

HISTORY OF THE PARK SYSTEM IN ARLINGTON COUNTY

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When fields to run in, brooks to wade, trees to swing on abound, the need for public parks and organized "recreation" is little felt. Such was the situation in Arlington County, Virginia, until little more than forty years ago. Indeed in 1932, the County Board *Minute Book* records a complaint from the County Manager that the problem of keeping weeds cut was all but insurmountable "because so little of the County is built up."

The picture has changed drastically. Now almost entirely developed, Arlington houses some 174,000 people in its 25.7 square miles (4.6 of them under the control of the Federal Government, and additional acreage covered with highways and parking lots). No longer a sleepy rural countryside, Arlington is one of the more densely populated portions of the Greater Washington Metropolitan Area.

Imaginative individuals long ago foresaw what would happen. As early as 1927, the County Zoning Commission heard a presentation by Charles W. Leavitt, City Planner from New York City, who apparently preached the acquisition of property and rights-of-way before the pace of development drove up prices.¹

The plan for Arlington County presented to the County Board of Supervisors in February 1930² proposed a series of "green fingers" along stream valleys and the Potomac shore, a concept actually adopted only a few years ago. The *Report* did not recommend the acquisition of any large parks in the County, holding that Arlington's proximity to the District of Columbia with its Rock Creek and Potomac Parks, and the existence of open space in private golf clubs and at the Arlington National Cemetery served the purpose. It did recommend, however, that subdividers should be urged to set aside space for small parks when developing their land because "the enhanced value of contiguous land will compensate them." Playgrounds were thought of only in connection with school sites except for two athletic fields, "not less than four acres, preferably six each," one on Lee Highway and the other near Arlington Boulevard. Even this limited plan was so far ahead of its time as to have been almost totally disregarded.

¹ Arlington County Zoning Commission, *Minute Book*, October 27, 1927.

² Allen J. Saville, Inc., *Report on Plan for Arlington County*, February 1930; typescript in Central Documents Collection, Office of County Manager.

One area had indeed been set aside for park purposes, but it was not then under the control of the County. In 1892, Gen. Samuel S. Burdett, one of the founders of the first planned subdivision in the County, Glencarlyn, deeded park land for the use of the residents of that community.³ This area, lying on both sides of what is now Arlington Boulevard, did become a part of the County system during the depression of the '30's when Glencarlyn Park was turned over to the Commonwealth of Virginia for use in connection with the Civilian Conservation Corps program. A CCC camp was established there, and the Corps undertook development and maintenance work on park land in the area. In 1940 Arlington asked the State for the land, and through agreement with the Trustees of Glencarlyn, it was deeded to the County. Its 95 acres form an important element of the Four Mile Run, Long Branch, Lubber Run park system.

This acquisition was the fruition of an idea germinated in the early days of County Manager government in Arlington. At a meeting of the County Board on March 11, 1932,⁴ it is reported that Mrs. [Florence] Cannon asked whether legislation was needed to permit the County to accept donations of land for park purposes, and she was assured that the Commonwealth's Attorney had ruled that the authority already existed. The record continues: "Mr. [F. Freeland] Chew said he would be glad to look into the matter of the park at Glencarlyn being turned over to the County."

Some small parcels of land generally undevelopable, consisting of street islands and tot lots, already had been so donated by developers. In early 1933, the County Manager was authorized to make a survey to establish the location of these sites.⁵ The 1933-34 County budget contained an item of \$500 (reduced from the proposed \$2,500) for park maintenance—presumably for these small areas. This was a generous allowance in view of the financial stringency in which the County Board found itself—a situation which required a 10% cut in salaries across the board. The 1935-36 budget contained an appropriation of \$5,000, a portion of which went for land acquisition.

In 1935 the County bought several small parcels of land, totaling 28 acres, along Four Mile Run north of Columbia Pike. The land intervening between this area and Glencarlyn Park, the so-called Moran tract, came on the market in 1939 and a proposal to buy it was presented to the County Board. Acceptance of this plan was delayed until the concept of "wilderness area" overcame the epithet "goatland." The tract was finally acquired, in sections, between 1963 and 1966, at vastly increased cost.

An important addition to the Arlington County park system was the

³ Frank L. Dieter, "Early Planning Progress in Arlington County, Virginia, to 1945"; *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 3, October, 1967, p. 35.

