

Glencarlynn's Unexplored Past

By Tim Aiken

I have often wondered what untold stories Arlington has to share. Might not my own neighborhood of Glencarlynn, home to the Ball-Sellers House, the oldest structure in Arlington, and the first planned suburban subdivision in the county, hold stories of a more complex and troubled past? Did enslaved people once work the land that I now call home?

Through census data, probate records, maps, and newspaper articles, and drawing heavily from the Arlington Historical Society's publications and the work of local historians, I have cobbled together a more detailed and inclusive account of Glencarlynn's complex past.

According to the 1800 census, an estimated one thousand settlers lived in the rural outlying areas of Northern Virginia. About a third were enslaved. Among those areas is the neighborhood of Glencarlynn, a 166-acre tract of land. John Ball purchased the parcel in 1743 from the original Lord Fairfax land grant and built the log house and its frame lean-to addition known as the Ball-Sellers House that survive to this day

Figs. 1 and 2: Ball-Sellers House, built by John and Elizabeth Ball around 1742.

Courtesy of the Arlington Historical Society



(Figs. 1 and 2). In 1748, his brother Moses Ball (1717–1792) acquired a ninety-one-acre parcel adjacent and just to the south of John Ball that followed the course of Long Branch. Both men farmed their land, raising corn, wheat, and tobacco; kept sheep, cows, pigs, geese, and bees; and operated a grist mill at the edge of their holdings on Four Mile Run.

When he died in 1766, John Ball directed that his property be sold and that the proceeds be divided among his wife Elizabeth and his five daughters.¹ In 1772, William Carlin (1732–1820) purchased the farm for one hundred pounds cash. Elizabeth Payne Ball (1716–1792), however, elected to take her widow's dower, retaining one-third of the land rather than accept her husband's will.

Local historian, Karl VanNewkirk, believes Elizabeth Payne Ball lived in a separate house on her one-third parcel until her death around 1792.² It's likely that William Carlin then leased this same parcel to his brother-in-law, Edward Skidmore (1765–1828). VanNewkirk thinks this residence was located somewhere west of the Ball-Sellers House and could be the same house or location that William's grandson William H. F. Carlin would one day call home.

It's doubtful that John Ball held enslaved men and women. No enslaved individuals were listed in his will. Given the small size of his farm and the fact that several of his relatives lived nearby, he probably did not need their labor. It is always possible that Ball hired enslaved people from their owners on neighboring farms to help work his land and run his mill.

From the original records of that time, we know that the owners of four of the six parcels abutting John Ball's property possessed slaves. They were: George and James Mercer, who owned land south and east that bordered the west bank of Four Mile Run; John Alexander, who owned a parcel immediately south along Columbia Pike; Simon Pearson, who maintained a tract at Seven Corners; and William Hardin, who farmed property east of John Ball just across Four Mile Run.

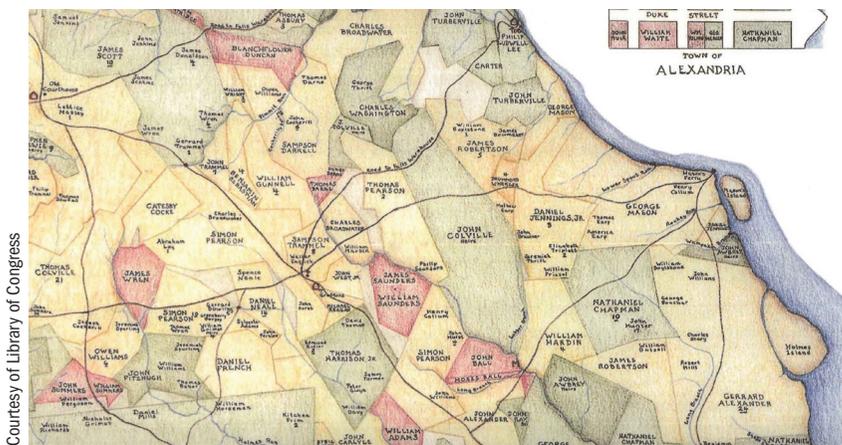
Local amateur historian Elizabeth Mitchell produced a fascinating digital map that shows the location of the Ball family tracts and neighboring farms (Fig. 3). The map outlines the early local road network, churches, and mills that existed in 1760 and shows the names of individual landowners and tenants. The map also indicates who among them held enslaved people.³

In 1774 George Washington became a neighbor to Glencarlyn when he acquired the George and James Mercer property. Eleven years, however, would pass before Washington found time to inspect and survey the Mercer property. He had a few more pressing matters to deal with during those 11 years. The initial survey attempted on April 21, 1785, failed when William “Billy” Lee, who had accompanied Washington, seriously injured his knee.

