



Arlington Historical Society

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Arlington Historical Society
September 2021

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President's Dispatch

On September 11, 2001, it was a beautiful day in Arlington. I was teaching social studies at Swanson Middle School. Right in the middle of my lesson, the secretary from the office handed me a note directing me to keep the television off and hold students in my classroom until further notice. From that moment, the day would unfold in unbelievable tragedy. I spent the remainder of the school day assisting parents who were coming to the school to take their children home. I also waited nervously to hear the status of my husband who occasionally had meetings at the Pentagon. By early afternoon, I received word from his colleague that he was safe and in lockdown at the Navy Yard. When I left school, my normal commute home took hours that day and as I drove through my neighborhood, USA flags were flying everywhere.

The terrorist attacks upended my belief that we were safe in America. We watched the tragedy unfold on television and we worked to make sense of it. Over the days that followed, our community came together and supported each other in collective grief. While there were incidents of intolerance, there was much compassion shown throughout the county. Twenty years have passed since that tragic day, but many of us still pause each September 11th to reflect on the tragic loss. Even today, Arlington continues to show it remembers.

However, our population under the age of 21 has little firsthand knowledge of this event. To them it is like my understanding of the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II. It is up to us to pass on the stories of this important event and others to younger generations. The Arlington Historical Museum is working to make sure the 9/11 story is not forgotten. This year, we had the great honor to support Daniel Gessel, a Life Scout from Troop 149, with his Eagle Project. Daniel created a video titled [*This is How Arlington Says Thank You: Arlington and 9/11*](#). This moving video tells the story of how the 9/11 attacks impacted our county and how the community responded and continues to honor and remember the devastating attack.

AHS is using Daniel's video and other educational resources to tell the story of 9/11 and many other historic events that occurred in Arlington. We hope you will join us as we continue to help our community learn the stories of our past.

Arlington Historical Museum

1805 South Arlington Ridge Road
Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays
1:00 - 4:00 PM

Ball-Sellers House

5620 3rd Street, South
Saturdays from 1:00-4:00 PM
through the end of October

Virtual AHS

Website: <https://arlingtonhistorical.society.org>

Facebook: Arlington Historical Society

Twitter: #ArlingtonHistory

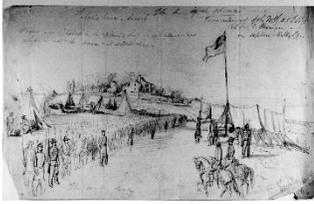
Instagram: ArlingtonHistory

AHS Board Meeting

Board meetings are on the fourth
Tuesday of every month.

Upcoming AHS Events

Now – Fall 2021: Museum Exhibit: Upton's Hill History



(Arlington Historical Museum, 1805 South Arlington Ridge Rd. Sat & Sun 1-4 pm) The impressive house that stood for generations atop Upton's Hill symbolized the historic nature of the site, but Arlington history surrounded the house in many layers, from early America through today. In this exhibit, the Arlington Historical Society shows the historic nature of Upton's Hill from top to bottom. (FREE)

Saturday, October 9, 2021: Spooky Songs and Scary Stories



(Ball-Sellers House 5620 3rd St., South: 6:00-8:00 pm) What supernatural stories did colonial residents of the Ball-Sellers House tell each other? What spooky songs did they sing when entertaining guests during the harvest? Actors and singers from Guillotine Theatre will regale you and your families with colonial folktales and songs featuring ghostly encounters and mysteries. We will give you a sample to help make your Halloween historic! Tickets on sale at:

<https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/events/spooky-songs-and-scary-stories/>

Thursday, October 14, 2021: The Syphax Family of Virginia and D.C.



(Marymount Univ. Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd., 7:00 pm) Historian and genealogist Steve Hammond will provide an overview of the Syphax family in Virginia and Washington, D.C. He'll cover long-time Arlington residents William T Syphax and his brother Julian M. Syphax and their impact on their communities and the nation and he will explain how he is related in the family. He will also discuss the reopening of Arlington House and the work he participated in to include the history of both the enslaved and free people who lived there. (FREE)

Thursday, November 11, 2021: George Washington Parke Custis



(Marymount Univ. Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd. and on Zoom, 7:00 pm) Author and historian Charlie Clark will discuss his new book on Custis who was raised by George and Martha Washington. Inheriting much of the Custis fortune, G.W.P Custis also became the enslaver of more than 200 people. The slow march toward their emancipation became a central struggle of his life, particularly after his daughter's 1831 marriage to Robert E. Lee. This first full-length biography of Custis offers a 21st century reappraisal of a life that bridges the American Revolution and the Civil War. (FREE)

Thursday, December 9, 2021: Racial Restrictions in Arlington History



(Marymount Univ. Main Campus, Reinsch Library Auditorium, 2807 N. Glebe Rd. and on Zoom, 7:00 pm) Marymount University sociologist Janine Dewitt leads a panel discussion with her team to talk about their research, their findings, and map its impact on our county. (FREE)

Do You Have an Arlington Cookbook to Loan to AHS?

