Arlington School Closings
1970-1984 And The Aftermath

BY SOPHIE B. VOGEL

In the year ending August 31, 1871, Arlington had a total of 5 public schools and 333 students. At the beginning of the 20th century there were 11 schools in the system and 886 students. The total capacity in the 21 classrooms was 1,100 pupils. In 1920 the average daily attendance was 2,022. Before the decade was over the school population increased by 100% to 4,568 students housed in 20 schools.

During the next eleven years Arlington’s school population almost doubled again, cresting at 8,118 in 1940. Students overflowed all available classroom spaces. First and second grades went on half session. While World War II was partially responsible for the influx of military and federal workers into Arlington, it also put a hold on the construction of buildings, like schools, not essential to the war effort.

A special election, held in May 1947, to determine whether Arlington’s school board, which had previously been appointed by a School Trustee Electoral Board named by the circuit court judge, should be elected, also included a four-part school bond issue for $6 million. The voters approved only the $1,776,000 part of the bond issue designated for the expansion of elementary schools.

There were no convenient, expensive, mobile classrooms to accommodate the overflow of children. Temporary facilities had to be found elsewhere, usually in neighborhood church buildings, while schools were undergoing expansion. Full day schedules were restored for first and second grades, although classes were held in two shifts.

By the 1950-51 school year, 15,130 students were enrolled in the school systems’ thirty elementary, four junior high and two high schools. C.B. Rose stated that 7,371 of those were children of federal employees who came to Arlington after 1939. In 1952, four new elementary schools and Williamsburg Junior High were under construction or in the planning stages. New school buildings and additions in the 1950s are detailed by Sy Stiss in his article “School Buildings in Arlington: 1922-1979” in the Arlington Historical Magazine, 1979. Eighteen new schools were built and additions were made to 30 more within a period of 10 years.

The state board of education issued a school planning manual in 1954 to guide school boards through the building of new schools. One piece of
advice offered by the state architect is particularly appropriate to the extensive renovation/addition program that has been in progress in Arlington for the past eleven years: "No funds ... should be expended for extraneous ornamentation unless every desirable educational facility has been provided in the building."^4

**Enrollment Begins to Decline**

The largest enrollment, 26,878 students, in the Arlington schools was attained in 1963-64. By that time Arlington had lost its elected school board, and its members were now appointed by the county board. The decline in enrollment began in earnest in 1966. In 1968-69 the school population was 26,438, reflecting a loss of 440 students in two years. In the same year, 1968, Key school was built to replace Monroe, which was razed, and Wilson.

A systematic renovation of schools was begun in 1970. As soon as a school was updated and enlarged, its enrollment dropped. Reed school, slated for improvement in 1973, was cut out of the plans without explanation. Meanwhile, sections of Reed’s attendance area where students walked to Reed were added to McKinley, Tuckahoe and to the new Glebe open-space school to fill vacant new spaces and classrooms. Reed’s transferred students had to be bused to their new schools.

**County Programs in School Buildings**

The school board and the school administrators, overzealous in their building program, stopped with Reed. Or, the neighborhood wondered, did they have another reason for excluding Reed? In 1972 the county and schools initiated “joint-use” facilities, mixing education, recreation and community programs in the construction of Thomas Jefferson Junior High School, and adding swimming pools, for use by both the students and the community, in all three high schools. The Career Center, where students and the community share a common library, was opened in 1974 “to complement and enrich technical programs in the high schools.” A community center was added to Gunston Junior High in the same year.

Even prior to the incorporation of county/school joint-use facilities into school building plans, the schools were (and still are) extensively used by the community for evening, adult education classes and for community meetings. The gymnasiums were used for after-school dance classes and adult evening dance classes, for exercise classes and basketball. Kenmore’s auditorium, which had the best acoustics in the county, doubled as a con-
cert hall for the Arlington Symphony Orchestra on weekends. The joint-use idea was a major innovation. There was confusion among some taxpayers as to whether the costs of the “community” additions were borne by the school board through the sale of school bonds.

The school board, the school administrators and the county were facing the problem of declining enrollments for the first time. Townhouses and high-rise apartment buildings were under construction in the county at a frenzied pace. Arlington’s future was envisioned as a “swinging-singles” bedroom community, displacing families with children. At one point Arlington Hospital considered closing its obstetrics service.

