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HISTORY OF THE CAPITAL BELTWAY IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

by Jeremy L. Korr

It would to be difficult to find a road in Montgomery County which has had greater social and economic impact in recent decades than the Capital Beltway. Despite its seemingly endless traffic problems today, it was painstakingly conceptualized, designed, constructed and revised by scores of individuals over the last half-century. Its story intertwines with stories of the many people who built, used and otherwise lived with it.

Why a beltway in the first place? The short answer is that existing options for travel between suburbs in the early 1950s were not good enough. Most of the main roads through the suburbs were radials, which had often grown along the streetcar lines at the turn of the century and continued to be used for streetcars and then buses.[1] There were east-west roads crossing Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, of course, but they were not particularly efficient. By the 1950s the population of Maryland's suburbs - especially what we would now call the inner-Beltway suburbs - had grown significantly, and the 19th-and early 20th-century roads and transit lines that served them, for the most part had not grown to keep pace with new transportation patterns.

One of the most-traveled east-west routes in the immediate pre-Beltway era was Route 193, which today is University Boulevard. In the early 1950s, it was an overburdened two-lane incarnation of a colonial tobacco road which had connected southern Montgomery County to the once thriving port town of Bladensburg. Route 193 was known as Kensington-Wheaton Road from Connecticut Avenue in Kensington to Georgia Avenue, then as Old Bladensburg Road to the Prince George's County line. It was called University Lane from the county line to U.S. Highway 1 in College Park, except that crossing the University of Maryland campus it was Campus Drive.

As planning for the Beltway was getting underway in 1955, the January 30 issue of the Evening Star called Route 193 "the only 'direct' cross-county road linking those areas of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties ... It is clogged with the heaviest traffic of any Maryland State highway in

its class. It has no curbs and few adequate shoulders to provide drainage and safety. Its blind curves and its narrowness invite death to motorist and pedestrian alike. Every main intersection becomes a traffic bottleneck." More than 350 traffic accidents occurred on the road between 1950 and 1955 and property damage over $75,000 was sustained in Montgomery County along what was not very affectionately called "Old Bladensburg Rut." This, we should note, was among the best of the intersuburban roads.

Well before the 1956 creation of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, planners envisioned a series of concentric belt highways to improve local access among suburbs and long-distance travel around the city. In 1932 a joint committee of highway officials from Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia proposed a set of bypass routes around Washington, with bridges at Alexandria and Great Falls. These bypasses, however, did not form a full ring and they were not approved by any political authority. Another regional highway planning committee was formed in 1939, but its efforts were stopped by World War II.[2]

It was the federal Bureau of Public Roads (now the Federal Highway Administration) which was perhaps most directly responsible for the first stirrings of what became the Beltway. In 1948 the Bureau used the Washington area for its first major "origin-destination" survey, in which motorists were asked about their commuting patterns. As the Bureau staff began to plot out the travel demand patterns from the collected data, the idea of what became the present Beltway "just sort of popped out at us," according to Douglas Brinkley, who was the D.C. highway planning chief in the 1940s and 50s.[3] From this point, the federal National Capital Park and Planning Commission, later called the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), took over. Its comprehensive plan for Washington, released in 1950, included what we now call the Capital Beltway.

The Beltway was just one of five proposed concentric ring roads around Washington. These were centered roughly around zero milestone, the point of reference near the White House, with respective radii of one mile, three to five miles, eight miles, 13 to 17 miles, and 25 miles. Of these five, only the third has been built. What happened to the other four?