The next exhibit at the Arlington Historical Museum—just in time for the holiday season—will be about cookbooks and food in Arlington. If you have a cookbook published by an Arlington church, school, or organization and would like to loan it to the museum for the exhibit, please contact AHS via email:

info@arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org We will treat it with care and credit you in the exhibit.

We Want to Hear from You!

As our membership continues to grow, the Arlington Historical Society wants to be responsive to our members. Each newsletter, we will be asking you to give your opinion on an issue. You will also have an opportunity to make general comments. **We value your feedback.** The survey can be found at <https://rb.gv/5qki9n> Below is the question, published in hopes that all interested members will reply:



AHS recently weighed in on the controversy over whether the county should invest in preserving the nearly 170-year-old Febrey-Lothrop House which was demolished in April. Some members may like AHS to become more proactive and step-up involvement in current-day debates over specific historic properties that are threatened by development. Others may prefer that AHS steer clear of such advocacy issues and focus on storytelling, exhibits, education, and research on the past. What do you think?

July 4th Reopening of Arlington Historical Museum

After the 16-month closure due to the pandemic, AHS celebrated July 4th with a reopening of the Arlington Historical Museum. County Board Chair Matt di Ferrante spoke and Delegate Patrick Hope presented AHS with a proclamation honoring the 100-year anniversary of the naming of Arlington. A new museum exhibit on Upton Hill was introduced and a Civil War encampment on the museum grounds with reenactors allowed visitors to learn about the role of our county as a stronghold for the Union during the Civil War.



Civil War Reenactors: Peter Vaselopolus, Michael Schaffner, and John Tuohy

AHS president Cathy Hix and Board member David Pearson welcomed guests to take a “behind the scenes” tour of the museum to gain an understanding of work that needs to be done on this 1892 structure. In her speech to guests, the AHS president announced a long-term project to preserve and renovate the museum with the goal of finishing it by the 250th anniversary of the USA on July 4, 2026. Currently, AHS has launched a matching funds campaign to match a \$15,000 anonymous donation. So far, \$2,800 has been raised for this effort. Additional donations can be made at <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/campaigns/preservation-of-the-arlington-historical-museum/>

Update on AHS Museum Preservation/Renovation Project

At our July 4th re-opening of our Arlington Historical Museum, AHS announced that we will be fundraising for preservation and renovation of our museum. On July 4, 2026, the nation will celebrate the 250th anniversary of our country. Our goal is to have accomplished our work on the museum by that date.

Our first project is to restore all the windows through the museum. We are still engaged with the Milner division at MTFA in securing bids for the work to begin in the spring of 2022.

AHS Remembers 9/11 at the Annual Banquet

On September 9, 2021, the Arlington Historical Society gathered at the Washington Golf and Country Club for the annual AHS banquet. This year AHS honored Arlington first responders on the 20th anniversary of 9/11. We publicly thanked the first responders, some of whom were in attendance. James Schwartz, the incident commander at the Pentagon on 9/11, shared his recollections of the day. Former County Manager Ron Carlee discussed his role coordinating county resources during the tragedy. We also debuted the film [*This is How Arlington Says Thank You: Arlington and 9/11*](#). This film was produced by Daniel Gessel for his Eagle Scout project and is available on the AHS website.



Special guests at the AHS banquet include firefighters and the US Navy Captain Hill formerly of the USS Arlington

Over 150 guests attended, including first responders, AHS members, County Board members, Police Chief Penn, Fire Chief Povlitz, and Sheriff Arthur. One special guest was Captain Christopher Hill, who recently stepped down from commanding the USS Arlington. The USS Arlington is a legacy ship named to honor Arlington's role in 9/11. A scale-model of the ship was on display at the banquet.

In addition to honoring first responders, AHS presented the Volunteer of the Year award to Charlie Clark for his work on the 1920s Story Map and to Frank O'Leary who received the Cornelia B. Rose, Jr. Lifetime Achievement Award for his decades of service to the county and his multiple fundraising efforts for AHS. We also recognized Eagle Scout candidate Daniel Gessel for his film and Grace Freitas, winner of the 2021 AHS essay contest.

