

Chevy Chase Citizens Association

The Early Days

In 1909 Chevy Chase was a small, remote place—a settlement of eighteen property holders and their families. P.L. Ricker's house, at 3740 Oliver Street, N.W., was the first in the new subdivision. The ground was broken in July 1907, and the house was completed in October. At about the same time, R.E. Heater built a home at 5431 Connecticut Avenue, just south of Livingston Street. In January 1908, William T. Murphy and his family occupied a house at 3728 Oliver Street, and in April of the same year, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers and Mr. and Mrs. B.W. Parker moved into their homes on the same street. The Elizabeth V. Brown School, built in 1898, stimulated this new development.

Ricker invited his eighteen neighbors in Chevy Chase to his home for a meeting on January 14, 1909. This memorable occasion was the birth of the Chevy Chase Citizens Association. The first meeting was attended by sixteen of the eighteen property holders. One year later the membership had increased to 28, while the population had increased to 127 persons occupying 31 houses. The officers of the association for the first year were P.L. Ricker, President; O.T. Reeves, Jr., Vice President, G.B. Sudworth, Treasurer; and E.D. Ryerson, Secretary.

In his annual report a year later, Ricker reported that through the association's efforts, the postal, milk, and ice services had improved, as had garbage and ash collections; oil street lamps were replaced with electric tungsten lamps; gas mains were laid; water and sewer lines were laid and five hydrants were installed; an addition to the school building was constructed; police services during part of the summer and fall were arranged; and several frog ponds that bred mosquitoes were filled. Two fire ladders were purchased and placed in the rear of the secretary's home, and fire extinguishers were purchased by fourteen of the members.

Goals for the association's second year were listed: surfacing or regular sprinkling of several streets to control the dust nuisance aggravated by the extensive use of automobiles; establishment of a firehouse; and improvement of express delivery services of groceries, medicines, and merchandise.

At the time of the Golden Anniversary, Edward T. Stafford interviewed Ricker, at his home, where the first meeting was held, as well as Edward F. Colladay, president of the Association from 1913 to 1915. The following reminiscences of these early presidents were recorded by Stafford in "Fifty Years in Chevy Chase."

Interview with P.L. Ricker

“When Chevy Chase D.C. was opened for settlement in the spring of 1907 through the agency of Thomas J. Fisher and Company, the lots east of Connecticut Avenue were priced at 25 cents per sq. ft., while those to the west bordering on Connecticut Avenue were priced at 38 cents per sq. ft. To stimulate sales a 10 percent discount was offered to the first 50 purchasers and an additional 10 percent for starting construction within three months. This saved the first builders from \$300 to about \$450 on the purchase price.

“The greatest attraction, however, was the nearby Elizabeth V. Brown School, where the Citizens Association met following several earlier meetings at members’ homes. Oliver Street was the first to be nearly completely built up. By the end of 1915 there were 39 children on Oliver Street, all but about a dozen on the south side of the street, seven in my home, five at 3752, the home of Capt. Charles Conrad of the Navy, and at least three children at nearly all other homes on the south side of the street. Nearly all were born there. They included Andrew Parker, now president of Woodward and Lothrop, and Dr. William Murphy, now chief of the Bethesda Suburban Hospital.

“All transportation to the city was by street cars and many of the residents of both sections of Chevy Chase thus became well acquainted, a condition that deteriorated rapidly with the advent of automobiles.

“It is probably known to but a few local residents that, in these early days, there was a car line from Chevy Chase Circle across to a stone car barn and power house at Glen Echo. This car line was torn up a few years later by real estate and the Kirkside Country Club developments along the line.

“Sometime in the fall of 1907 the Chevy Chase Land Company started building three homes to sell. These were 3777 Oliver Street, 3765 and 3755 Northampton Street, which were sold, respectively, in 1908 to James W. Bevans, J.C. Macomb, and Oliver T. Reeves, Jr., our first vice president. The home of the first treasurer, George B. Sudworth at 3768 Patterson Street, has just been torn down for development of the Presbyterian Church. The house at 3759 Northampton Street was designed and built by E.D. Ryerson, our first secretary, then a Treasury architect.

