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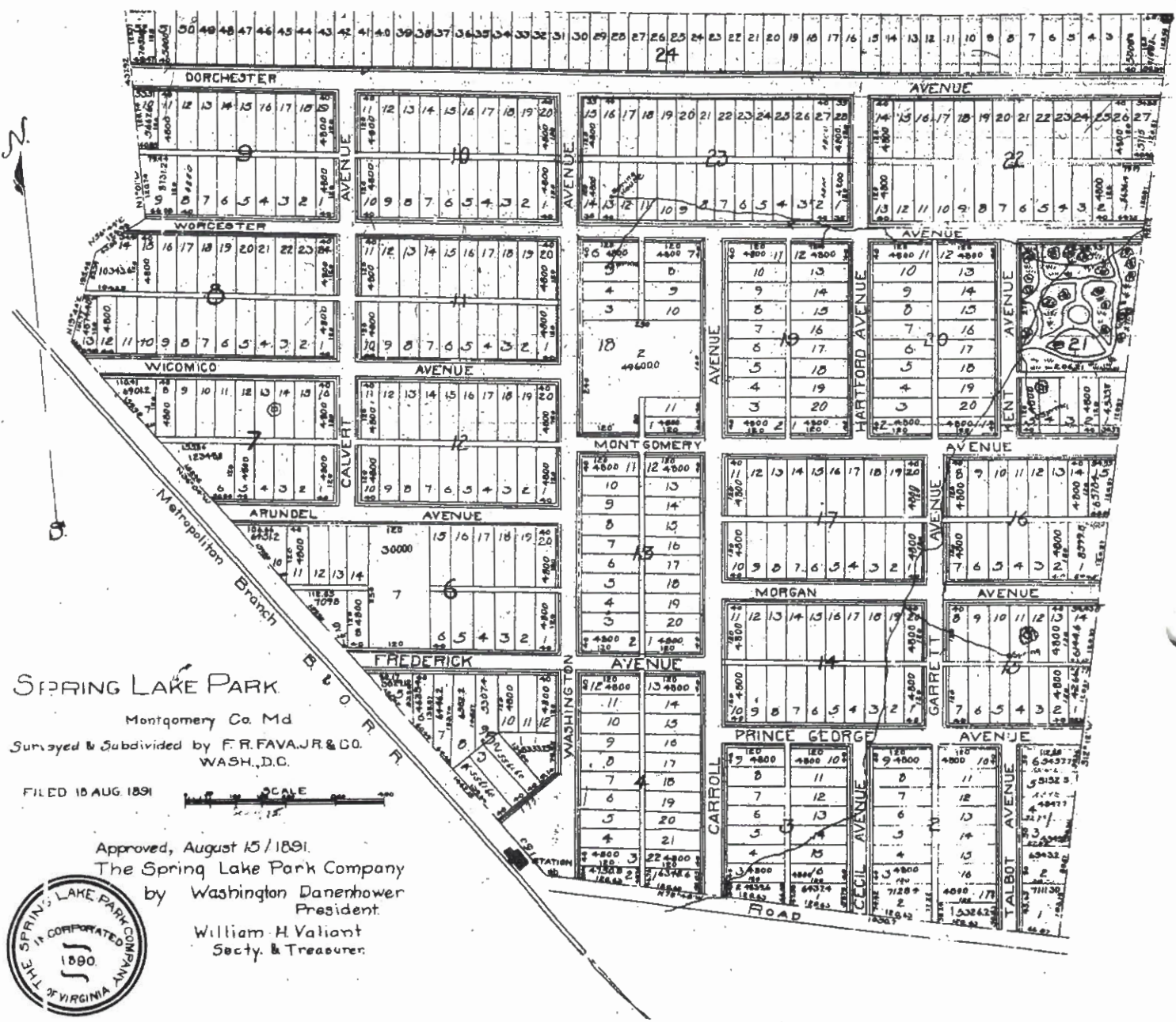
A FARM, A NEIGHBORHOOD, AND A CEMETERY
THE HISTORY OF THE HIGGINS FAMILY AND SPRING LAKE PARK

