

The Commercial Development of Twinbrook, Rockville MD

Twinbrook Shopping Center and Twinbrook Shopping Mart

Cindy Thompson

04/07/08

The Twinbrook Shopping Center and Shopping Mart are typical of mid-century shopping centers built to serve a growing suburban population in the United States at the end of World War II. Much celebrated when they opened, the two modern designed shopping centers were home to a wide variety of stores, and quickly became a major selling point for the Twinbrook neighborhood. Though much changed in appearance today, the two centers remain as popular shopping destinations for the local community, and have not outlived their convenience in design or location.

In the 1920s, as people with disposable incomes began to move outward from city centers with the assistance of automobile transportation, there was a movement away from the downtown shopping district and towards the regional shopping center approach to retail. Early shopping centers were usually fairly modest in size, with about eight to twenty stores and a drugstore and/or market as an anchor. As in one of the earliest and largest of these shopping centers, J.C. Nichols' 1922 Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, the buildings were usually designed in a variety of historicizing architectural styles that reflected the majority housing built at the time.

1

After World War II, growth of suburban development in the United States was nothing short of extreme. Between 1947 and 1953 the population of Americans living in suburban neighborhoods increased by 43%², and it didn't take long for commercial developers to catch on to the trend. The families that moved into suburban homes usually had high consumption rates based on their tendency to have both higher disposable incomes and numbers of children than their city dwelling counterparts, and by the mid-

1950s the neighborhood shopping center had become a typical feature of postwar developments.³

The Washington DC metropolitan area was certainly not immune from this type of development. Built in 1930, the Park and Shop on Connecticut Avenue in northwest Washington became one of the seminal designs for the shopping center type.⁴ Most notably, even within the city limits it was set back from the street a considerable distance to allow for the shoppers to park in front. In 1938 the Silver Spring shopping center opened in Montgomery County, and was one of the earliest shopping centers in the region to make use of the modernist design aesthetic in its architecture. In order to better express their efficiency and up to date products, mid-century shopping centers began to take on elements of the modern architecture movement; utilizing clear structural elements that plainly expressed the building's program and large amounts of window space to better display merchandise.⁵ Of course, one of the other major attractions of the new shopping centers were the vast expanses of parking lot that surrounded them. Not surprisingly, from 1951-1960, the number of shopping centers in the Montgomery County area doubled⁶, including in 1957, the construction of the Twinbrook Shopping Center and Shopping Mart.

Previous to the two Twinbrook shopping centers, the community of Rockville had a small downtown shopping district that ran East-West along State Route 240. The Main Street was populated by a mixture of building styles that served a wide variety of functions. According to Rockville, Portrait of City, included on Main Street were shops,

offices, homes, churches, manufacturing warehouses, places of assembly, an athletic field, a movie theater, a post office and firehouse.⁷ The shops in the downtown district sold all of the day to day items the citizens of Rockville needed, so a shopping trip to downtown Washington D.C. or Silver Spring was considered a luxury. Rockville was thought to be a pedestrian oriented downtown, but in order to help bring in shoppers from the Twinbrook subdivisions located a little farther a field, a “shopping bus” service was started in 1954. The September 2nd 1954 edition of the Montgomery County Sentinel published the route that the red and cream colored shopping bus took through the neighborhood, with stops on several streets and a destination of Montgomery Ave in the Rockville city center.⁸ Twinbrook residents were thrilled with the addition of the bus, a Mrs. Benjamin Anderson of Grandin Ave told the Sentinel at the time, “It’s a terrific idea, now even when my husband takes the car into work I can still get into Rockville to do my errands in the daytime.”⁹

Finally, in 1955 plans began to get underway for the addition of Twinbrook’s very own shopping center to compete with the growing retail outlets in the area. With the success of the Rockville shopping bus, it was apparent that the need was great for more immediate shopping in the rapidly growing neighborhood. Early in 1955 Twinbrook developer Joseph Geerart started seeking permission to annex new land to the city of Rockville in order to build two more Twinbrook subdivisions, Broadwood Manor and Twinbrook Forest.¹⁰ Part of this annexed land, just above Veirs Mill Road and across from Atlantic Avenue, was to be set aside for the new shopping center. The April 21st

