

“Peculiar Political Problems”

Arlington Parks, Segregation, and Urbanization

By Annette Scherber

In 2021, for the third year in a row, Arlington County placed 4th in the Trust for Public Land’s survey of how well populous US cities met the local need for parks. The Trust scores cities based on park access, equity, acreage, investment, and amenities. However, Arlington’s park system has not always been so successful. Decades of state-sanctioned segregation practices followed by urbanization and rapid population growth nearly eliminated the county’s once abundant open space. In consequence, during the 1960s, Arlingtonians scrambled to build a better park system to fulfill an increasing demand for natural spaces and outdoor recreation.

In 1961, park activist Mary Cook Hackman testified before the United States Senate that the “population explosion and resulting construction during the last decade have almost entirely consumed vacant land in Arlington, Falls Church, and Alexandria.” An Arlingtonian, she provided a clearer picture of the county, stating, “Arlington is almost completely built up, either with parking lots, blacktop, concrete, or buildings” causing serious runoff and sewer issues. She mused that the County Board was struggling with the question, “Should we have trees and dirt, or should we have a sewer?”¹

The expansion of the federal government in the first half of the twentieth century fueled Arlington’s quick transformation from a rural community into a populous, thriving suburb. An explosion of newcomers came to the region to fill federal jobs created during the New Deal, World War II, and the Cold War. Arlington became an attractive place to live for these primarily white, middle-class workers who sought

quieter, less dense suburban neighborhoods with an easy commute into the District of Columbia. The population expanded from 57,000 in 1940 to 135,000 in 1950. Houses and apartment complexes, schools, shopping centers, offices, and federal buildings gobbled up much of the county's open space.²

Arlington and the rest of Northern Virginia failed to incorporate park planning in this period of rapid development. A report written by the National Capital Open-Space Project in 1963 estimated that only 300 vacant acres out of Arlington's total 16,500 acres remained suitable for parkland.³ Northern Virginia contrasted starkly with the well-developed park system in the District of Columbia and Maryland suburbs. Though Maryland and Virginia suburbs had similar physical potential to create large and diverse park systems, only Prince George's and Montgomery counties in Maryland took early steps to acquire parkland before rapid urbanization occurred in the 1950s. Congress passed the Capper-Cramton Act in 1930 specifically to provide matching funds to help Maryland and Virginia acquire and protect land along the Potomac River and create a comprehensive park system for the National Capital Region. Maryland took advantage of these funds and built a park system featuring small, local parks and playgrounds, as well as stream valley and large regional parks that allowed residents to explore forests and waterways and enjoy hiking, fishing, swimming, and camping. In contrast, Northern Virginia's small local green spaces and playgrounds amounted to no more than a "skeletal park system."⁴

The report blamed Northern Virginia's refusal to use federal park funds on "political and economic reasons." During Congressional testimony in 1961, Hackman also blamed Virginia's "peculiar political problems." In 1958, a *Washington Post* reporter spelled out Virginia's neglect of its park system. The reporter explained that the commonwealth did not utilize the funds because it did not want the federal government "meddling in their affairs," particularly because "officials fear that if federal money is used to buy parks the parks will have to be racially desegregated."⁵

At the time, Virginia had been embroiled for several years in a highly publicized lawsuit featuring its segregated state parks. Since the founding of its state park system in 1936, Virginia enforced Jim Crow laws that mandated all public facilities remain segregated but had offered

no alternative parks for people of color (Fig. 1). In 1948, Maceo Martin, a Black man from Danville, Virginia, sued the Virginia Conservation Commission after he was refused entry to the Staunton River State Park. In response, Virginia opened Prince Edward State Park in 1950 to serve the outdoor recreational needs of all black



Courtesy of the National Park Service

Fig. 1: Entrance sign to Lewis Mountain Negro Area, a part of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, which was segregated until 1950.

