

THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY STORY

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KNOWLES STATION

and

THE TOWN OF KENSINGTON

1870 - 1963

by

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The Beginning

When the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad built the Metropolitan Branch from Washington to Point of Rocks through Montgomery County in 1873, the area now comprised within the limits of the Town of Kensington was farm land, owned by Alfred Ray, Daniel Brown, George Duvall, and George Knowles, through whose property the tracks ran. Here the railroad crossed at grade the old Bethesda-Bladensburg Road, which leaves the Rockville Pike near the old Bethesda Church, and passing through Mitchell's Crossroads (Wheaton) and Four Corners, continued on to Bladensburg. This old road, which appears on pre-civil war maps, is now variously known as Cedar Lane to Kensington, Howard Avenue and St. Paul Street through Kensington, and University Parkway to Wheaton.

A station was established at this highway crossing, which was called "Knowles Station" and this is the beginning of the community. Shortly thereafter, following the death of George Knowles and his widow, Luraner Knowles, the more than 220 acre Knowles farm was divided into a number of substantial lots and, except for those retained by the family, put on the market. This division of the Knowles property made land available near the railroad station and on a public road, and a small community began to develop which,

according to Boyd's centennial history of Montgomery County (second edition, published in 1880) had a population of seventy. This volume lists farmers in the community as Brown, Perry, Mannakee, Ray, Duvall and McDermott. Also listed are Joshua Corrick, postmaster; F. M. Fawcett, merchant; George Mullinix, blacksmith; and George Duvall, carpenter. The Fawcett store was located near the grade crossing on the south side, and the building in 1963 is still occupied by a department store.

A general store was opened in the 1880's on the north of the grade crossing on the west side of the Wheaton Road, which it is believed was first managed by William Mannakee. This site has been continuously operated as a merchandise mart, (1) by Corrick & Dulin, (2) by Arthur and Harry Williams, (3) as a grocery store, and (4) by Umstead as a hardware store; it is now operated by the Mizell Hardware and Lumber Company.

After 1880 the large lots of the Knowles property were acquired by various people who were interested in developing the community. William H. Wheatley, in 1888, recorded a subdivision of lots 13 and 14, lying south of his property on the Wheaton Road, and south of Plyers Mill Road, on the east side of what is now St. Paul Street. Dr. R. B. Detrick, in the early 1880's, acquired lots 21, 22, and 23 of the Knowles estate and built a handsome home on part of this land. This home was later owned by J. P. Herrmann, a prominent Washington businessman, and subsequently was the location of the Rhinehart School for Deaf Children. It was destroyed by fire in 1963. By plat filed in 1891, the Detrick property was subdivided into smaller lots as Detrick's subdivision, extending from the road along the railroad south to the boundary of the Brown farm (Warner) and from Detrick Street to the east, past the present Armory Avenue. Prior to 1890 the Knowles lots acquired by F. M. Fawcett south of the railroad and west of the store were subdivided into two parcels, with lots on each side of Fawcett Street.

Mr. Mannakee, whose wife was one of the Knowles daughters, and other members of the Knowles family, retained many of the family lots north of the railroad, and, after opening Metropolitan Avenue, developed the triangle corner by that street, St. Paul Street and Plyers Mill Road with homes, and built a handsome home for himself at the corner of St. Paul Street and Metropolitan Avenue.

On the Duvall property, adjoining the Knowles property on the north, George Duvall built the houses facing the county road (St. Paul Street) north of the Plyers Mill Road intersection, and opposite the Wheatly property, and also built residences on the property to the west, fronting on Plyers Mill Road. Also, in the 1880's the Waugh subdivision of large lots was recorded, covering the area north of Plyers Mill Road and west of the Duvall houses, extending north to what is now Dupont Street.

Thus, by 1890, Knowles Station and post office had developed into a substantial village of several hundred people, mostly living north of the railroad, but with a growing development on the south side on Fawcett, Lincoln and Knowles. In addition to a group of tradesmen, merchants and artisans, serving the area between Wheaton and Bethesda, there was a growing group of newcomers from Washington.

