

Girl Town

Temporary World War II Housing at Arlington Farms

By JOSEPH M. GUYTON

In 1940, Arlington, like much of America, was preparing for war. The county and the federal government had been growing for the past decade as New Deal expansion shifted to military buildup. Construction of the Pentagon began in 1941, months before Pearl Harbor, and military and civilian personnel started to flood into the capital region. Between 1940 and 1950, the population of Arlington County more than doubled.¹ As men were called into military service, women made up a large number of these workers. Anticipating their arrival and the stress it would place on the local housing market, government planners looked to the construction of temporary wartime housing around the city.² The largest of these dormitory complexes was located just across the river in Arlington. Arlington Farms became the wartime home for thousands of female workers.

Building Arlington Farms

Arlington Farms was constructed on a portion of the historic 1,100-acre Custis-Lee family estate. Under government control since the early days of the Civil War, part of the land adjacent to the National Cemetery had been in use since 1900 by the Department of Agriculture and was known as the Arlington Experimental Farm.³ In late 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a law moving the research farm to its current location in Beltsville, Maryland, to allow for the expansion of the local military cantonment. The law also authorized the purchase of the old Washington-Hoover Airport land, later chosen as the site for the Pentagon. Original planning allowed for the transfer of non-military land to the Department of the Interior to be reserved for temporary war housing.⁴ The National Capital Park and Planning Commission selected numerous sites around the city for the construction of temporary war housing. In addition to places in West Potomac Park, near the Lincoln Memorial, on Capitol Hill, near present-day RFK Stadium, and in Suitland, Maryland, some 7,000 units were slated for Arlington Farms, just over the Memorial Bridge.⁵

In September 1942, the Federal Works Agency (FWA), one of the forerunners of the General Services Administration (GSA), awarded over \$4 million in contracts for the construction of six dormitories and additional auxiliary buildings at Arlington Farms. The contractors were Philadelphia's John



Arlington County, Virginia - Aerial Photograph, March 1949

Source: Arlington County Mapping Center (<http://gis.arlingtonva.us/Maps/DocView.htm>)



1. Arlington Farms
2. Pentagon
3. Memorial Bridge
4. Navy Annex

McShain, Inc. and two Virginia-based companies, Doyle & Russell and the Wise Contracting Company. The three firms were also partnered on the nearby Pentagon construction. McShain's company was the most prominent in Washington at the time. Besides the Pentagon (1943), it was the primary contractor for National Airport (1941) and the Jefferson Memorial (1943).⁶ Construction began almost immediately and on March 1, 1943, the first occupants of the girls' dormitories moved in at Arlington Farms.⁷

Buildings covered approximately 28 acres of the 108-acre site. Clustered together, each of the dorms was "gray and extremely temporary in appearance" and took the name of a state. Inside, every attempt was made to provide a fashionable and comfortable home for the government girls. The buildings opened up into a colorfully painted lounge area fitted with partitioned booths, similar to the dating booths of a corner drugstore. Every dorm had additional public space, including a game room and a first floor service store which sold food, drinks, cosmetics, and other items. Common area furniture was "bamboo in the modern motif" and was decorated with paintings and sculptures by Works Projects Administration (WPA) artists.⁸

The temporary dorms were each set on a masonry foundation and had exterior walls made of cemesto, a low-cost composite building material first introduced in the 1930s. Off of the main lounge and common areas were ten two-story housing wings with single and double-occupancy rooms. There were laundry areas and a kitchenette on each floor. Rooms were “small, but pleasantly furnished, with bed, dresser, mirror, chaise lounge, floor lamp, ash tray, waste basket, and two pillows.” The girls could exchange their linen twice a week and had weekly maid service.⁹

The housing at Arlington Farms was managed by the Public Buildings Administration and designated for selected government workers with yearly salaries of \$1,260 to \$1,620.¹⁰ Four of the dorms housed military servicewomen, primarily Naval Reserve WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services), and six were for civilians. Single 8' x 10' rooms rented for \$24.50 and doubles for \$16.50 a month. Many women chose to room together and either send the extra money home or spend it out on the town. In time, a large recreation hall, a cafeteria that seated up to 2,000 people, a post office, a 30-dryer beauty shop, an infirmary, and other amenities were added to the campus. Later on a branch store of the local retailer Woodward & Lothrop was opened at Arlington Farms.