1955 issue of the Montgomery County Sentinel announced Geerart's plans for a 2 million dollar "California style shopping center" to be built within a 1200 by 175 foot area.¹¹

Shortly after the announcement of Geerart's Twinbrook Shopping Center plans, work began on development of the competing Twinbrook Shopping Mart, to be located across Veirs Mill Road from the Shopping Center. Developed by Donald Gingery, one of the original Twinbrook builders, and his business partner William T. Hannon, the Shopping Mart opened an A&P supermarket on November 17, 1955. Announced that day in the Sentinel, visitors to the new supermarket applauded its easy walking distance from their homes, and the press compared the shopper's excitement to that of a Broadway show opening in New York City.¹²

On April 17th, 1956 Geerart's annexation to Rockville was unanimously approved by the city government and construction began on the Shopping Center shortly thereafter. Plans were completed by Bethesda architect John Samperton, and included a long, one story structure of modern design that would hold twenty to thirty stores in addition to a separate structure for a Safeway supermarket. Parking for 900 cars was anticipated in the large lot surrounding the Center.¹³ (figure 1) Construction progressed with little incident; there was a picket line of unionized laborers in 1957 protesting the work done by non-union laborers, but Geerart pushed through with the work in the hopes of having most of the stores operational by Christmas of 1957.¹⁴

In the meanwhile, stores were also added to the Twinbrook Shopping Mart across the road, a People's Drug store opened in February of 1957¹⁵ and the Twinbrook Mart won the bid for the location of a Twinbrook branch of the U.S. Post Office, which was

added in October of 1957.¹⁶ In 1959 a much-anticipated Twinbrook Library was added to the Mart, and took up residence in the basement of the People's Drug store.¹⁷ (figure 2)

By November of 1957 most of Geerart's shopping center was complete. The structure was built out of brick, with a stone foundation, and the redwood shingled roof alternated between flat and mansard style rooflines. A covered walkway in front of the stores protected shoppers from the elements, and large amounts of glazing allowed for prominent display of products.¹⁸ (figure 3) Parking was built around the center for a total of 825 cars. The Shopping Center contained twenty-three stores, including the Safeway, three clothing stores, a jewelry store, shoe store, drug store, gift shop, hardware store, Music and Arts Center, hobby shop, TV sales and repair shop, men's and women's hair salons, a High's, a bakery, a restaurant, and a bowling alley.¹⁹ (figure 4) Both the Twinbrook shopping Center and Shopping Mart were also outfitted with their own competing gas stations.

While most stores were already operational at the time, a grand opening gala was scheduled for the Center on November 30th 1957. According to the full page Washington Post ad that ran the day of the ceremony, festivities including a ribbon cutting were scheduled to begin at 11am and would to be covered by three area radio stations. In addition to many excited Twinbrook shoppers, also attending the ceremony were Rockville Mayor and Twinbrook resident Dickran Hovsepian, radio celebrities Milton Q Ford, Tippy Stranger, Billy Johnson, and Ranger Hal, Miss Christmas of Rockville, the Rockville city and Richard Montgomery High School bands, and of course, Santa Claus.²⁰ (figure 5)

The immediate response to the Shopping Center was a positive one, the variety of shops and their proximity to the neighborhood and made some Twinbrookers remark to the Sentinel that the Center, “might cancel Twinbrooks need for second cars.”²¹ However, there was some worry among those who lived closest to the two retail centers that congestion to the area might cause undue distress to the residents. In a September 26th 1957 issue of the Sentinel, it was noted that some Twinbrook residents were fighting against a proposal to add more commercial space to the Veirs Mill Road corridor, and remarked that some felt the community, “was starting to resemble a metropolitan center.”²² To help those closest to the shopping centers, In January of 1958 a line of screening trees was added behind the retail properties to increase privacy for the housing that backed them.²³

