

Dear Valera,
I hope you enjoy this article.
Julie Rones

Sept. 9, 2013

CHAPTER 23

East Washington Heights

RANDLE HIGHLANDS, HILLCREST, PENN BRANCH, DUPONT PARK

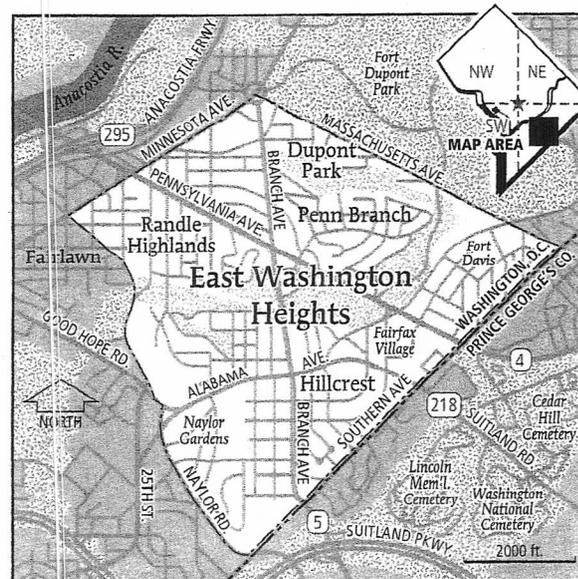
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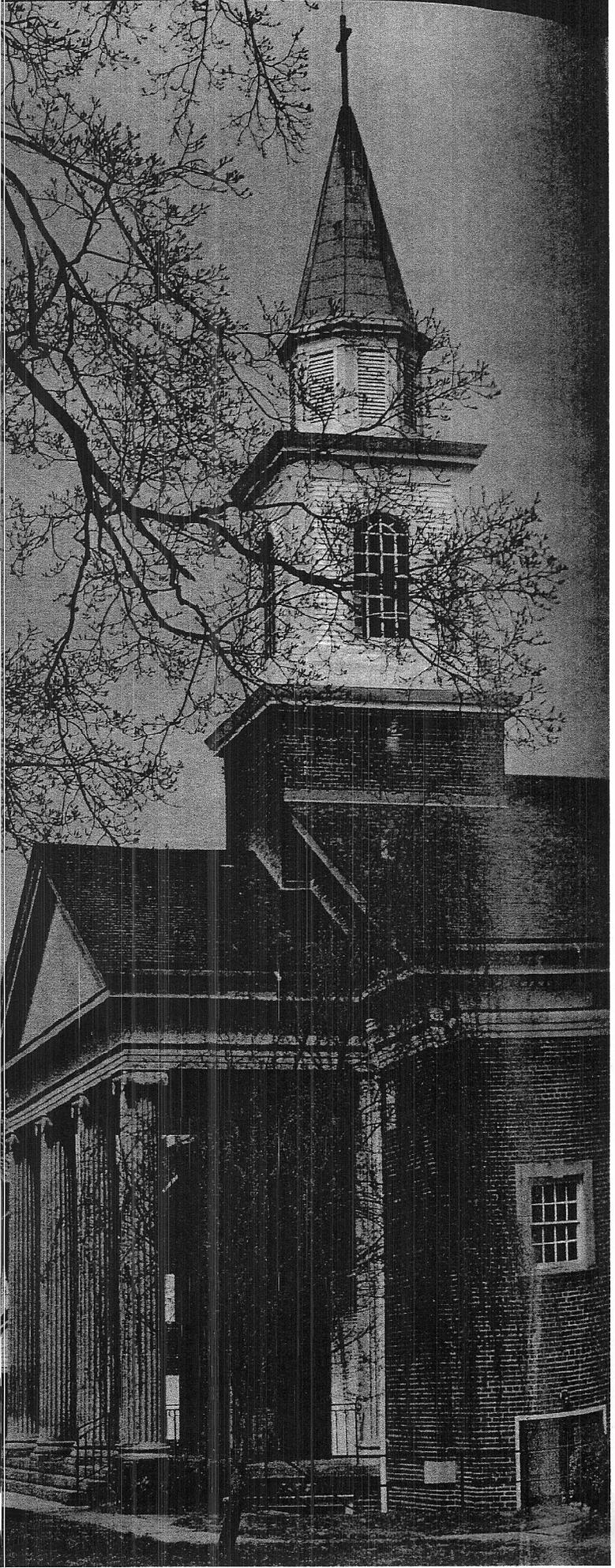
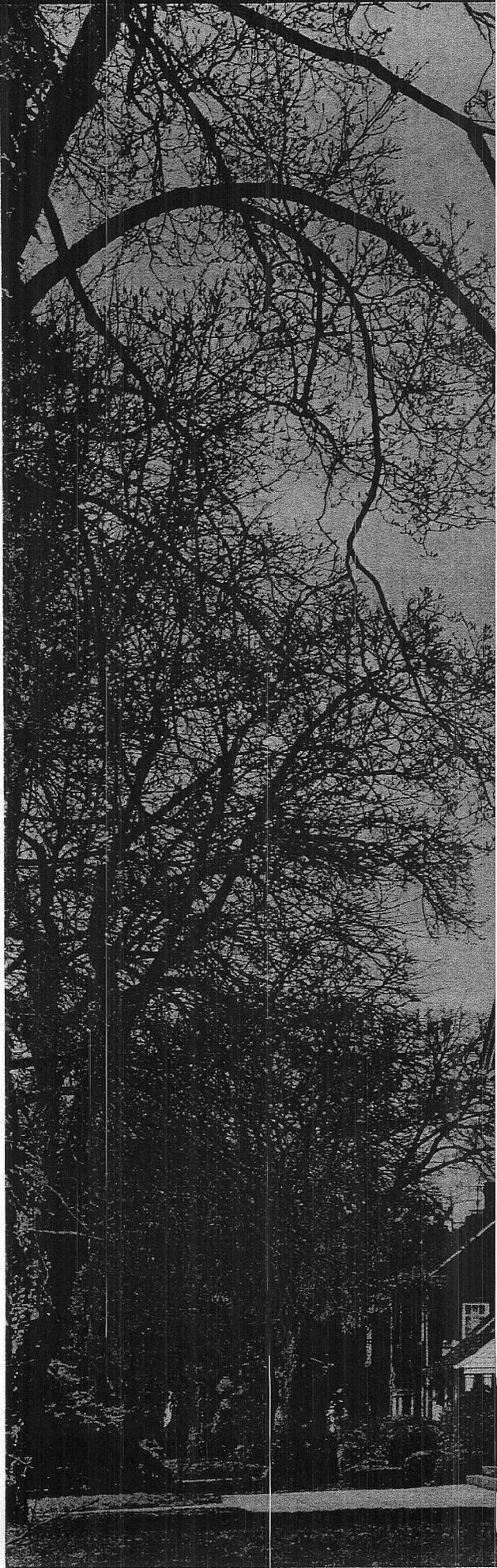
"In a few years I expect to see the city cover every inch of the land between Pennsylvania Avenue and Benning, along two miles of the highlands with [as] commanding views of Washington as those to be had from Arlington and the Soldiers' Home," Colonel Arthur E. Randle prophesied to a group of Pennsylvania businessmen in 1909, as reported in the *Evening Star*. He was speaking of Randle Highlands, his sprawling new residential development in an area that is today referred to as Far Southeast Washington. Originally straddling present-day Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, from Minnesota Avenue to the District line, Randle's burgeoning new community was emerging from an earlier, more upscale vision for this same area by late nineteenth-century developers who had named it East Washington Heights.¹