Built in the pre-Civil Rights era, Arlington Farms remained segregated housing for whites throughout the war. The housing needs of African American government workers were met by the Langston Hall dormitories, constructed at Oklahoma Avenue and 24th Street Northeast in Washington. These dorms, part of the original 1942 plan, also opened up in spring, 1943.¹¹

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had played a role in the design and construction of the Arlington Farms housing project. She had toured the facilities when they first opened (finding the map-decorated wastebaskets very “educational”), and presided over the formal dedication five months later on October 15, 1943.¹² Jane Watson, the *Washington Post's* art editor, proclaimed it “remarkable how much thoughtful architectural designing and planning, judicious use of color, and the introduction of cheerful fabrics in the interior furnishings have done to lighten the barracks-like effect of these dormitories.”¹³ The *Post's* “The Federal Diary” column called “Girl Town” an “attractive and a pleasant place to live.”¹⁴

Making a Dorm a Home

Women came from all over the country, recruited by the Civil Service Commission or into the WAVES, to work in government jobs around D.C. and to live in Arlington Farms. Some were older women, some were married with husbands serving overseas, but the majority were young, single women living

on their own for the first time. Many of girls did not have to commute far to jobs at the nearby Pentagon, Navy Annex, or Arlington Hall, which at the time was the home of the Army's Signal Intelligence Service. Due to the war, work was often of a secret or sensitive nature and took place around the clock, during day, swing, and graveyard shifts. They walked, bicycled, shared rides with passing motorists, took taxis, or used the area streetcars and Capitol City Transit Company buses to travel in and around the city.

Each of the dorms at Arlington Farms employed a director or house mother who usually had prior experience at a college, hotel, or boarding house. The women were independent and what rules they had were mainly self-imposed. There was no official curfew; women arriving home after two in the morning were simply required to check in at the front desk. Governing councils were organized, consisting of representatives from each wing, to set other house rules, address complaints, welcome newcomers, and plan parties and other activities.¹⁵

Every effort was made by the planners to provide for healthy leisure time activities and entertainment at Arlington Farms. In the early days the grounds remained muddy while construction on all the dorms was completed. They later took on a more

welcoming character, with a tree-lined main drive in the complex and grassy areas and sidewalks where the women could be seen out reading or sunbathing in warm weather. A large recreation hall was constructed and residents participated in a number of sports, games, classes, dances, and shows. They organized a fifty-girl choir, various sports leagues, theater activities, and even their own newspaper, *The Arlingazette*. Billing itself as "The Voice of Girls Town," the circular profiled fellow residents, reviewed local shows, shared news from Arlington Farms alumnae, and announced upcoming events.¹⁶

Women came to embrace both the independent and communal aspects of life at Arlington Farms. Mary Olena Adams, a former school teacher from Missouri who came to work for the Armed Forces Security Agency in 1943, said, "Here, you can shut your door and be alone, or open it and have company. You can always find some one to do something with. Even at 11 o'clock at night,



Library of Congress Online Catalog (LC-USW3-029050-E)
Reading the Sunday comics in a single room in Idaho Hall.

somebody will bang on your door and suggest a trip to the Hot Shoppe for a malted.”¹⁷

“28 Acres of Girls”

One of the many playful nicknames for Arlington Farms was “No Man’s Land,” but the presence of a few thousand women quickly attracted the opposite sex. Servicemen flocked across the river to Arlington Farms and couples could be seen outside walking around the grounds or inside kissing in one of the many common areas. Formal and informal dances with the men were common occurrences, except on Monday nights, which were designated as “ladies only” in the dorms. Other than that the rules for men were simple: they had to clear out of the buildings by 11 p.m. on weeknights, midnight on the weekends. William J. Bissell, who was appointed head of the region’s female dormitories and who lived with his wife at Arlington Farms, was a realist when it came to the dating and fraternization. “I am not running an old maid’s home,” he said.¹⁸

The women at Arlington Farms sometimes volunteered to help entertain wounded soldiers from the Walter Reed Army Hospital in Northwest D.C. Groups of girls made morale visits to the hospital to sing or perform for the troops, and also hosted them at the Arlington dorms for dances.¹⁹

After touring the site during its first summer, the New York Times presented a rather wholesome, if not corny, picture of male-female interaction at the dorms. “One of their pleasantest diversions is to lure over the hillbilly contingent from the near-by Army post [Fort Myer], complete with banjos and guitars, and to sing ballads with them, sticking with them through all sixty verses of a song.”²⁰

Free time was hardly confined to sentimental hootenannies on campus. Single girls, usually accompanied by one or more servicemen, took every opportunity to get out and experience life in the city.²¹ Most nights government girls could be found at various nightclubs, bars, and dance halls throughout the area on the arm of a soldier, sailor, or Marine. As their beaux rotated overseas, girls would promise to write and hit the town with the next in line. It was not surprising to find girls who maintained correspondence with a dozen or more men. Although most of these relationships were casual, the ephemeral liaisons required by war, contemporary newspapers carried more than a few wedding announcements describing the bride as a resident of Arlington Farms.

