

DEVELOPMENT

Chevy Chase was founded largely on California gold and Nevada silver, for the two men most responsible for its development had brought fortunes from the west that had been made through both.

At the time Chevy Chase was conceived in the 1880s, Washington was a small federal city that did not extend west as far as Georgetown or north farther than Florida Avenue. To the northwest, a group of western mining millionaires had built mansions on farmland—transforming the area around Dupont Circle into what was briefly known as “The Honest Miner’s Camp.” One of the biggest houses, called Stewart’s Castle, was built in 1873 on the present site of the Riggs Bank by William Morris Stewart, an easterner who had made a fortune mining gold in California and profiting from the silver of the stupendous Comstock Lode in what was then western Utah Territory. Stewart, a lawyer, became the leading political figure there, sponsored Nevada’s admission as a state in 1864, and was Senator from Nevada when a good friend and business associate, lawyer Francis Newlands of San Francisco, arrived in Washington with experience in real estate development—and with money to invest.

There was considerable interest in developing real estate outside the city core. And Newlands soon focused on a vast area of farmland on the northern side of Rock Creek which had been pointed out to him by retired Army Colonel George Armes. Charles Glover of Riggs Bank suggested that Newlands and Stewart, who also had money to invest, involve Edward J. Stellwagen of the real estate firm of Thomas J. Fisher. Decades later, Stellwagen, then head of the Fisher Company and the Union Trust Company, was to succeed Newlands as head of the enterprise.

The story from which this sketch is primarily drawn is documented by Judith Helm Robinson in her piece about Chevy Chase in the book *Washington at Home*, and by Albert W. Atwood in *Francis G. Newlands, A Builder of the Nation*, published by the Newlands Company in 1969.

The Newlands group, using proxies, quietly bought up most of the farmland between Calvert Street in the District and Jones Bridge Road in faraway Maryland just south of what is now the Capital Beltway. They amassed more than 1700 acres in all.

The group formed the Chevy Chase Land Company in June 1890 with Newlands as chief executive and Colonel Armes out of the picture, apparently because he talked prematurely about the land purchases. Senator

Stewart originally invested \$300,000 in the project but seems to have sold out sometime after he retired from the Senate in 1905 and returned to Nevada.

The millions that were to be poured into the development of the new suburb of Chevy Chase were in the hands of Newlands.

The Senator from Nevada

Born in 1848 in Natchez, Mississippi, and raised in Quincy, Illinois, and Washington, D.C., Newlands went



Francis G. Newlands

to Yale, then studied law at night at Columbian College, now George Washington University. He moved to San Francisco in 1869 to seek his fortune, and he found it.

He became the valued lawyer and friend of William Sharon, who had prospered in California real estate, and, like Stewart, in the Comstock silver mines in Virginia City, Nevada. Sharon, a financier and part owner of the Bank of California, moved into that rough and ready boomtown at a time when the more accessible veins of silver had been mined. He reorganized, centralized, and financed mining operations, and built the 16-mile Virginia and Truckee Railway to carry out the ore. Subsequently the mines poured forth such riches that President Abraham Lincoln credited them with propping up the United States during the Civil War.

Sharon had a son and two daughters. One of the daughters, Flora, married a British nobleman, Sir George Fermor-Hesketh, who had rounded Cape Horn in his yacht, had met and married her in lavish style in San Francisco, and had borne her away to his huge estate in England. Newlands married the other Sharon daughter, Clara Adelaide, in 1874. Handsome, sensitive, well-educated, she was to die in childbirth in 1882, leaving three daughters. When Sharon died three years later, Newlands became a trustee of his vast estate and in charge of one-third of it.

