

# Remembering “Our Man in Arlington”

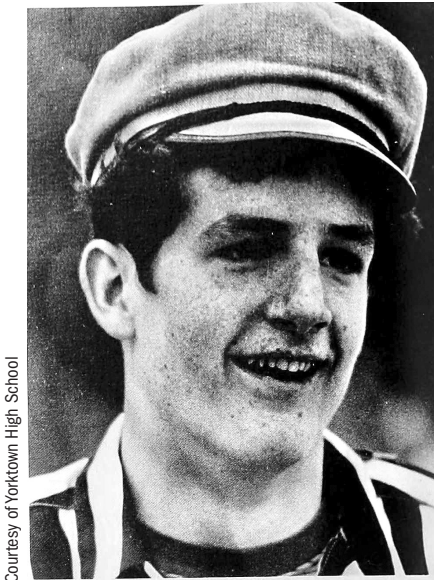
Charlie Clark

*By Richard Samp*

The Arlington Historical Society (AHS), along with the rest of Arlington, lost a true friend this year when local historian Charlie Clark passed away in November. For more than fifty years, Clark wrote about the Arlington he knew and loved, starting with his work as a columnist on the student newspaper at Yorktown High School, from which he graduated in 1971 (Fig. 1).

Clark is perhaps best known for “Our Man in Arlington,” his column that appeared weekly in the *Falls Church News-Press* from 2008 until his death. Those columns, along with his many books and magazine articles, span a broad cross-section of Arlington life over the past 200 years. Clark wrote his first article for the *Arlington Historical Magazine* in 1998 and began serving on the Historical Society’s board of directors in 2019 after his retirement as a full-time journalist. He has received numerous posthumous accolades and honors, including the rechristening of Arlington Public Library’s local-history research room as “The Charlie Clark Center for Local History.”

*Fig. 1: Charlie Clark’s 11th grade Yorktown High School Yearbook photograph, 1970.*



Courtesy of Yorktown High School

This article attempts to honor Clark by chronicling some of the many Arlington tales he shared with his readers.

### **Why Focus on Arlington?**

Clark's writing career did not at first focus on Arlington history, or history at all for that matter. A 1972 piece in the *Washington Daily News* (his maiden professional article, for which he was paid ten dollars) recounted Clark's visit to the Paris grave site of Jim Morrison, the lead singer for the Doors who died unexpectedly in 1971. Clark spent 1971–72 traveling Europe before starting college.<sup>1</sup> His article described how Morrison's grave had become a shrine for thousands of young American tourists. A succession of post-college journalism jobs—including at *Congressional Quarterly*, *Washington Post*, Atlantic Media, National Journal, and Time-Life Books—focused primarily on government operations, not history.

Clark began writing about Arlington's history when his family purchased an Arlington house in 1993 and moved from Alexandria. Why focus his historical research and writing on Arlington? As he explained in a 2021 radio interview, he felt that Arlington and its history had long been overlooked in comparison to Alexandria and other Washington-area communities with more colorful eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stories to tell. Arlington had a drier reputation as a “utilitarian” and “bedroom” community. But having grown up in Arlington and witnessed some of its history firsthand, Clark believed that Arlington had a fascinating story to tell if only someone would take the time to ferret it out. And the more Clark did just that, the more he fell in love with his community and the more he was motivated to find yet more stories.

### **Arlington in the 1960s and 1970s**

Clark wrote frequently about events in Arlington that occurred during his childhood. He often had no direct knowledge of those events but brought them to life by interviewing those directly involved and meticulously researching the documentary record.

One issue that roiled the county in the 1960s and 1970s was Virginia's plan to construct Interstate 66 through the heart of North Arlington. Much has been written about lawsuits that delayed the start

of construction for more than decade. In contrast, Clark's detailed account of the episode focused on the impact of the project on homeowners in the highway's path.<sup>2</sup> Clark described how homeowners, once Virginia determined the final path, sometimes had only a matter of weeks to move out and often were incensed by what they deemed the inadequate purchase prices they were offered. The litigation-induced construction delay meant that some streets lingered as ghost towns for a decade or more. One enterprising entrepreneur initiated a house-moving business and helped quite a few owners move their houses to nearby vacant lots. Because the State was forced to turn around and sell for scrap value the houses it had just purchased, these owners were able to buy back for pennies on the dollar the houses they intended to move to a new location. A transaction of that nature worked out particularly well for the McFee family in East Falls Church; they explained to Clark that the house they bought back had to be moved only a few feet—to a portion of their lot that was not needed for the highway.<sup>3</sup>

