



Howard B. Fields in 1920.

SHERIFF HOWARD B. FIELDS

by Jack Foster and Gail Baker

"The Sheriff was definitely the strong, silent type. He was as fearless as the job required and never carried a gun. His eyes, and I do not exaggerate, were poison. In the small crises attendant upon all courthouses, a stare from him sent wrongdoers on their way to find less resistant victims. He had the appearance of contained power and without show of power had no difficulty enforcing the law when that required his presence," said Thomas W. Phillips, a prominent Arlington attorney and civic leader, when interviewed by Edmund Campbell in 1985 for the Oral History Project of the Arlington County Library.¹

Howard Fields was a colorful character and one of the most powerful men in Arlington County history. He was elected Sheriff for the first time in 1915. He was defeated by A. C. Clements in 1919 but then elected again in 1923. He served continuously from 1924 through 1943, a total of 24 years in that position.

He began his long career of public service when he became a Deputy Sheriff in 1899 at the age of 26. One of his early assignments in this position was "keeping the peace" on the trolley line that ran between Washington and Fairfax. Between his terms as Sheriff he served as a deputy U.S. Marshal in Washington, D.C.²

In another oral history on file in the Virginia Room, Margaret Troxell described the Sheriff thus: "He looked like a typical Western sheriff with a handlebar mustache. He was a rough and tough person on the outside, but inside he was a very gentle man who was extremely fond of children. But he could be very, very hard where crime was concerned and he pulled no punches."³

Howard Birch Fields was born in 1873, one of six children of Joseph and Phoebe Birch Fields. His great-grandfather, Colonel Samuel Birch, a veteran of the War of 1812, owned many acres of land in the vicinity of present-day Wilson Boulevard between Glebe Road and N. George Mason Drive. The Sheriff's home and his four and a half acres were at the corner of Wilson Boulevard and George Mason Drive now occupied by Fire Station No. 2 and the Howard Fields Park.

Among the descendants of Col. Birch are other families prominent in Arlington County history. His son William John Richard Birch married Julia Ann Shreve, and they had a daughter, Margaret, who married George W. Veitch. (William, incidentally, lived to the ripe old age of 100.) Julia, a daughter of George and Margaret Veitch, married Harry R. Thomas. Both Harry and his son Homer served as judges of the County Court, and Harry's grandson, Ned,

served on the Arlington County Board (1968-71).⁴

Howard Fields enjoyed his retirement for nine years. Then on the evening of November 12, 1952, he was struck by an automobile in front of his house while waiting for a friend to take him to a Masonic Lodge meeting. He died the next morning at the age of 79.⁵

The aforementioned oral history interview with Tom Phillips presents another vivid illustration of the strength and character of Mr. Fields.

The Sheriff, with his black hat and ample mustache, stood facing the Virginia entrance to the Chain Bridge. Some distance behind him stood three of his deputies in uniform. Before the Sheriff, a few yards away, was the front line of a bridge full of Bonus Marchers. As you know, after the First World War thousands of veterans came to Washington to demonstrate publicly their claim for pensions which some said consisted of empty government promises. From appearance it could be said that these were poor men; in some instances desperate men.... Their purpose on the bridge was to march into Virginia and continue their demonstration.

For some moments they faced each other; a country sheriff and a mob of men desperate from frustration. Then Fields reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a paper. Putting on his glasses he read the riot act. Many have heard the expression "to read the riot act," but are unsure about its meaning. For those, let me say that there is a statutory provision that authorizes the law officer to read a fixed and certain message to groups breaking the peace. Action by the group read to after that constituted crime. The paper Fields had in his hand was the text of the riot act. He proceeded to read it in a loud and clear voice. Then he stared directly at the crowd before him on the bridge. There were a few hoots from some in the rear of the column, then quiet. In a few moments the marchers turned and walked back to the District. No guns exhibited, no shouting, no emotional upheaval. That, too, was Fields.⁶

Although tough and fearless, he was also compassionate. He provided many Thanksgiving dinners for the more unfortunate people of our community and performed many other acts of kindness.⁷ Let's see what the Sheriff himself said about the heart of a sheriff by the notice in the *Chronicle* following his reelection in 1932.

It is oft repeated that a sheriff has no heart; that he has not the fineness that other men possess. This is a mistake, a grave mistake. I wish to assure the thousands that supported me in the Tuesday election that I have a heart and it throbs continuously with appreciation and thanks for their unanimous kindness.

