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Historic Preservation: Twinbrook
The career of Joseph Geeraert and other developers

Joseph Geeraert, Donald Gingery, Roland Simmons, and Wesley Sauter founded Twin-Brook Incorporated in 1946. They had purchased over two hundred acres outside of Rockville, Maryland and set out to develop affordable housing for the new upsurge in young middle class families in need of homes. Inspired by the Levitt and Sons' Levittown on Long Island, they developed a entire community complete with houses, places of worship, schools, shopping centers and recreation areas. Geeraert was the president of the organization and the main developer of Twinbrook. Sauter and Simmons left the project by 1950 and left Geeraert and Gingery to continue to develop Twinbrook. Twinbrook was not the first or last development project of Geeraert or Gingery, but it is the one for which they are most known.

Joseph Geeraert was born in 1909 in Belgium. He attended arts school and graduated from St. Barbara College in Ghent where he was a member of the varsity row team. He was a member of the 1928 Belgium Olympic Rowing Team.¹ His family ran a business making brass items for churches. As the eldest of six siblings, Geeraert had to take over the business when his father left the family. His first trip to America in 1930 was to try and market his family's brass items to churches in America. He was not successful and had to return to Belgium because he did not have a visa to stay longer. He never was interested in running the business and saw the United States as a way to escape. On that original trip he met his first wife whom he married when he moved to American in 1931.² In New York Geeraert worked a variety of odd jobs from working on the docks to making deliveries. Geeraert's

¹ Cross, Gladys, "The Spotlight," Twinbrook Life, March 18, 1955, vol. II, no. 3, pg 5.

² Interview with Dee Dee Patterson, daughter of Joseph Geeraert, March 12, 2008.

first development venture happened at the 1938 World's Fair in New York. He built and ran "The Hunting Lodge," a restaurant and nightclub on the fairgrounds.³ The Lodge also had an archery component where Geeraert had pretty girls teaching people how to shoot a bow and arrow.⁴ In 1940 Geeraert moved to Washington, DC to begin his career in the housing market.

In 1941 Joseph Geeraert began his first housing development with a partner in Takoma Park, Maryland. His partner left him to finish the project in 1942. It was one street, West Grant Avenue, and approximately 30 "tiny brick houses."⁵ During that time Geeraert also worked in Cheverly Manor and finished approximately 80 homes.⁶ From there Geeraert moved to Chevy Chase and began building bigger houses on a horseshoe street. He built between 30-35 houses on Coquelin Terrace. Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern owned Geeraert homes on Coquelin Terrace when they were senators.⁷ Between 1944-1945, Geeraert was working in the District on remodeling projects of various embassies and in Bethesda on Oakmont Avenue.⁸

Also in 1945 Geeraert, along with Roland E Simmons, first inspected a tract of land called Walnut Hill Farm for sale by Lillian Small.⁹ Geeraert had met Wesley Sauter at a Chicago real estate convention and Sauter worked with Donald Gingery in construction. In 1946 Geeraert, Sauter, Simmons, and Gingery formed Twin-Brook Incorporated under Maryland law with Geeraert as president. On October 18 1946 they bought 202.3481 acres

³ Cross, "The Spotlight," pg 5.

⁴ Patterson interview.

⁵ Patterson interview.

⁶ Cross, "The Spotlight," pg 5.

⁷ Patterson interview.

⁸ Cross, "The Spotlight," pg 5.

⁹ Cross, Gladys, "This is Twinbrook," Twinbrook Life, January 27, 1955, vol. II, no. 1.

of land from Lillian Small for \$94,000.¹⁰ The first plat of land of section 1 was originally platted in December 1946 with 20,000 square foot lots, but it was replatted and recorded on January 28, 1947 with smaller lots.¹¹ It included the streets: Okinawa, Midway, Ardennes, Coral Sea and St. Lo. The streets were named after people and events of World War II since many of the new owners would be veterans. In 1950 Twin-Brook Inc. was dissolved and Sauter and Simmons sold their shares to Gingery and Geeraert except for some land in the southeast corner. Geeraert and Gingery continued to build and develop Twinbrook with the Geeraert Construction Company and the Donley Construction Company; Simmons and Sauter retired to Virginia in 1951.¹² Geeraert had gone to Long Island to visit Levittown to see how the Levitts developed entire communities, not just houses. He was already familiar with how to build houses from his experiences in Takoma Park, but Geeraert wanted to see how to also incorporate shopping centers, schools, churches and other civic services within his development.¹³

Twinbrook was not Donald Gingery's first venture in development; he had been in the building business since he was eighteen years old. Gingery was born in Pennsylvania and worked there as a leather worker until he came to Washington, DC to work for PEPCO and study engineering at George Washington University at night. He worked for Wesley Sauter in construction and in 1936 became an associate with L.E. Breuninger and Sons where he was in charge of construction for seven years. In 1942 Gingery graduated from the

¹⁰ "City of Rockville: Appendix of Twinbrook Neighborhood Plan Draft", Department of Community Planning and Development Services, pg 96.

