

Alcova and the Development of Alcova Heights, a Garden Suburb

(Fig. 1 and 2)

By Sharon C. Park

Introduction

This story of Alcova started out as a search for information on the two pairs of Victorian cast iron gates, sold by the Smithsonian Institution in 1910, that were subsequently installed at entrances to the Alcova property in Arlington, Virginia (3435 8th Street South). The gates were original to the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building (1881) and had been removed as part of a "modernization" program. Four pairs of gates were auctioned off and forgotten about for almost 70 years.¹ The fascinating history of the Alcova mansion house and environs and the Byars-Coontz family, the initial owners, soon took precedence over the research on the gates.²

Fig. 1: The Byars family relaxing on the front porch of Alcova which was added around 1921, ca. 1930.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

Fig. 2: Alcova, 3435 8th Street, South. The house remains a private family home with lovely gardens, 2023.



Courtesy of Sharon C. Park.

This article looks at the history of Alcova, its evolution from a farmhouse to a mansion, the early planning and development of Alcova Heights, and the impact of the Depression on the Byars family. The excitement of the Roaring Twenties society lifestyle of Joseph Cloyd Byars Sr. (1868–1954)—a former Virginia State Senator—and his wife, Jane Rhea Bailey Byars (1872–1948), set the stage for their family life in Arlington (Fig. 3 and 4).

In newspaper marketing ads from the 1920s, the name “Alcova” was touted as a “new word coined expressly for Washington’s Garden Suburb.”³ Sales were brisk in the 1920s, and while the momentum slowed during the Depression, housing starts rebounded after World War II as new government workers sought out affordable housing. Today, Alcova Heights is a thriving, diverse neighborhood in the heart of Arlington County.⁴

Early History

Alcova is located on the Arlington Plateau near the junction of Glebe Road and Columbia Pike. A Civil War map shows both the Gibson and the John Young farms which were combined to become the Spring Hill Farm the 287 acres bought by Joseph Cloyd Byars Sr. in 1915. Eventually, 142 of these acres would become the Alcova Heights we know today (Fig. 5).⁵ It is believed that parts of the house were in place during the Civil War, since the family sought financial compensation of \$3,198

Fig. 3: Jane Rhea Bailey Byars, ca. 1899.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

Fig. 4: Joseph Cloyd Byars. Image used during his various political campaigns, ca. 1900.



Courtesy of Center for Local History, Arlington County Public Library.



Fig. 5: Detail of 1865 map showing the intersection of Columbia Pike and Glebe Road. Line of Defences [sic] of Washington as Constructed During the War 1861–1865 Inclusive.

for damages incurred by Northern troops.⁶ John Young's son, William, inherited the property, and when his heirs sold the house and land to Joseph Cloyd Byars Sr.'s Columbia Land Company, the Alcova Heights development was born.

The House

In 1915, when laying out the lots for the new suburb, Byars reserved for himself Block 10, approximately 5½ acres surrounding the "Old Residence."⁷ Alcova was a simple two-story, side-gabled, frame farmhouse with an interior chimney which had some portions standing during the Civil War. The house, in a 2017 survey, was described as mostly nineteenth century with several generations of siding, a mix of window types, and a handsome Greek Revival cornice unifying several parts.⁸ Even after buying the property, J. Cloyd lived in several places to manage a variety of his business interests.⁹ The 1920 census shows the family resided in Richmond City, but regularly travelled back and forth to Bristol, Virginia, where the family had long-standing roots. The family relocated to Alcova, their "country place," on a more permanent basis sometime in 1921.¹⁰

With open fields, some fruit trees, and gardens, Alcova was a pleasing place to bring up the family. It appears that the house was relatively unchanged from 1915–21. J. Cloyd’s son, Bailey, recollected that as a young boy he could run freely over the still largely undeveloped land hunting squirrels and rabbits.¹¹

