

---

---

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-17

### **The Yellow Tavern**

1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street NW

Square 1254, Lot 889

Meeting Date: December 15, 2022  
Applicant: 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> St NW LLC (Coba Properties; owner)  
Affected ANC: 2E

---

---

This is an application by the property owner to have the Board revoke the 1964 historic landmark designation by the Joint Committee on Landmarks of the National Capital. The property was never listed in the National Register of Historic Sites.

The preservation law provides for the Board to deny designation applications as well as to approve them, and the regulations state that a property already designated may be removed from the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites if it no longer meets the criteria for designation. The form and process for revoking designation is the same as that for designation (10C DCMR § 221).

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board revoke the designation of 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street NW, because the claim of it having been the Yellow Tavern, or any tavern, is unsupported by evidence; the building do not stand out among examples of Federal architecture, and it has historic integrity issues that diminish its significance as a Federal-period dwelling; an association with significant individuals has not been established; and it should not be considered a standalone landmark.

The present criteria for designation did not exist in 1964, nor did the National Register criteria upon which they are based. Whatever the merits of the properties themselves, the designations of that period were not founded upon robust nominations. Instead, they sprung from lists of properties considered eligible based mainly upon secondary sources.

### **Background**

The fictive association of 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street with an historic Yellow Tavern originated in the mid 1930s, apparently an embellishment to please the property owner on the eve of a 1936 Georgetown house tour. A modest three-bay dwelling had undergone its own physical embellishment, first connected to a still smaller house by building over an alley or driveway and, more recently, by the introduction of a grand neoclassical doorway said to have been salvaged from an Alexandria residence. This era marked the beginning of a restoration movement in Georgetown and Alexandria sparked, at least in part, by “urban homesteaders” who were often New Deal federal employees. A repeated participation in the house tour appears to have been sufficient to establish the tavern myth in the public consciousness. It was a decade later that it was set in stone with the imprimatur of the National Society Colonial Dames of America.

Widow Ethel Small, a former resident of Orillia, Ontario, Canada, purchased 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> in 1935. It was she who opened her doors to visitors during the historic-house tours. In 1947, she approached the Colonial Dames about obtaining a bronze plaque to mark her property as the historic Yellow Tavern. Mrs. Lulie Peter, president of the local chapter, replied by letter that “A careful search of our files reveals no reference to a tavern on the property... [It] might have been an inn or tavern... but no documentation has come up to prove this. Furthermore, no documentation that has come to light so far carries it back into the 1700’s...” It seems a sound evaluation, and matters might have ended there. But strangely, two years later, according to Eleanor Lee Templeman, a new member of the Colonial Dames chapter, Mrs. Peter tasked her with having a plaque cast and installed for Mrs. Peter’s friend, Mrs. Small, with the assurance that Mrs. Peter’s husband, a former rector of the National Cathedral, had confirmed the historical attribution through research in Montgomery County records.

Almost immediately, Mrs. Templeman had qualms. “Pursuant to the newspaper picture of the plaque, Mrs. Grace Ecker Peter, who is recognized as an excellent Georgetown historian, brought to my attention some obvious errors....” Recounting the story nearly twenty years later, Mrs. Templeman confessed having “worried over the matter” ever since, “feeling that our Society should not, in our name, perpetuate historical errors.” But it was too late. Her 1968 letter was elicited by efforts of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) to survey Georgetown further, but the Joint Committee on Landmarks—sponsored and staffed by CFA and the National Capital Planning Commission—had designated the property as the Yellow Tavern four years earlier.

There had been a genuine Yellow Tavern, long a Georgetown landmark in a broader sense, but it had been demolished in March 1919, sixteen years before our story began. While 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street’s true history was obscure, the tavern had been well documented long before Mrs. Small arrived in town. As one might expect, the hostelry had stood not on 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, but on the road to Frederick, Maryland, still one of two principal commercial thoroughfares through the town. A key source is a 1909 *Sunday Star* feature, written at a moment when remnants—Flemish-bond brick and bearing traces of yellow paint—still stood. This “Old Yellow Tavern”, as newspapers from the half century following 1869 confirm, was located at the northwest corner of today’s Wisconsin Avenue and Q Street.<sup>1</sup> One of its exterior walls collapsed in 1890, and some of the building was then razed, but the rest—a two-story brick structure remodeled first to serve as a grocery with upstairs apartments and then as a church—was what the *Star* reporter inspected.

