

## Forest Heights (76A-036)

Forest Heights was established in 1940 as a suburban residential community in western Prince George's County, adjacent to the southeastern boundary of Washington, D.C. Located on the south side of Southern Avenue, the community is divided by Indian Head Highway. The highway, six-lanes wide with a landscaped median, runs through the center of the community, dividing it into two separate neighborhoods.

In 1940, the Washington Heights Realty Corporation platted Forest Heights on a 136-acre tract of undeveloped, wooded land. Lots were relatively large, approximately 60 feet wide and 125 feet deep on curvilinear blocks. The streets were named after Native American tribes, such as Iroquois Way and Mohican Drive. Houses had a consistent setback of 25 feet.<sup>1</sup> In June 1941, real estate firm McKeever & Whiteford advertised a "Special for Builders." They invited "reliable" builders to see their "beautiful new subdivision. 400 wooded lots, approved for FHA low-cost housing loans."<sup>2</sup> By October of that year, Southern Maryland Homes, Inc. was pre-showing their model home in the Forest Heights subdivision. The "Homes of Five and Six Rooms" in the "Defense Area" sold for \$5,250 to \$5,990 and were advertised for their convenient location near the Navy Yard and Naval Research Laboratory.<sup>3</sup> An article from *The Washington Post* that same month also noted the subdivision's convenient location to "Bolling Field, Anacostia Naval Air Base, the Navy Yard, and Indianhead powder plant [*sic*]." The article noted that homebuyers would "find standards of architecture and construction unusual in homes in the moderate priced bracket! Featured are two large bedrooms, bath with shower, living room over 22 feet long with fire place, large kitchen, full basement, air-conditioned heat and large lots."<sup>4</sup> As the name Forest Heights implies, the new suburb was located outside the low-lying city.

Initial development in Forest Heights was slow, in large part due to the onset of World War II (1941-1945). Yet the need for housing, prior to and during the war, resulted in the mass production of residential buildings throughout the Washington metropolitan area. This need was prompted by government expansion, with new residents traveling daily to the nation's capital from the suburbs by car, train, streetcar, and bus. The older, existing suburbs attracted high-status employees and professionals, while new suburbs like Forest Heights catered to young people just starting families and careers. Important to the development of Forest Heights was the opening of Indian Head Highway (MD 210). Constructed in 1942 as the Indian Head Naval Reservation Access Road, the highway provided quicker and easier transportation for local residents in Prince George's County and Charles County. It also physically and visually divided the community into two sections, which allowed for a more intimate neighborhood.

By July 1942, the first group of 25 houses in Forest Heights was sold. The growing need for housing prompted Southern Maryland Homes to immediately begin construction of 46 additional houses, of which 37 were already sold.<sup>5</sup> The demand for housing was great, with at least 25 applicants per house. Yet, the building boom in the Washington metropolitan area during and after the war created a shortage of building materials that included lumber, nails, pipes, and flooring. New construction throughout the area, at the urging of the government, was targeted to federal and military installations, and the facilities to service them such as roads, schools, and housing. Thus, Southern Maryland Homes, faced with 66

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<sup>1</sup> Prince George's County Land Records, Circuit Court, BB 8:43.

<sup>2</sup> Classified Ad, *The Washington Post*, 23 June 1941, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Display Ad, *The Washington Post*, 5 October 1941, p. R6.

<sup>4</sup> "Forest Heights Community Shows First Homes Today," *The Washington Post*, 12 October 1941, p. R7.

<sup>5</sup> Display Ad, *The Washington Post*, 12 July 1942, p. R7.

contracts on houses not yet completed, was unable to build while they waited for building materials. Sales were temporarily suspended until materials became available.<sup>6</sup>

By 1947, the economy in Maryland was stable enough to support private construction once again. This had a tremendous effect on growing suburbs like Forest Heights, which by 1949 contained approximately 300 houses with new construction continuing at a rapid pace. These new houses were marketed directly to veterans returning from the war and employees of the out-lying government and military installations. Advertisements for the neighborhood touted Federal Housing Administration (FHA) financing for potential buyers.

The growing community of Forest Heights proved to be an attractive, affordable, well-planned subdivision conveniently located near both Washington, D.C. and military installations in Prince George's County. To better serve the growing number of commuters in the area, the Washington, Marlboro and Annapolis (WM&A) Motor Lines extended bus service to Forest Heights and the nearby commercial businesses in Oxon Hill in May 1948.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to improve roads and services, Forest Heights incorporated as a town in April 1949.<sup>8</sup> The opening of the South Capitol Street Bridge (now called the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge) in 1950 provided an easier commute between the District of Columbia and Prince George's County, thus attracting new residents to Forest Heights.

