

# Brookland

## SOMETHING IN THE AIR

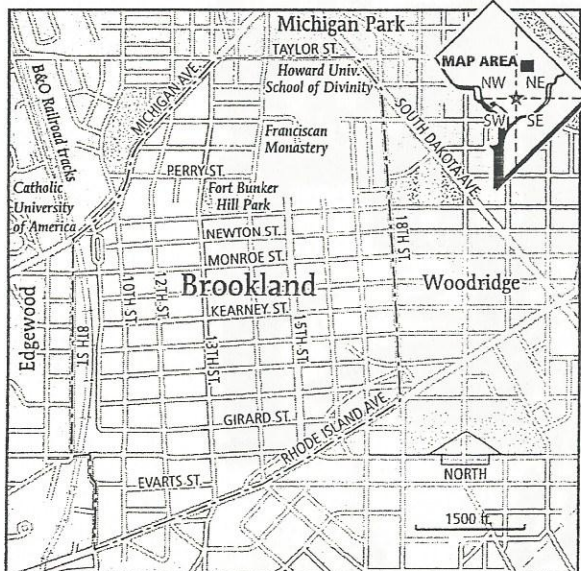
JOHN N. PEARCE

There is a bucolic air about Brookland, its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century single-family homes set in the thick greenery of street trees, parks, and the landscaped grounds of nearby institutions. Its location is marked on the city's skyline by the grand dome and campanile of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, symbolic of the strong presence of Catholic institutions in the community. Fort Bunker Hill Park, Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, and an eight-mile hiking trail contribute to the openness that makes it feel like a country town in the city. The expansive settings of educational and religious institutions add to the sense of light and air; the Franciscan Monastery alone offers forty-four acres of gardens.

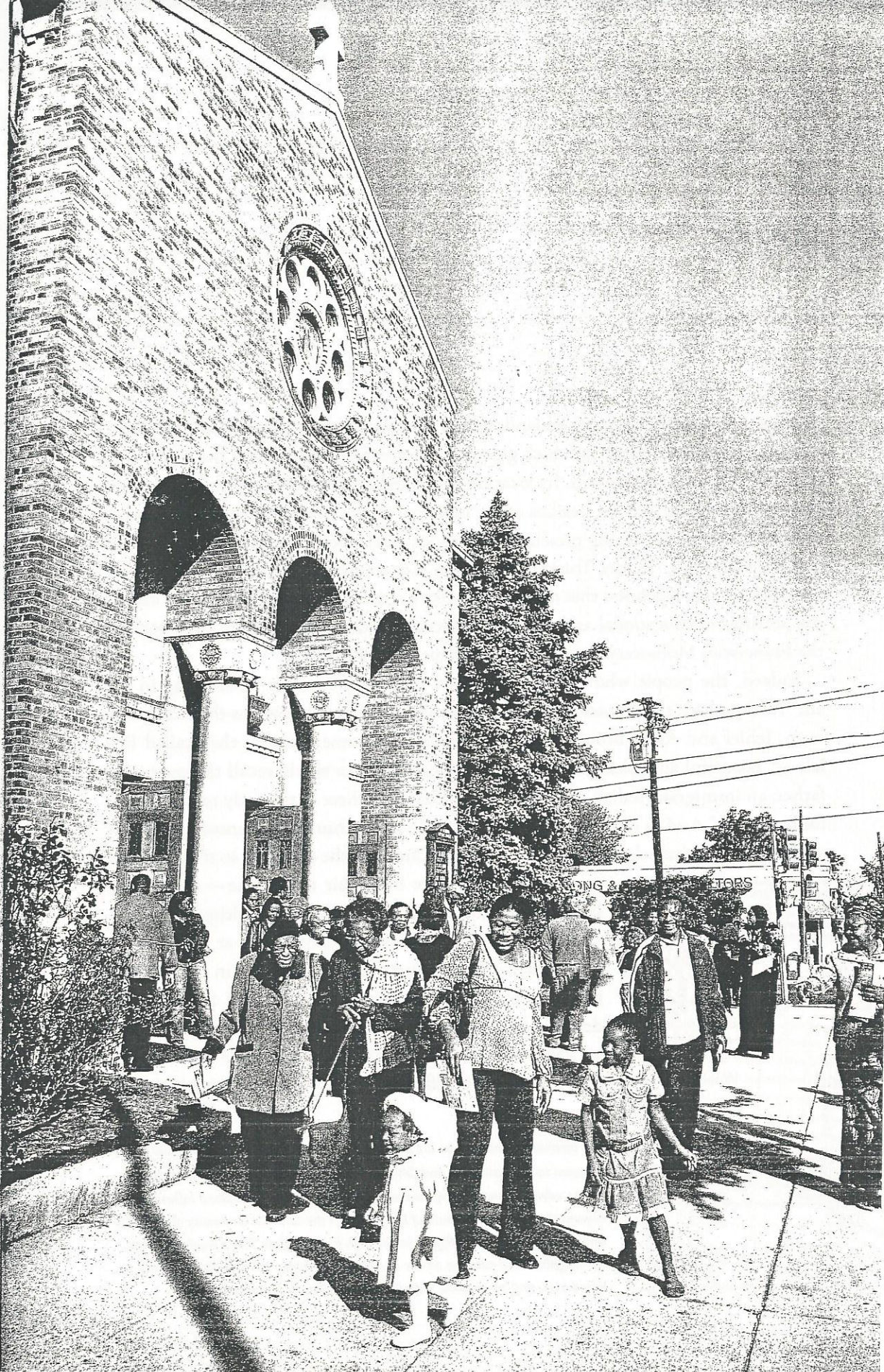
Indeed, the people who settled Brookland thought there was "something in the air." And perhaps the air *was* different. At Brookland's heart, known as the old Brooks farm, Jehiel and Anne Brooks built in 1840 the handsome mansion they called Belair — "beautiful air." Nearly 150 years later John Facchinà would recall the reason his father, an immigrant Italian mosaicist, gave for settling there in the early 1900s: "It was for better air." And in 1938, as longtime resident Thea Reachmack recounted, her doctor advised the Reachmacks to move from Dupont Circle "to the country" so that her asthmatic son would have better air to breathe — and Brookland's air was known as "pure and clean, healthy."<sup>1</sup>

