



CHEVY CHASE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

FALL 1999

Annual Meeting and Fall Lecture on October 20

Fall Lecture by William Offutt

The Civil War in Our Area

8:00 pm Wednesday, October 20, 1999

Chevy Chase Village Hall

It has been four years since Mr. Offutt published his book *Bethesda, A Social History*. The book's success and popularity was followed by the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission's 1998 publication of *Chevy Chase, A Home Suburb for the Nation's Capitol*. A quick comparison of the two volumes reveals a telling difference: the Chevy Chase book devotes only a few paragraphs and photographs to the years before 1870. The Chevy Chase story they tell is the history of the Chevy Chase Land Company, because until the Land Company built Connecticut Avenue, the area now known as Chevy Chase was literally off the beaten track. The name for the area, however, has existed virtually from the beginning. Chevy Chase was the name of Colonel Joseph Belt's 560 acre tract, which he was granted in 1725.

When Mr Offutt addressed the Historical Society in 1995, His topic was Not All Marriages Were Made in Heaven: A Look At Bethesda and Chevy Chase. It was an overview that emphasized the differences between the two areas and necessarily focussed on the direction of the massive developments of the Twentieth Century. We have invited him back to give us a closer look at earlier years; when Bethesda and Chevy Chase didn't really exist and the important towns were Tenallytown and Rockville. The last years when the population of the area was so light that family names identified each parcel: the Civil War years.

The building and road construction of this century have all but obliterated the signs of the War Between the States, but there was a tremendous amount of activity here. Thousands of troops marched through. Major Union fortifications were constructed to protect the Capitol at the expense of acres of forests and orchards. The war was not something distant, it was a daily part of life. Perhaps the reason there are so few Civil War memorials or markers here was that despite being a part of the Union, many local residents were Southern sympathizers and slave owners.

Please join us at this meeting. Light refreshments will be available, and Mr. Offutt will have copies of *Bethesda, A Social History* for sale. If you don't have a copy yet, you owe yourself one; if you do, remember that it makes a wonderful gift.



Existing cabin on *No Gain Estate*

Editors Note: We are grateful to historian William Offutt for providing the following articles on *No Gain*. This is part of our continuing series on original land grants that eventually became the neighborhood of Chevy Chase

A Quick Look at *No Gain*

The large property and secluded home on Brookeville Road that we call *No Gain* has carried that name for more than two centuries. The farm, some called it plantation, was originally part of two much-larger land grants called ‘Charles and Thomas,’ which covered much of what is now Chevy Chase, and ‘Labyrinth’ just to the east. The 342 acres that was eventually to be called ‘No Gain’ were assembled by John Cartwright in the 1750’s. The land extended from Rock Creek Valley to the western side of Connecticut Avenue’s path and from the Bradley’s lane and Belt’s Chevy Chase land on the south almost to present-day East West Highway. The eastern portion was marked by steep hills and numerous creeks and gullies but most of the land was reasonably flat and easy to cultivate once the forest was cleared.

The land was divided several times in the 18th century but then reassembled in 1780 by Zachariah Maccubbin, a man whose family had been in Maryland for a century and who owned a number of valuable local properties as did his wife, Martha Needham, and his mother. Zachariah, a slave owner and tobacco grower, built a home for his family after having his farm resurveyed and the property named *No Gain* which might well have been a reference to his growing financial difficulties.

The house, clapboard and two stories with a slope-roofed porch like many smaller local homes, probably dates from 1789. It has undergone major renovations at least twice and now sports a new roof over its added third floor and shed-roofed, one-story addition. But it is still there, barn red and resting under its three chimneys with its two-story Charleston-style veranda facing south and its own narrow woodlot. The log cabin farther down Thornapple Street, which several writers have attempted to tie to the same date, is actually a late-1920’s rebuilding of a structure which burned to the ground.