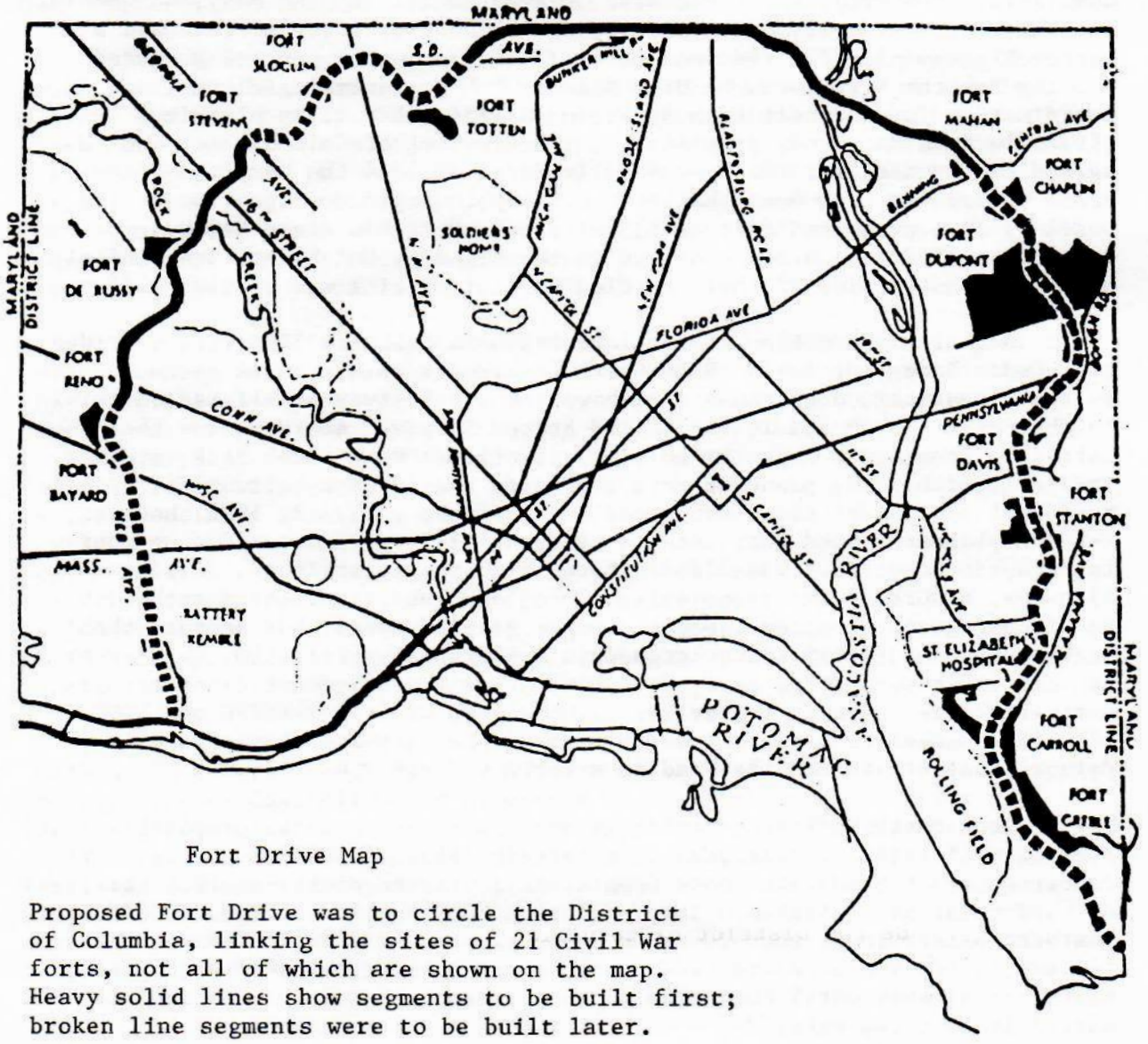
Proposed ring road number one, the one closest to the District's city center, was better known as the Inner Loop. District highway planners pondered such a loop as early as 1942, but the first official proposal came in the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) 1950 comprehensive plan. An Inner Loop, the plan argued, would carry traffic around the central city area and siphon 25 percent of the traffic off crowded city streets. Then by the 1960s, concerns over the impact of urban freeways led some previously supportive NCPC members to question the potential impacts of the Inner Loop and in the end, only portions of the Inner Loop were constructed, one section being the present Southeast-Southwest Freeway.[4]