⁴ County Board, *Minute Book*, I, p. 94.

⁵ County Board, *Minute Book*, I, p. 390.

dedication, in 1939, of a number of tracts along Lubber Run by Monroe Warren, developer of Arlington Forest.⁶ Originally intended as sewer easements, the potential for park use was recognized by foresighted individuals in the County government. On Saturday, June 14, 1941, Lubber Run Park was formally opened. The planned elaborate ceremonies to which State and County dignitaries had been invited, with the massing of the colors by the Fort Myer Color Guard, unfortunately were rained out by a torrential downpour.

As early as 1934, the Arlington County Civic Federation was pressing the County Board to have a comprehensive plan drawn up for parks and playgrounds, and in 1938, the Planning Commission was pleading for the employment of an expert on recreation to make a study of the County's needs. Recreational facilities, of course, include far more than just parks. Operation of playgrounds was under the control of the School Board at that time, and the County Board did not wish to change that procedure.⁷

Eventually, the tremendous influx of population into Arlington as a result of the expanded governmental activities in the National Capital growing out of World War II, and the rapidly dwindling open space, forced more positive action on the County. A bond issue for \$150,000 to acquire open space and flood control land was put before the voters on November 2, 1943, and passed. On November 13, 1943, therefore, the County Board established a Recreation Advisory Committee to be composed of the Chairman and one of the members of the County Board, the Chairman and one of the members of the School Board, the County Manager, the County Planning Engineer, the Superintendent of Schools, and the School Director of Recreation. The primary function of the Committee was to advise on selection of sites. Pressure was growing for the creation of a full-fledged Department of Recreation as a separate arm of the County government. Responsibility for what park lands the County then owned was a function of a section of the Planning Division in the Engineering Department.

Dr. Jay B. Nash, the recreation expert who was finally employed by the County Board, submitted his report on March 16, 1944.⁸ In addition to addressing himself to the development of a master plan for land use and facilities for recreation, he considered administration and programming. He recommended the establishment of tot lots, neighborhood playgrounds near the elementary schools, district play areas near the junior and senior high schools, and parks for unsupervised recreational activities. He stated that

⁶ Donald A. Wise, "Arlington Forest," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 4, October, 1968, p. 30. These supplemented the dedication of 15.16 acres by an earlier owner of this land, Thomas H. Pickford, in 1936.

⁷ County Board, *Minute Book*, VII, p. 568.

⁸ Dr. Jay B. Nash, "Report to the Recreation Advisory Committee—Arlington County, Va.," undated but received March, 1944. Mimeo. Central Document Collection, County Manager's Office.

the \$150,000 bond issue was only a start on a ten-year plan of development, but that the general plans which had been proposed were sound, and that the designing of areas which already had been done "reflected the most progressive trends of good planning." He suggested that recreation be administered by a Superintendent of Recreation under the School Board with a budget of \$23,000, and a back-up contribution of \$2,000 from the County Board.

At this time the Arlington County Planning Commission was developing a Master Plan for the County. As an element of this Plan, a *Report*⁹ projecting needs to serve an estimated population of 194,000 for 1965 (the 1970 Census found 174,000 people in Arlington) dealt with a playground plan for active recreational needs but did not cover picnic parks and open space in general. These were shown on Plate III of the Master Plan.

On July 22, 1944, the County Board adopted a resolution covering park and playground policy which, among other things, created a County Department of Park and Playground Lands, and authorized the County Manager to appoint a Director who could be "the same individual who is acting under the School Board as its Director of Recreation."¹⁰ The resolution also created an Arlington Recreation Council to be composed of one member from the County Board and one from the School Board, to be appointed annually by their respective bodies, the County Manager, the Superintendent of Schools, and the Commonwealth's Attorney. This council was charged with making recommendations on budgets and furthering a coordinated policy on recreation between the County and School Boards.

During 1944, also, the County Board authorized acquisition of various sites from the proceeds of the \$150,000 bond issue. The sites were essentially neighborhood playgrounds rather than parks, but taking them into public hands did preserve open space. Acquisition through purchase and condemnation proceeded slowly, partly because the bonds actually were not sold until March 1, 1948, and financing was through advances from the General Fund.