The improving methods and routes of transportation offered to the residents of Forest Heights encouraged development more rapidly than previously experienced. Further, McKeever & Whiteford's exclusive sales agreement with the Washington Heights Realty Corporation had ended by 1947, opening the neighborhood to a greater number of developers and builders. This prompted a change not only in the materials and size of the housing being constructed, but the forms and designs used as well. For example, in 1954, Ralph and Jean Rocks resubdivided a portion of Forest Heights and platted three sections on which they constructed large, two-story twin dwellings. These twin dwellings, constructed by Allen & Rocks, Inc., were chosen as one of *The Washington Post's* "Homes of '54." The "semidetached" house was offered for sale at \$13,950 with no down payment. The houses featured "three bedrooms, 1 ½ baths, copper plumbing, full basement and equipped kitchen."<sup>9</sup> The houses were "preengineered and prefabricated" by American Houses, Inc.<sup>10</sup> The twin houses proved to be overwhelmingly popular and by 1955, Allen & Rocks, Inc. had sold 180 houses and were opening their third section for development.<sup>11</sup> Also active in the mid-1950s was William P. Martin, who built concrete-block ranch houses veneered in brick. One of his designs was also chosen as a "Home of '54."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the town of Forest Heights annexed several parcels of land on both sides of Indian Head Highway, gradually increasing the municipal boundaries of the town.<sup>13</sup> Forest Heights was fully developed as a residential suburb by 1965. The Eastover Shopping Center, located just north of Forest Heights, was completed in 1955 and provided a shopping destination for residents. The community is also served by a community center (the former municipal building) and two schools: Forest

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<sup>6</sup> Don O'Reilly, "Builder Hold Mixed Views on Prospects," *The Washington Post*, 1 June 1946, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> "Buses Authorized for Oxon Hill and Forest Heights," *The Washington Post*, 20 May 1948, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip J. Austensen, "There'll Be Hot Time Tonight in New Town of Forest Heights," *The Washington Post*, 20 June 1949, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Variety to Keynote Homes of '54," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 18 July 1954, p. R1.

<sup>10</sup> "A 'Home of '54' Overlooking the Potomac," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 12 September 1954, p. H14.

<sup>11</sup> Display Ad, *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 26 June 1955, p. G5.

<sup>12</sup> Display Ad, *The Washington Post*, 3 October 1954, p. R15.

<sup>13</sup> George D. Denny, Jr., *Proud Past, Promising Future: Cities and Towns in Prince George's County, Maryland* (Brentwood, MD: Tuxedo Press, 1997), 181.

Heights Elementary School and Flintstone Elementary School. Today, the community remains an active commuter suburb and contains approximately 2,600 residents who live in more than 900 houses.<sup>14</sup>

Currently, there are no designated Historic Sites or Resources located within Forest Heights.

## Windshield Survey

A windshield survey of Forest Heights was conducted in January 2009. The survey area consists of approximately 852 primary resources that encompass almost all of the municipal boundaries of the Town of Forest Heights. The community is predominately residential, with limited commercial development located on the northeastern edge along Livingston Road. The community contains a variety of buildings constructed between 1940 and the present. The majority of buildings in the survey area date from 1940 and ca. 1956. There are a number of popular mid-twentieth-century architectural styles represented in the community, including Colonial Revival and numerous illustrations from the Modern Movement. Many of the buildings show the influence of both the Colonial Revival and Modern Movement, demonstrating the transitional nature of mid-twentieth-century architectural styles, fenestration, and materials. Common building forms include Cape Cods, ranch houses, minimal traditional, split-foyer, and split-level houses. Both wood-frame and masonry houses are found throughout the community. Houses are typically one or one-and-one-half story in height, although two-story Colonial Revival-style buildings are scattered throughout the community. The neighborhood is largely single-family houses; however, the southeastern portion of the community developed by Allen & Rocks, Inc. consists completely of two-story twin dwellings. The buildings in Forest Heights are modest and display minimal ornamentation, typical of middle-class residences. The topography of the neighborhood is hilly, overlooking the nation's capital, and scattered with mature trees. The platting and individual houses in the neighborhood show the influences of the FHA standards and guidelines. The curvilinear streets have long, uninterrupted blocks with houses on large, evenly spaced lots. Although developed as a commuter suburb, there are very few houses that contain either integrated garages or detached garages.

