

**Montgomery County
in the
Early Twentieth Century**

**A Study of Historical and
Architectural Themes**

**Completed for the
Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission
and the
Maryland Historical Trust**

by

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Introduction

Montgomery County is a large, complex, and rapidly developing area. Since the 19th century it has benefited from its location adjacent to the Nation's Capital, drawing on its population for its residents, and profiting from the increases in home-seekers during times of national stress. While other areas of the United States have stagnated or declined during the Great Depression, Montgomery County grew, providing homes for the thousands of people drawn to the area to work for the federal government.

Today, the private sector has joined the federal government as a major employer, and the demand for housing continues. As the houses go up, shopping centers are built to serve the needs of the new residential areas. Office and professional parks, industrial and research compounds are developed on what was farmland only a few years ago. Large office complexes are built in the midst of once quiet, small suburban towns. The face of Montgomery County is changing rapidly, and those concerned with the physical reminders of its past are justifiably interested in documenting these sites before they disappear.

Survey work performed in the early 1970s documented resources of historical and architectural interest, and the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites*, published in 1976, is an excellent guide to these resources. At the time of this 1976 survey, the emphasis was on sites built prior to 1900. In order to bring the survey up to date, the Historic Preservation Commission, with assistance from the Maryland Historical Trust, has commissioned this survey and study of early 20th century historical and architectural resources.

This report is the culmination of Phase I of the early 20th century survey. It consists of a review of Montgomery County history, focusing on the period of approximately 1900 to 1941. It pinpoints the major themes in the County's growth during this period, and discusses the physical manifestations (primarily buildings) of these historical forces. Based on a reconnaissance survey of the entire County, a list of potential historic sites was compiled. Five themes were selected and given more detailed study. Within the context of these themes, sites were chosen which illustrate important aspects of Montgomery County history in the early part of this century. Recommendations for placing some of these sites on the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation and the Maryland Inventory of Historic Sites appear near the end of the report. Phase II of this project will continue the investigation of themes and the selection of additional sites.

Going to the Country: A Summary of Montgomery County's Twentieth Century History

From our late 20th century vantage point, the word that most characterizes Montgomery County today is "development." To the Washingtonians alive at the beginning of the 20th century, however, the word best describing their view of Montgomery County was "escape." City living had become oppressive, particularly in a climate such as Washington's, where malaria and yellow fever were not uncommon maladies. The 19th century dislike of the marshy lowlands which comprised much of the District of Columbia was fully justified. In the heat and humidity of summer, mosquitoes and flies were a real problem; homes were not equipped with window screens, let alone air conditioning.¹ North of Florida Avenue, the newer neighborhoods of 19th century row houses were replacing the woods and meadows of what had been farms only a decade before. Without mature street trees to shade them from the sun, even the residential districts were oppressively hot.

The city was becoming crowded, too. Although Washington did not receive the hordes of immigrants that gravitated to more industrial cities, the Civil Service Act of 1883 brought to federal employment a stability that encouraged middle class families to settle here rather than remain in their home states while the family breadwinner put in his time for his administration. Before the Civil War, Washington had a permanent population of only 75,000. Twenty years later the population had more than doubled to 178,000.²

Physical distance, however, limited the extent of residential development at the time of the Civil War. One could travel only so fast on foot or in a horse-drawn carriage. "Commuting" to work from a distance of even five miles was unheard of. Street railways using horse-drawn trolleys were an improvement, making "suburban" development in northwest Washington a possibility by the 1880s.

The leap to the far countryside, however, came in 1873 with the opening of the Metropolitan Branch of the B & O Railroad. The path was laid quite literally for movement out of the city into neighboring Montgomery County. Now, theoretically, city workers could commute to their jobs from homes in the country by boarding the train, paying a small fare, and riding half an hour into the city. This was the theory. In reality, however, it took decades for most suburban subdivisions to develop. Wealthier citizens bought

lots in Linden, Forest Glen, Capitol View, Garrett Park, and Kensington, but many of the homes they built were for summer use only, the families returning to their city houses for the winter season. Many lots were purchased but not developed. There were at least two reasons for this. The first was the desire of the new suburbanites to surround themselves with as much "country" as possible by purchasing two or more lots and building on only one of them, sometimes holding the others for future development by their children. The second reason is directly related to market conditions and the state of transportation in the 1880s and 1890s. Commuting by train proved not to be as convenient as originally proposed. Only the closest suburban subdivisions, Takoma Park and Woodside, were within train's reach of the office for "families of moderate means." The train schedule, and travel time and fares which increased the farther one went from the city line, discouraged moderate and middle income families from building homes too far out on the rail line.³

