



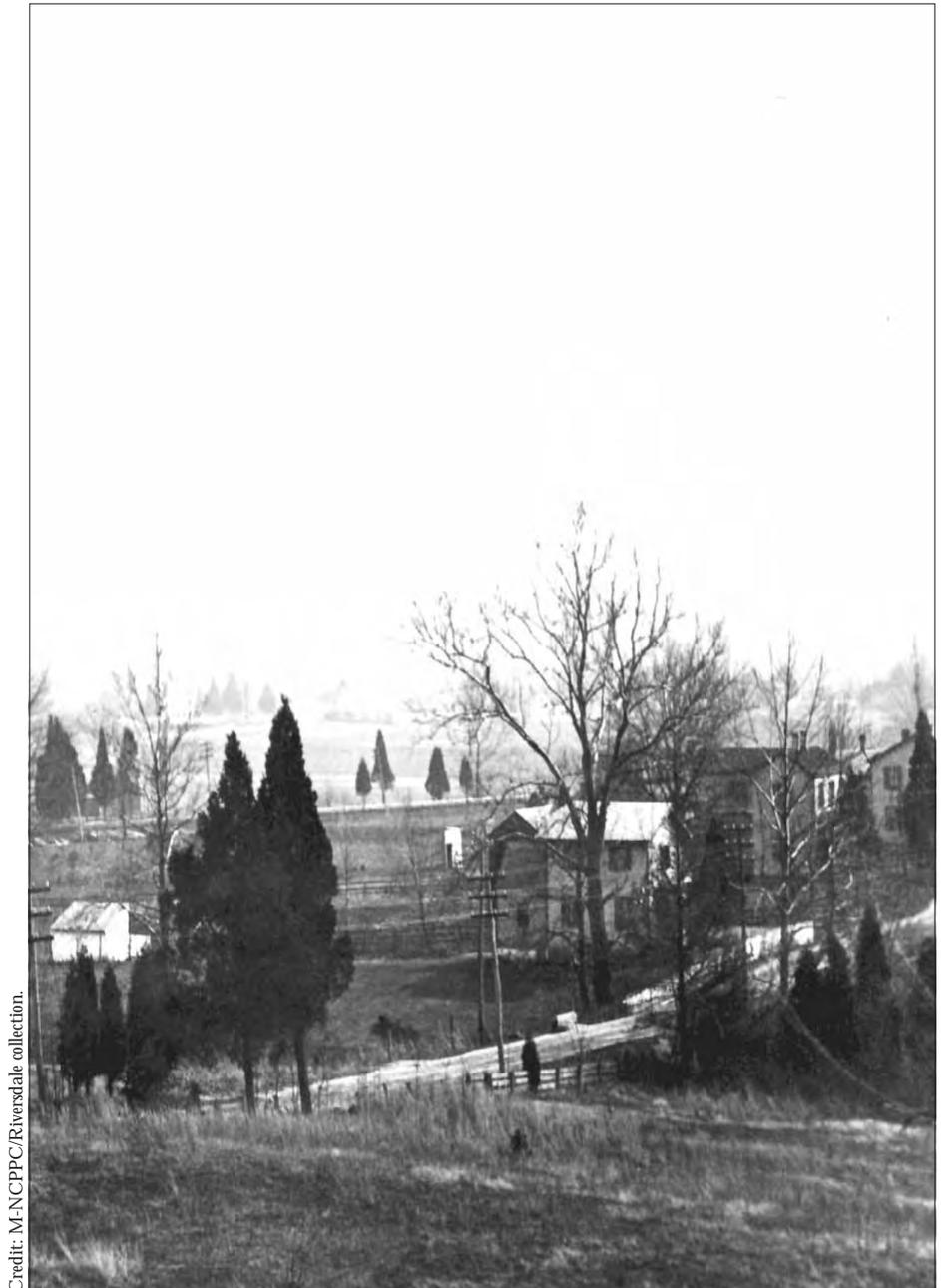
Historic Overview of Riverdale Park

Riversdale, The Calvert Mansion

The history of Riverdale Park begins not with the town itself, but with one of Maryland's founding families. In 1801, Henry Joseph Stier, a Belgian aristocrat, established his plantation on a large tract of land north of Bladensburg. In the summer of 1803, his daughter, Rosalie Stier Calvert, and her new husband, George Calvert, moved into the recently constructed mansion on this estate, which they called Riversdale. The original boundaries of the property comprised 729 acres, and the plantation grew to nearly 2,000 acres by the middle of the nineteenth century. It was roughly bounded, in modern terms, by US 1 on the west, Kenilworth Avenue on the east, Paint Branch on the north, and the Town of Bladensburg on the south.