Shortly after 1921, Byars hired a young architect, Edward William St. Cyr Barrington, to remodel the farmhouse and make it grander.¹² St. Cyr Barrington (1894–1976) worked in the Washington office of architect Jules Henri de Sibour who designed many houses for the rich and famous in the District of Columbia. Barrington worked for de Sibour as an apprentice while training as an architect at the Lythicum Institute in Georgetown (1913–15).¹³ He ventured out on his own in 1920, and so, Alcova may have been one of his first personally designed projects. Barrington reoriented the front entrance of the existing house to capture the view east towards Washington and designed a two-story-tall portico with a balcony addition to create a spectacular impression of a grand manor house (Fig. 6). Because Byars’s childhood home, “Southern View,” in Glade Spring, Virginia (Fig. 7), had a majestic two-story portico with balcony, one might surmise that these were Byars’s requirements for his new home. In addition, Barrington enclosed the south porch into a sunroom, added a new fireplace and external chimney on the north, and enhanced the interior with classical detailing, such as

Fig. 6: View of Alcova, 1928, with its two-story portico and sunroom.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

Fig. 7: “Southern View,” Glade Spring, VA, was the childhood home of J. Cloyd Byars Sr. The tall porch and balcony likely inspired the changes to Alcova.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

mantels, paneling, and a set of French full-length casement windows with diamond panes looking out to the garden. The improvements to the house made it possible to entertain family and friends. Located on the property was a cottage or guesthouse; a barn, later turned into a six-room apartment; a windmill well pump tower; and tennis courts.¹⁴

The Family at Alcova

The Byarses were a colorful and well-connected southern family. J. Cloyd was a graduate of the Henry and Emory College and the University of Virginia law school, and Jane was educated at the Stonewall Jackson Female Institute in Abingdon, Virginia.¹⁵ Jane and J. Cloyd were married in 1896 and relocated multiple times as the couple and young family moved to follow J. Cloyd's many enterprises. Byars lived primarily in Bristol, Virginia, for his law practice. He resided in Norfolk for five years managing a company, perhaps without his family. He also lived in Petersburg for a while to run the Riverdale Land Company. From 1901–04, Byars served as a state senator. He unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1908 and the US Senate in 1930, so his law practice and land development were his primary focus.¹⁶

Jane Rhea Bailey Byars was descended or closely connected to prominent Americans such as Meriwether Lewis, George Rogers Clark, Thomas Jefferson's mentor Dr. Thomas Walker, and George Washington. She was an active suffragist and a member of several prominent organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia.¹⁷ Jane and her husband were members of the Society of Virginia of the District of Columbia and the Southern Society of Washington. One of the Southern Society activities the Byarses were involved with was the restoration of Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson.¹⁸

The Byarses' family life centered around Alcova with easy access to Washington, DC. They attended committee meetings, annual organization meetings, dinners, balls, and educational lectures, networking with visiting dignitaries and generally enjoying the freedom and festivities of the "Roaring Twenties."¹⁹ The Byarses' three children—Joseph Jr. (1898–1933), Virginia (1901–99), and Bailey (1906–99)—found

Alcova to be a wonderful place to bring friends for social and family events. Joseph enjoyed tennis with his friends even as the open land around the house filled in with development (Fig. 8). When Virginia married Lt. Kenneth Coontz in 1924, she chose to have the grand reception at Alcova.²⁰ The wedding was a high society event as noted in the newspapers of the time—*Washington Times*, *Evening Star*, *Washington Herald*. The Byarses had a very close friendship with Governor Elbert Lee Trinkle and his wife, Helen Ball Sexton, who served as the Matron of Honor at Virginia’s wedding.

The Byarses’ sons were involved in the family real estate business when young. The oldest, Joseph Jr., attended George Washington University and became secretary/officer of the Alcova Improvement Company at the age of 22. After graduation, he worked as a newspaper reporter in Washington until 1930, when he moved to New York City to become a news editor for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Unfortunately,

he died at the age of 34 after a short illness—a tragedy from which his mother never fully recovered.

