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MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S FIRST GARDEN APARTMENTS

by Mark Walston

Prior to the 1920's, Montgomery County was still largely rural and sparsely developed. The land boom which occurred during the late nineteenth century had tapered off, leaving in its wake a few beginnings of suburban communities, principally those bordering on the District Line - Chevy Chase, Takoma Park, Silver

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Spring - and areas along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad line which provided a commuter facility and hence encouraged development in a north-northwest direction from Silver Spring through Kensington and Garrett Park to Rockville. But these communities were only small deviations from the dominant rural pattern. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, their attractions had not significantly increased the county's population, which had risen only slightly from 30,451 in 1900 to 34,921 in 1920.

In contrast, during this period the population of the District of Columbia was rising rapidly, especially between 1910 and 1920, the World War I years, when the city grew by nearly a third. In response to the burgeoning population, subdivisions and residential developments pushed northward out of the central city toward Montgomery County, their directions dictated by the major transportation lines, notably Seventh Street (Georgia Avenue), Wisconsin Avenue, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

The increased demand for housing by this influx of population prompted Washington builders and developers to eschew the earlier pattern of suburban development, characterized by single-family dwellings set back on landscaped lots, in favor of large block developments of attached, multi-family units. Economy, higher densities, and more profit per square foot were their motivations. As housing stock, town houses and apartment buildings were nothing new to the Washington area. Georgian-styled Wheat Row, constructed in Georgetown in 1793, was one of Washington's first multi-family, row-house complexes. The acceptance of apartment buildings as desirable housing was more gradual, but, by the late nineteenth century, Washingtonians, perhaps looking toward the fashionable city apartments in such European capitals as Paris, began filling newly erected, luxury apartments. Meanwhile, at the other end of the nineteenth-century social spectrum, the housing needs of the laboring classes and the poor engendered the transformation of the larger single-family dwellings vacated by the suburbanized rich into the city's first low-rent apartment buildings. Thus, by the beginning of the building boom of the 1920's, multi-family dwellings were an accepted part of the Washington housing scene.

When, in the early twentieth century, development neared the Montgomery County Line, the architects and developers encountered situations differing from those encountered in the central city. Primarily, building sites were no longer bridled by the flat, rigid grid plans of the city street system. Northwestward to the fall line the landscape began to roll in hills and valleys, sometimes gently, sometimes with steep descents into stream gorges. The older inner-city designs of long rows of flat, connected buildings, their roof lines at the same height, became impractical to build on the undulating ground, flat grading being too costly a proposition. Consequently, the architects learned to adapt their large complexes to the landscape, marching the segmented buildings down hillsides, turning and twisting the sections in conformance to the land. Foxhall Village, on Reservoir Road, developed by Waverly Taylor between 1925 and 1930, with its English Village style half-timbered row houses adapted

to the retained hilly terrain, was but one of these many 1920's "natural" suburban multi-family developments in Northwest Washington.¹

While garden apartments and suburban row-house developments were going up all over Washington during the 1920's, the building scene in Montgomery County was still predominantly single-family dwellings. Between 1920 and 1930, the county's population rose dramatically, from 34,921 to 49,206, and the increase was accompanied by a sharp rise in new construction. Yet the availability of still inexpensive acreage along the major roadways and railways into the city, the already established single-dwelling character of the neighborhoods, and the basic desire of new families for a house in suburbia prompted the continued predominance of single-family dwellings.

However, by 1920, the first apartment complexes had spilled across the District Line into Takoma Park in Montgomery County. The town of Takoma Park and the adjacent village of Silver Spring, being connected to Washington by a trolley line, a railroad, and a major roadway, were perfectly suited for moderate-rent apartments catering to commuters.

One of the first apartment complexes in Montgomery County was constructed in about 1910 in Takoma Park, near the District Line between Cedar and Maple Avenues. The complex consisted of three buildings, two fronting on Maple Avenue and one on Cedar Avenue, brick in construction, of typical row-house form with pent roofs and flat facades parallel to the streets. Each building contained eight units. The rears of the buildings, with their two-story wooden porches and individual outside entrances, opened on a small enclosure, now occupied by parking. While this complex cannot be truly classified as suburban apartments, being more a continuation of the urban row-house apartments of the late nineteenth century, they do herald the advance of the apartment building out from the city through suburban Washington and into Montgomery County.

