

RECREATION IN ARLINGTON COUNTY 1870-1920

By

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The purpose of this paper is to discover the kinds of activities that occupied the leisure time of the people of the area from 1870 to 1920. The area referred to will be known as Arlington County, as it is today; but at the time discussed in this paper it was known as Alexandria County to distinguish it from Alexandria City. It became Arlington County in 1920. During the period under discussion, Arlington was made up of several villages and small farms. As part of its heritage, it also included two large plantation houses, Abingdon at the site of National Airport and the Custis-Lee Mansion on the grounds of Arlington Cemetery; twenty-two military installations built during the Civil War and largely abandoned; and much undeveloped acreage. It was rural Virginia and it was the other side of the Potomac from the nation's capital. This dual personality led not only to interesting developments in recreation in Arlington, but also to a lack of developments as might be found elsewhere in similar communities.

The story of recreation in Arlington begins in colonial times. Colonial life took on many new aspects as the economic security of the colonies grew more certain. With more time to devote to leisure, the colonists developed opportunities for recreation. Hunting and shooting contests, barn raisings, training days, and similar activities became a part of the colonist's life, especially in New England and the middle colonies where small farms abounded. But in Virginia and the South different social and economic conditions prevailed. By the eighteenth century and with the growth of slavery and the exhaustion of the soil, there were fewer small farms and as a result recreational patterns were different. Small farmers moved West and plantations developed. The plantations were far apart and often with no centralizing townships. While this meant that whites had more leisure time it was time generally spent alone. However, it did lead to an easy going attitude in the use of leisure. There are numerous references to dice and card playing as early as 1665 even though the Virginia Assembly in 1619 had decreed "that any person found idle should be bound over to compulsory work . . ." But as conditions of life became somewhat easier, enforcement grew lax. Horse racing and cock fighting were popular and bets were often made. So gambling was an early part of Virginia's recreational heritage.¹

Public recreation was also a part of that heritage. It was soon after George Washington Parke Custis built Arlington House in 1802 that the river acres of the estate were turned into a picnic spot to which the public was invited on all days but Sunday. A small river boat ferried people across the Potomac to a landing Custis had made near a spring.² At this time Arlington was part of the Federal District, having been ceded by Virginia in 1787. It remained part of the

District of Columbia until 1846 when it was returned to Virginia as Alexandria County. It was occupied during the Civil War by Federal troops who far outnumbered the civilian population.

Two events occurred in 1870 which gave new direction to recreation in Arlington. The first was that Virginia was admitted back into the Union resulting in the end of military occupation. The second was that New Jersey outlawed gambling in that state. New Jersey promoters looking for a location convenient to a populous city and as yet undeveloped chose two locations in Arlington to re-establish their businesses, Jackson City and Rosslyn.

Jackson City was an ill-conceived attempt by New York speculators in the 1830's to establish a twin city to Washington, much like Brooklyn was to New York. The site chosen was the Virginia side of Long Bridge (the present location of the Fourteenth Street Bridge). The city was named after Andrew Jackson and sites were offered for sale at public auction in 1841. By the start of the Civil War it was still farmland. Fortifications were built there to protect the Federal City and when they were abandoned in 1870 the sites were developed by the New Jersey promoters. Rosslyn, at the Virginia end of the Aqueduct Bridge (later replaced by the Francis Scott Key Bridge), had always been more of a place to pass through than a destination. It was a terminal for boats, a ferry, an aqueduct, three trolley lines, and two railroad lines. It too was bought up by promoters.

The beginnings of gambling and horse racing in Arlington go unreported in the area newspapers for several years.³ Yet the Alexandria Gazette of January 3, 1870 has a lengthy article describing a palatial gaming house in New York. Before the final paragraph condemning gaming the article goes on for several paragraphs about the house itself. It mentions floor to ceiling French mirrors, heavy blue satin curtains over white lace, a long black walnut table where an 11:00 P.M. "epicurean" supper is served, and more. It states that "bankers, merchants, lawyers, artists, generals, and young men about town are frequenters. Even reported 'pious' men have been known to gamble there." An article from the same paper printed on January 22, 1871 tells of the horrors of gambling in Boston and describes the travails of a Boston city treasury employee who embezzled for the purpose of gambling. Yet no mention is made of the influx of promoters into Arlington.

