

## **The Birth of the Montgomery County Civic Federation**

by Charles Wolff

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The rapid growth in the 1920s of Washington's suburban bedroom communities had already created dozens of locally-focused civic groups. But a single event in 1925 galvanized the inner suburbs and led to the urgent birth of the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) to focus on broader issues.

The story involves the dominant Washington newspaper of the day, The Evening Star, and a landowner from a famous family who was a major figure in Montgomery County and the State. Many civic groups near Friendship Heights, Bethesda, and Silver Spring sprang into action because of a secretive deal in Virginia that gave a private company the power of eminent domain (i. e., to seize large amounts of land of its own choosing and pay for it later).

This report is based on my research at the Library of Congress, preceded by personal comments on the 1920's. Square brackets enclose references to The Evening Star newspaper.

### **----- THE TIMES -----**

There was a great lifting of spirits after the end of World War I, whose demoralizing trench warfare was prolonged and especially deadly. Optimism and investment soared, especially in the stock market, which came to resemble a casino. The Dow Jones Industrial Average nearly quadrupled from its low in 1920 to its high before the 1929 crash.

It was appropriately called "The Roaring Twenties". President Coolidge famously answered, "The business of America is business". In such an atmosphere, proposals to build something were greeted with a presumption that whatever it was, it was probably a good thing.

Socially, the 1920's saw young adults further abandoning Victorian customs. In this respect the decade was a short-lived, mini-prelude to the more consequential 1960's. Youthful exploration of freedom spurred one of the most energy-intensive dances, the Charleston, whose female participants were called "flappers". Not everyone was pleased.

In traditional circles, "Women's Leagues" were a big part of civic activity. They financed ongoing charity programs for people in severe need and broadly advocated for community betterment. Their work was frequently reported in Washington's citywide newspapers---an attention that we would covet in vain today. Many neighborhood civic associations also existed. Often they were created by the developer of a housing tract to use as a bragging point when selling the houses.

In sum, the times were optimistic and economically vigorous, except on the farms. It was harder to prevent someone's flawed idea of "progress" than it is today. Montgomery County had no zoning laws or Planning Board in 1925. Unwelcome proposals often had to be addressed in far-off Baltimore or Annapolis, or just tolerated.

## ----- The Belt Line -----

A new company had managed to extract a tremendous benefit from the Corporation Commission of Virginia while remaining completely out of public view. They obtained the right of eminent domain to lay out a right-of-way for a freight railroad called "The Belt Line". It would start north from Alexandria, cross the Potomac River south of Glen Echo near the D. C. border. Then it would proceed through Maryland inside today's Capital Beltway to surround 2/3 of the District of Columbia.

The "Washington and Loughborough Belt Line and Terminal Co." had no timid plan. They wanted nothing less than to change the Washington area's overwhelming dependence on the federal government. They hoped to make this region a "national transportation center and a self-sustaining commercial city" that could survive even without the existing federal activities [19 Jul 1925, p. 6]. The initial node of activity in Maryland was to be located roughly between the Potomac River and River Road within one mile of the D. C. boundary.

Specific goals for this location were to:

- 1) Build a new rail bridge over the Potomac south of Glen Echo in Maryland.
- 2) Relieve alleged rail congestion with a huge switching yard near the Potomac and new bypass of D. C.
- 3) Create a commercial center with warehouses, freight depots, and refrigeration plants.
- 4) Vigorously induce "light manufacturing plants and other industrial projects to locate there".

The freight line in Maryland would have passed near Bradley Hills, Somerset, and between Chevy Chase and Kensington. Then by Silver Spring (between Forest Glen and Woodside) and onto Takoma Park and Prince Georges County. The entire route hugged close to the D. C. line but never inside because D. C. zoning banned its uses.



#### -----BELT LINE ISSUES-----

The main issue, of course, was that Maryland suburbs close to Washington were then residential with almost no commercial activity. Quiet bedroom communities were horrified at the thought of frequent freight trains rumbling by and feared their property values would plummet. The belt line company argued that its line would not “tend in any way to destroy or harm outlying residential property” [26 Jul 1925, p. 16]. The company added that they were the largest landowner (2000 acres) along the affected route and most of their land was slated for fine residential development. Why would they degrade their own property?

There were other issues. Was there really a rail congestion problem in Washington that needed solving? The Pennsylvania and B & O railroads would later say that there was no current or foreseeable need. Also, many houses and land parcels would have to be condemned because a rail line cannot make sharp turns around obstacles. Finally, did citizens want to convert the suburbs to a more commercial or industrial character?

