

PLANNING BOARD DRAFT PLAN

Potomac Overlook

WINTER 2021-2022

 **Montgomery Planning**

The *Potomac Overlook Historic District: An Amendment to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation* contains the text and supporting documentation for the amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation in Montgomery County, Maryland* (1979), as amended; *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan* (1990), as amended; and *The General Plan (on Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties* (1964), as amended.

The *Potomac Overlook Historic District: An Amendment to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation* addresses nineteen houses located approximately two-and-a-half miles to the southwest of downtown Bethesda and overlooking the Potomac River. In July 2019, the majority of Potomac Overlook residents signed a petition and requested evaluation of the subject properties for potential listing and protection under §24A of the Montgomery County Code. On June 9, 2021, the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) recommended that the Planning Board list the subject property in the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and requests that the County Council approve an amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* to designate Potomac Overlook as a Master Plan Historic District. On November 18, 2021, the Planning Board concurred with the HPC's recommendation, listed the district in the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* in Montgomery County, and recommended designation in the Master Plan for Historic Preservation.

THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission is a bi-county agency created by the General Assembly of Maryland in 1927. The Commission's geographic authority extends to the great majority of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties; the Maryland-Washington Regional District (M-NCPPC planning jurisdiction) comprises 1,001 square miles, while the Metropolitan District (parks) comprises 919 square miles, in the two counties.

The Commission is charged with preparing, adopting, and amending or extending *The General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District* in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. The Commission operates in each county through Planning Boards appointed by those county governments. The Planning Boards are responsible for implementation of local plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision regulations and the administration of the bi-county park system.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission encourages the involvement and participation of individuals with disabilities through its accessible facilities. For assistance with special needs (e.g., large print materials, listening devices, sign language interpretation, etc.), please contact the M-NCPPC Montgomery County Commissioners Office by telephone 301-495-4605 or by email at mcpchair@mncppc-mc.org. Maryland residents can also use the free Maryland Relay Service for assistance with calls to or from hearing- or speech-impaired persons; for information, go to www.mdrelay.org/ or call 866-269-9006





MASTER PLAN FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* is a functional master plan with countywide application. The plan and the Historic Resources Preservation Ordinance, §24A of the Montgomery County Code, are designed to protect and preserve Montgomery County's historic and architectural heritage. When a historic resource is placed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, the adoption action officially designates the property as a historic site or historic district, and subjects it to the further procedural requirements of the Historic Resources Preservation ordinance.

Designation of historic sites and districts serves to highlight the values that are important in maintaining the individual character of the County and its communities. It is the intent of the County's preservation program to provide a rational system for evaluating, protecting, and enhancing the historic and architectural heritage of the County for the benefit of present and future generations.

The following criteria apply, as stated in §24A-3 of the County Code when historic resources are evaluated for designation in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*:

Evaluation Criterion (1): Historical and Cultural

The historic resource:

- a. has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the County, State or Nation;
- b. is the site of a significant historic event;
- c. is identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society; or
- d. exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historic heritage of the County and its communities; or

Evaluation Criterion (2): Architectural and Design

The historic resource:

- a. embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction;
- b. represents the work of a master;
- c. possesses high artistic values;
- d. represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- e. represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or County due to its singular physical characteristic or landscape.

THE PROCESS OF AMENDING THE MASTER PLAN FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The Staff Draft Plan (comprised of the Master Plan Historic District Designation Form and Design Guidelines) is prepared for presentation to the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). The Staff Draft Plan reflects the recommendations of the Historic Preservation staff. The HPC holds a public hearing and receives testimony, after which it holds a public worksession to review the testimony and revise the Staff Draft Plan as appropriate. When the HPC's changes are incorporated, the document becomes the Public Hearing Draft Plan.

The Public Hearing Draft Plan reflects the HPC's recommendations for amending the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The Planning Board holds a public hearing and receives testimony, after which it holds a public work session to review the testimony, consider the analysis and recommendations provided by the HPC and Historic Preservation staff, and revise the Public Hearing Draft Plan as appropriate. When the Planning Board's changes are made, the document becomes the Planning Board Draft Plan

The Planning Board Draft Plan is the Planning Board's recommended Plan and reflects its revisions to the Public Hearing Draft Plan. The Regional District Act requires the Planning Board to transmit a master plan amendment to the County Council with copies to the County Executive who must, within 60 days, prepare and transmit a fiscal impact analysis of the Planning Board Draft Plan to the County Council. The County Executive may also forward to the County Council other comments and recommendations.

After receiving the Executive's fiscal impact analysis and comments, the County Council holds a public hearing to receive public testimony. After the hearing record is closed, the Council's Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee holds public worksessions to review the testimony and make recommendations to the County Council. The Council holds its own worksessions, revises the Planning Board Draft according to its assessment of which resources and districts should be designated, then adopts a resolution approving the final amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

After Council approval, the plan is forwarded to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission for adoption. Once the Commission adopts the plan, it officially amends the master plans, functional plans and sector plans cited in the Commission's adoption resolution.

IMPLEMENTING THE MASTER PLAN FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Once designated in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, historic resources are subject to protection under the Historic Resources Preservation Ordinance, §24A of the County Code. Any substantial changes to the exterior of a resource or its environmental setting must be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) and a Historic Area Work Permit (HAWP) issued under the provisions of §24A-6 of the Ordinance. In accordance with the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* and unless otherwise specified in the master plan amendment, the environmental setting or each site, as defined in §24A-2 of the Ordinance, is the entire parcel on which the resource is located as of the date it is designated on the Master Plan.

Designation of the entire parcel provides the County adequate review authority to preserve historic sites in the event of development. It also ensures that from the beginning of the development process, important features of these sites are recognized and incorporated in the future development of designated properties. In the case of large acreage parcels, the amendment may provide general guidance for the refinement of the setting by indicating when the setting is subject to reduction in the event of development; by describing an appropriate area to preserve the integrity of the resource; and by identifying buildings and features associated with the site which should be protected as part of the setting. For most of the sites designated, the appropriate point at which to refine the environmental setting will be when the property is subdivided.

Public improvements can profoundly affect the integrity of an historic area. Section §24A-6 of the Ordinance states that a HAWP for work on public or private property must be issued prior to altering a historic resource or its environmental setting. The design of public facilities in the vicinity of historic resources should be sensitive to and maintain the character of the area. Specific design considerations should be reflected as part of the Mandatory Referral review processes.

In many cases, historic resources and their associated parcels are also affected by other planned facilities in a master plan; this is particularly true with respect to transportation right-of-way. In general, when establishing an environmental setting boundary for a historic resource, the need for the ultimate transportation facility is also acknowledged, and the environmental setting includes the entire parcel minus the approved and adopted master planned right-of-way. In

certain specific cases, however, the master planned right-of-way directly affects an important contributing element to the historic resource. In such cases, the amendment addresses the specific conflicts existing at the site and suggests alternatives to assist in balancing preservation with the implementation of other equally important community needs.

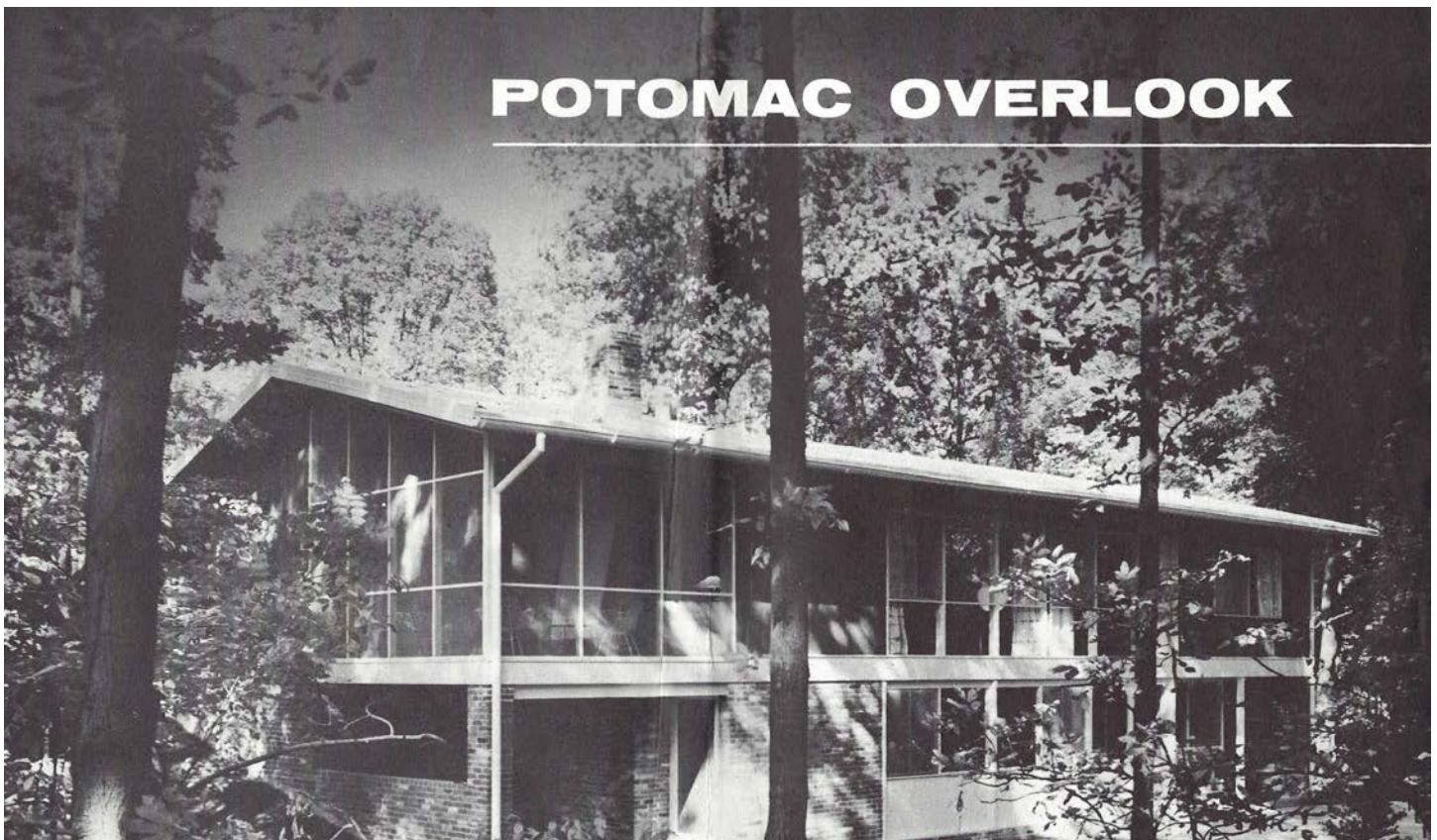
In addition to protecting designated resources from unsympathetic alteration and insensitive redevelopment, the County's Historic Preservation Ordinance also empowers the County's Department of Permitting Services and the HPC to prevent the demolition of historic buildings through neglect.

