Woodley Park Community: A Sketch of Our Past
Chapter 1. Birth of a Suburb: 1890-1920

Woodley Park is distinguishable as a neighborhood by its architectural integrity. The dominance of rowhouses, the consistently English architectural styles, and the park-like strips of green lawn and trees give the area its visual character.

At the time of Washington's early development, the Woodley area consisted of modest manor houses on large sites and at least one working mill on wooded land rising away from the flatland by the river. To attract residents when development began in the 1870's, the area was called Woodley Park after the lovely Federal mansion, "Woodley," built by Philip Barton Key, a lawyer and congressman who was uncle to Francis Scott Key, author of the *Star Spangled Banner*. In 1888, art collector businessman Thomas Waggaman and John Ridout redesigned the neighborhood into smaller lots focused on Woodley Road, described as "a country road, winding (its) way down the hillside, crossing the creek on wooden bridge(s) a few feet above the level of the stream."[1]

Development began in 1905 with the construction of the small but elegant townhouse at 2600 Connecticut Avenue, designed by Clark Waggaman, son of the now bankrupt Thomas Waggaman. Clark Waggaman's first commissions, all in the area, included the still existing buildings at 2519, 2602, 2604, and 2623–2627 Connecticut Avenue. These three-to-four-story townhouses prophesied that Connecticut Avenue north of the dividing valley of Rock Creek would develop as a fashionable location.

Connecticut Avenue was a critical element in the late nineteenth century plans of Senator Francis G. Newlands' Chevy Chase Land Company, builders of the suburb of Chevy Chase. Newlands sought the advice of nationally renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted regarding the design of the main traffic artery to the distant suburb. Olmsted advised that Connecticut Avenue be regarded as the main channel of a great river, with other streets as its tributaries.[2] Connecticut Avenue, developed in the suggested manner, became a crucial spine connecting the communities of northwest Washington and providing the commercial focus to such enclaves as Woodley Park.

The Taft Bridge crossing Rock Creek on Connecticut Avenue linked Woodley Park to the neighborhood of Kalorama or "beautiful view" and to downtown Washington. The bridge was constructed between 1897 and 1907 of unreinforced concrete, and named for President William Howard Taft in 1931.

Between 1905 and 1910, 144 buildings were constructed in a wave of real estate speculation. The first row of houses was on Garfield Place. The most prolific developers of Woodley Park houses in this first decade were Ray E. Middaugh and William E. Shannon with 45 buildings. In 1908, they began construction of two groups of townhouses along Cathedral Avenue and 27th Street. The latter were defined in the firm's advertising by the amount of green open space in the planning of the development:

> *"One spot in the city where a man who is able to purchase a fine house closed in between a succession of brick walls can afford, at no greater cost, a comfortable 'home', surrounded by a comfortable lawn and the beautiful things of nature that make life worthwhile."*[3]

Despite the presence of many architects working for many builders, there emerged a remarkably unified architectural character in Woodley Park. Within each row, units of uniform height were built of similar materials with decorative detail of consistent style and proportion and with an identical relationship to the street and to open land. All of the rows shared a common scale, linear but not narrow, and an urbane but unpretentious presence. Their character was strongly reminiscent of Edwardian England. Such details as keystones over windows, panels inset on facades between floors, doors highlighted by fanlights and sidelights, Roman Doric columns of delicate proportions, and Palladian windows were popular and recalled the delicate neo-classicism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. English, too, was the organization of open space into a greensward or strip park running in front of the houses between the facades and building line. Woodley Park's cohesive visual identity reflected the strong influence of contemporary English city planning.

Apartments appeared in Woodley Park first in 1914 with the construction of a small, multi-unit building designed by architect Frank Russell White and still standing at 2812 Connecticut Avenue. Some of the later apartment buildings, such as Cathedral Mansions and the Kennedy-Warren, were set within park-like grounds allowing all residents to enjoy views of the open land held in common. Other large apartment buildings occupied nearly all of their sites, such as those which punctuated the progress of Connecticut Avenue, constructed by the colorful builder-developer Harry Wardman at 2659, 2700, 2800 and 2854.

Woodley Park was a place for families. The 1910 census recorded 91 family groups living in the neighborhood. By income and occupation, these were middle and upper middle class households. Household heads were employed by the government, as clerk, statistician, topographer, patent examiner, military officer, and by financial organizations as brokers or clerks. Others worked as construction managers and sales representatives for the active building industry, or as lawyers, journalists, and small businessmen.[4] Though not opulently wealthy, many of the residents owned their own homes and could afford a way of life which included live-in servants.

With such a population character, the growth of neighborhood churches occurred quickly. By 1913, St. Thomas Apostle was established in a small, temporary structure at its present site at 2665 Woodley Road. All Souls Memorial began in 1911 with a transportable chapel which grew into the present Tudor parish church at 2300 Cathedral Avenue.

One of the large tracts of undevelopable land was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution for the establishment of the National Zoological Park in 1889. Intended at first as a refuge for endangered species, the park quickly developed amenities for visitors such as winding paths and landscaped valleys and

slopes. Woodley Park thus was becoming a popular destination for families throughout the greater Washington area and for the Capital's many visitors.

Notes

1. "Thos. E. Waggaman and John Ridout, Trustees, Addition to the City of Washington formerly called Woodley Park", dated June 15, 1888, in the Library of Congress, Division of Maps. The descriptive quote is from the Annual Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1887), p. 40.

2. Frederick Law Olmsted to Francis G. Newlands, November 15, 1891, Olmsted Associates File, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

3. Middaugh and Shannon, Inc., Promotional brochures of 1909, 1910 in the vertical files of the Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Memorial Library, Washington, D.C.

4. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Population, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

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