

Memories of CAPITOL VIEW



Courtesy Claude Brame

Washington, DC is a city of neighborhoods. Capitol View, straddling East Capitol Street east of the Anacostia River, in Washington's far northeast and southeast quadrants, is one. Capitol View takes its name from the fact that the U.S. Capitol can be seen in its distant western view.

Started as a much smaller community, by the 1950s Capitol View grew to be everything within a triangular-shaped area bound roughly by Blaine Street to the north, Southern Avenue on the east, and Central Avenue on the south to 47th Street.



5000 block of East Capitol Street, NE.
Courtesy Riddick Vann



Above, 5074 Central Ave. On left, 5022 Ames St. NE, Milton Dorsey, Architect, 1928 *Courtesy DCHPO*

Most of Capitol View is a well-kept secret – a stable, community with detached eclectic bungalows, Colonial and Tudor-revival houses and semi-detached town homes situated on a gentle hilly, suburban landscape. Some of the city’s largest trees are here, anchored in the soil of decomposed rock and marine clay. Many have survived to be well over a hundred years old.

“Capitol View, like most suburban communities, was isolated and not easily accessible to the main city. This isolation provided an ideal environment for ... growing children, young adults and the older generations.”

— Mr. Ricaud Owens

Another little-known fact is that Capitol View is one of the few communities in Washington developed for African Americans by African Americans. The story of DePriest Village is just a part of the rich history of this enclave, whether it is spelled more traditionally as Capital View, or more properly as Capitol View.

“America’s Finest Colored Community”

In the 1920s, under the guidance of John Whitelaw Lewis, a visionary black businessman, Capital View Realty Company began developing the area between 49th, Blaine, 54th Streets and Central Avenue as a residential subdivision for African Americans. As late as 1927, this section was sparsely settled. In fact, during the early 1900s, what is now Capitol View was composed of forest and farm lands where tobacco was raised. Even in 1925, there were no paved streets, curbs, gutters, water, sewers, gas, electricity, street lights or public transportation. Most of today’s streets were not laid out at that time. Division Avenue, from Blaine to Deane Avenue was wooded with only a home here and there. East Capitol Street had not been cut through. People raised chickens, goats, and horses; they had to carry their water three or more blocks from the spring or pump to their homes.

Then Capital View Realty began building houses with the modern conveniences, marketing them to black customers seeking to raise their families and achieve home ownership in a suburban setting. Called by the *Afro-American* newspaper, “America’s finest colored community,” (Oct. 10, 1936), the intention was to make the new development a

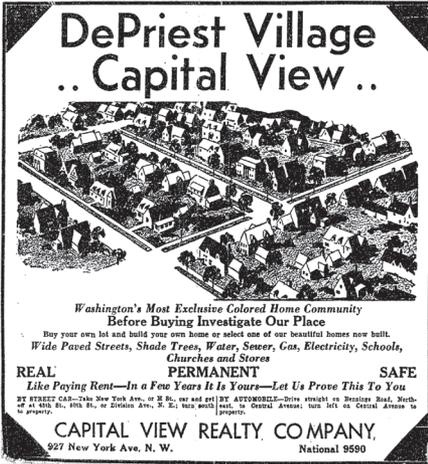
model community. Variations of the following description appeared in articles promoting the development: “These new homes in Capital View are constructed of steel, stone and brick

and have all ultra-modern features. The walls are hand painted; the floors oak. Briggs two-toned ‘beauty ware’ enlivens the baths and kitchens. Lighting is semi-indirect, and heating plants and hot



A quirky marketing tool printed in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 8, 1937. Each bathroom had a slit in the wall in the basin for disposal of the blades.

water systems are the latest types” (*Baltimore Afro-American*, July 31, 1937). Houses were bought quickly and the new owners set out to make their homes showpieces by installing gardens, hedges and window boxes.



Typical advertisement found in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 22, 1931

“There was a sign at 49th and Blaine Streets that read “DePriest Village.”

— Mr. Riddick Vann

For a time the development was called DePriest Village after Oscar Stanton DePriest of Chicago, the first black congressman to be elected since Reconstruction and who was

serving in the House of Representatives at the time (1929 – 1935). Many of the homes in the development were designed by young African-American architects, some of whom went on to successful careers, making an imprint on the Washington-built environment. Beginning in 1924, building permits show Vaughn & Ferguson Company, a partnership of Roscoe Vaughn and George Ferguson, notable designers, as the first architects in the development. Decades later, Capitol View resident and community leader, Randall S. Marshall, RA (great nephew of John A. Melby) would get his first job as an architect with the firm, then known as Vaughn, Woodson (brother of H. D. Woodson) and Ferguson.

