

BROOKLAND CIVIC

Our History

Written by Past President of BNCA, Caroline Petti, printed with permission

Some form of Brookland Civic Association has existed since the very beginning of Brookland, i.e. since the Brooks family property was subdivided into a suburban residential area starting in the late 1880's-early 1890's. In those early days, especially with the absence of home rule in the District of Columbia, neighborhood associations were common across the City of Washington. Indeed, they played a critical role in representing neighborhood residents in District political matters and in competing for public improvement projects.

The Brookland Citizens

Association got its start in 1880.

One of the earliest issues the Citizens Association focused on was transportation in and out of Brookland. At the turn of the century, the only way to get to Brookland from downtown was to catch a horse-drawn bus at 7th and New York Avenue and ride for two hours. The one-way fare was 5 cents.

Paving and improving streets and sidewalks was another high priority. Expanding streetcar service to Brookland was also a high priority. The Citizens Association is credited with getting the Monroe Street Bridge built (in 1910) and with bringing streetcar service to Brookland shortly thereafter. Brookland Citizens Association letters indicate that the Monroe Street Bridge was built by the District of Columbia and the B&O Railroad Company at a total cost of about \$44,000, but that the approaches to the bridge were paid for by the citizens of Brookland who "taxed themselves...to the extent of about \$15,000." Shortly after the bridge was erected, the



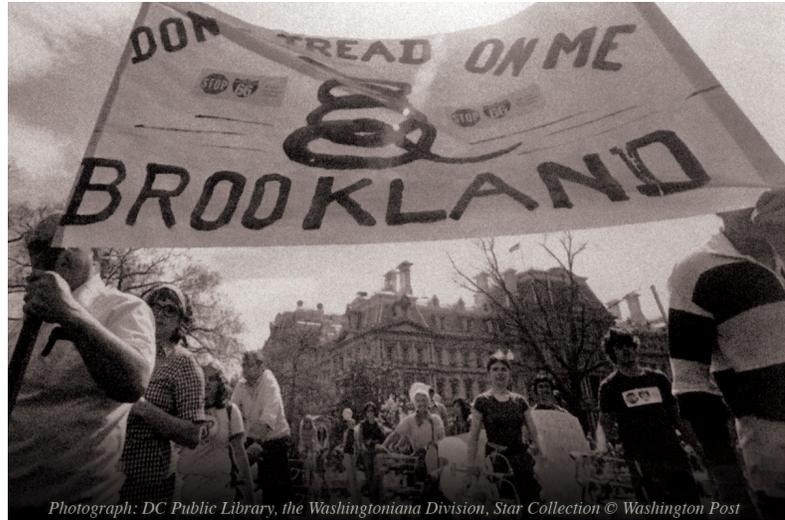
The Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association is a thriving organization today. Here are BNCA members at the Triangle Park Clean-up in Spring 2018.

Citizens Association – joined by the Catholic University of America, Dominican College and the Franciscan Monastery – petitioned the Congress to extend the streetcar tracks across the bridge. By the 1920's, the Citizens Association had over five hundred members and had established itself as an influential player on Brookland and city-wide issues.

Another major initiative of the Citizens Association was working to preserve the old Civil War fort, Fort Bunker Hill at 14th and Otis Streets. After many years of advocacy, their efforts paid off and in 1936 Fort Bunker Hill was dedicated as a city park. Some of the more ambitious plans for the park never came to fruition. For instance, they envisioned the construction of artificial cascades which would flow from an elevated terrace at the top of the sloped site down to a pool that could be used for wading. In addition, they envisioned a public library at one corner of the site and another place reserved for band concerts. Today we'll be lucky if we

can get the National Park Service to clear the paths of poison ivy!

In those very early days, the majority of Brookland's residents were white and, like other private subdivisions in the city, Brookland was strictly segregated. It stayed this way through the first half of the twentieth century, but the years between 1940 and 1960 ushered in a transition from predominantly white to predominantly black. With this transition came the establishment of the Brookland Civic Association which ultimately became the Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association of today.



Photograph: DC Public Library, the Washingtoniana Division, Star Collection © Washington Post

The Brookland Civic Association was formed in 1941 as a black response to the fact that the Brookland Citizens Association did not allow black members. At that time, segregation was everywhere. Many deeds contained restrictions banning the transfer of property to blacks and others. There was a ban on the use of white schools and recreation centers for black meetings or events. For example, if you applied for use of meeting room space, you would be asked for the racial identity of each member of your group. Early meetings of the Civic Association had to be held in private homes, black schools or in black churches. I understand many of them were held here at Brookland Union Baptist Church and at Slowe Elementary School across the street.

In the early years, much of the time of the Civic Association was spent working for the end of racial discrimination.

Other major issues included working for Home Rule for the District of Columbia and supporting the work of the NAACP.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the whites-only Brookland Citizens Association still existed and was shamefully doing what it could to undermine de-segregation.

In 1950, the Citizens Association protested the desegregation of McKinley High swimming pool and opposed the integration of white fire companies.

In 1951, they protested the de-segregation of playgrounds in Brookland. In a letter to the chair of the Recreation Board, the Citizens Association stated: "We

are in favor of segregation...we should like to keep our playgrounds for white only..."

1953, they opposed the new non-segregation policy of Brookland's Newton Theatre. It boggles the mind to think that a group of neighbors would organize for such purposes.

In the 1960's, some members of the Brookland Citizens Association tried to integrate the organization. They were defeated, but a few years later the Association disbanded. You might say they were on the wrong side of history.

Meanwhile, the integrated Brookland Civic Association continued and thrived. Among the issues the Civic Association tackled:

- Successfully fought the proposed North-Central Freeway
- Worked to promote the establishment of the Brookland/CUA Metro
- Successfully worked to save the Colonel Brooks mansion from becoming a Metro parking lot

It was Margaret Mead who said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world....Committed Brookland citizens—with names like Pryor, Harris, Rooney, and Weaver—trying their best to do what's right for their community. The fruits of their past labors will be enjoyed by Brookland residents for many years to come.