

BELAIR BATH AND TENNIS CLUB  
Belair at Bowie, Maryland  
Southwest corner of Belair Drive and Tulip Grove Drive  
Bowie  
Prince George's County  
Maryland

HABS MD-1265  
*MD-1265*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## BELAIR BATH AND TENNIS CLUB

HABS No. MD-1265

**NOTE:** Please see the following historical reports for additional information about the history of Belair at Bowie, Maryland:

Belair at Bowie, Maryland (overview)	HABS No. MD-1253
12418 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1254
12420 Stonehaven Lane (The Cape Cod)	HABS No. MD-1255
12408 Stonehaven Lane (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1257
12500 Swirl Lane (The Colonial, 4 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1260
12100 Tulip Grove Drive (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1263
12400 Shadow Lane (The Colonial, 3 bedroom)	HABS No. MD-1264
12401 Sussex Lane (The Manor House)	HABS No. MD-1267
12405 Sussex Lane (The Rancher)	HABS No. MD-1269
12413 Salem Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1270
12406 Skylark Lane (The Country Clubber)	HABS No. MD-1271

**Location:** Southwest corner of Belair and Tulip Grove drives, “Belair at Bowie, Maryland,” Bowie, Prince Georges County, Maryland.  
Boundaries

**Significance:** The Belair Bath and Tennis Club is an original feature and the first of three similar clubs in the “Belair at Bowie, Maryland,” community, built by famed Levitt and Sons beginning in 1960. Levitt and Sons completed the club in time for the 1962 swimming season as it proceeded with construction of the surrounding three sections of Belair. Facilities for recreation were a key element of the company’s planning methods and marketing strategies since the 1930s. Intended from the beginning to be a member-owned club and described at the time as “posh,” the facility related more to the community centers of the company’s pre-World War II Long Island developments than to the large neighborhood pools sprinkled throughout the three Levittowns.<sup>1</sup> The decision to fund a private club with a limited membership instead of community pools open to all homeowners showed financial caution in response to changed market conditions as well as a desire to court more affluent prospective buyers.

**Historian:** James A. Jacobs, HABS

**Description:** The Belair Bath and Tennis Club is situated on an oblong parcel at the southwest corner of Belair and Tulip Grove drives. A lighted parking area occupies the

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Lupe, “The Changing Face of Bowie,” *The Baltimore Evening Sun* 9 Oct. 1963, sec. D: 11, for posh.

northeast portion of the site, abutting both roadways, with the club facilities arranged in an L to the west and south of the parking lot.

The pool house/entry faces east across the parking lot toward Belair Drive. It is a one-story building with a rectangular footprint, a symmetrically ordered facade, and a butterfly roof with deep eaves carried on large beams with exposed ends. The exterior walls alternate sections of brick with ones of concrete block. At the center of the main facade and the low-point of the butterfly roof, two sets of unglazed double doors are recessed from the plane of the front wall, forming a large protected entrance, further defined by a pair of brick planters. A flower bed with a flagpole defined by concrete curbing in the shape of a triangle with rounded ends stands on axis with the main doors and creates an implied driveway and “pick-up” and “drop-off” location. Low shrubs extend along the front of the pool house.

Six tennis courts, a basketball court, and a storage building are arranged along the parking lot's south side within the club precinct. To the west of the pool house and courts are a snack bar building and two swimming pools. The smaller pool is a simple rectangle and intended for young children. The larger pool is composed of two offset rectangles with the deep diving end and shallow end separated by lap lanes running across the rectangles where they overlap. Two additional tennis courts stand to the west of the larger pool.

**History:** In April 1962, Levitt and Sons advertised that the Belair Bath and Tennis Club was “now nearing completion;” as a limited-member organization the amenity reflected both continuity and evolution within the Levitt community-planning continuum.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1930s, the company had included recreation facilities in its new developments on Long Island marketed to New York's upper-middle class. In the most lavish example, Levitt and Sons reopened a former estate mansion in 1939 as a private club for its Strathmore-Vanderbilt project, launched a year earlier on acreage bought from the famed family.<sup>3</sup> Residents of the neighborhood could “swim in a \$30,000 sapphire-blue pool in what used to be Mrs. Vanderbilt's landscaped front lawn,” use the gardener's cottage-turned-gymnasium, or “play bridge, dance, gossip and sometimes dine in a clubhouse that used to be her home.”<sup>4</sup> When it opened, each family purchasing a house in the Strathmore-Vanderbilt development was “automatically a member of the club.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Advertisement, “Opening Soon...Belair Bath and Tennis Club,” *The Washington Post* 28 Apr. 1962, sec. D: 2.