Residents were appalled by the suggestion and prevailed upon the hospital not to take that drastic action. The obstetrics service survived to enjoy a boom in births. Arlington Hospital delivered 2,993 babies in 1996!

School Closings in the 1970s

Langston school was closed when Glebe was opened in 1970. Stewart school was demolished after it merged with Tuckahoe; Woodlawn was closed, its students sent to Reed and Glebe, while the building was leased and later given to the Hospice of Northern Virginia. Nellie Custis school was closed several years after it had been renovated in 1975. In July 1978 school system administrative offices, which had been occupying the Marshall building, moved to their new building on North Quincy Street. In October 1979 the Marshall school building was sold. It is still standing and is now a medical building.

The fall of 1979 saw a new methodology applied to school closings. A school cluster in a four-mile area was treated as a unit in the consolidation process. When an administrator mentioned, at a school meeting, that the schools were a mile apart “as the crow flies,” a parent retorted, “Our children are not crows, they do not fly. They walk.”

The schools in the designated northwest quadrant initially included Ashlawn, Barrett, Glencarlyn, Jackson, McKinley, Reed and Tuckahoe. Barrett and Glencarlyn were later dropped from the cluster.

During the summer, before the possibility of school closings was made public, county personnel visited Reed school to assess its possibility as a replacement for Lee Center, which had been remodeled for use as a senior citizen center after it was closed as a school in 1965. In the consolidation process of 1982-83 this idea was embellished in an appendix to the 204 page school consolidation report, in which Bill Hughes, a county employee, offered alternative uses for the Reed building before it
was designated for closing. Hughes suggested one way to keep Reed open was to use space in Reed for senior citizen activities now conducted at Lee Center; then close Lee Center. He also suggested using Reed, if it were closed, to house part of Westover library, if the library were expanded. A county employee was thus deciding the fate of a school before it was declared a candidate for closing by the school board, despite language in the Virginia Code which prohibits the county from interfering in school board matters.

September to December of 1979 was a trying time for the PTAs and neighborhoods of the cluster schools. Many speakers urged that no more schools be closed. Others willingly offered to pay higher taxes to keep the schools open. Front-page coverage in local journals and in The Washington Post and The Washington Star was extensive. Letters to the editor implied that educational criteria were not the real reason behind closings. Headlines reflected the emotions of the moment: "Battle On Over School Closings," and "Parents Attempt to Sway School Board." In the latter
article, the journalist summed up some comments and reported a prophetic demographic projection:

Another highlight of the [school board] session was the release of state government statistics which challenged the school administration’s prediction that elementary school enrollment would continue to decline. According to Arthur Vogel of the Highland Park-Overlee Knolls Civic Association who presented the figures, state planners had detected a mild baby boom in Arlington that had been unrecorded here. “The increase in births at a rate of 2.4% annually,” Vogel says, “will build a backlog of pre-schoolers that shows most dramatically in the growth of the 0 to 5-year-olds at a whopping 6% annual rate. This backlog of pre-schoolers should show up clearly in increased elementary school enrollments in 1986.” According to Tom Weber, the school system’s chief data analyst, “We don’t get involved in numbers like that... We see nothing here in Arlington that would change the trend of a declining school enrollment ... Of course if the birth rate changed that would change the trend.”

The school board never adequately explained costs that would be transferred or incurred by school closings. As a result the president of the Highland Park-Overlee Knolls association, Roger Morton, took exception to the savings indicated by the schools:

To present electricity, fuel and water as saving factors is highly misleading since most of the costs, all of the water, will be transferred to other schools, along with the students. The economic chart shows only cost savings. It should also include any cost increases associated with closing a school... 12

All of the schools presented valid reasons why they should not be closed. Of the five schools in the cluster, Reed had the largest capacity, the most diverse population, a Montessori program (which Reed pioneered), and almost all the students walked to school and to local field trips in the commercial strip and to the Westover branch library which abuts the school grounds. One bus was provided as a safety measure for students who lived on the other side of George Mason Drive. School Superintendent Dr. Larry Cuban did not close Reed for the above reasons.

