



Washington History in the Classroom

This article, © the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., is provided free of charge to educators, parents, and students engaged in remote learning activities. It has been chosen to complement the DC Public Schools curriculum during this time of sheltering at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.





Cityscape

The Surviving Cultural Landscape of Washington's Alleys

BY KIM PROTHRO WILLIAMS

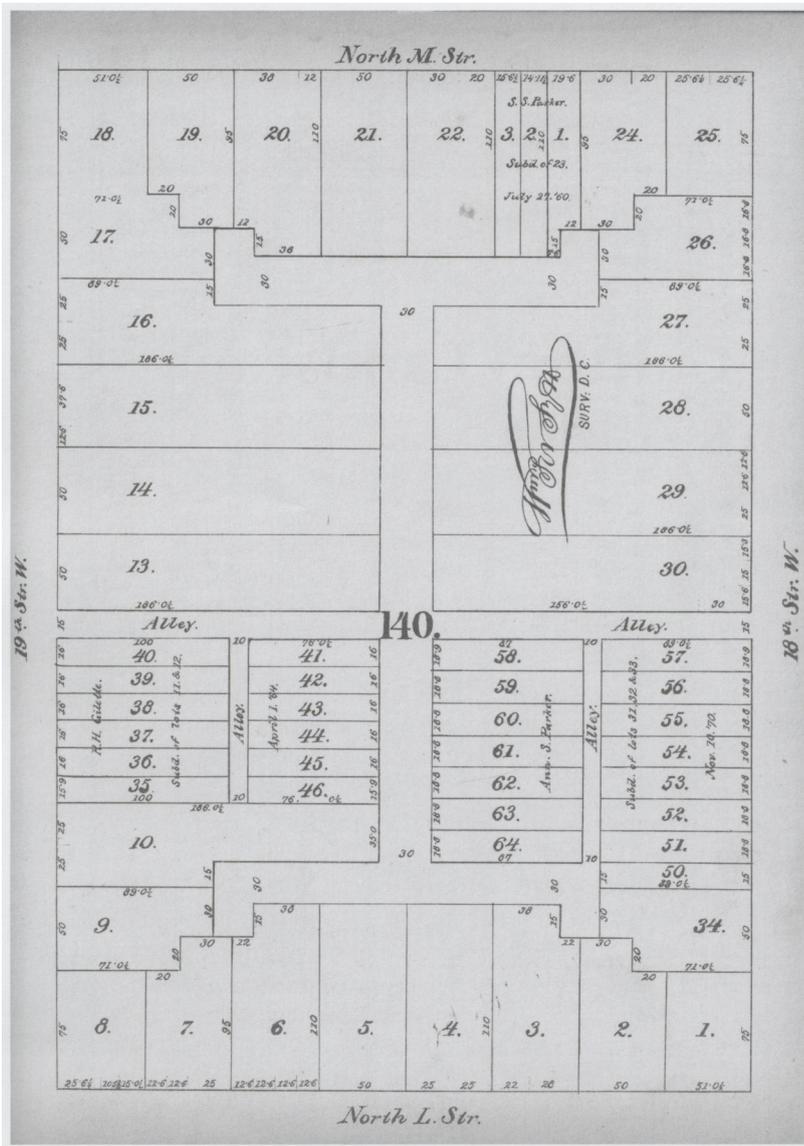
Essentially invisible from the city's public streets, Washington's complex system of alleys within the city squares developed residential and working communities during the decades following the Civil War. The residents were largely, though not entirely, African American, and certainly were among the city's poorest. From the late 19th- through the mid-20th centuries, social and urban reformers sought to eradicate the spaces and disperse those who lived there. At the same time, other socio-economic forces, including the introduction of new modes of transportation, spawned the development of new alley building types, especially stables, commercial and light industrial buildings, and garages. A review of historical maps and city directories shows that by the turn of the 20th century, the city's alleyways teemed with mixed-use activity, and alley dwellers resided alongside horses and emerging business enterprises.¹

In the latter half of the 20th century, however, as suburban living began to ease housing shortages and industrial zones were created away from the city center, there was no longer a functional

need to build in the city's alleys. Alley buildings of all types were abandoned and demolished. Alleyways were converted into surface parking or, in some cases, condemned altogether and erased from the map as large office buildings were built where they once stood. By the late 20th century, alleys and alley buildings were increasingly rare. Those that escaped demolition were considered obsolete and anachronistic, and often were left to deteriorate.

