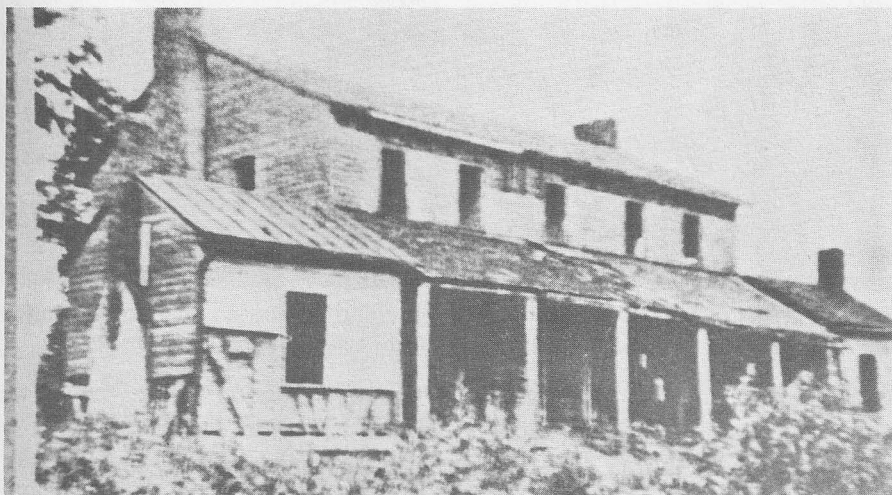


THE ABINGDON MANOR RUINS

The Fight to Save

by Sherman Pratt in consultation with Bernard Berne



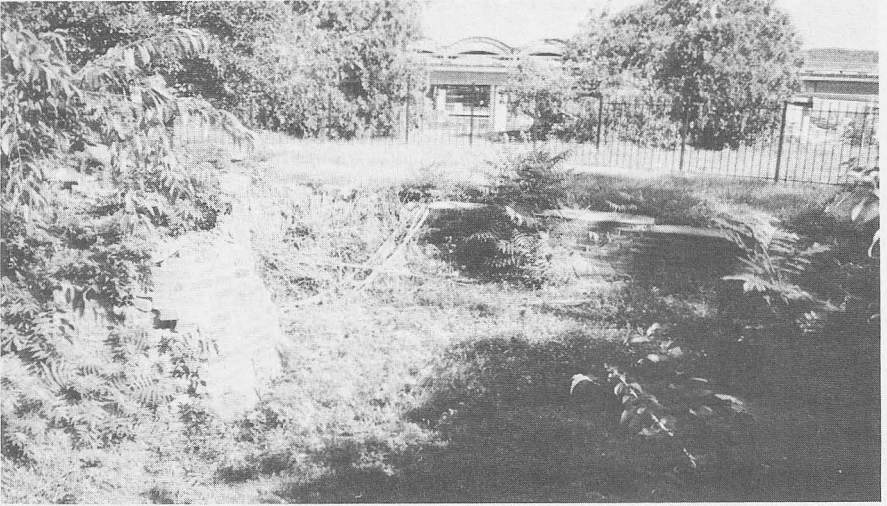
Abingdon Plantation Manor about 1929. A movement to restore the manor was abandoned when the structure was destroyed by fire in March, 1930.

AHS ARCHIVE

As 1991 drew to an end, area media reports indicated that the Washington Metropolitan Airports Authority planned to demolish the ruins of the Abingdon plantation manor¹ house and site at National Airport to make way for new multi-level garages. The Authority was well along on its major project to enlarge and modernize the National Airport. The news hit Arlington history preservationists, as well as many others, like a nuclear explosion. They had been long fighting to preserve the site and its ruins in place and had thought they were making meaningful headway.

The battle to save the Abingdon site and what was left of its manor ruins had been going on for several years before 1991 with periods of optimism and pessimism by preservationists who wanted no airport parking lot on the site. As recently as mid-1990, to the delight of those fighting to save the site and ruins, the airport authority indicated that they would be spared.

On July 23, 1990, in a page one article by staff writer Peter Kaplan, with the banner headline "Airport won't dig up old digs," the *Arlington Journal* reported, in part: "The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority last week



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The Abingdon Manor ruins as seen in 1995 on the eve of the Airport Authority Preservation project.

backed away from plans to dig up the ruins of Abingdon House, part of the Colonial estate with connections to George Washington. Faced with growing opposition, the authority's 11-member board set aside a recommendation that it excavate (the site of) Arlington's oldest structure to make room for a 7,000 space garage at Washington National Airport... Critics of the excavation plans greeted the airport authority's move as good news." The article quoted Arlington County Board Chairman Albert C. Eisenberg as saying, "I always had great faith that common sense would prevail."

Eisenberg's euphoria, and that of others of like mind, would soon be dampened, however, by the later announcement of a reversal and change of position by the Authority to the effect that the site would be excavated instead, and the area used after all as part of a concrete parking garage.

Abingdon and its ruins were not a run of the mill historical artifact. The present city of Alexandria nearby is named after Abingdon's early Alexander owners. Abingdon was also the birthplace or childhood home of some exceptionally noted people in early National and Arlington County history to include Nelly Custis, the granddaughter of Martha Washington.

The Abingdon manor had burned in 1930 and all that remained within a wrought iron fenced enclosure, about a quarter of an acre in size, was the lower portion of the brick walls and some of two fireplaces. Its location was and is on a grassy knoll, about 100 yards in front of the airport main terminal relatively inaccessible to pedestrians or air travelers and not very visible to motorists passing by on the George Washington Parkway or other nearby airport roads.

History Of Abingdon

The Abingdon manor was revered and famed locally as the first structure in what is now Arlington County that was lived in by a known owner. There were other land owners in its day, such as George Washington, George Mason and others, but they lived not on their Arlington lands, but outside the County at their mansions such as Mt. Vernon. Abingdon was also, before it burned, the oldest structure in the County, even predating Arlington House in Arlington Cemetery built in the period 1804 to 1814, and the Ball-Sellers House on South 3rd Street built about 1880 but with a log cabin interior believed to date from 1750.

The Abingdon manor probably was built sometime before 1746 by Gerrard Alexander, who had inherited the land from his father. The land was part of a purchase in 1669 by his great grandfather John Alexander from the ship captain Robert Howson. The elder Alexander had bought a strip of land about two miles wide on the west bank of the Potomac extending northward from Hunting Creek to a point up the river about a mile above the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

In 1778, John Parke Custis, son of Martha Washington by her first marriage, purchased a part of the tract generally north of Four Mile Run that was to become known as the Abingdon plantation. He and his wife Eleanor Calvert Custis promptly moved into the manor house. A year later a daughter, Eleanor "Nelly"² Custis, and two years later in April 1781, a son, George Washington Parke Custis, were born to the couple. Nelly was born at Abingdon and George nearby across the Potomac at Mount Airy, Maryland.³ Later that year, the father of the two children died of a fever during the battle of Yorktown and young Nelly and George Custis were adopted by their grandmother, Martha Washington and her husband George Washington. In 1799 George Washington died and three years later, upon coming of age in 1802, Custis took possession of "land inherited in Alexandria County from his father John Park Custis...(and)...in addition George Washington left him lands on Four Miles Run...on what must have been the finest location overlooking the Potomac and the new national capital."⁴ He then looked around for a place on the tract to build his own manor to be known initially as Mount Washington and eventually as "Arlington House." It was so named after the family manor built around 1657 near Cheriton on the eastern shore of Virginia near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay.

George Washington Custis selected the spot for his manor on high ground with the most spectacular panoramic view of the Capitol Building, possibly the Presidential Mansion, and other Washington and Georgetown sights. In 1831 his daughter Mary was married in an elaborate Arlington House cer-

emony to a young Army officer and fourth cousin, Robert Edward Lee from Stratford on Virginia's Northern Neck east of Fredericksburg. In later years, the George Custis manor on the Potomac was also to be known by some as the "Custis-Lee Mansion."

A Favorite Topic For Writers

Abingdon, before and after it burned, has been the subject of many articles in magazines, newspapers, and elsewhere. George Washington frequently stayed at Abingdon when traveling through the area and especially when visiting his timber lands along the Four Mile Run (now roughly the Shirlington area west to about Columbia Pike) to prevent timber poaching.⁵ In a book by Alexander Hunter,⁶ a Confederate soldier who once owned Abingdon, and was on the lands during the Civil War, the author tells that he was

...determined to run the blockade to Washington City... we donned citizen's dress and went to a certain farm (Abingdon) three or four miles above Alexandria (of which I was the prospective owner) where a row boat was kept, and bribed the gardener, Old Uncle Sandy, to row us to Washington, reaching there about noon. Then commenced our tour. How thick the blue-coats were! How many officers in the city! How elegant their uniforms... We wended our way to Willard's Hotel; the lobby was filled with an excited crowd, in the bar-room the discussions were fiery. One officer said to a group around him 'I'll tell you, gentlemen, in two months from the word go we will march from the Potomac to the Rio Grande and drown the last d—n Rebel in the Gulf' So the talk drifted on and proved they had no higher opinion of their foes than said foe had of them.