By Eleanor W. Cunningham, Carol R. DuVall and Eileen S. McGuckian

With the opening of passenger service on the Metropolitan Branch of the B&O Railroad on May 25, 1873, a new era dawned for Montgomery County, Maryland. Near the County seat of government, speculators foresaw that the division of farmland for building lots all along the Rockville Pike would bring thousands of new home owners to the area. This meant that employees in the nation's capital could live in the suburbs, commuting by train to their places of employment in the city. The new rail line positioned stations at Randolph, Halpine, Rockville, and Derwood and by 1920 ran eighteen passenger trains a day.¹

In 1890 land speculators platted several new subdivisions in and around Rockville, including West End Park, Lincoln Park, and Autrey Park. Washington Danenhowe platted Rockville Park and in 1891 incorporated the Spring Lake Park Company in Virginia, surveying 76 acres and 9 square perches for a new subdivision close to the B&O Railroad's Halpine station (near the present Twinbrook Metro station).²

The land for Spring Lake Park was formerly part of what was known as the Higgins farm. Here James (1733-1816) and Luraner Becraft (1744-1819) Higgins lived and raised their twelve children. With the help of slaves, they cleared the land, built a house and necessary outbuildings, and grew crops for sale as well as for their own use. During the Revolutionary War, James enrolled as a private in the Fifth Company of the Lower Battalion of the Montgomery County Militia. James and Luraner were buried in a tiny cemetery on their farm.³



Plat J. A. 21, Folio 30, Land Records of Montgomery County, Maryland, 1891, Spring Lake Park.

Subsequent generations of the Higgins family divided up the parcels that comprised James and Luraner's original farm. In 1866, fifty years after James' death, his grandchildren erected a sizeable square marker of local sandstone to honor James and Luraner and their son James Becraft (1772-1848) and his wife Mary Elinor Wilcoxen (1783-1845) Higgins. The marker became the centerpiece of a family burial ground that survives today. In subsequent years, five of James Becraft and Mary Higgins' children were buried in the cemetery, along with the spouse (George Knowles), daughter, and granddaughter of one of them. The final burial in the cemetery was that of Mary Eleanor Higgins in 1891, the year the Spring Lake Park subdivision plat was recorded in the Land Records.

By that time, both living and deceased Higgins family members had shunned the old farmstead in favor of the blossoming County seat and the newly upgraded Rockville Cemetery. Higginses identified with Rockville more than tiny Halpine or Spring Lake Park. In the mid-19th century, Higgins kin had fought on both sides of the Civil War, bought in-town businesses, served in public offices, founded the Town of Kensington, and generally moved away from the ancestral land. They sold the house and acreage to a succession of owners who no doubt dreamed how proximity to the tracks would improve their fortunes. By 1891, the old farmhouse had new inhabitants, and soon was divided into two dwelling units. The ancient cemetery was "reserved" in the legal but casual custom of the day.

The plat for Spring Lake Park contained approximately 465 building lots (with fourteen streets named for Maryland counties), the old farmhouse, a barn, three springs and a half acre reserved as the Higgins family cemetery.⁴ In addition to train service, the trolley between Georgetown and Rockville in 1900 opened another connection to the nation's capital and encouraged additional residential and commercial development along the Rockville Pike.⁵

Few people today have heard of Spring Lake Park, but recent rediscovery of and preservation work in Higgins Cemetery have created an incentive to remember this vanished neighborhood. Originally, access to Spring Lake Park was from Rockville Pike to Halpine Road, across the railroad, then onto Fishers Lane to Calvert Avenue, the main street of the small subdivision.

THE SPRINGS

Generations of the Higgins family, like those who would follow, enjoyed the water from a spring near their homestead. Three springs in Spring Lake Park provided the only source of water for residents until individual wells were dug and later when public water was brought in. In a 1900 deed for the sale of two and one half acres of land (Block 18) from J. Edward Metzbower and Samuel Renshaw to John H. and Mary Knoch, permission to use the spring adjacent to the former Higgins farmhouse was granted in these words:

"Together with the right to use the water from a spring near to the land of the said Knoch for family purposes only,... said user in no wise to impair said land or injure said spring, except so far as is absolutely necessary for the purposes aforesaid."⁶

Young Roy Harmon in the 1920s carried buckets of water from that spring to his home on Arundel Avenue for purposes of drinking and cooking. Water for washing clothes and cleaning came from roof run-off water into rain barrels, typical for early families in Spring Lake Park.⁷

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS



Calvert Avenue home of Raymond F. and Alberta Weaver Ray, circa 1925. Courtesy Carol DuVall.