We were thankful to have over 30 sponsors provided cash donations and gift certificates for an "I Love Arlington" big bag of goodies that was raffled during the event. The pandemic caused us to cancel the AHS banquet in 2020, so we were happy to be able to gather for this special event.

Stewardship of Your Money

The AHS depends on donations and membership fees to allow us to carry out our mission. Your financial donations have allowed us to do the following work:

- Hosted an open house on July 4th for members of the community
- Sponsored a booth at the Arlington County Fair
- Held a banquet to honor 1st responders on the 20th anniversary of 9/11
- Purchased a scale-model of the USS Arlington for display in Arlington Historical Museum
- Purchased a robust Zoom account to offer free virtual programming for larger numbers.

Get Your Member-Only 10% Discount at the AHS Online Book Store

<https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/shop/>



To get the Member-only 10% off on all purchases online just as you would if you visited our museum shop, use this **Coupon Code** on the Checkout page:
AHSMEMBER10

AHS offers the largest selection of books on Arlington history anywhere. Some are not even available on Amazon or Barnes and Noble! Every book you buy helps support the AHS mission to strengthen our community by improving the understanding of our shared history

AHS Tribute to Arlington Businesses: The Signature Theatre

An integral part of Arlington's history are the businesses that provide services within our community. Many of these businesses have been part of our community for decades. AHS is launching a series to highlight the great business community of Arlington. Stories of these businesses can also be read at <https://www.arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org>

Signature Theatre has provided Arlingtonians with a unique “signature” variety of works since 1989. After its founding by Eric D. Schaeffer and Donna Migliaccio, the theatre originally staged its work in the Gunston Middle School auditorium with 126 subscribers and a vision to provide the Washington area with an alternative to the conventional and traditional plays of the time. In 1991, the production of Signature's first musical, *Sweeney Todd*, propelled the theatre to heightened popularity, including four Helen Hayes awards from the performance.

Signature moved to a new location in 1993, converting an auto garage into a black box theatre with 136 seats. From the new location, the theatre delivered works such as *Grand Hotel* and *The Fix*, which sparked a long-term relationship between Signature and producer Cameron Mackintosh.

After 13 impressive years in “The Garage”, Signature moved to a new location in Shirlington, raising \$16 million in a capital campaign in partnership with Arlington County for the new location. The Shirlington location now houses two state-of-the-art black box theaters, rehearsal spaces, meeting rooms, and a lobby that boasts impressive oversize production photos and floor-to-ceiling windows with scenic views over the Village at Shirlington.



Among Signature's most popular works include *Chess*, *Glory Days*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, and *A Little Night Music*. Famous producers such as James Lapine, Fred Ebb, John Kander, and Terrence McNally have all presented works at Signature. The theatre also picked up the Regional Theatre Tony award in 2009, in addition to 128 Helen Hayes awards and 452 nominations, solidifying Signature as a go-to destination for local theater in Arlington and a well-deserved “musical theater powerhouse” designation from *The Washington Post*. The theatre is also home to the largest musical theater commissioning project in the United States, The American Musical Voices Project.

The theatre continues to attract talent from Arlington and beyond, and now reaches an audience of over 100,000 people annually across the United States. Signature also offers multiple opportunities for Arlingtonians to engage with the theatre, including a masterclass, school workshops, and adult education courses. Signature also offers a Signature in Schools program for the Arlington community. Founded in 1995, the program grants local students the opportunity to participate in a creative and immersive theater experience and explore the relationship between history and theater, all while performing a premiere production alongside Signature Theatre professionals. Signature in Schools now includes students from 18 Northern Virginia high schools and five school districts.

Signature Theatre can be found at its current location on Campbell Ave in the Village at Shirlington, as well as online on its website and Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram accounts.

The Promise of the Pike

Over the years, Arlington has transformed from a sleepy suburb of Washington, D.C. to a thriving urban community. One of the areas of growth has been along Columbia Pike. Called the Columbia Turnpike during the Civil War, this road became a gateway in the 20th century. This article is authored by Anuj Khemka, high school student and 2018 winner of the AHS essay contest.

With immigrants from more than 128 different countries, Arlington's Columbia Pike neighborhood has been described as "The World in a Zip Code." According to a 1998 census, the Pike was the most diverse neighborhood in the Greater Washington D.C Area. A third of the Pike's population originated from outside the United States, and in total, nearly 8000 immigrants took residence in the area. Today, the Pike remains the perfect representation of ethnic diversity. Over the iconic street's three miles in South Arlington, an array of ethnic shops and restaurants — from Ethiopian markets to religious goods stores — line the sidewalks. Meanwhile, the area's apartments serve as international crossroads, each floor the gateway to countless new countries. For a county that was once rural and almost entirely white, the Pike's diversity marks a remarkable transformation over the last half century.

