

# SUITLAND PARKWAY

## Park History and Ecology

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Image Source: [Famartin, Wikimedia Commons](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Many DC-area residents know Suitland Parkway only as a convenient (and often congested) thoroughfare between eastern DC and Prince George's County. But the parkway and its associated stretches of forest have a long and intriguing history. This paper explores the area's history, and argues that the parkway's forests are not just mere woods by the highway, but a "nature preserve" in their own right.

### **PART 1: BARRY FARMS (1867-1900)**

To grasp the complete story of Suitland Parkway, one ought to understand the neighborhood that came before. The Parkway runs through Barry Farm, a neighborhood steeped in Black achievements. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau was established to provide means of survival to newly freed slaves. Bureau Commissioner Oliver Otis Howard (founder and namesake of Howard University) purchased 375 acres of farmland in southeast Washington in 1876 for about \$50,000 from farmer James D. Barry.<sup>1</sup> The Bureau divided the land into one-acre parcels and sold them to former slaves at prices between \$125 and \$300. In addition, they provided lumber to the new landowner so a home could be constructed.<sup>2</sup>

Barry Farm grew rapidly. By 1869, over 260 families had purchased property and constructed homes.<sup>3</sup> The community's size, exceeding most others established by the Bureau, enhanced its desirability. Some families used spare acreage to raise a garden or livestock, while others made money by selling parts of their land.<sup>4</sup> The area became known as a mecca for Black

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<sup>1</sup> John Muller, *Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.: The Lion of Anacostia* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012), pp. 95-6.

<sup>2</sup> Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. *Before the Anacostia Station: A Look at Indian Life and the Barrys Farm Settlement*.

<sup>3</sup> Muller, 2012, pp. 96.

<sup>4</sup> WMATA.

Americans to live a life of self-sufficiency in an idyllic rural setting. General Howard himself had high praise for the neighborhood, remarking that “everyone who visited Barry Farm and saw the new hopefulness with which most of the dwellers there were inspired, could not fail to regard the entire enterprise as judicious and beneficent.”<sup>5</sup> Notable early residents of Barry Farm included Charles Douglass, second son of Frederick Douglass, who worked to eliminate racial barriers to teaching in DC, and Solomon Brown, the Smithsonian Institute’s first Black employee and later member of the DC House of Delegates.<sup>6</sup>

## **PART 2: PARKWAY DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION (1900-Present)**

Around the turn of the 20th century, the City Beautiful movement – a school of thought positing that social ills could be reduced and civic pride improved through use of comprehensive urban planning – became popular with leading city officials.<sup>7</sup> In DC, it led to the McMillan Plan, a 1901 Senate Park Commission report that called for the creation of a series of “parkways.” A parkway is a roadway that attempts to balance scenic enjoyment of the landscape with efficient transportation - a novel concept at the time.<sup>8</sup> While the McMillan Plan did not mention the construction of Suitland Parkway, the desire to preserve parkland across all regions of DC had been seeded.

Meanwhile, amid a proliferation of military personnel in the area, urban planners in the 1930s saw the need for a major road connecting Bolling Air Force Base, on the Potomac in southern DC, with Camp Springs Field (now Joint Base Andrews), in Prince George’s County,

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<sup>5</sup> Muller, 2012, pp. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Shoenfeld, S. (2019, July 19). *The history and evolution of Anacostia’s Barry Farm - D.C. policy center*. D.C. Policy Center. <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/barry-farm-anacostia-history/>

<sup>7</sup> Yalzadeh, I., & Blumberg, N. (2014, June 21). *City Beautiful movement*. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/City-Beautiful-movement>

<sup>8</sup> Krakow, J. L. (1990). *Washington D.C. Area Parkways: Historic Resource Study*. National Park Service.