Yet recent rehabilitation projects in Washington and across the country show that revitalized historic alleyways can provide distinctive urban spaces that contribute to a vibrant social life. Within the past decade Cady's Alley in historic Georgetown, between the C&O Canal and 33rd, 34th, and M Streets, NW—once home to underutilized warehouses, dwellings, and stables—has been transformed into an active pedestrian street of furniture showrooms, office space, clothing stores, and a popular café. In Blagden Alley and Naylor Court, where densely developed alleyways remain remarkably intact, individual owners over time have brought physical and social rejuvena-

This remarkable photograph of Nayle's (or Nailor's or Naylor's) Alley, once found between Fourth, Fifth, K, and L Streets, NW, reveals the variety of historical activities and building uses in city alleys. On the left, in order of ascending height, the alley housed garages, former stables, and warehouses. Straight ahead was the side of Northern Liberties Market. Along the right, beginning from the market and in descending order of height, was the multi-story former Purity Ice Company plant, classic two-story alley dwellings, and garages. The federal Alley Dwelling Authority took this picture in 1936 during its campaign to eradicate substandard alley dwellings. Today this alley no longer exists. But if you know where to look, you can find a surprising number of alleys and their structures around the city. *Courtesy, National Capital Housing Authority*



When planners first laid out the city's squares in 1793–1794, alleyways were included in the center of the large blocks to separate the spacious residential lots. Planners expected that purchasers would place a house on the street front, with the rear portion of the deep plots available for vegetable gardens, animal pens, and accessory buildings. During and after the Civil War, when the need to house a burgeoning population intensified, many owners subdivided their properties, creating house lots from the rear portions. Access to these new lots was only available via the alleys. A set of new alley lots can be seen in this plat of Square 140 (between 18th, 19th, L, and M Sts., NW), which was subdivided by 1873–1874.⁴ Courtesy, *Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library*

tion by converting the former stables, garages, and warehouses into residences, artists' studios, restaurants, cafés, and other uses. In both cases, the city's historic preservation law played a crucial role in first recognizing and then designating these areas as historic districts, and in encouraging renovation.²

In 2011 the D.C. Historic Preservation Office began a survey to identify and document all surviving historic alley buildings that culminated in 2014 with the *D.C. Historic Alley Buildings Survey Report*. Over the course of three summers, student interns and volunteers, equipped with maps and cameras, walked the city's alleyways to identify and document extant alley buildings. All buildings that had walls and roofs (no carports or roll-up garage doors) and that were determined upon inspection to be approximately 50 years or older were recorded.³ The surveyors photographed the buildings and noted building use (historic and current), materials, height, character-defining features, and notable alterations. An archival study of historic maps, building permits, newspapers, and city directories supplemented the on-site data. Together the information has yielded a basis for understanding the buildings—when they were built, who built them, and for what purpose. All of the information and photographs were entered into a database for retrieval and analysis.

The survey identified, researched, and recorded more than 1,800 alley buildings, from dwellings to carriage houses, stables, blacksmith shops, bakeries, and warehouses. The database and publication of the *D.C. Historic Alley Buildings Survey Report* provide the first comprehensive understanding of Washington's extant alleyways and alley buildings, offering an important step towards the re-discovery and reinvention of what was historically a rich and diverse alley culture.

This photo essay highlights key survey findings and offers a glimpse into the hidden cultural landscape from which the surviving alley buildings emerged.