The Brooks Mansion, which still stands at 901 Newton Street, NE, almost as patriarchal as Brooks in his old photographs, is a prominent image of Brookland. Some Brooks descendants long lived in Brookland and nearby. Brooklanders have loved the old mansion, too, and their early and ongoing preservation efforts focused on it, achieving listing on

the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. The mansion's history is a testament to the neighborhood's enduring appeal and the care taken to preserve its architectural heritage.

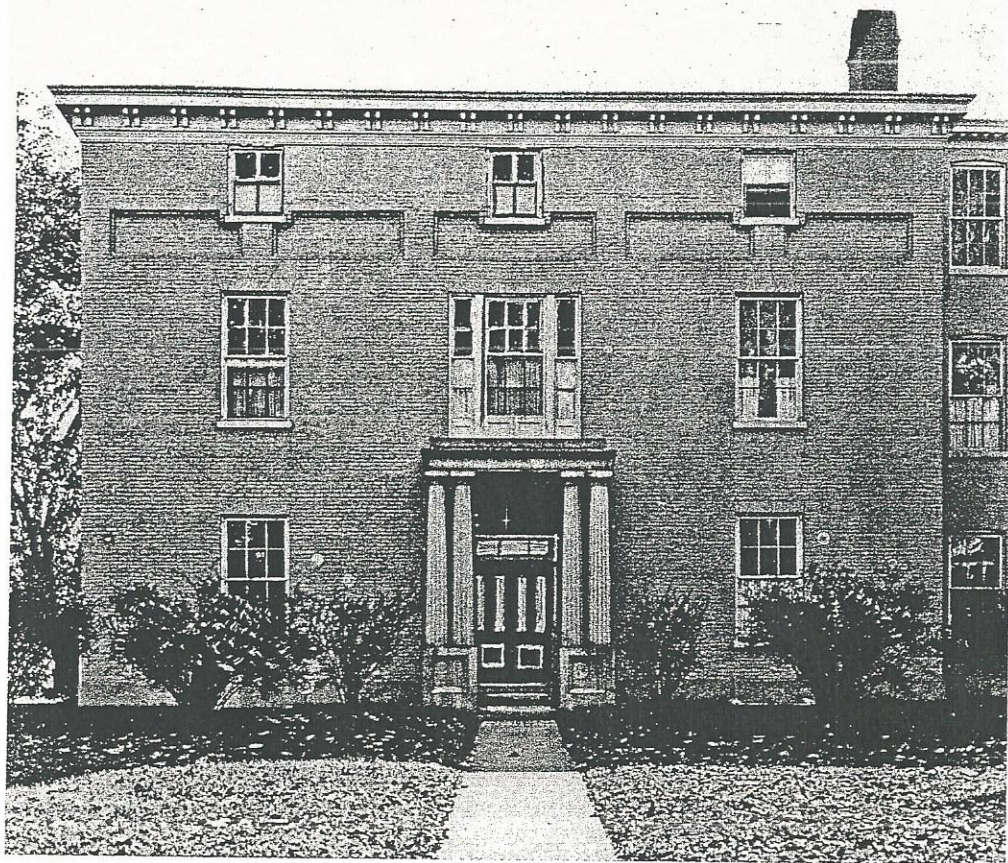


The boundaries shown here are based on eight contiguous subdivisions laid out adjacent to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad track between 1887 and 1901 and on the advice of present-day residents. There is a strong "Brookland influence" beyond these borders because of linkages with the Catholic University of America and other cultural and religious institutions in the region. Some would say that the neighborhood overlaps on the north with Michigan Park, on the east with Woodridge, and on the west with Edgewood. Map by Larry A. Bowring



*Parishioners  
leave Mass at St.  
Anthony's Roman  
Catholic Church at  
12th and Monroe  
streets on a sunny  
Sunday morning.  
St. Anthony's has  
been a center of  
community activity  
since the early  
twentieth century  
in Brookland, a  
neighborhood with  
many Catholic  
institutions. Photo  
by Rick Reinhard*

