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Commerce in Takoma Park: A Century of Change

By Elizabeth Bentley

On an early autumn morning, the sun's warmth penetrates the tinted facade of the Takoma Letter Shop where it fronts Carroll and Philadelphia Avenues. This is Takoma Park's oldest existing family-owned business, and inside, owner Charles (C. P.) Cook presides over an operation seemingly unchanged since his grandfather started the firm in 1939.

It is an illusionary air of permanence, one that Takoma Park citizens work hard to preserve, for this shop is now in its fourth Takoma Park location. "My grandfather moved into the Citizens bank building at 7000 Carroll Avenue about 1939, and was an upstairs tenant," C. P. explains. "When we moved Takoma Letter Shop here in 1981, old Mr. Fetty was using it as a storage place and storefront for his public address systems." C. P. still operates the offset printing presses of his father's time beneath family photos, a letter signed by William Howard Taft, mementos of military service, and school diplomas.

With the October closing of Park Pharmacy, Takoma Park's oldest, continuously operating business filled its last prescription in a community where change is both mourned and the rule. William "Doc" Fishbein bought Park Pharmacy from a Dudley son of 19th century Takoma Park builder Fred E. Dudley in 1961. Park Pharmacy first opened its doors in 1919.

From coal to corsets, commerce of earliest Takoma Park years clustered around the B&O railroad station where Cedar Street crosses Blair Road, and meets Fourth Street. Takoma businesses have vied for the local trade since B. F. Gilbert sold the first Takoma lot in 1883. A disastrous fire in 1893 destroyed the first Takoma Park hotel and two other important buildings, but did not slow the town's rapidly developing commercial sector.

Takoma Park was the District of Columbia's first suburb, and owes its existence to the visionary foresight of founder Gilbert. He realized the creation of a federal Civil Service

would combine well with the fortuitous completion of the B & O Railroad line to offer an ideal opportunity for establishing a successful suburban community.

Before long, shops, a hotel, coal yards, and businesses clustered in the area of the railroad station at 4th and Butternut Streets, NW, and spilled beyond the railroad onto Cedar Street before it rounded the corner and became Cedar Avenue on the Maryland side. Nearby springs, including one at the back of Feldman's Department Store, provided water for residents and steam engines alike.

By July 1, 1920, *The Weekly Record* reported a population of about 10,000, an "up-to-date" Bank with resources over \$1,000,000, as well as "first-class newspaper, and job printing office," 2 brick yards, 3 coal yards, 3 express companies, a steam laundry, a Masonic Hall, 2 bake shops, 2 automobile shops, a hardware store, 1 department store, 2 streetcar lines, ... \$15,000 garage under way, 2 public school houses, First-class drug store, a Community Band, six grocery stores, 2 real estate offices, 3 shoe shops, 3 lunch rooms, 2 fruit stores, 2 ice cream and soda parlors, the B. & O RR Station, [and] the Review and Herald Publishing Company."

**Takoma Park's commercial heyday
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Takoma Park business centered along the railroad station, along Laurel Avenue, and also at the more distant "half-way stores" near the intersection of Philadelphia and Carroll Avenues (now called Takoma Junction). Two street car lines served the suburb: the 7th Street line, ending on 4th and Butternut at Blair Road, and the 14th street line ending in the Laurel Avenue block.

Briefly a third line, the Baltimore-Washington Transit or "dinky" line, operated along a route commencing at the railroad station, and then passing into Maryland along Aspen Street and Laurel Avenue en route to Sligo Creek.

(Clair Garman of Historic Takoma, Inc. is giving a walking tour along the old "dinky" line on the first Sunday of each month this winter. [Click here](#) for more information about the Dinky line.)

Perhaps the heyday for Takoma Park's commercial areas lasted from the mid 1920s to the end of World War II, and even into the early 1950s. During the Depression, "there was a certain amount of affluence in Takoma Park because many residents were civil servants," says long-time resident Dorothy Barnes.

"There were always paying jobs in Takoma Park, a man could come here and be sure he would find something," Roland Dawes of Roland's Barber Shop told me. "Besides, everyone lived off Walter Reed Hospital, you know, searching the trash bins. Even the best people would do it." Takoma Park owed its early successful existence to accessible

public transportation. Until the early 1950s, with its increasing reliance on the automobile, everyone walked to the markets, and used home delivery services.

Dorothy Barnes remembers, "As a child, I often walked up to LaScola's deli-grocery store from my house [on Elm Avenue] to purchase bananas. Mr. LaScola always kept a huge banana stalk hanging inside the store, and it was worth one's life to touch them."

