

# THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY STORY

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## BETHESDA PARK: "THE HANDSOMEST PARK IN THE UNITED STATES"

by William G. Allman

If asked what late-19th century amusement park might have claimed to be "the handsomest park in the United States," first to come to mind would probably be part of the Coney Island complex or, on a more local level, perhaps Glen Echo Park or Marshall Hall. This boast, however, appeared in an 1893 newspaper advertisement for Bethesda Park, a short-lived (1891-1896?) and rather obscure amusement facility in Montgomery County.<sup>1</sup> In this, the centennial year of its inception, an examination of its brief history provides an interesting study of the practices of recreation and amusement in the 1890's and the role they played in suburban development.

The last decade of the 19th century was the first decade of the era of the electric street railway, a major improvement in public transportation that contributed greatly to suburban development around American cities. With a significant extension of the radius of practicable commuting from the city center, developers could select land that lay beyond jurisdictional boundaries, embodied desirable topographical features, or fulfilled the "rural ideal" which was becoming increasingly attractive to urban Americans.<sup>2</sup> The rural Bethesda District fell within such an extended commuting radius from the city of Washington, and had been skirted by the the county's first major transportation improvement - the Metropolitan Branch of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad completed in 1873.

Obviously, development was the most flexible when a developer built his own street railway to provide access to his chosen property. In turn, in order to increase ridership the railway could provide electric power for the operation of an independent attraction, such as an amusement park, at the end of the rail line. Such patronage, important to the solvency of the railway prior to serious settlement along its route, also provided a stream of prospective customers for that suburban land. Simultaneous operation in all three categories - land, transportation, and amusements - represented quite a comprehensive approach to suburban development.



Unlike its more illustrious contemporaries - Chevy Chase on the east and Glen Echo on the west - Bethesda was not planned as a single concentrated suburb. Rather, it was an area in which some speculators and established landowners jointly promoted the tools which they believed necessary for the suburban development of their respective properties.