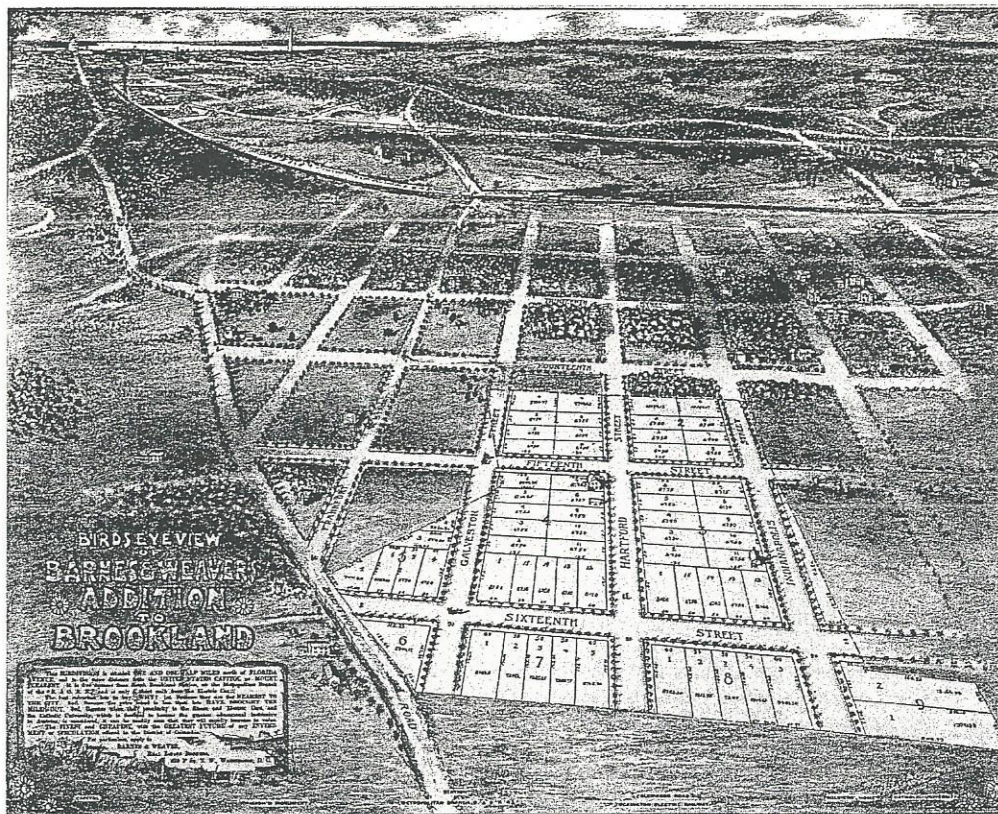
*One of the few surviving mid-nineteenth-century estate houses in the city, the Greek Revival-style Brooks Mansion stands as a neighborhood landmark near the Brookland Metrorail stop. It was built by Jehiel and Anne Queen Brooks in 1840. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*



the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. Another preservation effort was the lively reuse of a once-decaying, turn-of-the-century pickle works, revitalized as Colonel Brooks' Tavern, where a photograph of Brooks welcomes visitors.<sup>2</sup>

Although the name of Jehiel's wife, Anne Queen Brooks, is not marked on any present place, she is the connection to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century families who farmed this acreage. Anne received from her father, Nicholas Queen, 150 acres, part of 1,500 colonial Maryland acres Nicholas's ancestor, Richard Marsham, had owned. Nicholas Queen was proprietor of Queen's Hotel, a Washington hostelry, where many congressmen and other notables stayed, and Jehiel and Anne Queen Brooks had many Washington connections. It is not surprising that the Brookses chose the Greek Revival style for the house of brick and granite they built in 1840 near the northwest corner of their Bellair land; it echoed the Greek Revival character of Arlington House, the White House porticoes, and the Treasury in the grand style of the Federal City to the south.<sup>3</sup>

Not long after the Brooks Mansion was built, the needs of the growing city brought new public facilities to the very borders of the farm. First, in the 1850s, the racially integrated Columbian Harmony cemetery was moved from the city to a large tract south of



The railroad that gave birth to the first Brookland developments is seen running through the center of this bird's-eye view of a mid-1890s addition to the new suburb. The Capitol and the Washington Monument are drawn on the horizon, to underline the easy access by train to the center of the city. Courtesy Library of Congress.

the Brooks farm boundary along old Brentwood Road, near the present line of Rhode Island Avenue. (It would later be moved again to Landover, Maryland.) Then, in 1873, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad built a branch along the western edge of the farm, with a stop at the Brooks Station below the mansion where farmers loaded their vegetables for shipment to the city's markets. The stop also served a few Brookland commuters. In 1885 the Catholic University of America, a suburban campus of national importance, was established just beyond Brookland's western edge, northwest of Brooks Station. In the more than one hundred years in which the university and Brookland have existed side by side, the two have been intertwined both physically and culturally, as suggested in the name of the current Metrorail stop, Brookland-CUA.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1880s the arrival of cemetery, train, and university set the stage for eventual subdivision of the Brooks farm. After Colonel Brooks's death in 1886, his heirs sold the property, and in 1887 the new owners recorded a plat of subdivision of 140 acres into narrow, deep lots — then the standard of suburban development. This was apparently the first recorded use of the name "Brookland." In the winter of 1889–90 the Eckington & Soldiers' Home Railway, the first electric streetcar line in the city, beginning in 1888, reached 4th and Bunker Hill Road in Brookland, linking Mount Vernon Square to Catholic University and vastly increasing interest in the development of the area.