Virginians, to abide by the separate but equal doctrine. White residents continued to have their pick of the other eight segregated state parks.⁶

In 1951, four other African Americans filed a racial discrimination suit after being denied entry to Seashore State Park in Virginia Beach. The judge delayed issuing a verdict to await the results of the pending *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision on the racial segregation of public schools. Once the Supreme Court ruled segregation of public schools unconstitutional, the Seashore case was reopened, and the judge ruled that Virginia could not deny access to the park. Instead of immediately integrating state parks (as nearby Maryland did), Virginia explored ways to prevent desegregation, including leasing the parks to a private operator, closing the parks, and even selling the entire state park system. In 1955, Virginia's Attorney General, J. Lindsay Almond Jr., told reporters that the state should "Get out of the public park business as quickly and completely as possible" since no legal defense remained for segregated public facilities. Virginia Governor, Thomas B. Stanley, ultimately closed Seashore State Park in 1955, rather than integrate it. The park remained closed for eight years and was not fully reopened until 1964 when the Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation in public places.⁷

Like Virginia, Arlington County operated a segregated park system from the founding of its first park in 1936 until the early 1960s. Lacking

county assistance, Black Arlingtonians purchased land for their own park, Green Valley Ball Park (now Jennie Dean Park), in the 1930s. In 1948, the county finally established the “Negro Recreation Section” of the parks department to provide sports and arts related programming and events for Black Arlingtonians at Jennie Dean Park (which the county purchased in the 1940s) and at the schools and small

Black Arlingtonians purchased land for their own park.

playgrounds located in Arlington’s black neighborhoods.

The county acquired one such playground in the Hall’s Hill neighborhood in the early 1950s for Black residents, after several years of debate concerning the park’s location. White residents

protested the proposed location of the park, which sat on the edge of Hall’s Hill, near white neighborhoods Woodlawn and Tara. A *Washington Post* reporter noted the white spokesmen testifying at a County Board meeting “felt the playground should be nearer the center of the Negro district but also admitted they were fighting the move to prevent a closer encroachment of the Negro area upon the white section.”⁸

By the late 1950s, unlike many other Virginians and Virginia government officials, a majority of white Arlingtonians saw desegregation of public facilities as the right path forward. The newcomers who flocked to Arlington to fill federal jobs between the 1930s–1950s began to shift the political ideals of the county. Well-educated and often raised outside the South, they usually held more moderate views and rejected small government. Keeping schools, parks, and other public facilities open was more important than closing them to preserve segregation. As has been widely accounted and studied by local historians, these white moderates such as members of the local group Arlington Committee to Preserve Public Schools fought alongside local Black activists and the local NAACP and successfully desegregated the county’s school system in 1959, the first in the Commonwealth to do so. Following suit, the county officially desegregated its park system in 1962.⁹

As the region began to desegregate, Northern Virginians started expanding their park system. Residents knew if they wanted to stem the tide of urbanization and preserve any remaining natural open space for

outdoor recreation, they would need to forge ahead without Virginia. The Commonwealth would not establish the first state park in the region while it was contemplating closing the entire state park system to flout desegregation.

In 1957, the Northern Virginia Planning District Commission urged Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax County, Falls Church, Loudon County, and Prince William County to organize a regional authority, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVPRA), to acquire large undeveloped land in the region to operate as public parkland. Funding would arise from member jurisdictions, based on population. The authority would be empowered to accept federal funds and gifts of land. Joining together would be the key to success. Smaller, denser, and increasingly developed jurisdictions such as Arlington could help fund the creation of large parks in areas with larger, cheaper tracts of land, like Fairfax County. An earlier authority created in 1950, the Virginia-National Capital Park Authority, failed after Fairfax County refused to join Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church.¹⁰

In July 1958, the Arlington County Board became the first jurisdiction to endorse NVPRA's articles of incorporation.¹¹ Later that year, Fairfax and Falls Church joined. NVPRA hoped to acquire land to "compensate for inadequate park facilities in the urbanized sections of the region" and "meet increasing park demands being produced by the expanding population." It quickly focused on acquiring "large natural parks which maintain the natural beauty of the countryside and at the same time provide the kind of healthful outdoor recreation which in the past has been available at larger state and national parks." The authority further explained in a report for the Public Open Space Programs of the National Capital Region the value of regional parks as a "buffer against development in certain areas, preserving scenic and historic areas, and reducing future siltation and pollution." In its first two years, the authority acquired 915 acres of land to create Bull Run Regional Park near Manassas and Pohick Bay Regional Park near Lorton.¹²

In 1966, NVPRA acquired its first parkland in Arlington County. Parcel by parcel, the authority pieced together multiple tracts to create the 67-acre Potomac Overlook Regional Park (PORP) in North Arlington, located along the Potomac River. NVPRA used eminent domain



Courtesy of PORP

Fig. 2 and 3: This house, pictured in 1955, was turned into the PORP Nature Center in 1974.

