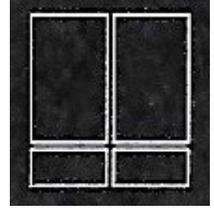


Hi Neighbor!



Newsletter for friends and neighbors of the Rock Creek Woods, MD community

Land and People Before Rock Creek Woods: A Personal Search

By Robert Engelman, formerly of 3924 Rickover Road

Rock Creek Woods was indeed woody when my family moved there in the waning days of the 1950s. The lots were freshly carved out of forested land, and grand trees were reasonably plentiful—though my father was annoyed that the builders had lopped down more on our property than he had expected or wanted

destroyed. Still, the houses were new (many still unfinished), the bottle-deposit collecting was lucrative (plenty of workers drinking plenty of soda), and the place was full of exploratory potential for the eight-year-old I was at the time.



I felt a bit misled: Rock Creek itself was nowhere in sight. But my next-door neighbor friends and I soon discovered that we had only to follow the “Little Creek” behind our backyards to the “Big Creek” a few dozen yards downstream, and then that creek for a much longer distance through what seemed pure wilderness. For an hour or two we’d tramp through woods and brambles and along the stream banks, often soaking our shoes for lack of a clear path. Eventually, magically, we’d find ourselves at the meeting of waters across from the hilly opposite

bank of the *really* Big Creek—the rushing Rock Creek for which our neighborhood was named.

One day we hiked into the thick woods past the dead end of Rickover Road and discovered an enclave of small, deteriorating dwellings. One structure, more a shack than a house, was abandoned and easily entered for our perusal—until an angry man appeared at the front door, sending us flying home.

It was easy in such an environment to pretend we lived in another time. But none of our perambulations prepared me for the awe I felt when I encountered, around 1961 or '62, a huge quartzite boulder next to my elementary school. Construction of the extension of Connecticut Avenue had destroyed most of the old community, along with a nearby field where we played softball. The highway construction crew had found and removed this boulder from their path and for some reason placed it on end on the school grounds. A crude placard stood in front of the yellowish stone, telling the story of star-crossed Indian lovers, denied marriage by their parents, who had killed themselves by dashing their heads against this “Bash Rock.” Indians? In my neighborhood? A truly ancient world suddenly opened up for me—itsself dashed when I

realized the hoax. The name of the prehistoric “period” during which this romantic tragedy had supposedly unfolded was suspiciously similar to the surname of my school’s stern and not-so-popular principal.

Embarrassment about being “had” over, a seed was planted. I wanted to know what the land was like and who was living on it before our house had been built in 1959. My parents couldn’t help me much, but later my father related that the name “Hermitage” was printed on a deed or plat in our possession. It named an easement—the use and care of which was assigned to bordering homeowners—behind our backyard and stretching to the junction of the two local creeks. During visits home on breaks from college and after graduating, I often walked the paths of my childhood and beyond looking for clues about the area’s history. In 1975 I knocked on the door of the last house still standing—on a hill above Connecticut Avenue—from the old community beyond the end of Rickover Road. A young woman answered the door and told me that her grandfather, then living in a modern house nearby, might be able to answer my questions about the old houses’ history. She gave me his address, but to my everlasting regret I never contacted him. On rare outings to historical archives in libraries in later years I ran across reports and documents that provided some information and occasionally maps of the area between Kensington and Wheaton. A manila folder labeled “Local History” gradually thickened in one of my file cabinets. But by this point I had a career, a family, and little time to pursue what I figured would never interest anyone but myself and maybe a sibling.