Newlands’ father-in-law Sharon, like Stewart, had been a U.S. Senator from Nevada. Newlands himself was to become a Nevada Congressman in 1893, then

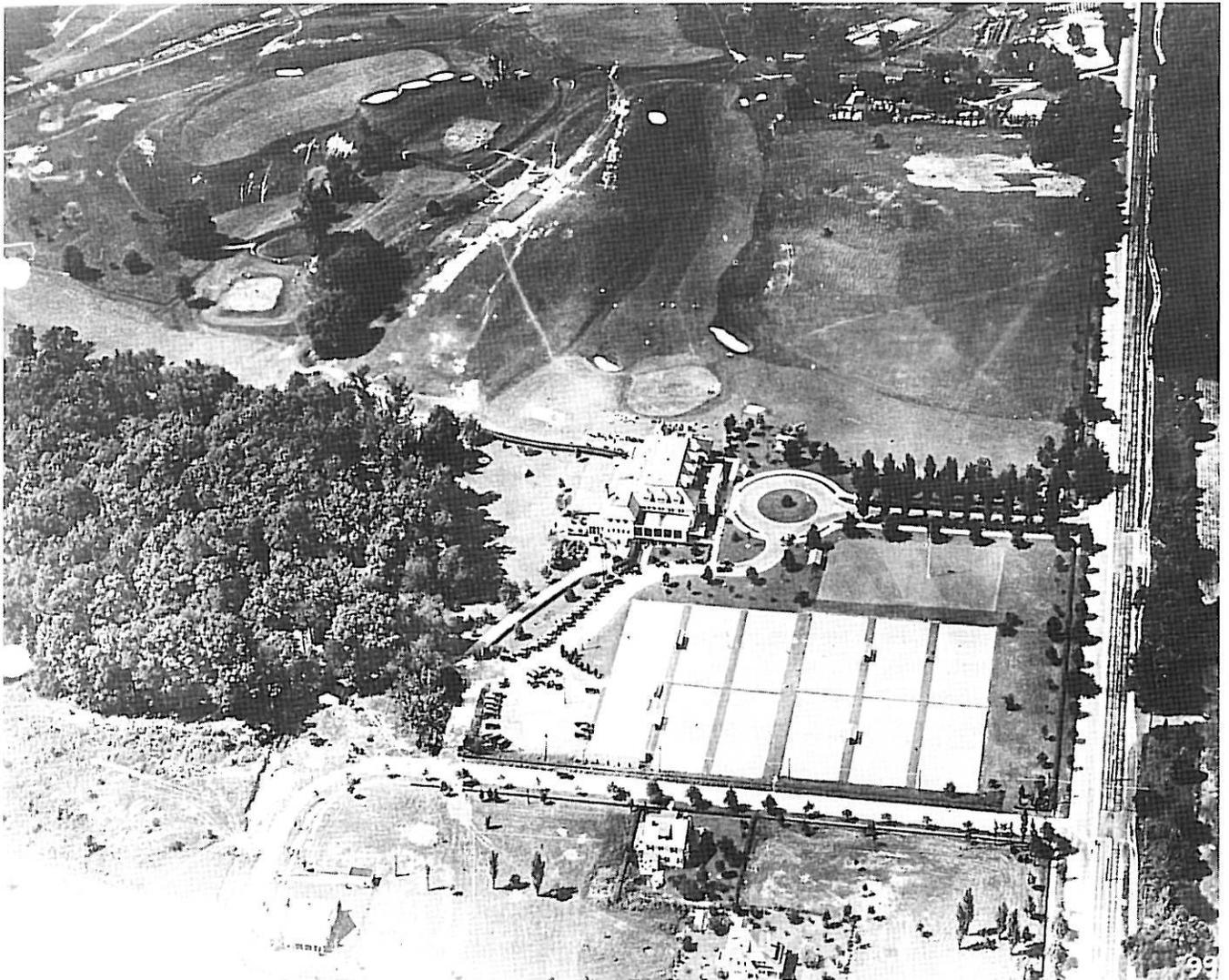
became Senator in 1903 and served until he died in 1917. He was active on more than 19 different Senate committees, spearheaded irrigation projects in the west, and became a close friend of President Wilson. Some of his colleagues, including Senator William Henry King of Utah, had wanted Newlands to be the Democratic presidential candidate in 1912, but, according to King, Newlands was “too modest and too unpretentious.” Atwood reports that the *Los Angeles Times* once said in an editorial that Newlands was “honest and patriotic and learned, and as much of a statesman as it is possible for a Democrat to be.”