to acquire the largest parcels and landowners and development companies gifted six other sections. Funding came from Arlington County appropriations and bonds, a HUD grant for open spaces, and federal funds. PORP, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, formally opened in 1971.¹³

PORP truly embodies NVPRA's mission to preserve both scenic and historic areas, as well as provide a large, natural space for outdoor recreation. When NVPRA acquired the land, the area stood as one of Arlington's last large, undeveloped wooded spaces. As early as 1973, the park offered two trails to guide visitors through dense woodland and meadows, one leading to an old springhouse and another to a scenic view of the Potomac River and the Washington Monument. In 1974, PORP opened a nature center, which interprets the history of the parkland and its former inhabitants, flora, and fauna (Fig. 2 and 3). Archaeological digs between 1967–1970 uncovered numerous pottery sherds local Native Americans created between 2500 BC to 1670 AD when they lived in the parkland. By 1700, white settlers had driven out Native Americans. The Donaldson family owned much of the land called "Fair View" between the 1840s and the 1930s. The family operated a market farm and sold their produce in Georgetown. Visitors still find arrowheads in the park and can inspect a Donaldson-era barn foundation, among other relics from the past. Over the years, the park's operations have expanded to include additional trails and interpretive displays, an educational organic vegetable garden, and live animal displays featuring turtles, snakes, insects, and rescued owl (Fig. 4).¹⁴ Later NVPRA park projects in Arlington included Upton Hill Regional Park and the W&OD Trail (Fig. 5).

Arlington County also took independent action to expand county-run parks. In September 1961, in the County Master Plan, officials committed to preserving 319 acres of parkland to retain streams, foliage, flowers, and wildlife and create "greenways" along existing stream valleys and ravines. Stream valleys and ravines had remained largely untouched because their steep terrain made them difficult to fill and develop until technical advances in earth-moving equipment in the 1950s. Keeping streams and ravines intact and developing nature trails through their naturally rugged terrain would create attractive recreational areas and fulfill integral parts of the county's storm drainage system.¹⁵

The plan worked. In 1960, Arlington County owned only 374 acres of parkland. By 1963, the county had added over 100 acres. Today, the county has 1,296 acres, many of which run along the county's streams, including Four Mile Run, Spout Run, and of course, Donaldson Run adjacent to Potomac Overlook Regional Park. NVPRA (today known as NOVA Parks), includes the three original member jurisdictions plus Alexandria and Loudoun County. The organization has thus far preserved over 12,000 acres of parkland for the region.¹⁶

Though Arlington and NOVA Parks have greatly expanded acreage of parkland and improved outdoor recreation in the region, there is still room to improve. The legacies of racist Jim Crow segregation policies continue to mark the region's park system. Despite Northern Virginia's valiant effort to make up for time lost during the Jim Crow era, NOVA Parks still trail the Maryland suburban equivalent, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, by about 40,000 acres of parkland.¹⁷ The Trust for Public Land's national survey also discovered that Arlington's majority-minority neighborhoods had 34% less park space per capita than predominately white neighborhoods. The next chapter on Arlington park history will hopefully demonstrate the county's commitment to equitable access of parkland.¹⁸

About the Author

Annette Scherber is an archivist and recent transplant to Arlington by way of the Midwest. She is a docent for the Arlington Historical Society. She would like to thank Sarah Fioramonti, former naturalist at Potomac Overlook Regional Park, for sharing her knowledge about the history, grounds, and programs of the Potomac Overlook Regional Park.

Endnotes

1. US Congress, Senate, *Housing Legislation of 1961, Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Banking and Currency* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 1026, 1028.
2. C. B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia: A History*, 175–198, 206; Lindsey Bestebreurtje, “Built by the People Themselves—African American Community Development in Arlington, Virginia, From the Civil War Through Civil Rights”

Courtesy of PORP



Fig. 4: PORP Park Manager, Martin Ogle, teaching local children about the park, 1974.

The Evening Star, February 14, 1929



Fig. 5: Children playing at the lower reflecting pool at Upton Hill Regional Park, ca. 1975.

