

Rock Creek Woods: A Walking Tour of a Mid-Century Modern Gem

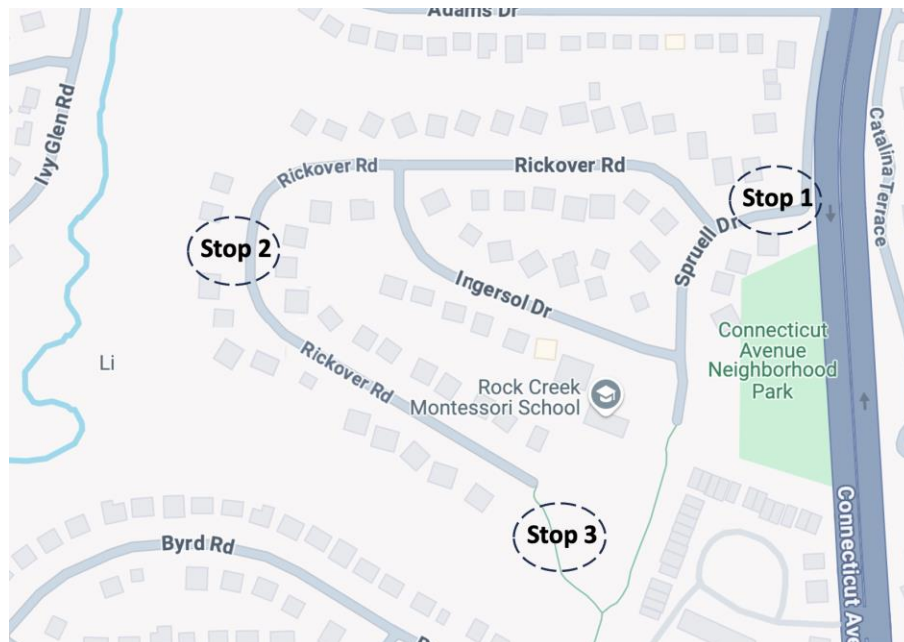
Explore the history and architecture of this unique neighborhood in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Introduction

Rock Creek Woods is a neighborhood of 76 single-family homes in Montgomery County, Maryland, designed by renowned architect Charles Goodman in the late 1950s. The neighborhood is a showcase of mid-century modern design, featuring open floor plans, large windows, and natural materials. The homes are nestled among rolling hills and mature trees, creating a harmonious blend of nature and architecture.

This walking tour will guide you as you walk through Rock Creek Woods. You will learn about the history of the neighborhood, Goodman's vision, and the efforts of the residents to maintain and enhance the community connection of Rock Creek Woods. The tour will cover about 1-1.5 miles with several small hills.

The tour will begin and end at the Rock Creek Woods entrance sign (Stop 1) on the Connecticut Avenue Service Road, at the intersection with Spruell Drive. You are welcome to walk down Rickover Road or Ingersol Drive to reach Stop 2. As you are walking down to stop 2, keep an eye out for the home models described in the text. Stop 3 is along a paved wooded path in the woods which will take you back to the original starting location if you take a left back towards Spruell Drive.



About the Architect: Charles Goodman

Goodman was one of the most influential and prolific modern architects in the Washington, D.C. area, designing over 1,000 homes and several public buildings in the mid-20th century. He was known for his innovative use of prefabricated materials, his attention to site planning and landscaping, and his integration of indoor and outdoor spaces. Goodman was inspired by the European avant-garde movements, such as Bauhaus and De Stijl, as well as by Frank Lloyd Wright and other American masters. He sought to create affordable and functional housing that would also express the spirit of the modern age.

Goodman's career spanned from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, and he worked on a variety of projects, ranging from airports and schools to churches and embassies. Some of his notable works include the National Airport Terminal, the Alexandria Library, the River Park cooperative, and the Hollin Hills community.

Rock Creek Woods is exceptionally significant because it was built between 1958 and 1961, at the end of Goodman's merchant-builder phase, and epitomizes the apex of that part of his career. Rock Creek Woods embodies all the architectural and land planning features that were emblematic of his design ideals. At the time Rock Creek Woods was built, the subdivision received regional architectural and land planning awards, as well as national commendations and attention. Rock Creek Woods was his last major project in the DC area, and was completed in 1960.

Contrasting greatly with the image of suburbia as represented by Levittown, New York, Goodman succeeded in creating affordable housing that was not uniform, on land that was not flat, and for people who could not be stereotyped.