On December 6, 1979, the board voted to close only one school, Jackson. Several weeks earlier the president of the Jackson PTA said he felt like a sacrificial lamb. 13 Many parents besides those at Jackson shared that feeling. The George Mason special education program, with a 90 student enrollment, moved into a renovated Jackson school which had a 500
student capacity and 224 students when it was closed (at the beginning of the '79 school year it had had 292 students). Dr. Cuban quoted a saving of $132,000 if the 292 students were transferred to other schools. Jackson was refurbished using $175,000 from the sale of Marshall; another $96,000 from capital accounts was used to install ramps and elevators for students in the George Mason program. The greater part of the Jackson building housed county offices.

After a two-year hiatus, the process of school closings in Arlington resumed in 1982. In Fairfax the school board voted to defer a study on closing two of its schools. Anne Arundel County in Maryland decided to keep two schools open. "The savings are not what they would seem when all things are considered," said board member Jane I. Simon.

Arlington had a new School Superintendent, Dr. Charles Nunley, and a predominantly new school board, but the administrators did not change. The "northwest quadrant" was revived and scrutinized by the new school board. The schools identified for closing were the same as in 1979, except that Barrett was substituted for Jackson, which had already been diverted to other uses. The next several months were wild; everything came up for closing—junior highs, high schools and the magnet schools. Besides those in the northwest quadrant, a host of other schools were mentioned. When Dr. Nunley included Swanson and Jefferson Junior Highs as candidates for closing he was criticized by the board. One member said: "The public must accept the process as a fair one." In March 1982 the press reported the possibility of Tuckahoe being sold to Bishop O'Connell High School, which was overcrowded and needed space for the 200 freshmen it had to turn away each year.

The panic button had been pushed; a press item on June 3 carried the following news: "Woodmont, the newest school building in the county, will close this month, and its students will go to Taylor under terms of a consolidation plan generated last winter by the Parent-Teachers Associations of both schools." Woodmont had by-passed the school board and taken matters into its own hands. The chairman of the board, letting the matter stand, said it would not happen again.

Meanwhile on November 14, 1982 The New York Times ran an article, "Here's a Surprise: We need Teachers," corroborating Art Vogel's prediction with a bar graph showing an increase in school enrollment beginning in 1986. The same month a demographics study was ordered by the school board. Helminski & Wilkens was the firm commissioned to carry it out.

A four hour public hearing, attended by 500 persons, 60 of whom spoke, was held at Williamsburg Junior High in March 1983. One Reed
The president of Swanson’s PTA questioned the logic behind Nunley’s stated reasons for closing the junior high: because it was the oldest, smallest and second most expensive to operate. “If Page Traditional School moves there,” he asked “Is Swanson building then going to become newer, larger and cheaper to operate?” A parent from Tuckahoe said: “I would ask the board to stop this process and ask if there is a compelling budgetary reason to close schools. If not, stop this foolishness right here.” Another parent pointed out that “An enrollment report [Helminski & Wilkens] compiled recently at the request of the board, has painted a more optimistic picture of student enrollment than the school system’s own study did.”

At a second hearing at Thomas Jefferson, several speakers urged the board not to close any schools. They cited demographic studies predicting 2,000 more elementary students within nine years and lost resources. The prediction was accurate. In 1990 enrollment was 14,115 (K-12), plus 309 under five years old. In 1991 enrollment rose to 14,708 and 309.

On April 28, 1983, Henry Gardner, Executive Director of Operations, said: “In our recommendation to close Barrett and Reed the primary driving force was to have two classrooms per grade level...although Tuckahoe would still not have enough students to offer two classes at each grade level.” Reed had 273 students (about 72% were white), a Montessori program and an extended day program. The Montessori students were not included in the count; if they had been the enrollment would have totaled 310 and met the criteria for remaining open. In his report, Nunley stated Reed was selected for closure because its students could be accommodated in adjacent schools and “because the building is older, but it is also more marketable due to its proximity to the Westover area.” Nunley, in his own recommendation to close Reed, indicated the county interest for Reed as part of its search for additional buildings.

At the school board meeting on May 5, 1983, the board announced Reed, Claremont and possibly Barrett would be closed within two years. Reed students would be divided between McKinley, Tuckahoe and
Nottingham, all requiring busing. Reed parents insisted their students would not fit into three schools, especially since 16 new children brought the total to 326. The administrators reached the same conclusion in March 1984 but took no action.