Apartment complexes such as those on Maple Avenue form the transitional urban-to-suburban apartments of turn-of-the-century Montgomery County. These buildings were usually located within or on the fringes of commercial districts and so often conformed in style and siting to the adjacent traditional commercial architecture. However, as the apartments began to move away from the high density of the Takoma Park commercial center into the residential section, with its buildings set farther apart by lawns, gardens, tree-lined streets, and paved walkways, the apartment building soon conformed to its new architectural surroundings and engendered the beginning of the county's suburban or garden apartments.

The first suburban apartments in Montgomery County to be referred to specifically as "garden apartments" were constructed by Morris Bien on Elm Avenue in Takoma Park. Occupied by 1930, and perhaps constructed as early as 1915, these shingle-style apartment buildings blend with their residential surroundings. The two-story height, gable roofs, and setback from the street make them inconspicuous as apartments among single-family dwellings. This architec-

1. Frederick Gutheim, *Worthy of the Nation* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), pp. 153-156.

tural blending, as Randolph Sexton of the *American Architect* noted in 1926, is essential to the design of the suburban apartment. "It must suggest, as far as possible, a private country house."² As opposed to the tall, urban "elevator" apartment, the suburban apartment, because of a two- or three-story height (seldom over four stories), could easily retain the gabled roofs, bays, and dormers characteristic of the private house and thus present an atmosphere of domesticity. Add to this the landscape of suburbia - lawns, walks, and garden plots - and what results is the common garden apartment of the early twentieth century in Montgomery County.



Elm Avenue Apartments, Takoma Park,
the County's First Garden Apartment Complex

The building boom of the 1920's in Montgomery County ended in 1927, as the housing industry nationwide went into a sharp decline on the eve of the depression. Ironically, that depression, which threatened and destroyed the prosperity of so many American counties, was to bring to Montgomery County a surge of construction activity unprecedented in the county's history.

2. Randolph W. Sexton, *American Apartment Houses of Today* (New York, NY: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1926), p. 23.

Coinciding with the rapid expansion of Federal employment under the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt administration, the population of Montgomery County swelled enormously during the 1930's, from 49,206 in 1930 to 83,912 in 1940. To accommodate the increase of nearly 35,000 new residents, over 12,000 new units were added to the county's store of housing, more than the total housing units in Montgomery County in 1930. The two lower districts of Wheaton and Bethesda, because of their proximity and immediate access to the city, experienced the greatest burst of construction activity, so much so that by the end of the 1930's almost 65 percent of the population lived in these two Election Districts. The following chart shows the increases in population and housing units in Montgomery County between 1900 and 1940:³

Year	Population	Total Housing Units	Increase during Decade
1900	30,451	6,766	
1910	32,089	7,130	364
1920	34,921	7,464	334
1930	49,206	10,970	3,506
1940	83,912	23,555	12,585

Single-family dwellings still led the way as the predominant housing type, as large-scale, small-house communities sprang up all along the District Line. But developers, sensing the need within this growing population for moderately priced rental housing, began increased construction of suburban apartment complexes. The market for large numbers of such a housing type had never existed before in Montgomery County; but, by 1935, with the economy on the upswing and the insurances created by the National Housing Act of 1934, builders and developers were quick to act, constructing apartments in unprecedented numbers. Between 1935 and 1940, the already established commuter towns of Takoma Park, Silver Spring, and Bethesda were to see the largest number of new apartment buildings.

Of the various suburban apartment buildings constructed in Montgomery County prior to 1941, ten major complexes have been identified as still in existence. The oldest of all, the Elm Avenue garden apartments, has already been discussed. One group of apartment buildings, located on Pershing Drive opposite the Armory in Silver Spring, constructed about 1938, no longer serves as apartment residences, having since been converted to office use and, while of interest to note, will not be discussed here. Only those buildings of a

3. City Planning Associates, *Physical Inventory and Structural Conditions, Montgomery County*, 1968, p. 69.

suburban or garden-type currently in use as residences are included.

