

## SPRINGS OF ARLINGTON

*Celebrating the restoration of the historical Donaldson Spring at Potomac  
Overlook Regional Park, May 1, 1988.*

By

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What a lovely word, not only to name the most beautiful season, but to indicate water rising, or springing, from the earth! There is a certain magic in water flowing from the depths of dry soil. The surrounding dampness encourages the growth of ferns and wild flowers. Water is essential for the life of man, flora and fauna. The world's great deserts would have remained uninhabited without the oasis. From prehistoric times, springs have played an important role in the lives of humans. The Donaldson Spring in Potomac Overlook Regional Park was the site of an Indian hunting and fishing camp. There is evidence that it was also their burial ground.

Pioneer families chose their home sites adjacent to springs, and many constructed stone springhouses over them. Here in the cool water were stored milk, butter and other perishables. Each spring has its individual tradition. The one which we honor today symbolizes the linking of two of the earliest local families, the Donaldsons and the Marceys, who intermarried as was the custom in rural communities.

Throughout Virginia, all the most important plantation homes were established adjacent to this important water supply. The abundance of springs on the hillside above the Potomac at Mount Vernon decided the house location and supplied water to the estate from the settlement of the first of the Washington family in the 1700s until a very recent date. Mount Vernon's former Director, Cecil Wall, since his retirement a few years ago, comes weekly to a flowing spring in the woods to fill his jug with the pure sweet water, refusing to drink from the municipal supply.

A bit up the river on the original plantation's River Farm is Collingwood, built in 1785 at the site of a fine gushing spring which the Indians called "The Great Fountain." Here the English sailing vessels filled their water casks for their homeward journey. In 1801 when Richard Bland Lee advertised his Sully Plantation for sale, he specifically mentioned "There is a good spring convenient to the dwelling house."

Dear to the heart of Mr. Custis, second only in his affections to his Arlington House, was Arlington Spring, on the flat near the river. It was a favorite spot for picnickers and bathers. When an organization of merit appeared, it was not unusual for a servant to appear with refreshment from the house on the hill. Mr. Custis' own celebrations at the spring included

the entertainment of dignitaries beneath the shelter of the Washington War Tents. The historical Arlington Spring was destroyed during construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

A century ago, the most famous springs in our county were the Carlin Springs, a famous outing resort established by members of the Carlin family, descendants of John Carlin of Alexandria. In 1772 he purchased the estate of the pioneer, John Ball, to whom it had been granted in 1742. (The Ball-Sellers House, belonging to the Arlington Historical Society, incorporates a portion of the original home.) The fine springs, adjacent to Four Mile Run became a popular resort for Washington families who could come on the newly established rail line with a station on the site. Carlin Springs was also a meeting place for various civic and church organizations. Of great appeal to young people was "round hole" for swimming at the junction of Lubber Run and Four Mile Run.

John Ball's brother, Moses, received a grant to the west in 1748. His spring is preserved on the grounds of Northern Virginia Doctor's Hospital. Watercress grew there, perhaps dating back to prehistoric times. For a couple of years, I visited the site periodically to carefully clip a small bunch. On my last visit, I found that the yard-man tending the lawn had thought the cress was a weed, and sprayed the entire patch with weedkiller!

George Washington's diary, in April 1785, told of spending the day with Moses Ball, surveying their mutual property line. I believe that we can safely say, "George Washington drank here," and possibly nibbled the wafer-cress!

At "Reserve Hill" now the Knights of Columbus headquarters on Little Falls Road, was a fine spring. The original house burned in 1892, and was immediately replaced by a fine stone structure. Mr. Saegmuller installed a waterwheel pump to supply running water in the house. The stone water tank was patterned after a water tower in his native German city of Nuremberg.

Mary Hall's spring on the golf course of the Washington Golf and Country Club was destroyed in 1959. Mary's home at the crest of the hill had well-trodden paths from the federal forts in north Arlington. The estate was purchased about 1902 by Surgeon General U.S.N. and White House Physician, Dr. Preston Rixey. The original house burned in 1920 and was replaced by the handsome Greek Revival mansion which is now the central building of Marymount University.