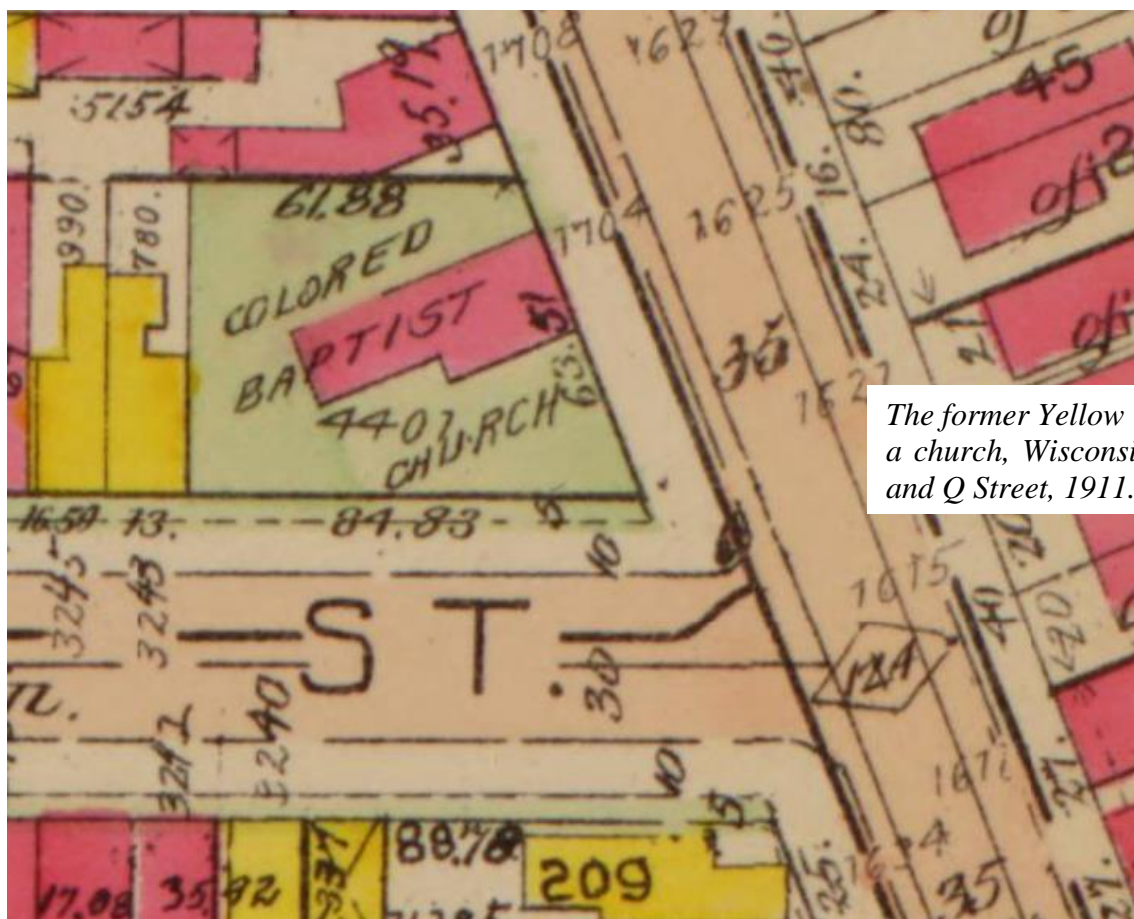
In the cellars, which are of an extent and massiveness of construction rather surprising, considering the dimensions of the upper portion of the building, are to be seen the huge foundations of the chimneys and, in particular, a vast oven, now bricked up, of a size such as might be expected in a modern bakery establishment. In the front cellars are openings which at one time must have led to an area or continuation of the vaults into or under the pavement of Wisconsin avenue.

None of this approximates the cabin-sized cellar of 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, which contains only a relieving arch supporting a single domestic-sized interior end chimney above.

---

<sup>1</sup> Both roads have undergone name changes; Q Street was briefly referred to as R, and before that, as Fifth Street. That is why references to those streets will appear in items about the tavern.

A confounding fact is that the *Star* article mentions the recent visit to this tavern of the great-granddaughter of “the German” who supposedly built it.<sup>2</sup> This must have been the same great-granddaughter, Mrs. Marie H. Beacham, who wrote historian John Clagett Proctor in 1931 recounting her visit decades earlier and seeking further information about the vanished structure. She confirmed that her ancestor was a German, Jacob Holtzman. She recalled seeing the oven in the cellar. But as early newspapers indicate, Holtzman’s (and subsequently William Roberts’s and William Cunningham’s, etc.) tavern was actually a *three-story* building located at Wisconsin and O Street. A personal connection to the extant tavern was likely wishful thinking on Mrs. Beacham’s part. Still, the reference to Holtzman’s place is useful in showing what a Georgetown inn of the early nineteenth century was expected to be. An 1815 rental advertisement described it as “2 two-story brick kitchens with lodging rooms and fire places above,—a very large brick stable, and sufficient ground for a handsome yard, wagon yard, and large garden... [T]here are large sheds on each side [of] the stable...”



