DC Historic Preservation Office
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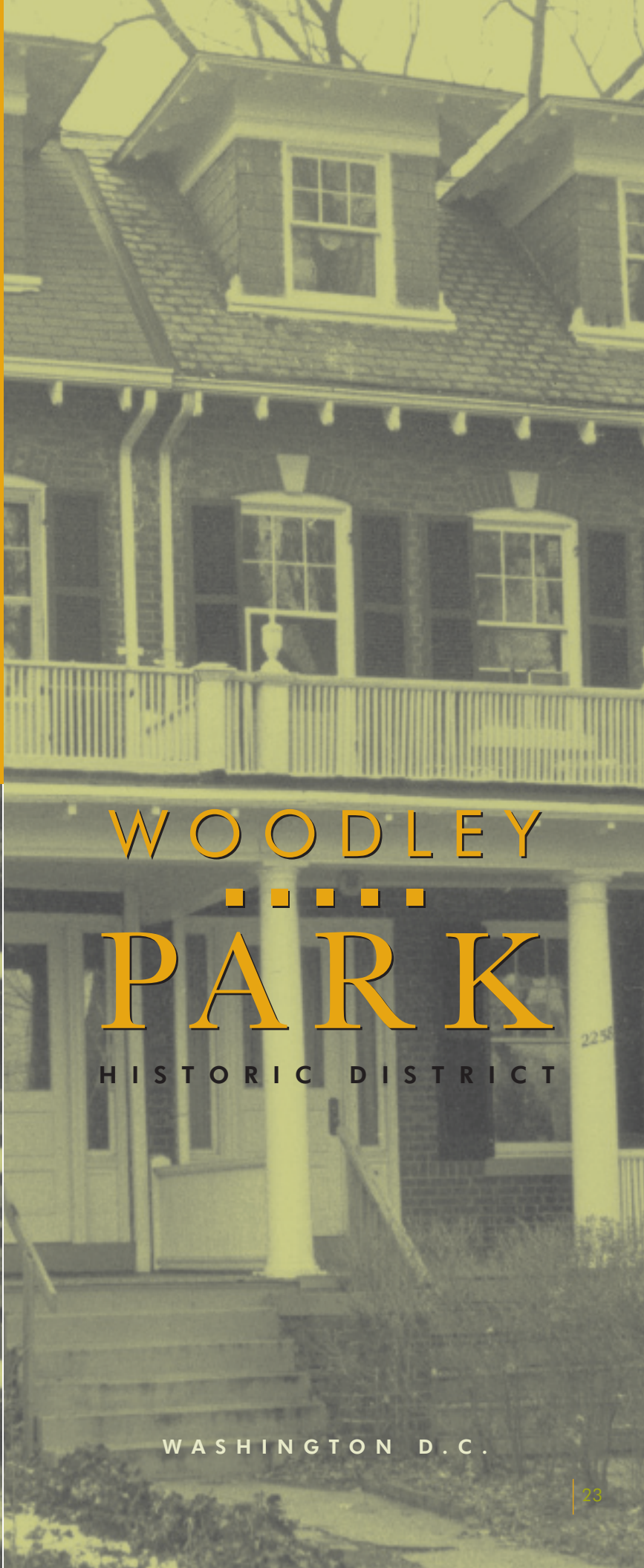

WOODLEY PARK

HISTORIC DISTRICT

WASHINGTON D.C.

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Woodley Park in winter looking northwest over Connecticut Avenue bridge, 1908.
Library of Congress

Nestled among such landmarks as the National Cathedral, Observatory Circle, and the National Zoo is the neighborhood of Woodley Park. This residential district with a central commercial corridor maintains a strong connection to its past and conveys a sense of history through its carefully planned streets, historic architecture, and open spaces. Initially on the rural edge of the young federal city, the area that became Woodley Park remained largely undeveloped until late in the 19th century. Today, however, rowhouses have replaced agricultural fields, country estates have given way to apartment buildings, and Connecticut Avenue—Woodley Park's primary thoroughfare—is lined with busy restaurants and shops.

