Cleveland Park
Personalities

Libby Rowe
By Rives Carroll

Following her graduation from Bryn Mawr College during the Depression, Libby worked for the United Mine Workers until she married James Rowe, Jr. and was forced to resign because the UMW did not permit married women on its staff. When her late husband, a New Dealer, went overseas with the Navy in World War II, she worked in the Washington office of the International Labour Organisation, then part of the League of Nations and later continued under the United Nations. At this time the Rowses had only one child, but when Libby stopped working in the early 1950s, she was a full-time mother with two daughters and a son. In 1951 they moved to Cleveland Park, because they wanted to stay in the city but couldn't afford Georgetown.

Libby has personally demonstrated her affection for "all four quarters of the city. This is my hometown," she asserts in her deep voice. Through instinct, zeal, and a little chance, Libby became one of the District's most avid planners. As a member of the D.C. Auditorium Commission, later the Cultural Center Commission, and finally the Committee for the Kennedy Center, Libby was searching for a suitable site when, on a visit to the National Capital Planning Commission, she saw three-dimensional models of proposed freeways that could destroy a large part of the city. "In 1954," she explained, "I began to read everything I could get my hands on" about cities, urban renewal, and highways.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s with increased concern surrounding the hydrogen bomb, many planners supported dispersement of the federal government and the construction of freeways to provide easy access in and out of the city. By the time Libby became active in planning, the Southwest and Whitehurst Freeways were already in place; as an employee at Family and Child Services, she was alarmed by the social disruption they caused. In addition, the proliferation of freeway proposals was encouraged by the new Interstate Highway Program, which offered each community a dollar for every ten cents it raised. Truckers urged the construction of highways right through the city. "That," claimed Libby, "is why I got to be a planner."

By the late 1950s, Senator Alan Bible of Arizona was holding hearings on the proposed freeways and had revived an old plan for a subway as a preferable means of transporting people in a growing community without disrupting the city. During these hearings, a five-year freeze was placed on freeway development west of Rock Creek Park. Deeply committed to the issues by this time, Libby, in 1961, became one of five Kennedy appointees to the National Capital Planning Commission. She served as chairman until 1968.

In the early 1960s, few citizens were alarmed by the imminent freeway construction. Eight-lane expressways appeared innocent when seen as simple black lines on a developer's map. But Washington could have been strangled by concrete. For example, 270-s was slated to cross north Cleveland Park and join Rock Creek Parkway, a plan supported by Montgomery County developers. Also planned was a freeway from Virginia to cross the Potomac on the proposed Three Sisters Bridge, just upriver from Key Bridge, with one fork forming an inner loop that would have divided the city and burieded under the White House lawn. Meanwhile, I-95 was cutting into the city from the northeast. Such a maze of criss-crossing, high-speed roads now seems mind-boggling, but at the time, even local newspapers and radio and television stations considered this progress!

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Libby Rowe
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The Committee of 100 on the Federal City, an old and respected citizens planning group, took the lead in protecting the city from this devastation. The National Capital Planning Commission, through which all such development plans must pass, used its judgment to prevent or delay renewal and freeway plans, "buying time" for citizens groups to organize.

"By the end of my time on the Planning Commission," Libby said, "we had the most wonderful citizens groups—a whole alignment of retired colonels in Arlington, 'city beautiful' people, small merchants, black homeowners, and militant blacks in the Northeast—a real coalition of all kinds of citizens from all parts of the city." By the time home rule was established in 1974, the threat of destructive renewal and freeways had ceased.

"Fighting the federal bulldozer" was not limited to opposing ruthless urban renewal and freeway construction; it included protecting historic buildings and areas as well. The Planning Commission sponsored a citywide survey to identify landmarks and historic districts and place them in one of three categories. Carl Feiss, a Cleveland Park resident, directed the survey, which designated Cleveland Park as a Category III Landmark. Subsequently, in 1964, Libby established the Joint Committee on Landmarks, a marriage of the Fine Arts Commission and the Planning Commission and the first preservation committee for the District of Columbia.

Through Libby Rowe's leadership and vision, our city was saved, preservation encouraged, and subway plans revived. Her interest continues today. An active member of the Friends of Tregaron, the White House Historical Association, and the Committee of 100, which she chaired from 1973 to 1980, Libby testified just recently in favor of a bill to return the Van Ness end of Glover Archbold Park to the Park Service.

It is with good reason that this gracious grandmother of five is still asked regularly to testify as an expert witness against proposals which threaten her city. She cares.

