

J. Cloyd Byars

AN EARLY HISTORY OF ALCOVA HEIGHTS

By

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The Alcova Heights area is bounded by Glebe Road on the east, Doctors Run on the west, Columbia Pike on the south, and 5th Street, South, and Arlington Hall installation on the north. During the 1920s and 1930s Arlington Hall was a fashionable girls' junior college under the direction of Dr. W. E. Martin, but during World War II the site was taken over by the Federal Government and has been used by various government agencies ever since.

The history of Alcova Heights can be traced back to the original grant from Lord Fairfax, Proprietor of the Northern Neck, in the early 1700s. Following this, the land passed through the hands of several owners until 1915 when the Columbia Land Company purchased most of the land in the area which is today called Alcova Heights from the Young-Gray estates. The name Alcova Heights is derived from *Alexandria* County, *Virginia*. In 1921, the company was dissolved and its holdings transferred to the Alcova Improvement Company, J. Cloyd Byars, president. Present owners have acquired their land either directly or indirectly from that company. Mr. Byars subdivided the 142-acre tract into lots, some 50, some 100 feet in width, and dedicated land for streets and alleys. He assigned street names as follows (the present-day equivalent of each name appears in parenthesis): Marconi Avenue (8th Street), Deepwood Avenue (9th Street), Springhill Street (Lincoln Street), Virginia Street (Monroe Street), Linden Avenue (Oakland Street), Brook Dell Avenue * (Quincy Street).

Other streets were added in later years but these were the ones originally laid out by Mr. Byars.

I saw Alcova Heights for the first time early in 1920. We were residents of Washington, and my parents, Florence and Andrew Cannon, were interested in finding a place in the country where they could build a summer home. My father parked his car on Glebe Road next to Mr. Byars' beautiful old southern mansion, "Alcova." Mr. Byars brought out a plat of the new subdivision, and we walked to various sites. The street had not been cut through at that time, so the few houses already constructed faced either Glebe Road or Columbia Pike. The rest was mostly open fields tufted with an occasional grove of trees.

The two surfaced highways, Columbia Pike (formerly Columbian Turnpike) and Glebe Road (known as the Road to the Falls or the Al-

* Later renamed Azalea Street for the many beautiful wild azaleas (pinxter) that bordered it.



The Cannon log cabin with wood siding addition—about 1925.

exandria-Balls Cross Roads Road), bordering this area, made Alcova Heights very accessible. Trolley service to Washington, Rosslyn, and Alexandria was available approximately one mile away at Arlington where Columbia Pike and Walter Reed Drive now intersect (See Figure 1). Mr. Byars had little difficulty in selling lots at five cents a square foot.

My parents bought property in Alcova Heights in 1920 and 1921 and added several additional lots later in the twenties. In 1921, a neighborhood carpenter built what was planned as a garage, of sawed pine slabs, facing Azalea Street. They selected a site for the house about a hundred feet away, near Marconi Avenue. Because of financial problems, they decided to add a kitchen and porch to the “garage” structure, and we moved in late in the spring of 1921. I lived there until my marriage in 1938. I remember our log cabin with mixed emotions. From the outside it had a romantic, informal appearance. In the summer it was very pleasant, but the winters were something else. It was completely uninsulated; in fact, the flat side of the sawed slabs were the interior walls. A fireplace in mild weather and a pot-bellied stove in winter heated the cabin. We had an abundance of fresh air, sometimes more than we really wanted!

At the corner of what is now 7th and 8th Streets, South, we drew our water from a clear, bubbling spring until a well could be drilled. Later

150 FT. ALERST.
 OUT COLUMBIA PIKE - CROSS TROLLEY TRACK - ABOUT
 3/4 MILE - CROSS STREAM WITH WHITE GUARDRAILS ON
 BRIDGE - ABOUT 500 FT. BEYOND BRIDGE TURN R UP HILL - 2 SQUARES TO F.H.C.