After the streets were laid out, families began to buy lots and build. But Spring Lake Park did not develop into the Victorian neighborhood Danenhower envisioned, such as happened in Rockville Park and West End Park in the town of Rockville, possibly because the lots were smaller and in a less prestigious location. However, by the late 1920s several modest cottages and bungalows had been constructed.

One builder, Jake Best, built identical two story houses on the corners of Calvert and Wicomico Streets, both of which had wells. The owners generously allowed neighbors to carry water from those wells, much closer than the spring.⁸ For its first fifty years Spring Lake Park could boast of neither public water nor paved streets. Streets that had not been cut completely through were only foot paths. Early residents remember the rutted muddy roads. After the winter mud season the County would send crews to fill in the ruts with cinders, crushed cinder block or, later, with gravel.

The children of Spring Lake Park attended Montrose School on Randolph Road, built in 1909. Trudging a mile down the railroad tracks, they cut a path across the fields of the John E. Wilkins estate, arriving safely at the rear of the school property without the benefit of school patrols.

High school students from Spring Lake Park rode the trolley to Rockville High School on Montgomery Avenue and Monroe Street or, later, to the new Richard Montgomery High School, built in 1942 on the fairgrounds after a fire destroyed the old high school in 1940. When the trolley line discontinued service in 1935,⁹ students rode Capital Transit buses until school buses were provided in the 1940s. Boys and girls who could not afford to ride the bus hitchhiked or walked to high school.¹⁰



1918 photo at Montrose School with several Spring Lake Park children. Courtesy Peerless Rockville.

The Great Depression caused residents of Spring Lake Park to lose their jobs and their mortgages. Men worked as they could as day laborers. Fortunately, President F. D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided jobs. In Rockville, federal funds paid for water and sewer improvements, street work, and a new elementary school and post office.¹¹ One program provided improved sanitation facilities for the poor. Raymond Custer, resident of Spring Lake Park, built outhouses during the Depression under the WPA.¹²

Roy Harmon recalls how his family stretched their resources. "My mother, Cora Custer, owned a cow which she kept in the garage. She milked the cow twice a day, selling the milk for 10 cents a quart. She also made and sold cottage cheese and butter." Her back yard garden supplied vegetables for canning, adding to their winter food supply.¹³ Surviving the Depression, the men in the Park finally found work as carpenters, painters, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, cabinet makers, car salesmen and government workers.

EARLY SPRING LAKE PARK FAMILIES

By around 1930, most everyone in the Park knew that in the old two-family farmhouse lived elderly Mrs. Marie Scholtzel, daughter of John and Mary Knoch. Born in 1858 in Washington, D.C. and married to Albert Scholtzel, they had one son, Albert Charles, born in 1885. Albert died a year later. Their son died in 1905, and Marie's father died in 1907. This left Marie and her mother alone in the farmhouse. With extra space, Mrs. Scholtzel from time to time rented part of her home. Cora Custer, checking on her elderly neighbor one August day in 1946, found her very ill. She brought the frail little lady to her house, and within a month Cora found Marie Scholtzel had died quietly during the night at age 88.¹⁴

Several Harmon brothers brought their families to Spring Lake Park. The first family was Fred and Cora Harmon, who came from Washington, D. C., with their daughter, Jeannette, in the early 1900s. They built on Arundel Avenue, across from the Higgins Cemetery. Their son, Roy, was born in Spring Lake Park in 1918. Darius and Louise Harmon moved in next with their daughters, Leona and Alma. They occupied the home built by Jake Best on Wicomico Avenue. Then Otis Harmon brought his third wife, Ella, to Spring Lake Park, building a bungalow on Frederick Avenue where their children, Marie and Charles, were born.