Together, Woodley Park's mix of former country estates, semi-detached houses, apartment buildings, and row-houses comprise a distinguishable entity that has merited recognition as a National Register Historic District. The Woodley Park Historic District is bounded roughly by Cathedral Avenue to the north and east, 29th Street to the west, and Woodley Road and Connecticut Avenue to the south and southwest. The district is significant for its varied architecture, featuring the work of notable architects such as George Santmyers, Albert Beers, William Allard, and Mihran Mesrobian, and for its contribution to our understanding of development patterns in Washington, DC.

Typical of the Federal style, the brick house called Woodley was symmetrical and restrained, with doorway fanlights and a denticulated cornice over the main three-story block and the two-story wings. Pictured here in an early view before additions, the mansion has been home to the Maret School since 1952. Library of Congress

EARLY ESTATES

"It has always been fashionable for wealthy men to have rural summer houses in an attempt to escape the heat and accompanying diseases of the crowded city centers."

Throughout much of the 19th century, the area northwest of the city of Washington remained quietly rural, a landscape of gentle hills and winding dirt roads dotted with country estates. Separating this bucolic environment from the new federal city was the forested ravine of the Rock Creek valley to the south and east.

The land was originally part of several adjoining Maryland land grants acquired by the Beall family beginning in 1703. In 1792, the more than 1200 acres amassed by the Bealls was sold out of the family and divided into smaller tracts, where several large estates developed.

Philip Barton Key purchased a 250-acre tract containing agricultural lands, forest, and stream valleys. Around 1801, he built a large dwelling, calling it Woodley, which today stands at 3000 Cathedral Avenue and is home to the Maret School. Key sited the house on a hill, which afforded a commanding view of the buildings under construction in the nascent capital, the port at Georgetown, and the expanse of the Potomac River. Key's nephew, Francis Scott Key, is said to have spent considerable time at the estate. In later years, Woodley was rented out and served as the summer residence of Presidents Martin Van Buren, Grover Cleveland, and James Buchanan, who took refuge from the heat of the city at Woodley's higher elevation.

The Keys soon had a neighbor to the north. Redwood, also known as Oak Hill, was built in 1819 on Connecticut Avenue across from today's entrance to the National Zoo. The home provided a respite to residents from the insufferable heat and unpleasantness of a Washington summer, offering a higher elevation, cooler breezes, and unspoiled rural and forested surroundings. One such resident was Jefferson Davis, whose wife Varina wrote in 1856 that "at midsummer we took a house two or three miles out of town, and spent the heated term there. Mr. and Mrs. [Franklin] Pierce used frequently to come for us for the day, and such intimate talks, such unrestrained intercourse and pleasantries exchanged are charming memories."

During the Civil War, Union soldiers looted Redwood's large fruit orchards and forced the homeowners to flee into the city. The large frame dwelling later became a fashionable resort, but was razed in 1920 to make way for the Cathedral Mansions apartments.

Redwood stood across Connecticut Avenue from today's entrance to the National Zoo. Built about 1819, the frame house featured a full-width two-story porch and roof deck for enjoying the view of the city and surrounding countryside. Library of Congress

Boschke's Topographical Map of the District of Columbia shows the look of the Woodley Park area in 1861, prior to subdivision. Notice the winding road, Woodley Lane, which provided the main transportation route through the hilly area until Connecticut Avenue was constructed.
D.C. Historic Preservation Office

The earliest settlers in the Woodley Park area arrived by wagon and carriage on dirt roads. Woodley Lane provided the main route for travelers, as Connecticut Avenue had not yet been extended north of Rock Creek. An 1887 description portrays the difficulty of travel to this area from downtown, stating that Woodley Lane was "a country road, winding its way down the hillside, crossing the creek on a wooden bridge a few feet above the level of the stream, and thus making the difficult and circuitous assent to the greater elevation of Tennallytown Pike" (Wisconsin Avenue). The old Woodley Lane roughly followed today's 24th Street, Woodley Road, 29th Street, and Cathedral Avenue.

The only businesses in the area throughout the 19th century were a few mills in the Rock Creek Valley, which provided grist milling services for area farmers as well as lumber milling for the construction of new buildings throughout the city. Soon, however, the area would come to be seen as lucrative for its real estate development potential. As the District grew and the need for housing increased, undeveloped land became a valuable commodity. Early estates gave way to new subdivisions, which allowed smaller lots and more densely populated neighborhoods. It is this type of development pattern that shaped the community of Woodley Park.