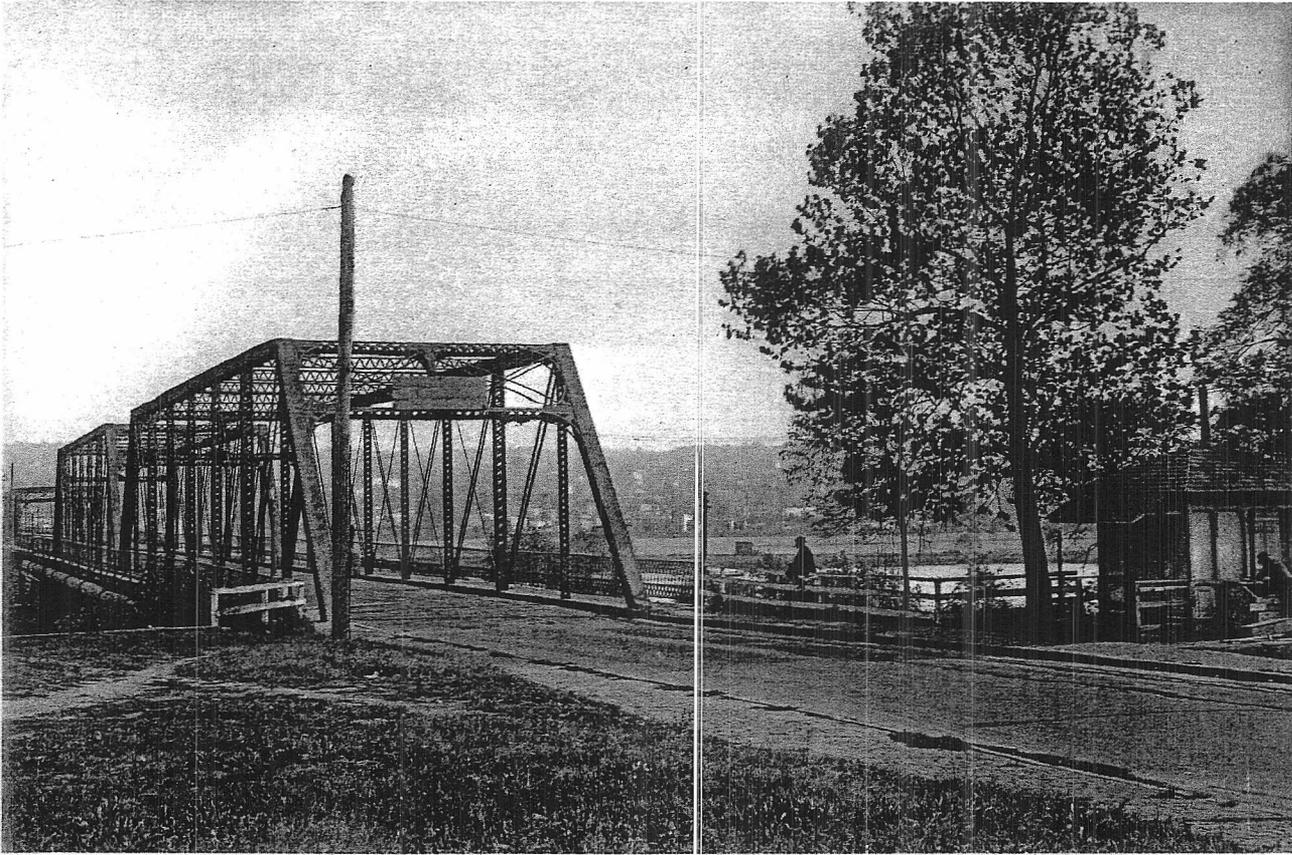
Today the area encompasses four distinct residential neighborhoods perched upon most of three miles of wooded hillside high above the Anacostia River — Randle Highlands, Hillcrest, Penn Branch, and Dupont Park. These neighborhoods are attracting more attention from potential home buyers as well as city officials looking to address a tradition of inattention to development and social needs "East of the River," as all of Wards 7 and 8 are currently known to many who do not live there.

Although less than three miles east of the Capitol, the area's location across the Anacostia River from central Washington has for generations branded it a separate place. Early in the city's history, many expected a rapid eastward expansion of Washington. Peter Charles L'Enfant had envisioned a center of commerce along the west bank of the Eastern Branch, as the Anacostia River was then known, which would have brought development directly across the waterway from Randle's future landholdings. It is noteworthy that both the official front entrance to the Capitol and the statue of Freedom that crowns its dome face toward the east. However, eastern development stalled early on when the Eastern Branch — once deep enough for ships to travel as far north as Bladensburg, Maryland — filled in with silt from adjacent farms and from the added runoff resulting

The area once named East Washington Heights by a late nineteenth-century real estate syndicate covered eight hundred acres on either side of Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, east of the Anacostia River, all the way to the District line. Over time a number of distinct communities have emerged on this hilly terrain with the dramatic views that captured the imagination of early investors. Map by Larry A. Bowring







from deforestation during the development of the city. Thus early residents found it convenient to cluster around sources of employment at the Capitol and the President's House and closer to the settled, thriving town of Georgetown.²

Transportation across the Eastern Branch had been problematic from the beginning, particularly at Pennsylvania Avenue, leading to the area Colonel Randle had chosen for development. First chartered by the Maryland state legislature in 1795, the original wooden Pennsylvania Avenue bridge opened in 1804 but was set ablaze on purpose in 1814 to protect the Federal City from the invading British. It was replaced in 1815, but after steamboat sparks burned this bridge down in 1845, there would be no replacement at all for the next forty-five years. Meanwhile, the Benning Bridge served the village of Benning to the north and the 11th Street Bridge served the planned suburb of Anacostia to the south. Frustrated residents finally formed the East Washington Citizens Association to lobby for action and in 1887 won authorization for a \$110,000 iron and masonry truss bridge. Still, at only twenty-four feet wide, the narrow bridge was behind the times even before it opened in 1890.³

