

Berwyn Heights (67-022)

Berwyn Heights was established as a late-nineteenth-century railroad and streetcar suburb, located in northwestern Prince George's County, approximately eight miles northeast of Washington, D.C. The community is roughly bounded by Greenbelt Road on the north, Edmonston Road on the east, the subdivision of College Park Estates on the south, and the railroad tracks of CSX (formerly the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad tracks) on the west.

In 1888, Edward Graves platted Charlton Heights, a large subdivision comprising roughly 380 acres to the east of the Washington Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad tracks.¹ Lots in the subdivision were long and narrow, approximately 50 feet wide and 100 feet deep. Working with his uncle Benjamin Charlton, investor James E. Waugh, and three other businessmen, the group incorporated as the Charlton Heights Improvement Company and subsequently purchased the entire subdivision from Graves in September 1888.² Development in the new community was initially slow, and by 1890, approximately 20 houses had been erected in the neighborhood. Both Graves and Waugh oversaw construction of their own houses in the new subdivision, possibly as a way to spark additional development.³ Several of the earliest houses in the neighborhood were mail-order plan houses, typically ordered from R.W. Shoppell's Cooperative Building Plan Association of New York City.⁴ Although the company sold several of the houses and some unimproved lots, by 1892, the Charlton Heights Improvement Company had failed.⁵ Graves and Waugh purchased the remaining lots and continued to sell them over time.⁶

In 1896, the subdivision was incorporated as the Town of Berwyn Heights. The neighboring subdivision of Central Heights, located just west of Berwyn Heights, was also incorporated in 1896 as Berwyn. The Berwyn name is believed to be taken from a Presbyterian chapel constructed in 1890 in Central Heights. In 1892, the name of the church was changed to the Berwyn Mission.⁷

By the turn of the twentieth century, Berwyn Heights' location along improving transportation routes, such as the new streetcar line, ultimately sparked limited growth in the community. It was one of many communities in this rapidly developing part of Prince George's County to be serviced by the City and Suburban Railway, which reached the area in the 1890s. Similarly, the B&O Railroad constructed a station stop in Berwyn Heights. In 1902, the Berwyn and Laurel Electric Railroad was formed (renamed as the Washington, Berwyn and Laurel Railroad Company) and service was extended past Berwyn Heights to Laurel. The Washington, Spa Spring and Greta Railroad Company extended to the community in 1912, with service continuing to 1933.⁸

By 1910, the small town contained just over 150 residents in 38 houses.⁹ In 1915, these neighbors formed the Berwyn Heights Association in an effort to improve the streets, sidewalks, lighting, and the

¹ Prince George's County Land Records, Circuit Court, Plat Drawer 11, File 24.

² Ann Harris Davidson, *Then & Now: Berwyn Heights* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), ix.

³ George D. Denny, Jr., *Proud Past, Promising Future: Cities and Towns in Prince George's County, Maryland* (Brentwood, MD: Tuxedo Press, 1997), 46-47.

⁴ Susan G. Pearl, Memo to Fern Piret, Planning Director of Prince George's County, dated 2 November 1992, "Berwyn Heights: Historical Material for 1996 Centennial," 1.

⁵ Davidson, *Berwyn Heights*, x.

⁶ Pearl, "Berwyn Heights," 2.

⁷ D.D. Skarda, "Berwyn Heights: History of a Small Maryland Town," n.p., 21-22.

⁸ Howard S. Berger, "Streetcar Lines in Prince George's County, 1892-1958," in *Historic Contexts in Prince George's County: Short Papers on Settlement Patterns, Transportation and Cultural History* (Upper Marlboro, MD: Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 1991), 51-52.

⁹ Pearl, "Berwyn Heights," 2.

community in general. In 1921, the Potomac Electric Power Company reached its minimum requirement of 50 subscribers and extended electrical service to Berwyn Heights. Because of the way the original town charter was written, there was essentially no town government. The Berwyn Heights Association functioned as a quasi-governmental body until the town's charter was redrafted and incorporated in 1924.¹⁰

