

Editor's Note: Each year, the Arlington Historical Society, in partnership with the Cherrydale-Columbia Masonic Lodge 42, sponsors an essay contest for Arlington students in grades 8–12. This year, essay contestants were asked the following question: Arlington was once a rural area but has now developed into an urban community with modern infrastructure and population density. Amid this ongoing change, how can we Arlingtonians remember and preserve our history? In what ways has Arlington successfully preserved its history that can help guide us in the future? The Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay.

Melding Arlington's Past and Future

By Julia Carey

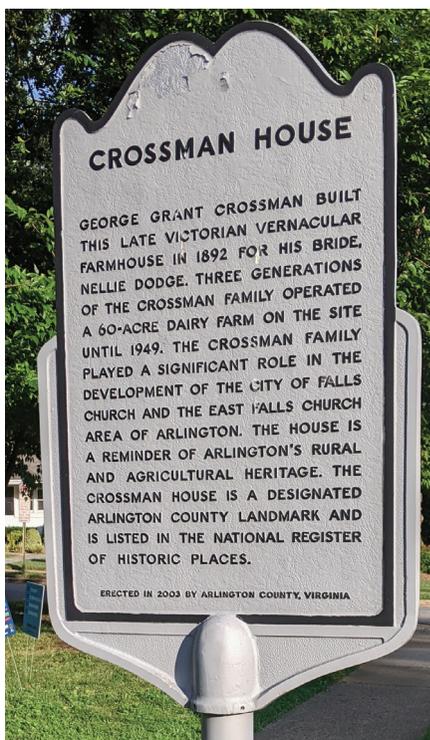
Arlington, Virginia's historical sites and resources have frequently been overlooked in favor of more well-known landmarks in Washington, DC, and neighboring counties. However, Arlington has a rich history of its own, first as rural farmland, next as an epicenter of the Civil War, and then as an urbanizing suburb. According to the Arlington Historic Preservation Master Plan, "During the late-nineteenth century...the largely rural Arlington area began to experience unprecedented growth stemming from the rapid expansion of Washington, DC. Transportation advances, such as electric streetcar lines, and improved communication attracted real estate developers to buy up tracts of land for suburban development; these stimulated a number of communities (including Glencarlyn, Clarendon, Ballston, Cherrydale, Barcroft, and Rosslyn)."¹ Historic preservation has become even more necessary as the county's population has grown. It is crucial for Arlington to take action to preserve its past via steps to rescue historic buildings and by enhancing and publicizing community resources and events.

With a significant increase in the development of Arlington properties by corporations such as Amazon and Boeing in recent years,

accompanied by a higher demand for housing, it has become more crucial than ever to update official guidelines to preserve as many historic buildings and properties as possible.² Many historic structures can be repurposed as museums, educational facilities, governmental offices, or community centers. Since the last edition of the document outlining the county's goals and guidelines on historical outreach, programs, and preservation was completed in 2006, some of its provisions could be updated to reflect technological and circumstantial shifts. According to Arlington County's website, this update is in fact occurring: "The Historic Preservation Program is updating its Master Plan, which will direct the priorities and programmatic activities of Arlington's Historic Preservation Program for the next decade. This process, which started in May 2020, will culminate with the adoption of a new Master Plan in 2022."³ Hopefully, this new framework will lead Arlington historians and advocates to success in preserving Arlington's valuable resources for years to come.

The presence of plaques or barriers at locations, such as boundary stones and historic houses, solidifies these landmarks' necessity, promotes tourism, and encourages community connection.⁴ Signs posted around Arlington describe a village for freed slaves, Arlington's first fire station, and the medical discoveries of physician Charles Richard Drew, who improved blood banking by demonstrating the storage of blood plasma. Today, there are over eighty such

Fig. 1: The sign in front of the Crossman House marks the location and importance of the home.



Courtesy of Julia Carey

informational plaques scattered around Arlington (Fig. 1).⁵ An increased number of markers accompanied by explanations could educate locals to advocate for the protection of historical resources and attract tourists.

More Arlington sites should be added to the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, there are seventy roads, locations, structures, buildings, or districts classified as historic places.⁶ Preserving significant properties is key to retaining the feel of Arlington as well as its historic value. While not every building can be saved, community recognition of the heritage held in buildings will aid, as will the publicization of tax credits. The latter can make renovation more affordable. “In some cases, owners of historic properties may be eligible for federal and/or state historic tax credits for their rehabilitation projects. The...Federal Historic Preservation tax incentives program... offers a 20-percent tax credit and a 10-percent tax credit for certified historic and older properties... In addition, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources administers a 25-percent state rehabilitation tax credit.”⁷ Increased awareness of these credits could make a partial renovation more appealing than a teardown, leading more homeowners to preserve the historic value of their homes.

