### **A History of the Donaldson Run Neighborhood**

Written by Helen B Lane for the 2000 Donaldson Run Neighborhood Conservation Plan

**Early Inhabitants (10,000 BC to 1860 AD)**

Over ten thousand years ago when the first human beings passed through our neighborhood, it was cold and tundra-like. These hunters of large game were descendents of the Asian people who crossed the Bering land bridge. A spear point typical of these people was found during the excavation of the Donaldson Run swimming pool. As the climate slowly grew warmer the cultures of the inhabitants in our area evolved.

Pottery and other artifacts from both the Archaic (8000 to 1300 BC) and Woodland Cultures (1000 BC to 1608 AD) have been found near Donaldson Run. In the 1850s Robert Donaldson, the farmer from whom our neighborhood derives its name, found a soapstone bowl, which he used to hold chicken feed. This artifact of the Woodland Culture is now in the University of Pennsylvania museum and is dated to the late Archaic Period (2500-1300 BC).

Although Captain John Smith may have reached the mouth of Donaldson Run when he sailed up the Potomac in 1608, there was no permanent settlement in our neighborhood until after 1800. The first house in our neighborhood was that of Caleb Birch. He built his first log cabin early in the century and the farm was still in the family in 1850. On their 110 acres the Birches grew wheat, rye, corn and Irish potatoes and also had a market garden. They owned four horses, eight cows and 31 swine. The ruin of Caleb Birch’s house was restored as a residence and greatly remodeled in 1939. A number of the original chestnut logs were incorporated in the restored structure, which is located at 4576 North 26th Street. A historical marker has been placed at the site.

In the early decades of the 19th century the inhabitants of our neighborhood lived on scattered and modest farms. Even though our area was then part of the original 10-mile square Federal District, the only roads serving our farmers were little more than cart tracks, along what is now Lee Highway and Glebe Road. Our farm families included the Marceys and the Donaldsons. Andrew Donaldson was also Superintendent of the Glebe, which belonged to Christ Church in Alexandria. It was Donaldson’s duty to prevent the theft of timber by trespassers and to deliver every fourth load to Christ Church. Our county, then part of Alexandria County, was returned to Virginia in 1846. Around 1850 the Aqueduct Bridge across the Potomac at Georgetown was completed and in 1852, a plank toll road was built along what is now Lee Highway through Falls Church to Fairfax, then called Providence.

**The Civil War and Following Decades (1860-1890**)

The Civil War brought severe hardship to the farms along Donaldson Run and extreme damage to the natural environment. As soon as Virginia joined the Confederacy in the spring of 1861, our neighborhood became part of an armed camp, occupied by the Union Army. Forts were built above Chain Bridge, and Military Road was built by the Union Army to connect them with the fortifications to the south protecting the Capital.

Military Road reportedly was built in three days through what was described as broken and densely wooded country. An etching of the Civil War period shows Military Road as a muddy rutted swath. Most of the trees in the area were cut down to give a clear line of sight to the defenders and to remove cover for attacking enemies. Much topsoil washed away and erosion gullies soon formed. The origin of Military Road is noted on the historical marker in front of the Cherrydale Library.

As the war dragged on, the encamped soldiers destroyed woods, barns, furniture and homes for firewood. The end of the war left the inhabitants exhausted and impoverished. Although many of the locals had supported the South, some of the Yankee soldiers stayed and married local women.

In the next decade newcomers trickled into the area and civilization slowly took hold. A little community grew up on the periphery of our neighborhood where Glebe Road crossed what is now Lee Highway. The first public school that served our neighborhood’s children was built in 1871 on Glebe Road. It was a one-room school, with one schoolmaster and about ninety pupils of assorted ages. It was replaced by a larger building with several teachers in 1885. A general store was located next door to the school.

**Gentry, Trolley Lines and the Beginning of a Commuter Community (1890-1929)**

After the war, the Commonwealth and local government were weak and unable to confront the gambling and criminal element which operated along the riverfront. Rosslyn was such a rough area that Donaldson Run area farmers returning from market in Georgetown often traveled through it in armed convoys. The election of a reform government in 1902 brought better public order and encouraged wealthy Washingtonians, in search of cooler locations for summer homes, to consider our area. Among these was Dr. Presley M. Rixey, the personal physician of President William McKinley, who was with McKinley when he was shot in 1901. Rixey later became Surgeon General and a member of Theodore Roosevelt’s inner circle. Rixey bought the property on the periphery of our neighborhood now occupied by Marymount University and the Washington Golf and Country Club. When the Washington and Old Dominion Railway (trolley) line was built along what is now Old Dominion Drive, Rixey built a whistle stop for his family and guests. It was “the flossiest on the line” with a sign in foot high brass letters that said, “Rixey Station”. Roosevelt was a frequent guest and often went riding in the surrounding woods.