Proposals for the second belt road long predate all the others. By around 1880, there was talk of a road to link the old civil war fortifications just inside the District of Columbia line. The "Fort Drive" was first formally proposed in a 1901 city development plan, and then it lay relatively dormant until 1930, when Congress authorized purchase of the right-of-way in locations where planners could not easily route the Fort

Drive over existing roads. By 1952, 98 percent of the required new right of way had actually been purchased and a piece was constructed (the four-lane stretch of Military Road as it crosses Rock Creek Park in the District), but Fort Drive lagged as a priority and has never been completed.[5]

Skipping the third ring route momentarily, the fourth belt road was the Outer Circumferential Highway, later known as the Outer Beltway. For a variety of reasons, this road has not been built. In Virginia, the Western Transportation Corridor, and in Maryland, the Intercounty Connector, are both incarnations of segments of this "Outer Beltway." These extremely contentious proposed highways are at this time both very much still viable and under furious debate.[6]

The fifth belt road, approximately 25 miles from zero milestone, never made it off the drawing board. This so-called "Third Circumferential Highway" made its way through a few consultants' studies in the 1960s, but not much further than that.[7]



Fort Drive Map

Proposed Fort Drive was to circle the District of Columbia, linking the sites of 21 Civil War forts, not all of which are shown on the map. Heavy solid lines show segments to be built first; broken line segments were to be built later.

While each of the other proposed ring roads ran into roadblocks, how did the third ring, located about eight miles from the White House, the one we know today as the Capital Beltway, break through and get off the ground?

Certainly the desire to relieve traffic on Route 193 and other congested narrow roads was a key inspiration. Also, World War II had ended just a few years earlier and one early justification for a belt highway around Washington was its potential value in times of war. In 1952 Senator Case of South Dakota sponsored an amendment to a pending federal-aid road bill authorizing $36 million for the circumferential highway and in support of this, W. E. Reynolds, a commissioner for General Services Administration, told the Senate Public Works subcommittee that a beltway would provide better escape from Washington in the case of an enemy attack.[8] When the Interstate Highway system was created in 1956 it was to help relieve traffic, but also to contribute to the nation's defense.

In late 1952 the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), which had been created in 1927 by the Maryland General Assembly for Montgomery and Prince George's Counties suburbs, released a master highway plan for the two counties which showed a general proposed routing for the "Inter-county belt freeway."[9] More meaningful regional coordination for the belt highway began in 1954, when fifty planning officials from Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia met and agreed on the need for the freeway. In March of 1954 the Maryland State Roads Commission announced that it was ready to begin construction of its portion, at a projected cost of $35 million. Virginia State Highway Department officials also committed to the highway, but had to indefinitely postpone construction of their section until financing was available.[10]

Actual construction in Maryland began in February 1955 with a bridge over Cedar Lane just inside Rock Creek Park, east of Wisconsin Avenue. Even as that construction got underway, however, the Beltway itself was on trial in the court system and in the United States Senate. At issue was the Beltway's routing through the multi-juridictional Rock Creek Park extended. The earliest highway planning maps showed in the 1940s a beltway-prototype road that ran the proposed ring road north of the park. By 1950, however, M-NCPPC planners found that intense residential development and some poor topographic conditions had wiped out their northerly options. In planning highways, M-NCPPC normally used its zoning and land reservation authority to discourage or stop development along a planned route, but because the beltway was not firmly articulated on a master plan until 1950, the agency had not taken such steps early enough to prevent development along a northern route. Seeing themselves without much choice, M-NCPPC and NCPC officials agreed on a routing which crossed the park and they carefully defined that stretch of the road as a parkway.[11]