The town remained small and largely undeveloped until after World War II (1941-1945). Between 1924 and 1955, the number of houses in Berwyn Heights grew from 65 houses to 316 houses.¹¹ In 1945, town residents resisted being incorporated into College Park, which was then incorporating as a municipality.¹² The southeastern portion of the community was largely undeveloped until the 1950s, when several developers resubdivided portions of Berwyn Heights. Greenbrier Knolls was platted in 1955 by Hubert P. and Hazel V. Norris and Henry L. and Doris C. Albright. The subdivision, consisting of approximately 10 acres, was one of the earliest post-war resubdivisions in Berwyn Heights. It was followed by the subdivisions of several lots and the larger College Knolls (1960).¹³ The growth of the community in the mid-twentieth century resulted in the construction of a new firehouse in 1954 and the Berwyn Heights Elementary School in 1958. The new, modern school replaced a late-nineteenth-century log school and an early-twentieth-century two-room school (Berwyn Heights Schoolhouse, PG: 67-022-07). The firehouse was later replaced in 1968 with a larger facility.¹⁴ By 1970, Berwyn Heights was fully developed. Today, the Town of Berwyn Heights has approximately 3,000 residents that live in 1,000 dwellings.¹⁵

There are 11 Prince George's County Historic Sites in Berwyn Heights:

- PG: 67-022-07, Berwyn Heights Schoolhouse, 5814 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-10, Wetherald House, 8411 58th Avenue
- PG: 67-022-11, O'Dea House (NR), 5804 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-12, Chlopicki House, 5717 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-13, Cross House, 5805 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-15, Wolfe House, 5617 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-16, Pickett House, 8616 57th Avenue
- PG: 67-022-17, Kleiner House, 5603 Ruatan Street
- PG: 67-022-18, Cissel House, 8911 57th Avenue
- PG: 67-022-19, Schniedman-Seal House, 5713 Seminole Street
- PG: 67-022-21, Elwood J. Taylor House, 8516 58th Avenue

There are currently no designated Historic Resources in Berwyn Heights.

Windshield Survey

Windshield surveys of Berwyn Heights were conducted in July 2007 and January 2009. The survey area was expanded to include the entirety of Charlton Heights as originally platted. The town is primarily residential with limited non-historic commercial and industrial development located along Greenbelt Road, 55th Avenue, and Ballow Avenue. Public buildings in Berwyn Heights include a municipal building, school, fire station, library, senior center, and community center. The community contains

¹⁰ Skarda, "Berwyn Heights," 25-26.

¹¹ Skarda, "Berwyn Heights," 28.

¹² Denny, *Proud Past*, 50.

¹³ Prince George's County Land Records, Circuit Court, WWW 26:57, WWW 26:26, WWW 37:32, WWW 38:60.

¹⁴ Skarda, "Berwyn Heights," 38, 42.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Berwyn Heights town, Maryland," fact sheet,

approximately 1,000 primary resources constructed between ca. 1790 and the present, with the majority of buildings constructed between ca. 1950 and ca. 1965. The oldest house in the neighborhood is known as Sportland at 5933 Natasha Drive. Constructed ca. 1790, the building was originally part of the eighteenth-century estate of Archibald Edmonston. The house was altered in the early nineteenth century with the construction of a large Greek Revival-style addition, which now reads as the main block. The plan, design, fenestration, and materials of the building have all been altered over time.

Common building forms in Berwyn Heights include front-gabled buildings, bungalows, Cape Cods, minimal traditionals, ranch houses, split-foyers, and split-levels. Berwyn Heights contains a collection of popular late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century residential architectural styles including Queen Anne, Stick, Second Empire, Colonial Revival, Craftsman, Dutch Colonial Revival, and numerous illustrations from the Modern Movement. At least four of the earliest houses in the neighborhood are examples from R.W. Shoppell's Cooperative Building Plan Association. It appears that there are also several mail-order kit houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company. The largest concentration of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century houses in the neighborhood is located along Ruatan Street, between Berwyn Road and 60th Avenue.

The first infill development began in the 1920s with the construction of modest bungalows. Sporadic development in Berwyn Heights continued from the 1920s through the 1940s. The majority of the neighborhood developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Streets have an irregular plan, with angles of varying degrees throughout the neighborhood. The streets are typically lined with mature trees, many of which were planted by the Berwyn Heights Association in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The older houses in the neighborhood typically have deeper setbacks than the mid-twentieth-century development. Lots in the original sections of Berwyn Heights are long and narrow, typically averaging 50 feet wide and 200 feet deep. Resubdivided lots vary in size and are more square than rectangular.

