



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT
THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

MCPB
Item #4
5/29/08

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 22, 2008

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

FROM: Clare Lise Kelly, Research & Designation Coordinator *CLK*
Historic Preservation, Countywide Planning Division

VIA: Scott Whipple, Historic Preservation Supervisor *SW*
Gwen Wright, Division Chief *GW*
Countywide Planning Division

SUBJECT: Public Hearing Draft Amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation: #30/15 Wild Acres (Grosvenor Estate)*,
5400 Grosvenor Lane

ATTACHMENTS: Nomination of Wild Acres: letter and research form
Master Plan Amendment
Submissions to Planning Board
Submissions to HPC

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Designate Wild Acres, 5400 Grosvenor Lane, Resource #30/15, on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

BACKGROUND

On March 20, 2008, staff received a nomination to designate Wild Acres on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. (See Attachment) Wild Acres, located at 5400 Grosvenor Lane, was the estate of Gilbert and Elsie Grosvenor. The resource, located on a 26.43 acre parcel (P065, Tax ID 0042430), includes a primary residence, a four-car garage, and a caretaker's house.

Established in 1912, the Grosvenor estate, Wild Acres, was historically a 104.93-acre property bounded by Rockville Pike on the east. Wild Acres was subject to development as early as 1951, when construction of I-270 was begun, known then as US 240. The eastern portion of the estate was taken for this project. This southern portion of I-270 opened for traffic in 1957. The same year, construction began on the Capital Beltway, a portion of

which is located along the southern boundary of the estate. The Beltway opened in 1964. Two years later, Gilbert Grosvenor died, followed another two years later by his wife.

In 1973, the Grosvenor family sold the Wild Acres estate. The Renewable Natural Resources Foundation (RNRF), as contract purchasers, filed a Special Exception for operating scientific educational organizations on site (later amended to a category for eleemosynary¹ and philanthropic institutions). A Special Exception was approved (S-257) that provided for the construction of office buildings not to exceed 15% lot coverage. The headquarters of the Society of American Foresters (SAF) was established in the mansion house, dedicated in 1975 as the Gifford Pinchot Forestry Building. M-NCPPC purchased 12 acres of the Grosvenor Estate for parkland, now Fleming Local Park. (See map p7 and timeline p8.)

In 1976, Wild Acres was placed on the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites*. In 1980, RNRF requested a review of the resource by the HPC and the Planning Board. Both reviewing bodies found the resource not eligible for designation, and Wild Acres was removed from the *Locational Atlas*.

The Maryland Historical Trust found, in 2000, that Wild Acres is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This determination was made as part of the I-495 Capital Beltway Transportation Improvement Study. The resource was found to meet the following National Register criteria: association with events making a significant contribution to history (A); and distinctive of a period, work of a master, and/or possessing high artistic value (C).

On January 17, 2008, the Planning Board reviewed the Wild Acres property under the Legacy Open Space program as a Natural Resources nomination. The Board approved the designation of the southern forested portion of the Wild Acre property for protection through the special exception or development review process. The attached map shows the boundaries of this designation.

A contract purchaser, Nations Academy LLC, submitted a petition on February 5, 2008, for a Special Exception under the zoning ordinance (S-2725) to construct and operate a private educational institution on this parcel and additional adjacent acreage in the R-90 zone. Through a legal arrangement, the property, totaling 35.4 acres, is owned by a consortium including the RNRF. The proposed development plan, revised April 21, calls for the retention of the primary residence and demolition of the garage and the caretaker's house. On May 5, the applicant requested an indefinite postponement of this special exception, which has been granted.

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) evaluated Wild Acres on April 23, 2008, and voted unanimously to support the designation, citing six criteria in the Preservation Ordinance. The Public Hearing Draft Amendment of May 2008 reflects the HPC recommendations (see attached).

¹From the Latin *eleemosyna* or *Alms*: of or pertaining to the giving of alms, an act of charity.