Rock Creek Park area residents had spoken against the proposed routing well before it reached the Senate in 1955. In addition, they were concerned about the State Roads Commission's plan to double-up that stretch of road using it as both a beltway and as a continuation of U.S. 240 (a southern extension of what is now U.S. 270). U.S. 240 would leave the beltway inside the park and head south toward Washington, dead-ending at East-West Highway until such time as the District of Columbia decided to extend it into the city.[12]

In August 1953 members of the Rock Creek Hills and the Parkwood Citizens' Associations requested that the proposed Rock Creek Park routing be prohibited. By October these groups had been joined by the Forest Glen and Locust Hills communities and by the Citizens' Action Committee for Fair Road Planning, headed by local resident and former U.S. senator Gerald Nye. Nye argued that using Rock Creek Park for either of the highways would establish a precedent which could open up Sligo Creek, the Anacostia, and other stream valleys for highway development. In point of fact, M-NCPPC in 1946 had submitted a confidential report to the U.S. presidential budget office proposing limited-access parkways through these stream valley corridors as well as several others.[13]

In addition, the Parkwood grouop argued that their subdivision's developer had sold the adjacent section of parkland to M-NCPPC in 1938 with the contractual restriction that the land would be developed "as a parkway to be used and maintained as part of the Rock Creek Park system." If the NCPC had known about that restriction, Parkwood residents said, it would not have approved the Beltway through the parkland.[14]

This brought up the question of what, exactly, is a parkway. The local press had been referring to the Beltway interchangeably as a belt highway and as a belt parkway. The stretch of parkland in question, Rock Creek Park extended in Montgomery County, was developed as a joint federal-state project under the federal 1931 Capper-Cramton Act and concurrent Maryland state legislation. Under these acts, Maryland paid two-thirds of park acquisition costs and the federal government paid one-third. Maryland owned the park and was charged with developing it, but its decisions remained subject to approval by the NCPC.[15]

It was, therefore, up to both Maryland and the NCPC to interpret the Capper-Cramton Act's preamble, which said its purpose was to provide for the "comprehensive park, parkway and playground system" of the area. Any development through the park, including the Beltway, had to be either park, parkway or playground. On October 30, 1953, NCPC chairman Harland Bartholomew explained that since the Beltway through the park would be built at "substantially a parkway standard" and that there would be concurrent development of the park's recreational facilities, the project could meet legal requirements. Three weeks later, six Rock Creek area residents filed suit in federal court challenging Batholomew's interpretation. The residents argued that it was clearly a multi-lane, limited-access, high-speed highway, part of Maryland's overall highway, and did not conform to restrictions referencing parks and parkways.[16]

Attorneys for both sides scrambled to find legal definitions for "parkway." Federal Judge Matthew McGuire of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia heard arguments in March of 1954. Arguing for the residents, attorneys J. Joseph Barse and Edward Northrup contended that the Beltway was intended solely as a major highway, not to serve Rock Creek Park, and was neither a parkway nor benefited the park. U.S. attorney Oliver Gasch urged the judge to dismiss the case, insisting that planners were well aware of the legal requirements and would approve the road only if they were certain they were meeting proper standards for serving the park.[17]

Months later Judge McGuire ruled he had to delay a decision because neither side had provided specific plans showing how and where the road would cut through the park. Within weeks, the Olmstead Bros. firm of Brookline, Massachusetts, had submitted a plan and in June the NCPC approved it with the stipulation that the southern leg of U.S. 240 would not be built from the Beltway south through the park.[18]

In July 1954 federal judge Edward Tamm threw out the suit, effectively ruling that NCPC did have the authority to rule on the Beltway through the park and accepting attorney Gasch's argument that planners would set stringent restrictions for the section of the Beltway through the park so that it would qualify as a parkway. An appeal and motion for injunction filed by Barse, as attorney for the residents, was rejected.[19]

