

Historic Significance of Takoma Park

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Begun by New York venture capitalist B. F. Gilbert, in 1883 as one of the first three railroad-accessible suburbs to downtown Washington, DC, Takoma's development followed a prototypical pattern for similar real estate ventures throughout the United States in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The little community was promoted as offering healthy living (it occupies land several hundred feet higher than the lowlands of downtown Washington), fresh air, and uncrowded living conditions.

Using the newly built railroad, Takoma Park offered easy access to many desirable attributes of semi-rural living: potable fresh water springs, clean air, and a landscape that seemed truly a bit of country. Unlike other early commuter rail suburbs, Takoma Park, by reason of its dual advantages of being located on a major rail line, as well as a commuter rail stop, developed a healthy commercial district that, while it has waxed and waned over the years, substantially survives to the present day. For a time, Takoma Park was the largest city in Montgomery County, and for many years it was also one of the largest in Maryland.

Of special interest to its present residents, and to historians is the distinctive character of Takoma Park's political and social structure. From its inception, B.F. Gilbert promoted political activism and civic involvement in solving the community's problems. It has also become perhaps the most racially and culturally integrated town in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. Yet, as with other communities, racial and multicultural acceptance came slowly to its schools and businesses, clubs and parks. Young people today are very curious about how a community now so diverse comported itself in past years. Takoma Park was also a community divided between two jurisdictions: Maryland and the District of Columbia, and, until recent years, between two Maryland counties: Prince George's and Montgomery.

In 1922, it was reported that Takoma Park had 4,144 adults on the Maryland side and 1,874 in the District. There were 1,280 children between the ages of 0-19 years in MD, and 615 of the same ages in D.C. The town also had African-American residents, many of whom came to the area just after the Civil War, as a result of the town's proximity to Fort Stevens where former slaves sought refuge around Union army camps. Also, Quakers had assisted Negroes immediately preceding the Civil War to purchase property just south of Takoma within the District of Columbia.

Further, in 1907, the World Headquarters for the Seventh Day Adventist Church and its college and hospital located in Takoma Park, bringing to the town new residents from around the globe. Today, Takoma Park also is the center for a large Buddhist community, as well as a number of Christian church organizations.

Takoma Park is perhaps best known to the general public for its small town atmosphere and pleasant, tree-shaded neighborhoods of stately Victorian mansions and Sears bungalows of the 1920's. Behind this quiet façade lies an almost strident activism

on the part of its residents to preserve the best attributes of a small community of some 18,000 residents.

Today, the community realizes the importance of preserving its historic identity. The community banded together to prevent bisection of the town by a proposed Freeway in the mid 1960's, and to prevent construction of a huge parking garage to serve the Metro in the 1970's. In the early 1990's, residents prevented construction of a small strip mall in the center of the town. Now there is interest again in the kinds of small shops and local businesses that have always been an important part of this vibrant community.

As Takoma Park enters the 21st century, its citizens have united once again to save the best aspects of their community. Spurred by a proposed townhouse development adjacent to the Metro station, residents on both sides of the District line are uniting for the first time in many years to develop a plan for future growth. Long-time residents offer the perspective of nearly three-quarters of a century to today's citizenry, and younger residents are anxious to learn more from them about the community's social and economic development.