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Clark also wrote about the decision of the American Nazi Party to locate its national headquarters in Arlington starting in the late 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Many Arlington residents were shocked and embarrassed by the large Nazi signs the party displayed on the front of the various properties they occupied. Clark found that the party's membership was quite small throughout the years it remained in Arlington—never more than sixty members nationwide. Nonetheless, the party generated an outsized level of publicity, a phenomenon Clark attributed to the public-relations savvy and oratory skills of party leader George Lincoln Rockwell. Rockwell likely decided to relocate to Arlington because he realized the public-relations benefit of being seen in the national-capital area. He chose the “Nazi” name largely for its provocative and publicity-generating value; the party's principal platform was white supremacy and opposition to the American civil rights movement, not devotion to Hitler. Clark's article lauds Herman Obermayer, the long-time editor of *The Northern Virginia Sun*, for repeatedly calling Arlingtonians'

attention to the vile, racist, and often threatening speeches of Rockwell and other party members.

Rockwell was murdered outside a Wilson Boulevard laundromat in August 1967 by a disgruntled party member. Clark provided a detailed account of the murder investigation and subsequent trial and conviction. Without Rockwell's leadership, the party slowly withered and eventually relocated to Wisconsin.

Clark chronicled some of the many civic organizations that grew up as Arlington transformed into an urban center in the years following World War II. Among his favorites was the Little League, in which Clark played youth baseball from 1962 to 1967. Along with co-author Tom Hawkins, who played in the league a decade earlier, Clark pieced together the story of organized twelve-and-under baseball in Arlington from its inception in 1951 through 2017.<sup>5</sup>

The league never expressly barred players based on race but minimized their inclusion until the 1960s. In the 1980s, youth baseball split into two groups, Little League and the Babe Ruth League, largely sponsored by the Arlington business community. The number of Little League players has grown from 300 boys in 1951 to more than 3,000 boys and girls in 2017.

Clark often focused on the creation of green space in urbanizing Arlington. Gulf Branch Nature Center along Military Road near Chain Bridge was a favorite of his. As a young newsboy in the 1960s, he had delivered the daily newspaper to the private residence that later became the Nature Center.<sup>6</sup> When fears arose that it and the nearby woodland abutting Gulf Branch might be opened to private development, the County Board in 1966 and Parks and Recreation Department rescued the site, thanks in large part to the efforts of County Board Members Tom Richards and Dorothy Grotos. A plan for the creation of a "nature center" was proposed. The beloved Gulf Branch facility has now been operating for more than fifty years and includes a variety of nature-themed exhibits as well as an elaborate series of walking paths through the wooded parkland.

Clark directly participated in some of the historical events he memorialized, including a civil rights demonstration advocating racial integration of private clubs. Washington Golf and Country Club has been racially integrated for decades, but it had no Black members in the

1960s. Its segregated status drew public attention in 1968, when an African American woman joined the tennis team at Indian Spring Country Club in Maryland and Washington Golf withdrew from the interclub tennis league rather than compete against the Indian Spring team. A group of several dozen Yorktown High School students (including Clark) picketed outside Washington Golf in September 1968.<sup>7</sup>

The demonstration was extensively covered by local newspapers and television stations. Many participants later told Clark that the afternoon's highlight occurred when local Chevrolet dealer Bob Peck emerged from the club to angrily berate the high schoolers for interfering with the free association rights of a private organization. In the early 1970s, the US Supreme Court largely rejected claims by private clubs that First Amendment freedom-of-association rights protected them from enforcement of federal anti-discrimination laws.