The owner of the property, SAF; the owner of the existing special exception, RNRF; and the contract purchasers, Nation's Academy, have expressed support for historic designation of the mansion house with boundaries that include only the immediate surroundings of the house. The owners have not supported an environmental setting that includes historic vistas, the carriage house or the caretaker's cottage. The surrounding community supports historic designation of Wild Acres. The Planning Board received 53 letters to date from interested parties most of whom strongly support designation of the carriage house and caretaker's house as well as an environmental setting that includes more than the main house. In addition to letters from 18 individuals, the HPC received letters supporting historic designation from two local civic associations and a petition signed by 231 residents.

Following the public hearing and worksession on this proposed Amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, the Board will formulate its advisory recommendation. The Board's recommendation will be forwarded to the County Executive and to the County Council for a final decision.

STAFF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The staff endorses the nominator's position that the Wild Acres estate merits designation on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. Staff agrees with the HPC that the resource meets six criteria for designation: 1a, 1c, 1d, 2a, 2b, and 2c.

The staff's recommendation includes the following key factors and topics:

1. Criteria for designation from Chapter 24A of the Montgomery County Code;
2. Historical Significance;
3. Architectural Significance;
4. Environmental Setting and Landscape Significance

1. Criteria for Designation

The staff finds that Wild Acres clearly meets six of the nine criteria for designating a site on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*:

- 1a. "Has character, interest and value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation" for representing the country estates that once lined Rockville Pike in the early 20th century.
- 1c. "Is identified with a person... who influenced society" for being the home of Gilbert Grosvenor, Editor of the National Geographic Magazine and President of the National Geographic Society.
- 1d. "It exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, and political heritage of the county and communities" by representing the "town and country" atmosphere of the Bethesda-Potomac region in the early 20th century.
- 2a. "It is the distinctive characteristic of a type" by representing the Tudor Revival style mansion house and coordinating garage, as well as the rustic Craftsman style of the caretaker's cottage.

- 2b. "It represents the work of a master" by being a fine example of the work of Arthur Heaton, an accomplished local architect who was prolific in the early 20th century. Heaton designed all three of the resources in this nomination.
- 2c. "It possesses high artistic value" for the estate that includes natural setting, caretaker's cottage, and sweeping vistas to the north and south.

2. Historical Significance

The Grosvenor Estate has been identified as a local landmark since as early as 1962, when Roger Brooke Farquhar updated his 1952 edition of *Old Homes and History of Montgomery County, Maryland* with a special edition that included a spread on Wild Acres. At that time the estate was only 33 years old. The Grosvenor estate had by then suffered the threat of development, with construction of I-270 and the Capital Beltway. Wild Acres was considered a potential historic resource when it was placed on the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* in 1976.

Research in the archives of the HPC and the Planning Board has not provided details of the 1980 deliberations for historic designation. It is likely that two facts weighed heavily on the minds of the reviewing bodies. The first is that the building was a mere 51 years old at the time. Fifty years is the general guideline for when a building may be considered historic, and Wild Acres had just barely crossed into that category. The other influencing factor was undoubtedly the Special Exception which was approved three years before Wild Acres was placed on the *Locational Atlas*.

Circumstances have changed since the 1980 review of Wild Acres. The building is now close to 80 years old and with the passing of time has come an appreciation for pre-Depression era estates of this grandeur. In addition, more research has been done on the historic context, especially of country estates in Montgomery County, and we have a better perspective on Gilbert Grosvenor and his significant contributions to society. Finally, there is the current practice of reviewing the historic and architectural significance of a property independently of development plans.

