



THE REAWAKENING OF FOREST GLEN

AN OLD SCHOOL ENJOYS NEW LIFE

Just minutes from cranky Georgia Avenue traffic and within earshot of the Capital Beltway's constant rush of cars, National Park Seminary is like a lost Neverland.

A Japanese pagoda has been lovingly restored to its original burgundy with green and black trim, yet most of the quirky mix of buildings on the 26-acre campus of a former girls' finishing school aren't faring so well. The Dutch windmill has long since lost its blades, the roof is mossy, and the blue-gray paint is chipped.

Most of the English castle's windows are boarded up, and a family of turkey vultures has taken up residence inside. Senior House—once a grand girls' dorm with a wide front porch and second-story balcony—is literally leaning over, ready to fall and take surrounding buildings with it.

"This is really a critical time," says Bonnie Rosenthal, a longtime Silver Spring resident and one of many who have worked for the past several years to try to save the site from being demolished or rotting away. "If these buildings are not saved now, we're going to lose more and more."

An ambitious renovation and construction plan slated to begin this summer will turn the deteriorating campus into one of Montgomery County's liveliest neighborhoods, predict its developers. And those who care for the property are hopeful, glad that finally someone is investing in keeping a small part of the Forest Glen history alive.

Long before cars clogged Montgomery County streets, a group of Washington businessmen built Ye Forest Inne in 1887. Convenient to a new railroad station and offering a respite from the area's heat and humidity (because of a higher elevation than the city), the summer hotel was designed to lure Washingtonians to the glen and spark their interest in nearby wooded lots where they could build their own suburban homes. Several nearby developments prospered, but even as Forest Glen's founders opened their hotel year-round and added a casino, the venture failed to turn a profit.

Enter John and Vesta Cassedy of Norfolk, Va., who, in 1893, leased the hotel and grounds from the Forest Glen Improvement Company and turned the site into a girls' school. At the time, "seminary" was a generic word for a private school, usually for one gender. The Cassedys called their school National Park Seminary because of its proximity to the newly established Rock Creek Park, and the first class of 48 students enrolled in September 1894.

The Cassedys eventually bought the property and gradually added buildings to the site, including a science and art building, a stable removed from the main campus (so girls wouldn't



have to smell the horses), and a gymnasium. A charming little chapel built in 1898 sits at the corner of the campus; its stained glass windows are protected by Plexiglas, even though one of the largest windows has since been stolen.

As the school's owners oversaw construction of a library, a theater, a new residence for themselves, and more dormitories for the increasing enrollment at the school, each girl was required to join a sorority, the groups that gave the grounds much of the appeal that remains today.

The first sorority meeting building was Alpha Epsilon Pi's American-style bungalow, built in 1896. The small houses sprouted quickly, with the Dutch windmill and Swiss chalet opening in 1899, Colonial House and the Spanish mission house in 1903, the English Garden

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Castle in 1904, and the landmark Japanese pagoda in 1905.

"It's such a unique site," said Richard Schaffer, 38, a self-proclaimed girls' school junkie who, in 1988, co-founded the advocacy group Save Our Seminary. "Think about it. In your whole life, have you ever seen anything like it?"

Most of the buildings, however, barely resemble their original designs. Time, neglect, and water damage all have taken their toll, not to mention the overgrowth of vines on so many walls, trees that have not been pruned in decades, and even plants sprouting on some of the buildings' roofs. The smell of wood rot is strong along many of the campus' pathways.

School owner James Ament, who took over in 1916, designed covered walkways and corridors to connect every building so students would be protected from the elements. He added many ornate flourishes, such as the Court of the Maidens, a covered brick walkway linking the main building to the chapel and Aloha House. Instead of columns, 10 maidens in flowing robes hold the walkway's roof aloft. He believed his students would prosper from an education that brought the world to them, and added an additional 150-odd acres to the school grounds by purchasing a nearby farm.