The Architecture:

The Goodman houses were early pioneers of the use of south-facing glass exposures with wide overhangs for passive solar energy, shade in summer, and sun in winter. Goodman's designs enabled merchant builders inexperienced in modern construction methods to construct creative and affordable housing in the difficult Contemporary idiom.

Rock Creek Woods' uncompromising Contemporary architecture, with grids of opaque and transparent modules, highlight all the features that make Goodman residences so distinctive: extensive use of glass, modular design, exposed window frames as structure, sculptural chimneys, expanses of warm-toned brick, and lack of decorative trim. Inside, the houses feature open and flexible floor plans, handled in a subtle way to expand the sense of space and volume.

Stop 1: The Rock Creek Woods Sign and Goodman's' Vision

The Rock Creek Woods sign is a replica of the original sign that was installed in 1959, when the neighborhood was first developed. The sign reflects the modern aesthetic of the neighborhood, as well as its connection to nature.

Charles Goodman's' vision for Rock Creek Woods: to create a community of modern and functional homes that blend with the natural surroundings. Goodman wanted to offer an alternative to the conventional and boring suburban houses that dominated the postwar housing market. He believed that modern architecture could improve the quality of life and foster a sense of community among the residents.

Goodman carried out not only the architectural designs but the site planning as well. His vision entailed houses embedded within the natural environment and, in the Rock Creek Woods subdivision, he retained the existing topography, specimen trees, and woodlands surrounding the area. Every house is individually sited according to the topography of the land and in relation to its neighbors. All houses have been carefully angled to the street, with some floor plans flipped, to preserve privacy and to maximize a southern exposure

With his merchant builder subdivisions, Goodman was the first architect to create affordable yet truly distinctive Contemporary houses and to individually angle these houses for privacy within "cultural naturalistic landscapes."

The Goodman Homes

Spread through the 74 homes are three basic house models, each of two stories, with liberal use of glass walls. A fourth model, with three stories, was used for two houses on lower Rickover Road. All houses were built with a living and dining room, family, or recreation room, three bedrooms, two baths, and with provision for a fourth or fifth bedroom and a third bath on the lower level.

Rock Creek Woods houses can be identified by their extremely large chimneys made of Cushwa brick, a brick made locally in Rockville, Maryland that comes in warm tones of rose and pinkish brown. These large brick expanses often pierce the eave line of the house and their white-painted wood skeleton walls, which are infilled alternately with glass or wood panels.

As you walk down towards Stop #2 see if you can identify which houses fall into the models Goodman designed. Notice many of the houses are mirror images of each other. This way Goodman was able to adjust the window locations and angles of each home to maximize spacing and privacy while citing each home into the natural landscape.

The "Starview" model

The "Starview" model (Goodman's plan BC-1D) is designed for ground that falls off in the back. This is a 38'- wide by 36'-deep house with three bedrooms and two baths on the upper level and a 24' or 36' recreation room on the lower level, along with an optional bath and one or two future bedrooms. One accesses the lower level by a transverse stair located off the entry. The kitchen is open to the entry on one side and is separated by a counter from the dining/living room on the other side.

The "Brookeview" model

The "Brookview" model houses, which sit on knolls, are accessed via a large ground-level entry/stair hall. On the ground floor are rooms dedicated to recreation, storage, and a future bedroom and bath. On the upper floor are the living room/dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and two baths. Goodman designated this plan type BC-2U.

The "Woodview" model

The "Woodview" model (Goodman's type BC-3U) houses feature split foyers. The entry is at the midpoint between stairs that go two ways: up to the living room, kitchen/dining room, three bedrooms, and two baths, and down to a recreation room and storage, with future bedroom and bath. These houses have cathedral ceilings and glass gables on the upper level. The kitchen is separated from the dining room/living room by a serving counter. This combined kitchen and family living space reveals that Goodman envisioned the "great room" as early as 1958.

Three story homes

Finally, the pair of three-story houses, sited on lots that descend steeply down a hillside, are set near St. Joseph's Branch and the section of Rock Creek Park situated behind lower Rickover Road. These feature the living/dining area and kitchen on the middle level, the bedrooms on the floor above, and recreation and utility rooms on the lowest level. This plan type was designated BC-4U by Goodman.

Stop 2: Nancys Garden and Sense of Community

One of the most distinctive aspects of Rock Creek Woods is its strong sense of community. This neighborhood is not just a collection of houses, but a close-knit community that values its history and its future. One example of these values is this garden. In the 1990s, the community built a memorial bench and "Nancy's Garden" on a vacant wooded lot, honoring a local resident and friend who had passed away. This same sense of community was also embedded in Goodman's original design. For example, you will notice that the homes lack a garage which may prevent neighbors from running into each other. Goodman's houses also exhibit the characteristic of "borrowed views," wherein one neighbor's yard merges with another to form the sense of a communal park.