Once the Chevy Chase Land Company was formed, largely with Sharon-Newlands money, the company undertook a gigantic development project.

Building Connecticut Avenue

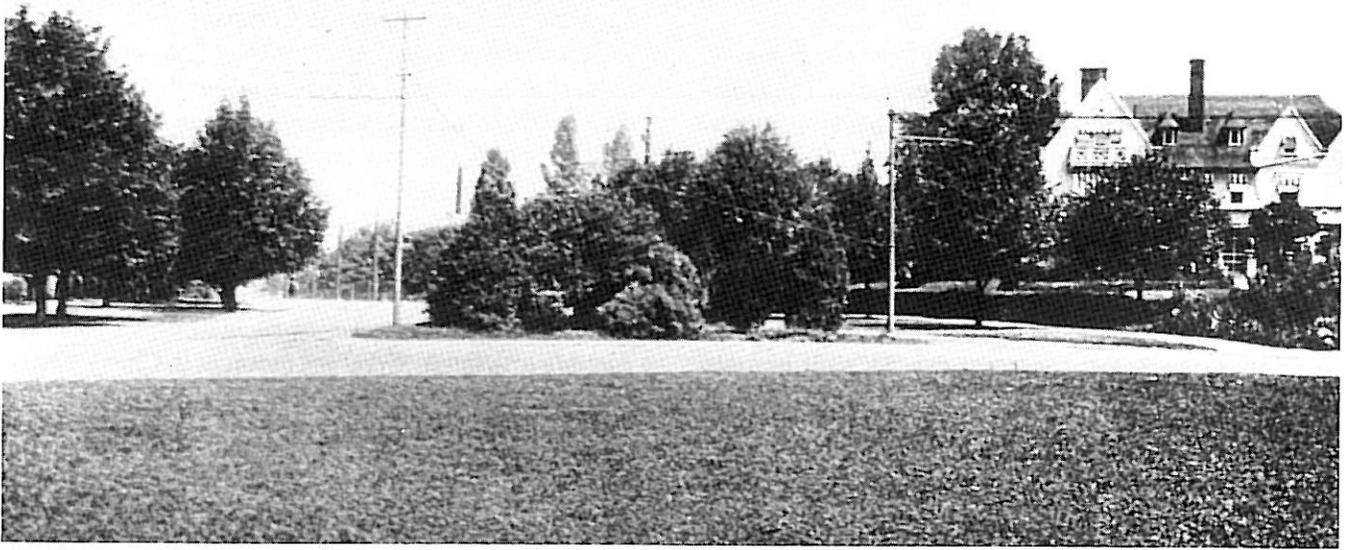
To connect this far-away area to the city, the company extended Connecticut Avenue through all the land it had purchased, with workers using picks and shovels to excavate miles of roadbed up hill and down. Trestle bridges went up over Rock Creek at Calvert Street and over Klinge Road. The company built an electric railway at a cost of \$1.5 million to thrust out to the end of its area.

The building of Connecticut Avenue—and its railway—incidentally stimulated the development of Cleveland Park in the District. But more important for the Town of Chevy Chase, Senator Newlands had many specific ideas about suburban development for the origi-



Looking north with Connecticut Avenue on the right side of this circa 1915 photo. Meadow Lane, lower left, curves into Cypress Street, now East-West Highway. The Columbia Country Club occupies the upper area.

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Chevy Chase Circle looking north with the Newlands/Corby Mansion at right.

PHOTO BY MRS. MINNIE E. BROOKE, ROBERT A. TRUAX COLLECTION

nal Chevy Chase area that were later incorporated into other sections of Chevy Chase when building began there after the turn of the century.

He employed several experts to plan and build in Maryland a development with good roads, wide streets, pure water, a sanitary sewage system, and sidewalks, with provision for such amenities as shopping, schools, churches, and clubs. He established zoning regulations that barred apartment buildings and row houses.