When Riversdale was first constructed, the old Baltimore Turnpike ran through the western portion of the property. This became what we now know as US 1. In March 1833, the state's first railroad—the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O)—was chartered. The Washington, D.C., to Baltimore line was first used for passenger traffic in August 1835. These transportation corridors are important features of the modern town of Riverdale Park.

Charles Baltimore Calvert sold the Riversdale mansion and 475 acres to a group of New York real estate investors in 1887. The Calvert family farmlands became the site of the future town of Riverdale Park, and the mansion itself



Credit: M-NCPPC/Riversdale collection.



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Rear view of Riversdale

has served as the offices of the town developer, the home of senators, and eventually as M-NCPPC office space. After decades of heavy use, Riversdale fell into disrepair by the late 1960s. The Riverdale Historical Society spearheaded the mansion's restoration. This work began in 1990, and the mansion was restored and reopened to the public in 1993. Today, Riversdale is recognized as a valuable and unique source of identity and a focal point of the town.

Beginnings of the Town: 1889–1920

The end of the Calvert family's tenure at Riversdale allowed for the creation of the subdivision of Riverdale Park. The town itself became a desirable residential community because of two important factors: its proximity to Washington, D.C., and the advent of passenger rail service to suburban communities at the turn of the century. After the Civil War, a number of unplanned speculative settlements and platted subdivisions developed in the county adjacent to these railroad lines and junctions. The new passenger rail lines allowed the county's residents to commute to Washington, D.C., and Baltimore.

The first lots were platted in 1889 by surveyor D. J. Howell, with the key feature of the subdivision being the B&O Railroad station. The major streets near that area were designed to converge on an ornamental town center that incorporated the semicircular design of New York Place (now Natoli Place). The early streets were laid out in a grid pattern, straddling the rail station and ending at the Baltimore Turnpike. Baroque elements of this plan included park spaces, green circles with diagonal cross streets, and vistas terminating at the Riversdale mansion. The original streets were named for Presidents Washington through McKinley, as well as for other distinguished statesmen such as Clay, Lafayette, and Beale. This homage to the Federal City underscored how the livelihood and identity of the town were inextricably linked

to the nearby capital. Most of the original building lots had 60 feet of frontage and were about 150 feet deep. To the northwest, lots had smaller dimensions to accommodate a diversity of incomes.

The Riverdale Park Company built the first model houses in the subdivision in order to entice development to the area. The Harry Smith home at 4707 Oliver Street and the Wernek House at 4606 Queensbury Road are two of these models. Both are "examples of a substantial style of dwelling designed to convince potential lot purchasers, builders, realtors, and investors that Riverdale Park was the 'most picturesque suburb of Washington.'"¹ The Riverdale Park Company built these model houses and the original Victorian B&O Railroad station in the early 1890s.

By 1900 more than 50 houses had been built in Riverdale Park and a streetcar stopped in the town every ten minutes. Two grocery stores operated in the new commercial center around the train station, and other businesses were being established on the eastern side of town. The new City and Suburban Railway, a streetcar line, came to Riverdale in 1899 and spurred more housing development near the town center. Most of the houses built at this time had larger lots and most were within walking distance of the railroad station.

At this time, however, the needs of pedestrians were the primary concern of the community, and Riverdale Park's citizens lobbied for internal improvements. The Riverdale Park Company helped the town by improving and widening Rhode Island Avenue with grading and new sidewalks in 1925, contributing to establish a new streetcar terminal in East Riverdale in 1910, and donating space for a polling place for the town's first elections in 1920.

¹ Riverdale Park Company. *Brochure*. (Riverdale: Riverdale Park Company, 1904).



