

Fairlington Historical Society
September 11, 2001 Oral History Interview
Paul Ferguson

Martha Hermann: Martha Herrmann with the Fairlington Historical Society talking to Paul Ferguson on May 30, 2026. Paul, can you give me your current title for the county, for Arlington County?

Paul Ferguson: Clerk of the Circuit Court for Arlington County and the city of Falls Church.

Martha Hermann: Thanks. And what did you do for the county before you became Circuit Court?

Paul Ferguson: I served on the Arlington County Board for 12 years, and I was the first person elected from Fairlington to serve on the board. I'll put a little asterisk to that. Alan Dean was elected a candidate from Fairlington, but before he took office he had already moved somewhere else out of Fairlington, so I was the first.

Martha Hermann: And what were you doing in September of 2001?

Paul Ferguson: On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was a member of the Arlington County Board. We rotate the chairmanship and I was not chair of that year or the vice chair; the chair was chief of staff that year. So you didn't ask me what I was doing on that day, so I won't tell you that. I'll try to answer your question.

Martha Hermann: Let's ease into that. That morning when you woke up, did you go up to Courthouse? What did you do first thing that morning?

Paul Ferguson: Well, I actually had an appointment for what was called a myotherapy appointment. I was having a little bit of back issues, and it was a place called Alexandria Myotherapy. I had that appointment at I think 11:30, but the first thing I was supposed to do that day was go to visit my grandmother, who I think was still living at 801 North Monroe Street by the Virginia Square subway stop. She may have moved to The Jefferson, but I think she was still—so I was supposed to meet her. And, as I drove down Quaker Lane and was approaching the I-395 ramp, I thought to myself—it was about 9:40—I thought, "Boy, I really missed the rush hour traffic. There is nobody on I-395." But then I thought there must have been a huge accident because I saw a big cloud of smoke, which was what had happened at the Pentagon. And then I saw somebody that was going to get onto I-395 on the Shirlington exit, the Shirlington entry ramp, and they decided to put it into reverse and not get on. So I thought this was strange, and I thought—remember, this is the days before GPS, Waze and Google Maps—so I thought there's probably a pretty bad accident here. I'm just going to take a back road. And then I noticed that I stopped to call my grandmother to tell her I was already late, to tell her I was going to be a little

late, and my cellphone didn't work. So I wasn't able to contact her. So I started to think something might be wrong here.

Martha Hermann: And let me stop you for a second. Did you take kids to school that morning? Or did they go to school?

Paul Ferguson: I'm trying to remember. My youngest was born August 13, 2001, so he was not going to school. He was at home with my wife, Karen. And my older one, Tim, I don't think he might have been going to the Fairlington playgroup, but I think that was Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. He was not yet in preschool. So the answer to that question was no, both of the boys were at home with Karen. I'll take you a further step back of what I was doing on that morning. At the Bradlee Shopping Center, there was a health club there called Washington Sports and Fitness. It was next to what was then the Atlantis restaurant, and I'm not sure what's in that spot right now.

Martha Hermann: The Bee-Liner, I think.

Paul Ferguson: Possibly. So I was doing actually a workout that morning at around 8:30 when people started to gather around and see the plane that crashed in New York. I came home to Karen at about 9:15 and 9:20 and I said, "Some dummy flew a small plane into the World Trade Center. Can you believe that? These small pilots don't know what they're doing." I said there's been an accident, and I remember her telling me that seems kind of odd. "Are you sure that that's what happened?" I said, "Yeah, I was watching the news. That's what they said happened." So I should have been suspicious that there was something going on, but I really wasn't. I've had a long-time relationship with this woman at Alexandria Myotherapy and she had a 24-hour cancellation policy, and I remember calling her trying to explain to her, "There's been a plane that's crashed into the Pentagon, I'm going to have to go into work," and she said, "Well, you're going to have to pay the fee." And I said, "That's fine, but I just want to let you know I can't get there." And she had no idea of the severity of what it is, and we always joke about that. Yeah.

Martha Hermann: You were on the ramp at I-395, saw the smoke, and people reversing off.

