

A Brief History of Silver Spring

In 1840, Francis Preston Blair, along with his daughter Elizabeth, discovered a "mica-flecked" spring near Washington D.C. (Mica is a type of mineral that flakes easily and is known for its glittery silver color.) He liked the location so much that he bought the surrounding land and created a summer home for his family which he called "Silver Spring." The city of Silver Spring, Maryland took its name from Blair's estate. Acorn Park, tucked away in an area of south Silver Spring away from the main downtown area, is believed to be the site of the original spring.



Acorn Park in 1917– the acorn-shaped gazebo is visible at left

Blair Family History

Francis Preston Blair (April 12, 1791 – October 18, 1876) was an American journalist and politician. Francis Blair was father of Montgomery Blair, a member of President Lincoln's cabinet. Preston Blair's daughter, Elizabeth Blair, married Samuel Phillips Lee, third cousin of future Confederate leader Robert E. Lee, and gave birth to a boy, Francis Preston Blair Lee. The child would eventually become the first popularly elected Senator in United States history.

Silver Spring Grows

The early 20th century set the pace for downtown Silver Spring's growth. E. Brooke Lee and his brother, Blair Lee I, founded the Lee Development Company, whose Colesville Road office building remains a downtown fixture. In the early 1900's, Washington trolley service on Georgia Avenue (present-day Maryland Route 97) provided transportation through the city. The trolleys stopped running for a period of time, but were rebuilt again in 1948 with additional lanes for automobile traffic, opening the areas to the north of Silver Spring to suburban development. The Trolley Museum on Bel-Pre Rd. is now home to many of these original trolleys.

Takoma-Silver Spring High School, built in 1924, was the first high school for Silver Spring. The community's rapid growth led to the need for a larger school. In 1935, when a new high school was built at Wayne Avenue and Sligo Creek Parkway, it was renamed Montgomery Blair High School. The school remained at that location for over sixty years, until 1998, when it was moved to a new, larger facility at the corner of Colesville Road and University Boulevard. The former high school building became a combined middle school and elementary school.

The Silver Spring Shopping Center and Silver Theatre were completed in 1938. The shopping center was unique because it was one of the nation's first retail spaces that featured a street-front parking lot. Until that time, stores were built so that merchandise was displayed in windows closest to the street so that people could see it; the shopping center broke those rules.

By the 1950s, Silver Spring was the second busiest retail market between Baltimore and Richmond, with the Hecht Company, J.C. Penney, Sears, Roebuck and Company, and a number of other businesses. In 1954, after standing for over a century, the Blair mansion "Silver Spring" was torn down and replaced with the Blair Station Post office. In 1960, Wheaton Plaza (later known as Westfield Wheaton), a shopping center several miles north of downtown Silver Spring opened, and captured much of the town's business. The downtown area soon started a long period of decline.

Washington Metro rail service into Washington, D.C. helped breathe life into the region starting in 1978 with the opening of the Silver Spring station on the Metro Red Line. By the mid-1990s, the Red Line continued north from the downtown Silver Spring core, entering a tunnel just past the Silver Spring station and running underground to three more stations, Forest Glen, Wheaton and Glenmont.

Silver Spring Now

At the beginning of the 21st century, downtown Silver Spring began to see the results of redevelopment. Several city blocks near City Place Mall were completely reconstructed to accommodate a new outdoor shopping plaza called "Downtown Silver Spring." New shops included national retail chains such as Whole Foods Market, Regal Theatres, Ann Taylor Loft, DSW Shoe Warehouse, Office Depot, and Pier 1 Imports, as well as many restaurants, including Macaroni Grill, Panera Bread, Red Lobster, Cold Stone Creamery, Fuddruckers, Potbelly, Baja Fresh, and Chick-fil-a. In addition to these chains, Downtown Silver Spring is home to a wide variety of family-owned restaurants representing its vast ethnic diversity. In 2003, Discovery Communications completed the construction of its headquarters and relocated to downtown Silver Spring. The same year also brought the reopening of the Silver Theatre, as AFI Silver. Development continues with the opening of new office buildings, condos, stores, and restaurants. In 2005 Downtown Silver Spring was awarded the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence silver medal.