This early 20th-century view of an unnamed D.C. alley shows wood-frame dwellings that were typical of the earliest residential alley buildings. They had no indoor plumbing, heat, or insulation. Dirt floors, outhouses, shared water pumps, and the absence of sewers contributed to unhealthy and insanitary conditions that attracted the attention of housing and social reformers. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*



These wood frame alley dwellings (1869) are located in Poplar Alley in Georgetown. In 1871 the city established a Board of Health, in part to condemn alley dwellings deemed unfit for human habitation. As a result, during the 1870s hundreds of these first-generation frame alley dwellings were demolished. According to our survey, only three wood frame alley dwellings remained in 2014. *Courtesy, D.C. Historic Preservation Office (D.C. HPO)*



Brick alley dwellings, like those pictured in this unidentified D.C. alley of the 1930s, were an improvement over wood frame structures, but they still lacked basic amenities such as heat and water. In 1880, two years after the Board of Health was abolished as part of the 1878 re-organization of the government, the city stopped condemning insanitary buildings in part due to the political influence of property owners and landlords. In the 1880s and 1890s, property owners and developers built thousands of alley dwellings that complied with city building codes requiring brick construction, and they realized a quick and steady return on their investments. Despite, or in response to, the poor living conditions, alley dwellers developed tight-knit, hidden communities.⁵ *Courtesy, LC*



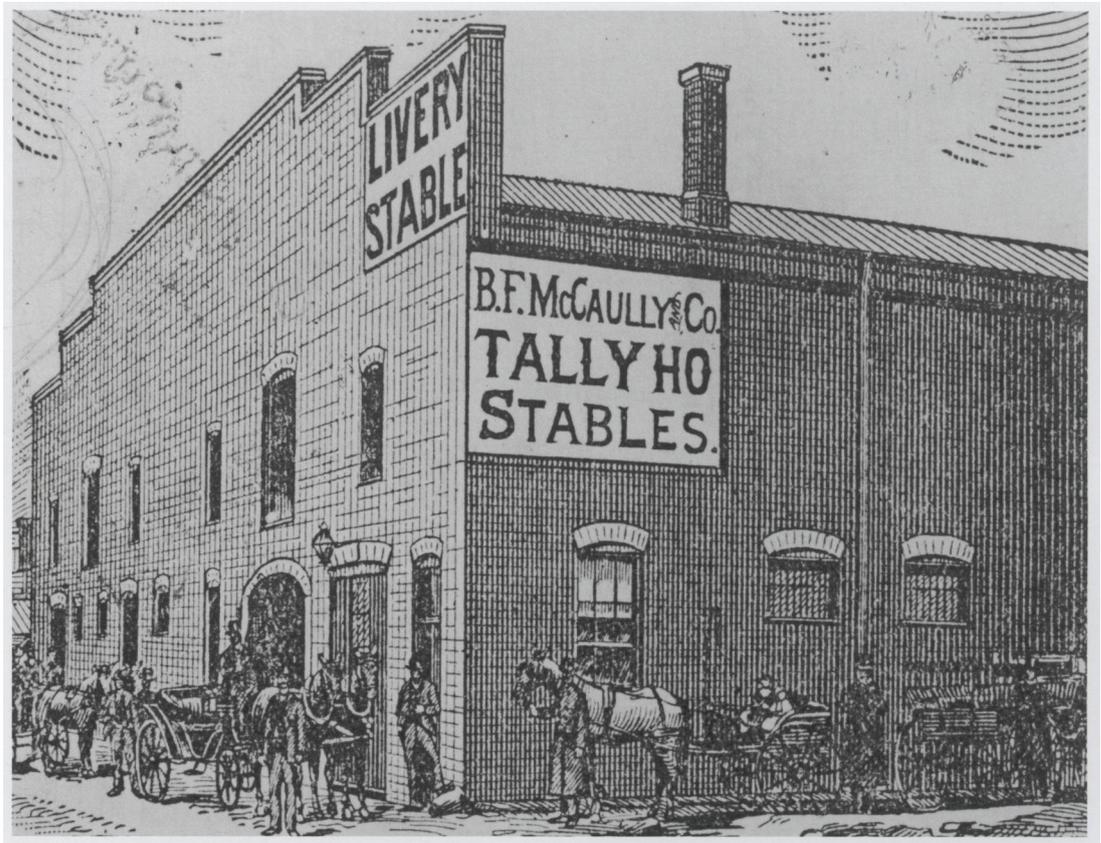
Groff Ct., NE, on Capitol Hill retains five of the original nine alley dwellings built by Diller B. Groff in 1890. This row survived a second wave of social reform, beginning in the 1890s, that led to the slow but steady eradication of thousands of alley dwellings. A 1912 inventory of the city's inhabited alleys counted 3,337 alley dwellings; only 108 (3 percent) survived in 2014.⁶ *Courtesy, D.C. Historic Preservation Office (D.C. HPO)*