Washington returned on May 5 the following year to complete the survey. During this second survey attempt, Washington, many believe, marked a corner of his new land holdings with his initials on a prominent oak tree at the confluence of Long Branch and Four Mile Run. The tree was brought down by a storm in 1899. A segment of the tree still bearing George Washington’s initials can be found in the Glencarlyn Library.

The story of William “Billy” Lee, the man who accompanied Washington on the first survey attempt, remains largely untold. Born into slavery around 1750, William Lee, along with his brother Frank, belonged to the estate of the late Colonel John Lee of Westmoreland County, Virginia. On May 27, 1768, George Washington purchased the two men for sixty-one pounds and fifteen shillings. William kept

Fig. 3: Portion of a 1760 Map of Fairfax County landholders and tenants, including the number of slaves held. What is now Arlington County is the right quadrant of the map.



the surname “Lee,” denoting the same famous Virginia Lee family that claims two signatories to the Declaration of Independence and later the commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

Washington’s records refer to William Lee as “Mulatto Will,” suggesting that William and perhaps Frank were born to an enslaved mother and a White father. Descendants of William Lee and historians assert that William and Frank Lee were the illegitimate sons of Colonel John Lee. In his diary, Washington expresses a fond devotion to William Lee, who remained close to Washington, accompanying him to every battle throughout the Revolutionary War and serving as his personal valet.

Following Lee’s knee injury, Washington procured metal braces to support his injured leg and arranged for him to take on work as a cobbler at Mount Vernon. The man holding General Washington’s horse in John Trumball’s 1780 painting entitled *George Washington* is thought to be William Lee (Fig. 4). Trumball’s portrayal of Lee may say more about the artist and his conceptualization of African Americans than what Lee may have resembled in person. Lee is the only enslaved person belonging to George Washington who was freed immediately upon his death in 1799.⁴

Moses Ball and William Carlin were most likely aware of George Washington’s survey work. Both men visited Washington at Mount Vernon in May of 1786. There is a journal entry Washington made that May that states, “When I returned home, I found Moses Ball, his son John Ball, and William Carlin here, the first having his effects under execution wanted to borrow money to redeem them. Lent him ten pounds for this purpose.”⁵ It is not clear what “effects” the president was referring to, but perhaps it was one of Moses Ball’s farming instruments or a farm animal he wanted to buy back. Moses Ball is known to have faced chronic financial troubles. William Carlin provided the security for the Moses Ball’s loan from George Washington.

Another African American, Benjamin Banneker, is associated with survey work that was conducted on the Carlin property. While it is unlikely that he visited the Carlin tract, Banneker (1731–1806), a self-taught astronomer and mathematician, was recruited to work on the survey team in 1791 to determine the boundaries of the nation’s new capital.⁶ A boundary stone marking a western edge of the federal city can be found on the former Carlin property at Carlin Springs

Elementary School. Today it indicates the boundary between Arlington and Fairfax County.

In 1772, William Carlin (1732–1820) purchased the Ball-Sellers House from the estate of John Ball. What prompted Carlin, an English immigrant and Alexandria tailor, who counted George Washington

Fig. 4: John Trumball's 1780 painting of George Washington and most likely his valet, William Lee.



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

and George Mason among his customers, to settle on the Ball homestead? Perhaps watching successful farmers bring their produce to market in Alexandria inspired him to seek his fortune in farming.⁷ Whatever the reason, he and his descendants, over the course of the next one hundred years, planted deep roots, working the farm and acquiring several adjacent properties.

There is no evidence among surviving records that William Carlin held enslaved people, but lack of evidence does not rule out the possibility. Virginia records from the 1790 and the 1800 census have been lost and there is no record of the Carlins of Alexandria or Alexandria County (Arlington County's name at that time) in the 1810 census.

The 1820 and 1830 censuses indicate that William Carlin's second wife, Elizabeth Hall Carlin and their children, owned slaves. In 1820, Widow Carlin held two women in bondage and in 1830, an elderly woman over the age of fifty-five. Historically, census records did not provide the names of the enslaved people, only their status, gender, and age. It's likely that the elderly woman mentioned in the 1830 census was named Nancy. Among the expenses listed by the executors of William Carlin's estate is ten dollars paid "to old Negro Nancy," identified as Elizabeth's helper or nurse. Elizabeth Carlin died in either 1834 or 1835.