By 1890 the increasing interest in suburban life was resulting in the development of Brookland, Takoma Park, Hyattsville, Washington Grove and Chevy Chase. Brainard H. Warner, a prominent Washington real estate man and banker, purchased from Spencer Jones about 125 acres of the Brown property adjacent to and south of the Knowles property, and bounded on the west by the Bethesda Road. After acquiring some additional land from Alfred Ray to the east, and from the Knowles estate to the north to get access to the railroad station, he filed a plat in November 1890 of a subdivision of the property under the name of Kensington Park (traditionally after the suburb of London, England). Mr. Warner built a handsome home on the site of the Brown farm house in the center of a four acre parcel adjoining Carroll Place. This property was later acquired by Frederic D. McKenney, a prominent Washington lawyer, who enlarged and modernized it. After his death it was occupied as a rest home, and still maintains the fine grounds and appearance.

Also, in 1890, the Davis subdivision of North Kensington was recorded, covering the property north of the present Dupont Street. A part of this subdivision was later included within the town.

These completed the subdivisions which later became part of Kensington. There was no common system of street names, and each subdivider picked his own. Dr. Detrick named his streets after his friends and acquaintances, such as Warner, Knowles, Freeman, Detrick and Lincoln. Lincoln Avenue was lost when Connecticut Avenue was relocated to cross the new railroad bridge. Warner named his streets after counties in Maryland, with the exception of Prospect Street. We note Washington, Baltimore, Montgomery, Calvert, Carroll, Frederick and Kent, but Prince Georges has been lost to Kensington Parkway, and Connecticut Avenue substituted for Howard, which name was moved to the County road. In the North Kensington subdivision, the two north-south streets were named Lexington and Concord, and the patriotic pattern was carried out in the east-west streets by naming them for naval heroes, such as Dupont, Farragut, Perry and Decatur.

PEOPLE

The growth of Knowles Station prior to the suburban rush of the 1890's was predominantly from local families, and this has given the town a local flavor, and attracted other county families during its later history. In this can be found the slight but real difference between the development here and that found in communities which were almost entirely developed for commuters to Washington. The business, professional, social and political life of the community owed much to this background of old county families, which, in addition to the Knowles family groups, included the Hurdles, Rays, Perrys, Duvalls and Browns. To these were added, as the community developed, Dr. Eugene Jones, from Poolesville, and his wife, who was Clara Conley of Fairland; Dr. William L. Lewis, who, while a Virginian, was married to Margaret Darby, of Dawsonville; and Dr. Warren Price, of near Hyattstown. Arthur Williams and Harry Williams with their families, from Dawsonville, operated a general store for several years. The Alfred Ray family was represented by Preston B. Ray, and by Mrs. J. Frank Wilson (Clara Ray). The Warthen family, who built so many of our fine homes, and were such a pillar of the Methodist Church, were natives of the County, as were Mrs. Jack Bowie, our postmistress, from Laytonsville; George Peter, early B. & O. Agent, town clerk, and bank cashier; and the Umsteads, Wagners, Vietts, Kefauvers and Van Fossens, to name but a few.

To these fine old Maryland families, and the group of Washington and Georgetown people, such as the Detricks, Fawcetts, Wheatleys, Dulins, Corricks and Moores, there was added during the years after 1890 some outstanding professional, business and government families from all parts of the United States. These included scientists from the Patent Office and the Bureau of Standards, the Postmaster of Washington, the Chief Clerk of the Department of Justice, the General Counsel of the Customs Bureau, the City Editor of the Evening Star, and some members of the faculty of the District of Columbia schools, including John Freeman, Supervising Principal; W. Perry Hay, science; and Edmund Noyes, history; the last named was the father of our Juvenile Court Judge. From the field of private business and from the professions, in addition to the early residents, came such well known citizens as J. P. Herrmann, who bought the Detrick property; Frederic D. McKenney, lawyer who bought the Warner property; William M. Terrell and Harry Martin, real estate; Albert Gatley, banker; and James M. Proctor, Assistant U. S. Attorney and later Judge of the District Court.

