Beyond the Horizon

A History of Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge

Jane Sigloh
Beyond the Horizon is a heartfelt compilation of stories and historical perspectives that brings to life who we are.

Who is Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge, who are we as individuals, and who are we together?

The WCBR Foundation hopes you will enjoy this sincere, yet, witty account written by long-time and beloved resident, Jane Sigloh.

As you close the back cover, maybe you will even ask yourself — what will the next 30 years bring? And, how can I help write the next chapter?

—Bethanie Constant
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Jane Sigloh
For
Jim Kennan
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Alvaine Hamilton, historian from the early years, put down her pen in 1996. “Eventually there will be a need for some sort of narrative history of how WCBR began and developed.” Hopefully, that need has been partially answered in these pages.

Credit belongs to Virginia Hyde Kennan for her memoir entitled Beyond the Horizon with its reference to Thomas Jefferson’s vision. Her writing prompted the title of this book. I hope it expresses my appreciation for her wise and witty observations of life at Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge.

Other resources included minutes from both the Board of Trustees and the Residents’ Association (1985–2020), the Foundation’s Annual Reports, Viewpoint (an early publication of the Marketing Department), Outlook (a weekly newspaper), Happenings, and copies of recorded deeds.

But the most valuable resources of all were the residents and associates who shared stories about living and working in our community. In countless interviews — with names too numerous to include — I heard the human side of our history.

I have not included footnotes for many of the random quotations. They were taken from the above resources — and occasionally from the humble imagination of a writer who presumed to know what someone “would have said.”

I appeal to residents in the next generation — do not let the history of WCBR fade into abstractions. Tell your stories. They will not only reveal the pleasing, puzzling, often difficult aspects of life that intensify as we grow older; they will reveal what it’s like to live in a community where people are committed to helping those who travel with them.

“Go now; write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, so that they may be for a time to come as a witness forever.”

—Isaiah 30:8

Jane Sigloh
Known by its four initials WCBR, Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge is a retirement home situated on land once owned by Thomas Jefferson. He purchased it in 1777 and chose two Greek words for its name, “Pant-Ops” meaning “all seeing.”

Shortened to “Pantops,” the name still signifies a view beyond the roof tops. Indeed, most residents in the apartment buildings can see the University of Virginia, Monticello, and the crest of the Blue Ridge mountains in the distance. As Virginia Kennan, one of WCBR’s early residents, observed in her memoir, “From what more propitious spot could we expectant mortals wind things up?”

But when did the whole idea of a retirement home for the elderly begin to develop? When did people realize that there weren’t many families still sitting around the table after church on Sunday? That the children had moved away to places where they could find a better job and meet some young people?

Probably decades ago. And that reality created a seismic shift in our culture. What about Mom and Dad? How can we leave them when they are growing weaker and more forgetful?

Those with foresight began to imagine campus housing where someone would feed the elderly and bandage their wounds. Where they could play Bingo on Monday night and tell stories about the time that … the time that. Where they wouldn’t be alone.

And why not build such a place in Charlottesville?

During the early 1980’s there were only two facilities in the area that provided such housing. One was Martha Jefferson House, a beautiful Georgian mansion on Gordon Avenue that offered a comfortable life style. The other was the Cedars, a healthcare center that provided skilled nursing.

And yet there were no local facilities
that provided both a comfortable life style and skilled nursing.

However, there were a number of them that had been built across the state. The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia opened a home in 1957 with limited service for about thirty residents. It was called “The Home for the Aged in the Diocese of Virginia,” subsequently renamed “The Cary Montague Home.”

Out of that seedling the Virginia Diocesan Homes Inc. (VDH) was established. It embraced the idea of both/and. As such, the homes were referred to as Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs). Goodwin House in Alexandria opened in 1967 and became the first institution in the area to offer a life care residence.

Then in 1971 VDH signed an agreement with the Westminster Presbyterian Homes Inc. (WPH) to establish an ecumenical corporation called it Westminster-Canterbury Inc. using traditional names associated with their respective faiths.

According to its corporate guidelines a retirement home using the Westminster Canterbury name had to guarantee life care for residents. It also had to be non-profit and capable of offering financial assistance to residents through a foundation called the “Fellowship Fund.” (That fund had to have a balance of at least $1,000,000 before opening) In addition, the Board of Trustees was to be equally represented by members of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches.

Amazingly, the concept caught fire. Westminster-Canterbury’s began to spring up all over the state. In 1975 the Richmond facility opened with three hundred and eighty four independent and assisted living apartments in addition to nursing facilities. Lynchburg built one in 1980 on a quiet, tree lined street near Virginia Episcopal School. And Virginia Beach welcomed residents to a spectacular high-rise complex with a view of the Chesapeake Bay.

Irvington built the Rappahannock Westminster-Canterbury on a campus of a hundred and sixty five acres. And as the fortunate beneficiary of land donated by the family of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Lawrence, Winchester opened the Shenandoah Valley Westminster-Canterbury in 1987.

So why couldn't Charlottesville build a Westminster Canterbury?

Local ministries had pondered the question for some time. And in June of 1984 a Steering Committee, under the leadership of Jim Kennan, held its first formal meeting. Mr. J. P. Causey, president of VDH, was invited to speak. And he did not spare words, advising the committee that because of the complexity of a CCRC, it presented a challenge in its financing, design, construction, and operation. And he again reminded the committee that the name Westminster
Canterbury could not be used without a guaranteed life care and a non-profit status.

The group carefully considered his advice. And after pondering the weight of it all, they decided to accept the VDH challenge. They would give it a try.

Mr. Causey agreed to help and said that VDH had money available for loans to defray the cost of a feasibility study. The dream of a Westminster Canterbury in Charlottesville was beginning to look like a possibility.
It was a commitment of sorts. They would go with the model that Goodwin House had established. A Board of Trustees was elected. By-laws were approved and a mission statement was drafted:

“WCBR is a non profit corporation sponsored by the ministry of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. A distinctive residential and life care community for persons of all faiths who have reached retirement age.

Its goal is to provide a service to older people by maintaining their independence, dignity, and high quality of life in a pleasant, supportive environment.”

The Board carefully considered the market, the financial requirements, legal hurdles and, of course, the site. Where would they build their CCRC?

But to complicate matters, there was competition. A local developer, Mr. William Heischman, was already planning a housing complex for the Elderly. (University Village). And an earlier survey indicated that there was room for only one in Charlottesville.

Really? Maybe they could work together? Tap the same resources?

Both organizations needed a Certificate of Public Need, an important document that dictated how many nursing beds a center could have. You’d think it would be an easy procurement. Why not go out to a furniture store and buy all the beds you needed? But that’s not the way the system worked.

To obtain a Certificate of Public Need (COPN) a facility had to apply to the Commonwealth of Virginia. Nursing homes were being built with no particular requirements, one was in a converted motel, so it became necessary for the state to establish certain rules that would assure quality care and protection for the home’s residents. On receipt of a COPN application, the commonwealth would assess a community’s needs and if the
needs proved sufficient, it would issue the certificate. With that, the facility would be eligible for a certain number of nursing beds provided it passed inspection for quality care and protection.

The number and location of certificates was limited. If there were room for only one CCRC in Charlottesville, which one would survive? Competition was intense.

The two organizations met and talked about all the possibilities. They tried to accommodate the other’s plans but finally concluded that a joint venture wouldn’t be possible.

First, Mr. Heischman’s plan included a stock-for-profit corporation and, as WCBR was frequently reminded, theirs had to be non-profit.

Secondly, the WCBR Board felt that health care was an important component of their project. It would provide comprehensive nursing care on the premises for life — at no extra cost for the resident. Those health care services would be paid for out of the entrance fees, a portion of which would be tax-deductible for “prepaid medical expenses.” The Board concluded that in spite of a big initial investment, that strategy would be less expensive for the residents than the “fee for service” plan that Mr. Heischman proposed.

WCBR ultimately received its COPN giving it the ability to purchase nursing beds with partial reimbursements from Medicare. But, as warned by Mr. Causey, it was all quite difficult. In June of 1985 the Board decided to hire Mr. James Melhorn from Diocese of Maryland’s Episcopal Ministry for the Aging (EMA) to be the management consultant. EMA would explore the alternatives.

In assessing the market they sent out 857 questionnaires. 32.9% were returned and analyzed. Contrary to the earlier survey, they concluded that an aging population in the area would be large enough and capable enough to support a Westminster Canterbury project.

With such promising news, the Site Committee, chaired by Rick Richmond, started thinking about where they could build a CCRC. There were very strong feelings that it should be on the WEST SIDE of town.

Having considered zoning, acreage, topography, distance from services,
neighborhood, access, water and sewer availability, and currently assessed value, they reported on the western sites. There were only two that would meet WCBR requirements and one was too expensive.

At about the same time Dr. Charles Hurt communicated an interest in making a parcel of land available to WCBR. It was on the north side of Rt. 250 East which at the time was just a two-lane road with little or no development.

But build on the EAST side of town?