Though Columbia Pike was founded in 1808, it didn't establish itself as a premiere destination for new beginnings until the 1940s. When Arlington began construction on the Pentagon in 1940, a number of predominantly African American communities in the county suddenly found themselves displaced. For many, Columbia Pike became their new home, because the military chose the area as the site of temporary replacement housing. The military also went on to establish a series of permanent garden apartment complexes on the Pike as well as a community of single-family homes called Columbia Forest. Both developments remain in use today.



Columbia Pike in 1929 (Photo donated by Wayne Hill)

Decades later, as discord in Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Central America propelled refugees to the United States, Columbia Pike's available and affordable housing, along with its proximity to Washington D.C, proved key in attracting many new settlers to the area. Starting in the 1970s, Columbia Pike's immigrant population increased dramatically. Chief among the countries of origin were El Salvador, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Bolivia. Once in the Columbia Pike area, immigrants used programs like the Arlington Education and Employment Program to learn English and take on a variety of jobs. Soon, full-fledged communities formed around the influx of immigrants. Markets and restaurants catered to certain ethnicities propped up. Gatherings such as the Refugee Thanksgiving Dinner and Columbia Heights West Street Festival took place with regularity on the Pike and still do.

Columbia Pike continues to draw immigrants to the area. The Pike is no longer as affordable as it once was, but existing ethnic communities, quality public education, and strong business opportunities remain convincing pull factors. Cafe Sazón co-owner Adriana Torres' family initially moved from Bolivia to the Pike because extended family lived there but ended up staying for the diversity in the area. Programs like the Columbia West Heights Teen Photography Project — in which students used digital cameras to capture photos of the Pike — helped Torres discover the culture and vibrancy of the Pike. Others come to Columbia Pike for the economic benefits. Wilbur, who operates a coconut water stand near Arlington Mill Community Center, moved to the area recently because the Pike's high foot traffic and cheap land meant he could support his family.

Regardless of the reasons people continue to come to the Pike, one thing has stayed constant: the Pike holds promise. Immigrants settle all across the area for the promise of business, for the promise of community, and for the promise of a new life.

Three Sisters: Person, Place, and Artifact

This regular “Three Sisters” column showcases three historical things that make Arlington so unique. Three Sisters consist of a person, a place, and an artifact from the AHS collection.

Person: Nguyen Ngoc Bich

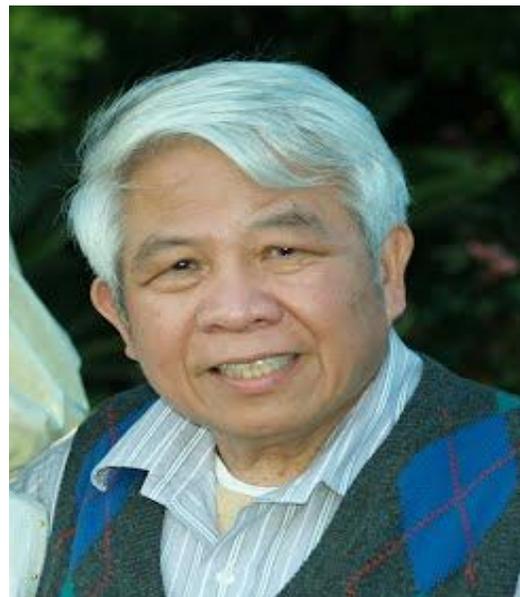
Nguyen Ngoc Bich (1937-2016) was a Vietnamese emigre who became an educator in Arlington, teaching adults at the Arlington Career Center and at Key Elementary and Wakefield High School before teaching Vietnamese culture, literature, and civilization at Trinity and George Mason Universities.

Bich also played a key role in establishing the restaurants and shops in Clarendon known as “Little Saigon.” He urged fellow Vietnamese immigrants to take advantage of the inexpensive short-term real estate contracts made available by vacancies from businesses that left during Metro construction. In its heyday, Little Saigon’s heyday had an estimated 80 businesses.

Bich fled Vietnam after the 1975 fall of Saigon. Before the fall, he was director general of the Vietnam Press Agency and a special envoy of the South Vietnam President to the US Congress in a last-ditch campaign for more war aid in the face of the Viet Cong’s last offensive.

