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**BUILDING HISTORY RESEARCH GUIDE**

This guide includes references to both primary and secondary materials, some of which are available at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and others that are available in other local repositories. For general information for other research locations click **here**. HSW holds many other published materials, maps, archives, manuscripts, and newspaper clipping files on specific neighborhoods, buildings, and architects. Please consult the library's online catalog at [www.historydc.org](http://www.historydc.org). Additional questions may be directed to library staff at [library@historydc.org](mailto:library@historydc.org).

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## **I) GENERAL INFORMATION ON BUILDING HISTORY**

### **A) BUILDING AND NEIGHBORHOOD CLUES**

Note architectural details, building materials, clues to current and previous use, possible alterations, relationship to surrounding buildings in the neighborhood, etc. Review published materials on architectural styles and local neighborhood history to place building within its historical context. If possible, consult family records and photographs and interview current and previous owners. SEE HSW's Neighborhood History Research Guide.

### **B) REAL ESTATE ATLASES**

Identify street address, square and lot number/s, and subdivision name (if applicable). Depending on location of property, any or all of these elements may have varied over time. Reviewing real estate atlases chronologically can help determine approximate date of building construction and track neighborhood development. Record all transitions in lot /square numbers and street addresses (previous numbers and street names are generally listed in parentheses). The following maps show the location of buildings (microfilm copies at Washingtoniana, DCPL and Library of Congress):

Boschke maps, 1857, 1861 (1857 shows City of Washington only, including building footprints; 1861 shows the entire District; location of buildings included, but not as detailed as the 1857 map)

Faetz & Pratt atlas, 1873-1874 (City of Washington only; 4 volumes arranged by square number; tax assessments describe property improvements; accompanying plat maps do not show buildings)

Hopkins atlas, 1878 (includes the entire metropolitan area and Prince George's County; published in small volume, G1275 .H59 1878)

Hopkins real estate atlases, 1887-1896 (issued periodically; after 1887, arranged by location)

Baist real estate atlases, 1903-1968 (issued periodically; arranged in volumes by location)

Sanborn insurance maps, 1888-present (Property amendments were pasted on over time)

NOTE: The Surveyor's Office, 614 H Street, N.W., holds files with varied information on subdivisions and individual properties; the staff maintains several card indexes.

### **C) BUILDING PERMITS**

From February 7, 1877, building permits were required for all new construction. Permits provide information on date of construction, architect, builder, owner, materials, dimensions, cost and use of building. Permits were also issued for alterations, additions, and demolition.

Building permit indexes, 1877-1958 – These indexes are on microfilm and may be consulted at National Archives or Washingtoniana, DCPL (not all years may be available at Washingtoniana; check with their reference staff.)

Check all of the following indexes that are applicable to the property you are researching: Square number, 1877-1928; Subdivision, 1877-1908; and Street Address, 1928-1958. Record permit number/s, abbreviations and dates. Each permit number corresponds to a specific year.

Building permits, 1877-1949 – Microfilm available at Washingtoniana and National Archives (not all years may be available at Washingtoniana; check with their reference staff.). Check the appropriate year of microfilm for permit numbers retrieved from the index. Some permits, 1877-1915, may indicate that plans have been microfilmed and removed. These plans may be consulted at National Archives II in College Park, MD. Permits and plans issued from 1915 to 1949 have been destroyed. Later permits and plans are at the D.C. Archives.

**NOTE:** D.C. Engineering Commissioner's Records, 1897-1953 at the D.C. Archives may provide additional information on services established or improvements made on or near a particular property. The collection is well-indexed.

#### **D) REAL ESTATE TAX ASSESSMENTS**

For buildings constructed before 1877, tax assessments can help determine the date of building construction. A significant increase in the value of improvements on a lot frequently signals the construction of a building or a major renovation.

**Tax assessments prior to 1887** must be consulted at National Archives; later assessments are on microfilm at DCPL and HSW. (For a detailed description of National Archives Record Group 351, which includes early tax assessments, SEE Dorothy Provine's *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Government of the District of Columbia, Record Group 351 CD3026.A32 no186*)

**General Assessment Books** were compiled periodically, generally every 5 years; access points vary:

Georgetown, 1800-1819, 1835-1879 (some gaps; microfilm at National Archives, MLK, and Peabody Room, Georgetown Public Library): early books are arranged in no obvious order, but have name indexes. After 1871, arrangement is in rough alphabetical order by owner's surname.