Exploratory conversations continued and an agreement was finally reached to purchase 25.7869 acres from Dr. Hurt. The cost was $1,000,000 and, most important, the contract would give WCBR architectural control over future developments adjoining the property. No gas stations. No high rise apartments that would block their view of the Blue Ridge mountains. The deed was signed, sealed, and recorded.

C. Henry (Hank) Hinnant was hired as president. Having served as vice president and treasurer of Westminster Canterbury in Lynchburg, he joined the Charlottesville community on July 1, 1989.

The Board appointed Shriver and Holland as architects. Business and the competitive situation dictated that the original plan for a larger complex be temporarily scaled back to 81 apartments, 40 cottages and 24 private nursing care units. The Board approved the modifications. Schematic drawings were submitted to the Zoning Board. Consultants prepared a model of financial requirements.

All they needed was $25,000,000. That’s all, just $25,000,000.
How could they raise $25,000,000? It was an ambitious goal. To meet VDH requirements for being a not-for-profit corporation, the legal team applied and eventually received a 501(c)3 status. That would allow a tax-deductible provision for contributions to WCBR.

Unfortunately, it would not guarantee an exemption from real estate taxes. The Virginia Legislature assigned to each county the responsibility of determining which 501(c)3 organizations should pay those taxes and which ones need not. Some counties, including Albemarle, did not extend the exemption so broadly as others.

According to Rick Richmond, the legal team petitioned the Board of Supervisors again and again without success. “We ran into a stone wall every time. They gave absolutely no encouragement for our being exempt from real estate taxes.” Those taxes would prove to be a hefty financial burden in the years that followed.

But thanks to the leadership of Elizabeth Scott and Ned Morris the drive for the Fellowship Fund reached $250,000 within a month … then $360,000 … then $725,000 … then $1,000,000 … then over the top. According to Mrs. Scott, the gifts “were a continuation of the Church’s commitment to support the elderly.”

Melhorn advised, however, that in addition to satisfying the Fellowship Fund, they should have another $1,650,000 for pre-construction costs. Those included legal fees, detailed architectural drawings, consulting services, an office, and they still needed a lot more for construction costs.

The Board approached the Albemarle County Industrial Development Authority (ACIDA) for help. As a public authority they were allowed to issue bonds that were tax exempt under the Internal Revenue Code.

But persuading them to do so
required a feasibility study that included demographics, site plans, anticipated expenses, the number of prospective residents, and plans to service the debt.

The study was finally completed and Westminster Canterbury of the Blue Ridge received financing for $25,000,000. When underwriters offered the bonds on the market, they were purchased within six hours. An impressive indication of the confidence for the Charlottesville community and the Westminster Canterbury CCRC model.

But still there was more. When fully operational, WCBR would depend on resident fees for support. That put the ball in the marketing court. Mr. Scott Hilles was hired as Development Coordinator. Rick Richmond described him as a jack-of-all-trades. “And if he didn’t know how to do it, he learned how to do it.”

The formal campaign began. Volunteers met with ministers and lay persons in local churches. The Marketing Committee
sent out letters to 2,000 prospects offering to enroll them on the Priority List. (With a $1000 refundable deposit) They held tea parties and picnics.

They advertised: “A Life Care Community provides independent living with extra services that include nursing care, housekeeping, food service, maintenance, and social activities in return for an Entrance Fee and monthly charge.” And “Of all the leisure opportunities that retirement provides, perhaps nothing brings more satisfaction than the opportunity to continue your education. As a public institution of higher education, the University of Virginia offers waived tuition for senior citizens who want to audit a course.” And “For lovers of history our location was perfect. Not only is Westminster Canterbury of the Blue Ridge close to Monticello, it’s just minutes away from James Monroe’s beloved Highland and Montpelier, James Madison’s home.”

Also, “The Skyline Drive and Blue Ridge Parkway, two of the most scenic byways in America, are only a few miles away. And Virginia’s beaches as well as the historic triangle of Williamsburg, Jamestown and Yorktown are all within an easy driving distance.”

By July of 1988, over half of the apartments had been reserved. Close to 100 others had joined the Priority List. Eventually a comfortable margin of prospects was reached. It was time to build.

R.E. Lee was hired as general contractor. He who would have 40 cottages and 81 apartments to build. The Board of Directors held a celebratory Ground Breaking ceremony on September 11, 1988. Albemarle’s beautiful red clay welcomed them.
Bulldozers began to level the land — moving 50,000 cubic yards of earth across the fields. Then it rained. And rained ... and rained. Causing days of delays as workers had to wade through red river sloughs. It finally stopped, giving contractors the opportunity to spread gravel on the road that looped around the site.

But there was a problem with the “loop.” The Ashcroft community on the hill to the north of campus had an entry road that crossed over the WCBR line. If not corrected, outside traffic would flow through the residential area.

The problem was ultimately resolved when Ashcroft built another road to the east, connecting with Rt. 250. The original gateway remained, however, giving emergency vehicles access to the neighboring community if needed.

By the summer of 1989 work was in progress on the Big House and the Health Center. Preston Locher, Project Manager, said, “It won’t be long before we see steel reaching for the sky.”

Expenses, however, began to exceed estimates. Scott Hilles met with the contractors to figure out what areas could be modified to cut costs.

They decided to put a hold on completing the health care wing and to replace the brick on the main building with white siding. Both modifications constituted a big savings though Monticello wasn’t too happy with the elimination of Virginia brick from their mountain view.

Meanwhile, the Marketing Department forged ahead. A sense of urgency hovered over their offices. In order to guarantee the operating expenses, they needed a higher percentage of reservations and deposits. They entertained and gave each guest a brochure with detailed floor plans and price schedules.

The response to their efforts exceeded expectations. By the fall of 1989,
reservations had reached almost 90% capacity. A model cottage was opened in December — offering prospective residents some suggestions on furniture arrangement and space utilization.

By the spring of 1990 the apartments were nearing completion and 75% of the cottages had dry wall installed. Painting and trim work had begun. Carpet was going in and, according to the interior decorators, “the common spaces will have the feel of a large elegant residence with a wonderful 18th century flair. Fresh materials such as crewels, chintzes and textured fabrics will dominate. Furnishings, including Chippendale and Queen Anne reproductions, will create an overall look of gracefulness and comfort.”

Excitement was building. Curbs and gutters were installed. Street lamps were lit. The irrigation system was operational. The small retention pond at the end of the entrance boulevard was full.

Then on the afternoon of May 14, 1990, future residents, Board members, and local officials gathered at the entrance of the new building for a dedication ceremony. Rick Richmond, President of the Board of Trustees, welcomed them with a tribute to the work of earlier years.
Three individuals played a most important role in our development. Jim Kennan, our first President, and Board members, Trudy Peyton, and Jane Saunier began discussing local housing for the elderly. Not long thereafter the small group became 25, and in June of 1985 the State Corporation Commission issued our charter. We continued to persevere with the support of people like Elizabeth Scott, John Rogan, Hovey Dabney, and Ned Morris, to mention a few. They were determined to succeed.

And succeed they did.

The Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee, Bishop of the Diocese of Virginia, offered a prayer of Dedication. “Westminster Canterbury is a ministry whose purpose is to enable its residents to use their gifts fully, live their lives richly, and make the very best of the years that God has given them.”

On October 15, 1990 the doors were opened.
Most of the early settlers were ready to move in by October 15th but WCBR wasn’t ready to receive them — not all at once. There weren’t enough carts and helping hands to push dozens of wardrobes, rugs, tables, chairs, lamps, books and dishes down the halls and into place on the same day. So they spread out the arrivals one week at a time. Fifteen people arrived on October 15th. Five more came on the 16th and 17th. Then about a dozen more each of the next three weeks.

An early requirement for entry was the capacity to walk through the front door. Unfortunately, one of the settlers, John McMillan, was wheelchair dependent. His wife Alma, being respectful of the rules, rolled her husband up to the door where he got up and walked across the threshold. Then she pushed the wheelchair behind him. Having fulfilled the requirement, John McMillan sat down. The early settlers were quite creative.

The Front Desk staff had been drilled over and over again on the proper handling of emergency response systems, often to the point where the new residents walked around hearing bells even when they were not ringing.

The cubby holes began to fill up. Packages and welcome flowers arrived from families and friends. The telephone switchboard took on a glow of its own as the multiline equipment handled hundreds of calls, day into night. “The staff put countless miles on their shoes addressing the wants and needs of new residents.”

By New Year’s Day the early settlers numbered 108.

The biggest challenges facing them — aside from trying to fit too many things into too small spaces — was once more the Albemarle mud. “It dominated our lives, stained our shoes, and tested our tempers. The parking lot near the East Wing was paved, but it was separated from the door by a wide expanse of
bare earth. There were slabs of wood on which one could bridge the space — a real adventure — but no one objected when permanent construction began to eliminate the challenge.”