Montgomery County provides a tax credit against County real property taxes to encourage the restoration and preservation of privately-owned historic resources located in the County. The credit applies to all properties designated in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* (Chapter 52, Art. VI). The HPC maintains current information on the status of preservation incentives including tax credits, tax benefits possible through the granting of easements, outright grants and low-interest loans. In 2001, the County Council passed legislation requiring an owner of a resource on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* or the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* in Montgomery County to disclose the property's historic status to each prospective buyer before signing a sales contract (§40-12A).

THE AMENDMENT

The National Park Service determined Potomac Overlook to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places per the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Subdivisions built by Edmund Bennett and designed by Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon in Montgomery County, Maryland, 1956-1973*. The finding offers no protection to the resource outside of a state or federal funded project.

This amendment presents the result of the HPC's evaluation of the proposed Potomac Overlook Historic District (35-157), Bethesda. In November 2021, the Planning Board listed the district in the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and recommended designation in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. The listing of the property in the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* protects the resource from demolition or substantial alteration under §24-A10, the Moratorium on Demolitions and Substantial Alterations, until review of the amendment by the County Council. If designated in the *Master Plan of Historic Preservation* by the County Council, the resource would be protected by the Historic Resources Preservation Ordinance, §24A of the Montgomery County Code.



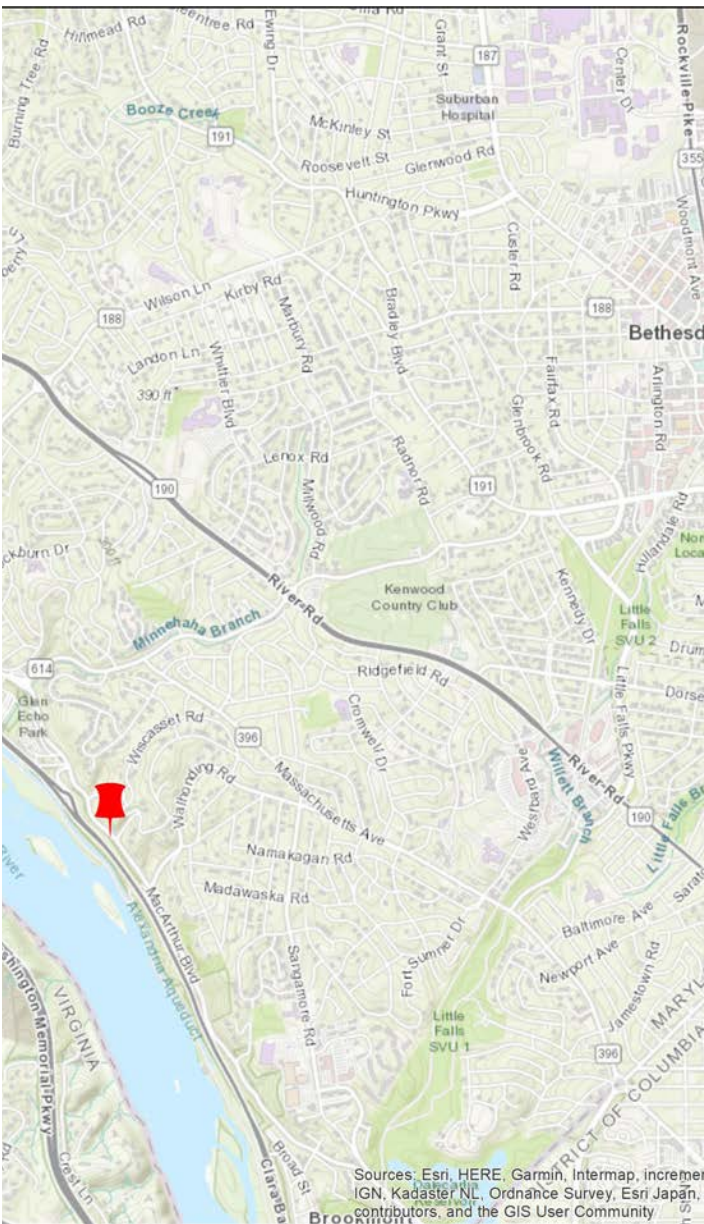
Original brochure for Potomac Overlook. | Source: Personal Collection of J. Dirk Nies.

DESCRIPTION

Site Description

Potomac Overlook is located approximately two-and-a-half miles to the southwest of downtown Bethesda in Montgomery County, Maryland. Merchant builder Edmund J. Bennett (along with John Matthews and Lloyd Potter) platted the 8-acre subdivision between 1956 and 1958. The subdivision rests on steeply pitched, rocky, heavily wooded terrain with views of the Potomac River and Virginia. The elevation at the base of the community along MacArthur Boulevard is approximately 150 feet and it quickly rises to 250 feet at its apex. The builders and architects utilized the existing topography in the positioning of each house to provide views of the Potomac River valley and add a sense of privacy. At the same time, the topography allowed the homes to be experienced from multiple perspectives as several sides of each dwelling could be seen from different vantage points throughout the neighborhood.

Potomac Overlook has an irregular boundary and consists of four homes fronting MacArthur Boulevard and fifteen homes facing two culs-de-sac (seven on Rivercrest Court and eight on Virginia View Court). The individual wooded lots range from 9,880 square feet to 28,824 square feet with an average of .39 acres. The circulation network consists of meandering paved roads, no sidewalks, and non-intrusive curved driveways that limited disturbance of the surrounding environment. The minimal demarcations between each property further blend the development with the natural qualities of the area. Stone retaining walls and post and rail fences complement the rustic setting.



Potomac Overlook is located in Bethesda, Montgomery County, Maryland.

Source: Montgomery Planning GIS.



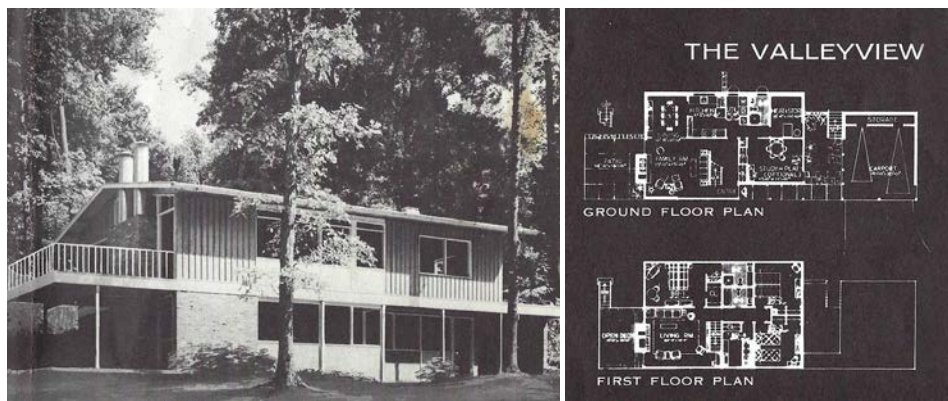
View of Virginia View Court. Source: Montgomery Planning, 2020.