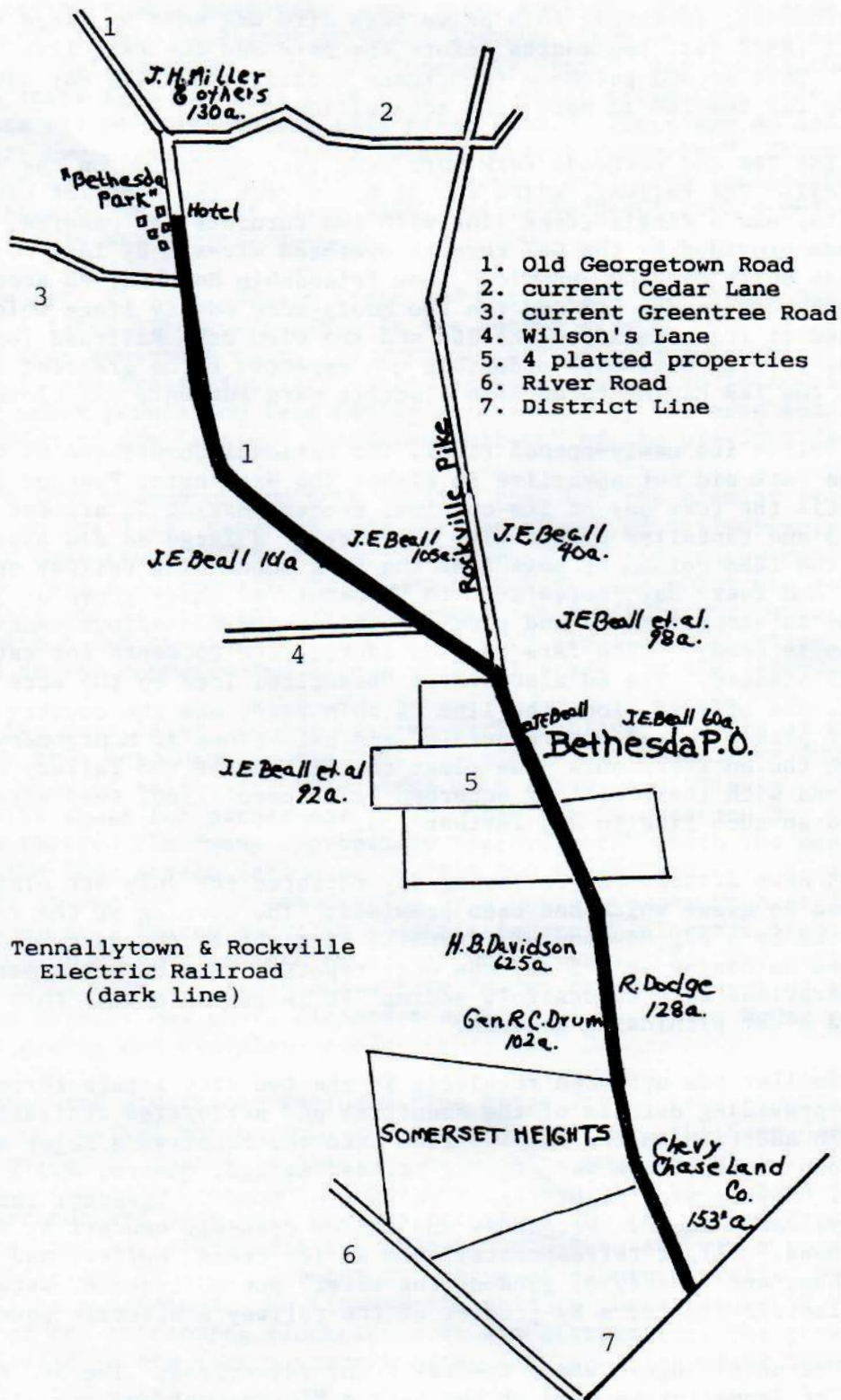
There was, however, a central figure in the development of Bethesda - John E. Beall, a lawyer, real estate broker, and officer of the Georgetown and Tennallytown Railway Company (hereafter the G&T). Shortly before the 1890 opening of that street railway, which ran up what is now Wisconsin Avenue to the District Line, Beall began investing in land in Bethesda and assembled other major Bethesda landowners, most of whom were also associated with the G&T, to incorporate a second line - the Tennallytown and Rockville Electric Railroad (hereafter the T&R).<sup>3</sup> Beall, who was the President, also bought a controlling interest in the Washington and Rockville Turnpike Company to complete necessary right-of-way proceedings.<sup>4</sup>

Although Beall was the owner or co-owner of over 1000 acres along the railway route, his development strategy for this land seems much less focused than the efforts of Francis Newlands in Chevy Chase or the Baltzley brothers in Glen Echo. The property which he best promoted was 194 acres northwest of the District Line, now known as the Town of Somerset. In June 1890, only two months after he and a partner acquired that parcel, they sold the choicest 50 acres, without profit, to a group of scientists from the Department of Agriculture with an agreement that five quality houses would be built "within one year of the completion of an electric railway." The "Agriculture Department Colony" was to be "a cluster of villas, forming a suburb fashioned after the very pleasant ones of Boston and other northern cities." Beall's apparent goal was to use this initial development to attract other settlers for the remaining land of the parcel, and in January 1891 he formed the Somerset Heights Cooperative Land Company. In another profitless transaction in 1890, he sold the choice 125-acre parcel northeast of the Pike at the District Line to Newlands' Chevy Chase Land Company, perhaps envisioning development in the hands of that financially capable firm as a means of contributing to the success of the nearby Somerset tract.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, one Annie Vance was acquiring a vast amount of land northwest of Bethesda, the community then consisting of simply the area around the junction of the Rockville Pike and the Old Georgetown Road. She sold one extremely large tract - 1230 acres just east of Seven Locks Road and about five miles northwest of Bethesda - to the Tennallytown and Rockville Railroad Land Company, formed in April 1891 by Beall, three other railway incorporators, and seven other Bethesda landowners. On one map, this vast tract was laid out with a grid of streets defining large blocks of about 22 acres each, with a larger central block containing the still extant colonial house, Locust Grove. It was through this broadly defined tract that the T&R railway line was to pass on its way to the western end of Rockville. Although this would appear to be the centralized community otherwise missing from the development of Bethesda, apparently it was not actively promoted and no plat of the land was ever recorded with the county.<sup>6</sup>

