

# THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY STORY

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## TRAIN STATIONS AND SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE OLD BALTIMORE AND OHIO RAILROAD

by Jo Beck

The quaint railroad stations that remain in Montgomery County today on the Maryland Rail Commuter (MARC) line serve as reminders of a real estate boom time that began in the 1870s when the coming of the rail transportation began an irrevocable change in our county.

Originally, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (the B & O) planned to build straight westward from Baltimore to the Ohio River, but after the Civil War Washington grew from a sleepy town to a bustling city. It became obvious that any main branch would have to include the capitol city. The railroad decided to build a 49-mile-long "Metropolitan Branch," running from the B & O station in the city of Washington to Point of Rocks, Maryland, at a cost of three million dollars.<sup>1</sup>

This was considered by many to be a risky undertaking. On its bisecting path through Montgomery County, the branch would encounter Maryland piedmont terrain that was rough and rocky, necessitating numerous "cuts" through solid rock and many bridges. However, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was a pioneer, its opening of a few miles of railroad in 1830 having marked the real beginning of the railway era in United States, and it went ahead with its plans.<sup>2</sup>

Once the Metropolitan Branch of the railroad was built, there were big changes in the towns that lay along the railroad and suburban subdivision began to appear. In 1889 it was reported by the Washington Post that "The development along the Metropolitan Branch within the past few years has been phenomenal. Nearly all the land between here [Rockville] and Gaithersburg has been bought up either by syndicates or wealthy individuals, and quite a number of the newly acquired properties have been platted for sale in building lots."

The trains carried not only passengers but freight, so that agricultural enterprises had a more efficient means of marketing their

products. Daily trains meant that dairy farms located along the corridor prospered and fruits and vegetables could quickly and easily be shipped to the city. At the same time, goods of all kinds, from plows to furniture and household china, could be brought into the county faster and at less cost.<sup>3</sup>

Completed in 1873, the railroad served as a corridor for growth and brought an immediate increase in land values. New England and British capital, along with Washington investors and local entrepreneurs began investment schemes, new developments and real estate syndicates.

In some places, building lots increased at a rate of \$100 a day. With more and more civil service employees in Washington, investors felt comfortable developing suburban communities for them. Buyers were urged to build summer homes or live year-round in the new developments and commute to their jobs in the city. There were twelve trains a day on the new route and the fare for the 45-minute ride from Rockville to Washington was 60 cents.

Growth first started in Garrett Park and Kensington, but quickly moved north to Rockville and Gaithersburg. In 1889, during the boom time, Rockville realtor Cooke Lockett reported that a good portion of his business consisted of the sale of "truck gardens and grass farms." The investment frenzy of 1887 to 1892 ended with the "panic of 1893" but prosperity and land values returned again by 1898.<sup>4</sup>

The railroad has been in continuous operation since 1873, first by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and then by its successor companies, now the CSX Corporation. Since 1974, train service has been financed by the Maryland State Railroad Administration and today approximately 4700 commuters use the rail service every day, an estimated 90 per cent of them going to Union Station in Washington.<sup>5</sup>

Along the route of the railroad were twenty-six train stations. In the early days people came to the stations on foot, on horseback, in buggies. Some wives took their commuting husbands to the station in the buggy in the morning and then met the train as it came through in the evening. The stations at Dickerson, Boyds, Gaithersburg, Rockville and Silver Spring were grand structures designed by Ephraim Francis Baldwin, an architect well known for his train station designs, as were the stations at Kensington and Germantown, which were more austere versions. Other stations along the line were nothing more than a simple lean-to that protected passengers from the elements.

Many of the original train stops were phased out through the years as the Baltimore and Ohio faced dwindling ridership. Some of the now-defunct stops listed in a 1919 timetable are familiar to us only as street names, school names or shopping centers: Buck Lodge, Waring, Clopper, Brown (near Brown Station School in Gaithersburg), Derwood, Westmore (near Montgomery College in Rockville), Autrey Park, Halpine, Randolph, Garrett Park, Forest Glen, and Linden.<sup>6</sup> The train stops that are still in use on the MARC line have stories of their own.

