

# A History of the Ridgefield Neighborhood

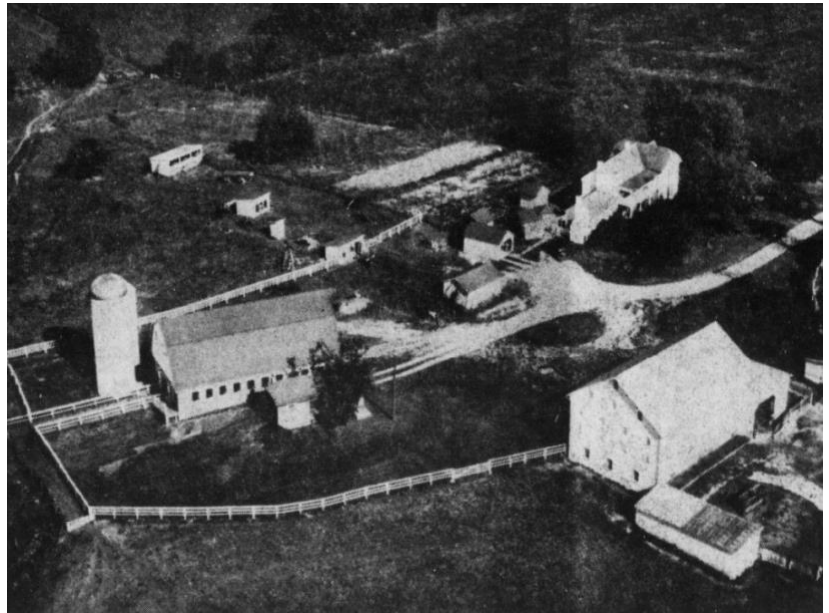
by David Danoff

November 2023

Have you ever wondered what was here before the neighborhood was here? Who owned the land? How did the neighborhood take its current shape? Using Montgomery County land records, subdivision plats, historic maps, census records, newspaper stories, and other sources, I have been able to learn many details I had often wondered about. Read on to learn more.

## Part 1: The Dairy Farm

The area that became our Ridgefield neighborhood was once a farm owned by Albert J. Cissel (1892-1973) and his wife, Lula Mae (1897-1976). They lived there with their two boys, Albert Jr. and Howard Cissel. The farmhouse, barns, and several other structures were located on what is now 15908, 15904, and 15900 Green Meadow Road. The entrance drive to the farmhouse led from Darnestown Road through what is now the playground next to the Fairhaven United Methodist Church and 12904 Meadow View Drive. In 1940, the farm was valued at \$15,000 (the equivalent of about \$300,000 today).



In 1955, the *Montgomery County Sentinel* ran a weekly contest for readers to identify local farms from aerial photos. The Cissel farm was featured on March 3, 1955. (See above. The farmhouse is in the upper right corner.) The following week, the *Sentinel* revealed the winner: "Paul R. Ward, nephew of Albert J. Cissel, was the first to call in with the correct identification of the farm as that of his uncle. A few moments later, Mr. Cissel himself called to complete the identification. He told the *Sentinel* that the farm has been in his family since 1898 and that it currently is a dairy farm with 90 head of cattle."

### **\$15,000 Fire Razes Barn at Darnestown**

An estimated \$15,000 to \$20,000 damage was caused last night when fire destroyed a bank-barn on the farm of Albert J. Cissel on Route 28, near Darnestown, Md.

The barn, county police reported, contained oats, corn and farm machinery and two calves. The estimate was made by Mr. Cissel.

However, the year 1955 would not end well for the Cissels. On the night of June 22, a fire destroyed one of their barns, causing more than \$15,000 in damage. The fire was apparently set intentionally by a teenage farmhand.

In October, Albert advertised a public auction of his cows and milking equipment, stating that he was discontinuing his dairy business.

Pepco acquired the right-of-way for their transmission line corridor in 1958, cutting a 20-acre swath through the Cissels' land. The Cissels sold their remaining land to a developer in 1963, and the first houses were built in 1966.

The Cissels died in the 1970s and are buried in the cemetery behind the Darnestown Presbyterian Church, where they were active congregants for many years.