Other black architects who worked in the community included John A. Melby, Hestle H. Brooks, and Milton Dorsey. A number of homes were also designed by white architects – Walter Valentine, who later developed a large portion of Capitol View, and prominent and prolific Washington designer, George T. Santmyers.

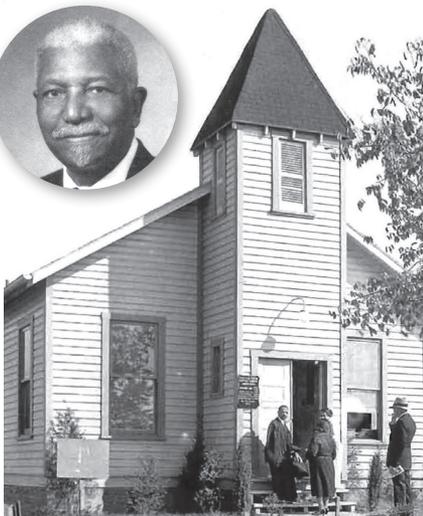


5316 Ames St, NE; Walter Valentine, Architect, 1938. *Courtesy DCHPO*

new customers that he was awarded a ticket to attend the Redskin's first professional football game at Griffith Stadium!

■ Mrs. Thelma Fagin (Hyman), born in 1917, moved to Capitol View with her husband, Vincent, in 1939. She remembers that her neighbors were a warm and friendly group of people, kind and concerned. Doors were not locked and people looked after each other – it was a wonderful place to live and grow.

■ Mr. Edward W. Edwards, Sr. was born in 1939 to educators who lived in Capitol View at 53rd and Blaine. He recalls that his backyard had a pond and a small zoo in which squirrels, raccoons, snakes and lizards were kept.



Inset, Reverend Andrew Fowler, 1947 pastor. Below, the first Capital View Baptist Church built in 1947. *Courtesy Bertie Brame.*

■ Early resident, Mr. William Manokoo Wallace was born in Anacostia in 1922 but moved with his family in 1936 to 5025 Blaine Street. Wallace remembers the family all dining together in the comfortable, brick, coal-heated home. He was a paperboy for the *Washington Times-Herald* and was so successful at signing

new customers that he was awarded a ticket to attend the Redskin's first professional football game at Griffith Stadium!

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■ Mr. Carol Madison Thomas was born in Capitol View in 1930 to Tasco and Frances Thomas of 112 – 50th Street, NE. He attended Capital View Baptist Church, his mother's church, until he was nine and joined his father's church, Church of the Atonement, both Capitol View places of worship.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

In 1925, John Whitelaw Lewis, the developer, determined that a church should be at the heart of the new subdivision and began to encourage the formation of one. With letters from Metropolitan Baptist Church, the Capital View Baptist Church was started in the home of a Mrs. Turner at 50th and Ames. In 1927, the church received recognition from the Churches of the District of Columbia. Charles H. Johnson was the first pastor who set about securing a building. Capital View Realty Company obtained a permit to build the church at 17 Division Avenue – the architect was John A. Melby. In 1947, a new and larger church, under the pastorate of Rev. Andrew Fowler, was built at 5201 Ames Street, the designer also African-American, R.C. Archer, Jr.

Capital View Baptist Church fulfilled the vision of Lewis, as it quickly became the center of the community. In addition to providing worship services, it sponsored many of the social and civic activities of the neighborhood. According to Mr. Owens, who moved to the community in 1936, the church offered a Boy Scout program.



Capital View Baptist Church, 2010.

Courtesy Claude Brame.

“We never advanced to a real formal troop with uniforms and all but we had lots of fun learning survival subjects and going on hikes... The church also sponsored Friday evening lawn fetes on the field with fun-filled activities for the whole family. Almost everyone looked forward to the hayrides and all of the great food – dinners, cakes, pies, ice-cold watermelon, and as always, Mr. Corbitt’s ice cold soft drinks and varieties of Fussell’s ice cream.”

