Teachable Moment

For Real Hometown Understanding, Start with Real Estate Maps

BY KATHRYN SCHNEIDER SMITH

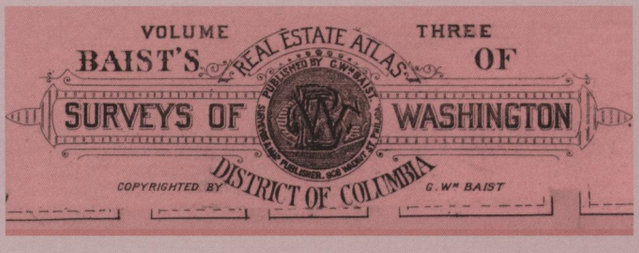
The neighborhoods in the District of Columbia that are attracting new attention in the 21st century have their roots in the 19th. To understand how these neighborhoods came to be, there is no better place to start than with maps created by real estate or insurance companies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This Teachable Moment shows how these marvelously detailed maps not only provide a snapshot of their times, but also present clues to follow to a more complete understanding of our hometown.

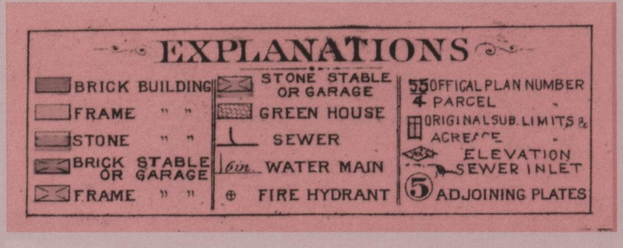
From the late 1860s through the turn of the 20th century, many new, named places suddenly appeared on city maps as eager developers followed expanding public transportation routes to open rural areas surrounding downtown to residential and commercial development. In 1862 the first public horse-drawn streetcars began to run in what was then known as Washington City, that part of the city that had been laid out by Peter L'Enfant in 1791: east of Georgetown, south of today's Florida Avenue and Benning Road, and bordered by the Anacostia River. By the late 1860s and early 1870s, some streetcar lines began to reach where large farms dominated the landscape beyond Florida Avenue (known as Boundary Street until 1890). Electric streetcars—much faster, more reliable, and capable of longer routes—began operating in 1888 and reached their zenith in the 1890s. They were complemented by B & O Railroad commuter lines. The growing transportation network spurred rural landowners to sell their farms to developers. The developers introduced formal street grids along passages that had begun as Indian trails and country roads connecting Washingtonians to creek crossings, mills, river ports, and other important nearby settlements.

As a result, crossroads once distinguished by rural taverns attracted new institutions. Churches and schools arose to serve the new residents. Street names changed. Meandering old roads disappeared or became alleys. Homes and civic structures arose in the favored period architectural styles. Neighbors formed community associations, and their efforts for civic improvements deepened a sense of identity and place. Over time, these neighborhoods developed their distinct characters, which are part of their appeal to Washingtonians today.

Fortunately for those seeking the unique stories of their home communities, the period real estate maps, published in bound volumes by companies such as the Sanborn Map Company of Pelham, New York, and G.W. Baist of Philadelphia, can be found at the Kiplinger Library of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., the Washingtoniana Collection of the DC Public Library, and the Map and Geography Division of the Library of Congress. Insurance companies once used the detailed information on these maps—especially locations and dimensions of buildings, building materials (pink for brick, yellow for wood), sizes of lots, and how the site related to city services, natural features, and local institutions—to value and appraise properties. These maps are a rich resource for historians; they not only provide information but importantly raise questions that open further avenues of inquiry.[1]

For a sense of that path to discovery, here are portions of two real estate maps (1892 and 1919) of a section of the Brightwood neighborhood. They show the dramatic march of urban street grids onto a rapidly changing rural landscape. The people and institutions named are interesting in themselves, but also set a course for further investigation. The small squares and other dark regular shapes on the lots are buildings. (The original maps available at the libraries and online show by color which houses are brick or wood.) The larger lots show acreage; too small to see on these copies are the dimensions of each lot. The annotations on the maps point to only a few examples of the information they contain and the questions they raise.





BRIGHTWOOD IN 1892

1. The full map would show this was Military Road, and further research would show it was built to link a circle of Civil War forts.
2. Ford Road, as the full map would reveal, was Rock Creek Ford Road, suggesting it was the way to a rare shallow crossing of the creek.
3. What is this school? Further research would identify it as Military Road School, opened in 1864 as one of the first public schools for black children in the District.
4. The irregular lots on most of the map show a still-rural landscape.
5. The full map shows that "Elizabeth" is Elizabeth Thomas, who was a free black woman during the Civil War, one of a number of women property owners. Further research reveals she lived in a black community called Vinegar Hill.
6. The names on the large lots invite inquiry. Archibald White was a descendant of the original settler, James White, in 1772.
7. The six roads in an irregular pattern date from the District's earliest days and meet to create a major intersection named Brightwood. Its post office suggests it was the focus of a rural community.
8. The broadest street is Brightwood Avenue, an extension of Seventh Street Road.
9. Who was M. G. Emery? He was Washington City's last elected mayor (1870) before the District briefly became a territory in 1871. The rooftop of his stately home was a signal station during the Civil War.
10. Who was J.R. Keene? As the founding president of the Brightwood Citizens Association in the 1870s, he began the campaign for public transportation.
11. The name "Brightwood" on the street grid identifies the new suburb of Brightwood Park. Note that only a few houses have been built there in 1892.

