Woodley Park Community: A Sketch of Our Past
Chapter 2. Urban Community: 1920-1950

During the 1920's the community known as Woodley Park assumed the broad outlines of its contemporary profile. The population by 1930 had grown to 5,698 and displayed many of the characteristics of today's population. A majority of the residents were middle-aged, between 25 and 64; the number of women exceeded the number of men; and the community included only a small fraction of non whites. At that time, children aged 5 to 14 represented a larger proportion of the population than today, and the elderly over 64 were less numerous. As in 1910, families maintaining middle and upper middle class households continued to be the mainstay of the community.[1]

The thirty years from 1920 to 1950 saw an expansion of residential population in rowhouses, single family dwellings, apartment buildings and residential hotels. At the same time, as the process of urbanization began, Woodley Park witnessed a growth of business, commercial and public institutions. The two hotels which dominate Woodley Park today, the Sheraton Washington and the Omni Shoreham, trace their beginnings to this era. Both hotels in their early years provided homes away from home for transient government clientele. The Sheraton, built by real estate mogul Harry Ward man, opened in 1918 and was enlarged in 1928. The Shoreham, built by Harry Bralove, opened in October 1930.

The Sheraton, originally named the Wardman Park Hotel, was commonly known as "Wardman's Folly" because of expectations that its location in the then suburbs would deter potential visitors. Contrary to popular wisdom, it was an immediate success, meeting a need for luxury housing following the end of World War I. The hotel's early history was bound up with the war, for wartime shortages slowed construction begun in July 1917, and the postwar influenza epidemic prevented the hotel from staging a grand opening. Frank Russell White designed the red brick building with 1200 transient rooms and residential suites, a three-story garage, a roof garden, a tearoom for 100, a dining room for 500 guests and a lobby large enough to double as a dance floor.[2] In addition to distinguished residents, several embassies including those of Nicaragua, Bolivia and Portugal were established in the building.[3] By the 1920's Wardman felt the time to expand was at hand and made plans to construct an Annex. In 1928 an eight-story addition designed by Mihran Mesrobian was opened on an adjacent hill, where Wardman's private home previously had been located. Known since 1973 as the Wardman Tower, it is the only part of the old hotel still standing.[4] During the Depression and throughout World War II, the Wardman Park "was a bustling mini-city of generals, admirals, legislators and diplomats.[5]

The Shoreham Hotel, in comparison, was smaller with 132 apartments and 250 hotel rooms. Staying at the Shoreham was enhanced by its lush setting amid spacious lawns with balconies overlooking Rock Creek Park and by its rich Art Deco interiors. The nightclub and terrace dancing pavilion were among Washington's most popular. The Shoreham Hotel was a favorite of Presidents and stars of the entertainment world. Sizable additions, constructed in 1935, 1946 and 1949, increased the number of hotel rooms with the result that the building's character was changed from residential to commercial.[6]

The comprehensive zoning act of the District of Columbia, enacted on August 30, 1920, set in motion some of the diverse uses we find today in Woodley Park. Although only one commercial zone was designated, along Calvert Street west of Connecticut Avenue, nevertheless during the 1920's a long battle between commercial and residential interests over the fate of Connecticut Avenue ensued. It was not until the 1930's that the commercial strip along Connecticut Avenue developed into a business zone. By 1936 businesses of all varieties were flourishing. There were several groceries, drugstores, a beauty shop, a liquor store, a hat shop and a number of doctors' offices. The restaurant Napoleon, a delicatessen, and Garvin's grill marked the beginnings of present day "restaurant row" along Connecticut Avenue. Two stores which remain today, Peoples Drug and the cleaners at 2612 were already in business in the mid-1930's.[7] A Woodley Park resident from the 1930's remembers that the character of shopping was different.

> *You would telephone the grocery store on Connecticut Avenue and they would deliver your order. All the stores were elegant in those days and catered to an elite population.*[8]

Not all Woodley Park residents were famous occupants of the two hotels. During the 1920's well known Washington builders, A.N. and W.C. Miller with architect George T. Santmyers, continued to erect rowhouses. Their buildings, though still in a faintly English, neo-classical style were embellished with fewer ornamental details than those from the previous Beaux Arts decade.

A marked increase in the construction of apartments changed the residential nature of Woodley Park during this period. Harry Wardman was the neighborhood's most prolific developer of apartments, locating several prominent buildings on corner lots along Connecticut Avenue. When his Cathedral Mansions at 2900, 3000 and 3100 Connecticut Avenue across the street from the zoo opened in 1924, it was reputed to be the largest apartment house south of New York. The three building complex, which was home to 2700 residents, included 492 apartment units and a cluster of shops.[9] An advertisement in Who's Who in the Nation's Capital (1926-1927) called Cathedral Mansions "A City Within Itself" and listed a kindergarten, filling station, a grocery and a cafe among its attractions.

