
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-09

Schlitz Brewing Company Bottling Plant/National Geographic Society Warehouse

326 R Street NE (aka 300 R Street and 329 Randolph Place)

Square 3574, Lot 32

Meeting Date: January 27, 2022
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 5E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate the Schlitz Brewing Company Bottling Plant and the National Geographic Society Warehouse a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1908 to 1937, from the completion of the initial Schlitz depot until the completion of a garage addition to the warehouse. The property might be otherwise known as the Schlitz Brewing Company Washington Branch, as the company itself referred to it, and the National Geographic Warehouse, referring to the magazine stored and shipped from there.

The complex, although now connected and all originally used principally for the storage and shipping of goods, comprises two distinct eras and architectural styles reflecting the different products for which they were constructed.

The Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company, maker of “the beer that made Milwaukee famous,” relocated its Washington, D.C. branch to Eckington with a new building constructed 1907-1908. Schlitz emerged as the largest U.S. producer of beer in 1902 on account of the rapid expansion of its brewing facilities and its distribution capacity. Breweries had originated as home operations, growing to what we might today call brewpubs and microbreweries serving a very localized customer base. In the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, American beers had real competition from ale imports from Britain, a nation with great experience in brewing and in shipping to present and former colonies. Still, local American breweries proliferated, because shipping bulk products was expensive, and beer is perishable. The number of plants greatly increased with the immigration of huge numbers of Germans, who introduced lager and weiss beer in the 1840s, changing American tastes.

The number of American breweries is said to have peaked at 4,144 in the year 1873, then began falling, initially because of a depression, but more persistently because of consolidation in the industry and improved transportation networks. The following year, St. Louis’s Anheuser-Busch brewery began construction of a network of trackside ice plants to replenish the refrigeration in insulated rail cars bound for distant cities. Other breweries followed suit, and large brewers soon owned their own fleets of cars and found themselves on the boards of railroads. The ability to produce beyond one’s city or region ultimately relied on the ability to step up production sufficiently, which was assisted by steam heat and motive power and, importantly, artificial

refrigeration for cooling, cold filtering, fermenting and storage. Also crucial were improved, air-tight packaging and the invention of pasteurization for the sake of longer life of the beer. Over time, the larger breweries—more profitable because of scale economies—shouldered aside the small, local outfits, beating them on their home field.

When first entering a market, outside breweries generally started small, using an established local bottler or beverage dealer as an agent. With some success, they soon cut out the middleman and established their own depot. The independent distributor would be a creation of post-Prohibition government regulations. Among the first such depots in Washington was established by Alexandria's Robert Portner brewery in 1876. It was soon joined by Philadelphia's Bergner and Engel, Buffalo's Gerhard Lang, Toledo's Grassner and Brand, Rochester's Bartholomay, and Anheuser-Busch and Schlitz, of course, and several others, including some of the Baltimore brewers. Others would never graduate beyond selling through agents. Washington's own breweries battled for market share—the last, the big Christian Heurich Brewing Company enduring until 1956—but most succumbed to competition.

British-backed syndicates of the 1890s and the largest brewers of the post-World War II era would experiment with multiple production plants, but the branches of this era were not brewing facilities. At their most basic, beer depots consisted of offices, cold storage, and stables for deliveries. Major brewers added bottling plants in sizeable cities, taking advantage of increasing consumption outside bars where the beverage could still be served from kegs. A greater use of glass packaging encouraged brewers' interest in the lightness and clarity of the product within.

Proximity to a rail line was a must, for receipt of the beer and the bottles. It was cheaper to ship the beer in bulk, as it occupied less space and constituted less weight than in the breakable bottles. Bottles had to be shipped, too, but they typically originated from other points; brewers managed to vertically integrate to a degree, but never controlled glassmaking. The first locus of Washington beer depots was along the Baltimore and Potomac line near the intersection of Virginia and Maryland avenues SW. After selling through Georgetown bottler Samuel C. Palmer, Schlitz built its earliest D.C. branch 615-623 D Street SW and began issuing bottles embossed with "Schlitz/Washington Branch".



Images courtesy of the Potomac Bottle Collectors Facebook page and group, and Mike Cianciosi in particular.