Bell's Ct., NW, (now Pomander Walk) in Georgetown, *left*, retains all ten of the alley dwellings built in 1889. Snow's Ct. in Foggy Bottom, *below*, and Miller's Ct. on Capitol Hill, *above*, are typical two-story, two-bay-wide D.C. alley dwellings. Whether free-standing, or part of a row or a pair, the houses built before 1892 averaged 12–16 feet in width and had a front living room and rear kitchen on the first floor and two bedrooms above. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*

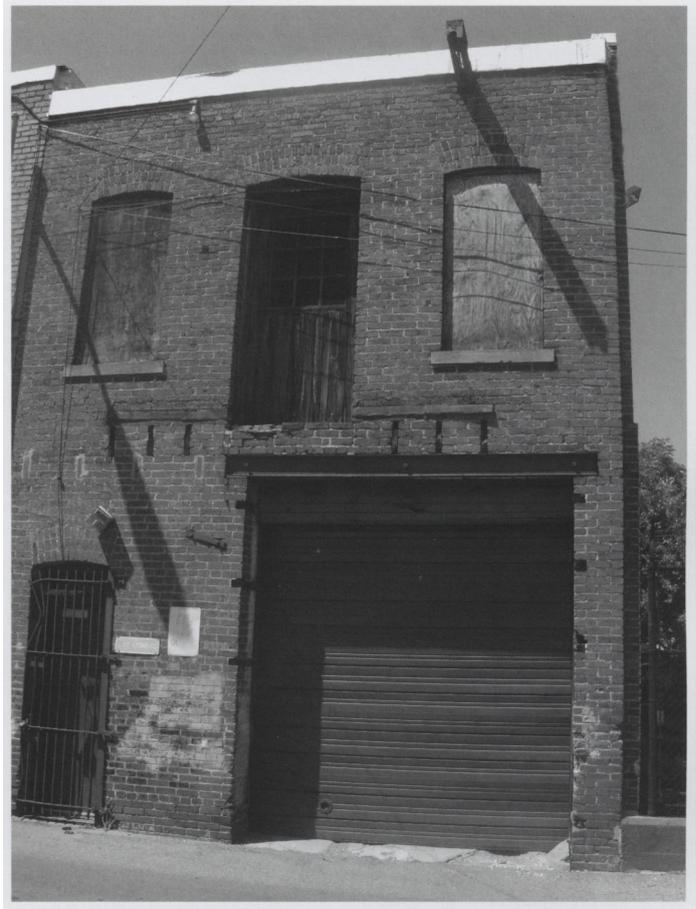


Commercial livery stables, such as the still extant Tally Ho Stables building in Naylor Ct., NW (currently home to the DC Archives), also operated in the alleys. Their horses and carriages served the general population. According to city directories, the number of commercial livery stables, both in alleys and on streets, peaked in 1898 at 82. By 1932, only one still operated. Surveyors found eight former livery stable buildings remaining today in the city's alleys.⁸ HSW



