



John C. Johnson, first black resident of the Lakeland community, is an unqualified friend.

# Urban Renewal and Lakeland

## *Black Community Eyes Future With Hope, Fear*

By Eugene L. Meyer  
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In 1901, John C. Johnson, who was half-Indian, half-black, committed the audacious act of buying property in an all-white Maryland neighborhood of large, luxurious homes near five man-made lakes. He would sit up all night with a shotgun to protect his home from resentful whites.

The area was called Lakeland, and it was located in what was more than four decades later to become the city of College Park.

Today, 75 years after Johnson broke the color bar, Lakeland endures—a closely-knit all-black community of 150 families living in a semirural enclave hidden across Rte. 1 from the University of Maryland.

In the often rootless, transient Washington area, where people frequently do not know their next door neighbors, Lakeland stands out as an oasis of familiarity. It is a place where neighbors often are relatives, and the generation gap is likely to be the distance of a few houses or a block. It is a place to which people who have left wish to return. It is home.

But it is a home in the throes of a remodeling job, and the uncertainties of "urban renewal" have evoked a mixture of fear and hope among its residents.

The hope is that the long-awaited redevelopment will end the threat of flooding from nearby Paint Branch and Indian Creek and assure future

housing for children and grandchildren. The fear is that Lakeland will be transformed by strangers, new low-income residents who will bring crime and other ills of an impersonal urban society.

Dora Robinson, 83, still lives in the two-bedroom bungalow she bought in 1933 after her husband died. She was from Centee, near Laurel, but she had friends and two brothers in Lakeland. "I was glad to be near by relatives," she recalled last week. She still is. Her son, Leon, 64, lives around the corner.

In the 1890s, a white developer named Edward Newman subdivided Lakeland, built streets, installed gas lights, erected a town hall, a general store and several large homes soon occupied by whites.

Around the turn of the century, the Baltimore Gold Fish Company built and stocked five lakes, near the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad right-of-way. The largest, Lake Artemesia, survives, across the tracks from where Agnes and George Henry Gross live.

George Gross was born in Lakeland 72 years ago and brought his bride here from Muirkirk in 1925. "It was beautiful around here, then," he said. "Everybody could go swimming. There was ice skating all winter."

Like many Lakeland residents, George Gross worked in a menial job at the nearby university which he, as a black person, could not attend. He

retired in 1970 after 45 years of washing dishes and waiting on tables. In the early days, old residents recall, the university also was the source of troublesome bulls and cows loosed on Lakeland by students who sought to scare the people.

As blacks moved in from the swampy edges of the town and the stream banks, the whites withdrew. There were a number of mysterious fires, and the belief persists that the whites burned down their own homes, like a people in retreat trying to leave nothing for the invading enemy.

"As the colored people came in, the things that were in here gradually went out," said Ruth Taylor Lancaster, 68, unofficial Lakeland historian and John C. Johnson's sole surviving child.

"We had a railroad station and a post office. We had a town hall. That was burned down mysteriously," Mrs. Lancaster said. Trolley tracks cut through the town. They, too, are long gone.

"There were no streets, just dirt roads. One or two people in here had a car," Mrs. Lancaster said. Today, most but not all the streets are paved. "We didn't have street lights," she said. "We had two churches, and that, of course, was the main enjoyment."

There was also Mack's "park," the lawn used for weekend dances next to the large house owned by J.W.C.

See LAKELAND, B4, Col. 4

# Community Eyes An End To Area's Annual Flood

LAKELAND, From B1

Mack, who became Lakeland's first City Councilman and proprietor of Mack's Market, which burned down only last summer.

Some of the homes were large ones formerly owned by whites. Others—like the one in which Ruth Lancaster lived—were smaller ones built by blacks. "We were poor, but I didn't know it," she said. "My father raised a garden. My stepmother did all the sewing, so I had a Sunday dress and Sunday shoes."

She left Lakeland, to attend college and then to live in Philadelphia for a few years, but she returned to live on the same lot John C. Johnson bought in 1901. There's a new brick rambler there now.

There are several other brick ramblers and some larger homes today in Lakeland, interspersed with older dwellings, some dilapidated, some not.

There is a new school, Paint Branch Elementary, built in 1972. It has 317 white pupils who are bused in and 168 black, no more than half from Lakeland.

"They were busing colored children all along, from as far away as Laurel,

when I was going to high school," said Mary Hollomand, a 45-year-old Lakeland native whose two children attend Paint Branch.

Mary Hollomand went to the segregated Lakeland High School, which was built in 1928 and now is used for special education by the county. Leonard J. Smith, an Agriculture Department research technician and long-time community activist, graduated from the high school in 1944. "At that time, they gave you a certificate that said, 'The Lakeland Colored High School,'" he recalled with lingering dismay. Before 1928, the closest high school for blacks was in Upper Marlboro, 15 miles distant.

Lakeland's first school, built in 1903, was a one-room building. Its second, two-room school was built in 1917 and named after John C. Johnson. It is still standing—part church and part apartment—across the railroad tracks.

"As I got older and started to compare, I realized we were getting a second-class education," said Shirley Queen, the 38-year-old granddaughter of Dora Robinson. "But at the time, I wasn't aware of it. There was warms in the old (two-room) school. We



DORA ROBINSON

... glad to be near relatives



Mary Hollomand, bottom left, is seen in 1947 graduating class. She still lives in Lakeland development.

See LAKELAND, B5, Col. 1

# Lakeland Looks at Urban Renewal

would all huddle around the old pot belly stove."

Spring floods in Lakeland were a way of life. Hurricane Agnes in 1972 helped speed approval of a controversial flood control plan opposed by environmentalists who argued that people simply shouldn't live there. The Lakelanders prevailed, and the Army Corps of Engineers since has widened and straightened both creeks and cleared away some of the vegetation from their banks.