The Church of the Atonement, Episcopal, actually predated the Capitol View development. Its first edifice was built in 1914 at the intersection of 54th and Grant, NE as the Chapel of the Atonement. Advancing to an independent mission of Calvary Episcopal in 1920, it finally become its own parish in 1961. In 1947, land was purchased at 52nd and East Capitol Streets SE to erect a new house of worship. Construction began in 1949 under the old vicar, Father Henderson, who was transferred by Bishop Dunn when the church opened. The congregation moved into the new location in 1951 and Father Quinland R. Gordon assumed responsibility for the new church.

St. Luke’s Catholic Church evolved from Incarnation in Deanwood. Led by Father Patrick L. Bradley, land located in the 4900 block of East Capitol Street, SE was purchased in 1956 from Paul and Irene Butler to erect a church. The building was dedicated in September 1957. Father Bradley, a Josephite missionary, was deeply loved and admired by the people he served. Father Stephen Hogan was the first permanent pastor.

Other churches in the Capitol View neighborhood include East Capitol Street Church of Christ, Hughes Memorial United Methodist Church and Peace Lutheran Church. Hughes began worship services in Capitol View in 1949 and ultimately erected a church building in 1957 at 53rd and Ames. Peace Lutheran was established in 1960 and dedicated its church building at 15 49th Place in 1962.

NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

As Capitol View/DePriest Village evolved from a rural community into a suburban one, there were no schools within its borders. Its children attended one of two elementary schools, Burrville or Henry Smothers,

both approximately a mile away, or later Merritt, which opened near Burrville. Mr. Thomas recalls having served as Captain of the Safety Patrol at Burrville on Division and Hayes when he was in the sixth grade. Mrs. Bertie Brame offered, “Smothers School was approximately two miles from most of the students, so when it rained and snowed, the walk to school seemed to take forever.”

“My brother, Richard “Dickey” Corbin, and I, walked uphill, downhill and uphill to Burrville Elementary School from our home at 54th and East Capitol Street until I was promoted to the seventh grade and he went to Merritt Elementary School.”

— Mrs. Marie Corbin Richardson

Another school attended by Capitol View youth was Smothers Elementary. Mrs. Prue Wilkinson Lyles who lived on Ames Street near 52nd, said,

“There were no school buses, we walked to Henry Smothers Elementary School on 44th and Washington Place (now Brooks Street).”

— Mrs. Prue Wilkinson Lyles

Although there were no schools in Capitol View at the time,

“There was no shortage of school teachers and several principals in the community who knew parents personally; consequently, there was little misbehaving in classes.”

— Mrs. Bertie Brame



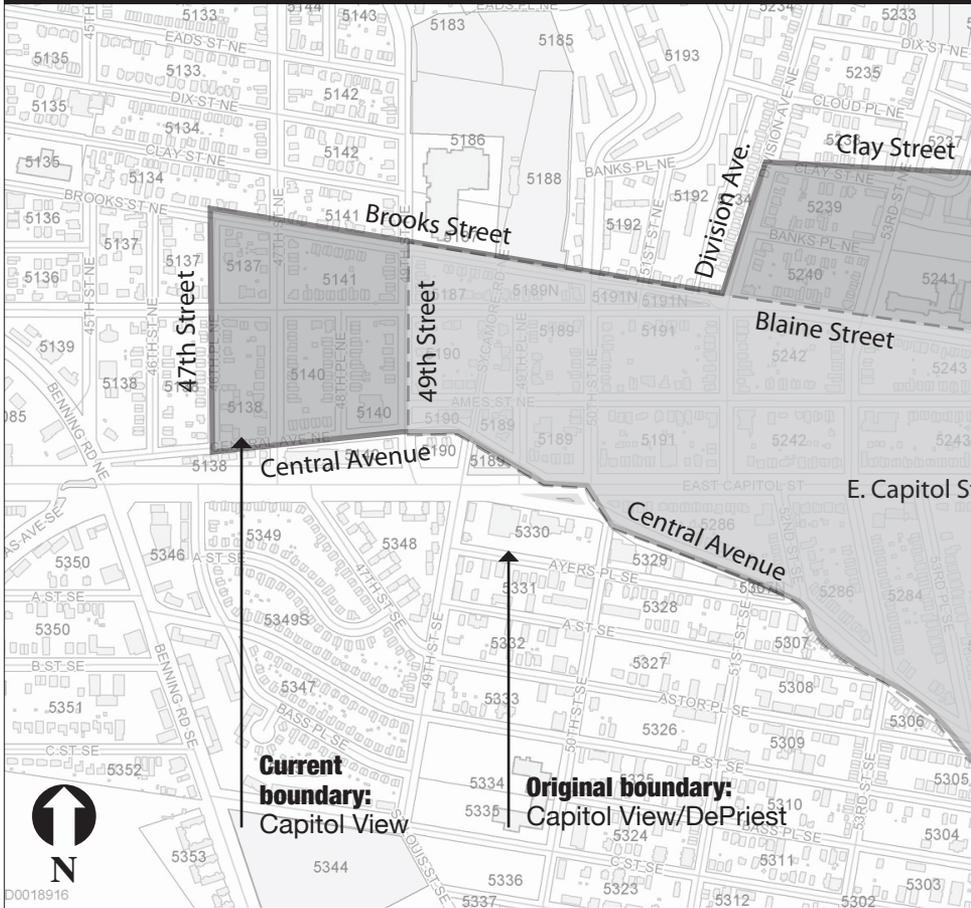
**Vivian Jean Miller Thompson and E. Patricia Hallman
at Sixth Grade Graduation from Smothers, June 1942.**