Rixey had an African-American valet named Richard Wallace, who had been a chauffeur for the Roosevelt family. Wallace discovered the abandoned Birch cabin (now at the intersection of North 26th and North Wakefield Streets) and asked Rixey if he could fix it up and use it as his cottage. Rixey agreed. In 1908, Rixey sold 75 acres to the Washington Golf and Country Club, one of the earliest golf clubs in the Washington area. When the new golf course was being laid out, Richard Wallace, who was assisting the surveyors, realized that one of the greens was to be located at his cottage. Wallace moved the markers so that his cottage would be spared. Rixey realized what Wallace had done but did not move the markers back. Rixey later deeded that portion of the estate to Wallace. Had Wallace not moved the marker, a chunk of our neighborhood would now be part of the golf course. The gnarled apple trees in front of the now remodeled cabin are said to have been planted by Wallace.

Development of the electric trolley lines, which ran from Rosslyn through Cherrydale and out to Great Falls, brought other touches of upscale urbanization to North Arlington. Frank Lyon, a newspaper publisher who later developed Lyon Park and Lyon Village, built a handsome residence in 1907 at what is now 4651 North 25th Street. This residence, called Lyonhurst, was the first home in the County to use electricity, which was tapped from the trolley line which ran along what is now Old Dominion Drive. Since 1946, when the Lyonhurst property became the headquarters of the Immaculate Heart Mission Fathers, it has been known as Missionhurst. The Joseph Tabor Johnson House at 4014 Lorcom Lane dates from 1907. Dr. Johnson named his residence Lorcom Farm, a combination of the names of his two sons Loren and Bascom, for whom he also built homes nearby. One of these later became the site of a Washington YWCA summer camp. The H-B Woodlawn School now occupies that site. The street name Vacation Lane has come down from the days of the summer camp.

Growth of the Federal City during the First World War brought more newcomers. Better roads and the advent of private automobiles soon began to shape North Arlington. The scattering of rural communities and summer residences was on its way to becoming a place of suburban neighborhoods whose residents lived in Arlington year round and commuted across the river to work. A public school opened in Cherrydale in 1916.

A significant milestone was the inauguration in 1925 of Washington-Lee High School, built about half a mile south of our neighborhood. Before then, County students wishing to attend public high schools commuted to the District of Columbia.

Despite the urbanization on its periphery, our immediate neighborhood still retained its rural character. Except for Military Road and Lorcom Lane few roads cut across our neighborhood. Yet change was coming. In 1927, a public water supply connecting Arlington with the District of Columbia water system was turned on. Prior to that Arlington’s water had come from springs and wells. Among those who campaigned most avidly for the water bond were real estate developers who were buying farms and properties in our neighborhood.

**The Depression and World War II (1929-1946)**

The Great Depression caused a dramatic fall in real estate values and the postponement of the subdivision developments envisioned for our neighborhood. The Washington Golf and Country Club lost members, operated in the red and came very close to bankruptcy and closure

In 1932 the County Board began the rationalization of street names. Prior to the renaming of the streets, each neighborhood named its own streets. As a result there were eleven Washington Streets, ten Arlington Streets and five Lee Streets scattered about the County. The committee undertaking the task divided the streets into a north and a south area divided by Arlington Boulevard. Streets paralleling the Boulevard were numbered from the Boulevard. Perpendicular streets were named alphabetically starting in the east, beginning with a one- syllable, then a two-syllable, and finally a three-syllable name. This rational system would result in strange anomalies when it was applied in the 1950s to the winding streets of our neighborhoodï¿½s new subdivisions. A zoning ordinance, the Countyï¿½s first, was adopted in 1930, which would greatly influence the development of Donaldson Run. The plan was part of a larger effort to guide the growth of the Washington metropolitan region that was championed by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Adopting the ideas of landscape architects like Frederick Law Olmstead, it encouraged residential subdivision planning which would plat streets to natural topography rather than to a grid. While a few earlier subdivisions in Arlington, such as Lyon Village, include some curvilinear roads with the development, their reliance on topography to guide street layout is minimal. Donaldson Runï¿½s street layout takes full advantage of the hilly terrain, unusual for an Arlington subdivision at that time.

Although the subdivision was now platted, new house construction was very slow throughout the 1930s. An exception was the complex of a dozen houses on winding streets and wooded lots called Beechwood Hills, developed in the mid- 1930s. A stand of native beech trees there has been preserved. Beechwood Hills is the oldest subdivision in the neighborhood. It is an example of garden city urban design concepts that were popular during the 1930s. During World War II home building came to a standstill.

