

IV. Gilbert's Town

By Kit Watts

At the time Judson Washburn took A. G. Daniells and the location committee on a streetcar that dead ended in Takoma Park, the town had only been incorporated as a municipality for 13 years.

A Yankee entrepreneur, Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, had a hunch that suburban development would follow along the B & O Railroad corridor. In November 1883 he bought 90-odd acres astride the DC-Maryland line.¹¹

Little of the area's history before then is known. But among the settlers of what became Takoma Park was the Samuel M'Closky Fenton family. The Civil war battle of Bull Run demolished their home in Virginia. They moved to Maryland, buying a farm that lay along Long Branch and Sligo Creeks. Young Samuel, the third of three sons, was a carver. An unusual monument to his thoughts and spare time in 1865 is within a stone's throw of Sligo Church and was on the property which Seventh-day Adventists bought in 1903. It is commonly known as the Presidents' Tree near the Maple Avenue bridge over Sligo Creek.¹²

Indian trails crisscrossed the dense forest of this area and tobacco traders followed the route. It was an overnight camping spot famous for crystal clear springs near the site where John Nevins Andrews School was eventually built.

The name of the town itself is credited to Mrs. Ida Summy, a friend of Gilbert's. She thought Takoma would be appropriate for the Indian word means "high up" or "near heaven." The area has an elevation of 300 feet, and compared with Washington, D.C., was a refreshing change from the city's mud and pestilence, stagnant canals, and marshy fields. Gilbert substituted the "k" to distinguish the name from that of Tacoma in Washington State and added "park" to give it a euphonious sound.¹³

"No malaria, no mosquitoes, pure air, delightful shade, and a most abundant supply of pure water" was the slogan adapted in 1888 to induce well-to-do city dwellers to succumb to the country delights of the town.¹⁴ Many did just that and large, fashionable hotels were built to accommodate them. (These were destroyed in a series of fires over the next decade or so.)

Permanent Takoma Park residents opened the first public grammar school in 1888. In 1889 the community's Christians built an ecumenical chapel. (In 1893 "Union Chapel" on the corner of Maple and Tulip was sold to the Presbyterian Church.)

In 1890, when the community incorporated and Gilbert was elected mayor, one of the first acts was to improve the bumpy clay streets and the three-foot wide wooden walk that followed them through town. There were no water mains or sewer facilities yet and few street lights.¹⁵

The coming of Seventh-day Adventist institutions would have impact on all that.

Footnotes:

11. Takoma Park, Photo History of Its People By Its People, 1883-1958, p.5.
12. "Local Beach Tree Holds Mystery And Solution to Civil War Incident," Richard J. Barnett, Sligonian, May 17, 1957.
13. Takoma Park, p. 6, 7.
14. Sligonian, January 23, 1959.
15. Takoma Park, p. 14.