Landfill to further protect the town from flooding is the costliest item in the urban renewal plan that began in the 1960s and has yet to result in any visible changes.

In the intervening years, almost all of the allotted \$5 million has been spent buying up properties. Work on the first tangible renewal—new curbs, sidewalks and street paving—is scheduled to begin in the spring. The city has asked for \$1.9 million more federal dollars, although completing the original plan would require \$6 million to \$7 million more.

A 1965 study called the Lakeland community "not only . . . a social liability but an economic one," in justifying the need for urban renewal. With inflation, however, planners have been looking at economies that would cut the costs. The most controversial



LEONARD SMITH

is fewer residents, Lakeland more higher-density apartments, with a majority going to the poor and moderate-income. "If they bring the high-rises in, we'll have all types of people . . . people that's . . . well, crime," worries Agnes Gross. "Most places where urban renewal has been they bring in these high-rise apartments, the community deteriorates."

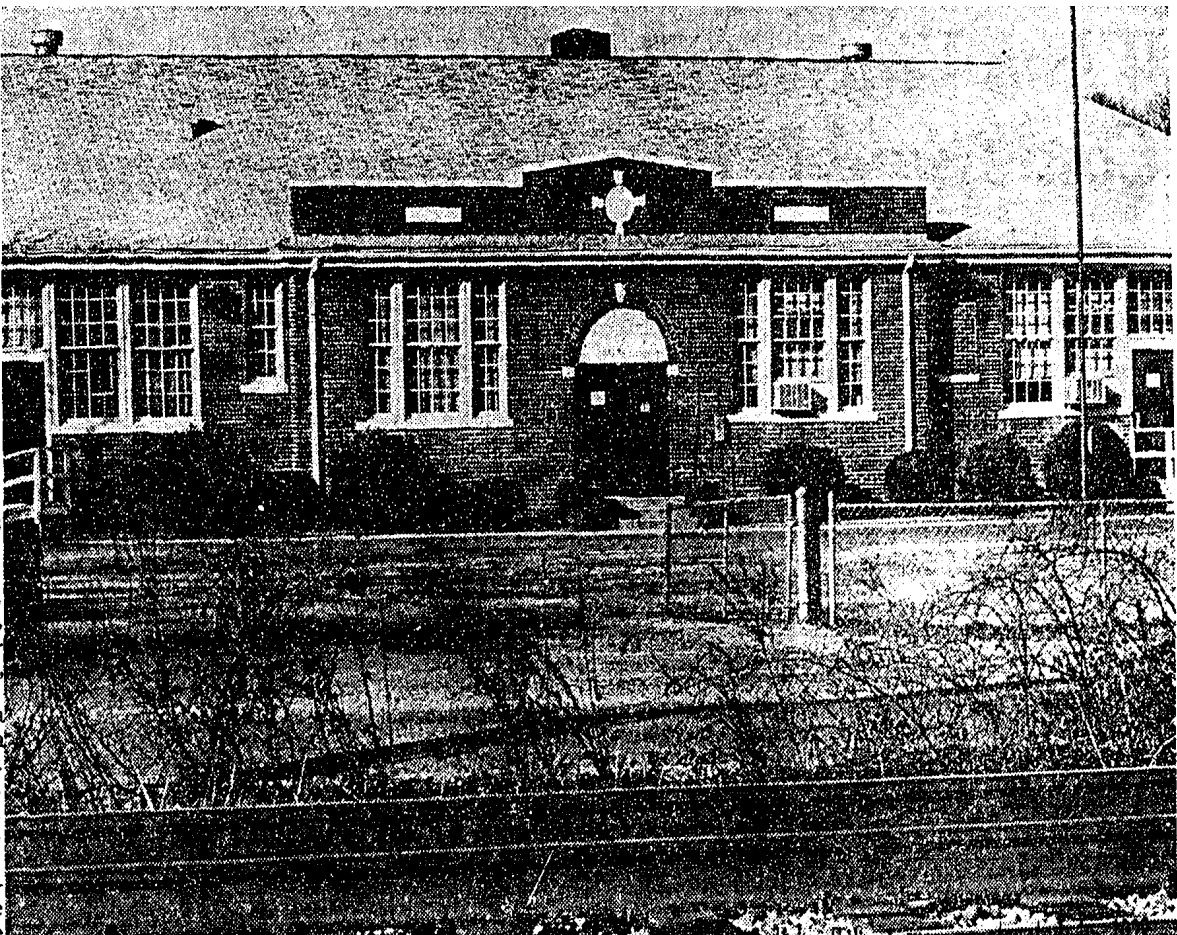
Edwin V. Thilly, city department director, insists the apartments would be no taller than medium-rise. He speaks excitedly of "the marketability" of the Lakeland urban renewal site. "It's on Rte. 1. There will be no problem selling or renting," he said.

Or getting major developers to bid on the job. Four asked to be designated tentative developers this fall, and one is about to be selected to come up with a final plan. The community favors one developer while the City Council appears to be leaning to another. The story of Lakeland is far from over.

There are 50 families whose homes are now owned by the city and slated for demolition. They will have to be rehoused. There are 14 more families, those who moved out before 1970, when urban renewal first was approved. Many of them want to return, too, if there is housing for them.

One of these is Shirley Queen, Dora Robinson's granddaughter and a writer-editor in a U.S. government public information office. She left Lakeland in 1967 and now lives in Greenbelt with her 19-year-old daughter.

"It's always been my dream to return," she said last week. "Let me leave you with this: I want to come back because it's a warm, beautiful community with warm, beautiful people."



The old Lakeland High School, now used by the county for special education. School was constructed in 1970. By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post