When the streetcars came into Brookland, longtime resident Helen Brosnan recalled, her mother was so delighted at this new convenience that she called the trolley bells "the sweetest sound I've ever heard."<sup>5</sup>

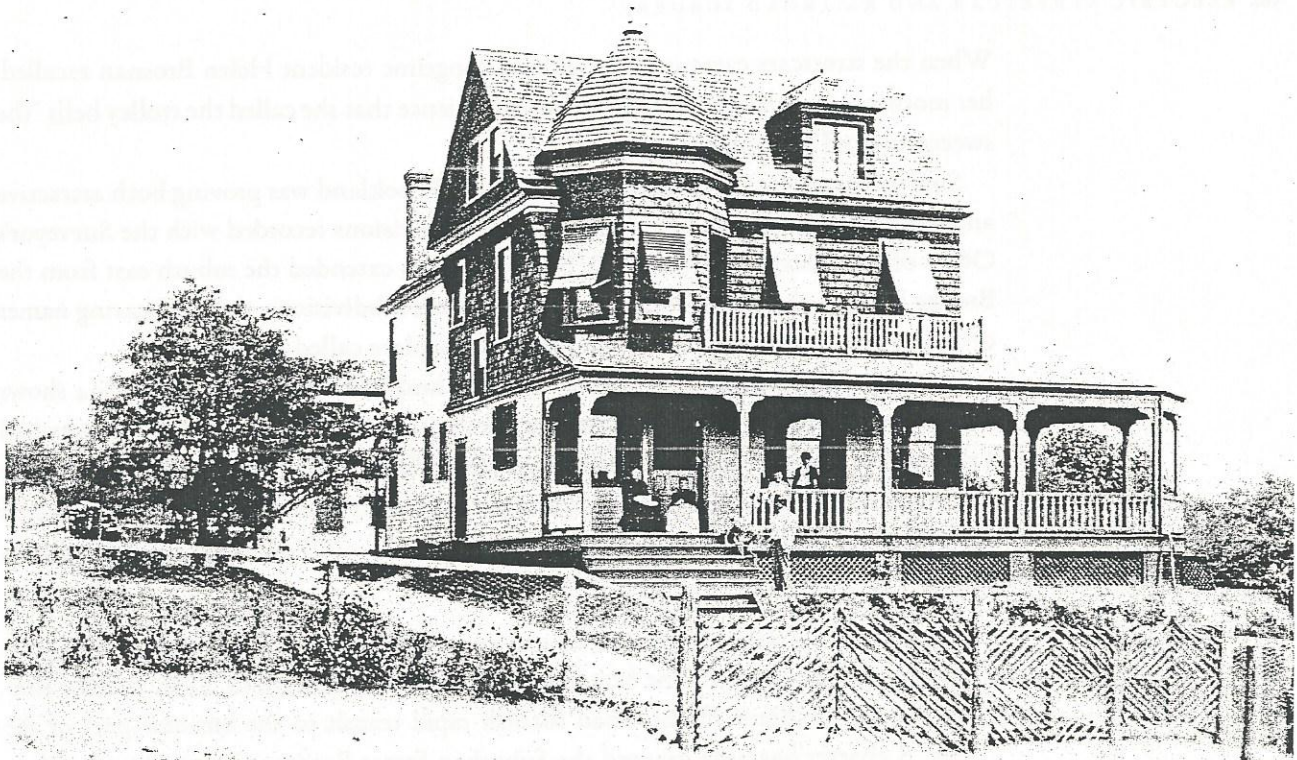
Shortly thereafter the original subdivision of Brookland was proving both attractive and successful, as reflected in the additional subdivisions recorded with the Surveyor's Office of the District of Columbia. These additions extended the suburb east from the Brooks Farm to the line of 18th Street. All of these subdivisions, though bearing names of their own, were perceived then and now as one place called Brookland.

Brookland's population reached about seven hundred by 1891. A map of 1894 shows that at least one house had been built on most of the blocks. By then the community had a post office; the stylish, brick Romanesque Brookland School (1891); a Baptist church; and more than fifty oil lamps along the streets of the first subdivision. In 1892 the real estate firm of McLachlen & Batchelder ("Telephone 432") summed up Brookland's virtues:

Brookland . . . has an elevation of two hundred feet high above THE POTOMAC RIVER AT HIGH TIDE. The Metropolitan Branch of the B. & O. R. R. and the Eckington and Soldiers' Home Road furnish rapid transit to the business part of the city. A charter has been granted the Suburban Street Railway Company to build an electric road from the Centre Market to Brookland. . . . The District . . . [has] built a Brick Schoolhouse erected Street Lights, and, LAID PLANK SIDEWALKS on a part of the streets.<sup>6</sup>