The town grew rapidly between 1900 and 1920 with its easy access to the city by rail and automobile. Eventually the citizens established many new organizations and built civic spaces of their own. Important spaces included the school, Riverdale Presbyterian Church, the Freemason Lodge on Gallatin Street, the preexisting Riversdale mansion, and the town center itself. In the mid-1920s, a new post office was built in the town center on Rhode Island Avenue.² Other businesses included the Riverdale Garage that was built around 1920 on Baltimore Avenue.

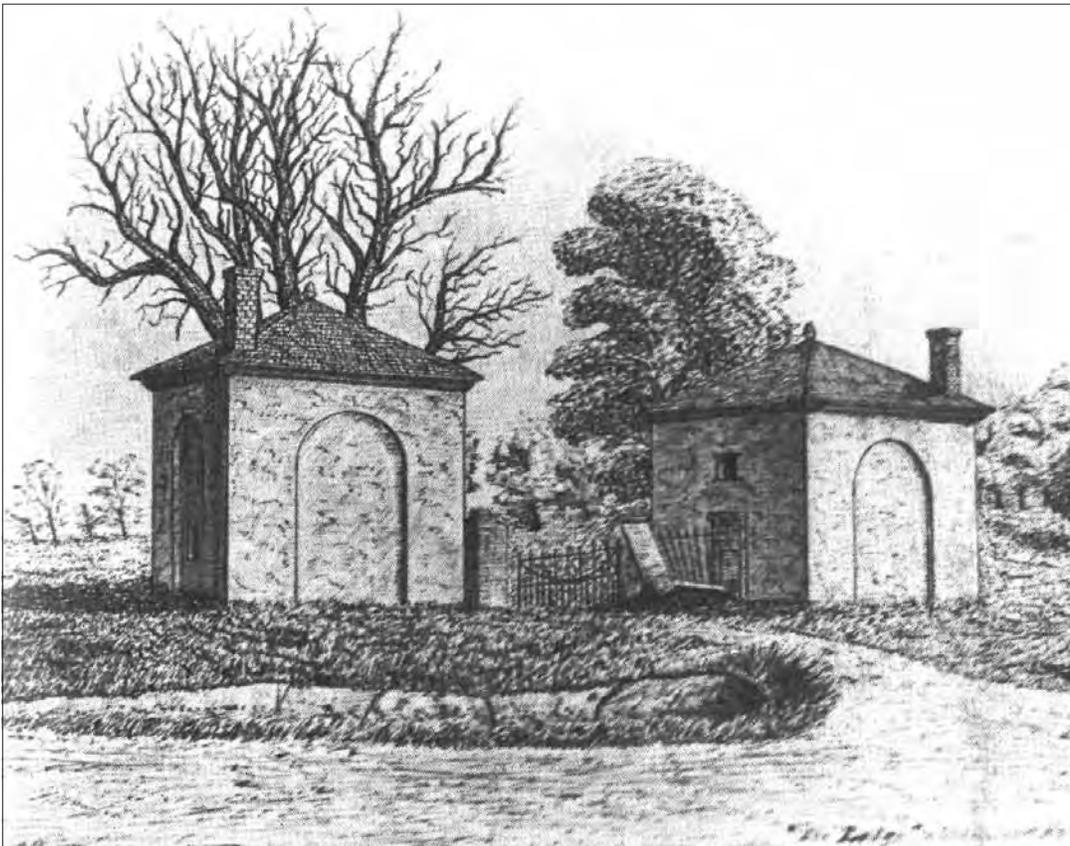
Development 1920-1945

In 1920 the Town of Riverdale was officially incorporated in Prince George's County; the town was officially renamed to Riverdale Park in 1998 in recognition of its historical beginnings. The town boundaries included the Riversdale mansion, the original subdivision development that occurred north and west of Riversdale, and an area west of Baltimore Avenue and north of Hyattsville known as West Riverdale. This piece of land was originally acquired by Francis Carmody and had been part of the larger tract of Ellaville, located west of the main gate to the Riversdale Plantation at Oliver Street and

Baltimore Avenue. The incorporation of West Riverdale into the town boundaries allowed Riverdale Park's merchants to expand commercial development along Baltimore Avenue.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the town focused on building and improving its basic infrastructure, particularly roads and lighting. This era also saw the beginning of many of the town's landscaping and beautification efforts. During the 1930s, the Ladies Aid Society and other civic groups spearheaded efforts to clean up trash and improve the facades of the commercial buildings along Baltimore Avenue. In addition to the circles and green spaces deeded to the town by the Riverdale Park Company in 1929, the citizens also sought to establish a new park complex east of Riverdale Elementary School in 1939. This park was slated to include a picnic area and tennis courts. Although the park was never built, these early efforts demonstrate the town's concern with providing for the recreational needs of its citizens. Other landscaping work was continued in the 1940s when the park circles were upgraded and Dupont Circle was chosen as the site for a World War I memorial.

