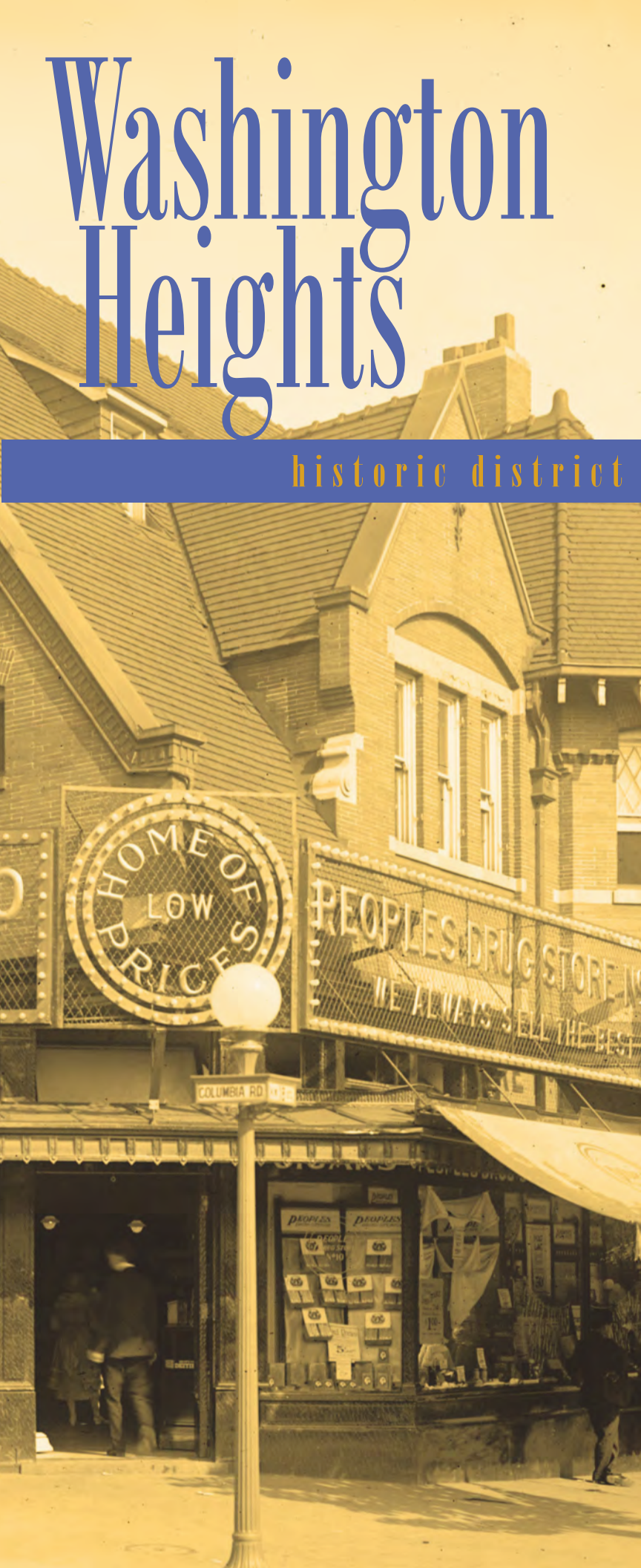
Washington Heights

historic district



East side of Columbia Road, NW
Photo, EHT Traceries, 2012

Cover: People's Drug Store No. 10, c.1920-21, corner of 18th Street & Columbia Road, NW
Library of Congress

Opposite: Washington Heights Historic District Boundary Map
DC Historic Preservation Office