As with many White people, the shock of George Floyd’s brutal death by Minneapolis police in May 2020 forced me to think hard about my own relationship to race and racial justice in the contemporary United States. My thoughts gravitated toward my ignorance as a young person that the land I grew up on and knew had been worked for a century and half by enslaved people—captive, uncompensated, lacking any control over their lives. And it occurred to me to try to learn as an adult who had lived and worked on this land, to the point, if possible, of being able to “say their names” and in so doing to connect, however inadequately, to their humanity. This quest became a pandemic project that continues today. I was lucky to find that Don Kaiser, an old school friend who had grown up in the nearby Rock Creek Palisades neighborhood, shares my interest in local history. He also possesses a talent for mining the Internet for old documents and turning the metes and bounds of colonial surveys into plats that be superimposed on modern maps. Together we’ve spent countless hours poring over this material, supplemented by conversations with local historians, archivists, and Black residents of nearby Ken-Gar and elsewhere. And while the historical detail is still fuzzy and often confusing, the story is becoming clearer with time. Somewhat to my surprise, we’ve come up with dozens of names (mostly first names, but some complete) of human beings who are likely to have lived and toiled in or near Rock Creek Woods prior to the abolition of slavery in Maryland in November 1864.

Not surprisingly, it’s been easier to learn about the White enslaver ownership of Rock Creek Woods than about those who were enslaved on the land. The mysterious name Hermitage, it turns out, goes back to a 1689 land grant, awarded by the third Lord Baltimore, Charles Calvert, to a top governing official of the Maryland colony, William Joseph. Joseph’s son, who inherited the property, seems likely to have had a grist or sawmill very near Rock Creek Woods, one of the first mills in what’s now Montgomery County. The creek

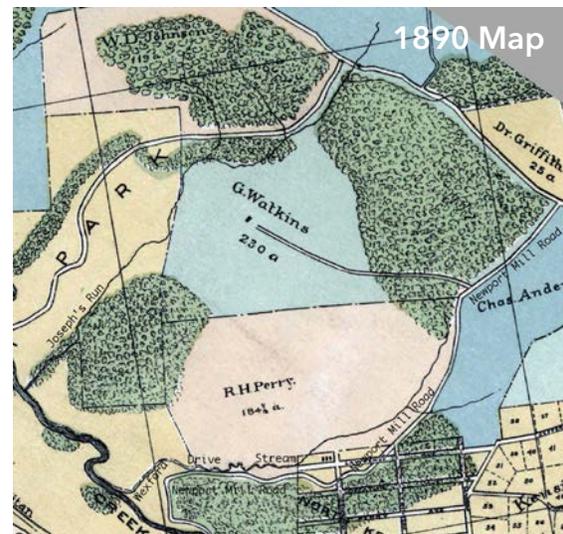


west of Rickover Road still bears its historical name, Joseph's Mill Branch (now often shortened to Joseph's Branch or Joseph's Run).

Later 18th-century owners of the land were Thomas Butler and Shadrack Hyatt, through whom the land under Rock Creek Woods passed briefly before settling into more than a century of ownership by several generations of family named Duvall. (This family—along with Barack Obama, Dick and Liz Cheney, and actor Robert Duvall today—were descendants of a 17th-century French Huguenot immigrant to Maryland named Marin DuVal, later Mareen Duvall.) Visitors to Trinity Episcopal Church in Bowie, MD, can still see, leaning against an exterior wall of the old brick church, a headstone of one of these Duvall owners that was retrieved from the family cemetery on the banks of Joseph's Mill Branch near Rickover or Adams Drive. Sadly, the exact location of the cemetery is now lost, but we can be confident the family's mansion, itself called The Hermitage, was located for nearly two centuries on the high point of Adams Drive, just above the upper end of Rickover Road.

We are reasonably confident that each person whose name we have identified either worked on or had a close connection to the land that became Rock Creek Woods, or at least worked in a tightly-bounded area for which I invented the name Newport Valleys. (Newport for mills that existed for a century and a half where Ken-Gar Palisades Park sits today, Valleys for the tributaries like Joseph's Mill Branch that slope down to Rock Creek from Wheaton Triangle.)

Saddest of these names of enslaved is that of Caroline Landick. A 1831 newspaper notice alerted White Montgomery County readers that this 23-year-old had escaped from the owner of a plantation, one Sarah Duvall. This plantation, we're confident, covered Rock Creek Woods or the eastern portion of Veirs Mill Village, or possibly both. Ms. Landick was described as having a "grim and down look," an unsurprising detail since she bore scars on her shoulders from who knows how many whippings. A handsome reward was offered for her capture, and her captors were instructed to identify her by tearing down the back of her multi-hued cotton and linsey dress to verify her scarred back. I've been unable to find out what became of her. But in my imagination she works her way down Joseph's Mill Branch, just as I and friends would do 130 years later—safely, living our privileged, suburban lives. At the tributary's mouth with Rock Creek, she turns upstream, north, hoping to make it through woods and across farm fields to Sandy Spring. In that Quaker community, most Black people are free wage workers and may be able to help her. As she stumbles up Rock Creek, perhaps with the sound of dogs not far off, imagination fails me, and fear for her outcome takes over.