Wisconsin Avenue's Small-Town Shops
By Ellen Bates

Only yesterday, urban America was laced with small shopping strips not unlike the Wisconsin Avenue commercial area between Lowell and Norton Streets. Although across the Avenue from the Cleveland Park Historic District's western boundary, for several generations this group of stores has provided goods and services to Cleveland Park residents and the neighborhood at large. Many of the facades, though modest, are architecturally significant and if developers erode these blocks, a good piece of Cleveland Park's architectural as well as social history will be lost. And residents will waste time and gasoline driving in increasing traffic to suburban shopping centers for the basics of everyday living.

It is for all these reasons that the Cleveland Park Historical Society includes this shopping strip in the commercial areas for which we are seeking rezoning (see page 1).

How many Cleveland Park natives were fitted for their first shoes by the Mancani family, in business since 1926 at the Modern Shoe Shop on Macomb just west of Wisconsin? How many mothers have ordered individually decorated birthday cakes from University Pastry, which opened its doors at 5234 Wisconsin in 1927? And during the past 40 years, how many old and young have enjoyed the Tuesday and Thursday specials at the Zebra Room? This venerable landmark at Wisconsin and Macomb can claim international renown, for visiting scholars from afar at the College of Preachers have spread the word on other continents about the local pizza parlor.

An estimated 5,000 residents, plus 2,800 students from neighborhood schools, patronize the commercial strip weekly, and many shop daily. Indeed, it is a rite of passage when a child is first allowed "to run up to the Giant for milk and cat food," or spend his allowance at Sullivan's Toy Store. On Saturdays, these blocks are a vestige of small-town America, as neighbors chat in front of the flower vendor at Friendship Florists, which opened in 1943, buy school supplies at G.C. Murphy's, a neighborhood favorite since 1923, or purchase spirits for the weekend at Burke's Li- quors, in business since 1926. Few can remember the long-gone University Hardware Company, Neam Brothers delicatessen, and D. Katz the shoemaker, but many wish similar businesses would return.

These stores have long served the neighborhood well and residents have remained loyal. The businesses are small-scale operations, but they are on a human scale, and in this country today, neighborhood shopping strips are a vanishing act.

Ellen Bates serves on the Cleveland Park Historical Society's Wisconsin Avenue Task Force.

Our handsome new three-inch Cleveland Park Historical Society button is available for $1 from Executive Director Kathy Wood (354-1276).
Rope designs on Cleveland Park houses created by (left to right) Waddy Wood, Ella Bennett Sherman, and Robert Thompson Head. Drawings by Christina Wood.

Architectural Corner

By Kathy Wood

Rope Designs on Cleveland Park Houses

Waddy Wood, a notable local Washington architect, designed Cleveland Park’s first Shingle Style house, built at 3100 Newark Street in 1897. This house also was the first in Cleveland Park to incorporate a decoration formed from rope dipped in plaster, an ornamental design almost unique to Cleveland Park.

The Shingle Style is a uniquely American architectural style which originated after the celebration of our centennial in 1876 when American architects paused in their adherence to the latest European architectural fashions and focused on our earliest 17th century Colonial architecture. H.H. Richardson and his student Charles McKim, who developed this style, derived inspiration from the picturesque early New England Saltbox houses. These frame houses, constructed of large half timbers and encapsulated in handhewn wood clapboards and shingles, called to mind the romantic image of preindustrial medieval craftsmanship. A desire to emulate this period and re-capture its spirit lay at the heart of the writings of William Morris and others in England who established the Arts and Crafts Movement. This movement revived many medieval crafts, which were exhibited at our centennial exposition and inspired Americans to turn back and celebrate their past.

Americans were also trying to establish their own distinctive American style. The creation of the Shingle Style shares with the English Arts and Crafts movement the enthusiasm for the preindustrial medieval emphasis on craftsmanship as opposed to standardized machine-made materials and the romantic view of the simple rural life. However, it is distinctively American in its use of materials that were prevalent in the architecture of 17th century New England.

It is fitting and significant that the first use in Cleveland Park of a curvilinear rope design placed prominently on the exterior of a house which has no other applied ornament is on one of these Shingle Style houses. This style was first developed for New England summer homes near the sea where the rope of the sailor and the fisherman would have a special significance.

Waddy Wood was an interesting architect because he did not get to one of the architectural schools of the period but was largely self-taught, as was common in those days. Among his training methods was to study the latest styles publicized in architectural journals found in the Library of Congress. Designs for Shingle Style houses were featured in the 1880s and 1890s. Sketches by E. Eliot Deane of one of those by William Ralph Emerson, the Loring house at Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts, appeared in the American Architect of 1884. Two of the sketches depict spiral rope designs on the side of a shed roof which look remarkably like the design used by Waddy Wood on his Cleveland Park Shingle Cottage (see left sketch above). Wood’s design also subsequently appeared in an architectural journal.