Washington Heights

historic district

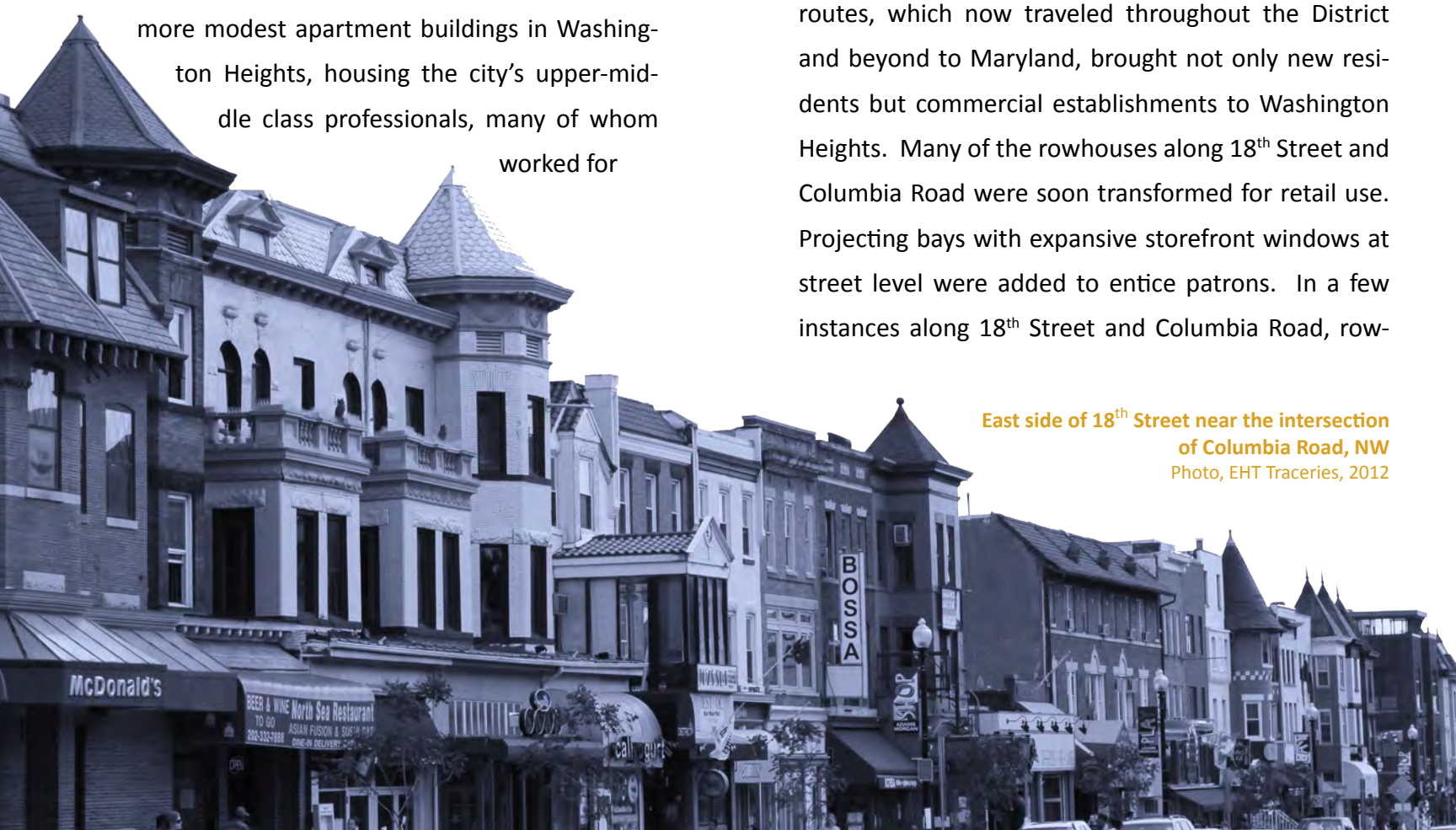
Located in the heart of the Adams Morgan neighborhood, the Washington Heights Historic District contains one of the finest and most eclectic collections of architecture in Washington, D.C. From late-nineteenth-century rowhouses and early-twentieth-century luxury apartments to a flourishing commercial corridor, the development of Washington Heights illustrates the transformation of a streetcar suburb to a thriving urban center. In 1888 the subdivision was recorded as "The Commissioner's Suburb of Washington Heights" and extended north from the boundary of the federal city at Florida Avenue to Columbia Road, between 19th and Champlain streets. Development of Washington Heights and the surrounding areas was the direct result of the need for housing the expanding

population of Washington, D.C., made possible by the extension of the electric streetcar which traveled up the steep incline of 18th Street for the first time in 1890.

Construction in Washington Heights began in the 1890s with speculative housing built in fashionably designed rows for middle-class families. Although some of these single-family houses were owner-occupied, most provided rental units for the transient residents common to the nation's capital. Unlike in many of the surrounding subdivisions, only a few freestanding dwellings were built for members of the upper class in Washington Heights, and most of those imposing buildings were located along the western periphery closer to Connecticut Avenue. In the early twentieth century, the burgeoning population demanded a shift in residential housing types, namely that of the apartment building. Investors and developers constructed both luxury and more modest apartment buildings in Washington Heights, housing the city's upper-middle class professionals, many of whom worked for the federal government or were high-ranking members of the military. These multi-family dwellings were constructed by Washington's more prominent developers who employed many of the city's most notable architects.

Chinese Legation at 19th & Vernon Streets, NW
Library of Congress

The increasing population and expanding streetcar routes, which now traveled throughout the District and beyond to Maryland, brought not only new residents but commercial establishments to Washington Heights. Many of the rowhouses along 18th Street and Columbia Road were soon transformed for retail use. Projecting bays with expansive storefront windows at street level were added to entice patrons. In a few instances along 18th Street and Columbia Road, row-