Ament brought a four-tiered marble fountain from the inner court of an Italian mansion and placed it in the front of the building called Main. The top tier of the fountain was stolen years ago; it is just one of the many statues on the site today that is chipped or missing parts. Some have been painted a school-bus yellow that is flaking off. A statue of Lady Justice—which was covered in vines for decades before neighborhood volunteers uncovered her during a late 1980s grounds clean-up—is missing her scales, the bottom half of her sword, and a big toe. All that remains of a Greek water carrier sculpture is her pedestal. Thieves took her off the site in 1996.

National Park Seminary's third owner worked to transform it from a finishing school to an accredited women's junior college, and changed the name to National Park



College in 1937. Dolores Seitz remembers the charm of the place that led her parents to send her to Forest Glen even though she had already enrolled at another school. On that hot summer day, a bellman ushered her and her mother into the parlor of the main building and offered them glasses of cold lemonade. Her mother was amazed that the entire school was carpeted.

"My mother fell in love with the school, and so did I," recalls Seitz, who attended from 1937-1939. "The area was so gorgeous, and the school was so well-kept." Seitz and her classmates danced together in the ballroom every evening, followed by a study hour, and then were allowed a 30-minute break in the tearoom for a Coke or ice cream.

"It was just a really wonderful place," says Seitz, who had traveled all over the eastern United States visiting schools. "I had never been anywhere like it."

But it was the site's proximity to Washington, not its unique style, that attracted Army officials in the early 1940s.

When the Army took over the property in 1942, using the War Powers Act and handing then-owner Roy Tasco Davis \$800,000 and the deed to a house across the street from the pagoda, "there was a lot of sadness," recalls Davis' granddaughter Nan Lowe. "The Army came in and said, 'Thank you very much. We're going to take this.'"

The orders came down in August, just as girls were arriving at the school by train with trunks full of belongings. Davis scrambled to find placement for them elsewhere, but he was stoic about his patriotic duty.

"The school went to war," Lowe says, remembering that her grandfather had sent his eldest son off to the Navy just a few months earlier. "It's what needed to be done."

National Park College became an official annex to Walter Reed Army Hospital and a place to rehabilitate soldiers, many of them amputees who had to learn such basic skills as how to board a streetcar. Wounded combat veterans could relax on a four-poster mahogany bed, play ping-pong in the grand, three-story ballroom, and swim in the indoor pool.

Mary Jo Shaver was a 21-year-old Army Lieutenant in 1952 when she found herself stationed at Forest Glen and charged with providing occupational therapy to Korean War amputees. It didn't occur to her that the place was that out of the ordinary, but she reveled in her posh room inside the Italian villa.

"It was a really nice place to live," says Shaver, who ate her meals in the historic inn's dining room and enjoyed the beauty of the forested glen outside her bedroom window.





Yet the transformation from school to military post was often an awkward fit. Officers and their families lived in the sorority houses, which were designed as intimate gathering spots rather than living quarters. All across the campus, the ornate and feminine feel of the school still clashes with some more utilitarian Army add-ons: a large bullhorn-style loud-speaker above a stained-glass panel that reads "Ye Forest Inne"; numbered metal signs nailed to stone walls; security lights; metal stairway handrails; and several cinder-block buildings constructed for office and storage space.

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As Walter Reed grew, so did the need for auxiliary office space and housing for health care staff. Therapists brought their psychiatric patients to the campus to work on restoration projects around the grounds and to add to the growing Army facility across the street, which included a commissary and post exchange. Walter Reed staff held yearly Halloween parties in the English castle, just as the school's students had years earlier. But there was little cash in the Army's tight budget to keep the historic buildings in working order.

"Over the years, we did not get the money to maintain that facility," says Col. Jeff Davies, garrison commander for Walter Reed Army Medical Center. "We didn't want the place to fall apart. We wanted it taken care of."

School alumnae and neighbors grew restless with what they saw as neglect to the property, which in 1972 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. That designation halted the Army's plan to raze the school buildings and replace them with military housing. When the Army announced plans later that year to build a huge medical waste incinerator on the site that would have served not only Walter Reed but also the National Naval Medical Center and the National Institutes of Health, public outcry stopped the construction. Meanwhile, stucco walls were crumbling and underbrush was making its quiet advance across the school's walkways and paths.