A footnote on page 40 of the Hunter book describes the Abingdon estate and manor thus:

Between Washington and Alexandria, on the banks of the Potomac, is one of the oldest and finest estates in Virginia. It was the family seat of the Alexanders and Hunters, and has been in the family for nearly three centuries. The family is descended from the powerful clan of MacDonald of Scotland, from Alexander, son of John, Lord of the Isles, by Lady Margaret his wife, who is the daughter of Robert the second King of Scotland. John IV, son of the Earl of Sterling, emigrated to Virginia in 1659 and had all the land from Georgetown to Hunting Creek, by letters patent. When he died in 1677 his will bequeathed to his son John all the land from Four Mile Run to Hunting Creek [sic], so that the historic home referred to became the home of the Alexanders. The mansion is still standing and is most solidly constructed. The beams and rafters are of solid oak, two feet in diameter, and strong enough, as was proven, to bear weight of two centuries.

In an Outlook Section article of the *Washington Post* on April 22, 1990,

writer Sherwin Landfield provided additional background on the history of Abingdon. Landfield pointed out that during the Civil War Abingdon had been occupied by the troops of the Federal Government and that the owner had to sue in court after the war to get the planation back. In that successful suit, the owner was assisted before the Supreme Court by the lawyer James Abram Garfield who later became president and was shot at the Mall railroad station in Washington on July 2, 1881 and died of blood poisoning.

Early Efforts To Save Abingdon And The Burning

On February 20, 1928, a feature article appeared in the *Washington Evening Star* newspaper, telling of the efforts of prominent Alexandria citizens to save the historic mansion of Abingdon "which in the past few years has become almost a total wreck". The article related that the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, owners of Abingdon, had been approached by the Alexandria Washington Society with a plea to defer the razing of the building until financial arrangements could be made to restore it. The article included some colorful history surrounding Abingdon. It reported that Dr. David Stuart, who with the help of George Washington had married the widowed mother of Nelly Custis in 1783, had lived at Abingdon, was one of the first Commissioners to the new federal city of Washington and "with Daniel Carroll, established the boundary lines for the District in 1791."⁷

In the June 1929 edition of the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* the article "Sketch For the Restoration of Abingdon" by writer Delos Smith appeared on page 325. The article consisted of an in-depth history of the Abingdon estate with sketches of the floor plans and external appearances. It also included a drawing of nearby "Mount Airy" manor in Prince Georges County Maryland where the above mentioned John Parke Custis (father of George Washington Park Custis who built Arlington House in Arlington cemetery) met and later married Eleanor Calvert, and where the Arlington House builder was born as stated herein. The DAR article told of the visit of three men in 1928 to Abingdon with almost chillingly prophetic observations concerning the coming fate of the manor house:

A year ago, three men went down from Washington to see Abingdon with a view to discovering what remnants of the old original house might yet remain in spite of decay, vandalism, and alterations. They were familiar with many other old houses of the Tidewater country where the serene old mansions stand in dignity, hallowed and trim, amid ancient trees and box-bordered gardens... (in) dismay they approached the building for it was empty and dilapidated, the gardens gone, the fences rotten, and the grounds littered with rubbish... (but) there was something clean and honest in the old framework.

The basis of a true colonial character was here which, if restored, would show itself to be worthy of the admiration we reserve for the best work of our pioneer forbears...the goodly steep roof...gables walls, sloping rafters...were enough to show the graceful outline of the time of John Parke Custis...an Abingdon restored today (could) stand as a memorial on the new Mount Vernon Boulevard which is soon to pass its doors!

Within the month a party was found tenting nearby while they enjoyed the splendid view of the river and basked in the warmth of a *large campfire*. The premises are untenanted and uncared for. If Abingdon is to go out like a *candle flame*, the memory of it must still live to those who have visited here [emphasis supplied].

Little did writer Smith know in June 1929, or the three visitors in 1928, just how soon their predictions of the demise of the Abingdon manor "like a candle flame" perhaps from brush fires from a "large campfire" of intruders would take place. In March 1930, only months after the DAR article, Abingdon was to be utterly consumed by flames in circumstances almost precisely as conjectured by the three visitors. The *Washington Post* on March 6, 1930, reported it thus:

Old Nellie Custis House Destroyed By Brush Fire Flames Level Abingdon Mansion Once Property Of George Washington

Abingdon, one of the oldest houses in the Nation, the birthplace of Nellie Custis, and once the property of George Washington,⁸ burned to the ground late yesterday afternoon at its isolated site on the Four Mile Run in Arlington County, a short distance south of Virginia Highlands along the route of the Mount Vernon Boulevard.

Fanned by high winds, (sparks) from one of the numerous brush fires which have menaced other parts of the country during the last few days, swept through bushes and dead weeds over the gracious front lawn and quickly enveloped the large two-story frame structure with flames...

In recent years many pilgrimages have been made to Abingdon by hundreds of school children and tourists, many of whom chipped off wood as souvenirs...private individuals in Richmond have salvaged the beautiful marble mantels which long graced the open hearths...

Several attempts have been made in recent years to seek restoration...At a convention of the DAR of Virginia last year, the Arlington County Chapter presented a resolution to commit the State organization to the proposal (to restore the manor) but the resolution was defeated.

Although records are scarce of latter day residents in Abingdon there is evidence that it was occupied shortly before it burned. In an "Informal Memo-

randum”⁹ of the Arlington County Manager’s office dated August 13, 1987, the “Beckworth” family members are reported as the last residents in the Abingdon property. The Memorandum reflects that the family lived there from 1923-1927, and farmed the plantation for four years. It lists an “Aunt & Uncle were E. W. Beckworth (Edward Payne) and Hollis A. Phillips who, after renting Abingdon, lived at 621 S. 21st Street in Virginia Highlands.”

Abingdon Publicity

Over the years since the burning of the Abingdon manor, there have been regular articles to keep alive the memory of the historical and meaningful structure and its grounds. Noted historian Eleanor Lee Templeman wrote of the history of Abingdon in a March 28, 1957 issue of the *Northern Virginia Sun*. In her article headlined “Abingdon Oldest House in County,” Templeman recapped the history of Abingdon and wrote that the “remains of the Alexander family (in the) burying ground were in recent years moved to Pohick churchyard, along with those of ‘Long Tom,’ legendary treacherous Indian who had been killed while ambushing a member of the family.”

Writer and photographer James Barron also wrote of the history of Abingdon in a February 5, 1974 *Northern Virginia Sun* article and a July 12, 1974 *Alexandria Gazette* article. He related the site to the radar station towers and other operations at National Airport. His articles included photographs of Abingdon as it appeared before and after the 1930 fire. Barron wrote in the *Gazette* article that, “...Tourists who descend from jets at Washington National Airport probably never realize that the runways are on historic ground once owned by the Custis family and seen by George Washington...”¹⁰

Other recent articles of particular note on Abingdon include: “Abingdon: a place of historical beginnings,” by Lloyd R. Decker in the July 15, 1976 issue of the *Arlington News*; “Lost Heritage: Early Homes that Have Disappeared from Northern Virginia,” by Ruth Lincoln Kaye in *Northern Virginia Heritage*, February, 1987; “Abingdon Plantation,” in the Summer 1990 edition of the *Crystal City Magazine*; and “Abingdon Plantation: A National Airport Dilemma?” by Charles Baptie, in the Summer 1990 issue of the *Metropolitan Washington Airport Magazine*. Writer Kaye, in her article, mentioned that some of the foundation bricks from the Abingdon manor were recovered and used to restore the garden wall in Gadsby’s Tavern in Old Town Alexandria on South Royal Street.

Early Concern For Preservation

As stated at the outset above, the concern of local preservationists and historians over the fate of Abingdon did not begin in 1991. The site and what was

left of its ruins had been under the watchful eyes of many observers for some years.

As a means perhaps of keeping some focus on Abingdon, the *Alexandria Gazette*, in a feature entitled "News of Long Ago," ran the following item on April 27, 1977 that had apparently been originally published after the Civil War:

THE ABINGDON STOCK YARD — It has always been a subject of surprise to many that the Virginia shore opposite Washington has not been utilized for many purposes outside of mere agriculture...One of the great needs for this section is a stockyard...the present stockyard is above Georgetown and in a very unapproachable situation. There is no railroad near...cattle have to be driven several miles on hoof to reach it...Mr Alexander Hunter is now building a stock yard on his Abingdon estate... This location will be of great convenience both to the cattle drovers and butchers.