Given this history, Colonel Randle's forecast of a bright future for the miles of mostly undeveloped farmland across the Anacostia River in the District's eastern section was bold indeed. However by 1909 Randle had earned the right to be taken seriously by

There was no crossing of the Anacostia River at Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, for forty-five years until this iron truss bridge was completed in 1890. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

*(opposite)
The East Washington Heights Baptist Church at Alabama and Branch avenues is the only institution to perpetuate the name given to the highlands on both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, by the Bliss-Havemeyer Syndicate about 1890. Photo by Kathryn S. Smith*

Newspaper advertisements like this one in the Washington Post in 1894 inspired coaching parties from central Washington hotels, carrying those eager to enjoy the splendid dining rooms and spectacular views of the Overlook Inn. The Bliss-Havemeyer Syndicate hoped partygoers would become interested in purchasing a homesite in their development. Courtesy Library of Congress

OVERLOOK INN
(HAVEMEYER SYNDICATE PROPERTY.)
EAST WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

Located near the extension of Pennsylvania avenue east.
Across the Eastern Branch,

WILL BE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC ON AND AFTER JULY 11, 1894

The Inn has been handsomely furnished; there are a number of private dining-rooms, a gentleman's buffet, and ample porches, commanding slightly views of the river, city, and country.
Refreshments served a la carte at all hours. The cuisine the finest, and greatest variety.
JAS. F. BOHEN, Manager.

EAST WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

Overlooking the city at an elevation of 283 feet above datum, and 135 feet above the highest part of the city, and on

ARCHIBALD M. BLISS'

sub-division comprising the properties of the HAVEMEYER, WASHINGTON, NEW YORK, and CALIFORNIA SYNDICATES.
Streets and avenues correspond in width with those of the city, and have been graded, graveled, gutters laid, and shade trees set out. Gas and city water mains have been introduced; also police patrol.
Beautiful and eligible building sites for sale on easy terms, and money advanced to build homes, and payable on the installment plan if desired.
For plats and prices inquire at office of OVERLOOK INN.

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the businessmen assembled at Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, to hear his address titled "Washington the Beautiful and Cultured." Among the most dynamic early developers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Washington, Randle had made his mark by developing the thriving village of Congress Heights, located about four miles south of his new venture, bordering St. Elizabeths Hospital. He had been instrumental in securing a congressional charter to extend electric streetcar service to Congress Heights in 1896, beginning service in 1898. The rail line was crucial to his success in attracting workers from both St. Elizabeths Hospital and the Navy Yard to reside in Congress Heights. It seemed reasonable that Randle could also make a success of a new development just minutes across the Anacostia River from the Capitol. He was also aware, and perhaps encouraged by, the fact that some two decades prior, a powerful syndicate of Washington politicians and millionaire industrialists had envisioned the Southeast highlands as Washington's most desirable address.⁴

In 1889, surmising that the city's rapid growth meant that a development boom was destined for Washington's eastern sector, a group of nationally known business and political leaders — the Bliss-Havemeyer Syndicate — had begun acquiring land in the area that now borders Pennsylvania Avenue east of the Anacostia River all the way to the District line. The syndicate was led by sugar magnate John W. Havemeyer, whose family's American Sugar Refining Company (makers of the Domino brand) then controlled 70 percent of the U.S. sugar industry. Other investors included California Congressman Thomas J. Clunie, New York businessman E. C. Carpenter, and soon-to-be-former Congressman Archibald M. Bliss.⁵

Over the next year, the Bliss-Havemeyer Syndicate purchased about eight hundred



acres of farmland in the Southeast highlands and began selling lots for an upscale residential development that they named East Washington Heights. Other prominent investors quickly surfaced, including millionaire California Senator George Hearst, father of future publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, and New York Senator Chauncey M. Depew, general counsel and later president of the New York Central Railroad. Streets were laid out and landscaped, beginning with areas adjacent to today's Pennsylvania, Alabama, and Branch avenues in the heart of today's Hillcrest neighborhood. "Roads were built, trees that still bear mute evidence of their symmetric beauty were planted on each side; spacious pavilions, sunken gardens and stately groves of a variety of trees were kept in immaculate order. . . . This was the picnic ground of Washington for many years," rhapsodized the writer of a neighborhood history in a 1928 *Hillcrest Bulletin*.⁶

Following the nineteenth-century pattern of building a resort or other amenity to attract visitors and potential buyers, Congressman Bliss opened the Overlook Inn as the development's centerpiece in the summer of 1894. Located roughly at today's Westover Drive near 31st and Pennsylvania Avenue in today's Hillcrest, the supper club and hotel was instantly popular. "The sudden and pronounced success of the Overlook Inn of East

This 1890s promotional map for the Overlook Development of the Havemeyer Land and Improvement Corporation emphasized the short, direct route to the U.S. Capitol just across the new Pennsylvania Avenue bridge and the proximity to the Navy Yard across the 11th Street Bridge. Courtesy Library of Congress

Washington Heights is beyond question," proclaimed the *Washington Post* in August 1894. "Situated 280 feet above tide water there has not been a day during all this terrible hot visitation when its spacious piazzas have not been crowded with swell dinner parties composed of the leading citizens and sojourners of the Capital." In a brilliant stroke of marketing, Archibald Bliss transformed the difficulty of crossing the Anacostia River into a saleable feature by creating a fad among Washington's power elite. "The popular amusement just now among the fashionable set is the forming of coaching parties to Overlook Inn," observed the *Washington Post* in 1895, with regularly scheduled "caravans" leaving from the city's top apartment hotels.⁷

As Washington's elite organized their coaching parties, Bliss and his associates formed the East Washington Heights Traction Railway Company and began lobbying Congress for an electric streetcar line across the Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge. Given Arthur Randle's success with the line to Congress Heights, it is not surprising that in 1896 the syndicate turned to him to spearhead their efforts. However, in February 1897 Congress flatly denied their request. Plans were under way to reclaim the Anacostia flats, the marshy area along the shore seen as a source of disease, and building a new bridge for a streetcar, it was felt, would delay that important effort. Thus East Washington Heights completely missed out on the trendsetting 1890s development boom that followed both the electric streetcar and the railroads into Washington's new northwest suburbs.⁸

Despite this setback, the development might still have succeeded, given its prestigious leaders. But in rapid succession, the syndicate's highest-profile members, sugar magnate John Havemeyer and Senator Hearst, both died unexpectedly. Archibald Bliss, who had been appointed agent for the late Senator Hearst's East Washington concerns, himself took seriously ill. During the next several years, Bliss suffered all manner of misfortune, from being thrown from an automobile to being struck by lightning. Without consistent leadership, the East Washington Heights project stalled entirely. The Overlook Inn fell from high society's favor and by 1900 was no longer a public facility, but rather the increasingly rundown home of the ailing Archibald Bliss. Only a handful of homes had been built in East Washington Heights, along with the East Washington Heights Baptist Church, a small structure commonly referred to as "the little white church on the hill." In 1934 the original building was replaced with the imposing church complex located in the heart of present-day Hillcrest, at Branch and Alabama avenues. Today its name is the only specific evidence of this first major attempt at residential development in the Southeast highlands. It would be left to another noted developer to turn those hopes into action: none other than Colonel Randle himself.⁹