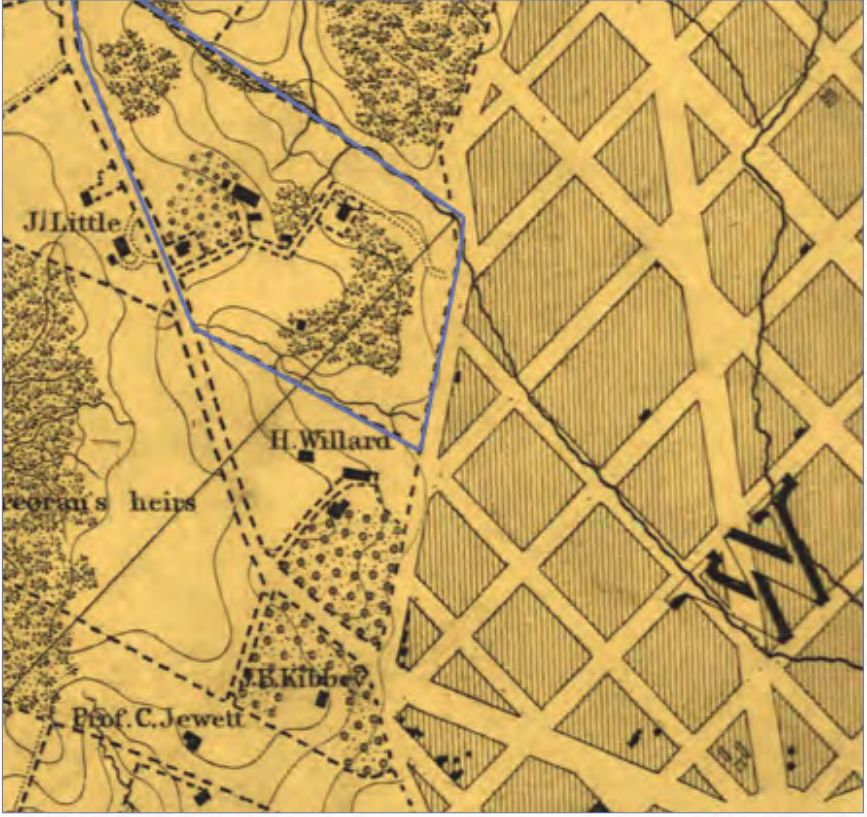


East side of 18th Street near the intersection of Columbia Road, NW
Photo, EHT Traceries, 2012

houses were demolished or completely re-faced to accommodate commercial uses. By the mid-twentieth century, Washington Heights had become a diverse multi-cultural neighborhood and a residential and commercial destination within the city. Today, Washington Heights remains an integral part of the Adams Morgan community.

BEFORE WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

Washington Heights and its neighboring subdivisions all originated from a 600-acre tract that was conveyed by Charles II of England to John Langworth in the seventeenth century. A century later, Anthony Holmead, one of the original proprietors of the District of Columbia, owned a portion of the tract bordering Rock Creek that included the future site of Washington Heights. Holmead called this particular area "Widow's Mite," a name whose origins have long been debated. After several subdivisions and changes in ownership, the property was purchased in the early 1800s by poet and diplomat Joel Barlow, who renamed it "Kalorama"—from the Greek word meaning fine view.



Detail of A. Boschke map showing area that would later become the Washington Heights subdivision. Oak Lawn is the property identified by the label H. Willard.
A. Boschke Map, 1856-59, Library of Congress

By the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, Kalorama was quickly becoming prime real estate on the immediate outskirts of the city. Still, the area had not yet been platted with buildable squares and dividing streets, and no public amenities necessary for development were available. When planned by Pierre "Peter" L'Enfant, Florida Avenue was known as Boundary Street and, as its name suggests, was the border between what was then the federal city of Washington and the rural County of Washington. Several county estates built by the city's more prominent residents as country retreats dotted the landscape. One of these

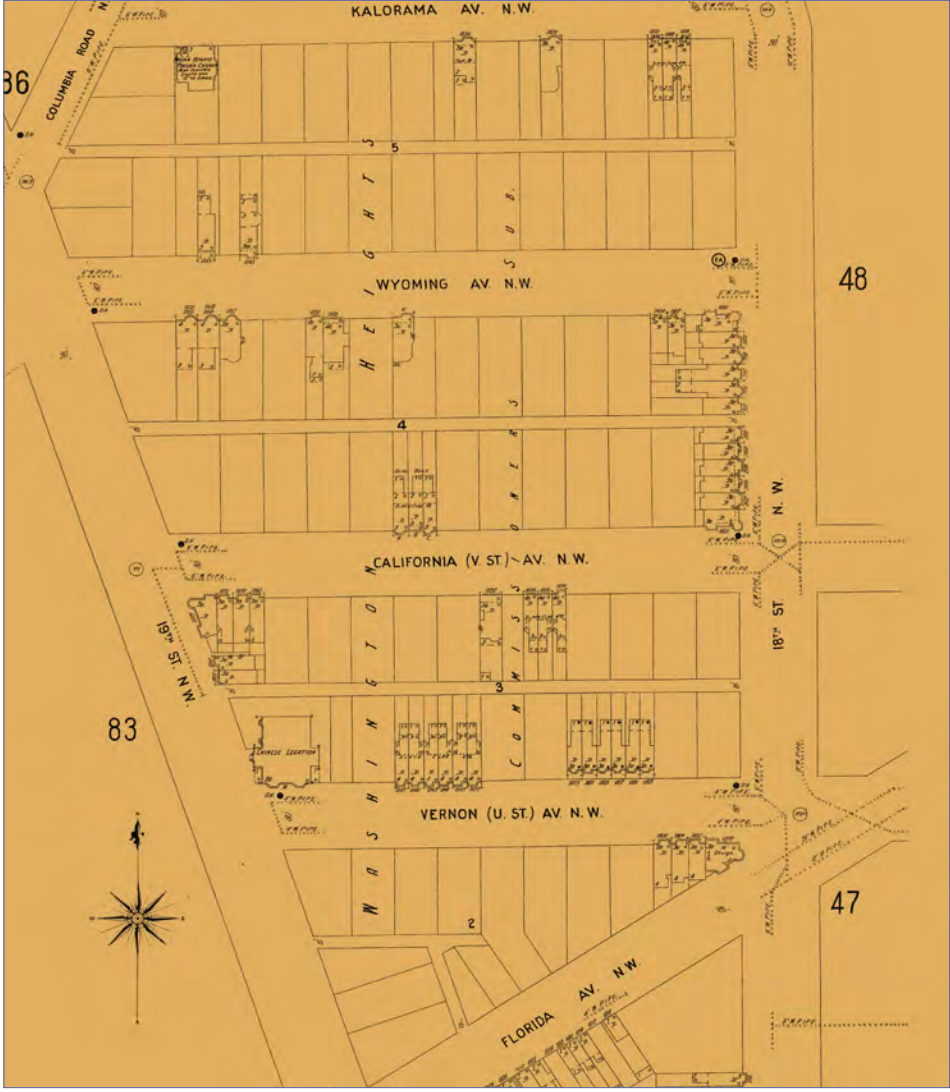
Aerial view of Oak Lawn, now the site of the Washington Hilton Hotel, c.1909
Library of Congress