Twinbrook residents also responded negatively to both the Shopping Center and Shopping Mart’s bids for liquor licenses in order to open liquor stores on their properties. After the bids were made public in 1957, residents immediately banded together to thwart the effort, and it took until 1958 for the licenses to get passed.²⁴

In light of the few negative responses, the majority of Twinbrook residents were proud of their community and it’s new modern Shopping Center. The Shopping Center started to show up as part of the selling point for the “All American” Twinbrook community in ads placed in both the Sentinel and the Washington Post.²⁵ In June of 1958, as part of an international city partnership program, Burgemeister Henrich Glissman of Pinneburg, Germany was welcomed to Rockville and one of his first stops

on the city tour was a visit to the new Twinbrook Shopping Center. The Center was bedecked in German flags and German translations of the store signs in his honor, and after visiting the Safeway supermarket, he ventured over to the thirty-six lane Twinbrook Lanes bowling alley to play a game before leaving.²⁶

With the success of the two shopping centers and the Twinbrook subdivisions as a whole, a third smaller shopping center was added to the community in 1960. The Burgundy Park shopping center on Baltimore Road in the Twinbrook Forest subdivision was built with only a small amount of retail space, and meant primarily to serve the immediate community.²⁷ Described in an August 18, 1960 edition of the Sentinel as a “crossroads of value,”²⁸ a 1962 Chamber of Commerce map shows the Burgundy shopping center as having a drug store, hardware store, Laundromat, barber shop, 7-11 convenience store, and two real estate offices. (figure 6)

As housing and population in Montgomery County continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s, competing shopping centers opened in and around the Rockville area. In 1958 ads appeared in Sentinel for the opening of the nearby Congressional Plaza shopping center located off of Rockville Pike at Halpine Road, and the shopping center was officially opened for business in 1960.²⁹ In 1970 the Montgomery County shopping mall, later renamed Westfield Montgomery Mall, opened on Democracy Boulevard in Bethesda.³⁰ An addition of three new stores was added to the Twinbrook Shopping Center in the 1960s, but as area roads were improved and it became easier for Twinbrook residents to travel farther distances for their shopping, the Shopping Center and Shopping

Mart began to fall into some disrepair. In 1976 the Twinbrook Library was given a permanent home in a new building on the Shopping Center site, and in 1989 the Safeway was replaced by a larger 37,000 sq foot Safeway store with a more modern look. The contrast between the two new structures and the older Shopping Center threw the building's decline into a harsher light, and it was decided in 1995 that the Center needed a façade upgrade.³¹

A use permit for the Twinbrook Shopping Center was filed in May of 1995, and in response the Rockville city planning department issued a staff report in August on the condition of the now almost 40 year old shopping center. The report noted that, "the aging strip center portion of the property has a dated and deteriorated appearance. This situation is exaggerated by its location between two newer and more modern structures - the Safeway store and the Twinbrook Library."³² The new upgrade called for a replacement of the facade treatment that would give the Center a more contemporary appearance and a renewed relationship with the Safeway building. The upgrade kept much of the original design features, the row of single story shops with large windows for merchandise display and a covered walkway for shoppers, but the façade was reworked with architectural elements that matched the new Safeway structure. (figure 7) The use permit also requested a 3,000 square foot addition for the eastern breezeway and provided plans to improve the parking situation and pedestrian access to the site.³³

The landscaping of the Shopping Center was also mentioned in the plans for improving the site, more green space was created in order to comply with newer requirements of the area's zoning and forest and tree preservation ordinances. A movement was started by the Twinbrook Citizens Association to try and recreate some of

the landscaping from the original center; mentioned in the staff report, there was also a call for original photographs and other images of the signage and landscaping of the center in the Twinbrook Life newsletter in 1995.³⁴ There was some trouble getting the façade upgrade completed however, and when it was finally finished in 1997 it appeared that the landscaping project had been largely forgotten.