Who were those adventurous settlers? Alvaine Hamilton who captured first hand the history of that era, said, “We had world travelers as well as people who had lived in the same house since childhood, matriarchs and bachelors, business people, teachers, authors, ministers, and civic leaders.”

“We were all in varying degrees suffering from the classic accompaniments of aging,” said Virginia Kennan. “The loss of familiar and well-loved people; the imminence of death; increasing dependence; idleness and a sudden ambiguity of status.”

Except for a few holdouts the aging matriarchs, bachelors, teachers, etc. were intent on getting acquainted. “It was assumed that we wanted to eat meals together and that conversations would be sparked by such questions as: Where did you grow up? Do you say tow-mah-toe or to-may-tuh? And, of course, talk of books, careers, and grandchildren flowed freely.”

The settlers learned quickly which common spaces were used for which activity. The present library served as the dining room. Residents waited in the Rogan Lounge until the head waiter came and escorted them to their tables.

Mrs. Mary Helen Jessup had donated funds for a library in memory of her husband, Mr. James L. Jessup and there was a small space next to the front door set aside for that purpose. A computer was eventually installed on one of the desks. People were grateful for the machine and the Word Perfect system but were somewhat confused as to its purpose. An instructor was hired to teach them what it meant to be “on-line.”

The Monticello Room was the gathering space for meetings, assemblies, concerts and in the early morning “Stretch and Tone” classes. There was a ballroom located behind the elevators subsequently removed for expansion to the new wing. The Clinic was temporarily located on the first floor of the Administration wing.

Morrison’s Custom Food Service had been selected to provide meals. In addition to two chefs, they had a registered dietitian to help plan well balanced, healthy meals. A sample dinner menu included entrees such as Tenderloin

Mary Helen Jessup
of Beef Brochette over Wild Rice and Cornish Game Hen with Orange Sauce. Very healthy.

Shortly after the first dinner, however, the ABC informed Morrison’s that alcohol could not be served in the Dining Room — much to the dismay of residents who were accustomed to a glass or two of wine with their evening meal. The restriction was ultimately overturned — much to the delight of those residents.

Eileen Foster, who moved in with her husband David in 1991, said there was always a Thursday afternoon high tea in the Rogan Lounge. Ladies would bring their finest linen tablecloths. A silver tea service was placed at one end of the table and a coffee service at the other end. “We had a hard time persuading the kitchen to serve little sandwiches. They brought big ones as if it were lunch time.”

Residents attended the first of monthly birthday parties and as soon as four people moved in, bridge games were organized. Saturday Night Movies were scheduled. The first one was South Pacific followed by old favorites like Singing in the Rain.

People gathered for Vespers on Sunday at 4:30 p.m.

Schedules were posted.

But moving in was exhausting — especially for the older than 70. They needed time to be still. Time to rest in a chair by the window and breathe a breath of gratitude. After all the rush and worry they were settled in a new home.

And tomorrow would be another day.
Most WCBR residents were retirees — many from careers in which their contributions determined the success of the enterprise. Careers in government, academia, medicine, business, or law. And after their offices had offered farewell toasts and a few dreams of leisure had been satisfied, what were they supposed to do? “I’m not ready to quit!”

And they didn’t quit. They volunteered — for a myriad of organizations like Boys and Girls Club, the Senior Center, and JABA. They joined the annual Alzheimer’s walk, collected food items for the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, and made Toys for Tots.

Jacqueline Gergen said “Volunteering is what we do. We give back to the larger world. And we become intrinsically whole.”

One of the most celebrated volunteer efforts was a Christmas party for the Barrett Day Care Center. Children gathered in the WCBR ballroom where they enjoyed a bounty of delicious treats and waited for the highlight of the day, a visit from Santa Claus!

There was a needlework guild that gathered once a week and shared its skills along with important conversations. In one six month period they knitted 109 caps for newborns at Martha Jefferson Hospital.

A group of songsters visited those in health care on Wednesdays and residents with cognitive impairment seemed to have no trouble remembering hymns. They joined the songsters with apparent delight in the familiar words.

A group called Residents Helping Residents, established itself. “If someone couldn’t hang a picture on the wall, a volunteer would do it. If someone needed a ride to the airport, a driver would be ready — at any hour. And what about repairs? Does your table tilt? Is the plant stand in need of a peg? Does your rocker
need a rung? Are your bookends busted? Try the Residents' Shop!

In 1993, a group of environmentalists made plans for improving the campus as a wildlife habitat for birds, butterflies, and animals. David Bixby made a dozen bluebird houses and asked for help. “We need about 10 more volunteers to keep track of nests. The birds are already house hunting and will begin building nests in a week or so.”

Volunteers also became a significant part of the money raising team for the WCBR Foundation. The first annual golf tournament was held in 1993. There were 52 players and 18 corporate sponsors. It brought in $6,810. By the 20th anniversary tournament there were nearly 70 golfers competing for prizes. They raised a record $42,000 in gross revenue. As Bo Hopkins said, “At no other time or place would you see so many friendly folks having such fun for such a just cause.”
There was also the Rummage Sale. New residents brought too many clothes for their closets. Workers were very proud of making $670 their first year. But the clothes kept pouring in. “Like Fibber McGee and Molly’s closet which tumbled its contents onto the floor when the door was opened, our ballroom storage closet was bursting at the seams. A late September Rummage Sale was the most successful Rummage sale ever. We made just over $2,600 for the Fellowship Fund.”

The Blue Ridge Gift Shop opened in 1996. It was modest in scope offering things like greeting cards, beaded jewelry and hand made ornaments for sale. Merchandise was artfully arranged by volunteers who assisted visitors in selecting just the right gift for their friend or loved one. The shop moved to a larger space in 2004 and by 2005 they had donated a total of $60,000 to the WCBR Foundation.

Then there was the Attic. Just the way people brought too many clothes for their closets they brought too much furniture for their apartments. There was always extra furniture, lamps, dishes, and paintings when someone moved into Health Care or the “mansion in the skies.” Volunteers started using an empty cottage to house the extras, offering them for sale to Associates at greatly discounted prices.

When Cottage 225 became available, the volunteers were allowed to use it on a “long term temporary basis.” Items sold quickly. By 2020, there was a greater need for the cottage so the Attic had to be put back in use for a future resident.

As Thomas Jefferson said, “It’s wonderful how much may be done if we’re always doing.” The doing was often difficult and time consuming, but it assured retirees that, even though they had crossed the finish line at the office, they weren’t finished. They were still needed.
Residents Participate in a Charity Walk

Top: Blue Ridge Attic volunteers; Below, L–R: Gift Shop volunteers, Charlie Stewart

Gary Selmecki at the 2018 Golf Tournament
A

d they definitely weren’t finished with fun. Within a day of unpacking the early settlers were playing croquet on the front lawn, a game that would develop into fierce competition with the Great Croquet Tournament.

“It will pit the very best players from all the wings against each other. Rules will conform strictly to the West Muggleswick Convention. No shouting will be allowed. Our new nurse at the Health Center has offered to carry water to the contestants and apply liniment as required. The prize will be a second helping of dessert.”

The Croquet Tournament was followed by an Airplane Flying Contest. Whose paper plane would fly the farthest, the highest, and the longest? “There were some good pilots at WCBR.”

And there were some good horseshoe pitchers as well. “Maybe it’s been a long time since you talked learnedly about leaners and ringers and hobbers. Those are key words in the vocabulary of horseshoe pitchers. With a new pit located out back near the Health Center entrance it’s time to start slinging the shoes and listening to the sound of metal striking metal.” There was a lot of slinging and listening out back, especially for the men.

There was also a lot of fun inside. Bingo every Monday night. Bridge. Trivial Pursuits. And Mah Jong, anyone?

Frances Young, an early settler from Greenwood, said Play Reading was her favorite social event. It was a group activity for homespun entertainment that used no stage, no props, no rehearsal, and no audience except for whoever was in the room.

Monroe Cooper started a poetry discussion group that met twice a month. “I find people my age enjoy the discussion of poetry not because of any magic in the images etc. but because it’s a fascinating way of exploring feelings.”

There were classical concerts and jazz concerts. One of their favorite groups was...
The Spinal Cords, “a talented, funny group of medical students who somehow found time to sing together in spite of the rigors of demanding studies.” And WCBR’s good friend, Dick Brandt, offered an occasional Sing Along.

Marnie Trotter invited people to a weekly chorus. “Undoubtedly you’ve heard us singing in the Chapel on Wednesdays. Anyone hankering to sing outside the shower, come join forces and tra-la-la along with us.”

The biggest hit of the year, however, was the Associates’ Christmas musical — “with the executive housekeeper waving a mop; aproned cooks flourishing frying pans, … and the nursing staff taking on political correctness in a rhymed libretto.”

Residents responded with their own musical.

Talks included words of wisdom about Learning to Become a Centenarian and American Buddhists’ Worldview. The Civil War Round Table was held monthly.