Architectural Description

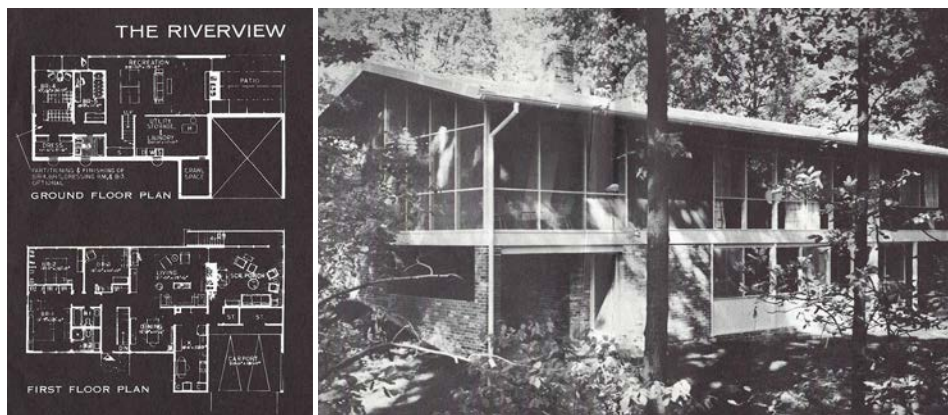
Architects Arthur Keyes and Donald Lethbridge designed three different contemporary-styled models at Potomac Overlook. There are minor variations among each model, however, based on the site conditions and to provide differentiation.



The Highview, the smallest of the three models, had four bedrooms and two bathrooms. The Highview houses sold for approximately \$27,000 and all six houses are extant.



The Valleyview, the intermediate-sized dwelling, had four bedrooms and three bathrooms. The developers built five Valleyview houses (the houses at 6612 Virginia View Court and 5300 Mohican Road were demolished) that each sold for approximately \$33,000.



The Riverview, the largest model, had five bedrooms and three bathrooms and each house sold for approximately \$35,000. All eight Riverview houses remain standing.

Original brochure for Potomac Overlook. Source: Personal Collection of J. Dirk Nies.

The three different models share many of the same aspects of design including form, massing, and materials. The two-story dwellings with a gable roof have an elongated rectangular plan. The architects exploited the topography by partially burying the first story of the two-story, wood-frame buildings into the slope of the hillside. The first story features a running-bond, multi-colored or salmon-colored, textured brick veneer. A wide, wood band course separates the brick-veneer first story from the wood-clad second story. Most of the dwellings feature redwood, vertically orientated, panels of tongue-and-groove siding or wood board-and-batten siding.

Fenestration consists of the original single-leaf wood doors, sliding glass doors, single-light windows, and aluminum-sash slider windows in addition to non-historic replacements. The original fenestration typically consisted of single-leaf wood doors with no lights or panels that accessed the entrance to the dwelling. On the other elevations, single-leaf wood doors and sliding glass doors accessed exterior spaces. Several of the original doors on the original seventeen houses have been replaced, but the

locations and size of the openings remain generally intact. The builders utilized pre-assembled window walls with single-light, glazed openings or one-by-one, aluminum-sash slider windows in a wood window buck (frame). The glazed walls' grid of aluminum, glass, and plywood panels created interesting geometric patterns. These features remain largely intact throughout the neighborhood.

The low-pitched gabled roofs with overhanging open eaves with exposed rafters and fascia allow the homes to blend into the setting. The roofs are sheathed with replacement asphalt shingles. None of the original built-up roofs with white, crushed

coral topping remain. Internal and gable-end chimneys pierce the roofs. Original skylights remain evident on several houses in addition to later fixed and hinged skylights.

The design and floorplan vary between each of the individual houses to respond to site conditions, but all the models have a combination of patios, screened-in porches, open porches, or balconies that connected interior and exterior spaces. In addition, detached or attached carports were optional on the Highview model, but were standard on the Valleyview and Riverview models.



The house at 6608 Virginia View Court has an original and unique single-car carport. | Source: Montgomery Planning, 2020.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Potomac Overlook is a significant example of a residential development resulting from the collaboration of merchant builder Edmund J. Bennett and the architecture firm of Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon (KLC). This development marked the first major subdivision developed by this collaborative partnership in Montgomery County. Bennett and KLC espoused the aesthetic design, functional advantages, and untapped commercial potential for modern architecture in tract housing. The contemporary-styled dwellings are recognized as outstanding examples of situated modernism. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) awarded them the “excellence of their cooperative efforts to create better homes and communities for Americans” award in 1961.

Potomac Overlook and the subsequent Bennett and KLC-planned subdivisions in Montgomery County adapted the core principles of modernism to retain a sense of social, geographical, and ideological aspects of a community at a tract-subdivision scale. The subdivision reflected the development team’s recognition of the importance of site development and land planning in creating communities respectful of the natural surroundings, topography, and tree canopy. Bennett and KLC established the identity of Potomac Overlook with the integration of the street layout, location and orientation of the houses, utilization of the topography to showcase aspects of the surrounding environment, design and materials of the buildings, and landscaping. These efforts resulted in a contemporary-styled modernist community built at an economy of scale for middle to upper-middle class residents that set itself apart from typical Colonial Revival-



Bennett

Matthews

Portraits of Edmund J. Bennett and John Matthews. | Source: Washington Post.

styled subdivision development that clear-cut tree stands and leveled the topography.

The contributions of several of the first owners at Potomac Overlook augment the historic significance of the district. This amendment to the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* recognizes the achievements of six owners who influenced local, state, and national affairs: Pao-Chi and Yu Ming Pien (7205 MacArthur Boulevard); Dorothy Gilford (6602 Rivercrest Court); Helen Wilson Nies (6604 Rivercrest Court); and Abraham M. and Helen W. Sirkin (6525 Wiscasset Road). Their achievements reflect the following themes: Asian American heritage, Jewish American heritage, women’s history, law, and mathematics, science, and engineering.



Construction of 6604 Rivercrest Court. | Source: Personal Collection of J. Dirk Nies.



Born in the District of Columbia in 1920, Edmund J. Bennett was the son of James V. and Marie (nee Zorbach) Bennett. He attended Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School and Mercersburg Academy (college preparatory school) in Pennsylvania. He enrolled at Brown University before transferring to Stanford University where he received a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Political Science in 1942.

After a brief career in the federal government, Bennett shifted his focus to residential construction. His adeptness in planning and organization, production and financial management, and merchandising led to his nationally elevated status among merchant homebuilders.

In collaboration with Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon, Bennett's significant modernist suburban neighborhoods in Montgomery County included:

- Kenwood Park (1956);
- Potomac Overlook (1956-1958);
- Flint Hill (1958-1961);
- Carderock Springs (1962-1966);
- Carderock Springs South (1967-1969); and
- New Mark Commons (1966-1971).

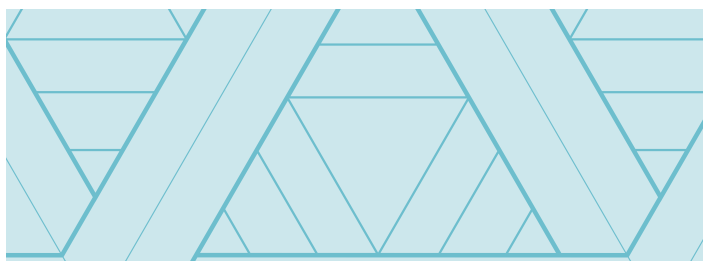
HISTORIC CONTEXT:

DEVELOPMENT OF POTOMAC OVERLOOK

In 1889, brothers Edwin and Edward Baltzley planned a luxury residential and resort development to be known as "Glen Echo on the Potomac" and platted the Glen Echo Heights subdivision (where Potomac Overlook would be located 68 years later). Two stone mansions built by the brothers are located to the east of Potomac Overlook. Early development of the subdivision remained minimal and occurred primarily between 1935 and 1960.

After World War II, the population growth of Montgomery County paired with liberalized Federal Housing Administration insured mortgage loans and a lack of adequate housing led to the rapid construction of single-family planned subdivisions primarily for caucasians. The war demonstrated to large-scale corporate builders the possibilities offered by large-scale production, prefabrication methods, new building materials, and streamlined assembly methods. In the Bethesda district, merchant builders who developed tract housing constructed over 11,000 units and the area had one of the state's highest median family incomes. These builders marketed customers on a lifestyle, the integration of homeownership and community. For many individuals (primarily white persons), the purchase of such a home was the attainment of the "American dream" as it represented middle-class status, economic prosperity, and familial stability.

A second wave of building occurred in the 1950s that catered to the upper-middle class. In communities such as Potomac Overlook, the residences were larger, had more amenities, and cost more than the tract housing built immediately after the war. A small group of merchant builders in the Washington, D.C. area shifted away from colonial revival, split level, and ranch-styled houses towards modern architecture. The builders recognized the functional planning advantages, aesthetic values, and marketability of contemporary design. In addition, builders such as Edmund Bennett partnered with a young cohort of architects eager to influence the direction of tract housing. Buyers had the option to purchase a residence designed by a prominent architect without paying for a custom-designed house. Potomac Overlook is one of six modern-styled subdivisions developed by Bennett and architects Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon in Montgomery County. In the mid-to-late 1960s, modernist-designed tract housing became less common as lenders and buyers raised concerns regarding the resale of non-traditional-styled dwellings. Therefore, these architect-designed subdivisions of the 1950s and 1960s reflect





Architects Arthur H. Keyes (left), David Condon (center), and Francis D. Lethbridge (right). | Source: Carderock Springs Citizens Association.

a brief period in history where interest in nontraditional design flourished.

