



Takoma Park in 1884: Portrait of an emerging suburb

By November 1884, the settlement then called "Tacoma Park" had barely made a dent in the wilderness around the train station. One year had passed since Benjamin Franklin Gilbert purchased 90 acres to create his sylvan suburb offering the advantages of country living to those who worked in Washington City. A half dozen houses had sprouted up, especially along Oak Avenue, the first road to emerge from the tanglewood of pine, scrub oak and poison vines.

From the beginning, Gilbert planned on a grand scale. Oak (eventually renamed Cedar to mark the continuation of the District's Cedar Street) was 40-50 feet wide with space on both sides for 12 feet of parking and sidewalks, plus a 40-foot setback for the houses. Maple and Holly and subsequent avenues repeated this scale.

Even before the roads were laid out, friends were lining up to buy lots. Gilbert sold 24 lots to 11 separate buyers by the end of 1883. One of them, Amanda Thomas, purchased nine lots along Tulip including the corner at Oak for \$1,270 on the same day that Gilbert took title to the 90 acres.

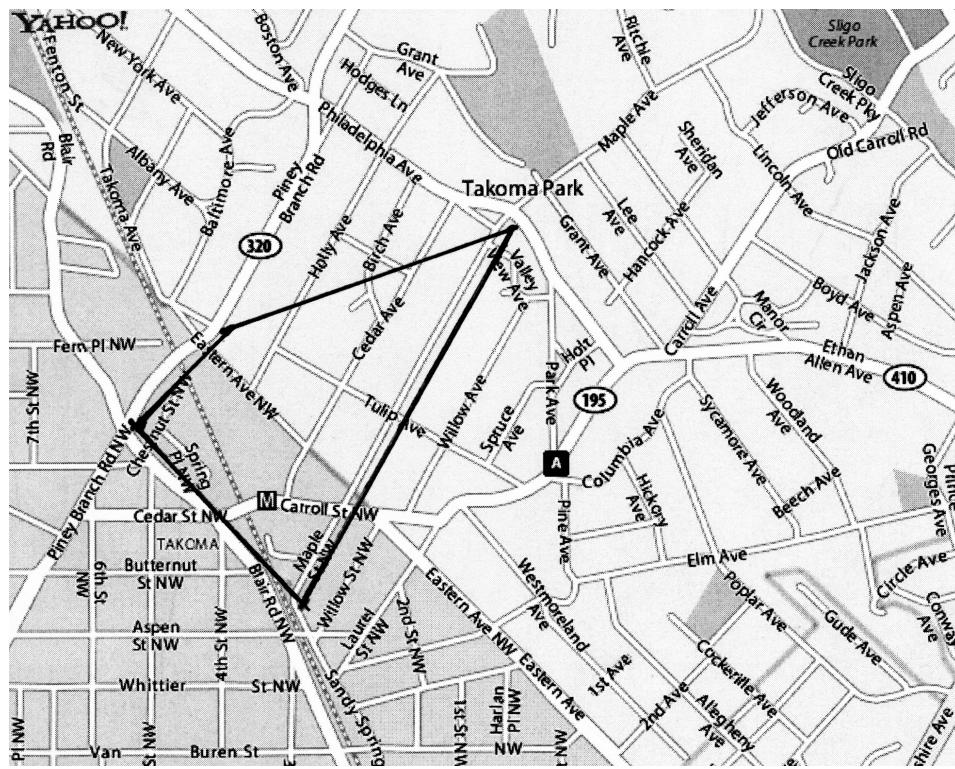
By mid-1884, Amanda and her husband Isaac were ensconced in their two-story clapboard house complete with carriage house—the first home completed. It still stands today and evokes the rural setting characteristic of the early years.

Gilbert's niece Marion Veitenheimer and her extended family were racing the Thomases for first house honors. They finished second despite a headstart. The house still stands at 7211 Cedar Avenue.

Gilbert had persuaded brothers Frederick and Lewis Dudley, two builders from Maine via Virginia, to become builders-in-residence. Frederick moved into his house at 204 Carroll (later 7204 Carroll) on November 15, 1884. The story goes he got the property for \$25 and a Winchester rifle.