The Dickerson train station is the westernmost in Montgomery County, tucked between the Potomac River and Sugarloaf Mountain and located just

inside the Frederick County line on Mt. Ephraim Road. For nearly 20 years before the station was built, Dickerson passengers waited for trains in what is now the Seneca Food Store. The small white frame building across the road from the tracks once stood next to the tracks and store owner W. H. Dickerson served as station agent. According to local historian Harry Meem,<sup>7</sup> 85, whose father was the station agent at Dickerson for many years, the store was moved two or possibly three times over the years to make way for modern double tracks and road widenings. "Luckily, Dickerson owned the land behind the store, so they could just keep moving it back," said Meem.

In 1891, when a station was finally built, Dickerson went back to tending store full time and Harry Meems Sr. was hired to take over as station master. By this time, telegraphy had become an important function of train agents and Meem was familiar with it, having learned the skill from his uncle in Gaithersburg. He took a room nearby in a boarding house with the Frederick Sellman family, and after he married one of their daughters built a house next to the station and raised his family there. Harry Meem Jr. and his wife Frances still live in the house.

Growing up in Dickerson, Harry Meem Jr. relished the excitement that the trains brought to his sleepy country town. Meem remembers that during World War II soldiers were stationed at the Monocacy River bridge a mile east of town, and another garrison was stationed at the Little Monocacy aqueduct. "Because of the war, they wanted to make sure nobody blew up the bridges," said Meem. "There were always three or four armed soldiers and their tents there all the time during the war."

One foggy morning during World War II, Dickerson residents woke up to the horror of a three-train pileup on the tracks just west of town. An eastbound passenger train carrying soldiers on leave, schoolboys on their way to boarding school, and businessmen, ran into the back of another passenger train. "Because of the war, engineers had to run on yellow (a caution status), yet were pressed to stay right on schedule," said Meem.

Rail sections were divided into "blocks" and signal lights several miles apart let the engineer know if the coast was clear in the block ahead. Upon getting the yellow, go-ahead light, the engineer in the rear train assumed that the preceding train had passed through the block and barreled on ahead, hitting the front train. The front train, though, had just entered the block and was going at a much slower speed.

The damaged cars buckled onto the westbound track and were then hit by a freight train. "As I recall, the freight train was carrying rails or something similar," said Meem. "Upon impact, the rails flew off, just like missiles." Fourteen people were killed and one body was never positively identified. Firemen, residents and rescue workers from the area rushed to the scene to put out the resulting fire and rescue trapped passengers.

The Dickerson station remained intact until it was burned by vandals in the early 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Several years later it was rebuilt and restored to its original, stately condition at a cost of \$60,000. County funds paid for the renovation and the county hosted a re-dedication ceremony on May 10, 1986. The restored station carefully matches the original, down to the last detail. The exterior is frame, painted the original brownish rust color.

Wide overhanging eaves protect passengers from the elements, authentic railroad station lights grace the platform and a decorative insignia on the roof peak gives the company name and date of construction: "B&O - 1891." Inside, the friendly face of the ticket agent is long gone, but the one-room structure still offers residents a nostalgic reminder of days gone by.

The Barnesville train station, also known as "Sellman Station," was torn down in the late 1950s. Sellman, apparently named after Captain William O. Sellman who owned land there, was a separate, thriving community located just a mile south of Barnesville. Development began around 1873 when the railroad came through and the town was gradually abandoned with the advent of interstate highways and automobiles.

For a number of years after the old station was torn down in the late 1950s, there was no shelter at all for the popular upcounty stop. It was finally decided to move to the site a 16-by-22 foot historic metering station owned by the Washington Gas Light Company, with the gas company, the county, and the city and residents of Barnesville sharing the costs. The squarish little structure had a makeover after the move. It was painted inside and out and a wide overhanging roof was added just below the original roof line, giving the building more an authentic "train station" look, and it was re-dedicated on October 10, 1977. Snuggled up against the woods, surrounded by trees and shrubbery in a rural area just south of Barnesville on Route 109 (Beallsville Road), the station today is a pretty sight.