The streetcar began to change all this. The turn of the century saw the chartering of numerous street railway companies, usually by men intent on developing tracts of farmland into suburban communities. Chevy Chase was the grandest example of this, but the developers of Glen Echo and Forest Glen, among others, also developed trolley lines to enable the citizenry to ride out to the country, lured by the attraction of a resort hotel, a Chautauqua, or an amusement park. The intention was to induce the visitors to purchase lots at the end of the trolley line, build houses and form a community. Apparently, stronger inducements were needed, for Glen Echo and Forest Glen did not succeed in this sense. Chevy Chase, however, was much more comprehensively planned. It included more amenities and community facilities, and was well promoted. The Chevy Chase Land Company was registered in 1890. Despite the economic depression of 1893, almost fifty families were living in Chevy Chase by 1900.

The streetcars enabled a fair amount of commercial development to occur along their routes. "Takoma Junction" in Takoma Park, Wisconsin Avenue, Old Georgetown Road, and Rockville Pike saw many stores and businesses springing up in the first two decades of the century, but growth, particularly residential growth, was slow. Commuting by trolley, though less expensive than the train, took more time (as much as 50 minutes from Forest Glen), and this discouraged many families from using their suburban houses as more than summer retreats. The suburbs abound with large Victorian houses and tiny bungalows dating from 1890 to 1915 which were originally used only in the summer. Not until the early 1920s when the automobile became cheap enough to enter common use, and the State of Maryland invested in an ambitious road building campaign between 1910 and 1915, did Montgomery County begin to develop as a true residential suburb.

The internal combustion engine, mounted in cars, trucks, and buses, radically altered the landscape. New subdivisions sprang up away from the rail lines, and major roadways became the new spines for concentrated development, this time commercial as well as residential. Prior to the 1920s, commercial and industrial development had been limited to a few crossroads and to stations and sidings along the railroad. Now any road with a sufficient concentration of people living nearby could support a few stores. Neighborhood shopping centers began sprouting in the 1920s, and by 1938 Silver Spring sported the first regional shopping center in the County.⁴ Traffic congestion became a problem, and the two-lane roads were widened to accommodate the growing number of cars. By the late 1920s the traffic problems were so bad that businessmen were calling for the removal of the trolleys from the streets to ease the tie-ups. They finally got their way in the 1930s, and buses became the major form of public transportation. The Metropolitan line continued to be used, but people relied more and more on cars and buses to take them to work, to school, to church, to the country club or the park, to the restaurant and the movie theatre, or for that drive to "the country" when suburban life became a bit too hectic. In the late 1920s, suburbanites commuting to work relied upon Colesville Road, the Brookville and Washington Turnpike (now Georgia Avenue), Kensington Road (now Connecticut Avenue) which ended in Kensington, Wisconsin Avenue/Rockville Pike, and Conduit Road (now MacArthur Boulevard). East West Highway, originally named the Silver Spring Bethesda Highway, did not open until 1930. Almost no subdivisions had been built out River or Bradley Roads, though one would travel these roads to reach the Kenwood and Bannockburn Golf Clubs, the Burning Tree Club, the Congressional Country Club, and the National Women's Country Club.⁵