Stop 3: Walking path through woods

As you proceed to loop back towards stop 1 where we started, you will take a short walk through the woods along a paved path. This path was originally designed to ensure that neighborhood school children could enjoy a safe and easy walk to school each morning and afternoon yet it also exemplifies the mid-century modern emphasis on harmony with nature. Goodman's vision produced a subdivision that has always had a strong sense of harmony with the outdoors including natural curvature of paths, natural hills, and an opening into shared space. The community worked together to plant and maintain forsythia along the wooded path and continues to maintain the area. Neighbors often run into each other as they meander through the woods for an early morning or evening walk.

[Along the walk back to the original starting location, consider the construction specifications of the homes you pass:](#)

Walls: In Goodman houses, foundation walls are concrete block. Houses are wood-framed according to modular determinations, but have brick veneer, wood siding, or window glazing as infill. The brick was often used brick, and later, brown, pinkish, or white brick. (There are a few rare houses that have portions of the wall devoted to concrete block panels for protection against heavy winds.) The siding was usually made from cypress, fir, or redwood.

Interiors: All Goodman builder houses feature the following interior design elements: 1) an open plan with furniture or a single wall plane intended to be used as dividers of space by function, 2) compact kitchens with metal cabinets, 3) "view walls," or window walls, that seemingly extend the house beyond its actual size 4) prominent hearths, 5) accent walls made of brick or wood (waxed pine, cypress, redwood, or wormy chestnut), 6) floors of asphalt tile usually in earthen tones, wood parquet, regular wood strips, or cork tile, 7), stock birch veneer doors, 8) ceramic tile baths, and 9) Kurt Versen lighting.

In the early 1950s, traditionally exterior materials moved to the inside of the house, highlighting a trend in design innovation and blurring the distinction between interior and exterior. Flagstone at the front door carried through and became the hearth material in most Goodman builder houses.

Thank you!

We hope you enjoyed this walking tour of Rock Creek Woods, and learned something new about the history and architecture of this unique neighborhood. Rock Creek Woods is a living example of the mid-century modern movement, and a testament to the vision and talent of Charles Goodman. Rock Creek Woods is also a vibrant and diverse community, where residents share a common bond and a respect for their environment. Rock Creek Woods is more than just a neighborhood, it is a lifestyle. Thank you for joining us, and we hope to see you again soon.

Additional reading material is provided below including details on the cost of the homes to the original buyers, Goodman's vision on the color palettes and an interview with an original owner.

Additional Reading Material:

Cost of homes

Goodman designed many of the houses for "future" bedrooms and storage in the lower level in order to lower the initial purchase price. That price, however, did include a Hotpoint range, wall oven, dishwasher, disposal, refrigerator, washer, and dryer. The Rock Creek Woods houses sold in the moderate price range. Prices varied from \$21,950 to \$25,000, depending on the model and the extras chosen.

Early brochures (April 1960) showed the cost of a fireplace at \$950, a recreation room and bedroom at \$1,100, and an extra bath at \$550. To put this in perspective, the average family in Montgomery County in 1959 had a \$9,345 income and lived in an \$18,000 home. At the time, the average cost of new houses was in the \$15,000 range in the Rockville area, \$27,000 in the Bethesda area. Every house was sited for a future patio. The roofs had a gable shape with self-sealing asphalt shingles. The original windows were fixed glass above with awning casements below.

Color palette

Historic documents show 78 crayon-on-trace drawings with Goodman's distinct color palettes for each individual house. The drawings show yellow, dark blue, white, green, and sky blue, among other colors, for the Masonite gables. One house was shown with Calvert rose walls, black gables, and grey for the front. The adjacent house was to have purple walls, sky blue gables, and star white trim. The next house was to have white walls, yellow gables, and black onyx roof trim.

Interview with Original Owners

The following is a lightly-edited transcript of a 2015 conversation with original owners:

Q: You were original homeowners in the Rock Creek Woods community. What was it like when you moved here?

Husband: Well, when we moved in it was all mud! Lower Rickover was nothing but a dirt road when we moved in with dust and mud everywhere from all the construction activity.

Not only was construction going on in our community there also was the construction of the close-by Connecticut Avenue extension. When we moved in our two young boys were fascinated by all the construction activity as well as all the earth-movers and trucks used in building the Connecticut Avenue extension.