I wish also to assure them that I shall during the next four years continue my policy of rendering to the public every facility at my command for their welfare and protection. I have an efficient force of men and my staff and I am proud of their records, their character, their courage, and their loyalty not

only to myself but to the public.

The appreciative voice of the people stirs me unspeakably. So with a grateful heart, I am,

Your servant,
HOWARD B. FIELDS⁸

Howard Fields married Cora A. Kerns in 1899. They had no children of their own, but they raised three foster children: Mrs. Fields's nieces, Edna and Charlotte Kerns, and Francis Griffith. Edna came to live with the Fieldses when she was ten years old, staying with them until she married Harry Woodyard. Mr. Woodyard worked as a Deputy Sheriff and later became Arlington's first Chief of Police.

Edna Kerns Woodyard was interviewed for this article when she was 94 years old. When asked whether Howard was a religious man, she said, "Yes and no. He was the type of person who would do anything for anybody, but he did not go to church. But he wouldn't feed a dog meat on Good Friday. His religion wasn't done in church. It was done on the outside."⁹

One hobby of Sheriff Fields that caused unfavorable criticism from time to time was cock fighting, prohibited in Virginia. He raised beautiful fighting cocks and he took them to Maryland on Saturday nights for the fights. At election time when this issue arose he would admit to the hobby, falling back on his assertion that he didn't do it in Virginia.¹⁰

"I have only two bad habits," Fields was quoted as saying, "raising chickens and playing poker, and I always get re-elected despite them."¹¹



1929. Arlington Police Department. Left to right are Howard Birch Fields, sheriff; Wayne Carr; Jim East; Bill Thompson; Hugh C. Jones; John Burke; Ray Cobeen; and Raymond Crack.

We conclude with another statement from Margaret Troxell in her oral history interview.

He was really quite a person. One thing I recall about him was, in those days we had torch-light parades at election time, and these parades would begin at the Court House and go to one of the schools where there would be speeches by the various candidates, and then they would go to all the different neighborhoods. One section of the county was known as Hell's Bottom, which was a Negro section, and these were always very colorful affairs. The candidates would all go in and speak and then the persons having the meeting took up a collection. Of course Sheriff Fields would drop in the largest bill, and usually his opponent wasn't in a position to follow. This made a terrific impression on the people, and after that they would serve what they called a collation, which would be refreshments. Sheriff Fields was respected and feared by the community. He really was a very fair man.¹²

Notes and References

Jack Foster is a charter member and past president of the Arlington Historical Society. Gail Baker, a former member and chairman of the Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board, is the great-great-niece of Howard Fields.

The authors wish to thank Sara Collins and Judith Knudsen of the Virginia Room for their research assistance; Margaret Helm, for keeping us on track genealogically; Edna Woodyard, for sharing her recollections; and Francis C. Turner, chairman of the Board of Trustees, Columbia Lodge No. 285, A.F. & A.M., for helping locate photographs of Howard Fields. The pictures accompanying this article were originally published in *History of Columbia Lodge No. 258, Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons, Arlington Virginia: February 26, 1904-December 31, 1968* (Arlington: Lodge 285, A.F.&A.M., 1970).

-
- ¹ Interview with Thomas W. Phillips by Edmund Campbell, May 1985. Arlington County Library Oral History Program.
 - ² "Howard B. Fields," *The Daily Sun*, Nov. 14, 1952.
 - ³ Interview with Margaret Troxell by Edmund Campbell, January 14, 1986. Arlington County Library Oral History Program.
 - ⁴ Melvin Lee Steadman, Jr., *Falls Church by Fence and Fireside* (Falls Church, VA: Falls Church Public Library, 1964), pp. 251-256. Note: Steadman's list of Howard Fields's siblings on page 256 omits his sister Julia.
 - ⁵ "Auto Kills Howard Fields, 79, Arlington Sheriff for 24 Years," *Washington Star*, November 13, 1952. Fields was a longtime Mason, having served as Master of Columbia Lodge No. 285 in Clarendon in 1920.
 - ⁶ Phillips interview.
 - ⁷ Conversation with Edna Kerns Woodyard, October 10, 1994.
 - ⁸ *Chronicle*, November 6, 1931.
 - ⁹ Woodyard conversation.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
 - ¹¹ *Daily Sun*, 1952.
 - ¹² Troxell interview.