Another of Vance's purchases lay on the west side of the Old Georgetown Road - the 50½-acre parcel which was to become Bethesda Park. An almost completely tree-covered lot, distinctly different from most of





Simplified tracing from map entitled  
 "The Vicinity of Washington" (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1894)  
 indicating holdings of John E. Beall and associates



the surrounding farmland, this prime park site was sold by Vance to the T&R in April 1891, just two months before the park and the rail line to it were opened. This second purchase from Vance suggests that she may have been fronting for the T&R in both land acquisitions.<sup>7</sup>

The T&R and Bethesda Park both went into operation on the 4th of July, 1891. The railway, which ran 3½ miles from the District Line to the park site, was a single-track line with two turnouts for passing. Electric power was provided by the G&T through overhead wires. By late August a depot was built at "the Junction" (now Friendship Heights) to accommodate transfers between the G&T and the two Montgomery County lines which converged at its terminus - the T&R and the Glen Echo Railroad (operational July 10, 1891). Obviously ridership was expected to be greatest in the summer, the T&R having three open electric cars but only one closed car.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike its newly-opened rival, the National Chautauqua at Glen Echo, Bethesda Park did not advertise in either The Washington Post or The Evening Star until the very day of its opening, thereby making no attempt to forewarn and tantalize prospective customers. A large ad did appear that day in the lead column of page 1 of the Post announcing railway operations "To-day And Every Day Thereafter" to "a beautiful shady grove of 50 acres ... free to excursionists and picnic parties, and a spacious dancing pavilion is ready." The fare was six tickets for 25 cents for cars leaving every 15 minutes. The ad also stated "Beautiful lots by the acre in parcels to suit, are offered along the line of this road, and the country through which it passes is the most beautiful and salubrious in Montgomery county." Although the entrepreneurs made clear the linking of the railway and park operations with their goal of suburban land speculation, they strangely included no such line in any further ads.<sup>9</sup>

A news article the following day repeated the July 4th claims and confirmed an event which had been promised: "The opening of the road was celebrated by a big display of fireworks at night at the park." Activity continued on Sunday July 5 and the Star reported that both the park and the rail operations were successful, adding "It is probable that this place will become a great picnicking grounds."<sup>10</sup>

Smaller ads appeared regularly in the two city papers throughout the summer, providing details of the amenities and activities available at the park. In addition to the railway ride into the country, a major amusement in its own right, there were flying horses, swings, quoits, and a shooting gallery. "Every week night from 7 to 10 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, dance music. Wednesday and Friday open-air concert by the U.S. Marine Band." Light refreshments, such as ice cream, coffee, and sandwiches, and "plenty of good spring water" but no liquors, were available under electric lights, a by-product of the railway's electric power.<sup>11</sup>

Not until August was a special event advertised. The St. Ann's Society of Tennallytown held at the park a "tournament and pic-nic," the "tournament" being a formalized jousting competition similar to those held today. The important aspect of this event, however, was the attraction of the patronage of a group which could utilize the railway to arrive at the park. Although not for a downtown organization, it still represented an opportunity to draw people out through Bethesda.<sup>12</sup>