Paul Ferguson: So I went back home. I went back home and tried to figure out what was going on. I was alerted by Arlington County what happened, and I asked them did they want me to come in to work, and they said it was not necessary right then. Then they had an emergency meeting where they called us in at about 2:00 in the afternoon where I went in and was briefed. And I remember that I was the only one of the five board members that chose not to go on site at the Pentagon. I was a little nervous about children, family, so I just said, "Look, it's not necessary that all five of us take this tour. I'm not the chair, I'm not going to go." So I went home, and I remember on that day they opened up the Fairlington Glen pool where we lived. So it was somewhat eerie because the temperature was perfect—it was 75 degrees, sunny, not a cloud in the sky—but we had a lot of smoke in the air, and we had fire engines and ambulances running

down Quaker Lane because they were taking people to Alexandria Hospital in addition to Arlington Hospital, which is now called Virginia Hospital Center.

Martha Hermann: So you could see, hear...?

Paul Ferguson: And I was hanging out at the pool with my two sons and my wife and lots of neighbors, but it was in a day where you weren't constantly connected by cellphones. I think I had a BlackBerry at the time, so I was reachable, but since I declined to take the tour, it was determined that I wasn't immediate on that day. And I remember I had neighbors that lived three or four doors down, and they were neighbors that were a little bit unusual in that usually in Fairlington you get to know everyone in your immediate court area. These were people that just always kept to themselves. It was a middle-aged couple, probably in their 50s—which I think is young now since I'm much older than that—but at the time I thought they were an older couple. And they, within the week, just vanished. And there was no "for sale" sign put up, but the house just sold within like a week or two, and there were new neighbors that moved in and we got to be friends, so they were nice. But I sort of thought this was odd. I didn't know what they did for a living or why they disappeared,

Martha Hermann: Maybe they were spies?

Paul Ferguson: I don't think so, but I really don't know. What I was surmising is maybe they have a high-level position with the CIA or the Pentagon, and them quietly moving out maybe is trying to tell the rest of us something, or if we were observing. I remember that it was a very difficult time for me to personally provide the leadership that my job required because my first thought was, "Do I take my sons and wife out of here? Is there going to be another attack?" And I also thought that it was probably likely we were going to get an attack on the Metro, that there was going to be something else that happened that was catastrophic. I was the only board member that was against, 30 days from September 11th, we had a big ceremony at W-L, then Washington-Lee, now Washington-Liberty. And I thought, "This is crazy." I'm against all of us, all of the Arlington officials gathering in one spot, and they said, "Well, there'll be plenty of security." And I'm like, "Well, there was a lot of security at the Pentagon when that happened." This is not a good idea. But it wasn't a public vote, but it was 4 to 1 where everyone said, "We're going to do this." And I remember there were times in that month where I had to represent the board and speak, and I tried to take a courageous tone, but I gained strength by the courageousness of the people I represented because they had more than I did. And they were just adamant that this was our home, we're not leaving. Sure there could be another attack, but Arlington is our home. I'm not leaving with

Martha Hermann: Yeah.

Paul Ferguson: So, I slowly gathered that strength and said I'm not leaving with my children or family either. But, I have to say, you look through history, well, didn't people figure out they live near the Capitol or they're at war, and why didn't they move out or why didn't they get out?

And I was hoping that that wouldn't be me that thought, "Well, this is obvious that we're going to have another attack." And what was really amazing about that time is I also remember we moved from our house on 36th Street in the Glen to the Arbors, which was our place on 34th Street, 3428 South Utah. And that was in 2001 of November. And I remember thinking, "Oh well, property values are going to go way down now." And we owned two places—actually, we owned for a short period of time three places in Fairlington because when I was single I lived at 2737 South Buchanan, and so I still owned that and I would have sold it, but the property values had not gone up to the level that I had bought it at, if you can believe that back then. So we were thinking we might be leveraged with owning three properties in Fairlington because we did significant renovations at 3428 South Utah. It was a Dominion with a high ceiling, and we built out the attic so that it wasn't technically a fourth bedroom, but it was an office.

Martha Hermann: It was a fourth bedroom?