The Boyd station was named for James Alexander Boyd, a Scottish immigrant turned entrepreneur, who had worked for the railroad industry as a stone cutter and later became a highly respected civil engineer. In 1861 Boyd and his wife went to Brazil to build railroads and on his return in 1866 he saw opportunity and adventure with the construction of the Metropolitan Branch line. When the railroad hired local companies to lay sections, Boyd was quick to snap up the contract for several difficult sections in the upcounty region, including the Barnesville segment. Parr's Ridge, just east of Barnesville at 527 feet elevation, was the highest point on the Metropolitan Branch.

Boyd was interested in agriculture and real estate investing as well as railroading and bought more than 1000 acres of worthless land at the convergence of Little Seneca and Ten Mile Creeks, brought in South American guano and lime, and turned the scrub pine and sedge grass land into productive pastures and fields. He built a model dairy farm southeast of Barnesville and his mansion served as a focal point for the estate, surrounded by tenant houses, barns, windmills and milking parlors.

When the railroad built a fine brick station near Boyd's farm, they named it "Boyd's Station." The small town that grew around the station was at one time the center of the dairy shipping business in the county but the turreted brick station was demolished in 1927, during a double tracking project, and although the train still stops at Boyds, there is no building.<sup>9</sup>

Washington Grove is a little town that Methodism and the railroad built in what was forest and farmland. In 1872 Methodist Church leaders in Washington formed a committee to choose likely sites for the camp meeting place that they wanted to establish as a summer retreat. A summer "camp" was thought to be a good means to strengthen their faith and attract new converts, and church members were enthusiastic about the idea of going to the country for a few weeks in the summer, away from the low, swampy, humid and malarial city of Washington.<sup>10</sup>

The committee found suitable land on a corner of Nathan Cooke's farm near Gaithersburg and the widow Cooke sold 267 acres and the railroad right-of-way to the Methodist association for \$6,636. That the land was adjacent to the newly-built railroad line was one of the key factors in the choice, as were its hilltop location, adequate water supplies for the campers, and the shade provided by the virgin forest.

The railroad promised to run special excursion cars to bring the thousands of campers to the site and in addition a platform, side track and station house for the commuters. A simple wooden train station was built at the intersection of Grove Road and Railroad Street, very close to the tracks, and later another frame station built next to Hershey's, on the Oakmont side of the tracks. The depots were a hub of activity, with special trains bringing hundreds of thousands of campers over the years. There were 12,000 in attendance one Sunday in 1882 and around the smoky locomotives there must have been a mob of people, horses, buggies and wagons. Prohibition meetings were also held at Washington Grove, permanent summer cottages and a hotel built,<sup>11</sup> adding to the traffic through the train station. The stations that were there are long gone, although the MARC trains still stop every day.

The Germantown train station is the best success story on the old Metropolitan Branch line; in 1989, 1000 passengers a day used the station, the most heavily used stop in the county. The depot, a reproduction of the original 1891 station, is used as a waiting room and the ticket office is located just across the street in the old Germantown bank building.<sup>12</sup>

When the railroad tracks were laid in 1873, the original Germantown commercial center shifted a mile to the east and many new business enterprises blossomed. Bowman Brothers Mill found new markets for its Silver Leaf flour in Washington and elsewhere, local farmers could bring in lime and guano to fertilize their fields, and the daily trains enabled dairy farmers to increase production. Land values rose steadily, with property along the railroad fetching the highest prices.<sup>13</sup>

The original depot was built by the Baltimore and Ohio railroad in 1891, a modest wooden building nearly identical to the depot at Kensington. This was burned by arsonists in the late 1970s and the new depot, a replicated 600-square-foot structure costing \$140,000, was built in 1989 on the same site as the original structure.

The quaint rebuilt Germantown train station serves as a historical link to past generations. The traditional projecting central bay was built to serve as the station master's office, giving him a clear view of oncoming



Germantown Train Station

trains, and the wide overhanging roof was designed to protect commuters from rain and snow. Ornamental roof supports, gable detailing and handsome brickwork on the chimney add authenticity and architectural detail to the charming little building. Inside, a roomy waiting room is lined with benches. The restored brick platform surrounding the depot accents the station's brown exterior.