Wife: Upper Rickover was the first section of Rock Creek Woods to be developed and some people had already moved in by the time we arrived. The houses on upper Rickover were already constructed and that part of the road was paved. But the further down Rickover you went the less the development and more construction activity.

Our house was just beginning to be built so the developer sent us to the neighbor's house at the corner of Rickover and Ingersol to see what our finished house would look like. We liked what we saw but more importantly we struck up a relationship with the neighbor that has lasted through the years. Even though they have since moved we continue to see them at least twice a month. Houses further down Rickover beyond our house hadn't been built yet.

Q: A neighbor once told me that there was a lot of construction going on when they moved here. One evening they strolled down to a site under construction and "borrowed" some cinder blocks for a bookcase they were building in their house.

Husband: The builder of the community bought a house at the top of Rickover in what is now the Kennedy's house. But people kept knocking on his door complaining that this or that didn't work or wasn't completed and would he please take care of it. I think he just got tired of it and eventually moved.

Wife: We originally came here by chance and were delighted with the fact that the community had an "open" housing policy and wasn't restricted unlike some other communities being built at that time that had whites-only policies. I can remember that there was a black family already living here when we moved in and several other black families have also lived here through the years.

We weren't going to buy a house in a segregated community. And that's also the reason why our children attended Green Acres School in North Bethesda. We weren't going to have our kids attend a segregated school. So, when the neighbors told us their children were also going to Green Acres, we agreed to take turns driving the kids to North Bethesda and the kids loved it.

Q: What was the social life like here in the early years of the community?

Wife: It gathered nice people, always special people. It was a real friendly, welcoming environment. A majority of the early residents were about the same age, just starting careers and many starting families just like us so there was a real community of interests. Children got along exceptionally well together and that formed even closer relationships between families.

It was a very interesting community. People were looking for what they referred to as “California-style” houses, the type that Goodman was building. Goodman said that he was building for millionaires but he also wanted to build a community affordable for young people.

The houses initially cost \$19,000 to \$20,000 and that was about all we could afford at that time. Houses with fireplaces installed cost a little more and ones with larger back yards, like ours, also cost a little more

It has been a wonderful experience living in this community. These modern-style houses with floor-to-ceiling windows seem to attract interesting people. We had really neat neighbors and interesting things to do in the community. You could do modern dance at the one neighbor and you could take cooking lessons at another house. And someone else taught painting and there were several pianists that gave lessons as well.

More About Charles Goodman:

Goodman was born on November 26, 1906 in New York City, the son of Polish immigrants. He, possibly the youngest of three or four children, began earning his own income by the age of 12 or 13, either required to do so financially or because he chose to take responsibility for his own upbringing. He began supporting himself by working as a golf caddy.¹¹ Leaving home in his teens, he made his way eventually to Chicago, but it is not known exactly where he lived during these years – perhaps with older siblings. What is known is that as the poor son of immigrants, Goodman felt a need to support himself and help support his family. Goodman’s experience as a caddy exposed him both to the upper classes of society and to the soothing effects of nature. This may have affected him as a designer, for in all his projects he sought to retain the natural terrain and its trees as much as possible.