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### **George Washington Parke Custis**

George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington who was raised at Mount Vernon by George and Martha Washington, was undoubtedly Arlington's most prominent nineteenth-century citizen. Despite that prominence, Clark realized Custis is simply mentioned as a bit player in biographies of his step-grandfather and his famous son-in-law Robert E. Lee. After studying Custis's life, Clark wrote *George Washington Parke Custis: A Rarefied Life in America's First Family*, Clark's book-length biography published in 2021.<sup>8</sup>

While seeing much to admire in Custis's life, Clark did not shy away from pointing out Custis's many shortcomings. After the untimely death of his father, Jackie, he lived at Mount Vernon where he was doted on by George and Martha Washington. He had every advantage including the best educational opportunities and inherited wealth but failed to graduate college and poorly managed his finances. Custis

inherited several hundred enslaved people and, despite his long-stated opposition to enslavement, did not free them until after his death. He is widely believed to have fathered as many as a dozen children with his enslaved women. His fame was largely based on his close family relationship with George Washington.

Clark nonetheless found many noteworthy accomplishments in Custis's life. Perhaps most importantly, Custis financed and organized the construction of Arlington House on a hill overlooking the Potomac River and Washington. It became the county's most famous structure; indeed, Arlington County draws its name from the structure. Construction of the house by hired and enslaved laborers took sixteen years (from 1802 to 1818). When completed, it was widely viewed as a fitting monument to the glory of George Washington.

Custis was quite proud of his sheep farming and regularly organized exhibitions designed to improve the quality of wool produced in America. He was an accomplished orator, artist, and playwright. While his plays never received literary acclaim, they were widely performed throughout the eastern seaboard.

Custis died in 1857 on the eve of the Civil War. Clark's verdict on Custis? "He was not a great man. [...] His life was a strange amalgamation of mediocrity and national greatness." Clark's ultimate motive in writing the book: "If there is a single individual founder of my hometown of Arlington, Virginia, Custis is he."<sup>9</sup>

### **Newspaper Columns Transformed into Books**

Clark's historical research and writing increased substantially after he began writing his weekly column for the *Falls Church News-Press* in 2008. Three of Clark's subsequent books consisted largely of collections of those weekly columns, occasionally supplemented by additional research (Fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Those three volumes contain vignettes that cover a broad cross-section of Arlington life over the past two centuries.

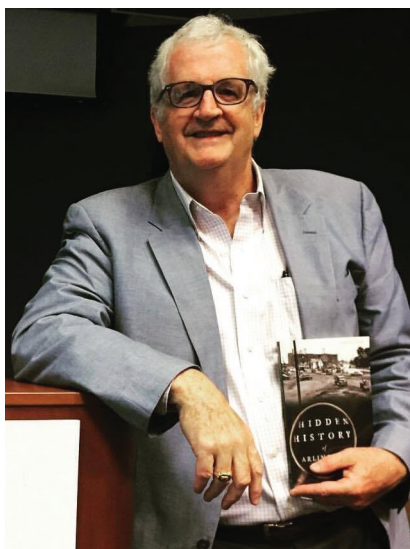
As part of his never-ending effort to document Arlington's role in early United States history, Clark related a story about how "the Declaration of Independence once made a pit stop in Arlington."<sup>11</sup> As British troops approached Washington in 1814, a State Department clerk took it upon himself to ensure the safety of the Nation's founding documents. In defiance of orders from his superiors, the clerk grabbed

the documents—including the original copies of the Declaration of Independence, secret Continental Congress journals, and George Washington correspondence—and carried them across Chain Bridge into Arlington. He stored them in an abandoned gristmill off Pimmit Run before eventually taking them to Leesburg.

A 2011 vignette resonates loudly with current members of the AHS board. The Society owns two historic properties: the former Hume School on South Arlington Ridge Road (built in 1891 and the site of the Society’s museum), and the Ball-Sellers House on 3rd Street South (the oldest house in Arlington, dating from 1750). Clark’s article notes that thieves had just stolen three valuable forty-foot copper downspouts from the outside of the Hume School and bemoans the huge annual expenses the Society incurs each year in maintaining the properties. Those maintenance needs have not disappeared, and the Society currently is seeking to raise funds for its ongoing major renovation of Hume School.