In a sense, suburban development is backwards. Traditional patterns of development in the United States evolved from locating a function - trade, industry, or government - at a particular spot, such as a seaport or a crossroads. Attracted by jobs or the possibility of doing business, people moved nearby and built homes. Viewed in isolation, suburban development is the exact opposite. Residential development was the impetus, not the result, of growth in Montgomery County. Throughout most of the 19th century, Montgomery County was completely rural. Her vast acreage consisted of woods and farms, with an occasional blacksmith's shop, church, mill, or general store with post office. The few towns that existed were simply larger versions of this country crossroads settlement. The exception to this, of course, was Rockville, but that town grew because it was a government center, the county seat. Even with the coming of the railroad there was little need for increased commercial development, for there were still very few people to patronize stores, banks, restaurants, theatres, and other commercial enterprises which

the city of Washington offered in abundance. Not until the 20th century, had enough city people moved to the edges of the country to encourage the development of such "urban" amenities. This pattern was repeated as more outlying areas developed. First came the subdivisions, then came the stores, garages, restaurants, and banks. By mid-century, suburban employment centers began to emerge as the federal government decentralized its operations and built compounds in Bethesda, Cabin John, Glen Echo, and Germantown. Today, the cycle of development has come round completely, with the growth of employment centers once again encouraging residential growth by filling in what little vacant land remains in the older subdivisions, and by creating new subdivisions on former estates, countryclubs, and farms.

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Themes in Montgomery County's Growth

It is clear from this summary of Montgomery County's history during the early 20th century that many forces were at work here. Some of these forces were clear-cut national trends, some were social movements, some were the result of technological advances. Many forces were intertwined with one another in a complex pattern which can only be separated artificially for purposes of study. The entire process was fascinating and rich in its implications for understanding the future (post World War II) growth of the County.

The physical results of these forces of change have contributed to the architectural and historical heritage of Montgomery County. To give some order to the vast array of 20th century structures and sites, the major themes of Montgomery County growth are delineated below and her physical heritage is examined in relation to these themes.

Theme I: Residential

By far the most obvious of the themes in Montgomery County's 20th century development, the resultant structures of the residential theme form the largest category in terms of variety and sheer numbers of extant examples. This theme has been divided into single-family dwellings and multi-family dwellings.

A. Single-family Dwellings

The single-family category is broken down for the most part into divisions along economic lines. These are:

1. Estates of the Wealthy By the end of the 19th century, the nation's wealthiest families were building elaborate, sometimes enormous houses on country estates. *American Country Houses of To-day*, published in 1915, illustrates dozens of grand houses in Connecticut, Massachusetts, on Long Island, in Newport, and even California -- but none in Maryland.¹ Three Washington mansions are shown, all within two miles of the White House. One of these "country houses" (designed for Mrs. Robert R. Hitt by John Russell Pope) sits right on Dupont Circle! The great country estates of wealthy

Washingtonians did not begin to appear in Montgomery County until well into the second decade of the century. Compared to cities like New York and Boston, Washington was not as built up by the turn of the century. There was plenty of room for a "country estate" within the city limits. By 1910 this had changed. Wealthy families had purchased land in the country, particularly along or near Rockville Pike, and were remodeling or replacing farmhouses with grand summer homes. Of those still standing, one of the earliest is the Corby estate, an extensive renovation in 1914 of a house built by Captain Oyster in 1902. At the other end of this time period is Timberlawn, the Shriver mansion, built in 1930. A tremendous amount of research on this topic has been done by Roy Gauza, who anticipates publishing a book on these houses in the near future.

2. Upper-middle-class Homes/Subdivisions While the wealthiest Washingtonians were content in their city mansions or country farmsteads, the upper-middle class was being lured to the newly developing suburbs by Francis G. Newlands and his Chevy Chase Land Company (founded in 1890). Newlands deliberately aimed his development at these well-to-do businessmen and government officials by offering amenities such as a trolley line to commute to work (after all, these men still worked for a living), a lake with an amusement park, a private club, a library, a school, electricity, free delivery service from downtown stores, and above all exclusivity, as guaranteed by deed restrictions.

Newlands was not the only one to woo the upper-middle class, but he was the most successful. Garrett Park (1887) and Kensington (1890) at first appealed to the same market as Chevy Chase, and some large homes were built around the turn of the century in these two subdivisions, but for the most part lots were developed later and on a less grand scale. There was a limit to the number of affluent families looking to relocate outside Washington, and they were won over by the superior organization and promotion of Chevy Chase. Somewhat later (1899) Somerset Heights was platted. Taking its cue from Chevy Chase, it provided many amenities from the outset, and was successful in attracting a similar clientele. No doubt its proximity to Chevy Chase helped its initial success, for by the turn of the century other contiguous subdivisions and additions to Chevy Chase were growing.

