

Then and Now: Cabin John Gardens
By Judith Welles

One of the close-knit parts of Cabin John is the neighborhood of Cabin John Gardens, the only single-family housing cooperative in Montgomery County. Unlike other streets in Cabin John which are mostly numbered, streets in Cabin John Gardens are named for naval engineers and architects, including Ericsson, Froude, Thorne, McKay, Russell, and Webb.

Sir William Froude pioneered model testing in the United Kingdom, which became the basis for Admiral David Taylor's later work in ship construction. John Ericsson was a Swedish naval engineer who designed the U.S.S. Monitor, a Union Navy ironclad warship used in the Civil War. John Russell designed the first seagoing battleship made entirely of iron in the mid-1800s. William Webb designed commercial ships in the 1800s. Donald McKay designed some of the grandest and most successful clipper ships ever built, including the Flying Cloud and the Sovereign of the Seas in the mid-1800s.

The reason for all of this is that the original site planned for the David Taylor Model Basin, now the Carderock Division of the Naval Surface Warfare Center, was to be in Cabin John. Instead, in 1936, the Navy began constructing the David Taylor Model Basin at Carderock, completing it in 1939. In December 1940, the federal government purchased 19.27 acres of land south of Conduit Road (now MacArthur Boulevard) from Mary Ellen Bobinger, widow of William H. Bobinger, owner of the Cabin John Bridge Hotel that had burned in 1931. Indeed, Mrs. Bobinger sold the land that had been the grounds of that famous resort, and for many years later, after houses were built on the property, people could find broken pieces of the hotel's china and other mementos of the hotel along the hillside near the bridge.

Responding to housing shortages and gas rationing, the government used the property to build housing needed for workmen at the Model Basin. These homes were the only residential construction in Montgomery County during World War II, and Cabin John's population grew.

The Navy had 125 homes constructed in Cabin John – 100 for white workers and 25 for black. The two small neighborhoods – Cabin John Gardens off MacArthur Boulevard and Carver Road off Seven Locks Road – became part of the larger Cabin John community.

At first, the government rented Cabin John Gardens housing to Model Basin employees. With veterans returning from World War II in the mid-1940s, the Gardens expanded its policies to rent to veterans.

In Cabin John Gardens, some 75 of the original homes had two bedrooms and 25 had three bedrooms. They all had coal furnaces and the first private sewer system in the county. There was also a Community House for social events and Scout meetings which is still in use.

Dana Swisher Lupton, who grew up in "the Gardens" and returned to live in the community as an adult, remembers how everyone in the neighborhood was "like family" and "there was a lot of things for kids to do." Another resident, David Fyock, remembers the short

walk to the river where he fished for perch, bass, catfish and scrappy. His mother, LaVeta Fyock, did hairdressing in her home for the neighbors.

In 1955, the Navy Department gave notice to residents that the Public Housing Administration had decided to sell the project to 1) residents individually, 2) to residents cooperatively, or 3) to the highest bidder. On December 2, 1955, the Cabin John Gardens Citizens Association was formed and residents began writing letters to urge the County Council to allow individual purchase of the houses.

Finally, in 1956, when the County Council would not approve sale of the property as individual housing, the property was offered for sale on a cooperative basis. A corporation, Cabin John Gardens, Inc., was formed to set a price for each house and draw up by-laws and membership agreements.

Reminiscing 20 years later, Dagny Newman, Secretary of the Cabin John Gardens Board of Directors, wrote, "We formed various committees and had our lawyer work out drafts for members and by-laws that we could go over and then have an overall meeting to discuss matters with the residents who desired to buy. When I think back and go over some of the old papers I wonder how we had the nerve to even try to do all these things – but do them we did and very satisfactorily too."

The government sold the 100 homes for a total of \$490,000, with owners becoming members of Cabin John Gardens, Inc. Each member homebuyer paid a down payment of \$847 or \$968 for a house and a monthly installment of \$53 or \$60, depending on whether a house had two or three bedrooms. In 1957, 76 residents became proud owners of homes in Cabin John Gardens, Inc.

Members own their houses but not the land on which the houses stand. The Corporation takes care of taxes, street and sewer maintenance, and any community problems that concern members. Over the years, coal furnaces changed to some oil, some gas, and some electricity for heating, all contracted by the cooperative.

There have been few changes in the original documents of the cooperative. Thelma Marshall, who became manager for the cooperative in the 1960s, was one of the first owners with her husband Pearman. They had four children and lived in one of the two-bedroom houses. Still living in the Gardens years later, she said, "We have a manager and board of directors that meets twice a month. We have to fix a water main break ourselves; we have to clean the streets when it snows."

Once very small and uniform, Gardens houses today have many different sizes, shapes and styles. Houses have become larger, with upper stories and additions on the side and back. Many of the current residents grew up in the Gardens and today are raising their own families in other houses there. Neighbors continue to look out for each other, not unlike the rest of Cabin John.

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