THE 1980s—THE BATTLE TO SAVE IS LAUNCHED

On August 1, 1985, H. Gray Gillem, Chairman of the Arlington County Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB) wrote to John Milliken, Chairman of the Arlington County Board urging him to write to the U. S. Department of Transportation to carry out an evaluation of Federally owned National Airport buildings and grounds to determine eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Gillem referred to recent legislation introduced in Congress to allow the transfer of the airport, and also Dulles Airport, to local control. He pointed out certain historical preservation needs at National for such action, particularly with respect to the Abingdon plantation site.

A letter to the Hon. Elizabeth Dole, Secretary of Transportation, was prepared for the Board Chairman, dated August 7, 1985, as requested by Gillem, but a penciled notation "Not sent" is on the copy in the Virginia Room files in the Arlington Main Library. A letter some weeks later on December 6th from Milliken to Gillem seems to shed some light on why the August 7th letter was not sent. In that letter, Milliken advised Gillem that he had referred the matter to the County Attorney to "consider the question of whether or not Arlington might reasonably request Secretary Dole to consider buildings on site at National Airport for inclusion in the National Register." Milliken wrote he had been told "the airport does not fall under one of the expressly defined categories for inclusion..."

On January 16, 1986, Russell V. Keune, AIA, the new chairman of HALRB, wrote to the new County Board Chair Mary Margaret Whipple. He said the HALRB had requested him to "reopen the issue of a formal request to the

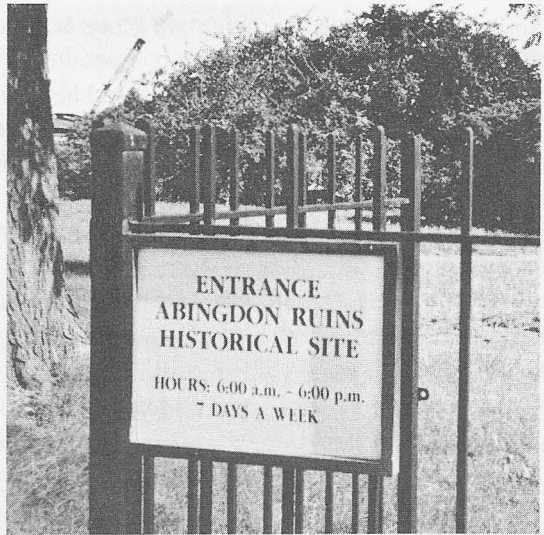
Secretary of Transportation for a survey,” and that “I believe the County Attorney is in error in his belief that nothing at National Airports falls under one of the expressly defined categories for inclusion ...” He urged that the Board reconsider the HALRB original August 1, 1985 request.

Over the following months, developments must have occurred that persuaded the Arlington County Board to alter its position of apparent uncertainty over whether

or not it was reasonable for the County to request the Department of Transportation for its position on the matter. At any rate, on August 11th Whipple wrote Keune that, “I would be willing to send the request to the Secretary of Transportation,” a position just the opposite of the one taken by her predecessor Milliken less than a year earlier. It can, perhaps, be assumed that persons favoring the preservation of the Abingdon site were able in the intervening months to persuade Whipple to reverse the County Board’s position on the matter.

Keune then advised Whipple on September 18th that HALRB had voted unanimously “to accept your willingness to pursue the matter with the Secretary.” He also wrote, “We are interested in insuring that the Federal government discharges its required responsibilities for historic preservation before transferring the property to another authority.”

The following year, in May and June, a “Programmatic Memorandum of Agreement” (MOA) was executed by the Chairman of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), and the Director of the Metropolitan Washington Airports, Federal Aviation Administration. The Memorandum alluded to Public Law 99-591 (Acts of 1986) concerning capital improvements at National and Dulles Airports, and to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (16 USC 470f), under which the transfer of properties at the airports would have “an adverse effect” on properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. In the memorandum the parties to it agreed in essence, among other



The entrance to the Abingdon Ruins.

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things, to develop and implement plans to survey and identify portions of the airports that contain properties that meet the National Register criteria. It was further agreed that such portions would be protected, preserved, rehabilitated, stabilized and maintained where appropriate, and to "consider reasonable alternatives to undertakings that would have an adverse effect on resources." The Memorandum provided for guidelines and standards for (1) archeological survey, (2) preservation planning, and (3) historic preservation and set dates for the completion of these actions.

The Issues Are Narrowed

In the months and years to follow, the efforts to save the Abingdon site and its ruins would narrow, essentially, to the questions of:

- (1) whether the entire site with its ruins would be saved in place, or,
- (2) whether the site would be excavated and paved over with its ruins removed to another location for display,
- (3) if the latter, could this be done without first an affirmative determination, as required by law, that continuing with garage construction would have "no adverse impact" on the historical Abingdon site and ruins, and
- (4) whether it would be feasible and possible to save Abingdon and its ruins.

On July 19, 1988, the new HALRB chairman, Jim H. Charleton, wrote to Milliken, who had resumed chairmanship of the County Board, and reported that citizens had inquired about the "apparent failure of the Airports Authority to consider appropriate archeological and interpretive measures regarding the remains of the historic Abingdon estate on the grounds of Washington National Airport." Charleton stressed the historical importance of the Abingdon remains. He pointed out that Federal agencies were obligated by Executive order to determine "whether historic resources are being impacted by their undertakings." He also wrote that a "Determination of Eligibility" must be requested from the National Park Service and that HALRB was of the opinion that the process was not functioning for both Abingdon and the Main Terminal at National. Charleton urged the Board to bring the matter to the attention of the appropriate authorities.

On August 9, Milliken replied to Charleton. He referred to the 1987 Programmatic MOA among the parties responsible to comply with Section 106 of Federal Law concerning historic preservation. Milliken said an agreement had been reached regarding "the scope of work for a consultant to develop the historic property plans" for the airports. Milliken also wrote that the "Master Plan for National Airport does not propose any new construction in the area of the Abingdon ruins currently enclosed by a fence." Milliken pointed out, how-

ever, that the approved Master Plan was a planning document and not a specific design document. Soon after, however, just the opposite appeared to be in prospect for the ruins.

A little over a year later on November 21, 1989, Hugh C. Miller, the Virginia SHPO and Director of the Department of Historic Resources, wrote to Francis J. Conlan, the Airports Authority Engineering Division Manager. Miller referred to the copy he was provided of Phase II of the Archaeological Investigations of the National Airport and specifically to the Study of the Abingdon Plantation Site. He wrote, among other things, that his office "concur[s] with the assessment that Abingdon is potentially eligible for inclusion to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria D" (as an "archaeological resource"). Miller also included a statement that was to later shock and infuriate citizens who were fighting to prevent the destruction of the Abingdon manor and site by airport expansion. He wrote:

It is the understanding of this office that Abingdon Plantation cannot be retained without jeopardizing a portion of the proposed project. Therefore, this office is willing to accept a determination of *No Adverse Effect*, provided the site is one hundred percent cleared archaeologically and all relevant pre-1940 archeological features undergo data recovery [emphasis supplied].

The position that the Abingdon plantation could not be retained without jeopardizing the airport project and that the project would have "no adverse effect" on the plantation ruins or site was one to which Abingdon preservationists could hardly have more strongly objected as we shall see below. It would be precisely on these points that preservationists would make their strongest stand in the coming months.

* * *

The closing weeks of 1989 and most of 1990 were to be some of the most active and contentious for the participants in the struggle to save the Abingdon site and ruins. There were to be times when it appeared the battle was both lost and/or won, with uncertainty as to which side had emerged victorious. The tide of battle would ebb and flow.

An opening shot to signal a resumption of hostilities was fired on December 5 at a meeting of the Arlington County Civic Federation, as reported in the January, 1990 issue of the Historical Society newsletter. The newsletter reported that "The news leaked out" by representatives of the Airports Authority in a Federation appearance that "the Virginia Department of Historic Resources had approved a 100 percent excavation of the Abingdon site." On the heels of that disappointing development, the Society met in special session

two days later on December 7 to consider action to take. At its next regular meeting in January, the Society adopted resolutions aimed at preserving the Abingdon site in place.¹¹

On December 12, 1989, a time of particular dismay for preservationists, *Arlington Journal* writer Martin Finucane in a page one article headlined "Colonial Home Site Threatened" reported that the Authority planned to build a new parking garage on the Abingdon site. He described the worries of historical activists that the National Airport rebuilding "would wipe out traces of history that go back to Colonial times."