In 1896 the Brookland School building was doubled in size. In 1903 it was enlarged again, this time in the newly stylish Georgian Revival mode. Also by 1903 Brookland boasted a firehouse and St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church. Many of the streets crossing and parallel to the 12th Street corridor had been paved with gravel, and most of Newton Street and parts of 12th, Irving, and Evarts streets had macadam surfaces. In 1904 the street names and numbers were changed to conform to the pattern of the rest of the city.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1880s the building regulations for what had been Washington City, south of present-day Florida Avenue and Benning Road, no longer permitted the construction of wooden dwellings, but this was not the case outside the boundary in old Washington County. The middle-class suburbanites and speculators of Brookland built mostly wooden homes in simplified versions of the Victorian, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Craftsman styles. The ready availability of precut wood framing and cladding and of machine-made nails of every type made it possible to build almost any shape or decoration. There were a few high-style, architect-designed houses and some highly individual ones, such as builder John Louthan's Round House, designed by Edward Noltz at 1001 Irving Street, and suffragette/botanist Carrie Harrison's "Spanish Villa" at 1331 Newton Street, built in 1909 of concrete piers infilled with terra cotta blocks.<sup>8</sup>



A number of employees of the Smithsonian Institution and the Government Printing Office gave a scientific, intellectual, and engineering cast to parts of the community. The great Smithsonian ornithologist Robert Ridgeway built Rose Terrace at 3413 13th Street, and botanist Theodore Holm built a house for himself and another for Joseph Krause at 1432 and 1440 Newton Street. Several immigrant artisans and mechanics were among Brookland's early residents, including Italian mosaicist Charles Facchina. Facchina's proudest achievement was the great mosaic panel of Minerva (after the drawing by Elihu Vedder) visible at the top of the stairway to the visitors' gallery of the Library of Congress's main reading room. Facchina, recognizing that the edges of Brookland near Michigan Avenue would develop more densely, built the first apartment building in Brookland, the Brookland Courts Apartments at 1210–1218 Perry Street, in 1924.<sup>9</sup>

A permanent home to many bright and creative people, Brookland also nurtured bright and creative children, including novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, later the author of the popular novels *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, who grew up at 1221 Newton Street. Brookland provided temporary quarters for creative people on the rise as well, such as Pearl Bailey, who lived briefly at 1428 Irving Street in the 1930s. Notwithstanding these notable residents, Brookland has always been a middle-class community offering everyday families a secure, neighborly home. This was remembered with pride

*The family of Smithsonian Institution ornithologist Robert Ridgeway comes together for a photograph on the porch of their home at 3413 13th Street in the new suburb of Brookland about 1895. A number of employees at the Smithsonian and the Government Printing Office were among the early residents. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*



*A view from the Ridgeway family's rooftop about 1895 shows the proximity of Catholic University, with two early buildings seen at the center right. The tower of the Sherman Building at the Soldiers' Home is seen over the trees on the horizon. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

and humor by one of Brookland's early developers, James L. Sherwood. "For a time we thought we were going to have a nabob neighborhood. We had about eight families of social prominence. But they discovered their mistake about 1910 and moved elsewhere."<sup>10</sup>

Although early Brookland was mostly white — and mostly segregated in work, play, and society — it always had black residents. Racial differences affected daily life, but outright conflict was rare. In the mid-twentieth century a number of African Americans who had distinguished careers in education, politics, and the arts made the neighborhood their home. Among the most prominent was Robert Weaver, the first black cabinet member, who served as secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Lyndon B. Johnson; Weaver lived at 3519 14th Street. The neighborhood was particularly favored by Howard University professors, among them Ralph Bunche, a diplomat and United Nations official who in 1950 was the first African American to

win a Nobel Peace Prize. He lived in an International-style house at 1510 Jackson Street that had been designed for him by African American architect Hilyard Robinson, also a Howard University professor. Poet and critic Sterling Brown lived for forty years at 1222 Kearney Street. A key figure in the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Brown welcomed his Howard University students to this home for decades to discuss matters academic and political. Noted artist Lois Mailou Jones, who taught at Howard University for fifty years, hosted an artists' collective in the 1940s in her home at 1220 Quincy Street.<sup>11</sup>

From the 1920s through the 1940s, the neighborhood's density increased, marked by brick row houses with Colonial Revival details, precut mail-order houses of a mainly Craftsman architectural character, and the simplified, streamlined architecture of the largely one-story brick commercial strip along 12th Street. In 1927 Brooklanders paraded in the street to celebrate the paving of this major artery from Rhode Island Avenue to Monroe Street. In 1931, 12th Street was paved as far as Otis Street, although its village-like character was maintained throughout the decade with vendors' carts hawking everything from ice to produce to rabbits.<sup>12</sup>

The stores on 12th Street were built from the late teens to the early 1930s by a few developers who lived in the community. Among them were James L. Sherwood, manager of the Brookland branch of the Hamilton National Bank; his son, Jesse R. Sherwood; Dr. R. R. Hottel, a local physician; and George C. Heider, who owned and operated a grocery store at 3507 12th Street.