Today the both the Twinbrook Shopping Center and Shopping Mart are still vibrant retail outlets; between the two centers there is only one vacant space. As the neighborhood populations have changed so have the nature of the stores, currently many of the restaurants and food markets cater to the growing Hispanic and Korean populations in the area. (see figure 4) The Twinbrook Shopping Center now consists of the Safeway, eight restaurants and food stores, three beauty and hair salons, two discount stores, two technology supply stores, two fashion accessory shops, a laundromat, uniform supplier, check's cashed shop, music store, video store, furniture store, pet store, and liquor store. (figures 8-9)

The Twinbrook Shopping Mart, which also had a façade upgrade in the 1990's, still is home to the Twinbrook branch of the U.S. Post Office, but also has four restaurants and food markets, a cleaners, cash depot, uniform supplier, and liquor store. The American Legion post 86 also has its headquarters in the lower level space originally occupied by the Twinbrook Library. (figures 10-11)

Both shopping centers are still much used today by Twinbrook residents, and while their appearance has been changed, it is evident that even after fifty years their design and location are still effective and useful for the surrounding community.

-
- ¹ Longstreth, Richard. "The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept during the Interwar Decades" The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 56 (September 1997, 268-293).
- ² Cohen, Lizbeth. "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America" The American Historical Review 101 (October 1999, 1050-1081).
- ³ Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center".
- ⁴ Longstreth, Richard. "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D. C., 1930-1941" The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 51 (March 1992, 5-34).
- ⁵ Longstreth, "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C."
- ⁶ "The Montgomery County Shopping Center Directory" 2005. The Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. April 2008. http://www.mc-mncppc.org/research/analysis/shopping_centers/2005/directory_part_1.pdf
- ⁷ McGuckian, Eileen. Rockville, Portrait of a City. (Franklin, Tennessee: Hillsboro Press, 2001, 125-157).
- ⁸ "New Shoppers Bus a Delight" Montgomery County Sentinel, 2 September 1954.
- ⁹ "New Shoppers Bus a Delight" Montgomery County Sentinel, 2 September 1954.
- ¹⁰ "Will sell 10 Acre Tract to City at Cost to Him" Montgomery County Sentinel, 21 April 1955: A4.
- ¹¹ "Will sell 10 Acre Tract to City at Cost to Him" Montgomery County Sentinel, 21 April 1955: A4.
- ¹² "Twinbrook enjoys Gala Premier of new Supermarket Tuesday" Montgomery County Sentinel, 17 November 1955: A4.
- ¹³ "Twinbrook Park Tract Annexed to Rockville" Montgomery County Sentinel, 17 April 1956: Front Page.
- ¹⁴ "Picket Fails to Halt New Center" Montgomery County Sentinel, 5 September 1957.
- ¹⁵ "Contractor's Rush Work on 30 Stores" Montgomery County Sentinel, 26 September 1957.
- ¹⁶ "P.O. Fete Saturday" Montgomery County Sentinel, 21 November 1957: Front Page.
- ¹⁷ Twinbrook Life, a newsletter of the Twinbrook Citizens Association. February 1959
- ¹⁸ Twinbrook Community Association Directory, 1957.
- ¹⁹ "Christmas Unofficial 'Til Dec. 15" Montgomery County Sentinel, 5 December 1957.
- ²⁰ Ad, "Grand Opening Twinbrook Shopping Center." Washington Post, 30 November 1957: B12.
- ²¹ "Contractor's Rush Work on 30 Stores" Montgomery County Sentinel, 26 September 1957.
- ²² "Christmas Unofficial 'Til Dec. 15" Montgomery County Sentinel, 5 December 1957.
- ²³ Twinbrook Life, a newsletter of the Twinbrook Citizens Association. January 1958.
- ²⁴ "County Okays Beer Permit in Twinbrook" Montgomery County Sentinel, 23 January 1957.
- ²⁵ Ad, "Grand Opening Twinbrook Shopping Center." Washington Post, 30 November 1957: B12.