Division of responsibility for the various elements of the program continued to be a cause of friction. As late as 1948, the County Board still took the position that organized recreation was a function of the schools. When, however, the School Board eliminated funds for this purpose from its budget, the County Board agreed to conduct a recreational program through a

⁹ *Report* from Planning Division of the Arlington County Engineering Department by Frank L. Dieter, County Planning Engineer, April 1944.

¹⁰ County Board, *Minute Book*, VIII, p. 258. No appointment actually was made for almost two years. On June 3, 1946, the County Manager appointed Wm. A. (Buck) Richardson, then Director of Recreation for the County Public Schools to this post. Keenly aware of the value of recreation and parks in an increasingly urban community, Mr. Richardson worked tirelessly to get more facilities for the County until his death on March 22, 1961.

Department of Recreation.¹¹

This Department, with Wm. A. (Buck) Richardson at the helm, began operation on July 1, 1948, in a part of the old Cherrydale School on Lee Highway at North Nelson St. This Center had been established by the Recreation Committee of the Arlington Community Chest which conducted a program of activities for all age groups. Expenditure for the Department of Recreation for its first full year of operation totaled \$140,091, of which \$70,285 was for maintenance and operation and \$50,136 for capital outlay. Quite an advance from the \$500 of 1933, but a far cry from today's \$2 million plus! Attention at that time was concentrated chiefly on after-school and Saturday playground programs rather than park development.

Citizen pressure played an impressive role in bringing about the expansion of County activities in the field of recreation. In February 1948 a report with recommendations was presented to the County Board by the Recreation Committee of the Arlington Community Chest and Council, chaired by Matt C. Huppuch. It embodied the views of 60 organizations in the County. Immediate official response was limited, and it was not for three years that the recommendation for a bond issue, the proceeds to be used for the acquisition of park land, was put before the voters. However, some of the organizational recommendations were implemented.

Meanwhile the Arlington County Planning Commission, in cooperation with a large Citizens Advisory Committee, was developing a Six-Year Improvement Program for all County functions. Published in 1951, this report¹² reflected, in part, proposals from the various Departments. In connection with recreation, it noted that the park and playground system of the County included approximately 163 acres, not all of which was usable for active recreation because of topography, location, or lack of improvement. Particular attention was directed to the overuse of Barcroft Playfield (as the area along Four Mile Run south of Columbia Pike is known) and of Lubber Run Park. It proposed the acquisition of land and establishment of a Recreation Center Building during the next six years.

The County Board submitted a bond referendum to the voters on November 6, 1951, proposing the expenditure of \$882,000 for the acquisition of land for public parks and playgrounds. Although the vote was overwhelmingly favorable, it was not possible to spend the money immediately. The Korean War was in progress, and the National Administration had asked municipalities to refrain voluntarily from projects which might have an inflationary effect. However, between 1952 and 1960 a total of 152.57 acres was purchased from the proceeds of this second bond issue. Selection of sites was

¹¹ In 1953 the name of the Department was changed to Recreation and Parks. In 1969 a County government reorganization consolidated the planning, park, and recreation functions into a Department of Environmental Affairs, with William L. Hughes as Director.

¹² Arlington County Planning Commission, *Arlington Looks Ahead*, 1951.

not always easy. Different areas of the County put forward competing claims for park money; and sometimes there were vehement protests from neighbors of proposed sites who saw public parks as an intrusion into their quiet private enclave.

Since 1951 a number of bond issues for park and recreational purposes have been put before the voters with varying response, due in part to the public's evaluation of competing demands upon the County's financial resources.

November 2, 1954—\$600,000	
For swimming pools	*Failed
*Prior to 1954 a bond issue for swimming pools passed but was thrown out by the courts.	
May 13, 1958—\$293,000	
For parks	Passed
May 17, 1960	
For Parks and Recreation—\$800,000	Failed
For Arlington's share in Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority—\$130,000	Failed
November 7, 1961	
For Land Acquisition—\$500,000	Failed
For Recreation—\$225,000	Passed
November 5, 1963—\$1,000,000	
For Open Space Acquisition	Passed
November 2, 1965—\$1,000,000	
For acquisition of land for Thomas Jefferson Junior High School-Community Center, and Gulf Branch property	Passed
November 8, 1968—\$2,500,000	
Development of recreation facilities at Thomas Jefferson Junior High School-Community Center	Passed
November 4, 1969—\$4,060,000	
Arlington's share in Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority—\$2,160,000	Passed
Swimming pools at 3 Senior High Schools—\$900,000	Passed
For storm drainage and acquisition of land—\$1,000,000	Passed