From his own childhood nearly 25 year later, C. P. Cook remembers, "In the 1950s, as kids, we always walked to the Takoma Theater and the bowling alley, or over to the Langley Theater, even to the Allen Theater at 6800 New Hampshire Avenue."

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Local Takoma Park business was brisk. Taliano's restaurant on Carroll Avenue occupies space once used as a Ford automobile showroom. Chuck and Dave's Bookstore fills the former entrance to the Ford service department.

Years ago, at the corner of Carroll and Westmoreland Avenues, where heads are now coiffed at Shampoo, school children skipped through Sherman's department store.

At the other end of the long block, on Laurel Avenue, there was a Safeway, a hardware store, and a Woolworth's nickel and dime store. The 1950s became a time of transition for Takoma Park commerce. Where public transportation once served, the automobile took over, and new suburbs replaced older ones.

On Park Pharmacy's last day of operation, owner "Doc" Fishbein commented, "When I bought the Park Pharmacy in 1961, that was the low point in commercial activity in Takoma Park. Everyone was going to Silver Spring, but now, people come here. Business is good again." Roland Dawes, who has been a barber in Takoma Park for over 30 years, talks of "bad times until about 20 years ago."

Stand outside the entrance to the former Park Pharmacy, and cast your eye down Carroll Avenue toward the Metro station. In the 1920s, a city park filled the triangle of land now occupied by the Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist Church (dedicated in 1953), and fine 19th century residences cast their shadow onto the Avenue between the park and the "subway."

Old timers may still mention the rearrangement of topography when the subway was built to pass traffic under the railroad tracks in 1913. Houses on the south side of Carroll became beached whales in the tide of progress. New storefronts were built below some houses, and a level railroad crossing became a thing of the past.

In the early 1970s, when the railroad bed was widened to accommodate the Metro, some of the oldest landmarks of the Takoma-DC business district were torn down: Feldman's

Department Store and Youngblood's Hardware became memories to their legion of loyal customers. "Youngblood's was huge," C. P. Cook told me. The Takoma Park Railroad Station also came down.

Older Takoma Park residents remember when little notice was taken of the jurisdictional line between the two Takomas. The founders of Takoma Park promoted the area as a single community. "Some of us attended school in the District; our churches were sometimes across the line; we shopped in central Takoma, and we went to the Takoma Theater. We really didn't think much about it," comments Dorothy Barnes, who was born and raised in Takoma Park, and is on the board of Historic Takoma Inc. "It was just Takoma." Early city directories and newspaper advertisements used "Takoma" in the address line; later on, there is also reference to "Takoma-DC," or "Takoma-MD."

When Takoma Park long-timers discuss downtown Takoma, they sometimes mention "the angle" to reference a point of land where Cedar Avenue once turned the corner and became Cedar Street. During Metro construction in the 1970s, Cedar Avenue was moved and a portion of the Metro parking lot replaced "the angle."

For the most part, displaced businesses closed their doors instead of moving. C.P. Cook remembers that both he and his father had their first haircuts at Kestler's Barber Shop, located in "the angle." Today, the 7-11 store sits on a part of the old Cedar Avenue.

**The past may be gone
but the present
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The last surviving Carroll Avenue residence was the Dudley home, built by Takoma Park's preeminent builder who collaborated closely with B. F. Gilbert. In 1971, it was demolished for parking space needed by the Review and Herald Building occupants.

At Takoma Junction, the stores at one time included a Safeway and a District Grocery Store (DGS), and the famous "Jim's Butter Gem" bakery where only "butter gems" and "pecan butter rolls" were sold. "When I was a kid, it was a big deal to walk up to the old railroad station, watch the old steam engines pass through, and buy a butter gem to eat on the way home," C. P. Cook told me.

Roland Dawes, resident of Takoma Park for 67 years, remembers when "real carnivals," complete with Ferris wheel and cotton candy, were held on the empty lot at the corner of Carroll and Philadelphia Avenues. "The firehouse was like the capital of Takoma Park, with its parties and dances."

Beneath the apparent exterior of stability, Takoma Park continues to adapt to the community's changing needs. Community resistance through the years to automobile-related changes, including the proposed North Central Freeway, and a commuter parking lot for Metro customers has helped safeguard the city's core areas. Today, residents and visitors still value Takoma Park's small town atmosphere, neighborhood stores, libraries,

schools, churches, and easy access to downtown Washington. The past may be gone but the present is still pretty good.