WOODLEY PARK SUBDIVISION

Throughout the 18th and much of the 19th centuries, development on the west side of Rock Creek was focused primarily in Georgetown. Some residential and commercial buildings sprang up along Wisconsin Avenue, but platted suburban developments were unprecedented. The first attempt to systematically develop the area came in 1875, when Mrs. A.E. Kervand divided her property at the heart of today's Woodley Park into 18 lots called "Woodley" after Philip Barton Key's prominent estate.

Little is known about Kervand, but the subdivision followed the pattern of Washington's earliest residential suburbs, such as Uniontown, Mount Pleasant, Barry Farm, and Le Droit Park. These early subdivisions provided a bucolic setting for new homes and took advantage of existing or planned public transportation lines to provide easy access to downtown. However, Kervand's plan was less successful at attracting buyers. Given the lack of easy transportation, it ultimately failed to bring buyers and remained a paper subdivision.

By 1878, the land had been subdivided again, this time into 31 lots, advertised as "the finest Country seats ever ofered (sic) for sale about the City." However, Woodley Lane was still the primary thoroughfare and prospective buyers remained cautious.

By 1888, real estate investors Thomas Waggaman and John Ridout had acquired the land. They renamed the subdivision "Woodley Park" and platted it with gently curving drives and lots for single family residences that took advantage of the varied topography. They also chartered the Rock Creek Railway streetcar line, which was designed to travel along Columbia and Woodley Roads into Woodley Park.

However, the rail line and residential development would have to wait. In 1888, Congress passed an "Act to Regulate the Subdivision of Land Within the District of Columbia" which extended L'Enfant's street grid to areas outside the original city boundaries. New subdivisions in Washington County were required to follow the city's established alignment of orthogonal streets and diagonal boulevards. Subdivisions like Woodley Park that were designed with curving streets were faced with the possibility of total street redesign and the potential for condemnations of property to conform to these requirements. The confusion surrounding the new law hindered any development in Woodley Park.

As early as 1893, the Rock Creek Railway ran on a 20-minute weekday schedule in winter, with a car every 12 minutes in summer to accommodate riders going to Rock Creek Park, the zoo, and Chevy Chase Lake. As homes were built in Woodley Park, many residents caught one of the 25 streetcars in service along the new Connecticut Avenue and crossed this Calvert Street trestle bridge to reach federal jobs downtown. Library of Congress

But plans were afoot for development on the far northern edge of the District that would alter the history of Woodley Park. The Chevy Chase Land Company sought to develop the new suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland and introduce streetcar service for commuting to downtown. Owned and funded by Senator Francis Newlands of Nevada and other investors, the company was organized in 1890 and purchased extensive lands in Washington leading to the new suburb. It also acquired the charter for the Rock Creek Railway Company, which Newlands altered to cross Rock Creek on Calvert Street and to extend service northward along a new route — Connecticut Avenue Extended. The company would clear the route, lay the tracks, and build iron truss bridges at Calvert Street to cross the Rock Creek Valley and at Connecticut over the Klingle Valley. Beginning in 1892, streetcar service began from Chevy Chase to downtown Washington, providing reliable transportation to suburban commuters.

Newlands was also instrumental in influencing the government's decision regarding subdivision layouts. When the Permanent Highway Act was passed in 1893, he saw to it that the prominent landscape design firm of Frederick Law Olmsted was hired to assist the Engineer Commissioner in drawing up the accompanying maps. Under Olmsted's influence, curved streets that responded to the natural topography of the land north and west of Rock Creek were integrated in the City's plan and streets aligned with the existing grid were no longer required.

Newlands was one of the most influential real estate developers in northwest Washington, DC and the adjacent Maryland suburb of Chevy Chase. Despite his investments in Chevy Chase, however, it is interesting to note that Newlands chose to live in Woodley Park at the Woodley estate, which he purchased in 1890.