It was the old county families who dominated the political, business and professional aspects of the community, and influenced its local politics. The son of Arthur Williams, J. Dawson Williams, was elected to the House of Delegates, and later to the State Senate. Preston B. Ray was elected to the House of Delegates, and later became Clerk of the Circuit Court. Dr. Eugene Jones was elected to several terms as State Senator, and his son, Charles Jones, a native of Kensington, was elected to the House of Delegates.

From this miniature melting pot of old county families and families from all parts of the country there developed a community with firm loyalties, a fine community life in the churches, clubs and school, and a strong desire to preserve the character and charm of the town.

The new subdivisions grew rapidly after 1890, and the influx of many new families was bound to affect the character of the old community of Knowles Station. The newcomers largely commuted to Washington, and the development materially increased the business of the railroad, the only transportation. In 1893 a new station was built south of the railroad, and is still there. New stores and business houses opened, and the tradesmen prospered. A source of friction developed when Mr. Warner persuaded the railroad company to change the name of the station to Kensington, and similarly had the name of the post office changed. This naturally incensed the many relatives and friends of the Knowles family, and may have been responsible for the political disputes which later developed to divide the town between the older and newer residents.

THE MUNICIPALITY

After 1890 the rapid development of the community began to produce problems which the county government could not handle. These included street maintenance, for which the subdividers were not responsible, lights, sanitation and sidewalks. In this situation, after much agitation, our representatives in the Legislature, in 1894, secured the enactment of a bill creating a municipal corporation known as the "Mayor and Council of Kensington", which was succeeded, under an Act of 1898, by the "Town of Kensington". This corporation has continued as the governing power of the community, despite the many changes in the county government, and, despite the development of its surroundings. The area as described in the original charter has not changed, and is limited to the comparatively small original subdivisions, less than a square mile.

The first task of the newly incorporated town was to get out of the mud. Subdividers in the 1890's had no obligation to pave streets, and the only road being maintained by the County, if it can be called maintenance, was the old Bethesda-Wheaton Road. In order that the citizens could get to the railroad station, post-office and store, the town installed board walks along the streets, which, while better than the mud, created a hazard of their own when loose nails caused the board to flip on the unwary pedestrian and smack his shin. Oil lamps on posts were installed, the effectiveness of which was not too good, as they smoked a lot, and were never lighted when the almanac promised a moon. Citizens when out in the evening carried their own lanterns, with names attached. Along about 1898 the town was authorized to issue bonds, and brick sidewalks were installed on one side of each street, together with cement stepping stones to get across the street. The first real attempt to get out of the mud came with the use of cinders acquired from the railroad in the 1920's. In the 1930's these were blacktopped.

With the coming of electricity after the turn of the century, the oil lamps were replaced by electric lights, and the town was ready for its next big step, a water and sewer system.

At this time the town was full of windmills, which were quite picturesque, but not efficient during long periods of windless days in the summer, and some of us remember the tedium of hand pumping water up to the tank. The community was also outgrowing the individual disposal systems. One or two small private water supply systems, using gasoline fueled pumps, supplied some customers by pumping water to their attic tanks, but these were strictly neighborhood affairs.

The initial proposal to issue bonds to finance a municipal water and sewer system met with resistance from those who preferred their own wells, and considered the proposal "by these newcomers" an interference with their way of life. After being defeated in an election in 1901 the matter lay dormant until revived in 1914 when the bond issue was approved. Wells and pumps were installed on the tract between Detrick Street and the County road near the railroad, a tank was erected, and water piped to all homes. A sewer system was installed, using as a disposal field the large vacant land at the southern end of Prince Georges Avenue. After this system was in operation for several years, the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission was created, and in 1922 it took over the town system and extended the sewer line eventually to the Rock Creek trunk sewer. The abandoned disposal field was later transferred by the town to the Park and Planning Commission in connection with its acquisition of Kensington Parkway, and became the Kensington Playground.