#### -----SECRETIVE PROCESS-----

Permission for the Belt Line was a done deal in Virginia when its citizens eventually heard of it. Later, the Washington Chamber of Commerce would be told “how the project was railroaded through the Corporation Commission of Virginia and left citizens of the latter state no redress except an appeal to a body of a sister state” [2 Sep 1925, page 1].

The audacious plan came to light on 17 Jul 1925 when the Evening Star reported that the company had petitioned the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) for permission to exercise its charter rights as granted by Virginia. Would interstate reciprocity encourage Maryland to ratify the Belt Line’s right of eminent domain?

The precedent of the Virginia Corporation Commission was not encouraging. Virginia had approved the belt line quietly, even though they must have known the populace would be angry when finally aware. [“Virginians Join Fight on Belt Line”, 22 Aug 1925, p. 2]

The same secretive rush job seemed set up for Maryland. Our PSC had scheduled a public hearing (and maybe immediate approval of the project) only six days after their perfunctory notice in the Montgomery Advocate (Rockville). That notice was the very first time the public learned that this freight line around Washington had been proposed. [23 Jul 1925, p. 1]

People back then knew they had a lot to fear. In their not-too-distant past, several railroads could seize land from mid-continent to the Pacific Ocean. They had seen belt lines built around a several eastern cities. Montgomery County residents knew they would need widespread protests and need some powerful or very influential supporters. Fortunately, two remarkably well located individuals stood up and took action.

#### -----MAJOR SUPPORTERS-----

**Colonel E. Brooke Lee** was born in 1892 in Blair House (across from the White House). He served in France as a U. S. Army major during World War I, receiving several high medals. Later he became a colonel in the Maryland National Guard. At birth, his family was already prominent and remains so (e. g., his grandsons in Montgomery County: Blair Lee IV, columnist and Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group).

Brooke Lee was elected in 1919 as Comptroller of the State of Maryland where he expanded its scope toward the powerful office it is today. Then, Governor Ritchie appointed him secretary of state (1923-1925). Clearly, he was well integrated into the power structure and the Democratic Party by 1925.

Lee's business was real estate development, to which the belt line posed an obvious threat. He strongly favored creating the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) and would co-author its plan to obtain zoning authority for the County. He also chaired two MCCF committees, but probably not simultaneously.

**Oliver Owen Kuhn** was the News Manager of The Evening Star, a perfect position to inform and influence public opinion. He published extensive coverage of the belt line and, especially, of efforts to mobilize the citizenry to derail it. I found 27 of their articles on these matters. In 1925 the Star had the largest daily circulation (100,000) and printed twice as many pages on a typical weekday as the Washington Post. Its importance continued until the 1960's when widespread television viewing gradually killed off America's evening newspapers.

Mr. Kuhn's actions as a private citizen were of comparable significance. He was a leading figure in bringing civic groups together, organizing public meetings, and inspiring their opposition to the belt line. For example, when representing a special committee formed at a mass meeting (below), he told the Washington Chamber of Commerce that the belt line "was one of the greatest menaces which had faced Washington and its development in a long time" [2 Sep 1925, p. 1] After his crucial work, Oliver Kuhn would be elected as the first president of the Montgomery County Civic Federation.

Civic groups in Montgomery County met urgently and sent representatives to two mass meetings to find a unified strategy against the belt line. Also in opposition were the Chambers of Commerce of Washington and Silver Spring.

#### -----THE PETITION-----

The Belt Line and Terminal Co. had simply petitioned the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) in Baltimore to grant it permission to exercise its rights and privileges under its certificate of incorporation. Approval would automatically include the right of eminent domain already in the company's charter.

When news of the belt line's petition came out on July 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, Brooke Lee immediately asked the PSC to delay the Public Hearing scheduled for July 23<sup>rd</sup>. He pointed out that southern Montgomery County "is not a commercial area but is entirely devoted to extensive residential development". He asked the PSC to make no final decision until the people "that may be so vitally affected can determine what the proposal really is, and consequently, their attitude toward the proposal". [23 Jul 1925, p. 1]

The belt line company responded that “Washington and its environs will be tremendously benefitted by the belt line and terminal project”. [26 Jul 1925, p. 16] They repeated that residential values would not be hurt.

Having heard from Lee---such an important Maryland official---the PSC postponed the hearing for “three weeks at least”.