# PUBLIC SALE

OF  
**HOLSTEIN CATTLE & EQUIPMENT**  
 CONDUCTED BY  
**NULL AND NULL**  
 AUCTIONEERS

Discontinuing the dairy business I the undersigned will sell on premises where I have resided for many years located 2 miles east of Darnestown and 1 mile west of Quince Orchard (Route 28) in Montgomery County, Maryland on  
**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1955**  
 BEGINNING AT 11:30 O'CLOCK A. M.  
 THE FOLLOWING TO-WIT:

**31 — HOLSTEIN DAIRY CATTLE — 31**

30 young Holstein milch cows, some will be fresh by sale day, some close springers, balance in full flow of milk; 1 pure bred Holstein bull. This herd is T. B. and Bangs accredited, and all animals were calfhood vaccinated for Bangs. Milk goes on Washington market.

**DAIRY EQUIPMENT**

3 DeLaval milking units with one extra pail, 12 can Wilson ice box, 14 can sterilizer, 1 large milk cooler, 30 Washington type milk cans, other miscellaneous dairy equipment, 1 8-ft. McCormick Deering grain binder.

NOTICE—Any of the above property may be inspected at your convenience.

TERMS OF SALE—CASH with clerk on sale day and no property removed until paid for.

Lunch and Refreshments served on Premises

**ALBERT J. CISSEL, Owner**

## ***Part 2: The Nineteenth Century and Before***

Old deeds for properties in and around our neighborhood often describe them as parts of “Mitchell’s Range” and/or “Trouble Ended.” Those were apparently the names given to original land grants apportioned in the 18th century. The two names are used somewhat interchangeably, and it’s not clear if they describe adjoining areas or the same area. “Mitchell’s Range” is still found on some maps and real estate websites to this day.

In the late 18th century, the land was apparently part of a larger holding owned by Edward Jones (1737-1790), a Revolutionary War veteran whose family had immigrated from Scotland. It was sold by his heirs in 1829 to a woman named Eleanor Buxton, who was residing on the property already. The earliest section of the farmhouse may have been constructed around this time—a 30 by 17 foot log cabin with chimneys at either end, a single large room on the main level, and two small bedrooms in a loft upstairs. The land seems to have been heavily forested at this time, with timber harvesting serving as a main source of income.

Eleanor Buxton sold the property to a woman named Rebecca Hurley in 1836, and after Rebecca’s death in 1839 the land was inherited jointly by her grandchildren, Isaiah Soper (1829-1921) and Eliza (1833-1891), who married Samuel Higgins (1819-1907), a widower with several young children, when she was about 22.

