

**HISTORIC
BERWYN HEIGHTS**

THE BERWYN HEIGHTS ASSOCIATION

On January 28, 1915, twenty-nine Berwyn Heights residents met at the home of Fred H. Benson (1867- 1923) and founded the Berwyn Heights Association. The main purpose of the Association, according to the minutes of the first meeting, was to be "the betterment of walks and streets in Berwyn Heights, and incidentally the general improvement of conditions in which the community might be interested."



Those present proceeded to elect a slate of officers, collect a membership fee of \$1 per year, and establish three standing committees: Ways & Means, Walks & Streets, and Membership. Fred Benson was elected President, John U. Gardiner (1873-1965) Secretary, and Elwood J. Taylor (1882-1954) Treasurer. These principals led the Association until 1921, when Fred Benson suffered a stroke, necessitating a change in the leadership. The newly formed Association got down to business right away and authorized an expenditure of up to \$5.00 to install a light at the Washington Interurban streetcar terminal located at Waugh (Berwyn) and Huntley (58th) Avenues.¹

The second meeting was held in February at the home of Treasurer Elwood Taylor, an electrician for the Chesapeake and Potomac (C&P) Telephone Company. Another twenty one residents joined the Association, among them Congressman Samuel S. Yoder, William W. Poultney, William H. Smyser, and Buist Getsinger, all trustees of the United Realty Company, which ten years earlier had bought up a large number of the Berwyn Heights properties from the Jacob Tome Institute.² Bylaws were adopted and Congressman John J. Kleiner, a member of the Walks & Streets Committee, submitted a petition to designate Waugh and Keleher Avenues as county roads, which would oblige Prince George's County to maintain them. The motion was tabled, and not pursued at subsequent meetings.³

In keeping with its founding principles, street maintenance would be the main concern of the Association and was discussed at almost every meeting. The first year, the Association hired County Road Commissioner Smith to repair the roads for the sum of \$88, or one third of the total of 1915 receipts.² The following season the Association decided to invest in a Sears, Roebuck Company road scraper and road drag costing \$48 in all, so that the work of maintaining the unpaved streets could be done in house.³ The machines arrived in May 1916 and were quickly put to use making urgent repairs along Huntley (58th) Avenue, then one of the main streets in the subdivision. Charles Loveless, a carpenter residing on Keleher Avenue (Ruatan Street), furnished the storage shed for the machines. Fred Keefauer, owner of the local general store, contributed his team of horses on the condition the roads leading to his store on the Berwyn side of the B&O Railroad tracks were maintained as well. And Jonas Kauffman, a carpenter making his home on Cunningham Avenue, was hired to do the road work.

The March 1915 meeting was again held at Elwood Taylor's home. Twelve new members joined and the *modus operandi* of the Association began to crystallize. Meetings would be held on a monthly basis at the homes of different Association members. After a roll call, minutes were approved, new members admitted, frequently including the sons and daughters of adult members, and

committees reported on what was accomplished. When a new issue or problem arose a new committee was appointed to handle it.

At the March 1915 meeting, for example, two committees were appointed: one to take up the matter of free transfers from Washington Railway & Electric (WRECO) to the Washington Interurban streetcar at 15th and H Street, NE; and the other to look into the conditions at Pinegrove Academy, the one room school house that served the community.⁴ Both the Interurban and the school regularly required the attention of the Association. The school committee initially focused on making repairs to the school premises, and working with the County's schools superintendent to furnish needed supplies. As soon as 1916, a lobbying effort began to open a new school house at the "crossroads" (Pop's Park) in the center of the community.⁵ The effort eventually bore fruit. The County agreed to construct a two-room school house on Keleher Avenue (Ruatan Street), which opened in 1922.



The Association's efforts to improve the service of the Washington Interurban streetcar (formerly the Washington, Spa Spring & Greta Railroad) were less successful, although the streetcar was of great importance to its members. Indeed, many residents had

bought properties in Berwyn Heights because the streetcar allowed for a convenient commute to downtown Washington, D.C. where most of them worked. After going through bankruptcy in 1915, the Interurban became a subsidiary of the Washington Railway & Electric Company, which operated most of Washington's suburban lines - and lost money doing it.⁶ Requests and petitions for a better schedule and free transfers to WRECO's downtown streetcar system were mostly rebuffed. Infrequent and unreliable service led more and more residents to use the B&O Railroad and the City & Suburban streetcar serving Berwyn instead.⁷