By the end of World War II the major developments in the town had been completed, and the succeeding governments have been concerned with improving the existing facilities, hard pavements on streets, new sidewalks, new parks, and the maintenance of the character of the community. No attempt has been made to secure enlargement of the area, and Kensington remains a small community in the midst of the almost complete development of the farms which originally surrounded it.

During the nearly seventy years of its corporate existence, the government of the town has been carried on by its unselfish citizens who have served as Mayor and members of the Town Council, with real dedication to unpaid and often unappreciated public service. With no hope of financial reward, they have entered hotly contested political contests to serve the community. Space does not permit the listing of their names, and many of them have been forgotten, but the community is the better for their service, and the consciousness of a job well done is their only reward.

ROADS:

For many years the only highway access to Knowles Station was the Bethesda-Wheaton Road which crossed the railway at grade. By 1890 Plyers Mill Road was opened, and shortly thereafter a road to Garrett Park, north of and following the railroad, with a bridge over Rock Creek near Duvall's Mill. This was later replaced by a new road to Garrett Park south of the railroad as an extension of Knowles Avenue. After the turn of the century, our representatives in the Legislature secured the opening of a road connecting with Chevy Chase Lake. This became Connecticut Avenue within the town, replacing the original Howard Avenue. Another road was opened from the east end of Metropolitan Avenue, through Capital View, to Forest Glen.

Much of this local road improvement was resisted by the rural county governments, and a former judge of the court is reported to have remarked to one of our local politicians that he was writing his political death warrant by helping "those foreigners".

KENSINGTON RAILWAY

By 1890 the Chevy Chase Land Company was actively engaged in acquiring land on Connecticut Avenue incident to the development of Chevy Chase, and extended their holdings to the vicinity of Jones Bridge Road. These interests financed the construction of an electric railway line from near 18th and U Streets in Washington up 18th to Calvert then west by a bridge across Rock Creek valley to Connecticut Avenue, and north past Chevy Chase Circle to the B. & O. Freight line, where they built a terminal car barn, a power house to supply electric current, and a dam on Coquelin Run to create a pond for water to cool the power plant. This pond was called Chevy Chase Lake, and although long since drained, it still gives its name to the locality.

This trolley end was just $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the Kensington Railway station, but there was then no road connecting. Mr. Warner and others interested in the development of Kensington organized the Kensington Railway Company to construct and operate a trolley line to connect with the Capital Traction line, and thus provide an alternative to the commuter service of the B. & O. The line was built north from Chevy Chase Lake via Connecticut Avenue extended to Jones Bridge Road, thence through the subdivision of Kenilworth (North Chevy Chase), and then by private right of way across Rock Creek through the Ray farm on the east of the small branch to the end of Prince Georges Avenue in Kensington and via that street to a terminus near the railroad station. The first car came over the line in May, 1895.