Activity took a more flamboyant turn, however, with the appearance for two weeks in mid-September of Grace Shannon, "the world's greatest Lady Aeronaut ... Balloon Ascensions and Parachute Jump." Ads touted these events in large type as "FREE FREE FREE" for which extra cars were run "to accommodate all who wish to see this great feat." There was an additional performance two days later, "owing to many urgent requests." These appearances by Grace Shannon were not, however, exclusive engagements as she had appeared in July at River View, one of Bethesda Park's chief rivals, down river from Washington.<sup>13</sup>

The park in 1891, though fresh and attractive, was still not much more than a fancy picnic grounds. In its second season, however, it became more of a true amusement park, the sort of increasingly boisterous, sensational, and exotic facility which was being developed in America for a growing urban population less easily entertained by the more sedate modes of recreation of the "genteel Victorian culture" of the previous decades.<sup>14</sup>

The 1892 season opened much earlier than had the premier season; the first ad, on April 28, reported only the new timing of railway service - every half hour from the District Line but every 15 minutes on Sunday.<sup>15</sup> On May 8, the park's advertising picked up slightly, mentioning the service of refreshments and an "elegant new switchback railroad" (a rudimentary roller-coaster with a car running by force of gravity along an undulating tract, to be turned at the opposite end onto a parallel track for the return ride.)<sup>16</sup>

A few days later, on May 12, the park displayed a large ad which marked the true beginning of its 1892 campaign - "BETHESDA PARK NOW OPEN" with its "Gravity Railroad," cafe, lake with swans, and "Plenty of pretty groves, with seats for picnic parties." Then for "Decoration Day," May 30, large ads recited the "many appropriate improvements" which the managers had made for the 1892 season including: a "\$10,000 Steam Carousel, accommodating 150 people at one time and accompanied by a costly German Orchestrion Organ;" the large switch-back; an electric fountain (electric lights creating color effects on jets of water) which was called "the only one of its kind in this country;" and a cafe "under the management of the celebrated caterer and chef, Alexandre Fortin ... the White House chef under the Arthur and Cleveland administrations."

Games and diversions included "The Prize Bazaar, the Shooting Gallery, the Musical Phonograph, the Electric Battery, the Coon Game, Quoits, the Razzle Dazzle [a seatless undulating roundabout] ... the Cane Board Game, the Baby Game, and many others." Athletic facilities included "tennis grounds and base ball grounds for those who bring their rackets, nets, bats, and balls." There was also a zoo. Security was a concern - "Ample protection to all. Grounds in charge of deputy sheriffs, and best order will be maintained. No liquors are sold on these grounds."<sup>17</sup> Thus, in spite of the increasing flamboyance of its attractions, the park was still oriented to the family trade - after all, who else might invest in a suburban home site?

As the summer of 1892 progressed, the park's advertising blossomed, especially in the Post where ads grew quite large and were occasionally illustrated. For the July 4th weekend, the Park featured an illusionist and an equilibrist "performing in mid-air."<sup>18</sup>



Special entertainment, always advertised as "free," continued to emphasize the daring and exotic. Grace Shannon returned with "Her Company of Practical and Scientific and Experienced Aeronauts," providing balloon ascensions, parachute leaps of "500 feet through space before opening," and trapeze work while descending. On August 3 she was billed as "the only woman ever attempting the perilous feat of moonlight ascension and discharging fireworks from the parachute when 3000 feet in the air." One could also see a volunteer parachute jump by a Washington Post reporter, and a jump by "Daisy, the only living aeronautic dog on earth."<sup>19</sup>

**FREE. | BETHESDA PARK. | FREE.**

**TO - NIGHT**



**7 O'CLOCK SHARP.**

Grand Triple  
**Ascension.**

**THREE PARACHUTE LEAPS.**

The first Parachute carrying  
the Aeronautic Dog,

**DAISY**  
THE SECOND,  
**Miss Pearl La Roy**  
AND THE THIRD,  
**Prof. Charles Scofield.**

**DON'T FAIL TO SEE IT.**  
Leaps from 1,000, 2,000, and 4,000  
feet.

The most marvelous and daring feat ever accomplished.  
 Plenty of open cars. Ample accommodations for all.  
 Take Georgetown and Tennallytown cars at Thirty-second street.