Bird Walks were a favorite adventure. “We found twenty species of birds including the first swallows of Spring and a noisy pair of Pileated Woodpeckers. We are looking and hoping for Purple Martins, so far without success.” And late in the summer there was hawk watching. “The Blue Ridge is the scene of the spectacular southerly hawk migration and the week of September 15th usually brings the highest number.”

There were field trips almost every week … to the Peaks of Otter, Wolf Trap, Garth Newell Music Center, Blackfriars, and Short Pump where women could do some serious shopping.

But what was it about those early settlers that gave them such joie d’ vivre? They were there to “wind things up” as Virginia Kennan said, but they were “winding things up” together. Listening, singing, reading, pounding, and laughing when their aerodynamic models fell to the ground. Somehow the predictable finale didn’t seem so sad after all. If there was a there out there somewhere, maybe they could listen, sing, read, pound, and laugh together again … like good friends who used to be next door neighbors.
Within a few months of moving in, the early settlers realized that they needed to organize. They were a scattered bunch of newcomers with no particular mission or cooperative enterprise. But if there were an Association of some sort, it would give them a sense of community and mutual support. So a Residents’ Association (RA) was formed. The first meeting was on December 14, 1991.

Loosely organized at first, business was conducted by a Council consisting of elected officers and area representatives who gathered “constituents” quarterly in order to assess their needs. Residents were invited to attend monthly Forums where they could ask questions and offer suggestions.

Bylaws were amended over time. Meeting dates and protocols changed as the number of residents increased. And a mission statement was agreed upon.

“The primary purpose of the Residents Association is to promote the interests, concerns, and well being of residents and to maintain a productive dialogue about these issues with the Administration and Board of Trustees.”

As in the give and take of most organizations, the dialogue wasn’t always “productive.” The Administration, for instance, didn’t agree to a resident request for carports to be built in the parking area. And it took awhile for them to respond to a request for a second van to transport distant cottage residents to the Big House. But they agreed on other requests:

West cottage residents asked for a screen of hedges to be planted between the main parking lot and their back yards. The landscape architect incorporated the request into the master plan and an evergreen grove of 200 Virginia cedars was planted on the western slope.

At the request of the Health Care Committee handrails were installed in the second and third floor halls.
Dinner table chatter prompted a request for sound absorbent material in the dining room. It was done.

Concerned about the speed of outside traffic, residents requested that three speed bumps be installed on the loop road. Again, it was done. “We hope they will serve as an effective deterrent to speeding and make the grounds safer for anyone.”

But the biggest push for a productive dialogue dealt with the budget. How were the resident fees being used? The RA expressed a desire to be consulted as the primary experts on the well being of residents and there were a lot of “respectful” exchanges about listening to the other side.

“Don’t we get to share in the decision making?”

The Corporate Board ultimately extended the privilege of budget review to the RA Finance Committee. “Regarding the programs and services of WCBR it is desirable and beneficial for residents, management, and Board members to work together. To this end the first step in preparing a budget consists in a review of current services and programs. Residents will be involved in this program and service review.”

The productive dialogue continued when the Board invited a representative of the RA to attend its monthly meetings. Although the RA appointee did not have a vote, the Board occasionally elected residents to serve as voting trustees in light of their individual capacities and insights. With the addition of an RA Planning Committee and multiple subcommittees, communication became more frequent and more lively.

“We need to constantly seek new ideas in order to improve the working relationship.”

Eventually the CEO and COO started scheduling monthly meetings with the chair of the RA as well as with its Executive Board. Residents served in an advisory capacity to the Corporate Board, and the Administration briefed residents on issues and strategies every two months at Town Halls. While not always perfect, the working relationship was working.
Promoting the interests, concerns, and well-being of residents not only required the expertise of a Resident Association Board, it required the expertise of various committees. Residents chose which, if any, would engage their expertise and energy.

There was a Flower Committee that put simple arrangements on the dining room tables every week. There was a Hospitality Committee that greeted new arrivals with a vase of roses at their door and invited them to dinner so they could meet the “old timers.”

One committee, headed by the talented Alvaine Hamilton, started a weekly newspaper. It was called the Outlook — “a serious effort at collaborating with residents and staff in planning the contents and producing an attractive, readable and meticulously edited product.”

Its format included: News, Activities of the Week, Clinic Corner, Birthdays, New Resident Welcomes, Bus Schedules, Winning Bridge Partners, Employee of the Month and a few Friendly Reminders:

“There are new parking rules. Tickets will be issued for violations so please park prettily.”

“We all enjoy having children and grandchildren visit but we do ask that for the safety of residents our young visitors refrain from using skateboards and roller skates around the loop road. Also please remind them to keep their speed in the hallways to a safe level. Rounding corners can be dangerous if you meet someone with a walker.”

“Ovens are not meant to be storage areas. They should be empty except for oven racks.”

The Chapel Committee was responsible for finding chaplains to conduct the Sunday Vespers. “Although WCBR operates under the guidelines of the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches of Virginia, we have people here who are members of many different churches.” The
committee arranged chairs in the worship space (the present Bishop’s Conference room). Eileen Foster said, “We wanted to make room for wheelchairs so it was pretty crowded.”

The Dining Committee served as a buffer between the community and the kitchen — very important since everyone was a food critic.

They sponsored the Great Spoon Bread Controversy in which rival recipes were advocated with great passion, and they distributed note cards to residents requesting their evaluations. Some were very quick to respond:

“Vegetables were overcooked.”
“Vegetables were undercooked”
“Please don’t serve left-over Chicken Cordon Bleu.”
“Sweet pickles should not be in Tuna Melt.”
“Trout was excellent — gently fried and moist.”
“Please don’t put bourbon and chocolate in pecan pie.”

The Health Care Committee made special requests for help with the emotional needs of residents: writing letters, visiting, reading stories, and playing board games. “You don’t have to be an expert player and it doesn’t matter if you often lose. It’s the individual attention and camaraderie that comes from one-to-one attention that will give these residents great pleasure.”

The same committee worked with management to establish training partnerships with PVCC and UVA. Those programs brought students to WCBR for practical experience, and some of them filled the nursing staff after graduation.

The library was located in what is now the RIC (Residents’ Information Center.) It was small but well attended. In the words of Eileen Foster:
To the Jessup Library
There is no cruise ship like a book
To take us lands away
Nor any jet plan like a page
Of prancing poetry.
The journey may the frugal take
Without dispense of Means.
So open is our Library
To enrich the West-Cant scene.
With apologies to Emily Dickinson

People were anxious to “enrich the West-Cant scene” so they gave some of their printed treasures to the collection. Unfortunately, the scene began to run out of shelf space and the committee had to turn down books until more space was provided.

Committees expanded in number over the years. They included Building and Grounds, Marketing, Finance, Nominating, Wellness, and one of the most important ones: Technology.

Steve Goldstein and Isabelle Halley des Fontaines moved into WCBR in 2014 and Steve was surprised that there was no resident website. He persuaded Isabelle to create one and she did. The website included a publication called Happenings, the successor to Outlook, with a daily calendar of events, photographs, notices, menus, and more. With her help the Technology Committee actively supported residents with an email based communication system.

So people could not only talk … talk … talk, they could text … text … text about their “interests, concerns and well being.”

Isabelle Halley des Fontaines helps Nancy Erwin with her iPad
The WCBR Foundation was incorporated in 1998 but its real beginning was at the beginning when the founders decided to join Virginia’s Westminster Canterbury Association — a decision that required a Fellowship Fund be established before opening WCBR’s doors. The Fund was to provide assistance for residents whose financial resources had been depleted.

As Jim Kennan said, “It assured the future of elderly people who would otherwise have been distraught over running out of money.” The Fund gave recipients more than just a sigh of relief — it gave them the dignity of remaining in a community they made home.

“It’s our way of returning some of the care and concern that our elders have given to us over the years.”

Between 1990 and 1994, WCBR offered help with entrance fees. In 1995, WCBR had to suspend the offer but 20 years later they surveyed the Fellowship policies of other Westminster-Canterbury organizations and learned that all five across Virginia provided monthly and entrance fee assistance.

“We need to do it as well.”

In the words of Peter Buchanan, Chair of the Foundation, “The WCBR Foundation has grown dramatically and like other WCs, we can help prospective residents with entrance fees.” The Foundation and Corporate Boards carefully considered the issue.

“Is it fair to those who emptied their savings in order to pay?”

“But we have other expenses.”

“We can afford it.”

“Helping that way will promote diversity.”

“And diversity is important.”

Finally, in 2015 both Boards voted to resume the practice.

For most of WCBR’s history, purpose restricted gifts were limited to Fellowship and the Chaplain’s Discretionary Fund.
(beginning in 1985).

Other Purpose Restricted Funds have come and gone in the ensuing years as needs arose, most resulted in valued improvements to the WCBR campus, such as the Nature Trail (2001–2007 campaign) and the Vista/Catered Living Garden (2009). Others supported associates with educational and training opportunities and enhanced the quality of life for residents.

