

TPMMA – Brief Community History

Montgomery County and the surrounding region have been home to Indigenous people for more than 10,000 years. Members of the Piscataway and Nacotchtank tribes stewarded local lands and waters, and originally used the area's stream valleys for hunting and collecting raw materials. The Sligo Creek stream valley contains one archaeological site reflecting this history, a low-density quartz flake scatter, which demonstrates Indigenous people's use of local stone to create tools. Concentrated European colonization of Maryland in the 17th century brought warfare, disease, and ecological disruption that drove many local Native American groups to move westward. Some members remained, and their descendants continue to live in Maryland.

Through the mid-19th century, the area that would become Takoma Park remained primarily rural and agricultural. Large amounts of land within and around the plan area were owned by members of the locally prominent Blair family, who enslaved a Black workforce to farm their lands and manage their households. These early Black occupants included Henry, a coachman, and Nanny, a cook. The Blairs used the Sligo Creek stream valley for recreation, where they had established a riding trail prior to the Civil War.

When the family patriarch, Frances Preston Blair, died in 1876, his heirs began to sell portions of the family land. Between 1887 and 1889, real estate developer Benjamin F. Gilbert purchased over 170 acres that were once part of the Blairs' "Falkland Manor." Gilbert was enacting an ambitious plan to purchase and subdivide land along the Metropolitan Branch of the B&O Railroad, which opened in 1873. As he assembled and sold property, he named the early railway commuter suburb "Takoma." He promoted his investment with illustrated advertisements describing a picturesque community with a beautiful and healthful natural environment featuring fresh spring water, high ground, and abundant trees. By 1886, Takoma Park had a post office and a new railroad station, which allowed Gilbert to promote its easy access to downtown Washington, DC. The Town of Takoma Park incorporated in 1890 and selected Gilbert as the first mayor.

The pristine natural environment was a key factor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church's decision to relocate their headquarters and supporting institutions to Takoma Park, and adjacent Takoma, DC, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Takoma Park's clean air and water provided the ideal setting for the Adventists, whose faith valued healthy living. In 1903, the Church purchased fifty acres of land along Sligo Creek. They opened the Washington Training College (today known as Washington Adventist University) in 1904, and the Washington Sanitarium, a holistic healthcare facility (later known as Washington Adventist Hospital), in 1907. These institutions fostered development east of Sligo Creek as they expanded and drew new residents to the area. Two sites associated with this history are recommended for designation in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation: Krestview (7625 Carroll Avenue) and the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church (7700 Carroll Avenue).

The benefits of the growing town were not shared evenly. Black residents, who had begun to settle in Takoma Park shortly after the community's founding, were socially and geographically isolated by widespread racial discrimination. In the early-to-mid 20th century, discriminatory housing practices, including the use of racial restrictive covenants, channeled the Black population into three distinct areas of Takoma Park. The largest of these, "the Hill," formed around 1920 in an elevated, hilly area on Ritchie, Geneva, and Oswego Avenues. In the same period, African American residents of Takoma Park

organized the Colored Citizens Association (CCA) to advocate on behalf of their communities. As the city expanded civil services and began providing streetlights, paved roads, and public utilities, such as electricity, water, and sewage, to white communities, Black residents saw that their neighborhoods were consistently overlooked. Through decades of legalized racial discrimination in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the CCA advocated for the fair provision of public services to Black communities.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, their efforts focused on obtaining access to recreational facilities. The local parks and the Takoma Park Recreation Center, an M-NCPPC facility, were only accessible to white patrons. Private gathering places in the area – local restaurants and clubs – were also predominantly segregated, leaving Black young people few places to socialize. After nearly two decades of activism, the City of Takoma Park constructed the Heffner Park Community Center (42 Oswego Avenue) in 1959 for the use of Black residents. This site is recommended for designation in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation for its association with this significant civil rights struggle and with influential Takoma Park resident Lee Jordan, who led this advocacy as President of the CCA and championed the power of sports to bridge racial divides.

Takoma Park experienced significant changes in the mid-twentieth century as improved infrastructure allowed for substantial new construction along Maple Avenue between Philadelphia Avenue and Sligo Creek. This area had long been subject to frequent flooding and drainage issues that made the land less desirable for development. Road improvements and the channelization of Brashears Run prompted a wave of apartment construction beginning in the mid-to-late 1950s that produced the mid- and high-rise apartment buildings that characterize this stretch of Maple Avenue today. The new buildings were advertised as deluxe, elegant residences with modern suburban conveniences: garbage disposals, elevators, large closets, and ample parking. Some barred families with younger children, a form of housing discrimination later prohibited by the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Takoma Park's population grew rapidly between 1950 and 1960 as this multifamily housing was constructed, and an increasing percentage of the local population lived in apartments. At the same time, older, single-family homes were increasingly converted into rooming houses or divided into small apartments. The resulting influx of new residents brought increased social, ethnic, and economic diversity to Takoma Park as immigrants, students, and lower-income families sought inexpensive housing near Washington, DC and downtown Silver Spring. By the close of the twentieth century, Takoma Park and the adjacent communities of East Silver Spring and Langley Park were home to a socially and economically diverse population unique in Montgomery County, a mix attributed in large part to the supply of multifamily housing. The study area retains this diversity today: it is home to Spanish, French and Amharic-speaking residents, and a population that is younger, less wealthy, and less White than the county as a whole.