedicated the new Recreation Center (Henderson House) on November 24, 1951. The old Henderson House became the first permanent recreation center in Arlington County. A dance was held that evening to initiate the new activities for County residents. The converted dwelling provided facilities for offices, classrooms, a kitchen, and a ballroom.²¹

On October 16, 1954, Hurricane Hazel swept through Arlington County. Heavy rainfall and strong winds with gusts up to 98 miles per hour accompanied the storm. There were a number of power failures throughout the County and emergency operations were handled at Arlington Hospital by flashlight. The strong hurricane gusts blew down electric wires at the Recreation Center (old Henderson House) causing a switchbox to short and a fire to start. Fireman said that flames spread rapidly through the building whipped by the wind. Flames shot 30 to 40 feet above the building as firemen battled to save the structure. The first alarm was sounded at 3 p.m. The four alarm fire raged unchecked for 45 minutes, before it was brought under control by about 50 firemen using 15 pieces of equipment. The fire burned out parts of the first and second floor, a portion of the roof, and an attic where athletic and other recreation equipment was stored.^{22 23}

The ruins of the old Henderson House were leveled and a new Recreation Center was built on the tract of land. On the wall of the downstairs hallway in the new Recreation Center is a large color photograph of the

¹⁷ Arlington County Deed Book 328/23.

¹⁸ Donald A. Wise, "Arlington Forest." *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1968), pp. 27-28.

¹⁹ Personal Interview, Mrs. Jasper Vance, Arlington, Virginia, August 31, 1969.

²⁰ Arlington County Deed Books 1014/175, 1076/163, 1139/598, 1177/301.

²¹ *The Daily Sun*, November 24, 1951.

²² *The Washington Post*, October 16, 1954, p. 19.

²³ Personal Interviews with Lt. J. W. Braber and Captain J. L. Georgie, Arlington County Fire Department, April 13, 1969.

old Henderson House. Today all that remains of the memories of the Henderson era is a short five-block stretch of road called "Henderson Road." This name was retained by Arlington County in 1934 during the renaming of the street network throughout the County due its historic prominence.²⁴

²⁴ C. L. Kinnier. "The Renaming of Arlington Streets." *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1959).

²⁵ Photographs were loaned to the author for reproduction by the Arlington County Parks and Recreation Department, 1968.



The Henderson House and Terrace, 1951. The Screened Porch led to a Ballroom.



The Henderson House, Lubber Run and clearing for North George Mason Drive.