

RENTAL HOUSING IN ARLINGTON IN GENERAL AND COLONIAL VILLAGE IN PARTICULAR

By

EVELYN R. DOYLE

A popular magazine, *Apartment Life*, has recently changed its advertising. "You don't have to live in an apartment to read *Apartment Life* — you could live in a towering condominium . . ." Indeed, condominiums, towering or otherwise, are increasingly a part of the housing scene not only in Arlington, but across the nation. A report written for Citicorp Real Estate Inc. stated the number of condominiums nationwide in 1978 as 100,000. The report predicts at least 130,000 conversions this year.

Arlington has been doing its share to swell that figure. Since the second half of 1978, reporters covering the housing situation in this area have been fond of regularly stating that "In the past six months, about 1000 units have been converted in Arlington." With the recent announcement of intent to convert 655-unit Arlington Village apartments, the number has exceeded 1000. Arlington's housing authorities are concerned, because conversion has been cutting deeply into the stock of moderate housing. According to Fran Lunney, director of Arlington's Tenant Landlord Commission, "A total of 5,226 units have been converted into condominiums in this decade. But twenty-two percent of the available moderate priced units have been converted." (And this statement was made before the Arlington Village announcement.) Arlington already has the lowest vacancy rate (1.58 percent) of any jurisdiction in the metropolitan area. Many housing experts call a rate of 5 percent "a housing crisis." The number of applications for new building permits decreased 76 percent. None of the applications were to build moderate rental units.

Whether all of this conversion is good or bad for Arlington County depends on your perspective. Asked to express an opinion on the subject, Lunney replied, "We're seriously concerned about the loss of moderate cost units through condominium and other conversions." But she added, "Arlington's older garden apartments now need rehabilitation." As do some of Arlington's housing activists, Lunney sees one solution for some of the county's low income tenants in the tenants forming a cooperative and buying their buildings. Government loans are available to enable tenants to do this. These cooperatives would be nonprofit organizations. In a nonprofit cooperative, one gains the right to occupy a unit by shares of stock in a cooperative "corporation" made up of the other tenants.

Tenants do not own their unit as is the case in a condominium. But the cooperative guarantees that the rents stay low.

Colonial Village is the only apartment development in Arlington County that can boast of designation as an "historic landmark." The story of the dealings of Colonial Village tenants with the new owners of the Village, Mobil Land Development Corporation, probably deserves a place in some history book, so I'll write a brief account for this one. Colonial Village was sold to Mobil in 1977. Soon after the sale two tenant groups were formed. The Colonial Village Preservation Committee was founded by Brian Ford, an engineer employed by the American Institute of Architects Research Corporation. The Colonial Village Tenants Association was started by Dennis Hottell, an attorney. The Colonial Village Preservation Committee was founded to have Colonial Village designated an Historic District and to have it listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Tenants Association was founded to generally protect the tenants' rights to have a say in plans Mobil might have for the Village, and especially to represent the interests of the elderly and low-income tenants.

Both groups fought for historic designation of the Village. The basic case for designating Colonial Village follows: Colonial Village was the first large scale housing project to receive an FHA construction loan. The rules for obtaining such loans were written by government officials in cooperation with Colonial Village's developer, Gustave Ring, and his staff. Colonial Village set the stage for garden developments. As the *Washington Star* and *Post* have both noted, it "has been called the most copied piece of real estate in the country," (*Post*, Oct. 6, 1977) and it "is the granddaddy of all such developments in the country." (*Star*, Mar. 19, 1978)

Historic designation prohibits altering the buildings' exteriors and prevents any changes from being made otherwise without permission of the Historic Landmark Review Board. On October 25, 1978, Arlington County's Historic Review Board met to decide whether to recommend that the County Board designate the Village historic. A candlelight march to the Court House had over 200 participants. Some were elderly people walking with canes or being pushed in wheelchairs. Others were young tenants who had the added incentive of a nostalgic return to the protest marches of the '60's to get them out into the street. A petition was read to the County Board, favoring designation and starred with names such as that of former tenant David Lloyd Kreeger. Young people sat on the floor of the Court House, saving the seats for the elderly. After hearing impassioned speeches, many of them having little relation to the historic nature of the Village, the review board recommended unanimously to recommend designation. On December 5, 1978, another march to the Court House took place. This march even had a bagpiper, but fewer tenants braved the cold to make the march. The Arlington County Board voted to compromise: one-fourth of

the Village was to be designated historic. The County Board wanted to defer its final decision until Mobil could present a site plan. An ad hoc site plan committee was appointed, which included representatives from the Colonial Village Tenants' Association. The Tenants' Association has been called "the largest and most poliically viable tenants association" by the Rosslyn Review, which also gave the group credit for being a granddaddy of sorts to other tenants associations.

The future of Colonial Village is not known. The Tenants Association has endorsed a plan of converting the units to a nonprofit cooperative. This would maintain low rents, but would not provide an investment opportunity for tenants, because an occupier/shareholder could not sell his unit share at a profit, as can shareholders in many other cooperatives, such as Watergate. Other tenants have been writing to the site plan committee asking to have Colonial Village go condominium, acting on faith that Mobil will give them deals as did the International Developers which developed Park Fairfax and the Fairmac Corporation which developed Fairlington Village.

