

Columbia, Maryland at a glance

Location: Howard County, Maryland, more or less halfway between Baltimore and Washington, DC. Howard County is the third wealthiest county in the United States; the area is mostly suburban, but with a strong rural presence. Columbia itself is designed with considerable amounts of greenspace in mind.

Population: roughly [100,000](#), broken up into ten distinct 'villages.' The 'city' is largely unincorporated; there is no traditional city government, and both police and fire services are handled on the county (Howard) level. Some functions of city government are handled by the not-for-profit [Columbia Association](#), which is run by a Board of Directors elected by homeowners and renters in each village. The population is both racially mixed, and significantly more affluent than the average.

Getting to Columbia: If going by car, take I-95, exit at the Rt 175 exit, and use Columbia's extensive road network. If coming by plane, fly in to Thurgood Marshall BWI Airport (Dulles and Reagan National are also viable options). If taking the train, Amtrak also has a stop at BWI. If by boat, disembark at the Port of Baltimore. Essentially, the site of

Columbia was deliberately chosen to be convenient to travelers to either DC, or Baltimore.

History: Until about fifty years ago, the Columbia area was largely farmland; it was tied into the plantation economy that flourished in Maryland before the Civil War. In the 1960s real estate developer James Rouse spearheaded the construction of a planned, deliberately decentralized city. While this effort succeeded (Columbia is arguably the second largest city in Maryland) there have been ongoing questions about social engineering, diversity, bribery / corruption / kickbacks, and proper oversight.

Potential government oversight: HEAVY. Fort Meade - the home of the NSA - is right next door, and most of the alphabet soup that is the US government bureaucracy can be found either in Columbia, or right next door to it. Possibly more importantly, the companies that sell services and products to the US government - including, specifically, its intelligence and military agencies - are well-represented in Columbia. And that's just the companies that are public about selling services to the government. It's not so much widely rumored as it is simply assumed that the area has various businesses and buildings operating under various government security restrictions.

Three interesting facts about Columbia:

1. The street names typically have no relationship to the historical record, local conditions, and/or current employment opportunities. In fact, they are about as close to random as one can get. There is at least one case where a name was changed for being too disturbing ([Satan Wood Drive](#)). That one was later explained as being a clerical error.
2. The Mall in Columbia has more or less been the anchor point for the city since its founding. Unlike most shopping malls in the United States, it is currently thriving. In fact, the Mall is currently expanding.
3. The main body of water is Lake Kittamaquondi, which is an artificial lake that has already spawned one 'lost' island. And two deaths. Also, it's named after a fairly warlike Indian tribe that did its level best to wipe out the Jamestown settlement. Needless to say, none of this is reflected in any of the developers' press releases.

General 'feel:' compartmentalized. Or perhaps 'collage.' Columbia gives the impression of being a city that was carefully carved up, and the pieces then rearranged in a

different order. Everything functions, but nothing is where it once was. And there's no real rhyme or reason for figuring out where things could be, either.

This gets reflected in day to day life, too. It's not that inhabitants of Columbia mind their own business so much that nobody knows their business except them. While the individual villages are certainly full of the usual social networks and whatnot, stuff that happens three blocks over might as well be happening over on the other side of the country. As long as there aren't any sirens or disturbances, things get... damped out.

And this is not commented upon.

- © Moe Lane. All rights reserved.
- <http://www.moelane.com>
- <https://www.patreon.com/MoeLane?ty=h>