¹¹ "City of Rockville: Appendix of Twinbrook Neighborhood Plan Draft", Department of Community Planning and Development Services, pg 96.

¹² Cross, "This is Twinbrook."

¹³ Patterson interview.

Columbus School of Law at Catholic University of America in Washington DC.¹⁴ Gingery joined Sauter again in 1944 for a building project in Bethesda: Westboro. From there he continued in housing developments in Northwoodside in Silver Spring and Twinbrook. Gingery also developed apartments including the Greenwich Garden Apartments in Baltimore.¹⁵ In the beginning, 1947-1948, Gingery built in Twinbrook based on Geeraert's designs, but soon both were building based on their own designs.

Geeraert and Gingery were active members of Twinbrook in addition to being the developers. In 1952 they donated wood and scrap lumber for the building of a recreation area in Twinbrook.¹⁶ Gingery moved to Kensington, Maryland in August of 1952, but continued to build and be an active part of Twinbrook.¹⁷ Geeraert and Gingery often donated refreshments for various Twinbrook Citizens Association events including the TCA annual picnic in 1952, annual holiday party for children in 1952, and the TCA picnic in 1959.¹⁸ In an effort to build not just homes, but a community, Geeraert and Gingery made more substantial contributions than just refreshments. John H. Markland publicly thanked both in a letter to the Montgomery Sentinel for their contributions to the greater Rockville area. Geeraert Construction Company was thanked for contributing \$500 to a recreation program, the construction and maintenance of a softball field and for leasing a house to the swimming pool association for a dollar a month. Gingery Construction Company was thanked for

¹⁴ Cross, "The Spotlight," pg 5.

¹⁵ Cross, "The Spotlight," pg 5.

¹⁶ "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, June 19, 1952, pg 11.

¹⁷ "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, August 7, 1952.

¹⁸ "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, September 4, 1952 pg 8; "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, January 1, 1953, pg 8; Elliot, Rita, "Twinbrook: TCA Picnic Attended by 2500 Persons," The Montgomery Sentinel, September 24, 1959, pg A9.

contributing \$1000 to a recreation fund.¹⁹ At the 1958 TCA Annual Ball, Geeraert presented the Twinbrook Citizens Association with a check for \$262.76, which brought their bank balance to \$750.00.²⁰ Gingery donated \$300.00 to furnish the smoking lounge of the teen recreation center.²¹ When it was discovered that three defective controls were causing Twinbrook Forest residents to have higher than normal heating bills, Geeraert personally offered them refunds because the gas company representative was not authorized to promise refunds at a meeting held between residents, Geeraert, the gas company representative, a representative from the furnace company and a representative from the control company.²²

In addition to building homes and contributing to the social event needs of Twinbrook, Geeraert also worked to help the city with other building projects. Geeraert offered to sell some of the Bullis Farm tract he owned to the city of Rockville for a proposed civic and recreation center. The Bullis land was used for seven hundred more homes and a shopping center.²³ Geeraert also sold the city eight acres of the Bullis Tract for Twinbrook Forest Elementary and twenty acres for Rockville Junior High School.²⁴

Health problems and zoning issues both plagued Geeraert in the later years of his Twinbrook project. Geeraert suffered from health problems during his time developing Twinbrook. In November 1955 he was hospitalized and had lung surgery at Garfield

¹⁹ Markland, John H., City Manager, "The Letterbox," The Montgomery Sentinel, December 22, 1955, pg A2.

²⁰ Elliot, Rita, "Twinbrook: Annual Ball Honors TCA Presidents," The Montgomery Sentinel, July 16, 1959, pg A11.

²¹ The Montgomery Sentinel, November 19, 1959, pg B7.

²² "Norris Promises Action to Locate More Twinbrook Classroom Space," The Montgomery Sentinel, January 13, 1955, pg 5.

²³ "Rockville to Get Second Offer of Location for Civic Center, Geeraert Suggests Bullis Site," The Montgomery Sentinel, April 21, 1955.

²⁴ "School Board Will Buy New Twinbrook Site," The Montgomery Sentinel, October 27, 1955, pg 4.

