

## Activists Were Green Before It Was Trendy

Fairfax Set to Commemorate the Battle for Scotts Run

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It started with a small green piece of paper tacked to a stake near a pristine tract on the Potomac River. It became one of Fairfax County's biggest land battles, pitting developers against conservationists and eventually involving Congress, Virginia's governor, the Board of Supervisors, one of the region's legendary land-use lawyers and many, many ordinary residents, including high school students, who faced off against bulldozers while singing "This Land Is Our Land."

The people won.

"This was really a citizens effort," said John J. Adams, 74, a McLean lawyer who, in the later stages of the struggle, had been asked to file a lawsuit on the county's behalf to condemn the property in order to take title to the land and stop the bulldozers. "We were fighting our own supervisor, the Board of Supervisors, the whole hierarchy of Fairfax County."

Today, the 336-acre swath of hickory forest and waterfalls that had once belonged to the late Edward B. Burling Sr., a prominent Washington lawyer, is Scotts Run Nature Preserve, a scenic touch of wilderness in the heart of suburbia. The Fairfax County Park Authority is gearing up to celebrate the year-long battle next month.

The land, a green bower of serenity, is tucked between the Capital Beltway and Route 193, Georgetown Pike. Walk a few hundred yards in, and the swoosh of traffic yields to bird song high in a canopy of giant trees. Keep going and you arrive at the Potomac, which is all the more scenic with a waterfall in a corner of the preserve.

The property belonged to one of the founders of Covington and Burling, a white-shoe Washington law firm. He had picked up the land for less than \$200 an acre in the 1920s. Over the next four decades, his cabin on the property became a sort of sylvan salon for Washington's grandees and powerbrokers. Edward B. Burling visited there well into his 90s for the pleasures of solitude and chopping wood. Friends worried that a man his age should not be alone in a secluded cabin without a telephone, but he refused to let any trees be cut down for telephone lines.

When Burling died in October 1966, members of his family soon found that they could not keep up with the taxes, which were then \$30,000 a year. They sold the property for \$2.4 million to McLean developer Miller & Smith Associates, which wanted to put 309 luxury homes on cul-de-sacs and curving roads. (The homes were expected to sell for \$68,000 to \$100,000.)

The developers did not have a reputation for razing everything; they planned to preserve 52 percent of the acreage as open land, including a strip along Scotts Run and the Potomac for a hiking trail. Many county leaders acquiesced to the plan.

Then Elizabeth Miles Cooke, who lived across the road from the forested tract, saw the little green square of paper tacked to a tree. "Public notice of a Hearing Before the Planning Commission. . . ." the paper said.

"She called me," Adams recalled, "and said, 'John, you've got to come down here. They're going to build houses on the Burling tract.'"

The environmental movement was in its infancy -- Earth Day would become an annual celebration for the first time in 1970 -- but it was potent. The stakes were large: Conservationists thought that the loss of the land would mean losing the rest of the Potomac River palisades to development.

Cooke, an artist who had been raised in the Quaker tradition, became the center of a peaceful protest that began along Georgetown Pike. Students got involved in a door-to-door campaign to gather signatures for a petition and generate support.

Adams, who is president of the Georgetown Pike and Potomac River Association, said one of the more remarkable aspects of the battle was the way that parks supporters were opposed by almost every organ of power, including the Dranesville District supervisor, the district planning commissioner, the county executive, the McLean Citizens Association and the Chamber of Commerce. For at least part of the time, the Board of Supervisors, the county Planning Commission, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority -- and even the Fairfax County Park Authority itself -- also stood on the side of the development, Adams said.

The Nature Conservancy offered to buy the property, for example, but state and local governments needed to make a request to the nonprofit organization and did not. Each roadblock, however, built more support, Adams said.

High school students distributed leaflets door-to-door. A wealthy Washington builder was so moved by the involvement of young people that he appeared at a Park Authority hearing to offer a \$1.5 million loan for purchasing the land. He also offered to kick in \$25,000.

Three senators -- Edward W. Brooke III (R-Mass.), Fred R. Harris (D-Okla.) and William B. Spong Jr. (D-Va.) -- entered the fray. So did Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson (D-Wash.), who introduced a bill that would make the Potomac a national waterway and protect its flanks with open space.

The press gave the environmental advocates friendly coverage, and even the New York Times weighed in.

In a July 14, 1970, referendum, voters in the Dranesville district agreed to tax themselves more to foot the \$1.5 million purchase. The vote was 3,208 to 2,758.

But negotiations dragged on as the county and the developer haggled over a price. John T. "Til" Hazel, the development firm's lawyer, had his brother start knocking down trees with a bulldozer. About 75 protesters, mostly women with young children, demonstrated, waving signs and banging on pots and pans.

"He would knock down one tree about every thirty minutes, just enough to keep their attention," Hazel told The Post in an interview years later. "Two weeks later they came up with the money."

Gov. Lynwood Holton (R) made a personal appeal to developers to halt construction while the county was negotiating the purchase.

On Sept. 5, 1970, the land became public for \$3.6 million.

"I think we were a product of our times," Adams said. "We were all part of the movement that we had to save the environment, and this was our little part of the world."

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