

The Historic of Parkfairfax

By Lisa Phinney

During the 1930s and into the war years of the 1940s, the Federal government expanded rapidly. As government workers poured in to fill new positions and create new agencies, Washington, bursting at the seams, was suffering a severe housing shortage. In response to this shortage, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company built Parkfairfax between 1941 and 1943. Remarkable for its concept of low-rise low-density housing, Parkfairfax was designed by Leonard Schultze and Associates. Schultze was noted for a number of high-profile projects including the design of Grand Central Station in New York and the famous Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach Florida. Working with Schultze, the site plan by the noted landscape architectural firm of Clark and Rapuano was remarkable for its sensitive placement of roads and buildings into a bucolic and park-like setting. Parkfairfax was constructed by the well-respected New York construction firm of Starrett Brothers and Eken, famous as the builders of the Empire State Building.



Parkfairfax filled immediately upon its completion in 1943 and there was a waiting list hundreds long to get in. Metropolitan Life hired a staff of 85 to oversee the extensive grounds. Met Life also imposed a number of restrictions on its tenants to maintain the highest standards. For instance residents were not allowed to have dogs or cats, and despite the era of Victory Gardens, Parkfairfax did not allow vegetable gardens. Family size dictated how large an apartment you were allowed to occupy. A young couple with a new baby could not live in a one-bedroom apartment – they would be required to move to larger quarters.

By the mid-1940s, like so many other young GI's returning from service in far-away lands, Carl Blackwell returned from the Pacific with his Australian war bride. The young couple was fortunate, a job waited for Carl in Washington and through the influence of well-placed friends they were able to find a nice apartment in the new exclusive garden apartment complex called Parkfairfax. The proud and happy newlyweds took lots of pictures of their new life together.





In a few short years the Blackwell family had grown with the addition of first Tuppence, and then several years later, Cathy. The Blackwells moved to their second, larger, apartment in Parkfairfax. Many young and growing families called Parkfairfax home and soon the community was filled with children. Tuppence remembered in her autobiography, written in high school, *“There were many other children in Parkfairfax and we played with them often...There was an enormous crab apple tree on the sloping ground near our apartment. We children climbed around on it quite dexterously as it was an easy tree to climb, and we greatly enjoyed it. The management of Parkfairfax, however, didn't enjoy our use of it for such a purpose at all. A man whom we called Mr. Parkfairfax often came around and chased us off the tree, but we always went back.”* Parkfairfax remained an exclusive address, home to members of Congress, including Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, members of the military and influential government workers. Metropolitan Life continued to maintain the highest standards in the buildings and grounds.

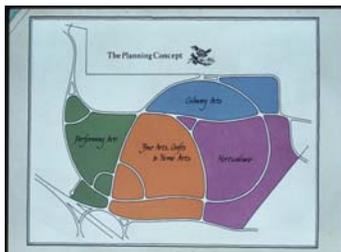


By the mid-1950s the Blackwell family, like so many families of the era, moved to a more suburban home in Fairfax County. Parkfairfax reflected the changing demographics of the city as more families moved out to houses in the suburbs and the population returned to more single occupants and young, childless couples.

Parkfairfax, like most apartment complexes in Washington and Virginia of the 1940s and 1950s was restricted. No African-Americans or Jews were allowed to rent there. All that changed when, in 1963, Met Life adopted an open occupancy policy. The change reflected the political and social ferment of the times. In Parkfairfax, a few residents moved or threatened to do so when the first African-American tenant rented in the complex, but most approved the plan. She was a schoolteacher from Washington, D.C., and her arrival was noted in the Washington Post with the headline “Parkfairfax to Get First Negro Tenant.”

By the mid-1960s Met Life began to divest itself of its extensive holdings in housing. In 1968 Met Life sold the buildings to Arlen Realty of New York for \$9.8 Million, and leased the land to them for 99 years. Arlen commenced upgrading the units with new boilers, new in-wall air conditioners and then-fashionable harvest gold appliances. But Arlen had other plans for Parkfairfax. Eventually the company planned to demolish the community to make way for a collection of high rises surrounding a lake and bridge paths. In a move not surprising for the turbulent times of the early 1970s, the tenants of Parkfairfax organized in protest. They eventually persuaded the City of Alexandria to deny the plan citing inadequate sewers for such a project. Furthermore, the City zoned the property with a four-story height limit. Having been thwarted in their redevelopment scheme, Arlen Realty began to neglect the property. Parc East Condominium on Martha Custis Drive, built in 1971 on land once belonging to Parkfairfax, is a vestige of this plan.

In 1977 Arlen Realty and Met Life sold the property for \$30 Million to PIA/IDI Corporation. PIA/IDI was led by Giuseppe Cecchi, a successful Washington developer known for his Watergate Complex in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, D.C. When Cecchi announced plans to convert Parkfairfax into a condominium, beleaguered Parkfairfax residents were outraged. Cecchi hired noted architect Wayne Williams, FAIA to develop a new concept for Parkfairfax. Williams, a California architect, was famous for utopian visions of communal living. His concept for Parkfairfax called for the creation of “hamlets,” each with its own town square and theme such as Horticulture or Performing Arts.



What was popular in California held no interest for the residents of Parkfairfax. While wildly imaginative, the concept held little interest for the residents who were wary of the condominium conversion in the first place. The plan was abandoned for a more straightforward approach. Improvements and amenities were added such as two new swimming pools, eight tennis courts in two locations, and two volleyball courts. Cecchi also instituted a favorable purchase plan so that Parkfairfax residents could buy into the condominium at a discount. Many took advantage of the plan. In fact, when the condos were then offered to the general public, Parkfairfax made the papers again, as the Washington Post noted that more than 50 people waited outside the sales office overnight for a chance to buy a home.

In 1979 Parkfairfax became a self-governing condominium association, adopting by-laws and administrative regulations, electing a Board of Directors and creating standing committees to oversee different aspects of running the property. Eventually, Parkfairfax hired its own maintenance staff, administrative staff, and engaged a management company to oversee the everyday business of running such a large and complex property. In 1999, Parkfairfax was placed on the National Register and the Virginia Landmarks Register as a Historic District. Today, Parkfairfax remains a distinctive place, with a large and diverse population sharing the beauty of tree-lined streets, open spaces, and woodlands nestled in the middle of a densely populated urban landscape.



This essay was written using the research in the National Register Nomination by Architectural Historian Laura Bobeczko and the reminiscences of Parkfairfax resident Tuppence Blackwell, who, along with her father Carl, shared her wonderful family photographs. Thanks to long-time resident and tireless Parkfairfax archivist David Bush for the use of photographs from his collection.