These Capitol Hill stables at 614-620 (rear) A St., NE, themselves endangered by later transportation innovations, once replaced alley dwellings. Between 1865 and the early 1890s, the city's growing population demanded horses for traveling. Alley dwellings were adapted for horses and carriages or were demolished for new facilities. The introduction of electric streetcars in the 1890s allowed residents to move beyond the boundaries of the "walking city," reducing the pressure to build alley dwellings.⁷ Our survey identified more than 400 remaining alley stables and/or carriage houses. Courtesy, D.C. HPO



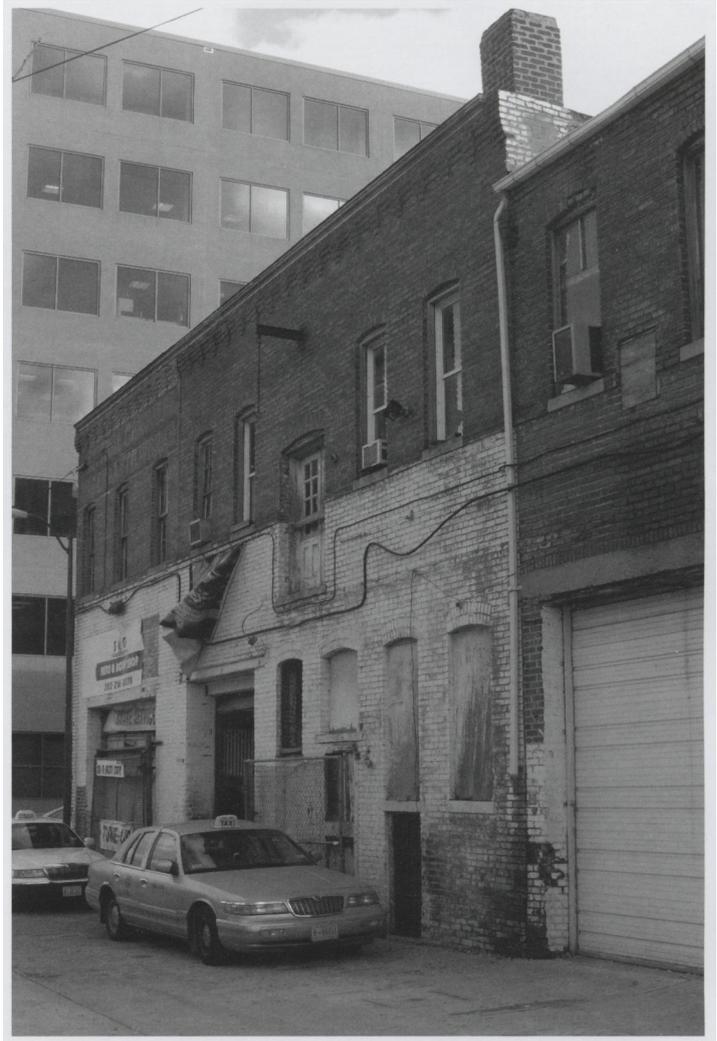


Above: These stables, built in 1906 at 1314 (rear) T St., NW, *left*, and in 1913 at 1349 Cedar Ct., NW, *right*, followed a standard two-story, two- or three-bay-wide building form with a wide carriage door on the first story and hayloft and windows on the second. Narrow windows that opened into the horse stalls are often found along the side walls of the stables. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*

