

FIRST MEMORIES OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA

by Margaret (Peggy) Fisher

Fresh out of college, with a B.A. from Bowdoin and an M.A. in economics from Harvard and a year at the London School of Economics, Joe Fisher came to Washington, D.C., to join the ranks of young enthusiasts to take part in Franklin D. Roosevelt's exciting New Deal. His part of FDR's "alphabet soup" was NRPB, the National Resources Planning Board. Designed to help lift the country out of the Great Depression of the early 1930s, NRPB had twelve regional offices whose assignment was to locate and recommend economically viable uses of natural resources. This was to become Joe Fisher's career objective.

In 1939 he moved to Arlington and found a room at Arlington Hall, at the time a girls' school, where he moonlighted as a tennis instructor. Arlington Hall was located at the intersection of Arlington Boulevard and George Mason Drive (across from what was to become the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington). Arlington Hall was subsequently purchased by the U.S. Government and used for intelligence, foreign service training, and the National Guard.

In 1940 Joe Fisher was sent to other areas. His career was interrupted in 1943, as most were in those days, by World War II. Meanwhile, we had married, and two weeks before he left to serve our first son was born. On his return in 1946 we went to Harvard University where he completed his Ph.D. in economics. Our future was determined when an emissary from Edwin G. Nourse, Chairman of President Truman's Council of Economic Advisors, came to Harvard and invited Joe to join the staff as an advisor on natural and human resources.

In 1947 we made the trek to Washington and went househunting. We tried to get into Fairlington, but it was solidly booked. Likewise Colonial Village and Lyon Village were full. These garden apartments were highly popular with returning GIs. Looking at houses we visited the manor house that was later to become the Knights of Columbus Hall. The owner planned to subdivide the land for building sites. It was beautiful, rolling countryside.

We couldn't afford to build, so we settled for a rental house on Quincy Street near Clarendon, in Arlington. The house had fleas, having been previously occupied by pets. Our young son, Ben, was flea-bitten all over. After three months we took the plunge and set up housekeeping in Falls Church, Virginia, buying our first house for the mind-boggling price of \$17,500! Such a thrill! It seemed like the ultimate luxury! Falls Church was a quiet little town, very proud that it had just gained city status and could be separated

from the vast and seemingly formless Fairfax County. Schools were understaffed, and only half-day classes were held in the lower grades. The school secretary was our son's first grade teacher, and his education got off to a very slow start.

Public school education was in crisis in these post-war years. Understaffed and underfunded, they could not cope with the new wave of the baby boom. Citizen reform groups formed to oust inadequate school administrators and install professionals and demand trained teachers. In Arlington the CCSI — the Citizens' Committee for School Improvement — was formed with Elizabeth Campbell among its prominent leaders. "The March of Time" on film publicized this exemplary reform movement. From that time on the Arlington and Falls Church schools were to become some of the best of the nation.

Back to the Fishers in Falls Church — Joe and I enrolled as graduate students in the George Washington University nighttime Master of Education program. Ben entered third grade with only first grade test scores. Lucille Foncannon, a marvelous and caring teacher at Madison Elementary School, took special interest in him and brought him up to grade level. Even when we moved to Arlington during that year, 1951–2, she kept him in her class, driving him out from Arlington, where she also lived, to the Madison School in Falls Church so that he could complete third grade with her. I did my practice teaching at the Falls Church High School, and after graduating taught English and social studies in the Thomas Jefferson Junior High School in Falls Church.

As the Fisher family continued to grow our little house in Falls Church had become too small, and in 1952 our rambling fourteen room house (c. 1913) on 24th Street North in Arlington was to become our home for forty-four years. Our first political activity began immediately. No sooner had we made our down payment on our new home than we were informed that neighbors, the Hendrys, across the street planned to build five twelve-story apartment buildings on their twenty-two acre plot. This was to become known by preservationists as the Hendry Tract.

We formed an organization of neighbors and hired an attorney, Oren Lewis (later to become a respected judge). We held heated meetings at the home of the Mason family (property later to be known as "The Cedars"). At our neighborhood meetings we plotted strategy to turn back the apartment project. We hounded the Arlington County Board, a practice that became a habit. We were successful in fending off the apartment buildings, but for decades the Hendry family planned one failed project after another (a nursing home, multiple housing exceeding the housing code, a bed-and-breakfast, a horse farm, a heliport, a farm, etc.).

Meanwhile, Joe enjoyed his first political appointment to the Arlington

Planning Commission. While there he helped create a Master Plan which included designation of the Hendry tract for parkland. It is too bad that Joe Fisher didn't live to see that plan become a reality when in 1994 the County purchased the land for \$15,000,000, and Fort C.F. Smith became an Arlington County park. (Joe died in 1992).