Bailey, at the age of 15, helped his father sell lots for an auto dealership at the corner of Glebe Road and Columbia Pike. If he could bring in a sale, his father allowed him to keep part of the commission. Bailey chose to purchase an automobile with his commission money even though he had no driver’s license.²¹ He continued to help his father while attending Washington-Lee High School and while operating a Shell gas station named “No-Graft” in Clarendon in 1929.²² Bailey remained

Fig. 8: The popular tennis court at Alcova with Joseph Jr. keeping score. Note Alcova Heights housing in the background, ca. mid-1920s.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

in development and was on a committee for the Virginia Real Estate convention in 1932.²³ He went to work for Fritz Westenberg who was developing Ashton Heights in 1938 and in 1940 was working in sales for Boss & Phelps who were developing Foxhall Village in Washington. After WWII, Bailey went to work for the War Assets Administration and later was an analyst in the National Production Authority at the Department of Commerce.²⁴

Arlington was home base for Virginia and Kenneth Coontz (son of the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Fleet, Admiral Robert E. Coontz, the highest-ranking admiral in the US Navy).²⁵ Unfortunately, Virginia was widowed when their only son, Robert Joseph Coontz was just nine months at his father's death. She remained at Alcova until 1931 when she returned to the family home city of Bristol, and married widower Judge Joseph Caldwell. They moved to nearby Blountville, Tennessee, where she remained until her death in 1999.²⁶

In 1925, Governor Trinkle appointed J. Cloyd to be the Chair of the Virginia Regional Planning Committee during the development of Alcova Heights.²⁷ Interestingly, in 1925, Byars, beginning to feel the economic pinch, subdivided Block 10 into additional sales sites, reducing the area around Alcova to 2.7 acres.²⁸

The Alcova Heights Development

The development of Alcova Heights began soon after Byars's Columbia Land Company bought Alcova in 1915. By 1918, the first lots were sold and, by 1920, fifteen buildings constructed.²⁹ Dubbed, "Columbia Place—A Garden Suburb," Alcova Heights promised affordable prices and an easy payment plan.³⁰ The close-in location (only a fifteen-minute drive to DC), the improved paved road along Columbia Pike, and the Columbia trolley station within a mile of the Byarses' property, spurred development. Byars's timing was excellent, as the county experienced a boom in population growth during the 1920s. This resulted in a substantial increase in the number of deeds for building sites recorded at the courthouse.³¹

In 1920, the Columbia Land Company was dissolved, and assets transferred to the Alcova Improvement Company to continue plans for developing the area around his house, Alcova.³² Advertisements were now for "Alcova Heights" and targeted to wage workers, "**Alcova**

Heights—plan offers good opportunity to people of small means.”³³

This language was consistent with Byars’s Christian capitalist principles that success for the wealthy should encourage success for those with less. He was a follower of Williams Jennings Bryan whose populist wing of the Democratic Party championed the interests of workers and farmers bypassed by industrialization.

While seeking to support wage workers in his advertisements, Byars accepted the Jim Crow laws that put in place segregation in Virginia in 1912, denying African Americans access to White neighborhoods.³⁴ Due to Arlington’s restrictive real estate covenants, African Americans could only reside in areas such as Hall’s Hill, Johnson’s Hill, and Green Valley.³⁵ J. Cloyd Byars’s engagement with the African American community remains unknown, but during his unsuccessful 1930 campaign for the US Senate, he sought the democratic votes of African Americans.³⁶ In 1927, Joseph C. Byars Jr. amassed and edited a book of poetry, *Black and White: An Anthology of Washington Verse*, with

Fig. 9: Family and friends helped promote the sale of sites at Alcovia Heights, ca. early 1920s.



Courtesy of Byars/Coontz Family Papers.

both African American and White poets. The book was favorably reviewed.³⁷

The development of Alcovia Heights in the 1920s centered around the concept of a “home within a garden” which also included indoor plumbing (on septic and well water at first) and electricity—a dream home and modern features for affordable housing (Fig. 9).³⁸ “The home you have always wanted may be yours at Alcovia today!” promised the Alcovia Heights brochure. “A rented house is not a home—You want a home of your own,” and it could be achieved with his plan.