Paul Ferguson: I could have been, but I used it as an office and it had a bathroom, and it became a third bathroom, too, in the house. So it made us have one of the bigger units in Fairlington, and we got historic tax credits. Me getting historic tax credits really helped a lot of other people in Fairlington get historic tax credits because the Director of Historic Tax Credits before I did my renovation explained it to me. And he said, "Paul, do you really understand this?" And I had to admit, "I don't really get it." He goes, "You basically spend \$100,000 on your renovation and you get a \$25,000 state tax credit that can be carried over for 10 years." So even though you don't have \$25,000 of taxation in one year—you know, we didn't pay state taxes for 4 or 5 years because of those credits—and then the credits were also resale. So once I got those credits, I became an evangelical historic affairs tax credit person. So I would go around in Fairlington and write in the newsletters, the individual condo ones and the civic association, that if you're doing renovations, you really need to think about applying for historic tax credits because we're a historic neighborhood.

Martha Hermann: We should have a little article on that in our next, our upcoming newsletters.

Paul Ferguson: I would have to bone up on making sure that it still exists. And we had staff people at the county that came out and helped the people in Fairlington because the application process was a little complicated. So we should all check in with the county. I think the state has made it slightly less generous, unfortunately, but I think it still exists, and if people are doing renovations, they should try to take advantage of it.

Martha Hermann: So let's go back to 9/11. And everyone hanging at the pool, getting the news as it's coming and understanding what was happening, and there's smoke in the air and you can hear sirens. In the next few days, what did you come to understand and know and have to do with?

Paul Ferguson: Well there was massive firefighting and cleanup efforts at the Pentagon. Not just for days, but for weeks. But very intense operations by our fire department for at least the 72 hours afterwards. It became clear, not just us in Fairlington and in Arlington, but nationally,

that it was a terrorist attack because they wanted to take credit for it—Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden heading that group. What was the concern of the locality was, you know, is there going to be another terrorist attack that happens? And we have tremendous intelligence and security, and, you know, we didn't wind up having one happen, but I was a little surprised by that, based on how easy

Martha Hermann: I have a question on September 11th. What was the purpose of the government officials taking a tour of the Pentagon that day to see what—

Paul Ferguson: Well, because it happened in Arlington County. I mean, we're the governing body, and even though it was a federal facility, our firefighters were the ones responding there. The Pentagon does have fire, but it wasn't—it was only a fraction of the people that needed it. So we got regional help, I know, from many other jurisdictions, but the on-the-ground command was the Arlington County Fire Department. So because it was our resources being expended and because it was in Arlington County, the county government felt we needed to see it. Because even though it's a county manager form of government, the county board is the one that votes expenditures, and I know that there was some emergency funding that had to be expended, so we had to see why that money was going to need to be expended.

Martha Hermann: Do you personally—did you personally know anyone that was affected, either by losing a loved one or their own life?

Paul Ferguson: Amazingly, I did not, which I was just stunned because I know a lot of people in Arlington County and in the region. The only person indirectly was the principal at one of the—Hoffman-Boston, her husband died. I didn't know him, and I had only met her once. So, yes.

Martha Hermann: Mmm-hmm. I was Jamestown PTA then, we were sister schools with Hoffman-Boston, so we directly knew her, did not know him, but it was horrific, and people at that school heard that plane going over the school into the Pentagon.

Paul Ferguson: Yeah, I was really just shocked that I didn't know anyone that was even injured in the Pentagon at that time.

Martha Hermann: Mmm-hmm. Did you notice anything around here, traffic or non-traffic planes, any—what were the changes you saw in the weeks after 9/11 here?

Paul Ferguson: Besides that first day there weren't the ambulances and firetrucks going up Quaker Lane. So things amazingly returned to somewhat normal. Although National Airport was closed a month or maybe more, and there was a real question of whether they were ever going to reopen it at all. So that was a very expensive lobbying effort that Arlington County participated in, where we threw a bunch of money into the top lobbyists to make sure we were doing our best to get that airport reopened.

Martha Hermann: It was closed for at least a month.

Paul Ferguson: Yes, but as you noted earlier, I represented all of Arlington. I certainly had some constituents that would like to have seen it stay closed permanently because of noise, and they made that clear that they didn't like the Arlington County lobbying effort, but it would have been an incredible economic development loss to that part of the county when you look at the hotels and the restaurants.

Martha Hermann: I remember walking along the river in those days, just to get outside and the lack of anything in the air.

Paul Ferguson: Yeah, it probably improved our air quality and it certainly reduced noise level pollution, although you did hear a lot of helicopters going in and out to the Pentagon.