was Oak Lawn, a ten-acre site bounded by what is now Connecticut Avenue, Columbia Road, 19th Street and Florida Avenue. In 1873, Thomas P. Morgan purchased the property, which included an 1820s Federal-style house that he enlarged to create a four-story Second Empire mansion. The high elevation of the lot allowed for a commanding view of the city from the house. Morgan, a Union officer in the Civil War, was best known for his accomplishments as a Washington businessman and as a Councilman, Alderman, and District of Columbia Commissioner. Only a year after renovating Oak Lawn, Morgan sold the property to Edward C. Dean, president of the Potomac Terra Cotta Company, and the property became known as "Dean's Tract."

SUBDIVISION OF LAND

Washington Heights was the first of several residential subdivisions created out of "Kalorama." First recorded in 1872, the subdivision was located to the immediate north of Oak Lawn and east of Connecticut Avenue. An article in a June 1882 issue of *National Republic* described the new suburb as "the choicest investment offered to the public" with tree-lined streets and building lots "lying close and overlooking the city."

A portion of the land that comprises present-day Washington Heights, from Florida Avenue to Columbia Road east of 19th Street, was part of a 38.5-acre tract owned by John Little in the mid-nineteenth century. The tract was owned by a "complex web of heirs, successors, purchasers, and creditors," which greatly hindered subdivision possibilities. The resulting lawsuit surrounding the issue of ownership was handed over



1903 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, showing Washington Height's Commission's Subdivision
Library of Congress

to the Equity Court of the District of Columbia. A small commission was appointed for the purpose of surveying the land and creating a plan for its subdivision. The team was made up of two real-estate men, Thomas J. Fisher and William Young, and a city surveyor, William Forsyth, who worked closely with the property owners to lay out the buildable squares, streets, and alleys. The resulting subdivision, named the "Commissioners' Subdivision of Washington Heights" was recorded on February 1, 1888.

By 1889, gas and water service was installed and many of the streets were paved with asphalt. In 1891, the first recorded building permit was issued for a three-

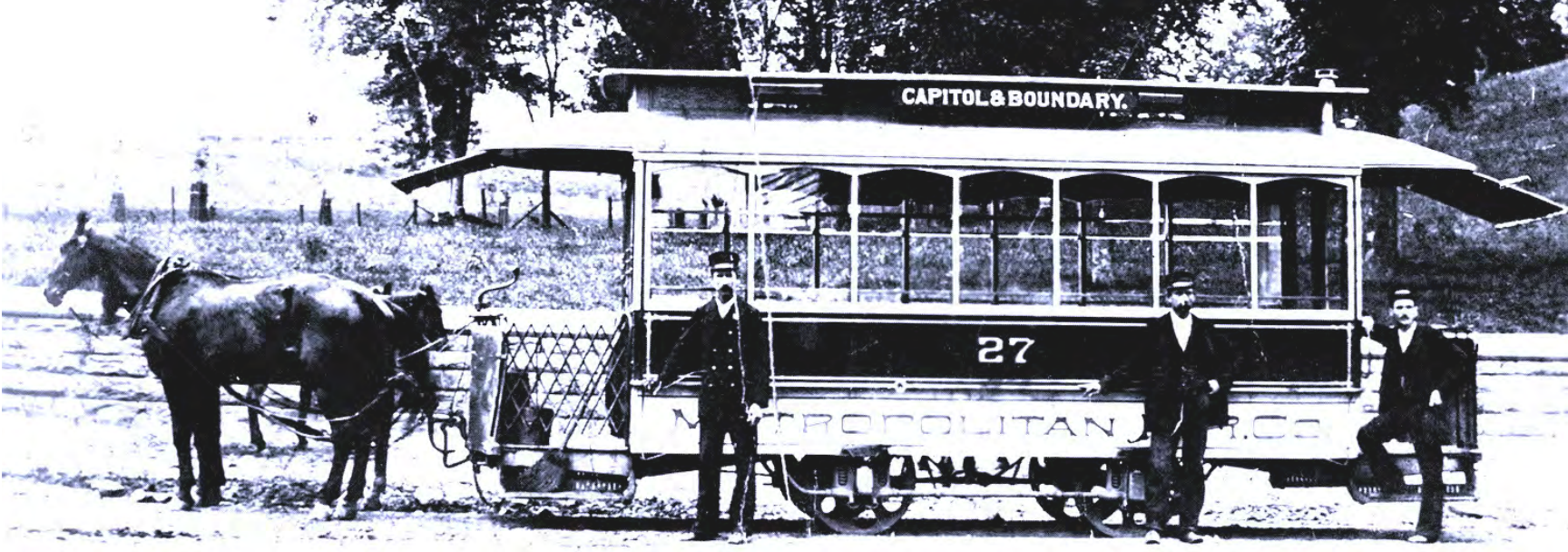


Image of Horsecar No. 27 on Boundary Street between Connecticut Avenue and 18th Street, NW, c.1890
The Historical Society of Washington, DC