A fourth Harmon brother, John, and his wife Mary, lived for years on the Wilkins estate as caretakers. Here they reared four children. When Parklawn Cemetery bought the Wilkins estate in 1952, John and Mary moved to the home formerly occupied by their daughter Nellie Mae, her husband, Frank Beisser, and children John and June on Wicomico Avenue. William Augustus Harmon, "Uncle Gus," lived with his daughter, Rachel Harmon Page, and her children on Worcester Avenue.¹⁵

The first Ray family to move into Spring Lake Park was John Henry and Mary Jane (Carter) Ray, who had previously lived along the Rockville Pike. In the 1920s they built a two-story house on Calvert Avenue on land purchased from Benjamin and Annie Lenovitz, (who ran the general store at Halpine), and sent their children to Montrose School. During the depression the family fell upon hard times and could not meet the mortgage payment on their home. In March, 1932, their son, Raymond, saved a smaller house next door from foreclosure and the auction block by withdrawing his savings of \$1,500 from Farmers Bank in Rockville to buy it, just before the banks closed the next day. He moved his wife and infant daughter with his parents into the smaller house. Eventually his brothers, Roy, Dorsey and Donald, built their own homes in Spring Lake Park.¹⁶ The last home in the Park was built by their sister, Mildred and her husband Frank S. Jones in 1946.¹⁷ Also living in the Park were Henry Weaver, a widower, his son Tom Weaver and family, and daughters Margaret

Burroughs and Catherine Hipsley. Tom Weaver worked at the Post Office in Rockville.¹⁸

Because there was no church in Spring Lake Park, many Park families attended the Church of God when it moved from Rockville to Montrose School in 1929. Later, with the help of several Spring Lake Park men, a white frame building was erected on the corner of Randolph Road and Maple Avenue in Montrose. Many more residents of Spring Lake Park came to fill the pews.¹⁹

SPRING LAKE PARK MEN IN THE MILITARY

On December 9, 1941 eighteen year old Eleanor Leighton of Montrose scribbled a brief entry in her diary: "Japan declared war on U.S. Two days later, Germany declared war on U.S."

Nearly two centuries earlier, in 1778 and again in 1780, James Higgins joined the Montgomery County Militia to serve in the Revolutionary War. One of his grandsons, John Hamilton Higgins (1815-1870), a Union sympathizer, was taken prisoner in Rockville in 1863, by Confederate General J. E. B. Stuart, but released the next day.²⁰

John Harding, resident of Spring Lake Park, husband of Margaret Harding and father of LeRoy and Virginia, fought in World War I and spent the latter years of his life in the Veterans Hospital in Georgetown.

When the call for recruits came in World War II, sixteen young men from Spring Lake Park responded, serving on all fronts in all services. Wilbur and Floyd Cunningham served with the Army, and their brother, Lennis, served with the Marines. Brothers Lester and Harold Harmon served in the Navy. Harry Duckworth, Roy Harmon, Frank S. Jones, Bernard Kitts, Ray Mullican, Francis Page, and Andrew Testerman were drafted into the Army; Donald B. Ray and Tom Weaver, Navy; Coman Sproles, Air Force; Leon Sproles, Coast Guard. Ralph Ray, Jr. served during peacetime.

The girls they left behind endured rationing of meat, gasoline, sugar and shoes and wrote letters to their fiances, sweethearts and friends overseas. They published local news in a mimeographed newsletter, Home Fires, sending it to servicemen overseas to keep them in touch. Eleanor Leighton, the editor, received a letter from Floyd Cunningham in 1942 from Camp Lee, Virginia: "I'd have been home Sunday if I wasn't in KP in the officer's mess hall. Boy, did I eat, anything I wanted! I washed the dishes. If I ever get married when I get out I'll be an experienced housewife. Don't forget I make my own bed, mop under it and wash and mend my own clothes."²¹ In a letter in 1943 from San Antonio, Texas, Cunningham wrote: "Yesterday a lot of my buddies I've known since I've been in the army were shipped out to places unknown. Most of us will follow them in about three weeks."²²

Roy Harmon wrote to Mrs. Ethel Leighton on May 2, 1943, from North Africa: "Thanks for dropping me a few lines.... I don't reckon I have to explain to you how busy we have been over here.... You can't realize how much I appreciate your prayers for me. They have helped out more than any one will



Roy Harmon, U.S. Army
1942-45. Courtesy
Eleanor Cunningham

ever know....Give everyone my love, and KEEP SMILING.”²³

On June 6, 1944, tolling church bells at Christ Episcopal Church in Rockville drew an overflow crowd from all denominations to a special prayer service for the safety of the men attempting to land at Normandy. Victory finally came, and on V-J Day, September 3, 1945, Rockville celebrated with a parade and speeches at Court House Square.²⁴ Fortunately, all of the boys from Spring Lake Park returned safely after the war.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

Before World War II there were fewer than twenty homes in Spring Lake Park; after the war, houses numbered close to fifty.²⁵ With streets paved, city water and sewer lines laid, children riding school buses, and shade trees, flowers and vegetable gardens flourishing in back yards, Spring Lake Park evolved into a vibrant community. Until the beginning of World War II, women of Spring Lake Park stayed at home. In the large house on Calvert Avenue that had been built by John Henry Ray, sisters Effie Magnum and Bessie Davis opened a boardinghouse, providing lodging and meals to many of the personnel at Congressional Airport across the Pike.