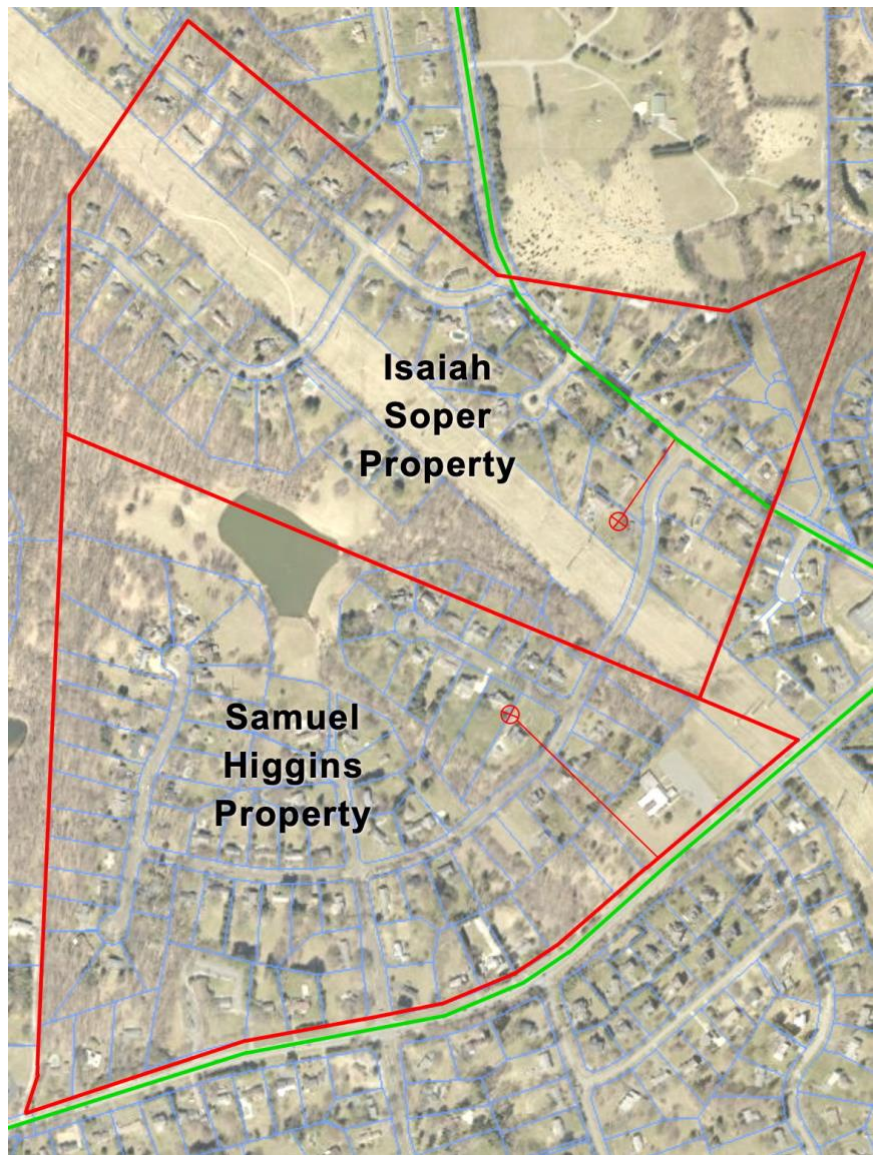


Being a few years older than his sister, Isaiah apparently took possession of the land first and was living there with his wife and children in the early 1850s. In 1856, Eliza and Samuel filed a lawsuit against Isaiah and his wife, citing the terms of their grandmother's will, which had called for an equal division of her property. The court ruled that Isaiah and his family should receive the slightly smaller northern section, while Samuel and Eliza received the southern portion and the farmhouse.

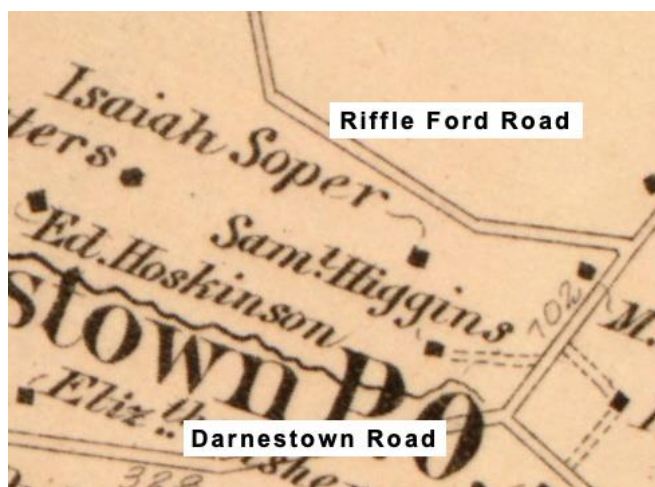
In the 20th century the land would be used primarily as a dairy farm, but in the 19th century it seems to have had more varied uses. A document from 1853 lists among Isaiah Soper's personal property: one horse, a dozen pigs, four sheep, two calves, plus crops of corn, wheat, rye, oats, grass, and potatoes. According to a document prepared by the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties in the 1970s, there was also a small family graveyard located somewhere along the dividing line between the Soper and Higgins sections.

Isaiah Soper and his wife lived on their portion of the land for more than 60 years, farming and raising six children. Their house seems to have been in the vicinity of 12809 Meadow View Drive.

Isaiah's wife died in 1916, and in 1919 he finally sold his land to Wilson R. Tschiffely (the 29-year-old grandson of Frederick A. Tschiffely, owner of the estate that is now the Kentlands). The deed specified that "Isaiah Soper and his unmarried daughter, Mary Ellen Soper, may continue to reside in the dwelling house upon the land hereby conveyed and to occupy the garden as now used, so long as the said Isaiah Soper may live."