Historic District Evaluation

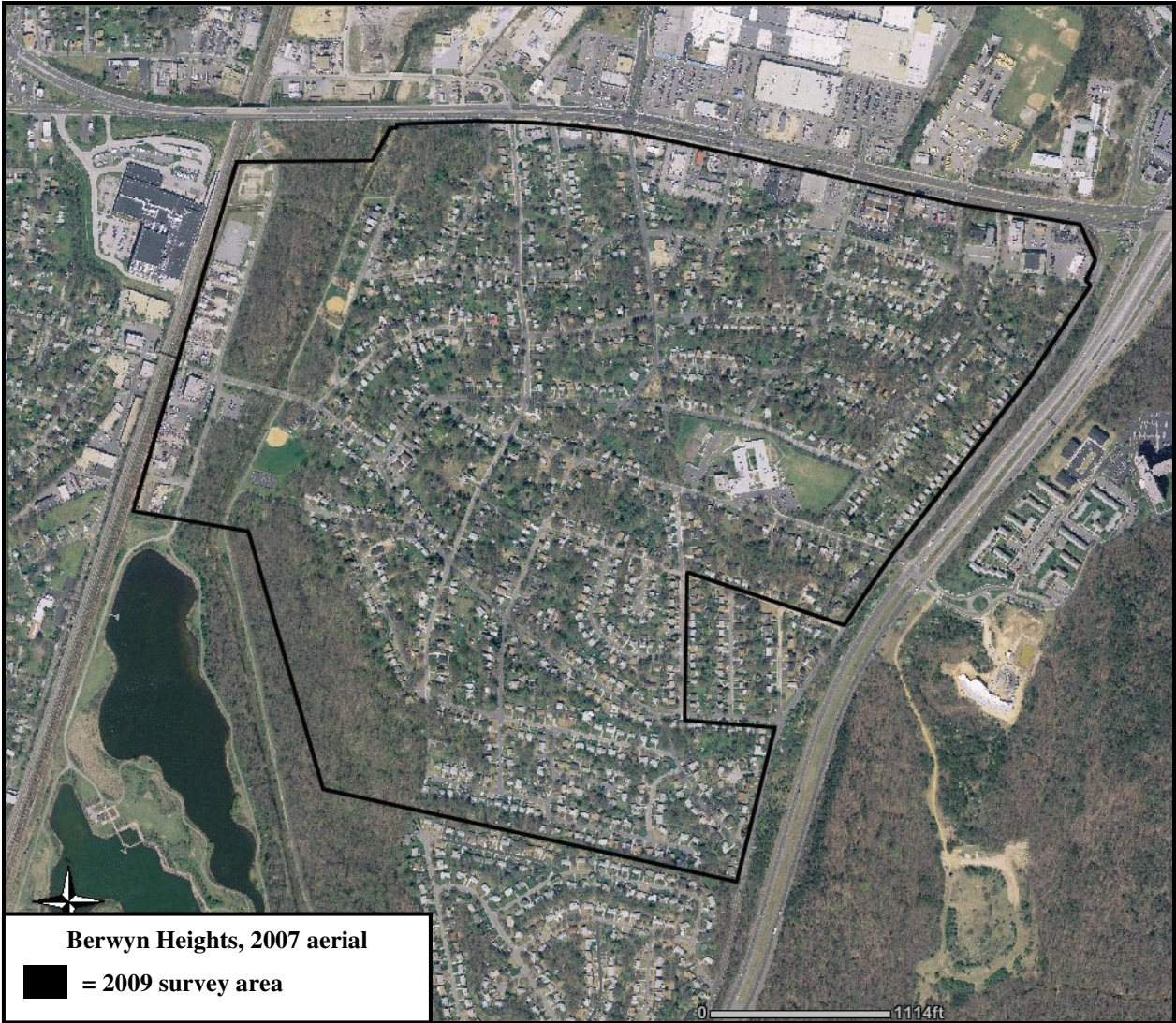
Berwyn Heights represents several Prince George's County Heritage Themes including suburban growth and residential architectural styles. The community illustrates the evolution of popular architectural styles and suburban development in Prince George's County from 1888 to ca. 1970. Despite the community's significance as a late-nineteenth-century railroad and streetcar suburb, Berwyn Heights is not recommended eligible for listing as either a local Prince George's County historic district, or as a National Register Historic District. Although the community is representative of the suburban growth and expansion of Prince George's County, Berwyn Heights does not have a significant concentration of resources that represent any one particular phase of development. As noted by local resident Anne Harris Davidson in her book on the community, Berwyn Heights "was designed as a carefully planned residential development for the elite of Washington, but it grew sporadically and in ways not planned...It is not as it was, not even in name, but continues to engender the devotion of many of its residents."¹⁶ Davidson also stated that development of the community "proceeded erratically, with each new round characterized by a different style of house, leading to Berwyn Heights having a chronological smorgasbord of homes."¹⁷ Platted in 1888 as a railroad suburb and later serviced by the streetcar, the community is no longer able to convey its significance as a railroad or streetcar suburb. A 1938 aerial image of Berwyn Heights shows the limited development that occurred in the neighborhood. Many original buyers in Berwyn Heights purchased several lots, which were later subdivided and improved with new construction, resulting in a significant amount of infill from the 1950s and 1960s. The buildings of Berwyn Heights document a wide variety of twentieth-century architectural styles and forms that do not