Washington Post  
July 16, 1892

Closer to the ground, but perhaps more exciting, being "in full view of the spectators, 50 feet in the air," were performances by "Prince Leo, King of Tight Wire Walkers." As one of his feats, he "carries a stove to center wire, lights a fire, and cooks and eats a meal."<sup>20</sup>

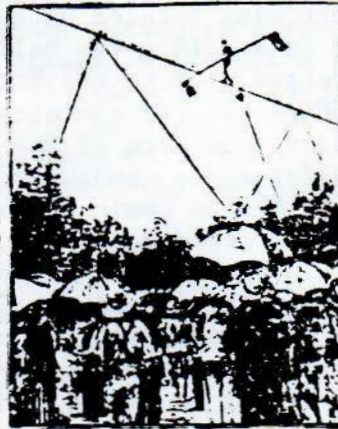


Washington Post  
August 10, 1892

Free. **BETHESDA PARK.** Free.

# PRINCE LEO,

Champion Tight Wire Walker.



**AUG. 10, 1892**

THIS AFTERNOON AT 5.30

THIS EVENING AT 8.30

Remember, Two Grand Performances Daily

Grandest and most thrilling sight ever witnessed. On a slender wire, in full view of the spectators, 50 feet in air.

**DON'T FAIL TO SEE HIM.**

Under management of W. C. Williamson.

Take Fennallytown cars at Thirty-second and M streets.

Not every evening witnessed grandiose entertainment, but even then the exotic was emphasized. During a four-day span between engagements by Grace Shannon, there were stereopticon lectures on the Holy Land, Paris, and Mexico. In late August, concerts by the Imperial Hungarian Gypsy Band filled three nights of the week.<sup>21</sup>

On July 20, the park seems to have succeeded in scheduling a large group outing - "the League of American Wheelmen," who were staging bicycle races on Analostan Island near Georgetown (an event of sufficient magnitude that souvenir silver spoons could be purchased at Washington jeweler R. Harris). This was followed by a repetition of the St. Ann's benefit tournament and a "Tournament for Championship of DC Maryland Virginia." For the encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, a massive reunion of Union veterans of the Civil War held each year in a different city, the Park advertised, "GAR Attention!", before touting the attractiveness of its grand Sunday barbeque and the show which closed its season - "Wichita Jack and His Historical Wild West." Called the "true and correct representation of the sports and amusements of the plains," this two-hour show could be seen twice daily free of charge.<sup>22</sup>



Only at the very end of that 1892 season had the park's second major building been completed - the Bethesda Park Hotel, a three-story Queen Anne-style frame and stone structure which cost \$15,000. This hotel would appear to represent an attempt to elevate the Park from a mere commuter playground to a more substantial resort. In fact, by late August 1893 an ad had called it "the handsomest summer resort in the United States."<sup>23</sup>

Transportation to the park was greatly improved prior to the 1893 season by the double-tracking of the T&R, which permitted more flexible operations. The T&R and G&T, having close corporate ties, also entered into joint service with cars running straight through from Georgetown. Some ads even said that "every car" would do so.<sup>24</sup>

In 1893 the rides and games nearly disappeared from the park's advertising. Instead, the advertising focused on an important addition - an open-air theater inaugurated on May 18. The half-story wooden building with a "decorated front" was erected next to the Hotel at a cost of \$3500. It was built to accommodate 1000 people for concerts and stage shows, events which supplanted the dare-devil entertainers of the previous season.<sup>25</sup> Theatrical productions by traveling opera companies included Gilbert and Sullivan's H.M.S. Pinafore by the Boston Comic Opera and Audran's Mascotte by the Dickson Opera. The latter proceeded to Albaugh's Opera House in Washington, one of the city's principal theaters, which indicates that the Park was attracting high caliber entertainment.<sup>26</sup> The stage, "with complete scenery, for artists to perform their specialities in a proper manner," did play host, however, to some exotic entertainment such as Col. Boone's Trained Lions and "Cyrene, Best Dancer on Earth," whose desirability was measured by an advertised salary of \$350 a week.<sup>27</sup>