story brick dwelling at 1862 Wyoming Avenue. Yet, despite the introduction of a city-sponsored infrastructure including gas, water, and sewer lines, as well as the sale of many of the new lots, construction did not come quickly to Washington Heights or the surrounding subdivisions. The Permanent Highway Act of 1893, established to create a street plan outside the L'Enfant Plan, was to blame as speculative developers and prospective homeowners were concerned that their newly platted subdivisions would have to be reconfigured. Consequently, land transfers and construction were virtually halted as owners feared their land would be condemned for street rights-of-way. In 1898, the amended Highway Act was passed, allowing the street configurations of those subdivisions like Washington Heights established before 1893 to remain as platted. Relieving developers' uncertainties, the Highway Act, along with more improvements in public services, prompted a surge in building construction after 1898. Building permit applications for Washington Heights increased to twenty-four in 1899 compared to only twelve one year earlier. More than 118 buildings, primarily rowhouses, were constructed by 1903. These architect-designed buildings, affordable to the middle-class market, illustrated the fashionable architectural styles of the time, such as Romanesque and Classical Revival and later the Colonial Revival and Beaux Arts.

STREETCARS

At the time of its development, Washington Heights had the advantage of being in close proximity to existing streetcar lines, further promoting its attractiveness as a premier suburb of the federal city. The Connecticut Avenue and Park Railway Company, established in April 1873, in conjunction with the Metropolitan Railroad Company, ran the line from 17th and H streets northward up Connecticut Avenue to Florida Avenue. The Connecticut Avenue and Park Railway Company offered horse-drawn service from the city to the southern edge of Washington Heights when it opened for development. However, the horse-drawn streetcar line did not continue beyond Florida Avenue from this point as the grade was too steep for the horses.

Direct service to Washington Heights improved in 1892 when the Rock Creek Railway of the District of Columbia began servicing the area with an electric streetcar that ran from U Street north along 18th Street and over

1870 Wyoming Avenue, NW, constructed in 1908 by B. Stanley Simmons
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005

the steep Rock Creek Valley via a long trestle bridge on what was later Calvert Street. The streetcar continued northward on Connecticut Avenue to the newly developed suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland. In 1893, the line was extended east along U Street to 7th Street, intersecting with several downtown lines and making the Washington Heights neighborhood more readily accessible to jobs, markets, churches, and social establishments downtown. In 1896, the Metropolitan Railway extended its service up Columbia Road and began taking travelers as far as Park Road in the neighboring subdivision of Mount Pleasant. The streets in Washington Heights that contained the streetcar lines subsequently developed as primary commercial corridors as residents of Washington, D.C. traveled to and from the growing neighborhood.

The extension of Connecticut Avenue, while connecting downtown to the emerging suburbs of Chevy Chase, Maryland and northwest Washington, bisected the newly created subdivisions in Kalorama, creating separate, distinct communities. The neighborhood west of Connecticut Avenue, now known as Sheridan-Kalorama, developed with large lots and grand, individually commissioned, freestanding houses that became the residences of Washington's elite. Washington Heights and its adjacent suburbs, such as Kalorama Triangle and Lanier Heights, would become a solidly middle-class neighborhood with well-designed, spacious, speculative row housing near the streetcar lines.

THE WHITE GLOVE ERA

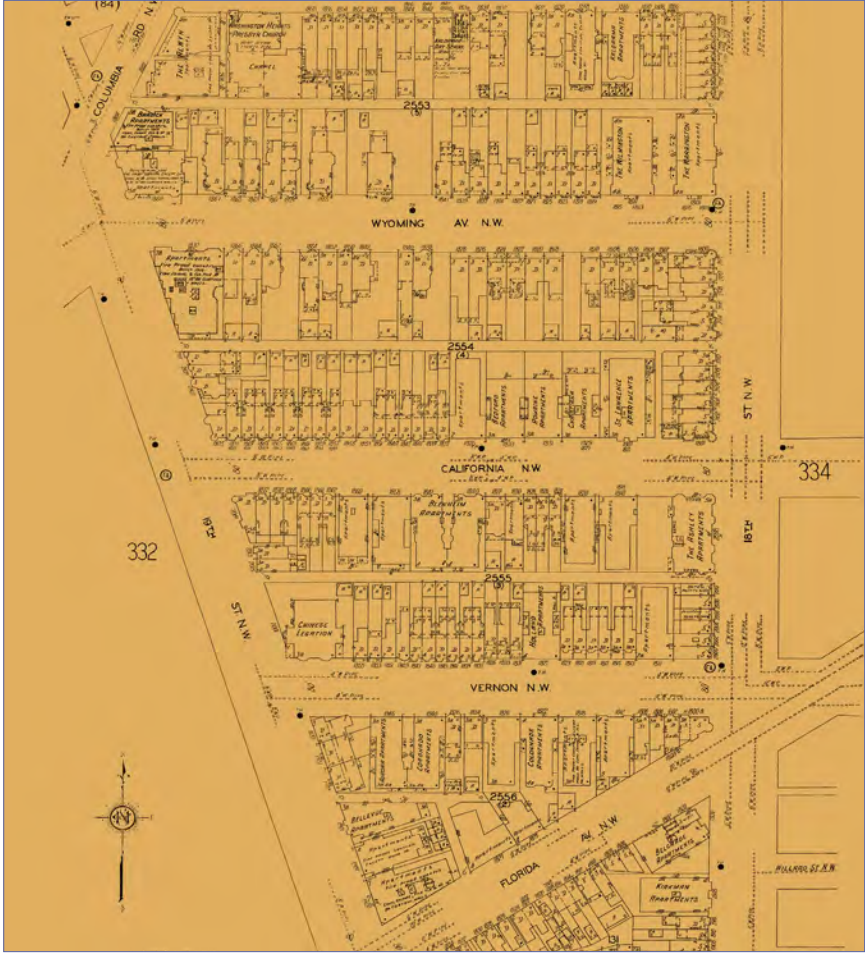
In the early decades of the twentieth century, Washington Heights continued to grow at an increasing rate. In 1905, the *Washington Post* reported that Washington Heights was "booming" as "most of the permits taken out were for small residences valued [from] $3,000 to $10,000, the figures being enlarged considerably by several apartment-house plans." The first of these small apartment buildings, like The Margaret (1903) at 1809-1811 Kalorama Road, were designed to look like