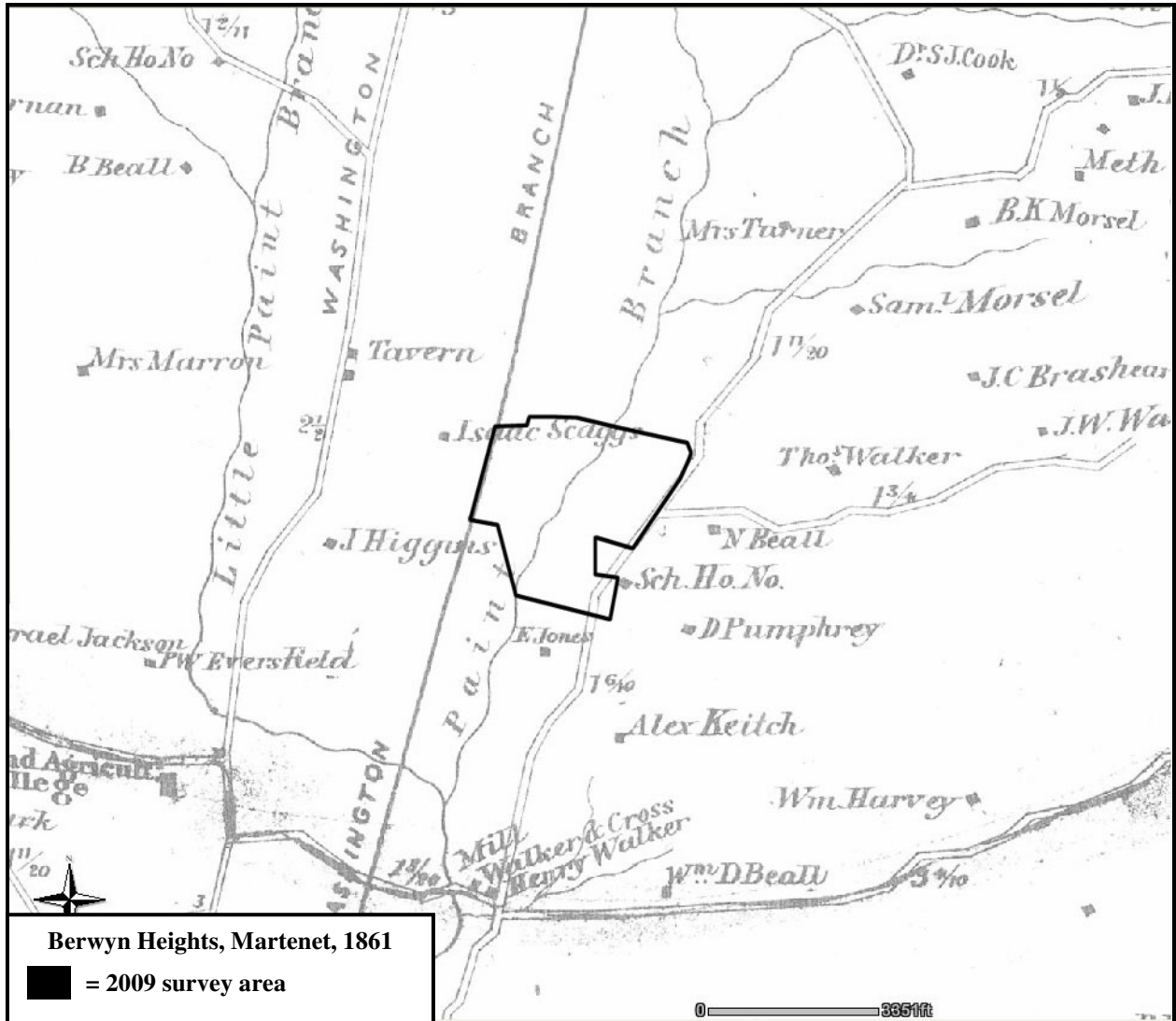
¹⁶ Davidson, *Berwyn Heights*, ix.