*Approximate boundaries of Soper and Higgins properties, late 19th century, with their farmhouses and entrance drives also identified. Riffle Ford Road and Darnestown Road are traced in green. Note that a triangular section of land to the north of Riffle Ford was originally part of Isaiah Soper's farm, before being sold for development in the 1920s. Thus it never became part of the Ridgefield neighborhood.*



1879 map showing the area of Riffle Ford Road and Darnestown Road. In records from the 1870s, Riffle Ford is described as "the new cut road." The crossing at Seneca Creek is sometimes called "Ripple Ford."

1874, at age 55. (He was run over by a reaping machine when his horses became frightened and knocked him to the ground.) In 1885, his wife appears to have suffered a serious illness. (The *Sentinel* reported: "Mrs. Samuel Higgins is threatened with paralysis.") In 1888, Samuel and Eliza took out a mortgage for \$2,000 from Josiah W. Jones (described in his 1896 obituary as "one of the wealthiest residents of the county, and noted for his charitable disposition"). The terms of the mortgage stipulated that if payment was not made within five years, their property could be seized and auctioned off.

And this is exactly what happened. In 1897, Josiah W. Jones, Jr. (who may have had a less "charitable disposition" than his recently departed father) auctioned the property to the highest bidder. The buyer was a member of the Gassaway family, who lived to the north in the large house at 17200 Riffle Ford Road.

The 78-year-old Samuel Higgins went to live with his son George, who had purchased property nearby and owned a house that still exists at 13405 Pulver Place, in the north of the Bondbrook neighborhood. (Eliza had died in the interim.)

The Higgins property passed through several hands before ending up with the Cissel family in 1898. Then in 1945 Albert Cissel purchased the former Isaiah Soper property from Wilson R. Tschiffely, reuniting the two farms and creating the complete outline of what would become our neighborhood.

But by the 1920 census, the 90-year-old Isaiah and his daughter were living in a rented property on Black Rock Mill Road. Isaiah died in 1921. He and his wife were buried in the Pleasant Hills Cemetery, which is today just a small plot of undeveloped land in one corner of the Spring Meadows neighborhood. The church that stood there and all the grave markers were apparently demolished during the 1950s.

Meanwhile, Samuel and Eliza Higgins did not hold onto their portion of the land quite as long as her brother. After farming for about 30 years, raising Samuel's older children and a daughter of their own, Samuel and Eliza may have begun to struggle financially as well as personally.

According to the *Montgomery County Sentinel*, Samuel lost his leg in a farming accident in

**FARM FOR SALE.**

I am desirous of selling my farm near Darnestown. This desirable place contains 120 acres of land, is divided into five fields, all which have been limed, two of the fields having been limed twice. There is a stream of running water in each field, and two fine young orchards, in full bearing, on the place.

For further information call on  
**SAMUEL HIGGINS,**  
 Darnestown, Montgomery county, Md.  
 feb 21-19

Samuel Higgins ran this notice repeatedly in the *Montgomery County Sentinel* during 1896 and 1897, right up until his land was seized and auctioned off.



Part 3: Black History in Our Area

The next part of the story may be uncomfortable to read, but it’s necessary to be honest about the past. Both Isaiah Soper, who in the second half of the 19th century farmed the northern portion of the land that is now our Ridgefield neighborhood, and his brother-in-law Samuel Higgins, who farmed the southern portion, were enslavers.

An 1853 property record for Soper lists five enslaved persons (see chart). After each name, with cruel insistence, the document adds: “A slave for life.” An 1858 notice in the *Montgomery County Sentinel* announces the seizure and sale (at the door of the Rockville courthouse) of an enslaved 29-year-old named George to pay for Soper’s outstanding debts. This is probably the same George from the 1853 record.

Enslaved by Soper (1853)	Enslaved by Higgins (1856)
George, 24	Lucy, 45
Horace, 21	George, 26
Mary, 9	Matilda, 23
Annie, 5	Lloyd, 15
Isaac, 4	Douglas, 5
	Airy, 3
	Lucinda, 6 months
	Flora, 3 months

As for Higgins, he appears in both the 1850 and 1860 U.S. census slave schedules (with three and then eight enslaved persons, respectively; their names are not given). An 1856 property record for Higgins names eight enslaved persons (see chart). Higgins is also listed in the post-Civil War documentation gathered by the state of Maryland in hopes of receiving federal reimbursement for emancipated slaves. He lays claim to a 15-year-old named Douglas Mason (probably the same Douglas from the 1856 record), as well as a woman named Matilda Green and six of her children, ranging in age from 13 to 2. This is probably the same Matilda from the 1856 record—and her history with the family appears to go back much further.