The first units of the Avondale Apartments on Avondale Street in Bethesda were completed in 1937. Constructed by Bowling and Gardiner and developed by Dr. William Bashore, these brick apartments were designed in the Colonial Revival style, undoubtedly the most popular style of the early apartment buildings. Each building contains four units. By 1940, the complex included 11 buildings. The positioning of the buildings, set back on both sides of Avondale Street, the tall shade trees, lawns, and sidewalks help the apartments to achieve the suburban residential blending attempted by many of the early suburban apartments. One unit in the first completed building in the complex, 4534-4536 Avondale Street, served as a dentist's office for Dr. Bashore.⁴



Avondale Apartments, Bethesda

4. *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune*, June 30, 1937.

William D. Blair, one of the original owners and developers of the Falkland Apartments, described in 1937 the circumstances leading up to the construction of the Falkland Apartments on Sixteenth Street at East-West Highway and Colesville Road in Silver Spring:

"The Falkland project is essentially an attempt to solve a problem in land utilization. For more than a century successive generations of the Blair family have held extensive acreage in Montgomery County, Maryland, on the border of the District of Columbia. The land was bought not for speculation, but as a family plantation by Francis Preston Blair, my great-grandfather, who came to Washington as a newspaper editor during the administration of Andrew Jackson.

"In recent years, with Washington expanding northward, Silver Spring has grown rapidly as a suburban community. A main traffic artery, Sixteenth Street, N.W., was improved to the edge of the property, and new boulevards running east and west cut through. The land had long since become unproductive as farm acreage, and although it continued to appreciate in value, mounting taxes and lack of earnings made it a considerable liability insofar as the estate income was concerned.

"Several solutions presented themselves. One was outright sale of the land for cash. Another was sale of the property under a purchase money mortgage to a real estate developer. A third plan open to us was to develop the tract ourselves.

"We were not experienced in land development, however, and we knew that it ordinarily involved considerable risk. Furthermore we did not feel that the estate could afford to tie up the funds necessary to complete a development, and adequate mortgage financing appeared unobtainable.

"Weighing all these considerations, development of the tract ourselves appeared our most practical course."⁵

Blair and the other heirs of the estate began looking for ways to develop their land profitably. One by one they examined similar estate projects, particularly those developed as exclusive residential areas or single-house subdivisions. Then, in 1935, the Washington newspapers carried the story that the Federal Housing Administration had approved, with the commitment of an insured mortgage, a large rental housing project, Colonial Village, across the Potomac River in Arlington County, Virginia. This announcement inspired the Falkland group to adopt a new line of attack, and they set out to develop their property in direct imitation of Colonial Village.⁶

5. William D. Blair, "Solving an Estate Investment Problem," *FHA Insured Mortgage Portfolio*, November 1937, p. 8.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The heirs of the estate contacted the FHA, which tentatively approved their rental-housing scheme. Falkland Properties, Inc., was then organized. A small block of stock was issued to their newly hired architect, Louis Justement, and another to B.L. Jackson, Inc., the general contractor. The remainder was retained by the estate.

Justement went to work with the FHA architects and landscape architects to develop plans for the housing complex. FHA architects had particular inclinations when it came to large-scale, rental-housing designs; hardly innovative, their inclinations were mostly imitative. The Colonial Revival design, which had proven over the past 20 years to be a safe style architecturally, was their particular favorite. Their design criteria, by which they accepted or rejected FHA-insured mortgage applications, were, in fact, so limited that, architecturally, one FHA-backed project was merely a minor deviation from the next. Colonial Village, Buckingham Community in Arlington, Dundalk Housing Project in Dundalk, Maryland, Northwood Apartments in Baltimore, Maryland, Dream's Landing Project in Annapolis (another Justement-designed complex), Larchmont in Norfolk, Virginia, and Falkland, each one an FHA-backed project constructed between 1935 and 1939, all began to meld into one giant Colonial Revival mass. It might even be said that the FHA, by the narrowness of its design concepts, did more to retard the architectural development of the modern garden apartment than their insured mortgage program did to encourage its development.