When William Carlin died in 1820, he directed in his will that his approximately 370 acres of land, be sold in lots small enough for persons with little money to purchase them and with the proceeds divided among his wife and children.⁸ Either because of difficulty finding interested buyers or because his children clearly preferred to remain on the land and continue farming, a different arrangement emerged. Contrary to William Carlin's expressed wishes, the executors of his estate allowed close relatives and in-laws, two of whom were the executors of Carlin's estate, to buy back most of the property and deed it to members of the Carlin family.⁹ Control of the original Ball parcel fell into the hands of William Carlin's three sons: Wesley (1788–1875), James Harvey (1800–1846), and George Whitfield (1786–1843).

Wesley acquired thirty-four acres of the Ball tract on the west side of Carlin Springs Road and forty acres from the Colville tract. His home, known today as the Mary Carlin House, still stands in the Arlington Forest neighborhood at the intersection of Carlin Springs Road and

North First Place. A model replica of the log house can be found at the Arlington Historical Museum.

James Harvey was deeded ninety-four acres of the Ball parcel, referred to as the “mansion house tract,” that he purchased for \$874. He also bought thirty-eight acres of the Colville tract that consisted of steep slopes and the stream valleys of Lubber Run and Four Mile Run. Today the mansion house is called the Ball-Sellers House, and the 94 acres corresponds to present-day Glencarlyn.

George Carlin acquired 63 acres of the original Ball property located west of Carlin Springs Road. In 1839, George sold his land, relocated to the City of Alexandria, and became a school master. The 1820–1840 census records show George presiding over large households of up to twelve people. The 1820 census lists a “free colored child,” and the 1840 census shows a Carlin residence with a “free colored woman and... child.” His descendants prospered as merchants and later operated a hardware store in Alexandria that bore the family name.

Perhaps to hide the potential conflict of interest over William Carlin’s estate, his executors did not record the deeds in court until more than two decades after his death. One deed records Mary Carlin (1818–1905), the granddaughter of William Carlin, as the buyer of the 40-acre parcel her father Wesley Carlin controlled and occupied. Mary Carlin was five years old at the time of the purchase, and no recorded payment exists. James Harvey Carlin’s transaction was filed in 1848, two years after he died. Since James Harvey Carlin was no longer alive, the deed was assigned to his widow, Letia (1797–1866), and their four children, John Edward Fletcher (1822–1900), William H. F. (1825–1901), Anne (1828–1892), and Andrew Wilson Franklin (1831–1885).

Census records confirm that the second generation of Carlins also held enslaved people. In the 1830 census, Wesley Carlin owned three individuals. In 1840, he held four enslaved: a woman and three children. In 1850, Carlin possessed a sixteen-year-old female, and in the 1860 census, two girls, ages five and seven. Two of the children listed in the 1840 census are probably the two girls he arranged to sell by public auction in 1846 in an ad posted in the local Alexandria paper (Fig. 5).¹⁰

Census records in 1840 indicate that James Harvey lived at the Ball-Sellers House with two free elderly African Americans, one man and one woman. James Harvey’s widow, Letia Marcetta Skidmore

Carlin, possessed a six-year-old boy in 1850. Among the residents listed at the Ball-Sellers House in the 1860 census are Letia, her children William, Anne, and Andrew, an eighteen-year-old White male named Albert Donen, and a free sixteen-year-old male “mulatto” named Washington Roberts. Albert Donen and Washington Roberts are recorded as “laborers.” Washington Roberts remained in the Carlin household through 1870. The 1870 census identifies him as a male “mulatto...farm hand,” age twenty-five. He lived with two of James Harvey Carlin’s children, Anne and Andrew, and his brother-in-law, Isaac Skidmore (1806–1883).

It seems plausible that Washington Roberts is the person listed as six years of age in the 1850 slave census and then listed as free in 1860.¹¹ Perhaps he is even the half-brother of Anne, Andrew, and William. When Anne died in 1892, her will directed that one hundred dollars be left to Washington Roberts “as...evidence of his faithful services.”¹² From later census data we know that Washington Roberts continued to live nearby and married Mina Whaite in 1884. From a publication by the Glencarlyn Civic Association, *Glencarlyn Remembered: The First 100 Years*, it’s clear that Washington Roberts lived on Carlin Springs Road just off 5th Street and worked for General Burdett. His wife “Mimi

Fig. 5: Alexandria Gazette advertisement for the sale of property, including enslaved, at the home of Wesley Carlin, 1849.