## Historic District Evaluation

Forest Heights represents several Prince George's County Heritage Themes including suburban growth and residential architectural styles. In two separate determinations in 2000, the Maryland Historical Trust and the National Park Service determined that Forest Heights is not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Further, the community is not recommended eligible for listing as a Prince George's County historic district. Although originally marketed as a "decidedly different development," Forest Heights is one of many mid-twentieth-century suburbs of Washington, D.C. that developed in response to the great housing needs of returning veterans and federal workers.<sup>15</sup> Further, there are better, more cohesive, and more illustrative examples of mid-twentieth century neighborhoods in Prince George's County such as Avondale, Hillcrest Heights, and District Heights. Because of the construction of Indian Head Highway and other road improvements, the original plan of Forest Heights as envisioned by the Washington Heights Corporation was not realized. Construction of the road altered much of the original plat of Section 1 of Forest Heights. Later, Indian Head Highway was enlarged from four lanes to six lanes, compromising the inner edges of the subdivision. Further, many of the houses within Forest Heights have been altered by the application of modern replacement materials and additions, which detracts from the integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and feeling. Forest Heights has retained its integrity of location, setting, and association, but has lost its integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and feeling.

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Forest Heights town, Maryland Fact Sheet," accessed 5 January 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Display Ad, *The Washington Post*, 12 October 1941, p. R6.

## Individual Designation

Forest Heights contains two Lustron houses—5618 Woodland Drive and 5819 Black Hawk Drive. After the passage of the Veterans Emergency Housing Act in 1947, the federal government provided direct funding for two firms to produce prefabricated steel housing, one being the Lustron Corporation. The Lustron Corporation soon became the “most heavily capitalized and industrialized of the 280 firms involved in the production of prefabricated houses in 1947.”<sup>16</sup>

The Lustron Corporation was founded by industrialist Carl Strandlund. Born in Sweden, Strandlund immigrated to the United States when he was a child and later studied engineering. By the 1930s, he was vice president of the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Product Company, a major producer of enameled steel panels used in a wide range of products including enameled steel gas stations. The need for housing superseded the need for gas stations, and in 1946, Strandlund presented plans to construct houses of steel enameled panels. An affiliate company, Porcelain Products Company, was to produce the houses, and the name was soon changed to the Lustron Corporation. The name Lustron originated from Lusterite, a product that Chicago Vitreous manufactured and Porcelain Products Company applied to iron.<sup>17</sup>

Strandlund hired the Chicago architectural firm of Blass and Beckman, headed by Ray Blass and Morris Beckman, the former chief draftsman at Skidmore Owings and Merrill, to design the Lustron houses. Strandlund was initially granted a Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan of 15.5 million dollars and use of the Curtiss-Wright aircraft plant to manufacture the houses. Constructed entirely of steel, the first model included 3,000 parts that were manufactured on an assembly line similar to automobiles. The houses were shipped individually on trailer trucks, arriving on the site packed in reverse order for convenience. The Lustron Corporation offered three basic models, all of which came in two or three bedroom variants. Originally, the house panels came in several colors such as turquoise, salmon, pink, which the company later replaced with surf blue, dove gray, desert tan, and maize yellow.<sup>18</sup>

The Lustron Corporation went in to receivership in 1950, and in all, the company produced approximately 2,800 houses. Several major problems plagued the corporation, including the reluctance of lending institutions to finance mortgages for what was considered a non-traditional structure. In addition, a number of cities’ building codes did not permit steel structures. While initially the cost of the houses was competitive, poorly trained assemblers and rising steel costs caused the cost of Lustron houses to be more than traditional houses. Overall, Lustron’s failure was a result of “poor timing, rising costs, inflexible codes and regulations, poor distribution network, and a lack of control over local housing markets.”<sup>19</sup>

As noted by Cynthia Liccese-Torres and Kim A. O’Connell, the few remaining Lustrons are “significant not just as an American housing experiment and architectural icon, but as an unprecedented preservation challenge.”<sup>20</sup> The house at 5618 Woodland Drive appears to be a Westchester Model 02. The house, which has been painted, retains the original windows, a feature often altered on Lustron Houses. The Lustron House at 5819 Black Hawk Drive appears to be two of the Westchester models that were attached to make a larger dwelling. Although the house has replacement windows, its integrity of materials is not

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<sup>16</sup> Patricia Garbe Morillo, *Lustrons in New Jersey*, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (2000), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Morillo, *Lustrons in New Jersey*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Eric N. Dobson, “Lustron Homes in Arlington County, Virginia,” (1992), 5.