3. Middle-class Homes/Subdivisions The first developers in Montgomery County were aiming for a different market. Linden was the first subdivision to be platted, in 1873, but only a dozen homes had been built by 1900. Far more successful was the first planned subdivision of Takoma Park, platted in 1883. Its developer, B. F. Gilbert, tried to attract workers "of moderate

means," stressing the affordability of his community by advertising inexpensive lots.² He required no minimum cost for a house, being more concerned that residents maintain high moral standards (he did forbid the manufacture of alcohol). While Gilbert saw to it his community had a church, a school and a library early on, he did not originally provide water, sewer or electricity to his lots. In the early years of the development, middle-class residents often purchased more than one lot, since lots were so cheap, and built large homes. This pattern was repeated farther up the railroad line in Woodside (1889), also intended by its developer, Benjamin F. Leighton, as a haven for moderate income families. The bargain rates and the beautiful setting were irresistible to the middle class (professionals, merchants, businessmen, government clerks), however, and most of the original homes in these subdivisions were actually middle-class -- many being used at first only as summer homes. While these and other subdivisions did eventually attract moderate-income families (shop clerks, mechanics, factory workers), the County gained a well-deserved reputation for "decent" (i.e., solidly middle-class) neighborhoods throughout the first half of the 20th century.

4. Moderate-income Homes/Subdivisions As mentioned above, those subdivisions intended for this group actually attracted more middle-class buyers in their early years. By 1900, however, the streetcar had made commuting cheap enough so that lower-level government workers could afford to live in the suburbs. This was the era of the bungalow. Whether built by a local builder or assembled from a kit ordered through the mail, hundreds of them began popping up in Takoma Park, in Silver Spring, in Cabin John. By the 1920s when automobiles were becoming common, these more modest houses began filling in vacant lots in the older suburbs, particularly Garrett Park and Capitol View, which had not developed very rapidly in their initial years. Granted, a great number of the tiny bungalows were built as summer homes, but not too many years passed before they were occupied year-round.

Garrett Park was the site of a unique development in moderate-priced housing: the "Chevy Houses." These were small, mass produced houses built in 1924 by Maddux and Marshall Company, Inc., and they came equipped with a radio. Not only that, if one wished, he could purchase a garage complete with a Chevrolet car at a discount and include its cost in the mortgage.³ This was probably the ultimate in a developer's attempt to offer the American Dream to people "of modest means."

5. Low-income Housing There were, of course, many residents of Montgomery County whose income was marginal at best. Most blacks enjoyed a precarious economic existence, living in sub-standard dwellings in settlements like Scotland and Monkey Run. These areas had grown after the

slaves were freed during the Civil War. Twentieth century suburban subdivisions deliberately excluded blacks through deed covenants which forbade the sale or rental of property to blacks. (See the chapter "Residential Subdivisions of the 1920s in Montgomery County" for a discussion and examples of these restrictions.) As more farmland was developed into subdivisions, blacks retreated to their existing settlements, to black neighborhoods in existing towns (such as Lincoln Park in Rockville) or into the city of Washington.⁴

Throughout the majority of this still rural county were poor farmers living in crumbling 18th and 19th century houses. No efforts were made to improve the housing conditions of these people, for government agencies did not exist to care for their needs, and there was no profit to be made in providing new homes for them. The first large-scale attempts at low-cost housing in Montgomery County came during the Depression, when Lavinia Engle called for a rural slum clearance program in 1935. After considerable opposition from the County Farm Bureau and several prominent real estate developers, construction on 200 low-cost rental units was begun in 1941.⁵ The next attempt at housing low-income groups did not occur until after World War II, when the huge numbers of returning veterans necessitated some response. In 1946, the County contracted with the U.S. Public Housing Administration for 249 units of temporary housing for veterans near the poverty level. Increasing population pressures stimulated the demand for more low-cost housing, and the solidly middle-class image of Montgomery County was finally shattered with the development of Viers Mill Village, a huge, 348-acre subdivision consisting of 1,400 tiny, partially pre-fabricated houses intended primarily for veterans. Trailer parks began to appear in more rural areas, and at least four of them still remain on Rt. 355 north of Gaithersburg.