The board motion to close Claremont at the end of the 1983 school year passed 4-1. Claremont was merged with Abingdon and the Claremont building was leased to a police academy. On October 1983 the Arlington Task Force for Families recommended that the county direct the school board to declare a moratorium on school closings, and to keep open the two schools targeted for closing in 1984. Addressing the school board, Art Vogel compared the handling of Arlington’s declining enrollment to Alexandria’s:

Alexandria and Arlington faced approximately the same changes in enrollment. Instead of closing schools, Alexandria was concerned with redistricting and to reduce the number of bus trips and the number of miles traveled by elementary students, while Arlington was thinking in terms of marketability and age of facilities. When Arlington sees a drop of 23% in one elementary school and an 18% increase in another, along with increases in both Reed and Barrett from Sept. ’82-Sept. ’83, it is obvious that the Arlington School Board has been looking at the wrong problem.”

A decision to close Reed and possibly Barrett in 1984 was reached by a 3-2 vote. Reed was debt-free and marketable according to Dr. Nunley. Despite the closing of Reed, parents continued to register their children for the 1984 school year.

The unanswered question so often asked at the school board hearings as to whether there was a compelling budgetary reason for closing schools finally came to light in August 1983 when the Budget Director found an unexpected surplus of $1.2 million. The $20,000 deficit that had been expected had turned into a surplus. Four top administrators received 6% pay raises.

Highland Park-Overlee Knolls - School Board Relationships

The residents of Highland Park-Overlee Knolls, who had worked closely with school boards since 1935, did not understand the reluctance of the 1979 and 1982 school boards to involve the community in decision making. In October 1935, the superintendent was authorized by the school board to ask the Public Works Administration for funding to construct a Highland Park elementary school. The civic association conducted a school census of the area at the request of the school board. In January, the school
board reviewed plans submitted by the state architect for the school. In February the school board asked Highland Park to submit several possible school sites. The one chosen was located on a farm owned by A. Duke Torreyson at the turn of the century; prior to that it was owned by a member of the Febrey family. Swanson Junior High was built on a hill which was part of the same farm.

When the East Falls Church civic association requested the school board to open Highland school to the children of both communities, the school board chose to erect a separate school in each neighborhood. It was a wise decision—World War II and a gasoline shortage were in the offing. At the request of the school board, Highland Park submitted three names for the school—the board chose Walter Reed.

More recently the civic association and the Reed PTA worked with School Superintendent Ray Reid and the school board in planning for the integration of Langston and Reed students and in the location of Glebe school. The original intention was to build a 1,000-student capacity elementary school, Glebe. It was scaled down after public hearings with the concerned PTAs and residents.

In view of past relationships and mutual respect between the school board and the community, it was not unusual for the Highland Park-Overlee Knolls civic association to offer assistance in enrollment projections, or for the PTA to conduct a door-to-door head count within the school’s boundaries, or to present a petition against closing Reed, signed by 900 people, to the school board.

Parents, residents, and merchants were convinced the school board was in error to close Reed and that the real reason was marketability. There was no recourse for them but to sue for a review of the school board decision—an avenue granted in the Virginia Code. At a PTA meeting, a vote to request a judicial review was taken. Those who voted against it and parent lawyers said it was impossible to win a suit against a school board in the Arlington courts. The majority felt that a statement had to be made to save the school from being sold. When the predicted five-year-olds would be ready for school, the building and the property would be there. Parcels for new school buildings were impossible to find and prohibitive in cost. Four parents volunteered to sue the school board, and a lawyer in Fairfax agreed to take the case. The entire community worked together to raise funds for the suit and to keep the neighborhood informed via bulletins.
The Suit

The Reed parents filed suit appealing the school board decision. The litigants were requesting an injunction against the school board and school superintendent to prevent their taking premature steps to close Reed. The school board requested the suit be dismissed. The request was denied by Judge Charles Duff on September 23, 1982.

