



## School days Takoma Park style

When students headed back to school the week before Labor Day, more than 1,850 children, kindergarteners through eighth graders, made their way to the three Takoma Park schools in the square bounded by Maple, Piney Branch, Philadelphia and Ritchie Avenues. This fact would have astounded the dairy farmers who herded cows on this same land as late as 1930. Thanks to them this farmland was the largest chunk of undeveloped land inside city limits and provided key space when bigger schools were needed.

The first of these was the red-brick Takoma Park Elementary, which took over part of the fields on Philadelphia near Maple in 1927. The imposing facade (actually a 1970 addition) is all that remains of the original building that once stretched across Hodges Field. It replaced the city's original tiny school, the 1889 schoolhouse on Tulip



PHOTO BY RICHARD ASHFORD

*Piney Branch as it appears today, with its revamped facade that allows light into the classrooms.*

at Maple, next to the Presbyterian Church, and was replaced in turn by the current school on Holly Avenue.

In 1942, the dairy farms on Piney Branch Road made way for Takoma Park Junior High, which originally housed grades seven, eight and nine.

The last piece of the school puzzle wasn't added until 1971, when Piney Branch "Middle" School opened on the tiny, two-acre parcel next to the soon-to-be built Municipal Building. The evolution of Piney Branch offers an enlightening look at the ever-changing ideas of education.

Piney Branch was initially proposed to solve a classroom shortage in the surrounding area. The county and the city cooperated to plan the building. Fascination with "Open School" theories of education combined with a community vision that sought to add a medical clinic, dentist office, and social services to the mix, resulting in a strange hybrid of a school.

Anyone who has been inside Piney Branch recognizes that it is a confusing layout for a school: few classrooms on the first floor, a maze of stairs and halls with classrooms clustered in the corners, and a library filling up the center of the building, and no direct access to anywhere. Blame the "open school" concept. Originally, each corner was one classroom for four sets of kids (so they could shift easily from one teacher to another). The media center had no walls at all.

It quickly became clear that this arrangement was too distracting for successful teaching. But not until 1982 did walls divide each corner in half, and later into quarters, creating the four-classroom clusters familiar today.



*This Takoma Park Elementary class, circa 1976, illustrates Takoma Park diversity.*

Walling in the media center created more obstacles for navigating the building. Originally there were no windows either, and years of concerted PTA lobbying finally found money in 1991 to add them.

The first floor was taken up by a dentist, a medical clinic, and various counseling services for parents. When federal funding dried up, the social experiment departed, leaving a strange configuration.

Another odd amenity is the Olympic-size swimming pool. Of all 199 schools in Montgomery County, this is the only school with its own pool. All Piney Branch students have twelve weeks of swimming as part of PE. Swim teams from local high schools, in particular Montgomery Blair, practice there. Otherwise supervision of the pool is in private hands, currently the YMCA.

So much for the physical building. The school was scheduled to open in 1971, but contracting delays required the first students, all fifth and sixth graders, to be parceled out to five surrounding schools for most of the first year.

Barely had Piney Branch students and staff settled into their real home, when the first Great School-Closing Crisis erupted. *Brown v. Board of Education* was 20 years old but the spectre of segregated schools and the possibilities of forced busing haunted many states. On top of that, Montgomery County faced diminishing enrollments, leaving some schools under-enrolled. The Board of Education looked for ways to consolidate students.

The birth of Piney Branch had already spelled the end for another school, Takoma Park-Silver Spring Intermediate. Located at the corner of Philadelphia and Chicago Avenues, this school dated back to 1927 and had served as the local high school before Montgomery Blair opened in 1935. The old school became a junior high (grades seven, eight and nine in those days), only to be relegated to elementary

school status when Takoma Park Junior High opened in 1939. Rather than renovate the school, the Board closed it down after opening Piney Branch in 1971.

A year later, the Board targeted Takoma Park Elementary for closure, arguing that it was destined to become a minority school (read segregated). The community was aghast that they should be targeted precisely because they were so well integrated. Their fight to safeguard both the school and its diversity is a tale for another day, but to make a long story short – the community succeeded in saving Takoma Elementary and forced the Board to replace the dilapidated building with a new facility facing Holly Avenue. Before they could breathe a sigh of relief, the Board's eye fell on Piney Branch and later Takoma Park Junior High. More years of struggle elapsed before the community felt safe again.

One of the results was the introduction of the "magnet" programs at all three schools, as a way of preserving a balanced population. As it turns out the enrollment projections of the County were way off. The white students did not desert the schools, and the roughly 30 percent white population of Piney Branch is made up largely of Takoma Park residents rather than relying on out-of-district students attracted by the "magnet" program.

Next time you see a flood of students along Maple Avenue or are stuck in morning traffic on Philadelphia Avenue, be thankful that Takoma Park is lucky enough to have a cluster of local schools.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HISTORIC TAKOMA

*This dairy once occupied the empty field at the top of this 1922 map of Takoma Park, now filled with schools, city buildings and high-rise apartments.*

