

[Editor's Note: In the Spring of 2018, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Masonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the sixth annual Arlington history contest, intended to encourage interest and research into local history. The contest which had been opened to all high schoolers of the Arlington County Public School System was opened this year to 8th graders and parochial schools in Arlington as well. The theme of the contest this year was: *2018 marks the 100th year anniversary of the armistice ending World War One. World War One has been called the "forgotten war" by some historians. Have we forgotten this war in Arlington? Why or why not?* The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay.

World War I: An Afterthought in Arlington

BY ARUJ KHEMKA, THOMAS JEFFERSSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

On April 6th, 1917, the United States officially entered the First World War, which had a profound effect and played an instrumental role in shaping the world we know today. When the Germans attacked a United States cruise ship, the Lusitania, instigating America's declaration of war, the feeling was immediate that a war on a scale the world had never experienced was about to take place. Over the next two years, approximately four million people from the United States were drafted to fight overseas in dreadful conditions.¹ In muddy trenches, many fought for their lives, their country, and the peace of the world. Of these men, 123 were from Arlington, VA.²

With the 100th anniversary of the first Armistice Day approaching, however, the strength of the first world war's legacy appears to be fading. Often called by historians the "forgotten war," many Americans deem World War I to be irrelevant or forget about it nearly completely. Here in Arlington, there is no doubt that a similar attitude towards the First World War exists. World War I occurred at a time when Arlington's identity was very different from what it is today, and while the efforts of organizations throughout the county ensure that the war's legacy in Arlington will last forever, the First World War will likely continue to remain an afterthought in the minds of most Arlingtonians.

In order to determine whether or not World War I has been forgotten in Arlington, it is important to recognize that during World War I, Arlington County was extremely different from what it is today. In fact, the county didn't even hold the name of Arlington. Rather, present-day Arlington was known as

Alexandria County. Having been retroceded from the District of Columbia 70 years before the US entered the First World War; the county was a rural adjunct of neighboring Alexandria city. The county considered itself an urban area; however, given that at the time, the definition of an urban area was any settlement with over 2,500 people. By today's standards, Arlington County would have been considered a small rural county.³ Neighborhoods consisted of small settlements among farmland, a sharp contrast from the towering apartment buildings amongst bustling streets seen in Arlington County today. Arlington County's population at the time numbered around 12,000 people.⁴ In comparison, Arlington's current population is approximately 230,000, nearly 20 times the size

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100 years before.⁵ Finally, Arlington County's relationship to the District of Columbia was profoundly different from that of the present day. Partly due to the development levels of both areas, unlike the Arlington County of present day, Arlington County was not responsible for a significant number of federal employees in Washington nor was it an outlet from D.C of the federal government's presence. Though a considerably large group of people in Arlington County did indeed commute to D.C for work, perhaps the strongest tie to Washington at the time was the interest amongst residents of the District of Columbia in building summer homes in Arlington.⁶ Clearly, the Arlington of a hundred years past was profoundly different from that of the present day. Regardless, despite its relatively weak connection to D.C at the time as compared to today, being in such close proximity to the capital of the nation, Arlington County played an active part in the United States' efforts in the First World War.

Fort Myer, a military base first used for the Civil War located in Arlington, and its extension, St. Asaph Military Camp, a converted racetrack, was likely the most glaring signs to Arlingtonians that a war known for ghastly trench warfare in Europe wasn't "so far away." Many soldiers from the United States were initially stationed at Fort Myer or St. Asaph Military Camp to become familiar with the aspects of trench warfare.⁷ As a result, it was not uncommon to see groups of soldiers walking with each other late at night or military bands staging public performances.⁸ Today, Joint Base Myer–Henderson Hall, which includes Fort Myer, and a co-existing museum, serve as one of the most appar-

ent and recognizable reminders to Arlingtonians of the impact the First World War had on the county.

Some of the other lasting effects that the First World War had on Arlington are evident. For one, the federal government's influence in Arlington, Virginia today stems initially from the events that played out during World War I. An increased need for federal employees during the war resulted in an influx of employees from Arlington County into D.C. This led to an increased federal presence in Arlington and other surrounding areas that to this day has never diminished.⁹ Just as more employees than ever migrated from Arlington County to Washington, World War I contributed to a significant population increase in Arlington. As Washington faced a surplus of government employees in the aftermath of World War I, many employees opted to move to Arlington County to live. This migration of government employees was a major factor in the increase of Arlington's population from 12,000 people to 20,000 and a contributor to its transformation from a rural area to an urban one. An impact of this change was the 1920 establishment that Arlington as an independent county.¹⁰

Despite the participation of Arlingtonians in the war and the lasting effects of the war on Arlington to the present day, there is no doubt that the impact of World War I is far surpassed by that of the Second World War. This can be attributed in part simply to the sheer size and length of the second world war as compared to the first. From 1941 to 1945, United States war efforts operated on a much larger scale than the previous war. Whereas rationing during the First World War was fully voluntary, during World War II, rationing was made mandatory, and food could only be purchased through the use of ration cards.¹¹ Thus, for every resident of Arlington and the United States of America as a whole, the Second World War had a stronger impact on basic pocketbook issues. Furthermore, whereas the United States was involved in the First World War for only one year and seven months before the first ever armistice day, the United States' involvement in the second world war lasted much longer, spanning nearly four years. Moreover, the lengthy duration of the Second World War made it so that even younger men who were still not old enough to fight in the war recognized the war as "the most dominant issue in school." Immediately after graduation, a trip to the battlefields of Europe and Asia was a near certainty.¹²

