

Preserving the Recent Past: The Moyaone Reserve Historic District

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After a two-year effort led by a dedicated group of community volunteers, the Moyaone Reserve Historic District has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

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WAGNER HOUSE

Architect Charles F. Wagner, Jr., built his house in the Moyaone Reserve in stages, as time and budget allowed. This image of the architect on the front porch of his house dates to the 1950s. Since its construction, few changes have been made to the residence, which features many original materials and design elements and retains a high degree of integrity. Original building materials include concrete block, board-and-batten siding, cement board, plate glass, slate, and pine paneling. Wagner described his home as “a beautiful house, a good house – with sun and air and outlook.”
Credit: Holliday Wagner

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The **Moyaone Reserve Historic** will be the first historic district in Charles County recognized for its collection of mid-century modern residential architecture.

The Moyaone Reserve Historic District encompasses a residential landscape of roughly 1,320 acres that spans parts of two Southern Maryland counties — Charles County and Prince George’s County.

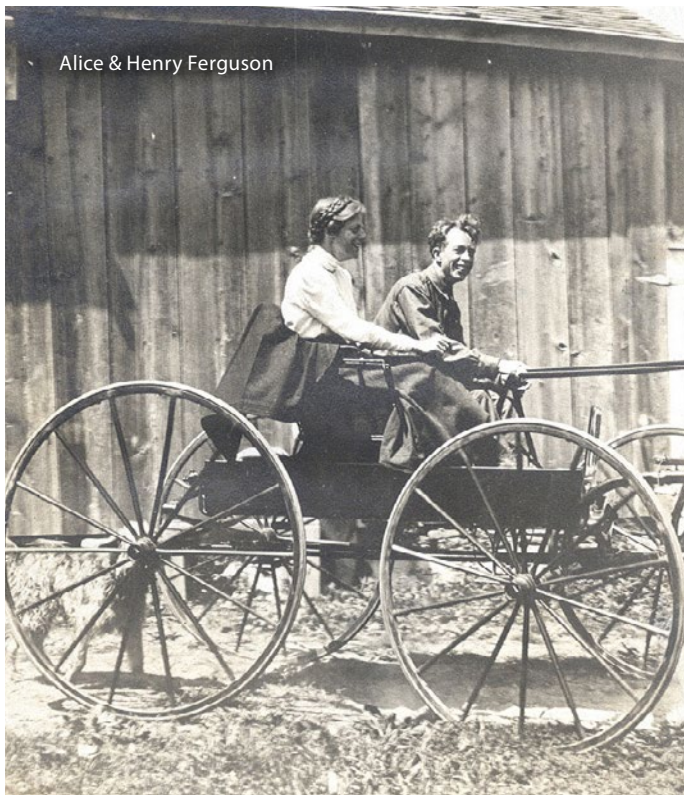
This landscape is characterized by a topographically diverse terrain that creates a distinctive setting for residential development. It offers scenic hilltops, hidden valleys, and plenty of level ground for home building, and within its boundaries are 124 houses that contribute to the significance of the historic district, reflecting a range of late twentieth-century residential forms and styles. Since its founding, the Moyaone Reserve has been a place defined by the presence of over twenty species of trees. This tree canopy serves an important role in defining the district’s rural character, providing a significant portion of the Mount Vernon viewshed, and creating a natural habitat for wildlife. Natural systems and features of the landscape have influenced land use within the historic district. While lots are generally zoned for residential development, several parcels are maintained as conservation areas.



The Moyaone Reserve originated from a land venture spearheaded in 1945 by a small group of like-minded friends who aspired to create a residential community that was conscientiously developed to preserve the unspoiled, rural character of the Accokeek/Bryans Road area, near the confluence of the Potomac River and Piscataway Creek. The community’s founders envisioned the Moyaone Reserve as a progressive alternative to the homogeneous suburban neighborhoods that were transforming the Washington region in the postwar years. With the initial purchase of a 467-acre tract, the group, which included Alice and Henry Ferguson, the owners of Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek, architect **Charles F. Wagner, Jr.** (pictured) and business consultant Robert Straus, among others, set about to create a community grounded in a shared interest in rural resources and their settings and low-impact residential design. Restrictive covenants established by the founders stipulated that lots could not be less than 5 acres and prohibited the cutting of large trees. These measures assured the concept of

large-acreage development sites on which houses were subordinate to the landscape. Early advertisements promoted the Moyaone Reserve as “a new kind of country living.”