#### -----THE FIRST MASS MEETING-----

At the height of vacation season, Montgomery County citizens managed to hold a mass meeting at the invitation of the Bradley Hills Community League to decide how to respond. The crowd of 400 filled “a large assembly room” at the Montgomery Country Club. Washington’s Evening Star was a big help by prominently publicizing the meeting in advance [“Maryland Communities Fire First Gun Tomorrow Night”, 6 Aug 1925, p. 2]. Afterwards there was an extremely long, blow-by-blow report of what various speakers had said. [8 Aug 1925, p. 2]

Oliver Kuhn, a colorful speaker, recalled how property values fell due to other belt lines and said history “showed that property owners got out with the first announcement like rats running from a burning building”. He had brought a copy of the railroad’s petition to the PSC and “proceeded to tear it to pieces”. [8 Aug 1925, p. 2] Brooke Lee, by letter, recommended that rail and industrial development be confined to those areas where it had already started. The meeting voted to reject the belt line without a dissenting voice and formed a special committee including Mr. Kuhn to present their views to the Public Service Commission and to others.

In the next two weeks, documents of opposition were being prepared by, at least, the Town of Somerset, Glen Echo, the Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, Woodside Civic Association, Woodside Park, and North Woodside.

#### ----- MCCF IS FORMED-----

Having found overwhelming public opposition to the belt line, activists assembled in small groups where the idea took hold of a federation of civic groups to address affairs that affect the County as a whole. It should have “a number of standing committees” whose “duty will be to keep an eagle eye on every project” and on legislation so as to promptly handle those meriting federation attention. [11 Nov 1925, p. 11] Walter Tuckerman hosted a meeting at his home that drafted a constitution.

By mid-November they were ready to call a second mass meeting to form a federation to fight “attempts to industrialize the area” and to urge “developing the county into one of the most beautiful residential suburbs of the National Capital”. [17 Nov 1925, p. 22] The constitution was adopted and Maryland’s Secretary of State, Brooke Lee, “spoke highly of the great good “ an MCCF could do. He urged cooperation between farm and town interests and said “the influence which we will have ... will undoubtedly be in direct proportion to the extent and value of our proposal”. [20 Nov 1925, p. 16]

The Montgomery County Civic Federation was fully born on November 30, 1925 when the first official delegates from 18 civic associations assembled and elected Oliver Kuhn of Alta Vista as the first MCCF president and Frank Hewitt of Silver Spring as vice president. The president stressed that MCCF must be nonpolitical and said it was “formed of both Republicans and Democrats, ... acclaimed by Socialists and indorsed by Prohibitionists”. The Evening Star printed pictures of six MCCF officers. [1 Dec 1925, p. 4]

### MCCF's 18 Founding Organizations

Alta Vista Community League	Fort Bayard Hills Citizens' Association
Battery Park Citizens' Association	Friendship Heights Citizens' Committee
Bradley Hills Community League	Garrett Park
Cabin John Park Citizens' Association	Kensington Home, School & Community Ass'n
Capital View Citizens' Association	Rockville
Chevy Chase	Silver Spring Citizens' Association
Chevy Chase Section 3	Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce
Chevy Chase Section 4	Takoma Park
Drummond	Town of Somerset

There's something we've lost since then. They had a spirit for making Washington and its suburbs the finest-looking capital in the world. In 1925, that included its "beautiful boulevards leading into and out of the city". [2 Sep 1925, p.1 and p. 2] How sad to see some of our main roads today.

### -----MAJOR EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS-----

From the start a strong committee structure was built in to fully study issues before presenting them to all delegates for decision. The initial concerns of members were zoning, police and fire protection, and poor road restoration by WSSC after laying pipes. Areas west of Rock Creek had no local fire protection. Magnanimous crews from D. C. were putting out some of their fires for free. MCCF stimulated Bethesda and others to seek better fire solutions. [13 Jul 1926]

The MCCF prepared an extensive study of the legal basis of zoning. They presented it to the state legislature to ultimately obtain enabling authority for zoning in Montgomery County.

Only two years after its birth, the MCCF and the business community achieved the creation of the Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) in 1927. One year later the first county zoning law was passed for southern areas.

For the last 25 years I've attended MCCF meetings. With the normal ups and downs as officers change, the group still upholds the original standards---a nonpartisan federation of civic groups from all over the county, identifying issues of countywide significance, considering them in committee, deciding their fate in the full assembly of delegates, and lobbying official bodies to act in the broad public interest.

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