The Dawson-Bailey stone house, built prior to 1785, with an addition built in 1859, is now part of the Arlington park system. Its existing spring toward the river is within the grounds of the stone "Castle" built by the late Doctor Jacobs. Under the nearby trees, this became a favorite relaxing spot for the soldiers. They had been given some sacks of walnuts which they

cracked while resting there. Enough nuts rolled away to start the walnut grove at the site.

Arlington County has both saved and destroyed some of its old springs. North John Marshall Drive divides to go around the remnants of a stone spring house and its ancient oaks. Yet the Marcy spring at the corner of 26th Road North and Robert Walker Place was destroyed.

On the west side of Minor Hill (Arlington's highest spot) near the old Phillips home was a fine stone-lined spring at the corner of Tacoma Street and Williamsburg Boulevard. The water was of such excellence that people came from distances to fill jugs for home use. This spot of sylvan beauty, with its giant oaks, is rumored to have been set aside in a previous subdivision plot for preservation for public use, but about 1950 it was destroyed in order to squeeze one more house into the block.

On the old Lockwood estate was Aunt Easter Spring, named more than a century ago for an old colored woman who lived nearby. It was in a dogwood grove surrounded by ferns and wildflowers, a favorite picnic spot for the Lockwood family. Adjacent to the Fairfax County line, in 1957, that county allowed a builder to devastate the site, cutting the dogwoods, depositing trash and diverting a storm sewer into the Arlington County property!

At the base of Upton Hill, on the property of Ashlawn School, is Powhatan Spring. Long ago, it was named for the Indian chief, as artifacts found nearby indicated that it was the site of an Indian camping ground. The spring was on the estate of the pioneer Febrey family. About 1900 they leased the spring to the Harper Company which bottled the fine water for sale throughout the Washington area and included the White House in its clientele.

Another very important spring nearby is on the grounds of the Gulf Branch Nature Center, in a handsome stone springhouse. The water is funneled underground to the lily pond, from which it flows into Gulf Branch. No one knows exactly why, or when, the name of that stream was changed from Spring Branch, thence to Falls Branch as shown on the 1900 map. The derivation of the more recent and less appropriate name remains a mystery. Old-timers called the spring on Robert Walker's estate "Aunt Nancy's Spring" in honor of his wife. The estate was named "White Pines," and it is rumored that one summer it was leased to the actress Pola Negri, and that here she was visited by Rudolph Valentino!

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Unfortunately, all of our springs and streams are decreasing in volume, or drying up completely, due to the constant lowering of the ground-water level. Homes, buildings, paved streets and parking lots divert the rain water into storm sewers, preventing the water from seeping into the ground as

nature intended. It is, therefore, important for us to treasure those springs which are left. We are grateful that the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, at its Potomac Overlook Park, has preserved and restored the historic Donaldson Spring. It was used by the Indians whose burial ground was on the flat nearby. The Donaldson family was in this area prior to 1782 when the name appears in the census of that year. In the 1800s, George Donaldson took his farm produce to Georgetown market by boat from the mouth of Donaldson Run. This was originally called "Swimming Landing Run" until shown on the County maps bearing the family name. Generations of Donaldsons rested in the peaceful family cemetery nearby, but the remains and stones were moved to Columbia Gardens Cemetery in 1962. Fortunately, I was able to take a photo of it before it was destroyed.



#### **WHY DO WE CALL IT?**

#### **FOUR MILE RUN**

Grants of land in the early Colonial days were located with reference to natural landmarks, particularly rivers and streams. Great Hunting Creek below Alexandria was one of these reference points. The next sizable stream up the Potomac is four miles away, hence "Four Mile Run." The name was first recorded in a land grant of 1694.

In the old usage, the term "creek" was applied to the stream where it entered a larger body of water such as a river. Thus on the old maps we find "Four Mile Creek" near the Potomac, and "the Run of Four Mile Creek" further inland. Nowadays, the stream for its whole length is known as Four Mile Run.