Glen Echo Park - Then and Now

Produced in cooperation with the National Park Service, Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture, Inc., and Montgomery County, MD.

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Glen Echo was chosen as the assembly site by the recently formed Chautauqua Union of Washington, D.C. The Chautauqua movement grew out of an assembly first held in Chautauqua, New York, in 1874. Chautauqua was organized to teach Sunday-school organization, management, and Bible-study but rapidly grew into a summer-long school for all kinds of courses. Imagine one of today’s folk festivals combined with a summer-long camp-out and a community college’s continuing education program, and you have a sense of Chautauqua. It was educational, cultural, high-minded and a lot of fun.

Hundreds of assemblies were organized around the country. The Washington D.C. assembly, incorporated as The National Chautauqua of Glen Echo in 1891, was the nation’s 53rd Chautauqua. The Baltzleys envisioned it not just as the local assembly serving Washington, but as one that would incorporate the best elements of the original and other assemblies around the country to form a nationally-significant Chautauqua center.

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The Bakers then began efforts to transfer some of the Park’s attractions to other Rekab, Inc., properties and to sell the remainder of the rides and attractions. The Dentzel carousel was one of the first to be sold, but a fundraising drive organized by Glen Echo Town councilwoman Nancy Long, provided money to buy back the Park’s beloved carousel.

Finally in 1999 the federal, state and county governments jointly funded an eighteen million dollar renovation of the Spanish Ballroom and Arcade buildings as well as many other major improvements to the park.

In 2000, the National Park Service entered into a cooperative agreement with Montgomery County government to manage the park’s programs. Montgomery County set up a non-profit organization called the Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture, Inc. The Partnership is charged with managing and maintaining Park facilities, managing the artist-in-residence, education and social dance programs, fundraising and marketing. The National Park Service is responsible for historical interpretation, safety, security, resource protection and grounds maintenance.

Glen Echo Park Today

Glen Echo Park retains many of its old treasures. The Chautauqua Tower, the Yellow Barn, the Dentzel Carousel, the Bumper Car Pavilion, the Spanish Ballroom, the Arcade complex, the Cuddle Up, the remnants of the Crystal Pool, and the Picnic Grove are the nine elements making up the Glen Echo Park historic district.

But the Park is more than a static collection of buildings. It’s a kaleidoscope of neighbors and tourists at work and play. Artists and students create works of art together; audiences laugh at the antics of the puppets and their masters at the Puppet Co. Visitors of all ages have fun as they learn dance steps at the Spanish Ballroom, explore nature at Discovery Creek Children’s Museum, ride the Carousel, attend Adventure Theatre plays, or picnic as in the olden days, in the oak-shaded grove, and participate in the summer festivals.

Half a million visitors come to Glen Echo Park annually. Classes, workshops, and theater performances are offered all year long. The Carousel runs from May through September. The Ballroom is filled with dancers and dance students year-round.

To find out more about arts programs at Glen Echo Park visit the Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture website at www.glenechopark.org or call 301-634-2222. To learn about National Park Service interpretive programs visit www.nps.gov/glec or call 301-320-1400. Visit the Clara Barton National Historic Site at www.nps.gov/clba.

For well over one hundred years Glen Echo Park has been delighting the people who come to study, to play, and to enjoy the Park’s own special charms. Let’s stroll through Glen Echo Park’s memories, and then see what the Park is offering you, your family, and your neighbors.

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Buildings went up to hold the hoped-for crowds of Chautauqua students. Most notable was the amphitheatre (the remains of which now form part of the banks of the Minnehaa creek). Its 6,000 seats made it one of the largest auditoriums in the country. The amphitheatre and grounds were illuminated with electric light. The Baltzleys also erected a building for the American Red Cross and its founder, Clara Barton.
By May 1891 Glen Echo had 900 men on its payroll, and on June 16, 1891, it opened to the public for the first time. Despite the fact that the Glen Echo Electric Railroad was unfinished, over 1,000 spectators managed to attend the opening ceremonies. During the first week of the assembly, a partially completed tent hotel housed 100 people while three to four hundred more people settled into smaller tents on the grounds to participate in the Chautauqua experience; many determined to stay for the season. Attendance was so good that the assembly, originally planned to end on July 4, was extended to August 1.