Maryland. In 1937, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) started to draft a plan for a parkway, but the impending war shifted priorities elsewhere, and the plan was put on the backburner.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, Barry Farm was going through changes of its own, as government agencies began eyeing its prime location for acquisition and development. With Black families excluded from new housing developments in DC, many were searching for affordable homes. In 1941 and 1942, the National Capital Housing Authority made plans to squeeze in a dense housing development at Barry Farms, condemning 23 existing homes to make room. The Authority rehoused only 11 of the 23 displaced families; the rest were deemed ineligible. Barry Farm Dwellings, opened to the public in November of 1942.<sup>10</sup>



*Fig. 1: 1934 map of property values in DC [detail], showing part of the Barry Farm neighborhood. The area between Sheridan Road and Nichols Avenue (to the left of Sheridan) was condemned to make way for Suitland Parkway.  
(Source: DC Public Library Archives, City & Regional Maps Collection)*

That same year, the NCPC dusted off its 1930s plans for a new parkway to connect southern DC with Prince George’s County; the project was now deemed a “war necessity.” This classification allowed the Roosevelt administration to directly fund the road’s completion, meaning the NCPC would not have to use its own funds.

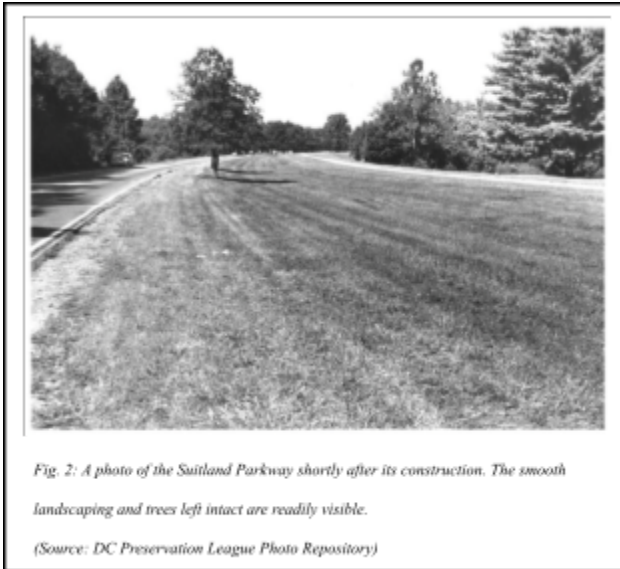
Concrete plans were finalized over the summer, and Colonel J.J. O’Brien was appointed chief land acquisition officer. While pledging

<sup>9</sup> Krakow, 1990, pp. 91.

<sup>10</sup> (1944.) *Report of the National Capital Housing Authority for the Ten-Year Period 1934-1944*, pp. 57.

to condemn as few properties as possible for the road, to avoid evicting “people of small incomes,” the War Department nevertheless cut a broad swath through Black neighborhoods, displacing over 600 people and destroying nearly 100 homes, mostly in the Barry Farm.<sup>11</sup> The block between Nichols Avenue and Sheridan Road alone lost 87 houses accommodating 112 families, many of whom were moved into the newly completed Barry Farm Dwellings.<sup>12</sup> In all, 341 tracts of land totaling 127.186 acres were acquired for the project.<sup>13</sup>

The road was christened the “Suitland Parkway” after its terminus in Suitland, Maryland,



*Fig. 2: A photo of the Suitland Parkway shortly after its construction. The smooth landscaping and trees left intact are readily visible.*  
(Source: DC Preservation League Photo Repository)

and construction began in September of 1943, performed by the Public Roads Administration. The War Department (today’s Department of Defense) was the road’s initial owner.

Beyond the general parkway design principles that attempt to blend ease of commute with enjoyment of scenery, an additional wartime justification for the

Suitland Parkway was to provide an expedient evacuation route out of DC. Because the road follows the landscape’s natural contours, it was thought that enemy aircraft would have a harder time targeting its users. Thus the Parkways’ meandering curves boosted defense while simultaneously increasing natural appeal. During construction, attempts were made to ensure landscaping preserved the quality of the terrain. Large trees in the median strip were allowed to remain standing, and thick wooden fences were used as guardrails to give a rustic feel.