This 1895 map, prepared by the Engineer Department of the District of Columbia, shows the influence of landscape planner Frederick Law Olmsted on the layout of Woodley Park. The winding streets lie in sharp contrast to the methodically gridded roads of the urban core.
D.C. Historic Preservation Office

This elegant townhouse at 2602 Connecticut Avenue was designed by Clarke Waggaman and is now used for commercial purposes. The stylized neoclassical building retains such original features as the lion-head keystone and Greek key panel above the door and the articulated brick base meant to imitate rusticated stone. D.C. Historic Preservation Office

DEVELOPMENT OF WOODLEY PARK

Finally, with the street plan, transportation system, and infrastructure in place, Woodley Park was poised to become a residential success. Unfortunately the construction boom, which lasted from approximately 1905 to 1930, came too late for Thomas Waggaman, who went bankrupt in 1904 and died just two years later. His vision of Woodley Park as a neighborhood of individually designed detached homes essentially died with him. The liquidation of Waggaman's assets meant that his real estate holdings were opened up to speculative developers.

Waggaman's son Clarke took over the remainder of his father's real estate business and designed some of the early houses in Woodley Park, despite no formal training in architecture. The first residence he built was his own at 2600 Connecticut Avenue in 1905 (now demolished). Other commissions were for townhouses of three to four stories in height, including 2519, 2602, and 2604 Connecticut Avenue. In all, Waggaman designed nine of Woodley Park's houses, but these comprised only a small portion of the construction activity underway throughout the neighborhood.

Well-known Washington real estate investors like Harry Wardman, Kennedy and Davis, and Middaugh and Shannon began to purchase blocks of land in Woodley Park, subdividing the large lots into many smaller ones, and commenced a building campaign of speculative rowhouses. They hired local architects such as Albert Beers, Nicholas Grimm, William Allard, George Santmyers, and A.H. Sonnemann, who employed a range of Colonial Revival, English Tudor, and Queen Anne design vocabularies. The rows surrounded the few existing single family residences that had been erected. Estates such as Woodley and Redwood were no longer on the rural fringes of the city, but were fast becoming part of Washington's urban fabric.

As Woodley Park transformed into a flourishing neighborhood, Connecticut Avenue became a fashionable address. Grand townhouses featured limestone facades, ornate keystones over windows and doors, and decorative stone relief panels. On 27th, 28th, 29th, and Garfield Streets, developers built more modest brick rowhouses with Flemish, Mediterranean, and English influences, individualized by alternating the use of covered and uncovered porches, varying the fenestration patterns, and using an assortment of roof forms, materials, and dormer styles.

Harry Wardman had these rowhouses on Garfield Street built in 1908 in an eclectic style with a range of architectural embellishments such as Palladian windows, Flemish gables, and scalloped arches. In 1914, typical residents included businessmen, government workers, a senator, and a Treasury Department official. D.C. Historic Preservation Office

Albert Beers designed this Mediterranean style home 2640 Connecticut Avenue for real estate mogul Harry Wardman. Wardman lived here from 1909 until 1928, when he demolished it to make way for his Wardman Park Tower.
Smithsonian Institution

By 1916, Woodley Park boasted well over 150 rowhouses, large detached and semi-detached residences, two churches, and two small apartment buildings. Many of the homes featured alley garages for automobiles, which were already becoming a standard household item. Families tended to be of the middle and upper classes, most with live-in domestic help.

Harry Wardman was particularly active in the development of Woodley Park. He amassed a considerable fortune constructing speculatively here and elsewhere in the city. He built the rows of townhouses located at 2712-48 and 2813-35 27th Street, and 2606-2634 Garfield Street. He was also responsible for the construction of several freestanding homes in Woodley Park, including 2651, 2657, and 2659 Woodley Road and 2272 Cathedral Avenue. In 1909, he built his own grand residence at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Woodley Road. It cost $60,000 to construct and featured a ballroom measuring 44 by 67 feet on the third floor.

In the early 1920s, Harry Wardman hired architect Mihran Mesrobian to design what he called an "English Village" in Woodley Park. It was built along 34th Street and Woodley Road, and extended south to Cathedral Avenue and east to 32nd Street. Construction began in 1922 on the Tudor revival homes, which featured half timbering, rough stucco finishes, and gothic arches. The development also incorporated an emerging necessity—the automobile garage. English Village mirrored the popular Tudor and English garden aesthetics popularized during the era by national magazines such as Home & Garden, and by prominent designers of many American suburbs that evolved after WWI.

In 1925, a second Wardman/Mesrobian development was built on Cathedral Avenue. Advertisements for these homes ran in the Washington Star newspaper, touting a sales price of $17,500 and offering assurance against further encroachment on the "tree-crested hills surrounding Woodley Park." Wardman and other builders continued the English theme on Cortland, 28th and 29th Streets.