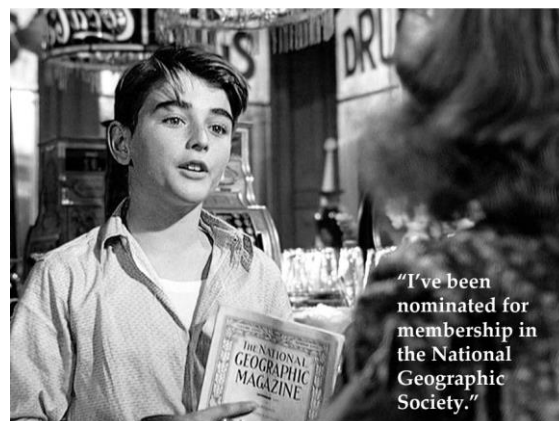


It was with the City Beautiful-era rationalization of the District's railroad lines that Schlitz relocated and constructed a new depot in a new Eckington neighborhood, on the approach to the switching yard north of a new Union Station. Schlitz was mindful of the stock placed on architecture at this time and invested a great deal in a facility that would represent one of the greatest brewers of the nation. Beer depots were trackside industrial facilities visited mostly by their own staffs and by bar owners and hotel agents. From the photographic evidence of the period, they were largely utilitarian, although, like proper Victorian and Edwardian adults wore hats in public, these buildings were decorated at least by cornices. Schlitz went beyond custom in having Charles Lesser design a facility more, not lesser—worthy of the Milwaukee plant itself. The architect had already completed several commissions from Schlitz for depots and taverns and had worked on many public buildings in Milwaukee, well acquainted with the reputational value of architectural expression.

But the expression of the Washington plant was not that of the classical revival that swept the upper Midwest a decade earlier and which was already embedded in the DNA of Washington's core and the planning documents that guided its development. With its red-brick corbelling, battlements and arches, the new building was retardataire by 1907 standards, but it carried on a German tradition of Romanesque and Renaissance revival that evoked images of Rhine castles and Rhine maidens that became associated with German-American breweries. It was a signifier and a product of aspirations of typically middle-class immigrant brewers who had truly arrived.

Even the greatest breweries were helpless in the face of the Volstead Act, whose ratification as the Eighteenth Amendment ushered in a thirteen-year experiment known as national Prohibition. Breweries then repurposed their equipment to produce near beer, malt extract, soda pop, ice cream, cheese, etc., as much to keep the lights on in the event of an end to Prohibition. But these were not as popular or as profitable, and both revenues and the distribution networks shrank. Schlitz offered a near beer for a time, but the company soon vacated the R Street facility, making it available to a new tenant, the National Geographic Society.

Founded in 1888 along the lines of the club-like British scientific societies, the National Geographic Society gradually broadened its scope to encompass most of the earth sciences and head into space. It had its greatest impact through its journal, *National Geographic*, which grew into a bulky, full-color magazine after its readership grew by orders of magnitude in the early twentieth century, fueled by stories of the achievements of adventurers such as Robert Peary and Hiram Bingham. It appealed to real-life and armchair adventurers of all ages and became a true American institution and household name.



Washington was an appropriate headquarters for a national society, and it was a city where printing had become the largest private industry and export. By 1912, National Geographic had outgrown a private printing plant and constructed its own at Florida Avenue and Eckington Place. In 1918, with a circulation nearing 700,000, it moved 200 employees of its magazine office, distribution and storage departments to the Schlitz building nearby. There, subscriber correspondence was handled, and freshly printed magazines were stored, addressed and mailed.

[A] largely female work force addresses letters, pamphlets, and other materials, such as the geographic news bulletins sent to more than 500 newspapers across the country. One vast room contains the membership index files, arranged in thirty-nine geographical sections. There is a file for every member... and each contains a metal address plate used in addressing the wrappers surrounding the National Geographic magazine.

Readership continued to grow, and the Society soon planned a major warehouse addition. It engaged Arthur Heaton, a prolific local architect who had designed as many Washington industrial buildings—warehouses and car barns—as anyone. Heaton had already modified the Schlitz buildings for the Society in 1920, and his plans for expansion were executed by builders Skinker and Garrett in 1924.

