

COLONIAL VILLAGE



1913 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia (resident manager's office); originally 24 freestanding clusters of buildings bounded by Wilson Boulevard, Queens Lane, Veitch Street, and Lee Highway

ARCHITECT: Harvey H. Warwick, Sr., 1935-37; Francis L. Koenig, 1940

ORIGINAL APARTMENTS: 1,059 (approximately 10 percent efficiencies; 60 percent one-bedrooms; 20 percent two-bedrooms; 10 percent three-bedrooms)

STATUS: opened as rental in 1935-40; one-tenth demolished; remaining: rental, 50 percent; condominiums, 25 percent; co-ops, 12½ percent; public housing, 12½ percent



One of the many varying designs of the Colonial Revival buildings that form the garden apartment complex of Colonial Village.

Although unable to finish his first major apartment house, the elegant Westchester, because of the adverse early economic effects of the Great Depression, developer Gustave Ring (1904-1983) managed to avoid bankruptcy by frugal and careful management when the building did open in 1931. Ring's next major real estate project, Colonial Village, 1935-40, was an outstanding success that established him as a nationally prominent real estate developer. Because of its excellence of design and construction, Colonial Village became a prototype for dozens of other large garden apartment complexes in other states.

A shrewd businessman, Ring was among the first local developers who survived the lean Depression years and sensed a rapidly forthcoming change in housing. His 1934 plans to build the area's largest garden complex, Colonial Village, met with immediate success because of the acute housing shortage in the mid-1930s. After Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, thousands of additional civil servants came to Washington to administer the burgeoning New Deal agencies. As a result, the apartment vacancy rate dropped from 12.5 percent in mid-1933 to 0.5 percent in late 1934. The success of Colonial Village spurred dozens of similar developments, mostly in the suburbs where land was cheap and available. Construction increased 1,000 percent in Ar-



Living room and dining room of a duplex apartment at Colonial Village.

lington County, Virginia, between 1933 and 1934, and 300 percent in Montgomery County, Maryland.

[Ring was familiar with three of the country's pioneering garden housing complexes—Sunnyside Garden Apartments in Queens, New York (1924–28); Radburn, New Jersey (1929); and Chatham Village, Pittsburgh (1932)—all the work of town planners Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright. At Sunnyside Gardens, Stein and Wright introduced the concept of superblocs—large, plainly designed brick apartment houses facing a common green. Because of the existing gridiron streetplan, however, each superblock unfortunately bore little relationship to its neighbor. Radburn, even though never completed because of the Depression, was more successful than Sunnyside Gardens. Less rigid in plan, Rad-



Site plan of Colonial Village.

burn was designed as a garden community complete with commercial, residential, and recreational facilities. Detached houses were placed within superblock developments both in loose rows and along cul-de-sacs. The superblocks were united by a greenbelt that completely separated pedestrian and vehicular traffic. By contrast, Chatham Village was surrounded on three sides by greenbelts that followed the sloping contours of the land. The houses fronted on an interior grass mall and were arranged in parallel rows set back slightly.]

Ring found a fairly inexpensive undeveloped 46-acre tract of land adjacent to the Arlington County Court House in Clarendon, conveniently near Rosslyn Circle and the Key Bridge leading into Georgetown. A Colonial Village resident could then drive to the Capitol in only fifteen minutes. The site had first been used by members of the Metropolitan Club of Washington in 1894 when they converted a 165-acre farm into the Washington Golf and Country Club with a nine-hole golf course. The club required its playing members to wear knickers and scarlet coats with green lapels. Golf became so popular that the club sold this property in 1908 and built an eighteen-hole course on a larger tract farther out North Glebe Road.

Not only was Colonial Village conveniently close to the city, but its design was an improvement on all previous garden housing projects. Ring always worked closely with his architects, Harvey H. Warwick, Sr., and Francis L. Koenig. The apartment buildings were built in clusters and grouped about spacious courts, some courtyards being almost enclosed and others open but set back from the street. Each court was designed as a park within a park and differed one from another through various patterns of walkways, landscaping, and the subtle variety of building detailing.

Colonial Village was well publicized in more than two dozen national architectural, urban planning, and banking journals, not only for its excellent design but also for its innovative financing. Its construction was made possible by the first issue of an apartment house insurance loan from the newly created Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Acting cautiously and remembering the failure of Hampshire Gardens, Washington's first true garden apartment house, Ring decided to build Colonial Village in four stages. Events moved rapidly. In February



The careful siting of Colonial Village includes the many sidewalks that connect dozens of apartment buildings. Some pass through basements.