Martha Hermann: Yeah. I remember seeing that Pentagon in the days after this and just being so struck by what it would have looked like. Did you meet with any of the first responders after that?

Paul Ferguson: There was, yes, because they were part of the Arlington County government. So I didn't meet with them because they were a first responder, but you would come across them in county government ways and they would talk about it. There was one police officer, his name is Harvey Snook, and he actually died from inhalation of working there. He was an Arlington police officer and he died—you know, it was probably 10 years that he lived, but he was never able to go back to work and he was sick and he fought the illnesses. And he lived on North Lebanon Street off of Wilson Boulevard. So I knew him, I had met him through county government, but he also lived across the street from one of my best friends from high school, from Wakefield High School, and he wound up giving—and he was single. He was a single police officer. He gave his pickup truck to the youngest son of my friend from high school, and that youngest son of my friend from high school. That youngest son, his name is Zach Johnson, became an Arlington police officer because of Harvey. And he's—he's a new officer. He just started about 3 or 4 years ago, I'd say.

Martha Hermann: Did you notice any changes, any kind of differences of just daily life here in Arlington County?

Paul Ferguson: Amazingly, not really. And as I said, whereas I was personally nervous and frightened, I was amazed that most people were saying, "This is a one-off, it's not going to happen again, we're safe." So maybe I had a little bit more information than they did, but they were right. And they were right to say that this is our home and whatever dangers we face, we need to be courageous and say we're not leaving.

Martha Hermann: Mm. Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to say about that time?

Paul Ferguson: I've said it already, but just the amazing resilience, courageousness, and willingness to get back to normal of not just people in Fairlington, but in all this whole area. Many of whom had important governmental positions and knew of the dangers, but besides that one couple that I talked about leaving, I don't know anybody else that left. And what was truly amazing was that property values soared in Fairlington and in all of Arlington from 2001 to 2005 more than any other time in our history percentage-wise.

Martha Hermann: Why do you think?

Paul Ferguson: Because of the influx of spending on our homeland security. Which I was worried as a government official of the opposite happening. I was thinking, "All right, who's gonna wanna come live here in Arlington? We just had a plane fly into the Pentagon, and if there is a future target, the Pentagon or Washington, D.C. is certainly a prime target." So why would everyone want come to Arlington, and why would our property values increase, really, geometrically? Which is what they did.

I started to tell a story, and I have a problem with telling half a story and not finishing it, but I do remember it. So we did these significant renovations, and I talked about the historic tax credits. So we took over the property on Utah Street in The Arbors in mid-November of 2001. And I remember that we had purchased—the woman that sold it to us, the only way we were able to purchase it was by handing out flyers and saying, "We are a family that wants to stay in Fairlington and we need a bigger place, please consider selling to us if you're selling." And I thought, "Well, this isn't gonna work." And a woman called us, and you know, we basically said, "We'll pay whatever you want," at the time, not whatever you want, but "Figure out what your realtor says is the top dollar and we'll add to that." And amazingly enough, this was in 2001, this was before September 11th that we contracted for the purchase, which is a key point in this discussion. And she said \$275,000, which was high at the time for a high-ceiling Dominion end unit in the Fairlington Arbor, which I thought—and we just said, "Sure." Like, whatever you want, we'll pay it because we wanted to stay in Fairlington so much. And then I remember when it came time to go to settlement, she said, even though we had given her money, "I think the prices are going up. I don't think I've gotten a fair deal." So I was thinking, you know, we took a real—just, what do we do? I'm a lawyer, like, do we go to court over this? I said, "We have a contract." And I said, "What do you think would be fair?" And she says, "Well, I think I need another thousand dollars." I said, "Oh, sure," so we bought it for \$276,000 rather than \$275,000. Which was top of the market at the time, which was high, but obviously we got an incredible deal. But it was going to be four or five months of renovations. So we had our current place, which was 4111 South 36th Street. So we were faced with a choice: do we pay a double mortgage and stay in 36th Street while these renovations are going on, or do we move in with my parents who live in the Arlington Forest neighborhood, 130 South Columbus Street, for this four or five-month period? And we really went back and forth on it and thought, you know, it's nice to be with my parents, but that's a long time and it's gonna be a little crowded in there. Wouldn't it be nice to just stay in this house? But because of September 11th, we were feeling nervous. We thought, "Okay, we now would have—we don't have much money, and we now have three properties in Fairlington that all have loans, and we're pretty leveraged." So if