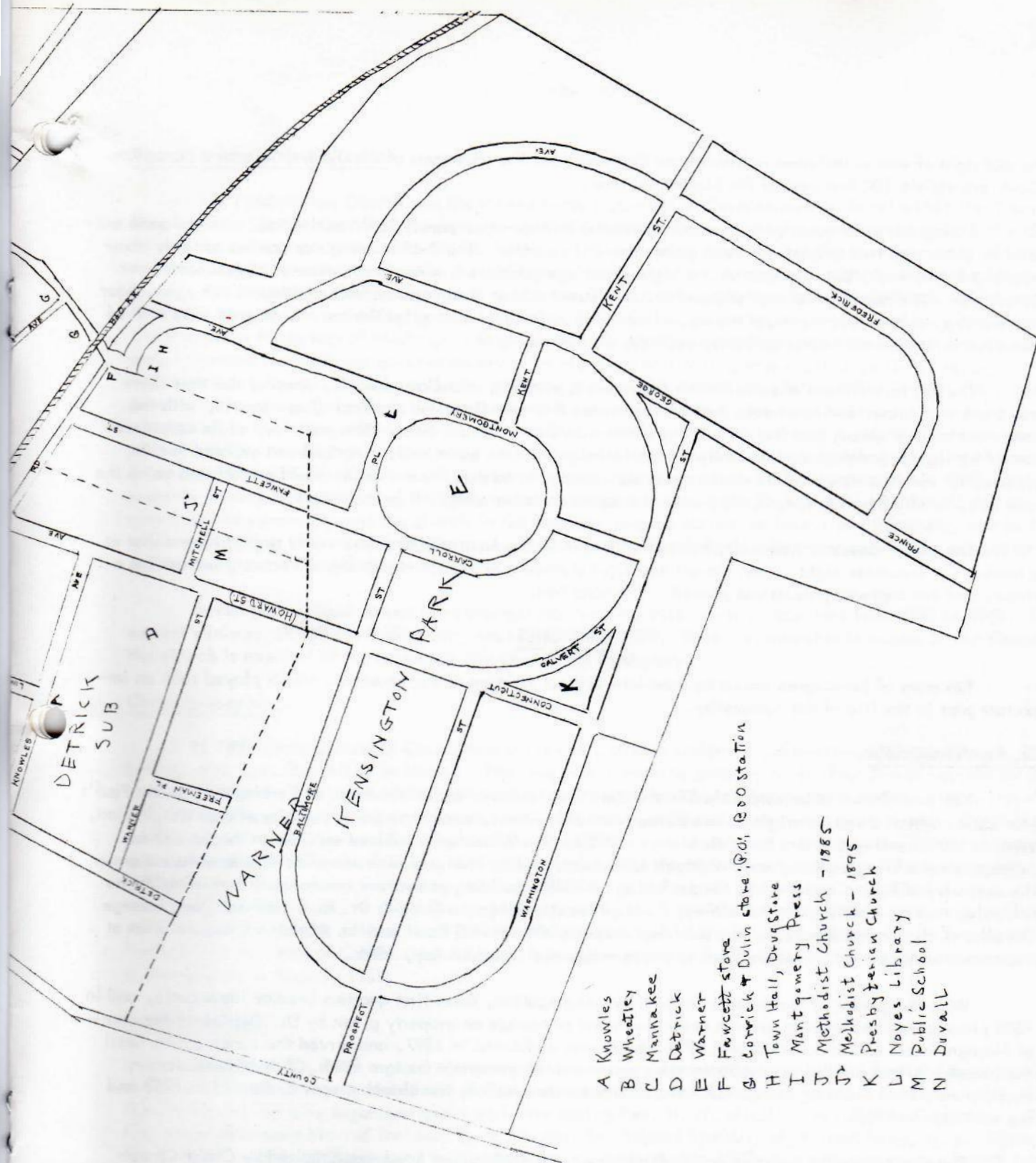
In 1902 a new company was organized to build a connecting line to Sandy Spring and thence to Ellicott City. This line failed and was acquired in 1906 by R. Henry Phillips, who operated the Kensington Railway himself, with the assistance of one employee. Phillips extended his Sandy Spring line slowly through Kensington along the railway to the railroad bridge at the west end, then built a bridge across the railway and extended his line about 3,000 feet before giving up when not half way to Wheaton. In 1925 the operation was taken over by the Capital Traction Company, and abandoned in 1933 with the substitution of buses. Some of

C.M. HOPKINS
ALAS 15 MILES
AROUND WASHINGTON
1878

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Rockville Pike
Rock Creek
Washington Monument
Potomac River
District of Columbia
Rockville Pike
Rock Creek
Washington Monument
Potomac River





- A Knowles
- B Wheelley
- C Mannackee
- D Detrick
- E Warner
- F Fawcett stone
- G Carrick & Dulin stone; (P.O.) Bus Station
- H Town Hall, Drug Store
- I Montgomery Press
- J Methodist Church - 1885
- K Methodist Church - 1895
- L Presbyterian Church
- M Noyes Library
- N Public School
- O Duval

the old right of way is included in Kensington Parkway, and the abutments of the old trestle bridge across Rock Creek are visible 100 feet east of the highway bridge.

