

Arlington Historical Society

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Arlington Historical Society
December 2021

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President's Dispatch

Arlington's history is a tapestry of rich colors and diverse patterns. However, a tapestry is better understood when you turn it over. By doing so you can see the many threads that are intertwined to create the rich front of the tapestry. Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to examine many of the "threads" of our shared history.

On October 14, Steve Hammond, a seventh-generation member of the Syphax family, discussed the role of his family in Arlington. The matriarch of the family, Maria Carter Syphax was enslaved at the Arlington House. She was the child of Arianna Carter and almost certainly slaveowner George Washington Parke Custis. Right after her marriage to Charles Syphax, she was manumitted and given 17 acres of land on the grounds of the Arlington estate. Her children and grandchildren became leaders in the Arlington community and began some of the first threads in our tapestry.

On October 16, AHS partnered with the Arlington Centennial Committee to have the first *Reencuentro*, an opportunity to hear the story of Arlington's Latino community. Through a panel discussion, cultural demonstrations, and educational materials, I gained a better sense of the rich heritage the many Latinos have intertwined into our Arlington tapestry in the later part of the 20th century.

On November 19, AHS participated in the centennial of the naming of Arlington County. We were able to see the progressive changes in the county over the last century and how they have intertwined to make us stronger. The display of flags representing the people of Arlington clearly showed our diversity and the changes and patterns of our past.

We need to continue to look behind the tapestry to examine the threads that make us this great county. It is especially important to expose the threads that are sometimes hard to find. To help uncover some of these threads, AHS is partnering with the Black Heritage Museum of Arlington to embark on a new project researching the lives of the enslaved who lived throughout our county. Our goal is to share these stories and find a way to commemorate their contributions. This project will allow us to help weave more of the story of our county. We hope you will join us in our many activities and projects this year as you are also part of the rich story of Arlington.

Best wishes to all of you for a happy and healthy 2022.

Arlington Historical Museum

1805 South Arlington Ridge Road
Saturday and Sunday
1:00 - 4:00 PM

Ball-Sellers House

5620 3rd Street, South
Closed for the season
Reopening in April 2022

Virtual AHS

Website: <https://arlingtonhistorical.society.org>

Facebook: Arlington Historical Society

Twitter: #ArlingtonHistory

Instagram: ArlingtonHistory

AHS Board Meeting

Board meetings are on the fourth Tuesday of each month and will be conducted virtually through March 2022.

Upcoming AHS Events

Museum Exhibit: Stirring Up Memories:



Arlington Cookbooks

Open through January 2022, this temporary exhibit features cookbooks from churches, synagogues, schools, and service organizations. (*Arlington*

Historical Museum, 1805 South Arlington Ridge Rd, FREE)

Thursday, January 13, 2022, 7 pm

A Family's Flight from Vietnam to



Arlington Sonia Johnston and her family will tell the story of how they fled from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and made their way to Arlington.

(*Marymount University Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd, FREE*)

Thursday, February 10, 2022, 7 pm

Great-Grandfather James Parks: His Life



and Legacy James Parks was born enslaved on the Custis plantation in 1843. His great-granddaughter, Tamara Moore, will share mementos and artifacts from his life and tell us about

him, the honor the US Government paid him, and the family and community he left behind. (*Marymount University Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd, FREE*)

Thursday, March 10, 2022, 7 pm

The History and Impact of Arlington



Zoning Marymount sociologist Janine DeWitt and her team will discuss their recent findings of the impact of institutionalized historical racist zoning in Arlington.