<sup>11</sup> Krakow, 1990, pp. 94-5.

<sup>12</sup> (1944.) *Report of the National Capital Housing Authority for the Ten-Year Period 1934-1944*, pp. 116.

<sup>13</sup> Krakow, 1990, pp. 105.

Embankments were covered with topsoil and Italian ryegrass for a natural aesthetic. There were even plans at one point to use unpaved lanes at the edge of the parkway for a horse trail.<sup>14</sup>

Suitland Parkway opened to the public in December of 1944, though construction was not yet completely finished. The end of World War II made completion a lower priority; it would not be completed as planned until 1996, when the easternmost section was widened to four lanes.

Being the direct route to an important military airport, the Suitland Parkway is still widely used for official business. As NPS researcher Jere Krakow remarks in his resource study of the road, “It has provided many foreign dignitaries with their first glimpse of the nation’s capital, albeit an inauspicious one with traffic delays caused by several at-grade crossings...”

After World War II, the War Department felt upkeep of the Suitland Parkway was becoming burdensome, especially as it was being used more like a regular thoroughfare than as an evacuation route or designated military road. In 1949, therefore, legislation was passed transferring its ownership to the National Park Service. The NPS already owned and managed other scenic roads around Washington, such as the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and George Washington Parkways, and was viewed as better equipped to manage such a road.<sup>15</sup>

In 1972, ownership of part of the parkway was transferred yet again, when the National Park Service transferred jurisdiction over the majority of the Suitland Parkway within DC (managed as “Reservation 675”) to the District’s Department of Transportation (DDOT). This transfer reflected a broader trend: throughout the early 70s, the National Park Service handed over management rights of various lands to the District in preparation for DC’s Home Rule.<sup>16</sup> The NPS still does manage a small section of the Parkway where it crosses Reservation 519, a swath of land between St. Elizabeth’s Hospital and Fort Stanton Park that acts as a connector in

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<sup>14</sup> Krakow, 1990, pp. 101-102.

<sup>15</sup> Krakow, 1990, pp. 99.

<sup>16</sup> This is discussed in more detail in the author’s paper on the history of Oxon Run Parkway.

the ring of Fort Circle Parks of outer DC.<sup>17</sup> The Parkway's Maryland section is also still managed by the NPS.

While the NPS left administration of the Parkway in DC largely up to local government, it was not averse to intervening on occasion when they saw fit. In 2011, a billboard advertising a local residential community was put up along the road. An indignant Park Service wrote to DDOT that advertisements were an inappropriate use of the Suitland Parkway and a direct violation of the basic parkway principle of unspoiled natural recreation.<sup>18</sup> The billboard came down shortly thereafter.

In 1995, Suitland Parkway was named to the National Register of Historic Places on the grounds that it represents “distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction,” a recognition that the “City Beautiful”-era merging of form and function in road building is a piece of history worthy of preservation in its own right.<sup>19</sup>

### **PART 3: THE SUITLAND PARKWAY WOODS**

Because Suitland Parkway was acquired and constructed for transportation, most of its historical coverage and documentation focuses on the roadway, while comparatively little has been written about the natural landscape preserved on either side of it. Yet those strips of green constitute a significant urban forest.

Before the road was constructed, most undeveloped land in the area was hilly hardwood forest, covered in upland trees typical of the region, such as oak, beech and tulip trees.<sup>20</sup> A small

