

Canterbury Woods Memories: Environment and Schools

In the 1970's tadpoles delighted the children, and spring peepers announced the change of seasons. Long Branch Stream was a natural environment before subdivisions upstream were built in the watershed and the stream became a storm runoff.

We did not see deer and foxes until decades later, when development in Burke and beyond reduced the available natural environment. In the 1970's QEB was also a quieter street and not a rush hour cut-through until Burke was developed.

Canterbury Woods students attended Frost/Woodson until Robinson High opened in 1971. When W. T. Woodson High School opened in 1962, it was not only the largest school in Fairfax County, it was also the largest in the state of Virginia. Robert Frost Middle School, which the Fairfax County School Board named after celebrated poet Robert Lee Frost, opened in 1964. Robinson High was named for the first Virginian to receive the Medal of Honor for his service during the Vietnam War. These histories have been copied in detail from the FCPS/history website, which also points on Canterbury Woods Elementary to a link for a charming history of Canterbury, England.

I did substitute teaching at Robinson in 1973 and had students from my QEB neighbors and also our old Kings Park neighborhood. Over a decade, Kings Park was transferred from West Springfield High to Robinson to Lake Braddock High, while Canterbury Woods students were transferred from Woodson to Robinson to Lake Braddock High and then back to Frost/Woodson in 1977 as FCPS managed new schools and students from new subdivisions in Burke, which was growing rapidly at the time.

However, the 1977 reassignment back to Frost/Woodson affected only uprising students, which meant some families had students divided between two schools. This made back-to-school night a real challenge for some! Our son's class was the first reassigned from Lake Braddock High to Frost/Woodson in 1977, which I welcomed because Woodson was a more traditional school while Lake Braddock at that time had a more open floor plan. However, the division worked for some neighbors, who found their children assigned to a school that matched their learning style. There were so many teens in Canterbury Woods in the early 1980s that multiple school buses ran to Lake Braddock and Frost/Woodson.

Canterbury Woods Elementary opened in 1965 and was not as large a facility in the 1970's as it is today -- I hardly recognize the building when we go there now to vote. It was an excellent school, due to the principal Darrell Huffman, also a CW resident. Since then, the school has been expanded to accommodate students in special programs.

In the 1970s and 1980s Woodson's Latin team won state and national competitions under the sponsorship of Maureen O'Donnell, who in 1980 was selected as Teacher of the Year for the state of Virginia and awarded an honorary doctorate from Yale University. The debate team at Lake Braddock under their wonderful coach, Vickie Drinnan, also took many state and national honors during the 70's and 90's with two CW students leading these efforts.

Woodson was struck by two tornados in the 1970s. In April 1973 a thunderstorm spawned the first, which caused heavy damage to the school on a Sunday when no students were threatened; and students doubled up at Oakton High during the reconstruction. In 1979 a tornado from a hurricane remnant caused less damage, though it destroyed a house a block away in what became known as 'tornado alley'.

Canterbury Woods Memories: Community Development and Growth

It was not possible to drive from the original section of Canterbury Woods to Woodland Way until the 8700 block of QEB was paved in 1972. However, the shopping area at Kings Park was there with Giant Food, the gas station, and a bank. There was also a Savings & Loan but no pizza and no Chinese. The bank went through multiple versions: Peoples, Dominion, First Union, Wachovia, and now Wells Fargo. Wakefield Chapel Road also did not connect through to 236 in the early 1970s. Driving to 236 required a map to navigate through the residential neighborhood via Holborn.

Our QEB blocks were constructed on land that had not been originally planned to be part of the Canterbury Woods development. The 8700 and 8800 blocks of QEB are part of Canterbury Woods, but the houses are Long Branch models and not the original Canterbury Woods models. Our blocks were intended as a pilot project for Long Branch by Hyman Bernstein, the contractor who built Canterbury Woods; but after our two blocks of QEB were built, the Long Branch project was sold to another builder.

Construction by Bernstein in 1971-1972 ran behind, and buyers were transferred. We originally held a contract for a house on King Solomon Drive in Long Branch, which was behind schedule, and acquired our home on QEB when the family holding the contract on our QEB house transferred to one on Althea.

Buyers of the QEB houses were worried and frustrated as construction ran behind until one of the realtors who had sold the contracts took over the job of site manager in 1972. We owe Scoop Maginniss of Town & Country a lot of credit for making it possible for us to move into our new homes. There were families anticipating moving in, watching and waiting for construction to be completed. It was frustrating, of course, running nearly a year behind schedule, but it was also a way for these families to bond with their new neighbors.

Fairfax County tightened the rules on inspection and occupancy permits after we moved into our house. We moved in a month before obtaining an occupancy permit because the house we were renting in Kings Park had been sold. The yard had not yet been fully graded or planted, and only one bathroom was completely furnished. We would not have acquired this house any other way so we were grateful. It was a different era.

Many water pipes in front lawns developed leaks, and there were a significant number of households on our block that eventually needed to put in new pipes. A mound in the front yard was a tell-tale sign of a leak. At one point, a neighbor got a knock on the door in the middle of the night, telling them that “their lawn was up in the air”! The pipe supply company eventually settled with some homeowners at about 50% of the expenses to replace the pipes and lawns because the type of plastic pipe delivered was not the heavier density ordered by the developer.

There was a very tragic event on Magdalene Court in 1972. A backhoe operator performing sewer construction under contract to Fairfax County accidentally caused a leak in the main gas line in the street. Two houses were destroyed and a third severely damaged by the explosion, which resulted in three fatalities. The NTSB report covers the causes, emergency response timeline, and investigation in detail, and is available online in Google Books.

Then there was the snowfall of February 2010 when a front loader cleared QEB curb to curb at 11pm by dumping the snow in piles 7 feet tall onto sidewalks and driveways that homeowners had cleared. There was no hope of clearing the sidewalks again until the snow melted.

Almost five decades later, we are still here and welcoming new neighbors!

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