1935 the FHA approved mortgage insurance, lent by New York Life Insurance Company, for the first phase at 4.5 percent interest. Construction began two months later on 20 April 1935.

Between 1935 and 1940, Ring built twenty-four free-standing clusters of buildings in the garden apartment complex, in four phases, with a total of 1,059 apartments. During phase one, April to December 1935, 276 units were built on 25 acres of land flanking North Rhodes Street. Phase two, December 1935 to November 1936, produced 462 units along Key Boulevard and west of phase one to North Uhle Street, while in phase three, February to July 1937, 236 units were completed west of North Uhle Street. Within the first phase was Queens Lane, the only nonvehicular accessible street in Arlington. Architect Harvey H. Warwick, Sr., designed all of these plans. The remaining land was used for the last phase designed by Francis L. Koenig and offered 12 apartment houses with 85 units built in the summer of 1940. The two- and three-story apartment buildings cost a total of slightly more than \$4 million to build.

Colonial Village had 18 basements, 9 laundries, 130 garage spaces, 720 onstreet parking spaces (Ring retained

ownership of some of the streets to deter public use), 24 heating plants, and a community center with a lounge, social hall, and kitchen. Designed in the Colonial Revival style, which became the prototype for almost all other Washington area garden apartments during the 1930s and 1940s, the buildings have a variety of alternating roof lines, door designs, and wing treatments. Abundant light and air were ensured, since every apartment had two or three exposures. Materials and construction quality were outstanding. Slate was used to roof the gabled buildings. Soundproof floors had 6 inches of concrete overlaid with hardwood.

UNUSUAL AMENITIES

Ring built a shopping center adjacent to Colonial Village on Wilson Boulevard in April 1936—eight stores, with two groceries, bakery, laundry, hardware store, drugstore, beauty parlor, and barbershop. He also designed playgrounds away from the street, since most of the units were for families with one or two children. Lawns were abundant. With more than four-fifths of the acreage unspoiled, the two streams that ran through the hilly tract were retained, as were the existing trees and terrain. Garbage collection points were carefully screened by enclosed brick walls, and rules relating to common areas were strictly enforced. Clotheslines, for instance, were allowed behind the apartment houses, but all clothes had to be removed by a certain hour. The nine basement laundry rooms also provided additional clotheslines in bad weather.

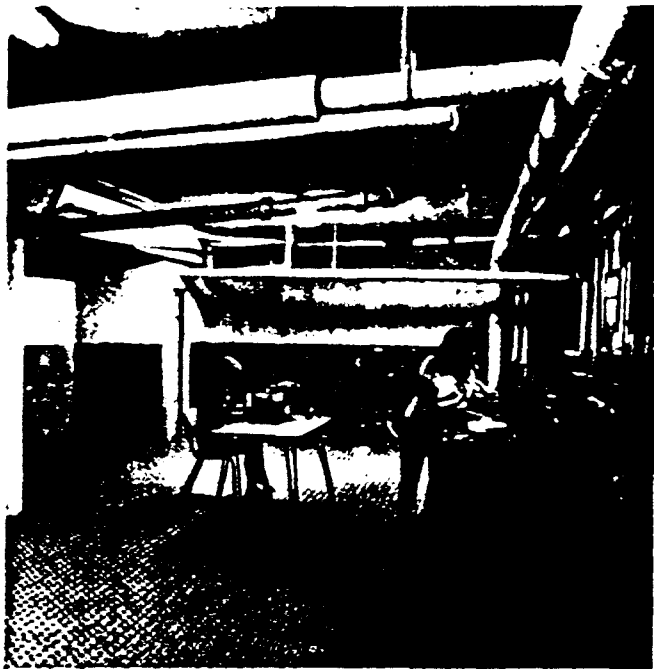
Another rule allowed only one child in a one-bedroom apartment. If two children were discovered, the family was forced to move. Surprise inspections were made regularly. In a walk-through of the grounds in 1982, the surviving architect, Francis L. Koenig, explained that steam on the bathroom window was a sure sign of a baby since the parents were secretly washing diapers in the apartment. Most residents welcomed the rules because they provided a well-maintained and orderly environment.