Army staff had such a fondness for the old school that some even offered to use their own

money to restore the buildings. Occupational therapists took their pediatric patients into the English castle for treatment. And as the buildings continued to decay, local preservationists and neighbors who had grown up loving the site formed Save Our Seminary, a small group that leads both tours and the efforts to preserve National Park as it once was.

"If I was a multi-millionaire, I would reopen National Park Seminary," says Schaffer, who, with Chevy Chase journalist Susanne Williams, founded SOS in 1988. "There's so much that went on there, it just blows my mind. It's amazing that you could lose such a place."

Following a 1993 fire that took down one of the school's grandest structures—the Odeon theater that had been built in 1901 and was the site of graduation ceremonies—the group and the National Trust for Historic Preservation accused the Army of demolition by neglect and took the agency to court. A judge eventually ruled the Army had been negligent in maintaining the property prior to 1992, but had done its best with repairs since then. Pending an appeal, Army officials tried

to work out an agreement with local preservationists and launched one of countless feasibility studies designed to figure out how best to use the site while preserving its historic value.

That's when Walter Reed officials agreed to let SOS restore the pagoda's exterior, a project that ran from 1995-1998 and resulted in a hint of what the entire site might one day look like: unique, whimsical, and like nothing in the county or the entire state.

The site isn't so much charming as mesmerizing, the buildings themselves like lonely relatives waiting for visitors. Its allure crosses age and social boundaries, too. Local rock band Kiva recorded a CD in the ballroom in 1997 and used the liner notes to plead for preservation. Longtime residents who grew up watching the buildings decay hope for a rebirth. Neighbors talk about the campus being alive, as if they can feel the students walking to class along covered paths.

"This place is just absolutely magic," says Silver Spring resident Nancy McGuire, who lives about a mile away from the site and has visited a handful of times. "It's just like a fairy tale."

SOS has been surprisingly effective in raising public support for the site. With each meeting hosted by the developer, hundreds of people show up to hear about construction plans and to ask that the historical character of the school be safeguarded. Such meetings typically draw 25 people, at most.

The group leads monthly walking tours of the site from March to November (they meet at the corner of Linden Lane, "next to the Indian statue"), and has the go-ahead to continue those educational walks throughout the construction process and beyond. They hope for a storage spot for the school's archives, which now are crammed into a facility across town.

The site's rebirth is likely to raise property values around the campus, and Schaffer wonders if he made the right move by selling his 1946 "well-built cracker box" near the campus last year for \$475,000, and moving to Harper's Ferry, W.Va. An avid collector of Forest Glen memorabilia, he has every school catalog lined up on his fireplace mantel.

Schaffer easily rattles off historical anecdotes about the girls' school. The students were known as too high-class to ride streetcars. But his research found a telling of the night of the Knickerbocker Theater collapse in January 1922, when 26 seminary girls



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were riding the trolley home from the National Theater in a snowstorm. The trolley broke down, and the girls had to knock on the door of a house on Georgia Avenue and ask to spend the night.

And these well-heeled girls of the early 20th century had their wild side. Schaffer recently bought a National Park Seminary scrapbook on eBay (it cost him more than \$1,200) that shows girls sunbathing topless on the roof of the Italian villa, one of the school's larger buildings that served as a dormitory.

Seitz, known to her classmates and teachers as "Storky" after her maiden name of Storck (because she's "not the Dolores type at all"), says living at the school was like having an extended family. The yearly Thanksgiving meal stretched out all day, with girls and their visiting relatives taking breaks between courses to dance in the ballroom.

Ask her about the renovation and construction plans for the site, and Seitz says, "I'm delighted. I just hope they do it right."