*The former Yellow Tavern as a church, Wisconsin Avenue and Q Street, 1911.*

<sup>2</sup> The *Star* article may be the source responsible for associating the Yellow Tavern with the White Horse Tavern/Inn, a connection that cannot be confirmed at this time. Taverns were typically referred to by three types of names, the first being the surname of a proprietor, the second by the sign in front, and the third being some physical attribute. These might be interchangeable, and they may change over time. “Yellow Tavern” may have only come into use around the middle of the nineteenth century, possibly only after the business had ceased, and perhaps describing a late repainting. There was another, prominent Yellow Tavern on Capitol Hill in the early nineteenth century. “White Horse Inn” and “the sign of the white horse” were first associated with a Georgetown tavern run by Benjamin Finnicom during the first decade of the 1800s, and it is unclear whether this then became either Holtzman’s tavern or the Yellow Tavern, two distinct places. It is not unlike the case of the famous Suter’s tavern, whose precise location was forgotten after the last Federal-era tipplers went to their graves.

A tavern need not have been purpose-built and, especially if it had been erected before the end of the Revolution, it would have been modest. Even the original, mid 1780s “Gadsby’s Tavern” structure in Alexandria had small first-floor rooms and sleeping rooms, but it also had a large, second-floor assembly room, whose function was replaced by a ballroom within a larger addition of 1792. The real Yellow Tavern may have had similarly limited sleeping quarters, but surely had more dining and drinking space than the house at 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> and more preparation space. At least at the moment, we have no direct evidence that the Yellow Tavern, the White Horse Inn, or the house at 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> were even erected during the eighteenth century. The circa 1795 attribution for 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> in Davis, Dorsey and Hall’s *Georgetown Houses of the Federal Period* is stylistic, perhaps politely or hopefully placing the house on the favored side of 1800—and perhaps influenced by the previously claimed 1788 date. But both construction details and the incomplete property tax records could plausibly place it more than a decade later.

The home at 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street was formerly two dwellings, each of two stories, of roughly equal and shallow depths, but one taller than the other. We may refer to them hereafter as the “big house” and the “small house”. The two are roughly contemporaneous and appear in the circa 1810 property tax records as dwellings. The lots were already in separate ownership, and they remained so until they were both purchased by the Offutt family in the early 1880s. By that time, the two structures, once probably detached, may have become abutting by virtue of an addition to the south of the big house. An 1874 deed referenced “the right of the owner of the part of the lot lying to the north to building over the alley [between the houses] according to the construction of the building as it now stands.” The last clause is ambiguous, but it suggests that buildings were already abutting, something that may be corroborated by the Boschke map. In any case, the 1888 Sanborn atlas confirms that a second story had been built over the passage by then. A view of the rear of the passage makes it clearer that this was not an original feature, but the brick work at rear is unhelpfully obscured by additions and stucco.

For their more-than-40-year tenure, the Offutts leased out the houses separately, so that, although now abutting, they were not connected. The interior connection would come in 1927, when the modest houses were purchased by interior decorator Madeline McCandless for use as her home, similar to today’s frequent combination of modest rowhouses. It was McCandless who, the following year, blocked the old alley by adding doors front and rear, and a stair within the enclosure. Perhaps we should not blame Ethel Small for originating the Yellow Tavern story. She was new in town, after all, and may have jumped to conclusions based on her the appearance of her recently aggrandized property. Miss McCandless could even have sweetened the sale of the property to Mrs. Small with a tall tale or two. The mythmakers and plaque-installers then smoothed over the fact that a near-twin house stands next door at 1528 33<sup>rd</sup>, was by adding a another plaque that compounded the error by claiming that that was the innkeeper’s house.

Especially given the confusion over which tavern was which, more of the mid-twentieth-century legends are ripe for debunking. The Yellow Tavern plaque claims the place was a resort of Thomas Jefferson, among other notables, for which there is no evidence. “Here Mayor John Cox entertained General Lafayette, dinner of reed-birds followed by dancing to music from the balcony.” Aside from failing to locate where a balcony might fit within or without this modest house, historical accounts of the exhausting schedule of Lafayette’s October 14, 1824 Georgetown visit make no mention of taverns. After being received at the entrance to the town, he was conducted to Mayor Cox’s residence, “where there was a brilliant assemblage of ladies, a handsome entertainment... plenty and excellent...” Reporters variously characterized the length

of that call as “some time” and “a few moments”, prior to being conveyed to a fête at Georgetown College, then to General Walter Smith’s residence, and finally to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun’s residence, before returning to Washington City by 4 p.m. A return to witness the college’s 1825 commencement ceremony appears to have been even more rushed.