Here in Arlington and in northern Virginia, he ran a publishing company and authored numerous books, mainly in English, about his Vietnamese heritage and lifelong fight against communism. He authored and edited works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry and translated books into Vietnamese and English. He was a teacher trainer in bilingual and multicultural education in Arlington, Washington, D.C. and at Georgetown University. In the first Bush administration, he served as the deputy director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs at the U.S. Department of Education. He became Director of the Vietnamese Service for Radio Free Asia. After retiring, he attended meetings and events in support of his lifelong dream of freedom and basic human rights for the Vietnamese.

He died of a heart attack while on a flight from Washington to Manila in 2016, where he was scheduled to participate in a conference.



Place: Wright Park



The Wright Park is within Buckingham Gardens apartment complex and is named for Henry Wright (no relation to the Wright brothers). In the 1930s, Henry Wright designed Buckingham Gardens which became the first garden-style apartments built in the US. He designed them to be two-story buildings all oriented around a central courtyard with green space and recreational areas. His unprecedented design called for only 20 per cent of the area to be covered by buildings, the rest was for residents to enjoy. Walkways connected the apartments and new businesses at nearby Buckingham Shopping Center allowed residents to easily walk to their neighborhood stores, movie theater, hair salon, or bank. All Wright’s innovations were designed to engender a self-sustained community.

But being the first garden-style apartment complex in the US isn’t the only claim to historic fame for Henry Wright’s vision. It was built beginning in 1937, and after overcoming racial barriers endemic to most of America, it has since been a gateway for thousands of immigrants. Latinos compose the majority of Buckingham residents, including people from El Salvador, Bolivia, Mexico and Peru, but Asian residents from Pakistan and India for example, also help make the park and the garden apartments more diverse. Traditionally the Buckingham community has been the source of grass-root support for new immigrants and low-moderate income families.

Artifact: Walter Tejada Election Sign

In the AHS artifact collection is a campaign sign for Walter Tejada. He was the first elected Latino to the county board and has been tireless in his support of Arlington's diverse population.

Tejada was born in El Salvador and shined shoes to help support his family. He came to the US when he was 13 and was living in New Jersey when he met his future wife, Robin, who moved to Arlington. Walter followed her.

First elected in 2003, he served until 2015 and was Board Chairman in 2008 and 2013. Tejada worked with local communities and encouraged residents to be active in Arlington. He continues to be active on issues such as affordable housing, civic engagement and volunteerism, community and economic development, education and employment, parks and recreation, tenant outreach and empowerment efforts, and youth development programming.



AHS in the Community: June - September 2021

Over the past three months, AHS has been busy sharing Arlington history in a wide variety of creative ways:

- June 10: free public event *The Frasers of Green Valley* with local author Martin Suydam who discussed this founding family of Arlington whose plantation eventually became the area known as Green Valley.
- July 8: free public event [Uncovering Alexandria's Waterfront](#) with Dr. Benjamin Skolnik, an archaeologist for the City of Alexandria who shared recent discoveries along the Alexandria waterfront.
- August 12: free public event [The Arlington Line: Civil War Defenses](#) with John McNair, Park Historian at Fort C.F. Smith who discussed how the Arlington area became a union stronghold during the Civil War to protect the Capital City.
- August 20-22: More than 15 AHS members staffed a booth at the Arlington County Fair. A map of Arlington in the 1860s was a popular attraction and many people stopped by to take an Arlington quiz.
- The AHS Education Committee offered two scavenger hunts of Arlington's history, one for elementary students and one for older teens and adults.
- AHS President Cathy Hix and Board member Annette Benbow presented local history talks to several local civic groups.
- AHS trained several new docents at the Arlington Historical Museum and the Ball-Sellers House.
- September 11: AHS members donned historical costumes and walked in the Glencarlyn Heritage Day parade. The Ball Sellers House was then open for the day for tours.

Business Members

We are grateful to have the support of the following local businesses:

Altria Client Services
The Aurora Hills Women's Club
Dominion Energy
The Fairlington Historical Society
Glass Distributors
John Marshall Bank
Prudential Financial
The Shooshan Company
Warren G. Stambaugh Memorial Foundation



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History Awaits Come Visit!

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1805 South Arlington Ridge Road
Arlington, VA 22202

Ball-Sellers House Museum
5620 Third Street South
Arlington, VA 22204

The Arlington Historical Society, founded in 1956, is a non-profit organization incorporated under Virginia laws. The Society supports research, collection, preservation, discovery, and dissemination of Arlington County's history. Board meetings are held on the fourth Tuesday of each month at 7:00 P.M. in the Arlington Historical Museum at the Historic Hume School and are open to the public.



Website: <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org>
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