Gaithersburg was a small farming village with no real identity before the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad built the Metropolitan line. There were several names for clusters of homes in the general area, including "Deer Park," "Logtown" and "Forest Oak," but when the last spike was driven on the rail line, these individual, isolated settlements suddenly had a focal point and a common interest. The small commercial center on the Frederick pike shifted to the area surrounding the depot.

Public records show that within two years there appeared a grain elevator, bank, mill and two hotels to accommodate the increased business activity. Fine homes were built on Diamond Avenue near the commuter station. Residents were able to travel to Washington on a whim, and some wealthier residents even sent their youngsters to posh private schools in Washington, feasible because of the easy commuting distance.<sup>14</sup>

A small frame structure served as the station at Gaithersburg until the present station was built in 1884, one of the few stations in the county that boasts the original station in its original location. The handsome, one-story brick building has a tall central section with a projecting central bay that allows the station master to see a long distance down the track in both directions. Decorative brackets embellish the eaves and the ends of exposed rafters are carved. Herringbone-trim battens decorate the gable. Originally, there was a waiting room for men on one side and for women on the other but now the west end is used as a museum by the Gaithersburg Heritage Alliance. The depot is still in daily use and a total of 14 commuter trains stop each day.<sup>15</sup>

Rockville was just a sleepy little town on May 19, 1873, when the first train steamed into its station. Long before the final coat of paint had dried on the new Rockville depot, local investors and speculators had begun planning for the prosperity they felt sure the railroad would bring. They were right, and Rockville's 1870 population of 670 tripled in the next 25 years. City fathers scrambled to install sidewalks from the station and elsewhere in town. Three grand hotels solicited for paying guests, who came for summer vacations or weekend excursions from Washington.

Suburban subdivisions were laid out that at first appealed to young, low-level government employees who could not afford to own a home in Washington, but escalating train fares limited the distance a family of moderate means could live from their place of employment. By the mid-1880s, developers began increasing lot sizes, building larger homes and adding fancy upgrades to attract wealthier buyers.<sup>16</sup> Rockville also served as a transfer point for passengers going on by buggy to Brookeville, Olney and Sandy Spring and businesses, such as Wire Hardware (originally called Welsh's Hardware), grew up along the railroad tracks.

Real estate and train brochures extolled the virtues of "Peerless Rockville" in flowery, Victorian terms:

"Washington City has no adjacent territory so desirable for suburban residences ... [it is] beautifully wooded, abounds in springs of purest water, is traversed by smooth and well kept wagon roads, and has adequate train facilities ... To those who must bear the heat and burden of a Washington day in midsummer, the suburban retreats along the Metropolitan Branch afford a refuge where the exhausted restore their energies under the quiet but potent stimulus of verdant lawn, shaded paths and the cooling breeze that comes laden with the perfume of the flower-decked fields and bears healing balm from the pine wood upon its wings."

The Victorian Rockville station was restored in the late 1970s and in 1981 was moved about 30 feet, out of the path of the Metro, and turned to face the downtown. Currently used for professional offices, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>17</sup> The station is built of red brick, with a central bay and Gothic-style windows. First floor windows have stone surrounds, which lend architectural interest. Jerkinhead dormers and decorative brickwork accent the facade and arched brackets support and

decorate the wide overhanging eaves. The steeply-pitched roof is covered with slate tiles in variegated dark and light bands.

Kensington did not exist when the Metropolitan Branch line was laid across a farm owned by the George Knowles family and a railroad stop called "Knowles Station" was created.<sup>18</sup> However, an enterprising Washington banker-turned-developer named Brainard H. Warner, who had grander plans for the area, bought 125 acres near Knowles Station to use as his summer home and a planned development. He dubbed the development "Kensington," because he had been charmed by the London suburb with that name, and invited his wealthy friends to join him in building their own summer residences there. He carried sufficient clout to persuade the railroad to change the name of Knowles Station to Kensington shortly after the station was built, much to the dismay of the Knowles family.