(*Marymount University Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd, FREE*)

Saturday, April 2, 2022, 1 pm

Ball-Sellers House Season Opening



The oldest structure in the Washington region reopens for the 2022 season. Planning for a special event is underway. Free tours by knowledgeable docents, Saturday 1-4 pm from

April through October. (*5620 3rd St., S in the Glencarlyn neighborhood.*)

Thursday, April 14, 2022, 7 pm:

Colonial Gardens



Master Gardeners Kathleen Clements and Cheryl Vann will discuss how colonial gardens would have looked, how they were tended, and how the produce was used by Virginia families like John and

Elizabeth Ball in the 1700s. (*Marymount University Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd, FREE*)

Get Your Member-Only 10% Discount at the AHS Online Book Store

<https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/shop/>

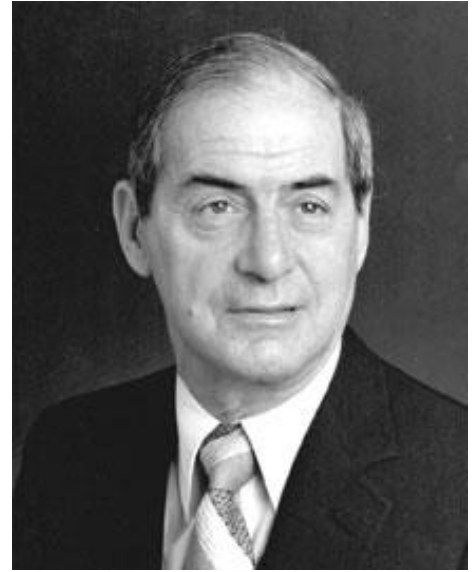
To get the Member-only 10% off on all purchases online just as you would if you visited our museum shop, use this Coupon Code on the Checkout page: **AHSMEMBER10**

AHS offers the largest selection of books on Arlington history anywhere. Some are not even available on Amazon or Barnes and Noble! Every book you buy helps support the AHS mission to strengthen our community by improving the understanding of our shared history.



Remembering John Marr with a Gift to AHS

Recently the Arlington Historical Society received a gift of more than \$18,000 given by the Center for Urban Education in memory of a neighborhood hero, Col. John Marr. John (not the same John Marr with a street named after him in Annandale) was a career army officer who brought leadership, and organizational and management skills learned during his 32 years of military service to bring smart development to Arlington.



Starting in 1975 the community was confronted with three big challenging land use and environmental issues and John Marr led the way to agreements between residents and developers and government when the community faced the following:

1. Proposed high density rezoning of a 116-acre tract of land in Pentagon City which eventually became retail, offices, and residences, but was then a large open lot owned by a developer.
2. A plan by Virginia's Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration to construct a five-eighths of a mile interstate highway, I-595, to replace Arlington's section of Route 1 in Crystal City, from I-395 to the airport connector.
3. An Arlington County plan to build an "experimental" pyrolysis plant for sludge incineration on South 31st Street despite resulting noxious air pollution.

John was President of the Arlington Ridge Civic Association twice and he was at the forefront of leading his community by continually reaching out to others and offering and seeking support. He was graced with the ability to see the big picture and all sides of a situation. His many years as a military leader enabled him to listen, think and communicate clearly and calmly and synthesize multiple perspectives. All made for an invaluable combination to enable all sides to come to agreement in preventing pollution and successfully advocating community-friendly development.

The Center for Urban Education recently dissolved, and its members decided AHS activities and goals demonstrated that it was the best benefactor of remaining assets Richard Herbst, now President of the Arlington Ridge Civic Association gave AHS this gift in October. AHS is proud and grateful to be the recipient of a donation in memory of a community hero like John Marr.

Stewardship of Your Money

The AHS depends on donations and membership fees to allow us to carry out our mission. Your financial donations have allowed us to do the following work:

- Launch the preservation/renovation project of the Hume School
- Make ground improvements to the Ball-Sellers House
- Renew our museum management software
- Manage a zoom account to offer virtual programming

Thank you to our business/organization members

Aurora Hills Women's Club
Fairlington Historical Society

Prudential Financial

John Marshall Bank
Marymount University

Three Sisters: Person, Place & Artifact

“Three Sisters” showcase three historical things that make Arlington so unique. Our Three Sisters consist of a person, a place, and an artifact from the AHS collection.

Person: Hattie Melba Berger Oliver



Hattie Melba Berger Oliver owned and operated her own restaurant, the Shady Dale Restaurant in Green Valley at a time when African Americans were banned from white-owned restaurants.