Courtesy E. Patricia Hallman.

The population explosion created by the opening of Lincoln Heights Dwellings in 1946, followed a short time later by the construction of additional public housing at Richardson Dwellings, Clay Terrace, and East Capitol Dwellings, forced the city to build not only an elementary school but also a junior high in Capitol View. George Harris Richardson Elementary School received its first students on February 6, 1948. It contained 16 classrooms capable of holding 540 students. Continued increased enrollment resulted in several additions over time.

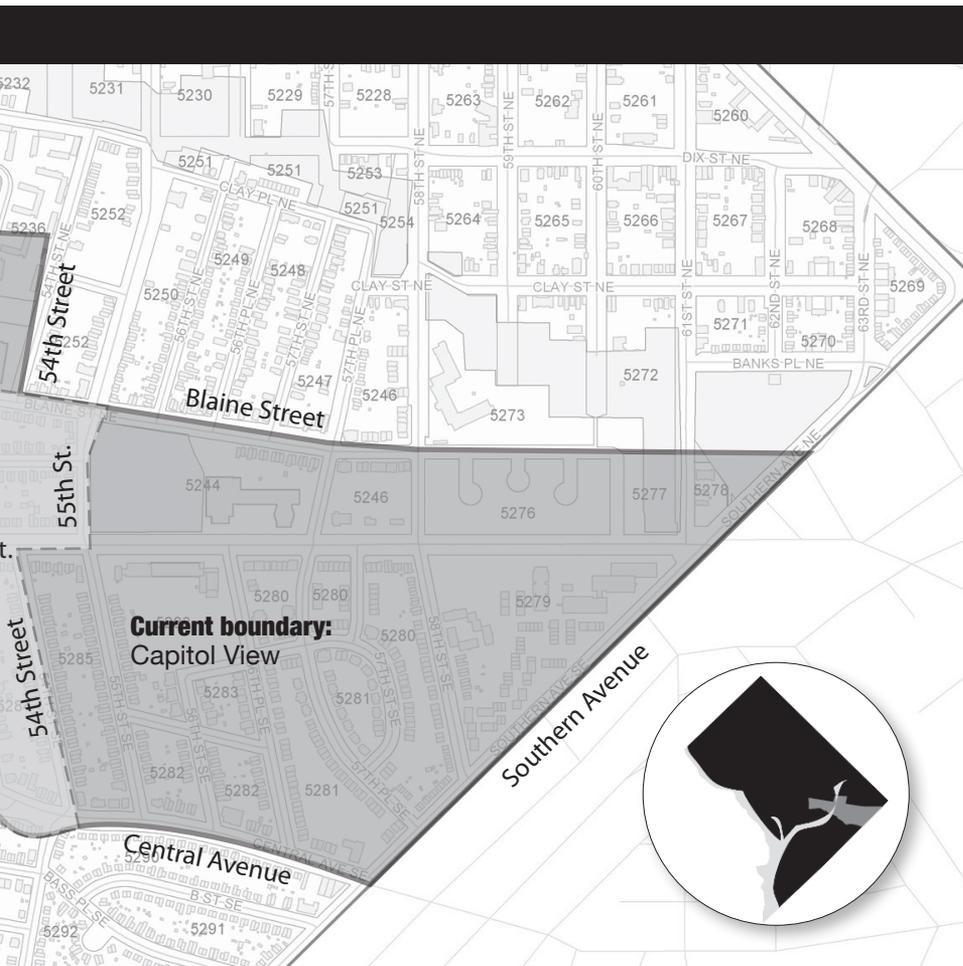
On December 15, 1949, less than one year after the opening of Richardson, Kelly Miller Junior High, named for Howard University noted educator and orator, became the first secondary school erected in Capitol View and the far Northeast. In addition to regular classrooms, the school provided a gymnasium, complete with showers; an auditorium with a balcony and stage; home economics rooms designed for cooking and sewing classes; and a room with its own printing press in which printing was taught. Like most of the schools, lunch was prepared, served and eaten