When the Kensington station was built in 1891, the railroad company was experiencing hard times. As a result, the station lacks the gingerbread trim of some of the earlier stations, although it still retains a measure of charm and quaintness despite years of neglect. The one-story frame structure has a wide overhanging roof and cedar shake siding. Originally, two doors led to separate waiting areas for ladies and men and a station master's office was located in the central bay.



Kensington Train Station



Silver Spring was only the name of a summer home when the railroad came through in 1873. Francis Preston Blair, a Washington resident, had built a summer home near there in 1842 and named it "Silver Spring" because of a spring he found on the property. In the 1860s, the community at the intersection of what is now Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road was called "Sligo," and had other houses, three stores, a school house, a blacksmith and a wheelwright shop and a tollhouse along the highway. It was not until some years later, in the 1890s, that the town became known as "Silver Spring."

The railroad brought considerable growth and just north of the railroad station one of the first commuter suburbs, Woodside, was started by Benjamin F. "Judge" Leighton, a Washington entrepreneur. Leighton had come to Washington from Maine in 1873 and, using financial backing from a group of wealthy Washingtonians, purchased 100 acres of the Wilson farm. He paid \$300 an acre for the land, a premium price because it was close to the railroad. Elsewhere, land prices were still tied to soil productivity.

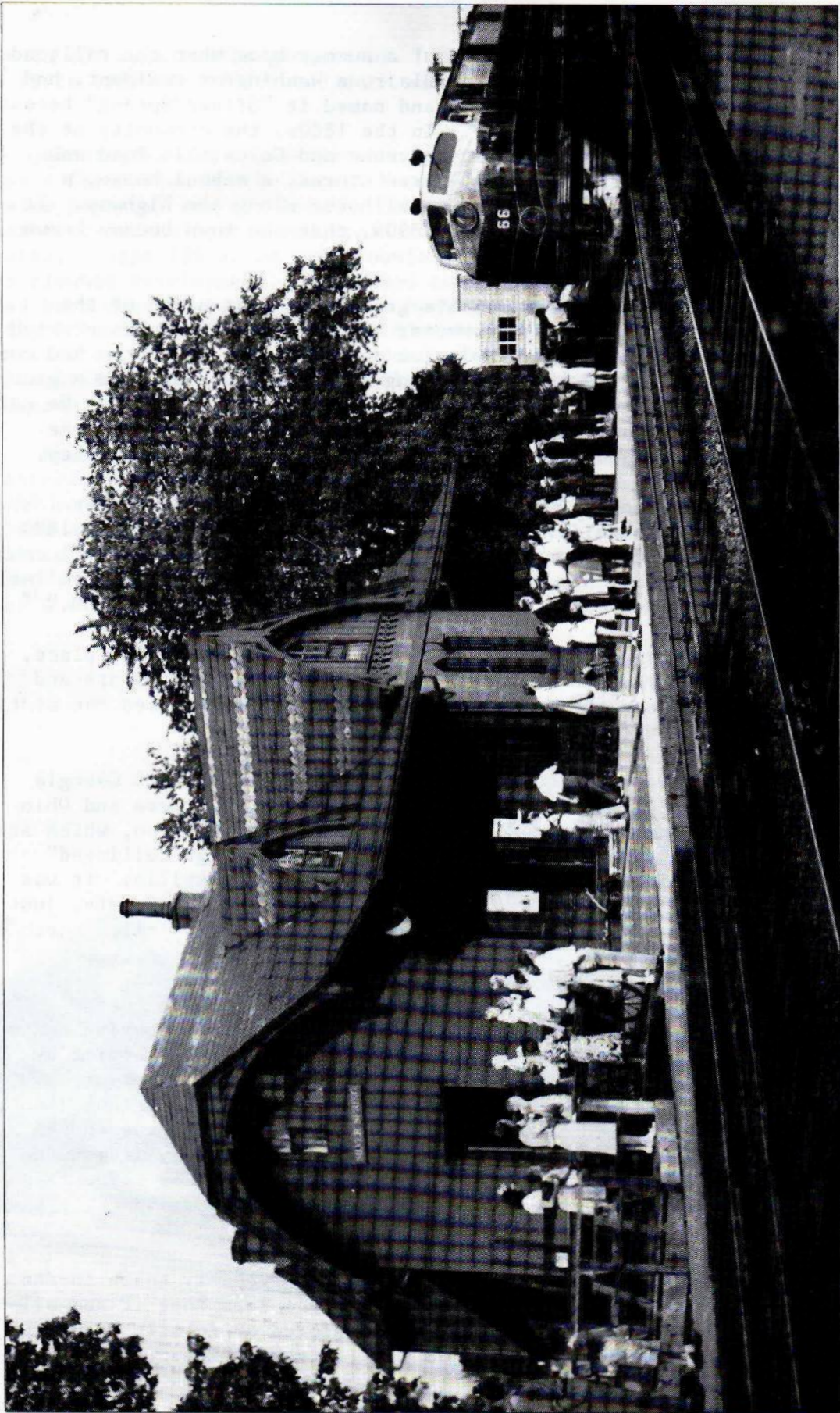
Leighton subdivided a tract known as "Labyrinth" in September 1889 and gave it the name Woodside. The promotional brochure put out in 1890 offered, "Lots for sale on easy terms; houses built and sold on small cash payments. The lot prices are lower than in any other subdivision similarly situated on the [B&O Metropolitan] Branch, ranging from \$225 to \$600."<sup>19</sup>

