

THE HISTORY OF ARLINGTON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
AND
ABINGDON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Prepared for
The Centennial Celebration of Arlington Public Schools

by
Catherine Sue Kleinfield
Principal's Aide

March 1971

VF 422 - Public Schools - History

THE FIRST FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ARLINGTON COUNTY

The first public school in Alexandria County (as Arlington was then called) opened its doors on January 25, 1871. Before that time, those families who could afford it, sent their children to private schools or had them tutored at home.

The Congress required the Commonwealth of Virginia to make available free public education in order for Virginia to regain its prominence among the states. The Constitution of 1869 called for the establishment of free public school education in Virginia. The 1870 legislation provided for the establishment of free public schools.

The first County School Board was made up of the district boards of trustees. There were three districts (called townships then). They were: Washington, Jefferson and Arlington Districts. Three men from each district made up the Boards of Trustees and these men made up the County School Board.

The three Trustees of Arlington District were: George Adams, who was elected Chairman; Harvey Bailey who was elected Clerk; and Garrett Wilbirt. Mr. Bailey reported to the Board that the 1870 population of Arlington District was 1,374.

Richard L. Carne was the first County Superintendent of Schools. He reported that Washington District had voted against a school tax and there had been no schools established in that District during the 1870-71 year.

Jefferson District had established one white and one colored school. Arlington District had established two white and one colored schools. Arlington's two white schools were open for 162 days, while Jefferson's white school was open for 93 days. Arlington's colored school was open 180 days and Jefferson's, 89 days for the 1870-71 school year.

THE FIRST FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ARLINGTON COUNTY

The first public school in Alexandria County (as Arlington was then called) opened its doors on January 25, 1871. Before that time, those families who could afford it, sent their children to private schools or had them tutored at home.

The Congress required the Commonwealth of Virginia to make available free public education in order for Virginia to regain its prominence among the states. The Constitution of 1869, called for the establishment of free public school education in Virginia. The 1870 legislation provided for the establishment of free public schools.

The first County School Board was made up of the district boards of trustees. There were three districts (called townships then). They were: Washington, Jefferson and Arlington Districts. Three men from each district made up the Boards of Trustees and these men made up the County School Board.

The three Trustees of Arlington District were: George Adams, who was elected Chairman; Harvey Bailey who was elected Clerk; and Garrett Wilbirt. Mr. Bailey reported to the Board that the 1870 population of Arlington District was 1,374.

Richard L. Carne was the first County Superintendent of Schools. He reported that Washington District had voted against a school tax and there had been no schools established in that District during the 1870-71 year.

Jefferson District had established one white and one colored school. Arlington District had established two white and one colored schools. Arlington's two white schools were open for 162 days, while Jefferson's white school was open for 93 days. Arlington's colored school was open 180 days and Jefferson's, 89 days for the 1870-71 school year.

On February 9, 1871, at Balls Cross Roads, the Board met and let it be known that the three public schools for Arlington District were to be called Columbia School No. 1; Arlington School No. 2; and Walker School No. 3.

Columbia School No. 1 was located in a building rented from a private school association. It was located on a half-acre lot on Columbia Pike.

Arlington School No. 2 was located in the former Union League Hall. The Arlington District School Board bought the building in 1871 for \$75. This school was on the Arlington estate and was the colored school for Arlington.

Walker School No. 3 was established in Good Templars Hall which was rented for \$50 a year. It was located near Balls Cross Roads.

The Board hired one teacher for each school. James Doherty was hired for \$35 per month; James Green for \$40 per month; and Miss C. C. Anderson received a salary of \$40 per month also. A total of \$50 was set aside to use for books, fuel and supplies for the three public schools.

II

'ABINGDON'

The origin of the word Abingdon is very interesting. The word Abingdon is very old. It came from the girls name, Abby. In the year 906 a small mountain in England was named Aebbanduna. Later the spelling was changed to Aebiendon and a small town in England took the name. The word changed through the years to the present spelling, Abingdon.

"Abingdon" was the plantation home of the Alexander and Custis families. It was a land grant from Governor Beckley to Mr. Robert Howson. It covered approximately a 6,000 acre area. Mr. Howson kept the land for about six months and then, in 1669, he traded 6,000 acres of it to John Alexander for 6,000 lbs. of tobacco.

Gerard Alexander inherited the estate and built "Abingdon House" in about 1740. He was the great grandson of John Alexander. Gerard's family came from near the town Aebiendon and this is how Gerard arrived at naming the house Abingdon.

In 1776, Abingdon estate was sold to the Custis family. George Washington Parks Custis and Nelly Custis were born in "Abingdon House."