Carol (Ray) Duvall, born in 1941, recalls her childhood in Spring Lake Park. “In summer larger boys and girls gathered random football or baseball teams on the corner vacant lot of Fishers Lane and Calvert Avenue, or hiked through the woods behind Spring Lake Park to swim in the Rock Creek water hole. Younger boys and girls loved to play in the springs and catch tadpoles.”²⁶ Several of Carol’s friends shared their experiences:

Bill Stang: “I remember watching Darius Harmon repair shoes, pumping water for Mrs. Burroughs because she was old, picking wild strawberries where Metro is now, and going to Mary and John Harmon’s house to watch the Kukla, Fran and Ollie puppet show on the first TV set in the Park....Ruth Ann (Weaver) Moran, looking back, said, “It was the best place in the world to grow up - riding bikes to Kraft’s store, visiting friends at Christmas time, waiting for the school bus at Carol’s house.”...Kitty (Grimes) Walker loved sledding down the long hill on Wicomico Avenue in the cold of winter, and the Halloween parties given by neighbors Leonard and Dorothy Kraft....On another occasion, using Miller’s garage as a theater, Fae (Ray) Baker and friends wrote, produced and performed an original play....Delores (Ross) Miss, like many Park boys and girls, often rode her bike up to Kraft’s store and loved to sit on the railroad bank to watch the freight trains go by....Her sister, Juanita, played in the Higgins Cemetery, now obscured by bushes and weeds.

On her seventh birthday Carol (Ray) DuVall went throughout the neighborhood inviting friends to her party. The problem was that her mother had not planned a party, and had not even baked the cake before the children began to arrive!²⁷

Spring Lake Park children enjoyed riding bikes along the winding roads and over the little arched stone bridges of the



Spring Lake Park children gather for Carol Ray’s seventh birthday party, 1948. Courtesy Carol Ray DuVall.

beautiful Wilkins estate, just behind the Park. A quarry was there, which thirty years before had supplied the stone for the bridges, the spring house and mansion.²⁸ In 1952 the Wilkins estate became Parklawn Cemetery, and today is the burial place of many former residents of Spring Lake Park.

In 1957 when for the first time Montrose School was allowed a half-time secretary, Fae (Ray) Baker, a former student from Spring Lake Park, took the job. The school was converted into a special education school in 1960, and the children of Spring Lake Park were transferred to either Twinbrook or Hungerford Elementary Schools in Rockville.²⁹

THE SECOND FIFTY YEARS

Federal programs such as the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the GI Bill of Rights made possible the dream of home ownership of returning servicemen who waited until after the war to marry and purchase homes. In addition to Rockcrest, built before the war, new subdivisions in Rockville were Harriet Park, Twinbrook, Silver Rock, Rockland, the Burgundies, and others. Several servicemen and previous residents of Spring Lake Park bought homes in Twinbrook.

Rockville began to plan for its future, preparing a comprehensive Master Plan, adopted in 1960. Through planning Rockville could guide development, roadways, community facilities, and utility capacity needed for the forecasted population of sixty-two thousand by 1980.³⁰ By 1962, the Capital Beltway and I-270 had opened. Major corporations as well as government bought large portions of land along the new freeway. A modern shopping center, Congressional Plaza, arose on the site of the former Congressional Airport, and commercial enterprises of every type replaced farms and mileposts. In 1970 a new Master Plan recognized the presence of small industries in Rockville, as far south as Halpine.³¹ Increased traffic generated by the new subdivisions and new businesses demanded changes in street and road patterns in and around Rockville. On Veirs Mill Road subdivisions and the new Twinbrook Shopping Center necessitated a connecting road from the Rockville Pike to Veirs Mill Road, eliminating the Halpine railroad crossing and entrance to Spring Lake Park by way of Fishers Lane.