Some of these issues were earmarked for specific areas, but by and large, land for parks in Arlington has been acquired in bits and pieces, some of it by dedication, most of it by purchase or condemnation, guided by the approved Master Plan. Some of the finest pieces were acquired for stream valley control with adjacent land purchased as it became available to consolidate the holdings.¹³

¹³ One part of the 1944 plan for open space which did not materialize would have created two lakes along Four Mile Run which would not only have provided recreation but would have served as impounding basins for heavy run-off thus reducing the flooding which in recent years has been so disastrous in this valley.

Arlington County now owns some 622 acres of park land and recreation sites. Continuing sophisticated development of park lands includes lighted outdoor sports facilities, an amphitheatre in Lubber Run Park, as well as establishment of nature trails and picnic areas.

Certain park activities in addition to those already singled out deserve special mention. One is the acquisition jointly with the City of Falls Church and the County of Fairfax of a small plot of land surrounding the west cornerstone of the original District of Columbia "ten miles square." Threatened with destruction by housing development, this historic site was purchased in 1955 by the three jurisdictions which abut at this point. The Park Division is responsible also for the maintenance of other historical markers, such as the boundary milestones (originally fenced by the Daughters of the American Revolution), and the monument to the so-called Washington survey oak, marked by George Washington when he surveyed his land in what is now Arlington County.

A special beauty spot maintained by the Park Division is the Arlington Memorial Rose Garden, now in Bon Air Park. Originally established by a private group on the grounds of the Arlington Hospital with donations from individuals whose families included members of the armed services during World War II, it was moved to its present location when expansion of the Hospital crowded it out. Turned over to the County, it is now a show place for rose fanciers.

The Arlington County park story should also include a history of its involvement with regional parks and parkways. Inasmuch as Arlington is part of the Washington Metropolitan Area, planning for open space in the County has been included in some regional park planning beginning when the National Capital Park and Planning Commission was set up in 1926. Acquisition of the "Moran" tract mentioned above, for example, was urged as part of the Commission's plan. (This Commission no longer exists, but its functions have been taken over by other regional bodies.)

As far back as 1934, the creation of the George Washington Memorial Parkway along the banks of the Potomac from Great Falls to Mount Vernon involved the cooperation of the Arlington County government for that portion which lay within its borders. Encouraged by the Capper-Cramton Act, the Arlington County Board signed an agreement on June 23, 1934, joining with the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Federal Government in a pledge of funds and delineation of properties. Existence of this long stretch of beautiful parkway has encouraged the County to acquire adjacent land, which the Park Division is keeping in a natural state.

Because of the density of population and the intensified development within Arlington, the needs of its inhabitants cannot be satisfied by park lands within the County's boundaries alone. Recognizing this fact, the County, in 1950, joined with the County of Fairfax and the Cities of Alexandria and Falls Church in setting up the Virginia National Capital

Park Authority to plan for, acquire, develop, and maintain park facilities in the area. This first effort at cooperative action was not successful and the Authority was allowed to lapse.

In 1959 Arlington County joined with Fairfax County and the City of Falls Church to form the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority. Fairfax City became a member when it became an independent city in 1963. Alexandria joined the Authority in 1969. Properties acquired and developed by the NVRPA (now amounting to some 4,000 acres most of which lie in Fairfax County) are accessible to Arlington residents. The Authority now is developing 55 acres on the Potomac Palisades in Arlington known as Potomac Overlook Park. A Nature Trail has been established in the Zachary Taylor Nature Area adjacent to this park.

The importance of regional cooperation to Arlington cannot be overstressed. A statement from the Office of the County Manager, "Financing Arlington's Local Government" (September, 1970), emphasizes the official awareness of this fact:

By recognized standards Arlington County is deficient in park, playground, and playfield space in relation to both current and projected population. As the pace of urbanization continues, the acquisition of relatively undeveloped land for public recreation takes higher priority and the opportunities for purchase narrow.

It follows that the future history of large parks for Arlington citizens will be made outside the County's boundaries.