The business people along 12th Street reflected the ethnic diversity of Brookland. Their names in the city directories over the years suggest their diverse origins. In addition to George Heider, at no. 3507, were Salvatore Chisari, shoe repair, no. 3508; Paul F. Moore, hardware, no. 3509; Hong Lee, laundry, no. 3512; John Kotsanas, restaurant, no. 3513; Frederick Klotz, billiards, no. 3533; Marion F. Cord, beauty shop, no. 3523; and James J. Hannon and Michael J. McGettigan, hardware, no. 3524. The strong Catholic presence in the neighborhood attracted many Brooklanders of that faith who were of Irish or Italian extraction. Catholic University had begun to influence the neighborhood as early as 1889, when the Brooks Mansion was converted to a Catholic school later operated by St. Anthony's Church. The foreign-born Smithsonian naturalists and Europeans among those associated with Catholic University also contributed to the old-world atmosphere.<sup>13</sup>

Catholic University attracted other major Catholic institutions to Brookland. In 1899 the Franciscan order dedicated its Byzantine-style church and monastery, later adding gardens surrounding replications of holy shrines from around the world. In 1927 the lower church of the landmark Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was completed on the grounds of the university. Its grand dome and 329-foot campanile, built between 1954 and 1959, became a striking element in the Washington skyline from every point of view. It remains the largest Roman Catholic church in America and one of the ten largest churches in the world. Trinity College, now known

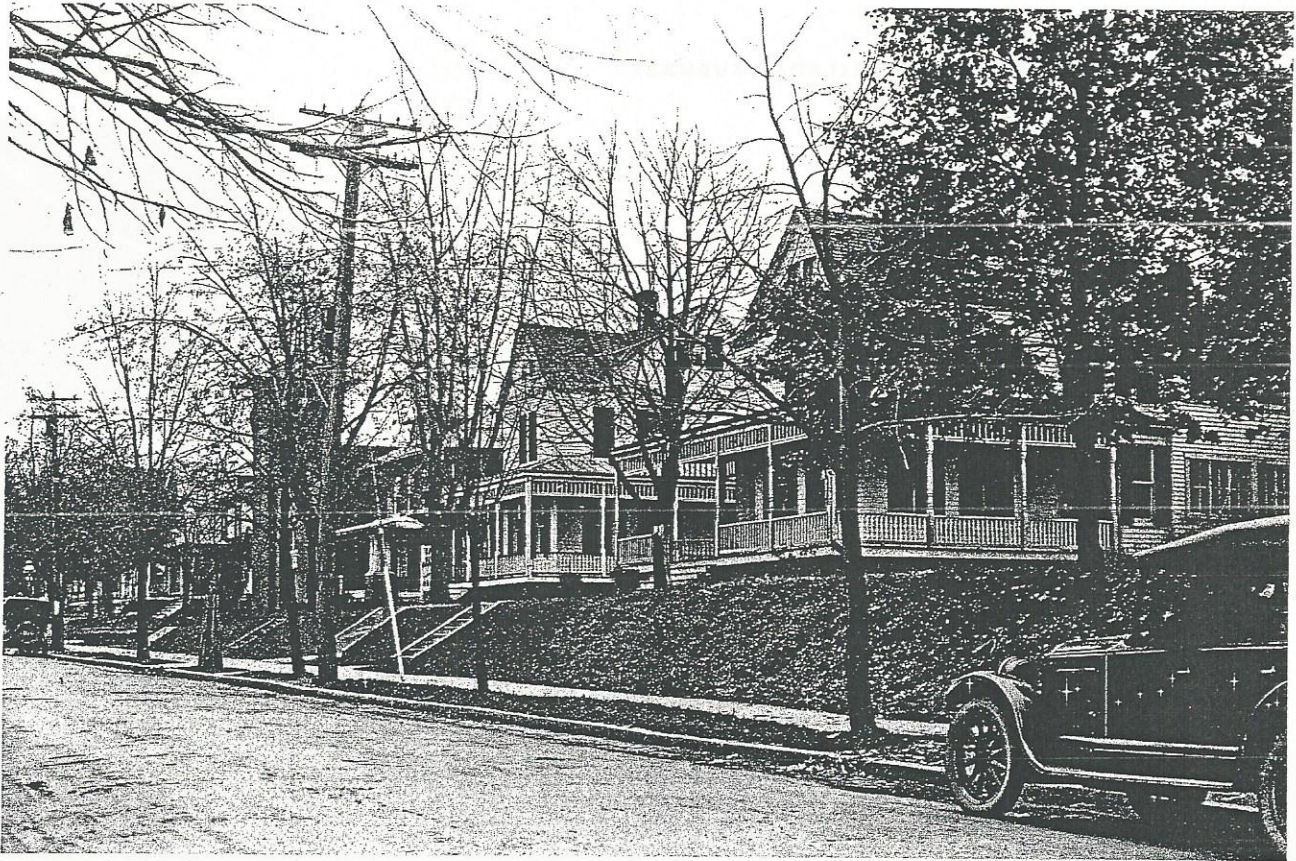




*In the 1920s trolley wires created a canopy over 12th Street, the one-story commercial center of the neighborhood then as now. In the right foreground is the 1911 Masonic Lodge. The Brookland Baptist Church in the background was torn down and replaced with the Newton Theatre in 1938. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

as Trinity (Washington) University, opened its doors in the neighborhood in 1900. The Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine, the Dominican College, and the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center are also located in Brookland. Over time, many Brookland houses were rented or bought by international Catholic orders. In the years between the world wars more than fifty religious orders were represented, and their members, walking from home to church or university in their distinctive religious dress, helped Brookland earn the nickname "Little Rome." The 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II to the university is remembered fondly by the people of St. Anthony's as "the Pope in our Parish."<sup>14</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s Brookland retained much of its small-town character. Its streets were lively with children and adult neighbors passing the time of day. The value of friendly relations among residents influenced the design and use of houses. Helen