Gary Green (1832-1900) and Lethe Matilda Green (1833-1918)

In the 1839 will of Rebecca Hurley, who was the grandmother of Isaiah Soper and Eliza Higgins, she divides the majority of her property evenly between them (including the land that would become our neighborhood). But she singles out one enslaved girl, “Lethe Matilda,” whom she specifically bequeaths to Eliza. Matilda and Eliza seem to have been almost exactly the same age.

Matilda would remain enslaved by Eliza, and then by Eliza’s husband Samuel Higgins, on the same farm where she had once been enslaved by Rebecca Hurley. Eventually she would marry and begin a family with Gary Green,

who was enslaved by a relative of Samuel Higgins. After emancipation they would continue to live in the area, raising nearly a dozen children. They would become part of a close-knit local black community, and Matilda would live to be nearly 85—but we’re getting ahead of the story.

Emancipation and reconstruction were slow to result in material improvement for the area’s black residents. In the years after the Civil War, there were many black families living in the Darnestown area, but few black landowners. For instance, the 1880 census shows that in the

vicinity of Riffle Ford Road and Darnestown Road approximately 46% of the population was white and 54% was black. But white men made up 94% of those identified as farm owners, while the majority of blacks lived in rented properties and worked as farm laborers, cooks, or servants.

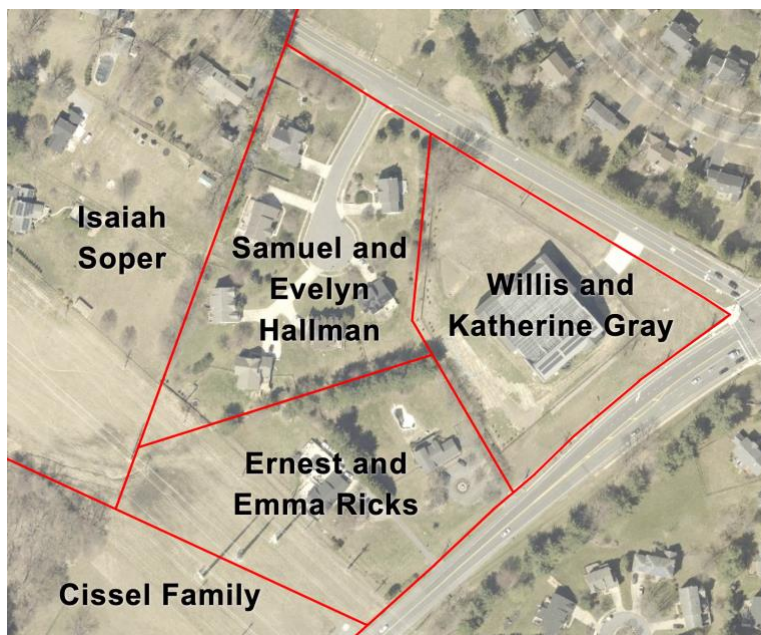
However, there were black families who acquired property of their own, including two examples just outside the boundaries of our neighborhood.

The 4-acre plot of land at the corner of Riffle Ford Road and Darnestown Road, where the Pepco substation now sits, was purchased in 1869 by a black man named Major Gray. He paid \$450 to William Rudolph Beall, who owned the estate on the south side of Darnestown Road. Major Gray and his wife, Ann, were born in the 1820s. They both seem to have passed away prior to 1900, at which point the census shows their son Willis Gray living on the land with his family. Willis remained there until 1929—six decades after his father had purchased the property in the years immediately following the Civil War.

In an L-shaped area surrounding the Gray property, another black family lived for many decades. James and Martha Ricks were born around 1830 and had at least 7 children. Martha purchased the property adjacent to Major Gray in 1882. In 1892, she divided this property between her sons John and Ernest, whose wife Emma was a daughter of Gary and Matilda Green. Samuel Higgins (who was 5 years away from defaulting on his mortgage and being evicted from his own property) signed the deed as Justice of the Peace.



