

The 1950's: An Outstanding Decade

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To say that the Nineteen Fifties was the most notable decade in the history of Laurel is not based merely on opinion. It is based on fact. Rising from a mill town at the turn of the 19th century, it had emerged a pleasant, ideally located, self-governed, top-of-the-crop town in Prince George's County when the Fifties arrived. When the Fifties ended, Laurel had reached the status of a humming city, having doubled its population from 4,000 to 8,000 plus. It prompted Vinton D. Cockey, well-known engineer and surveyor, to herald Laurel as "capable of becoming a county itself."

Instead of erasing the prolonged drama of World War II by starting immediately to activate development plans, Laurel, like the rest of the country, was building bomb shelters instead of homes to deal with the threat of a bomb drop by the Soviet or other international forces. But when the Fifties finally arrived, Laurel refused to wait any longer even though the U.S. had engaged in yet another war, the Korean Conflict. It forged ahead energetically with long delayed plans.

Main Street was first to show signs of awakening from the war years when Citizens National Bank doubled its size; First United Methodist Church constructed a large education addition and fellowship hall; and St. Mary of the Mills Catholic Church was busy at Eighth and Main streets building a school. Later in the decade the church enlarged its sanctuary to seat 750 people. Across the street on Eighth, later to be named Church Street, the Pallotine Order built a high school and convent. The east wing of Laurel High School was constructed in 1951 providing a gym, cafeteria and two levels of classrooms. New stores and professional offices melded easily with the old on Main Street, and in 1956 State Bank opened at 320 Main Street. Laurel's oldest street was still its hub.

Laurel's skyline changed as its first high rise apartment complex concluded construction at the intersection of Rt. 197 and Rt. 198, and attracted a mall nearby.

After all, Laurel would soon have a new neighbor at Fort Meade by the name of National Security Agency (the secret NSA, known then as "No Such Agency) with untold thousands of workers. Laurel wanted its share of NSA families and employment opportunities. A nine-story headquarters building dominated its extensive facilities and

was completed in 1957. NSA proved mutually beneficial to both the newcomers and Laurel. It marked a new era.

The Laurel Volunteer Rescue Squad was founded in 1952 boasting both men and women members who were soon winning nationwide attention in service demonstration contests, and the Laurel Volunteer Fire Department, which had been protecting Laurel since 1902, moved in 1954 into a new brick building at Montgomery and Ninth streets.

The “Fabulous Fifties” saw the opening in 1953 of the Gladys Noon Spellman Baltimore-Washington Parkway, easing access to the Laurel area. A year later integration of public schools started conforming to a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. The first step was removal of any hint of color in the names of schools. “Laurel Colored School” immediately became “Laurel Grove School,” but countywide administration steps took most of that year, and actual integration began in earnest in 1955 with L. B. Howland, Laurel High principal for 29 years, a prominent figure.

Laurel was fast changing its identity and extending its boundaries to accommodate demand for housing. The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory opened in 1954 on the new Rt. 29 a few miles north of the city and was contributing to Laurel’s growth. Rocky Gorge Dam (later renamed T. Howard Duckett Dam) was completed the same year by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission and supplied Laurel with a public water source instead of relying on Gude Lake. The WSSC also built Patuxent Filtration Plant and provided for area sewage disposal. Laurel was benefiting from all these measures.

In 1956 the Laurel Shopping Center opened amid extended festivities. It was the largest single project ever undertaken in Laurel and a significant milestone in its history, attracting stores, theatres, restaurants, and financial institutions and employing over 1,000 people. It not only put Laurel “on the map,” but increased its assessable tax base by some ten percent.

Steering the City of Laurel during this decade were, respectively, Mayors Merrill L. Harrison, Harry Hardingham and Hiram J. Soper. It was in 1952 that Ruth Sussman became the first woman to seek and be elected to Laurel’s City Council. She earned another “first” in 1959 when she was handed the gavel to serve as president of the Council.

The "Fabulous Fifties" was a stellar decade in Laurel history with all its changes, improvements and growth. Not to be overlooked was the opening of the Washington, D.C. International race at Laurel Race Course bringing thoroughbreds from foreign countries to compete; the new dial telephone system allowing customers to dial toll calls without help from the operator; the groundbreaking for a 15-bed Laurel General Hospital, also known as the Warren Hospital, on Prince George Street; and the first need (July 1956) to open the gates of Rocky Gorge Dam due to a torrential rainstorm and causing costly water damage as the Patuxent River overflowed its banks.

Yes, improvements and changes in Laurel in the Fifties were historic. Withal, Laurel retained its character, its charity and its charm...and could foresee a promising future.