Hospital during the construction of Twinbrook Forest and Halpine Village. Work on the houses continued while he recovered in the hospital.²⁵ Starting in 1957 Geeraert attempted to rezone areas for apartments. He wanted to use the Meadow Hall land for apartments and with each rezone request he reduced the acreage in hopes of gaining approval.²⁶ Geeraert even wrote an article in The Montgomery Sentinel regarding what he felt like were unfair difficulties he was facing trying to rezone for apartments.²⁷ The fight over apartments continued through 1963, when the president of the Twinbrook Citizens Association listed in his list of accomplishments the rejection of Geeraert's request for high-rise apartments of the Bullis Tract next to Carl Sandburg Elementary School.²⁸ Geeraert eventually gave up his fight and instead built townhouses on the area, including a townhouse for his daughter Dee Dee Patterson.²⁹

Gingery also moved towards developing apartments and towards developing outside of Twinbrook. He developed a sixteen acre plot west of Rockville Pike at Edmonston Drive for luxury garden type apartments and developed 313 two-story units at Hungerford Towne.³⁰ Geeraert also tried to build outside of Twinbrook. Starting in 1960 Geeraert began building Chandon Village in Herndon, Virginia. He bought a large tract of land by the new Dulles Airport, but his development struggled with the lack of access roads.³¹ Geeraert's advertisement for Chandon Village was based on his proven success in Twinbrook. The ad

²⁵ Wojtanowski, Elain, "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, November 17, 1955, pg 4.

²⁶ "Twinbrook News," The Montgomery Sentinel, October 31, 1957, pg 1 and 6.

²⁷ Geeraert, Joe, "A Communication Quote and Misquote," The Montgomery Sentinel, February 13, 1958, pg A8.

²⁸ Twinbrook Life, November 1963.

²⁹ Patterson interview.

³⁰ Stern, Joan, "In Rockville: \$4 million Apartment Zoning Wins Approval," The Montgomery Sentinel, January 27, 1960, pg A1.

³¹ Patterson interview.

said, “ In the past the name Geeraert has meant better living for thousands; For the future Geeraert is building in Chandon Village (see figure 1).” The ad mentions how super-highways, churches, shopping centers, schools, recreation areas and swimming pools are all beginning to be built in addition to houses.³² Chandon Village was never as successful as Twinbrook. Geeraert was really ahead of his time trying to develop the area by Dulles; the infrastructure was not ready yet for housing.³³

In addition to their development and construction of homes, Geeraert and Gingery were members of various associations in Maryland and Washington, DC. Geeraert was a member of the Lions Club of Takoma Park and a member of the Washington Metropolitan Building Association. He was also director of the Suburban Maryland Builders Association.³⁴ Gingery was a member of the Maryland National Capital and Planning Commission and the National Capital Regional Planning Council. Gingery was also secretary of the Board of Zoning Appeals.³⁵

Geeraert was in poor health in the three years leading up to his death. He lived in Bethesda and though he did not reminisce, he was very proud of what he accomplished. He seized opportunities and liked to gamble. He had a big heart and a big drive. He also loved being a showman. For example, to advertise his townhouses on the Bullis Tract in Twinbrook, Geeraert put palm trees around the model houses and offered visitors helicopter rides to look at the development and select lots.³⁶ Geeraert said of his philosophy of building houses, “I’ve tried to price the basic house so low that people can afford to buy it. If they’ve

³² Advertisement, The Montgomery Sentinel, August 25, 1960, pg B9.

³³ Patterson interview.

³⁴ Cross, “The Spotlight,” pg 5.

³⁵ Cross, “The Spotlight,” pg 5.

³⁶ Patterson interview.

got a little extra money, they can get a lot of extra house...I'm trying in Twinbrook Park, as in the other Twinbrook developments, to give the buyer as much house as possible, with a small profit margin."³⁷ Geeraert was proud of his work. He defended housing developments in his review of John Keats's novel, The Crack in the Picture Window, which is critical of the new suburban lifestyle. In the review, Geeraert invited Keats to visit Twinbrook and see how life is really like in the suburbs.³⁸ Geeraert past away on November 23, 1979, he was seventy years old.³⁹ Donald Gingery past away at age 69 on January 23, 1983.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Twinbrook Park Opening Up," Twinbrook Life, May 1956, vol. III, no. 5.

³⁸ Geeraert, Joe, "Builder Reviews Author Keats," The Montgomery Sentinel, February 14, 1957.

³⁹ Obituary, The Washington Post, November 24, 1978, pg B10.

⁴⁰ Obituary, The Washington Post, January 25, 1983, pg B8.

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