During the early years of its operation, this trolley line was a purely local institution, with the same customers, and a real family spirit between passengers and operator. The 7:45 morning car carried not only commuters going to work, but also most of the high school age youngsters, since there were no high schools near Kensington. The motorman always stopped at Kent Street and at Washington Street whether or not a passenger was waiting, as he knew the street would be lined with customers running for the car. One good lady arrived minus her skirt, but all waited gallantly until she went home for it.

The car took fifteen minutes for the trip, over a winding, unballasted track. Most of the time there was a one man crew, and fares were collected between the town limit and the Rock Creek trestle, with the power cut to half speed, and the car moving at not over five miles per hour. This practice, while considered normal by regular passengers, frequently alarmed strangers. One good lady, outbound and exposed to this practice for the first time, called on the motorman-conductor to stop the car so she could get off and catch the next one, to which he replied, "Lady, when the next car comes along I'll be running it".

The owner-operator frequently carried a shotgun on the front platform and would stop to take a shot at a hawk. On a summer night, when the oil headlight showed a possum on the track, all hands piled out for a chase, and the captured possum was placed in the sand box.

CHURCHES

No story of Kensington would be complete without mention of the churches, which played such an important part in the life of the community.

St. Paul's Methodist:

The first church to be established in the area now included within the Town of Kensington was St. Paul's Methodist, which owed its origin to two devout methodists newly come into the community of Knowles Station, William H. Wheatley and Dr. R. B. Detrick. In 1884, Mr. Wheatley organized services in the barn of his property on the Wheaton Road north of Plyers Mill Road, and in 1885 a church was officially established under the authority of Rock Creek Parish. In the spring of 1885 a building committee was formed, consisting of the following trustees: William H. Wheatley, F. M. Fawcett, Benjamin Duvall, Dr. R. B. Detrick, and George Duvall. A church was erected at the southeast corner of Plyers Mill Road and the Wheaton Road, on a lot at the corner of the Wheatley subdivision; it was formally dedicated in May, 1886.

With the growth of the community and the congregation, these first quarters became inadequate, and in 1896 plans were completed to erect a new church and parsonage on property given by Dr. Detrick at the corner of Fawcett Street and Mitchell Street. The church was dedicated in 1897, and served the congregation until the increase in membership required that the church and the parsonage be torn down. A handsome masonry church, education building and social hall combined were erected, the church proper dedicated in 1953 and the additions in 1957.

The first Methodist building on St. Paul Street and Bladensburg Road was acquired by Christ Church Parish of the Episcopal church. When it in turn needed larger quarters, the old building was remodeled as a residence.

The first Recording Steward of St. Paul's was Dr. R. B. Detrick, who served from 1887 to 1897. His successors were J. F. Stoek, George W. Stokes, Harry Ridgley, A. C. Warthen, and John J. Price.

The first minister was Daniel Haskell, who has been followed by a long list of devoted men, the most recent and incumbent being Charles F. Kirkley, who ministers to a congregation of nearly two thousand.

Warner Memorial Presbyterian

The Presbyterian Church was the second to be organized in the area now included within the Town of Kensington. Shortly after 1890 Presbyterians in the community began to work toward establishment of a church. Among the moving spirits were the Martin family, of Metropolitan Avenue, and the Kinnear family of Lincoln Avenue. Services were organized in the old school house where the Armory now stands. When the Noyes Library was erected in 1893 services were held there, conducted by ministers from the Bethesda church and the Rockville church. At a meeting held in September, 1893 the congregation was organized into a Presbyterian Church by the Presbytery of Washington City. Thomas R. Martin and William M. Terrell were elected elders, and J. Howard Fishback was elected deacon. To the Board of Trustees were elected Curtis C. McCain, Alphonso Hart, Marion Dorian, Aaron H. Kinnear, Brainard H. Warner and William M. Terrell. Mr. Warner gave to the congregation a large triangular lot at Connecticut Avenue, Washington Street and Calvert Place as a memorial to his father, Henry Warner, and assisted in the financing of a church building which was completed in 1894, in which year the church called its first pastor, the Rev. James T. Marshall. The charter members in the organization of the church numbered eleven. A manse was built on the property in 1897, and a separate Sunday School building in 1904, and these properties served the church until after World War II. The growth of the community and the church in the post-war years rendered the facilities inadequate, and in 1954 all three buildings were torn down and a new church and Sunday School, with necessary office and social quarters was erected and dedicated in 1956.

