

History of Addressing

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The origin of the basic design features of the County's Grid Address Numbering System (for example, the use of hundred blocks, axial baselines, and address number parity) stems from the design of Washington, D.C. and addressing plans implemented there in the first decade of the twentieth century. These plans also were the basis for the street naming patterns found in many of the older towns within the Capital Beltway. The following discussion of the modern history of addressing in the County starts with an examination of Washington, D.C.'s history.

For much of its early existence, the Federal City of Washington relied on a traditional form of addressing, one more descriptive than exact. Even with the advantage of an orderly street grid and street naming system created by the original city plan by Pierre L'Enfant, later revised by Andrew Ellicott, address numbers did not come into use until around the 1880's. Prior to that, citizens located homes and places of business by using landmarks, local knowledge, and street names. A posted letter would typically be addressed to person with their name and a street name, or care of a certain post office. As an example, the following address in a newspaper advertisement of a new business (a cabinet and coffin maker) appeared in *The Whig Standard* (Washington, D.C.) on September 25, 1844:

“The subscriber’s establishment can be easily found by inquiring for the sign of the “First and Last,” 7th street, between G and H streets, near the Patent Office.”

Over time, more of the federal city was built up and people started to rely more on address numbers than on landmark descriptions. Development expanded into the original D.C. suburbs—still within the District boundaries. Prior to 1893 property owners in the District of Columbia, outside of the old federal city limits, were allowed to subdivide their holdings, dedicate streets and alleys, and give the streets names they wanted preferred. As a consequence, the subdivisions joined one another in such manner that a street would run through several subdivisions and have a different name as it passed through each. The confusion this created grew worse over time as development began to spread outward from the old federal city. Local post offices would assign address numbers as needed but without much forethought, sometimes resulting in duplicate house numbers located only blocks apart on the same street. Frustration built up over time with the number of misdelivered packages and letters, the time wasted as people tried to locate where they were delivered, and the risk to public and property safety as fire companies, ambulances, and doctors traveled to the wrong address. City commissioners ordered a plan to be drawn up to impose order on the federal city's suburban streets and

numbers and recommended a plan to extend the city's existing street naming and numbering system beyond Boundary Street (known as Florida Avenue today) into the northern suburbs.

The following timeline includes some highlights of this process, taken from newspaper articles of the time:

- **August 15, 1901** A schedule of new names for District streets beyond the city limits is published by the city engineer on behalf of the District Commissioners. This changed nearly 500 streets in over 100 subdivisions located within northeast D.C. but outside of the developed old federal city limits, north of Florida Avenue (Boundary Street). The streets and house numbers were changed to conform with an extension of the existing grid system as established by L'Enfant and Ellicott in the 1790s.
- **August 2, 1905** Years pass without action, largely due to public opposition about the selection of street names. Another schedule, a refinement of the 1901 list, is published for public comment.
- **January 7, 1906** Many of the street changes were made with more street sign changes to come. It helped that in the District, approval of such changes required an act of Congress, and so once accomplished a plan was difficult to challenge successfully. In addition to address renumbering, some of the changes were to street types—narrow, short streets called “avenue” were changed to “street”.

Residential development in Prince George's County in the 1880's and 1890's followed the railroad lines that helped to grow the communities in towns like Hyattsville, Riverdale Park, Berwyn Heights, College Park, Glenn Dale, and Bowie. In the early decades of the twentieth century, these and later communities continued to expand, as developers followed first by the new streetcar and electric railroad lines, then new streets, establishing more residential areas adjacent to the District. Eventually the same problems that had plagued the District in the 1890's appeared in the Maryland towns and communities near the District border. These towns had their own methods of addressing, and communities outside of town often had no system.

As the growing areas of development met each other, their streets would meet without a consistent or logical naming or numbering system. A street's name could change three or four times within a mile as it passed through various municipalities or subdivisions. A single street name might be in use in a dozen different parts of the County. Address number sequences would start and stop without warning or apparent reason. While most everyone could agree that the problem should be fixed, no one wanted to have their own street and house number changed. The problem was compounded when it pitted one town against another—which town's street should be renamed to

remove a duplication, and which town's street would remain untouched? The problem called for a greater authority once again to impose order.

A prescient article concerning the addressing problems in the Maryland suburbs appeared in *The Washington Post*.

“The land developers in Maryland are laying out roadways with complete disregard for the Washington street system. Instead of extending the Washington naming and numbering plan, they are opening thoroughfares running in odd directions with each subdivision having a separate street name and house number system (if any), which does not correspond to the other Maryland towns or to Washington. Nearly all of Washington's alphabetical and numbered streets come to dead ends at the District line, and the Maryland labyrinth of roadways begins. That will undoubtedly cause great confusion in the future when nearby Maryland is as compactly built up as the District now is.”

(Source: *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1937.
“Washington, the Planned City, Is Really a Collection of Old Villages: Small Towns Swallowed as D.C. Grew”.)