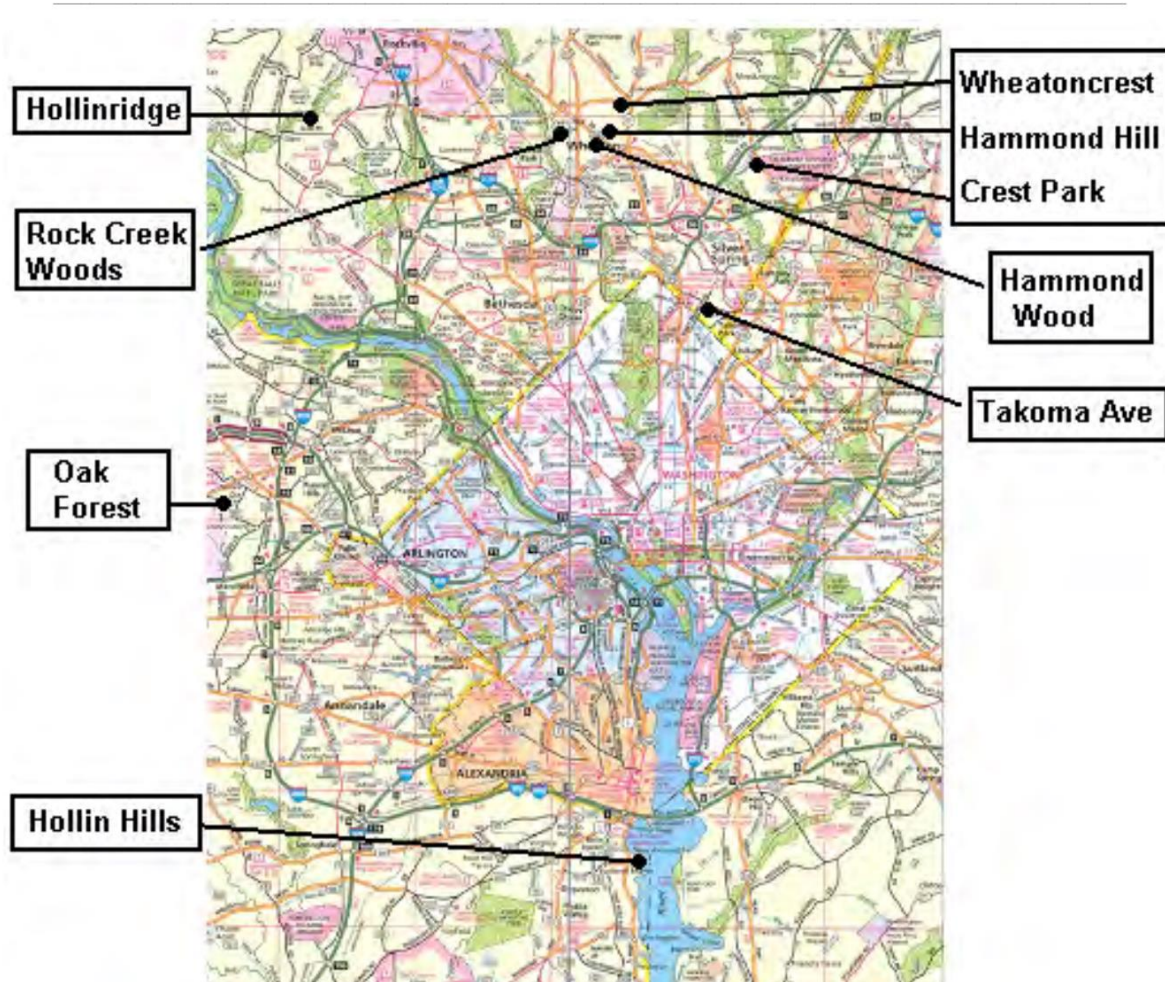
He earned a degree in architecture and like almost all unemployed architects during the Depression, Goodman went to work for the federal government in 1934. Goodman became known for stripping the surfaces of his buildings of excess ornamentation and simplifying fenestration

On the demise of Modern architecture:

In an interview for this nomination, Paul Burman, developer of Hammond Hill and Hammond Wood, recounted the difficulty of being a builder interested in Modern architecture. He noted the reason he stopped building Contemporaries in the mid-1950s was because of the near impossibility of receiving fair appraisals from FHA and VA underwriters. Goodman concurred in Burman’s assessment of the problem of narrow-minded appraisers. Christopher Martin noted that “Valuation depended more on the personality of the director and staff in each FHA district.”²⁰⁶ Goodman felt the obstacles firsthand, stating publicly that the federal valuation process took away any incentives that a builder might have to produce houses of better quality and design.²⁰⁷ Burman described the situation in Washington as

nostalgic, a town where the minute a brick Colonial was built – “no matter how dark the interior” – the appraisal figure went up.²⁰⁸ Another reason that Goodman’s houses may not have been as widely dispersed is that builders considered them difficult to build. Both Herschel Blumberg (Rock Creek Woods) and Oscar Margulies (Takoma Park) described Goodman’s houses as being tougher to construct than traditional houses because of the arrangement of joists and studs and, in the case of Takoma Park, the cantilever support. Part of the difficulty of building the houses undoubtedly lay with a workforce that was not used to exposed skeleton structures and infill wall panels. Harold Esten, Mr. Goodman’s former associate and a highly talented Modern architect in his own right, summarized what he felt were the four related factors behind the demise of Modern architecture in Washington: 1) lack of available financing, 2) preference for nostalgia, 3) conventional thinking, and 4) a general resistance to change.

Location of Goodman Merchant-Builder Houses



Resources:

https://apps.mht.maryland.gov/medusa/PDF/NR_PDFs/NR-1386.pdf

<https://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Subdivisions-and-architecture-Charles-Goodman-.pdf>

Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning, Historic Preservation Section