In 1955, Bennett, Matthews, and Potter purchased Block 4, Section 1 of Glen Echo Heights from Paul J. and Betty S. McVeary. Bennett had a 50 percent interest of the property and served as the primary builder. Other developers passed on the site due to its difficult terrain and topography despite the natural beauty of the surrounding environment. Led by Bennett, the builders hired architects Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon for consultation on site layout, design of the buildings, and supervision of construction.

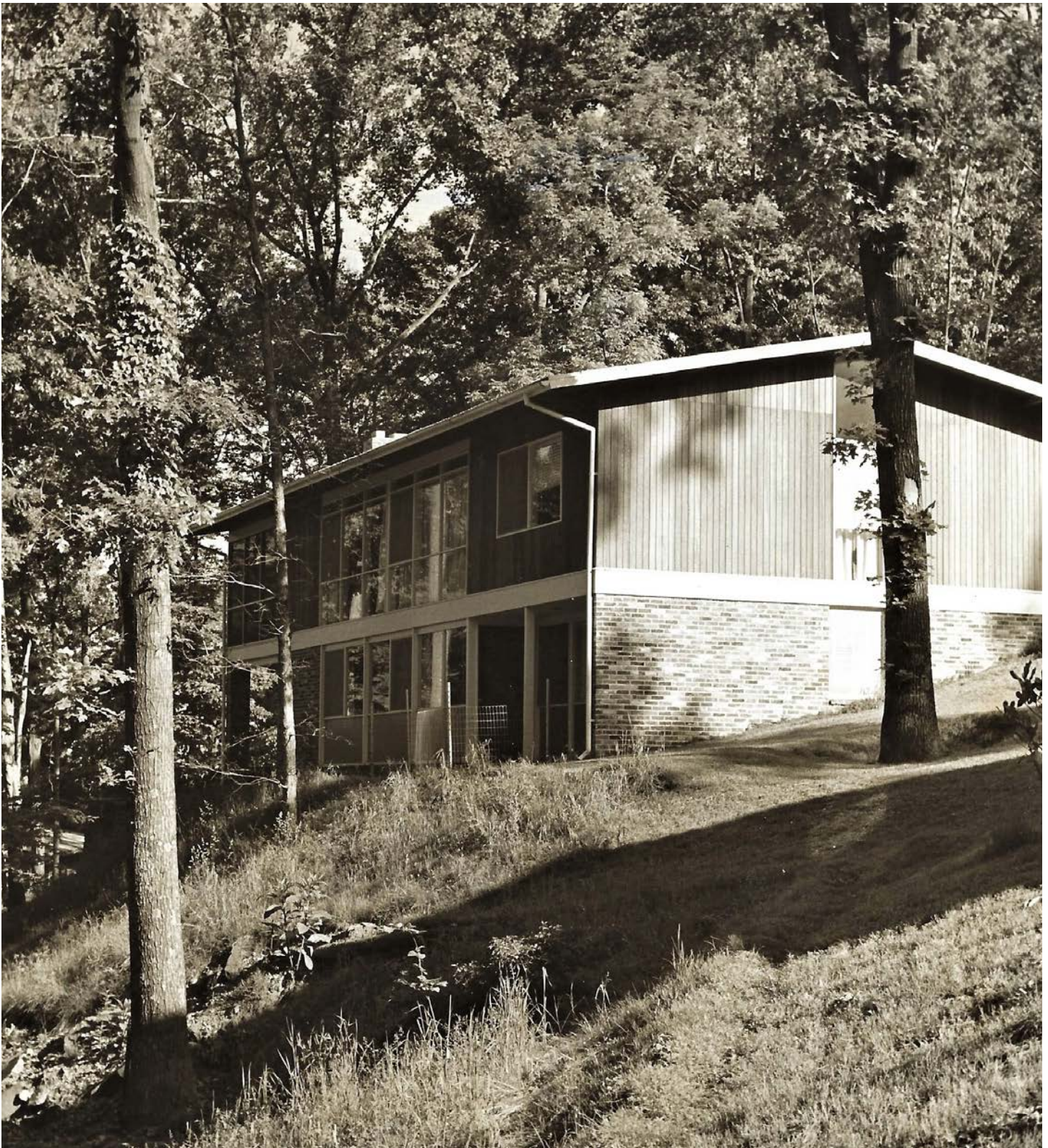
The site layout and preparation for the subdivision and construction took two years to complete. Bennett had specific considerations and requirements for Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon, but he was devoted to protecting the land, contours, and trees. The builders and architects established community identity with the “complete integration of street layout, siting, design, varied elevation, color, texture, ... roofing materials, landscaping, and ...finish.” These elements of Potomac Overlook differentiated the community from the typical tract housing designed in Montgomery County.

Bennett and KLC dedicated significant time to the retention of Potomac Overlook’s natural setting. Bennett stated:

I figure we spent a year more on the job than we would have had to if we would just gone in there and flattened everything. Also by flattening we would have got twice as many building sites. We located every major tree on a big topographic map and cranked them all into the plan. Each house was carefully sited.

In addition to respecting the natural topography, tree preservation remained a paramount aspect of the site planning at Potomac Overlook. Architect Francis D. Lethbridge said the following:

To save the existing vegetation always takes trouble and almost always costs more. The developer can sell the houses even if he doesn’t leave a tree standing, so why should he worry? The answer is—he usually doesn’t. If you’re going to preserve anything of the natural covers... you’ve got to preserve the contours. Lower the grade a few inches, and you scalp it completely. Raising the grade is just as bad. Even the biggest tree is apt to die if you dump soil around it—as little as 6 inches. To adapt yourself to the land as it is, you have to visualize the finished product before you turn a spadeful of earth. You have to plan every element—location of houses, roads, utilities—simultaneously. Everything depends upon having a builder who cares, one who’d find it hard to live with himself if he were known for having loused up the countryside.



View of house shortly after construction showing the retention of the trees and topography of the site. | Source: Personal collection of J. Dirk Nies.

The wooded-nature of Potomac Overlook provided practical advantages in addition to moral and emotional benefits to the property owner. The trees provided a sense of privacy and saved the buyer expenses related to landscaping of the property. KLC replaced manicured lawns with natural ground cover cleared of underbrush and bushes. The purposeful lack of fencing further heightened

the sense of a natural setting and had the secondary effect of creating a tighter knit community. Former residents raised in the community recall the entire wooded area as their playground with little concern by the property owners for boundaries and remain nostalgic for the sense of exploration and comradery the woods provided.

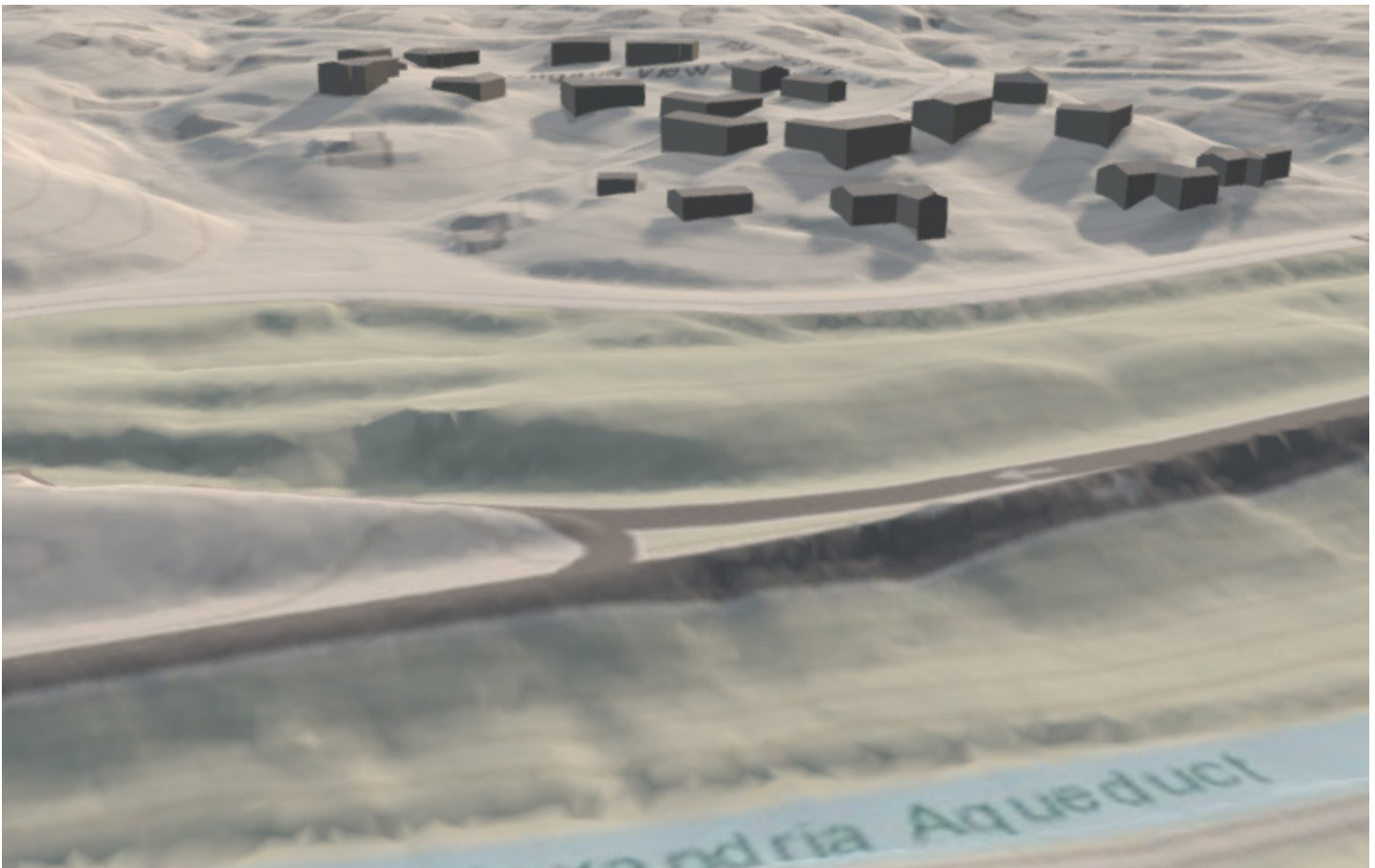
Bennett noted that the planning process ran into manmade as well as natural obstacles because of his plans to fit the houses into the landscape. He stated:

To avoid regrading, we had to put in driveways with as much as 16-percent grade.... We could get away with it because we were not dependent on FHA financing. (FHA limits driveways grades to 5 percent.) We had to get a waiver from the Department of Public Works for a stretch of street with a 14-percent grade—that took two or three conferences over a period of 3 months. Then there were the sewer lines. The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission says that the floor of a basement may not be more than 6 feet below the street, which means the first floor must be 3 feet above the street. But to keep from butchering the land we had to have houses below the street level—and run the sewers through easements along back property lines in the woods. With all the extra cost of hand labor, the commission hated like the Devil to agree to it.

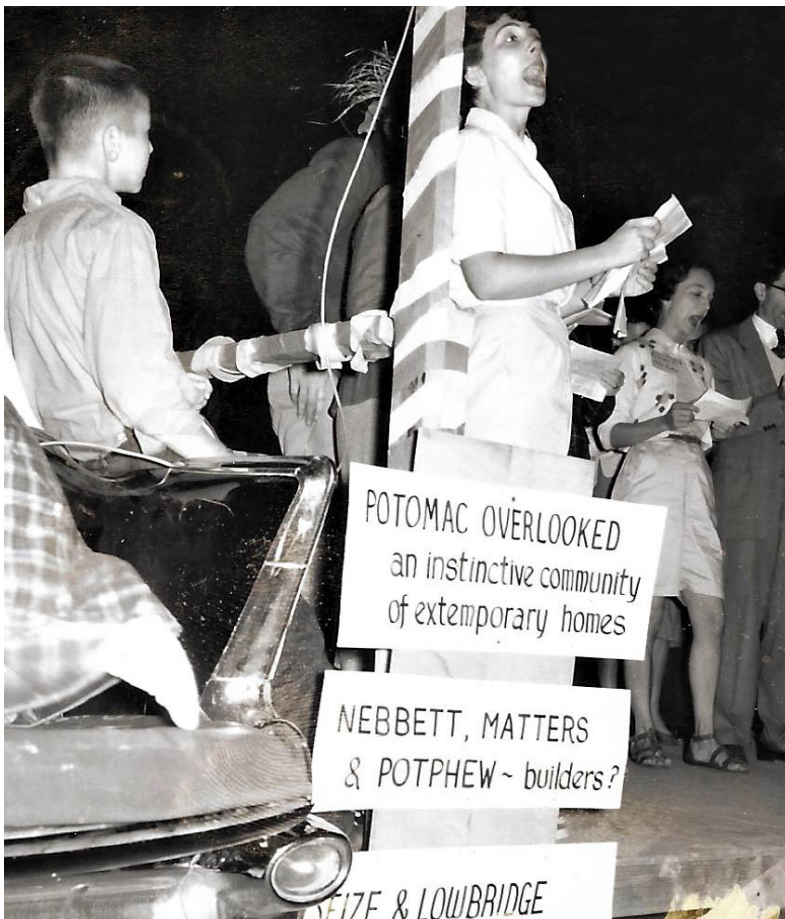
KLC designed the houses at Potomac Overlook to be flexible in plan so that all four sides of the dwelling were aesthetically pleasing from the public view. This allowed for the individual houses to be turned, reversed, or modified to adapt to the

topography and requirements of the site. All the while, Bennett and the architects stressed solar orientation with limited active living space on the western exposure and privacy with deliberate placement of large glazed openings.

Bennett and KLC designed the majority of their tract housing with the same approach. Bennett stated “the key to our design is a clean and crisp approach all the way from interior living space to exterior leisure space — all of it functional, all of it simple.” At Potomac Overlook, the architects designed three models. All three were similar in form and massing, devoid of ornamentation, and connected interior and exterior spaces with large expanses of glass, sliding doors leading to balconies, and open or screen porches. The designers, however, relied on the warmth of brick and wood-clad siding, paint schemes, and overhanging roofs to blend with the rustic qualities imparted by the site. In addition, the low-pitched gable roofs recalled traditional forms but allowed for cathedral ceilings and large glazed openings on the gable ends highlighting the geometrical detailing of the design. By utilizing the hillsides, the architects buried the first story and allowed the massing to read as a natural component of the landscape, not a visually distinct obstruction.



Model showing the layout of Potomac Overlook with respect to the topography. The architects sited the houses to have views of the river and to offer a sense of privacy.
Source: Montgomery Planning.



Celebration of the opening of Potomac Overlook attended by residents, builders, and architects. The residents made the humorous sign shown in the foreground.
Source: Personal collection of J. Dirk Nies.

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

OPENING AND RECEPTION OF POTOMAC OVERLOOK

Bennett, Matthews, and Potter had immediate success with the opening of Potomac Overlook. In 1957, advertisements for the first model home at 6551 Wiscasset Drive stated the following:

A distinctive community of contemporary homes. Land plans and home designs have been skillfully prepared by the famous award-winning architects Keyes and Lethbridge, AIA. Their plans are being expertly developed by Bennett Construction Company and Matthews and Potter, associated builders specializing in genuinely contemporary homes.

The following year, the National Association of Home Builder bestowed a Neighborhood Development Merit Award and a Design Merit Award citing its platting and house siting that resulted in family privacy and retention of viewsheds. The juries stated that it was conducive to family living, noted the sensitive handling of the land and setting, and acknowledged the difficult circumstances faced to make the subdivision economically viable. In addition, the Potomac Valley Chapter of the AIA conferred an honorable mention in its annual award program. The jury recognized its site plan, high-quality design, and sense of privacy between buildings.

The *Washington Evening Post* stated the following:

Nearby my home is an award-wining subdivision, Potomac Overlook, built on a steep, forested hillside on the Maryland side of the river just above the District of Columbia.... Potomac Overlook is an existing example of what a builder with an active conscience can do when working with lots of between a quarter and a third of an acre on an attractive but difficult site. Most of the trees have been saved—black oaks and tulip trees soaring 30 or 40 feet before branching—and so has much of the original forest floor. This, wrapped around the small lawns, ties the human handiwork into the terrain. The contemporary-style houses, although only 3 years old, look as if they had always been meant to be there.

national award winning. . .

POTOMAC OVERLOOK

A distinctive community of contemporary homes sited high above the Potomac. Land plans and home designs by award-winning architects Keyes & Lethbridge, AIA. Located only 1 1/2 miles from the District Line, Potomac Overlook is near the Spring Valley and Bradley Shopping Centers. Three bi-level models are offered, all with river views.

THE RIVERVIEW	2 or 3 bedrooms, 2 or 3 baths, carport, recreation room with fireplace, screened porch, covered patio, Washington-equipped kitchen and breakfast nook. From	35,990
THE VALLEYVIEW	3 bedrooms, optional study, 3 baths, recreation room, carport, deck off living room, covered patio. From	33,400
THE HIGHVIEW	3 bedrooms, 3 baths, recreation room, screened porch, covered patio, Washington kitchen. From	27,300

Out MacArthur Blvd., right on Mohican Rd., left on Wiscasset to 6551 or out Mass. Ave., left on Mohican Place and follow sign.

• magnificent river views open daily & sunday

BENNETT CONSTRUCTION CO.
MATTHEWS & POTTER

Winner of NAHB awards of merit for residential design and neighborhood development. OLiver 6-5555

Advertisement for 6601 Virginia View Court. | Source: Evening Star.

Robert J. Lewis, Real Estate Editor of the *Evening Star*, noted the following regarding Potomac Overlook:

A key to the successful development plan was the choice of appropriate locations for the house first. Then streets and lot perimeters were laid out to accommodate them to the actual home locations. Houses were then designed for each site in accordance with three basic plans having porch and carport adaptation and siting variations.

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

DEMOGRAPHICS AND ORIGINAL PROPERTY OWNERS

Edmund Bennett relied upon Potomac Overlook's proximity to Washington, D.C. and its professional workforce to entice property owners to the community. Western Montgomery County had the reputation for its exceptional schools and successful residents. Bennett recognized that purchasers of his homes were from the upper-middle class, often socially liberal and culturally progressive, and favored modernist forms of architecture.