(*Update:* The Woodley Park Towers was built in 1929 - 1930, on the corner of Devonshire Place and Connecticut Ave, in the Art Deco style of that period. It overlooks Klingle Creek, just south of Klingle Bridge. The front entrance, with its circular drive and distinctive water fountain, is on Devonshire. It was built by five Jewish businessmen, legend has it, to allow Jewish renters a place to live in the area. Previous to then, anti-semitic practices prevented Jewish renters from living in the apartment buildings that already existed in the area. Originally built as a rental property, it was converted to condominiums in the 1970's. - *Alan Weinstein*)

It was in 1931 with construction of the Kennedy-Warren apartment house at 3133 Connecticut Avenue that the age of the large apartment complex could be said to have dawned. The Art Deco building, named for developers Edgar Kennedy and Monroe Warren, reached a height of nine stories in front and fifteen in the rear.[10] The Kennedy-Warren, still a landmark in the 1990's, maintains some of its 1930's tradition. The doormen wear uniforms; the beauty

shop, dining room, lending library, recreation room and ballroom still offer a modicum of communal living. Both elementary schools, Oyster, the public school, and St. Thomas Apostle, the parochial school, opened their doors in 1926. The Sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Cross started the parochial school with 35 pupils, holding classes in rowhouses on 27th Street. St. Thomas closed its school doors in 1986.

Oyster elementary school, located at the corner of 29th and Calvert Streets, was built to reduce the crowding at other schools in the burgeoning northwest section of the city. Already by 1920 the Board of Education recommended the establishment of a "graded school" for the Woodley Park region.[11] In 1926 the school was opened and named in honor of Captain James Oyster, who had been a District Commissioner and president of the Board of Education.[12] Because all public schools in the District of Columbia were racially segregated from 1864 until 1954, only white children attended this eight classroom school.[13]

The two churches in the community responded to the population growth with building programs. In 1923, St. Thomas Apostle Parish constructed a permanent church building, still standing as the basement of the present church.[14] All Souls Memorial Church found itself surrounded by housing construction in the early 1920's. An apartment building was erected across the street, and new rowhouses were built on Woodley Place following the filling in of a fifty foot ravine. In 1924 the Episcopal congregation decided to rebuild its church, enlarging the original stone building and adding stained glass windows, among them one signed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, and chimes in the belfry.[15]

Embassies started to select Woodley Park as a desirable location during "this period. The Swiss moved into three buildings on Cathedral Avenue. In 1941 the government of Switzerland bought the 1920's mansion Single Oak, formerly part of the Woodley estate, as the ambassador's residence. One long-time resident remembers that in the 1940's teenagers crawled under the embassy fence and built an unauthorized sledding run on the grounds.[16] Also in 1941 the government of Panama bought the building at 2862 McGill Terrace, which today is used as the Panamanian ambassador's residence.

During World War II Woodley Park designated a plot of land for Victory Gardens. On the corner of Garfield Street and 29th Street, in a large lot previously wooded, residents grew sweet corn, squash, tomatoes and various other fruits and vegetables.

Notes

1. In 1930 there were 621 children aged 5-14; there were 373 persons aged 65 and older. In 1990 there were 524 children under 16, and 909 persons over the age of 65. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Tract Summaries for the District of Columbia. Washington, D.C., 1930 and 1990. Woodley Park belongs to census tract 5.

2. James M. Goode, Best Addresses (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 286.

3. Who's Who in the Nation's Capital 1926-1927 (Washington, D.C.: Ransdell Inc., 1927).

4. Goode, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

5. Sheraton Washington Hotel promotional brochure, 1992.

6. Goode, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-299.

7. Polk's Washington City Directory 1936 p. 2387, 2415.

8. Personal interview with Lee April, July 26,1993.

9. Goode, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-203.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 307. Also Anne Simpson, "Kennedy-Warren: Bastion of Gentility," *Ibid.* Washington Post, March 6, 1986.

11. Annual Report of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia 1919-1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), pp.34-35.

12. Biographical Directory of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia. (Washington, D.C.: School Department, 1953), p. 57.

13. Jeanne Rogers, "The Washington Experience - Nation's Showcase?" With All Deliberate Speed, ed. Don Shoemaker (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), 147-162.

14. St Thomas Apostle School 50th Anniversary Celebration 1926-1976 (Washington, D.C.: St. Thomas Apostle Church, 1976).

15. Rev. H. Hatch Dent Sterrett, The Story of All Souls (Washington, D.C.: All Souls Parish, 1948), p. 20.

16. Personal interview with Jane Jones, July 14, 1993.

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