Distinguished by the Heaton-trademark multicolored-fieldstone base, the otherwise brick-faced warehouse is in many ways conventional. What really sets it apart is the remarkable limestone entry pavilion, with its piers surmounted by owls representing both nature and wisdom (a more schematic take on a secondary entrance is around the corner on R Street). The brownish-red brick walls of the 3rd Street façade are relieved by decorative arches at the ground floor and Romanesque corbels, both coincidentally echoing elements of the Schlitz brewery in Milwaukee. The last major alteration to the complex was a 1937 Heaton-designed garage that filled in the courtyard between the buildings.

The “new” warehouse is not as significant as the National Geographic headquarters complex on 16th Street, and may even be edged by the former printing plant in terms of its importance to the magazine. Yet, it was an indispensable facility for the publication’s distribution, an example of Washington making a cultural and scientific impression upon the entire nation for decades.

Integrity

The property retains solid historic integrity, especially the exteriors of the two major buildings. Early Schlitz structures were demolished in the National Geographic expansion of the complex, yet it appears largely as it did while active as the magazine’s distribution center. Doors have been replaced, and some openings sealed, obscured or encapsulated, yet most of the windows remain throughout. Other than a shallow yard, walks and low walls on the 3 and R street fronts, this industrial lot offers no significant landscape features on its often altered and mostly paved surface.

Significance

The Schlitz depot/National Geographic warehouse merits designation under the National Register Criterion A and D.C. Criterion B for history for several reasons. First, its two primary uses were as a distribution center for the products of two longtime national brands, National Geographic and Schlitz, the former as the origin of its magazine shipping and the latter as

(nearly) the destination for its beer locally. Second, the initial phases of construction represent the reach of national breweries into localities across the country, the intensified competition enabled by improved production technology and transportation. Third, the National Geographic warehouse represents the private “diffusion of high-level cultural products and scientific knowledge”, contributing to the history of the nation’s capital as a center for scientific research, otherwise supported principally by federal government investment. Fourth, among other properties, including the landmarked U.S. Postal Service Mail Equipment Shops, the warehouse complex represents the rise of the industrial sector of the Eckington neighborhood following the rationalization of Washington’s railroad network.

The property also meets the National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D for the qualities of its architecture and as a building type. In the quality of their design, the two primary structures compare favorably to other Washington industrial buildings that have been designated, including warehouses, heating plants, car barns and printing plants. Both primary phases of construction are striking, and the architectural expression went well beyond what was necessary to the buildings’ functions, placing the property among the best of the District’s industrial complexes. And while the warehouse function was not rare, even in a city not known for manufacturing, the National Geographic’s operation was much more than a warehouse; it was an immense correspondence center staffed mainly by women. As for the initial Schlitz facility, it is a rarity in Washington, the last of the depots and bottling houses of outside breweries. It is a shame that so few structures associated with the District’s own brewing history stand. Ironically, the Schlitz branch may be the only extant above-ground structure directly related to a brewery in Washington,¹ a symbol, perhaps, of the triumph of the big breweries over hundreds of former local and regional businesses nationwide. Historically and architecturally, it is an important representation of the brewing industry, if not the brewing process, given that it was solely employed in bottling, storage, shipping and sales.

The application also nominates the property under D.C. Criteria E and F, for artistry and as works of masters, respectively. As striking as they are as industrial buildings, the best argument for artistry is the main entrance to the National Geographic warehouse. The architects went well beyond expressing pure function, applying elements that would be found in the richer industrial zones of major cities or even on residential architecture, but it is not especially inventive or unusual when compared against the built fabric of the entire District. The matter of mastery is difficult to define, which is why we typically steer clear. But both Charles Lesser and Arthur Heaton are architects who not only mastered “the art and mystery” of architecture in the traditional craft sense of graduating from journeymen. They were prolific and stood in the upper tier of their profession in their own localities. As the works of Heaton are familiar to us, the nomination’s discussion of those of Lesser could be beefed up.

Period of significance

It is reasonable to extend the period of significance to 1937, the date of construction of the last major piece of the complex, even if this piece, the garage, is less prominent, more altered, and less architecturally and historically significant. The timeframe captures a period of use of the property that reflects both the evolution of the facilities and of the companies and their industries.

¹ In addition to other potential archaeological features, the lager cellar of the Washington Brewery is extant beneath a ramp of the Whitehurst Freeway.