The house at 2601 29th Street demonstrates the romantic English influence in its stone exterior, diamond-pane windows, and Tudor arched entry. Photographed here in 1945, the building served at that time as the Embassy of Panama.
Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Washingtoniana Room

Concurrent with the development of the Woodley Park neighborhood was the establishment along its eastern border of the National Zoo and Rock Creek Park. In 1889, the National Zoological Park was planned as a scientific research facility and tourist attraction, nestled within a landscape designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. The following year, Congress designated the area north of the zoo as Rock Creek Park, which was created "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the United States."

The proximity of the park was undoubtedly a selling point for Woodley Park. The miles of bridle paths and acres of undeveloped land for exploration attracted some of the earliest homebuyers to the area.

Pleasure riding through Rock Creek Park has always been popular, whether by buggy, horseback, or automobile. Historically, owners of nearby property could ride horses from their homes throughout the park. Today, horseback riding is limited to 13 miles of bridle paths at the northern end of the park. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Washingtoniana Room

In addition to the park and zoo, other historic elements of Woodley Park are its churches and schools. The All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church, located at 2300 Cathedral Avenue, was built in 1914 at the eastern edge of today's historic district. In 1912, the Catholic Church purchased land to house St. Thomas Apostle Church at 27th Street and Woodley Road. An associated Catholic school occupied the townhouses across from the church for a number of years. The District soon opened the public Oyster School to accommodate the growing number of schoolchildren in the neighborhood. Built in 1926 at Calvert and 29th Streets, the original building was demolished and rebuilt in 2001 as the city's only bilingual public school.

The Taft Bridge, completed in 1907, is notable for its famous lion sculptures designed by Roland Perry. The lions were removed for restoration in 1985, but were found to be beyond repair. Replicas were created by artist Reinaldo Lopez-Carrizo and installed in 2000. The bridge is listed in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. Postcard courtesy of Paul K. Williams

The swell of new residents in Woodley Park and more northern neighborhoods and the increasing popularity of the automobile called for improvements in the road system serving the neighborhood. In 1907, the City constructed a new bridge to connect the two halves of Connecticut Avenue over Rock Creek. Reportedly the largest concrete bridge in the world, it was designed by George S. Morrison and Edward Pearce Casey. Named in 1931 after President William Howard Taft, it was initially referred to as "The Million Dollar Bridge" because of its enormous construction cost.

Beginning in 1917, Harry Wardman built the first large luxury apartment/hotel building in Woodley Park, the multi-story Wardman Park Hotel. This apartment and hotel complex (one-sixth of the units were for hotel use, the remainder were rental apartments) was designed by Frank Russell White in a semicircular arc with radiating wings around a central lobby and dining room. Just to the south was the Wardman Park Saddle Club, which stabled horses for residents and guests for riding in Rock Creek Park.

The Wardman Park Hotel, called "Wardman's Folly" during construction because it was considered too far from Washington, was nevertheless a huge success. It was filled to capacity almost immediately, with some residents moving in before construction had been completed. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Washingtoniana Room

With the completion of the Wardman Park Hotel, investors began to see the development potential of Woodley Park as a neighborhood of high rise and garden apartment buildings. From 1920 to 1921 alone, eight new apartment buildings were built, ranging in height from three to seven stories. In some instances, single family residences were razed to make way for the new apartments. Cathedral Mansions, another of Harry Wardman's investments, opened in 1923 on the site of Redwood, which was razed to make room for the new three-building apartment complex. Located at the northwest corner of Connecticut and Cathedral Avenues, Cathedral Mansions added an astonishing 2,700 new residents to the Woodley Park neighborhood. It also brought a commercial component to Connecticut Avenue, with its integral grocery, delicatessen, salon, and drugstore.

The late 1920s and 1930s saw the construction of higher and denser apartment buildings. In 1928, Mihran Mesrobian designed an annex to the Wardman Park Hotel. Harry Wardman demolished his own residence on the southwest corner of Connecticut and Woodley Road to make room for the new eight-story highrise, which Mesrobian designed in a cruciform plan with Georgian Revival details. Four wings extend off an octagonal central core with graceful semicircular balconies at each end. At 140 feet above street level, the Wardman Park Tower, which is topped with an iron globe, dominated the skyline when it was built. Its hilltop location and height still afford residents and guests stunning views of the city and park.

