

Kenilworth history article

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“Kenilworth: A Northeast Neighborhood by the Anacostia River”

by Joe Lapp

Located in the corner of Northeast DC east of the Anacostia River, the present-day Kenilworth neighborhood is a two-block-square “island” sandwiched between Kenilworth Avenue and Anacostia River parkland, just inside the DC line. The history of this neighborhood along the Anacostia River holds an important story for east of the river development.

In the beginning, before Kenilworth was named, it was mostly woods and marsh. Nacotchtank Indians had small family settlements nearby. They farmed the land, fished the river, and hunted deer in the woods.

When Europeans came, they drew lines across the land. Around 1700 Joshua Beall, a relative of P. G. County landowner Ninian Beall, received acreage along the eastern bank of the Anacostia that included the present-day Kenilworth.

Later Captain William Benning, by legend a river pirate, acquired land in the area and built a toll bridge across the Anacostia River. This bridge and Benning’s Road (now just “Benning”) provided an important eastern route out of the city. Captain Benning also gave his name to a horse racing track in the area. During the first decade of the 1900’s, Benning’s Track attracted spectators from all levels of DC society. Look at a map of the present-day Mayfair and Paradise communities, just south of Kenilworth, and you can still see the outline of the oval track in the shape of the streets surrounding these neighborhoods.

As the federal city grew, in the late 1800’s real estate brokers bought farmland east of the Anacostia River and created suburbs. Kenilworth was originally formed in 1895 as a white suburb by realtor Allen Mallery. He called it “Kenilworth” after a castle in England made famous by a visit from Queen Elizabeth. Mr. Mallery’s

wife loved the Sir Walter Scott novel that immortalizes the story of this visit, and thus the name.

The original suburb of Kenilworth lay along Olive and Ord Streets and along Kenilworth Avenue south of Eastern. By the early 1900's Kenilworth had a school, a church, and a few stores. The real estate company extended the street car line to Kenilworth, with service to downtown DC via Benning Road and H Street.

An active civic presence grew along with the neighborhood, and the original school building at Kenilworth Avenue and Ord Street became a community center housing a dozen organizations. Dedicated adults headed up the Kenilworth Citizen's Association, a Girl Scout troop, and a model aircraft club.

In 1879 Civil War veteran Walter B. Shaw had bought a small farm that fronted on Kenilworth Avenue and ran back to eight acres of Anacostia River marsh. A copy writer for the Treasury Department, he sent to his native Maine for a few water lilies and planted them in a pond close to the marsh. His water lily hobby grew into a business, and he made more ponds to hold the growing stock.

By the 1910's he and daughter Helen Fowler had a thriving trade in lilies, lotus, and aquarium plants, shipping tubers and cut flowers as far as Chicago. Helen took over the business and continued to expand it, traveling around the world to find exotic species. Thousands of visitors, including presidents and their wives, came to the ponds to enjoy the beauty of the flowers. In the 1930's dredging work by the Army Corps of Engineers threatened the water gardens. After much protest by Helen Fowler, in 1939 the government bought the ponds for a national park, the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens.

Around the same time that Allen Mallery subdivided Kenilworth, a smaller African American community formed close by on Douglas Street, just off of Kenilworth Avenue. Records of this subdivision are scarce, with none of the real estate clamor surrounding the Kenilworth suburb. Instead, black families quietly built houses on narrow lots.

These families were government workers, domestics, teachers, and others who could afford a bit of the American dream on a quiet street between a white suburb and Shaw's Water Gardens. Vegetable gardens occupied open space behind houses and flowers grew in tidy front yards. Neighbors shared produce and children played on the dirt street. Porches became gathering places, a space to rest in a shady spot and trade some news or play a game.

In the mid-1930's Kenilworth Avenue became a modern, paved road. The community held a celebratory dance on the new tarmac. Not so after 'improvements' in the 1950's. Needing to connect the new bridge across the Anacostia River at East Capital Street to the new Route 50 and Baltimore Parkway interchange just north of Kenilworth, city planners widened Kenilworth Avenue, razing the school, the church, and the businesses and homes that formed the backbone of the Kenilworth community.

Already feeling the effects of the era's flight of white families to outlying suburbs, this proved the end of the white suburb of Kenilworth. The houses on Olive Street quietly sold to black families eager for their own home, and the street slowly became absorbed into neighboring Deanwood. On the other side of the highway, Ord Street became part of Eastland Gardens, a middle class African American community that began in the 1920's and 1930's.

In the 1940's the Kenilworth area became home to one of the more odious DC landmarks, the city dump. Formed on a large tract of Anacostia River marsh, the city hauled its garbage there for open burning. The resulting plume of smoke became an infamous sight in the eastern part of the city, soiling laundry on the line and turning freshly white-painted houses gray. Children loved the dump, though, finding treasures in its heaps of castaway goods. Burning ended in 1968 when a young boy was killed in the dump's flames. In the 1970's the piles of refuse disappeared

under a cap of clay and became the grassy fields of Kenilworth Park.

During World War II the Lily Ponds Dwellings, temporary housing for white war workers, were built on the last remaining farmland in the Kenilworth area. After the war, the city replaced them with another government-funded housing complex. Kenilworth Courts opened in 1959. One of the first such complexes to house both blacks and whites, it was a place of promise for those who needed some time to ‘get on their feet.’

The community began to decline, however, as families who were able moved to better places, leaving those less privileged behind. By now a majority African American neighborhood with a high concentration of low-income families, in 1971 a mayoral aide called the area “hell on earth.” Kenilworth Courts, once a proud new housing development, increasingly exhibited many of the urban troubles we now think of when we say “the projects.”

One bright spot was the Fellowship Haven Church on Douglas Street. Begun in the late sixties by Pastor Elmer Lapp and his wife Fannie, this Amish-Mennonite church brought volunteers from rural Pennsylvania and Midwest communities to Kenilworth. Through craft and Bible clubs, Sunday Schools, and summer camps, the church offered a positive alternative to the increasingly troubled life on the streets.

Another bright spot was Kimi Gray and the band of other Kenilworth Courts residents who worked with her to turn their neighborhood around. Kimi and a few high school students formed College Here We Come in the 1970’s. The group motivated and prepared students to attend college then come back and work to improve the neighborhood. The scheme paid off. Inspired by community progress, Kimi and her fellow dreamers convinced the city to let them manage the 450-plus unit complex themselves.

The new Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation fixed physical plant problems, cut crime, inspired neat yards and clean streets, and increased rent collection. Politicians took notice, and soon Reagan-era officials sought Kimi’s advice, making tenant management the cornerstone of their housing policy. The Courts underwent major renovation in the late eighties and early nineties. Though Kimi Gray died in 2000, many residents remember her determined leadership that helped them turn their troubled neighborhood into a model community.

Today, Kenilworth is a neighborhood waiting for new direction. On Olive and Ord Streets you can still see the old country homes of the original Kenilworth suburb, and on Douglas Street families still sit on front porches, though fewer vegetable gardens offer produce. Kenilworth Courts has a core of long-time residents who love their neighborhood, though many wonder if the Courts, too, will soon be torn down in favor of ‘mixed-use development.’ Deer still roam and water lilies still bloom in the ponds at the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. When you come to see these lovely flowers next June or July, be sure to notice the neighborhood, too, before the next chapter of Kenilworth history begins.