

Reprinted with permission of the Takoma Voice, originally published May 1999.

The District's Frontier in 1884: Tradesmen Join Visionary to Shape Washington's First True Suburb

By Elizabeth Marple Bentley

In 1875, Mrs. Alcena Lamond recalled her arrival at the Lamond Station just south of the Brightwood railroad stop, and a rough half mile from land that would one day be called Takoma Park, "The place was all that a wilderness could be."

As Mrs. Lamond stood on the wooden planks of the rough platform, its backdrop was scattered farms and virgin forest. So scarce were local inhabitants that railroad officials moved a simple, three-sided wood-framed station down the tracks to Lamond from its Brightwood location in order to protect it from vandals.

For the railway stops on the newly constructed Metropolitan Branch rail line running between Baltimore and Washington, DC, it was not a fortuitous beginning. Yet, within ten years, Brightwood platform would be renamed Takoma Park, and a grand, three-story station built there to serve the rapidly growing suburb. Lamond station (sometimes called Terra Cotta for the Lamond family's thriving tile works nearby) would keep its hand-me-down shed.

B.F. Gilbert's Vision

Seven years after Mrs. Lamond's first dismaying glimpse of her future home, the times were right, and Benjamin Franklin Gilbert recognized his opportunity. A former New Yorker with nearly 20 years of successful real estate development in the District, he was convinced future growth lay to the north and northwest of the District boundaries.

In the late 1870s, between Rock Creek Cemetery and the District line lay mostly farms. Forested and hilly, bisected by the ravines of Sligo Creek, and interspersed with trails, a few farms, an occasional road, several famous springs and many more unmarked ones, the future Takoma Park presented an unlikely prospect for urbanization.

Gilbert, however, by utilizing the Metropolitan Branch line for easy access to the city, envisioned a healthful suburban community, an alternative to Washington's famously unpleasant and disagreeable living conditions. Undaunted by lack of support from business associates, he moved ahead alone. Years later, Gilbert's only daughter said of him, "Mr. Gilbert had a vision, an impracticable dream it may have seemed, which finally became a substantial reality in the beautiful city of Takoma Park, in which the residents enjoy a rare combination of the advantages of both rural and urban life."

Gilbert's Takoma Park overcame a national economic crisis, fires, and the founder's financial failures to become, by 1913, a thriving commercial center, and the largest city in Montgomery County, Maryland.



Takoma Novelty store.

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

In late autumn of 1883, Gilbert, at a cost of \$6,500, purchased the initial property for his subdivision from Gottlieb Grammer, and it was soon named Takoma. (Legend attributes the naming of Takoma after an Indian word meaning "high up--near Heaven," with a change in the spelling from Tacoma to Takoma). Gilbert would write in one of his promotional pieces, "Our Takoma is lifted up into pure air and pure water, with complete and natural drainage."

Indeed, the main areas of downtown Takoma Park do stand some 350 to 400 feet in altitude above the US Capitol, and District monuments.

Key to Takoma Park's early, rapid expansion was, of course, the railroad, and its developer's hearty marketing of the local terrain's superb natural attributes. With the zeal of the visionary that he was, Mr. Gilbert promoted Takoma Park as an alternative life style to living in the City.

A rapidly increasing population and a newly established Civil Service (federal employment would nearly double in the years between 1881 and 1890) were ready to hear his message.



Log cabin and tower.

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

by 1888 the station saw nineteen trains daily and an additional nine on Sundays.

Conceptually similar to other suburbs being established around the turn of the century throughout the United States, Gilbert distinguished Takoma through his vision and style in shaping the new community.

Perhaps the most famous and eccentric of all was a six-story wooden tower and adjacent log cabin built in the center of town during the national elections of 1888.

Of the half dozen suburbs that evolved around the District of Columbia, Takoma Park was one of just two that permitted commercial as well as residential land use.

Within a year, shops and businesses established themselves close to the level railroad crossing Cedar Street, and as the community grew, streetcar lines also extended service into the area. Fifteen trains a day passed through in 1886, and



Favorite's Department Store.

The initial lineup of stores around Takoma

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

Station included a grocery store-cum-post office opened by Isaac Thomas in 1884 (and sold by Thomas to George Favorite in 1886), and a branch outlet of Birch and Company, already well-known city grocers. Birch & Co. built a two-story structure across the track from the station with a second floor meeting hall large enough to accommodate nearly 500 people.

In 1889, there were more than 70 completed houses and six realtors devoted to selling Takoma properties including Henry Cady and, of course, B. F. Gilbert. In 1890, the town of Takoma Park was incorporated.

Conceptually similar to other suburbs being established around the turn of the century throughout the United States, Gilbert distinguished Takoma through his vision and style in shaping the new community.

In ten scant years from her arrival, Alcena Lamond's wilderness tamed to these pioneer entrepreneurial enterprises. Traveling the half mile into Takoma, she could then find a grand railway station, stores, a library, a women's association and recreation.

Opposite the railway station, on Cedar Street, she may have visited Burrow's Drug Store, or Warren's Stationery Store, another early and well-known business. Before long, there would be an ice house.