In the early 19th century, after the Maccubbins lost the property, *No Gain* passed through several hands and was often tenant farmed with the major crops becoming wheat and other grains. By the time of the Civil War, a slave owner named Samuel Anderson owned much of *No Gain* including a small slave cemetery. The farm passed to Anderson’s son John in

1870 and when he died in 1882 his wife inherited the eastern half of *No Gain* with Brookeville Road as the dividing line.

The western part of the old property was purchased in 1854 by Benjamin Hodges but after he and his wife died, that land was broken into three pieces of 90, 50, and 32 acres. John Williams attempted to reassemble the pieces but ended up subdividing only the 32-acre parcel while the agents of the Chevy Chase Land Company bought up the other 140 acres west of the Tenallytown-Brookeville road from a young couple named Hilleary and Kate Offutt who had inherited it from his father.

Early in the 20th Century Harry Martin acquired much of what had been Anderson’s *No Gain* land and made it into the various parts of Martin’s Additions. The *No gain* homestead and about four acres that included the log cabin became the property of Minihaha Brooke who operated Mrs. Brooke’s Tea House at her home for several years. Dr. Frank Shultz and his wife bought the *No Gain* home and land in the 1920’s, renovated the house and raised a small building on Brookeville Road for what they called the Bradford Home School. It became the Brooke Farm Tea Room after Chevy Chase Elementary School’s success in the early 1930’s. Dr. Schultz was the last to farm the land, growing roses, peonies and other blossoms for D.C. florists and raising grapes to make his own wine.

In the mid-1920’s, Clarence and Daisy Calhoun bought the hilly, undeveloped portion of the one-time Anderson land and built their incredible castle on the edge of the part. They lost it in the depression along with ninety acres of Braemar Forest, but Rossdhu Castle itself lasted through the war and on into the Fifties as an apartment house, and its gate house remains.



No Gain in 1988

No Gain is one of those properties and one of those names rattling down through the history of Montgomery County touching many families and numerous fortunes and accumulating tales and questions. Professor William Leogrande has written a long essay on “No Gain” which was published by the Montgomery County Historical Society in the May 1999 edition of the *The Montgomery County Story* and on which much of the above rests.



No Gain Might Have Been My Home

My grandfather was a reprobate. Everyone said so. I thought he was very interesting when I was four or five. He kept a caramel cake locked up in his desk; he drank a tumbler of whisky with a raw egg in it for breakfast, and he told wonderful stories. My mother and grandmother tried to keep me away from him, but I could open the sliding doors a few inches and sneak in to his “office” when they were busy. He never worked as far as I could tell, unlike my father who went out every morning to catch the streetcar at Offutt’s Station just behind our big house on Rockville Pike.

One of my grandfather’s favorite stories was about why we did not live in Chevy Chase. He and my grandmother had begun their married life there, so he told me on many occasions, on a big farm called *No Gain*.

“That’s a funny name,” I would say. “No Gain.”

“Truth, boy, God’s honest truth.” This was a few years after the 1929 crash when he had lost everything, locked himself in his room and wailed like a baby for several days.

“Kate and I,” he would say, stroking his stubbled chin and looking down at me with his rheumy eyes, “that’s your grandmother you know, she’s Katherine-by-damn-Peter, we went to live on this old place north of the Bradley’s lane. We had a decent house and cows and horses and goats and ducks and dogs and all sorts of things.”

“So,” I would ask, playing my accepted role, “why aren’t we still living there instead of way out here in the county?”

“Because,” he would say, scrunching his eyebrows together and wiping at his stained mustache, “If we had stayed down there, we’d have a trolley car running right smack through our dining room.”

That was the part I liked, and I would whoop and roll on the floor. I could just see that big green streetcar with its pole throwing sparks rumbling past the dinner table, jarring the china, frightening my aunts and upsetting the cars. It was a wonderful story, but of course, I did not believe it.

It was true.