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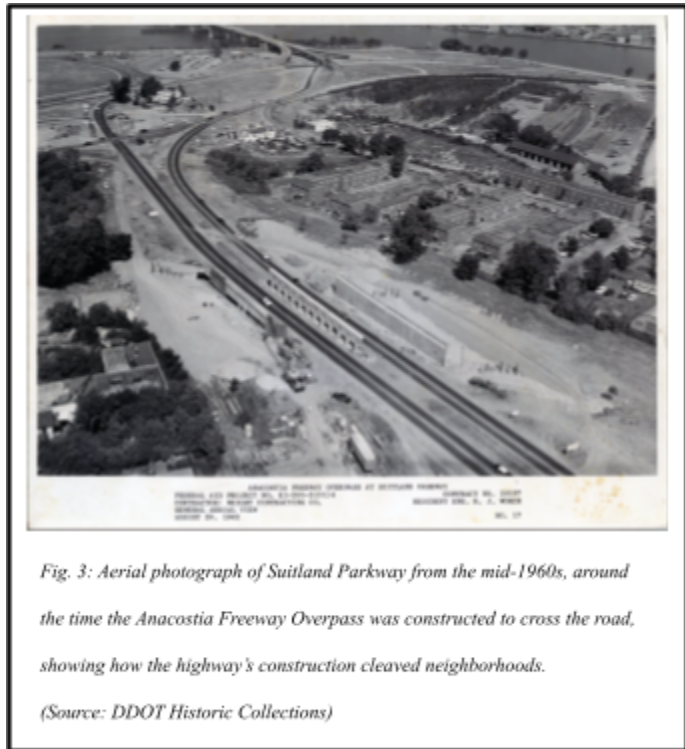
<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior. (2009, July). Reservation List- The Parks of the National Park System, Washington DC.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Freeman, Assistant Regional Director, NPS National Capital Region, to DC Department of Sanitary Engineering; National Capital Parks East Headquarters Archives

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior. (1995.) National Register of Historic Places Registration Form- PG 76A-22.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

tributary of the Anacostia River known as the Stickfoot Branch flowed through the area, its path roughly corresponding with that of the Parkway. At what is now Anacostia Station on the Metro's Green Line, a Piscataway village known as Nacotchtank thrived before colonization, its location likely chosen for the Stickfoot Branch's ample supply of freshwater and stones to make tools with. It's believed that Native Americans visited the area intermittently for more than six thousand years.<sup>21</sup>



*Fig. 3: Aerial photograph of Suitland Parkway from the mid-1960s, around the time the Anacostia Freeway Overpass was constructed to cross the road, showing how the highway's construction cleaved neighborhoods. (Source: DDOT Historic Collections)*

Stickfoot Branch is now largely channeled underneath Southeast DC, although a small portion near the Garfield Heights neighborhood remains above ground. This section is severely polluted and eroded, leading the DC Department of the Environment to propose in 2022 terracing the streambed with rocks to stem erosion.<sup>22</sup> As of summer 2023, construction had yet to start, but DC Department of the Environment specialist Josh Burch reported that the project will soon be put out to bid.

Because the Parkway is built through a natural valley, its wooded flanks slope upwards, sometimes steeply. In places, the valley is so narrow and the hills so steep that the road seems to

<sup>21</sup> Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. *Before the Anacostia Station: A Look at Indian Life and the Barrys Farm Settlement*.

<sup>22</sup> DC Department of Energy & Environment. (2021, February 24.) *Stickfoot Branch Stream Restoration Project: Public Scoping Virtual Presentation*.



disappear. At the top of these hills are residential neighborhoods that blend apartment buildings, row houses, and older single-family homes. At apartment complexes including Rockburne Estates, Stanton Glen, the Vistas, and Parkway Overlook, residents have long thrown trash from windows and balconies over fences into the woods. In 2021 Ward 8 Woods was contracted by the then management of Stanton Glen to clean its fencelines. Over the course of the month, they removed more than 20,000 pounds. In places the trash was piled several feet deep. The problem continues despite Ward 8 Woods's advocacy efforts; the management of most complexes refuse to take responsibility.

Elsewhere, secluded dead-end streets have all manner of household items, furniture, car parts, and construction materials can be found on the ground. Invasive English ivy, princess trees, and multiflora rose take advantage of these disruptions to grow rampant, undermining the area's diversity of native plants and animals.

The Ward 8 Woods Conservancy has taken on the massive task of removing these decades' worth of accumulated trash and beating back the advance of invasive species, clearing more than 100 tons to date and cutting vines from more than a thousand trees. This work has been done with funds from the DC Department of Energy and the Environment and private donors; there has been no meaningful support from DC Department of Transportation, the ostensible manager of the land.