Boundaries of Capitol View Northeast Washington, DC



in the cafeteria. Prior to Miller's opening, junior-high-aged students attended Browne Junior High School off Benning Road west of the Anacostia River. Kelly Miller was razed in 1996, rebuilt, and reopened in 2004 as a middle school.

Although DC public schools were desegregated in 1954, up to that point most black high school age students living in the eastern part of DC attended Cardozo, Armstrong, Dunbar or Phelps until 1952 when Spingarn High School was opened on Benning Road west of the river. Finally, a high school was



erected near Capitol View, Woodson, named for architect and civic activist, Howard Dilworth Woodson. It, too, is currently being rebuilt.

“December 21, 1925, at the residence of Mrs. Mary Thomas at 5208 East Capitol, the Capitol View Citizen’s Association was organized by concerned residents.”

— Capitol View Citizen’s Association Minutes

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CVCA



Capital View Sunday School. *Courtesy Ricaud Owens.*

From the beginning, Capitol View residents were community activists, taking their civic duties seriously. The formation of the Capitol View Citizens' Association (later known as Capitol View Civic Association, CVCA) regular meetings of neighbors to address issues such as unpaved streets, absence of street lights, lack of water, gas, electricity or nearby public transportation. According to the minutes of the organizing meeting, founders included John Whitelaw Lewis, Bruce T. Stewart, Edith Evans and Samuel Gomillion. Andrew Munday was elected as the first president and he served until 1934. One of the Association's first actions was to request the District to spread cinders and ashes over the dirt and mud streets of 53rd Place, SE from Central Avenue to East Capitol Street!

Other important actions taken by the Association included seeking bus service and a community center. According to Juanita Jackson Hamilton, a resident at 53rd and Blaine since 1941, her husband, a postal employee, walked to and from 55th and Deane [Nannie Helen Burroughs] Avenue to catch a streetcar to work. Mr. Thomas recalled "a gentleman who lived near East Capitol [who] had a cab

with two jump seats which seated seven persons. He drove from 53rd and East Capitol to ... the streetcar stop at Deane Avenue” providing service every 45 minutes for those on Division, Ames, 50th, Blaine, and 49th en route. Finally in July 1938, “Dream of Direct Bus Line Realized” read the headlines in the *Afro-American* with the following caption under a photo of a bus and a committee of residents, “Ever since its organization, the Capital View Citizens’ Association, Washington, has worked and planned for a direct bus service to connect with the Capital Transit Company’s main lines. Last Sunday the bus made its first run.”

A few months later the Capital View Community Hall was dedicated. The hall was part of the plan of the Capital View Realty Company and residents to continue to make the neighborhood a desirable community with valuable amenities. Local leader, Ethel Gray, credited Robert Johnson, chair of the hall committee (and also chair of the bus service committee) with bringing about the establishment of the center. Located at 5301 East Capitol, the Hall was the site of many fun-filled events, especially for the youth. Representatives of the Capital View Realty were present at the ceremony to turn over the key to the building.



Mayor Walter E. Washington with CVCA members following a banquet. Courtesy E. Pat Hallman

From the beginning of the development, Capital View Realty and later the Association ran contests with the aim of keeping the community as attractive as possible. One of the first awarded prizes for the best-kept front and back yards. In 1927, for instance, the realty company selected Mrs. Minnie Robinson at 56 53rd, SE for first prize for her front yard, and Mrs. M. Tate at 5021 Ames, for her back yard. By 1936, the Association had taken over with its “Better Homes” contest, with first through fourth prizes ranging from \$10 to \$2.50.