One such success of preservation efforts was the Hume School, built in 1891. “The Hume School is an imaginative Queen Anne-style building and is representative of the community pride shown in the erection of public schools during the last decades of the nineteenth century.”⁸ Today, the Hume School is home to the Arlington Historical Society. Its use as a museum makes it a hub of community activity, and its structure provides a window into education in the early twentieth century.⁹

Other stories of the rehabilitation of important structures in Arlington include Arlington House and the Green Valley Pharmacy. The grounds that previously housed Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s home became a federal cemetery in 1864, now famously known as Arlington National Cemetery.¹⁰ The cemetery has over 300,000 service members interred, as well as several presidents, drawing tourists who visit the District of Columbia into Arlington County. An additional example of the impact of community and governmental involvement in historic preservation can be found in the story of the former Green Valley Pharmacy. It was a hallmark business of the Green Valley

neighborhood of South Arlington and likely the first Black-owned pharmacy in the county. Green Valley Pharmacy provided pharmaceutical services as well as a dine-in counter from 1952 until it closed in 2017 (Fig. 2).¹¹ It is currently being transformed into a restaurant. The Green Valley Civic Association and Arlington County took issue with details of the renovation plan that eliminated historic elements, and “since the pharmacy building is protected as an Arlington County local historic district, any proposed exterior alterations must be approved by the Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board’s design review process.”¹² Because of the required involvement of these groups, careful consideration of the best way to retain historic details and memorialize the pharmacy, such as murals and displays, has occurred in the repurposing of the building.

Stratford Junior High School, now Dorothy Hamm Middle School, is another example of how historic properties can be used for the public good while also retaining their previous significance. From 1978 to 2019, H-B Woodlawn High School occupied the building. After renovation, it became Dorothy Hamm Middle School.¹³ Stratford’s history as the epicenter of school desegregation in Arlington was incorporated in the building’s renovation. “This historic moment—often referred to by the press at the time as ‘The Day Nothing Happened’—owing to the lack of violence—is now marked by banners at Dorothy Hamm Middle School.”¹⁴ This is a crucial event to preserve, and the reuse of this building as a school makes its continued remembrance feasible. From its inception, honoring Stratford’s history was part of the plan, as journalist Jo DeVoe reported. He wrote, “A new commemorative walk outside

Courtesy of Arlington Public Library



Fig. 2: Current image of Green Valley Pharmacy, a local landmark and a once important business in Arlington’s African American community.



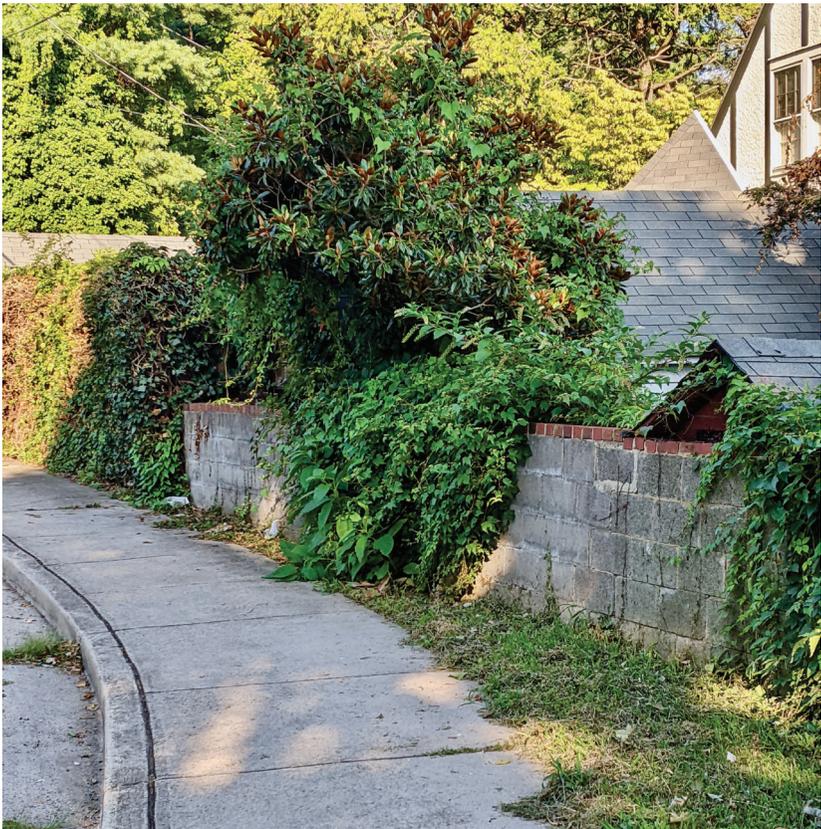
Fig. 3: Four Arlingtonian students who desegregated Stratford Junior High School on February 2, 1952. L-R: Gloria Thompson, Ronald Deskins, Lance Newman, and Michael Jones.