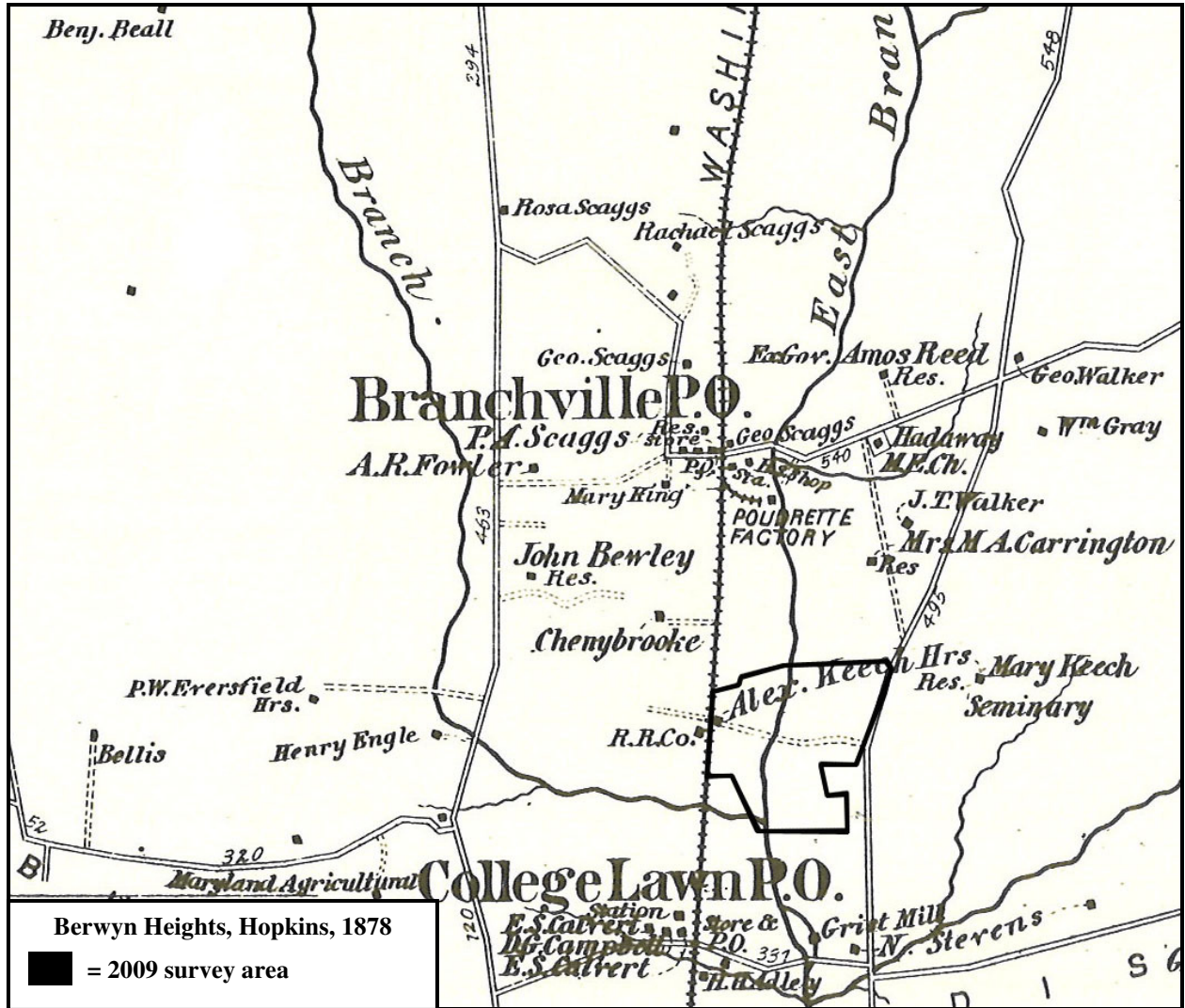
¹⁷ Davidson, *Berwyn Heights*, x.