“During the winter of 1907-08, Mr. Murphy and I both had calls and attempted entrance from early night prowlers, who were driven off before any damage was done. In the winter of 1908-09, I made a snowplow of 2-by-10 planks and Mr. Reeves, who had a horse, and I stood on the plow to clear a few light snows from the sidewalks. Early grocery supplies were mostly ordered from the Theo. Sonneman store on Brookeville Road. The first local grocery at 5630 Connecticut Avenue was built by W.B. Follmer with an adjoining drug store of Doc Armstrong.”

Interview with Edward F. Colladay

Edward F. Colladay, another of the charter members of the association and long one of the city’s distinguished citizens, moved to 3734 Northampton Street in October 1910, and lived there for eighteen years. Shortly after moving into the very sparsely settled neighborhood, Colladay joined the association, and later became the president.

“In the beginning we were only a handful of interested cooperating neighbors who were easily accommodated in the living room of any one of the houses. We besought the Commissioners and other public authorities for better paving, curbs, sidewalks, and car services. We were very persistent in these matters. As the neighborhood grew in population, the children outgrew the E.V. Brown School, and we were successful in persuading the Commissioners and Congress to double the school’s size and provide an auditorium. When the enlarged building was completed we celebrated its opening. This was a crowning glory in my work with the association.

“Some of the early members who were active in the association included George W. Harris of Harris & Ewing; William Steward, director of the U.S. Census; Ernest Knaeble, Assistant Attorney General; Harold E. Doyle of Thos. J. Fisher & Company; Commander Sandoz, founder of the real estate firm bearing his name; and Captain Santelmann, Director of the Marine Band. “The spirit of neighborliness was prevalent in Chevy Chase. We had only one neighborhood store, the Chevy Chase Supply

Company, and none of us wanted more than that. The Kirkside golf course was a feature of the area, the Rector of the Episcopal Church being a regular player. Herbert Hall gave me my first lessons in the great Scottish game. The Kirkside Golf Club was closed July 1, 1926, because of building construction, thus bringing to a close the activities of this delightful and pleasant organization.

“Music was part of the neighborhood life. There was a Chevy Chase Music Club, all of whose members were from the citizens association. This organization met monthly and different members, vocalists and instrumentalists, were assigned to prepare and render works of a selected composer. This group was disbanded as a result of the first World War taking many of its male members.”

Boundary Changes

The work of the association was hampered somewhat at first because its territory in the early days comprised only those blocks east of Connecticut Avenue between Livingston and Patterson Streets and west of Chevy Chase Parkway. The section north and east of Chevy Chase, D.C. was developed later; the residents there formed the Pinehurst Citizens Association, which later became the Rock Creek Ford Citizens Association. In 1919 this Association was merged with the Chevy Chase Citizens Association. The boundaries of the Chevy Chase Citizens Association were by 1919 as follows: starting at Chevy Chase Circle and going northeast on Western Avenue to the western boundary of Rock Creek Park; thence south and west along Military Road and Keokuk Street to Chevy Chase Drive; thence north along Chevy Chase Drive to the intersection of Livingston Street; west on Livingston Street to Connecticut Avenue; and north on Connecticut Avenue back to Chevy Chase Circle.

The Citizens of Chevy Chase living west of Connecticut Avenue and south of Livingston Street were members of the Connecticut Avenue Citizens Association. Under the circumstances it was practically impossible for Chevy Chase to boast of a strong, united citizens association. The situation seemed to be that of a house divided against itself, and a solution was not found until Fred S. Lincoln became president in 1920. He and Frank C. Steward of the Connecticut Avenue Citizens Association brought about a consolidation of that part of the Connecticut Avenue Association north of Albemarle Street with the Chevy Chase group. Miss Ella Given reported that the consolidation was achieved “with such tact and ability as to win the appreciation and gratitude of all well-wishers of Chevy Chase.”

Today, the association's east boundary is Rock Creek Park; the north boundary is Western Avenue; while the west and south boundaries begin at the intersection of Western and Wisconsin Avenues and run southeast on Wisconsin Avenue, east on Jenifer Street, south on 41st Street, east on Harrison Street, south on 39th Street, east on Fessenden Street, south on 38th Street, east on Albemarle Street, north on Connecticut Avenue, east on Ellicott Street, and east on a line to Rock Creek Park.