Nathan Barrett, a student of the illustrious Frederick Law Olmstead, was employed as landscape architect to design the suburb. The development was to have large lots and wide streets with English and Scottish names. The homes on the main street had to cost at least \$5,000, a substantial sum in those days, and those on the side streets \$3,000. Newlands thought good landscaping was an economic asset and a pleasant amenity. Native tulip poplar, white and black oak, pin oak, linden, and sycamore were planted or carefully preserved. And many foreign trees were planted, including maples from Norway, English elm, and Japanese boxwood.

“Uncle Frank’s Folly”

Big steps were taken to lure potential buyers to the area. With an eye toward the carriage trade, Senator Newlands and the Land Company helped form the Chevy Chase Club, and he became its first president. To attract potential buyers to the healthy cooler air of more elevated Chevy Chase, the Land Company in 1893 built

the Spring Hotel, which is now a small part of the main building of the 4-H Center. And to attract everyone able to afford a trolley ride through the rising new suburb, the Land Company dammed a small stream, Coquelin Run, near the northern end of the company’s holdings at Jones Bridge Road, creating Chevy Chase Lake to the east of Connecticut Avenue. An amusement complex there drew people to the area on weekends; the complex eventually included boats for hire, refreshment kiosks, a merry-go-round, a bandstand where the Marine Band often played, and a dance pavillion where Irene and Vernon Castle introduced the Castle Walk in the rag-time era.

Newlands built a house for himself—known later as the Corby Mansion—at Chevy Chase Circle. However, when he found that his guests were missing the last trolley to town and time and again had to spend the night at his place, he sold it and moved closer to the Capitol, buying the estate called Woodley, which is the Maret School today.

By the end of 1893, a year of perhaps the worst depression in American history, Atwood writes, Newlands had spent three million dollars on land, grading, bridges, and taxes, and nearly a million in developing Chevy Chase Village.

While other developments went under, the secretary of the company wrote stockholders four years later, in February 1897, that “sales of lots (for 1896) totaled \$15,166.50 . . . [but] the town of Chevy Chase has quite held its own in growth during its three-and-a-half years

of life, there being now 27 houses occupied by families.”

There was very little further development, however, until Chevy Chase was nearly 30 years old. The Company was land poor for that long period, held together by the banks and mortgage lender Thomas J. Fisher. The Senator’s nieces called the Chevy Chase venture “Uncle Frank’s Folly.” But, according to Atwood, Newlands never lost his good disposition or his faith in the future of Chevy Chase: he “had no taste for quick speculative gains but was interested only in long-term results.”

Besides, the Senator was not exactly poor himself. Extensive family holdings in the west included San Francisco’s Palace Hotel.

Over the years, Chevy Chase was to become one of the most famous suburbs in the United States. In our town, beautiful houses were to be built at different times on such streets as Leland, Beechwood, and Rosemary, as well as Meadow Lane. But little progress was made in developing Chevy Chase until the building boom that followed World War I, when lots in Section Four and other sections finally began to sell.

The Land Company was to pay no dividend until

1922, five years after the death of Senator Newlands and 32 years after he formed the Company.

Since other original investors had long since cashed in their chips, or papered their walls with the stock, the Chevy Chase Land Company today is owned by the Senator’s direct or collateral descendants.

Today the company is going strong, with far-flung interests. In our area, it owns the Chevy Chase Shopping Center and the Metro building which it built in Friendship Heights on the northeast corner of Wisconsin and Western Avenues. It also owns land on Connecticut Avenue just south of the bus terminal in Chevy Chase, D.C.

In the area where Chevy Chase Lake once stood, the company owns the office and retail complex—land and buildings—on both sides of Connecticut between Manor Road and the railroad tracks, as well as the townhouses and garden apartments on Manor Road.

Senator Newlands would be pleased to know his company is doing very well indeed and that his nieces were short-sighted in calling Chevy Chase “Uncle Frank’s Folly.”

John Linehan



The Offutt farm house, 4500 Leland Street, has been a private residence since it was built circa 1888.

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