Byars offered lot sizes of 25 feet, 50 feet, and 100 feet wide with the ability to buy and consolidate adjacent lots. Lot depths varied from approximately 150 feet to over 300 feet, and were priced accordingly. A 50'x150' lot at \$0.05 a square foot would cost \$375.00, so with \$250 down, the remainder could be paid monthly over 5 years, if necessary. Monthly payments could be targeted to what an owner was currently paying for rent.

The Byarses encouraged their family and young friends to help guide potential buyers “to Alcova Heights” and encouraged families to bring a picnic and enjoy the area (Fig. 10). Byars also contracted, when sales were very brisk in the 1922–25 market, to have Edmund J. Flynn help with sales and share commissions.³⁹ Interestingly, the Flynn firm, which got its start in Arlington, is still a real estate investment firm in the Washington area today.

Byars worked as his own builder through the Alcova Construction Company. There were building plans from which buyers could select homes for immediate construction—bungalows, cape cods, and other simple structures with lots of windows and porches and plenty of yard space for planting vegetable and fruit gardens. Byars advertised that he would send a car to pick up prospective buyers to facilitate their

Fig. 10: “Alcova Heights New Homes.” Houses along Spring Hill Road, which was renamed South Lincoln Street in 1935, ca. late 1920s.



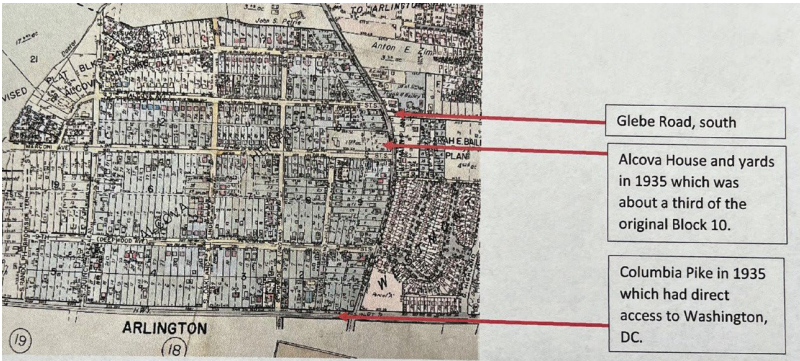
Courtesy of Arlington Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development.

access to the development—and hopefully lead to quick sales. In 1922, to keep up with construction demands, he partnered with Home Building and Construction Company, to help build in Alcova Heights and share profits.⁴⁰

The sales brochure created for Alcova Heights was enticing.⁴¹ The terms were attractive. Five and six room bungalows were advertised with the notion that the single-family house with plenty of windows and a garden was superior to dark row houses in the city and were priced similarly. Within the first years of sales, over 143 lots were sold at five cents a square foot. At the same time, nearby Ashton Heights was being developed and lots sold at fourteen cents a square foot, so Alcova Heights, equally close to DC, was quite a bargain.⁴² Byars gave his buyers, if they used his construction company, a clear title to the property, even if not fully paid for at the time. The clear title allowed the buyer to obtain a mortgage for the construction. In many cases, Byars acted as the lender for Alcova Heights. His Alcova Construction Company took the first mortgage, and the Alcova Improvement Company took the second. This generosity would in the end over-leverage his own financial security.

In 1927, Byars sold his land sales company to H. B. Terrett but stayed active with the lots he personally owned.⁴³ While sales may have slowed beginning in 1929 with the Depression, the county survey map

Fig. 11: By 1935 over half of Alcova Heights was complete and new street names were established by the county. Image from Plate 13, Atlas of Arlington County, VA, published by the Franklin Survey Co., Philadelphia.



of 1935 shows that most lots had buildings on them (Fig. 11). Alcova Heights had two gas stations and two churches—Arlington Presbyterian Church and Arlington Baptist Church. It was again thriving.