Finucane wrote further that the Arlington Historical Society had voted to work for the preservation of the ruins of Abingdon and quoted Society President June Robinson as saying, "We voted to do whatever we can to see that the remains of it, if possible, are saved." Finucane wrote that the authority's plan, as announced by its spokesman David Hess, was not to preserve the site intact, but to "excavate and remove any historic artifacts before building on the site," a position fiercely opposed by most of the preservationists. "The airport authority has worked with state historic preservation authorities in deciding how to handle the site," Finucane wrote. That course of action and position seemed to be consistent with the views and position contained in the November 21 letter of the SHPO alluded to above.

The *Arlington Courier*, only two days later in an article by John Riley, announced the formation of a new historical group in Arlington, the Arlington Heritage Alliance (AHA), headed by historians Bruce McCoy and Sara Amy Leach. Riley wrote that the group had thrown itself into the battle in support of efforts to save the Abingdon ruins, as well as some other historically important buildings such as "Lawyers Row" to include the Jesse Building on North Courthouse Road across from the court house.¹²

On December 13, Hilary Adams wrote in the *Alexandria Gazette*, in part, that the historic site "will be removed from National Airport to an undetermined location to make room for a parking facility." She said that David Hess, spokesman for the Airports Authority, indicated the removal would be completed in "late summer or early fall" to a new location not yet known. Adams quoted Sara Collins, a member of the Arlington Historical Society, "So much of our visible history has already disappeared. It's important that we can be reminded of where the original plantation sat. If it's moved, you'd never have the same sense of where it really was."

In still another Abingdon site preservation article *Northern Virginia Sun* writer Yvonne French reported on December 20 of the efforts of historian Eleanor Lee Templeman to save the ruins. French wrote that Templeman had written letters to numerous local politicians and had obtained the intervention of State Senator

Edward Holland of Arlington. As a result of negotiations with Holland and others, French wrote that the project manager for historic preservation had under consideration several alternatives to accommodate the site.

On the 26th of December, *Journal* writer Finucane revealed what seemed to some as a ray of hope and an indication that the pendulum might be swinging in the direction of the ruins preservationists. He reported Authority spokesman David Hess as saying "We're not going to touch the site until we look at it further." Hess conceded that the plan was to remove the ruins "to an appropriate place" until preservationists launched their all out offensive to save the ruins in place. Finucane quoted County Board member Milliken as saying he didn't know if he would try to save Abingdon but wanted to learn more about the site's historical significance.

In the closing days of 1989 some shots "for good measure" were fired on behalf of preservationist efforts. On December 28, Gail Baker, new Chair of HALRB, wrote to Ellen Bozman, current Chair of the County Board, and urged the Board, in effect, to cease being an idle "standby" in the Abingdon dispute, and become an active and "consulting party" under section 106 of the Federal Historical Preservation Act. Baker wrote, in part, "HALRB discussed this matter (Abingdon) and unanimously passed the following resolution: HALRB encourages the Arlington County Board to become a consulting party in the Federal Section 106 process...Consulting parties are the primary participants in the Section 106 process...as a consulting party the County can play an active role in the decision making and convey to the Airports Authority the considerable public interest in Abingdon's future...Individuals too may become consulting parties, and several Arlington citizens have expressed their interest in doing so."

Then, on December 29, Bozman wrote Don Klima, Director, Eastern Office of Project Review of the Federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and expressed the Board's interest and concern over the fate of Abingdon. She wrote, in part, concerning a new proposal, "...we understand it calls for archaeological excavation of the Abingdon site rather than its preservation intact as previously proposed...We would appreciate receiving any materials and documents relevant to this issue."

1990 — A Year Of Intense Activity

As 1990 arrived an ever increasing number of players arrived on the field of combat to throw their weight into the fray. Arlington residents mentioned herein, and some others to include Barcroft resident Randy Swart, were among those known in the community to be especially interested and active in the drive to save the Abingdon ruins. Swart had written to the Board and reminded

it of the Arlington County ties with the plantation and that a street and elementary school bore the names of Abingdon.

On January 3, Alexander Keyes, President of the Civic Federation, wrote County Board Chairman Eisenberg requesting that the Board become a consulting party in the development of the Master Plan for National Airport and that the design options for retaining the ruins should consist of "enhancement and embellishments at the site." Keyes wrote further, "While some [Federation] delegates pointed out that the deteriorated conditions of the ruins did not display enough historical merit to warrant preservation, the large majority...considered the sense of history embodied within this site to be worth strong preservation efforts and recommended further improvements to explain and enhance its historical significance."

In a January 4 memorandum to the County Board Chairman, County Manager Anton S. Gardner outlined the status of the Abingdon matter to date and described the HALRB involvement. He also wrote, "Because of the existing Memorandum of Agreement to comply with Section 106, it was assumed that any proposed changes...would be subject to public process to which the County would be invited...this has not occurred and staff has recommended that Arlington formally request participation as a consulting party..."

A Major Development

In a January Briefing Paper on the Abingdon ruins, the Virginia Department of Historical Resources, to the particular interest of preservationists, stated, "Preservation is always preferred...(but) if it can be demonstrated that preservation is neither prudent or feasible, then other options must be explored." This position was greatly encouraging to Abingdon preservationists. They were contending that it had not been demonstrated that preservation was neither prudent or feasible and, therefore, no other option should be explored.

On January 8, Congressman Frank Wolf and State Senator Clive DuVal wrote to preservationist Bernard Berne. Neither took a particularly strong stand in favor of preserving the Abingdon ruins and site in place. Nor did State Delegate Mary Marshall in a January 24 letter to Berne. Wolf wrote that he had written to the Airports Authority General Manager "encouraging steps that best preserve the *historical significance* of the ruins" [emphasis provided], and DuVal wrote merely that he hoped the Authority "will find some way to build the garage without destroying Abingdon." Berne considered "preserving the significance," which could be done in a display at another location, as far short of insuring the preservation of the ruins and site in place.

June Robinson as president of the Historical Society had on February 5 distributed materials on the dispute to all Society members to bring them "up

to date on matters concerning Abingdon.”

Of special irritation to preservationists at this time was the release of a National Airport sketch in a January consultant report for an Airport System Revenue Bond Prospectus. The prospectus showed a continuous parking garage that included the Abingdon site and stated that the plan would provide “an opportunity for the Authority to charge premium parking rates in the new facilities.” To the Abingdon preservationists it appeared that the site and ruins were to be sacrificed so that additional parking revenues could be realized.

* * *

In what was to be a next step in these dramatic developments to save Abingdon, on March 9, 1990, James Wilding, General Manager of the Airports Authority, released a notice of a 7 p.m., March 29 “public hearing on the Abingdon Plantation Historic Site” at the Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel, 1700 Jefferson Davis Highway in Arlington. The notice included an explanation of the background and said “It is presently considering alternative means of handling the site, including archeological excavation with full data recovery, and *retention of the site*” [emphasis supplied]. The notice invited public comments in person or in writing concerning “1) whether the plantation site should be preserved undisturbed; and 2) if the site must be disturbed, what should the Authority do with the historical artifacts and materials that are excavated?” It said the hearing would be strictly an information gathering session for the staff or members of the Authority’s Board of Directors present and that the public should not expect responses from the Authority for any comments or proposals during the hearing.

Also on March 9, *Northern Virginia Sun* writer Peter Mullaney reported that the Arlington County Board would hear a staff report on the Abingdon site and he said that Board Chairman Albert Eisenberg had indicated “the board will fight for the site’s preservation.” He said Eisenberg “was convinced of the site’s historic value by the well-researched appeals of county residents.” The staff report urged support for the effort to save the ruins in place, and the Board’s Task Force on Arlington Open Space would shortly thereafter recommend “Preserve and discourage adverse construction” in the area of the Abingdon ruins.

On March 10, the County Board, as an agenda item, requested the Airports Authority among other things to “demonstrate that options to achieve construction goals which will not adversely impact the Abingdon site have been considered” and “[if they] are not feasible and evacuation cannot be avoided that total recovery, public display and placement of historic markers be assured.” Some preservationists were not highly pleased with that Board action

which seemed to them to present the Authority with an undesired alternative to preservation on site.

On March 19, Arlington's State legislative delegation threw its weight behind the efforts to preserve Abingdon in a somewhat ambivalent letter to Daniel Feil, the Authority's staff architect. In the letter signed by State Senators DuVal and Holland and Delegates Almand, Marshall and Stambaugh they wrote, "...we approve of a study that would disturb the site minimally if at all." The language was considerably short of outright opposition to excavation, but there was the addition, "In sum, let us keep the ruins where they are." Some days later U. S. Senator Charles Robb in a stronger position advised Feil of his "full support for the preservation of Abingdon," but he did not indicate whether that went as far as favoring preservation on site with no excavation.