Nonetheless, when WRECO requested permission from the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) to end streetcar service to Berwyn Heights in September 1920, the Association made a concerted effort to stop the closure. The Association's Transportation Committee, headed by Ernest C. Corkhill (1880-1946), Fred Benson, and Adene Williams, coordinated the response. They organized a letter-writing campaign, surveyed riders, lobbied representatives and represented the citizens in a formal PSC hearing on March 14, 1921. Although the PSC ruled in favor of the streetcar operator, the Association did not end their quest to keep the streetcar running until an appeal was made and lost in May 1921.⁸

Another perennial concern of the Association was the absence of electric lights in the community. Meetings were held on dates when the moon would shine to light the way, weather permitting. A Phases of the Moon Committee calculated those dates for the coming year. Soon enough, a committee was appointed, consisting of Messrs. Frank Chandler, Charles Stein and William Willard, to find out how many residents would use electricity for lighting if the electric company would furnish it.⁹ By December 1916, sixteen home owners had pledged themselves as future customers. Initially, the Potomac Electric Power Company (Pepco) wanted a guarantee of \$30 a month in subscriptions with 3 year contracts. After Pepco sent out an employee to survey the town and interview homeowners, the price tag went up to \$60 a month to pay for an estimated installation cost of \$2,098.¹⁰

By April 1917, the Electric Light Committee had enlisted nineteen subscribers and petitioned the Public Service Commission to compel Pepco to provide electric service. The PSC acknowledged receipt of the petition in May and notified Pepco to respond.¹¹ Nothing seems to have come of the petition and the Committee continued to recruit subscribers. A renewed effort in 1919 to pressure Pepco to provide service with help from Congressman Sidney Mudd and Senator Thomas Schall, who had recently moved to Berwyn Heights, also came to naught.¹²

Finally, in January 1921, the threshold of fifty subscribers was reached, each pledging \$50 to pay for electric service.¹³ Those subscribers' homes were wired that summer. However, street lights were another matter. When Pepco did not come up with a satisfactory proposal, the Association ended up purchasing and installing poles and lights themselves at a cost of around \$500, but the work took another two years to complete.¹⁴ The Association also purchased belts and pole climbers to make repairs.¹⁵ [This and other Association equipment was found on the property that once belonged to Elwood Taylor and is now in the Berwyn Heights Museum]

Over the nine years of its existence, the Association initiated many more projects and programs. Some were successful and some were not. In November 2016, Miss Marie Stevens, daughter of Major Pierre and Sarah Stevens residing on Avis Avenue (Quebec Street), pointed out that certain streets were used as dumps and was promptly named chair of a Clean-up Committee. She arranged for the County Health Commissioner to brief the Association on sanitation regulations, then rounded up some youngsters to cart refuse from around the community to a designated location at Keleher (Ruatan) and Miller (60th) Avenue for transport to a permanent disposal site.¹⁶

In September 1917, the Association began to set money aside for a club house. The following year, Messrs. Taylor, William Willard and John McNitt were appointed a special committee to locate a site. In November 1919, the Association appropriated a sum not to exceed \$10,000 to purchase lots 20-23 in block 9, the property on which today's Town Center stands, and build the club house.¹⁷ At subsequent meetings, construction plans were drawn up, a cellar excavated, and a name agreed upon: "The Berwyn Heights Association Community House." The club house was never constructed and in July 1922 Clarence Benson requested permission to turn the building site into a playground.¹⁸

The decision to build a club house appears to have been related to another initiative launched by the leading members of the

Association at the time. In November 1919, they incorporated the Berwyn Heights Company to buy, sell and improve real estate in the community,¹⁹ Fred Benson was President, Elwood Taylor Vice President, William Willard Secretary, and John McNitt, Jr. Treasurer. John Gardiner served as legal counsel. Major Clarence C. Benson (1891-1951), son of Fred and Margaret Benson, was also on the Board of Directors. He would become President in January 1922, following his father's disabling stroke and the passing of John McNitt.²⁰



Benson, McNitt, Willard and Taylor owned substantial tracts of land in Berwyn Heights prior to the formation of the Berwyn Heights Company, some of which they subsequently sold to the Company.

However, most of the real estate the Company came to own was purchased through McNitt from the United Realty Company in a sale comprising some 125 acres.²¹ Thus the Berwyn Heights Company picked up where the United Realty Company had left off in developing the subdivision.