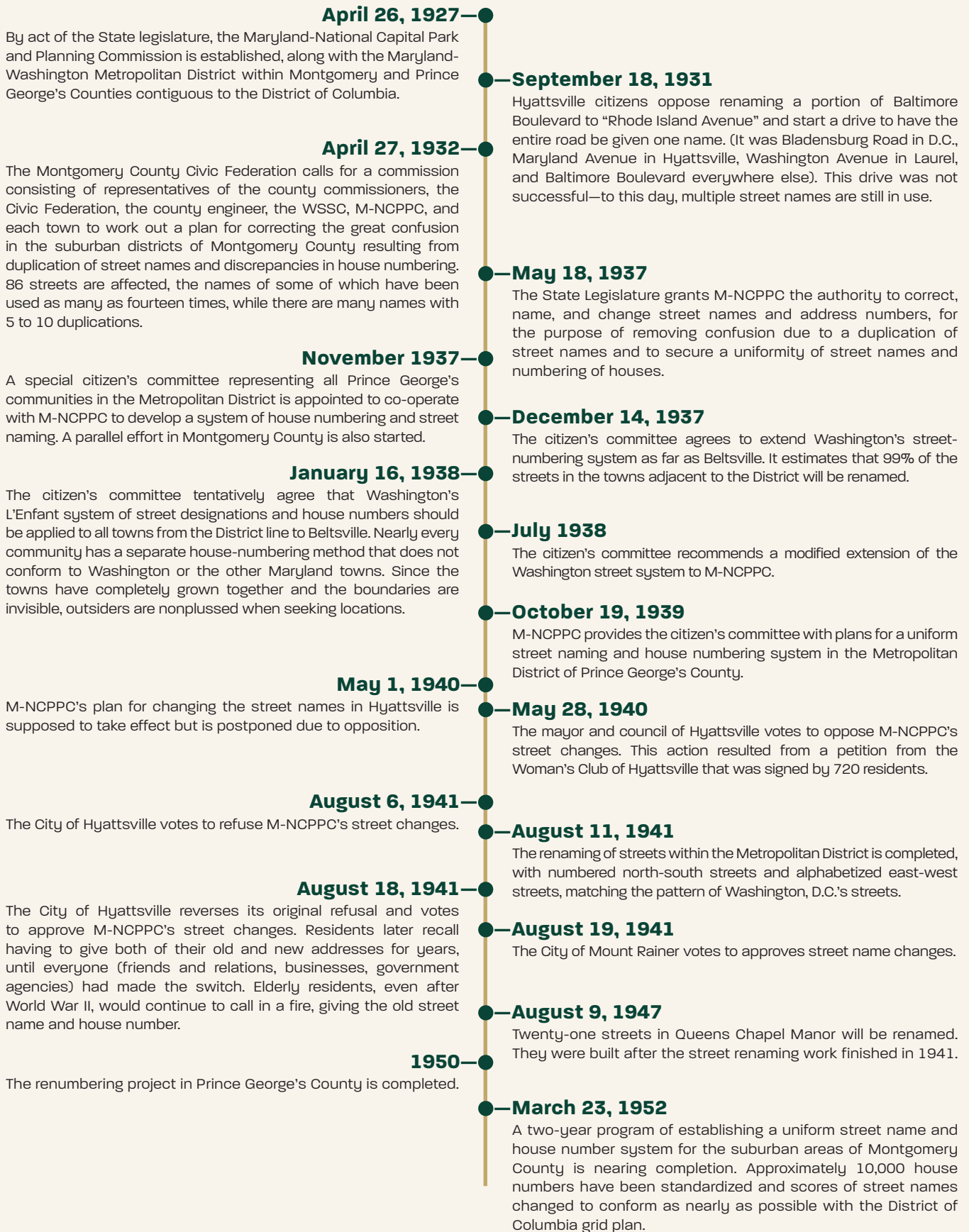
In response to the challenges created by unplanned development, the State of Maryland in 1927 created a bi-county agency to oversee planning and park development for an area named the Maryland-Washington Metropolitan District, an area comprising roughly the northern, inner half of the confines of today's Beltway. This agency, known as the Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), also had authority over the location of new highways and the extension of existing highways. In response to the addressing problems in the Maryland suburbs of the District of Columbia, the state gave M-NCPPC authority for addressing within the Metropolitan District in 1937 to expressly remove street name duplications and address number errors. This task would take the next thirteen years in Prince George's County, and fifteen years in Montgomery County to accomplish.

Many streets in both counties were renamed to conform with the street name patterning system used in northern areas of the District. North-south streets were assigned numeric street names according to their spatial locations relative to the District's grid system. East-west streets were assigned, from south to north, with the following pattern:

1. “A zone of streets named with letters of the alphabet, such as A Street, B Street, etc. (Washington, D.C. only),
2. Then alphabetized two-syllable names of famous Americans, such as Adams Street, and Bryant Street (this zone is located almost entirely in Washington, D.C., but some streets cross into Mount Rainier, Bladensburg, and Brentwood, Maryland).
3. The next zone consists of alphabetized three-syllable names of famous Americans, such as Allison Street, Buchanan Street, etc., (these names are used in Northern Washington D.C., and in Hyattsville, Riverdale, and Edmonston, Maryland and vicinity).
4. The next zone extending into Maryland contains the alphabetized names of colleges, Austin Road, Clemson Road, and so forth.
5. The next zone consists of alphabetized Native American names, such as Apache Street, Blackfoot Street, etc., and is in Maryland only, such as College Park.”