The March 29 hearing was held as scheduled and attended by several dozen citizens, most of whom spoke strongly in favor of not excavating the ruins but retaining them in place. The speakers included County Board Chairman Eisenberg who called attention, according to *Arlington Journal* writer Martin Finucane on March 30, to a long list of celebrated figures in American history who had been associated with Abingdon to include Captain John Smith, George and Martha Washington, Robert E. Lee, President James Garfield, and Arlington's Custis family. He quoted Eisenberg as saying in part, "Abingdon is one of our treasures, and we ask you to preserve it." The meeting was presided over by the Chairman of the Airports Authority Planning Commission, Carrington Williams, who was the only member of the Authority's Board of Directors present.

Richmond Times-Dispatch writer William Rubarry indicated in an article several days later on June 4 that the issue at that time was still in much doubt despite the Authority's hearing and the County Board favorable positions. He reported that the Authority had not yet reached a final decision on the matter, that its initial proposal "envisioned a parking lot around the ruins, but not to disturb them" but that "last year the officials began to have second thoughts."

Rubarry also reported that Klima of the Federal Council on Historic Preservation had complained that the Council's position had been misrepresented by the Authority at the March public hearing and asked why the Council had not been invited to the hearing. Rubarry further reported that the Council had approved the 1988 airport renovation plans, but that plan "portrayed Abingdon Plantation as being avoided, unlike the current plans." In other words, Klima was objecting to the Authority's misrepresentation that the Council had approved the plans on the table and under consideration at the March 29 public hearing.

The Height Of Battle

As Spring drifted into Summer in 1990, opponents of paving over the Abingdon ruins rolled out their heaviest artillery and most vocal combatants. Withering fire was directed at any and all officials in a position to influence an outcome on the matter, but the barrage did not appear to have much impact on the designated, well entrenched targets.

Some Of The Darkest Hours

At an Airports Authority planning committee meeting on June 21, airport architect Daniel Feil distributed a memorandum outlining the background of developments as of that date. Feil reported that the SHPO had made a “no adverse effect” determination of the parking system on the Abingdon site, “provided a 100% archaeological data recovery program is implemented.” His memorandum alluded to the earlier March 29 public hearing and reported that the consensus of the 43 respondents was to leave the site “as it is,” but that some agencies and groups had taken the position that if it were not possible to do so, then they favored an “archaeological excavation with full data recovery and an interpretive exhibit open to the public.” The memorandum also stated that to preserve the site would result in a loss of 740 parking spaces, unless those spaces were provided at other airport locations, or by adding an additional parking level. The architect apparently considered that neither of those options was feasible. He recommended that “there be excavation and full data recovery” and that a “museum quality” interpretive exhibit be developed. The Planning Committee concurred in this recommendation to destroy the Abingdon site, a development that could hardly have been more disappointing to the Abingdon preservationists. Preservationists were beginning to wonder if they would ever prevail.

In the *Washington Post* coverage of the June 21 Authority meeting writer David Lindsey quoted Carrington Williams, chairman of the Planning Committee of the Authority, as saying, “We think the excavation plan is the best way to go.” To the contrary and in unequivocal disagreement, Lindsey quoted Judy Muniec, chair of the AHA, as saying, “We would much prefer to have it preserved. It’s a part of our history, one of the riverfront plantations that were between Arlington and Mount Vernon.”

Interdictory Fire

The last shot, however, had not yet been fired. The battle raged on. On June 25, historical preservationist and civic activist Bernard Berne wrote to the Chairman of the County Board. Berne outlined arguments for preserving the Abingdon site. The more salient were:

- Abingdon foundations date from at least 1746, longer than any other historical structures in Arlington, Alexandria, and Washington including Georgetown.
- All the above received their names from people who lived at Abingdon.
- George and Martha Washington lived at Abingdon, and often visited it. It was one of four famous plantations, including Mount Vernon, associated with the Washington family. All are national shrines except Abingdon.
- Abingdon is near a Metro station, ideal for tourist visits.
- The Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer has stated that Abingdon can only be destroyed if there is no *feasible and prudent alternative*, and the airport architect, Dan Feil, misrepresented the State's position when he failed to inform the Authority on this point.
- Abingdon is one of the County's most treasured historical resources ranking with Arlington House and the National Cemetery.
- Virtually every local historical group and elected official supports preservation in place, and the airport staff did not tell the Planning Committee about this wide support; and
- Only one member of the Airport Authority's Board attended the public hearing, and thus it cannot be assumed that absentees are aware of these points.

On the heels of Berne's letter with the above points, support fire continued from other sources. On July 3, County Board Chairman Eisenberg wrote to Klima and to Hugh Miller, the Virginia SHPO. He referred to the recommendation of the Authority's Planning Commission to demolish the Abingdon site that would be presented to the Authority at its upcoming July 19 meeting. He wrote that the recommendation was presented to the Planning Commission by Project Manager Feil who had quoted the SHPO as having made a "no adverse impact" determination concerning the impact on Abingdon of the proposed parking facilities, and had also said that the Authority had complied with the terms of the MOA. Eisenberg added, "Mr Feil's report is a disturbing development following assurances from your office and Mr. Don Klima...that the Section 106 Review had not been initiated." Eisenberg expressed concern that "demolition and excavation of the site could ensue without our knowledge," and he asked what steps would next be taken on the matter and what action was available for Arlington County.

On July 5, H. Bryan Mitchell, the Deputy Director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, reiterated in a letter to Berne that the Department's position "has been, and still is, that of preservation in place at the Abingdon site." He wrote, however, that, "...due to the controversy involved with the Abingdon site, it would be our recommendation that a MOA be developed specifically for Abingdon."

On July 9, a detailed letter to the editor from Berne was published in the

Washington Post relating the issues involved in the Abingdon preservation efforts and faulting airport officials for thinking of replacing the site with a garage.

On July 16, Bette Clements, President of the Arlington Historical Society, wrote to Airports Authority Board Chairman Governor Linwood Holton, and advised him that the Society had adopted a resolution favoring preservation of the site, and said it was disturbed at the "apparent misrepresentation" of the State position before the Authority Planning Committee. Clements urged the authority to halt any plans for demolition of the site and to initiate a Section 106 review. On July 17, Arlington citizen Sara Collins, a professional historical librarian, also wrote Chairman Holton and presented a petition by concerned citizens who supported "preservation of the Abingdon Plantation House site as a visible, tangible symbol of our historic heritage."

On July 16, U.S. Senator John Warner joined the others in pleading for the preservation of the Abingdon site. He outlined historical reasons for doing so and wrote that it was his hope that the Authority would decide "to preserve the Abingdon site *in place*" [emphasis provided].

Perhaps the real and most telling "coupe de grace" in the exchange of fire of this period came from the guns of the State Department of Historical Resources. On July 13, Deputy Director Mitchell wrote County Board Chairman Eisenberg and advised him that no determination of "no adverse effect" had ever been made concerning the Abingdon ruins. He wrote that the Authority staff report to the Authority Planning Commission to the contrary "was in error" and that Chairman Governor Holton had been so advised. Mitchell added:

We believe that the Abingdon ruins are eligible for the National Register as an archaeological site. Destruction... would constitute an adverse effect. It is our preference that the expansion of the airport be designed in such a manner as to allow the retention of the site. We recognize... that may not be feasible, but at this point it is the burden of the Authority staff to present us with documentation to that effect.

Finally, Mitchell wrote that the site might not be eligible for the Register "as a site associated with historic events or persons" since such a resource "must have significant association and it must retain its (structural) integrity" (which Abingdon did not have since there was no extant "structure" – only ruins). He wrote further, however, that "This finding in no way alters our previous determination that the site is eligible for the Register because of archaeological significance."

A Welcome Turn in The Battle?

Finally, at a point when preservationists were confronted, seemingly, with only the most despairing of news and events, a bright ray of sunshine and hope burst full upon them. It appeared that the Authority was reversing itself and would move after all toward preserving the Abingdon ruins in place. In an article headlined "Airport won't dig up old digs," Peter Kaplan wrote in the July 23 *Arlington Journal* that the Authority "last week backed away from plans to dig up the ruins of Abingdon house," and "Faced with growing opposition, the authority's 11-member board set aside a recommendation that it excavate Arlington's oldest structure to make room for a 7,000 space garage at National Airport." He quoted Authority Board member Bette Anderson as saying, "All of us have been deluged with letters...we need to take another good close look at it." However, he also quoted Board Chairman Carrington Williams as saying, "I've done a lot of agonizing on the subject (but) we've got what we consider our marching orders from Congress."

Some clouds of doom seemed here to reappear just when all seemed sunny and rosy. On August 24, Williams wrote to Senator Robb and explained the lengthy history of the Authority's involvement with the Abingdon ruins. He pointed out that if the ruins remained in place, they would be surrounded by garages on three sides, and thus have a view of only Crystal City to the west. He said "few people know of or visit the ruins." He also wrote, "...to make Abingdon a public attraction as it now exists would, I believe, require access and parking space which, with existing constraints, would not be feasible...we incline to the view that preservation...in place is less than consistent with (our) mandate from Congress...to rebuild National Airport and make it more functional and convenient for air travelers, including maximum use of available (parking) space for passengers...(but) we are reviewing the matter further..." Sometime later, on November 2, Williams wrote to Berne along similar lines and said, in part, "I believe the overwhelming sentiment...is in favor of transportation improvements...and historic preservation must give way to that."