Seven pastors have served the congregation, starting with James T. Marshall from 1893 to 1903. The current minister, Dr. Omar Buckwalter, has served since 1959. With a membership in excess of one thousand, the church is now one of the important churches in the Presbytery.

Christ Episcopal:

In 1899 Christ Episcopal Church was started as a mission under the jurisdiction of Grace Church, Silver Spring, with Rev. David Barr in charge. The church acquired the property at St. Paul Street vacated by the Methodist Church on its move to Fawcett Street, and in 1913 became an independent parish, with twenty-five original members. The first vestry included such well known old Kensington names as McKeever, Birgfeld, Bowie, Clum, Trowbridge and Dr. Warren Price. In 1924 a new church was erected on the corner of Knowles and Connecticut Avenue (now Armory Avenue), which served the parish until, outgrown, the congregation in 1952 acquired the property vacated by the Catholic Church at Prospect Street and Connecticut Avenue. This occupancy was shortlives, as the property was acquired by the State Roads Commission in connection with the widening of Connecticut Avenue, and in 1957 the church acquired the property extending from Everett to Franklin Streets, west of Connecticut Avenue. Ground was broken for a new building, which was completed and dedicated in August, 1958.

Kensington Baptist:

On August 30, 1922 a group of twenty-seven persons interested in organizing a Baptist Church acquired two lots on Dupont Street at the corner of Concord, on which tent meetings were held. On October 11, 1922 the church was formally organized and a call extended to Rev. H. H. Nicoll to become the first pastor. The first board of trustees elected included H. H. Brooks, Dr. Edward Speider, W. F. Matthews, H. M. Flinn, W. J. Brooks and Smith Putnam. A temporary church was erected in 1922, succeeded by a more formal frame structure in 1926. Other buildings and additions were added until 1951, when the growth of the congregation, and the opening of University Parkway with its business development made the location unsuitable. In 1954 the church acquired the five acre tract adjoining the southern boundary of the town on the west side of Connecticut Avenue and built a fine new brick church, with adequate Sunday School and social hall, to take care of the rapidly growing congregation. On August 24, 1958, the first service was held in the new building, under the pastorate of the Rev. J. Guy Saunders.

Holy Redeemer Catholic:

For many years the area of Knowles Station and Kensington was part of historic St. John's Parish of Forest Glen, the story of which goes back to the 18th century and the Carroll family. In 1911, under the leadership of Father Charles Rosensteel, of St. Johns, a church was built at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Prospect Street, dedicated by the late James Cardinal Gibbons. This mission church grew rapidly, and in 1948 Holy Redeemer was established as a separate parish, with its own resident pastor. In 1950 the parish received as a gift from the family of the late B. Francis Saul a seven acre tract out of the Saul farm located between Saul Road and Rock Creek. Here a fine school, convent and auditorium were built and dedicated in 1951, and with the continued growth of the parish, ground was broken for a new church in 1962, which was completed and dedicated in the spring of 1963.

Adas Israel Congregation:

The most recent addition to the religious community was the erection of a synagogue by Adas Israel Congregation on property adjacent to the southern boundary of the town, and east of Connecticut Avenue, across from the Baptist Church. This building was erected in 1958, and the growing congregation is adding to the religious life of the Kensington area.

Thus, of the five churches originally started and located within the limits of the Town of Kensington, only two, the Methodist and the Presbyterian, the first two to be organized, remain within the corporate limits. Although others have moved they are still adjacent to the town and are cherished as Kensington institutions long identified with the history and social life of the community.

To be continued