In 1957, Bennett priced the three models at Potomac Overlook between \$27,300 and \$34,990. This price point targeted such professionals who did not yet have the disposable income for custom-built modern homes. As a result, the original property owners of Potomac Overlook came from a range of professions including: naval architects, diplomats/foreign service, scientists, authors and journalists, mathematicians, and lawyers (see Appendix for list and short biographies of the original owners).

Similar to the rest of the county, home ownership at Potomac Overlook lacked racial diversity due to de jure and de facto housing practices in the twentieth century. Unlike some of the surrounding communities, however, there were no explicit racial covenants. Residents recall an open and inviting community, which included an ethnic and religious diversity (such as Chinese and Jewish residents). In February and March of 1961, the Good Neighbor Campaign conducted a metropolitan-wide survey and asked households to sign a pledge that they would welcome "any person of good character, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin." The survey resulted in 2,566 signatures in the Maryland suburbs, which included covered 441 homes in seven neighborhoods in western Bethesda. No African American lived within the immediate vicinity of these seven neighborhoods. Of the individuals contacted in Glen Echo Heights-Mohican Hills-Potomac Overlook, 39 percent signed the pledge as compared to the 24 percent average for the rest of Western Bethesda. In

addition, 83 percent of those who pledged support allowed for their name to be used. The majority of property owners who signed the pledge from surrounding neighborhoods refused permission to use their names.

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

MODERN ARCHITECTURE, SITUATED MODERNISM, AND PRECEDENTS FOR POTOMAC OVERLOOK

Architectural historians broadly define the Modern movement of architecture by an emphasis of form, honesty in function and materials, the rational and efficient use of space, and simplicity of design in lieu of historical ornamentation. Modernism looked to discard cultural references and create a global design language. The movement incorporated several forms and individual styles (International Style, Brutalism, Expressionism, New Formalism, etc.) that expressed the core principles by different means. These building styles reflected the lifestyles, economy, and technological progress of the twentieth century. An idea that remained consistent across the ideological spectrum was the use of technological innovation and experimentation with building, planning, and landscape design to rethink and improve the way people live.

Historians have reconsidered aspects of the Modern movement and its aesthetic values by looking beyond the landmarks of master architects. They have stressed a vernacular modernism that utilized design principles of traditional urban and suburban forms, perceived the specific regional qualities and needs to enact social change, and emphasized collaborative partnerships between architects, planners, designers and clients. Lesser known architects utilized techniques associated with modernist masters, but blended the ideas with traditional values and site-specific environmental conditions to reconcile regional architecture with the functionality of modernism. The architects who participated in the modernist movement through such a lens are considered "situated modernists."

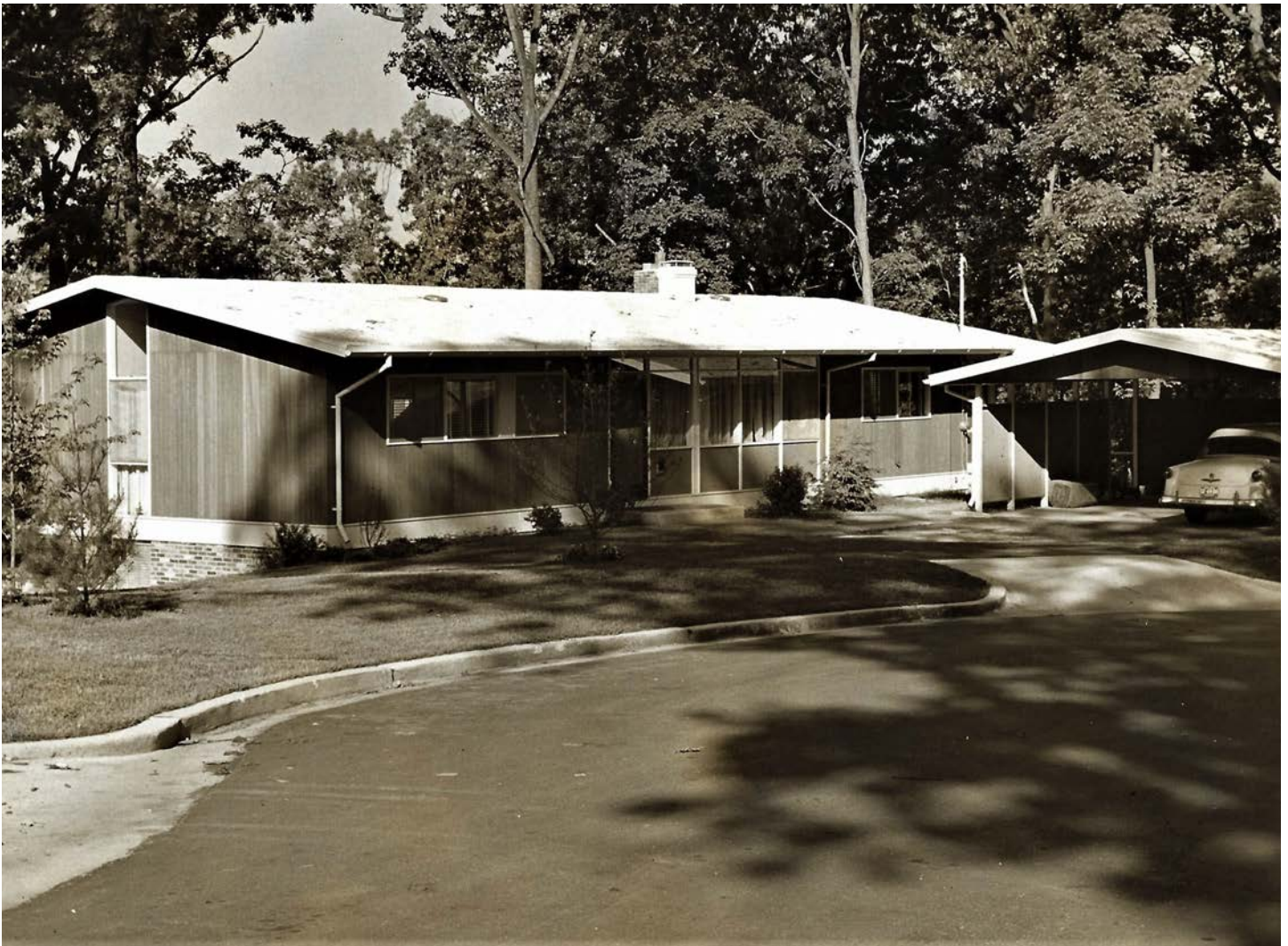
Situated modernists adapted the core principles of modernism to retain a sense of social, geographical, and ideological aspects of a community. They utilized the modern movement's design language, but for different goals. Situated modernists' designs reflected particular contextual and programmatic requirements that allowed for individuals to identify with their immediate locale and its context (topography, site, viewsheds, materials, etc.), thereby strengthening a sense of community. For example, the purist strived to display the art of construction in an open floor plan while the situated modernist utilized its spatial planning benefits. Modernists applied transparent materials to highlight technological innovations, while the

situated modernist emphasized transparency to elevate the relationship between the user and the exterior environment. The situated modernist pursued the integration of the house and landscape and shifted away from the construction of earlier sculptural modernist buildings that often failed to coalesce with the environment. The architects took advantage of physical qualities, wooded, and steep lots, utilized brick and wood materials, and designed their buildings with consideration of the natural environment to create a rusticated, vernacular modern architecture.

Montgomery County's rapid growth provided architects opportunities to tailor projects to their core set of modernist principles. Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses served as a point of inspiration for merchant builders who built modernist-style tract housing. Locally, KLC built upon the ideas established at architect Charles Goodman's modernist subdivisions Hammond Hills (1949) and Hammond Woods (1950) near Wheaton. The two communities were early examples of creating naturalistic-focused enclaves.



View of 7209 MacArthur Boulevard and 5300 Mohican Road, 1959.
Source: Personal collection of J. Dirk Nies.



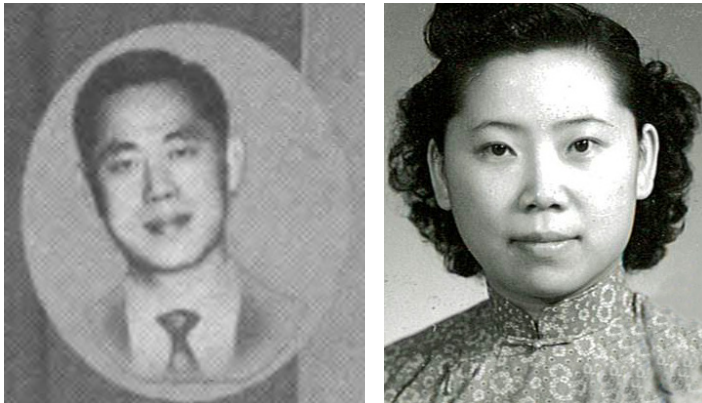
View of 6604 Rivercrest Court, 1959. | Source: Personal Collection of J. Dirk Nies.