Arlington was actually described as "the Monte Carlo of Virginia" in a guidebook issued by the state in the early 1890's entitled "A Guide for Justices of the Peace." The largest and most powerful operation was the St. Asaph Gambling House located between Jackson City and Alexandria. It had thirty-seven full-time employees. At the St. Asaph the principal endeavor was selling fake bets after the race was over. This was the same game that was played in the movie "The Sting." There was also a racetrack at Jackson City which is now the Pentagon lagoon. It was operated by the Old Dominion Telegraph Company. There were two houses of ill-repute just at the foot of the Long Bridge.

In Rosslyn there was Jack Heath's Gambling House where keno was played. It is claimed that cries of "Keno! Keno!" could be heard all day on Sunday. Also on Sunday, as well as other days, were thirteen barrooms set up as fake

social clubs and a cocaine house. Slot machines were everywhere. The single highest loss recorded here was \$40,000 by a player in one day. Horse racing and cock fighting were very popular and many area farmers raised cocks for fighting.⁴

As recreational as these establishments might have proven to some, they were a distinct nuisance to others. Citizens of Arlington who ventured into Washington on a Saturday night had to organize into armed groups in Georgetown and cross the bridge into and through Rosslyn in a tightly knit cavalcade. Rosslyn had its "Dead Man's Hollow" and Jackson City its "Hell's Bottom." Both were dumping grounds for the dead bodies of men whose murderers were never brought to trial. Around 1890 the "Good Citizens League" was organized but it was not until raids began in 1904 that the operations were shut down.⁵ One of the strongest opponents to the closings was the Alexandria and Mount Vernon Railroad which operated from Pennsylvania Avenue and Twelfth Street in Washington to Mount Vernon. It carried three thousand persons daily to the St. Asaph Gambling House at the rate of twenty-five cents a round trip.⁶

Shortly after the closing of the gambling houses and racetracks the Washington and Mount Vernon Railroad constructed Luna Park, an elaborate forty-acre family amusement park just a few miles away from Jackson City. The Washington Post covered its opening on May 30, 1906. "Like a silver city set with diamonds, appeared the architectural and scenic wonders of Luna Park last evening, as fifty thousand scintillating lights revealed to this gaze of admiring thousands the charm and beauty of this latest amusement creation." Built by Frederick Ingersoll of Pittsburgh at a cost of \$350,000, it was described as being of Ionic design, surmounted by an Egyptian tower from which gleams a powerful search light. Broad avenues led up to creations in Byzantine, Moorish, Japanese, Arabic, Gothic, French, Renaissance or Corinthian designs. It had a one hundred fifty-nine foot tower with chutes going down at a steep angle and "reposing in the waters of the lagoon." There was a casino building with a large ballroom and music. The orchestra was in a horn-shaped stand with metal sides that amplified the sound. On the first floor was a restaurant and a scenic river flowed by on which were boating parties. There were theaters and entertainment and fun houses. "Everything was not rampant fun" the newspaper went on to say. There was a military band and a quartet singing classical songs. Another attraction was a game called "Guess Which is the Man." It consisted of six "girls" riding bicycles around on a platform. The object was to guess which "girl" was really a man. There was a roller coaster, one leg of which enabled the cars to go up to ninety miles per hour. A very popular attraction was having your picture taken behind the wheel of an automobile. Another highly touted feature was a fully equipped hospital to take care of those who became sick or injured while at the park.⁷

Animal acts were sent down from Coney Island in New York. One was a diving horse which leaped off a high platform into water. Another was four elephants, one of whom lathered another with a mop and a bucket of suds and then "shaved" him with a big wooden razor. These four elephants precipitated Arlington's only elephant hunt when they escaped one night and had to be

tracked down. It was not an easy or quickly accomplished task. The elephants were the last animal act rented by Luna Park. A few years later the park was badly damaged by fire and abandoned.⁸

