

# Scenes from the Past...

Since the National Zoo's inception in 1889, many Woodley Park residents, including those at the nearby Kennedy-Warren apartment building, have awoken to the sounds of lions growling, wolves howling, and other animal noises from their four-legged neighbors. Designed by the famed architectural landscape firm of Frederick Law Olmstead, who was also responsible for the design of Central Park and the U.S. Capitol grounds, the National Zoo has evolved from a showcase of the world's exotic species to a conservation organization, public education pioneer, as well as a scientific research organization. Of course, adorable pandas, monkeys, and tigers are still the main attraction.

Created by an 1889 Act of Congress for "the advancement of science and the instruction and recreation of the people," the National Zoo became part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1890. In addition to the main 163-acre urban park in the Rock Creek Valley, the zoo also operates its 3,200-acre Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia. The zoo's spacious and picturesque park marked a significant departure from the 19th century philosophy of creating zoo's in small areas. Due to its origin prior to the creation of New York's Zoological Park and Munich's Hellabrun Zoo, the National Zoo may have been the first zoo to be located in such an expansive park-like setting.

Plans for the zoo were drawn by three individuals: Samuel Langley, third secretary of the Smithsonian; William Temple Hornaday, a conservationist and head of the Smithsonian's vertebrate division; and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead. Historians at the zoo, however, indicate that the first recorded live animal gift to the nation occurred in 1785, when Charles III of Spain sent a "royal jackass" to George Washington while he resided at Mount Vernon.

The zoo has been at the forefront in striving to expand the public's knowledge of the wildlife and the environment through public education programs aimed at teachers and school children, with images of Victorian-era school children common in the collection of zoo images at the Library of Congress. The first animals at the facility were literally captured in the wild and brought back to Washington. The zoo also strove in the early years of its existence to create a refuge for buffaloes and other animals that were quickly disappearing from the North America landscape. The present monkey house, the New Mammal House, and the lion house are the only two original zoo buildings that remain today.

Despite Washington's long, humid summers, polar bears seem unaffected by the heat at the National Zoo. Past polar bears have resided at the zoo for more than 25 years without showing ill affects of the heat. The chimpanzees are known to be one of the easiest species for the zoo to exhibit due to their pleasant demeanor and friendly attitude toward spectators and keepers. Others were no so easily contained: Kechil, a 10-year-old elephant that had been captured in Sumatra, was known in 1932 as the "bad boy" of the park, able to throw "with good aim rocks which have been tossed into his enclosure, and has been known to hit visitors on the head," according to a 1936 book on the zoo.

The 1950s were an important decade for the National Zoo as the first full-time, permanent veterinarian was hired during a time period when the zoo began turning its focus to conservation efforts when more species began to decline. The late 1950s saw the creation of the Friends of the National Zoo (FONZ) in 1958, a nonprofit organization that persuaded Congress to fund the zoo solely through the Smithsonian; previously the budget was split between the Smithsonian and the District of Columbia's appropriations. FONZ now boasts over 38,000 families in its membership.

Hsing Hsing and Ling Ling came to the zoo in 1972 as a gift from the People's Republic of China in response to President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China. During their time at the zoo, 70 million visitors came to see the panda pair.

The National Zoo is also the caretaker of one of the city's oldest houses, located on zoo property, later known as the Holt House. Its abandoned and deteriorating condition has been the center of controversy ever since *The InTowner* exposed its neglected condition in a front page report six years ago. ("Zoo Allowing Collapse of 200-Year Mansion, Desecration of Burial Ground and Rock Creek Pollution; Laws May Be Broken," May 1997.)

The exact date of construction is unknown; however, researchers believe that the house was constructed during 1809-1818, when George Johnson resided at the property, as accounts indicate that George Johnson invested \$50,000 for improvements at the mills, some of which may also have been used to build a residence. After George Johnson's father, Roger, died in 1835, the property was sold to Dr. Ashton Alexander,



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

In the roaring twenties, alcohol may have been freely flowing when these five men were photographed playing musical instruments to entertain the polar bears, accompanied by a woman dancer.

all photos—courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division



A young Zoo visitor enjoys some fun time with an orangutan on a bench at the National Zoo in the 1930s.



Zoo worker Charles C. Trevey is seen here baking huge loaves of bread for the bears at the National Zoo in August of 1922.



