Northwood

by Tom Nugent

Once upon a time–this was over 100 years ago–when the world seemed smaller and no one had ever ridden in an automobile—there was a place made of green, rolling hills, great towering oaks and sprawling country estates owned by some of Baltimore's wealthiest and most powerful people.

Of that place, of that verdant and spacious landscape located just north of the City, a Philadelphia map-maker in 1877 would write: "It is rolling and beautifully diversified, the soil fertile and well-cultivated. Most of the land is owned by the wealthy merchants of Baltimore City, and there is probably no district in America that has so many beautiful country places."

It was, according to all accounts of that era, a gorgeous countryside.

But that was in 1877; that was before the great series of economic and sociological transformations which would irrevocably alter—even as they were altering most of the rest of the American landscape—both the appearance and the character of this rural, tranquil region.

Only a few decades after the map-maker's description of this land north of Baltimore, the entire area would undergo a violent change. It would become a place of paved, tree-lined streets, of hundreds of red brick rowhouses stacked side by side like dominoes, of new schools and new churches and apartments and duplexes and, finally, even a shopping center.

The scene shifts, leaps forward; now it's 1931, and an ambitious group of Baltimore businessmen (they have given themselves a name, The Roland Park Company) has set out to develop the land which will come to be known as Northwood.

Having acquired a 540-acre tract of landscape from the estates of three prominent Baltimoreans (John Work Garrett, Enoch Pratt and A.S. Abell), the Company proceeds to build the series of small, trim-lined brick houses which will ultimately give this neighborhood its character.

In these early years, Northwood is a quiet place. It is rowhouses, neat lawns, lots of grass, lots of trees. The Company sells its new houses for anywhere from $4,500 to $10,000; during these Depression and post-Depression years, that represents a great deal of money. And so the new residents of Northwood will be affluent, professional people. They will work in lawyers' offices and doctors' offices in downtown Baltimore; they will be young and family-oriented.

In 1932, a man named J. Knox Insley—he has just been named the first president of the newly-formed Northwood Association—will write of the new community:

"Beautiful, spacious, restful, far-removed, indeed, it seems, from the noise and bustle of the crowded City which moves along rapidly and relentlessly just beyond its limits."

World War II comes to an end; the real building boom begins.

Within 20 years, Northwood's population will climb from a few thousand to more than 40,000. And its landscape will change once again. In addition to the endless ranks of brick tract houses, there will be apartments (including the Northwood Apartments, which will be the largest apartment development ever to have been built in the Baltimore area), new schools, churches, gasoline stations, stores and a modern shopping center.

As the years pass, the 540-acre tract (it is still referred to as "Original Northwood") will be swallowed up in the ongoing builders' boom. By the mid-1960's, Northwood will have expanded to its present boundaries: from 33rd Street to the City line, south to north from Loch Raven Boulevard to the Hillen Road-Perring Parkway corridor, west to east.

And, ironically, this neighborhood of red brick and green oak will in the end find itself once again a part of the City of Baltimore.

In all of this frenetic new development, however, a great deal of the past will be preserved; the Roland Park Company will continue to insist on certain standards of structure and design (known as the "Covenants," these local strictures require, among other things, that new houses in the community shall be erected at least 25 feet away from the nearest road, and that all exterior trim shall be painted a uniform white); both the executives at the Company and the citizens who serve in the Greater Northwood Community Association will work hard to preserve the integrity, the original identity of this carefully planned region.

But the Covenants will also become the source of great controversy, as Northwood enters the modern era of the 1960's. The in-coming blacks will appear, to protest the Covenant which excludes them from living in the neighborhood. Then a man named Richard Kirstel, in 1972, will go so far as to paint his door orange (in direct violation of the regulation which calls for white exterior trim) and there will be a great deal of debate, of bitter argument, before many of these archaic rules are finally relaxed.

And some of this will be very ugly.

Protestors from Morgan State University will decry the blatant racism evidenced in the Covenant that excludes blacks from the community.

But time will pass. And finally, after the ugly block-busting, and the fighting in the schools; after the angry lawsuits, the demonstrations and the bitterness, Northwood will emerge—like a thousand other American neighborhoods which have made the same journey—with a sizable black population, and with a new sense of tolerance both for human beings of all kinds, and for those who decide that their front doors must be covered with orange paint.

By 1979, Northwood will find itself standing, uncertainly but hopefully, on the margin which divides past and future. An integrated community of about 45,000—the kind of place which takes great pride in its yearly Arts and Crafts Festival, in its neighborhood garden tours and in the energetic and creative activities of its busy community association.

Northwood. Having survived the tensions and uncertainties of an enormous, accelerating growth to become what it is today; Baltimore-suburb-turned-into-important-and-growing-city-neighborhood. It's an American story. It's an American place.

Govans

by Wesley Wilson

"Govans is a community of people—big, small, white and black— comfortable with themselves. They haven't had to resort to the ridiculous habit of wearing funny costumes and staging stupefying festivals in order to differentiate themselves from everyone else." That's how one long-time resident affectionately describes his neighborhood. Govans is like that...quiet, industrious, steady, with a plan for its own development, and a stake in the rebirth of all of Baltimore. And Govans has always played a significant role in that revitalization, beginning ten years ago, when the neighborhood was the very first to agree to participate in the Baltimore City Fair.

The area was born when Frederick Calvert (the last Lord Baltimore) granted several hundred acres of land to a wealthy importer/shipowner, William Govane. Govane increased that grant by purchasing an adjoining area, known as "Friends of Discovery," and in turn naming his estate "Drumcastle." As the area was handed down through other Govane generations, a small stone cottage was constructed. That cottage, long since gone, was the first home in what was to become "Govans." Until quite recently, a few direct descendents of Govane lived in the vicinity of that cottage.

Govans as a town grew in spurts, encouraged by the introduction of various forms of transportation over the years.

Grave of James Govane.
Photo courtesy of *The Sunpapers*

Other contributing factors were the springs of good water in the area, a grist mill that operated until 1880 along the Chinquapin Run, and the establishment of country inns and trading stores in the area that was to become the intersection of York Road and Woodbourne Avenue. Local industry played an important role in the growth of the area. One of the most profitable to Govans was the flower industry, both private and commercial. The first orchids to be grown in Baltimore were grown in Govans.

The single greatest influence was the construction of a turnpike that ran from Baltimore to Lancaster, Pennsylvania via York in 1786. Until 1840, the town grew slowly. But, with the arrival of the first omnibus in 1844 (which would facilitate the luxury of twice daily mail delivery and pick-up in just ten years), Govans began a significant increase in population. Village centers and churches were founded.

The earliest congregation to establish itself in the area was the "Govans Presbyterian." St. Mary's also had its beginnings at this time, on the present site of the College of Notre Dame. (St. Mary's remained there until the construction of a new building in 1942 on York Road and Markland Avenue.) The Govans Methodist Episcopal Church was the third to establish itself in the area, with its present building having its founding in 1850. Other churches located in the Govans area today are: the Gregory Memorial Baptist, Church of the Holy Nativity, Lutheran Church of the Holy Comforter, and the Swedenborgian Hillside Chapel.

The character of Govans changed again in 1863 with the introduction of the first railway from Baltimore City. In 1874, horse-drawn cars running on these rails brought former city dwellers who constructed permanent homes in what was soon to become a "suburban community." The first wave of these new residents were wealthy merchants and industrialists, who built residential mansions and landscaped gardens. The influx of these residents, who became