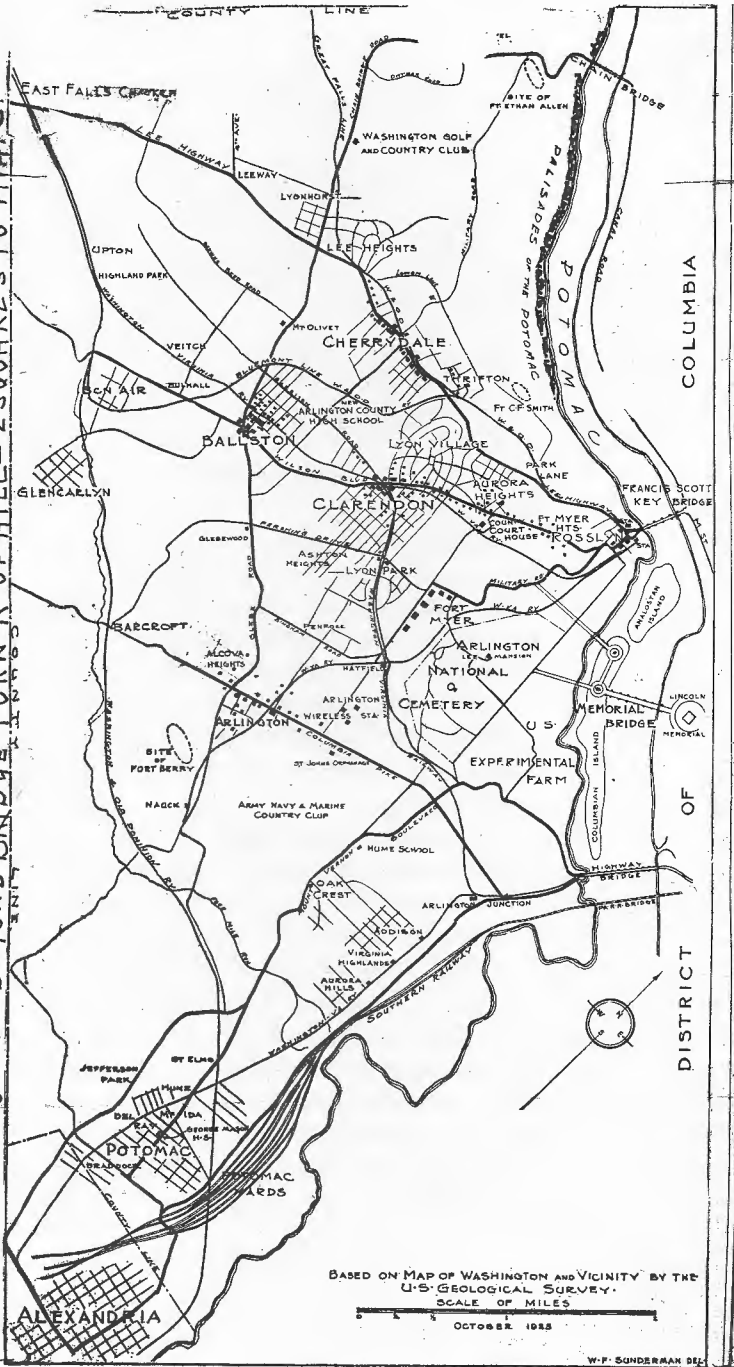


Figure 1

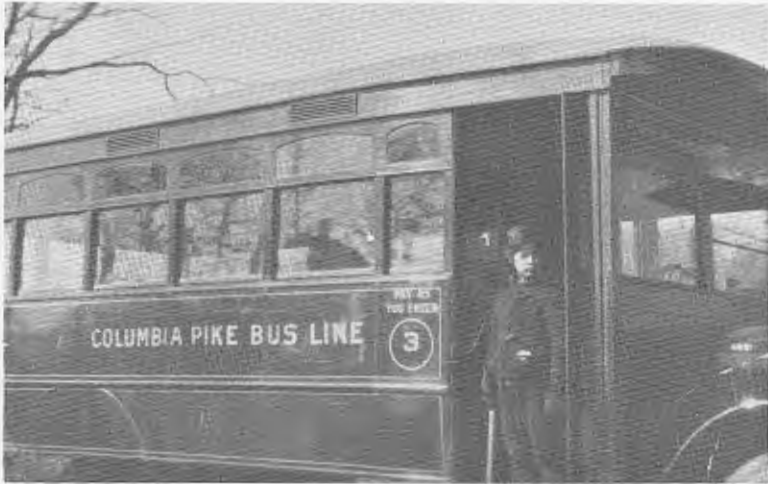
in the 1920s, I can remember our neighbors across the street employing a divining rod to locate a good spot for a well. Septic tanks and outhouses provided the necessary sanitation facilities. There were very few telephones, and most of these were four- and eight-party lines. Some of the planned streets were cut through during the twenties but were only narrow dirt roads. There were no sidewalks, no curbs or gutters, and no street lights.

