

Picture The Grove Before “The Grove”

Looking at pictures of the Grove that go back to the 1880’s and comparing them with today’s Grove can be interesting, almost eerie, for the similarities. Of course in the old pictures there’s sense of oldness, but in what way? The lack of telephone and electric lines is not immediately obvious, one just senses it. The foliage is different because the grounds had so recently been a forest. The relative uniformity of the cottages does not anticipate the additions and modifications that have stretched and warped those cottages into the houses of today.

Still, once the basic patterns of the paths and lots was worked out—and by the second summer, 1874, they were worked out nearly as they are today—little change other than new cottages, a bush more here, a tree less there, a porch enclosed, or a light pole added, could or would occur. Very slowly the old look of yesterday became the new look of today.

If there were pictures from the 1850’s, 60’s, or early ‘70’s—now that would be something else. The really big change in the Grove came not in the 125 years between 1873 and 1998, but just before that, in the decade or so before its founding, between 1860 and 1873. Imagine these pictures:

Before 1860 the area around Gaithersburg was intensely rural and agricultural. Between the villages was a mix of small and large farms with mostly cleared land and small woodlots. The Grove would come to be located on one of these wooded areas, part of the Cooke farm. A picture of the Grove at this time would show a well-established but unpaved roadway leading through the woods to Laytonsville in one direction and Gaithersburg in the other. Trails led away from the main road. There was no railroad—no tracks, bridges, or berms—just rolling unconnected fields and copses of trees on steep ground and along creeks and in hollows. A large farm was visible to the west, a smaller older farm to the east.

As the summer of 1864 approached the Civil War had been raging for three years and farming had become insecure—prices were good, but a farmer was not always sure he would be paid. Help was getting scarce; many of the young men had gone to war, and slavery was becoming a tenuous institution. The fighting had intensified; the past summers had brought mammoth battles within a day’s ride of the Grove. By this summer, foraging soldiers had raided produce and livestock. The towns of Hagerstown and Frederick, threatened by the Confederates that summer, had to pay ransom or be burned. A picture of the areas near the Grove at this time would show it neglected, as if only partially occupied. Many of the Grove’s older trees were probably cut for timber and firewood, their tops left scattered among the underbrush.

In July of 1864 Confederate General Early led an army south from Frederick, routed the Monocacy defenses, and proceeded on to Gaithersburg. Early billeted himself and his men on John DeSellem’s farm across from the present-day St. Martin’s School. DeSellem was a slaveholder (the emancipation proclamation did not apply to loyal states), though he favored Union and made no secret of it. The next day they took his remaining horses, “tons of hay, barrels of corn, beans, cows, bacon, carriage horses turned loose on the grain crop, fences torn to pieces—and general wreck and ruin followed—it was a night and day of horror as our lives were in imminent danger.” Early’s army marched south past Shady Grove, foraging and wrecking as it went, all the way into Washington, DC. A picture of the Grove during this time might have

captured foragers on horseback as they rode up to the farms to ask politely if there was meat or grain to spare, sometimes taking it no matter the answer.

By the end of the war in 1865 farms throughout central Montgomery County were in near-ruin. Their slaves, fences, livestock and work animals, and stores of grain were gone. Bankruptcies forced consolidations, markets were disrupted, and land lay fallow. A picture of the Grove would show the main road (possibly along the alignment of Grove Avenue at the time) in disrepair. Farm lanes met the main road at the Grove; one track lay along the ridge near the old farm (now Ridge Road), one went off to the Mineral Springs north of the Grove (upper Grove Road), and another made a thin splice (roughly along Oakmont Avenue) between the Laytonsville Road and the Rockville Road. The Grove would have appeared neglected and desolate; the old farm was now abandoned, and the fields and fences of the Cooke farm were in disorder.

But then in 1872 the Metropolitan Branch of the B&O Railroad Company was pushed through to Gaithersburg. It was a major construction project with all manner of carts and wagons hauling goods and men across old farm lanes and trails. The Branch was to be a shortcut for traffic headed west; it would save an hour or two for its passengers, but here it was a disruptive force, cutting across fields and severing roads all along its path. A picture of the Grove during the construction would show the southeast corner of the Cooke farm cut off and isolated by the cut, the new berm rising in view of the farm's front door. The ridge road had been cut and re-routed; the splice to the Rockville road was simply cut off. A low access road (now Railroad Street) had been laid down along the railroad berm. On the west, the Laytonsville Road lost its graceful arc and was pinched into a tight curve where it met the B&O right-of-way.

If the Methodists had been looking for a campground before 1872 they would not easily have been able to find the Grove. But at the end of 1872 the railroad was underway, Nathan Cooke was gone and his widow was operating the farm. She had little use for the wooded area on a rise to the east or the 'old farm' on the other side of the ridge road. When the search committee visited the Grove they may have taken pictures, but the picture they most wanted to take back to the others was of a tract that was "elevated and healthy, ...with an abundance of pure cold drinking water, ...not to be surpassed by any land within one hundred miles." "Its nearness to the railroad, its elevated position, its salubrity, and numerous other advantages, renders it more desirable to the public than any other place in the vicinity of Washington."

On the fourth of July, 1873, the parishioners came out on the train to see for themselves.