another terrorist attack happens and the value of these properties falls considerably, we're in trouble here, even though my wife was an attorney and made a good salary. I was an attorney that made very little because I was spending most of my time with the Arlington County Board, so I was trying to practice law part-time. But my income was—it wasn't nothing, but it was not substantial, let's say. It was more than my salary at the County Board, which at that time was \$25,000. I remember we raised our salaries from \$15,000 to \$25,000 in my first term, and people said, "You're raising your salary 66%." I was like, "Yeah, you know, like, if they're gonna vote me out for this..."

So anyway, what we decided was we were nervous about having the three properties. So we sold our unit in the Fairlington Glen on 36th Street, we sold it, I remember, for \$198,000. And if we would have just waited six months, we would have sold it for about \$275,000. I mean, it went up so much in that brief period of post-September. So I was like—I mean, people have the golden touch with investment property, and I'm like, I've got the exact opposite. I had it, and it's only a regret if you really think about it. And I sincerely thought about staying in that house. But we didn't, and we sold that property. And sadly, we sold my property on Buchanan Street so that we could buy the property in the Barcroft that we live in now. We did what was called a like-kind exchange. So that property that I had bought when I was single for \$107,000 in 1995 sold for, I think, \$325,000. And then we kept our unit at 3428 South Utah that we moved out of in 2013, thinking, "Well, maybe we'll move back ourselves one day, or maybe one of our kids will live here." But I have started to lose some strength, and I've had weakness in my legs, and I'm having more and more trouble with stairs. And so having—even though our unit has three bathrooms, there's stairs with all of them. And I can do stairs, but trying to plan for being older and aging in place, we decided that when we retire, we're gonna need an apartment type of property where I don't have stairs. So, we sadly, in 2024 did a like-kind exchange for our property on Utah for a condo unit in Shirlington, which someday my wife, Karen, and I will live in.

Martha Hermann: So you're renting it out?

Paul Ferguson: So we rent it out now, and we'll live there.

Martha Hermann: Which building? Where in Shirlington?

Paul Ferguson: So, it's right across the street from Busboys and Poets. It's the only condos in Shirlington, but all the rest are rentals, lo Piazza. I actually tried to buy property at lo Piazza in 2004 when it was being built because my inside information was Shirlington—I was talking about Shirlington's gonna be big, man. I was like, "You don't realize all the government money that's being expended here." "So, isn't that inside information?" I said, "No, it's public if anyone wants to look." Shirlington's gonna be valuable property. So we put a contract in on it, but then—and we were kind of leveraging ourselves. I thought it was a good idea. Karen didn't think it was a good idea. But then they decided that it was going to be a rental apartment, and that everybody that had put their money down for a condo, they just refunded that money. So that did come in handy because our car went out and we needed to buy a new car, and the money

came back from that. But anyway, there's not a lot of purchasing opportunities in Shirlington and I just—this—you wanted to talk about September 11th, but I do have to tell one story about Shirlington because there were significant land-use changes done in Shirlington during my time on the board. And for people that I represented in Fairlington, the library used to be on Arlington Mill Drive where the animal shelter is. And people liked being able to drive in and out of there, and they didn't want a garage. And there was significant opposition to the Shirlington redevelopment that you can all see now as a success with the grocery store there, the Signature theater, and the restaurants. That whole part didn't exist. It was, years ago, Best Products.

Martha Hermann: Mm-hmm. I remember that, yeah.