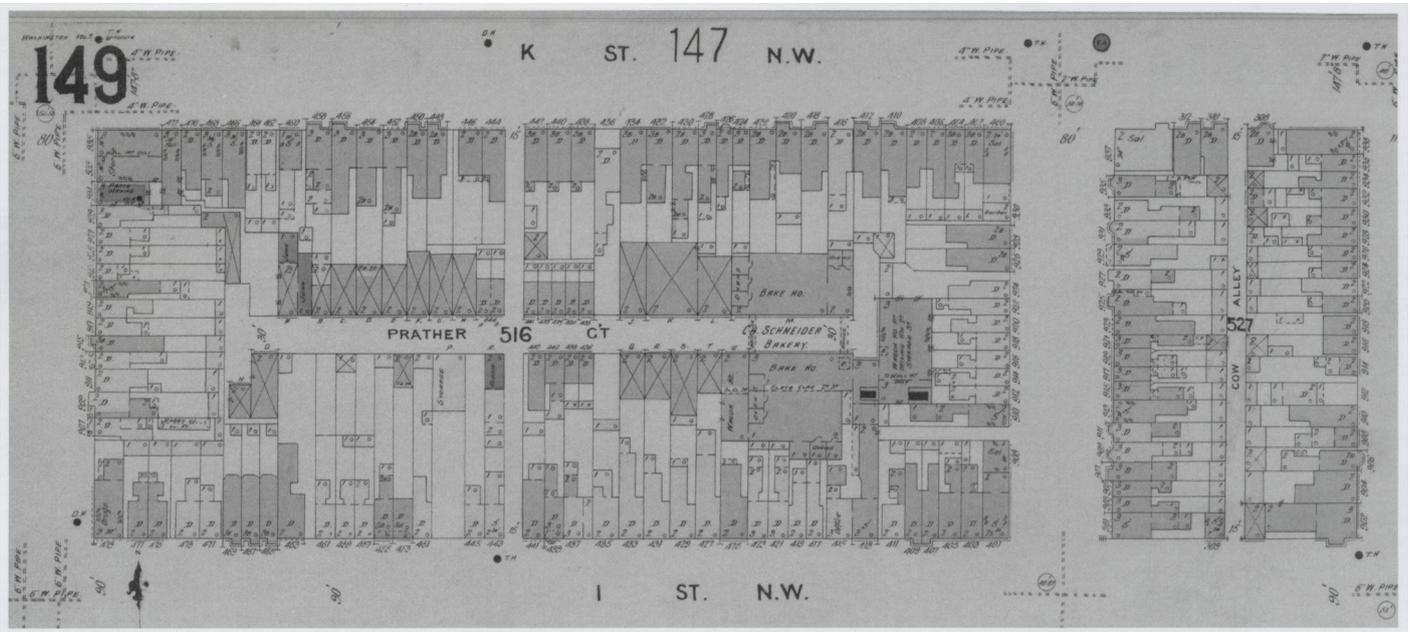
Left: Thomas F. Walsh, known as “the Gold King” for his discovery of one of the world’s largest gold mines in Colorado, built this stable at 1523 (rear) 22nd St., NW, in 1903. He and his family lived two blocks away at 2020 Massachusetts Ave. (today’s Indonesian Embassy). The large and lavish private stables of the rich often included quarters for the hostler above the horse stalls and carriage rooms. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*



Most private stables lacked much in the way of architectural adornment. One exception is this ornate stable at 1619 (rear) Connecticut Ave., NW. Built in 1890, it features intricate brickwork and a terra cotta horse head that clearly identifies the building's purpose. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*



Below and right: This 1904 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Prather's Alley shows a typical mix of uses, where dwellings (marked "d") and stables (marked "x") co-existed with a bottling plant, warehouses, and Schneider's Bakery. Most of these structures have been demolished and replaced, but this group remained in 2011, including William Beuchert's blacksmith shop (1912, with three windows), next to his warehouse (1915, five windows). Beuchert's is one of only two known remaining blacksmith shops in the city. *Courtesy, LC, D.C. HPO*





The Edmund K. Fox "auto barn" at 1618 (rear) 29th St., NW, was built in 1904 as automobiles began to replace horses in the nation's capital. At first new car owners simply remodeled existing stables, but eventually the garage as a building type was born, and today garages dominate structures found in alleys. With both horse stabling facilities and bays for cars, Fox's auto barn neatly illustrates the transition from horse to automobile. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*



This 1935 photo of Brown's Ct., *left*, shows the 20th-century adaptation to the automobile, with an original dwelling on the right and a garage, a later adaptation, on the left. The garage, *above*, at 2201 (rear) Massachusetts Ave., NW, built in 1900 and identified as an "auto house" on the building permit, is the first known private garage in the District. *Courtesy, National Capital Housing Authority (NCHA); D.C. HPO*