Seeing that the courts were included to support NCPC, Rock Creek area resident Gerald Nye turned to his former colleagues in the U.S. Senate. He encouraged Senators Cordon, a Republican from Oregon, and Murray, a Democrat from Montana, to inquire formally into the Rock Creek Park-Beltway controversy. In February 1955, just as Maryland was beginning construction of the Cedar Lane bridge, Senator Murray introduced a resolution to prohibit the National Capital Planning Commission from approving any highway whatsoever crossing Rock Creek Park in Maryland and to require it to nullify any approval already given.[20]

At hearings on Murray's resolution, Senator Butler, Republican from Maryland, requested that Congress remove itself from what was fundamentally an internal state matter. Murray rejected this argument on the grounds that Rock Creek Park remained a part of the national park system and the two-day hearing adjourned with sharp conflict remaining between Maryland officials and Senator Murray over whether Congress could intervene without Maryland's agreement.[21] It is apparent which argument prevailed, since today a beltway does run through Rock Creek Park.

The section of the Beltway that ran through the park was indeed built as an identifiable parkway. NCPC and Maryland officials had said all along that they would only approve the highway through the park if it met parkway specifications and as promised the state built that segment to different standards. Isadore Parker, who as a draftsman designed much of the Beltway in Maryland in the 1950s, commented later, "There seemed [in the Rock Creek Park segment] to be an effort to maintain a parklike quality to the road instead of something ... as utilitarian as the New Jersey Turnpike. So as a result, instead of steel guardrails, they were designed to have wooden guardrails. And there was also great care given to retaining trees and other kinds of structures that were parklike in nature ..." When the section opened between Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues on October 24, 1957, only light vehicular traffic was permitted; no trucks.[22]

When the beltway was later incorporated into the Interstate highway system, there was a shift away from the parkway structure of the Rock Creek Park section. According to retired State Roads Commission district engineer William Shook, the park route had been planned as part of the Beltway, but it was built as a four-lane parkway at a time when the road was not subject to stringent Interstate standards. "[Several years after the Rock Creek Park segment opened in 1957,] we literally tore it up and rebuilt it when

we started building the Beltway again in the early '60s. So that section was closed, the roadway torn up, bridges rebuilt. I remember Cedar Lane and so forth were just essentially torn out and reconstructed [to meet strict federal standards adopted after the original construction]."[23] The National Capital Planning Commission and the State of Maryland had followed through and the Rock Creek Park segment was indeed built as a parkway as promised, but that lasted only six years.

Officially, the Beltway in Maryland opened to traffic on October 24, 1957, when the first 1.5-mile segment, the parkway segment, was completed between Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues. At the same time, the first interchange in Prince George's County was completed. Governor Theodore McKeldin and representatives of the Bureau of Public Roads and the District of Columbia Highway Department cut a ceremonial ribbon at the Kenilworth interchange in Prince George's County, while Mrs. McKeldin cut a ribbon simultaneously at the Wisconsin Avenue junction. The complex interchange at Pooks Hill, where the beltway met Wisconsin Avenue and what is now I-270, took another two years and $2.3 million to complete; Governor Millard Tawes cut the ribbon celebrating the interchange's opening in November 1959.[24]

Complaints about the Beltway's design, its interchanges and its Rock Creek Park section were not the only stumbling blocks along the way to the road's completion. The route taken for the Beltway did not please everyone. Over the years, there have probably been few roads laid out that did. Although the areas the Beltway passed through were not as heavily developed as they are now, it did displace some businesses and residences.