will have illustrated panels retelling the story of integration. Inside, historic artifacts from the Hamm family will be on display. Every year, [principal Ellen] Smith plans to recognize February 2nd, the first day of school for [the students that integrated Stratford,] Deskins, Jones, Newman, and Thompson (Fig. 3). Additionally, the school curriculum will include the topics of integration, civil rights, and social justice.”¹⁵ In this way, one building combines its current use and historic meaning. Dorothy Hamm Assistant Principal Lisa Moore remarked that it is “our expectation, for all our students and staff to know this history. The history that took place in this building—they need to know that, and live that.” Clearly, the past infuses Dorothy Hamm Middle School.

There should be an increased focus on local history in Arlington Public Schools. Curriculum is required to include extensive state history, but little local history. Empowering youth through exposure to local stories promotes the future protection of these resources as well as a connection between generations. For example, older residents could speak about their experiences in Arlington. Discussions with African American Arlingtonians occurred at Yorktown High School on February 26th, 2021, as part of a school-wide assembly. Some of

the first students to integrate Yorktown High School nearly sixty years ago discussed the discrimination they faced. Residents of the Halls Hill neighborhood spoke about the segregation wall built in the 1930s (Fig. 4).¹⁶ Yorktown assistant principal Shari Benites stated, “Students really expressed interest in learning about this history because it is so connected to their lives, where they live, and not just an abstract lesson.”¹⁷ Also, it is important to prioritize recognizing and reckoning with the challenging parts of Arlington’s history. Teaching local history in conjunction with national and state history should be encouraged by Arlington Public Schools through assemblies like Yorktown’s, field trips, and use of local primary sources, making history even more relevant and informative to students.

Fig. 4: The cinder block portion of the Hall’s Hill segregation wall, 2022.



Courtesy of Julia Carey

In an increasingly digital age, resources such as the Center for Local History's new archive of Arlington newspapers throughout the twentieth century provide a valuable resource for researchers and a form of insurance against deterioration. Online resources such as virtual tours, social media posts, Zoom events, and digitized collections extend the outreach and lifespan of historical projects. For example, the Arlington Historical Society created a virtual tour of the Ball-Sellers House. Additionally, virtual exhibits such as *Student Letters to Sally Loving*, an exhibit shedding light on the local experience during WWII, provide the opportunity to take an in-depth look at primary historical documents in a transcribed format.¹⁸ This approach could be used in schools to provide a localized view of national events. Oral histories are another way to distribute and preserve the unique memories and perspectives of Arlingtonians online. For example, the Center for Local History contains thousands of pages of transcripts, including everything from former county board member Roye L. Lowry's recollection of the decision to build the Metro system, to Theda Henle's description of segregation and the county boards, to Charlie Sher's memories of the Columbia Pike neighborhood after 1918.

In-person community events such as walking tours, neighborhood-based historical initiatives, and meetings spotlighting the history of marginalized groups in Arlington are another way to ensure Arlington's past is remembered. For example, in spring 2022 Arlington County sponsored a series of Prohibition-era history walks. The leader of the tours, John McNair, stated, "The hope is that the programs bring in new audiences who want to learn about local history, parks, and public places. Telling stories about Prohibition in Arlington also opens up a window into what life was like here a century ago."¹⁹ Additionally, the organization Preservation Arlington said in 2017, "Housing stock from before World War II" is at risk "with the continued loss of these homes 'erasing Arlington's architectural and community history.'"²⁰ One way to combat the loss of history even as buildings may disappear is the creation of neighborhood-specific preservation groups who can run community events and projects.

Arlington County has had numerous successes in preserving history within the county. However, adaptation is necessary as Arlington's population continues to grow. Historic buildings and properties are

at risk, but creative uses for these buildings and incentives to property owners can reduce their destruction. This adaptation should also include a revitalization of public resources such as virtual tours, transcribed oral histories, walking tours, and signage. These resources exist, but their continuation and expansion are necessary, as is the publicization of preexisting resources. According to a survey of Arlingtonians conducted in 2021 to inform the 2022 update to the Historic Preservation Master Plan, “Respondents want the HPP (Historic Preservation Plan) to be more proactive, particularly when it comes to designating local resources and preventing demolitions.”²¹ Therefore, the County should designate more funding and staff to meet community desires and accomplish further historic preservation.

About the Author

Julia Carey, a lifelong Arlingtonian, is a senior at Yorktown High School. She is an aspiring historian and genealogist.

Endnotes

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