Takoma merchants served a close-knit community-occupying for the most part, late Victorian style homes on generous lots.

"We had two grocers here in the 90's. Every morning they would come round to the houses to take the orders. The grocer carried a basket of bread and yeast cakes, which you bought right then, and you told him what you wanted and he sent it around in the afternoon," local publisher Frank Skinner told people years later.

Forest and underbrush yielded slowly even to Gilbert's entrepreneurial imagination and drive while continuing to offer an attractive rural cast to the town's promotion.

"The first load of lumber for our shack had to be driven between trees wherever space could be found wide enough for the horses and wagon and unloaded on a rounded knoll, taking it on faith that an avenue would be opened out front," Takoma builder William Skinner said of his 1886 arrival.

Photos from around the turn of the century, and nearly 20 years after the founding of Takoma Park, show wooded tracts, and even a board walk adjacent to a rutted and muddy Carroll Street as it passes through town. A few farms, including the Hodges' dairy holding at the bottom of Maple Avenue, continued their agricultural pursuits.



A muddy road and the log cabin.

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

Further from the railroad but clearly visible from its platform, Gilbert built the six-story high observation tower, and his famous "log cabin." Initially they were used to stimulate interest in the 1888 national political campaign. This same area, at the crossroads of Laurel and Carroll Avenues, would eventually become the heart of Takoma-MD's business district.

By the 1890s, the crown jewels for the new business community were the three-story and thirty-room Watkins Hotel (1892), and the new Takoma railroad station (1888), with its extensive covered platform and fine waiting room heated by a pot bellied stove. Later, a freight depot was added.

Near the station was "Little Spring," a long-known source of pure water with sufficient flow for both citizens' use, and for the steam-driven engine of Takoma Light Company.

Even better known was "Big Spring."



Big Spring. Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

"The water was wonderful. It didn't have any special taste--just tasted like water, not the spigot water we get now," reported Takoma pioneer, Arthur Skinner.

In December of 1893, fire, the instant reaper of buildings and businesses before the advent of modern fire-fighting equipment, struck the nascent community. Thomas' store (then owned by Mr. B. L. Favorite), the Birch and Co. Hall, and Watkins Hotel are all destroyed.

When the ashes were cold, Favorite rebuilt near Warren's Stationery shop to catch the increasing pedestrian traffic of residents passing to and from their homes, Mr. Watkins turned to a new trade, a coal yard, and the Odd Fellows helped the citizens of Takoma Park obtain a new meeting place by underwriting construction of Takoma Hall.

The citizenry did finally establish a volunteer fire department.

In 1892, Gilbert, who continued to promote the suburb and enlarge its land holdings, began construction on a large, imposing 160-room hotel facing the rail line further west of downtown Takoma, between Takoma and Chicago Avenues. He envisioned the hotel as a favorable commercial venture and an appealing advertisement for the community.

However, the original underwriters for the hotel felt it was an "extravagant" design and withheld their support. In the end Gilbert chose to build the North Takoma Hotel on his own.

Financially overextended when the national economic downturn of 1893 began, and with the hotel venture a red-line failure, Gilbert never recovered his prosperity. His legacy would not be commercial success, but a community that, over the years, confirms his vision for the town of Takoma Park.

Despite the 1893 fire, the diminishing role of Mr. Gilbert, and a depressed national economy, Takoma's business community continued to expand in tandem with the town's growing population. The first streetcars of Brightwood Electric Railway from downtown Washington arrived in Takoma in April of 1893.

In 1897, the Baltimore and Washington Transit Company began construction on a street rail system to extend from 4th and Butternut via Aspen and Laurel Streets to Ethan Allen Avenue, and eventually to the hugely popular Wildwood Resort and Glen Sligo Hotel on Sligo Creek.

New York physician Dr. R. G. Flower announced plans for a Sanitarium at Sligo Creek. Before century's end, substantial homes occupied each block along Carroll Street, and there was a primary school at 304 Tulip Avenue, a library, and churches.



Washington Sanitarium. Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

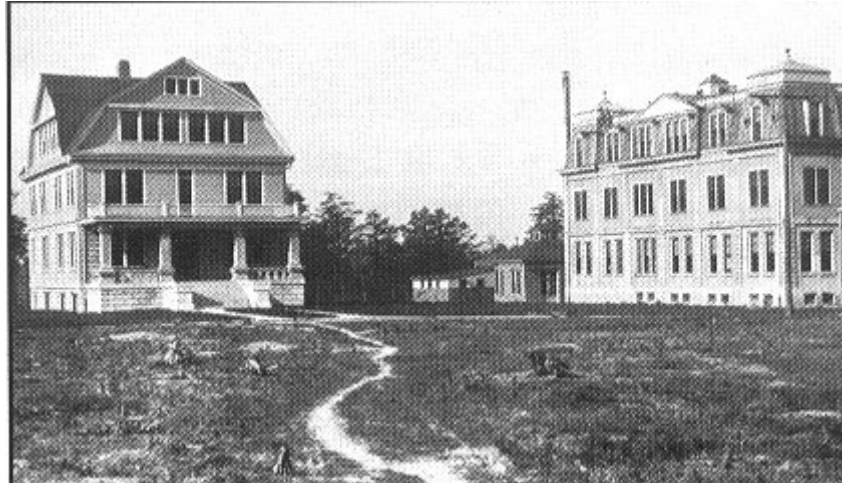
At the turn of the century, quickening commercial interest in Takoma pushed business further east along Cedar Street toward Laurel Avenue. At the far north end of town, the city established a water treatment plant on Sligo Creek, and soon water flowed from a water tower on Ethan Allen Avenue. Congress approved building a primary school for children of District residents.

