Lorton History - Schools of Yesteryear
When one room schoolhouses were not uncommon

By Irma Clifton

Fairfax County is noted throughout the country for its fine education system, and right here in Lorton we enjoy some of the most modern, up-to-date schools in the county. For all of the twentieth century--and now into the twenty-first century--Lorton has been noted for its quality schools and the willingness of area citizens to encourage and support them. The community should and does take great pride in the fact that through their efforts several schools have been built during the last decade in the Lorton area ahead of schedule and within budget. This is apparently a tradition that is carried over from the last century when a man built a school in Lorton at his own expense, and earlier a leading citizen donated land for a school.

Many small schools with limited numbers of classrooms served southeastern Fairfax County before the turn of the last century and into the first quarter of the 1900s: Hard Bargain on Colchester Road, Lorton Valley on Gunston Cove Road, Ox Road School on Route 123, Lebanon School on Gunston Road, Potter's Hill School near Telegraph Road and Lorton School in the village of Lorton to name some. The one-room Lorton Valley School was built in 1878 on land donated by the Plaskett family. These schools were segregated as were all schools in Fairfax County at the time.

It was in 1918 that the schoolhouse in the village of Lorton burned and William Halley, a resident of the area whose children attended the school, purchased timber and arranged to have it shipped to Lorton for the construction of a replacement school. The four-room structure was built in the early 1920s on Lorton Road about a quarter of a mile west of the Lorton railroad station. It is thought Halley may have introduced the first public transportation of school children in Fairfax County. According to early written accounts, "For a year, he drove eight children to and from school…so that they would not have to walk through the grounds of the Lorton Correctional Institution."

The four-room school soon became too small to serve the growing population, and in 1930s the county, in a spurt of educational zeal, built nine new consolidated elementary schools, of which Lorton, in 1934, was one. The new school was of brick construction. In those days the annual cost to the county of education per pupil was $52.87 and the average teacher's salary was $972.10. Teachers often roomed with local families. A house on the hill next to the school was home to several.

The old schoolhouse was used for several years during the 1940s to house fifth-grade students before it was converted to a residence for the janitor and his family. This arrangement lasted until around 1950 when the population explosion in the county resulted in more students and classroom shortages. The old wooden four-room schoolhouse was refitted as classrooms and occupied by students until the mid 1950s, when a new school, Gunston Elementary, was built in Lorton, thus relieving over-crowded conditions at Lorton Elementary.

Over the years Lorton School served as a gathering spot for community activities. Dances for local veteran's organizations, fund-raisers for the fledgling fire department,

Christmas (now called holiday) programs, PTA activities, suppers and beauty pageants were but a few of the get-togethers held at the school.

In the early 1970s a devastating fire set by neighborhood hooligans destroyed the cafeteria, kitchen, storage area, stage and at least one classroom of the Lorton School. Some students were transferred to a school at Fort Belvoir until the damaged areas could be reconstructed. An ambitious expansion also added a wing with additional classrooms at that time. The hallways of the renovated school were adorned with artwork donated by world-famous local wildlife artist Ed Bierley, whose children had attended the school.

The 1980s saw a building boom in the Lorton area, and the need for a larger, more modern up-to-date school became evident. Lorton Elementary School's days were numbered. A new school was planned for the recently developed Crosspointe community, and in 1988 Silverbrook Elementary School opened as a replacement for Lorton School. In the spring of that year a good-bye reception was held at the old school, attended by alumni including the granddaughters of William Halley, who had attended Lorton School in the 1950s, and returned to bid farewell to the school that had been the heart of the community for over 60 years. The Bierley artwork, which was transferred to the new school, can be seen today in the art gallery of the east and west stairwell and landing of Silverbrook Elementary School.

The old Lorton School now serves as Fairfax County Public School's Transportation Office, housing the director of transportation and Area 1 and Area 2 transportation offices. A parking lot and cell phone tower take up the old playground space.
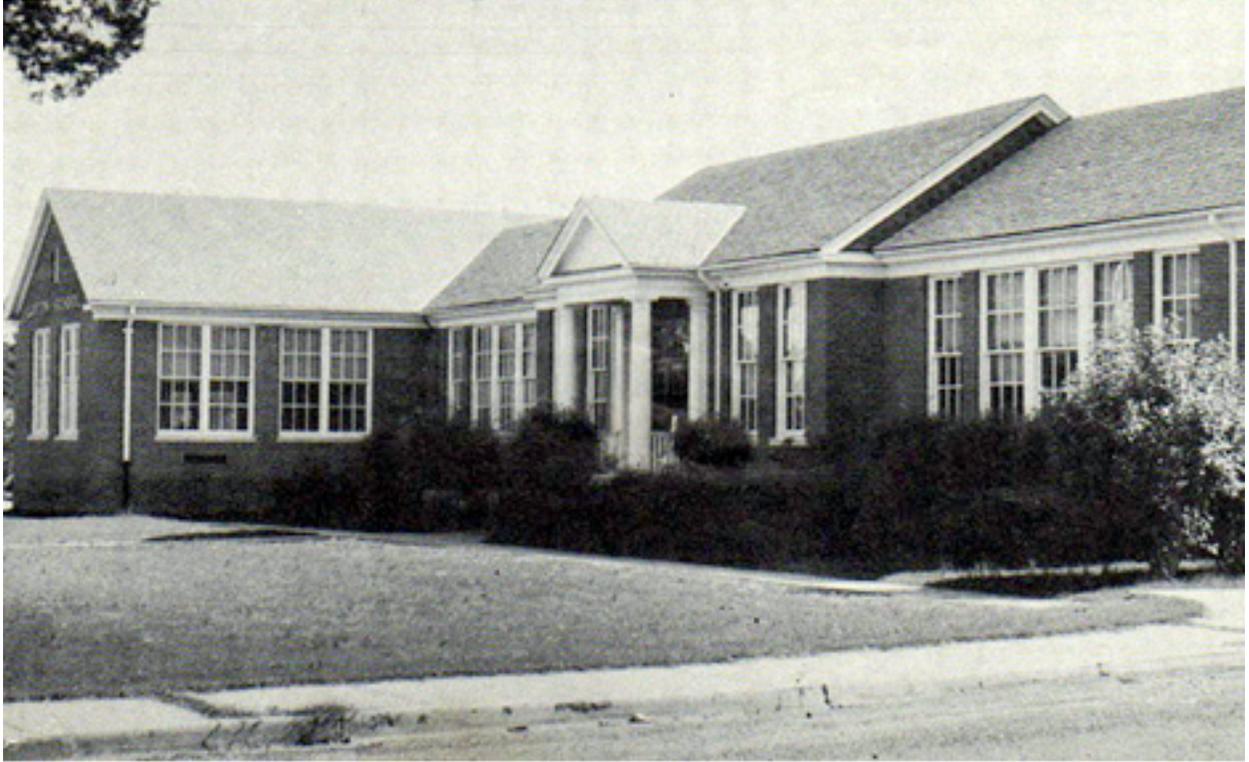
Lebanon School Class of 1924 on the steps of the school on Gunston Road. Teachers pictur
are Irvin William Shepherd and Mary Agnes Harley. Credit Photo courtesy Dawn Shepherd fro
the collection of the Lorton Heritage Society

The four-room Lorton School with students in the early 1920s. Credit Photo courtesy Lorton Heritage Society

Lorton Valley School shown with students in 1898. Credit Photo from the book "Memories of Plain Family: 1836-1936" by Susan Annie Plaskett

Lorton School at the intersection of Lorton Road and I-95 appears today much as it did in the 1960s. Credit Photo courtesy Fairfax County Public Schools