The Foundation enjoyed a tremendous boost when it received a $2.8 million bequest from the estate of Newton and Wilma Thomas $300,000 of which was Board designated to start an Employee Education Endowment for associates. As a consequence they started the Associates’ Education Scholarship Fund. That Fund enabled associates to continue studies and training.

Bobby Sipe was one of the earliest recipients. “I started working here in 1992. For the last four years I’ve been in
apprenticeship programs with the goal of obtaining state licensure in HVAC. If it weren’t for the Scholarship Fund, I would probably have left to find another job.”

In 2010, an Employee Emergency Fund was added to the Foundation’s commitments by the Foundation Board. Whether an associate faced a medical emergency, a car accident, a furnace failing in the dead of winter, or funeral expenses for a departed loved one, the Foundation was ready to help.

Erin Garvey was hired as the Director of Development in 2013. During her eight years of service the Foundation’s focus expanded further to include additional resources for the community’s cultural enhancement: music therapy, concerts, guest speakers, and more large print books for the library. Additionally, the Hearthstone Institute’s I’m Still Here™ training program received a board designated Foundation grant so the community could better understand how best to serve those struggling with the challenges of dementia.

The Foundation office and Board aimed to raise the funds to support programming through an annual campaign designed to finance 100% of the identified needs. In addition, a major gifts campaign was conducted to help grow the Foundation’s asset base. Support for that came in the form of outright gifts, bequests and other deferred giving instruments.

In 2014, The Lettie Pate Whitehead Foundation made a major commitment with a $100,000 donation for the benefit of elderly, Christian women with financial need. The Lettie Pate Whitehead Foundation has continued their support of the Fellowship Fund to date.

Resident and donor, William (Bill) Kerler, gifted $500,000 through his Trust to the Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge Foundation for “it’s General Endowment Fund.” The Boards named the new General Endowment Fund, that provides support for the general operations and programs of the Foundation and Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge, after Mr. Kerler.

Elizabeth Pinkerton Scott, one of the Founders of WCBR, said, “We have a wonderful good feeling here.” That was a simple way of speaking about the
impact of philanthropy on the WCBR community. “It’s like a bell that invites people to give…and give a little more.”

Mrs. Scott made the very first gift to WCBR during its process of forming in May 1985. Upon Mrs. Scott’s passing, at the age of 104 in July 2019, she bequeathed $500,000 to the WCBR Foundation. It was the last in a long line of gifts from Mrs. Scott totaling over $2,300,000.

On receiving the ultimate gift from Mrs. Scott, President and CEO Gary Selmeczi expressed gratitude on behalf of the community. “Mrs. Scott’s compassion for helping others has been an inspiration to many and we are honored to be given this bequest so that we may continue her legacy of compassion for those in need.”

The Buchanan Family Health Care Endowment was established in 2018, subsequent to Jane Buchanan’s diagnosis and death from ALS. Wisdom gained through time in WCBR’s Healthcare wing inspired the couple to start a permanent endowment for the benefit of health care services.

Erin Garvey said, “Besides making larger annual gifts, many donors also made smaller ‘tribute gifts in honor of or in memory of someone. I think it says a lot about the culture of philanthropy at WCBR that when residents and associates wish to recognize someone for a good deed as well as to honor the memory of a friend that they choose the WCBR Foundation to do so.” They often chose the Tribute Garden, built next to the entrance road, to honor those memories.

Based on available information upon the writing of this book, between May 7, 1985 and June 30, 2021, 19,663 donations have been received by 2,839 donors totaling $18,656,466.
In 2017 the office of Human Resources changed the title Employee to Associate. It was an effort to name everyone employed at WCBR a “partner engaged in teamwork.” One new team member said, “It doesn’t level the playing field but it sounds a lot like a promotion.”

Sandy Campbell was one of the first Employee Associates. She started working in Health Care in 1991. “Westminster Canterbury was my second home.” As an LPN she took care of patient families as well as patients. “It’s so hard on them to lose their loved ones.”

Fran Brown came here in April of 1995, right after the expanded Health Center was finished. She often worked in Vista and loved it. “We went out on bus trips … did parades around the ballroom. I recited Nursery Rhymes and they all joined in. Also Bible verses … they would pick up the story and talk all over the place.” Fran said it was amazing for her to meet current residents who remembered her taking care of their parents.

WCBR offered Employee Associates a wide variety of benefits including health insurance, sick leave, and a retirement plan. Those benefits expanded over the years to include vision and dental insurance, Paid Time Off (PTO), disability and life insurance, a Flexible Spending Account for child-care, and a 403(B) retirement plan.

In 2012, Associate Service Awards were given to those who had worked for 10, 15, and 20 years. It was a gala ceremony. Recipients responded with gratitude and residents responded with reciprocal gratitude.

But knowing how important the Associates were to their lives, Residents wanted to offer something more … something extra, so they started a Christmas Fund. Their first year’s goal was $25,000 for 65 full-time and 35 part-time associates. “With the help of some good speakers we were able to promise
$300 for every full timer and a nice bonus for the part timers.” By 2020, Christmas Fund donations reached $428,540 and distributed to 422 Associates. At the celebrations there weren’t enough thank-you’s to go around, so people told stories about this time that time.

One older gentlemen told about the time that the blizzard of 1993 struck campus. “We followed the progress of the storm on television and told each other that we were mighty fortunate — mostly because the staff was able to give of themselves above and beyond their formal job descriptions … whether it was maintaining the mechanical systems, digging out the pathways and, most of all, caring for folks in the Health Center.

Meals on Wheels were served the cottages and 20 staff members stayed at the facility overnight — sleeping in the guest rooms and every empty bed in the Health Center.

By the third day the staff decided a change was in order. All the cottagers were invited to come to lunch in the dining room, transported by our trusty bus. It was a gala event with sort of a carnival-cruise sound as tall stories were swapped and a full service meal was served.”

The givers had become receivers and the receivers, the givers. In a network of grace.
In 1786 Thomas Jefferson wrote about the view from Monticello “Where has nature spread so rich a mantle under the eye? Mountains, forests, rocks, rivers. With what majesty do we look down into the workhouse of nature … all fabricated at our feet?”

Two hundred years later the view from Monticello would encompass a large commercial development. Government and private enterprise pumped millions of dollars into the mantle of forests, including 75,000 square feet of office space, a seven-lane highway across the Rivanna River, a hotel complex, a major grocery store and a housing project. What was once a workhouse of nature had become a workhouse of business.

Westminster-Canterbury bought 25 acres on Pantops to build its building and then another 25 acres in preparation for the Blue Ridge expansion. In 1995 they bought seven acres between the campus and Rt. 250 for $960,000 and began lease negotiations with Martha Jefferson for office space on the property. Those seven acres were ultimately sold.

The Worrell Land Co. owned 241 acres on the west side of Rt. 250. It was named for Peter Jefferson who owned it and passed it on to his son, Thomas Jefferson. In 2001 Martha Jefferson Hospital purchased 84 of those acres on which they built an Outpatient Care Center and subsequently the main hospital (Sentara).

As developments grew, so did traffic. There were a lot of people coming and going across Free Bridge. Unfortunately, traffic lights did not keep up with traffic. For some drivers Rt. 250 became a freewheeling road to and from Richmond causing timid, respectful, vigilant, law abiding drivers from Westminster Canterbury to wait … and wait before turning right. Turning left was considered risky.

Unfortunately, on May 26, 1994 a not-so-timid resident didn’t wait long enough
and the free wheeling traffic didn't slow down. It caused a near fatal accident. A light was installed at our entrance.

In 1993, the Virginia Land Company began a feasibility study to determine if townhouses adjacent to the entrance of WCBR would be of interest to the public. There was and there is still. Then in 1998, plans were made for a two-story building on the same property — designed and built for assisted living.

In 2016 the Board of Trustees approved the purchase of 2.09 acres on Rt. 250 for $1,650,000. It was primarily a defensive decision as a hotel developer was looking at the site.

Offices, apartments, and restaurants seemed to spring up overnight. Packed together like passengers on a crowded train, there was no longer a rich mantle of forests under the eye of Monticello.

Mr. Jefferson’s neighborhood had become citified.
CBR was also building on its mantle of forests. The white cottages along the south perimeter had only one bedroom and were not selling well. Hinnant suggested that 10 of them could be modified at the cost of $26,000 to $40,000 per conversion.

With the Board’s approval, modifications began in the spring of 1994. “In addition to adding patios to the units, residents and future residents opted to increase the interior space through new rooms which they will use as dens, libraries, sewing areas, home offices or television rooms.”

The first Coffee Shop opened in 1991, offering free coffee, tea, and muffins. A few years later it was turned into a center for casual dining. “Chairs, tables, and centerpieces continue in the green and burgundy color scheme.” Named the Westminster Grille, people sat at two long tables and enjoyed the same menu as their more formal friends upstairs.

In 1992 an indoor swimming pool was built with funds raised by residents and relatives. It was a big addition to the wellness program and a welcomed source of relaxation for the weary. Just outside that building a garden courtyard was assembled, giving residents in Health Care a chance to gather with their families for conversation and a breath of sunshine.