*Ernest Ricks (1859-1946) and Emma Green Ricks (1867-1921)*



*Division of land near Riffle Ford Road and Darnestown Road, c. 1918*

In 1918, the section along Riffle Ford Road was conveyed to one of Ernest and Emma's daughters, Evelyn, and her husband, Samuel Hallman. Samuel and Evelyn Hallman had at least 12 children. One of their sons, Melvin, purchased the section of land along Darnestown Road in 1965 from other relatives who had inherited it. Melvin sold this land in 1978 to create the two houses on Darnestown Road.

Finally, in 1995 the Hallman heirs sold their other parcel of land on Riffle Ford Road to a developer. It had been in the Ricks/Hallman family for 113 years. The street that accesses their land today is called Hallman Court.

Gary and Matilda Green, Ernest and Emma Ricks, Samuel and Evelyn Hallman, Melvin Hallman, and many other family members are all buried behind the Pleasant View Methodist Episcopal Church on Darnestown Road near the Lakelands. The Pleasant View church was built in 1888 to serve the area's black residents, on land originally purchased in 1868 by former slaves. The church and its adjacent school building (placed on the site in 1902 to serve local black students) were in poor condition until a much-needed renovation began earlier this year.



*Pleasant View ME Church, 1975*

In 1968, soon after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., members of the Pleasant View church voted to merge with two local white churches: McDonald Chapel (originally located at the intersection of Darnestown Road and Quince Orchard Road) and Hunting Hill (originally located at the intersection of Darnestown Road and Key West Avenue). The new integrated congregation became Fairhaven United Methodist Church, and they constructed their new building alongside our neighborhood, on land that had once been part of the Higgins farm.

A recent documentary about the merger of the churches and the general history of the Quince Orchard community, entitled "Finding Fellowship," is available on PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/video/finding-fellowship-3bz18Q/>. The family that created this documentary is descended from Gary and Matilda Green, and also related to the Hallmans. More information about Pleasant View and the efforts to preserve it can be found at: <https://www.pleasantviewsite.org/>.

#### ***Part 4: Development of the Neighborhood***

In October 1963, Albert Cissel and his wife, Lula Mae, sold their dairy farm to Raymond and Thelma Backus, a pair of Bethesda-based developers. The total area was 173.5 acres. Pepco had claimed 20 acres in 1958 for their power line right-of-way, and in 1961 Albert Cissel had transferred about 4 acres to his younger son, Howard Cissel, for a home on Darnestown Road. Howard Cissel and his family would live in that home until 1987, when they sold the property to the Gaithersburg Chinese Alliance Church.

Raymond and Thelma Backus had already purchased and begun to develop the land south of Darnestown Road ("Ancient Oak Estates") beginning in 1962. They started laying out plots in Ridgefield in early 1965. In August 1965, they sold these initial plots plus 120 acres of remaining undeveloped land to Brown, Schram Construction Company.






Brown, Schram conveyed three lots along Darnestown Road in November 1965 for the creation of what became the Fairhaven United Methodist Church, followed by one additional adjoining lot in 1967, which was where the access road to the Cissel farmhouse had run. The access road was no longer needed at that point since the neighborhood streets had been created and the new residents of the farmhouse could use Meadow View Drive.

Brown, Schram built most of the houses in the neighborhood between 1966 and 1975. In an advertising brochure, they described the new community as:

*Set among the hills, with a view of Sugar Loaf Mountain. For country living with in-town convenience, just minutes from Rockville. A perfect merger of the graciousness of yesteryear with the streamlined efficiency of today.*

RCI was created in 1971. The first general meeting was held at Darnestown Elementary School on September 16, 1971. At that meeting, the bylaws were adopted and it was resolved that only residents and their guests would be permitted to use the park land. The first dues assessment was for \$50 (equivalent to about \$375 today).

In 1975, 13210 Colton Lane was added to our neighborhood. This property was not part of the Cissel farm but was developed as part of the Bondbrook neighborhood. Because of its location at the far northern tip of the development, with a stream separating it from the rest of Bondbrook, it was apparently attached to Colton Lane for convenience.



**THE BRADFORD**

The handsome exterior of The Bradford, with its look of Colonial gentility, houses a modern plan for family living.