*Neighbors in Brookland enjoyed socializing on their front porches, such as these on Monroe Street between 12th and 13th streets photographed in November 1925. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

Krause Caruso recalled the house she and her husband built in the 1930s: “[When I was a girl in Brookland] we used to live out on the front porch. And when my husband built this house [at 1437 Otis Street], I told him there were three things I wanted and one of them was a front porch. So he had one built, and I still sit out there. Not too many people do that today but a few do. I love it. I knit and read.”<sup>15</sup>

For children the highlight of the winter season came after heavy snowfalls. Local police closed Newton Street between 15th and 18th streets and built bonfires at each end of the hill. “The sledding was great on Newton Street,” former resident Harry Tansill recalled. “It was a mysterious phenomenon how the snow and ice lingered longer there long after it had melted away on other streets. Quite a break for me and my Flexi Flyer!” Ice skaters flocked to the pond near Slow School. Teenage boys and girls met at chaperoned dances at St. Anthony’s and the Masonic Hall and attended parties at one another’s homes. There young people cranked up the Victrola and, recalled Leo Stock and his sister, Betty Stock Hardy (great-grandchildren of Jehiel and Anne Queen Brooks), they listened to such popular hits as “The Sheik” and danced the Turkey Trot or the Paul Jones. Dates were treated to the movies or maybe an afternoon soda at the fountain in Baldwin’s Bakery or Peoples Drug Store. Beginning in the 1920s silent movies were

regularly shown at St. Anthony's Church. In the mid-1930s commercial movie houses opened: the Jessie Theater at 18th and Irving streets and later, in 1938, the Newton Theater on the site of the old Brookland Baptist Church at the corner of 12th and Newton streets. The Newton's Streamline Moderne design by noted theater architect John J. Zink and its formal opening ceremony underscored the important status given to movie theaters in that era.<sup>16</sup>

Family and friends were often also neighbors in Brookland. Helen Krause Caruso grew up in the neighborhood and returned after starting her married life in Southwest Washington. When she came back with her own family in 1938, she found herself sharing her Brookland block with the close friends and next-door neighbors of her childhood, the Theodore Holmeses, as well as with her father, her father-in-law, her uncle, and her husband's aunt. Such strong kinship networks were typical of the neighborhood.

Although still village-like, Brookland was nonetheless part of the changing metropolitan scene. The influence of the automobile was reflected in the number of garages added to existing Brookland houses in the 1920s and 1930s. In-town houses with car accommodations could not compete, however, with the new automobile-oriented suburbs to which rising young professionals aspired. As a result, many of the earlier railroad and streetcar suburbs were bypassed by young home buyers. After World War II, Brookland was one of many older suburbs that witnessed the accelerated transition from a predominantly white population to a predominantly black one. Residents of Brookland have mixed remembrances of the effects of racial integration that began in the southern portion and moved northward. Some white residents have said that fuller integration was not an event that substantially changed their world. Although the community became more mixed racially, it was still their community, to which they were loyal. In Helen Brosnan's words, "We didn't intend to move. It was home. That was all."<sup>17</sup>

Others recall strong resistance to integration by some white residents. Until they were declared unconstitutional, racially restrictive covenants allowed some property owners to exclude blacks. Sometimes blockbusting techniques were used: a real estate agent would purchase a home and immediately resell it to a black family, causing other white families in the neighborhood to feel they must sell their houses. Poet and Howard University professor Sterling Brown was not a blockbuster, but he remembers that when he moved to Brookland in 1935, "For Sale" signs in the neighborhood seemed to sprout overnight. By 1945 the desire for a neighborhood Sunday school for children of the black community had led to the founding of the Brookland Union Baptist Church, the first black church in Brookland. After the desegregation of the public school system in 1954, the schools became predominantly African American, reflecting both the number of young black families moving to the area and the exodus of many white families to new suburbs in Prince George's County, Maryland.

Many of the black families found Brookland appealing for the same reasons that at-