The case was heard on March 26, 1984. The plaintiffs submitted transcribed minutes of school board meetings held in 1982 and 1983 at which school closings were discussed. Reed's lawyer stated that the criteria for closing were not applied equally to all schools. Jackson and Reed were closed because of age, yet Woodmont, the newest school in the system, was also closed. The judge looked at the chairman of the school board and asked, incredulously, "Did you really do that?" The school board chairman replied, "I didn't do it." The school board chairman also said marketability was not a factor in the closing.32 Before court was dismissed, the judge addressed the litigants and spectators who filled the courtroom, explaining he could only rule on whether malfeasance featured in the school board decision to close Reed. He could not rule on the quality of their judgment.

On April 9, 1984, the judge decided in favor of the school board. He wrote in the decision, "It appears to me that the board gave reasonable and proper consideration to the need for consolidation, the various criteria adopted and the demographic evidence presented."33 Judge Duff said no fair reading of board members' remarks the night they voted to close Reed would support the argument that marketability was a factor in the board's decision.34 The plaintiffs lost the case and Reed was closed at the end of the 1984 school year, although its enrollment increase was higher than Barrett's.

The Aftermath

The community's elementary school population was fractured and bused to four schools instead of the promised three. Neighbors in Hall's Hill, whose students had been integrated into Reed from Langston, were bused to six schools in alien neighborhoods.

They were deprived of a chance to study and work together. Parents without transportation had no means of visiting the schools their children attended, as they had done at Reed.

The school board voted in March 1984 not to close Barrett. They were persuaded by the demographic changes in south Arlington, by the fact that Barrett's enrollment increased by 6 students by December 1983, and by the overcrowding in Key school. The 100 Montessori students were transferred from Key to Wilson school.35
Several civic leaders opposed the school board’s plan to transfer the closed Reed school building to the county. They felt it would be needed as a school again. Two day-care centers and a community program, Arlington Community Action Program (ACAP), were renting space in the school. The school board, however, waived seven months of rent from one program, the Northern Virginia Development Center, when it ran into financial problems and could not pay.36

In May 1985, when Superintendent Nunley wanted to turn Reed over to the county, the president of the Westover Civic Association recommended Reed be kept for insurance in case other schools became overcrowded. Members of two neighboring civic associations agreed and spoke before the school board that evening. Gail Nuckols, the board chair, said that she personally would be cautious about giving back buildings that might be needed.37

The current programs in Reed are: the well-funded federal head start program (ACAP) for 3-4 year-olds, which is on the second floor, accessible only by steep stairways; the administrative offices of ACAP; and the Children’s School, a non-profit private day-care center, in the Round’s
The head start program bus out front of Reed elementary school.

3,000 square feet and rooms 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 of the primary wing. During the 1998-99 school year there was a special education pre-school program consisting of 24 children at Reed. On April 13, 1989, special election day, a parent who has three children in the day-care center stopped beside a group of residents to ask when Reed would open as a school. "The day-care center can be moved anywhere, parents drive children there. I want my five-year-old to walk to Reed," she said.

No financial benefit accrued to the school system from school closings. For example, Reed's budget in FY1999 was $374,417; in FY2000, it is $381,881. To offset these operating costs, the private day-care center pays only $30 per year in rent. The use of state or local funds appropriated for educational purposes, according to the Virginia Code, cannot be used to support day care programs.38

Although many students left the school system after the closings, enrollment did go up as predicted: in 1983 it was 12,668; by 1986 a gain of almost 1600 had brought the total to 14,251; and in 1999 enrollment reached 18,277. The birth rate in Arlington Hospital remains high. Another school is needed in south Arlington but space to build one is not available. Students have been sitting in mobile units for a decade. The effort to ease crowding in the 1990s is a slow process.

38 ARLINGTON HISTORICAL MAGAZINE
Arlington Public Schools' buildings which have seen major work funded by bond referendums since 1988 that have exceeded $1 million in capital improvements, include these elementary schools: Abingdon, Arlington Traditional, Ashlawn, Barcroft, Barrett, Claremont, Glebe, Glencarlyn, Henry, Jamestown, Long Branch, McKinley, Nottingham, Randolph, and Taylor. Secondary schools in this category include Gunston, Kenmore, Swanson, and Williamsburg... Wakefield and Yorktown; and the Stratford Building which houses the H-B Woodlawn and Stratford Programs.39

The closing of elementary schools in the '80s contributed to the expensive addition and restoration program in the '90s to house the 4,000 additional students that have enrolled in Arlington's schools since 1986. Capital Improvement Funds proposed will total $119.8 million (bond referenda for FY2000, 2002, and 2004 are yet to be placed on the ballot). In the year 2000, $9,257,700 will be earmarked to implement the results of a multi-use facilities study; this is listed as a priority before additional classrooms for student use.

