Springland Farm Community: The Cleveland Park Historic District’s Northern Neighbor

by Carin Ruff

“We are using our common history to organize ourselves. If we didn’t have this history, we’d just be Springland Lane, Tilden, Reno and Upton — four city streets. But with the history, we have an identity. And that has led us to work very closely with one another.”

So writes Chuck Ludlam, former Peace Corps volunteer and indefatigable community organizer. Ludlam and his neighbors in the small group of streets that run west off of Reno Road just north of the Cleveland Park Historic District have organized themselves to share and preserve their history and reclaim public spaces for nature.

The northern boundary of the Cleveland Park Historic District runs along Quebec and Rodman Streets west of Reno Road and Tilden Street east of Reno down to Connecticut Avenue. At the time Cleveland Park was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in 1986, that was judged to be both a significant natural boundary and the historic northern limit of Cleveland Park’s early development as a prewar “suburb”. Just to the north of that boundary, however, lies a small enclave with a strong sense of its own history and direct ties to Washington’s 18th-century past.

Reno Road used to dead-end at the estate of John Adlum (1759-1836), Revolutionary War and War of 1812 veteran, surveyor, and vintner. Adlum settled at the end of the 18th century on the estate he called “The Vineyard,” where he grew grapes and made wines that Thomas Jefferson admired. Adlum wrote the first American treatise on viticulture, in 1823. His estate stretched north of Rodman from the Nourse property, where Sidwell Friends is now, on the west, down to Connecticut Avenue on the east. The south-facing slopes above Tilden east of Reno where diplomatic missions now sit was the site of the vineyards.

In the early 1840s, one of Major Adlum’s daughters and her husband built a house at 3550 Tilden Street, which still stands and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Springland Farm springhouse is now in the side garden of 3517 Springland Lane, and has been designated a D.C. historic landmark, with the support of CPHS and thanks to the advocacy of Chuck Ludlam and the Springland neighbors.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the large Adlum estate was divided. The eastern portion was acquired by the federal government in 1903 as the site of the National Bureau of Standards, which became an important driver of the development of Cleveland Park. West of Reno, the family built houses in the 1930s and ’40s, some on spec and some for family members. There were so many widowed daughters of the family living on Tilden Street that it was known as “Aunt Hill!” Descendants of the Adlum family continued to live in houses on the old estate grounds until 2007, when Adlumia Hagner died at age 91. Adlumia (a name given several daughters of the families descended from John Adlum), attended National Cathedral School and was an important local leader in the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. Her lifetime home at 3530 Springland Lane is now threatened with destruction. In response, several neighbors have formally incorporated the Springland Farm Historical Society and Conservancy and are in talks with the owners about preserving several large trees on the property.

Neighbors were also behind the reclamation of the small, triangular traffic island at Upton and Reno. What used to be a turning lane that encouraged cars to zoom onto Reno at unsafe speeds has, after great labor and seemingly-endless negotiation with the District government, been turned into a lane just wide enough for bikes and pedestrians, sheltered by a lushly-planted garden. The new lane also channels stormwater. Chuck Ludlam reports that the community would like to organize similar improvements for the traffic island in the middle of Reno where it meets Springland and Tilden. That, however, is National Park Service land, so it is not clear at this point what will be possible in the way of privately-sponsored improvements. The Springland Farm Community’s record of successful neighborhood activism bodes well for an eventual solution that will improve the land for everyone.