Conclusion

The heyday of the Byarses in Arlington was from 1920–32 although they remained in the area on and off until 1938. The Jazz Age was over, and times were hard at the end of the 1920s. While Byars's plan to assist clients of small means was a smart business plan at first, by the end of the 1920s it created financial problems as the mortgages he held were often in arrears. With the Depression in full effect, Byars was forced to sell Alcova in 1932 to local lawyer Allen Crenshaw Coe. Mr. Coe allowed the Byarses to use the Alcova Barn Studio as their residence when in Arlington.⁴⁴ The senior Byarses were periodically at Alcova until 1941 when they returned to Bristol, Virginia. They eventually moved to Blountville, Tennessee, to be with their daughter, Virginia. Jane died in 1948, and J. Cloyd died in 1954. Bailey married in 1939 to Ruth Elizabeth Ashton and remained in Arlington and nearby Falls Church until his death in 1999.⁴⁵

The hard times, however, would not have dulled the Byarses' sense of success with their Alcova ventures. Courtland Darke Baker, a friend of the family who would become an Associate Professor of English at George Washington University, paid tribute to the family and their happy years at Alcova in a charming poem *Ad Alcovam*.⁴⁶ A wonderful line in the poem reflects on times at Alcova—"Bringing remembrance of those splendid days."

About the Author

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Particular thanks go to Robert Coontz Jr. who is the great-grandson of J. Cloyd and Jane Byars. He is a retired journalist and news editor for the magazine *Science* and lives in Alexandria, Virginia. He is currently inventorying the Byars/Coontz Family Papers, and gave generously of his time, family history, and photographs to make this article a reality.

Endnotes

1. "Smithsonian Wrought Up Over Long-Lost Iron Gates." *Washington Post*, August 21, 1979, Smithsonian Archives.
2. Robert Coontz Jr., Byars/Coontz Family Papers, private collection.
3. "Alcova" is the new word coined expressly for Washington's Garden Suburb." *Evening Star*, April 11, 1920. When the property was purchased in 1915, while still part of Alexandria, Byars named his property "Alexandria County, Va," thus "Alcova."
4. Alcova Heights Citizen's Association, *Alcova Heights Neighborhood Conservation Plan*, February 2014.
5. John Gross Barnard and A. Boschke, Detail of the Map of the Environs of Washington: Compiled from Boschkes' Map of the District of Columbia, from Surveys of the US Coast Survey "showing the lines of Defences [sic] of Washington as Constructed During the War 1861–1865 Inclusive," 1865, Library of Congress.
6. Ancestry.com, Southern Claims Commission Allowed Claims, 1871–80, John Young, ca. 1878.
7. "Alcova Heights in Virginia," undated, ca. 1920, RG 334-1-1-2, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
8. Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Arlington Survey by EHT Tracerics, Property evaluation for Alcova, 3435 8th Street, South, 2017.
9. Byars/Coontz Family Papers, private collection. Census and family records in the collection show J. Cloyd Byars lived in several Virginia locations—2009, 2016, 2018, until 2020—in Bristol, Norfolk, Richmond, and Petersburg.
10. *Richmond-Times Dispatch*, June 23, 1921.
11. Linda Wheeler, "Alcova Heights: Old-Fashioned Community Spirit," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1995.
12. Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of Virginia County* (Arlington: The Author, 1959), 88–89.
13. Edward William St. Cyr Barrington, *DC Architects Directory*, DC Preservation League, 2012.
14. Byars/Coontz Family Papers, private collection.
15. Ibid.
16. Political Materials, Byars/Coontz Family Papers, private collection. Letters and family memorabilia regarding political campaigns.

