



Takoma Park at 125

Commemorating the birth of a sylvan suburb

Places, like people, have an official moment when they come into existence. For Takoma Park that moment was November 24, 1883.

On that day a deed was drawn up between B.F. Gilbert and Joseph & Sarah Burr. In exchange for \$6,500, Gilbert purchased 93 acres of abandoned farmland from the estate of Gottlieb Grammar.

Gilbert had no interest in farming. He was a real estate developer who envisioned houses nestled among the close-set trees, offering middle class families an alternative to the unhealthy living conditions that were their only choice in the District.

These 93 acres were the first of 14 parcels of land that would be stitched

together to form Takoma Park.

The world has changed so profoundly in the last 125 years that it is hard for us to imagine life in 1883. Queen Victoria, who gave her name to the whole era, still had more than 20 years left as monarch of the British Empire.

Along with no cars, airplanes, air conditioning or television, we would have to get along without yet-to-be-invented Lifesavers, cornflakes, Hershey chocolate bars, and Coca-Cola.

Telephone lines were just now stretching between New York and Chicago. Edison was still investigating tungsten as the secret to creating an electric light bulb. The newly-opened Brooklyn Bridge and the

first 10-story skyscraper in Chicago gave glimpses of the future, while Remington was revolutionizing business with its new-fangled typewriter.

Treasure Island, Huck Finn and Sherlock Holmes were delighting readers everywhere while the National League resumed baseball games suspended since 1876. And the railroads agreed to create four time zones.

The American nation was barely 20 years beyond the wrenching turmoil of the Civil War. Chester Arthur had assumed the Presidency in the wake of Garfield's death from a crazed madman's bullet.

The Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875 which attempted to guarantee all persons equal treatment in "public accommodations" and then declared that American Indians were not citizens.

The Washington Monument was finally nearing completion. It stood alone on the marshy fields that would one day be the Mall. The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials were decades away. The city proper ended at K Street for all intents and purposes, though Boundary Street (Florida Avenue) marked the furthest reaches of development. It took most of a day to travel from Georgetown to Baltimore by horseback.

The Capital itself was flooded with post-war workers, eager to join the ranks of the government. Clerical jobs were now possible thanks to the Civil Service Reform Bill of 1883. Examinations and a merit system made it fairer. The presence of these workers who deserved healthy living prompted the 42-year-old Gilbert to undertake his radical scheme.



Benjamin Franklin Gilbert
1841 - 1907

This was not Gilbert's first development project. Born in upstate New York in 1841, he gravitated to the Capital as a young man. Over the previous decades he had tried his hand building rowhouses on K Street, and in a visionary attempt to develop the area now known as Dupont Circle (which failed when his fellow investors got cold feet).

But "suburb" was still a relatively new concept. People lived either crowded together in cities or isolated in the vast rural stretches. Gilbert envisioned a combination – men working in the city while their families grew up in the healthy air of the countryside. He realized that the new Baltimore & Ohio railroad provided a way to link the city job and country home.

Moreover, this would free families from the crowded tenements and dangers of malaria and unsafe drinking water which plagued the marshy District.

He jumped on the train to see what he could find. Six miles north of the Mall, he found the Grammar estate. The parcel included one of the 1791 boundary stones marking the District-Maryland border which divided the parcel in half. It was a distinction that he disregarded, an attitude which continues to this day among some residents.

Gilbert, a stickler for healthy living, was attracted by other amenities: a multitude of underground springs not to mention



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HISTORIC TAKOMA

Gilbert's first purchase was the Grammar parcel, land once owned by Charles Carroll of Bellevue, brother of Daniel Carroll of Duddington who provided most of the land in Federal City, including the National Mall and Capital Hill. Writing in 1890, the Washington Post extolled the "purely rural, untamed chater of the forest there, in the depths of which the town has been laid out."

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Sligo Creek a mile north promised pure drinking water. A ridge of land (following today's Cedar, Carroll and Ethan Allen) stood 300 feet above the District's marshes and guided him laying out the streets. The tract, though densely wooded, was crisscrossed by Indian and tobacco trails that provided access.