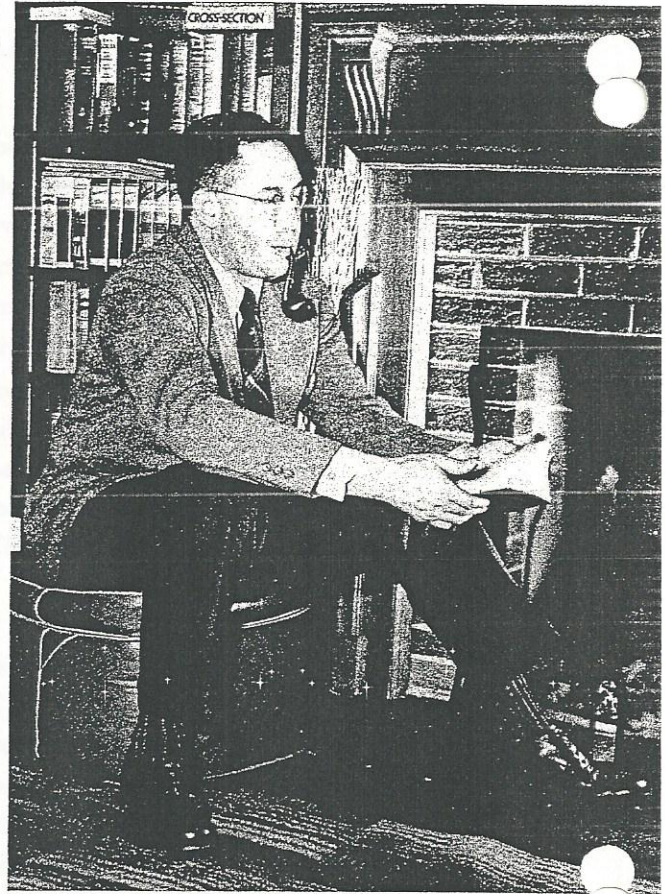
tracted the original residents, white and black. Helen Brooke, mother of former Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke, recalled that her family chose Brookland because it was “a nice, quiet neighborhood and my friends lived there. It was a pretty place to live, and we loved it very much.”<sup>18</sup>

From the 1950s through the 1970s Brookland went through a period of struggle over the shape of its future and emerged stronger and more conscious of itself as a community. Part of the struggle for racial integration in the 1940s and 1950s had focused on the Brookland Citizens Association refusal to admit blacks and its resistance to open housing and recreation. By the 1960s black residents had formed the Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association; in the 1970s and 1980s theirs became the organization that integrated and has since outlived its rival, the all-white citizens association.

Also unifying the neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s was the protracted struggle against the city’s plan to sacrifice a block-wide swath of Brookland to build a multilane freeway as part of the Interstate Highway System next to the railroad right-of-way. This North Central Freeway (I-95) would also have plowed through Takoma Park as it made its way from the Inner Loop in the central city to the Beltway in Maryland. The highway threat spurred an outpouring of individual and collective civic energy, and Brookland leaders, black and white, worked with activists from Takoma Park and across the District to spearhead the anti-freeway fight on behalf of the entire city. Consequently the interstate highway was blocked, and in the process citizens from all parts of the city found themselves unified for the good of their neighborhoods. In addition to the revitalization of the Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association, the highway battles led to the creation of the Upper Northeast Coordinating Council, an umbrella organization for regional civic concerns.

In what must be seen as a victory for Brookland activists, the “highway houses,” which had been acquired for the highway right-of-way, were finally rehabilitated in the late 1970s and early 1980s and returned to the market after years of neglect. But when plans were made for sites for Metrorail lines and stations, the Brooks Mansion itself was threatened. A decline in the school-age population led St. Anthony’s Parish, the mansion owner, to sell the property to the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority in 1970. The WMATA planned to demolish this historic structure, a central symbol of Brookland’s identity, to provide more parking spaces at its Brookland-CUA station. But once again citizens and local political leaders managed to secure the preservation and reuse of the Brooks Mansion, which still stands as a neighborhood centerpiece.<sup>19</sup>

The neighborhood commitment to historic preservation and to Brookland’s history



*Poet and Howard University professor Sterling Brown reads by his fireplace in his Brookland home. He was one of the first of many distinguished African Americans to live in the neighborhood, and he regularly invited students to his home for informal conversations about literature and politics. Courtesy Sterling Brown Papers, Manuscripts Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University*



*Visitors and worshippers pass through the gate to the Franciscan Monastery at 14th and Quincy streets about 1945. The monastery, with its extensive gardens and replicas of holy places from around the world, is one of many local institutions that contribute to the strong Catholic presence in Brookland. Courtesy The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

continues to reveal itself in a number of ways. Special events surrounded the hundredth anniversary of Engine 17 and Number 4 Chemical Company in 2002. Signs mark the location of sites on the city's African American Heritage Trail. A new Brookland Community Development Corporation sponsors special events that often honor the community's unique history, including an annual Brookland Festival of Lights, and the opening of a visitor center for the neighborhood. Research by students at the George Washington University, and especially studies and plans by students at Catholic University, now mesh with both professional and amateur preservation and revitalization activities.

The old pickle factory turned Colonel Brooks' Tavern continues to attract a devoted clientele to its 12th Street location, particularly to weekly Dixieland performances of a band called the Federal Jazz Commission. Organizations and individuals associated with theater, dance, the arts, and writing have made their homes in or near Brookland, as is suggested by the creation of the Brookland Artists and Writers Association in 2001, and art and antique dealers are among the lively additions of recent decades.



*Brooklanders march past the 1920s storefronts of 12th Street in the annual Brookland Festival in 2006. Photo by Robert Roberts. Courtesy Brookland Community Development Corporation*

Brookland's people in the twenty-first century include those who have moved homes or businesses there only in the past few years and those who have lived there for many decades, with memories reaching back to the days of unpaved streets and rural vistas. There is a racially integrated neighborhood culture that includes shopkeepers and residents of Asian and Latino extraction. In Brookland, as in other neighborhoods of Washington, much remains to be done to pass on, intact and enhanced, those places that connect neighbor to neighbor and the present to the many-layered past. But for Brooklanders, new and old, something beautiful still lingers in the air.