Hattie grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia. When she first moved to Arlington, she rented a room from the sister-in-law of the man who owned the Shady Dale, a restaurant on Shirlington Road (the site of the current Martin Luther King Center), and supported herself by doing domestic work while her husband worked two custodial jobs. In 1942 the owner of the Shady Dale Restaurant decided to get out of put the restaurant up for rent. Hattie’s husband and a business partner took it over but running the restaurant soon became too much for her husband who continued working at his first two jobs. So, Hattie took his place and helped run the restaurant. Initially, she was the dish washer while the

partner cooked, but they quickly discovered that Hattie was the better cook, so she took over all the cooking responsibilities.

Eventually Hattie assumed all the management responsibilities for the restaurant. She did all the shopping, cooked all the food, and washed all the dishes. The menu included potato salad, greens, and fish and she also sold sandwiches. Her biggest days were Friday when her fish dinners earned renown from some Pentagon employees and on Sunday afternoons after church.

Hattie had her second daughter while she ran the Shady Dale and then a son. Running the restaurant and caring for three children was more than she could handle, so Hattie stopped running the restaurant. The new proprietors of the Shady Dale hired Hattie to cook for them, but they were not as successful as Hattie, and they were finally forced to close the Shady Dale. For a while, Hattie cooked for the lunch counter at one of the little white-owned grocery stores in Green Valley. Finally, she got a job cooking at the Three Chefs restaurant on Columbia Pike. Hattie Oliver passed away in 2013.

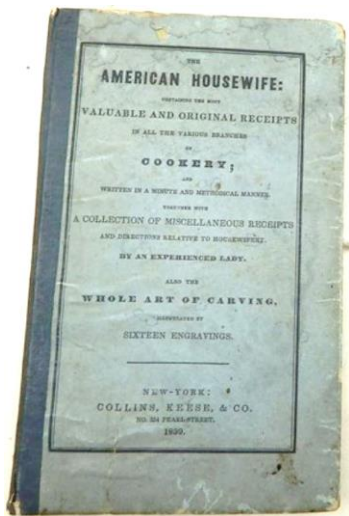
Place: M. Sher’s General Store

Between 1910-1920, a handful of Jewish immigrant shopkeepers and their families began selling their wares along Columbia Pike, the center of development in Arlington. Their establishments were “mom and pop” stores, single room grocery and general merchandise shops, independently owned and operated, that required little capital to establish. Startup funds usually came from family members and friends. One such shop was M. Sher’s General Store, located on Columbia Pike near Fillmore Street, where the Cinema and Draft House now stands. Menachem Sher, originally from Austria-Hungary, opened this family run general store which sold horse feed, all kinds of groceries, clothing, gasoline, and everything a country store would have.



As was common among many shopkeepers, the family lived behind and above the store. In 1918, when they first opened, the building had no running water or heat. The family delivered groceries to customers by horse and wagon. The free labor of the entire family fueled the business. The store opened at the crack of dawn and stayed open until 9-10 pm, 7 days a week. (Excerpted from “The People of the Book: Jewish Arlington, 1900-1940,” by Jessica Kaplan in the 2021 edition of The Arlington Historical Magazine.)

Artifact: Cookbook



“The American Housewife” published in 1839. The long subtitle to this book says it all “Containing the Most Valuable and Original Receipts in all the Various Branches of Cookery; and Written in a Minute and Methodical Manner.” Published in 1839 by Collins, Kreese, and Company, New York, this is one America’s earliest cookbooks. This early edition was donated to AHS by Jack and Louisa Burns in 1983. Like the Arlington cookbooks currently on display at the Arlington Historical Museum, this cookbook represents cooking methods and foods of its era; in this case the mid-1800s. Unlike most modern era Arlington cookbooks, it also provided instructions for curing and cooking ham, a longstanding tradition in Virginia that was highly valued before refrigerators and resulted in the fame of Virginia hams that continues to this day. It also uses terms like “plaw” (boil) and “frizzle” (meaning to fry or grill with a sizzling sound). Also not typically included in modern cookbooks, a real gem in this book is its section of recipes for home items or tasks and home remedies.