Some good news arrived soon afterwards from Authority Chairman Holton. On September 5, he wrote to Eisenberg and referred to a misunderstanding by the Authority architect that led to the earlier misrepresentation of the State's position before the Authority Planning Commission. He said that "it is now clear that the State Historic Officer believes that preservation in place is preferable," provided it is a "reasonable and prudent" alternative. At this point, it seemed that preservationists might have some basis for cautious optimism.

1991 Arrives – and Legislative Assistance

As 1990 rolled into 1991, the Abingdon site controversy did not see a reso-

lution satisfactory to the proponents of preservation on site. Big guns arrived on the battlefield, however, in the form of meaningful, but not quite dispositive, legislative assistance for the Abingdon preservation efforts. In early 1991 on February 21 the Virginia Senate agreed to House Joint Resolution No. 475, sponsored by Delegate Karen Darner and others, calling for appropriate elected officials and others to take all steps necessary to preserve and interpret to the public the Abingdon ruins. The resolution was welcomed by preservationists, although it was non-binding in effect.

Considerable indecision and uncertainty dominated events for the next several months until September 18 when State Director Miller wrote to Virginia Delegate Bernard Cohen with some discouraging language. Miller wrote, in part, "...The General Assembly urged the Authority and us to *explore all feasible possibilities for saving the ruins* [emphasis provided]," and "We agree with the Authority that preservation of the ruins in place cannot be feasibly accommodated within the expansion of the airport." Miller's representation of the legislative action was misstated. The language used in the Miller letter was not precisely that which was contained in the Joint Resolution of February 21, which read not to "explore possibilities," but, rather, the much stronger language "to take all steps necessary to preserve."

On the same day, Miller's Deputy H. Bryan Michell wrote to Authority managing engineer Conlon in a similar vein to Miller's letter to Cohen. He alluded to the matter of determining "no adverse effect," and wrote "the site and its... resources continues [sic] to be adversely affected by its present context" and "We understand the severe limits (of site preservation) to MWAA's ability to locate parking in the vicinity of the Main Terminal...we find the mitigation measures are clearly described and realistically considered in light of what is prudent and feasible..." Michell seemed to be saying inferentially, if not expressly, that his office concurred in excavation and removal of the Abingdon ruins.

A few days later, on the 25th, Peter Kaplan in the *Arlington Journal* delivered what seemed to be the final blow. He confirmed that the SHPO had approved the Authority plans to "remove the Abingdon ruins...despite protests by Virginia preservationists and lawmakers." He referred to the SHPO letters of the week before and wrote that the SHPO concluded the Authority had no "prudent and feasible" alternative to removing the ruins to make way for parking spaces. Kaplan wrote that approval by the state agency "removes the largest obstacle to the Authority's plan for Abingdon."

By year's end, the Arlington County Board included in its 1992 Legislative package the position statement, in part: "Arlington County supports legislation which would ensure the *preservation in place* [emphasis pro-

vided] of the Abingdon...ruins." That statement met with strong approval from preservationists.

1992 – A Decisive Year

Steve Bates in the *Washington Post* reported on January 30, 1992 that a decision from the Authority as to whether or not to excavate the Abingdon site was expected in the Spring and that measures aimed at forcing the agency to preserve the ruins had been introduced in the Virginia General Assembly.¹³ The Authority's staff discussed the measures, a bill and a resolution, in its February "Briefing Paper" to the Authority's Planning Commission.

On March 4, *Washington Times* reporter Frank Wolfe wrote that the Virginia General Assembly had passed the measure requiring the Authority to leave the Abingdon site untouched until April 1, 1993 by a House vote of 78-20 and a Senate vote of 21-19. Wolfe quoted Authority spokeswoman Tara Hamilton as saying, "We're disappointed." He wrote that the measure would need to be passed by the D.C. Council and Abingdon supporters expected the Authority "to lobby the council against the bill as strongly as it lobbied the Virginia Assembly to reject a proposed study of its preservation."

As word of the Airports Authority announcement of intent to destroy the Abingdon site spread, so did community interest and alarm at the prospects of losing forever the historical and treasured plantation manor site.

Another Abingdon supporter wrote to the *Washington Times* in a letter published February 6, 1992, in part:

...The Abingdon ruins at National Airport are in danger of disappearing forever from this planet. Now is the time for concerned citizens to rally to this historical preservation cause. What's left of the Abingdon plantation — in the path of the new National Airport parking garage — must be saved. Posterity will thank us if the site is spared. We will be faulted if it is not. It can be done if there is enough public outcry. Few today may understand the importance of Abingdon. Its ruins, scant as they may be, are about the only pre-Revolutionary War artifacts in Arlington County other than the Ball-Sellers house on South 3rd Street. Even the prestigious Arlington House in the National Cemetery (Custis Lee Mansion) dates from well after the war. Both George Washington Parke Custis, who later built Arlington House, and Nellie Custis (grandchildren of Martha Washington) were born at Abingdon. Also, the City of Alexandria is named after Gerrard Alexander who built Abingdon in about 1741...

As the days passed following the revelation that the Abingdon ruins were in danger of elimination, numerous individual citizens rose in defense of the ruins and urged the Airport Authority to reconsider its plans to do away with the

Abingdon site. One of the most energetic and persistent critics was Arlingtonian and Historical Society member Bernard H. Berne, mentioned repeatedly herein. He was in time to become known around the community as "Abingdon Ruins Bernie." He became heavily committed to the "crusade" to save the ruins and must be given a major share of credit for alerting the community of the threat to the Abingdon site and in encouraging the General Assembly to become effectively involved. Additionally, various organizations joined in the drive to save Abingdon. The 1992 legislation had only granted Abingdon one additional year of life. With that in mind, Chairman Michael Glick of the Arlington HALRB, in a September 30 letter to County Board Chair Ellen Bozman, urged the County Board to include in its legislative package for the Virginia General Assembly a proposal "to insure the *continuing* [emphasis supplied] preservation in place, the study, and the interpretation to the public of the Abingdon Plantation House ruins and Historic Site at Washington National Airport." Similar recommendations were made to the Board on October 8 by Arlington Historical Society President Bruce Gregory McCoy, and on October 28 by AHA President Terri Brown. By the end of the year, the governing bodies of the City of Alexandria and the Counties of Arlington and Fairfax recommended that permanent legislation, as desired by the HALRB, AHA, the Arlington Historical Society and others, be transmitted to their respective legislative delegates and senators.

The Existence Of Opposition

Not all reaction in this and other periods was necessarily in opposition to the Authority's plan to eliminate the Abingdon ruins. Some, perhaps most, citizens were clearly indifferent or at least expressed little or no interest in the matter. Some even seemed to approve the loss of the ruins and site. In an editorial headed "All this to save a few stones?" the *Arlington Journal* on November 30 suggested that there was not enough of the manor remaining to make it worthwhile to try to save.

The *Journal* editorial resulted in a stream of letters to the editor taking the newspaper to task for what was felt by some readers to be a cavalier position concerning a historical site of major significance. This writer, in a "Counterpoint" article in the December 9, 1992 issue, pointed out that certain sites are historically of value and worth saving even if little remains of what was once there, or even if there was never any structure of any kind but was just a place where a major historical event took place. The article cited the area in Montana where the Battle of the Little Big Horn took place, or where the 300 Spartans held off the Persians at Thermopile in the 5th Century B.C., that are preserved for all posterity to visit and marvel. It was stressed that those and innumerable other historical sites are preserved not for any structures intact or

in part, but because of great historical events that occurred on the land. The article included a contention that no one would even think of erecting any structure, or otherwise consider any other non-historical and unrelated development, on such historically important sites, and that it should not be done on the Abingdon site.

Another Turn of The Tide

As 1992 neared an end, the Authority appeared to be wavering and regrouping in their insistence that the Abingdon site was essential for their expansion plans for the airport. On November 19, to the excitement of preservationists, in an article headlined "Plan may spare Abingdon from airport lot," *Arlington Journal* writer Norman Gomlak seemed to signal an about face and possible capitulation of the Airport authority concerning the survival of the Abingdon ruins in place. Gomlak wrote, in part, that the Authority "appears to have found a way to save the historic plantation ruins at Washington National Airport from being destroyed when a parking lot is built."