Businesses in The 20s and 30s in Takoma, DC

Cedar, Blair Road

- Dome Oil Co.
- Watkins Apartment House

4th & Butternut

- Takoma Theater
- Old Colony Laundry Co. "We wash everything but the baby" [behind the Takoma Theater]
- Isaac Bigelow Roofing

300 Butternut

- Casey Motor Company [empty lot]

401 Butternut

- Israel Gritz Shoes and Furnishings

6900 4th

- Davis & Platt Contractors, later The Takoma Enterprise [4th Street Market]

6904 4th

- Kaufman's Bakery [National Electric]

6908 4th

- Pioneer Press, owner Frank Skinner [Thomas & Lee Cabinetry]

6910 4th

- Takoma Taylor

6912 4th

- H. O. Albans 5¢ to \$1 Store [Urban Arts Cafe]

6916 4th

- Park Inn Lunch [Takoma Station]

302 Cedar Street

- Walter J. Pugh Furniture & Radios

317-319 Cedar St.

- Takoma Bowling Alleys

323 Cedar St.

- J.W. Simpson & Son Meats & Vegetables

335 Cedar St.

- Feldman's Department Store ("Union suits. ... ladies cadet silk hosiery").

341 Cedar St.

- O. W. Youngblood's Hardware

5th and Cedar

- Takoma, DC. Library. Built in 1919.

6000 Blair Road

- Southern Building Supply Co. [empty lot]

Carroll & Cedar - "The Point"**359 Cedar St.**

- Mattingly Pharmacy (Takoma Park's first drug store)
- E. K. Richardson & Co.
- LaScola's Deli
- Bailey Building built on site of Warren's Stationery Store in 1924
- Kestler's Barber Shop

18 Carroll St.

- Pansey's Beauty Shop, later Hirsta Bros. Deli & Cafe

32 Carroll St.

- Anthony Grubb Real Estate (also *Takoma Journal*)

32 Carroll St.

- Takoma Sheet Metal Works

Carroll St.

- Acme Market [Takoma Funeral Home]

Carroll St.

- Restaurant/Deli

249 Carroll St.

- Dr. Parson's House [Takoma Funeral Home parking]

269 Carroll St.

- Glickman's Market

300 Carroll St.

- The Follmer House [India House]

304 Carroll St.

- Modern Shoe Repair

Carroll St.

- Glickman's Amoco Station

Carroll St.

- Castle Barber Shop

266 Carroll St.

- Friedrich's Cleaners, 1947

Carroll St.

- a bakery

Takoma Park, MD in the 20s and 30s**21 Laurel Ave**

- Park Bakery and Luncheon

33 Laurel Ave

- Park Pharmacy

37 Laurel Ave

- Takoma Park Hardware

Laurel Ave

- Safeway

Laurel Ave

- Woolworth's

27 Carroll Ave

- Sherman's Department Store [Shampoo]

Carroll Ave

- Hendrix (Ford Motor Company) [Taliano's]

Carroll Ave

- Driveway to Service Department [Chuck & Dave's]

Carroll Ave South

- Electric Maid Bakery [Mark's Kitchen]

107 Carroll St.

- E. V. Crittendon Paper Hanging

204 Carroll St.

- Fred E. Dudley House [CVS Pharmacy]

212 Carroll St.

- William Stuart House

Carroll at Maple

- The first Takoma Park Bank Building, 1917 [Takoma Business Center]

Carroll at Willow Ave

- Takoma Park Bank, 1927 [later Suburban Bank, now Nations Bank]

Carroll Ave

- Citizens Bank Building, 1931, later with drive-through banking service

Eastern Ave

- Takoma *Review and Herald* Building [Arise, et al]

Maple St.

- Review and Herald Cafe (at rear of R & H Building)

Carroll & Willow Aves

- Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist Church (used on Sundays by Takoma Park Christian Church) [former Citizen's Bank parking lot]

Carroll & Tulip

- Glickman's Esso Station
- Sickler's Oil Service [now Savory]

Takoma's "half-way" stores in the 40s

Carroll Ave before Grant

- Fetty's Public Address Systems [Takoma Letter Shop]
- Roland Dawes Barbershop
- Savage's Market [Kinetic Artistry]
- Gas Station

7300 Carroll Ave

- Manor Pharmacy, Sanitary Grocery [TJ's deli]

7303 Carroll Ave

- Freddy's Deli
- Hubbard Cleaner's
- Greek Restaurant
- Bakery "Butter Gems and Butter Pecan Rolls"
- Frank's Realty
- District Grocery Store (DGS) [Suds}

Carroll Ave on east side

- Shell Gas [Takoma Junction Shelter and Park]
- Safeway [later Turner Electric and now Takoma Park Silver Spring Food Coop]
- Lot between Fire Station and Safeway used for Carnivals
- Amoco Gas Station [Takoma Auto Clinic]
- Takoma Park Volunteer Fire Department