Hilleary Lyles Offutt, 23, of Bethesda had married Katherine Norfleet Peter, 21, of Darnstown in 1887. They went to live on his inheritance, the 140-acres *No Gain* farm west of the Brookeville-Tenallytown Road that his father had bought from the Hodges family in the early 1870’s. In October 1888, the first of their seven children, a boy they called Hill, was born there.

Then in 1890, the stealthy purchase of land between Boundary Street (now Florida Avenue in the District of Columbia) and Jones Bridge Road for what became the Chevy Chase Land Company began. The fifty-acre parcel and ninety-acre piece that made up the Offutt’s portion of “No Gain” went through a dizzying series of land transfers after being briefly acquired by attorney George E. Hamilton of Stone Ridge and Senator William M. Stewart of Nevada. The report of the Chevy Chase Land Company and the County land records disagree about the price, but it was substantial.

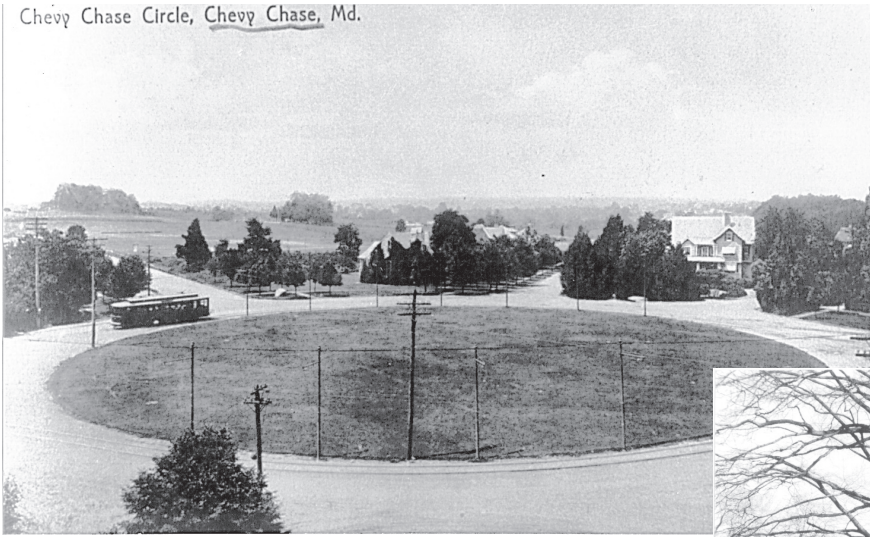
When he sold the land to the strawmen covertly representing lobbyist Frank Newlands and the Sharon syndicate, my grandfather did not intend to move. He kept about one-and-a-third acres, the area just around his home, enough for the outbuildings and a pleasant lawn. But when the trolley line’s route from the Circle to Chevy Chase Lake was laid out, it became evident that the Rock Creek Railway needed the Offutt land so they paid my grandfather his price. He received \$4,927.32 for his 1.366 acres. (My wife’s grandfather, for comparison, was paid \$5,388.62 for his twenty acres in D.C., and the 304-acre Chevy Chase tract went for \$114,000 or about \$375 per acre.)

With money in the bank, my grandfather packed up his small family and bought a 138-acre farm on Rockville Pike and then sold most of it to Georgetown University for its Preparatory School and took on the role of gentleman farmer. His oldest son eventually became a banker and invested his father’s money in the stock market on margin.

For a great deal more on the early history of “No Gain” including the persistent misinformation about the seventy-year-old log cabin on the property see Professor William A. Leogrande’s “No Gain: Portrait of a Family Farm” in the May 1999 issue of the Montgomery County Historical Society quarterly, *The Montgomery County Story*.

Bill Offutt is author of Bethesda: A Social History, published in 1995 by The Innovation Game of Bethesda. His local history Web site is on the Internet at www.bethesdahistory.com. He can also be reached by telephone at 301-530-4299.

Chevy Chase Circle, Chevy Chase, Md.



Chevy Chase Circle circa. 1911

Then . . .

. . . and now



Chevy Chase Circle, February 1999

Photo by George Kinter