Arthur E. Randle was born in Mississippi in 1859 and sent north to Pennsylvania for an education. After graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, he traveled south with his older brother, Dr. William Henry Randle, whom President Rutherford B. Hayes commissioned to combat yellow fever in the southern United States. In 1885 Arthur Randle settled in Washington, D.C., and began investing in real estate, his first major development project being Congress Heights. In 1903, using part of the fortune

he made from the sale of his hard-won railroad rights in Congress Heights, Colonel Randle formed the United States Realty Company. He immediately purchased the majority of the Havemeyer-Bliss Syndicate's stalled East Washington Heights tract, renaming all of it Randle Highlands. The Columbus Cooperative Corporation, controlled by Randle's nephew, Oscar C. Brothers, finally purchased the missing 225-acre Overlook property in 1915, after a decade of negotiations with Archibald Bliss's heirs. The colonel proclaimed, "I intend to make of Randle Highlands [to Washington] what Brooklyn is to New York City."¹⁰

For several decades into the twentieth century, Randle Highlands fit entirely into the earlier East Washington Heights footprint. It was centered on Pennsylvania Avenue east of present-day Minnesota Avenue to the District line and was bounded on the south by the established villages of Anacostia and Good Hope, and on the north by land that Colonel Randle sold to the federal government in 1912 for the creation of Fort Dupont Park. On the west, between Minnesota Avenue and the Anacostia River, Randle Highlands bordered a tiny 1888 settlement, named Twining for a well-liked city commissioner, Major William Twining. As in other real estate ventures across the city, smaller sections within the original Randle Highlands development gradually took on independent identities of their own — Penn Branch, Dupont Park, Hillcrest, Fairfax Village, Naylor Gardens, and Fairlawn among them. Today the name Randle Highlands is generally applied only to the area bordered by Minnesota Avenue to the west, Pennsylvania Avenue on the north, a portion of Texas Avenue to the south, and 30th Street on the east, adjacent to modern-day Hillcrest.¹¹

Randle, by 1905 included in the city's list of social elites, shrewdly used his own increasingly respected name to rebrand his new development. (The title of colonel was honorary.) Through savvy negotiation and sheer force of personality, Randle finessed congressional objections and obtained a charter for his East Washington Heights Traction Railroad Company, with approval to lay tracks on the bridge at Pennsylvania Avenue in 1902. The first phase of the line went into operation in 1905. Even though it ran only about three-quarters of a mile along Pennsylvania Avenue — across the bridge, through the tiny settlement of Twining City at its base, and then to the east side of Minnesota Avenue — residential development in the Southeast highlands seemed to be taking hold.¹²

Randle's United States Realty Company had first offered lots for sale in Randle Highlands in 1903, starting in the sector bordered by Pennsylvania Avenue, 30th Street, and Naylor Road, an area that retains the original Randle Highlands name today. Large full-page ads appeared regularly in the local press by 1905, extolling the virtues and promise of Washington's eastward expansion. As was the case in many real estate subdivisions in the District at the time, Randle inserted racially restrictive covenants in his deeds, specifying that "no negro or colored person or person of negro blood" could own land there.¹³

The success of the initial offerings in Randle Highlands was followed by an even



Arthur Randle (left) poses with colleagues on an almost empty Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, about 1915, with his 1910 Greek Revival home and his 1911 Dutch Colonial firehouse as backdrops. Both, he hoped, would encourage others to build grand homes along the avenue. Courtesy Library of Congress

larger development to the north of Pennsylvania Avenue in 1906. Logically named North Randle Highlands, the new section extended north all the way to Massachusetts Avenue. It sold even more quickly than the original section, now that the electric rail line had been secured. Although no evidence of racially restrictive covenants has been found, those who purchased in the neighborhood were white. Thousands attended special promotional events, such as an Easter egg-rolling contest in 1906 featuring music by the Naval Gun Factory Band, when hundreds of children from all parts of the city had to be turned away. A 1906 *Washington Post* article proclaimed Randle Highlands “among the largest real estate enterprises ever successfully carried through in the District.”¹⁴

In 1910 Randle moved from his residence in Congress Heights into an impressive

Greek Revival home he constructed at 2909 Pennsylvania Avenue, just east of his growing development. With impressive two-story columns and a semicircular portico looking west towards the Capitol dome, the house, which still stands, was quickly nicknamed "the Southeast White House." The Randles entertained many of the city's rich and powerful, including Vice President Thomas R. Marshall and his wife in 1914. While his plans for Randle Highlands were decidedly more middle class than was the earlier syndicate's vision for East Washington Heights, Randle clearly hoped that his gracious mansion would inspire more grand residences along prestigious Pennsylvania Avenue, with its direct views of the Capitol. In 1911 he donated land just west of his own home for the picturesque Dutch Colonial firehouse at 2813 Pennsylvania Avenue, lasting evidence of his grand vision for the avenue.¹⁵

Ultimately, the area just south of Randle's home would develop the most urban character among all of the hillside neighborhoods. In 1939 the 1890 truss bridge at Pennsylvania Avenue was replaced by the modern John Philip Sousa Bridge, named for the famed Marine Corps band leader native to Capitol Hill. The bridge would stimulate the Pennsylvania Avenue commercial corridor and greatly improve access to all neighborhoods of the eastern highlands. When the green space at L'Enfant Square was finally completed in the late 1930s, that bustling convergence of Pennsylvania and Minnesota avenues boasted the Art Deco Dobkin's clothing store (later known as Morton's) and a collection of attractive row houses and storefront shops. The year 1940 brought several blocks of modern retail on Pennsylvania Avenue between 25th and 27th streets, with a new A&P grocery and the streamlined eight-hundred-seat Highland cinema anchoring the block. In the nearby residential areas, row houses and small apartment buildings were built along the main roads, while the side streets of Randle Highlands featured tidy Edwardian frame houses, foursquares, and bungalows.¹⁶

Other developers had become involved in the Southeast highlands in the 1920s. Fairlawn, for example, took shape along Minnesota Avenue between present-day Historic Anacostia and 25th Street. Possibly due to Colonel Randle's failing health in the early 1920s, a large tract of Randle Highlands on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue surrounding the old East Washington Heights Baptist Church was sold to Alger & Company. Once also the centerpiece of the syndicate's fashionable East Washington Heights concept, this section would become the heart of today's Hillcrest. Indeed, through the late 1920s, it would seem that most of Colonel Randle's dreams for development in Southeast were being realized.¹⁷

