

"History of Belle Grove Square"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

William Winchester's 1764 town plan of Westminster was linear in form and did not include a central town square. For this reason, public spaces evolved around the hills at each end of town. Later additions to the city followed and expanded on the original street plans and none included a public square. The creation of Belle Grove Park in 1877 came about purely through the generosity of Westminster residents Mr. and Mrs. George W. Matthews. Matthews had recently developed a parcel of land, known as Matthews' Addition, containing thirty lots bounded by West Green, Bond, Matthews (now Park Place) and Park Streets. He reserved the center for a park primarily for the use of the residents of his addition. As early as June 1875 the city had approached Matthews to discuss the transference of the park, initially mentioned in the city council minutes as "LaFayette Square". Matthews agreed to consider the request but wanted to discuss the matter with the adjacent property owners. In the meantime the park was already being used for public purposes. On July 4, 1876, the City dedicated a monument commemorating the Centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The brownstone marker still stands in the park.

George and Maria Matthews offered the one-acre park to the city in March 1877 and a deed was recorded on May 21st. The presentation of the deed to the city was reported in the May 12, 1877 issue of the Westminster American Sentinel newspaper:

Gift to the City

On last Monday evening our very estimable Citizen Geo. W. Matthews, Esq., appeared before the City Council and presented them with a deed for what is known as the public square, near the Reformed Church, free of all charges. The gift was accepted in a neat speech by a member of the board, and a vote of thanks on behalf of the people unanimously tendered the liberal doner [sic]. The title to the valuable and beautifully situated public square is now absolutely invested in the city of Westminster, and by the terms of the deed is to [be] used for pleasure, recreation and peaceable gatherings, free for all citizens.

It now remains for the city to protect, decorate or otherwise embellish this public square, and to make it appropriately attractive. At the same time it is the duty of every person to protect it as he would his own property. Doubtless the time will come, when by the wisdom of the people this square will be like McBeth's [sic] castle, "which had a pleasant seat, where the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses."

The deed to the city stated that the city was responsible for maintaining the park and there was to be free access to those residing in Matthews' Addition. The park was also intended for "all citizens or inhabitants said City of Westminster, and to all well behaved persons whatever, to use only as a pleasure ground, and place of resort, temporarily, for innocent amusement or recreation." The City installed curbing, planted shade trees and provided public seating. Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Belle Grove Square was the site of many public events of the type envisioned by Matthews. When he died in 1903 he was fondly remembered by the citizens of Westminster in an obituary published in the August 28th issue of the Westminster American Sentinel newspaper: George W. Matthews

The venerable George W. Matthews, one of the most prominent and public-spirited citizens of Westminster, died at his home at 8 o'clock, last Sunday morning, at the advanced age of nearly 90 years. Mr. Matthews was born on the farm of his father, the late William Matthews, in Baltimore county, February 7, 1814. He was of English descent, though his ancestry in this country antedated the Revolutionary War, in which his grandfather served as a soldier of the Continental Army. His father was also an American soldier, and, as a light horseman, participated in the battle of North Point, and the defense of Baltimore, September 12, 1814. Mr. Matthews came to this county about 50 years ago and first engaged in farming as the owner of an estate on the Patapsco. This he subsequently sold, and, in 1864, removed to this city and became a member of the firm of Wagoner & Matthews, which conducted an extensive foundry and agricultural implement manufactory for a number of years. Later he engaged in other business enterprises, but 15 or 20 years ago retired from active participation in private pursuits and became a justice of the peace, an office which he filled with ability and intelligence until about seven years ago.

The city is indebted to his generosity for the possession of its only public square, a beautiful parcel of ground containing about an acre, located in the heart of the town and known as Belle Grove Park, a name given it in honor of one of his daughters, then Miss Belle Matthews, of this city. He also donated to the Baptist church, of which he was an ardent member, a large lot fronting on the park, upon which a church of that denomination was erected, but has since passed into the hands of the German Baptist Brethren.

Mr. Matthews leaves a widow and two daughters (Mrs. Belle M. Garrettson, of Kenton, O., and Miss Laura Matthews, of Bowie, Md.) His only son, R. Charles Matthews, died about two years ago. He also leaves three grandsons, one granddaughter, two great-grandsons and five great-granddaughters. One of his grandsons is Mr. George E. Matthews, a well known business man of this city. The late Capt. B. F. Matthews, of Baltimore, a veteran of the Civil War was his half-brother. Messrs. Winfield Matthews, residing in the West, and Mr. Thomas Matthews, another Civil War, veteran, of Baltimore, are also his half brothers. Funeral services were held at the residence of the deceased on Monday afternoon, Elder Chas. D. Bonsack, of the German Baptist Church, and Rev. D. G. Miller, of Centenary M. E. Church, officiating. The pall-bearers were: Messrs. Samuel Erb, Wm. H. McCollum, Nelson Gilbert, E. D. Bowersox, George Erb, and Louis P. Manning, of Salem Lodge, I. O. O. F., of which deceased was a member. The remains were interred in Westminster Cemetery.

Belle Grove Square was restored by the Woman's Club of Westminster, with help from other local organizations, as a Bicentennial project. The work included the restoration of the fountain, installation of flagpoles and landscaping. These recent efforts were in keeping with the 1877 City Council resolution acknowledging the gift and pledging to "endeavor to show our appreciation of the value of the gift by so improving and adorning the grounds thus conveyed that they shall serve as a beautiful memorial of the donors and remain a perpetual testimonial of our gratitude to the same." The use of the park in for the benefit tour is also in keeping with the vision of George and Maria Matthews more than a century ago. Photo caption: Charles Clemson (left) and Claude Smith (right) posed on horseback on Matthews St. (now Park Place) at the turn of the century. The second and fourth houses from the left will be among the six houses and two churches open for the Holiday House Tour on Saturday, December 14th. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.

Side bar copy: The Holiday House Tour will be held on Saturday, December 14th from 3:00-8:00 p.m. The tour includes entrance to 2 churches and 6 homes decorated for the holidays by 6 local florists, live seasonal music, and special offers from some of Downtown Westminster's finest restaurants. Tickets are

\$10 and proceeds benefit the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. To order tickets or for more information, call Tracey Smith (410) 848-7967. Tickets may also be purchased on the day of the tour.