Seen here is William H. Blackburne, the first director of the National Zoo, who served in that capacity for over 40 years. Pictured with a baby gorilla named N'Gi, who had been captured in West Africa on January 17, 1928, Blackburne himself had spent 12 years with the Barnum and Bailey Circus before his appointment as Director.



National Zoo staff playfully enjoys a swim in the new 171,000 gallon pool in the polar bear enclosure upon completion in August of 1973, two weeks before the bears arrived.

## RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley\*

### TABARD INN It's the doughnuts!

Forget Krispy Kreme. Sidestep Dunkin' Doughnuts. Head straight to Washington's Tabard Inn restaurant and gather up a day's supply of their very sugary doughnuts. Of course, these are best eaten hot, fresh from the kitchen and dipped into café au lait. An analogy? Think puffs of air—well, heated air—and a crunchy sprinkling of sugar. That about sums up each decadent mouthful, stolen when the waiter is not watching a solo patron consuming six hot doughnuts with vanilla whipped cream in almost a single breath.

And that's at Sunday brunch. What about other times, other meals, at DC's beloved Tabard Inn restaurant, which offers many charms, and some really first-class food? The menu changes regularly, but a recent Friday night turned up a conch chowder or tuna tartare as a starter, followed by braised veal cheeks with mustard-crusted veal liver (read calves' liver), a tempura soft shell crab, or grilled rabbit loin as entrée choices—and check out the wines, too.

Surely lunches and dinners rate a second glance, but Sunday brunch here is a special occasion, an eventful meal that assures a packed living room, where the very hungry wait patiently for a table. The wait may be long, indeed. At a recent Sunday, the glum host predicted at least one hour—should have made reservations—unless someone were lucky enough to snag a stool at the diminutive bar at the restaurant's entrance. There's never a wait for that, he said, but it is "first come, first served" and you'd better be ready to pounce.

So what's the Sunday fuss? Besides the doughnuts, people apparently love the twenty-something scene, though plenty of older folks came in groups or as families, Sunday newspaper in hand. There's also something beguiling about the noisy, casual dining room—a hub of activity and conversation that swirl around the plates of poached eggs with black bean chili con carne, toasted pecan waffles with vanilla

pear compote, or a Brazilian seafood stew headed to tables.

If you can detect a flaw, it might be that the service ebbs and flows in no particular pattern. A disgruntled couple got up from their barstools and stormed out after waiting for service, while their neighbors got coffee and a menu much more quickly. My basket of muffins—yes, in addition to doughnuts, you can also fuel up on small, sweet muffins, loads of softened butter, and slices of sweet bread—came right away with the coffee, but the waiter, after taking my order, disappeared for a long stretch.

When it came, it was easy to think that my order of the eggs with chili might easily have been bested by the quiche with crab, leeks and roasted red peppers, or even the pricier lump crab cakes with crawfish succotash. Even though the beans were flavorful, poached eggs don't really showcase the kitchen's skills. And for another brunch, I'd surely set aside some appetite for the sweets: recently, these included a real stunner, the vanilla ginger-snap mascarpone cheesecake, and regretfully, I declined, having already consumed a week's worth of doughnut calories. But cheesecake fanciers may not be able to say "no" to a wedge—what a combination.

But if a Sunday brunch simply does not work into your schedule, don't worry about missing out on doughnut heaven. The reassuring telephone voice declared that fresh doughnuts are available every morning for breakfast. And yes, make a reservation for brunch. □

**Tabard Inn, 1739 N St. NW; tel., 833-2668. Hours: Open daily for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch. Brunch entrée prices: \$9-\$15; doughnuts, \$6 per half-dozen. Major credit cards.**

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This 1937 image of the Holt House illustrates the impressive front facade of the home.

## SCENES

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a prominent physician from Baltimore. The home is named after its third owner, Dr. Henry Holt, originally of Oswego County, New York, who purchased the property in December 1844 from Alexander. Despite his medical title, Holt farmed the property. Prior to Holt residing in the home, it was occupied by John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and

Martin Van Buren.

Holt's farming business suffered, however, and he was forced to borrow money, using the farm as collateral for most of the time he remained on the land. Dr. Holt and his family sold the property to the Commissioners for the National Zoological Park in 1889 for \$40,000.

—Paul Kelsey Williams  
Historic Preservation Specialist  
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

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