PROJECT NO. 1. *This nest of five alley houses, facing a brick wall in Rupperts Court, was the first purchase of the Authority. The houses were crowded into the interior of a square. The principal street boundary of the square is a commercial artery. Other buildings in this alley were used for commercial purposes*



WHERE ALLEY HOUSES STOOD. *Constructed by the Authority on the site of Rupperts Court alley houses, this repair shop completes commercial development of the alley. The Authority has leased the shop to a private tenant*

Despite reformers' efforts, alley dwellings persisted into the early 20th century. In 1934 Congress passed the Alley Dwelling Act and established the Alley Dwelling Authority to eliminate all remaining alley dwellings and to encourage economic redevelopment of the squares.¹⁰ The ADA's annual reports proved a rich resource for the survey, including this page from the 1936 report documenting the demolition of alley dwellings in Ruppert's Ct. on Capitol Hill and their replacement with a car repair shop. That shop building—Long's Garage, *right*—survives today.¹¹ HSW; D.C. HPO



Artist Edward Rowan was photographed about 1932 in his St. Matthew's Ct., NW, home/studio. During the 1930s, artists sought expansive interior space and affordable rents within former stables. Two alleys in particular—St. Matthew's Ct. and Artists' Alley (behind 3300 block of P St., NW)—became veritable artist colonies. St. Matthew's Ct. also hosted a community theater and tea room. Among those who set up alley studios were artist and builder John J. Earley and artist Mary Bussard (Foggy Bottom), U.S. Capitol fresco muralist Constantino Brumidi (Eckington), and architect Harvey Page (Dupont Circle).⁹ Photograph by Lewis P. Woltz, courtesy, Edward Beatty Rowan papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution





In 1935 the ADA readied Brown's Ct. for demolition, *left*, as part of its citywide campaign. World War II housing shortages would slow such efforts, and by the late 1940s professionals began renovating many remaining dwellings, especially in Georgetown, Capitol Hill, and Foggy Bottom. Faced with the city's destruction policy, they successfully lobbied Congress to repeal the Alley Dwelling Act in 1955, enabling more renovations or new construction, like these at 603-611 Brown's Ct., *below*. In the 1970s and '80s alley dwellings appealed to a new generation of city lovers and preservationists.¹³ *Courtesy, NCHA; D.C. HPO*



A renovated alley dwelling stands out at 1735 Fraser Ct., NW. While many surviving historic alley buildings remain vacant and deteriorating, others are undergoing renovation and conversion into private residences, offices, and businesses. *Courtesy, D.C. HPO*