Hospitality is the keynote here, as you enter the inviting foyer with its natural slate floor. When guests arrive, their wraps are easily hung in the large closet off the foyer . . . and feminine guests may make use of the attractive powder room to make themselves lovelier before entering the large formal living room. There's a spacious dining room for sit-down dinners where guests can enjoy delicious food, easily prepared in the adjoining work-designed kitchen. Cozy family gatherings and informal parties will undoubtedly center around the large fireplace in the wood-paneled family room.

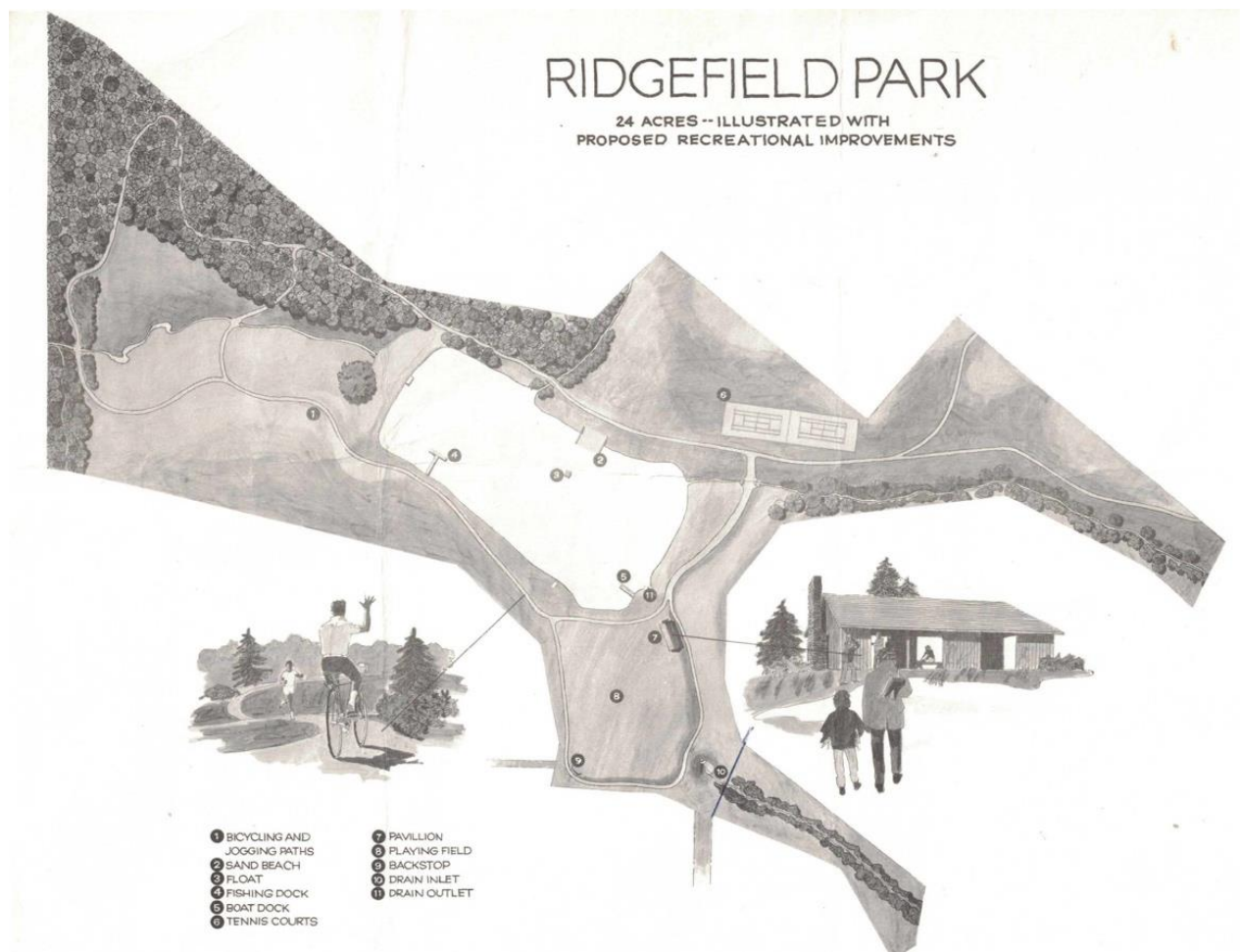
For the special convenience of the Lady of the House, the laundry opens off the kitchen . . . and just beyond the laundry is a spacious, convenient storage alcove in the completely finished 2-car garage.