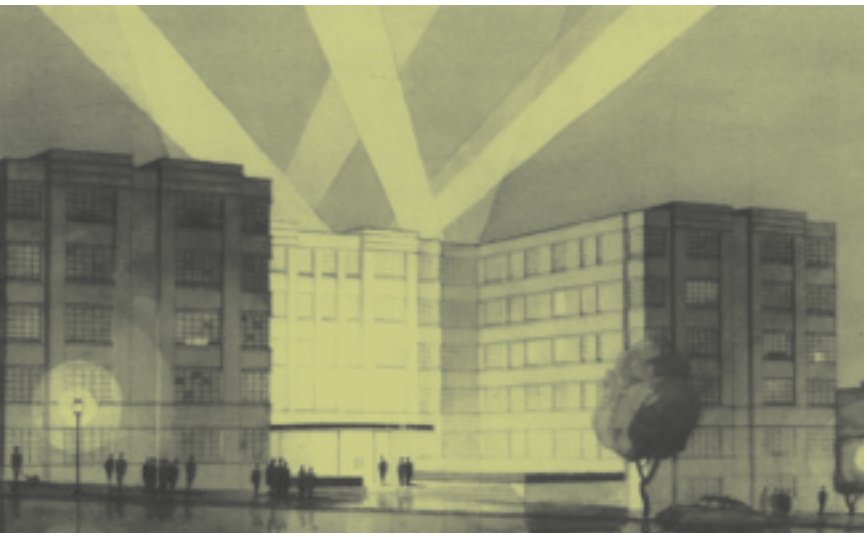
Although the original Wardman Park Hotel was demolished, the Wardman Park Tower (or Annex) at the corner of Woodley Road and Connecticut Avenue remains. Built as a luxury residential hotel, the Tower has served as the home to presidents, vice "presidents, celebrities, members of Congress, and chief justices.
D.C. Historic Preservation Office

Started just a few years after the Wardman Park Tower, the Kennedy-Warren Apartments illustrates the change in architectural style that emerged in the 1920s and '30s. Designed by Joseph Younger for investors Edgar Kennedy and Warren Monroe, the Kennedy-Warren is one of the District's premier examples of Art Deco architecture. It went up at 3133 Connecticut Avenue in 1931 and was the first building in Washington to make extensive decorative use of aluminum on both the exterior and interior. The design placed an emphasis on verticality and featured Aztec designs on the interior and fine streamlined finishes throughout.

The impressive Kennedy-Warren apartment building at 3133 Connecticut Avenue is one of the finest examples of Art Deco design in Washington. After a construction hiatus of over 70 years, the second tower was completed in 2005 according to the original designs and using the originally specified materials.
D.C. Historic Preservation Office

Construction on the Kennedy-Warren was interrupted by the Great Depression. The original plans called for an enormous complex of interlocking crosses centered around an entry tower, but the project could not be completed due to financial constraints. Like many of his peers, Edgar Kennedy went bankrupt. Even the prolific Harry Wardman, who had heavily invested in the stock market to finance his many real estate ventures, suffered the same fate. Most development activity in Woodley Park came to a grinding halt in the 1930s.

In the World War II era, a housing shortage spurred another boom of residential construction. Three large apartment complexes were added on 29th Street, and several rowhouses on Connecticut Avenue were demolished to make way for more new apartments.



The Delano apartment building at 2745 29th Street was designed in 1941 by George Santmyers. The International style of the building is reflected in its modern flat form, use of glass and steel, and streamlined edifice. Smithsonian Institution

With the exception of a few retail shops, which were permitted despite great conflict among residents, businesspeople, and the DC Zoning Commission, Woodley Park remained essentially residential throughout the first two decades of the 20th century. In 1921 the shop at 2606 Connecticut Avenue was constructed as the first purpose-built commercial building in Woodley Park. The city's 1920 zoning regulations did not permit commercial development in this part of the city, so the case went all the way to the Supreme Court to determine whether or not the commercial use could be permitted.

Due to increasing demand for commercial development, the Commission voted in 1930 to allow stores and businesses to move into the neighborhood over the opposition of neighbors. Connecticut Avenue began to transform into a commercial strip, and within only ten years, virtually every rowhouse had been converted for use as a restaurant or shop and new commercial buildings filled the remaining vacant lots.