Gomlak also quoted James Wilding, general manager of the Airports Authority, as saying "...the Authority will probably not need to build as much new parking as originally planned..." A similar article, headlined "Manor's Ruins May Be Saved, Airport Says," by writer Steve Bates appeared in the November 20 issue of the *Washington Post*. Preservationists felt that the tide of battle was changing, that they were regaining the initiative, and were effectively advancing on the field of battle.

Gomlak also wrote in his article that Daniel Alcorn, a member of the Authority board, was pleased with the news, that he'd like to see the Authority set aside money to restore the site, and "if we do it, we need to do it well...to retain its historical integrity, and be done to a quality standard." Gomlak also reported that Jean Federico, director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, noted that Wilding's statement "was almost a 100 percent change from previous Board policy."

A December "Status Report" by Wilding to the Authority's Planning Commission, presented at its January 5, 1993 meeting, listed actions presently being implemented concerning the Abingdon matter which included (1) "designing into the Middle and North Parking Structures the capability for future construction of a sixth level," and (2) proceeding with the MOA negotiations relating to the effects of the parking structures on the Abingdon site. Wilding concluded that multiple options were identified to provide adequate parking without having to excavate the Abingdon site. In so concluding it appeared the Airports Authority had found it was indeed feasible and prudent to preserve the Abingdon site.

1993 – Securing The Objective

On January 7, 1993, Gomlak of the *Journal* wrote in an article headlined “They won’t pave ruins or put up a parking lot” “After years of debate, the regional airports authority has agreed to preserve the ruins...” of Abingdon. He quoted Jean Federico, director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, as saying she “was pleased to see that the plantation ruins will stay where they are...There is a difference between not building on it and making it look attractive. The next step is to preserve it properly.” Gomlak wrote that Wilding, general manager of the Airports Authority, said, “It was a relatively slow build up of use...(one garage had opened during the previous year) that had the light bulb go off in my mind...”

Only days later on January 15 and 20, 1993, Virginia Delegates Vincent F. Callahan, Jr., and Karen Darner wrote to Bernard Berne and Bruce McCoy, respectively, that they did not believe any further legislation (to replace the expiring 1992 law) to insure the preservation of the Abingdon ruins was necessary in view of the Airport Authority’s change of position and apparent commitment to save Abingdon. Darner wrote that she had become convinced through conversations and written communications with members of the Authority that “good faith” was in operation. She alluded to the Authority’s promise to draw up a memorandum of understanding to the satisfaction of all concerned.

A Memorandum of Agreement

In due course a proposed MOA and a Preservation Program (Plan) for Abingdon was prepared and released in March 1994 by Frank D. Holly, Jr., the Authority’s Engineering Division Manager. At a public meeting at the National Airport, Holly distributed copies of the MOA and plan to all interested parties for their information and comment. The Virginia SHPO, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Airports Authority were parties to the MOA. The memorandum contained ten stipulations, concerning Authority obligations. In essence they provided the Authority would:

1. Endeavor to have the Abingdon site nominated to the National Register of Historic Places;
2. See that resources and the historic setting of the site are protected and disturbance of archaeological deposits avoided;
3. Continue to provide public access to the site and make provision for disabled visitors;
4. Develop a site stabilization program;
5. Remove, as necessary, all vegetation that causes, or could cause; damage to structural remains or archaeological deposits and avoid adverse effects by any new plants introduced;

6. Make historic and archaeological information related to the Abingdon site available to the public, and develop on-site interpretive exhibits and displays;

7. Provide an opportunity for SHPO and the council to review and comment on elements of the plans, and take any such comments into account;

8. Initiate consultation, as needed, if any future airport development is determined to have potentially adverse affects on the site;

9. Consent to consultation and amendment of this Agreement if changes in the scope or specifications of the project results in additional detrimental or harmful effects on the site; and

10. Consult to remove any objections by SHPO or the Council to any plans or specifications pursuant to this agreement, and if the Authority determines that the objection cannot be resolved then to request further comments of the Council using the process provided for in the Code of Federal Regulations.

Some Desired Modifications In The MOA

In response to the above proposed agreement, and at the instance of its member Berne and other concerned members, Arlington Historical Society President Seymour Stiss wrote to the Airport Authority on May 3, 1994. He stated that the Society agreed with most of the planning and design efforts but offered three recommendations. The Arlington County Board and the Civic Federation, by inference, joined in these recommendations. They were:

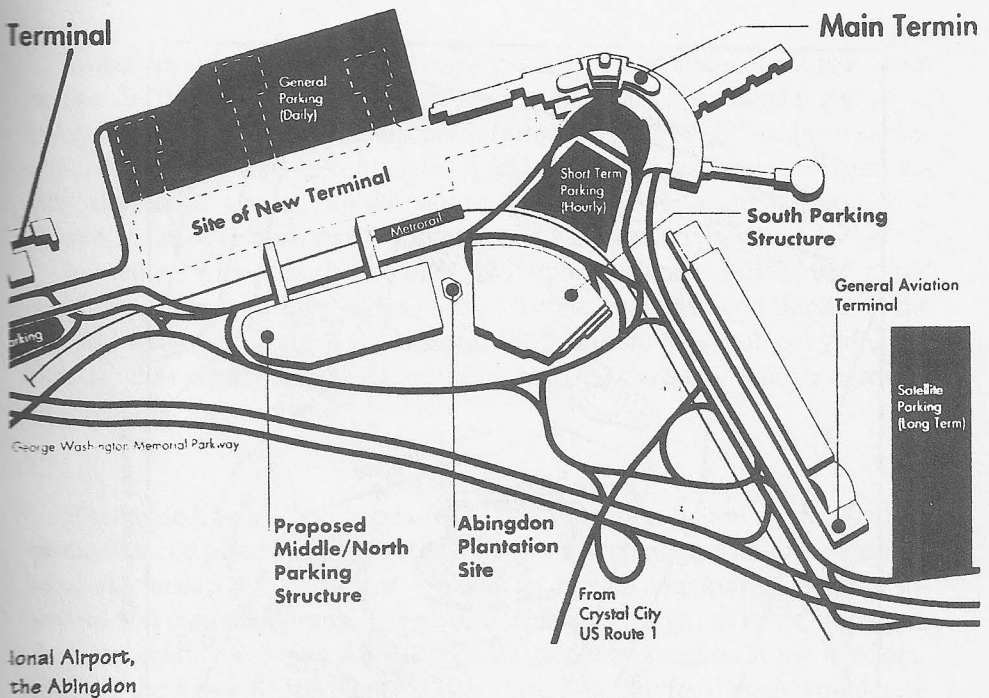
FIRST, the Society recommended the MOA be amended to require the Authority to preserve the ruins and site "in perpetuity" or for so long as the Authority has control of the site.

SECOND, that the MOA be amended to stipulate that the Authority will maintain the notable yew trees on the site and that no trimming take place except as necessary to protect the trees and the integrity of the historical site.

THIRD, that the Abingdon Plantation Site be nominated to the National Registry of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register, and that Abingdon be referred to as an historic site rather than a structure.

The Airports Authority agreed only to protect the yew trees. Thus the MOA signed later in October did not provide for the permanent preservation of the Abingdon site, to the keen disappointment of Abingdon preservationists.

On May 18, 1994, David M. Foster of the Arlington Civic Federation wrote Frank Holly, the Authority's managing engineer, and said the Federation had long supported the preservation of Abingdon "in place" and suggested that the final MOA provide that such preservation be permanent. He also said the Federation urged that the Abingdon site be considered for nomination to the National Register of Historical Places and the Virginia Landmark Register.



Airport Authority sketch showing the location of the Abingdon site in relations to the airport roads, terminals and other structures.