(Source: Planning Advisory Service, American Society of Planning Officials (1950). *Street Naming and House Numbering Systems* (Informational Report No. 13).)

The following timeline includes some highlights of this process, including some events leading up to 1937:



Even as this first effort to correct the addressing in the early suburbs and towns finished in 1950, development in the rest of Prince George's County continued. In response to the growing need for the services provided by M-NCPPC, the Metropolitan District area was expanded again and again. By 1962, a good portion of the County beyond the original Metropolitan District has the same problems caused by poorly coordinated street naming and address numbering. Another effort is started by M-NCPPC to solve these problems with some success.

The following timeline includes some highlights of this process, again taken from newspaper articles of the time:

1962—●

M-NCPPC staff led by Frank Young of the House Numbers and Street Names Division establish a Grid Address Numbering System for the Metropolitan District, and commence a second mass re-addressing project, moving from south to north.

September 8, 1973—●

The M-NCPPC reports having changed most of the major streets and address numbers in the southern part of the Prince George's county to comply with its system and announces that address numbers and street name changes will be coming to the areas of Fort Washington, Brandywine, Forest Heights, and District Heights. Implementation of the address system throughout the Metropolitan District is set to continue over the next several years, moving from south to north. About one-fifth of the Metropolitan District has yet to be incorporated into the Grid Address Numbering System.

November 17, 1977—●

Address changes proceed without much trouble south of Central Avenue. However, residents of towns like Cheverly are loudly opposed to the changes, and similar resistance is expected in other populous areas to the north like Hyattsville and Greenbelt. The Town of Cheverly faces a change to all of its address numbers, and a change to 33 of its street names. The citizens were particularly unhappy to learn that they (as all municipal residents would) have to pay for the changes in the street signs. The M-NCPPC reports that 772 street names and 45,197 address numbers have been changed since 1962, with about 400 more street name changes to go. Montgomery County also has a similar, though smaller, project in progress.

2021—●

To date, no major effort has been made since the 1970's to bring more of the County's streets and house numbers into conformity with M-NCPPC's address reference system.

●—**August 21, 1968**

About 13,000 addresses are reported to have been changed by this point. Due to their addresses having be renumbered and renamed over the past six years, thousands of voters in Prince George's County were accidentally dropped from the voter registration rolls and could not vote in the primary and general elections.

●—**August 4, 1977**

One fire official commented on the address problems caused by the patchwork pattern of urban development in both counties, "It sometimes looks like each developer didn't talk to the others on purpose."

●—**December 1977**

In response to a public outcry over M-NCPPC's ongoing project of removing duplicate street names and re-numbering addresses, six state legislators from Prince George's County take action. A bill they introduce is passed by the General Assembly and gives municipalities within the County veto power over any proposed renaming of streets or renumbering of address numbers within their boundaries. The delegate representing Cheverly is the chief sponsor of the legislation.

●—**July 1, 1978**

The bill, passed in May, becomes law, but is temporary, sunseting by April 15, 1979.

●—**July 1, 2013**

A state law takes effect that changes the area of addressing authority of M-NCPPC from the Metropolitan District to the Regional District. While the districts largely overlap in most areas, this change extends M-NCPPC's addressing authority over the cities of Greenbelt and District Heights and the southeastern corner of the county, while reducing it over portions of the City of Laurel.

The basic reasons for objections to address changes by the public have not changed since the 1890's. For many people, the names of their streets are a defining part of their homes and communities, and to some degree, their identity. Living on a particular street can grant a certain status, higher property values, and inclusion with a particular group of people. Business or professional firms may have established in the public's mind a close identification of their activities with their street address. In older areas, a municipality can lose some of its individuality and connection to its past if the name of a historic street is changed. Further, some people simply object to change, especially if they do not understand the need for it. As the modern world became more complex, the burden of an address change on an individual homeowner grew enormously. Newspaper articles from the 1900's and the 1930's noted the inconvenience of having to change one's stationery. By the 1960's and 1970's, the problem of obsolete letterhead faded in comparison to having to update driver's licenses,

passports, credit cards, Social Security, school records, draft registration, pension payments, and so on. In addition, the various agencies that the Address Team notifies of address changes do not always note the change properly, leading to various complications for the individuals affected.

Building on the major addressing projects undertaken in the 1930's and 1960's, the M-NCPPC Address Team continues to improve the quality of the street names and address numbers. Such changes may originate from a citizen's or a governmental request, or from errors noticed by M-NCPPC staff. Objections by the public continue. As of the time of this writing (in 2021), M-NCPPC's authority to correct addressing errors by renaming street and renumbering address remains limited within the County's municipalities, and the problem of street name duplication and address number errors still persist. On the other hand, the amount of confusion due to poor addressing is far less than it might be, thanks to the decades of work by M-NCPPC staff following the address authority and mandate given by the State in 1937.