Civic activism was not confined to the adults of the community – children also played their part. According to Mrs. Brame, “Smothers School had a newspaper drive. Funds helped the government purchase an army jeep. Students were outside in the front of the building and the jeep was driven up the front steps to show the students what their efforts had accomplished. I will never forget that day.”

PUBLIC BUILDINGS

“[I]f we read more, we might become teachers, doctors, chemists, or other useful men and women...Sincerely, Children of Capitol View Area.”

— Maria Trotter, 10 years old, 1961

In 1961, several Capitol View residents appeared before the Senate Appropriations Committee seeking funding for a community library. Of those testifying of the need for a library, none was more touching than that from student Maria Trotter.

A library for this growing neighborhood was finally opened in January 1965, with Edward James Talbert as the first librarian and a staff of eleven. The building is a two-story reinforced concrete structure with brick and concrete panels. With 20,000 square feet, space for 60,000 books, the first floor initially held the lobby, adult reference-reading room and space for young adults. The second floor housed the children’s room while the basement housed book

storage, the heating plant and a large community room. Serving the Capitol View as well as the Marshall Heights community, the library was a welcome addition. The SE/NE Friends of the Capitol View Branch was formed in 1981 as a way to support the library and includes several of the community residents such as Mrs. Josephine Patterson Samuels, a Capitol View resident since 1949.

In 1954, the DC government obtained a building permit for a firehouse to be located in Capitol View at 4820 Central Avenue. Up to this point the nearest one was located in Deanwood on Minnesota Avenue.

RECREATION

“There were many vacant lots then [1930-1948] where the local youth played football and baseball.”

— Mr. Carol Thomas

Recreation of all types was available for the young people and adults of Capitol View. Many long-term residents recall sports, plays, parades, parties, lavish banquets and other social and recreational activities sponsored by the Capitol

View Civic Association, Capital View Church, and neighbors.

For example, there was a Capital View Athletic Club in the late 30s and early 40s that sponsored sports activities. Football and baseball teams practiced at a vacant lot at 53rd and Ames. A football team, coached by Mr. Kelly, brought acclaim to the community. Other men in the neighborhood joined in or coached other sports teams. Mrs. Lyles’s father who had played with the Negro leagues as a young man would play softball games on the Ames lot. The 1950s neighborhood baseball team, named Capitol View Pirates, was coached by young resident at the time, Randall S. Marshall. There was even a ping-pong team named Contee’s Capital View that competed city-wide!



Ruth Thomas, 1947.
Courtesy of Ruth Thomas Owens.

“Young people in the neighborhood put on plays in the back yards of the homes. They were so popular and enjoyed that the DC Recreation Department presented a dual swing set to the neighborhood to be enjoyed by all.”

— Mrs. Bertie Brame

One young resident, Ruth Thomas, who had studied ballet for years, choreographed a simple ballet and taught it to a family of girls. Their father, a skilled carpenter, made a stage and fashioned a spotlight from the roof of his porch in the backyard for the planned performance. The neighbors were invited and the ballet was a whopping, unforgettable success! Ruth Thomas (Owens) went on to become one of the first African-American members of the School of American Ballet in New York!

“During summers, Vacation Bible School was the great attraction. After Mrs. [Myra] Reeder welcomed us with smiles and hugs, we enjoyed prayer, singing and Bible Study,” recounted Mr. Owens. On Saturday afternoons, the Strand Theater was enjoyed by both adults and the children of the neighborhood since it was within walking distance. Mrs. Lois Lee Patterson, whose family moved to Capitol View in 1926, recalled that her sister, Armentia Lee had been crowned ‘Miss Capitol View’ in one of the many parades held in the community.

The Association staged Fourth of July celebrations annually that included family games, food, carnival events, pony and hay rides. The festivities would end with professional fireworks in the evening.

Similarly, Christmas would be a community-wide event sponsored by the Association and by the churches. Mr. Thomas recalls that the Association would give outdoor Christmas lights to new residents to ensure that the entire community was lit. It also sponsored an annual community tree-lighting, followed by caroling. The churches presented concerts and pageants. And of course, the Association would bring in Santa Claus to hand out Christmas goodies!

Among the fondest memories of Mrs. Richardson "... were the Christmas parties my parents allowed me to have every Christmas from junior high school to high school. My friends from school enjoyed the ride to my home. It was the highlight of our Christmas break."