Lester Wilkinson, who acquired rights-of-way for the Beltway in Prince George's County, recalls that there was some displacement. "Obviously, it's almost impossible for a highway that big to go all the way through a county without ... displacing a few homes. But essentially at the time it was mostly undeveloped land."[25] Because the Beltway was built between 1957 and 1964 and citizen protests over freeways did not become a significant factor on the national scene until the mid-1960s, neither the media nor planning and political officials seem to have been particularly interested in the relative handful of people who were directly affected by the beltway's location. For one, future county executive Neal Potter saw his family's farm in Cabin John condemned for beltway construction, shattering decades of family memories.[26]

Cabin John Bridge crossed Plummers Island, a 12-acre scientific retreat in the Potomac River that was owned by the Department of the Interior, but operated since 1901 by the Washington Biologists' Field Club. Members of the club did successfully convince the State Roads Commission to shift an early plan for the bridge 200 yards upstream, where it would still cross the island but have less environmental impact.[27]

The Cabin John segment of the Beltway, specifically the portion between Virginia's Route 7 and Montgomery County's River Road, which included the Cabin John Bridge, opened at the end of 1962. It was scheduled to open just after Thanksgiving but was delayed by extremely cold weather. William Shook explained at the time that "wind whistling down the river makes it too cold for the workmen" and that some pavement, asphalt and concrete had yet to be laid. The bridge opened on December 30 in 13-degree

1957 Progress Report by Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission
Shows the Inter County Belt Highway (Capital Beltway)
As One of Three Concentric Belt Highways

weather, with strong winds blowing across the river, too cold for official ceremonies. In November 1963, a four-mile segment between River Road and Old Georgetown Road opened to the public,[28] but the remainder of the Beltway in Montgomery County awaited the full opening the next year.

Before the highway could officially open, it needed a name. Through the 1950s it had been referred to with quite a variety of names, including the Washington Circumferential Highway (its unofficial but generally used name), the circumferential, the belt road, the belt parkway, the Inter-county freeway, the Inter-county belt freeway, the Inter-county belt highway, and the intercounty belt parkway. In March 1960, the State Roads Commission decided on "Capitol Beltway," as shorter and easier to pronounce than Washington Circumferential Highway, and sent a request to the Virginia Department of Highways to consider using the same name for its portion. After discussion, Virginia officials agreed to "Capitol Beltway." Then, just four months later, officials changed the word "Capitol" to "Capital," so that the designation would refer to the Nation's Capital, rather than to the Capitol, the building where Congress meets.

The full Beltway, name and all, was finally opened to the public in August 1964. On August 16, the day before the barricades at interchanges were removed, Giant Food sponsored a 50-man cycling tour around a portion of the Beltway, ostensibly to promote cycling as "an ideal family sport for people of all ages," but also to encourage shoppers to purchase the bicycles on sale at the 17 Super Giant stores in the area. The notices for the event did, however, include a disclaimer: "Needless to say, cycling on the Beltway is not permitted; also, cycling on any high speed thoroughfare is not advised by area cycling clubs, whose members suggest you enjoy scenic roads for this healthful pastime." [29]

The next day, August 17, about 3000 people gathered at the New Hampshire Avenue interchange near the Prince George's and Montgomery County line to hear speeches by Governor Tawes, Federal Highway Administrator Rex Whitton, and dozens of local officials. Tawes cut the ceremonial ribbon at 12:40 p.m. and immediately the fully operational, $189 million Capital Beltway experienced its first traffic jam, as cars had lined up four abreast for miles surrounding the opening ceremony. State and county police spent 20 minutes unraveling the mess.

Moments after the opening ceremony, a Ford truck stalled, received a push from bystanders and chugged down the road as the first vehicle with mechanical problems on the completed Beltway. Trooper J. L. Galyon of the College Park state police barracks presented the first citation, to an interstate truck in violation for failing to use mud flaps as required by new state law. The Forestville Volunteer Fire Department made the first use of the expanded Beltway for an mergency run when it sent an ambulance to aid a man who became sick on a construction project. Maryland's portion of the Beltway opened with a 60 m.p.h. speed limit; Virginia began with a 65 m.p.h. limit. The full loop included 38 interchanges, 44 miles in Maryland, 22 miles in Virginia and a few yards in the District of Columbia where the Wilson Bridge crossed the Potomac River. [30]