Wild Acres has historical significance both for its specific connection with the Grosvenors, and for representing country estates in the early 20th century. Gilbert H. Grosvenor was a significant historical figure. He was Editor in Chief of the National Geographic Magazine from 1903 to 1954. The nominator points out that under his guidance, the circulation of the NGM grew from 1,000 to over 2 million. Grosvenor's influence extended to the expansion of the national park system. It is important to recognize the important role Grosvenor forged in his field. Grosvenor is considered the father of photojournalism. His pioneering work included firsts in American wildlife photography, expedition photos, and anthropological photography, and use of color photography in journals. Elsie May Bell Grosvenor was the daughter of Alexander Graham Bell who, in addition to his accomplishments as an inventor, was the President of the National Geographic Society.

It was a reflection of the income and status of the time that many of the country estates in lower Montgomery County were established by publishers. In the 19th century, these estates were found in Silver Spring (Washington Globe's Blair, 1840s; Washington Star's

Crosby Noyes, 1882). In the early 20th century, the desired location was the countryside of Bethesda and Chevy Chase. Choice among these was Rockville Pike land. After 1890, a streetcar made the land accessible and, by the 1920s, the Pike was in good condition for automobile travel. Following Grosvenor's 1912 purchase, publishers who built houses in this part of the county included John F. Wilkins of the Washington Post. Grosvenor's estate was bordered by Pook's Hill, the estate of Merle Thorpe, Editor and Publisher of Business Week. And Grosvenor's colleague John Joy Edson, Treasurer of National Geographic, built Timberlawn on Sugarbush Lane, Bethesda (demolished).

The Grosvenor name is recognized in placenames established in the vicinity of Wild Acres. Grosvenor Lane (formerly Grosvenor Road) connected the Wild Acres estate with Rockville Pike and Old Georgetown Road.² After the Metro opened in 1976, the closed station to Wild Acres was named Grosvenor.

3. Architectural Significance

Staff believes that the nominator's arguments for the architectural significance of the building are compelling. The mansion house is a fine example of period architecture highly representative of wealthy estates in the pre-Depression era. The mansion house has two primary facades with details designed specifically for the Grosvenor family. The north façade is a fine example of Tudor Revival featuring half timbering, brick and stonework. The front door is surmounted with the Grosvenor coat of arms. The south façade has a Colonial Revival aspect, with a more symmetrical main block with central entrance. A copper downspout on this façade is incised with "GG 1928," being Grosvenor's initials and the construction date.

The residence and related buildings have significance as the work of Arthur Heaton (1875-1951), an accomplished architect who was known for both using of traditional design yet embracing new technology of the automobile. Heaton designed the main residence, the carriage house (four-car garage), and caretaker's cottage. Heaton's papers, located at the Library of Congress, contain plans for Wild Acres including the building identified as the Gardener's Cottage. Heaton was supervising architect for the National Cathedral, and he designed the innovative shopping center, the Park and Shop on Connecticut Avenue. He was elected a Fellow of the AIA in 1941. Heaton had a close relationship with Grosvenor. He designed the headquarters for the National Geographic Society and designed the Grosvenor House in Washington DC.³

4. Environmental Setting and Landscape Significance

Wild Acres' contributing architectural resources are the main residence, the four-car garage, and the frame caretaker's cottage. These structures are a unified whole, designed by the same architect and built for the Grosvenors. The relationship between these structures and the site was and still is a critical element of the overall design. The

²Gilbert Grosvenor owned an additional 14-acre parcel at the NE intersection of Grosvenor Lane and Old Georgetown Road (1941 Klinge Real Estate Atlas)

³Arthur Heaton was Associate Architect for George Washington University where Grosvenor was a trustee, and both were members of the Cosmos Club.

Grosvenor Estate was originally 104.93 acres. Much of this property was forested, as documented in 1951 aerial photographs. The areas north and south of the house, however, were cleared. The setting includes the vista from the front of the house north toward Grosvenor Lane. Equally significant is the vista from the house south toward the sweeping lawn. Historic photographs document Grosvenor family gatherings that took place on the south lawn.