However, the magnitude of the Second World War aside, the impact and legacy of World War II in Arlington is greater than that of the First World War for several other reasons that provide a deeper understanding of the nature of our remembrance of World War I today. The increasing population in Arlington County due to World War I slowly propelled it onto the path to urbanization, and by 1941, the year the United States entered World War II, Arlington County had made significant strides away from its highly rural state of just 25 years

earlier. Even so, by today's standards, Arlington County was still a mostly rural area, and it was World War II, not the First World War, that helped the county transform itself from an area defined by small settlements among farmland to one in which city-like amenities were in abundance and the air bustled with activity. From 1940 to 1960, Arlington County's population nearly tripled, growing from 57,000 to 163,000 in just 20 years.¹³ Similar to the period after World War I, but on a much larger scale, this can be attributed to the growing number of federal employees in Washington. From 1941 to 1944, the number of federal employees doubled, creating high demand for housing in Arlington. This led to the construction of dwellings built closer to one another and high rise apartments, a common site above the rushing streets in Arlington, Virginia today.¹⁴ Overall, while World War I may have laid the foundation for Arlington's growth, World War II fully instigated its complete transformation from a rural to urban area. In addition, the occurrence of World War II and further wars would coincide with a time when Arlington County bore many similarities to the Arlington of today, whereas at the time of World War I, Arlington did not even have the same name. For these reasons, in the face of future wars that affected Arlington, and in a county with a far different identity than a hundred years earlier, World War I has struggled to enter and remain in the minds of many Arlingtonians.

Nevertheless, numerous efforts in Arlington have been taken to commemorate the war. As with most wars, the majority of commemoration efforts stem from a desire to memorialize those who served in the war. For one, Pershing Drive, located in Arlington, Virginia, is named after General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces and a former resident of Arlington.¹⁵

The rest of the notable memorials to World War I in Arlington commemorate the 13 men from Arlington who perished in the war. In Courthouse Plaza, by the parking lot primarily for the nearby AMC Movie Theater, stands a Willow Oak "Memorial Tree."¹⁶ Just meters away, on the soil above the tree's roots, lies a plaque installed in 1923 by the Women's Civic Club of Clarendon. On the teal granite surface of the plaque, 11 names are inscribed. Above reads a short message: "Dedicated to the boys of Arlington County, Virginia, who gave their lives in the cause of humanity." Unfortunately, the plaque excludes the two men of color who also died in the war, making clear the racism that was around at the time.

Next, outside of the Cherrydale Health and Rehabilitation Center stands a plaque remembering the four men from the neighborhood of Cherrydale who gave their lives in the war.¹⁷ The memorial was initially placed in 1918 outside the grounds of the no-longer standing Cherrydale School by the Francis Wallis

Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.¹⁸ The branches of a tree cover the stone memorial, and implanted in the soil, just feet away, a small American flag flaps in the wind.

Aside from Arlington Cemetery, the most familiar war memorial in Arlington is the Clarendon War Memorial. In the middle of Clarendon Circle, on elevated grassy ground, a granite structure with a ball and American eagle on top stands high. On the opposite side of the steps only recently built to walk up and see the memorial up close, appears an old plaque, nearly unreadable. On this plaque, in big letters, it reads, "To the memory of those who served in the world war and those who gave their lives." Underneath are engraved the names of all thirteen men from Arlington who died in the war. In this memorial as well, the racism prevalent during the time period of World War I is apparent—the two men of color are listed separately from the other 11 with the word "colored" listed next to their names in parenthesis.¹⁹ The monument, built in 1931 by the American Legion post in Arlington, later bore the names of Arlington's fallen in future wars.²⁰

It is the efforts of each of the groups responsible for the installation of the World War I memorials in Arlington that ensure that the memory of the First World War may never be fully forgotten in Arlington. In addition, initiatives taken by other organizations such as the World War I Commemoration Task Force, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Arlington Historical Society, and the John Lyon Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, which is named after a fallen soldier in World War I, are instrumental in continuing our commemoration of the First World War. However, even these efforts are hindered by the immense obstacles facing the continued commemoration of World War I. The World War I memorials in Arlington tend to go unnoticed, and in the case of the Clarendon War Memorial, they can be overshadowed by other wars that affected Arlington. The lone exception to these trends is Arlington National Cemetery, at which a World War I exhibit is on full display and where the nine Arlington soldiers who died in the war, along with General Pershing, are buried.²¹

The Arlington of World War I and the immediate years after the war does not conform with the Arlington of present day. Therefore, even as efforts are undertaken to commemorate the war, the First World War remains an afterthought amongst many Arlingtonians. As long as the efforts of groups dedicated to commemorating the war persist, World War I will probably never be completely forgotten; however, it is clear that most Arlingtonians are not aware of the impact of the First World War, and this is likely never to change.

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- ³ In order to avoid confusion, Arlington County will be used to refer to the county that we live in in all instances.
- ⁴ Mark Benbow, "Arlington and the First World War," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, October 16th 2017, 19; *Arlington Historical Society; A Brief History of Arlington County, Virginia*. (Arlington, VA: Arlington Historical Society, 1965), 4-5.
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¹⁹Maggie Young, "Clarendon," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, October, 1978, 51-52; Annette Benbow, "Those Who Gave Their Lives: Arlington's Fallen Sons in World War I," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, 2014, 23.

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