If one were to believe the advertisement claims, the park was a showplace. For example, the season's opening advertising claimed "More Amusement for the Money than any Park in this Country." This was followed by ads claiming it to be the "Handsomest Park in the United States," "visited daily by thousands" and "biggest success ever known." Only one ad gave any concrete statistic, however - "visited by 24,000 people up to last evening (Saturday) in one week."<sup>28</sup>

On Friday, October 5, Montgomery County officials raided the park for the alleged sale of intoxicants. Finding the park deserted because it primarily was used only on Sundays that late in the season, they re-staged the raid on Sunday, October 7. In the meantime, A. H. Hart, one of the managers, "skipped town" leaving "behind him a good many people who would be anxious to make settlement with him." The somewhat humorous side effect of this event, however, was that the park was "wide open" and "all enjoyed free rides" and the use of the facilities that day. Although the ads had claimed "This Park remains open all winter," it did not that winter.<sup>29</sup>

New management opened the park on May 1, 1894, as a "first class suburban resort." That it had become prominent in the public awareness was indicated in an 1894 guide to Washington's nightlife which called the T&R the "Bethesda Park Railroad." Attractions listed were dancing two nights a week, refreshments, games, a roller coaster, and bowling. The theater was run only on special occasions, most of which were "grand sacred concerts" on Sundays. These attracted "large crowds to this pleasant resort, and those



who desire to get away from the hot and dusty city and enjoy cool breezes and good music can find no better place to go." <sup>30</sup> The proprietors seemed to be retreating from the more adventuresome attractions of the prior two seasons; perhaps the earlier extravagance was simply coming up against financial realities. The T&R had been encumbered with large mortgages - \$25,000 in 1892, with an additional \$100,000 in 1893, the year of a national depression - and John E. Beall, who owned 94 percent of the stock by 1893, had mortgaged all of his own property holdings during those years. <sup>31</sup>

In 1894, however, the park did attract the excursion business of at least part of one of the large social organizations in Washington which heretofore had patronized the Potomac River parks. This was the July 9th family excursion of the Jolly Fat Man's Club, an association which had traveled to Marshall Hall in 1893 but was now divided into two factions, one of which planned a steamer outing to River View, fare 25 cents. Bethesda Park, obviously in an effort to attract a larger portion of the Fat Men, offered a half fare of 10 cents for a round trip from Georgetown. It was reported that 21,800 fares were collected for the largest crowd ever assembled at the Park. This would seem to suggest successful operations, but during all of that season the Park's ads were fewer and of lower key than in the past. <sup>32</sup>

A serious blow to the future of the park occurred on October 8, 1894, when the hotel and theater were destroyed by a fire attributed to faulty wiring, a loss of \$21,000, all but \$2000 of which was covered by insurance. By this time the theater was not heavily used, and little mention was made of the utility of the hotel at a commuter-oriented park. Although the financial loss was small, no one seemed interested in rebuilding the hotel or the theater. <sup>33</sup>

It was not surprising that a serious fire in October would mark the end of park operations for the 1894 season; but judging from the absence of advertising in The Evening Star, The Washington Post and the Montgomery County Sentinel, the Park was not reopened in 1895.