Under the Grosvenor ownership there was a complex of several structures on the property. Among the buildings no longer standing are a horse barn and a farmhouse that predates the Wild Acres mansion. Two standing structures that are not recommended for designation are a cow barn and a silo. The cow barn (1920s) and silo (1943) are located on an adjacent parcel with two office buildings built in 1981. Though historically connected to the Grosvenor estate, the barn and silo are now on a separate parcel and are not included in the nomination.

Of all buildings that once stood in this complex, there are two that are recommended for inclusion in the designation: the caretaker's cottage and the carriage house or garage.

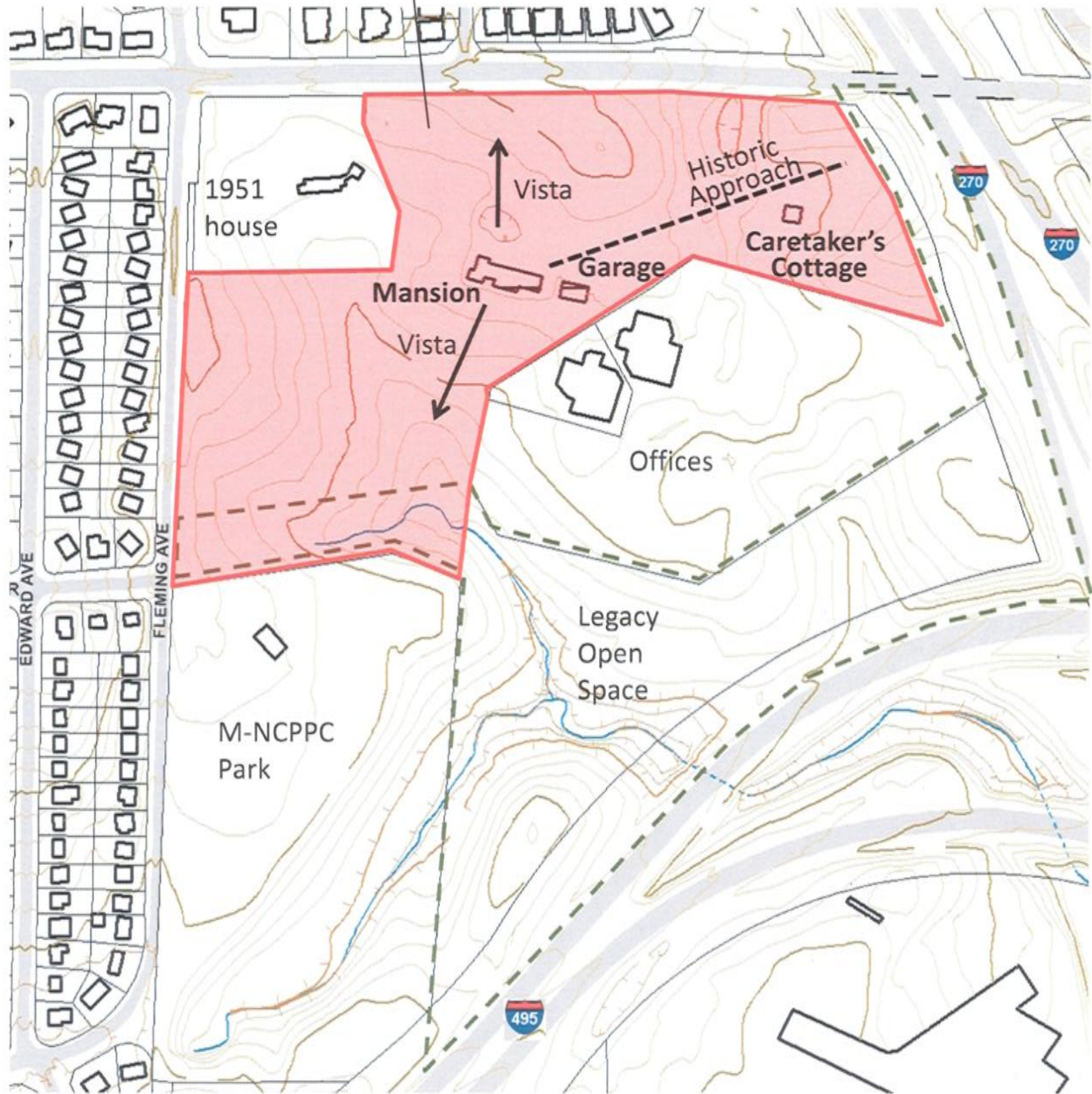
The following portions of Wild Acres are **not** proposed for designation and/or are considered non-contributing elements: 1) interior of the building (Chapter 24A does not provide for jurisdiction over interiors), 2) barn and silo located on adjacent parcel., 3) office buildings (1981) on adjacent parcel.