-
- ²⁶ “German Mayor Visits Ultra Modern Center” Montgomery County Sentinel, 5 June 1958: C2.
- ²⁷ Lachin, Terry. E-mail interview. 26 March 2008.
- ²⁸ Lachin, Terry. E-mail interview. 26 March 2008.
- ²⁹ “Contractor’s Rush Work on 30 Stores” Montgomery County Sentinel, 26 September 1957.
- ³⁰ “The Montgomery County Shopping Center Directory” 2005. The Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. April 2008. http://www.mncppc.org/research/analysis/shopping_centers/2005/directory_part_1.pdf
- ³¹ Staff Report. City of Rockville Planning Division, 18 August 1995.
- ³² Staff Report. City of Rockville Planning Division, 18 August 1995.
- ³³ Staff Report. City of Rockville Planning Division, 18 August 1995.
- ³⁴ Twinbrook Life, a newsletter of the Twinbrook Citizens Association. September 1995.

Bibliography

Ad, "Grand Opening Twinbrook Shopping Center." Washington Post, 30 November 1957: B12.

Cohen, Lizbeth. "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America" The American Historical Review 101 (October 199, 1050-1081).

Lachin, Terry. E-mail interview. 26 March 2008.

Longstreth, Richard. "The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept during the Interwar Decades" The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 56 (September 1997, 268-293).

Longstreth, Richard. "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D. C., 1930-1941" The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 51 (March 1992, 5-34).

McGuckian, Eileen. Rockville, Portrait of a City. (Franklin, Tennessee: Hillsboro Press, 2001, 125-157).

The Montgomery County Sentinel, 1954 – 1958.

"The Montgomery County Shopping Center Directory" 2005. The Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. April 2008. http://www.mc-mncppc.org/research/analysis/shopping_centers/2005/directory_part_1.pdf

Twinbrook Community Association Directory, 1956 – 1957.

Twinbrook Life, a newsletter of the Twinbrook Citizens Association. 1958 – 1995.

"Twinbrook Neighborhood Plan" Rockville Department of City Planning. 2008. Rockville City Government. April 2008. <http://www.rockvillemd.gov/masterplan/twinbrook/>

Staff Report. City of Rockville Planning Division, 18 August 1995.