The detailing used by the two architects was subtly different. Warwick, for instance, extended his brick quoins through the cornice to the roofline, while Koenig stopped

his quoins at the cornice. Koenig's buildings often featured wooden Chinese Chippendale fretwork railings between the pairs of decorative chimneys at the ends of the gables.

A NATIONAL PROTOTYPE

The ideal living conditions of Colonial Village and its modest monthly rents during the 1930s (\$36.50 for an efficiency, \$50 for a one-bedroom, and \$62.50 for a two-bedroom) insured success. In fact, Colonial Village's popularity exceeded the most optimistic hopes of the developer, the insurance company that lent the construction funds, and the FHA. The New York Life Insurance Company originally backed Colonial Village with some trepidation in early 1935 and later that year rejected a similar request from the Blair family for mortgage money for the Falkland Apartments in Silver Spring, Maryland. But once Colonial Village's financial success was established, New York Life began actively to seek investments in



One of the large basement laundry rooms designed for Colonial Village.

similar projects. By 1939 it had more than \$18 million in mortgage funds in twenty-two large-scale rental housing projects across the country. When Colonial Village's first phase of 276 apartments was completed in December 1935, there were ten thousand people on the waiting list. Under Ring's ownership, the vacancy rate of Colonial Village remained at zero because of excellent management and reasonable rents.

The success of Colonial Village was widely touted by the FHA. Agency administrators invited Ring to write a series of articles on how the complex was designed and on his concept of garden apartments. One of his principal guidelines was that a successful garden apartment complex should occupy only 20 to 25 percent of its land. (Colonial Village had only 18 percent occupied by buildings.) Ring felt that two-story garden apartment buildings were preferable and that four-story walk-up apartment houses were hard to rent; elevators were too expensive to purchase and maintain unless the apartment house was five or more stories high. He advocated the efficient location of stairs, elimination of lobbies for small public foyers, and units with two exposures. A separate dining room was considered wasteful: Ring preferred a dining alcove next to the kitchen. He also believed that the garden apartment buildings should be designed so that most bedrooms faced any direction but west, which was too hot in late summer afternoons and nights. All rooms, including kitchens and baths, should have windows. Ring believed that any garage should be carefully screened from the street. All buildings should be connected by sidewalks. At Colonial Village, several walkways even passed through a series of buildings at the basement level. The garden apartment buildings should be set off from the street in deeply staggered setbacks and should face onto spacious, well-landscaped courtyards.

The site plans and description of Colonial Village were widely published and copied by developers across the United States. The Federal Housing Administration was indeed one of the most successful of the New Deal agencies, and between 1934 and 1944 backed construction of eleven thousand apartment buildings and other housing projects in twenty-four states. As a result, five million Americans were housed in 1.25 million new apartment units and houses. The FHA advised developers and

owners and even helped plan buildings.

In addition to Colonial Village, Gustave Ring built three other important garden apartments in the late 1930s—Arlington Village and Brentwood Village in the Washington area and Northwood in Baltimore. All were successful financially and were well designed. Approximately three hundred garden apartments were built in the capital area by other developers during the 1930s and 1940s following the success of Colonial Village. A few important examples are the Falkland and Rock Creek Gardens in Maryland, and Fairlington, Parkfairfax, and Buckingham in Virginia.

A LANDMARK PRESERVED

A major change came to Colonial Village when Ring sold the complex to the Mobil Corporation in 1977 for \$17 million. The land became particularly valuable a few years later because of the opening of the nearby Courthouse Metro subway station. Tenants immediately organized the Colonial Village Tenants Association and fought to place the complex in the National Register of Historic Places after learning that Mobil planned to demolish half the apartment houses for commercial development. In a compromise reached in 1979, Mobil agreed to raze only one-tenth of the apartment buildings on an 8-acre site on the top of the hill nearest the courthouse. Here three twelve-story "Colonial Place" office buildings were planned.

The remaining body of Colonial Village was divided into rental, cooperative, and condominium sections. Because a number of the tenants were elderly and lived on modest incomes, a rental section was set aside for fifteen years before conversion to either condos or co-ops. All tenants living at Colonial Village prior to 11 December 1979 were guaranteed rental apartments if they chose to stay. Colonial Village fortunately was listed in the National Register. While that honorific designation does not prevent proposed changes to the buildings, Mobil's sale of the condominiums and cooperatives and its establishment of the public housing units here ensure preservation of the site.