

The Ridgley Family in Prince George's County



Figure 1. Hopkins map of 1878

For over one hundred years, members of the Ridgley family have been prominent African-American citizens and landowners influencing history, education, community and land development on both sides of Central Avenue where it joins Ritchie Road. For the purposes of the Preliminary Subregion 4 Master Plan and Proposed Sectional Map Amendment, this document briefly explores that history and significance and the ways in which it can be identified and celebrated.

Lewis Ridgley was born c. 1831.<sup>1</sup> After being drafted in the Civil War<sup>2</sup>, in 1871 he entered into an agreement, together with his wife Mary, to purchase 52 acres of land and cultivate tobacco<sup>3</sup> at the northwest corner of what is now Morgan Boulevard and Central

Avenue (MD 214).<sup>4</sup> The land was owned and the mortgage was held by Thomas and Bettie Berry of Concord, a plantation that once comprised 1,426 acres.<sup>5</sup> In the same month of that year the Berrys conveyed to Ridgley, Joseph Beall and Richard Cook as trustees one-half an acre of land more than three quarters of a mile east of the Ridgley farm “provided the said premises shall be kept and used as a place of divine worship for the use of the ministry and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter the community built what became known as Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church (now known as 8900 Central Avenue) and burials were placed nearby. The Hopkins map of 1878 clearly shows the church and a property owned or occupied by “L. Ridgely.”<sup>7</sup> (See Figure 1.) In 1892 Bettie Berry, now widowed, sold to Ridgley and four other black trustees an additional acre of land joining the church lot to the west.<sup>8</sup> An expanded graveyard was begun at the western edge of this property. In 1921 the original church was destroyed by fire and the present church was built. It stands on the one acre parcel, a short distance west of the original church. The church and cemetery were designated as a Prince George’s County Historic Site in 1981. When Central Avenue was widened in 1986, the church was moved to a new foundation slightly northeast of its original location.<sup>9</sup> In 2005 the Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

According to some accounts, Lewis Ridgley was a former enslaved person who had worked for the Berrys;<sup>10</sup> Ridgley may have been working and living on their land before entering into the agreement with them.<sup>11</sup> By 1938, aerial photographs show that the vast majority of the property was cultivated as cropland, with wooded areas north and south of the former Randolph Village Elementary

School. The tract was improved by a tobacco barn and perhaps as many as six dwellings and tenant houses near Central Avenue.<sup>12</sup> The surrounding area was, of course, similarly rural in character with woods, fields and cultivated land. At one time a “carriage house” existed on the property and “people came from all around for dances.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. Arthur Sr. and Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1948

Lewis and Mary Ridgley had several children, the most prominent being Arthur Sr., born in 1862,<sup>14</sup> who finally acquired a clear title to the 52-acre tract in 1929.<sup>15</sup> Arthur and his wife, Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley, raised 13 children on the Ridgley farm.<sup>16</sup> (See Figure 2.) Their youngest child, Mildred, was born in 1920. She recalls that “the main crop on the farm was tobacco...corn to feed the pigs...my mother had what was called a truck garden<sup>17</sup> with chickens, eggs,

strawberries, and string beans...and we had five acres of lilacs...those five acres of lilacs were taken to market and also sold on Central Avenue...that money was used to pay taxes...but the string beans, the vegetables and the poultry and eggs and the like, that was my mother's money. And she put it in the bank. And with her money she was able to buy land...”<sup>18</sup> In 1909, Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley had purchased 5 1/3 acres on the south side of Central Avenue to the east of Ritchie Road.<sup>19</sup> The land was sold to her by Samuel Lofton,<sup>20</sup> who was also a trustee of the Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church. Presumably, the Ridgleys used the land to grow flowers or produce; aerial photographs from 1938 show it as largely unimproved, with fields and trees.



Figure 3. An early photograph of the Ridgeley School, taken from the southwest

In 1927 the Prince George's County Board of Education received a request from what was even then called the “Ridgeley<sup>21</sup> colored school,” asking that a new building be erected.<sup>22</sup> School had been held first in the church, and then in what were known as the two “Benevolent Halls,” no longer extant, that stood to the west and



south of Parcel 88.<sup>23</sup> Arthur Ridgley, Sr. offered to exchange two acres of land owned by his wife Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley<sup>24</sup>, approximately 400 feet off Central Avenue (with a deeded right-of-way) to the Board of Education for a one-acre tract fronting directly on Central Avenue.<sup>25</sup> On the two-acre tract the board constructed the new Ridgeley School, in part with funds from the Rosenwald school program. (See Figure 3.) The building served as an elementary school for more than twenty years, then was used for the education of special needs children in the 1950s. Used by the Board of Education for decades as a bus lot, the property is being restored as a museum and community center by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission to reflect its significance as an important school for black children in the early twentieth century. In 1929 Arthur and Mary sold the one-acre tract to the House of Prayer Church of God,<sup>26</sup> by whom it is still owned today.