There were no house-to-house mail deliveries. We picked up our mail at the post office, located in an old frame building that also served as the trolley waiting room, at the southeast corner of what is now Columbia Pike and Walter Reed Drive. The postmaster, Julian Rapp, lived in the house which still stands on the northwest corner of Quincy Street and Columbia Pike.

Columbia, at the southwest corner of Columbia Pike and Walter Reed Drive, served as the elementary school for this area. The main brick structure was built in the late 1800s to replace an earlier Columbia School on the southeast corner, built prior to 1864, near present South Wayne Street. The fifth grade was housed in an adjacent frame building, heated by a pot-bellied stove. I attended school there from 1923 to 1925. Miss Lena Carey, the principal, taught the sixth grade while her sister, Miss Mary Carey, taught the eighth grade. Students attended high school in Washington or at Mt. Vernon or George Mason High Schools in the lower end of the County, until Washington-Lee High School opened in September 1924 in temporary quarters, then moving to its present site in October 1925.

Transportation was further improved when Bob May and his wife started a bus service. The line consisted of one second-hand bus and one driver, Mr. May, operating between his home in Barcroft and Washington. There was no printed schedule at first. The bus left the May's home for Washington every hour on the hour, made the turnaround at its "terminal" (9th Street in Washington, around the corner from the trolley terminal), and returned to Barcroft. If you wanted any information about bus service, you phoned Mrs. May at their home. I remember how pleased my parents were to have public transportation direct to Washington. The Arlington trolley station was over a mile from our house, and in order to reach downtown Washington, you had to change at Hatfield.* In order to encourage the fledgling enterprise, my father permanently retired his Hudson, refused to accept any offers of rides to Washington, and exhorted his neighbors to patronize the bus. The first Barcroft-Washington trip was made on June 21, 1921. In 1924, service from Washington to Alexandria was added, and the line became

* The Hatfield Station was near the present intersection of Washington Blvd. and Arlington Blvd., on the edge of Fort Myer Army Post.



Robert May's third bus

the AB&W Rapid-Transit Company. (The original title was Columbia Pike Bus Line.) In the fall of 1925, Bob May's original bus became the first school bus at Washington-Lee High School. Driven by John DeLashmatt, the bus carried students from South Arlington to W-L.

I recall one amusing incident perhaps attributable to the size of the bus company. Although more drivers were added as the line expanded, they were still relatively few in number. We knew them all by name, and they knew us. We lived two blocks from Columbia Pike up a fairly steep hill. It was a sort of "running gag" that my father would ask the driver periodically to drive up Azalea Street and deliver us to our doorstep. One night he made his request and added, "It's my birthday," whereupon the driver turned away from Columbia Pike, wheeled up Azalea Street, and deposited us at our front door, while the other passengers sang "Happy Birthday." Where can you find service like that today?

Many of those who bought land from J. Cloyd Byars in the 1920s, or their descendants, still reside in Alcova Heights. Mrs. Elsie D. Clardy is one of the former. Married daughters of some of the early residents are living in the community; Eleanor Trapp Bell, Marilyn Knoblock Sowers, Susie Hunter Wiseman, Hilda Bamforth Jones, and I. One lot near 9th Street, South, on Quincy Street, is owned by Mr. Byars' son, Bailey.