17. John G. Deal, "Jane Rhea Bailey Byars (1872–1948)," Dictionary of Virginia Biography, Library of Virginia (1998–), published 2019, http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/bio.asp?b=Byars_Jane_Rhea_Bailey.
18. *Evening Star*, March 16, 1930 and *Evening Star*, April 2, 1930
19. *Evening Star*, February 4, 1932; *The Washington Herald*, December 7, 1922.
20. *Evening Star*, May 7, 1924.
21. Linda Wheeler, "Alcova Heights: Old-Fashioned Community Spirit," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1995.
22. Elizabeth Cannon Kimball, et al., "Washington-Lee High School: The Early Years, 1924–1939," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, 5, no. 2 (1974).
23. *Evening Star*, March 6, 1929, Bailey was very active in the Arlington Community; *Evening Star*, Sept. 24, 1932, ad for No-Graft Service Station and for real estate convention; *Evening Star*, August 13, 1933, Bailey also was a member of the Kiwanis and assisted with the St. John's Orphans picnic.
24. Byars/Coontz Family Papers, private collection.
25. "Admiral Coontz to Miss Family Wedding," *The Washington Times*, May 2,
26. 1924. Caldwell Family Collection, MSS 0006, Sullivan County Department of Archives, Blountville, TN. A side note on the Alcova gates: Virginia took them with her to her new home in Blountville, and one pair was returned to the Smithsonian in 1979.
27. Trinkle Appointment Book and List of Byars's Policies and Politics Charts, Byars/Coontz Family Papers.
28. Survey of lots for Block 10, August 1925, approved by John T. Talman, Supt. of Roads; RG 334-1-1-2, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
29. *Washington Times*, May 8, 1920, advertisement of the Alcova Improvement Company states fifteen houses built which would indicate fairly recent land purchases such as 1918.
30. Letterhead Columbia Land Company, no date, but prior to 1920. RG 334-1-1-3, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
31. Promotional Flyer, ca. 1926, Alcova file RG 28, A72 B9, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
32. Alcova Improvement Co. Transfer Papers, January 20, 1920, RG 334-1-1-3, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
33. "Alcova Heights Combines the Convenience of the City with the Luxuries of the Country," *Washington Times*, May 8, 1920, Real Estate; Alcova Improvement Company (owner and builder), *Evening Star*, April 11, 1920, has a promotion in

- “which the purchaser pays \$100 down will be given a bonus of \$100 additional credit for lot and home buying.”
34. Jim Crow Laws discussed in <https://americansall.org/legacy-story-group/jim-crow-laws-virginia>.
 35. “We didn’t have any other place to live: Residential Patterns in Segregated Arlington County, Virginia.” *Southeastern Geographer* 53, no. 4 (2013): 403–427.
 36. Byars/Coontz Family Papers.
 37. Joseph C. Byars Jr., *Black and White: An Anthology of Washington Verse* (Crane Publishing, Washington, DC, 1927). Poems by 17 authors including four poems by Joseph C. Byars Jr.
 38. Early development was on wells and septic with county water and sewer coming in the late 1920s and 1930s.
 39. *The Washington Times*, March 31, 1923. Edmund J. Flynn was just starting out in sales in 1922 and eventually developed his own company for co-op apartment houses in DC. The company still exists today at <https://www.Edmundjflynn.com>.
 40. RG 334-1-1-4, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library.
 41. *Alcova Heights in Virginia*, no date, ca. 1920, RG 334-1-1-2, Center for Local History, Arlington County Central Library, brochure for sales; eight pages plus covers outline the entire plan for affordable purchase and construction.
 42. *A History of Ashton Heights. A neighborhood history prepared by the GWU students of Professor Richard Longstreth*, 1994, <https://arlingtonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AH-History-Report-1994.pdf>. In 1922 Ashton Heights lots sold for twelve cents a square foot cash or fourteen cents a square foot on monthly payments.
 43. “New Owners Assume Control of Beautiful Alcova Heights,” *The Washington Times*, May 14, 1927.
 44. Byars/Coontz Family Papers, Letters, and Diary entries indicate the family stayed periodically on the Alcova property after it was sold.
 45. *Evening Star*, November 7, 1939, Bailey’s wedding to Miss Ashton who was the daughter of the late Doctor Ashton of Arlington and may not have been directly related to the Ashton Heights development.
 46. Courtland Darke Baker, *Ad Alcovam*, Byars/Coontz Family Papers, undated, ca. 1930s.