Washington Heights Presbyterian Church (now Good Will Baptist Church), organized in 1900, was one of the first institutions in Washington Heights
Photo, EHT Traceries, 2012

their neighboring single-family dwellings in size, scale, and style. Yet, interior amenities offered to residents often distinguished the modest buildings. The Colonade (1910) at 1822 Vernon Street was described in the February 1911 edition of *The Apartment House* for its "unusual arrangement," which lacked kitchens in the individual apartment units but provided screened-in sleeping porches and seven-room suites with an extra bathroom.

Luxury apartment buildings like the fashionable Wyoming Apartments (1905) at 2022 Columbia Road were being constructed simultaneously to specifically attract wealthy residents to the neighborhood. These high-style buildings were set on lots near Connecticut Avenue and at the ends of California Street, Wyoming Avenue, Kalorama Road, and Belmont Road at Columbia Road, standing alongside the rowhouses and smaller apartment buildings that had thus far defined the neighborhood. The apartments, designed by the city's most prominent architects, were characterized

The Margaret, 1809-1811 Kalorama Road, NW, was the first apartment building constructed in Washington Heights
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005



By 1927, as illustrated on this Sanborn map, Washington Heights was fully developed with row houses and apartment buildings
Library of Congress

by grand public lobbies and amenities such as dining rooms, laundry, reception rooms, and housing for a full-service staff. Other luxury apartments built in the early twentieth century were The Oakland (1905-1911), The Netherlands (1909), The Norwood (1916), and Schuyler Arms (1926).

The opening of the upscale and fashionable Knickerbocker Theater at 2454 18th Street became representative of what has been coined the "white glove era," when prominent residents of the city lived, shopped, and socialized in Washington Heights. The infamous theater was designed in the Classical Revival style by a young Washington, D.C. architect, Reginald W. Geare, under the direction of Harry M. Crandall, a Washingtonian who owned a chain of local movie theaters. When

the theater opened in October of 1917, it was acclaimed as "wholly unlike anything of the kind yet built in Washington," with its "walls of Indiana limestone and Pompeian art brick" curving to follow the bend in Columbia Road. The theater, which seated 1,800 persons at its capacity, not only showed movies, but plays, concerts, lectures, and other events. Crandall was congratulated for "the realization of plans which represent a long forward step in the elevation of the motion picture in the Capital City."

Knickerbocker Theater, c.1917
Library of Congress

The excitement surrounding the lavish theater was soon eclipsed by disaster. On January 22, 1922, only five years after the theater opened, a heavy snowstorm hit Washington, D.C., covering the city in 28 inches of snow. Despite the severe weather, the theater opened that evening as usual by featuring a silent film. The second show of the evening was just beginning when the roof of the building collapsed due to the weight of the snow, killing 98 and injuring over 100 patrons. After an investigation, it was discovered that the roof beams were inserted only two inches into the walls instead of the required eight inches. The city government quickly imposed a strict building code for all theaters in the District of Columbia. Crandall later hired New York architect Thomas W. Lamb to rebuild the theater within the walls of the Knickerbocker. Completed in 1923, the Ambassador continued to show movies until 1969.

Knickerbocker Theater Disaster, 1922
Library of Congress

With a grand theater at the center and luxury apartment buildings framing the interior streets lined with rowhouses, Washington Heights expanded its commercial development along 18th Street, Florida Avenue, and Columbia Road. New, purpose-built stores were erected at the same time that several existing rowhouses were rehabilitated for commercial use. In many instances, large storefront windows replaced the original fenestration as a means of better exhibiting the commercial wares to passing patrons. Examples include the rowhouses at 1790-1796 Co-

lumbia Road, designed by Waddy B. Wood in 1897-1898. The original facades were altered just a few years later in 1911-1912 by the addition of large storefront windows on the first story, while the upper stories continued to provide residential space. A more prominent example is the adjacent building at 2481 18th Street, on the northeast corner of 18th Street and Columbia Road. Designed by Wood in 1899, the imposing single-family dwelling constructed for Mary I. McAllister was altered to serve as People's Drug store in 1915 and has continued its commercial use as a McDonald's since the 1970s. Street vendors also came to the neighborhood, drawn to the commercial nature of 18th Street and Columbia Road. One such vendor, who traveled to Washington Heights from her home in Anacostia stated, "I would go up to 18th and Columbia Road which was a great place to sell flowers to the dignitaries of Washington." By 1925, few available lots remained in Washington Heights, which had grown into a solidly middle-class, self-sufficient neighborhood.