My research with Don continues, in part with the hope someday connecting with descendants of those enslaved where I grew up. Perhaps our work will help some people learn names and stories of their ancestors. And in part I simply hope to understand a bit better the stain of historic enslavement and racism and their legacy in today's society. Several groups in Kensington oriented to history and antiracism graciously offered me an evening to present my findings last September at the town office, and a video of that presentation is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFcvC3k74kU>. I regularly update a rather lengthy report on the project, freely available in PDF format at <https://bit.ly/3BPQ84W>. I welcome interest and reactions among those who live in Rock Creek Woods today.

New neighbors: Ian Magee and Brooke Minters

Ian and Brooke moved into 4019 Ingersol (former home of Molly and Dan Yorkowski) at the beginning of February. It's their first home together and they couldn't be more excited to live in such a lovely neighborhood. They like their Goodman home and convenient, yet pleasantly quiet location.

Ian was born in D.C. and grew up in Maryland. He taught math in D.C. secondary schools for several years. He now is an insurance company data analyst who focuses on building catastrophic weather models while finishing a second master's degree. Brooke grew up in Los Angeles, earned a BA at Sarah Lawrence College, and an MA in journalism at UC Berkeley. She became Executive Video Producer at *Politico* and later joined *The Verge*, a technology news website, as Editorial Director of Audio. For relaxation and fun, both enjoy playing tennis together and cooking scrumptious meals. Brooke likes to garden and looks forward to spring.



Farewell to neighbors Helen and Cedric Beachem

Helen and her first husband, Allen Sperling, were RCW original owners, moving to 3600 Spruell Drive in 1960. They had four children, Dan, Susan, David, and Michael. They separated in 1979 and divorced in 1980. While raising children, Helen was involved in many RCW activities including dance lessons with neighborhood couples, book club, and volunteer work with the county Mental Health Association.

Not long after her separation, Helen and Cedric Beachem met by chance at the New Carrollton Amtrak station. They were seated on the same bench waiting for the train and started to chat. They sat together on the train and then back home began to see each other regularly. They married in 1983 and moved into Helen's house. Some years later when Helen returned from a visit to NYC to New Carrollton by train, Cedric surprised her with a bottle of champagne and two glasses, a most appropriate moment at the most appropriate places to celebrate the anniversary of their first meeting. Never had a glass of champagne tasted so wonderful to Helen. Deciding to downsize, on December 1, 2022, they moved to Five Star Premium Residences on Connecticut Avenue. Tragically, on December 18, Cedric, 90, passed away of a cerebral hemorrhage. Cedric is survived by wife, Helen, and sons from a previous marriage, Frank and Thomas. His son Donald predeceased him.

Cedric had a very distinguished career as a metallurgical engineer. After graduation from North Carolina State, he volunteered for the U.S. Air Force in the Korean War. Following discharge he joined the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) and worked there until retirement in 1997. He was named Chief Scientist and head of the Fractologist and Failure Analysis staff. He was elected Fellow of the American Society of Metals and received the Navy Superior Service Award for finding a cause of a problem that saved the Navy millions of dollars. After retiring at NRL Cedric worked as a naval consultant and pursued a lifelong ambition to fly as a pilot when he became part owner of a small aircraft. Helen remembers when he flew her over Hawaii on a beautiful scenic tour while on vacation. He joined a men's club called "The Fossils." Helen graduated from Hunter College and began teaching as was expected of women then. In 1975 she went back for a Master's in Psychology at Antioch University. Hired by the U.S. Army Research Institute as a Research Psychologist, she administered an Army-wide program of On-going Research Reporting.