Washington City, 1814-1879: generally arranged by square and lot numbers before 1874. They vary in the amount of information provided about a particular property, but are most useful for obtaining the name of the owner for searching the annual tax books. (SEE below.)

Washington County, 1855-1864 and 1868-1879: early books are arranged in no obvious order, but have name indexes. After 1864, assessments are generally arranged by subdivision, then alphabetically by surname of owner.

**Taxbooks** were compiled annually and generally arranged in loose alphabetical order by owner, according to the first letter of the last name and the first letter of the first name. (Washington City tax books are arranged by ward before 1837.) The alphabetical index may cover more than one volume. (First names beginning with the letters I and J appear to have been filed together.) Tax books generally provide square / lot numbers, value of land, tax rate, value of improvements, and may include value of personal property. Taxbooks are available for the following periods:

Washington City, 1824-1879

Georgetown, 1871-1879

Washington County, 1871-1879

**NOTE:** The National Archives holds the following "undescribed" tax document for Georgetown, which includes descriptive accounts of lot improvements: *Assessment of Real Property, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Legislative District, Georgetown, 1871-1877* (2 vols; RG 351, undescribed entry, no. 68.) This assessment is not included in Provine's preliminary inventory of RG 351

**Tax assessments, 1886-1946**, are available on microfilm at HSW and Washingtoniana. (Later

tax assessments and current assessments should be available at Washingtoniana.)

## **E) DEEDS**

**Deeds, 1900-1923 and 1937-present:** Room 300 of the Recorder of Deeds holds a large card index, arranged by square and lot number, which shows changes in lot numbers and lists mortgages and leases as well as transfers of property by sale or gift.

**Deeds issued prior to 1900:** The Recorder of Deeds holds both general name indexes and grantor/grantee indexes for deeds issued from 1792 on.

The DAR Library and Family History Centers can order microfilm of D.C. land records, 1792-1886, and deed indexes, 1792-1919. The DAR holds a microfilmed name index to deeds, 1792-1884.

The National Archives holds copies of D.C. Deeds, 1792-1869, and records of real estate acquired by the District of Columbia, 1844-1875.

Washingtoniana, DCPL, holds a real estate transaction file on microfiche that traces property ownership, ca.1927-1985. The index is arranged by square and lot number.

The Surveyor's Office, 614 H Street, NW, also holds files with varied information on subdivisions and individual properties; the staff maintains several card indexes.

## **F) CITY DIRECTORIES**

Directories cover the period 1822-1973, but are not available for all years. They list residents alphabetically and include occupation, place of employment, home address, and sometimes name of spouse. Some business listings may include illustrated advertisements to identify former occupants. (Microfilm copies available at HSW; Washingtoniana, DCPL; and LOC; Washingtoniana also holds separate Hanes street indexes from 1974-present.)

1822-1913: Entries are only accessible by name of occupant. Check the directory for name of owner given on permit or in tax assessment books. If the owner is not the occupant, you will need to begin with the 1914 directory (see below). Street directories provide information on the location of streets, which is useful for streets or street names that no longer exist.

1914-1973: Directories include a separate street index.

Note: The *Washington Elite List* includes a street index at the back as early as 1888.

## **G) STREET NUMBERING GUIDE**

Until 1854: No street numbering.

1854-1869: Address numbers start at the western or northern boundaries of Washington

1854-1884: Georgetown addresses start at Rock Creek, increasing to the west; and at the Potomac River, increasing to the north.

1869-present: New system under which addresses are assigned according to the natural progression of numbered and lettered streets, and on the quadrants centered at the Capitol.

Addresses on the diagonal avenues are assigned according to their inclination relative to the horizontal.

1884: First city directory in which Georgetown numbering system conforms to the rest of D.C.

## **II) WASHINGTON ARCHITECTURE: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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