

# Memories of Disruption

## When I-66 Shook Up Arlington

*By Charles S. Clark*

**A**mong the more vivid shared experiences of Arlingtonians in the 1950s through the 1980s was the disruptive and drawn-out arrival of Interstate-66.

That divisive federal-state construction project required confiscation, under eminent domain, of 1,054 land parcels of homes, parks, gardens, and dozens of businesses. Moreover, it was spread over four decades. Conflict over the eventual \$275 million road lasted from visioning that began in 1958 to the right-of-way finalized in 1966, to lawsuits and protests by environmentalists, to the down-scaled compromise design in the 1977 Coleman report, to the paving that allowed its opening in 1982.

Opponents—among the first to take advantage of the required Environmental Impact Statement under the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act—feared noise, pollution, dividing of neighborhoods, and the unsightly 12-lane concept behind the original design. Among the ringleaders of the resistance were Jim and Emelia Govan, who rallied grass roots to the Arlington Coalition on Transportation.

John Reeder, in a 2019 interview with the author, recalled being active from 1976–1982 with a group called Continuing Action on Transportation and Environment (CONTACT), co-chaired by Marianne Karydes. “Ted Neff of the Maywood neighborhood got that area designated as a national and local historic district to oppose I-66 demolition,” Reeder said. At one point, he and a co-activist had a confrontation with a store detective outside the old Sears in Clarendon, where they were asking passersby to sign anti-I-66 petitions. The police were also called in, but CONTACT leader Karydes called a county board member and got the authorities to back off.

“Our original next-door neighbors, Mr. and Ms. Larry Potter, were unusually active in opposition to I-66,” recalled Cherrydale resident

## Memories of Destruction

For decades, Larry Potter and his family lived near the corner of North Johnson and 20th Streets in Cherrydale. The Potters were not only vocal opponents of I-66 but also eyewitnesses to the drastic surgery performed in their own neighborhood in the 1960s. These photos, taken by the late Larry Potter in 1963, capture in progress the homes on North Johnson Street in the path of the new interstate whose owners chose to have them transported to adjacent lots nearby.



Photos Courtesy of Bob Connelly  
Graphics Courtesy of Getty Images/  
gstraub (sign), Happy\_vector (filmstrip)



Bob Connelly. “They gave us their Stop I-66 bumper stickers and early 1960s photos of homes being picked up intact, trussed securely onto trucks, and moved a couple blocks away” (See “Memories of Destruction”).

There was a (largely) tongue-in-cheek contest to name the new highway, the *Journal* newspapers noted. The Arlington Historical Society proposed naming it for African American medical pioneer and onetime Arlingtonian Charles Drew. Many entries were cynical parodies from opponents of the highway—proposing naming it after King George, Virginia Gov. Mills Godwin or Carter Administration Transportation Secretary Brock Adams.

No one could argue that the advent of the much-debated I-66 didn’t alter Arlington profoundly.

Retired Virginia Transportation Department land-use planner Tom Van Pool still owns a copy of one of the state’s full collection of I-66 right-of-way plan sheets. It shows the site of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Usonian Pope-Leighey House, which was transported from Falls Church to Woodlawn plantation.

