

[Editor's Note: In the Spring of 2017, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Masonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the fifth annual Arlington history contest, intended to encourage interest and research into local history. The contest was open to all high schoolers of the Arlington County Public School System. The theme of the contest this year was: *The Progressive Era in America between 1890 and 1920 was a time of political reform and social activism to clean up the ills of the nation. In Arlington, Crandall Mackey, local district attorney used his power to clean up a part of Arlington, often referred to as the "Monte Carlo of America." Was Crandall Mackey successful in his quest and did Arlington continue this social activism through the 1900s?* The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay.]

Crandall Mackey and Lawless Rosslyn

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A.K. Antony, a noted political figure in India, once said, "there is no compromise when it comes to corruption. You have to fight it." This is a statement that Crandall Mackey would have approved in reference to Rosslyn as he attempted to fight crime and corruption in that part of Alexandria County (Arlington County after 1920). In the early twentieth century, there were many issues in Rosslyn that gave no sign of improving unless firm action was taken. This is why Mackey chose his means to cure the ills of the "Monte Carlo of America," as Rosslyn was then popularly called. Because of his efforts, he achieved some success in partially cleaning up the area, paving the way for other social activists to follow in his footsteps. After Crandall Mackey launched an era of progressive change, future developers and residents would assist in a full cleanup of the area, creating the Rosslyn area we all know today.

There were many problems in the area we now know as Rosslyn before Crandall Mackey began his cleanup of the region in 1904. These problems arose in the circumstances that ensued in the years following the end of the American Civil War. In the 1860s, the the area we know today as Rosslyn emerged as a lawless community of former soldiers and others who had driven farmers off of their previously owned land. As these people became settled into the area, they established saloons, gambling halls, brothels, speakeasies, pawnshops,

and other illegal “businesses.” Some of these establishments were hidden in stockyards and lumberyards. The illegal and dangerous activities gave the area the nickname the “Monte Carlo of America” and it was commonly known as a “seedy, red-light district” (Peck) at the Virginia terminus of the Aqueduct Bridge (now Key Bridge), and also at the end of Long Bridge (now the 14th Street Bridge), then called Jackson City. There were specific areas within Rosslyn that were more dangerous than others such as “Pork Chop Row” or “Dead Man’s Hollow.” “Pork Chop Row,” today’s Fort Meyer Drive, was a street notorious for nighttime gambling and other vices. In “Dead Man’s Hollow,” a short distance from Lee Highway, many farmers traveling back from DC were forced to travel in an armed convoy due to the extreme danger of the area. Not only was there prominent danger, but nearly all of these institutions broke the law. At the time, Virginia had implemented “blue laws,” which were meant to restrict activities and commerce on Sundays. Rosslyn, however, had become known for its “Sunday Saloons” since “the front doors and windows of [their] clandestine bars were dutifully closed on the Lord’s Day, but the back doors were always open.” (Peck) This was one aspect that increased crime in Rosslyn because sizable groups of people traveled into the area on Sundays to these establishments. Prohibition sentiments were also common beginning in the 1870s, although the actual Prohibition movement was not in full motion until approximately 1920. The most infamous opponent of these sentiments was the Consumers Brewing Company, sold in 1902 and renamed the Arlington Brewing Company. It was located on the banks of the Potomac River (where the Marriott hotel is located today). The company helped to fuel crime in the area before being forced to cease its alcoholic production during prohibition. Considering the Rosslyn area today, it is hard to realize the danger and illegality that characterized this neighborhood before the work of people such as Crandall Mackey.

Crandall Mackey came into a position of power and influence after defeating the popular Dick Johnson in the election for Commonwealth Attorney in 1903. He won by only three votes and he ran with the campaign promise that he would straighten out both Rosslyn and Jackson City. In order to do so, he “[worked] against [many] deep-seated human impulses” and took on “some of the highest and lowest men of his era”. (Covert) Throughout his journey to clean up the area, he “[dovetailed] efforts [with] the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League,” (Peck) as well as the Good Citizens League which had been formed to fight corruption. Mackey’s overall mission was to fight corruption and crime in Rosslyn resulting in the “cleanup” of the area. He is best known for the raids that he conducted, beginning in 1904, in order to undertake in this cleanup. After several legal attempts to fix the area, he gathered a group of approximately between 12 and 25 people to accompany him on his

raids. They first traveled into Jackson City, a neighboring area also overtaken by crime, before reaching Rosslyn. In Rosslyn, they used weapons, such as saws, axes, and guns, to destroy the brothels, throw away whiskey, smash the gambling dens, and set some of the establishments on fire. Later, in June 1910, Mackey also attempted to close the Arlington Brewing Company and although he did not succeed in closing the establishment permanently, he did manage to halt production of alcoholic beverages and change their production to a cherry smash soft drink. After he “cleaned up” Rosslyn, some people considered him a hero. For example, the *Washington Times* newspaper’s headline the next day (May 22, 1904) read, “Mackey Makes it Safe for Humanity in Alexandria County by Cleaning up Rosslyn Bums” Through Mackey’s actions, gamblers and gangsters were deprived of many of the institutions that they had previously frequented. However, even Mackey’s aggressive social activism and attempts at political reform did not immediately convert Rosslyn into the area we now know today.

After Mackey conducted his raids, he was known for making the area safer. Rosslyn would need many more adjustments, including millions of dollars in development and a continuation of social activism in order to see its transformation. After Mackey’s raids, Rosslyn was not as dangerous as it had been. However, people still declined to move into or travel through the area. Despite the declining number of remaining brothels, gambling dens, and saloon, the area continued to be considered a “real dive,” (Pyzyk) and instead the area was increasingly populated by lumberyards, pawnshops and junk yards.

Crandall Mackey and Delegate Fain, however, had taken steps towards action to regulate the distribution of alcohol. They made it possible for “Virginia [to adopt] state control over distilled spirits” (Peck), which is an authority it still possesses today. Although Crandall Mackey’s cleanup of Rosslyn did not permanently fix or transform the area, he led people to pursue better visions for the area and inspired continuing social activism. Even thirty years ago, there were only a few significant establishments in Rosslyn, such as the River Place Apartments. Although this was true, it only took ten years for this to change radically. Between 1960 and 1970, twenty-seven major buildings were constructed in Rosslyn and 23 more prominent establishments were constructed soon afterwards. This was in part due to the county’s new “site plan” process, which permitted developers to construct buildings up to 150 feet high. Plans for the Rosslyn area included turning the area into a popular business hub where the new metro station would later be completed in 1977. Nowadays, the area includes the metro station, close proximity to many major highways in Virginia as well as Washington D.C., a flourishing residential market, and many thriving industries. These advantages and installations in Rosslyn would never have been possible if Crandall Mackey had not taken the first step to clean up

the area. First, he temporarily fixed the area and second, he inspired others to take further action in order to reshape the area into the popular and prosperous Rosslyn of current times.

Before Crandall Mackey had reached the Rosslyn area, it was characterized by hundreds of illegal establishments and activities as well as corruption and danger. This affected both the people in and surrounding the area. Mackey's raids had a big impact on this situation by his raids and the legal actions that accompanied them; he began the process of cleaning up the area. In addition, he inspired a future wave of activism that would continue until Rosslyn was transformed into the prosperous and popular area it has become today.

About the Author

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