An unfortunate consequence of young, often naive or provincial women arriving in the metropolitan area was the occurrence of crime and sexual assault. Perhaps the most sensational crime was the murder of Dorothy Berrum, a resident of Maine Hall, Arlington Farms, in October 1944. Ms. Berrum was a petite 17-year old from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, recruited straight out of

high school to work at the Pentagon. Just three months after moving to Arlington, Ms. Berrum's body was found raped and strangled near the sixth hole of the old East Potomac golf course on Hains Point. Her killer was a married, 24-year Marine named Earl McFarland, whom she had met just that night at a USO dance. McFarland was later convicted of the murder and executed.²²

The Berrum tragedy made headlines for months in D.C. and there were calls to send all government girls under the age of 20 back home.²³ The *Post* editorialized that "the frightening degree of promiscuity certainly exists among the younger warworkers [sic] brought here from various parts of the country, . . . plainly evidenced by the number of young girls who have received treatment at the venereal disease clinics," and they railed against the "numerous concomitant evils of wartime sexuality."²⁴ This incident highlights the more salacious characterizations of this new class of female workers, who were often stereotyped as "wild" women in the minds of the American public and in the press. Admittedly, some women explored their new freedom in ways outside the normal, 1940s-American social mores. However, the vast majority behaved in a proper manner, did their jobs honorably day in and day out, and served their country above reproach.²⁵

Despite the Berrum murder and the scandalous representation of government girls, Arlington Farms remained a popular housing option for young women and continued to attract servicemen. Before the war's end the "twenty-eight acres of girls" was famous. In March, 1945, a group of four escapees from a Japanese prison camp in the Philippines returning home made a visit to Arlington Farms one of their first stops. The men were in town for interrogations at the War Department and had read about the dorms in a magazine while coming cross-country.²⁶

Moving On

While the war officially ended in September, 1945, the need for housing for federal workers remained. Women continued to live in the temporary housing at Arlington Farms for the next five years. The state of Virginia belat-



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Intermission at one of the bi-weekly "open house" dances held in the main lounge of Idaho Hall.

edly descended on the complex to force residents to pay state income taxes in 1945.²⁷ However, it took another year and an order from an Arlington Circuit Court judge to finally include the area in one of the county's designated voting precincts.²⁸

The occupancy rates at Arlington Farms began to decline steadily in the post-war years. Women were consolidated into selected dorms as other buildings were transferred over to the military for family and enlisted housing. For the government girls who remained, rent stayed at its original levels. Arlington Farms had paid for itself until July, 1946 when a bump in government pay that increased operating costs was coupled with the dwindling number of tenants.²⁹ In late summer of 1947, Arlington Farms, then with the capacity for 4,275, had around 3,000 residents, an occupancy rate about 70%.³⁰ Enough room had been cleared for the grounds to host the 17th Annual 4-H Club National Encampment.³¹

By early 1950, fewer than 1800 girls remained at Arlington Farms and the government began planning to shut down operations and transfer all the buildings and land over to the military as of July 31, 1950.³² The women at Arlington Farms quickly found accommodations elsewhere and vacated their apartments in order to meet the deadline. The Army officially moved into the former "G-Girl Haven" in September 1950 and began using Arlington Farms as a draft center supporting the new war in Korea.³³