### **PART 3: TRAILS**

Two recreation trails run alongside the Suitland Parkway: the paved Suitland Parkway Trail and the natural surface George Washington Carver Trail. The Suitland Parkway Trail runs for about 1.7 miles along the north side of the Parkway (between Pomeroy Road SE and the

DC-Maryland border) and is maintained by the DC Department of Transportation. It is used daily by bicyclists and pedestrians, and is patrolled by Trail Rangers from the Washington Area Bicyclists Association. The trail is poorly designed, running perilously close to the high speed car traffic through most of its length. It is also poorly maintained: the pavement is full of cracks and potholes, vegetation from the woods encroaches, and the litter covers the ground.

DDOT has drawn up plans for a comprehensive rehabilitation project to move the trail away from the highway and add barriers where topography prevents this.<sup>23</sup> Funding for the project was removed from DC's Fiscal Year 2024 budget at the initiative of Ward 8 Councilmember Trayon White, who successfully redirected the funds to recreation center projects.

Another recreational amenity adjacent to the Suitland Parkway is the George Washington Carver Trail, a 0.4-mile loop on NPS land behind the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum. Created in the 1990s by museum staff, the trail was named for Black agricultural scientist and naturalist George Washington Carver. A brochure distributed inside the museum provided a self-guided tour, with commentary about the African-American relationship to nature pegged to each of ten signposts. Museum staff eventually stopped maintaining the trail, and the brochure stopped being printed. In 2020, the Ward 8 Woods Conservancy assumed maintenance of the trail and, in 2021 debuted a new web-based tour (linked on the Conservancy's website) providing an introduction to forest ecology.

The Carver trail traverses a near-pristine area of upland forest sloping down to the Parkway. Overhead, the canopy is dominated by white and chestnut oak, and the sparse understory features mountain laurel and wineberry.

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<sup>23</sup> DC Department of Transportation. *Suitland Parkway Trail Rehabilitation Concept Engineering Project*.

## **PART 4: VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

Over a century ago, proponents of the City Beautiful movement saw the construction of new roads as a way to not only improve transit, but to increase enjoyment of the landscape. The Ward 8 Woods Conservancy seeks to recapture that vision now by creating a network of natural surface hiking trails traversing the varied scenery of the Suitland Parkway Woods.

In February 2021, Ward 8 Woods formally proposed the first new hiking trail in Ward 8 in a generation, tentatively named the Suitland Parkway Northside Trail. The trail would hug the sunny, south-facing hillside that rises above the westbound lanes, passing by rock outcroppings, up and down ravines, and over numerous streams. The trail would begin at the corner of Sheridan and Pomeroy Roads and travel east across Stanton Road and Alabama Avenue before terminating at Southern Avenue. The trail would parallel the paved Suitland Parkway bike trail and would also connect to the existing George Washington Carver Trail. A parallel trail on the south side of the Parkway could be added later to create a loop of more than four miles.

The trail would open these public lands up for safe and convenient hiking, running, dog walking, birdwatching. It would also give ready access to areas that will need long term work to eliminate invasive species and reestablish native ones.

## **APPENDIX: AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Any comprehensive research project leaves areas where further research would be beneficial, and this project is no exception.

To balance this project's history and analysis of the Suitland Parkway's construction and the neighborhoods it cut through, more could be researched and written on its natural ecosystems. The Anacostia Community Museum's records offer little background on the origins of the George Washington Carver Trail. A deeper dive into its history might tell when and how it was constructed and why it stopped being maintained.

Oral history is another methodology that could help us trace Suitland Parkway woods' history. The author collected oral testimony from a long-time resident for a companion paper on the Oxon Run Parkway, on types of activities enjoyed by kids of earlier generations in DC parklands. Similar recollections surrounding the Suitland Parkway woods might uncover new information and even bygone trails and activities.