Dudley's wife was still living the house 50 years later at the time of the Semi-Centennial celebration. The house was razed in 1970 as part of a Seventh-day Adventist expansion.

A building spree was underway as 1884 came to a close. The Kniffen house at Eastern & Cedar, the Cady-Lee on Eastern



The borders of B. F. Gilbert's first land purchase on November 24, 1883.

and Piney Branch, and the Bliss house on Maple were the most distinguished, but dozens of others followed.

One of them, Charles Heaton's residence at 205 Oak (corner of Eastern and current-day Cedar) was dubbed the "most artistic" in town.

Gilbert himself was among those with property on Oak Avenue diagonally across from the Thomases. Before constructing his own residence, he arranged for a temporary building to house those waiting while their homes were being constructed. Gilbert, his wife and his daughter shared the eight-room building with three other families that first year.

As a result, their \$20,000 mansion, diagonally across from the Thomases, wasn't finished until 1885. His property today is marked by a white fence, though the house itself burned down in 1915.

There were enough houses by 1886 to induce Gilbert to produce a 18-page brochure with writing help from Heaton extolling the virtues of the villa houses of Takoma Park.

Another new resident in 1885 was Ida

much to the consternation of the residents of Brightwood itself. The "c" was not altered until a year or two later by request of the postal service to avoid confusion with Tacoma, Washington. The station itself was a simple three-sided waiting shed; within two years it would be replaced with a respectable turreted Victorian station.

Although these hardy residents were relatively isolated, they did have important neighbors.

Neighbors

General Samuel Sprigg Carroll's manor house at Carroll and Ethan Allen was the center of a large "farm," part of the ancestral Carroll heritage dating back to Charles Carroll in 1711. In fact when Gilbert was ready to expand his suburb in 1885, he acquired the section of Carroll's farm south of Ethan Allen, adding 22 blocks for development.

Across from General Carroll at 16 Holt Place was the Greek Revival summer retreat of the Woodward family, half of Woodward and Lothrop, built in 1876. Further north, at 8114 Carroll Avenue, the Davis family occupied a three-story Victorian and operated a general store at that intersection.

The politically influential Blair family had their compound in nearby Silver Spring. South of Takoma Park, the Carberry-Lay estate would soon become the Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital. And west of Georgia Avenue, Alexander Shepard, the "boss" of the District (and Gilbert's friend) had his summer retreat, which accounted for the cobblestone paving of Georgia Avenue.

The next train stop east was Lamond, named after Angus Lamond's terra cotta tile clay works operating since 1876.

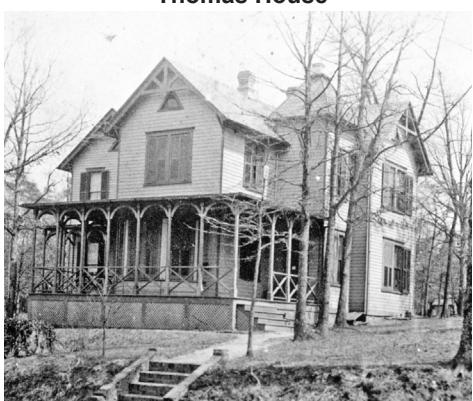
Several landmarks would be familiar to us today. The granite boundary stone placed just off Carroll Avenue in 1790 marked the division between the District and Maryland, and divided Gilbert's suburb, a fact everyone ignored.

Meanwhile, Sligo Creek lay one mile north, with an abandoned gristmill (at present-day New Hampshire Ave), a wooden bridge at stream level (where Old Carroll ends), and a bridle path leading to Francis Preston Blair's estate.

Lastly, Maryland Agricultural College was barely clinging to existence four miles east on the old Calvert estate. It was being run as a military college under ex-Confederates and could barely muster 30 students. By 1886 it would be revived by the "Agricultural Experimental Station" program.

It may not have looked like much in 1884, but within five years there were 70 houses and 500 people, a thriving community that pooled its talents and resources to build the Union Chapel and first schoolhouse, to plan the first Fourth of July celebration, and to push for incorporation as a town in 1890.

Thomas House



Tulip at Maple, altered but still standing

Dudley House



Carroll at Maple, razed in 1970.

Heaton House



Cedar at Eastern, burned in 1970