Seen as an antidote to grid-based merchant-builder subdivisions and as an alternative to the curvilinear or neighborhood unit approach of some architect-builder subdivisions of the time, the Moyaone Reserve developed organically without a preconceived design. Tracts were acquired gradually as surrounding land became available and platted with respect to the existing terrain. Parcels offered both level ground to build on and visually interesting natural features. Unlike traditional suburban streets where houses are centrally arranged on manicured lawns and separated from the street by sidewalks and tree lawns, most houses in the Moyaone Reserve were set within large, densely planted lots and hidden from the road. The community set aside large swaths of land as nature reserves, established bridle trails in place of sidewalks, and constructed unpaved rather than hard-surface roads. The roads followed routes that avoided having to level, cut through, or otherwise alter the topography, emphasizing the rustic character of the place over conformity with any overall residential plan or suburban ideal. Residential development within the Moyaone Reserve included architect-designed houses, houses built by intrepid do-it-yourself'ers using plans and materials ordered from catalogs, and everything in between. Whether they built modern homes with open floor plans and copious glazing or more conventional residential forms, property owners shared a deep appreciation for their natural surroundings.



In 1922, Alice Ferguson purchased Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek as a weekend retreat for her husband and herself. The story of the Fergusons and Hard Bargain Farm is an opportunity to understand not just an isolated piece of history, but to preserve a full picture of how one couple pioneered the key elements of environmental conservation as we know it today.

Learn more at www.FergusonFoundation.org

During the postwar period, many residents of the Moyaone Reserve commissioned an impressive collection of mid-century modern homes designed by a noteworthy list of local architects, including Charles M. Goodman, Charles F. D. Egbert, Harold Esten, and Casper Neer. No architect or builder had a greater impact on the Moyaone Reserve than Charles F. Wagner, Jr. In 1946, Wagner purchased a 12-acre lot that included the western edge of a small plateau but mostly consisted of a densely wooded slope. There he built a modest, yet elegant modern house that was widely admired by residents and visitors alike. Its success led to multiple commissions in the Moyaone Reserve beginning in the late 1940s through the mid-1970s. Wagner's houses were typically modest in size, simple in composition, and built using low-cost, readily-available materials. Modernist window walls were paired with natural materials like board-and-batten exterior siding, interior wood paneling, and terra-cotta tile flooring. The houses were efficiently designed to take advantage of the sun's energy for heating. Starting in the 1960s, Wagner's residential designs became more site specific. Houses were built into slopes in the terrain to minimize the physical and visual intrusion of the architecture on the landscape. Also during this period, he frequently combined natural materials, such as slate and brick, with standardized, prefabricated materials, including cinder block

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and plywood paneling. In recent years, many Wagner-designed houses have been recorded for the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, creating a lasting record of the architect's contributions to the community.

Since its founding, land conservation, environmentalism, and historic preservation have been key concerns of the Moyaone Reserve. In the 1950s, industrial development along the Maryland shore of the Potomac River threatened the community's rural setting and the historic view from Mount Vernon, inciting a decades-long effort led by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) to protect the viewshed, which encompassed the Moyaone Reserve, through the creation of a national park. In 1957, the MVLA and a determined cadre of Moyaone Reserve residents created the private, non-profit Accokeek Foundation – one of the nation's oldest land trusts – to hold in trust key pieces of land within the viewshed. In 1961, Piscataway Park was established as the first national park to preserve a historic vista, becoming a model for subsequent federal parks across the nation. As part of the development of the park, Moyaone Reserve residents were given the opportunity to donate or sell scenic easements to the Department of the Interior to create a protected, wooded buffer of privately owned land within the Mount Vernon viewshed. By early 1968, the Interior Department had acquired virtually all of the lands and interests in lands necessary to create Piscataway Park. When it was dedicated that February, the park encompassed a total of 1,100 acres owned by the federal government along the riverfront between Piscataway Creek on the north and Marshall Hall on the south. The park also included an additional 2,800 acres backing up to the strip of land along the river that was protected through permanent scenic easement grants. At the time, scenic easements were a relatively new legal instrument, one that allowed the land to remain on the tax rolls while placing limits on the character of its development.