The U.S. HEW building overshadows Spring Lake Park. Photograph by Eleanor Cunningham.

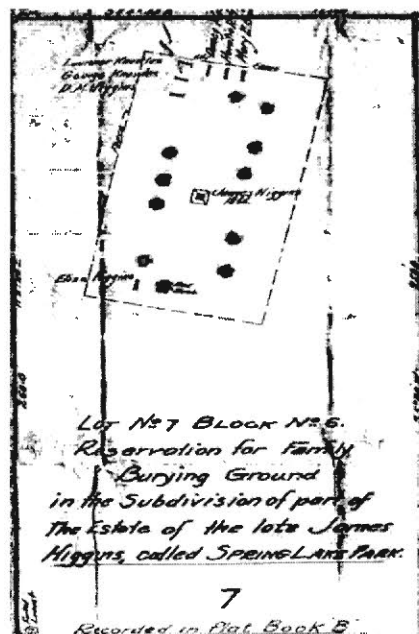
Spring Lake Park residents were not all pleased with huge Twinbrook developing in their back yard. By 1952, three hundred homes were occupied and there were so many children that Twinbrook Elementary opened that September. The following year, additional classrooms doubled the school's capacity.³² In 1964-65 Twinbrook Parkway sliced through Spring Lake Park from the Rockville Pike to Veirs Mill Road, obliterating several Spring Lake Park houses on either side, as well as Calvert Avenue, the main street. In 1970 the huge U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare building opened on Parklawn Drive.

Commercial and light industrial uses took over Spring Lake Park, encouraging residents to sell.³³ Raymond Ray died in 1977; Alberta H. Ray, his wife, sold the house in 1979, the last family to move out.³⁴ The remaining single-family houses were altered for non-residential uses, with additions, paving of yards, and change of architectural lines and building materials. When Twinbrook Metro Station opened with its huge parking lot in 1984, Spring Lake Park had all but disappeared. Today, only six houses remain standing in the old subdivision, and development of the entire north side of Twinbrook Parkway for multiple usage is being planned.

During the twentieth century, the little Higgins burial ground came upon progressively harder times. In 1927, a family member commissioned Charles J. Maddox to survey the property, but the fact that it doesn't show all of the graves indicates lack of visitation and knowledge at that time. By World War II the cemetery had become largely forgotten by the family that moved away. The property went up for auction and was at one point sold for back taxes. However, it remained a landmark in Spring Lake Park, where children played hide and seek, and adults considered it a familiar feature of the neighborhood.³⁵

By the 1970s outsiders, noting the general decline of a once-thriving neighborhood, began to use the property as a dumping ground. Household throw-aways, landscaping brush and tree limbs, and other trash appeared. The fence collapsed, the boxwoods died, gravestones toppled over, and volunteer trees sprung up everywhere. The quarter-ton tombstone of Horatio Higgins (1817-1884) mysteriously landed at the doorstep of a County warehouse off Shady Grove Road.

The tide began to turn when Mary Ann Barnes, a resident of Twinbrook, took note of the desolate situation and began to investigate. She learned a bit about the Higgins history, inquired at public offices, and began to enlist others in her quest. Her tenacity paid off in 1997 when a group of concerned citizens sat around the table in Peerless Rockville's office in Rockville. The group included members of the Higgins family, chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Peerless Rockville and Kensington Historical Society, as well as current non-residential neighbors in Spring Lake Park. They agreed to return with further information and to develop strategies that would reverse the damage to this sacred ground on Arundel Avenue in Spring Lake Park.



1927 plat of Higgins Cemetery, surveyed by C. J. Maddox. Courtesy Peerless Rockville.

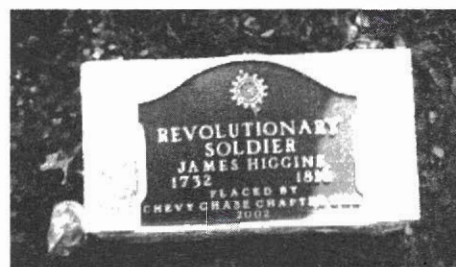
The working group thus formed accomplished quite a lot over the eight years that followed. They hauled away hundreds of truck-loads of trash, removed thirty unwanted trees, and sponsored numerous work sessions that enlisted volunteers of all ages. The group's attorney filed a suit in Circuit Court that resulted in consolidation of Higgins family ownership, then incorporated the Higgins Cemetery Historic Preservation Association to take title to the property.



