

“Federation Corner” column
The Montgomery Sentinel, 21 May 2015

On the birth of Montgomery County Civic Federation

By Charles Wolff

The Federation was formed 90 years ago in reaction to plans for a freight railroad called the belt line that would have circled most of the District of Columbia inside today’s Capital Beltway. This is part 2 of my report that began in the Sentinel, [7 May 2015](#). (Square brackets cite Washington’s Evening Star newspaper.)

The audacious railroad 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. This included the right to seize land for the route and for sprawling switching yards and terminals.

Permission for the Belt Line was already a done deal in Virginia. They 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] 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 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 on 16 July 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 knew they had a lot to fear. In their not-too-distant past, several railroads were allowed to seize land from mid-continent to the Pacific Ocean. They had seen belt lines built around a several eastern cities. The precedent of the Virginia Corporation Commission was not encouraging. 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 to help.

-----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, 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 as the Washington Post on a typical weekday. 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, 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.

Also opposing the belt line were the Washington and Silver Spring Chambers of Commerce and, of course, many neighborhood civic groups in Montgomery County.

When news of the belt line's petition came out on July 17th and 19th, Brooke Lee immediately asked the PSC to delay the Public Hearing scheduled for July 23rd. 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."

Next week, Part 3 will conclude this tale about the birth of the federation.