In 1965, through the tireless activism of a dedicated group of Moyaone residents, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation that enabled five counties, including Charles and Prince George's counties, to grant special tax provisions to landowners with scenic easements. The following year, Prince George's County passed the nation's first local law granting tax credits for the preservation of scenic open space. As an innovative tool for land conservation, the ordinance became a model for other jurisdictions

throughout the country. Today, all properties within the Moyaone Reserve are bound by scenic easements, ensuring the ongoing preservation of the historic view from one of our nation's most revered historic sites and demonstrating the importance of easements as a method of encouraging private participation in conservation. The efforts of the Moyaone Reserve community and others to prevent development that would encroach into the panoramic view from Mount Vernon and to preserve the wooded setting of the community and the rural character of its landscape represents an outstanding achievement that has national significance within the conservation and historic preservation movements.

In 1998, Arapahoe Acres in Englewood, Colorado, became the first postwar residential subdivision listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and, since then, neighborhoods across the country have successfully met the challenges of documenting, evaluating, and preserving resources of the recent past. Regionally, the National Register recognizes such modernist suburban enclaves as Hollin Hills in Alexandria, Virginia, and New Mark Commons in Rockville, Maryland. As the first historic district in Charles County recognized for its collection of mid-century modern residential architecture, the Moyaone Reserve Historic District helps tell the story of the county's postwar development and enhances public understanding of its diverse architectural heritage.

The National Register designation of the Moyaone Reserve also marks an important milestone for the community, which has a strong tradition of supporting local conservation and historic preservation efforts, beginning with its interest in protecting the Mount Vernon viewshed through



the pioneering use of scenic easements. More recently, when Dominion Energy petitioned to build a compressor station in the Accokeek/Bryans Road area, residents joined local environmental groups to successfully block the development. “When the next external development threat appears in our area,” said Michael Leventhal, past president of the Moyaone Association, “the National Register designation will provide an added layer of protection, via Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.” This provision requires federal agencies to consider the effects on historic properties of projects they carry out, fund, permit, or approve. The National Register designation also has the benefit of qualifying homeowners of contributing houses within the historic district for Maryland’s Historic Revitalization Tax Credit, which provides funds in the form of an income tax credit for repair or renovation projects.

The Moyaone Association and its predecessor, The Moyaone Company, have operated as a voluntary, non-profit homeowners association since 1953. In addition to sponsoring the National Register nomination, the association supports the community’s ongoing conservation and preservation activities, such as the annual Potomac River Cleanup, organic

gardening plots at the community garden, and compliance with federal easement requirements. In addition, the Moyaone Association sponsors a bi-annual Homes Tour of selected properties to showcase the features (both landscape and building) of its member properties. (The next tour is scheduled for April 2021.) Moyaone Modern (moyaonemodern.com), founded by a local homeowner, is dedicated to the preservation, education, and promotion of mid-century modern architecture within Piscataway Park. The organization sponsors periodic architectural tours and lectures.

The Moyaone Association was pleased to have received funding for its National Register nomination application from the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Prince George’s County, the Maryland Historical Trust, and Preservation Maryland.

Robinson & Associates, Inc., is a research and consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., that specializes in architectural, landscape, and cultural history. Services include research and documentation of historic buildings and landscapes, National Register and National Historic Landmark nominations, and Maryland Historical Trust surveys. ■



The **KOCH HOUSE** (opposite page) located on Overlook Drive in Poplar Hill was designed by Harold Esten, who studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and opened a practice in Silver Spring in the 1950s. Credit: Dave Koch

The affordability and efficiency of kit houses appealed to many residents of the Moyaone Reserve, and numerous examples can be found in the historic district. The **WATTS HOUSE** (top left), a Pan Abode house built in 1964-65, is an excellent example in the Moyaone Reserve of a mid-century, Rustic Revival-style, kit house. Pan-Abode International was established in British Columbia, Canada, in 1948 by Aage Jensen, a Danish cabinetmaker. It sold pre-cut Western Red Cedar logs and building plans for easy-to-assemble, yet durable, pre-manufactured houses. Credit: Robinson and Associates, Inc.



The **HIBBEN HOUSE** (bottom left) is perched on a wooded hillside site in the Poplar Hill subdivision of the Moyaone Reserve. Designed by Washington-area architect Charles F. D. Egbert and completed in 1967, it is an outstanding example of mid-century modern design in Charles County. The house features large, floor-to-ceiling windows, plate-glass picture windows, and clerestory windows that flood the interior with natural light and blur the distinction between interior and exterior spaces. Using conscientious massing and natural materials, including blond-colored brick, stained redwood siding, slate, and rough-hewn stone, the house blends harmoniously into its natural surroundings. Credit: Robinson and Associates, Inc.