Meanwhile, the most important project on campus was building the long awaited 32 bed Health Center expansion. It was part of the original plan but in 1988, when construction costs began to exceed estimates, the plan had to be abandoned for only a “shell” of the west wing. Contractors started to fill in what was under the shell in May of 1994.

“Filling in” meant adding rooms on the top floor for licensed nursing care beds and rooms on the second floor for those with less critical needs. The first floor was dedicated to Health Care for the cognitively impaired.
“Residents who are in the early stages of memory impairment need a stimulating facility that allows them to participate in activities as well as giving them a feeling of independence.” Private rooms were arranged around a circle with a center for dining and social gatherings. Dutch doors gave residents the flexibility of maintaining a closed-door privacy or opening the top half to see what was going on in the common area.

Residents and staff selected the Vista Program of WCBR as a name for the cognitively impaired unit, and in 1995 it was awarded the *Innovation of the Year Award* from the Virginia Association of Homes for the Aging. “The Vista floor will add new dimensions and possibilities to those residents.”

When the west wing was completed, the Clinic, which had been temporarily located across the hall from the administrative offices, was moved to the first floor of Health Care. In 1997, it saw 7,000 patients. That’s a lot of inoculations, blood pressures, and Band-Aids.

Constructing the first Hillside cottages on Bishop’s Ridge began the same year. They featured cathedral ceilings, skylights, and attached garages. They were quickly reserved for occupancy.

The next big project was the Catered Living building, an important addition to campus care. It was designed to feel like home with living rooms, dining rooms, resident kitchens, family rooms and porches.

Suites on one level provided a very low level of assistance for those who only needed reminders or help in managing their medications. Another level provided for other activities such as dressing, bathing, and walking. Residents needing more assistance, would likely transfer to Health Care.

The new brick Center opened on July 1, 2000. It was finished. But the dust had barely settled on its construction before plans for another project were on display. A huge expansion would change the shape of the campus and the lifestyle of WCBR.
In September 1995 Donald Sandridge, chair of the Strategic Planning Committee, addressed the question of whether WCBR’s current accommodations were going to be adequate in the future. “Since our opening the retirement home industry has mushroomed. And there’s an increasing demand for larger units and a wider choice of amenities.”

Sandridge solicited resident feedback, and residents didn’t hesitate to offer feedback. In a long list of ideas they suggested apartments with balconies and covered patios, a movie theater, a real chapel, and convenient parking for cottage residents with lessened mobility. “Those ideas would please future residents.”

And yet new accommodations would also mean an adjustment. “We’re a close group. Everybody knows everybody. If you expanded the facility wouldn’t we lose our sense of community?”

To assuage the anxiety of early settlers the RA formed a Residents’ Planning Advisory Committee. The committee interviewed other CCRCs, reviewed marketing analyses and checked out financial records. Then they presented their report to the residents: “The Rationale of WCBR Expansion. WCBR today is beginning to fall short of what is in demand now and will be wanted in the projected future. We are financially stable. Operating costs are covered by revenues from fees and investment income. Funds are being reserved for obsolescence and the bond rate covenant is being satisfied. We are therefore in position to broaden our offering and yet remain small enough to afford residents a unified community with personalized social interactions.”

The Resident Association approved the Rationale. The Board of Directors adopted Plan 2000 Plus and architects Sheretz Franklin Crawford and Shaffner were hired.
Initial plans were drawn up for a 377,000 square foot complex to be named the Blue Ridge Apartments. Original apartments were named Monticello. Plans were reviewed, modified, and posted.

“Each of the new apartments will have two bedrooms and two baths, a well equipped kitchen, walk-in closets, underground parking, and an outdoor balcony or patio.

There will be a two-story auditorium that can be used for lectures, dinners, concerts, parties and other community events. It will feature a Jeffersonian inspired skylight and dome. There will be a two-story auditorium that can be used for lectures, dinners, concerts, parties and other community events. It will feature a Jeffersonian inspired skylight and dome.

The new dining room will seat up to two hundred. It will include a spacious outdoor balcony for entertaining during the warmer months. Other well-appointed rooms for special events will add versatility to the dining venue.

A chapel will seat seventy-five people. There will be an alternate configuration with a partition that opens to the auditorium for larger gatherings, memorial services etc.

The new library will occupy the space now used as the dining room. It will double in size.”

Final plans were accepted and financing was obtained when the Albemarle County Industrial Development Authority approved the issuance of $79,815,000 tax-exempt bonds.

Part of the project included the purchase of additional land. Not for bricks and mortar but to accommodate drainage requirements. In February 1997, Westminster-Canterbury bought 24.719 acres in the adjacent land for $1,000,000. “Our new property contains the remnants of a Peter Jefferson stone wall, a creek, beautiful trees and a fire road.” It would provide for a retention pool at the bottom of the hill.
The 1997 purchase also included 5.281 acres next to the Ashcroft Rd. Those acres would complete the campus circle and eventually allow for the addition of four new Hillside Cottages on the east side.

Bobby Sipe, a long time WCBR associate, remembers a ski slope and chalet on that property. “It was very popular during the 70’s and remained there until our expansion in the 90’s. A few broken skis were leaning against the walls.”

On October 12, 2001, the first spade full of red dirt was turned over at a Blue Ridge groundbreaking ceremony. Construction began … well, not exactly. The contractor discovered that before they could begin, 160,000 cubic yards of earth had to be moved. “That’s roughly the area of a football field filled to the height of a ten story building.”

Concrete was eventually poured and by early March of 2002, the foundation was in place. Drilling rigs and backhoes gave way to cranes. Cranes installed structural columns and the shape of the building became visible in May.

Late that summer there was a “topping out ceremony.” Anticipating the placement of the last beams, the builder painted one of them white. It was placed where residents, staff and board member could sign their names. Then on the afternoon of July 25, 2002, a cocktail reception was held.

At the designated hour the builder gave a thumbs up to the crane operator who raised the beam high in the air to the accompaniment of cheers from the crowd. The white beam not only carried signatures, it carried an American flag and an evergreen tree (a long held tradition among builders who considered the tree a gift from European immigrants.)

The summer’s long spell of sunny days was a blessing. With a hundred workers laboring in trades that included concrete, steel, masonry, plumbing, carpentry and electricity, the Blue Ridge project stayed on schedule. It was finally ready for occupants on November 14, 2003.

But the real opening had already occurred in March. That’s when the Cultural and Arts Center was completed. Residents and guests gathered under the dome for an early celebration. The Albemarle County’s Pipe and Drum Corps — in their kilted regalia — opened the ceremonies. Then the audience was treated to a taste of the new audiovisual system. With the opening minutes of *The Sound of Music*, as Julie Andrews was twirling across a mountain top, the familiar Rogers and Hammerstein score filled the air.

Life at WCBR was going to change. There would be a lot of new people and new routines. But the hills were alive with the sound of music.
The building was finished but it had to be transformed into a residence. That wasn’t easy. Each new occupant was given one day and a limited amount of elevator time to move in. It was described as “controlled chaos.” But emerging from the chaos, residents saw that the promise of Plan 2000 Plus had been realized. “It’s amazing! Look at the staircase!”

On their first visit to the Rotunda, they discovered how acoustically well-designed it was for professional musicians and talented amateurs as well as a venue for talks.

Marnie Trotter’s Steinway Grand piano stood on center stage. She had donated it to WCBR and a campaign to build it back to its “1924 concert level” reached its goal within weeks. As Ms. Trotter said, “Like many of us it just needed new parts.”

The adjoining Blue Ridge room was designed for dancing. No carpet on the floor so couples could slip and slide across its surface. And a well-established group of ladies called the “Silver Steppers,” could entertain guests with their own rhythmic tapping.

Next door was the new Chapel, a vast improvement over the Bishop’s Conference Room. Katha Bolfrass was hired as the first full time chaplain and with resident Lila Mait she encouraged the support of Jewish traditions. The new Chapel had open doors.

Across the hall was a Billiards Room with two Brunswick tables set up for competition and pleasure. Around the corner was a Creative Arts room inviting residents to draw or paint or sculpt. Next to it was a room set aside for flower arranging — not flower arranging for the small vases they had used in the old dining room, but flower arranging for large bouquets of welcome.

The library, located in the former dining room, consisted of bookshelves and a spacious sunny reading room. In addition to a collection of large-print
books, the amenities included up-to-date instruments that magnified print for readers with failing eyesight.

The main dining room was located directly above the Blue Ridge staircase. The whole of the Blue Ridge addition was wonderful unless you walked outside. Residents faced the same challenge that the early residents had faced. “There were no shrubs, no trees, no grass, no walkways — just a wide expanse of Albemarle mud.”

Shelah and Jim Scott were among the first residents and Jim learned quickly that, after walking their dog Buster he would have to carry him upstairs and drop him in a sink. “A dog’s feet, either muddy or dusty with red clay, would not be welcomed on bright new rugs.”