The Silver Spring train station in its heyday was a glitzy place, a hub of activity. Presidents, foreign heads of state, movie stars and military troops all used the station. Hollywood film crews used the station inside and out for movie footage.

The dilapidated brick building that stands today at 8100 Georgia Avenue is not the original train station built by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad on the Metropolitan Branch line. The original station, which stood on the site until 1945, was built in 1878, one of the "high ceiled" depots and a mirror image of the old train station in Rockville. It was one of the earliest built and the last station in Montgomery County, just half a mile north of the District of Columbia line and seven miles north of the Capitol in Washington.

By the 1940s, the Silver Spring area had grown so much that entrepreneur Sam Eig constructed Montgomery County's first shopping center in Silver Spring. Residents no longer had to travel to the District by trolley, auto or railroad to shop for furniture, jewelry, liquor or clothing, although for years many of them did when buying important items, since Washington had a much larger selection. Silver Spring was chosen as a suburban stop for all main-line trains and Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower liked to motor there to meet their families. They also liked to detrain there and skip out on the press and crowds expecting them at Union Station.

A picture of the old Silver Spring station, probably taken in the early 1940s, follows this page. It is the county's loss that it and all those beautiful old train stations were not restored or rebuilt to match the original - one more link to the past that is gone forever.



Silver Spring Train Station

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#### NOTES

1. Herbert H. Harwood, Jr., "Impossible Challenge" (1979), a history of the Metropolitan Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.
2. Ibid.
3. Ray Eldon Hiebert and Richard K. MacMaster, "Grateful Remembrance: The Story of Montgomery County, Maryland" (1976)
4. Ibid.
5. Montgomery County Government Department of Transportation fact sheets concerning MARC train stations in Montgomery County.
6. Hiebert, op.cit.
7. Interview with Harry Meem, son of former Dickerson stationmaster, Dickerson, Maryland.
8. Interview with Ed Daniels, MARC train historian, Montgomery County Transportation Department.
9. Jane C. Sween, "Montgomery County: Two Centuries of Change" (1984)
10. Interview with Philip K. Edwards, Washington Grove historian and author of "Washington Grove 1873-1937: A History of the Washington Grove Camp Meeting Association."
11. Interview with Clare Lise Cavicchi, Washington Grove historian and resident.
12. Interview with Don Sprankle, Germantown MARC ticket agent.
13. Interview with Susan Souderberg, Germantown Historical Society.
14. Interview with Judy Christensen, Gaithersburg Heritage Alliance.
15. Interview with Don Gall, ticket agent, Gaithersburg MARC station.
16. Hiebert, op.cit.
17. Interview with Eileen McGuckian, Peerless Rockville.
18. Hiebert, op.cit.
19. Ibid.