Then, on July 5, 1929, the 70-year-old Randle inexplicably took his own life while visiting a friend's Santa Barbara, California, ranch. Although he had largely retired for health reasons a few years before, it was reported that he was recuperating quite well. It was a sad end to the life of a man who had successfully transformed this rural sector of Washington into a fast-growing residential community.¹⁸

The progress that Randle sparked continued, however, under the leadership of his son Ulmo S. Randle, who showed flashes of his father's talent for attracting attention,



Nationally acclaimed actor Robert Downing kept a summer estate in what is now Fort Dupont Park, where his performances on the lawn attracted audiences from across the city. He is pictured here in 1889 as Marc Antony in Julius Caesar. Courtesy Library of Congress

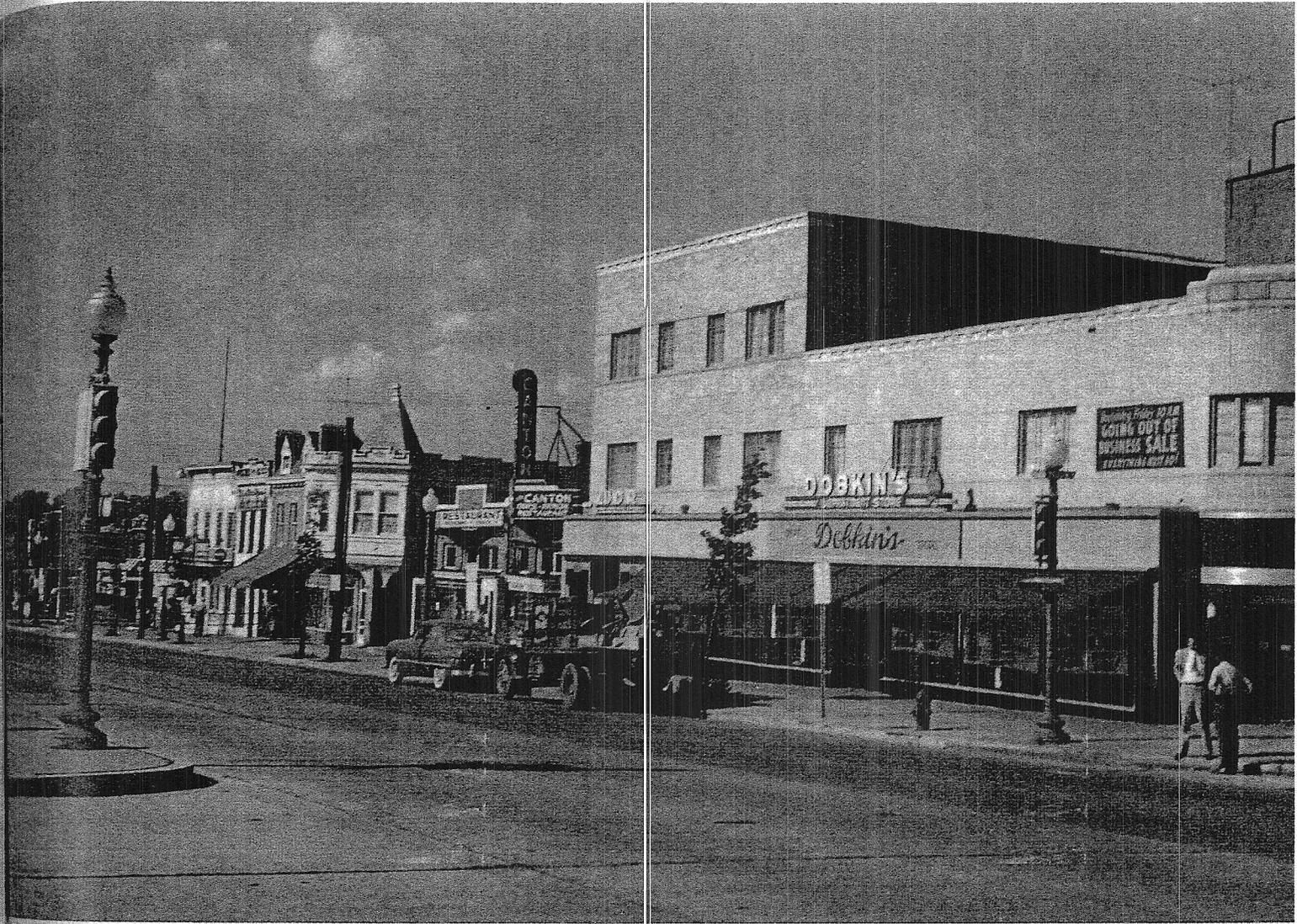
even in the midst of the Great Depression. In 1933 hundreds turned out to see Ulmo's new model homes — two quaint English-inspired brick bungalows that still stand at 1804 and 1806 28th Street. The homes featured new all-gas Electrolux (in no. 1804) or all-electric G.E. (no. 1806) appliances, endowing “the moderate-priced residence the luxury of equipment usually found only in homes costing many thousands of dollars more.”¹⁹

As Ulmo Randle continued his father's work in Randle Highlands, Alger & Company began to subdivide Hillcrest, centered on Branch and Alabama avenues. It was the first major subdivision to emerge from the original Randle Highlands tract. Like the earlier Randle Highlands development, its deeds restricted ownership to whites only. Its particularly fine architecture and large lots have long appealed to upper-income buyers, first white, and later African American after racial covenants became unenforceable in 1948. Many of its residents have been civic, political, and business leaders in the neighborhood and in the city at large. Hillcrest saw its first major residential development in the mid-1920s aided by the new affordability of mass-produced automobiles for the middle class. More significantly, the East Washington Heights electric rail line that stopped at Minnesota Avenue was replaced in 1923 by Capital Traction bus service, which went all the way up Pennsylvania Avenue and steep Branch Avenue into the heart of Hillcrest. Suddenly, the daunting hills of the neighborhood were transformed from a deterrent into an amenity.²⁰

In the early 1920s the neighborhood was entered at Hillcrest Drive, an extension of 28th Street that curves south and east through a portion of the meandering Fort Circle Park system, separating the new development from the earlier houses of today's Randle Highlands to the south. At that time Hillcrest encompassed an area that extended east to Pennsylvania Avenue, south along the District line at present-day Southern Avenue, and west all the way to Naylor Road. However, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Fairfax Village and Naylor Gardens apartment complexes filled large un-

developed parcels of land at Hillcrest's eastern and western extremities and came to be thought of as separate communities.