An extra large Master Suite dominates the second floor of The Bradford, with 3 other bedrooms for children and guests. Marble topped vanities add luxury to both second floor baths, and to the powder room off the first floor foyer.

*One of the models advertised in a 1967 brochure.*

In 1976, the properties at the tip of Brandon Way Road were added to our neighborhood when Montecrest Lane was being created, most likely for the same reason.





*A brochure from 1967 shows the original plan for "Ridgefield Park," containing not just a lake but a sand beach, two docks, tennis courts, a covered pavilion, paved paths, and a landscaped playing field.*

It's interesting to note, based on aerial photos and maps from the mid-20th century, that the central part of the neighborhood was almost entirely devoid of trees when the area was being farmed. There were fringes of tree cover along the two creeks, and there were thicker forests covering what became the northern part of Colton Lane and Brandon Way and the southern part of White Rock. (These are areas where some large, 100-150 year old trees still remain.) But everything else was open pasture. Thus, virtually every tree in the central portion of the neighborhood must have been planted in the 1960s or later.

The Cissel farmhouse was purchased by Russell and Madelene Pipkin in 1964. They lived there for 37 years and raised three children. On their 4.5 acre plot, in addition to the 19th century farmhouse, there was also a barn, silo, and other outbuildings from the early 20th century. The Pipkins both died in 2001, and their daughter Veronica sold the land to a developer in 2002.

The Pipkin family had originally hoped to build as many as eight houses on the land. This was reduced to a proposal for four houses (three facing Green Meadow and one facing Meadow View), but neighbors from Green Meadow and other parts of the neighborhood, plus RCI and the Darnestown Civic Association, all wrote letters objecting to the overdevelopment of the property. The neighbors were concerned there would be too many houses, too close together,

and they would be much larger than the surrounding homes. Veronica Pipkin-Pruitt complained to the planning board that her family was being treated unfairly:

*I understand that my neighbors feel threatened by change, but the changes that are proposed will add to the value, beauty, and neighborly feeling of Ridgefield.... The surrounding property values will be improved by the beautiful, modern housing proposed, certainly more so than the existing dilapidated house, barn, and outbuildings. The modern trend towards larger homes is not something that my parents or I can control, and I don't feel that what is left of my family should be financially penalized for this normal, common trend.*



*Two pictures of the former Cissel farmhouse, c. 1975. The small section visible at left was the earliest part – a 30 x 17 foot log cabin with two chimneys, constructed around 1829. The larger two-story section was constructed around 1900.*

In the end, the Montgomery County Planning Board approved the site for three houses. The farmhouse and other remaining structures were demolished and replaced with the houses at 15900, 15904, and 15908 Green Meadow Road.

A few long-time residents of the neighborhood probably remember what was there before. For the rest of us, it exists only in old pictures, maps, and documents, through which we can try to imagine the lives of those who once lived on the land we now call home.



## **Resources**

**MDLANDREC.NET** (<https://mdlandrec.net/main>) – Maryland land records, both historic and modern. Free account required.

**Library of Congress: Chronicling America** (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>) – Scanned copies of many newspapers, including the Montgomery County Sentinel (1855-1963).

**Montgomery County GIS Maps** (<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/gis/app/index.html>) – A variety of interactive maps, containing property information and many other things, including aerial views from 1951-2019.

**Medusa: Maryland Cultural Resource Information System** (<https://apps.mht.maryland.gov/Medusa>) – Interactive map showing historic sites, with links to reports from the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties.

**Ancestry.com** (<https://www.ancestry.com>) – Census records, as well as immigration and naturalization records, city directories, birth, death, and marriage records, yearbooks, and many other things. Paid account required.

**Find a Grave** (<https://www.findagrave.com>) – Burial records, sometimes with pictures of tombstones.

**Old Maps Online** ([https://www.oldmapsonline.org/en/Montgomery\\_County%2C\\_Maryland](https://www.oldmapsonline.org/en/Montgomery_County%2C_Maryland)) – Scanned copies of many old maps.