Our wooded neighborhood was known as Woodmont, as was the four room elementary school down the street. Joe and I would later each take a turn at being president of the Woodmont PTA. Built in 1935 along with other elementary schools such as Monroe, Cherrydale, Lee, and Randolph, our little school was neighborhood oriented, and all of the Fisher children from 1952 on were to walk the two blocks to Woodmont and return there to play after school. When they reached grades 5 and 6, they were consigned to either the library or a substandard basement room or to one of the newer schools, Taylor or Jamestown. Schools were segregated in those days, and in 1957 when kindergarten was introduced in the public school system, our third son, Bill, could be admitted only by my showing proof of his Caucasian race.

When the Supreme Court voted to require integration of the public schools, massive resistance, under the leadership of Senator Harry Flood Byrd, threatened to close down all Virginia public schools that tried to comply. Some of our neighbors actually paid tuition to Washington, D.C., to enroll their children in public schools there.

Our great Arlington attorney, Edmund Campbell, and his Arlington School Board member and education reformer wife, Elizabeth, took the fight to Richmond. Serving without fee and supported by articulate Arlington citizens and the School Board, Ed and Elizabeth Campbell lobbied hard and succeeded in persuading Governor Lindsey Almond and enough Virginia legislators (by a slim majority vote of one) to allow the public schools of Virginia to admit the first few African-American students.

Arlington County was the first jurisdiction in Virginia to comply with the Supreme Court ruling. For that daring-do, our right to elect our school board was removed by the die-hard massive resistance forces of the Byrd machine. But our schools did begin to integrate, and our son Ben and his Afro-American friend Bobby Eldridge of our Unitarian Church were able to sit together in class. Our Unitarian minister's wife, Marion Weston, was one of those who donated her time tutoring black students to ease their transition.

Public schools in Petersburg, VA, closed down over the issue and remained closed in resistance for some time as private segregated schools sprang up to educate only whites there. Arlington has always been blessed with an enlightened electorate and public officials from both parties to head us in a positive direction. We have been richly blessed.

Back to our move to Arlington in 1952 — our house, like the other big houses on 24th Street North, had been built in 1913. Our garage was really a barn and bales of hay and records of chicken and egg sales were to be found on the property. We were told that our street had originally been called Malvern Place. Apparently the Organized Women Voters, a conservative, conscientious counterpart to the League of Women Voters in Arlington, helped to establish our present system of alphabet and numerical naming of our streets. Thus, we have the numbers north and south of Arlington Boulevard (which used to be called Lee Boulevard) and the alphabetical one to three syllable names from East to West.

Our 24th Street has never been easy to find, ending at Fillmore on one end and meeting 23rd Road perpendicularly at the other within three blocks and suddenly becoming Uhle Street (before the Spout Run Bridge fell down). 24th Street from beyond Fillmore Street starts and stops over ravines and “runs” and is impossible to track. Without familiarity or maps you can’t follow 24th Street with any logic. (As they say in Maine, “You can’t get there from here.”) In short, Arlington grew like Topsy, but we have our own secret charm.

In the 30s, 40s, and early 50s, except for food and pharmacy, most shopping was done in the District of Columbia at Lansburgh’s, Woodward and Lothrop, Garfinckel’s, and Kann’s. The Rosslyn Circle was for the trolley and bus. The trolley ran out to Glen Echo and into D.C. Trains roared through Arlington and the whistle was a familiar sound in our neighborhood as well as in East Falls Church. There was a charming railroad station there, and I did a painting of it and nearly got mowed down by an unscheduled train!

Rosslyn in the 40s and 50s was a conglomeration of pawn shops, the Cherry Smash building, tenements with gas lights, etc. Huge ugly billboards introduced commuters coming from D.C. on Key Bridge to Arlington. It was a hodge-podge. Over Spout Run a fragile iron bridge connected our 24th Street with Uhle Street. We were annoyed by drag racers who zoomed noisily down our street at night, and commuters took short-cuts through there by day. This was resolved when some teenagers consuming six-packs of beer while driving down Spout Run ran into one of the supports, and the bridge fell down! Joe Fisher, who by then had been elected to the Arlington County Board, joined those who voted not to restore the bridge!

My memories of our public libraries in Arlington are also interesting. When I was doing university research in the late 40s and early 50s our Central Library consisted of an old house with rows and rows of jam packed movable metal shelves. Exterior doors of the house didn’t quite meet the floors, and I recall snow drifting in around my feet in the winter. It was drafty! The library was intimate and friendly — warm and cold at the same time! Books were

indexed on file cards in wooden drawer files. Your friendly librarian did leg-work for you, lacking any of the computerized efficiency which is now the order of the day.

Forty-five years later Arlington and Falls Church remain outstanding communities with state-of-the-art libraries, excellent public schools and recreation programs, lovingly tended parks and mini-parks, beautification projects throughout the area, splendid cultural programs, and great neighborhood and community pride. We feel blessed to have lived here and to have shared a small part of its history.

Notes and References

Margaret (Peggy) Fisher has been a resident of Northern Virginia for fifty years, since 1947 when she and her husband, Joseph Fisher, first moved to Arlington. Always active in school, church, neighborhood, and cultural and environmental causes, the Fishers never lost their love of Arlington. Peggy continues actively as writer, artist, and art teacher of adults in Arlington and enthusiastically supports the government of our county and the high quality of our life here.