AHS Preservation/Renovation Museum Project Begins

Calling all members for help with our AHS Museum Project! As we approach year end and into 2022, please consider donating to our Bellringer campaign to help preserve and renovate the AHS Museum! Also, please consider helping, either with leads (and introductions!) to other individuals or organizations who might be interested in these types of projects, assistance with tax credit analysis and help with identifying and writing grants.

We remain on track to commence these preservation and renovation efforts beginning in 2022. The AHS Museum is located at the historic Hume School, which was built in 1891 and is the oldest extant school building in Arlington. The building, while structurally sound, does require significant preservation work as well as updates to building systems and accessibility improvements. In addition, we would like to expand the portion of the building that we can use to present additional exhibits, show films, display maps and host community events in furtherance of our mission to tell the story of Arlington County.



We continue to work with the Milner Preservation Group, part of the Arlington firm MTF Architecture, to develop a phased approach to address these needs. Phase one will include restoring the windows, which date to the museum’s time as Hume School, as well as addressing other immediate preservation requirements and performing other investigative work that will aid us in planning future phases. Future phases will include exterior repairs and improvements, a significant renovation of the building interior and making the entire museum accessible to all.

We hope you are as excited about this project as we are—we will require a lot of assistance to complete a project of this magnitude! If you have any questions or would like to help with this project, please do not hesitate to contact AHS President Cathy Hix (apscathy@gmail.com). As always, the museum is open on Saturdays and Sundays from 1-4 if you would like to see it for yourself!

Freedman's Village: 1863 to 1900

By Anuj Khemka



The founding of Freedman's Village in 1863 represented a new era for not just Arlington, but the United States as a whole. Standing strong for nearly forty years in the face of harassment from white neighbors and mixed treatment from the US government, the African American settlement nevertheless symbolized new beginnings, racial progress, and resilience.

Freedman's Village was first established by the US army as a camp for escaped slaves seeking refuge in or around the nation's capital. The Emancipation Proclamation prompted a rush of new arrivals, pushing similar camps throughout Washington D.C and Alexandria to the limit by overcrowding. Living conditions in existing settlements drastically declined and disease ran rampant, with as many as 25 people dying per week in some. The rural, spacious setting of Freedman's Village offered the promise that it might not face the same issues that nearby locations had.

Freedman's Village was built on the government-seized estate of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, meaning that while Lee was actively fighting to continue the practice of slavery, his land was being used to assist hundreds of formerly enslaved individuals. Within a week of its opening, Freedman's Village became home to more than 100 people, and soon, over a thousand. Residents stayed in one of fifty dwellings made to house one to two families each.

The settlement quickly transformed from a camp to a community. A school, hospital, and chapel were all part of Freedman's Village, along with the residential dwellings. Additionally, the government set up shops to teach the men blacksmithing and carpentry while the women learned sewing.

Several figures played a key role in the village's development. Maria Syphax assisted Freedman's Village residents with vital skills, such as needlework. Syphax was formerly enslaved at the Arlington plantation. She was granted her freedom in the 1820s and given 17 acres of land on which to live. Notable women's rights activist Sojourner Truth also volunteered at the settlement for a year in 1864. With the war still raging on at the time, former masters captured and attempted to re-enslave several young men from the village. Truth worked with the men's mothers to issue warrants and get their sons back. Reverend Robert S. Laws—another instrumental figure of Freedman's Village—was regarded as the “leader of public sentiment in the Village,” as one American Missionary Association member put it. Beyond his role as pastor at one of the settlement's two Baptist churches, Laws advocated on behalf of residents when it came to disputes with the government over rent and wages. In 1866, for example, he convinced the U.S. Freedmen's Bureau to reverse its decision to evict any Freedman's Village residents who were unemployed or unable to pay rent.

Through their work and that of other residents, Freedman's Village was able to withstand threats to its prosperity and freedom for almost four decades. However, some residents moved away or into other Arlington communities and the village eventually met its end in 1900 when Congress offered residents \$75,000 in exchange for resettlement. The end of Freedman's Village allowed real estate developers to undertake a number of lucrative projects in the area. The legacy of Freedman's Village is its testament to resilience and many of its residents who became some of the first families of the area.