In June 1896, the T&R, the park's once busy parent company, was sold at foreclosure for \$36,500. An accounting of the park property mentioned only the switch-back railway, razzle dazzle, rustic pavilion, four-lane bowling alley, hot house, laundry, and water tank. The new owner, Oscar T. Crosby, member of a syndicate which had acquired the G&T in April 1895, transferred all of the railway property, except the park site, to the newly organized Washington and Rockville Railway Company. <sup>34</sup>

In August it was reported that Crosby had leased the park site, which was to re-open as "Bethesda Electric Park." The only evidence that the new management succeeded was the announcement of a political rally on October 2 sponsored by the Bethesda Sound Money Club. "[E]very one who desires to hear the issues of the campaign discussed intelligently [is] cordially invited" to this "rousing demonstration" for Republican presidential candidate, William McKinley. However, on the very night of that announcement, September 29, the Washington area was visited by a serious hurricane. In Montgomery County, damage was reported in Chevy Chase and Kensington, while "the magnificent trees in Rockville and the county adjoining ... were leveled to the ground in great numbers." Although no specific mention was



made of the Bethesda area or Bethesda Park, Leroy O. King, in his marvelous book on street railways of the Washington area, attributed the Park's demise to the toppling of trees onto its remaining facilities. Three days later, nonetheless, the Star was still reporting the Republican rally as a "Large Gathering Expected Tonight at Bethesda Park," to include a number of Republican clubs attending for speeches, an appearance by the local candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, and brass band music. If electric power had been restored and the grounds somewhat cleaned up, the Park would probably have been functional for such a serious-minded gathering, even if all or some of its remaining amusements had been damaged by the storm.<sup>35</sup>

After 1896 no further mention of the Park appears in the newspapers. Traffic on the T&R declined and an 1897 Washington guidebook stated that only "occasional cars run northward as far as Bethesda." The T&R Railroad Land Company must also have become hard pressed, as it sold much of its large tract near Rockville back to the original owners. The 1899 default on a final mortgage seems to mark the conclusion of the company's ineffectual operations. At that time, it also appears that the financially strapped John E. Beall abandoned his Bethesda aspirations and his home there, taking up residency again in Washington.<sup>36</sup>

In 1900 Crosby's syndicate finally extended the railway line to Rockville. The extension left the Old Georgetown Road just beyond the Park site to run north across country to Montrose, whence it followed the Pike into Rockville. Some cars were short-routed, going only as far as "Alta Vista," just north of the Park site. At the same time, Crosby sold the Park property in three parcels. The narrow northern parcel was platted as "Oakmont/Bethesda Park" in 1902, shortly after its sale in 1901. The southern section, sold in two parcels in 1900 to his railway partners, was platted as "Sonoma" in 1912.<sup>37</sup>

The street railway which once ran to the Park survived until 1935, when it succumbed to the popularity and flexibility of the bus and automobile, and the suburban development hoped for in establishing both it and the Park was gradually realized.<sup>38</sup>

For many years a pair of stone pillars, which had marked the Park's entrance, stood beside Sonoma Road next to the Bethesda Women's Club. When these pillars were removed during the widening of Old Georgetown Road in the 1960's, a small circular foundation, possibly from the "Razzle Dazzle," was left as perhaps the only material evidence that Bethesda Park, the self-proclaimed "Handsome Park in the United States," had once existed.<sup>39</sup>

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William Allman is Assistant Curator of the White House, a position he has held for fifteen years. He was born in Bethesda and became interested in Bethesda Park about ten years ago while working on a paper for a graduate school course at The George Washington University.



# NOTES

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7. Montgomery County Corporation Records EBP #1, p. 158; Montgomery County Deeds JA #27, p. 6; Fava Naeff map.
8. The Washington Post, July 4, 1891; King, op.cit., p. 42; Sentinel, June 5, July 17, August 28, 1891.
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22. Post, July 20, August 14, September 14, September 18, 1892; Star, September 15, 1892.
23. Post, September 12, 1892; Sentinel, October 12, 1892; Star, October 19, 1892; Post, August 23, 1893.
24. Star, May 19, May 29, June 9, 1893.
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The Montgomery County Historical Society  
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Rockville, Maryland 20850

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