

Lorton History: When Murder and Mayhem Came to Town

A spurned lover turned violent

By Irma Clifton

The year was 1905 and my father, at the time, was a nine-year-old student at Lorton Valley School. It was he who told me the details of this story, but it was only after I became an adult that I was able to research what happened. It seems that not only did my father have a remarkable memory but for a nine-year-old he was observant and got his facts straight as well.

Just after the turn of the last century a massive effort was instituted to make railroad tracks uniform throughout the country. To accomplish this, contractors recruited workers from many sources. Labor camps were set up where the laborers would live while working on sections of track, and when the work was done on a section, move on to the next section, setting up a new camp. One such camp was located in Lorton Valley in the spring of 1905 and was, according to an article from the Fairfax Herald, home to a crowd of "foreigners and negroes" brought into the country to work on the new railroad tracks.

The camp was located not far from the Lorton Valley School on Lorton Valley Road (now known as Gunston Cove Road) just across from the Plaskett family home. The small school had students from many grades and several children were in their early teens. One female student became the object of infatuation for a young Italian laborer from the nearby railroad camp. The young man even went so far as to present himself to the teacher carrying a book and slate saying he wanted to become a student. The request was refused but it was reported that laborer became so violent and abusive in his remarks that the teacher, also a county deputy sheriff, procured a warrant for his arrest.

The next day when the teacher, George A. Malcolm, acting in his capacity as deputy sheriff, went to the camp to arrest the Italian laborer, whose name is recorded as Joseph Leanto, he encountered resistance. Before Leanto could be restrained he drew a weapon and fired five shots into Deputy Malcolm who was able to return fire but to no effect. Deputy Malcolm was transported to the Emergency Hospital in Washington, D.C. where he succumbed to his injuries.

The following day a posse of local men approached the camp and learning that Leanto had made no effort to escape, attempted to arrest him. Again Leanto pulled his pistol and attempted to fire at a member of the posse but instead shot himself in the hand. The posse overpowered Leanto and in the melee it was believed that Leanto was somehow mortally injured. After he was properly secured he was shipped by train to the Washington Hospital with the following note pinned to his clothes: "Please notify this man's friends in Washington. If he gets well, let the sheriff of Fairfax county know, as he is wanted." The posse claimed that Leanto had shot himself in the head in an attempted suicide, a story which the Italian Ambassador in Washington doubted, and complaining to the State Department said, "that it is an open question whether the Italian was not killed by a mob."

The State Department forwarded the Ambassador's request to the Governor of Virginia asking for an investigation, but the results of that request are unknown. The incident which drew international attention, was apparently put quietly to rest with no prosecutions.

George A. Malcolm was a 24-year-old teacher with the Fairfax County Public Schools who had been sworn in as a deputy just 11 months before his death. Prior to becoming a teacher at Lorton Valley School he had taught at Oak Gove School. He is buried in Pohick Church Cemetery.

Students from the old Lorton Valley School eventually transferred to Lorton School on Lorton Road and the old school was sold and converted to a home. It remained a private residence for many years and was last occupied by the Ruffner family. Percy Ruffner worked at the Reformatory for thirty years before retiring from the Engineering Division. The structure that was Lorton Valley School was demolished in the 1990s to make way for a new housing development.



George A. Malcolm was known as a popular and promising young man before he was gunned down while serving a warrant on a laborer who was working on the railroad tracks in Lorton. Credit OfficerDownMemorialPage,odmp.org



Lorton Valley School was converted to a private residence when it ceased being a school. Believed to be shown here is Percy Ruffner on the front porch of the residence which faced Lorton Valley Road. Credit Fairfax County Photo Archive