Venues had definitely changed and new rooms for study, dining, entertainment, worship, crafts and games made all the building hurdles seem worthwhile — even with the mud.
Indeed, everything about the Blue Ridge expansion seemed worthwhile. But there were problems. The Board of Trustees was struggling with unexpected financial issues.

In the fall of 2001 the Marketing Department had opened a Charter Residency Period with pre-construction prices for Blue Ridge entrance fees. The offer prompted a number of reservations but at a cost. Entrance fees were a significant part of the Plan 2000 budget.

In addition, many of the earlier residents wanted to move from their Monticello apartments to larger ones in Blue Ridge. Those moves were considered transfers so the residents could not be charged a second entrance fee; and to compound the situation, the transfers would leave 20 Monticello apartments empty. The Marketing Department geared up new strategies to reoccupy those apartments but “re-occupancy” was slower than expected.

As construction continued through 2003 and 2004, it became apparent that the cost assumptions used to determine entrance fees were inadequate and that the bond rate covenant was not being satisfied. The Board met with the auditor, Larson Allen, who after considering all the options, advised WCBR to increase its monthly fees.

So it was with a sense of urgency that the Board of Trustees voted to increase the monthly fees 6% for the fiscal year 2004, 10% for the fiscal year 2005, and 7.5% for the fiscal year 2006. Additionally, they voted to increase the entrance fee for Blue Ridge 15%. It was a blow to the community.

“How could they fail to see the warnings?”

“We can’t afford the increase.”

“Will the extra fees cover our debt service?”

It took a long time for people to recover and be reconciled. Westminster-
Canterbury had made serious errors — putting its very mission at risk. But like the house built on a rock, it would stand. And it would provide.

In November 2004 Hank Hinnant announced that he would retire in 2005. Vin Cibbarelli, Chair of the WCBR Board, formed a Search Committee including two residents. Gary B. Selmeczi was chosen as President and Chief Executive Officer, effective July 2005.

A graduate of Westminster College and recipient of a Master’s degree in Health Services Administration, Selmeczi had served as Executive Director of Goodwin House in Alexandria from 1993 to 2005. Shortly after his appointment the community welcomed him at a reception in the Rotunda.

During those years he had attended Joint Administration Meetings — Which became known as “JAM sessions” — with other Episcopal and Presbyterian communities.

He said, “Meetings would rotate amongst the various community sites, so each had an opportunity to brag over their latest and greatest program, renovation or expansion. They were valuable sharing sessions where we could learn from others’ experiences — good and bad.” He met many of the WCBR Trustees at those meetings.

Shortly after his appointment, WCBR welcomed Selmeczi at a reception in the Rotunda. Amid the glasses held on high, he told attendees how glad he was to assume the position of President and CEO. He would stress the importance of financial stability. It was a new beginning.
The original budget didn’t designate a lot of money for landscaping. The wide expanse of red clay looked barren. But in a huge gesture of generosity the Perry Foundation offered a $25,000 matching grant to “make the construction site look more like the neighborhood it’s going to be.” Thanks to the corresponding generosity of friends, they met the challenge.

White pines and Burford hollies were the first trees to be planted. Then the red maples. By 1993 several hundred trees were growing on the land around. On the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s birth seven of his favorite tree, the tulip poplar, were planted.

A portion of the grounds was set aside for a wildflower meadow. “We have a dual motive in preserving it,” said Carvel Blair, Chair of the Environmental Committee, “To act as good stewards of our beautiful 25 acre campus and to provide the opportunity for residents to observe a wide variety of birds.”

Monroe Cooper, the great humorist of the early years, added his thoughts. “Nowadays we know that birds have been here on earth for at least sixty million years. In fact, they were among the earliest people watchers observing hominids when they first began to walk upright at the relatively late date of four million years ago. The birds were waiting for us to develop new habitats.”

There were habitats for other animals at Westminster-Canterbury. “A wide variety of animals call this home, including a bullfrog, spring peepers, a family of wild turkeys, two skunks (at least), two woodchucks, two black snakes (at least), a red fox, a blue heron, and four deer (at least).” They were mostly welcomed.

But the geese on the small pond were becoming a nuisance. “A threat to our grounds,” said Richard Erwin. “Fouling the paths and becoming quite aggressive. I cannot overstress the point of NOT
feeding them or doing anything that will encourage them to stay, raise a family and tell relatives about what a great place WCBR is for year round living.”

Eventually a large part of the land was given over to mowed lawns and formal gardens. There was a shop on the north side of campus where you could get topsoil and mulch.

The most exciting addition to the landscape, however, was the 1999 purchase of 17 acres at the eastern edge of the property. It was a wooded hollow bisected by a mountain stream that was dammed to form a large retention pond.

Ned Morris launched a $130,000 campaign to build a trail around the pond. “For anyone seeking pleasant exercise, a place for quiet meditation, the trail will afford the serenity they seek.” A highlight of his efforts was the Daniel Pavilion, a gift in honor of Mrs. Mary Jo Daniel and Mr. Adrian Daniel.

Jim Greene, Westminster-Canterbury’s photographer and talented naturalist, sent pictures of the trail to residents. One woman, confined to a wheelchair, said, “It’s wonderful to see green herons and swallows and turtles around the new pond.”

There were, of course, a few challenges to the land around. In 2004 residents of the new Blue Ridge apartments complained that the original trees were so tall that they cut off a view of the mountains. “They should be cut down” Then when housing developments started rising up near the property lines, the opposite cry went up. “They should plant more trees.”

The cry was directed to Max Evans who had been hired to design the land around Blue Ridge and Max Evans really liked berms. “There were berms everywhere — in parking lots and empty lots.” Like the protest about too tall trees, the cry went up. “They should take down the berms!” Down they came — gradually along with
maple trees and crape myrtles that topped them.

In 1995, WCBR was officially recognized as a Habitat for Native Wildlife.

By 2006 it was officially recognized as a Habitat for Native environmental experts.
By 2006, Westminster Canterbury consisted of 379 residences. There were:
- 56 one bedroom apartments
- 147 two bedroom apartments
- 5 one bedroom cottages
- 60 two bedroom cottages
- 45 Catered Living studios
- 12 Memory Support rooms
- 52 private Nursing Care rooms

“What bountiful accommodations on our stationery cruise ship!” But with more accommodations there were more people, and with more people there were more opinions, and with more opinions there were more disagreements.

Especially on issues like the Dress Code.

In the early years a more formal generation lived in WCBR. Ladies wore dresses for dinner and a coat and tie were definitely de rigueur for men. But as younger people moved into the residences, there was less interest in formal attire.

Pull-over sweaters were fine.

One of the older residents, a retired professor of Classics at UVA, was quite dismayed by the change. Sweaters at dinner? He put a letter in the residents’ mailboxes urging them to dress in a properly dignified manner. “In so doing it will reflect on the respect we have for each other and for the handsome room in which we dine.” The dignified manner automatically included a necktie.

But, professorial advice notwithstanding, necktie wearing slowly disappeared from the handsome dining room.

But the Dress Code argument did not disappear. It was an issue for the July 2007 Council meeting. The Code — with slightly more lenient guidelines — was proposed and finally accepted by the Residents Association. “Neither the Administration nor the Association will enforce the guidelines but a spirit of cooperation and mutual consideration...
is requested.” As Virginia Kennan said, “Ours is not a stage on which to appear full fig. Besides, we can’t preen successfully with dermatologist patches stuck to the face or step properly in orthopedic shoes.”

Some residents were very critical of the front entrance. There was just a simple green awning to shelter the walkway. “That’s not a classic way to welcome visitors. We need a Porte Cochere.” And so the architects designed a Porte Cochere.

People were pleased with its Jeffersonian lines. Most people — except for those who sat on the balcony off Rogan Lounge. “It’s too high!” The Porte Cochere blocks our view of the mountains.” The architects finally took 18 inches off the top.

And given the artistic impulse of many residents, there were occasional disagreements about the decor in the common rooms. “That table is too big.” “There’s no need for a sofa in the hallway.”

A friendly notice was posted in the newsletter. “Residents are reminded that furniture in the common areas should not be rearranged. We have an active group of residents who are part of the Decorating Committee.”

With more people there were definitely more opinions. But like pioneers in a new territory, residents tended to stick together. “We have a fierce loyalty to the newly met old friends with whom we share what is left of the rest of our lives.”
In the spring of 2011, Gary Selmeczi spoke to residents about the need to expand the Monticello apartments. “Their low reserved/occupancy rate was primarily due to a lack of interest in smaller models.” They needed to be combined, with washers and dryers, up-to-date heating/cooling systems, and kitchens designed for more serviceable use.

“We are researching what the ideal mix of units is and what prospective residents were willing to pay for them.” They soon realized that a Consolidation Plan would reduce the number of apartments from 81 to 58 with a definite loss of head count income. Why not change the idea of a Monticello consolidation to a Monticello expansion? Maybe call it Pantops?!

The idea prompted lively discussions at Area Meetings:

“WCBR is already too big and has lost the ambience the early residents enjoyed.”