Long before the Bliss-Havemeyer Syndicate and Arthur Randle were attracted to these heights, today's Hillcrest neighborhood was the heart of the sprawling plantation of George Washington Young. In 1826 Young inherited his father's 150-acre tract and Nonesuch manor house. After 1833 he was also the owner of the 624-acre Giesboro plantation, extending from the vicinity of Congress Heights south to the District line. By the Civil War, Young was the largest slaveholder in the District of Columbia and the wealthiest man in Southeast Washington. The much-altered Nonesuch manor remains today at 3703 Bangor Street. Around it are fine examples of the architecture of the 1920s to the 1940s. Hillcrest's charmingly eclectic streetscapes feature Tudors, foursquares,



Cape Cods, and bungalows, as well as Dutch, Spanish, and center-hall Colonials that boast unrivaled views of the Mall and downtown from numerous streets. Highly coveted today, Sears "Honor Built" mail-order houses abound in the earliest sections of the neighborhood, including the Gateshead, a striking English Tudor (2133 31st Place); the Fullerton classic foursquare (2317 Branch Avenue); and the Hillsboro, an English cottage (2140 31st Street). An entire block of Sears Dutch Colonials sits on the west side of the 2700 block of 33rd Street, including two examples of the Priscilla (nos. 2706 and 2708).²¹

As middle-class African Americans began replacing white homeowners in the late 1960s, Hillcrest came to be called "the Silver Coast" in a nod to "the Gold Coast," the popular nickname for already established enclaves of African American professionals along upper 16th Street, NW, such as Crestwood. It is an apt comparison, because from

A small commercial area grew up around the crossing of Minnesota and Pennsylvania avenues, known as L'Enfant Square, in the 1940s after a new, more modern Pennsylvania Avenue bridge, named for John Philip Sousa, was completed in 1939. Photo by John P. Wymer. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

the early 1930s into World War II, the much-admired firm of realtor-builders Paul P. Stone and Arthur S. Lord had simultaneously developed large sections of Crestwood in Northwest, Woodridge Gardens in Northeast, and Hillcrest in Far Southeast. Stone and Lord's advertisements boasting of their involvement in all three comparably upscale communities were staples of the real estate section of local newspapers for more than a decade.²²

Hillcrest had subdivisions of its own, notably an exclusive section called Summit Park, designed to encircle the Nonesuch manor house and its expansive grounds. Resembling such Northwest neighborhoods as Chevy Chase or Shepherd Park, the substantial brick center-hall Colonials and Tudors of Summit Park are set on especially large lots. By the mid-1930s, Summit Park was considered a separate neighborhood from Hillcrest entirely, with its own very active Citizens Association. However, by the 1950s most of the land surrounding Nonesuch had been built upon, and Summit Park was absorbed into the fabric of surrounding Hillcrest.²³

Among the numerous prominent residents of Summit Park was the Curtis family, owners of one of the largest retail furniture chains on the east coast. The Curtis Brothers' trademark Big Chair in front of their former flagship store in Historic Anacostia on present-day Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue remains a Southeast landmark. The Curtis family also developed a significant number of houses throughout Hillcrest, including a modern Colonial purchased in 1979 by newly elected Mayor Marion Barry and his then-wife Effi, sparking a wave of interest in the area among upwardly mobile professionals.

Another important Hillcrest subdivision came to be considered a separate neighborhood from its very inception: the 1939-41 development of Fairfax Village. Like Fairlington, McLean Gardens, and other garden apartment communities around the city, it was built through the Federal Housing Administration's efforts to house the influx of federal workers during World War II. It is anchored on the north by Fairfax Village Shopping Center at the intersection of Pennsylvania and Alabama avenues, a then-innovative Park-and-Shop strip mall built in a complementary Colonial style. Fairfax Village is bounded by Pennsylvania and Southern avenues, Suitland Road, and 38th Street. Currently, this affordable development is an exceedingly well-maintained mixture of rental units, garden apartment condominiums, and owner-occupied semidetached townhouses.

As Fairfax Village went up, and as the Great Depression began to loosen its grip, single-family residential development resumed and expanded across to the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue, stretching east from 28th to 38th Street. Once considered an expansion of Randle Highlands, a portion of this section has developed its own identity as Penn Branch. Unlike the earlier Randle Highlands and Hillcrest sections, which included a number of wood frame houses and bungalows, Penn Branch houses are almost entirely built of brick and stone, including center-hall Colonials, Cape Cods, and Tudors, as well as more modern 1950s and 1960s split-level, ranch, and contemporary dwellings. In 1965 a used car dealership on the prominent northeastern corner of the



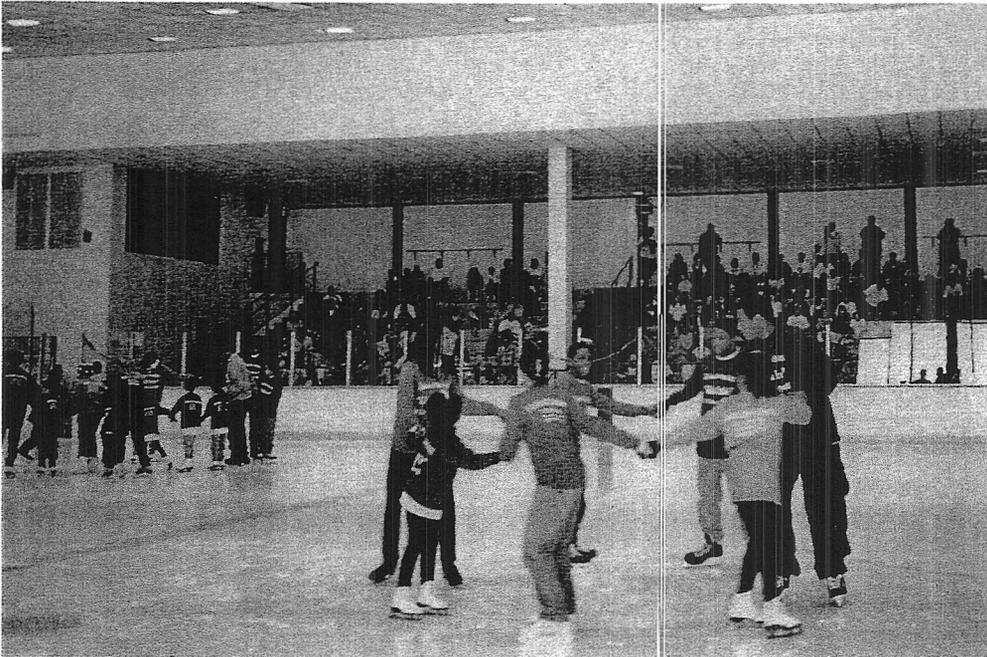
A diverse group of students waits for traffic on a rainy day outside St. Francis Xavier Catholic School at Pennsylvania Avenue and 27th Street in 1968. A group called Southeast Neighbors worked to maintain a racially mixed neighborhood after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision spurred the flight of white residents. Courtesy Star Collection, DC Public Library. © Washington Post