Within a year, the Company purchased a cement block machine for the manufacture of foundation blocks, contracted with George Wooten, who operated a sawmill on Keleher Avenue, to furnish lumber, and had three kit houses built, with another two under construction. However, after the loss of President Benson in September 1921 and Treasurer McNitt in January 1922, building operations were being phased out and the Berwyn Heights Company focused on the buying and selling of land. This reflected the preference of its new President, Clarence Benson as well as Margaret Benson, who later served as Secretary and President of the Company.²² On the Association side, the loss of two leaders may very well have halted the club house project.

The year 1919 was a milestone for the Berwyn Heights

Association. World War I had ended, and soldiers were returning from the front. In September 1919, the communities of Berwyn Heights, Berwyn, Branchville, and Beltsville held a big homecoming celebration to honor the soldiers. The festivities drew thousands of visitors from surrounding communities and Washington, DC. The highlight was an elaborate parade featuring “our victory boys,” Civil and Spanish war veterans, the Red Cross, flag bearers, tournament riders, two bands, several floats, automobiles, airplanes and more.²³ The parade was followed by speeches from dignitaries, including Judge Fillmore Beall of the Prince George's Circuit Court, Dr. A. F. Woods, President of the Maryland College of Agriculture, Senators Thomas Schall and Joseph France, and wrapped up with a banquet.²⁴

The homecoming celebration of 1919 was the capstone of a two-week long summer carnival, an entertainment the Berwyn Heights Association hosted every summer to raise funds for essential projects in the community. The carnival was Elwood Taylor's idea and he was in charge of planning for a number of years.²⁵ There was music and dancing at a pavilion, masquerade balls, cake walks, a merry-go-round, raffles and all manner of refreshments. One year, two building lots, donated by Congressman Yoder, were raffled off to a lucky winner.²⁶

During the war years, the Berwyn Heights Association teamed up with the Red Cross and shared the carnival profits.²⁷ Later, the Association collaborated with the Berwyn and Branchville Citizen Associations to stage the event, which took place in an open area near the Berwyn trolley station.²⁸ The carnival was supplemented by smaller fundraisers, such as musical concerts, 4th of July picnics, bazaars, and card parties, to pay for the never-ending work of street maintenance and other public works.

Financing improvements in the community in this manner became a bigger challenge as the community grew and placed the burden on those leading the civic association. Following the election of a new slate of officers in January 1922, which installed Elwood Taylor as President, Charles Stein as Vice President, Jay Hunt as

Secretary and Jean Brelsford as Treasurer, the possibility of Berwyn's incorporation came up.²⁹ The Berwyn Heights Association expressed its opposition to the incorporation, and instead supported the establishment of a new Berwyn Community Association. However, the movement toward establishing some type of structure with the power to tax started to gather momentum.

In January 1923, the Association elected Samuel H. Moyer (1879-1959) as President and Ernest Corkhill as Vice President. Jay Hunt continued to serve as Secretary, and Jean Brelsford as Treasurer.³⁰ During the last year of its existence, the Association completed the street lights project, posted signs at street corners, and began a memorial tree planting program. On the other hand, the Association also had to deal with a number of nuisances, such as troublesome dogs, vandalism of carnival property, Halloween pranks, and damage to a bridge from traffic to the Sportland boxing arena. As the year drew to a close, the Association decided that it was time for a change, and invited all residents to a special meeting to discuss the future of the Association.³¹

That special meeting was held at the school house on February 1, 1924. Those assembled debated at length the best way to carry on the work of the community and then voted on three options: 1) incorporation; 2) tax district of Berwyn Heights; and 3) tax district of Berwyn District, encompassing Berwyn, Berwyn Heights, and Branchville. The vote was not conclusive. Once again, a committee was appointed, which sent a letter and ballot to all citizens to vote on the options.³² The tally showed 28 in favor of a tax district with adjoining communities, 24 in favor of incorporation, and 10 in favor of a separate tax district.³³