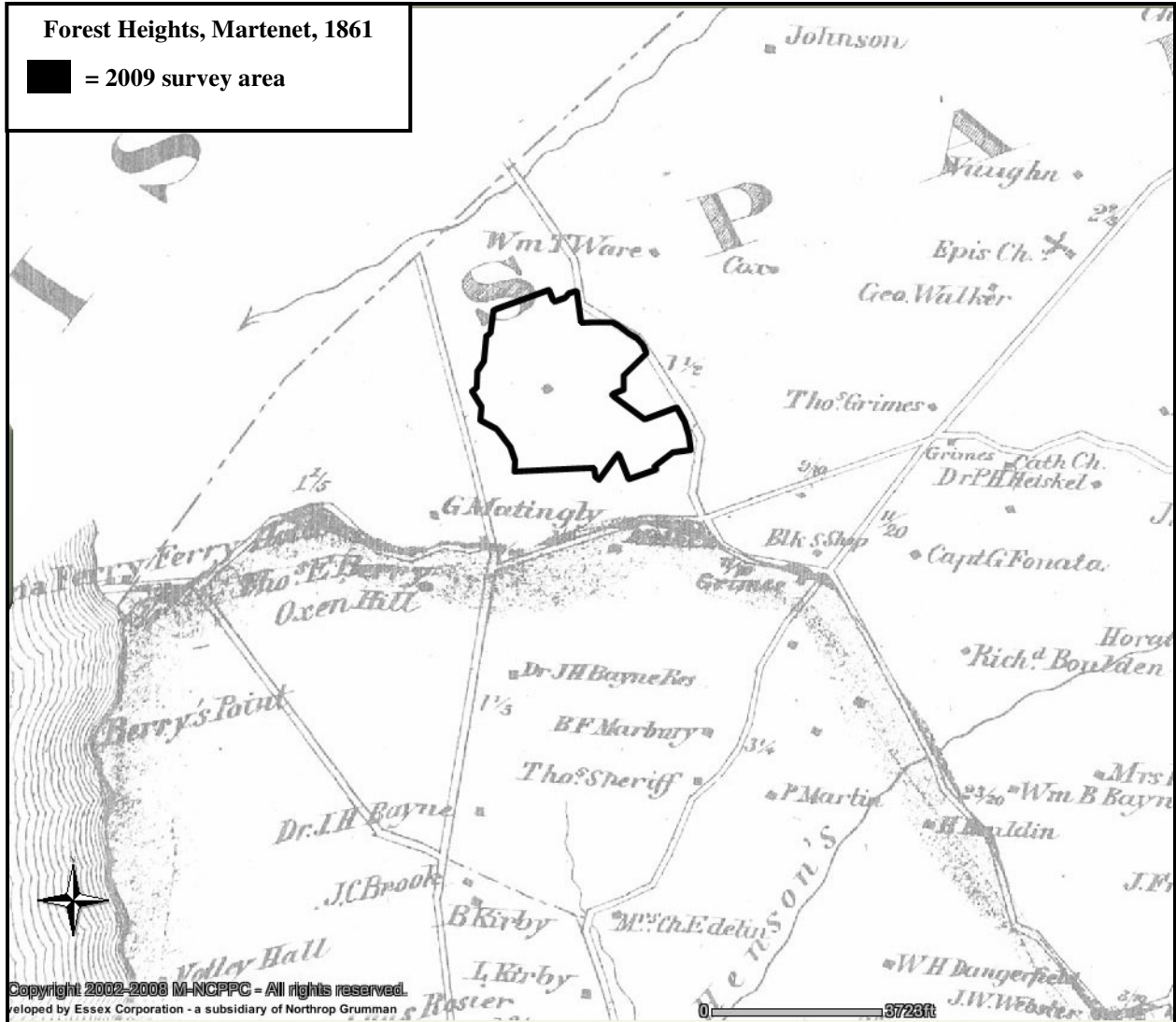
<sup>19</sup> Tom Wolfe and Leonard Garfield, “‘A New Standard for Living’: the Lustron House, 1946-1950,” in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III*, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Cynthia Liccese-Torres and Kim A. O’Connell, “The Illustrious Lustron: A Guide for the Disassembly and Preservation of America’s Modern Metal Marvel” (Arlington, Virginia: Arlington County, 2007), 3.

fully compromised. An intensive-level survey should be completed on both houses and their eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and as Prince George's County historic sites evaluated. Further, a National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form should be considered for the Lustron houses in Prince George's County. There are at least six known Lustron houses in the county.

