

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Montgomery College and the Battle For Block 69**

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Last week, readers learned of some notorious actions taken by Montgomery College in its early years. A new state law in 1969 resulted in an independent Board of Trustees taking over College governance. Unfortunately, they hit the ground running...in the wrong direction. However, what then came out of a decade of increasingly bad behavior by the College - that all but transformed it into a renegade institution - was an unprecedented, new planning and cultural public policy, historic preservation. If not for that bad behavior, Montgomery County's historic preservation law probably would have come much later, been much weaker, and the county would now have fewer historic resources to use, to appreciate and to learn from.

In March 1970, the College began working in earnest to buy all 22 houses that made up land adjacent to the Takoma Park campus, a block bounded by Philadelphia, Takoma, New York, and Chicago Avenues known as Block 69. At first, the College said it would only buy from willing sellers. Soon it was talking about a "friendly condemnation suit." By July 1971, it was prepared to start condemning houses. Half of the owners insisted they would never sell willingly. In November 1971, the Planning Board voted against the College's plan to expand into Block 69. The College Trustees, asserting their higher authority as a state agency, then voted to overrule the Planning Board's decision. The County Council and the State Board of Public Works responded to the residents' opposition and delayed their decisions related to funding the expansion.

August 1972: "The stripping this week of an old Victorian-styled home purchased by Montgomery College for expansion of its Takoma Park campus sent shivers through the remaining block residents who continue the fight to keep the college from moving in. The Supplee house salvaging goes on and the opponents of the college get hotter. This week the Save Takoma Park Committee shot off telegrams to Council President... Hovsepian and County Executive... Gleason saying 'In the name of humanity stop the stripping of the irreplaceable Victorian home at 609 New York Ave...' The Save Block 69 Committee sent a similar telegram to both men, this one charging the block residents have been subjected to 'psychological warfare for two years'."

September 23, 1972: "Etta Mae Davis, 59, was about to take a bath in her home on New York Avenue in Takoma Park yesterday morning when she heard a crash at the vacant house next door. 'My God, it's bulldozers,' she thought, and dressed for action. Indeed, a bulldozer was battering the big Victorian-style house next door. Mrs. Davis waited until its driver paused to allow removal of some electric lines, then climbed over the rubble into the ruined living room and refused to leave. The bulldozer stopped. Mrs. Davis stayed for nine hours until she and nine of her neighbors who came to join her were arrested on charges of trespassing on public property and led away peacefully by Takoma Park police.

"It was the latest and most dramatic confrontation to date between the residents of the block and officials of Montgomery College. The two-year college wants to destroy 22 homes on the block to expand its campus. So far it has purchased about 10, demolishing one last year, and is authorized to acquire the rest through condemnation proceedings as a last resort. The residents and the college have been fighting in the courts and before Montgomery County and state agencies for more than a year. Yesterday's all-day protest took on the air of a neighborhood party. College students strolled over during and after classes, and college instructors and administrators discussed the problem of Block 69 while standing on campus across the street from the demonstration.

"Residents charged that they had received no advance warning from the college administration and the destruction was an attempt 'to terrorize the community.' A spokesman for the college confirmed that residents had not been told because it feared that public announcement would attract a crowd. Mrs. Davis and the others who were arrested, including three juveniles, were released on their own recognizance. The offense they are charged with carries a maximum fine of \$1000 or six months in jail. After the 10 were led away by police, the bulldozer started up again and resumed battering the house to splinters."

The residents of Block 69, and many others in Takoma Park and Montgomery County, were energized by their outrage over the secret demolition plans and the subsequent arrests. Soon after this incident, a number of Takoma Park residents began to do research that resulted in the successful nomination and placement in 1976 of two areas of their city, including Block 69, on the National Register of Historic Places as historic districts. While this did not prevent future demolitions, it did lay the groundwork for Block 69's Victorian houses to be seen as special because of their unique historic value. In fact, it was Montgomery College's relentless insistence on demolishing one of these Victorian structures known as Carroll House that caused the College's final defeat.