Association Governance

Articles of incorporation under the laws of the District of Columbia were filed and a certificate of incorporation was issued to the association by the Recorder of Deeds on October 10, 1951. Such incorporation served to stabilize the association and protect its members, relieving them of individual fiscal responsibility for association acts. In connection with this incorporation procedure, the association's name was changed from the Citizens Association of Chevy Chase, D.C. to its current name, the Chevy Chase Citizens Association. Although the Citizens Association of Chevy Chase, D.C., had a constitution before its incorporation, the Constitution of the Chevy Chase Citizens Association was adopted on March 21, 1955. It has been amended several times; the current constitution as amended is on the web site of the association, <http://chevychasecitizens.org>.

Because the citizens of Washington initially did not have any right to vote, some outlet or alternative means of expression their views was natural, and that has come about by means of citizens associations. Each section of the District has an officially organized citizens or civic association. Washington owes much to the many hours of toil and intelligent effort put into association work by the men and women of the various communities; Chevy Chase is no exception.

Senator Arthur Capper, longtime chairman of the Senate District Committee, expressed admiration for the work of citizens associations in Washington (quoted in Origins, 1974):

"Though the people of the District of Columbia have no direct representation in Congress, it is quite apparent to me, based on my experience as chairman of the Senate District Committee, that the residents of the National Capital are fully as interested and concerned with the problems of local government as the citizens of any State or municipality in the entire country. Indeed, it seems to me that a larger percentage of Washington people show an active, instead of a merely passive interest in local affairs than is generally the case in a large city. This is no doubt due to the fact there is a very high standard of intelligence among Washington people, and while they do

not enjoy all the rights and privileges of a democratic form of government, they have not by any means supinely resigned themselves to what might easily become an extremely autocratic regime if less interest were displayed by District residents. I firmly believe that the things which have contributed most to the general welfare of the D.C. are its fine body of civic and neighborhood associations, and the effective aid and support of the local development. . . . Of one thing there can be no doubt whatever: The citizens associations of the D.C. are of real value in the upbuilding of the community and should have the active support of everyone who claims to be an American citizen."

In Chevy Chase Citizen Association meetings, matters of importance to the community are discussed. As of 2011, general meetings open to the community usually are held in 8 months each year, January through May and September through November. December was reserved for a holiday party featuring activities at the community center.

Many outstanding members of the community have served on the association's executive committee. Three judges of local courts each served for long periods. Others include lawyers, business executives, operators of businesses, professional people, the president of one of the city's largest utilities, and just plain but dedicated citizens. A list of presidents of the Association is given in the appendix of this volume. Some early presidents may not be shown because of lost records.

In 1909 all members were property owners. For many years, membership was restricted to white adult residents of good moral character; during the Cold War, members could not be members of organizations declared subversive by an agency of the federal government. Later amendments to the constitution removed these restrictions; for many years membership has been open to all residents without regard to race, sex, creed, or political affiliation.

Many membership records of the association have been lost. Available information indicates a growth from 16 members in 1909, to 365 in 1920, to 1,600 in 1937, to 3,400 in 1952—and then a decline to about 2,000 in 1959 and a further drop to 682 in 1978-79. Membership increased to 1,106 in 1982-3, the year before the 75th anniversary. At one time, the association was the largest citizens association in the District. After the turn of the 21st century, however, membership took another drop, to about 350 households (of roughly 6,000 in the Chevy Chase, D.C., area)

The expansion of the boundaries in 1920 and the efforts of E. Nisber Wright, membership chairman for many years, were primarily responsible for the growth of the association during the first forty years. The reasons for the decline since the early 1950s have not been apparent, but lack of vigorous membership campaigns and the large turnover in the population of the area may have been factors.

The Chevy Chase News (later the Chevy Chase Citizen) was long the official organ of the association. The paper was founded in April 1920 by President Fred S. Lincoln and was edited and published by him until his death in the middle 1930s. For a short period it was published by the Elman Printing Company, then for some years it was edited and produced by J.M. Heiser. In 1939 the association complimented Mr. Heiser for the excellence of the paper; many leading editorials were written by Alton G. Grinnell of McKinley Street. The last issue found in the Chevy Chase Library was dated march 1949, after which communications to the members took the form of a one- or two-page newsletter containing a meeting notice and brief items of current concern. The newsletter was increased to four or six pages in the late 1970s. As of 2011, a four-page newsletter titled Chevy Chase Citizens News was sent to members and published online in each of the 8 months a year in which the association held general public meetings. The newsletter was recognized in 2005 with an award from the D.C. Federation of Civic Associations.