<sup>3</sup> “Vanderbilt Estate Bought for Homes,” *The New York Times* 16 Jan. 1938: 175; “Mansion Made into Club,” *The New York Times* 2 Apr. 1939, sec. RE: 1; “Clubhouse Opens Today,” *The New York Times* 16 Apr. 1939, sec. RE: 2.

<sup>4</sup> Boyden Sparkes, “They'll Build Neighborhoods, Not Houses,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 28 Oct. 1944, sec. RE: 1. See also: Advertisement, “The Strathmore-Vanderbilt Country Club,” *The New York Times* 2 Apr. 1939, sec. RE: 3 and Advertisement, “The Strathmore-Vanderbilt Country Club on Exhibition Today,” *The New York Times* 16 Apr. 1939, sec. RE: 3. At least one earlier Levitt development—“Strathmore-at Manhasset” launched in 1936—included a some type of recreation center, which the company built as an “administration,” or sales, building before being “turned over to the

World War II halted Levitt and Sons's brisk business in middle and upper-middle-class suburban houses. The firm's wartime work in mass-produced defense housing fostered the creation of streamlined construction methods and introduced them to the possibilities of a new demographic cohort. After a year of more affluent postwar building, Levitt and Sons eventually decided that the American working-class was a massive untapped market with unexplored profit potential, a gamble made much safer with government backing of development and homeowner loans through Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration programs. With the start of Levittown, New York, in 1947, it redirected its primary business interests from upper-middle-class to working-class purchasers. Despite this socioeconomic shift, comprehensive community planning remained a discernible consideration in its residential development schemes.

With Levittown, the firm traded hundreds of large and modish houses arrayed across estate landscapes for thousands of "minimum" houses lined up in rows on former farmland. Still, Levitt and Sons desired to create community centers that offered facilities for recreation and socializing. Between 1947 and 1951, the company built 17,500 one-and-one-half story houses in its first mega-development. Seven "village green" concept shopping centers served the massive neighborhoods each of which included a swimming pool, park, and children's playground in addition to a supermarket, gas station, and other basic stores.<sup>6</sup> While acting "as an inducement to draw people to the shopping centers," this pairing of commercial establishments and recreation facilities also encouraged the maximum use of the parking area and provided mothers with a place to deposit their children while shopping.<sup>7</sup>

For the second Levittown, built between 1952 and 1957 outside Philadelphia in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the firm planned for roughly 17,000 houses arranged in mile-square "master blocks" that were further divided into three-to-five neighborhoods or "sections" composed of 300 to 500 houses.<sup>8</sup> An elementary school, swimming pool, playgrounds, and ball fields stood at the center of each master block with most of the commercial establishments consolidated into a single "mile-long" shopping center.<sup>9</sup> The departure from the "village green" concept used in New York in part reflected the

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residents for use as a clubhouse when the community is completed." "Manhasset Estate Bought for Homes," *The New York Times* 12 Jan. 1936, sec. RE: 1.

<sup>5</sup> "The Strathmore-Vanderbilt Country Club on Exhibition Today," RE3.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred S. Levitt, "A Community Builder Looks at Community Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 17 (Spring 1951): 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 85 (Levitt), and "New Towns: Levittown Will Grow from Master Blocks, Have Green Belts," *Architectural Forum* 95 (Nov. 1951): 138, for quote.

<sup>8</sup> State Museum of Pennsylvania with Franklin and Marshall College, "Levittown: Building the Suburban Dream," online exhibit, 2003, accessed online, 6 Sep. 2006 (<http://server1.fandm.edu/levittown/default.html>).

<sup>9</sup> "New Towns," 138.

continued growth and expanded popularity of suburban shopping centers during the postwar period. Americans increasingly needed no greater incentive to shop than the activity itself, and swimming pools could be more logically located within residential neighborhoods, in parks adjacent to ball fields.