Today Woodley Park offers a unique mix of open space, small and large residential buildings, and a bustling commercial strip. The historic district represents 200 years of architectural, landscape, and planning history. No longer on the fringe of a developing city, the neighborhood is served by a Metro station which provides transportation to commuting residents as well as the zoo's three million annual visitors.

Taken in 1949 and 2004, these two photos show how little the commercial character of the 2600 block of Connecticut Avenue has changed in the past 50 years. Typical of commercial architecture of the period, the center buildings are one story with a parapet roof and corner finials. Commercial architecture of the period typically used a vocabulary of restrained classicism with flat limestone facades embellished with stylized classical ornamentation such as pilasters, swags, and urns. Inset - Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and City Museum

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The houses in the 2600 block of Woodley Place (opposite) and 2200 block of Cathedral Avenue (cover) are typical of the residential architecture found throughout the Woodley Park Historic District.
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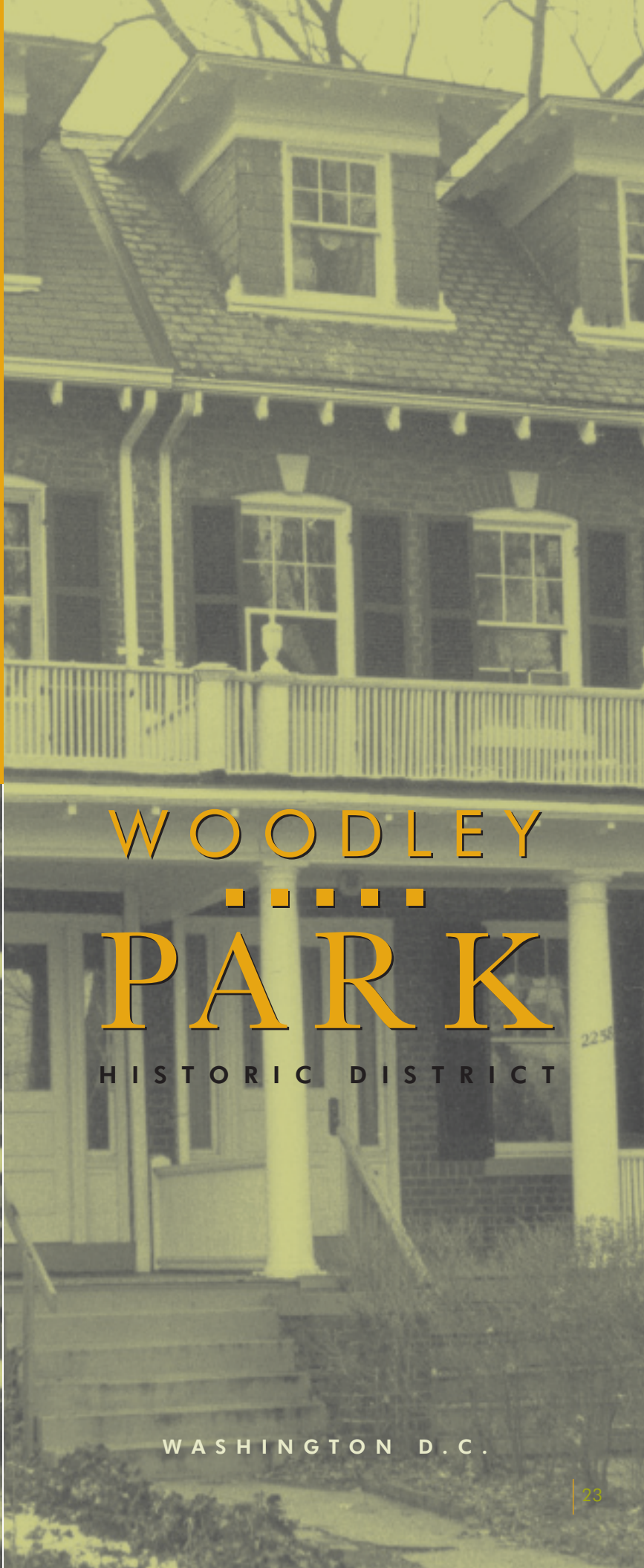

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