James Higgins marker, with other stones in background, at Higgins Cemetery, showing preservation in progress. Photograph by Eleanor Cunningham.

The three archaeological excavations located additional gravesites beyond what showed on the 1927 plat. Researchers continued to assemble more about the family and the site. With assistance from Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission, the DAR, and private donors, the large Higgins marker was restored and beautified, and the Higgins Association initiated development of a Master Plan to identify goals. Recent site work has been possible through corporate partners such as The JBG companies and Capitol City Landscapers, and Higgins Cemetery is currently on the way to designation as an historic site on the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation.

Today Higgins Cemetery survives as an oasis in a century-old subdivision that was carved out of colonial farmland. Even as plans for higher density and modern usage become reality in all directions, the tiny 19th century burial ground serves as a reminder of times and people of the past and of extraordinary measures that sometimes must be accomplished to preserve a local landmark. It carries the thread of the 19th century dream of Spring Lake Park and of the many families who called this once-rural area home. We believe that the preservation of the cemetery will lead many visitors to envision the pulsing little subdivision that for so many years surrounded this piece of sacred ground.



Plaque placed in honor of Revolutionary War Veteran James Higgins, by Chevy Chase Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Photograph by Eleanor Cunningham.

Eleanor W. Cunningham is a retired MCPS secretary and the author of *Montrose School, The First Ninety Years*. Carol R. DuVall lived in Spring Lake Park for thirty years, is retired from Marriott International, and helps Peerless Rockville to preserve local historic sites. Eileen S. McGuckian has been active in historic preservation in Montgomery County for three decades and is especially proud of the progress of Higgins Cemetery.

NOTES

1. McGuckian, Eileen S., *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, (Franklin, TN: Hillsboro Press, 2001) 68-70.
2. Plat J. A. 21, Folio 30, Land Records of Montgomery County, MD, 1891, Spring Lake Park.
3. U.S. Census, Will Inventories and Accounts show various Higgins families possessing 10 to 15 slaves at any given time.

4. Plat J. A. 21, Folio 30, op cit.
5. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 74.
6. Deed from William Veirs Bouic to John H. and Mary Knoch, July 13, 1900, Liber J. A. 12, Folio 31, Land Records of Montgomery County, MD.
7. Roy Harmon, phone interview with Eleanor Cunningham, January 24, 2005.
8. Ibid.
9. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 99.
10. Roy Harmon, phone interview, E. Cunningham, April 9, 2005.
11. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 119.
12. Roy Harmon, phone interview, E. Cunningham, April 9, 2005.
13. Ibid.
14. Letter to Montgomery County Historical Society from Alice Harmon, April 26, 1988.
15. Roy Harmon, phone interview, E. Cunningham, January 10, 2005.
16. Carol (Ray) DuVall email to E. Cunningham, January 29, 2005.
17. Carol (Ray) DuVall, email to E. Cunningham, February 19, 2005.
18. Ibid.
19. History, First Church of God, Rockville, Maryland, in 1979 Directory.
20. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 16, 52.
21. Letter from Floyd E. Cunningham, to Eleanor Cunningham, October 22, 1942, from Camp Lee, VA.
22. Letter from Floyd E. Cunningham to Eleanor Cunningham, January 10, 1943, from San Antonio, TX.
23. Letter from Roy Harmon to Ethel A. Leighton, May 2, 1943, from North Africa.
24. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 123.

25. Maps, Pre-WWII and Post-WWII, by Alice and Roy Harmon, 1998, Peerless Rockville Collection.
26. DuVall email to E. Cunningham, January 29, 2005.
27. Ibid.
28. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 103.
29. Cunningham, Eleanor L., *Montrose School, The First Ninety Years*, (Rockville, MD: Peerless Rockville, 1999) 28.
30. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City*, 154.
31. Ibid., 165.
32. Ibid., 127.
33. DuVall email to E. Cunningham, February 19, 2005.
34. DuVall email to E. Cunningham, April 11, 2005.
35. Recollections of Maude W. Betts (1991), Roy and Alice Harmon (1998), and Carol Ray DuVall (2004).

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