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At Home Among the Trees

In Gaithersburg's Washington Grove neighborhood, history grew up with the beautiful hardwoods that line the streets.

By Carolee Noury // Photography by Bill Kamenjar

IF "A TOWN WITHIN A FOREST"

sounds like a faraway land to you, you're not alone. Montgomery County's Washington Grove neighborhood – comprised of about 225 homes – is a bit of a hidden gem. Not far from I-370, the Intercounty Connector, and the Shady Grove Metro station, the area boasts serenity

and plenty of shade during the warm months.

Washington Grove reflects the sentiment of its foundation. Formed in the late 1800s as a summer camp and revival spot for several Methodist churches, it was valued for its dramatic departure from city life. Canvas tents gave way to more permanent tent stands, which eventually were converted into cottages. And though it's no longer a summer-only community, many of the earliest homes remain beneath the lush canopy of oak trees.

The sense of escape also has not expired. Mayor Joli McCathran says,

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“There’s this sigh of relief when your workday is done and you cross back into the Grove. It’s so peaceful.” Susan Van Nostrand, resident and real estate agent with Long and Foster, agrees. “There’s that magical feeling you get when you’re on vacation. You’re in a place that’s so wonderful you envy the people who are lucky enough to live there. Well, that’s exactly what it’s like here. You feel like you live year-round at your vacation spot.”

It’s certainly in part the trees which have been protected since the town’s earliest years, first by the Woman’s Club (which is still active), but also by the community. Echoing the founders’ purpose, many of the oldest homes face one another. It’s nearly impossible to be a stranger to your neighbors. Much of the travel within the town is on foot, as there are more walking paths than roads. And to get your mail, you’ll have to head to the nearby post office.

“You go for your mail, but also to catch up. It sounds like an inconvenience, but it’s a gift to always be running into people you know,” says McCathran, granddaughter-in-law of the first mayor, Roy McCathran, for whom the town hall is named. “It adds to our sense of connectedness, and no small number of selfless acts, like making sure people have what they need to get by during storms or a few extra hands for shoveling.”

How exactly does an oasis of trees exist, between recent trimmings to reduce power outages and the high demand for land to develop? “If a tree is a hazard, it has to go and we understand that, but if a tree can be saved we work hard to keep it. In fact, one of the homes in town has a porch that was built around a healthy tree. We’re fiercely protective of our trees and our way of life,” says McCathran. “That communal spirit keeps us focused on the fact that what we have is worth protecting. We know who we are, where we’re going, and what it takes to keep going in the right direction.”

Residents value the combination of serenity and relative proximity to all the perks that make the county special. “You can walk in the woods or to the

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nearby MARC station. Shopping, restaurants and major commuting routes are all close by. It's this perfect combination of feeling like you're living in the country, while still having easy access to so many things," says Van Nostrand.

With its quiet contrast to neighboring towns, Washington Grove is easy to overlook. It's also not the easiest place to find. Addresses sometimes confound even the best navigational systems, with street names like "the Circle," resulting in odd variations like "Circle Cir." Van Nostrand explains related challenges: "Since we're a relatively small area, house hunters don't realize we have our own zip

code. Most addresses and houses front on walking paths and not the paved roads, which run behind them. GPS systems can't even find certain addresses."

Once people cross into Washington Grove, it's a different story. "They are amazed when they come out here for the first time. Families often stay generation after generation. Others read about us somewhere and because of our distinctiveness, it stays with them. It only takes a moment here to feel the shift, to experience our oasis in the middle of a highly developed area," says Van Nostrand.

Washington Grove is defined not only by its greenery, but also by its

20880: WASHINGTON GROVE**WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE:**

Washington Grove MARC train, Woodward Park, Maple Lake, Post Office, McCathran Hall (community center).

A QUICK DRIVE:

Gaithersburg Metro, Olde Town Gaithersburg, Rio/Washingtonian Center, Downtown Crowne, Montgomery County Fairgrounds, 35 minutes to downtown Washington, D.C.

SCHOOLS:

Washington Grove Elementary, Gaithersburg Middle School, Gaithersburg High School.

OF NOTE:

Washington Grove has a film society which watches and discusses films on Sunday evenings at McCathran Hall during the fall and winter. There is also a women's club which promotes greater sociability and a betterment of civic and cultural conditions in Washington Grove. Annual events include a spring egg hunt, the annual women's club flower show, a music weekend, Fourth of July and Labor Day weekend events, a children's Halloween party and a winter holiday concert.

community. The town's history has been carefully cultivated from trunks and attics all over town throughout the years. The strong sense of community is apparent in frequent events, including the Fourth of July parade that involves so many townspeople. "There aren't many spectators, but it's still a blast," McCathran says.

Van Nostrand sums it up well. "Once you come, you'll understand why we're dedicated to keeping it the way it is." 