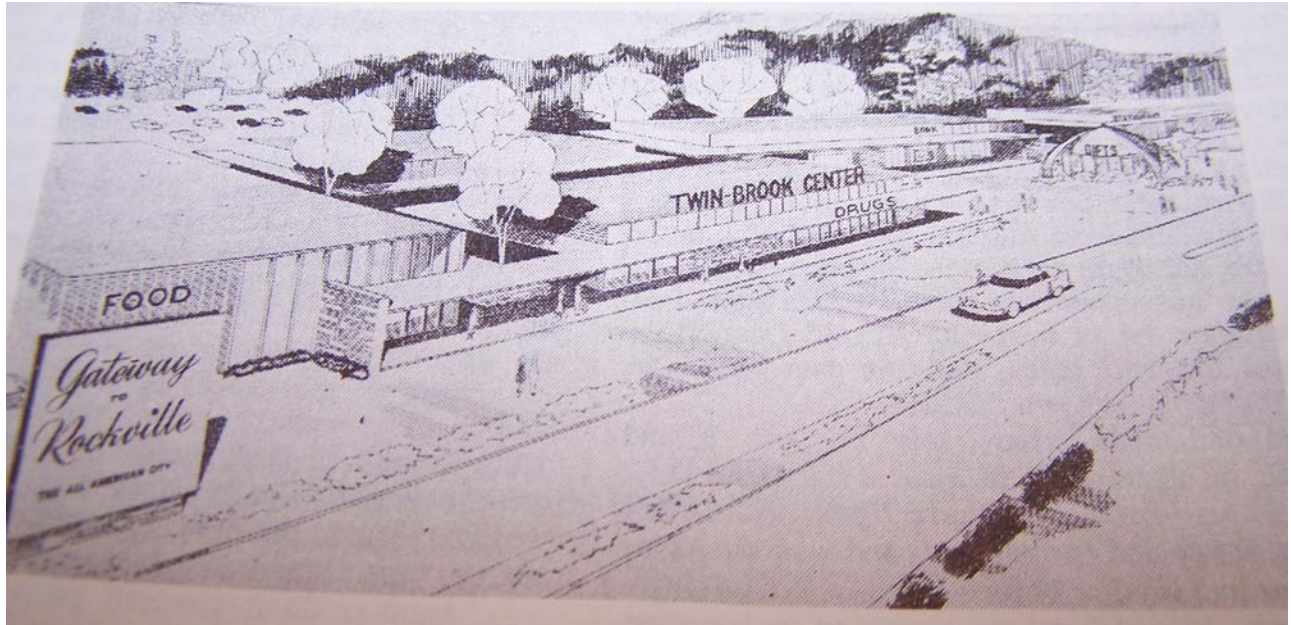


Figure 1. Proposed Twinbrook Shopping Center, Rockville, Maryland; John Samperton, architect; Joseph Geerart, developer; 1956 rendering (Twinbrook Community Association Directory, 1956)

Figure 2. Twinbrook Shopping Center and Twinbrook Shopping Mart, Rockville, Maryland; Joseph Geerart and Donald Gingery, developers; 1960 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps)