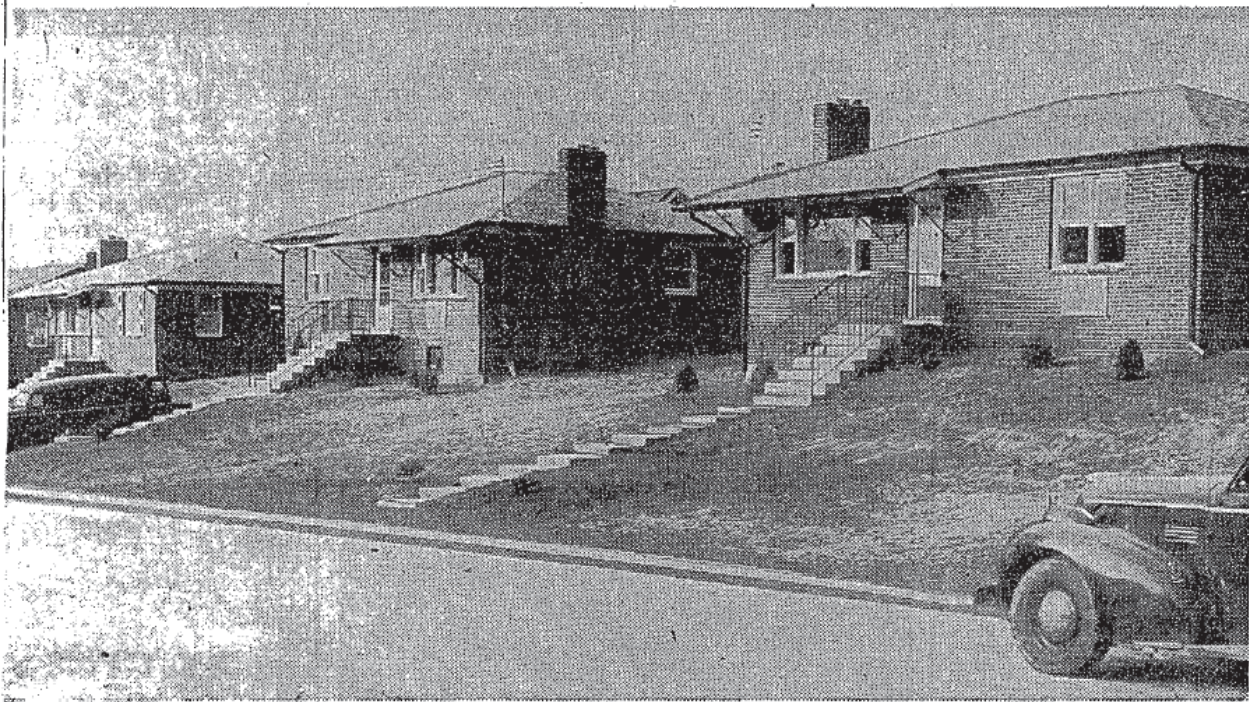
Prepared by EHT Tracerics, Inc.  
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### *A Model Home Has Burgeoned Into a Street Scene*

*Builder William P. Martin has boasted that house hunting ends when you see his "Home of '54" and that's just what has happened to a record number of visitors at his Forest Heights, Md., dwellings. Sales of the \$15,750 to \$17,000 homes has been so phenomenal the builder has*

*put extra men to work to speed completion of the dwellings. The brick ramblers contain a living room with fireplace, equipped kitchen with birch cabinets, three bedrooms, full basement and tile bath.*

"FHA Issues Modernization Regulations," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 3 October 1954, R6.



Looking east, 5618 Woodland Drive (Lustron house) (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking west, 5819 Black Hawk Drive (Lustron house) (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking southeast, 5712-5714-5716 Arapahoe Drive (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking north, 608-610 Pitt Lane (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking south, 5906-5908-5910 Terrell Avenue (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking northwest, 5907-5905-5903 Sumner Lane (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking east, 800-802-804-806 Quade Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking south, Flintstone Elementary School, 800 Comanche Drive (*EHT Traceries, 2009*)



Looking northwest, 5701-5611-5609 Ottawa Street (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking northwest, 5507-5505-5503-5501 Alden Way (*EHT Tracerics, 2009*)



Looking southeast, 134-132-130 Rolph Drive (*EHT Traceries, 2009*)



Looking southeast, 100 block of Onondaga Drive (*EHT Traceries, 2009*)



Looking east, 107-105 Rolph Drive (*EHT Traceries*, 2009)



Looking south, 5708- 5706-5704 Black Hawk Drive (*EHT Traceries, 2009*)



Looking north, 5609-5607-5605 Woodland Drive (*EHT Tracerics, 2009*)



Looking north, 5431-5425 Indian Head Highway (*EHT Traceries, 2009*)