Not everyone in the 1870's found their taste in recreation running to gambling and horse racing. When the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railway Company erected a station on the Carlin property, John Carlin decided to turn the area near it into a picnic and excursion resort. There were two springs on the site and thus the name Carlin Springs. It had an ice cream and restaurant pavilion to accomodate two hundred fifty guests as well as a dance pavilion. There was also a small bar which was closed when the grounds were rented to Sunday school or church groups. Carlin also laid out a tournament course. There was a "round hole" for swimming at the junction of Lubber and Four Mile Run where, at the time, the water was around seven feet deep. People came by train from Washington and Alexandria. The *Evening Star* of August 8, 1871 reported that the "excursion of employees of the Mount Vernon cotton factory to Carlin Springs was a pleasant and agreeable affair." Carlin Springs remained a popular resort for about twelve years until the river boats along the Potomac took people further away from the vicinity for their holiday. It was finally closed down in 1893 when the residents of Arlington complained of the low caliber of clientele the Springs attracted.⁹

Arlington around the turn of the last century was made up of small farms and villages. It was accessible to Washington by only two bridges and the homes lacked gas lights, running water, and indoor plumbing found in Washington homes. There were a few houses in the area to which people came to "spend the summer in the country," but by and large Arlingtonians considered themselves a self-contained rural community. The kinds of recreation the citizens of Arlington seemed to favor centered around their homes, family, and friends. Oral and written histories by people who grew up in the area at that time reveal the kinds of activities in which they engaged.

Toys were mostly home-made or "concocted."¹⁰ Hoops were discarded rims of wagon wheels from the blacksmith shop. Kites and bows and arrows were home-made. Sparrow eggs were collected and necklaces made from them after the insides had been blown out. Bicycles were rarely mentioned but sleds were mentioned often.

Games were numerous. The children played fox and hounds in the woods or just visited the farms of the area to watch the pigs or gather fruit in season. "Wild horses" was a game claimed to have been invented by children of the area. "A player was not caught until butt by his enemy. Struggles to escape before being butt proved hard on captive's clothes. Our parents finally combined and put a stop to the game." Prisoner's Base was another game mentioned. Charades and hop scotch were recalled as being far less strenuous play. "I-spy" and "Double I-spy" played with teams of a boy and a girl required hiding places. Large oaks were considered especially suitable. The games usually took place on an open field or in front of someone's house. There were no designated playgrounds. Play was almost entirely coeducational, including football.

About once a month there were sociables at a hall, often one connected with

a church. Cakes and lemonade were provided by the village ladies. Games were played such as Farmer in the Dell, Then Came a Duke-a-Riding, and Going to Jerusalem. When the children had exhausted themselves the adults turned to dancing a waltz, a two-step, a Virginia Reel or lancers (the old-time square dance). A piano provided the music.

Tournaments were held at a tournament ground such as the one at Carlin Springs. Rings were suspended on crosspieces attached to posts set along a course. A starter would announce "The Knight of Bailey's Cross Roads" or "The Knight of Annandale" etc. A young man on a plow horse would fix his lance and at the signal "Charge Sir Knight" would gallop down the course trying to catch the rings on the end of his weapon. The knight getting the most rings during the tournament crowned the "queen of love and beauty" at that evening's dance. The dance was a square dance on a platform set up for the occasion. Fiddle music and a caller were provided. Other dances were held at a hall rented for the evening and a piano player was hired. An account is given of a club that was formed by teenagers called the Merry Bell Club which collected dues to be used for dances. A room for the night had to be found for the piano player because there was no way for him to get back to Washington at night.

There were also dances in Washington that the young people attended. It was a long hike to the trolley for some so the girls had to carry their dancing slippers and wear their hiking boots. Then there was the walk across the Aqueduct Bridge to the Pennsylvania Avenue cars. On the way home there was always a wild dash back across the bridge before the last trolley left. Trolleys and trains not only provided transportation to and from recreational pursuits, but provided recreation themselves. People could just ride to the end of the line and back. One popular destination for those courting was Great Falls.