In terms of site planning and landscape design, the FHA administrators, through their reports and such self-promotional publications as the staff-produced *Insured Mortgage Portfolio*, had always looked to the Buhl Foundation's Chatham Village in Pittsburgh (1930-1935) as *the* example of good site design. Arguably they could not have found a better example: Chatham Village is a beautiful illustration of buildings adapted to a natural setting. In fact, Justement and the FHA architects liked the Chatham Village plan so much that the resultant Falkland plan copied sections of it almost verbatim. A comparison of the two shows the similarities to be striking and undeniable. The solution derived by the Chatham Village designers, Ingham, Boyd, Wright, and Stein, in siting the buildings on a triangular piece of land was simply superimposed by Falkland Properties on their own triangular piece of land.

The first section of Falkland, on that triangle, containing 178 units, was completed in 1937. The second section, containing 301 units, was completed in 1938. Its 479 units made Falkland the largest complex constructed in Montgomery County during the apartment boom of the 1930's.

In reality, the size of Falkland is its only mark of distinction. Its financing scheme was preceded and directly inspired by Colonial Village. Its architecture, with its stepped rectangular blocks and applied ornamentation, is best described as traditional garden-apartment Colonial Revival which had been an accepted style for the past 20 years, but one which, at the time of Falkland's construction, was slowly being abandoned for the more "modern" styles. And, given all the possibilities the undeveloped Falkland property presented, its eventual site plan was derived from Chatham Village in Pittsburgh.

At the same time that William Blair was busy developing the old Blair family estate into the Falkland Apartments, across Georgia Avenue, Morris Miller was at work developing another Blair family estate into a garden-apartment complex. In 1936, Morris Miller had purchased from Minnie Brooke two parcels of land, one on each side of the "Brooke Tea House," later known



Falkland Apartments, Silver Spring, Largest Apartment Complex
Constructed in Montgomery County during the 1930's

as the "Blair Mansion Inn." Intending to build apartments on the two parcels, Miller contracted with Weaver Brothers, a Washington firm experienced in the field of apartment houses, and, in 1937 and 1938, the two complexes were constructed.⁷ The first of the two buildings, the Blair Park Apartments which occupy the northwest parcel at the intersection of Blair Road and Eastern Avenue, is a large, three- and four-story brick building, containing 53 units, of typical apartment design: indented blocks, flat roofed with applied Colonial Revival ornamentation. Because of the restrictions of the site, it contains little in the way of landscaped "garden" amenities. The second complex, Blair

7. Montgomery County Land Records, Book 632, p. 4; Montgomery County Plat Books, Book 10, p. 701.

Park Gardens, however, constructed in 1938 on the parcel southeast of the Inn, contains in its architectural and site designs distinctive garden-apartment elements. The treatment of the formal courtyard entrance on Blair Road, the rounded interior corner and exterior corner entrances, the staggered setbacks of the various segments, and the varying use of painted brick and stone to define sections make these compact 74 units a good example of 1930 garden apartments in Montgomery County.

The Schrider Street Apartments at Schrider Street and Silver Spring Avenue in Silver Spring, a mixture of different suburban apartment styles, were built in 1939. The developer and architect are unknown. All of the buildings are of brick construction. The largest building in the complex, containing 11 units, is architecturally typical of suburban apartment designs of the 1920's onward: primarily rectangular in form, with a flat roof, and a minimum of applied Colonial Revival ornamentation, such as the brick quoins, cornice work, and water table. The remaining buildings of the complex, a series of attached two-story, four-unit buildings, resemble Colonial Revival town houses in their design. These buildings are arranged in a gentle arc around the court terminus of Schrider Street, set back from the paved road by lawns and walkways.

Begun in 1940, the Piney Branch Apartments at Piney Branch Road and Manchester Road in Silver Spring have recently been converted to town houses and renamed "Top of the Park." This complex was the second FHA-backed, large-scale, rental apartment project constructed in the county. The long rows of brick buildings are variously arranged perpendicular and parallel to each other, staggered down heavily wooded slopes overlooking the Sligo Creek Valley. The building fronts have been "individualized" to distinguish one unit from another, thus obliterating the original appearance of the apartment buildings. The complex remains of interest primarily for its site plan, which, by the adaptation of the buildings to the wooded hillsides, retains the natural atmosphere and gives the complex a park-like feeling.