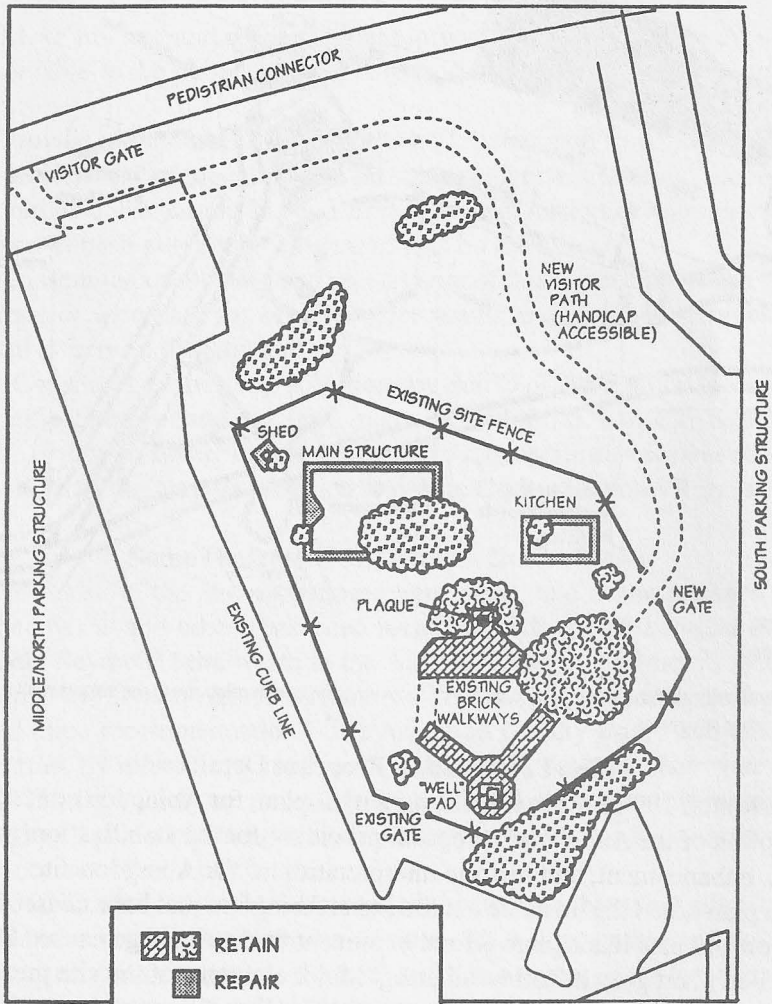
The Preservation Program Details

The March 1994 Preservation Program, or plan, for Abingdon contained a description of the Authority's proposal providing for the stabilization, public access, enhancement, and historic interpretation of the Abingdon site.

The plan noted the unstable conditions at Abingdon that have caused deterioration and past inadequate efforts to prevent further damage caused by uncontrolled plant growth and weathering. Major elements of the site preservation program for the primary structure ("Main House"), secondary structure ("Kitchen"), and ancillary structure ("Shed") included:

- a. removal of non-historic plants, pruning of others;
- b. repair and capping of foundation remains;
- c. uncover and repair the North Chimney base;
- d. filling the basement to stabilize the foundation, discourage vandalism, and promote the safety of visitors; and
- e. replacing existing wooden bracing on standing walls/foundations with appropriate permanent supports.

To make the new Abingdon more accessible to the walking as well as the motoring public, the Authority plan provided for a new "pedestrian bridge" to connect the site to the Metrorail station and the new North Terminal. Addi-



Airport Authority sketch of Abingdon showing work proposed to preserve.

tionally, the existing Mount Vernon Trail would be extended with a site access path. Site parking would be available in either the South or Middle/North nearby parking structures, and there would be a handicapped accessible path from the pedestrian connector to the plantation site. The plan also called for pedestrian access to the side open to the east that had previously been designated for more parking in the Authority's recommended master plan. With these features, the Abingdon Site should be easily accessible to visitors in cars or to air travelers with time to kill when waiting in the terminal for planes or when transferring between flights.

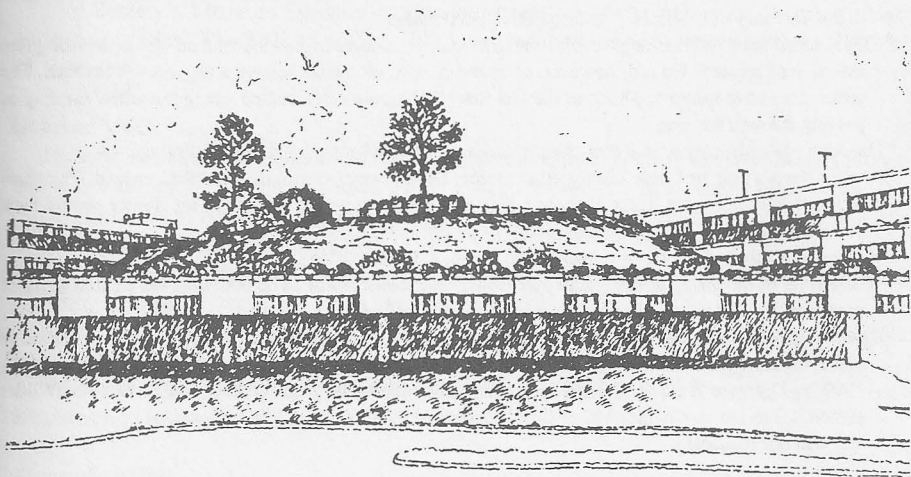
To aid visitors in finding the Abingdon site, or better understanding it when on the site, the Authority plan included the erection of directional signs and interpretive displays of weatherproof informative placards as had been earlier suggested. These were to contain historical and other significant archaeological information concerning the site to stress its importance and the role it played in the development of Arlington and Northern Virginia.

In preparing its preservation plan the Airport Authority related that it had worked closely with the Virginia State Historic Preservation Office and the Federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The Authority did not indicate the extent, if any, to which it had taken the positions of those agencies or the public into account.

The Battle Ends

Thus ended, at least so hoped many participants, a tedious, exasperating, protracted and often acrimonious and uncertain campaign with many maneuvers, skirmishes and battles on a matter of utmost importance to those involved and their supporters. There were widespread sighs of relief. Although the proponents for saving Abingdon were no doubt gratified at the final outcome of the matter, many were also convinced that but for them it would have been otherwise, and Abingdon and its ruins would, in due course, have been only a memory. The perseverance and skill with which they had mounted their campaign, and steadfastness with which they maintained the momentum of the assault throughout, had paid off.

One can only wonder whether future visitors to the Abingdon site would ever



Airport Authority sketch of the plantation site looking west, with airport parking structures on each side.

know just how much “blood” of community and history lovers had been spilled on the field of battle in the great campaign of the 1980s and 90s to save the site from extinction so that it could be viewed for many years, and hopefully forever, as a vital element in Arlington County, Virginia and national history.

Notes and References

Sherman Pratt has been a resident of Arlington County since his retirement from the Army in the early 1960s. He is immediate past president of the Historical Society and has been a contributor to the Society's Magazine. He is the author of military history books on World War II and the Korean War. Bernard Berne is also a Society member, a civic activist on historical matters, and widely known in the Arlington community for his efforts to save the Abingdon ruins and site.

- ¹ By modern standards the Abingdon house would hardly qualify as a manor, or mansion, but in its primitive day of log cabins it was probably looked upon as such and has been so called by writers in the media and elsewhere. Herein we will resolve any doubts in its favor and refer to it as a manor.
- ² The nickname Nelly has sometimes been spelled by writers with an “ie” ending instead of a “y”. The “y” was used by her mother and thus seems the preferred spelling. Her adoptive father George Washington is known to have used both endings.
- ³ Mount Airy survives as a preserved historic plantation outside Andrews Air Force Base at 8714 Rosaryville Road, in Upper Marlboro, Prince Georges County, Maryland.
- ⁴ Nan and Ross Netherton, *Arlington County Virginia, A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company, 1992), p.47.
- ⁵ Donald A. Wise, “George Washington’s Four Mile Run Tract,” *Arlington Historical Society Magazine*, Vol. 5, No. 3, October 1975, pp. 19, 20.
- ⁶ Alexander Hunter, *Johnny Reb and Billy Yank* (New York and Washington: The Neal Company 1905), p. 34 et seq.
- ⁷ This is an overstatement of the role of Stuart in the boundary survey. The project was under the overall control of Major Andrew Ellicott, who was assisted by Stuart, Benjamin Banneker, and others. Stuart did, however, participate in the placing of the first South corner stone at Jones Point near Alexandria on April 21, 1791. Stuart also, with two other Commissioners, named the capital the “City of Washington in the Territory of Columbia,” a designation later changed.
- ⁸ This is an error by the *Washington Post* writer. Washington never owned the land on which the Abingdon manor was located. He did, however, as stated herein, own land nearby along Four Mile Run. The writer may have meant to allude to the fact that Washington often visited Abingdon when entering or passing through the area.
- ⁹ The Abingdon files, Virginia Room, Arlington County Main Library, Arlington, Virginia.
- ¹⁰ Writer Barron was probably only partly correct. The runways are mostly on “fill” ground. The main terminal building more likely is about where the Abingdon wharf, alluded to by Hunter, would have been located.
- ¹¹ *Arlington Historical Society Magazine*, Vol. 9, No. 2, October 1990, p. 64.
- ¹² The efforts of the group to save “Lawyers Row” were unsuccessful. The buildings were razed to make room for the new jail and court house, completed in 1993-95.
- ¹³ House Bill 726 requiring the Airports Authority to “take all steps necessary to insure the preservation in place, the study, and the interpretation to the public” of the Abingdon ruins was offered on January 21, 1992 by Delegate Karen L. Darnier and others. On March 20, Virginia Governor L. Douglas Wilder signed it into law as Chapter 402 of the 1992 Acts of the Assembly. The law expired on April 1, 1993 and was not reenacted.