By his third book, *Lost Arlington County*,<sup>12</sup> Clark’s attention had become much more focused on the county’s historic structures and the frequency with which they were being demolished to make way for new development. Clark was greatly saddened by that trend; he concluded pessimistically, “The future of preservation in Arlington is endangered at least, and prospects for arresting growth are almost nil.”<sup>13</sup> A chapter in the book relates events leading up to the demolition of the Febrey-Lothrop House on Wilson Boulevard in March–April 2021, a demolition rushed through by developers despite the best efforts of historic preservationists to save the nineteenth-century structure.<sup>14</sup> Clark described *Lost Arlington* as “an effort [...] to remind our

Fig. 2: Charlie lectures on his new book, *Hidden History of Arlington*, 2017.



Courtesy of the Clark Family

community of its shared heritage.”<sup>15</sup> He explained, “I do claim a role in recording the sweet and sour changes that the march of time inflicts. In Arlington, they’re unfolding at an accelerated pace that begs for action to ensure that the county’s shared history is not lost.”<sup>16</sup>

Clark heeded his own call to action. At the AHS, he headed the Preservation Committee, a group dedicated to learning about historic buildings in danger of destruction and ensuring preservation of as many of the historic features as possible. At the time of Clark’s death, his committee was working to preserve portions of the Arlington United Methodist Church on South Glebe Road, which was slated for demolition to make way for senior housing. One of his final “Our Man in Arlington” columns focused on those efforts.<sup>17</sup>

Clark also continued writing and publishing books until the final month of his life. *The Life and Times of the Falls Church News-Press*<sup>18</sup> detailed the history of that newspaper beginning with its founding in 1981. To research the book, Clark read every copy of the newspaper ever published. He marveled at the ability of a print newspaper to survive in such a small city in this age of declining circulation and advertising revenue. Of course, as Clark points out, one way the *News-Press* has been able to survive is to hire columnists like Clark

*Fig. 3: Charlie, third from the left, is inducted into the Yorktown High School Hall of Fame, 2018.*



Courtesy of Yorktown High School.

to write about activities outside of Falls Church and thereby attract a wider audience. Clark described his book as “a love letter to local journalism.”

### Clark’s Legacy

The world needs historians who challenge us to remember and in doing so ensure that we never forget. The vast compendium of Arlington historical writings composed by Charlie Clark in his lifetime ensures that Arlingtonians will remember our heritage—and will remember Charlie Clark with gratitude. In a recent radio interview, Clark tried to explain why he devoted so much of his life to exploring the history of the community he loved so much: “I wondered, how might curiosity help me understand my community better, or help me better my community through understanding.” There is little doubt that Clark’s efforts to understand Arlington better did much to better the community (Fig. 3).

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### About the Author

Richard Samp is a retired attorney, occasional contributor to the *Arlington Historical Magazine*, and a long-time Arlington resident. He currently serves on the board of directors of the Arlington Historical Society.”

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### Endnotes

1. Clark later recounted his European travels in *My Gap Year Reinterpreted: An American Boomer Recalls a European Adventure in Tumultuous Times* (Opus, 2022).
2. Clark, “Memories of Disruption: When I-66 Shook Up Arlington,” *Arlington Historical Magazine* 16, no. 4 (2020).
3. *Ibid.*, 25.
4. Clark, “The Assassination of an Arlington Nazi,” *Arlington Historical Magazine* 13, no. 1 (2005).
5. Clark and Hawkins, “Diamond Memories: The Roots of Arlington Little League,” *Arlington Historical Magazine* 16, no. 1 (2017).
6. Clark, “For the Love of Gulf Branch: Arlington’s Hidden Symbol of Smart Growth,” *Arlington Historical Magazine* 15, no. 4 (2016).
7. Clark, *Hidden History of Arlington County* (The History Press, 2017), 91–93.

8. McFarland & Co., Inc. (2021).
9. Ibid., 1–3.
10. Clark, *Arlington County Chronicles* (The History Press, 2014); Clark, *Hidden History of Arlington* (The History Press, 2017); Clark, *Lost Arlington County* (The History Press, 2021).
11. Clark, *Arlington County Chronicles*, 31–33.
12. Clark, *Lost Arlington County* (The History Press, 2021).
13. Ibid., 12.
14. Ibid., 146–154.
15. Ibid., 9.
16. Ibid., 12.
17. *Fall Church News-Press* (August 17–23, 2023).
18. Clark, *The Life and Times of the Falls Church News-Press* (The History Press, Oct. 2023).