

Glen Echo Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Glen Echo Park is administered by the
George Washington Memorial Parkway



Then and Now



For well over one hundred years Glen Echo Park has been delighting 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 can offer you, your family, and your neighbors today.



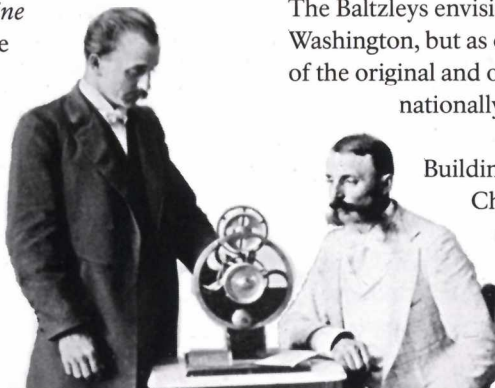
Glen Echo: Summer Resort and Chautauqua Assembly

Glen Echo Park started with two brothers and the better egg beater one of them had invented. Brothers Edward and Edwin Baltzley had a vision: they were going to use the proceeds from Edwin Baltzley's egg beater to build a large real estate development and a nationally-recognized educational center. In 1888 they purchased 516 acres and named their property Glen Echo on the Potomac. They founded the Glen Echo Railroad, and began to sell building lots. In 1891, when the Baltzley brothers published *Glen Echo on the Potomac: The Washington Rhine* (an illustrated advertising brochure), they were able to offer evidence of Glen Echo's superiority over all other suburban sites.

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 learning center.



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 Minnehaha creek). Its 6,000 seats made it one of the largest auditoriums in the country. The amphi-



theatre 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 attended 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 “fete” 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.

Glen Echo: Trolley Park

In 1903 the ownership of the property was transferred to the Washington Railway and Electric Company which maintained the subsidiary Glen Echo Park Company to operate the park. This was the era of the “trolley-park”. Before the Great Depression, “trolley-parks” were found on the outskirts of many cities. Owned and operated by the transit companies, they provided



a destination for trolley riders. It was a national phenomenon: Kansas City had Electric Park, Chicago had Riverside, and Philadelphia had Willow Grove. Admission was free; profits came from trolley fares as well as the rides, games and concessions.

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.

Attractions for the park’s 1911 amusement park season included a 10,000 square foot dance pavilion, a human roulette wheel, a miniature railway, a children’s playground and many others.

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). The year 1921 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. It was a huge hit among residents of the muggy Washington area, and it even boasted a sand beach!

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.

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.



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.

At the War’s end, the park’s facilities were reopened, new rides were added, and walkways were resurfaced. The Fun House had to be closed when the former amphitheatre building was condemned in 1949.

Attendance figures tell their own stories. In 1944, 15,000 people attended opening day; in 1945, 8,000 attended; in 1950 the crowds were reduced to 3,000.

Segregation and the Turbulent ‘50s and ‘60s

During the 1950s, Glen Echo Park’s management went through several transitions. In 1954 title shifted to Continental Park Enterprises, Inc., a subsidiary of Capital Transit Company. They sold the park in 1955 to Rekab, Inc., owned by the Baker brothers, long-time amusement park operators. Rekab Inc. owned the park for the next 15 years.

The harsh reality of the story of Glen Echo Park is that it was not always open to everyone. For much of its history it was segregated. To many, Glen Echo Park represented unlimited fun. But to African-Americans, the segregation of Glen Echo Park made the realities of their time abundantly clear.



In the summer of 1960 students from Howard University and neighbors of the park especially from the nearby Bannockburn community began civil rights protests at the park entrances. After much resistance, the owners of the amusement park were forced by public protests and public opinion to integrate the park in the Spring of 1961. It remained open to all for the last seven years of its operation as an amusement park.

At the same time that the park was integrated, the culture of the Washington area was changing. People were leaving the city to live in the growing suburbs, street-cars were discontinued in Washington, and more people owned cars. They now had greater entertainment possibilities; they weren’t limited to where the streetcar would take them. Television offered entertainment without leaving home.

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. As a result the disturbance grew worse, with vandalism and violence.

In 1968 the amusement park closed and Rekab, Inc. considered building high rise 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.

Now the park and it’s buildings had been saved but many of the amusement park rides had been sold and moved. The Dentzel carousel was one of the first to be sold and it was going to be moved to California. Glen Echo Town councilwoman Nancy Long organized a successful fundraising drive to buy back the park’s beloved carousel.



Glen Echo Park Becomes the People's Park

The National Park Service assumed management of the park in 1970. It hosted a series of public meetings to allow the community to help forge a new direction for the park. In 1971, the National Park Service opened the park to the public for the first of a series of summer events. The park's Creative Education Program began in 1972 offering a wide variety of classes. Everything from auto-mechanics for women to environmental education and photography classes were taught.

Over time the program developed a focus on the arts. It became clear that this new park offered an exciting opportunity to develop a new kind of arts program, where artists and students could work together. Glen Echo Park would be more than a place to sit and be entertained. It would become a multi-interest cultural center with programs in the arts and humanities for children and adults.

Renovation and Rebirth

During many years as a park for the arts with classes, dances, festivals and theater performances, the condition of the park's buildings deteriorated. Money was not available to renovate, stabilize, or adequately maintain the buildings. There was only enough to modify them to satisfy the park's need for classroom, studio, theater, and gallery space. This lack of funding made the park's future uncertain.

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 web site 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. When visiting Glen Echo Park you may also like to visit our sister park the Clara Barton National Historic Site, find information at www.nps.gov/clba.

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