6. Farmhouses Thanks to the railroad, Montgomery County's farms were rebounding at the end of the 19th century, and many prosperous farmers were replacing their outdated houses with new ones. Stylistically, they were far less varied than their city counterparts, being primarily simplified Queen Annes, foursquares, or bungalows.

B. Multi-family Dwellings

1. Duplexes, Townhouses, and Multi-family Blocks Not all houses in Montgomery County were designed for single families. By 1907, three apartment buildings had been built on Maple and Cedar Avenues in Takoma Park, the suburb closest to the District line. These buildings each contained

four flats, as apartments were called at the turn of the century. In appearance, however, they resembled double houses, or the row houses so common in Washington a short distance away. Another trio of apartment buildings was constructed around 1910 on Carroll Avenue, also in Takoma Park. Thereafter, several double houses and buildings of flats were built in Takoma Park. Prior to 1930, however, the only multi-family dwellings built outside of Takoma Park were the Glen Castle Apartments in Forest Glen. This was a group of six flats incorporated into the enlarged (c. 1915) Forest Glen Trading Company building, which today is known as the Castle. By the 1930s, apartments were being built over the shops in neighborhood commercial centers, such as the Montgomery Hills Shopping Center (c. 1930). The year 1936 saw the groundbreaking for the County's first true garden apartment complex, the Falklands. The only group of true townhouses (as opposed to the duplexes built in Falkland's first section) to be built before World War II was in Silver Spring on Dixon Avenue just west of Georgia Avenue. This was a block of nine brick townhouses which have recently been torn down for high-rise development.

2. Garden Apartment Complexes The first garden apartment complex in Montgomery County, and by far the largest and most ambitious, was the Falkland Apartments built in 1936-1938 by the Blair family on part of their former farm in Silver Spring. Falkland's architect, Louis Justement, studied many projects for moderate-income families, including Colonial Village in Arlington, VA, and Chatham Village near Pittsburgh. He developed a design which combined masterful site planning with a novel mixture of townhouse units placed among apartment blocks (these townhouses were technically duplexes since they lacked a party wall). The success of this project encouraged a number of similar developments throughout the southern portion of the County, including Blair Park Gardens in Takoma Park (1938); Piney Branch Apartments (1939-1940) and Spring Gardens Apartments (1941) in Silver Spring; and Hampden Hall and Hampden Lane Apartments and Bradley Terrace Apartments in Bethesda (1940). Most of these garden apartment buildings were designed in the Colonial Revival style, often quite simplified and rather derivative. The major exception is Spring Gardens which is an excellent local example of the "Modernistic" style, a combination of Moderne and Deco styles, displaying such characteristics as wrap-around corner windows, glass block, and low-relief geometric stone panels to ornament entryways.⁶ Even the entry doors and their hardware are thoroughly "modern."

The majority of Montgomery County residents, however, objected loudly to the development of multi-family housing. To them, it represented many of the evils they and their parents had been trying to escape when they left the

city at the turn of the century: overcrowding, traffic congestion, increased burden on county services, and the introduction of a lower-class "element." Suburban residents felt so strongly about this issue that it became the basis for the toppling of the long-standing Democratic political organization of E. Brooke Lee.

When the MNCPPC [Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission] was created and the first zoning ordinance adopted, zoning and planning meant protecting expensive one-family residential construction. Self-protectively, the civic associations wanted to discourage any other type of development. The Lee organization favored opening the County to broader zoning. The County's rapid population growth had engendered a rash of applications for apartment rezoning in Silver Spring and Bethesda. Civic associations bitterly opposed any changes to accommodate multi-family housing. . . . The quarrel about apartment house zoning pitted both Lee's MNCPPC and prominent members of his Democratic organization against old allies in the Montgomery County Civic Federation and other home owners' groups. The civic leaders who had helped Lee create the bi-county planning agency were now bitterly denouncing its policy, and loudly condemning the bad effects of "one-man-rule."⁷

Ironically, it was Lee's progressive leadership and superb organization that brought intelligent planning to the County, guiding its development for decades, and creating the very environment so attractive to the suburbanites who chose to settle here. The newcomers, however, were determined to fight for more control over county government. Throughout the 1940s they consistently defeated Democratic candidates and finally voted in a charter in 1948 which fundamentally altered county government.