“Where will we park if you build on our parking lot?”

“We need to trust that management is looking carefully at the situation in order to stay financially sound.”

Selmeczi assured attendees that the planning stage would last for several months and construction would not begin until 70% of the new units were reserved. (A feasibility study indicated that there was a market capacity in Charlottesville for 40 additional independent living units.)

In December 2012, a Projected Overview of the new complex was released. It included 36 apartments with seven different styles, 75 underground parking spaces, a 16,000 square foot Wellness and Fitness Center, a 56 seat Classroom/Theater, and a Garden Overlook.

The most exciting part of the Projected Overview was the Wellness and Fitness Center. It would include two saline pools, locker rooms, exercise studios, and a walking track. The prospect of such an addition prompted a wave of enthusiastic approval.
“The cost of the building and related modifications is $30 million with $15 million to come from entrance fees and the other $15 million added to our long term debt which is currently $69 million. New construction would take at least 1½ years.”

Plans were approved by the Board of Trustees. Whiting Turner Co. was hired as the contractor and prospective residents wielded golden shovels at a ground breaking.

But as seemed traditional with WCBR building sites, it rained ... and rained ... for two months. In addition, the excavation crew encountered unexpected layers of rock that delayed construction. Eventually the major concrete work was done, steel columns were anchored to the foundation, walls were erected and a roof put in place. People were keenly interested in watching the construction so an empty Monticello apartment was set up for viewing.

The Garden Overlook gave the area a special dimension. It had a small kitchen, restrooms and a paved balcony so people could enjoy dinner with a view of the mountains and the pond. There were 20 raised beds on either side so gardeners didn’t have to bend over when working with their vines and flowers.

But the completion date for the main building kept being postponed.

Anticipating a move to one of the apartments, Wendy and Jim Craig sold the house they had lived in for 32 years. But their Pantops apartment wasn’t finished. “We were homeless.”

Since a number of future residents were in a similar situation, WCBR arranged for 13 families along with multiple dogs and cats to stay in the Residence Inn. The expenses were paid by Whiting Turner.
Lissa Merrill said that she and Dick, her husband, were the first to sign up for Pantops so they were given the first move-in date. “All was arranged but when the day arrived, our apartment didn’t have paint, wood floors, or kitchen cabinets. We and our two dogs moved into the Residence Inn for the next eight weeks while the contractor raced to finish the building and get the occupancy permit. The delay of the building, breakfasts at the hotel, and moving into our new homes together made the Pantops’ residents a close group.”

According to Wendy and Jim Craig, “Learning that the move to Pantops was being delayed was a disappointment, but the stay at the Inn provided a period of forced relaxation between selling and moving. Like many of our experiences since we’ve become WCBR residents, it was better than we expected. And we were no longer homeless.”

Having coined the name of the building from Thomas Jefferson’s original name for the land, residents looked out of their windows for a “view of all the world.” They weren’t quite able to see all the world but if conditions were favorable, certain features of the terrain beyond the horizon were visible — at least to a few imaginative eyes.
There were 40 cottages on the original campus — some of them so far away that older residents needed a ride to the main building. Many were eventually torn down but the Jefferson cottages on the west side remained. They were refurbished in the early years and again in later years, giving most of them new siding, screen porches and fireplaces. Their proximity to the main house made them a more attractive option for new retirees.

In 1999, the Marketing Department conducted a feasibility study that included telephone interviews and a top-to-bottom survey of what was good and what was not so good about various residences. It concluded that more cottages were needed.

A Blueprint for the Future was drafted and in 2000 construction began on the first Hillside Cottages on Bishop’s Ridge. At more than 2,000 square feet, they featured two bedrooms, a full sized kitchen, a den, a living/dining room with vaulted ceilings, and an attached garage. They were very popular. “Being able to work in their gardens or just sit on the patios enjoying the surroundings, cottage residents believe they have the best of both worlds at Westminster-Canterbury.”

In 2005, 10 more Hillside cottages were built across from the new Blue Ridge quadrangle and down the hill. But there was also an interest in cottages that did not require so much downsizing. “We could bring the old dining room table with us.” So plans were made for more spacious living.

The Albemarle Cottages would be nearly 2,500 square feet in size and available in two variations. “In a tip of the hat to the two intrepid explorers commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to explore the far reaches of the growing American West we have named the two cottage styles The Lewis and The Clark.” Both floor plans featured two bedrooms, a large living room, den, dining room,
porch and a two-car garage. Very spacious. They were completed in 2008.

But WCBR still needed more cottages. There seemed to be a market demand for greater independence than apartments could offer. In 2015, plans were made to replace five Jefferson cottage duplexes with five freestanding Hillside Cottages on the west side. The new cottages would be 75 square feet larger than the first Hillsides. The garage would be a little wider and the kitchen a little deeper. Columns “needed to be rounded to look more Jeffersonian.”

The new Hillsides were completed in the summer of 2016 and that was it. The market might still hope for cottage homes on the Westminster Canterbury campus, but there was no more room. Buildings were pressing the boundaries of the 50 acre campus.

Perhaps, as a new generation of retirees sees the security and joy of living in the WCBR community, they would try to duplicate it beyond the gates in a satellite location. And building would begin again.
In the spring of 2020, a coronavirus identified as COVID-19, spread through neighborhoods across the world. It was primarily a respiratory illness and was especially dangerous for older adults.

Facing a pandemic, WCBR had to make difficult decisions: quarantines, lockdowns, testings, tracings, masks and “social distancing.” Instead of offering meals in the dining rooms, the associates delivered them to the doors of every resident. As soon as the FDA approved COVID’s Pfizer vaccine, the Clinic started vaccinating everyone on campus.

It was a necessary transition but it took a toll on the sense of community, especially for those who lived alone. Chaplain Elaine Tola urged people to do whatever they could to alleviate the sense of isolation. “Write notes. Call. Send emails.”

Matthew Barresi, Director of Fitness and Wellness, knew how to stream training sessions to apartments and cottages so a lot of not-so-nimble elders started bouncing around their living rooms in pajamas. Doing Functional Moves, Aerobics, Tabata, Yoga etc.

Mitch Sams and Ross Thomas, founders of WILL (Westminster Institute of Life Long Learning) didn’t want to abandon their weekly program of resident lectures. They were usually held in the Pantops classroom/theater but the dictates of social distance wouldn't allow such close attendance. Like Matthew Barresi, they streamed the talks.

Residents quickly became more adept at “Googling” and their grandchildren taught them how to Zoom. “It was amazing. I could see my son sitting in his living room and he was way up in Connecticut.”

What was even more amazing was Telehealth. Locked down patients could “visit” the doctors’ offices through a computer or even a cell phone and talk about their aches and pains. It was evolutionary.
Some people resisted the mask requirement. “They’re suffocating.” Joy Perry and a team of volunteers stitched together 600 of them in various colors and patterns. They had a definite appeal to an instinct for masking fashion. Kay Ansell made some for the nurses — printing pictures of their faces on the fabric so patients could recognize their caretakers. Lila Mait made “superhero” masks for the senior leadership team.

Months passed. Residents could hear the bells toll. As the sound echoed through the halls, they realized more and more that theirs was a privileged existence — protected within the gates of WCBR. “If only we could promise the same to others.”

Then in September of 2020 the positivity rate in Albemarle County began to decline. Restrictions were gradually lifted. The dining room opened and people could actually sit next to each other. The Fitness Center welcomed people back to classes as did the Pantops theater. Chapel services opened to in-person worship.

Someone suggested that we gather in the Rotunda and, like seniors at a graduation ceremony, toss our masks in the air. It’s over! Unfortunately, we had not graduated from COVID. “It’s unlikely to ever be eliminated because of the pathogen’s inherent properties. It has a high level of transmissibility and a prolonged period of infectiousness.”

But vaccines were proving to be effective in preventing a severe illness. “And with increasing immunity, COVID will go the way of other respiratory viruses — it would be contained.” Given such expert assurance, residents began to relax a little. They didn’t toss their masks in the air. They left them on the hall table.

Westminster Canterbury’s history
would reveal a lot more stories about the pandemic. About living in a “COVID Cocoon,” unable to venture out to restaurants or concerts … even to church. About waiting for news of families and longing to see their faces outside the window. It was hard.

But, paradoxically, WCBR history would also reveal something about the long months of isolation that nourished the spirit: the recovery of Time. Time to sit on the porch and watch the clouds sweep by. Time to call back yesterdays … with all their precious memories. Time to “wind things up” with a sense of peace and the promise of something beyond the horizon.

Some people would even take digital pens in hand and write down stories about the years that followed the pandemic. About building on the foundation of the past and looking to the future with a vision of the possible.

Let it be.

“By Wisdom a house is built; and by understanding it is established.”

—Proverbs 24:3
Jane Sigloh is an Episcopal priest, a teacher and a writer. She and her husband Denny moved into Westminster-Canterbury of the Blue Ridge in 2017.