There were of course seasonal patterns of recreation. In winter there were taffey pulls and card games such as Five Hundred, Hearts, and Casino. Again young people organized themselves loosely into clubs which would meet every so often at each others houses. Musical Chairs and Post Office were often played. Mrs. Mary Swann, a resident of the area at the time, charmingly describes Post Office as a game in which "a young man went into another room and asked for a girl to come into that room to buy stamps or get a special delivery letter — a lot of hugging and kissing went on I suppose."¹¹ Skating and sledding were popular outdoor activities in winter. A pond on Four Mile Run would be used for skating until the ice was all cut up, then the skaters would move on to the next pond. Sledding was good because there were no cars and only an occasional horse-drawn vehicle. The danger lay in the curves and the abutments to the bridges that usually signalled the end of a run. Bonfires were kept bright for warmth and for story telling.

The highlight of the summer season was the Fourth of July. Large picnics and fireworks were the order of the day. Watermelons were tied with ropes and lowered into wells to make sure they would be cold. Other summer activities included hay rides, hikes, church suppers and picnics, and lawn parties.

The biggest summer activity was swimming. The best swimming in Arlington was held to be at Four Mile Run, where in places the water was seven or eight

feet deep. There was a mill with a large wheel there and the children would crawl over the sluice way, grab the top of the wheel, and ride it down to the water.

Once or twice a year the children would be involved in a play or musical. Village picnics were also popular. For a village picnic sheets would be drawn from tree to tree to make dressing rooms and the children and some adults would swim "one hour after lunch." Tennis started to be played about 1900. Ping pong and bridge were also played.

Exclusively adult recreation was represented by membership in clubs of several kinds. There was a Euchre Club, the Muslit Club (musical and literary), and the Whist Club. Much of the village business was conducted at these club meetings. The ladies gave luncheons and vied with each other for culinary honors and also "called regularly" upon each other. The gentlemen enjoyed cock fighting, which was illegal but winked at by the sheriff. There was also a special train to Washington for those who wished to attend the theater.

Little is known about the recreation of blacks in Arlington at that time. It seems to have centered around the churches where concerts were given and large gatherings took place. Mrs. Margaret Wright recalls dancing to an accordion and she sings a song with a lively tempo. There was a social hall for meetings of organizations like the Odd Fellows and the young people's Epworth League. Usually recreation consisted of large groups of boys and girls "just walking."¹² The only sport Mrs. Wright mentions is baseball which was played from May 30 on. There seems to be little difference in the recreational patterns of blacks and whites except that whatever they did they did not do it together.

Arlington's dual personality did lead to interesting developments in its recreational history but it was also responsible for some of what it lacked. No circus came to Arlington, there were no theaters, nor were any professional sports played. For these things and more Arlingtonians went to Washington. Arlington continued to have a rural image until the 1930's. In 1930 the population was 26,615 people; by 1951 it had grown to 145,000. Arlington between 1940 and 1950 was the fastest growing non-industrial community in the nation. Open fields have been replaced by fenced-in playgrounds, gaming houses, by massage parlors, and the old swimming hole at Four Mile Run by swimming pools.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play*, New York, Appleton-Century-Croft, 1965.

² Dorothy Ellis Lee, *A History of Arlington County Virginia*, Richmond, The Dietz Press, Inc., 1946.

³ I looked at all copies of *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Star*, and the *Alexandria Gazette* from January 1, 1870 to December 31, 1873 inclusive and selected copies through 1910.

⁴ Margaret Troxell, "Gamblers Driven Out Only by Rough Treatment," article for the Northern Virginia Sun Centennial Magazine Section, August 30, 1946.

⁵ Eleanor Lee Templeman. *Arlington Heritage*, privately published by the author, 1959.

⁶ Troxell, *op. cit.*

⁷ Brochure from Luna Park at the time of its opening in 1906, original on file at Washington Public Library, Martin Luther King Branch.

⁸ Templeman, *op. cit.*

⁹ Templeman, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Most of the following is taken from Hadassah Backus, *Recollections of a Native Born Glencarynite and a Short History of Glencaryln*, processed, January 1952, on file at Arlington County Public Library.

¹¹ A taped interview with Mrs. Mary D. Swann made on July 12, 1975 for the Arlington County Library Oral History Project.

¹² A taped interview with Mrs. Margaret Evelyn Wright made on December 15, 1974 for the Arlington County Library Oral History Project.