## **Evaluation**

While we can probably discount any association of the Yellow Tavern or the White Horse Inn with Lafayette, any reasonably intact Federal-era tavern could be landmarked, because the building type is important enough and scarce enough to be eligible. Verifiable associations with significant individuals or events would be icing on the cake. Rhodes Tavern had been listed in the National Register in 1969, despite some integrity issues, and its demolition galvanized the local preservation movement. But there is no evidence that 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street was ever a tavern. Had it been, it was not the Yellow Tavern. Although buildings were less functionally specialized at the turn of the nineteenth century, this house was likely always a house and identified as such in tax records. The “big house” has the size, plan and form of a dwelling. It is too small to be considered a side-hall plan; it has merely a side stair. It lacks some of the facilities one would expect at an urban tavern and is in an unlikely location for that use. One could theorize about imaginary or lost rear-yard stables and kitchens, but there is no indication of such structures in tax assessments or on the earliest historic maps. There are only post-Civil War references to back buildings and sheds. The only evidence is Depression-era house-tour brochures and a bronze plaque—and the subsequent newspaper items that parroted them—which is no evidence at all.

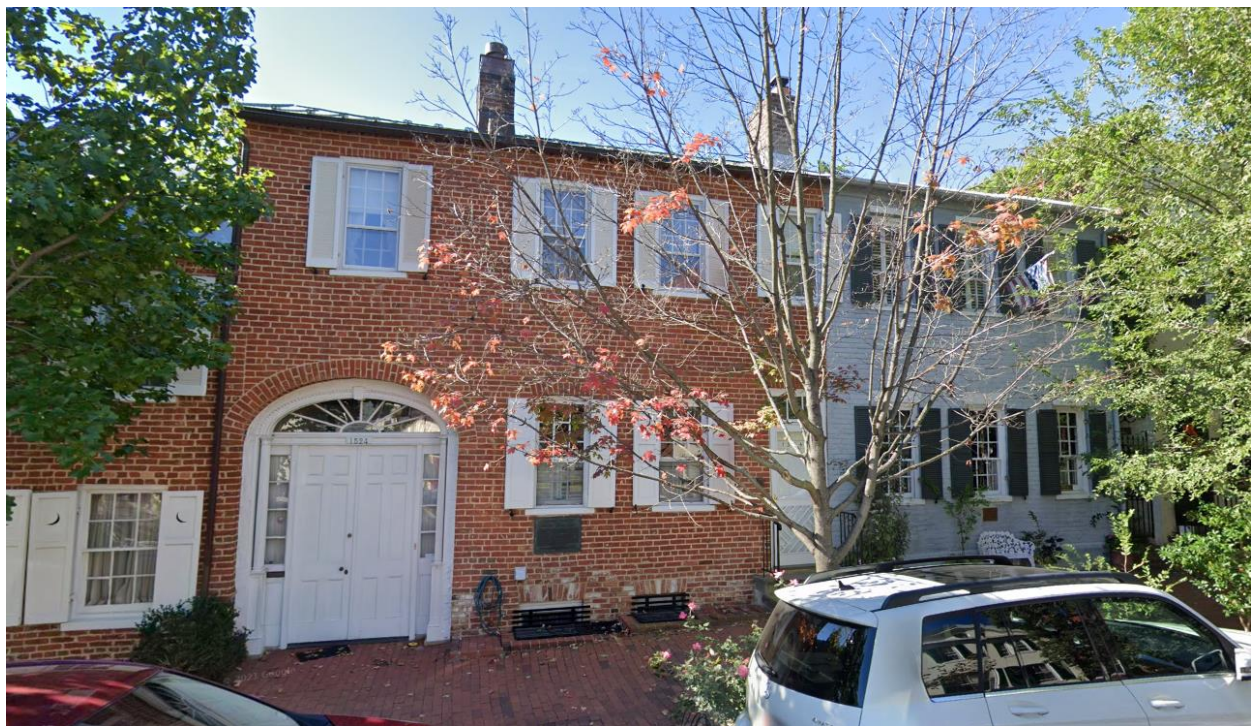
Could the building(s) be designated for other reasons? Would a house of the same era be as significant as a tavern? The structures are quite old, despite their unknown construction date. Several Georgetown properties were designated by the Joint Committee on Landmarks for the sake of being Federal-period houses or commercial buildings, albeit by the same summary review process. Some of these have better stories, associated with significant individuals or businesses. And some are of more architectural significance. There are enough Federal houses extant in Washington that, without a fuller and more compelling narrative, this house would not rise to the distinctiveness of a landmark based on the current standards. No known important events occurred at the property (D.C. Criterion A). The property is associated with an historical period, as any building would be, and with patterns of growth of Georgetown (Criterion B), but not in a way that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia. It is not known to be strongly associated with significant persons early on, despite the lots having been associated with some prominent Georgetowners (Criterion C; see below for further discussion of persons). It does exhibit characteristics of the “Federal” architectural style but does not “embody” them (Criterion D), as the constituent structures are not distinguished by notable neoclassical details, for instance. And it has integrity issues, which will be discussed below. 1524 33<sup>rd</sup> Street is a conventional house among many conventional houses. Its most distinctive feature is its high-style neoclassical doorway, which was salvaged from another building and better illustrates a free approach to historical “restoration” characteristic of the middle decades of the twentieth century. The house is not an example of high artistry (Criterion E), but of competent craftsmanship in construction and adaptation. It is not known to have been erected or altered by a creative master (Criterion F), nor does it exhibit especial creativity. Like most properties in Georgetown, this one may possess archaeological resources, perhaps dating as far back as the eighteenth century. But there has been no “ground-truthing” of such resources, and there is no reason to conclude at this point that they would yield “information significant to