PUBLIC SALE.—Under the authority of a Deed of Trust, bearing date October 20th 1846, I shall proceed to sell at public auction, to the highest bidder for cash, at the residence of Mr. Wesley Carlin, in Alexandria County, on Monday, the 26th day of February, two Negro Girls, aged about 11 and 13 years. Also, Household and Kitchen Furniture, Farming utensils: 1 Wagon; 1 Cart and Gear: 1 Horse: 1 Carryall. Hogs, Cows, &c. Sale to commence at 10 o'clock A. M. SAMUEL LUNT, Trustee.
Jan 22--dtd

did washing for the ladies in the village.” Roberts was “bitten by his own dog and died of hydrophobia [a symptom of rabies] about 1914” at the age of 67. He is buried at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Fairfax County.¹³

When the Civil War broke out, James Harvey’s son, William H. F., served as a private in the Virginia Third Infantry Regiment of the Confederate Army. As noted, George lived in the City of Alexandria with free African Americans, but his son, James F. Carlin (1820–1882), is listed in the 1850 slave census with three enslaved, a twenty-five-year-old woman and two children. After the war, Andrew Wilson Franklin filed claims with the Southern Claims Commission, a court established after the war to reimburse war-related property losses of Southerners who were sympathetic to the Union cause. Andrew Wilson Franklin’s claims were rejected, as were in the cases of many with proven sympathies to the Confederacy.

In 1866, William H. F. Carlin married his cousin Margaretta Skidmore (1824–1888). They lived on and farmed a 20-acre parcel he bought from his uncle Wesley on the west side of Carlin Springs Road. He lived until 1901. William’s house and grounds may have been the same premises that Elizabeth Ball and later Edward and Letia Lydia Hall Skidmore occupied. It was torn down in the 1950s to make room for Kenmore Middle School.

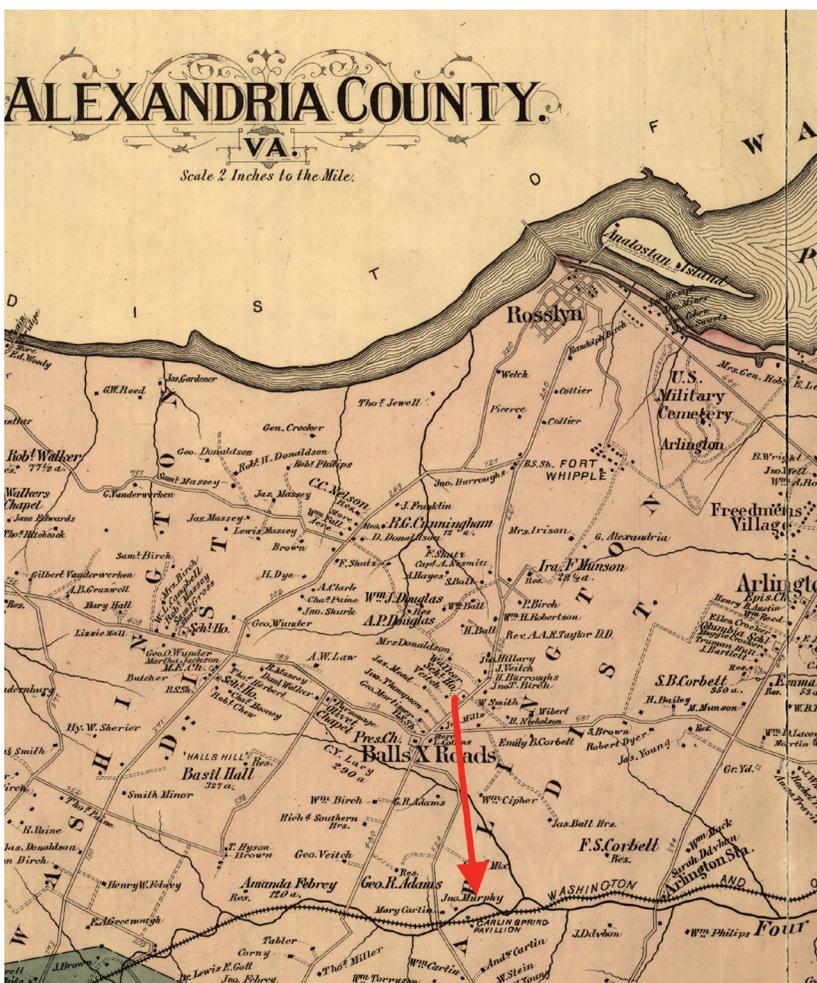
James Harvey’s third son, John Edward Fletcher Carlin (1822–1900), moved to Alexandria, worked as a carpenter and a grocer, and married Helen M. Green (1825–1895) in 1848 and Martha Mankin (1831–1880) in 1868. He had five children and appears not to have owned enslaved men and women.¹⁴