Notes

1. James Borchert, "Alley Landscapes of Washington," *Landscape* 23, no. 3, 1979, 281–288; James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850–1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); on alley reform, see Grace Vawter Bicknell, "The Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C.," (Washington: Committee on Housing, Woman's Welfare Department, Nov. 1912); Thomas Jesse Jones, "The Alley Homes of Washington," *The Survey: A Journal of Constructive Philanthropy* 29, no 3 (Oct. 1912): 67–71; Jones, comp., *Directory of the Inhabited Alleys*, Washington, D.C., (Washington: Housing Committee Monday Evening Club, 1912); and George M. Kober, M.D., *Report on the Housing of the Laboring Classes in the City of Washington*, D.C. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900); *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, District of Columbia* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist), vols. 1, 2, 3, 1903, 1907, 1909, 1911, 1913, 1919, 1921, 1932, 1968; G.M. Hopkins, C.E., *A Complete Set of Surveys and Plats of Properties in the City of Washington, District of Columbia* (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, C.E., 1887); Sanborn Map Company, *Maps of Washington, District of Columbia* (New York: Sanborn Map Company), vols. 1, 2, 3: 1888, 1904, 1927, 1959; Building Permits in "Records Relating to Construction, Engineering, Land, and Transportation, 1791–1968," Records of the Government of the District of Columbia, RG 351, National Archives.
2. The D.C. Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978 (DC Law 2-144) was enacted to identify, protect, enhance and promote the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history. Work such as exterior alterations, new construction and demolition within historic districts (including alleys and alley buildings) requires a D.C. building permit, and design review.
3. Kim Prothro Williams, *D.C. Historic Alley Buildings Survey Report* (Washington: D.C. Historic Preservation Office, 2014).
4. *Faecht & Pratt Real Estate Directory of the City of Washington, D.C.*, 1874, vol. 1, square 140, Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library.
5. Bicknell, "The Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C.," 5; Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington*, 29–34.
6. Jones, *Directory of the Inhabited Alleys*, 7.
7. Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington*, 48–52.
8. *Boyd's Washington and Georgetown City Directories*, 1862, 1866, 1870, 1874, 1878, 1882, 1886, 1890, 1894, 1898, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1916, 1920, 1924, 1928, 1932. Former livery stables remain in 1300 Naylor Ct., 929 (rear) N St., 920 Snow's Ct., 1333–1335 Green Ct., 1529 (rear) Kingman Pl., 1211 (rear) 13th St., 1737 (rear) Johnson Ave., and 1514-1520 (rear) P St. all in the Northwest quadrant.
9. "An Equestrian Statue: Winfield Scott Hancock Figure," *Washington Post*, Aug. 4, 1895; "Studio for G Street," *Washington Post*, Feb. 26, 1911; John J. Earley Office and Studio, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2008; Frederick W. Cron, *The Man Who Made Concrete Beautiful* (Fort Collins, CO: Centennial Publications, 1977); "A Tea in a New Studio: Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Page Hold a Delightful Entertainment," *Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 1890, 5.
10. District of Columbia Alley Dwelling Act, approved June 12, 1934 (48 Stat. 930, as amended, 5 D.C. Code 103).
11. *Report of the Alley Dwelling Authority for the District of Columbia: An Account of Activities from the Establishment of the Authority through the Calendar Year 1936* (Washington: Alley Dwelling Authority, 1936).
12. "Alley Homes Defended by Residents," *Washington Post*, Apr. 10, 1954; "Alley Home Ban Repeal Advocated," *Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 1945; Commissioners Seek End to Ban on Alley Homes, *Evening Star*, Apr. 19, 1954; D.C. Votes to Delete Alley Ban," *Washington Post*, Apr. 20, 1954; "Senate Gets Bill Repealing Alley Statute," *Washington Post*, May 25, 1954.

Hillcrest Children and Family Center Marks 200th Anniversary, continued from page 26

commercial building.⁶ This time the orphanage moved to 14 bucolic acres on Nebraska Avenue just west of Tenley Circle. Renamed Hillcrest Children's Village, its stone cottages sat amid plenty of outdoor play space.

In the early 1950s changing social needs and greater prosperity led Hillcrest to revise its mission from caring for orphans to treating children with emotional disabilities of all races. It entered into a partnership with the Washington Institute of Mental Hygiene and Children's Hospital to open the city's first residential treatment center for children with emotional disabilities.

In the 1960s the renamed Hillcrest Children and Family Center opened at 1325 W Street, NW, moving to its current home on Rhode Island Avenue, NW, in 2012. Hillcrest enters its third century eager to continue its mission of caring for Washington's children and families.

Historian Mara Cherkasky is co-founder of the history writing and research firm Prologue DC, LLC.

1. Julie Berebitsky, "To Raise as Your Own," *Washington History* 6, no. 1 (spring/summer 1994): 6.
2. Susan Klaus, "Some of the Smartest Folks Here," *WashingtonHistory* 3, no.2 (fall/winter 1991–1992): 34.
3. Berebitsky, "To Raise as Your Own," 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. "When Washington Was Younger-No. 74," n.d., scrapbook, collection of the Hillcrest Home.
6. "City Orphan Asylum Sells Old Home," Feb. 12, 1927, Hillcrest scrapbook.