As in New York, the Pennsylvania residents had “free use of Levittown’s championship swimming pools...[and] all playgrounds, baseball fields, [and] play areas.”<sup>10</sup> Levitt and Sons essentially repeated this planning approach at its third major development—Levittown (later Willingboro), New Jersey—where neighborhoods of 1,200 to 1,500 houses were anchored by a park containing a multipurpose school/“town hall”/community center, swimming pool, ball courts, playgrounds, and baseball fields.<sup>11</sup> As noted by sociologist Herbert Gans in his landmark study, *The Levittowners* (1967), this refinement in the company’s community planning would “divest[ed] [Levitt and Sons] of control of the recreation facilities” and help to consolidate the management of establishments most used by youth.<sup>12</sup> Just steps behind Levittown, New Jersey, in design, sales, and construction, many elements of Levitt and Sons’s Belair development—most obviously the houses—were identical to those used in New Jersey; however, the firm simultaneously scaled back and refined its concept to address shifts in the national housing market and an unquestionably middle-class clientele.

Planned initially for about 4,500 houses, the size of Belair-at Bowie, Maryland, in part reflected slower-than-expected sales at Levittown, New Jersey. In an attempt to invigorate sales at New Jersey and compete with the expectations of the Washington market, Levitt and Sons spent a great deal of time and money creating a new and expanded line of models and (correctly) believed that the houses would virtually sell themselves. As a result, most of the early advertising for Belair focused on the house models rather than the overall community. The shift related to other financial considerations as well. As a general business practice, Levitt and Sons was always cautious in spending large amounts of “improvement capital” prior to people moving into a development—indeed, sales of houses generated the funds to build such amenities as shopping centers and recreation facilities.<sup>13</sup> The company would have been even more sensitive to this approach during the first year of construction at Belair; in 1961, Levitt and Sons was “in the red” and it posted only “modest” profits for 1962.<sup>14</sup> This minor,

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<sup>10</sup> Advertisement, “The Levittowner,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 4 May 1952, sec. SO: 14.

<sup>11</sup> “Bill Levitt’s Third Big Town: More Value for Less Money,” *House & Home* 80 (Aug. 1958): 76.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1967) (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Rize, personal interview with James A. Jacobs, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>14</sup> “Production: The Small, Economy Levittown,” *Business Week* 9 Jun. 1962: 62.

and temporary, financial crunch limited the available capital to invest in Belair beyond grading, streets, houses, and the first schools.<sup>15</sup>

Belair was all about the houses at first, but eventually received some of the community amenities that had been features of his communities since the 1930s. Levitt and Sons entirely planned Belair from the location of schools, churches, and recreation facilities down to the pattern of model type and house color along its streets. A ca. 1962 “road guide” distributed to residents depicted the first three sections—Somerset, Buckingham, and Kenilworth—with the existing and future locations of the schools, churches, recreation areas, and the shopping center shaded. Except for the “recreation site” adjacent to the “school site” straddling the Somerset and Buckingham sections, presumably comprising ball fields, the Belair Bath and Tennis Club was the only completed center for recreation in the fledgling community.

Levitt and Sons positioned the Bath and Tennis Club along Belair Drive, one of the principal thoroughfares for the southern portion of the community. When the ca. 1962 road guide was generated, the Belair Bath and Tennis Club was the only thing that Levitt and Sons had constructed in what a short time later would become the Foxhill section. This location was just down the hill from “Belair Mansion,” the main house for the estate on which Levitt and Sons laid-out the community, which from 1964 through 1977 functioned as the city hall and the police station for the newly formed City of Bowie.<sup>16</sup> The city and club properties were visually contiguous and, along with the Woodward family’s nearby stable and an allée of historic tulip poplars, worked to create a precinct where the new Belair visibly mingled with the old.