The College bought Carroll House in 1971. A few years later, it announced plans to demolish the building and replace it with a new structure. This led to a July 1975 letter being sent by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to the College Trustees urging them to save the building: "Takoma Park and in particular block 69 has a significant architectural heritage which makes a vital contribution to the quality of life of the city. It is often true that conversion proves less costly than demolition and construction of a new building." The Planning Board then turned down the demolition plan, acknowledging that the College could vote to overrule that decision.

Instead, the College equivocated about what to do with Carroll House. The community asked that it be sold back to a family to restore and live in it. People became increasingly outraged that the house was allowed to deteriorate due to a complete lack of maintenance. The College finally announced in the summer of 1977 that it would use the building until April 1978. When someone made an actual offer to buy the property several months later, the College turned it down and instead decided to demolish it and create a park. This plan was met with total incredulity by everyone, including other government agencies, because there were already 2 large parks within a few blocks of the College. Anger toward the College was now far greater than it had been after the arrest of the 10 residents in 1972.

"Montgomery College, despite a tax-funded report from their own architects recommending that the house be put back into single-family use, despite the Mayor and City Council, the County Council, the County Executive, the Planning Board; despite the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Maryland Historic Trust, Montgomery County Historic Society, the County Committee to the Maryland Historic Trust, and despite all of the people who have repeatedly pleaded with them to save this house, took steps to force the permit to be issued and actually sent in machinery to start demolition. Only because the permit was denied, did they have to stop. It is apparent that it is no longer only citizens who are sickened by this case of institutional blockbusting."

January 19, 1978: "The Montgomery County Council unanimously passed an emergency bill this week, placing a moratorium on the demolition of historic sites until July 1, 1980. County Executive James P. Gleason asked the council to introduce the bill in the wake of several disputes over the future of historic buildings. The most crucial of those disputes has been the Takoma Park community's fight to save the Carroll House. Montgomery College wanted to tear it down to make room for a park the college planned to build. But the community protested to Gleason and the county council that the house was a historic site and should be preserved. Gleason instructed the Department of Environmental Protection to deny the college's request for a demolition permit. The college appealed the action "

Aug. 16, 1978: "The Carroll House... which has been threatened several times with demolition, was given another reprieve by a circuit court judge this week. Judge Philip Fairbanks dismissed an appeal from [the College], which was trying to destroy the house at 7700 Takoma Ave... Takoma Park residents and the city govt. have fought for years to preserve the house, and the County Council has included it in the historic preservation law. The college was denied a demolition permit by the county, and a moratorium has been imposed on all demolition of historic houses. The college has argued, however, that it is not subject to county codes because it is a state agency. Judge Fairbanks dismissed the college's appeal and said that if the college begins demolition, an injunction could be sought to halt it."

Feb. 23, 1979: "Legal questions have clouded the fate of the historic Carroll House in Takoma Park. The county still intends to buy the Victorian structure... and is negotiating with [the College] to set a price. Because the college is a state agency and owns the house, he said, and because the house was designated as an historic site by a local agency, the county CANNOT force the college to make the repairs. Because the state takes legal precedence over the county, however, it is unlikely that the county could force the college to do anything by way of preserving the house."

Montgomery College got a new president in the summer of 1979. Jan. 14, 1980: The Board "authorizes the sale of the property and improvement at 7700 Takoma Ave... to the highest bidder." The sale was completed in May 1980. A decade of some of the worst behavior by any government agency in County history was at an end. It took every branch of government and hundreds of county residents to stop the College's most destructive plans in the '70s. It would be another 20 years before another plan, again in the face of community opposition, would result in the College reverting to some of the same behaviors it used in the '70s in its single-minded effort to win at all costs. And just as Montgomery County got an excellent historic preservation law in 1979, courtesy of the College, so did other good outcomes result in the College's bad behavior in 2001 and 2002. I'm looking forward to more of these good outcomes based on how I expect the College will continue to react inappropriately to challenges to its authority in 2008, this time to the community's growing demands that the Maryland College of Art and Design property be turned into a park instead of a subdivision.