² The building is now the site of Taylor Wells Antiques.



*Sketch of
Riversdale Gate lodges.*



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Housing styles and lot sizes evolved during this time as the tastes of Riverdale's middle-class population began to change. Newer ranch, bungalow, Cape Cod, and cottage-style houses supplanted the older Victorian development. These houses were made of a variety of materials including stucco, brick, stone, and sometimes molded concrete block. Lot sizes were generally smaller, and many houses included garages to accommodate the family automobile. This development occurred mostly in the northeast corner of the town and south of the Riversdale mansion.

Post World War II Development

The decades after World War II brought tremendous growth to Riverdale Park and created the need for more housing and services for the town's expanding population. To accommodate more housing, a nineteenth century ornamental lake south of the Riversdale mansion was drained and graded for small housing lots. New houses were also built in the old floodplain of the recently channeled Northeast Branch to the east of the town center. New garden, mid- and high-rise apartment buildings between the Northeast Branch and Kenilworth Avenue south of Riverdale Road were built.

The original subdivision of Riverdale Park was built out when Hattie Caraway sold the remainder of the Riversdale property to developer J. Harris Rogers in the 1930s. New ranch and Cape Cod-style houses were built on the newly created streets in the town, named Oglethorpe, Nicholson, Madison, and Longfellow Streets, 47th and 48th Avenues, and Riverside Drive. In addition, the financially unstable trolley line ended service to Riverdale in 1958; subsequently, increased automobile traffic from commuters necessitated the widening of Rhode Island Avenue and caused crowding on many of the town's smaller side streets. Queensbury and Riverdale Road also became heavily used in the 1950s as major east to west routes. These small neighborhood roads could not handle the traffic, and by the 1960s the town desperately needed a replacement traffic artery.

The solution to these problems was the construction of East West Highway. The construction began in 1966, and the road opened in August 1968. While the road construction was costly to the town due to the loss of several old houses and the historic Riverdale Presbyterian Church, the new East West Highway relieved Queensbury and Riverdale Road of heavy traffic volume, thus allowing those streets to retain their small neighborhood scale and feel.



*Victorian home on
Oliver Street.*



Photo: Riverdale Historical Society.

Original Victorian rail station.

A Focus on Town Center

In the 1980s and 1990s, the town of Riverdale began to refocus its attention on the old town center. In collaboration with the state and county, a new station for the MARC commuter trains was constructed and landscaping, paving, and wider sidewalks were installed in the town center. This construction was completed in 1995, and the event was celebrated along with the town's 75th anniversary.

This project was followed by the creation of the Riverdale Park Town Center Redevelopment Committee. This group prepared a strategy for the redevelopment and revitalization of the town's historic core. The strategy has been implemented and the town is currently working with a developer to renovate and redevelop a key commercial site at the corner of Queensbury Road and Rhode Island Avenue.

In the late 1990s, the town sought to highlight the community's historic character by pursuing the designation of portions of the town as National Register Historic Districts. In December 2002, the Riverdale Park and West Riverdale Historic Districts were listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Implications for the Town Center Design

Today, Riverdale Park is a growing community whose citizens continue to cherish their roots. They recognize that the diversity of housing stock, location of US 1 and the B&O Railroad, and the commercial areas that link the two together are intrinsic to Riverdale Park's continued success and growth. And though it need not act as a literal model for future development, those interested in developing the town centers should look to Riverdale Park's architectural heritage as a template for quality development. The town reflects all the historical styles of the early- to mid-twentieth century. New architecture on the street should not be restricted to one particular historical style, as this would not accurately reflect the historical development of the town. Riverdale's architectural heritage is rich, precisely due to the variety and quality of styles represented. New development should seek to incorporate that variety into the buildings and streetscapes while also being sensitive to the residential character of the surrounding town and the historic fabric of its core.



Early Riverdale Park residential development.