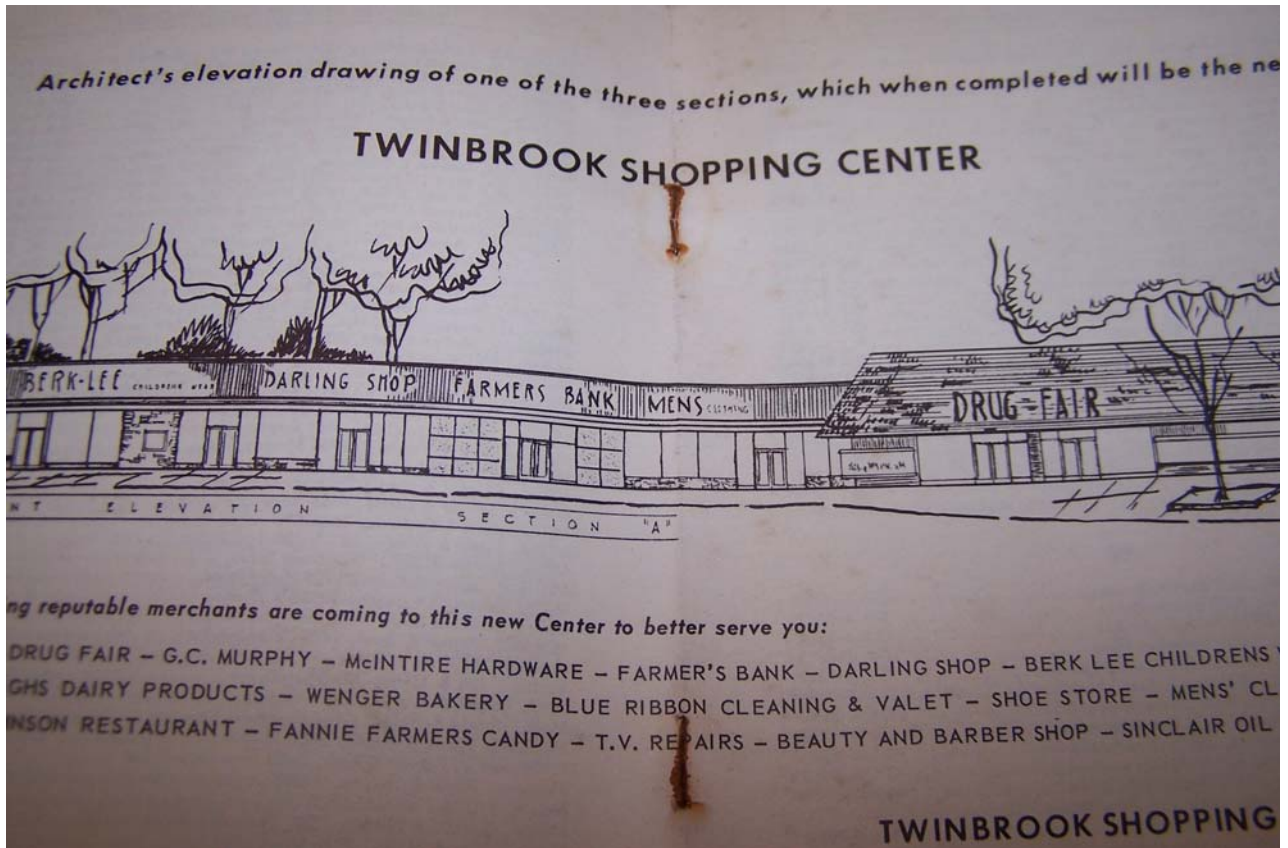


Figure 3. Figure 1. Twinbrook Shopping Center, Rockville, Maryland; John Samperton, architect; Joseph Geerart, developer; 1957 rendering (Twinbrook Community Association Directory, 1957)

Twinbrook Shopping Center

Original stores:

Adeline Shops, Inc. (clothing store)
Blue Ribbon Valet (dry cleaners)
Drug Fair, Inc.
Farmers Bank and Trust
Fashion Aire Children's Wear
G.C. Murphy (department store)
Gifts & Gadgets
High's Dairy Products
Levey's Jewelry
McIntyre Hardware
Miles Shoes
Music and Arts Center
Safeway
Sinclair Petroleum (gas and car repair)
Sports & Hobby Center
Twinbrook Barber Shop
Twinbrook Beauty Shop
Twinbrook Lanes, Inc. (bowling alley)
Twinbrook Restaurant
Twinbrook TV
Wehger's Bakery

Twinbrook Shopping Mart

Original stores:

A&P Supermarket
Alberta's Dance Studio
Barber Shop
Beauty Shop
Montgomery Ward
People's Drug
Post Office
Princes Cleaners & Launderers
Sheffield's (clothing store)
Shell gas station

Current stores:

Asian Market
AT&T Store
Aurora's Hair Design
Bamboo Buffet
Beauty Supply
Café Shilla Bakery
Capitol Stores II (discount goods)
Checks Cashed
CVS Pharmacy
Dollar Land
Don Pollo Restaurant
Design Optical
DTV Store (technology goods)
Dunkin Donuts/Baskin Robbins
Flynn and O'Hara School uniforms
Ha Dong Oak Restaurant
Homeshine Furniture
Just Puppies (pet store)
Laundromat
MD Nails
Safeway
Sula & Musica II (music store)
Tomatillo Mexican Grill
Twinbrook Deli
Van Jewelry and Watch Repair
Video Town
Wine and Liquor

Current stores:

American Legion Post 86
Cash Depot
Denise Bakery
Friendly Cleaners
Latin Market
Lemoncello Italian Restaurant
Linn Uniforms
Ollie's Beer and Wine DC
Post Office
Tijuana Mexican Cafe

Figure 4. List of original and current stores, Twinbrook Shopping Center and Twinbrook Shopping Mart. Original store data taken from the Montgomery County Sentinel, 1957 and Rockville Chamber of Commerce Map, 1962. Current data taken by Cindy Thompson, March 2008.

Figure 5. Ad, “Grand Opening Twinbrook Shopping Center.” Washington Post, 30 November 1957: B12

Figure 6. Figure 2. Twinbrook Shopping Center, Twinbrook Shopping Mart, Burgundy Park Shopping Center, Rockville, Maryland; 1962 (Rockville Chamber of Commerce Map)

Figure 7. Twinbrook Shopping Center, Rockville, Maryland; Joseph Geerart, developer; 1997 façade upgrade (Staff report. City of Rockville Planning Division, 18 August 1995)



Figures 8-9. Twinbrook Shopping Center, Rockville, Maryland; Joseph Geerart, developer; 1997 façade upgrade (Image taken by Cindy Thompson, March 2008)



Figures 10-11. Twinbrook Shopping Mart, Rockville, Maryland; Donald Gingery, developer; façade upgraded in the 1990s (Image taken by Cindy Thompson, March 2008)