- (George Mason University, 2011), 13; US Congress, Senate, *Housing Legislation of 1961*, 1028.
3. National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Public Open-Space Programs and Activities, National Capital Region" (1963): 200.
 4. National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Outdoor Recreation in the National Capital Region" (1965): 12-19; Steve Morgan, "Resource Guide: Capper-Cramton Act," *National Capital Planning Commission* (April 10, 2020), <https://www.ncpc.gov/news/item/110/>; "Review of Projects on Lands Acquired Under the Capper-Cramton Act," *National Capital Planning Commission* (2019): 1-2.
 5. National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Outdoor Recreation in the National Capital Region" (1965): 15; United States House of Representatives, *Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations for 1962: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 1235; Ralph Reikowsky, "Urbanized Area Being Buried By Buildings," *Washington Post* (January 21, 1958).
 6. Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, "History of Virginia State Parks", <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/history>; William E. O'Brien, *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 123-124.
 7. Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, "History of Virginia State Parks"; William E. O'Brien, "State Parks and Jim Crow in the Decade Before *Brown v. Board of Education*," *Geographical Review* 102, No. 2 (April 2012): 174-176; "Almond Advises State to Quit Parks Business as NAACP Pushes Suits," *Daily Sun* (July 9, 1955); "Harrison Sees Reopening of Park Long Shut by Segregation Dispute," *Washington Post* (July 26, 1962).
 8. Arlington County, Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Developing, "A Guide to the African American Heritage of Arlington County Virginia," 35; Arlington Public Library, "The Early History of Arlington's Parks and Recreation Department," <https://library.arlingtonva.us/2019/12/04/early-history-parks-and-recreation-department/>; Wilma Jones, "Untold Stories of Black Arlington Virginia: Arlington's Negro Recreation Section" (Arlington Independent Media, 2021) <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/2021/03/untold-episode-1-arlington-negro-recreation-section-2021/>; "Arlington Kills Proposal For Park," *Washington Post* (November 10, 1946); "Hall's Hill Group Accedes to Tract," *Northern Virginia Sun* (August 19, 1949); "Playgrounds Open Today," *Washington Post* (June 20, 1955).

9. Arlington Public Library, "The Story of Public School Desegregation," <https://library.arlingtonva.us/2018/01/11/the-desegregation-of-arlington-public-schools/>; Cecilia Michelotti, "Arlington School Desegregation A History," *Arlington Historical Magazine* 8, No. 4 (1988): 5–6; Bestebreurtje, "Built by the People Themselves," 299–305.
10. "Park Authority Urged in Area," *Washington Post* (November 1, 1957); Reikowsky, "Urbanized Area Being Buried By Buildings;" John Lawson, "Park Unit Gets First Approval," *Washington Post* (July 20, 1958); "History of the Park System in Arlington County," *Arlington Historical Magazine* 4, no. 3 (Oct. 1971): 41–42.
11. "Park Unit Gets First Approval."
12. National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Public Open-Space Programs and Activities," 181–183.
13. Potomac Overlook Preservation Association, "Brief History," <https://friendspotomac.wordpress.com/brief-history/>.
14. "Park Authority Progress Brings Recreation to Northern Virginia," *Northern Virginia Sun* (September 11, 1967); Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, "Trail Guide for Potomac Overlook Regional Park," (1973); Center for Local History, Arlington, Virginia, "Potomac Overlook Regional Park" folder, Vertical File Collection; Helen B. Deppe, "The Donaldson Site, Arlington County, Virginia," *Archaeological Society of Virginia Quarterly Bulletin* 27, No. 2 (December 1972): 4–6; "Park Center to Open," *Northern Virginia Sun* (July 17, 1974); Other information on the Donaldson Family and park facilities came during author's visit to park and examination of interpretive displays on April 24, 2021.
15. "Plan Drafted to Save Parks in Arlington," *Evening Star* (February 5, 1960); National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Public Open-Space Programs and Activities," 199–202.
16. National Capital Regional Planning Council, "Public Open-Space Programs and Activities," 199; "Frequently Asked Questions," Arlington County Parks & Recreation, <https://parks.arlingtonva.us/frequently-asked-questions/>; NOVA Parks, "About NOVA Parks," <https://www.novaparks.com/about/about-nova-parks>.
17. The Maryland-National Capital Planning Commission, "Who We Are," <https://www.mncppc.org/194/Who-We-Are>.
18. Trust for Public Land, "Arlington, VA 2021 ParkScore ranking: #4," <https://www.tpl.org/city/arlington-virginia>; Scott McCaffrey, "Arlington Parks Rank High in Survey, but are Downgraded on Equity Concerns," *Sun Gazette Newspapers* (May 28, 2021).