As completed, the Belair Bath and Tennis Club featured a pool house with the main entrance, offices, and locker rooms, one large swimming pool and one “kiddie” pool, six tennis courts, a lighted parking area, and a snack bar. Levitt and Sons constructed a large parking lot now situated at the southwest corner of Belair and Tulip Grove drives and oriented the sleek new pool house facing west across the parking lot toward Belair Drive. As with the modern schools and churches eventually constructed in Belair, the pool house of the Bath and Tennis Club stood out from the predominantly traditional mix of dwellings lining the community’s streets. The building’s brick and perforated concrete block construction and butterfly roof with exposed beams was a modish pause along the otherwise tidy, but mostly conventional streetscape. A small rectangular kiddie pool and a larger pool composed of two offset rectangles stood to the east and southeast of the pool house. The tennis courts bordered the south side of the parking lot and utilized a former estate support building for storage. The physical plant for the summer-oriented club was

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<sup>15</sup> At Levittown, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, Levitt and Sons either developed or provided free land for shopping centers, parks and other recreation facilities, schools, and churches. The company even took this a step further at New Jersey by underwriting the cost of the school construction and folding the cost into the price of the houses.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen E. Patrick, “A Brief History of the City of Bowie, 1683-1996,” 4, Bowie Museum Archives at Belair, Bowie, Maryland.

attractive and surely contributed to the perception of Belair as a bona fide and “complete” community, which was part of the Levitt sales pitch.

Although almost certainly reflecting a desire for cost cutting at a time of uncertain profits, Belair was still Levitt and Sons’s first large postwar development without public, community pools. From the beginning, the company intended to turn ownership and maintenance of the facility over to the members once the roll reached 750 families.<sup>17</sup> Even with the later completion of two other clubs with similar capacities, their memberships represented only about one-third of Belair’s households.<sup>18</sup> When Levitt and Sons began signing members in 1962, the initiation fee was \$300 in addition to annual maintenance fees, a cost of approximately \$2000 in 2006.<sup>19</sup> Despite this hefty fee, the Belair Bath and Tennis Club filled its roles within a year and a waiting list for membership existed by 1964.<sup>20</sup> While possibly forced to eliminate community pools for financial reasons, as a business in a highly competitive region of the postwar housing market Levitt and Sons made no indication of any worry about the possible impact on sales. The company’s apparent calm may have only been a public bluff or, perhaps, company directors took comfort in the fact that the firm was undeniably providing far more space and amenities for the money than other Washington area builders. Regardless, for a developer intent on attracting a solidly middle-class clientele, Levitt and Sons’s advertisements and sales literature unflaggingly situated the private club as an attraction and even a point of general pride for the planned community.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A year after construction, “the ownership of the Belair Bath and Tennis Club was turned over yesterday to the members at a brief ceremony in the offices of Levitt and Sons in Bowie.” See: “Members Get Club at Belair,” *The Washington Post* 24 May 1963, sec. A: 10.

<sup>18</sup> In 1964, Levitt and Sons opened the “Belair Swim and Racquet Club” adjacent to the high school and library site on the north side of Route 450 in the Meadowbrook section. In 1966, Levitt and Sons added a third club to Belair on Old Chapel Road in the Whitehall section called the “Belair Pool and Tennis Club.” The later clubs had identical facilities to the original: pool house, two pools, and six tennis courts. See: “Belair to Get Another Club,” *The Washington Post* 9 May 1964, sec. E: 4; “New Section Is Opened at Belair,” *The Washington Post* 1 Aug. 1964, sec. E: 14; “Levitt’s Belair to Get 3d Recreation Center,” *The Washington Post* 25 Sep. 1965, sec. D: 22; “Belair at Bowie Residents Get 3d Pool Center,” *The Washington Post* 22 Jan. 1966, sec. C: 5; “New Section Open at Belair,” *The Washington Post* 6 Aug. 1966, sec. E: 121.

<sup>19</sup> Levitt and Sons, Inc., “Coming to Belair, Bath and Tennis Club,” promotional flyer included in sales brochure for Belair, 1962, private collection. For conversion tables to 2006 dollars, see: Robert Sahr, Oregon State University, “Inflation Conversion Factors for Dollars 1665 to Estimated 2016,” accessed online, 30 Jul. 2006, [http://oregonstate.edu/Dept/pol\\_sci/fac/sahr/sahr.htm](http://oregonstate.edu/Dept/pol_sci/fac/sahr/sahr.htm).

<sup>20</sup> “Belair to Get Another Club,” E4.

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see: Lupe, D1; Advertisement, “So Near...You’re Here In Only 25 Minutes!” *The Washington Post* 24 Jul. 1965, sec. E: 6; Advertisement, “You’ll Find...” *The Washington Post* 7 Sep. 1963, sec. C: 17;

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**Project Information:**

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