

Columbia, Maryland: City of Secrets

Part Four: Suburban Cultism

The area that would become Columbia, Maryland is typically presented as being undeveloped farmland, prior to the first real estate projects in the 1960s. This is largely true, but incomplete. There was, in fact, an existing hamlet in the last quarter of the 19th and first quarter of the 20th Centuries, also called 'Columbia:' and virtually none of the information about it is easily available. Which is another way of saying that Old Columbia can be the seed for any sort of cultic weirdness in New Columbia. Some examples are provided below.

Hidden in Plain Sight: it's assumed by the few people who would know and care that the original Old Columbia settlement is currently under the cloverleaf intersection of Maryland's Routes 29 and 108. This is incorrect: in fact, the original settlement was at the intersection of Old Annapolis and Columbia Roads - which currently boasts an existing town-house complex. Obviously, these are not the same buildings as those built in the 19th Century... at least, not the parts above ground. Below ground is a different story: the elaborate tunnel network built then remains, and the people living in those houses are the

direct descendants of the original inhabitants of Old Columbia. Having to temporarily move in the 1960s while their new homes was constructed seemed a small price to pay for the chance to upgrade their common areas.

In this particular venue, the cult is likely either one of those classic 'Blood Makes The Corn Grow' or 'Hungry For Victuals They Couldn't Raise Nor Buy' types. Or, for particularly satirical campaigns, both: a cult that aggressively recycles, repurposes, and reuses its human sacrifices in order to reduce its ecological footprint could be darkly amusing. In any case, the underground complex can store indefinitely a multitude of sins, secrets, and corpses. In this scenario the cultists may not be in full control of Columbia, itself: all that it needed to do was suborn or control the right developers at the right time, and make sure that nosy sorts stay away from the basements. Much easier than taking over the entire Columbia Association.

Secret Masters of Columbia. Or perhaps the cult *did* take over the Columbia Association, and have been designing and developing the city along strict esoteric and occult lines ever since. This differs primarily from an Illuminati Conspiracy in scope: the Hidden Masters aren't running the world, merely a small portion of it. Also, the

influence of the cultists on the outside world is likewise much smaller in scope. Which, at the very least, allows for a party of adventurers to successfully run away, at least in the short run.

Cultist motivations in this case are of the 'Great Work' or 'Keepers of Forbidden Knowledge' or 'Apocalyptic Death Cult' variety. In any version, there's some sort of long-term project underway, and the town is ultimately designed around the need to service that project. This kind of setup can be even more micromanaging than an Illuminated Conspiracy city: after all, the Illuminati typically don't care where the fast food restaurants or mailboxes are. But a Columbia that's been designed from the start to be a giant magic-kinetic spell is going to be a Columbia where everything is put in its proper place. Or at least, that would be the plan. Reality can be messier.

Ghostly Columbia. All of this assumes, of course, that the original inhabitants of Old Columbia are no longer around to run things. But perhaps they're *not* gone; and yet neither really in *charge*, nor in *residence*. In this particular situation, the graves of the Old Columbia residents **are** under a cloverleaf... which makes it effectively almost impossible to dig up their corpses and permanently banish their ghosts. Whether or not the

ghosts encouraged this lucky result is up to the individual GM.

The motivations for ghostly 'cultists' could be the same as any mentioned previously, with one new addition: 'Vicious Amusement.' Assuming that the Ghosts of Old Columbia have some way of manipulating their surroundings, in this version they amuse themselves by fighting various proxy battles with each other, building up families, destroying families, creating entertaining minor disasters for others to clean up: imagine a real-world version of *The Sims* with blood and pain added and you'll get the idea.

One last note: adventuring parties should expect even *more* casual scrutiny from a Suburban Cultist Columbia than from a Shadow Government one. The Illuminati may be large, but they are often impersonal and focused on the big picture. A Columbia run by cultists retains a certain local, hometown flavor to its paranoia.

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