

GREENBELT: A FEDERALLY FUNDED TOWN

June 2012



Two unit house, Greenbelt, Maryland

UHP Staff

Each year, tourists descend on Washington DC in droves.

For most, the list of must-see sites is set: the National Mall; the White House; Georgetown; the International Spy Museum; the Vietnam War Memorial.

Stepping off the beaten path to explore less well-known historic sites can be difficult, especially if you have limited time in Washington. But if you hop on the Green Line of Washington's subway system (Metro), you can travel back in time, to discover a part of our history which few Americans know--the town of Greenbelt, Maryland.

Greenbelt Towns

Greenbelt was the first of three "greenbelt towns" created as part of the New Deal. These greenbelt towns---Greenbelt, Maryland; Greendale, Wisconsin; and Greenhills, Ohio---were government planned and sponsored communities built on "garden city" principles.

Built outside of major metropolitan areas, garden cities provided the "conveniences and cultural opportunities of a city with many advantages of life on the land." These communities were intended to relieve urban over-crowding and provide a healthier home to the urban poor.

During the Great Depression, the idea of building garden cities had an additional allure as the new construction would create jobs for some of the 15 million unemployed Americans.

With this in mind, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration secretly began buying land in Berwyn, Maryland, just outside of Washington DC in 1935. By September of that year, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) formally approved plans for a new garden city community to be created outside of the District of Columbia.



Left: Mothers wait for a medical exam for their children, Greenbelt, Library of Congress

Below (Left): Art deco elementary school, Greenbelt, Library of Congress

Below (Right): Commuters carpooling in Greenbelt, 1938, Library of Congress



The pressure to create jobs was so intense that laborers were sent to begin work on the town even before the plans for the city had been formalized. Ultimately, 5,000 men worked to build the new community. Ten million dollars were budgeted for the building of Greenbelt although the project ultimately wound up costing more.

Emergence of Greenbelt

Over time, the plans for the city were modified. City planners had originally intended to create a segregated community for African Americans within Greenbelt itself but this plan was quickly shelved with the result that Greenbelt became an all-white town. Planners did, however, remain true to their desire to create mixed income housing, with multi-unit housing being especially common. By September 1937, people could formally apply to live in Greenbelt. To ensure that the community served people of “moderate income,” salaries for

residents were capped. Along with the income requirement, residents were carefully assessed to determine that they were in good health, that the size of their family was in line with the type of housing they received, and that they were financially reliable. Residents also needed to demonstrate “clean living habits and an indication of community spirit.”

In its early years, the town was run as a cooperative. However, the emergence of World War II changed Greenbelt as the government’s focus shifted and new housing was built in the community. The government had never intended to be the permanent landlord for Greenbelt and in 1952, Congress passed a law allowing for the sale of lots in the town.

Today, Greenbelt is a thriving suburban community of about 23,000. In 1993, Metro’s Green Line was extended to this area and a subway station was opened here. The opening of this metro station solved a problem that had long plagued Greenbelt

during its first few decades---like many American suburbs, Greenbelt lacked good public transportation, making it difficult for commuters to travel to the city for work.

Greenbelt Museum

Any visit to Greenbelt should include a trip to the Greenbelt Museum. There, you can see a historic Greenbelt home as it might have appeared in 1937. Residents of Greenbelt donated the objects and artifacts in this display home. The photograph of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is an especially nice touch since many Greenbelt citizens no doubt saw Roosevelt’s administration as the reason they were able to live in this “garden city.”

But it’s also fun to look at the kitchen and contrast that with how we live today. No sub-zero refrigerators and no excess space!

Walking around the town center is a fantastic way to gain insight into how city planners envisioned the future during the 1930s. The buildings in the city’s Roosevelt shopping area are small but streamlined art deco structures, reflecting the modernist tendencies of the era. The city has the best collection of art deco buildings in the greater Washington metropolitan area. Pedestrian pathways encourage you to wander and discover the city just

as residents would have done in the 1940s---by walking.

Discovering Other Sites Along the Green Line

Unfortunately, the city has no particularly outstanding restaurants which means that you may want to hop back on the Green Line and head back into Washington DC itself for lunch or dinner. You can get off at a variety of Green Line stops to savor some of the District’s fantastic and ever-growing eateries.

We recommend, however, stopping at the U Street Metro Station. This will take you in a different direction historically. The U Street Corridor, as this area of Washington is known, was once home to one of the nation’s largest urban African-American communities. Here you can see Duke Ellington’s childhood home and visit the legendary theaters which gave this area its nickname, “Black Broadway.”

Ben’s Chili Bowl is a local landmark, frequented by politicians, musicians, actors, and ordinary citizens alike. On any given day, you might eat at the counter with the likes of President Obama, Bill Cosby, or Spike Lee, all frequent customers there. It is a fun place to indulge yourself with a great half-smoke or chili dog.

The Ashleys were the first family to move in to Greenbelt.

Library of Congress