Figure 4. Louis Ridgley outside the Lewis and Mary Ridgley house, 1940s.

The Ridgleys were active in their community. Besides serving as a trustee for the Ridgeley Rosenwald School,<sup>27</sup> Arthur Ridgley, Sr. was also a trustee of the Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church, as was his father. Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley was a teacher at the first Ridgeley School,<sup>28</sup> a Sunday school teacher at Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church and president of the Ladies' Aid Society.<sup>29</sup> After being educated there as an elementary school student, then at another

Rosenwald school, Highland Park in Lakeland, Mildred Ridgley Gray served as principal at the Ridgeley Rosenwald School when it became a school for children with special needs. While serving as an officer in the U. S. Army, Louis Ridgley posed by the Arthur Sr. and Mary Ridgley House in his Infantry uniform. This house was located near the center front of the property, and was demolished between 1965 and 1976. (See Figure 4.) According to Mildred Ridgley Gray, it closely resembled the priest's house associated with the Holy Family Roman Catholic Church on Woodmore Road in Mitchellville. This house, which still exists, is a 3 bay, side-gabled 2-story frame dwelling with a façade-width screened porch.<sup>30</sup>

In 1945 Arthur Ridgley, Sr. and Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley subdivided the Ridgley farm, the original 52-acre tract, into ten roughly

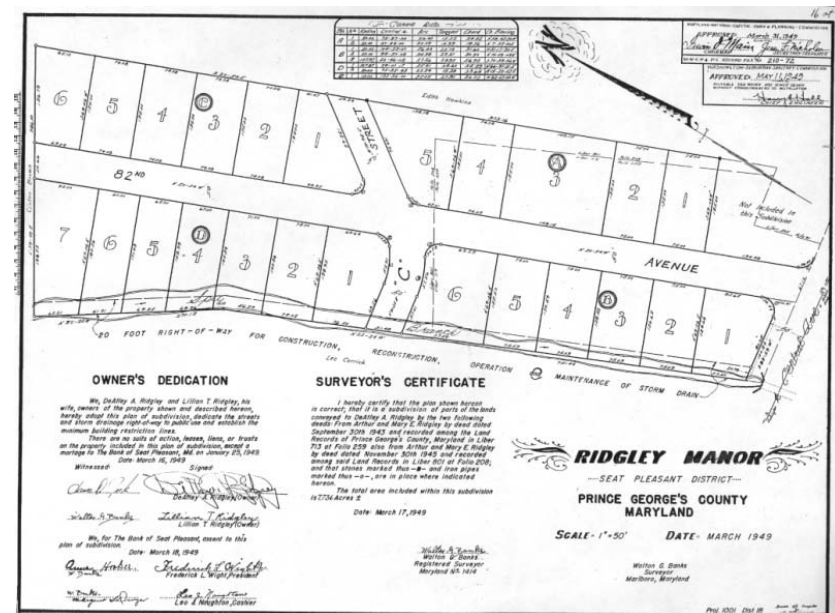


Figure 5. Plat of Ridgley Manor Subdivision, March 1949

equivalent parcels with the division lines running from Central Avenue northwesterly to the northern boundary.<sup>31</sup> They deeded the parcels to six of their children: DeAtley<sup>32</sup> Ridgley, Mattie Ridgley Green, Mildred Ridgley Gray, Louis Ridgley, Arthur Ridgley, Jr. and Vergie Ridgley Myrick Whitmore.



Figure 6. William & Mildred Ridgley Gray residence, 8118 Central Avenue

In the years following World War II, DeAtley Ridgley and his wife Lillian were the most active in developing their land, which consisted of the westernmost two parcels. In 1949 DeAtley and Lillian adopted a plan of subdivision for the westernmost parcel, four blocks of residential lots bisected by Jonquil Avenue and Anchor Street, which they named Ridgley Manor.<sup>33</sup> (See Figure 5.) By 1953 DeAtley was in the process of subdividing the next westernmost parcel into blocks and lots when he sold it to Frank Fleming.<sup>34</sup> Fleming never recorded the subdivision, and in 1964 he conveyed it to the Board of Education, which constructed the Randolph Village Elementary School. In 1984 the property was

conveyed to Prince George's County and the building is currently used as a call center.