Wood designed only one Shingle Style house in Cleveland Park and used a rope motif only once. Robert Thompson Head, another self-taught architect, also used this rope motif once, high up on a side gable of his largest and most varied Queen Anne Style house at 2941 Newark, built in 1904.

It was Ella Bennett Sherman who popularized the motif in Cleveland Park. She was the wife of John Sherman who was President of the Cleveland Park Company from 1895 to 1909. She often used the rope motif on the houses she designed for Cleveland Park between 1902 and 1909. She was an artist who studied at the Art Student’s League in New York and then probably learned how to design and draft houses from Robert Thompson Head during the five years he was designing houses in Cleveland Park. Especially notable are her rope designs for houses on Newark (3121, 3042), on lower Macomb (2929, 3023), and at the northwest corner of Macomb and Ross Place.

Keep your eyes open for this detail on houses in other neighborhoods and please let me know if you find any. So far I have not seen this detail used elsewhere except in Manchester-by-the-Sea.

Architectural historian and CPHS Executive Director Kathy Wood’s extensive work on Cleveland Park culminated in her preparation of the successful Cleveland Park Historic District nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. She is author of a chapter on Cleveland Park in Washington at Home: Neighborhoods in the Nation’s Capital, edited by Kathryn S. Smith (forthcoming 1988), and also teaches American architectural history at local colleges.
From the Executive Director

Architectural Review Committee

CHPS’s Architectural Review Committee (ARC) has been meeting monthly since May to review exterior changes proposed for Cleveland Park houses and Connecticut Avenue shops. Meeting with us are Nancy Witherell and David Maloney of the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) staff.

Only one of the some 30 cases we’ve reviewed so far has had to go before the HPRB. This was the new Uptown Cafe at Connecticut and Ordway, where a deck was built and windows altered without a proper building permit. The cafe owner is working with city officials to rectify the situation.

Currently, Cleveland Park’s new status as an historic district is not causing delays, but a new zoning requirement affecting properties citywide is making it difficult for some, not all, homeowners to get a building permit quickly. To get the zoning desk to sign off on your building permit, you must have a subdivision (record lot), which costs about $100 and takes up to six weeks to process.

While you are waiting for zoning, you can easily satisfy the historic district requirements for a building permit by having your plans reviewed by the HPRB. Key things to remember are that your plans, with clear photos and a drawing of your site with the location of your exterior alterations marked on it must be filed with the Landmarks Office (Permit Processing Division, Room 205, 614 H Street N.W.) by the last Friday of the month.

The ARC has issued an instruction sheet to guide Cleveland Park home and business owners through the building permit process. Call Kathy Wood (284-1276) for a copy or information.

The 15-member ARC is led by Bryan Leithauser and Whit Peters and currently also includes: Kathy Wood (CHPS Executive Director), Peggy Robin (ANC), Cherrie Anderson, Rives Carroll, Ed Fleischman, John Fowler, Sally Halverson, Ruth Montague, Eleanor Oliver (services as secretary), Robin Roberts, Sue Ruff, Anneliese Sullivan, and Mary Beth West.

Other CHPS Activities

The major rezoning effort described by CHPS President Tersh Boasberg on page 1 will occupy us for the next few months. Then we will work with Mrs. Peggy Chen to plan a celebration of the centennial of Twin Oaks, our important neighborhood landmark built as the summer home of National Geographic Society co-founder Gardiner Greene Hubbard.

We are also planning another spectacular house tour for next spring. Cleveland Park artist Di Stoval is working on a banner we could all purchase to hang on our houses on special Cleveland Park days—the House Tour and Block Party days.

We unveiled our new Cleveland Park Historical Society buttons on Friday, October 16, when 150 visitors from cities around the country attended the 41st Annual Preservation Conference of the National Trust for Historic Preservation elected to attend a special tour of Cleveland Park, followed by a seminar in the newly refurbished Hearst Hall of National Cathedral School. Tersh Boasberg led the seminar on how to preserve an historic neighborhood threatened by commercial overbuilding, with panellists Peggy Robin, Ward 3 ANC Chair, Charles Cassel of the Historic Preservation Review Board, Alvin McNeil from the D.C. Office of Planning, and Kirk White, noted Washington zoning lawyer, Rives Carroll, Judy Hubbard, and Nancy Witherell helped me guide our visitors on a driving and walking tour of the neighborhood prior to the seminar. Our visitors were enthusiastic about the entire morning.

Call me if you’d like to purchase (for $1) our beautiful new CHPS button (see page 6). We hope everyone will wear one as we descend on the Zoning Commission in January to let them know how determined we are to protect the commercial areas of our historic district.

Kathy Wood Executive Director

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