**An End and a Beginning**

Despite the success of the summer programs there were some difficulties with the season. Hot and rainy weather limited the activity and crowds. The cost of constructing the grounds and buildings as well as producing the Chautauqua programs was enormous. The second season proved more difficult than the first with continued bad weather and an economic depression. The Baltzleys had over-extended themselves; they fell into debt and were forced to discontinue Chautauqua programs at Glen Echo.

In the years that followed, a wide variety of entertainments were hosted. There was a day-long “fête” of the Potomac Commandery of the Grand Army of the Republic, the annual encampment of the United Daughters of the Confederacy of Maryland and Virginia, plus numerous vaudeville shows and operas. By 1899 Glen Echo Park featured several amusement park rides. In those years it also offered baseball, bowling, boating, picnic space, and a dance pavilion.

In 1933 the Spanish Ballroom was opened, with 7,500 square feet of dance area to accommodate 1,800 dancers. Its stage was graced by many of the era’s great bands. Nationally-known bands like the Dorsey Brothers, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton and local groups like the Jack Corey Orchestra performed at the park. Even the early rock and roll band, Bill Haley and the Comets, played in the ballroom.

Glen Echo during World War II

Glen Echo’s popularity peaked in the early 1940s. During World War II, crowds of Washingtonians and service personnel stationed in the area flocked to the Park. In 1942 attendance on the major holiday weekends (Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day) was estimated at 30,000 people per weekend. However, wartime restrictions were beginning to affect park operations. In 1943 the boat ride was discontinued because of the gas shortage and the shooting gallery closed because ammunition was impossible to obtain. Many of the Park’s employees left to join the armed services.

By 1935 the park employed 218 people, including a park horticulturalist to care for the park’s shrubs and flowers. The park also had its own carpentry, plumbing, paint, and blacksmith shops. Annual “clean up, paint up” campaigns kept the grounds, buildings, and other attractions looking bright and new.

The Glen Echo Park Company hired Leonard B. Schloss, an experienced amusement park manager and promoter, as general manager. He held that position until 1950. The Park was advertised as an ideal family resort, fashioned after Atlantic City and Coney Island.

In the three seasons following, attendance at Glen Echo Park averaged 400,000 per season. Mr. Schloss’s policy was to offer one new ride each year. Thousands of Washington area residents were thrilled by riding the Gravity Railway (1912), the Gyroplane (1913), the Derby Racer (1916) and the Whip (1918). Ninety-two-one saw the addition of the Coaster Dip and the Dentzel Carousel. In 1923 the Bumper Car ride was installed at Glen Echo Park. The Crystal Pool was added in 1931 accommodating 3,000 swimmers plus an adjacent sand beach.

Segregation and the Turbulent ’50s and ’60s

In 1968 the amusement park closed and Rekab, Inc. considered building apartments on the property. In the end though, community uproar and zoning restrictions forced the Bakers to consider trading the park property for a parcel of federal land “of equal value.” In 1968 the Department of the Interior and the National Capitol Park and Planning Commission asked the General Services Administration (GSA) to acquire Glen Echo Park in order to protect the Potomac Palisades and provide additional park lands. In 1970 title was transferred and the National Park Service took over administration of Glen Echo Park.

Unfortunately, the social unrest over civil rights at the park did not end with integration. On Easter Monday 1966, traditionally a day of recreation in the African-American community, there was a riot-like disturbance at the park. The roller coaster was closed for what management said were mechanical problems. Then, some of the other rides closed also. Many of the park’s African-American patrons saw the closings as a racially motivated effort by the management to disrupt their enjoyment of the park. A result the disturbance grew worse, with vandalism and violence.

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