

“Federation Corner” column
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Birth pains of the Federation

By Charles Wolff

This ends the tale of the birth of the Montgomery County Civic Federation. The other segments (Sentinel, [7 May](#) and [21 May 2015](#)) told of the “belt line” freight railroad proposed to encircle most of D. C. Two very influential belt line opponents were Col. E. Brooke Lee, a developer and political figure, and Oliver Kuhn, news editor of Washington’s Evening Star. (Citations to the Star are in square brackets.)

THE FIRST MASS MEETING

At the height of vacation season, Montgomery County citizens managed to hold a mass meeting at the invitation of the Bradley Hills Community League to formally react to the belt line. A crowd of 400 filled “a large assembly room” at the Montgomery Country Club. Washington’s Evening Star was a big help by prominently publicizing the meeting in advance [“Maryland Communities Fire First Gun Tomorrow Night”, 6 Aug 1925, p. 2]. Afterwards there was an extremely long, blow-by-blow report of what various speakers had said. [8 Aug 1925, p. 2]

Oliver Kuhn, a colorful speaker, recalled how property values fell due to other belt lines and said history “showed that property owners got out with the first announcement like rats running from a burning building”. He had brought a copy of the railroad’s petition to the PSC and “proceeded to tear it to pieces”. [8 Aug 1925, p. 2] Brooke Lee, by letter, recommended that rail and industrial development be confined to those areas where it had already started. The meeting voted to reject the belt line without a dissenting voice and formed a special committee including Mr. Kuhn to present their views to the Public Service Commission and to others.

In the next two weeks, documents of opposition were being prepared by, at least, the Town of Somerset, Glen Echo, the Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, Woodside Civic Association, Woodside Park, and North Woodside.

MCCF IS FORMED

Having shown overwhelming public opposition to the belt line, activists assembled in small groups where the idea took hold of a federation of civic groups to address affairs that affect the County as a whole. It should have “a number of standing committees” whose “duty will be to keep an eagle eye on every project” and on legislation so as to promptly handle those meriting federation attention. [11 Nov 1925, p. 11] Walter Tuckerman hosted a meeting at his home that drafted a constitution.

By mid-November they were ready to call a second mass meeting to form a federation to fight “attempts to industrialize the area” and to urge “developing the county into one of the most beautiful residential suburbs of the National Capital”. [17 Nov 1925, p. 22] The constitution was adopted and Maryland’s Secretary of State, Brooke Lee, “spoke highly of the great good “ an MCCF could do. He urged cooperation between farm and town interests and said “the influence which we will have ... will undoubtedly be in direct proportion to the extent and value of our proposal”. [20 Nov 1925, p. 16]

The Montgomery County Civic Federation was fully born on November 30, 1925 in Takoma Park when delegates from 18 civic associations elected Oliver Kuhn of Alta Vista as the first MCCF president and Frank Hewitt of Silver Spring as vice president. President Kuhn stressed that MCCF must be nonpolitical and said it was "formed of both Republicans and Democrats, ... acclaimed by Socialists and indorsed by Prohibitionists". The Evening Star printed pictures of six elected officers. [1 Dec 1925, p. 4]

EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF MCCF

From the start a strong committee structure was built in to fully study issues before presenting them to all delegates. Initial concerns of members were zoning, police and fire protection, and poor road restoration by WSSC after laying pipes. Areas west of Rock Creek had no local fire protection. Magnanimous crews from D. C. were putting out some of their fires for free. MCCF stimulated our localities to seek better fire solutions. [13 Jul 1926]

The MCCF prepared an extensive study of the legal basis of zoning for presentation to the state legislature from which they would seek enabling authority for zoning in Montgomery County.

Only two years after its birth, the MCCF and the business community achieved the creation of the Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC). One year later they obtained the first county zoning law, applying to southern areas.

There's one thing we've lost since then. They had a spirit for making Washington and its suburbs the finest-looking capital in the world. In 1925, that included its "beautiful boulevards leading into and out of the city". [2 Sep 1925, p.1 and p. 2] How sad to see some of our main roads today.

I have been a delegate to the MCCF for 25 years. With the normal ups and downs as officers change, the group still strives to uphold the original standards---a nonpartisan federation of civic groups from all over the county, identifying issues of countywide significance, considering them in committee, deciding their fate in the full assembly of delegates, and then lobbying official bodies to act in the broad public interest.