Arlington Business Tribute: Orleans House: Gone But Not Forgotten

By Alexander Aguilera

AHS highlights the great business community of Arlington, both past and present.

Opened in 1964, Tom Sarris' Orleans House was a Rosslyn landmark for over 40 years. Located on the corner of Wilson Boulevard and North Lynn Street, the restaurant drew customers and tourists from all over the region to experience the famous prime rib and salad bar. Characterized by iron railings and wooden trim on the exterior and a large two-story dining room on the interior, the restaurant was famous among Arlingtonians for its New Orleans-themed decor, giving patrons the impression of dining in the heart of its namesake on Bourbon Street.



Orleans House is remembered fondly by Arlingtonians for hosting countless prom night dinners, office lunches, and dinners with friends and family. A favorite among frequent visitors was the prime rib special, remembered by many for its flavor and low price. The restaurant was frequently crowded and typically had long wait times despite its large capacity, a key indicator of its popularity and longstanding reputation. Orleans House was also endowed with a convenient location, situated between blocks of Rosslyn corporate skyscrapers and within walking distance to the Rosslyn metro station.

This all changed with the sale of the restaurant's land to JBG Co. in 2007. Despite Sarris' opposition to the land sale by the county, the Maryland-based real estate developer aligned with the county's plan to develop the valuable parcel that Orleans House occupied. JBG's winning bid ultimately transformed the block into a mixed-use development, adding to the quickly evolving Rosslyn skyline.

Tom Sarris, the revered culinary mastermind behind Orleans House and renowned Arlington business owner, passed away in 2014. He is fondly remembered by Arlingtonians for The Covered Wagon, the Tom Sarris Steak House, and, of course, the Orleans House, all of which helped grow the Rosslyn area dining scene and support economic development in Arlington.

AHS in the Community: October through December 2021

Over the past three months, AHS has shared Arlington history in many virtual and live events. Here are just a few:

- **October 14:** Steve Hammond, a 7th generation member of the Syphax family recounted the life of matriarch Maria Carter Syphax who was enslaved at Arlington House and several descendants who became leaders in the Arlington community. View his presentation at this free public event at: <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/2021/12/the-syphax-family-of-virginia-and-d-c-2021/>
- **October 16:** AHS partnered with the county Centennial Committee to participate in the first *Reencuentro*, an opportunity to hear the story of Arlington's Latino community.
- **October 27:** Annette Benbow spoke to the Burke Historical Society about the history of the Ball-Sellers House
- **November 11:** Journalist and AHS Board Member Charlie Clark shared a 21st century assessment of George Washington Parke Custis based on his research for a newly published book. View this presentation of this free public event at <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/2021/12/george-washington-parke-custis-2021/>
- **November 13:** The Arlington Historical Museum hosted an open house to launch its new temporary exhibit: *Stirring Up Memories: Arlington Cookbooks*. Guests enjoyed a variety of recipes from the cookbooks.
- **November 19:** AHS participated in the county Centennial event on the 100th anniversary of Arlington's naming. Museum Director Mark Benbow displayed artifacts from the AHS collection related to milestone events in Arlington over the last 100 years.
- **December 1:** George Axiotis spoke to the Arlington Optimist Club about vice and crime in 1890s Arlington.



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Arlington, Virginia 22210

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History Awaits Come Visit!

Arlington Historical Museum
1805 South Arlington Ridge Road
Arlington, VA 22202

Ball-Sellers House Museum
5620 Third Street South
Arlington, VA 22204

The Arlington Historical Society, founded in 1956, is a non-profit organization incorporated under Virginia laws. The Society supports research, collection, preservation, discovery, and dissemination of Arlington County's history. Board meetings are held on the fourth Tuesday of each month at 7:00 P.M. in the Arlington Historical Museum at the Historic Hume School and are open to the public.

Website: <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org>
Email: info@arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org
Facebook: [ArlingtonHistoricalSociety](https://www.facebook.com/ArlingtonHistoricalSociety)
703-892-4204