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY OWNERS

Several of the first and long-term owners at Potomac Overlook influenced local, state, and national affairs. This report highlights the following six owners: Pao-Chi and Yu Ming Pien (7205 MacArthur Boulevard); Dorothy Gilford (6602 Rivercrest Court); Helen Wilson Nies (6604 Rivercrest Court); and Abraham M. and Helen W. Sirkin (6252 Wiscasset Road).

Pao-Chi and Yu Ming Pien (7205 MacArthur Boulevard)



Portrait of Pao-Chi and Yu Ming Pien. | Source: United States Department of the Navy and St. John's University School of Medicine.

Pao Chi “Pete” and Yu Ming Pien purchased 7205 MacArthur Boulevard in 1958 and owned the property until 1985. Their achievements reflect the county’s Asian American heritage, women’s history, and excellence in science and engineering.

The Pien family arrived in the United States at a time of shifting attitudes towards Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. Pao Chi Pien spent his entire 30-year professional career as a naval architect at the David Taylor Model Basin (DTMB). He was an innovative and influential engineer, winning awards from the Navy Bureau of Ships, the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, and from the commanding officer of the DTMB, who in 1960 presented Pien with the first annual David Taylor Award. His internationally influential research shaped the field of engineering and included an innovative theoretical hull form dubbed the “Pienoid” for its inventor. He was recognized with a National Science Foundation Fellowship in 1961, which he used to study naval architecture in Tokyo. In retirement, Pien spent a further 30 years privately devising improvements to the internal combustion engine and filing patents for new inventions.

Yu Ming Hu graduated from St. John’s University School of Medicine in Shanghai in 1944 and immigrated to the United States in 1948. After her marriage to Pao Chi Pien in 1951 and the couple’s move to Maryland, she gained employment at

several local hospitals including Georgetown University Medical Center, Children’s Hospital, and Adventist Hospital. Dr. Hu, who continued to use her maiden name professionally, was one of only a few women physicians on the original staff of Holy Cross Hospital, which opened in 1963 as a new facility offering modern medical care where new treatments and technologies were piloted. She continued working as a practicing physician into her 60s.

The Pien family raised three children at Potomac Overlook who grew up in a mostly white community, with few Chinese families or gathering places outside of Chinatown in Washington, D.C. At a time when immigrants were expected to assimilate, the parents strove to ensure that their children fit in among their peers. Neighbors and acquaintances had little familiarity with Chinese culture and at times lacked cultural sensitivity. Despite this, the Pien children recall a close-knit neighborhood and warm connections with nearby children and families. The family’s experience as first and second-generation Chinese immigrants, especially at a time when few Asian-American families yet lived in the county, embodies a significant and underrepresented element of the county’s social and cultural heritage.

Dorothy Morrow Gilford (6602 Rivercrest Court)



Portrait of Dorothy Morrow Gilford during her time at the Office of Naval Research, 1960. Source: University of Washington

Notable statistician Dorothy Morrow Gilford resided at 6602 Rivercrest Court with her husband and fellow statistician, Leon Gilford, from 1958 to 2008. As a high-level official in federal research programs, her leadership shaped national projects and policies, particularly in the fields of defense and education. Her achievements in

mathematics and her pioneering role as a woman leader in the civil service reflect aspects of the county’s social and cultural heritage.

Gilford served as one of the first Heads of the Probability and Statistics Program at the Office of Naval Research (ONR) (1955-1962) and Director of the Office of Naval Research, Mathematical Sciences Division (1962-1968). She later was employed by the National Center for Education Statistics (1969-1974) and the National Academy of Sciences (1975-1994) where she influenced national education policy through the

development of new statistical tools to study educational attainment in response to nationwide concerns over math and science learning. Her achievements were recognized with the Federal Woman's Award in 1965 and with her selection as a Fellow in numerous professional societies, including the American Statistical Association, Institute of Mathematical Statistics, American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Royal Statistical Society.

Abraham M. and Helen W. (née Ball) Sirkin (6525 Wiscasset Road)



The Sirkin family standing on the deck at 6525 Wiscasset Road, 1966.
Source: Personal Collection of Susannah Sirkin.

Abraham M. and Helen W. (née Ball) Sirkin purchased the house at 6525 Wiscasset Road in 1958. The Sirkins are significant at the local, state, and national level. Abraham, as Chief of Information of the U.S. Marshall Aid Mission, and Helen, as an economic analyst, both contributed to the success of the Marshall Plan after World War II. In 1953, Abraham

joined the United States Information Agency (USIA) where he advocated for freedom of the press and human rights when stationed in South India and Greece. Helen left the workforce to raise their children, but supported the mission of the USIA and her husband when stationed overseas. She encouraged local women's organizations, agricultural development, and engaged in cultural exchanges. During the Nixon and Ford administrations, Abraham served as the USIA's representative to the State Department's Policy Planning Staff where he helped craft proposals supporting human rights as a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy.

The proximity of Potomac Overlook to Washington, D.C. paired with the natural qualities of the landscape attracted the Sirkins to the subdivision. The family joined the Adras Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C. and remained active members. In addition, the Sirkins were aware of a lack of openness, opportunity, and acceptance in other nearby subdivisions that had restrictive covenants barring the sale of properties to Jewish persons. In comparison, Potomac Overlook was an accepting community. A group of mothers at Potomac Overlook organized "house school" to share the responsibility of preschool activities. Helen was a passionate supporter of the design and preservation of Potomac Overlook.

She had a critical role in the Covenants Committee and preservation of the community in the 1990s.

Helen W. Nies (6604 Rivercrest Court)



Helen W. Nies with two of her oldest children, John Dirk and Nancy, in 1959. The house at 6601 Rivercrest Court is in the background.
Source: Personal Collection of J. Dirk Nies.

Helen Gladys (nee Wilson) and John Dirk Nies purchased the house at 6604 Rivercrest Court in 1958. Helen Nies is significant at the local, state, and national level as the first woman to serve on the United States Court of Customs and Appeals, the Federal Circuit, and Chief Judge of the Federal Circuit. She left a long-lasting legacy of

scholarship by means of her judicial opinions and impacted the legal profession, particularly the advancement of women in the field, through her volunteer activities.

In 1942, at the age of 16, Wilson graduated high school and enrolled at the University of Michigan. Wilson received a Bachelor of Arts degree in "Letters and Law," a program that permitted enrollment in law school during the last year of undergraduate school, in June 1946. She continued at the University of Michigan Law School, one of ten women in the student body of over a thousand. In 1948, she married Captain John D. Nies, Army Air Corps, and the couple moved to Washington, D.C. Helen Nies secured a position as a legal clerk with the Office of Alien Property in the Department of Justice in 1948 and advanced to an attorney when admitted to the bar. Two years later, Nies accepted a position in the Office of Price Stabilization as assistant to the Assistant General Counsel before quickly elevating to Branch Counsel, Consumer Durable Good Division.

After the birth of their first child in 1952, Nies resigned her government position and remained at home for nine years. In 1961, Woodson, Pattishall, and Garner hired Nies on a part-time basis. She specialized in trademark, copyright, and unfair competition law. Nies became a resident partner three years later when she returned to the workforce full-time. She successfully challenged the U.S. Army and stopped the practice of the hazing of new officers at the Fort Bragg training program.

In 1978, Howrey & Simon hired Nies to expand the firm's intellectual property practice focused on federal court litigation, but she remained heavily involved in law societies and associations. The legal profession recognized her accomplishments through numerous awards including the Woman Lawyer of the Year Award by the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia in 1980. That same year, President Jimmy Carter nominated and the United States Senate confirmed Nies to serve as a judge on the United States Court of Customs and Patent Appeals (CCPA). Two years later,

she became a Circuit Judge when the CCPA joined with the United States Court of Claims to form the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. In 1990, Nies was raised to Chief Judge of the Federal Circuit, the first woman to serve in a chief judgeship of that court or either of its predecessors. She became a Senior Judge in 1994, but tragically died in a bicycle accident two years later.



DESIGNATION CRITERIA

The Potomac Overlook Master Plan Historic District meets four Designation Criteria as listed in Section 24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code.

1.A Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation.

Potomac Overlook is associated with the continued suburban development of Montgomery County in the late 1950s. The expansion of the Federal government and shifting of employment centers outside of the capital, liberalization of the Federal Housing Administration-insured and Veteran Affairs-insured mortgage loans, and housing shortages led to the construction of single-family planned suburban subdivisions primarily for white-persons in Montgomery County. The population of the county increased from 164,401 in 1950 to 340,928 in 1960. Potomac Overlook represents a second phase of suburban development that catered to the middle and upper-middle classes. This subdivision and similar developments leveraged the professional expertise of site planners, architects, landscape architects, and engineers to develop large tracts. In addition, Potomac Overlook allowed for middle-class residents to afford modernist architecture in a natural setting absent a unique architect-designed house.

1.C Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource is identified with a person or group of persons who influenced society.

Several of the first owners at Potomac Overlook remained in the community for an extended number of years. Many of these owners influenced local, state, and national affairs. This report highlights the contributions of the following six owners: Pao-Chi and Yu Ming Pien (7205 MacArthur Boulevard); Dorothy Gilford (6602 Rivercrest Court); Helen Wilson Nies (6604 Rivercrest Court); and Abraham M. and Helen W. Sirkin (6252 Wiscasset Road). Their achievements reflect the following themes: Asian American heritage, Jewish American heritage, women's history, law, and mathematics, science, and engineering. The houses associated with these individuals are listed as outstanding resources in the historic district. There are no other sites in the county that reflect their contributions. In addition, the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* lacks sites designated for these themes.

