

Vernon J. Walker: Reston's Pioneer Naturalist

BY SHELLEY MASTRAN

Many Restonians are familiar with the Walker Nature Center on Glade Drive, but most do not know much about the person for whom the center is named: Vernon J. Walker. He was hired by Robert E. Simon Jr. in 1967 to direct Reston's Nature Center.

Reston's Master Plan states that, in developing Reston, "the natural forest and ground cover will be preserved as much as possible Many of the streams and stream valleys will be left in their natural condition and runoff will be controlled by the use of lakes, retention basins and temporary siltation basins." Moreover, by clustering much of Reston's housing, the plan added substantial open space and parks. Simon needed someone to oversee the management of these natural and open space areas.

Walker had been teaching environmental science in the New Jersey public schools. He had a master's degree in science education and had worked with the New York Fresh Air Fund and the New Jersey State School of Conservation. He came to Virginia to direct Reston's Nature Center.

For decades, the Nature Center was "really program not place," as noted in a 1970 article in *American Forests*.



© RESTON MUSEUM

Walker had an office in a Washington Plaza townhouse but was rarely in it; he was outdoors instead. He took on the tasks of educating Reston residents about their environment, providing landscaping and gardening advice and overseeing the care and maintenance of Reston's common lands. This last task involved coordinating with the Reston Home Owners Association (RHOA) and its environment committees.

Walker wrote a quarterly newsletter, *Nature Newsnotes*, that was mailed to all residents

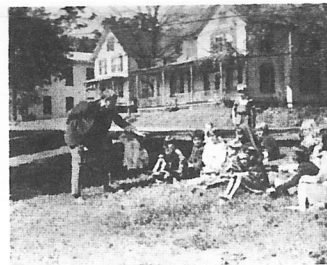


PHOTO BY ARVIL DANIELS

and contributed articles on various topics (e.g., poisonous plants) to the *Reston Times*. He gave workshops and lectures, advised clusters on landscaping issues, worked on projects with schoolchildren and twice a month led interpretive walks. Above all, he was committed to community engagement — getting Restonians outdoors and helping them to appreciate the community's natural bounty.

From the beginning, Simon planned for a physical nature center in Reston. Gulf Reston deeded a 41-acre parcel to RHOA in 1975. After Walker passed away in 1982, planning efforts for completing the center accelerated. In January 1987, Reston Land Corporation deeded an additional 30

acres to Reston Association, and ground was broken for a small, seasonal structure that included a storage room and two restrooms. In 2001, Friends of Reston began a capital campaign to build the beautiful Nature House, a year-round education building on the site today. It opened in 2009.

Vern's wife, Elfriede, was also an environmental advocate and community leader who supported the nature center long after his death. One of the Walker grandchildren, Idalina, was the Naturalist at the center from 2015 to 2018. As Katie Shaw, Nature Center manager, has written, "Vern's methods and philosophy ... shaped the character of the green spaces Reston is known for. He incubated the love for Reston's trees and the concept of living in harmony with Reston's wildlife." What a wonderful legacy!

Shelley S. Mastran is a board member of Reston Historic Trust & Museum.



1639 Washington Plaza, Reston, VA 20190
Phone: 703-709-7700
Email: info@restonmuseum.org
www.restonmuseum.org
www.facebook.com/RestonMuseum
twitter.com/RestonMuseum

RESTON MUSEUM HOURS

Monday-Friday 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.
 Saturday 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.
 Sunday Closed