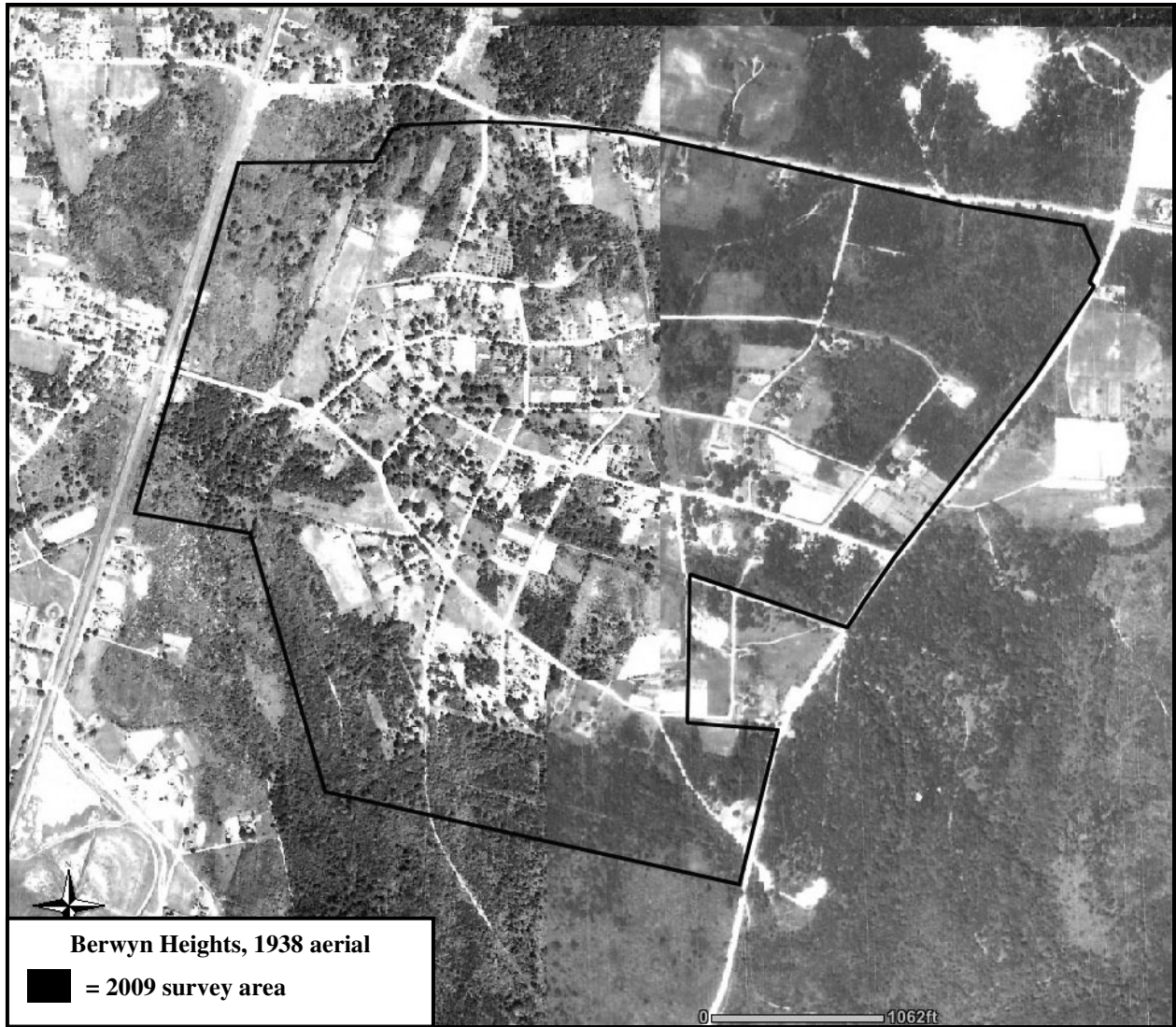
illustrate a cohesive community. Further, many of the older houses in the neighborhood have been altered with additions and modern replacement materials such as siding, windows, and roofing material, resulting in compromised integrity of design. The number of resubdivisions in the community also compromises the integrity of design as originally intended by Edward Graves when he platted the subdivision. Berwyn Height has retained its integrity of location, materials, and workmanship, but the community has lost its integrity of design, feeling, and association.

Prepared by EHT Tracerics, Inc.
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Looking southwest, 5805 Ruatan Street, Cross House (PG: 67-022-013) (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northwest, 5712 Ruatan Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northeast, 5617 Ruatan Street, Wolfe House (PG: 67-022-025) (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northwest, 5812-5810-5808 Pontiac Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northwest, 8903-8905-8907 Seminole Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking southwest, 5705-5707 Seminole Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking west, 5612-5610 Seminole Street (*EHT Traceries, 2007*)