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The Wilderness That Became Takoma

By Elizabeth Marple Bentley

In 1883, the land B.F. Gilbert enthusiastically purchased for his future Takoma was somewhat hilly, rough and forested, and interspersed frequently with springs. The same hills and irregularities in the land also discouraged extensive agrarian use. Urbanization might not have appeared a likely land use prospect.

This description of the area, as Gilbert first knew it, appeared in the *Washington Star* on June 15, 1889:

"Five years ago Takoma was nameless and unknown. Farmers looked with scorn at the edges of the dense growth of forests which covered the land, and its local designation was synonymous for all that was poor and worthless.

It was as wild looking a region as ever stopped the progress of agriculture or served as a home for the animals and birds which flee before the approach of civilization. To penetrate the tough underbrush was in many places only for squirrels.

It was a wilderness, the only entrance to which was either by following the picturesque Sligo in its enchanting deviousness, or by swinging the axe or manipulating the grub-hoe."

Essentially, the soon-to-be Takoma was a backwater of occasional farms bypassed by most roads. Travelers would sometimes pass through on a route extending north, along the bow of General S. S. Carroll's property, over Sligo Creek or Run on a low, wood-framed bridge, and then continue north toward Sandy Spring. Today a small stretch of the old Sandy Spring Road lies at the south end of Maple Avenue.

For some distance, a well-known path hugged Sligo Creek [see *Takoma Voice*, July 1998], while Piney Branch Road extended north from Seventh Street Pike (today's Georgia Avenue) to meet East Branch Blair Road, and stopped.

The only farmhouse remaining along the stretch of road that went from the Maryland line directly through the future Takoma is the Davis-Warner Inn at 8114 Carroll Avenue. Recently renovated, the house and farm predate Takoma Park; the house was probably constructed around 1855.