The DeAtley Ridgleys were not the only family members planning and building, however. William and Mildred Ridgley Gray improved their property c. 1955 by constructing a one-story brick house with a prominent chimney and hipped roof that faced Central Avenue. The house was constructed by an African-American contractor, Robert Hill,<sup>35</sup> from Montgomery County.<sup>36</sup> Combining visual cues from the both the currently popular French provincial and western ranch styles in a simplified yet formal manner, this residence signals a clear break from the frame dwellings and farm-related structures of the past.

By 1965 there were as many as seven dwellings on Ridgley property fronting on Central Avenue. The Arthur Jr. and Louise Ridgley Farmstead, on what is now Parcel 44, was documented for the Maryland Historical Trust in June of 1996 as part of a project to survey properties impacted by the extension of the Metrorail

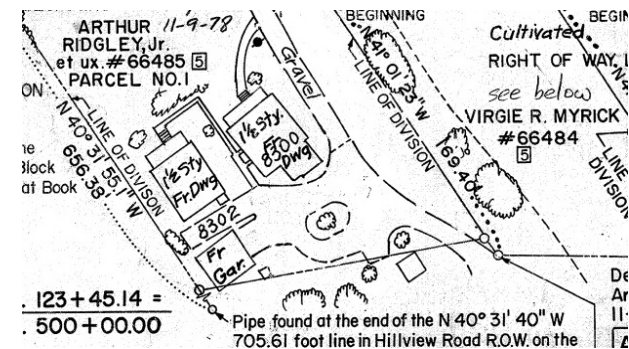


Figure 7. The Arthur Jr. and Louis Ridgley Farmstead, 1976 plat

system. Located at the extreme southeast of the 52-acre tract, it too has since been demolished, and was not photographed as part of the survey, but it consisted of two main one-and-a half story houses, a tenant house, tobacco barn, privy, corncrib, and garage and shed accessed by a common drive.<sup>37</sup> (See Figure 7.)

Despite the family dwellings, the Ridgley Manor subdivision and the Randolph Village Elementary School, this section of Central Avenue was rapidly developing into a busy commercial corridor. State road plats from 1976 show the southern side of the street occupied by commercial buildings, a drive-in movie theater, and a gas station.<sup>38</sup> Completion of the Capital Beltway in 1964 with a cloverleaf interchange near Ridgely Church triggered traffic and growth. In 1990, Central Avenue was widened into six lanes. Construction of the Morgan Boulevard Metro Station began in 2002; today it occupies one quarter of Lewis Ridgley's original 52-acre farm. Of all the Ridgley dwellings and buildings on the farm, only two remain: the c. 1955 house of Mildred and William Gray and a wood frame



Figure 8. 1939 House owned by DeAtley and Lillian Ridgley

vernacular house built in 1939<sup>39</sup> at the entrance to Jonquil Avenue (7900 Central Avenue; see Figure 8.) This house was owned and occupied by the DeAtley Ridgleys when it was deeded to them by DeAtley's father in 1945. The ruins of the tobacco barn, which was still standing as late as 1998, lie in a wooded area dividing the call center from the Metro parking lot.

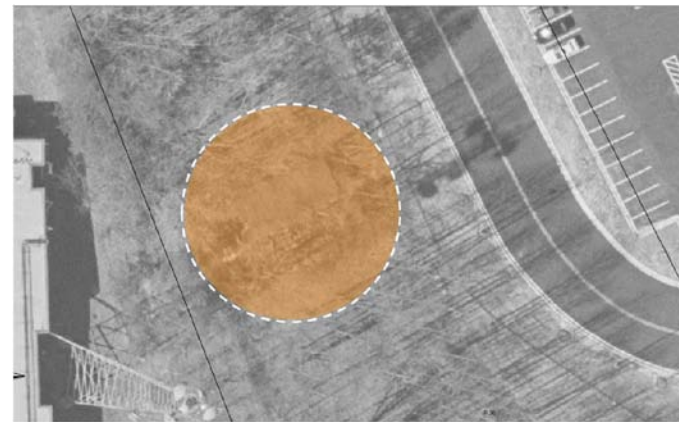


Figure 10. Ruins of the tobacco barn, 2005

The following page provides an annotated overview of the land use and development of the farm, school and surrounding community interpreted through aerial photographs.