In 1802, when George Washington Parks Custis became of age, he inherited the estate. He built "Arlington House" on the northern part of his inheritance. "Arlington House" is where Custis' daughter married Robert E. Lee.

Abingdon came into the hands of the Alexander family again, with a payment of 70 pounds per hundred acres annual rental for the twelve years use. The estate now consisted of approximately 1,100 acres.

The heirs of Robert Alexander sold it to George Wise. Mr. Wise sold the estate to Alexander Hunter, an Alexander family descendant, in 1837.

The Hunters had no children so they willed Abingdon estate to Mr. Hunter's brother, Bushrod W. Hunter, to give to Bushrod's son Alexander Hunter II.

Bushrod and his son Alexander entered the Confederate Army and Abingdon was taken over by the Federal Government.

Later, Alexander Hunter II went to court and regained Abingdon estate. He sold it soon afterwards to the Custis family.

ABINGDON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Abingdon Elementary School is named after the old Alexander-Curtis estate, "Abingdon". The ruins of Abingdon plantation home are located on the hilltop above the National Airport, near the base of the Radar Station.

The Abingdon estate was approximately a two-mile wide strip extending from Hunting Creek, south of Alexandria to north of Arlington Cemetery. We believe that Gerard Alexander built "Abingdon House" around 1740. It is possibly the oldest house in Arlington County.

In 1930 the section of the land where the house was standing was taken over by the National Historical Society. They had started to restore the house but a fire destroyed it on March 5, 1930. The estate had changed hands so many times that in 1933 it was proclaimed that no one could ever purchase that section of the land where the foundations of Abingdon stand.

The Federal Government took over the estate in 1940 as a site for an airport. The Washington National Airport and the Pentagon are both built on the old Abingdon estate.

Now that you have some idea of the history behind the name of our school we will discuss Abingdon Elementary School from its beginning to the present.

Fairlington Elementary was the only school for this area until 1950. In Sept., 1950 Abingdon Elementary School opened its doors for the children of Fairlington and Claremont Apartments and Claremont homes.

Concerned citizens of Fairlington were largely responsible for the building of Abingdon School. The Fairlington School could no longer

take care of the children in this area and in October, 1947 these citizens conducted a poll to find out whether Fairlington Community preferred an addition to South Fairlington School or the building of a new school in North Fairlington. The results of the poll showed 2,011 votes for a new school and only 92 votes for the addition to South Fairlington School.

The original plans for the new school were for six rooms. It was felt that more rooms were needed and the P.T.A. and Civic Association of North Fairlington took a house to house survey of the number of children in the area. This survey helped in getting four more rooms approved for the new school.

Construction began in October, 1949. During the planning and construction, the school was called North Fairlington School. In September, 1950, upon completion, the new school was named Abingdon Elementary School. The total cost of construction, land and architectural fees was \$366,522.21.

Abingdon Elementary opened with ten classrooms, a multi-purpose room, a library, offices for the Principal and secretary, a teacher's lounge, two storage rooms and a kitchen. The staff consisted of the Principal, ten teachers, a full time secretary, part time librarian, part time nurse, two maintenance men and a kitchen staff of three.

There were only three grades taught at Abingdon for a time. There were four classes of Primary I; three classes of Primary II; and three classes of Primary III. The children in First and Second Grades attended class from 9:00 to 2:00 and the Third Grade attended from 9:00 to 3:00. The October, 1950 enrollment was 384.

The first Principal at Abingdon was Miss Mary Barbour. Her successors, in order, were: Mrs. Betty Hales; Mrs. Corrine Jaffees; Mrs. Dicie Woodson; and the present Principal, Mrs. Luena Young.

Grades 1-6, held classes at Abingdon for the first time in 1959. In 1965 facilities for kindergarten were provided and in 1967 two temporary

class rooms were placed at the school. In 1968, the Third Grade temporary rooms were placed at Abingdon.

At present, Abingdon has nineteen class rooms, a multi-purpose room, library, conference and work rooms, a clinic, offices for the Principal and secretaries, teacher's lounge, kitchen and storage rooms.

In the Spring of 1970, a new parking lot was added and a bid was accepted for the second addition to Abingdon.

Construction of the new addition began June 30, 1970 and is expected to be ready for use June 30, 1971. This new addition will include fifteen new class rooms, media center, a gymnasium, reading, music, science, art, and conference rooms, and office and storage space. The entire school will be air conditioned with the exception of the gym which will be air cooled.

The past twenty-one years have changed the face of Abingdon considerably. Upon reaching the 70's, we begin with the most modern facilities to provide the best educational program for children to meet the challenges before them.