Letters printed in the Washington Post and Evening Star commenting on the new highway were overwhelmingly positive. August 16, 1964, the day

before the Beltway opened, McDonald's placed an advertisement in the Washington Star: "FREE BELTWAY MAP showing all exists and entrances and the complete circumferential highway ... Just drive in at any McDonald's and pick up your copy!" The map showed the entire Capital Beltway, as well as all McDonald's locations inside and close to the Beltway. At that time there were probably many people in the area who had never driven on an "expressway" before, so some driving tips were included on the back of the map: "... Sudden stops can mean sudden death on an expressway ... The ease of expressway driving may tend to lull you to sleep ... Keep your eyes open for your exit. If you miss it, don't back up ... Never make a U-Turn on an expressway ... Avoid breakdowns on the expressway - check your car before you start. Gas tank filled. Radiator full ... Tires, plenty of tread ..." On the opposite page is the Montgomery County section of McDonald's 1964 Beltway map, which shows the Beltway and the interchanges as they were then.

In its middle age, the Beltway has come full circle, with frequent unsatisfactory traffic conditions over much of the highway; bridges and overpasses built half a century ago need replacement. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine life without it. Places of employment, shopping centers and suburbs are seldom laid out in neat lines for rail service. There is no doubt that the Capital Beltway, love it or hate it, is here to stay.

Jeremy Korr, a lifelong resident of suburban Maryland, is assistant director for the College Park Scholars Program in American Cultures, an undergraduate honors program, at the University of Maryland, from which he earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees. His Ph.D. dissertation, in progress, comprises a more thorough study of the Capital Beltway. He has taught at the University of Maryland for five years and during the summers teaches at the Children's School of Science in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

NOTES

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2. Star, August 16, 1964.
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4. Star, November 7, 1961.
5. Star, March 2, 1952.
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8. Star, February 19, 1952.
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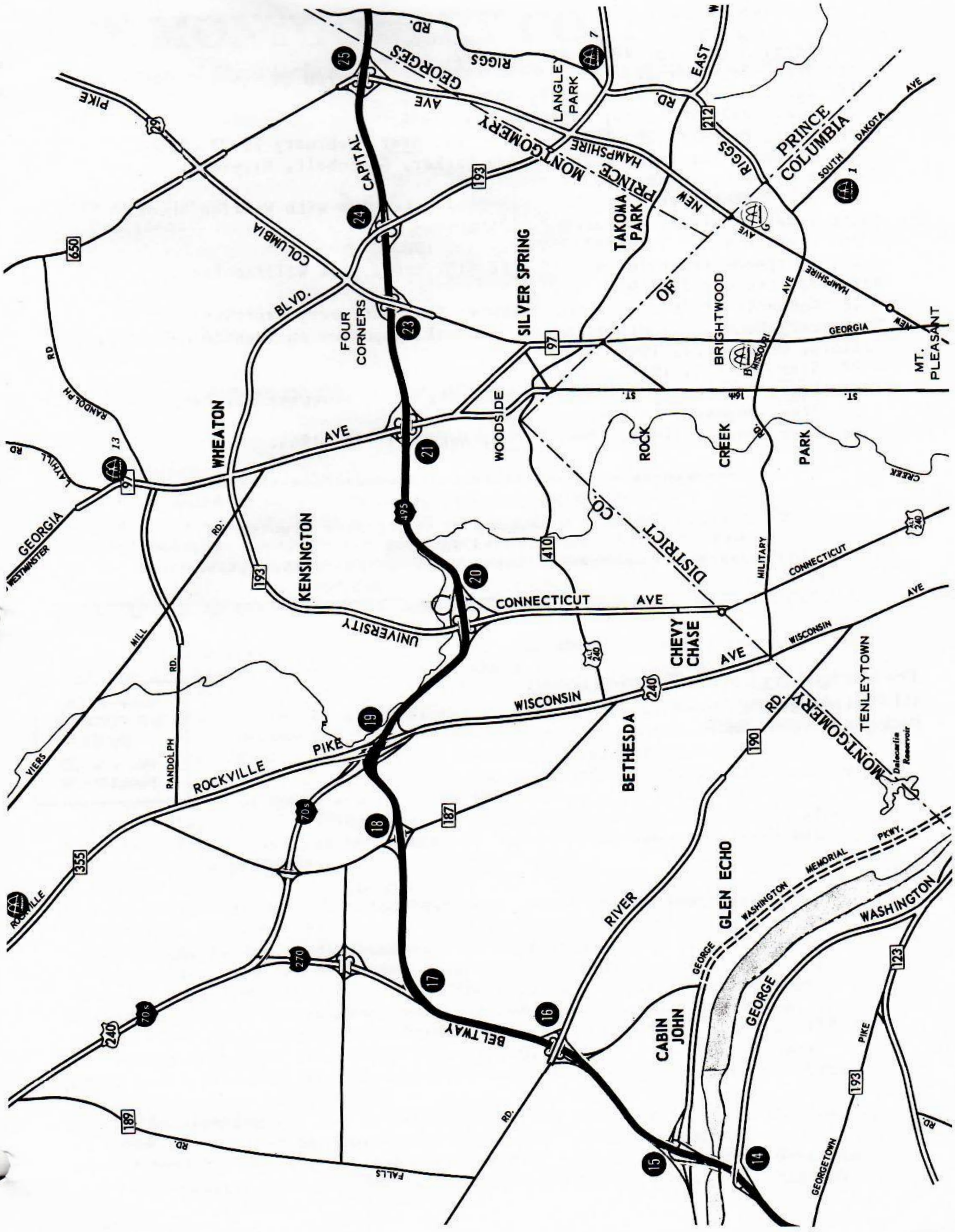