**1946 to the Present**

After the war, our neighborhood as we know it today developed swiftly. Housing starts burgeoned and the hillsides soon were covered by one-family suburban homes. The principal builder was Marvin T. Broyhill and Sons. Although the Broyhills built a wide variety of houses, the typical Broyhill house was a three- bedroom rambler which sold for about twenty thousand dollars. Most of the houses in the neighborhood today are ramblers built in the 1950s. The biggest problem confronted by Broyhill builders was our extremely hilly terrain. Moving the earth around cost more than the construction of the houses. The Broyhill houses had the reputation of being well constructed and were often purchased sight unseen. Most featured all electric GE kitchens, with the latest appliances including dishwashers.

About 1950 the Broyhill Forest subdivision was completed and North 26th Street, which came down from Glebe Road, and North 31st Street which came up from Military Road were joined, creating 26th/31st Street, one of North Arlington’s strangest street name anomalies (and is even listed in Ripley’s "Believe it or Not" according to The Washington Post) and providing a cut-through from Glebe to Military Road. The homeowners along the two streets were not happy when they were connected. Some had been told when they bought their homes that the streets would never be connected. The line of trees along the golf course on North 26th Street recalls the time when this was a quiet country lane. New families moving into the neighborhood at the height of the baby boom also required newer, larger schools. In 1954 Taylor Elementary School opened on Stuart Street and the smaller, older Marshall School on Glebe Road was closed. The polling place for the Marshall precinct was also shifted to Taylor School. In 1958 the Donaldson Run Recreation Association swimming pool opened. It was one of the first community swimming pools in Virginia. The struggle to raise money and establish the pool helped strengthen the sense of community. The pool and Taylor Elementary School are the two institutions that today give the area a greater sense of neighborhood.

New residents also organized two new churches and erected attractive church buildings. In 1951 St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church was built at the corner of Lorcom Lane and Military Road. To accommodate the growing congregation, a larger edifice was built in 1961, incorporating the first building as a chapel. A Korean congregation, with membership from around the County and beyond, was organized at St. Andrewï¿½s in 1984. In 1958 the Church of the Covenant Presbyterian Church was organized. Members met for Sunday services at Taylor School until the new church was completed in late 1962. The building, at 2666 Military Road, is on the site of the old Marcy farmhouse, which had included some of the timbers of the original Marcy log cabin. The old timbers were used once more in the building of Evans Farm Inn in McLean.

The Arlington County Master Plan of 1961 included road construction projects that today seem undesirable. It included an extension of Yorktown Boulevard which would have paved over upper Donaldson Run and left it as a storm sewer. However, public opinion was shifting away from highway building and the green and rocky banks of the Run became the center of efforts to preserve trees and neighborhoods. Many old trees were felled as Military Road and Lorcom Lane were widened, but the extension of Yorktown Boulevard did not happen.

The establishment of Potomac Overlook Regional Park in 1966 preserved the last significant undeveloped area on the periphery of our neighborhood. A nature center was opened in 1974. We who now live in the most urbanized county in Virginia are fortunate that this green, natural area with its diverse wildlife and native trees was saved. Today upper Donaldson Run, bordered by a bike path, flows through the Zachary Taylor Park and provides a green area in the heart of our neighborhood. Remnants of the 1961 Master Plan are the peculiar entrance to Yorktown Boulevard off North 26th Street, and the fireplugs along the bike trail. Although the Nature Area is no haven for native plants, it is a pleasant place to jog, ride a bike, or walk. There are big tulip poplars, oaks, and beech, but most of the under-story has been overrun by English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, bamboo, garlic mustard and other alien species which are crowding out the remnant of native plants. If there is a pause in the noise from the planes departing Reagan National Airport, the song of a wood thrush may still be heard on summer evenings. Unfortunately, the water of the Run is too acidic to support a healthy variety of aquatic life. The stream absorbs heavy fertilizer runoff from neighborhood lawns and the golf course. Another problem has been the leaf mulch pile which receives the fallen leaves of the entire County. It is located near the headwaters of the Run. As the mulch pile grew, the brown acidic runoff entered the Run and became a significant pollutant point for the Chesapeake Bay. Several years ago the County built a cement floor beneath the mulch pile to deter the runoff. The clarity of the water is now improved and neighborhood children know where to find a few crayfish. Eels have entered the Run every year since the time of the Indians. In 1997 there was a large "die off" of eels. The cause of the "die off" is not known, but too much fertilizer in the storm sewer runoff was among the suspected causes.