Arlington Farms is perhaps an unjustly overlooked footnote in the county's and the nation's history. Originally designed to meet a temporary need, the wartime housing at Arlington Farms should be considered among the success stories of World War II. The hastily constructed dormitories proved to be as durable as the community they helped foster among the thousands of women who called Arlington Farms home. Female workers were provided with an affordable, comfortable living space and the government got the reliable and skilled personnel needed for the war effort. The impact of thousands of women entering the professional government workforce in the 1940s would be felt in the Washington area and beyond in the decades that followed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ From 57,040 in 1940 to 135,449 in 1950. US Census Bureau, "Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990," Richard L. Forstall, ed., <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/va190090.txt> (accessed June 16, 2011).
- ² Nona Baldwin, "Rooms for 20,000 More Women Soon Needed in Washington," *New York Times*, July 12, 1942, p. D4.
- ³ Edwina V.A. Avery, comp., *The Arlington Experimental Farm: A Handbook of Information for Visitors* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928), pp. 1–5; Zula Dietrich, *Zula Remembers: South Arlington in Earlier Times* (Fort Valley, VA: Loft Press, Inc., 2005), pp. 71–72.
- ⁴ "Arlington Farm to Make Way For Army Post," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 1940, p. 10. See *Act of November 30, 1940, 54 Stat. 1220*. Congress had, the month before, passed the Lanham Public War Housing Act (*Public Law 849, 76th Congress - Act Oct. 14, 1940, ch. 862, 54 Stat. 1125*) in order to speed construction of housing related to national defense.
- ⁵ "Planning Unit Picks Sites For Dormitories," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1942, p. 14.
- ⁶ "Arlington Housing Project Awards \$4,268,000 Contracts," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1942, p. 9. For more information on the life and work of John McShain see Carl M. Brauer, *The Man Who Built Washington: A Life of John McShain*, (Wilmington, DE: Hagley Museum and Library, 1996).
- ⁷ "Residence Hall Ready For First 200 Occupants," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1943, p. B1.
- ⁸ "Government Girls Occupy New Dorm," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 1943, p. B1. A complete list of the various dorm names could not be found. However, names compiled from various sources included: Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, and Nebraska. Idaho Hall was the first to open, followed by Kansas Hall. It is unclear why these state names were selected. Fritz Lanham, for whom the Lanham Public War Housing Act (which funded construction) was named, was a Democratic Congressman from Texas.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ "Room, Board to Cost Girls in U.S. Dorms Under \$50," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 1942, p. 20.
- ¹¹ "First Lady Creates Stir At Dormitory," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1943, p. B7.
- ¹² "Dormitories In Arlington Dedicated," *The Washington Post*, October 16, 1943, p. 5.
- ¹³ Jane Watson, "Critic Finds U.S. Housing Attractive," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 1943, p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Jerry Kluttz, "The Federal Diary," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1943, p. B1.
- ¹⁵ Eleanor Lake, "28 Acres of Girls," *St. Louis Times-Dispatch*, October 1, 1944.
- ¹⁶ *The Arlingazette*, Vol. 3, No. 11, May 1947. A photocopy of this issue of Arlington Farms' self-produced newsletter can be found in the Arlington Farms file folder in the Virginia Room at the Arlington Central Library.
- ¹⁷ Dorothea Andrews, "Arlington Farm Soon to be a Memory to G-Girls," *The Washington Post*, July 23, 1950, p. M10.
- ¹⁸ Lake, "28 Acres of Girls."
- ¹⁹ Jackie Lyn, *All In A Lifetime: True Experiences and Miracles* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007), pp. 68–73.
- ²⁰ Eleanor Darnton, "4,800 Call It Home," *New York Times*, August 22, 1943, p. X9.
- ²¹ Joan Baxter Dunlap, "Don't Cry, Honey. He's Home Now," in *An Honor To Serve*, Richard David Wissolik and Barbara J. Wissolik, eds. (Latrobe, PA: SVC Northern Appalachian Studies, 2007), pp. 89–94.
- ²² "Victim, 17, Raped, Then Strangled," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1944, p. 1. See also Joseph McNamara, ed., *The Justice Story: True Tales of Murder, Mystery, and Mayhem* (New York: The New York Daily News, 2000), pp. 65–78.

²³ “Welfare Head Advises Sending Young Government Girls Home,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 1944, p. 1.

²⁴ “Girls On The Loose,” *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1944, p. 4.

²⁵ Ethel Standley Collection (AFC/2001/001/38211), Veterans History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/38211>, (accessed June 10, 2011), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. The Veterans History Project website (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>) contains a number of digital records from women, military and civilian, who were stationed in Arlington during World War II. The website “Women of the WAVES” (<http://www.womenofthewaves.com/profiles/index.shtml>) also contains wartime reminiscences from WAVES, some of whom spent time in Arlington during the war.

²⁶ “Death March Survivor Finds ‘The Girl’ Here,” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1945, p. 7.

²⁷ Jerry Kluttz, “The Federal Diary,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1945, p. 3.

²⁸ “Arlington Farms Girls May Get Vote in Redistribution Plan,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1946.

²⁹ “U.S. to Close Three Resident Halls for Girls,” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1947, p. B1.

³⁰ Jerry Kluttz, “The Federal Diary,” *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1947, p. B1.

³¹ “4-H Workers On Fulltime Basis Urged,” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1947, p. B2. Additional information and historical documentation on the 1947 4-H Club National Encampment can be found in the Arlington Farms file folder in the Virginia Room at the Arlington Central Library.

³² Andrews, “Arlington Farm Soon to be a Memory to G-Girls.”

³³ “Army Moves Into G-Girls’ Haven Today,” *The Washington Post*, September 1, 1950; “50 Virginia, Maryland 24 and 25-Year-Olds Are Processed at Arlington Farms,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1950, p. 2.