Whatever the future of Colonial Village, it has a past that is rich in human history. You may enjoy some of the anecdotes in the story below.

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I met him at the bus stop. The man from McLean. It was one of those government holidays — Veteran's Day, Columbus Day, George Washington's Birthday — that all blend into one because we celebrate on Monday. The man had jumped into his Buick and driven to the old bus stop on the corner of Lee Highway and Rhodes Street to take the Metrobus into town. He waited 10, 15, 20 minutes. No bus showed so we rode downtown in the Buick. He mentioned having run into the rental manager at Colonial Village the previous week. She remembered the number of the apartment that he and his wife had shared in 1936.

She is the subject of a fair number of "horror" stories in the Village. For one thing she keeps the long waiting list which determines who can live in the popular development. (Before Colonial Village was built in 1935, 15,000 people had applied to live in the first 276 units, so this popularity has precedent). The other reason is that she has been known to call younger tenants at work to inform them that they have been observed breaking the rule against taking shortcuts across the grass. But there's an element of admiration in the voice of these "victims" — because this lady really does care about the condition of Colonial Village.

This attitude of management caring about the development goes back to the beginning of the Village. Its developer Gustav Ring, built the Village with the idea of producing “quality housing at moderate prices.” Some tenants remember paying \$12 a month a room for rent. For this, they lived in a professionally landscaped development that had, in the early years, its own hobby shop, and a postal employee who sold stamps and took packages in the rental office during the Christmas rush. The management employed a porter who delivered packages to tenants’ doors.

The hobby shop is still there. It has tools and worktables and a man called Mr. Yager. (There is something venerable about the staff of the Village, so even the sort of person who calls almost everyone by their first name wouldn’t think of calling Mrs. Wolfe, say Elizabeth.) Mr. Yager recalls the young couples, enlisted men and their wives who came to the Village without any furniture. “I would help them build a bedframe, a chest of drawers — whatever they needed, right here in this shop.” He regrets that his arthritis now limits him to giving advice.

The Ballroom over the office was the site for dances in the early days of the Village. Red Cross ladies rolled bandages there during World War II. And at least one couple said marriage vows in the room. This couple “moved to the suburbs” (many Villagers don’t like to think of themselves as suburbanites) to raise their children but moved back after their offspring were grown. The bridegroom’s mother still lived in the Village when they moved back “home.” (In fact, there are several families having two or three generations in the development — a working daughter who lives in a different building from her mother and other combinations.)

Like any other community, the Village has its legendary characters. And it’s not just the oldtimers who know about them. A young dental student told us about Doc. Doc is not a doctor, he’s a man who believes that electro-therapy is good for what ails you — backache, arthritis, tennis elbow — whatever the problem Doc made the neighborly gesture of giving one a treatment on the Machine — which he keeps in his apartment. Doc is now too ill to treat others though, and is well cared for by his neighbors.

Then there is the Dandelion Lady. For years, she roamed the Village uprooting dandelions — and not to make wine. She just felt that the grounds of the Village deserved the dignity of a weed-free existence. Like many other tenants, she also fed the birds. In fact, when she was told that Mobil had bought the property and was considering leveling it, she said that she could afford another home, but the birds and squirrels would have no place to go. Two weeks after she heard the news about Mobil, she had a fatal stroke walking home from the corner store.

Not all the characters had altruistic intentions. When the management first installed the gas refrigerators (they were later replaced with electric models), some workmen left large holes around the pipe. Calvin S. (fictional

name, of course) had a drinking problem. His wife threw out any liquor bottles she found. Mrs. S. could not understand how her husband stayed drunk. She never guessed that a friend in the next apartment was handing Calvin bottles through the hold behind the Fridgeaire.

Colonial Village is not what it used to be. No longer can one receive packages from a porter employed by the management. The management no longer sends flowers to mark wedding anniversaries of tenants. No longer are the campus-like grounds patrolled by a security guard at night, although the area is still remarkably safe. The most recent romantic tale goes back to 1968, when the woods hid fugitives from the Black riots that marked the beginning of the end of Washington's days as a sleepy, provincial, racist town.

The woods also hid the bear that escaped from Smokey Mountain Park. Could you picture a bear in Alexandria's Condo Canyon? Rabbits are so plentiful that you can sometimes see them in the daytime. There also are racoons, opossum, and woodchucks. And the birds are so plentiful that they can keep a city person awake.

Walled courtyards hide English country-style gardens, filled with blooms you may not have seen in years — bachelor buttons, cockscombs, and nasturtiums. (There are fads in flowers as in everything else.) The gardeners care enough about the look of the whole court that they care for sick or vacationing neighbor's plots. And the common grounds provide plenty of space for enjoying the outdoors or doing some solitary meditation. Anyone who had a thinking spot as a child recognizes the importance of this. One ideal spot that I found is a bench, hidden by trees and bushes and perched by a stream. There is also an empty foundation of a house, where you can sit and watch Lee Highway through the trees. There are little foot bridges, ironwork arches and generally enough delightful things to discover that you could pleasantly occupy several Sunday afternoons exploring. It is hard to describe the grounds to someone who is used to other apartment grounds and pictures don't do them justice. It's more like Rock Creek Park with environmentally appropriate buildings. Rock Creek Park is built on valuable land too. But nobody's suggested building an office building or a parking lot there lately.