

Ms. Horwitt's Learning Garden, a Glimpse at Arlington's Past

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Most children today know Arlington only as a bustling metropolitan suburb of our nation's capital. However, only a century ago, Arlington was a town of rolling green hills dotted with white painted farmhouses. This transformation was caused by an incursion of civil servants filling the rapidly swelling ranks of the federal government and Pentagon, which spurred the construction of large suburbs where once stood cattle, barns, and arable land. The expansion of railroads and highways made the need for local farms obsolete, and Arlington's agrarian background was superseded by a new, urbanist ethos. The technological boom of the 21st century distanced society even further from the understanding of the rich history behind Arlington's roots, and in the present, there are only two acres of land left to remind us of what once was.

Reevesland, the last remaining dairy farm in Arlington, rests upon a great hill overlooking the Boulevard Manor neighborhood. It was built by William H. Torreyson in 1863 and was later bought by George Reeves in 1898.¹ In 1900, Reeves' son Nelson was born and became a third-generation farmer. He dedicated the rest of his life to maintaining the farm, where he produced milk until 1955, and continued the family's garden until he passed away in 2000. His legacy re-



The Reevesland Farmhouse

mains not only in his work on the farm, but also in his life of service to the community. Throughout his life, he served as a precinct clerk, registrar, election judge, and courthouse clerk for the county,² and played an active role in Arlington's cultural sphere, sharing tales of the county's rural past with his new neighbors. The remaining portion of his farm that still exists today serves as a monument for his dedication to farming, the community, and the history of Arlington.

¹Official Website of Arlington County Virginia Government

²Bolling, Beth

From 2001 to 2010, the farm stood vacant without any signs of future use. The county had intended to preserve the historical landmark, but without the necessary funding to restore it, talk began of selling the property. Fortunately, a retired Arlington Public Schools Spanish teacher, Joan Horwitt, proposed an idea to put the land to use, while preserving the legacy of Nelson Reeves.

The idea came to Ms. Horwitt when she was helping at Ashlawn Elementary School's homework club. She was attempting to explain the flavor of fresh hummus to a student who was learning English.³ This inspired her to create a garden for the students at Ashlawn. It would be a place where students could have a hands-on education in gardening, healthy eating, and elementary biology. It would be a program with the potential to surpass language barriers, expand curiosity, and provide an unforgettable experience to young students. Ms. Horwitt knew Nelson Reeves as a passionate neighbor and gardener, and was overwhelmingly encouraged by the community to use his land for a learning garden. In utilizing the Reevesland farm for her project, she could provide the necessary gardening education to students while providing insight into Arlington's rich agrarian history.

In the spring of 2011, Ms. Horwitt launched her program, "Lawns to Lettuce for Lunch", and constructed the first eight garden beds at Reevesland with help from the community. That spring, Ashlawn students planted the first crop, officially launching the program. It was an instant success, and students were eagerly planting and harvesting lettuce, arugula, peas, and herbs in the fall and spring.



*Ashlawn students enjoying fresh lettuce at
the bi-annual "fiesta"*

To handle the demand of more crops, several Boy Scouts organized their eagle scout projects to add 10 more beds to the garden. To extend the breadth of her program, she went door to door to find people willing to plant their own lettuce to donate to the program at Ashlawn. The cumulative crop is used for the bi-annual "fiesta", where the student body of Ashlawn eats fresh, healthy, and delicious salad, as a celebration of the hard work needed to plant, harvest, clean, and prepare the dishes. The remaining lettuce is donated to the Arlington Food Assis-

³In a phone interview with Joan Horwitt

tance Center. Last spring, 100 pounds of lettuce were donated after feeding nearly 700 students at Ashlawn. In addition to gardening, first graders would write poetry about nature and then place it in the garden along with the rest of the crops. It was also common to take a field trip to Reevesland just to appreciate the beautiful scenery. Reevesland became a staple of the education and overall experience at Ashlawn and became a popular spot for all members of the Arlington community to congregate.

While Ms. Horwitt loves teaching the students about gardening and getting the community involved in growing lettuce, she particularly enjoys gaining new perspectives from curious students. She says that students always amaze her with questions about gardening that she would never consider on her own, and that watching students discover new aspects of nature makes the every day in the garden a reward.

“If it’s for the kids,” she said, “I’ll do it.”

Even today, as we are subject to the confines of our homes indefinitely, Ms. Horwitt and her volunteers are still working hard on this spring’s batch of lettuce. During an interview with me, she told me that she still goes to Reevesland regularly to check on the plants and water them. She said that participants who are growing lettuce at home can still continue as usual.

Due to the pandemic, they can use the extra time to ensure the healthy growth of their crop. She is also making sure to send pictures documenting the growth of the plants to all of her students. While the spring fiesta may not happen this year, Ms. Horwitt still plans to donate all of the lettuce to the Arlington Food Assistance Center. This is what Nelson Reeves would have done, and I am proud of the contribution my former school is making to our community during this crisis.



The Reevesland Learning Garden

In the future, Ms. Horwitt plans to grow the program even more. In February, the program won the Whole Kids Foundation competition and received a grant of \$3,000 to renovate the garden.⁴ Ms. Horwitt is planning on installing three more garden beds and an environmentally efficient watering system to meet the requirements of an increasing student body at Ashlawn.

⁴ARLnow.com

While Arlington county's humble agrarian roots have been obscured by its sprawling suburbs and bustling business centers, the Reevesland learning center is a prime example of how a single person can preserve and showcase a moment in history for the benefit of an entire community.

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