BRIGHTWOOD IN 1919

1. Rock Creek Ford Rd. and Military Rd. have been straightened. Congress had mandated the extension of the L'Enfant street plan to the rest of the District in 1914.
2. The Brightwood crossroads has become an urban intersection, with smaller, developed lots on all sides.
3. Brightwood Ave. was renamed Georgia Ave. in 1909 at the request of Georgia Sen. Augustus Bacon.[2]
4. The new car barn is a garage for the electric streetcar line. In 2015 the site is a Wal-Mart.
5. Matthew Emery's large estate is still there, with additional outbuildings. His land remains open today as part of Emery Park.
6. Meandering Shepherd Rd. is about to join a straight Concord Ave. (today's Missouri Ave.).
7. The Brice and Keene families continue to hold tracts of undeveloped land.
8. Developers have laid a street grid on open land recently owned by Julia Vinson and the descendants of Archibald White, extending the grid shown on the 1892 map farther north. Street names are three-syllable and alphabetical to conform to city regulations.
9. The four-figure numbers are new to the map, designating official city square numbers.

Elizabeth Thomas is pictured in 1911 in front of her home in Vinegar Hill, a community founded by free blacks in the 1820s. During the Civil War, her land was taken to build Fort Stevens. Abraham Lincoln personally promised to reimburse her, but he died before he could follow through.[3] *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

Union soldiers pose outside the tavern-turned-army-headquarters at the southwest corner of Seventh St. (Georgia Ave.) and Military Rd. Fort Stevens, focus of the only Civil War battle in the District, lay nearby at today's 13th and Quackenbos Sts. A small portion was restored by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and is now preserved by the National Park Service.[4] *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

The Brightwood Car Barn on Georgia Ave., 1947. It serviced streetcars from 1909 to 1955, and survived until 2012, when it was razed for construction of a Wal-Mart. *Photograph by Leonard Rice*

The Brightwood maps help us visualize how the area changes as real estate development moves northward out of Washington City. Builders are following the routes of public transportation to create new housing. The new neighborhoods appeal to people of modest means seeking to leave an ever more crowded central city that mixes residential and commercial activities. They are drawn to a location that offers modern city amenities, but also separates residential from commercial uses in a type of semi-rural setting that came to be known as "suburban." The car barn on the 1919 map serves a new electric streetcar line after the early Brightwood Citizens Association successfully lobbied Congress to help residents commute to downtown. A horse-drawn streetcar line they had initiated in the 1870s had proved unsatisfactory, but the electric streetcar definitively opened the area up to significant development in the 1890s.

When combined with other primary sources, the maps help us construct a narrative about the people of the area and the lives that they lived. Names of people, churches, schools, and institutions can be followed in city directories, federal census records, newspapers, institutional records, letters and other manuscripts, other early maps, and old photographs.

The name Brightwood persists today in a neighborhood west of Georgia Avenue, NW, that the Brightwood Citizens Association defines as stretching from Kennedy Street to the former Walter Reed Medical Center at Aspen Street, and from Georgia Avenue west to Rock Creek Park. Brightwood continues to evolve. In 2013 a large Wal-Mart Supercenter opened on the northeast corner of the intersection of Georgia and Missouri Avenues, perhaps heralding another wave of commercial development. Future historians may be able to use online mapping systems that monitor such changes in real time, but for the changes at the turn of the 20th century we still rely on the Baist and Sanborn real estate maps.

1. This Teachable Moment is adapted from the D.C. Public Schools textbooks, *You in History* by Kathryn Schneider Smith, a companion volume to *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of the District of Columbia,* first ed., by Keith Melder, Kathryn Schneider Smith, and Peter Share (Washington, Intac, Inc., 1983). *You in History,* designed to teach young people how to use primary sources, is out of print but available in the Historical Society's Kiplinger Library. On using primary sources to study D.C., see Smith, *Port Town to Urban Neighborhood: The Georgetown Waterfront of Washington, DC 1880–1920* (Washington: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 1989): 129–136.
2. Katherine Grandine, "Brightwood: From Tollgate to Suburb" in Kathryn Schneider Smith, ed., *Washington at Home: An Illustrated History of Neighborhoods in the Nation's Capital,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): 135.
3. Ibid., 129.
4. Ibid., 131.