Andrew and Anne continued to live in the Ball-Sellers House and work the farm, eventually starting a dairy operation. They replaced part of the existing house sometime in the 1880s with the two-story farmhouse we see today. In the 1870s they also built and operated Carlin Springs, a pavilion featuring a restaurant, health springs, and picnic grounds near the W&OD railroad station. They ran the business for more than ten years and built a small railway shelter on their property, taking advantage of the Washington, Ohio, and Western Railroad (today’s Washington & Old Dominion) to bring passengers to the pavilion (Fig. 6).

The pavilion catered to local African American residents during its final years of operation.¹⁵ Perhaps Washington Roberts was involved in its maintenance. The business struggled to generate revenue during the pavilion's final years.

The dairy farm was sold in 1863 to William H. Torreyson, whose family expanded its size and continued its operations for close to a

Fig. 6: Portion of an 1878 Map of Alexandria County, the Carlin Springs Pavilion, and the residences of Mary, William, and Andrew Carlin can be found along the railroad tracks at the bottom of the map.



Courtesy of Library of Congress

century.¹⁶ When Andrew died in 1885, he left his one-quarter interest in the “old Homestead estate” to his sister, Anne. She operated the farm for a year and a half with the help of Washington Roberts. Anne spent the last few years of her life living with her brother William.

In 1887, the Carlins sold James Harvey’s two parcels to William W. Curtis and Samuel F. Burdett. The developers subdivided the parcels into parkland and 384 lots to be sold at one hundred dollars a lot to “all men and women of moderate means or who receive stated salaries.” First named Carlin Springs, the subdivision was renamed Glencarlynn in 1896.¹⁷

The last known Carlin to live in the Glencarlynn neighborhood was Wesley Carlin’s daughter, Mary Carlin. She was a teacher, living her entire life in the house at North First Place. Mary died in 1905 and is buried in the Carlin cemetery.

In her last years, Mary was cared for by a former slave, Joshua Devaughn and his niece Emma, both African American (Fig 7). According to Glencarlynn historian Munson H. Lane, Mary gave Devaughn a parcel of land across a little stream where he built a home and lived

Fig. 7: Standing to the left of Mary Carlin is an African American man thought to be Joshua Devaughn.



Courtesy of Glencarlynn Citizens Association

with Emma and another niece, Mary, until his death several years later.¹⁸ Devaughn was also a Baptist minister and “a very devout man.”¹⁹

There are conflicting accounts about Joshua Devaughn in the census records. The 1880 census lists two African Americans, Joshua Devaughn, age fifty-five, “laborer” and his wife Nancy, age forty-five, living in proximity to Anne and Andrew Carlin.²⁰ There is no mention of Devaughn for the next two decades. The 1890 census was destroyed by fire, and the 1900 census was either misfiled or a census worker neglected to survey the neighborhood. The 1910 census, however, lists a Joshua Devaughn, age sixty-six, with the occupation of “clergyman” and industry of “Baptist” with a wife named Louisa, age forty. The previous entry enumerates the Lanes, including Munson Lane, age thirteen, presumably in the house Mary Carlin once occupied.

A great deal can happen in thirty years. People can remarry and change professions, but it is doubtful they can slow the aging process. Somehow in the thirty years between the 1880 and 1910 censuses Joshua Devaughn aged only eleven years. A 1922 death certificate appears to split the difference between the two ages, stating that he was a minister, married to Louisa, and born in April 1831 in Warrenton, Virginia. He died at the age of ninety-one.