Lust's Regent Theater, located at 2021 18th Street, NW was demolished c.1922
Library of Congress

Interior of People's Drug store at 18th Street & Columbia Road, NW, formerly the residence of Mary I. McAllister, c.1920-21
Library of Congress

WASHINGTON HEIGHTS TO ADAMS MORGAN

By the 1950s, the segregation of the white Adams School (1930) and the black Morgan School (1902) caused tension in a neighborhood that had been changing demographically since the 1930s. Washington Heights, now an urban neighborhood that had grown from suburban roots, was experiencing decline and deterioration spurred by preference for the outlying suburbs in Virginia and Maryland. House values were decreasing, and nine blocks of the neighbor-

Morgan School, c.1902
Report of the Board of Education, District of Columbia 1903

hood's housing were named among the 100 worst in the city by the Community Renewal Program. The first step toward change came with the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed school segregation. The Adams and Morgan schools became the catalyst for the racially divided neighborhood as its citizens joined together in 1955 and created the Adams Morgan Better Neighborhood Conference. Its purpose was not only to promote school integration, but to "arouse interest in community problems and deal with the growing physical deterioration in the area." With help from the city and American University, the Neighborhood Conference set up a demonstration project that organized the neighborhood into block associations to help with the planning process. The Neighborhood Conference established a Community Council and a Planning Committee and began discussions for an urban renewal plan with the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC). It was the first time in the city that "residents, businessmen and property owners, including educational, cultural and religious enterprises met with professionals to plan together."

By the 1950s, neighborhood demographics changed as a large number of Latin American residents and other ethnic groups settled here. This shift was due in part to the already-established immigrant population that had moved into Washington Heights from the 1920s to 1940s because of its proximity to several embassies. The affordability of the neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s further propelled this phenomenon. Soon, the multi-cultural demographic of Adams Morgan began to form as ethnic stores and restaurants opened on the commercial corridors. The diversity of the neighborhood continues to be an identifying characteristic of the Washington Heights/ Adams Morgan community.

RESIDENTS

The high-style, yet affordable housing and supporting commercial establishments opened Washington Heights to a wide mix of residents with the working and middle classes living next to wealthy and prestigious Washingtonians. The occupations of the middle class included draughtsman, typewriter, geologist, lawyer, and newspaper clerk. Although a large number were born in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, residents were also from the Northeast, Midwest, and Southern parts of the United States, illustrating the transitory nature of many residents. The residents

1821 Kalorama Road, NW
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005

seemed to be evenly divided in terms of owners and renters. However, most of the original owners listed on building permit applications did not live in the neighborhood, suggesting the dominance of speculative building.

Generally, the demographics of the residents living in Washington Heights did not change greatly from 1900 to 1930 as the majority still consisted of middle-class families. Many of the residents worked for the federal government, which had doubled in size during this time due to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs. A large percentage of the residents of Washington Heights now also included military personnel. However, while the luxury apartment houses brought many professionals and high-ranking military and government officials to the neighborhood, the smaller apartment buildings around the edges of the neighborhood began to attract working- and middle-class residents. This was the first of several major demographic changes in Washington Heights since its establishment.

A small number of immigrants lived in Washington Heights at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, by the 1920s and 1930s, more foreign-born residents had moved to Washington Heights and a large percentage were from European countries including England, Ireland, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Greece, and Jewish immigrants from Russia. This new wave of residents also included many non-European immigrants from Japan, China, and the Philippines. Although most were working class, employed as tailors, merchants, and shoemakers, others were trained professionals such as physicians and teachers. A Swiss immigrant, living at 1849 Kalorama Road, was a bookkeeper for the Swiss legation. A Polish resident, who rented an apartment at the Wyoming, served as a counselor for the Polish legation. A French Canadian, lodging at 2102 California