## 1938

Arthur and Mary Eliza Dyson Ridgley's 52-acre farm and the 2 acres occupied by the Ridgeley Rosenwald school are shaded. The Ridgley's farm is covered with cropland and wooded areas as are the adjacent parcels. Except for the school, buildings are clustered near Central Turnpike.



## 1965

The DeAtley Ridgley's subdivision is at the far left of the large shaded area. Next to it the Randolph Village Elementary School is under construction. One third of the original 52-acre tract is still being cultivated. Property to the west is rural; to the east the Randolph Village subdivision has replaced the cropland. Parcels to the south have been extensively redeveloped with a drive-in theatre and large buildings with light-industrial uses.



## 1998

Except for the Gray house, the school and the Ridgley manor subdivision, the 52 acre tract has reverted to forest. Surrounding it are subdivisions and large buildings with light-industrial uses and businesses that face Central Avenue. Garrett Morgan Boulevard now reaches toward the Stadium. The drive-in theater has disappeared. The green space surrounding the school is covered with concrete and vehicles.



## 2007

The Morgan Boulevard Metro Station is seen at the top right of the large shaded area. The station itself is dwarfed by its surface parking areas which should eventually be replaced by garage and underground parking. Development of the area north of the station is underway.

The Preliminary Subregion 4 Master Plan’s vision for the Morgan Boulevard Metro center “includes transit-oriented development around the Metro station” and “distinctive, high-quality development [framing] Central Avenue and becoming denser as it approaches the Metro.”<sup>40</sup> Making this vision a reality means transforming the remainder of the Ridgley farm from the dwelling and a mixture of open land and wooded areas to a high-density mixed-use community where people live, work, shop and enjoy recreational activities. If completed, it will be the realization of a process that can be said to have begun sixty years ago when DeAtley Ridgley first planned his subdivisions.

### *Conclusion*

The allied themes of family, faith, community and education are represented by the Ridgley farm, church and school. Together they tell a compellingly story about African Americans establishing their place in the American landscape through hard work, perseverance, and acumen.

Interpreting the story of the Ridgley family and linking the stories of the Ridgeley School and Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church to the farm and relating it to the overall area has been identified as a needed key planning issue in the Morgan Boulevard Metro Center section of the Preliminary Subregion 4 Master Plan. Ideally, the goal described in this issue should not be accomplished merely through signage and interpretation but should involve recommended changes to the area that would shape it to reflect significant history, specifically and especially that of the Ridgley family.

The historic character of the Ridgley farm, embodied in its dwellings, barns, outbuildings and cultivated land no longer exists; conversely, resources of high integrity, such as Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery and the Ridgeley Rosenwald School are extant but are surrounded by buildings with light-industrial uses, parking lots, and fast food restaurants. They are isolated from each other and from the Ridgley farm. Each, however, is adjacent to a partially wooded undeveloped parcel that affords these historic resources some of the quality of their original settings. Recommendations for retaining and enhancing the remaining character of the area associated with the Ridgleys could incorporate all or some of the following suggestions:

### *Ridgley Farm*

1. Consider investigating and evaluating the house at 7900 Central Avenue for its historic/architectural significance and/or for purposes of documentation.
2. Consider reinforcing the Ridgley heritage by re-identifying and re-branding the Jonquil Avenue neighborhood by its original name of Ridgley Manor.
3. Consider using the Ridgley name when planning the redevelopment of the farm by using it to name streets, plazas, parks, et cetera.



4. Consider installing displays in public areas located on the redeveloped farm that interpret the history of the property and link it to the Ridgeley Rosenwald School and the Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church.
5. Consider reconstructing a replica of the tobacco barn in its original location when the area is redeveloped. The structure could be used as a farmers' market and community space for other venues, such as concerts, and would provide a tangible reminder of the property's history.

### *Ridgeley Rosenwald School*

1. Considering nominating the school to the National Register of Historic Places for the purposes of recognition and prestige.
2. Consider securing Parcel 59 (8505 Central Avenue) as open space so that the school can better retain its historic environmental setting.
3. Continue with plans to restore the school as a museum and community center.

### *Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church*

Considering securing the wooded parcels surrounding the church as non-developable wooded space so that the church can better retain its historic environmental setting.