Bridge games were a favorite for the women of Capitol View and each weekend they could be found in one home or another enjoying rollicking good times. Accounts of these and more sedate gatherings were frequently found in the society columns of the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Chicago Defender* as was "the gala garden party given by Mrs. Myra Reeder at her DePriest Village home" in 1949. Club names included the Periwinkle Bridge and Everyday Pals.

"Capitol View was a great place to grow up. Such open space! The Lincoln Heights area was vacant, it was like an orchard. The children picked all types of fruits and berries... flew kites off of the bluff on the Heights overlooking Division Avenue. They also zoomed down Division Avenue on sleds in the winter having to walk back up."

— Mr. Carol Thomas

House parties were not a rarity and the joint would jump with music of the 40s and 50s —the Big Band sounds, Louis Jordan, the Mills Brothers, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Nat King Cole and many more. The guys wore the dress of the day – the zoot suit, or modified pegged pants, according to Mrs. Ruth Owens; and the ladies donned broomstick skirts, well-starched cotton blouses and penny loafers. They danced away, enjoying the recreation rooms in their homes with their neighbors.

For many years the only “official” club in Capitol View was the community center. Mrs. Lee Patterson noted that dances were held there on Friday nights. The community center, sometimes referred to as the dance hall, was located adjacent to Mr. and Mrs. Martin’s “friendly mom and pop” store on 5315 East Capitol. Martin’s was one of the few commercial enterprises found in Capitol View prior to the 1960s.

Other retail businesses, until the late 1960s, included a DGS (District Grocery Stores) at Central and 49th Place, and the Capitol View Cooperative Store at 49th Place and Blaine Street. Mr. Wallace recalled, “There was a store called ‘The Little Store’ owned first by a Jewish family, and later by Mr. and Mrs. Thompson.” There was also a Sanitary Grocery Store, now known as Safeway, patronized by residents.

In 1938, Dr. L. E. Jones opened a drugstore in Capitol View. It was equipped with a fountain, luncheonette, a full line of prescriptions and drugs, toiletries, magazines and other stock to make it a valuable addition to the community. Several residents have fond remembrances of the drugstore.

Capitol View also had its share of entrepreneurs among its residents. A two-story house at the corner of East Capitol and 52nd Street was occupied by the Bramlett-Willis family. Madame Bramlett was owner and operator of the Hawaiian Beauty empire. With her sons, they owned and managed several beauty salons and invented and manufactured beauty products that they distributed internationally, according to Mr. Owens. Another business person who lived at Central Avenue and 50th was Mr. Corbitt. He was the community vendor who made, bottled and capped soft drinks that he then provided at community affairs. Similarly, the Fagins who lived at 52nd and Ames from 1939 to 1951, bought fresh produce

at the Florida Avenue Market which they in turn sold to neighbors on the summer weekends.



Founding member
Bruce T. Stewart
Courtesy Claude Brame

There were several residents of Capitol View who endeavored and succeeded in making a long lasting impact on the community. One of the most influential was Rev. Andrew Fowler, the pastor of Capital View Baptist Church from 1941 to 2003. He not only led the church to city-wide prominence but always invited all residents of the community, regardless of faith, to both religious and social activities. Another was Bruce Stewart, known as Mr. Capitol View Civic Association. He was a trustee of Capital View Baptist Church as well as a civic leader active in establishing the community hall, public transportation for the neighborhood and, in mentoring youth.

NOTABLE RESIDENTS

Capitol View residents remember other notable neighbors that included musicians, rock and roller Bo Didley and jazz pianist Bobbie Lee. Theodore Hagans Jr., who built a multimillion dollar real estate empire before dying in 1984 in the crash of the airplane he was piloting, was also a well-known resident of Capitol View. Mr. Thomas recalls a childhood friend from Blaine Street, Avatus Stone, a standout Armstrong High School athlete. He went on to play quarterback for Syracuse University in 1949 and for several professional football teams. He later played for the Ottawa Roughriders, the Chicago Cardinals, and the Baltimore Colts, and ultimately returned to his roots in Washington to coach at Phelps Vocational School. Mr. Lemuel Penn made national news as a result of being murdered in Georgia in 1964 by the Ku Klux Klan as he was returning home from military reserve training. ■

“This is my Capitol View. The community that shaped my life, influenced my character and I am truly blessed for the experience.”

— Mr. Ricaud Owens

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