The 1880 census identified about twenty-five African Americans and sixty-four Whites residing in and around the Glencarlyn area. It is unlikely that the emerging community of single-family residential homes that Curtis and Burdett promoted as “opportunities for all men and women of moderate means” was available to non-White families. In the 1920s, restrictive covenants on deeds throughout Virginia prohibited the sale of residential property to people of color. By 1930, the only African American resident in the immediate area of Glencarlyn was Joshua Devaughn’s widow Louisa.²¹

Not only did enslaved people once live and work in Glencarlyn, but in the decades immediately following emancipation and the Civil War, Glencarlyn’s Black residents established a more complex and intertwined set of relationships with Glencarlyn’s White residents and former slave owners. But as Glencarlyn and much of Arlington transformed from farmland to residential subdivisions and discriminatory racial policies took root, Black residency all but disappeared from Glencarlyn. Like the photograph of Mary Carlin and Joshua Devaughn

and the accounts of Anne Carlin and Washington Roberts, we must acknowledge that all are a part of our local history and community.

About the Author

Tim Aiken is a government relations specialist having worked at all levels of government, including 24 years in the US Congress. Tim holds a Master of Public Administration from George Mason University and a BA in biology from Middlebury College.

Endnotes

1. Stacy Dowdall, Mary Hardin, Milly Thompson, Winifred Rollings, and another (possibly Elizabeth) who was married to James Gray.
2. I am grateful for the extensive research Kurt VanNewkirk on early Arlington land records on both the Ball and Carlin holdings that he shared with me over extensive conversations during the winter of 2021.
3. Beth Mitchell and ed. Donald M. Sweig, *An interpretive historical map of Fairfax County Virginia in 1760 showing landowners, tenants, slave owners, churches, roads, ordinaries, ferries, mills, tobacco inspection warehouses and the towns of Alexandria and Colchester*, Office of Comprehensive Planning, County of Fairfax, 1987.
4. George Washington, *Last Will and Testament*, July 9, 1799, Founders Online, National Archives. [Original source: Papers of George Washington].
5. George Washington, *Diary of George Washington*, May 1786, Founder's Online, National Archives. [Original source: Papers of George Washington].
6. Silvio A Bedinia, "Benjamin Banneker and the Survey of the District of Columbia, 1791" (PDF), Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, DC.
7. A plausible theory is that John Carlin's first wife, Sarah Payne, may have been related to Elizabeth Payne Ball. If so, the family's interest in supporting John Ball's widow may have prompted William Carlin to acquire the farm.
8. The original 166-acre Ball tract was at some point expanded to 191 acres, and an additional 185 acres from the original Colville tract found on Mitchell's 1760 map was purchased in 1792. This second parcel covers much of today's Arlington Forest and contiguous parts of Barcroft.
9. The two executors were John Richards, who was married to Catherine Rebecca, and Jacobs Bonds, who was married to Mary Carlin.
10. *Alexandria Gazette*, January 31, 1849.

11. While there are numerous data entry errors in the decennial surveys, separate registries were maintained for enslaved people, Whites, and free African Americans, making the erroneous entry of a free person in the enslaved registry less likely.
12. Her will also directed that headstones be erected in the Carlin Cemetery for her brother, Andrew, and her Uncle, Isaac Skidmore, and his wife. Some of these markers can be seen today piled to one corner of the cemetery.
13. Glencarlyn Citizens Association, *Glencarlyn Remembered: The First 100 Years*, 1994, and <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/82771643:60525>.
14. US Census, 1830–1900, and Ancestry.com.
15. Patsy Mose Fletcher, “Historically African American Leisure Destinations Around Washington, DC,” *Alexandria Gazette*, August 14, 1884.
16. Torreyson’s daughter, Lucy T. Reeves, her husband George, and their son, Harvey Reeves, operated the farm until 1954. Today the farm is known as the Reeves Farm. The farmhouse still stands in Bluemont Park. Torreyson also came to acquire the Ball parcel that George Carlin sold in 1839.
17. *Alexandria Gazette*, April 15, 1896.
18. There were two separate but adjacent 3-acre parcels Mary deeded to Joshua Devaughn. The second parcel was granted through execution of her will.
19. *Glencarlyn Remembered: The First 100 Years*, and Munson H. Lane, “Brief History and Recollections of the Village of Glencarlyn and Vicinity,” *Arlington Historical Magazine* 4, no. 2, October 1970.
20. The early census surveys did not list street addresses, but the proximity of two households in a survey listing can be a close approximation to the proximity of actual residences, since survey work was performed by individuals who walked from house to house. In the 1880 census, Anne and Andrew Carlin are listed on line 202, and Joshua and Nancy Devaughn are listed on line 204. Mary Carlin is listed on line 213.
21. US Census, 1930.