



Courtesy of Terry Showman

Ruby Lee Minor sells land at Lynon Park.

# The Original Queen of Arlington Real Estate

*BY CHARLES S. CLARK*

## Who Was the Early-on Queen of Arlington Real Estate?

Ruby Lee Minar (1883-1952), whose name still inspires awe in home-builders, was tops in the 1920s among the visionary investors from across the Potomac who created the Arlington suburb.

“The most successful woman in realty development in the country,” as she was dubbed by a 1929 business journal, worked alongside Arlington luminaries Frank Lyon and Adm. Presley Rixey to create prize subdivisions.

Born in Montana to a Baptist minister, Ruby earned degrees from Kalamazoo College and the University of Chicago before becoming a speech teacher and women’s suffrage activist. Her marriage to journalist John Minar brought them to Washington.

World War I left the couple with a meager \$200 in liberty bonds. Minar invested it in home lots in Chevy Chase, Md., and soon set up a downtown office on New York Ave NW. Noting the new Key Bridge and improvements to Lee Highway, she got the idea of buying a 400-acre set of tracts between Washington Golf and Country Club and Lee Highway. She christened the enclave Lee Heights. And she advertised its convenience to tennis courts at the country club, and boating and fishing opportunities on the Potomac.

Minar insisted on views of the river and the monuments from “where dust and smoke from the city and passing trains would not reach it,” she said. Lee Heights was 400 feet higher than downtown’s Pennsylvania Avenue.

The automobile is responsible for the lure of suburbia, she said. “When a man can live in a healthful and beautiful suburban community and still get to his office in town within 15 or 20 minutes, he naturally picks the suburbs.” A motor car would deliver a commuter to, say, the Treasury Department in 20 minutes or by motorbus in 25. Sales prospects improved when cars became enclosed and suddenly house-hunters were more willing to venture over to the booming suburb even when it was raining or blustery, Minar observed.

Those 130 large-scale homes in Lee Heights together were soon worth \$3 million, according to news reports from back in day when they put individual purchaser’s names and occupations in news stories.

“Washington is becoming a great world capital,” Minar told *The Washington Post*, “and Lee Heights is today an integral part of the Metropolitan area of Washington.”

In 1921, she continued to earn press attention. “Ruby Lee Minar Sells Land at Lyon Park worth \$225,000,” read the headline in the *Washington Herald*. The deal was followed by a reception with Frank Lyon at the still-standing Lyon Park Hall. Like many fledgling Arlington neighborhoods of the era, the neighbors agreed to form a civic association.

In 1922, Minar opened a new office in Cherrydale. Its six-man staff handled sales in Maywood, Thrifton, Dominion Heights, Park Lane and Livingstone Heights. Salesmen who made their quota by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month received Thanksgiving turkeys that were displayed live in the New York Avenue office as an incentive.

By 1923, Minar’s tout went further. “Indications are,” she told the *Post*, “that next year will be the biggest building year that Arlington County has ever had... Construction in the county began to mount shortly after the armistice and is now going on at a rate many times that of any period in its history.”

After those upscale subdivisions, Minar built more-modest homes in Brandon Village (near Ballston) to take advantage of three Arlington highways and two electric rail lines. “How would you like to live at the top of the monument?” her promotions asked.

Minar lost much wealth in the Great Depression, according to current-day builder Scot Harlan, quoting his 93-year-old father who observed Minar’s projects. But by the 1930s, she was ensconced in a mansion near Lorcom Lane at Military Road, said current builder Terry Showman, a fan. That was the land bought in 1907 by Joseph Taser Johnson, the prominent surgeon who named his farm Lorcom for the combined names of his sons, Loren and Bascom.

Minar hosted neighborhood parties, often with a group called the Lorcom Marching and Chowder Society.

One night a fire broke out at the mansion, according to Cherrydale memoirist Dean Phillips. A confused Minar had to be rescued in her nightgown as the bucket brigade and Cherrydale volunteer firemen went back for her boarders.

In 1942, she moved to Miami Springs, Florida. Builder Harlan performed the demolition of her home in 2004 to make space for a row of modern brick Georgians; Arlington Historical Society volunteers came by to go through some of the artifacts.

Minar for decades had been active in the women’s service club Soroptimist International. She became the federation’s first president in 1928, and the group named an award for her.

In August 1952, she was on the Swedish ship Stockholm, accompanied by her daughter Patricia Lee Minar, heading to the Soroptimists International meeting in Copenhagen. Ruby Lee died of a heart ailment off the coast of Denmark. She was 68.

Thanks to homebuilder Terry Showman for sharing items from his photo collection.

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### **About the Author**

Charles S. Clark, who writes the “Our Man in Arlington” column for the Falls Church News-Press, is a frequent contributor to the Arlington Historical Magazine.

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