1827 Belmont Road, NW
Photo, EHT Traceries, 2012

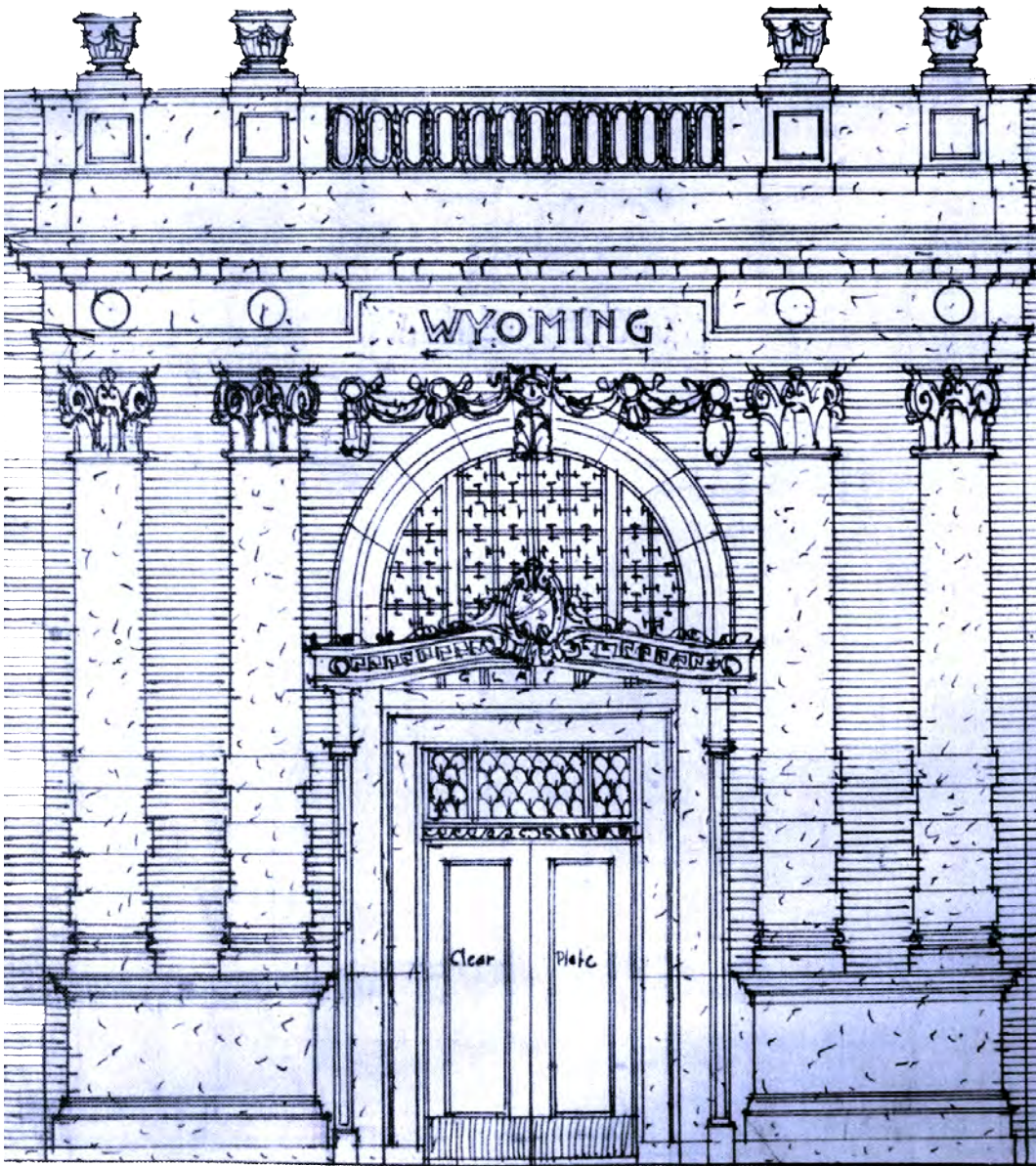
1854 Vernon Street, NW
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005

Street, was a stenographer for the French Embassy, and a Cuban immigrant rooming at 2413 18th Street worked for the Cuban embassy. A number of immigrants also lived and operated businesses along 18th Street. In 1930, a German upholsterer and an Armenian rug maker lived and worked at their rowhouses at 2341 and 2409 18th Street. A Russian upholsterer and his wife ran a shop from their home at 2431 18th Street.

In the 1910s and 1920s, African Americans living in Washington Heights still primarily consisted of servants, living in homes of their white employers, or janitors, living in small basement apartments in the apartment buildings where they worked. Blacks also commuted from Southeast Washington and Virginia to their jobs as servants, maids, laundrymen, and chauffeurs for the dignitaries and other affluent citizens living along 19th Street and Columbia Road. Yet, by 1930, particular blocks in Washington Heights had become exclusive to black families. According to the census records, Vernon Street was home to only white residents in 1920 and composed entirely of black residents by 1930. These later residents had occupations like waiter, porter, chauffeur, messenger, janitor, and mechanic, compared to secretary of a senator, clerk for the United States government, automobile salesman, and newspaper correspondent who were living on the street previously.

Many of the more elite residents regularly found their names in *Who's Who in the Nation's Capital*. Perhaps the most notable residents were Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower, who lived in the Wyoming from 1927 to 1935. In 1920, D.C. Supreme Court Justice Walter I. McCoy, the Ambassador of Montenegro, and several high-ranking Army and Navy officials were residents of Washington Heights. In 1930, the Chief Surgeon of the U.S. Government, and the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army were residents of the Wyoming, while Oakland Apartments was home to John S. McCain, Commander of the United States Navy. The family of Senator John Hollis Bankhead, Jr., who was the uncle of famous

Entrance pavilion of the Wyoming Apartments, 1911
National Archives



actress Tallulah Bankhead, lived at the Netherlands Apartments. Respected Washington, D.C. architects Arthur B. Heaton and Waddy B. Wood, and real estate developer Lester A. Barr, also resided in the neighborhood.

1852 Columbia Road, NW
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005

1875 California Street, NW
Photo, KCA Volunteers, 2005

Watermark Image: 1792 Columbia Road, elevation drawing, c.1911
National Archives

Back Cover: Row houses along Belmont Road, NW
Photo, EHT Traceries, 2005

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