Delegates were then sent to speak with neighboring communities about a joint tax district. President Moyer, at a February 22 Association meeting, related the apparently unsatisfactory outcome of these meetings, and the Association voted not to join its neighbors in a tax district. Instead, it appointed Brelsford, Corkhill, Donaldson, Gardiner, and Stein to draft a new charter and

present it to the Maryland Assembly for incorporation as a town.³⁴

The Maryland Assembly enacted the new charter on April 9, 1924.³⁵ The residents approved it in a referendum on May 6, and the first Board of Commissioners was elected on May 15, comprised of Charles Anderson, Ernest Corkhill, Edward Donaldson, Fred Frost, and Charles Stein. At the first meeting, the commissioners chose Edward Donaldson as chair, and appointed a treasurer, a health officer, a bailiff and a supervisor of roads and walks. Loveless, Willard and Worden were appointed Assessors to carry out the all-important job of assessing the property on which the Town was authorized to levy a tax, as set forth in Section 14 of the Town Charter.³⁶

For its part, the Berwyn Heights Association met once more on May 23 and, after a spirited debate of its future, voted to turn over its assets to the Town government and cease operations.³⁷

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- 1 *Berwyn Heights Association (BHA) Minute Book*, Minutes of First Meeting, 28 January 1915.
 - 2 “Development at Berwyn,” *Evening Star*, 16 June 1906, p. 2
 - 3 BHA Meeting Minutes, 11 February 1915.
 - 2 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 May 1915.
 - 3 BHA Meeting Minutes, 9 March 1916.
 - 4 BHA Meeting Minutes, 4 March 1915.
 - 5 BHA Meeting Minutes, 11 May 1916.
 - 6 “A Little Merger: Not a Precedent,” *Washington Times*, 19 March 1916, p. 10, And: John DeFerrari, *Capital Streetcars: Early Mass Transit in Washington, D.C., Charlestown, S.C.: The History Press*, 1915, p. 150.
 - 7 “In the Matter of an Application of the Washington Interurban Railroad Company for an Order permitting and approving the discontinuance of its service and removal of its tracks between East Riverdale and East Berwyn, Maryland,” *Records of the Public Service Commission*, Case No. 1900, September 1920 to June 1921, Maryland State Archives.
 - 8 *Records of the Public Service Commission*, Case No. 1900.
 - 9 BHA Meeting Minutes, 7 September 1916.
 - 10 BHA Meeting Minutes, 4 January 1917.
 - 11 BHA Meeting Minutes, 12 April 1917.
 - 12 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1919.
 - 13 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 January 1921.
 - 14 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 April 1922, 5 April 1923.
 - 15 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 March 1924.
 - 16 BHA Meeting Minutes, 2 November 1916, 1 February 1917, 12 April 1917.
 - 17 BHA Meeting Minutes, 27 September 1917, 3 October 1918, 6 November 1919.
 - 18 BHA Meeting Minutes, 6 July 1922.
 - 19 “Certificate of Incorporation,” *Berwyn Heights Company Minute Book*, p. 3.
 - 20 *Berwyn Heights Company Minute Book*, Minutes of First Meeting of Board of Directors. p. 38.
 - 21 “Berwyn Heights Co. Purchases 125 Acres,” *Evening Star*, 1 November 1919, p. 17.
 - 22 Clarence C. Benson letter to nephew Henry Benson, 7 September 1945, per James H. Benson family tree, ancestry.com, accessed 12 January 2016.
 - 23 “Berwyn News,” *Washington Times*, 10 August 1919, p. 8
 - 24 *Souvenir Program of Home Welcome Ceremonies to World War Veterans of College Park, Berwyn, Branchville and Beltsville*, 9 August 1919.
 - 25 BHA Meeting Minutes, 11 May 1916, 4 January 1917, 1 May 1919.
 - 26 “Berwyn Carnival to Open Monday,” *Washington Times*, 12 August 1916, p.12.
 - 27 BHA Meeting Minutes, 7 June 1917, 6 June 1918.
 - 28 BHA Meeting Minutes, 8 May 1919.

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- 29 BHA Meeting Minutes, 12 January 1922, 22 March 1922.
30 BHA Meeting Minutes, 4 January 1923.
31 BHA Meeting Minutes, 3 December 1923.
32 BHA Meeting Minutes, 1 February 1924.
33 BHA Meeting Minutes, 7 February 1924.
34 BHA Meeting Minutes, 22 February 1924.
35 "An act to repeal and re-enact with amendments Chapter 267 of the Acts of 1896 entitled 'An Act to incorporate the town of Berwyn Heights in Prince George's County.'" *Maryland Assembly Session Laws*, vol. 568, chap. 528, p. 1261 (1924).
36 Donald D. Skarda, *Berwyn Heights: History of a Small Town*, 1976. pp. 27, 28.
37 BHA Meeting Minutes, 23 May 1924.