BELTWAY
CAPITAL
WHEATON
KENSINGTON
FOUR CORNERS
SILVER SPRING
WOODSIDE
TAKOMA PARK
LANGLEY PARK
BRIGHTWOOD
MT. PLEASANT
CHEVY CHASE
BETHESDA
TENLEYTOWN
GLEN ECHO
CABIN JOHN
ROCK CREEK PARK
MONTGOMERY
PRINCE GEORGES
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
CONNECTICUT AVE
WISCONSIN AVE
ROCKVILLE PIKE
UNIVERSITY
COLUMBIA PIKE
NEW HAMPSHIRE AVE
GEORGIA AVE
GEORGES AVE
RIGGS RD.
EAST WEST
SOUTH DAKOTA AVE
16th ST.
MISSOURI AVE
MILITARY RD.
RIVER RD.
FALLS RD.
MILL RD.
RANDOLPH RD.
VIERS
LAYHILL RD
WESTMINSTER
GEORGETOWN PIKE
WASHINGTON MEMORIAL PKWY.
GEORGE WASHINGTON
Dalecarlia Reservoir
CREEK
ROCKVILLE

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18. Star, May 4, 1954; June 11, 1954.
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20. Star, February 20, 1955. 21. Star, February 25-27, 1954.
22. Personal interview with Isadore Parker, Greenbelt, Maryland, October 5, 1998. Star, October 25, 1957.
23. Star, September 27, 1963. Personal interview with William Shook, Beltsville, Maryland, February 1, 1999.
24. Star, October 25, 1957; January 13, 1960.
25. Telephone interview with Lester Wilkinson, from Williamsburg, Virginia, October 27, 1998.
26. Comments at "Building the Beltway: The Montgomery Experience," Montgomery County Historical Society Annual Symposium on Twentieth-Century History, October 24, 1999.
27. Star, July 5, 1960.
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29. Star, August 16, 1964.
30. Star, August 17-18, 1964. Post, August 17-18, 1964.

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