The Spring Gardens Apartments at 1220 Blair Mill Road in Silver Spring are unique in that they are the earliest example of the true urban garden apartment to be found in Montgomery County. The 169-unit complex was constructed about 1940. The architect is unknown. Spring Gardens mirrors the earlier urban garden apartments in the arrangement of the brick buildings into large blocks oriented inward to a series of courtyards. Automobiles have been entirely eliminated from these courtyard cores, where only pedestrian walkways exist. The architecture of the complex is distinctive as well, having broken from the Colonial Revival style traditional among the early garden apartments. Perhaps best described as "moderne," the buildings incorporate such design devices as corner windows, geometric ornaments, and courses of glass blocks. Their design was shortly thereafter repeated in the apartment complexes constructed along Coleville Road at Fenton Street in Silver Spring.

Located at 4807, 4905, and 4909 Hampden Lane in Bethesda are a series of apartment buildings constructed in 1940 and 1941. Situated within the expanding Bethesda business district, the settings of the buildings have changed so drastically that they can no longer be considered "garden" apartments. They are noted primarily for the interest of their architecture. Hampden Hall, at

4807 Hampden Lane, a two-story, 20-unit brick building exhibiting clean lines and a judicious use of Revival detailing, such as the second-story Palladian window, was completed in the spring of 1940. Constructed by Riley Evers, the building was designed by Van Tiel H. Bien, a prominent local architect who designed some of the finer homes in Kenwood. V.T.H. Bien was the son of Morris Bien, who constructed the county's first garden apartments on Elm Avenue in Takoma Park. The buildings at 4909 and 4905 Hampden Lane were constructed in 1940 and 1941, respectively. Designed by Ed Muth and built by Bowling and Gardiner, the same firm who constructed the Avondale Apartments, the later of these brick buildings, while undistinguished, does show the gradual abandonment of the Colonial Revival style and increasing signs of modernity.⁸

M. Willson Offutt designed and constructed the Bradley Terrace Apartments at 6901 to 6921 Strathmore Street in Bethesda in 1940. The setting of the low brick buildings, while impacted by surrounding later development, still exhibits the formal plantings and terraces of its original landscape design. Architecturally the buildings are a continuation of the Colonial Revival style de rigueur for garden apartments. Highlighted among the elements are corner entrances and a wooden cupola.

During the 1940's, Montgomery County's population continued its enormous growth, with the numbers soaring from 83,912 in 1940 to 164,401 in 1950. Engendered by this flood of residents was a tidal wave of construction activity. Housing of all types, from low-rent temporary defense housing to high-rise apartment buildings, sprang up across the county's southern border, geographically following the development pattern established in the previous decade, with the eastern suburban district bearing the brunt of new construction.

Single-family detached homes continued to dominate the county's housing scene, accounting for 80 percent of the permits issued for new construction during the decade. Yet, while the percentage of multi-family units to total new units in Montgomery County, 20 percent, coincided with the national trend of new housing during the period, it was well below the percentages for the other jurisdictions in the Washington metropolitan area, where multi-family units accounted for 66 percent of total units in the District of Columbia, 59 percent in Alexandria, 55 percent in Arlington County, 41 percent in Prince George's County, and 34 percent in Fairfax County.⁹

As opposed to the rapidly changing ratio of single-family houses to apartment houses in its neighboring counties, Montgomery County was still characterized by residential communities of single-family dwellings. It was the image of the county as a haven of homes in the suburbs that enticed many people to come to Montgomery County, and it was an image that many residents fought vigorously to maintain. In the minds of most countians, nothing could

8. *Bethesda Journal*, May 10, 1940; *Washington Star*, August 21, 1960.

9. Homer Hoyt Association, *Economic Survey of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Maryland*, January 1955, pp. 29-30.

destroy this picture of suburban domesticity more violently than the insertion of apartment buildings. So strong was the public opinion against apartments that, during the 1940's, the County Commissioners, responding to public pressure, denied nearly all planned apartments when presented before them for enabling rezoning requests. This antipathy of Montgomery County residents toward apartments did not subside until the 1960's; only then did apartments become an accepted part of the suburban landscape.

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