Pennsylvania and Branch avenue intersection gave way to the Penn-Branch Shopping Center. Designed by architect Ben Rosin, it was celebrated as the first multilevel retail-office complex in Washington, using both elevators and escalators to transport patrons between the twenty stores located in the 102,000-square-foot space, including a large Safeway supermarket, a bank, and other amenities. Residents and the general public soon began to refer to the community to the north and east of the Pennsylvania and Branch Avenue intersection as "Penn Branch," with 38th Street and Pope Branch Park as its eastern and northern boundaries.²⁴

As onetime East Washington Heights filled with new, differently named communities, the city's second largest park began to emerge along its northern edge. In the 1930s, after decades of assembling privately held properties, including land once owned by Arthur Randle, the National Capital Park Commission had control of most of the remains of the Civil War forts that had surrounded the city. It planned to create a system of Fort Circle Parks. This necklace of protected green space would be more fully realized in less-developed Southeast than anywhere else in the District and remains a cherished amenity for current residents. Fort Dupont Park, just north of today's Massachusetts Avenue, would become the largest of these parks at 376 acres, second in size only to Rock Creek Park in Northwest Washington. A protected greensward south and east of Fort Dupont Park picked up the remains of old Fort Davis as the chain of Fort Circle Parks threaded its way through the Randle Highlands development toward Fort Stanton Park to the south, making the area even more attractive to residents.²⁵

The hills in and surrounding Fort Dupont Park had been lightly settled by farms and country estates in the late nineteenth century, including the homes of post-Civil War Washington Mayor Sayles Bowen and S. M. Clarke, comptroller of the currency under President Abraham Lincoln. Surely the most colorful early resident was Robert Downing, a Washington-born actor who, beginning in 1886, achieved national celebrity after his star turn as Spartacus in playwright Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator*, which toured nationally to great acclaim. An 1894 article in the *Washington Post* chronicled the actor's life at Edgemore, his country estate in Southeast. Downing and his equally famous wife, actress Eugenia Blair, were living with their two daughters on twenty acres on the south side of what is now Ridge Road, just east of present-day Fort Davis Drive, nestled in what is today part of Fort Dupont Park.²⁶

"The house is a roomy frame," the *Post* reported, "and one of the out-houses is fitted with a bath-tub and gymnastic paraphernalia. In it, Mr. Downing spends at least an hour every day, taking precautions against the adipose, which proves such an embarrassment to stage heroes." The article went on to say that Downing had given a performance of *Ingomar* at his country home, "with natural forests for scenery, his lawn for a stage, and the setting sun for a calcium light. He played the part in his usual able manner, and the Massillians with sandaled feet trod un-dismayed through the dew." These alfresco frolics became a summer tradition, attracting theater lovers from across the city for per-



Young skaters show off their skills at the Fort Dupont Ice Arena, the only public indoor ice rink in Washington. Built in 1976 in Fort Dupont Park, the arena draws skaters from across the city for classes, children's programs, and free skating, and provides practice space for school and adult league ice hockey teams. Courtesy Friends of Fort Dupont Ice Arena

formances that benefited organizations such as the Knights of Pythias, the fraternal charity organization to which Downing belonged.

The eventual purchase of Edgemoor and its surroundings for Fort Dupont Park set the stage for the modern development of the area between its southern border and Pope Branch Park. This neighborhood came to be known as Dupont Park. The opening of the nine-hole, privately owned Fort Dupont golf course in 1948 sparked the construction of a block of stately brick Colonials and Tudors on Massachusetts Avenue, just west of Alabama Avenue.²⁷

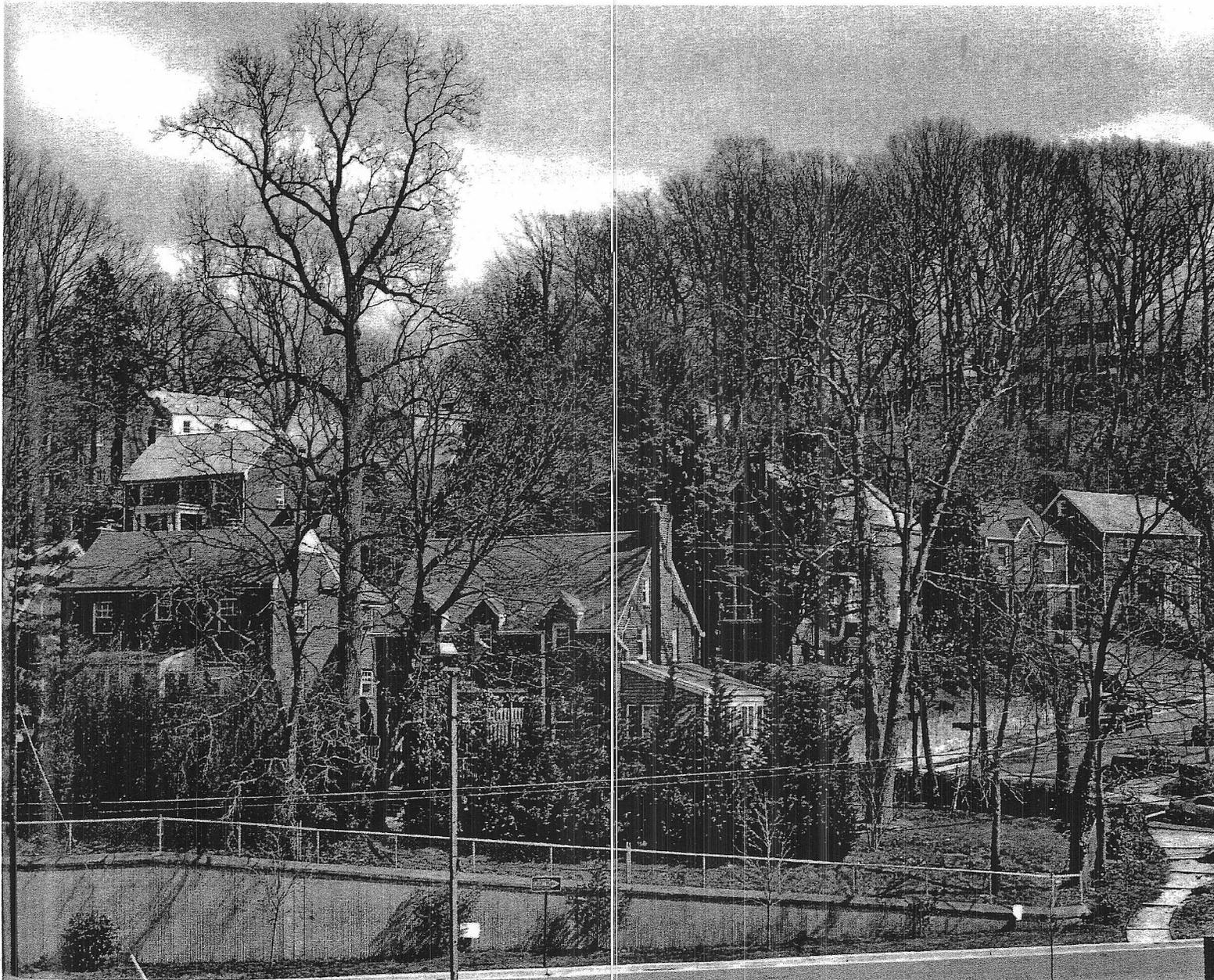
The golf course was improved and expanded in 1957 to eighteen holes, inspiring the construction of modern brick split-level homes and ramblers in the Dupont Park community during the decade following the 1956 paving of Massachusetts Avenue — one of the few thoroughfares in Southeast designed to align with the L'Enfant grid across the river. Many of the homes in this neighborhood have excellent views of the Capitol and the Mall. The new Dupont Park community differed from Randle Highlands and Hillcrest in that it did not have racially restrictive housing covenants in its deeds, or as an early Hillcrest advertisement had delicately put it, “sensible restrictions for Home Owners.” Dupont Park was created just as the 1948 *Hura v. Hodge* Supreme Court ruling made such covenants unenforceable. Among the long-time Dupont Park residents was the city's first African American fire chief, Burton Johnson.²⁸