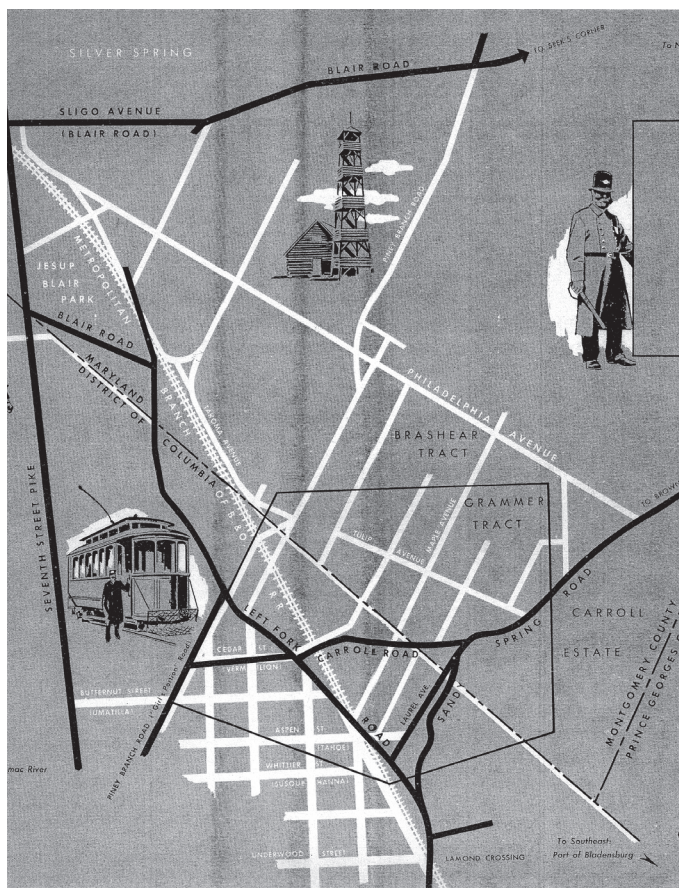
The only thing he didn't like was the name given to the train stop: Brightwood. But that was solved when one of his fellow guests at the DC hotel he called home, made a suggestion. Ida Summy offered "Takoma" - as an Indian word meaning "high up" or "near heaven." He immediately adopted it, adding "Park" to complete the image. Fittingly enough, Ida and her husband soon joined Gilbert in the new community.

His first sale, however, was made on November 24, the same day he took title. Amanda Thomas purchased four lots (within a year she and her husband Isaac would occupy the first completed house in the suburb).

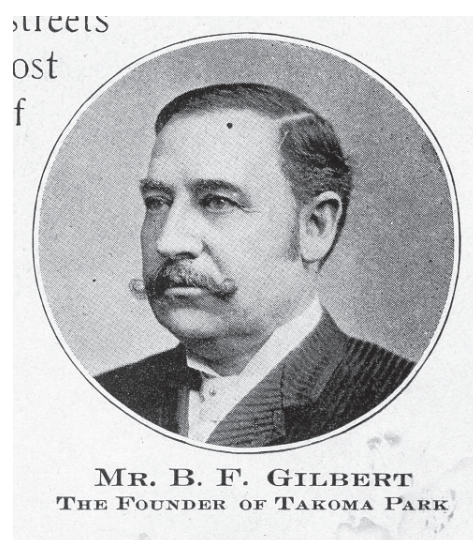
Gilbert offered lots at 5 cents a square foot (versus 50 cents in town), making home ownership a reality of dozens of families. Despite his real estate experience expansion was slow. By the end of the first year 70 souls (counting children) called Takoma Park home. By the end of 1886, there was a population of 100 in a total of 16 houses.

Each year brought more residents, who began to turn their attention to amenities like churches, schools, paved roads, a public water system. By 1890 the town incorporated as a Maryland municipality, with Gilbert elected as first mayor.

His last years were less successful. Buying additional parcels of land, combined with unwisely undertaking the construction of a 160-room hotel in North Takoma, left him overextended when



The Grammar tract ran from the intersection of Piney Branch & Blair Rds., NW southeast on Blair to Willow Street, NW, then NE along Willow to Valley View in Maryland and west to Chestnut



nationwide financial panic hit in 1893.

Gilbert never recovered and spent his declining years as an invalid, dying in 1907. But the community he founded was ready to stand on its own.

The independent nature that Takoma Park residents consider their hallmark, was nurtured in the wilderness of early Takoma Park and is Gilbert's most enduring legacy.

Diana Kohn is the Education Chair of Historic Takoma. To commemorate the 125 anniversary of Gilbert's first purchase, Historic Takoma has asked the City Council to declare November 24, 2008, as B.F. Gilbert Day.