In 1904, a significant new player moved to Takoma Park. Helping with relocation of the Michigan based Seventh Day Adventist Church, search committee member A. G. Daniells wrote in June of 1903, "One of the finest places we have found was a place called Takoma Park. It is on the main line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad running to Chicago and St. Louis. It is also reached by an electric line. It is five or six miles from the city . . . It is a magnificent place."

With a missionary college and a sanitarium in mind, the Adventist church first purchased a 50-acre site on Sligo Creek from Dr. Flower, whose plans, despite a \$60,000 investment, remained stillborn. In 1907, the Church dedicated its Foreign Missionary Seminary (today's Columbia Union College), and a year later, the Washington Sanitarium building.

The church acquired a second large tract, in the center of Takoma, for a General Conference building, a publishing center, and a church; they also bought land between Tulip and Carroll Avenues to resell as residential lots to church members.

From its headquarters in Takoma Park, the General Conference Center oversaw 2,874 churches around the world by 1912, and published texts and literature for church use from its companion Review and Herald Publishing Association building. At its opening, the Review and Herald print shop reportedly employed between 60 and 70 people.



Review and Herald Publishing Association building.

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

Bringing an influx of people and jobs that lasted into the mid-1980s, the Seventh Day Adventist Church hastened the commercial use of Carroll Street's south side.

Over in north Takoma, Gilbert's failed business venture, the North Takoma Hotel, caught the interest of William Denton Bliss, who owned and operated a successful school for study of electricity in downtown Washington. He purchased the hotel, remodeled! it, and moved the Bliss Electrical School to its new dormitory and classroom ! space in late 1908.

Less than two months after the school's move into the former Oorth Takoma Hotel, fire broke out in Bliss's newly redone school, and once again severely disrupted a Takoma Park commercial endeavor.

Heroism saved the nearly 200 sleeping students, but the former Gilbert hotel was gutted. Over the next several years, Bliss constructed substantial classroom, administration, and dormitory buildings in the same location. Years later, they became part of Montgomery County's first junior college in Maryland.

Lifeblood of the first years, the railroad was also a serious menace to the people it served, and to their animals. A nasty accident involving the railroad took the arm of one of Takoma Park's first builders, William Skinner. Skinner, Gilbert's choice to build some of

the first homes in Takoma, had his arm severed at the shoulder, and never returned to construction.

"The neighbors who gathered at the scene removed a door from the station and placed my father upon it. Six men then lifted this improvised stretcher and carried it down Carroll Avenue to our home on Pine Avenue. Mr. Gilbert walked at the rear of the procession counting the cadence to keep the movement as smooth as possible, to minimize the pain of the patient," Skinner's son wrote in 1939.

A horrendous train wreck occurred at the Lamond crossing on a foggy night in 1906, and also a fatality at Chestnut Street. Although the wreck resulted from the rear ending of one train by another, it pushed the development of safer railroad crossing alternatives.

In 1912, construction of the "subway" or "underpass" for Cedar Street ended the era of "crossing guards." Aspen already had its own "subway", while the Lamond Station and Chestnut Street crossings were also closed.



The Cedar Street Underpass.

Photo courtesy of Historic Takoma, Inc.

Nearly 30 years had passed since Gilbert embarked on his mission to create his own utopic vision of what a suburb should be for its inhabitants.

From land he described as covered with "a growth of stunted pine and scrub oak, intertwined and mixed with no end of briars and poison vines," Gilbert had recognized an opportunity and seized the moment.

Fulfilling his prophecy, Takoma Park became, in less than 30 years, a complete entity unto itself, with an evolving identity and unique outlook.

By 1913, local commerce, newspapers, schools, churches, and paved roads were already replacing the early, difficult pioneer days of muddy streets, board walks, forested back yards, and expanses of empty lots that would, inescapably, become memories to be investigated by the historically curious nearly a century later.

The author extends a sincere thank you to Historic Takoma Inc. and to Dorothy Barnes and Clair Garman for their generous assistance in preparing this article.

Additional thanks go to The Historical Society of Washington, DC, Montgomery County Historical Society in Rockville, Martin Luther King Library and its Washingtoniana Collection in the District, Takoma Park Maryland Library, and to Pastor Trevor Delafield of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Coming in the June Takoma Voice: an Historical Walking Tour of Takoma Park by Elizabeth Marple Bentley

Contact Clair Garman, 301-270-2248, to join him on a walking tour of the "Dinky" line on the first Sunday of every month. \$5 donation to Historic Takoma, Inc.

Copyright © May 1999 Takoma Voice