Mark Walston, in his 1983 report for the MNCPPC on the Falkland Apartments and pre-World War II apartment building in Montgomery County, presented the following statistics regarding the construction of residential units:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Single Family Units</u>	<u>Multi-Family Units</u>	<u>Total Units</u>
1935	745	14	759
1936	1,083	590	1,673
1937	1,777	458	2,235
1938	1,144	100	1,244
1939	1,815	128	1,943
1940	2,133	235	2,368
1941	2,411	510	2,921
1942	801	593	1,394
1943	312	523	835

<u>Year</u>	<u>Single Family Units</u>	<u>Multi-Family Units</u>	<u>Total Units</u>
1944	76	52	128
1945	708	105	813
1946	2,039	292	2,331
1947	3,310	1,209	4,519
1948	2,930	928	3,858
1949	3,408	1,481	4,889
1950	6,235	471	6,706 ⁸

In this long list of numbers can be seen the pattern of residential growth in Montgomery County from the Depression to mid-century. Between 1920 and 1930, a total of 3,506 homes were built in the County. In the early years of the Depression construction dwindled, but by mid-decade the demand for housing was so strong that the three years between 1935 and 1937 saw more homes built than in the entire decade preceding the Depression.

When the rest of the nation was still stagnating due to the condition of the economy, the area around Washington was benefiting immediately from New Deal programs by providing housing for the influx of government workers called to Washington to implement these bold new programs. Such development is unique. During other economic depressions and wars, Montgomery County's growth slowed with the rest of the nation's. As can be seen above, housing construction during World War II dwindled to practically nothing. But Depression era residential construction is far more prevalent here than in most other parts of the country, thus providing a unique opportunity for studying building of this period.

3. High-rise Apartment Buildings A second point demonstrated by these statistics is the trend in multi-family residential construction. After the initial spurt of growth in 1936 and 1937, construction of apartment units subsided significantly, and did not exceed its earlier peak until 1942. World War II reduced such construction drastically, and although apartment construction increased dramatically after 1947, it still accounted for only 16% of all residential construction in 1950. In 1949 ground was broken for Montgomery County's first high-rise apartment building, the nine-story Pook's Hill Apartments off Rockville Pike. Not until the 1960s was resistance to apartments sufficiently reduced to allow increased construction, this time of luxury high-rise apartments. By the early 1970s, one-third of Montgomery County families were living in apartments.⁹

The third significant fact emerging from the statistics is the beginning of an enormous boom in residential construction starting after World War II.

Between 1946 and 1950, Montgomery County's population nearly doubled. This unprecedented growth brought about substantial changes which altered the face of the County more drastically than ever before. Farmland disappeared at an ever-increasing rate, as year after year subdivisions sprang up farther out in the County. The Capital Beltway ringing Washington opened in 1964, and large regional shopping centers began to appear. With their arrival, older "downtown" shopping districts began to decline, eventually to be replaced with high-rise office buildings. The federal government relocated the Atomic Energy Commission to Germantown in 1958; the Bureau of Standards completed its move to the County by 1967. Both brought large centers of employment to the County. Private industry also found Montgomery County attractive in the decades after World War II. In 1947 only 1,098 county residents were employed in industry; by 1973, this number had risen to over 15,000.¹⁰ Thus the cycle had been completed. People were now moving out to the County to be near their jobs. Housing and shopping facilities were being constructed to accommodate the influx of workers, rather than the other way around. A new era of growth had begun.

residential subdivisions. Opportunities for outstanding design were limited to an occasional building, often located in an area developed during the Victorian era. The striking and unusual buildings of the National Park Seminary in Forest Glen are a good example of this. Begun in the late 1890s, many Seminary buildings were built between 1900 and the late 1920s following the pattern of exuberance established in the late 19th century.

In most cases, the early 20th century sites chosen for study in this report were selected as much for their social-history value as their architectural value. Fortunately, nearly all important architectural examples of this period have already been recognized and have been or are being placed on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. This study endeavored to find those less obvious architectural and historical resources: those which are less appreciated because little has previously been known about the context in which they were built.

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