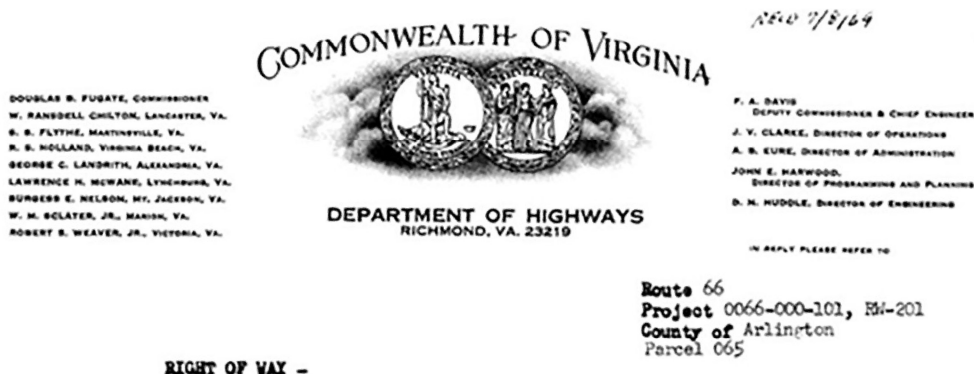
Former Maywood resident Sam Day in 2019 recalled an array of stores around Kirkwood Road at Lee Highway disappeared—Steve’s Diner, the Village Market, and Young’s Bicycle Shop. Realtor Ed Downs remembered Ware’s Pharmacy, located at Arlington’s Falls Church border, was forced to move. And retired Fairfax teacher Carmen Clark Colliatie recalled how her First Church of Christ Scientist of Arlington was condemned and rebuilt on North McKinley Street.

Those who lost homes suffered the most anguish. Bill Whitehart recalled that his parents learned that their home at 1002 North Patrick Henry Drive was being condemned the same day they learned their son Mark had been killed in Vietnam. Lynnette Yount, a leadership coach and minister’s daughter, in 2019 said her “parents were truly screwed over” when the state offered a price that was “abysmally low.” Luckily, my mother was a good financial planner, and my parents had saved enough for a lot and having their dream house built.” But she was forced to switch high schools from Washington-Lee to Yorktown.

Jean McMahan told this writer of the “shock and disappointment” of her parents when told in 1963 that the North 24th Street house

they'd owned and expanded since the 1940s was doomed. They too were offered "a very low amount" but got a lawyer to up it by a few thousand. "I distinctly remember the 'rush' of trying to find a new home because of the new road," she says. But construction wouldn't start for nearly a decade.

Fig. 1: Eminent Domain letter from State of Virginia



Courtesy of J. Miles McFee

J. Miles McFee and his sister Melissa McFee Stricker compiled a history of their parents' adventure of responding to I-66 by moving not once but three times (Fig. 1).

“My father’s comment was to name it ‘that fricking road,’” Miles McFee said in 2019 about his homes near Williamsburg Boulevard and Westmoreland Street. “While he was not happy about the right of way taking our house and the corner of the property, he ended up buying the house back from the state for \$600 (after they paid him \$17,679) and moving it to the other side of the lot. He ended up buying two other houses close by along the way, which worked out well with respect to real estate investment.”

Added Melissa McFee, “Our dad, being a World War II veteran, decided to take the opportunity of the privileges given to veterans when buying a home with the GI bill benefits. However, one of the requirements was we had to live in that house. In the spring of 1965, after only six months in the house on 27th Road, we moved back ‘down the hill’ into 6943 North 28th Street. The entire real-estate adventure became our father’s ‘pension plan.’”

Some homeowners simply refused to sell their houses. “When the lawsuits got going, some people didn’t move out, and maybe one or two people per block were left,” said homebuilder Terry Showman. Phil Lord, who lost his house at 1409 N. Utah St., added, “It was strange to have so many vacant houses around—like No Man’s Land.”

Diane Kresh, director of Arlington Public Libraries, remembered the surprise of losing her home at North 29<sup>th</sup> and Wyoming Streets. “The amount of money my parents were offered was maybe \$17,000 or \$19,000,” and they were upset that the [similar] houses flanking theirs were valued higher,” she said. “My family moved [nearby] during the week of the John F. Kennedy burial. The old lot remained vacant for years. There was a huge willow tree in the backyard that remained until the bulldozers started clearing for I-66 construction,” Kresh recalled. “I still think about that tree...still sad it’s gone.”

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### **About the Author**

Charles S. Clark, who writes the “Our Man in Arlington” column for the Falls Church *News-Gazette*, is a frequent contributor to the *Arlington Historical Magazine*.