Contrary to present-day assumptions, all of Far Southeast Washington (east of the Anacostia River and south of East Capitol Street) was historically predominantly white. The process of change began during the mid-1950s after the desegregation of public



Spring breaks out on Highview Terrace in Hillcrest. The fine homes of this neighborhood in Far Southeast were built about the same time as those in Crestwood and Hawthorne in Northwest Washington, all areas developed by the real estate and builder team of Paul P. Stone and Arthur S. Lord beginning in the 1930s. As the street name suggests, this house affords a fine view, as do many in the neighborhood. Photo by Kathryn S. Smith

accommodations and schools by the Supreme Court rulings in 1953 and 1954. Demographic change in Far Southeast was accelerated as the District satisfied the postwar demand for public housing by constructing sprawling public housing projects on the abundant and inexpensive open land still to be found south of the neighborhoods of East Washington Heights, concentrated in the city's Ward 8 (the East Washington Heights neighborhoods are in Ward 7). Further, Ward 8's numerous modest Federal Housing Administration garden apartments — built for working-class white federal workers during World War II — attracted thousands of African Americans displaced by the redevelopment of Southwest Washington in the early 1960s. As these trends drew African Americans toward Far Southeast, urban unrest in the city following the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 caused whites to move away. As is noted in the chapter on Barry Farm/Hillsdale, Far Southeast Washington's population shifted dramatically from 82.4 percent white in 1950 to 86 percent African American in 1970. Initially the process was not without tension for new African American families. Pearl Cross, a nurse, remembers that for the first several years her late husband, Lawrence — a D.C. public school teacher who for decades also taught sign language to the parents of deaf students at Gallaudet University — was routinely stopped and questioned by police while driving back to the 33rd Street home they have occupied since the late 1960s.²⁹



The impact of white flight on Hillcrest and Penn Branch was significantly minimized through the efforts of an organization called Southeast Neighbors, according to Franklin G. Senger III, who since 1960 has been pastor of Holy Comforter Lutheran Church in Hillcrest. "It was organized around 1964 by Harry Kaplan, and modeled after Neighbors, Inc.," recalls Pastor Senger, who was himself integral to this organization. Since 1959 Neighbors, Inc. had built coalitions between longtime white residents and new black home buyers in Northwest District neighborhoods such as Shepherd Park, Manor Park, and Takoma Park. With tactics ranging from simple community meetings and

The brick houses of the Penn Branch neighborhood climb up the hilly terrain just east of the Penn Branch Shopping Center at Pennsylvania and Branch avenues. Colonial Revival, Cape Cod, and Tudor styles prevail in this community, which were popular in the 1930s when this neighborhood began. Photo by Kathryn S. Smith

socials, to vigilantly exposing discriminatory housing practices, Southeast Neighbors facilitated a relatively smooth, gradual integration in Hillcrest and Penn Branch. This lasting legacy of inclusiveness and community involvement is evidenced by a variety of indicators, including the presence of numerous lifelong white residents now in their eighties and nineties, a grounded longstanding base of African American professionals, and a significant gay and lesbian population of both races that make up the fabric of these communities today. The exodus of major stores from the Pennsylvania Avenue retail corridor following 1968 makes this highly visible gateway to Southeast a misleading introduction to the miles of quiet, diverse, tree-shaded communities with their remarkable views that lie just up the hill.³⁰

Many residents west of the Anacostia River discover the beauty of the eastern section through visits to Fort Dupont Park. The Fort Dupont golf course, closed in 1971, became the site of a much-utilized community garden and recreation center, while another tract became an outdoor amphitheater offering popular free summer concerts by jazz and blues artists such as Little Jimmy Scott and Roy Ayers. The Fort Dupont Ice Arena opened in the mid-1970s at the park's northern edge on Ely Place. Through the Friends of Fort Dupont Ice Arena's Kids On Ice program, the arena has offered excellent skating programs to about ten thousand underprivileged youths from across the region since 1995. Since 2002 serious skating students from all over the Washington and Baltimore suburbs come regularly to study with resident coach Nathaniel Mills, who competed with distinction in the Olympics in 1992, 1994, and 1998. Frequently visited by other Olympians and professional skaters, the program is considered among the best in the region. In addition, with miles of peaceful hiking trails and new bike lanes along Alabama and Massachusetts avenues, the park and its tranquil environs are increasingly enjoyed by bicyclists and hikers from throughout the city.³¹

Most current residents are not familiar with the area's past as East Washington Heights beyond the name of the church at Branch and Alabama avenues. In an interesting turn of events, however, the name of the church has recently inspired some to suggest reclaiming the "East Washington" moniker, which they perceive as a more unifying label than "East of the River," a term still widely used but one that many feel has come to symbolize only economic distress and separateness.

Most significantly, the political power and visibility of the entire eastern portion of the District increased markedly in the early twenty-first century. For the first time four key members of the D.C. Council came from Far Southeast, including the representative from Ward 8, Marion Barry, and three residents of Hillcrest in Ward 7 — Council Chair Vincent Gray, At-Large D.C. Council member Kwame Brown, and Ward 7 representative Yvette Alexander. With a politically active citizenry and prominent representation, many believe that the golden era of East Washington — so long envisioned — might well be on the horizon.