an understanding of historic or prehistoric events, cultures, and standards of living, building and design” (Criterion G) beyond the significance of the extant house or its peers. Archaeology would at least shed light on the historic uses of the rear yard, but that is unlikely to be a research question of landmark significance, at least prospectively.

There are a couple of additional issues. While the original main block of the Federal-period house is largely present, the house has diminished historic integrity. Additions are a natural adaptation and the least of the issues, although they obscure much of the rear of the building. And there has been interior work, of course. But the connection of the two buildings followed by the insertion of the too-grand doorway has significantly altered its character from its original feeling. There may have been a reconstruction of the façade fairly early, such as when the alley was built over, because the big house has similarities and differences to the small house and to 1528 33<sup>rd</sup>.

The big house seems to have been a twin of the house at 1528 33<sup>rd</sup>, presumably the “2 brick houses” of the 1808-1812 tax records and the “2 2-story brick dwellings and back buildings” of the immediate post-Civil War period, whose common ownership suggests they remained rental properties.<sup>3</sup> They have similar dogtooth cornices and window lintels, and the façades meet at a cold joint that also forms the north edge of the original doorway of 1524/1526, meaning that it was completed after—even if days after—and abutting, the party wall. So, if the property’s historic use—its actual association with people and events—is not distinct from that of 1528, then the two should be nominated as a unit, or not at all.



*A Google Streetview image of 1524 and 1528 33<sup>rd</sup> Street.*

---

<sup>3</sup> The historic maps suggest that these two houses had main blocks of different depths, but that may be an artifact of various campaigns of addition that had already occurred, because the extent and pitch of the principal roofs are the same.

Just at the end of Georgetown's period of significance, the house *did* become associated with a person of note. The decorated destroyer-commander Captain Charles F. Chillingworth Jr. purchased it from Ethel Small in October 1949 while he was attending the National War College in preparation for duty in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations as head of the Plans Development Section. He was thus still resident when called back to sea service in the Korean War, where he was again decorated. Elevated to admiral, he was posted to London at the end of 1952 as commander of the Military Sea Transportation Service for the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean. He returned to the Pentagon at the end of 1955, retired the following year, and only sold the 33<sup>rd</sup> Street house in 1969—which is more than fifty years ago. The application does not address Chillingworth's relative significance, and the question is worth further exploration. It is difficult to weigh in light of the multitude of prominent civil and military officials that have lived in Washington. If the property is eligible for Chillingworth's post-World War II contributions, then it raises the question of whether the 1950 expansion of his property into the Volta Place lots for auto access and a pool is significant. In any case, this property is not sufficiently significant for the reasons it was designated.

If the Board revokes the designation, the property will remain contributing to the character of the historic district, protected by the preservation law and the Old Georgetown Act, as a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century house with major nineteenth- and twentieth-century alterations comfortably within the period of significance of the Georgetown Historic District. By now, many of these alterations have assumed a historic significance of their own. Although not a tavern, the property's tavern *story* has become as notable as any element of its history.