Paul Ferguson: It wasn't. Best had gone out of business, and it was just kind of like vacant land. So, I had people tell me, I betraying the neighborhood and they would never vote for me again. I said, I wanna guarantee that if you think that this thing stinks, or that it's a negative to Fairlington when it's finished, vote me out. Vote me out. I said, "Yeah, I'm so sure this is gonna be great, please just indulge me." And they're like, "No, you're..." You know, a number of people—and this wasn't just like one or two people, this was, you know, when you would go speak at the different condo associations and civic associations, people were completely opposed to the Shirlington redevelopment. And I went—I pushed all the chips in on it, and the developer tried to say, "Well, this area just doesn't support a grocery store." I said, "Well, this board member is just gonna vote against it." And then the other board members said, "Well, he lives in Fairlington, so if he's voting against it, we're voting against it." So even though we were five members, I got a lot of deference being the only one from Fairlington. So I said, "No grocery store, no approval." Because we used to have the Grand Union and the A&P, and that went, and we didn't have a grocery store in Shirlington. So sure, a lot of people could use the Bradlee Shopping Center, but for a lot of people, that was a little far—and there's certainly those that lived in this part of Fairlington couldn't walk there as easily as they could to Shirlington. So I talked about lots of things that were not on your list. So it's—

Martha Hermann: Mm-hmm. So but that's wonderful. It gives a whole flavor of the area.

Paul Ferguson: Well, thank you. Thank you.

Martha Hermann: We wanted to have the 9/11 interviews because the 25th—can you believe 25 years is coming up in September?

Paul Ferguson: I do remember that was out bicentennial year for Arlington's like history, or when we came into existence. And I remember, in October, we had a big ceremony right outside of the county government building where we buried a time capsule that was gonna be opened in 50 years. And I always—and I thought, "I hope I live 50 more years so that I can be there when we..." because I can't really remember everything we put into the time capsule. But I remember being there at that event thinking, "Maybe none of us will be here, you know, in 50

years." I mean, this was only a month after September 11th. So I, as I've told you a number of times, I was a little bit nervous about something else happening. So much of—

Martha Hermann: I've always said I feel like we live at Ground Zero.

Paul Ferguson: Yeah, yeah. So possibly something that I put in there might have reflected that. I just can't really remember what I put into that time capsule, but it's buried right out there by the flagpole. So I was 36 years old on September 11th, 2001. So if I make it to 2051, I would be 86. So I got a shot.

Martha Hermann: Oh Paul, you were wonderful. Thank you.

Paul Ferguson: Well, so are you, Martha. Thank you for helping me do that. It's just really an honor that you would take the time to do this and want to have a good part of it.

Martha Hermann: We're trying to—the historical society is really trying to step up what we've done. And we had a big Stumbling Stones celebration and unveiling. You know, we have the stumbling stones out in front of this office.

Paul Ferguson: I think I recall that. One thing I'd also like to note is during my time when I was the Fairlington Civic Association president from 1993 to 1995, there was a historian that lived here named Kathryn Fellows, and she did a book, Fairlington at 50. And then I think there might have been another one, Fairlington at 60, yeah. But it was her book—it was an amazing

Martha Hermann: We still use it.

Paul Ferguson: The Fairlington at 50 was incredible. And so it was the biggest financial windfall ever for the Fairlington Civic Association because she let us buy it a lot—like, we helped pay for some of the costs, and then she said, "You know, you helped pay for some of this, and I'll let you sell it." So we kept printing up more editions. We would print up like 500 of 'em, and the realtors wanted to buy them—the Long & Foster realtor that was there. So we would print up 500 books and they would sell. And it was almost kind of like you'd hold back about 50 of 'em so you could give 'em to your friends, because you as a civic association member, you had that little clout if you could get somebody one of these books that were just in such high demand. So we just kept raising the price of 'em. We had so much money. So some of the things we did were signs. There are signs that say "Fairlington Villages" when you come in. The civic association bought those signs. We tried to buy them for wherever you came in. People had all kinds of ideas how we should spend the money. They wanted to have bike lockers at the Fairlington South—Fairlington Community Center, and we said, "No, we're not gonna spend the money on that." But we were flush with funds that we were able to spend a lot of money on the community. And I don't know who pays for the Fourth of July parade, if it's the condo association or the civic association.

Martha Hermann: Mm-hmm. The Villages pays for a good portion of it.

Paul Ferguson: And that's a nice tradition. And the civic—so, yeah, that's a nice street.

Paul Ferguson: So I clearly need to yield the floor. I've gone on past my time. Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?

Martha Hermann: No, because you have covered it all.

Paul Ferguson: Covered it all, and more than you wanted to know. So, thank you.

Martha Hermann: You're wonderful to come and do this, and I appreciate it, and thank you so much.

Paul Ferguson: Thank you.

Martha Hermann: Bye.