**Figure 11. Ridgely Methodist Episcopal Church and surrounding parcels**



<sup>1</sup> 1860 United States Census Records

<sup>2</sup> It is not known if he served in the Civil War, only that he was drafted. If he was drafted, he was a free man. Prince George's County, Maryland, 1864 Civil War Draftees, extracted from the *Baltimore Sun* September 26, 1864, p. 1, drafted on September 24, 1864, Ellicott's Mills, Maryland – First District: Lewis Ridgely, col'd.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, October 6, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber HB 4, Folio 221

<sup>5</sup> Federal Tax Assessment, October 1, 1798; Margaret W. Cook, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form "Concord," January 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber HB 4, Folio 223.

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the notation for "L. Ridgely" is located on the south side of Central Avenue west of "Spa Branch" (creek) that defined the westernmost edge of Ridgley's property.

<sup>8</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber JWB 23, Folio 471.

<sup>9</sup> Funding for the move was provided by the State Highway Administration.

<sup>10</sup> Testimony submitted to the Prince George's County Planning Board September 3, 2009 by Armata Laverne Gray on behalf of the Mildred Ridgley Gray Charitable Trust, Inc.

<sup>11</sup> According to Mildred Ridgley Gray, the house pictured on page 4 was standing when Lewis Ridgley entered into the agreement to purchase the land from "Planter Berry." Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, December 10, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> PG Atlas aerial maps, 1938 and 1965.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, October 6, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> 1870 United States Census Records

<sup>15</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber 338, Folio 319

<sup>16</sup> *African-American Heritage Survey Update 2008: Oral History Interviews*, 2009, M-NCPPC, page 37, interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray by Charlotte King, August 11, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> A truck garden is a farm where vegetables are grown for market.

<sup>18</sup> *African-American Heritage Survey Update 2008: Oral History Interviews*, page 38

<sup>19</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber 54, Folio 85; the land comprises parcels known today as 59, 87,90 and 91.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Lofton's name is mistakenly noted as "S. Lofly" on Hopkins Map of 1878.

<sup>21</sup> The family's surname is variously spelled Ridgley, Ridgely, and Ridgeley in documents of the period. "Ridgley" is the preferred spelling for the family surname today; "Ridgeley" correctly refers to the school, and "Ridgely" is used to refer to the church.

<sup>22</sup> Transcriptions of the School Commissioners of Prince George's County Board Meeting Minutes, March 9, 1926, page 79.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, December 10, 2009

<sup>24</sup> Deed records show that the parcel was transferred from Samuel Lofton only to Mary Ridgely; when the parcel was transferred to the School Board, Arthur Ridgley Sr., was also on the deed.

<sup>25</sup> Transcriptions of the School Commissioners of Prince George's County Board Meeting Minutes, March 9, 1926, page 79.

<sup>26</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber 334 Folio 291

<sup>27</sup> Transcriptions of the School Commissioners of Prince George's County Board Meeting Minutes, page 119-122, 124.

<sup>28</sup> *African-American Heritage Survey Update 2008: Oral History Interviews*, page 38

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, page 44.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, October 6, 2009. (See PG 74A-004, 12010 Woodmore Road, Mitchellville, MD, 20721.)

<sup>31</sup> "When a Ridgley child agreed to marry and stay in the neighborhood, Arthur Ridgley, Sr., would give [that child] land." Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, December 10, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Pronounced "de-OT-ley." Interview with Mildred Ridgley Gray, October 6, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Prince George's County Circuit Court (Plat Book) www 16, p. 44, Ridgley Manor, Blocks A-D, MSA C 2381-8166

<sup>34</sup> Land Records of Prince George's County, Liber 1578, Folio 505

<sup>35</sup> *Black America Series: Prince George's County, Maryland*, 2003, Carolyn Corpening Rowe, Jane Taylor Thomas, Beverly Babin Woods, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> *African-American Heritage Survey Update 2008: Oral History Interviews*, page 39.

<sup>37</sup> Individual Property/District MHT Internal NR-Eligibility Review Form: Arthur Jr. & Louise Ridgley Farmstead PG: 72-043, Kimberly Prothro Williams, June 20, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> State Road Plats, March 1976, MSA S 1625-44950; MSA S 1625-44951.

<sup>39</sup> MD Real Property Assessment, 7900 Central Avenue, Landover MD; 18-2084143.

<sup>40</sup> *Preliminary Subregion 4 Master Plan and Proposed Sectional Map Amendment*, August 2009, The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, p. 149.

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Jennifer Stabler and Mary Furlong, December 2009**

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Prince George's County, Countywide Planning Division  
Historic Preservation Section