Catch more history: Jerry McCoy's "Then and Now" column in the Silver Spring Voice relates the tale of Montgomery Blair's mansion at Falklands. Pass columns of both "Takoma Archives" and "Then and Now" and are available online at takoma.com and silverspringvoice.com.

Comment on the Purple Line Project AA/DEIS (Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement)



The Purple Line is a proposed 16-mile light rail or bus rapid transit line that would extend from Bethesda in Montgomery County to New Carrollton in Prince George's County providing a direct connection with both branches of the Metrorail Red Line, the Green Line and the Orange Line at Bethesda, Silver Spring, College Park, and New Carrollton. The Purple Line would also connect to all three MARC lines, AMTRAK, and local bus services. The main goal of the project is to provide faster, more reliable transit service options, and better connections to Metro.

The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) is accepting comments on the Purple Line Project Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (AA/DEIS). The AA/DEIS presents the project's purpose and need, analysis of the various alternatives and environmental considerations. Between now and January 14th, you can share your comments on the AA/DEIS by:

- Submitting electronic statements on the Purple Line website: www.purplelinemd.com
- Sending in your written comments to Diane Ratcliff, MTA Director of Planning, 6 St. Paul Street, 9th Floor, Baltimore, MD 21202
- By emailing your statement to purpleline@mtamaryland.com
- By giving testimony - oral or written - at one of four public hearings that will be held in November.

Please attend one of the Purple Line AA/DEIS Public Hearings!

Saturday, November 15, 2008
Open House Starts: 10:30 am
Public Hearing: 11:00 am - 3:00 pm
New Carrollton Municipal Center
6016 Princess Garden Parkway
New Carrollton, MD 20784

Tuesday, November 18, 2008
Open House Starts: 4:30 pm
Public Hearing: 5:00 pm - 9:00 pm
National 4-H Youth Conference Center
7100 Connecticut Avenue
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

Wednesday, November 19, 2008
Open House Starts: 4:30 pm
Public Hearing: 5:00 pm - 9:00 pm
Ritchie Coliseum
University of Maryland
Route 1 (Directly across from Rossborough Inn)
College Park, MD 20742

Saturday, November 22, 2008
Open House Starts: 12:30 pm
Public Hearing: 1:00 pm - 5:00 pm
Montgomery College
Takoma Park/Silver Spring Campus Falcon Hall
7600 Takoma Avenue
Takoma Park, MD 20912

All locations are accessible to persons with disabilities. To request special services such as an interpreter for the hearing impaired, please call 410-767-3694 or TTY: 410-539-3497 at least one week prior to the meeting.

In advance of the public hearings, we encourage you to review the AA/DEIS on which the hearings will be based. The document is available for review at the below locations, and online at www.purplelinemd.com.

Bethesda Library
7400 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814

Maryland State Archives
350 Rowe Boulevard
Annapolis, MD 21401

New Carrollton Library
7414 Riverdale Road
New Carrollton, MD 20784

Bladensburg Library
4820 Annapolis Road
Bladensburg, MD 20710

Maryland State Law Library
Robert C. Murphy Courts of Appeal Bldg.
361 Rowe Boulevard, #6
Annapolis, MD 21401

Prince George's County M-NCPPC
6600 Kenilworth Avenue
Riverdale, MD 20737

Chevy Chase Library
8005 Connecticut Avenue
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

Maryland Department of Legislative Services Library
Legislative Services Building
90 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Silver Spring Library
8901 Colesville Road
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Greenbelt Library
11 Crescent Road
Greenbelt, MD 20770

MDOT Regional Office
4351 Garden City Drive, Suite 305
New Carrollton, MD 20785

State Library Resource Center
400 Cathedral Street
Baltimore, MD 21201-4484

Hyattsville Library
6530 Adelphi Road
Hyattsville, MD 20782

Montgomery County M-NCPPC
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Silver Spring Regional Services Center
8435 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Long Branch Library
8800 Garland Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20901

Takoma Park Maryland Library
101 Philadelphia Avenue
Takoma Park, MD 20912

University of Maryland Hornbake Library
College Park, MD 20742

If you are unable to attend a Public Hearing, log onto our website for information at www.purplelinemd.com. For further information on this project, please contact: Michael D. Madden, Project Manager, Maryland Transit Administration (410) 767-3694 mmadden@mtamaryland.com
En Español: Carlos Abinader, Maryland Transit Administration (301) 577-2063 cabinader@mtamaryland.com