That's just the intent of the two firms in charge of restoring Forest Glen to some of its original beauty. The Madison, Wisc.-based Alexander Company is handling the restoration of every historic building, and Eakin Youngentob of Arlington, Va., is in charge of new construction. All told, it will be a \$90 million housing complex when completed in 2007. The sorority houses and a few other buildings on the site will become single-family homes. Some of the larger buildings, such as the original hotel, will be turned into rental apartments and condominiums.

New townhouses designed to fit in with the historic feel of the area will pop up along Linden Lane and across the campus. Some will have the porchy, American farmhouse look. Some will be mission style. Some will hint at the Tudor influences that grace many of the school's original buildings. No cookie-cutter, fiberglass siding development here. Anyone looking to move into Forest Glen must have a taste for the unique.

"I get more calls about the pagoda, I'm telling you," says Alexander Company Development Project Manager Natalie Bock. She has a list of roughly 50 people interested in buying the pagoda when the restoration is finished. Yet she does admit the project is daunting, even to a company known for its historic preservation of seemingly non-habitable areas.



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"It's mind-boggling," she says about National Park as she steps gingerly along a cracked roadway. The firm must keep to its promise of historic restoration and is relying on millions of dollars in federal historic tax credits to help pay for the project.

Rezoning paperwork should be completed within the next few months; meanwhile, the advances of time worry everyone involved. Project architect Dave Vos fell through the floor of one of the buildings last spring, grabbing for a column and taking it down with him. On another visit to the site, a large metal plate tipped under his feet, and Vos tumbled once again.

"He fell straight down into a concrete-lined hole up to his chest, and the metal plate pinned him in the back," Rosenthal says. "He took a couple of minutes to recover and had a whopper of a scrape and bruise on his thigh from the fall. I told him he's not allowed to walk alone anymore!"

Safety concerns led to the Army's closing of most of the historic structures in 1999 (military staff were being shuffled from building to building as ceilings collapsed and floorboards gave way). In 2000, Army officials declared the property as excess, meaning if no one in the "federal family," including other military branches, wanted it, then edu-



cational and recreational uses would get priority. If those weren't financially doable, state and local governments would get dibs.

Montgomery County officials stepped in to help speed things along, but even with their help—and the backing of such high-profile supporters as Maryland Sen. Paul Sarbanes and Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan—the process has taken almost five years. And with each passing day, the buildings continue to deteriorate.

In October 2004, the General Services Administration, which acts as a sort of real estate agent for Army property, transferred title of the site to Montgomery County, which in turn transferred ownership to the developers, who are waiting for rezoning

paperwork before their hoped-for official groundbreaking in July.

"We would not be surprised if it takes longer than predicted, but we feel very confident that this is going to happen," says SOS President Fred Gervasi, a Seminary neighbor who has such a fondness for the site that he and his wife married in the school's chapel in 1986.

"We have a good developer, the county, and the federal government working hard to get this done."

The development will not only add a huge chunk of change to Montgomery County's real estate tax coffers, it will also alter the tranquility of Forest Glen dramatically. An occasional car drives by on Linden Lane, but the back side of the property is serene. A group of

teenagers walks with bowed heads toward the secluded wooded glen that developers hope to turn into a public park. Trails will lead from the development to Rock Creek Park, and one day, instructors might even lead pupils through a dance lesson in the grand ballroom.

"As beautiful as these buildings are, socially, it's a dead zone," Gervasi says about the campus across the street from his house. He predicts the development "will fill an empty space both physically and socially."

The developer plans to leave more than half the property as green space, both because of the steep slope leading down into the glen and the fact that part of the grounds is considered protected wetland. Carroll House, a transitional shelter for homeless men operated by Catholic

Charities inside the former school stable slated to be converted into condominiums, will move into its own space at the historic inn.

Montgomery County is considered one of the nation's leaders in providing for affordable housing, and requires new development to make 12 percent of its units affordable to people at 60 percent of the median county income. Forest Glen's developers agreed that 20 percent of their units will be affordable. How much the castle and pagoda will go for remains to be seen.

"It's gonna be beautiful," Col. Davies says about the renovation and new construction. "We're glad that this is falling into the hands of someone who will take care of it. It was hard for us to see that place go down."