2.A Architectural and design significance. The historic resource embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction.

Potomac Overlook embodies the distinctive characteristics associated with situated modernism and contemporary-styled architecture. Bennett and KLC's adapted the core principles of modernism and built-upon regional and national residential developments to retain a sense of social, geographical, and ideological aspects of a community at Potomac Overlook. The subdivision is noteworthy for its: 1) detailed residential site planning that respected and conserved the existing topography instead of the typical razing and flattening of the landscape; 2) preservation of the natural environment and tree stands; and 3) systematic layout of buildings to connect interior and exterior spaces, provide viewsheds, and privacy within the community. The development featured the "crispest, most geometrical detailing of all houses designed by KLC for Bennett...and where the use of building components is most clearly expressed on the outside."

Bennett and KLC utilized contemporary-styled architecture at a tract-level scale. Contemporary houses fit with the ideological goals of the designers but adapted to the challenging site parameters and steep terrain at Potomac Overlook. The houses reflect contemporary-styled architecture associated with the mid-twentieth century. Stylistic elements include: 1) rectilinear plan and horizontal emphasis; 2) low-pitched gabled roofs with wide overhanging eaves; 3) construction with natural materials (wood and multitextured brick veneer); 4) preassembled window walls; 5) integration of interior and exterior spaces; 6) balconies, open terraces and patios, and screened porches; and 7) attached or detached carports.

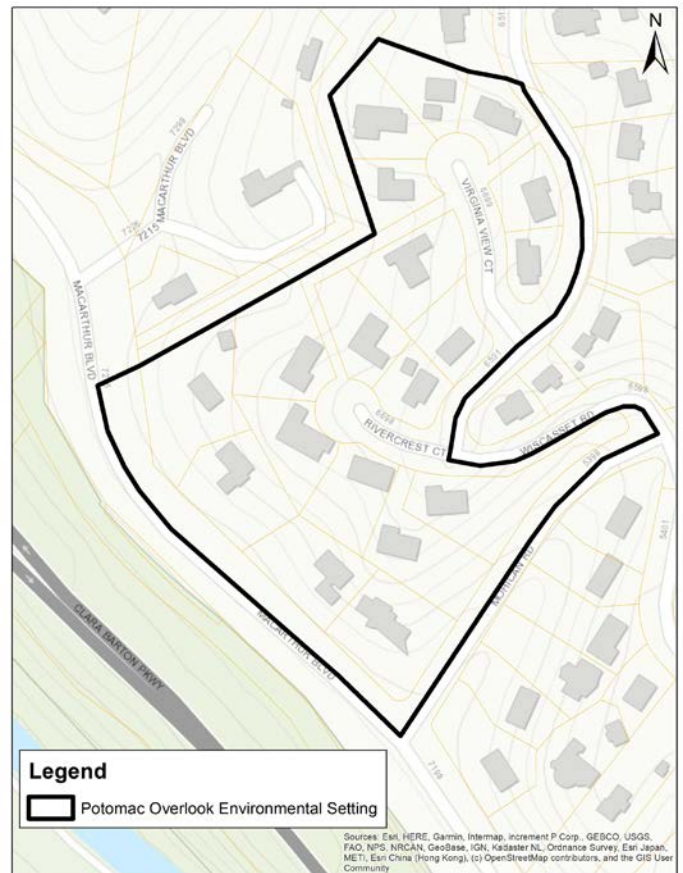
2.B Architectural and design significance. The historic resource represents the work of a master.

Potomac Overlook represents the collaborative effort of master architects Arthur H. Keyes, Jr., and Francis D. Lethbridge and builder Edmund J. Bennett. This subdivision and future communities designed and constructed by the development team resulted in local and national attention. In addition, all three men had distinguished careers and were leaders in their respective professions. Keyes and Lethbridge were elected as Fellows of the American Institute of Architects in the 1960s. Dr. Isabelle Gournay, University of Maryland School of Architecture, Planning & Preservation, wrote that Bennett should be considered the "[Joseph] Eichler of the East" and recommended that his works be appreciated in a similar context.

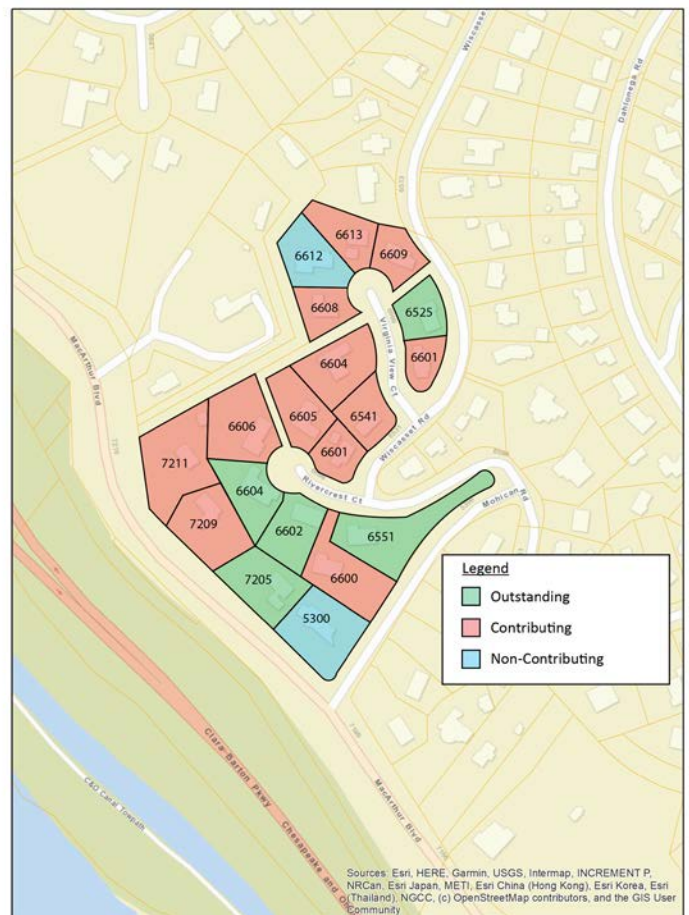
ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The Potomac Overlook Master Plan Historic District is in Bethesda, Montgomery County, Maryland. The subdivision is bound by MacArthur Boulevard to the west, Mohican Drive to the south, Wiscasset Drive to the south and east, and single-family dwellings to the north and west. The proposed environmental setting to be listed in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation* consists of the original boundaries of the subdivision (as platted between 1956 and 1958) as shown on the accompanying map.

The five outstanding resources are 7205 MacArthur Boulevard, 6602 Rivercrest Court, 6604 Rivercrest Court, 6525 Wiscasset Road, and 6551 Wiscasset Road. Four of the houses listed as outstanding resources are associated with individuals who made significant contributions to local, state, and national affairs. The house at 6551 Wiscasset Road is listed as an outstanding resource since it was the model home and it retains the highest degree of architectural integrity in the district. The two non-contributing properties are: 5300 Mohican Road and 6612 Virginia View Court. The twelve remaining properties are contributing resources. There are nineteen properties in total that are the subject of this Master Plan Amendment.



Environmental setting for the Potomac Overlook Master Plan Historic District.
Source: Montgomery Planning.



Map showing the location of the outstanding, contributing, and non-contributing resources. | Source: Montgomery Planning.

HISTORIC AREA WORK PERMIT

A Historic Area Works Permit (HAWP) is required to change the exterior features of a historic site or a building located in a historic district. Per §24A-6 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Historic Area Works Permits (HAWP) must be issued for any work on public or private properties containing a historic resource before the following actions:

- Constructing, reconstructing, moving, relocating, demolishing or in any manner modifying, changing, or altering the exterior features of any historic site or any historic resource located within any historic district.
- Performing any grading, excavating, construction or substantially modifying, changing or altering the environmental setting of an historic site or an historic resource located within an historic district.

An overview of the review and approval process is described in §24A-6 to §24A-8 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance and on the Historic Preservation program's website: <https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/historic/historic-area-work-permits>

DESIGN GUIDELINES

The *Potomac Overlook Historic District Design Guidelines* intend to meet the needs of property owners, the HPC, and historic preservation staff. The *Guidelines* were written in collaboration between the historic preservation staff, property owners in Potomac Overlook, and the neighborhood Covenants Committee; the HPC recommended minor changes that are reflected in this updated version. The design guidelines are a tool that regulate exterior alterations, new construction, and demolition within the local historic district to ensure the preservation of the overall physical character of the community. These historic preservation design guidelines will be a source of information for property owners contemplating projects to repair, rehabilitate, or alter historic properties in Montgomery County, as well as a tool for architects, contractors, the Potomac Overlook Covenant Committee (which will serve as the Local Advisory Panel), and others who assist in the design and review process. The guidelines will also aid the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) in its consideration of Historic Area Work Permit (HAWP) applications.





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Potomac Overlook

— WINTER 2021-2022

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