Reed’s Future

Reed has not been re-opened despite yearly promises by the school staff members and a school board member. Reed was last used as a school by Longbranch in 1995 while the Longbranch building was being renovated. The proposal by the schools was to move eight mobile classrooms
onto the grounds to accommodate about 500 students. That meant the loss of the baseball field and playground for neighborhood children. Residents from Highland Park-Overlee Knolls, Westover, Tara-Leeway and East Falls Church attended a meeting in the spring of 1995 to object to the loss of the playing field. They showed how all the Longbranch students could be accommodated inside the school. The Children’s School was moved out of the Round, which could accommodate 100 fifth graders, into less spacious quarters in the primary wing. The ACAP program was relocated to Wilson school. As a result the eight temporaries were whittled down to two for office space.

The chair of the school board, at a June 1996 meeting in her office, assured officers of the four civic associations that a school would be opened at Reed. In August 1998 a meeting was scheduled with the civic associations, who expected to meet with a school board member. Instead, the meeting was chaired by a newcomer to the school facilities staff and a county staff employee. They presented four scenarios for multi-use programs at Reed. The fourth scenario, that of reopening it as a school, was barely addressed.

The *deja vu* scenario of ’79, a proposal to move Westover library to Reed, was revived at an early planning meeting at the library. It was presented by the same county employee who talked of building a facility for the Health & Human Services Department on the present library parcel. Members of a multi-use study team composed of two members from the schools and two from the county had been meeting since June 1998. In its 6 1/2 page undated report, *Report on the Findings of the School/County Multi-use Study Team*, the team identified school-owned and county-owned facilities, selected a realtor to appraise each property for marketability, estimated the cost of renovation for each facility, matched anticipated program needs with available buildings or sites, determined the long-term status of each of the facilities under study, and arrived at a consensus scenario.

Area residents learned that an agenda item to be considered at the April 29, 1999 school board meeting concerned Reed school. The proposal was to raze the 1938 section of Reed and rebuild it to accommodate the Westover library. On short notice, members from all the civic associations in the area spoke before the school board. The reasons they gave for keeping Reed as a school property included overcrowding at the middle school level as well as the elementary; the unavailability of a future school site should it be needed, and the demographics in the area that have been ignored and/or misread by school staff.
The school board voted to retain the Reed property for school use. Meanwhile, neighborhood children are riding buses and are sitting in mobile units. Baby carriages have been a common sight in Westover since 1986 and there seems to be no scaling down of the infant population. The infants are not registered on maps or counted by the schools but they exist in the community and will have to be accommodated in due time.

Mrs. Vogel, librarian at Reed from 1957-80, sat through all the school board meetings and hearings during the 1979 closings. In 1983 she transcribed the audiotaped school board minutes for the PTA as required by the judicial review, and in that capacity she was a witness for the plaintiffs.

References

2 Ibid., p. 209.
5 Reed School, *Self Study Report*, 1975-76, pp. 6, 16.
7 *Arlington Journal*, Aug. 22, 1979, "Reed Parents Crying 'Foul.'"
8 *Northern Virginia Sun*, Mar. 8, 1983.
22 *Northern Virginia Sun*, Mar. 9, 1983
27 *Northern Virginia Sun*, May 6, 1983.
28 Speech to School Board by Art Vogel, member of the County Task Force for Families, Nov. 26, 1983.
31 Virginia Code (22.1-87) Judicial Review: “Any interested parent, custodian or legal guardian of a
pupil attending the public school in a school division who may feel aggrieved by an action of the school board, may within thirty days after such action, petition the circuit court having jurisdiction in the school division to review the action of the school board. Such review shall proceed upon the petition, the minutes of the meeting at which the school board’s action was taken, of any hearing before the school board, and such other evidence as the court may deem appropriate. The action of the school board shall be sustained unless the school board exceeded its authority or abused its discretion.”

38 Virginia Code (22.1-132.1) C: “No state or local funds appropriated for educational purposes shall be used to support any program established to subsection A and B (Daycare programs) of this section.”
40 Ibid.