The recommended environmental setting is less than the entire parcel. Typically in designation of historic sites, the entire parcel is the environmental setting to be reduced in the event of subdivision. In this case, the parcel is an irregular shape with the southern portion visually divided from the northern portion by the parcel with office buildings (see map p.7). The southern portion of the property is subject to Legacy Open Space dedication. The recommended environmental setting as shown on the map is over half of the area of the 26.43 acre parcel.

CONCLUSION

Staff finds that the Wild Acres merits designation on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. Staff finds that the building has both historic and architectural significance, meeting Criteria 24A-3(b)(1)a. c. and d., as well as 24A-3(b)(2)a. b. and c.

Recommended Environmental Setting



WILD ACRES, 5400 Grosvenor Lane, Bethesda

TIMELINE OF DEVELOPMENT AND PRESERVATION

1951-57	I-270 constructed (US 240, I-70). The highway traversed eastern portion of Grosvenor Estate.
1951	Residence at 5510 Grosvenor Lane constructed for Grosvenor family member on 2.7 acre parcel subdivided west of main residence. Still owned by the family.
1957	Southern section of I-270 was last one to open.
1957-64	Capital Beltway (I-495) constructed. Cut through southern portion of Grosvenor Estate.
1962	Wild Acres recognized as a significant historic site in Roger Brooke Farquhar's <i>Old Homes and History of Montgomery County, Maryland</i> , pp320-322.
1966	Gilbert Grosvenor died.
1968	Elsie Grosvenor died.
1972	Renewable Natural Resources Foundation established. RNRF is a consortium of professional groups including the Society of American Foresters.
1973	Grosvenors sold Wild Acres estate. RNRF files Special Exception. Three phase proposal includes office buildings to headquarter member societies. Approved special exception specifies that buildings not exceed 15% lot coverage. Height of new buildings not to exceed height of the Grosvenor mansion Twelve-acre parcel subdivided (SW of main Grosvenor residence) and acquired by M-NCPPC for local park
1974	SAF renovated interior of mansion house, while preserving the exterior.
1975	Headquarters of SAF established in Grosvenor mansion, dedicated as Gifford Pinchot Forestry Building.
1976	Nature trails established. Sewer moratorium precludes construction of office buildings. Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites published, identifying Wild Acres as a historic resource Grosvenor Metro station opened
1979	Master Plan for Historic Preservation approved and adopted
1980	September: Site plan application for office buildings approved. Owner requests historic evaluation be completed and resource found not eligible for designation. October : HPC evaluates resource and recommends against designation November: Planning Board evaluates and votes to remove from <i>Locational Atlas</i> . Wild Acres was 51 years old.
1981	Two office buildings constructed
2000	MHT finds Wild Acres eligible for National Register of Historic Places

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

The following criteria, as stated in Section 24A-3 of the *Historic Preservation Ordinance*, shall apply when historic resources are evaluated for designation in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

(1) Historical and cultural significance:

The historic resource:

- a. has character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the County, State, or Nation;
- b. is the site of a significant historic event;
- c. is identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society; or
- d. exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historic heritage of the County and its communities; or

(2) Architectural and design significance:

The historic resource:

- a. embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction;
- b. represents the work of a master;
- c. possesses high artistic values;
- d. represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- e. represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or County due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape.