
THE SETTING

Long before our time, the Town of Chevy Chase was part of a larger, gently rolling, wooded countryside, punctuated by several small fresh-water springs and streams. The soil, though thin, was adequate for farming, and the drainage was excellent. The high point, on Bradley Lane, is approximately 360 feet above the Potomac tidal basin, and the low point of some 110 feet is where Coquelin Run passes under East-West Highway.

The land is less punctuated by small streams today, as the two principal ones have been piped underground. Coquelin Run, which appears to be spring fed, was placed in large round cement conduits along the west side of Maple Avenue in the early 1960s and the intermittent stream, which ran down the little valley from Woodside Place along Meadow Lane, was placed underground long before Coquelin.

When Coquelin Run was placed underground, a pleasant flat green area was created southwest of the junction of East-West Highway and Maple Avenue. The southern part of this green space became Zimmerman Brothers' Park in honor of Fred and Paul Zimmerman. These two brothers, who had made the terrace in front of their home at 7605 Maple Avenue into one of the most attractive gardens in the area, did most of the planning of the park across the street.

The area is still covered with many trees, but they are more regimented and thus reflect the cultural influence of owners and town planning. The native trees in our town include ash, birch, butternut, catalpa, cedar, wild cherry, cottonwood, crab apple, white dogwood, elm, hemlock, holly, locust, maples of several types, oaks, redbud, spruce, pines, tulip poplar, and willow. Exotic trees include bamboo, Japanese cherry, pink dogwood, ginkgo, linden, Oriental and star magnolia, mimosa, and Norway maple. Azaleas have found this climate much to their liking, and the many varieties provide an abundance of color from the last week in April to the middle of May. Other flowering shrubs include deutzia, forsythia, laurel, mock orange, rhododendron, japonica, and spirea. In the summer, the rose of sharon and hydrangea are in bloom, followed by the crepe myrtle.

A fascinating and ancient perennial, the anemone japonica, blooms each early fall in the Fessenden garden at 4117 Woodbine Street. This plant produces a beautiful display of single white blossoms well worth seeing.

The well-cared-for trees and gardens provide food and cover for a great variety of birds and a few wild animals. The birds that commonly nest in the area

include cardinals, catbirds, chickadees and titmice, crows, mourning doves, house finches, flickers, and several woodpeckers, including the large pileated woodpecker, grackles, ruby-throated hummingbirds, blue jays, kingbirds, and flycatchers, purple martins, mockingbirds, and robins, song and chipping sparrows, English and white-throated sparrows, starlings, chimney swifts, brown thrashers, vireos, and house wrens. An occasional local nester might be the yellow-billed cuckoo, Baltimore (now Northern) oriole, nighthawk, nuthatch, wood duck, and mallard, or wood thrush. In the spring and fall, the area is alive with migrating birds, such as grosbeaks, hawks, tanagers, veeries, warblers, and frequently gaggles of high-flying geese.

The most common wild animal in the area is the grey squirrel with an occasional black one. The smaller red squirrel, which used to be numerous, has become quite rare. Rabbits, o'possums, and raccoons are still around, but seem to have made such a nuisance of themselves that they are disappearing. If one has a quick eye, one might get a glimpse of a chipmunk or a shrew, or, quite late at night, a red fox.

Early Residents

Before the arrival of the first Europeans, this part of Maryland was settled for many generations by the Piscataway Indians, a generally peaceful branch of the great Algonquin Nation. Evidence of their past presence and settlements has been found not only in this immediate area but also in many places along the Potomac River, Rock Creek, and lesser streams. The usually moderate climate and the pleasant and variable terrain, particularly that part above the marshy area of the tidal basin of the Potomac, provided these early inhabitants with all their basic needs. There were abundant game animals and fish, many fresh-water springs, large streams for travel and trade, wood and stone for their tools and weapons, soil fertile enough for their few crops, and forests to provide the means for protection against weather and foes.

The first Europeans in this general area were probably Spaniards who came up the Chesapeake Bay from the Caribbean about the middle of the 16th century. They were followed into the bay considerably later by John Smith of Jamestown and Henry Fleet, a fur trader. The latter reportedly came up the Potomac River as far as Little Falls in the 1620s.

In 1632, a few years after Henry Fleet had made his

observations of this area known in England, Charles I granted a large area of land west of the head of Delaware Bay to Sir George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. This tract included most of present-day Delaware, all of Maryland as we know it today, including the Potomac River, and the northern half of the Chesapeake Bay. This large grant was called Terra Maria or Maryland in honor of Queen Henriette Maria, the wife of Charles I.

After Sir George Calvert died, his grant passed to his eldest son, Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore. Cecil never came to America himself, but in 1633 he asked his younger brother, Leonard, to lead a group of some 200 colonists to Maryland. They sailed in the early months of 1634 in the 400-ton "Dove" and the much larger "Ark of London," landing on St. Clements Island in the southern part of the Chesapeake Bay on March 25, 1634. Shortly thereafter they established a settlement at St. Mary's City near the tip of a large peninsula projecting southward into the bay.

In the middle 1600s, settlements continued to grow around the bay. It was not until the late 1680s, however, that the Calverts were able to stimulate the interest of wealthy Englishmen in the Maryland areas north of the Potomac River. Some of the earliest grants made to these absentee landowners were immediately north and east of the present-day Town of Chevy Chase. They included such tracts as "Girls Portion," "Joseph's Park," and "Clean Drinking." About 1715, the landowners began to encourage tenants to move into what was considered uninhabited country.

Although there were a few well-to-do Englishmen among the permanent settlers, most were poor, uneducated, often indentured, men and women of English, Scotch, and German descent. Many found this part of Maryland to be remote, wild, and sometimes hostile. The fear of attacks did not come from the generally friendly local Indians but from northern marauding French and Indian raiders. The lack of passable roads made communication between tenant farms, movement of local militia, and transportation of supplies and products extremely difficult. Another continuing and increasing source of frustration were taxes levied first by the British government and then later by the federal, state, and county governments.

One of these early grants that is of particular interest to residents of the Town of Chevy Chase was that given to Charles Beall and Thomas Fletchall in April 1716. This tract of some 400 acres encompassed most of what is now the town, from Bradley Lane to Leland Street, as well as a large segment of Chevy Chase Section Three to the east. Less than a year after the original "Charles

and Thomas" grant was made, it was sold to William Ray for 60 pounds sterling. In 1730, Ray began to subdivide his property, selling some lots and willing others to members of his family.

One of the eventual recipients was Mary Ray, who inherited 70 acres in 1760. Her triangularly-shaped property centered on what is now the intersection of Thornapple and Ridgewood Streets with apexes at Hillcrest and Bradley Lane on the south, East Avenue and Stanford Street on the west, and about the middle of Leland Street on the north. In 1780 the county tax assessor evaluated Mary Ray's estate as: "Property-20 lbs, no slaves, no plate, 8 cattle-17 lbs, other property-5 lbs." The tax assessor also indicated the main house contained four whites and was "old and very sorry, all cleared and of little value, as can be well conceived."

Cheivy Chase

The grant of most interest to all residents of Chevy Chase, in the District and in Maryland, is the 560 acres deeded to Colonel Joseph Belt by the fifth Lord Baltimore: "Wee Doe hereby Grant unto him the Said Joseph Belt all that tract or piece of Land Called Cheivy Chase . . . this tenth day of July Seventeen hundred and twenty-five."

No one knows why the name Chevy Chase was chosen for this grant. It refers to the Cheviot Hills, now rounded and green with lovely watered valleys grazed by Cheviot sheep, in Roxborough County, Scotland, and England's Northumbria. In Belt's time, this Cheviot Chase was wild, wooded, lonely border country, fiercely fought over for centuries by Scotch and French and English armies and by resident clans. One of the most famous of these battles had been joined at Otterburn, on the southern edge of the Cheviots, on August 19, 1388. The story of this clash between Douglas and Percy, told and retold in popular ballads such as "The Hunting of the Cheviot" and "The Battle of Otterburn," was well known to Scotch and English immigrants like the Belt family in 18th-century America. In 1802, the tale was published by Sir Walter Scott as "The Ballad of Chevy Chase," and it was this version which was most familiar to the 19th-century Americans who developed Chevy Chase and founded the Chevy Chase Club.

The first verse of one of these ballads reads:

"God prosper long our noble King,
Our lives and safties all!
A woeful hunting once there did
In Cheivy Chace befall."

Colonel Belt himself was English, third generation of



Bradley Lane in 1910. St. John's Church of Norwood Parish is in the background. COURTESY, MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

a family established for 45 years in Virginia and Maryland. Born in Arundel County, Maryland, in 1680, he was the grandson of Humphrey Belt, who came to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1635. He was also well educated and a talented person. He became a colonel in the local militia and served in the French and Indian War. He was a member of the Maryland House of Burgesses, a trustee of the first free schools of Maryland, a founder of the Rock Creek Parish, an avid horseman, and the owner of a large estate. Married to Esther, daughter of Scotsman Ninean Beall, he was the father of a large family.

Shortly after receiving his grant, Colonel Belt built a two-and-a-half-story brick house on a site—now 3734 Oliver Street—just southeast of what is now Chevy Chase Circle. In order to transport the materials, especially the hundreds of English bricks, he built a road

which branched off the old north-south Indian trail and ran northeast to his homesite. This intersection later became Tenleytown (Tenley Circle). A few sections of this old Belt Road are still in existence. The Belt family home was torn down in 1907.

In 1747 Colonel Belt built a large farmhouse about a half mile north. This site, now at the southwest corner of Connecticut Avenue and Bradley Lane, was later owned by Abraham Bradley and is now the location of one of the main buildings of the Chevy Chase Club.

Following Colonel Belt's death, his heirs began to divide the original 560-acre grant. This division and the creation of the District of Columbia in 1799 left the southeastern part of the Belt estate in the District and the remainder under the jurisdiction of Maryland. This dismemberment of the old estate helped accelerate the settlement of this part of Montgomery County. Later,

the establishment of Rock Creek Parish, the Bethesda Meeting House, St. John's Episcopal Church, and the Bethesda Post Office, as well as the influx of commercial families into the area, greatly increased the need for better roads for the transportation of goods and products and for communication and protection.

Trails and Roads

The earliest settlers in this area were heavily dependent on the old Indian trails. The principal trail, now Wisconsin Avenue, began on the north side of the Potomac River near where Rock Creek enters the Potomac. It ran north toward what is now Bethesda, Rockville, and Frederick, and then beyond to the west. The trail is now marked by 12 Madonna of the Trail statues, stretching across the United States. The first of them is immediately north of the Bethesda Post Office. By the middle 1700s, the rough trail was suitable for wagons as far as Frederick. From there on, it was basically a wide footpath, as General Braddock discovered when he led his

heavily-burdened British and Colonial troops to their ignominious defeat by the French and Indians near Fort Duquesne, now Pittsburgh.

Colonel Belt built a road off this main trail, and near Tenleytown, where that branched off, another road—now River Road—was established running generally along the north side of the Potomac River toward Cumberland. These three roads generally running northward from the Potomac, along with such later east-west roads as Cedar Lane, Jones Bridge Road, Bradley Lane—once called Jackson Road—and Military Road, formed the basic network from which the current Bethesda-Chevy Chase road system was developed.

Although the initial grants to such recipients as John Courts in 1699 (“Clean Drinking Manor”) and Colonel Belt in 1725 helped open the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area for settlement, it was the development of the area by the Chevy Chase Land Company that established the style of living that has endured for nearly 100 years in Chevy Chase.

Linscott Hall



Connecticut Avenue looking north from Rosemary Street about 1912.

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