



# HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of* WASHINGTON, D.C.

WWW.DCHISTORY.ORG

## **Building History Research Guide**

Research queries & appointment requests: [library@dchistory.org](mailto:library@dchistory.org), 202-249-3954

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. 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.dchistory.org](http://www.dchistory.org). Additional questions may be directed to library staff at [library@dchistory.org](mailto:library@dchistory.org).

<b>Building and Neighborhood Clues.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Real Estate Atlases .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Building Permits.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Real Estate Tax Assessments.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Deeds .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>City Directories .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Street Numbering Guide .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Buildings of Interest.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Washington Architecture: A Selected Bibliography.....</b>	<b>5</b>

## 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.

## 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, 1100 4<sup>th</sup> Street, S.W., holds files with varied information on subdivisions and individual properties; the staff maintains several card indexes. <http://dcra.dc.gov/service/surveyor-services>

## 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 :** Building Permits Database by Brian D. Kraft is available at HSW and Washingtoniana. A manual for searching the manual by address, name, street, and square is available. 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.

## 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.

**Tax-books** 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**

**Tax assessments, 1886-1946,** are available on microfilm at HSW and Washingtoniana. (Later tax assessments and current assessments should be available at Washingtoniana.)

**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).

## Deeds

**Deeds, August 1921-Present:** Digitized records can be accessed by square and lot numbers or address using computers at the Recorder of Deeds, 1101 4<sup>th</sup> Street, S.W., or online at <https://gov.propertyinfo.com/dc-washington>. Also at the Recorder of Deeds are microfiche of deeds from 1973 to 1983, arranged by square and lot numbers.

**Deeds issued prior to August 1921:** All records before 1921 are at the D.C. Archives, as is the card index for deeds from 1900-1973.

Rev Nov 2009

Re-Formatted September 2014

## Alternative Locations to Locate Deeds:

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 (Record Group 351, Records of the Government the District of Columbia, Entry 112, Deedbooks, Office of Recorder of Deeds, 1792-1869, 551 volumes.), 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**, 1100 4<sup>th</sup> Street, S.W., also holds files with varied information on subdivisions and individual properties; the staff maintains several card indexes.

## 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. (Hard copies available at HSW. Microfilm copies available at HSW; Washingtoniana, DCPL; and LOC; Washingtoniana also holds separate Hanes street indexes from 1974-present. HSW has yellow pages from 1973-2003)

**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.

## 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.

## Buildings of Interest

**Prior to 1917:** United Confederate Veterans and Sons of Confederate Veterans, *Official Souvenir and Program Twenty-Seventh Annual Reunion, Washington, D. C., June 4-8, 1917* **P2406** Descriptions of buildings (houses, offices) with remarks on historical significance or early residents. Addresses are divided into West of Capitol and East of Capitol.

## Washington Architecture: A Selected Bibliography

- American Institute of Architects. Washington Metropolitan Chapter. *Washington architecture, 1791-1957*. (1957) **NA735 .W3 A6**
- Blumenson, John J.G. *Identifying American architecture: a pictorial guide to styles and terms, 1600-1945*. (1981) **NA705 .B55 1981**
- Canty, Donald et. al. *Washington: a capital city*. (1978) **P 1336**
- Clark, Appleton P. Clark. "Origin of the Building Regulations." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 4 (1901): 166-172. **F191.C72**
- Commission of Fine Arts. *Georgetown architecture*. (Series, 1967-1970) **NA705 .A25 no. 2-10**
- Commission of Fine Arts. *Massachusetts Avenue architecture* (1973-85; 2 vols.) **NA735 .W3 U5**
- Glassie, Henry. "Victorian Homes in Washington." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 63-65 (1966): 320-365. **F191.C72** reprint, **P 0140**
- Goode, James M. *Capital losses: a cultural history of Washington's destroyed buildings*. (1979; updated second edition, 2003) **NA735.W3 G66**
- Goode, James M. *Best addresses: A century of Washington's distinguished apartment houses*. (1988) **NA7860.G66**
- Gauss, H.C. "The Title Deeds of the City of Washington." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 18 (1915): 44-52. **F191.C72**
- Hoagland, Alison K. "Nineteenth-Century Building Regulations in Washington, D.C." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 52 (1989): 57-77. **F191.C72**
- Jackson, Donald E. "L'Enfant's Washington: An Architect's View." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 50 (1980): 398-420. **F191.C72**
- Junior League of Washington. *The City of Washington: an illustrated history*. (1977) **F194.J8**
- Kohler, Sue A. *Sixteenth Street architecture*. (1978-1988; 2 vols.) **NA735 .W3 K644**
- Kousoulas, Claudia D. and George W Kousoulas. *Contemporary architecture in Washington, D.C.* (1995) **NA735 .W3 K68 1995**
- Lee, Antoinette J. *Architects to the nation : the rise and decline of the Supervising Architect's Office*. (2000) **NA4421 .L44 2000**
- Llewellyn, Robert. *Washington, the Capital*. (1981) **F195 .L67 1981**
- McLoud, Melissa. *Craftsmen and entrepreneurs: buildings in late nineteenth-Century Washington*. Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University, 1988. **P 3169**
- Metcalf, Frank J. "Octagon Houses of Washington and Elsewhere." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 26 (1924): 91-105. **F191.C72**
- Miller, Fredric M. and Howard Gillette. *Washington Seen: a photographic history, 1875-1965*. (1995) **F195.M53**
- Moore, Charles. "Personalities in Washington Architecture." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 37-38 (1937): 1-15. **F191.C72**
- Moore, Joseph West. *Picturesque Washington: pen and pencil sketches*. . . (1886) **F199.M823**
- Murphy, Frederick V. "Architects and Architecture in the District of Columbia." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 46-47. (1947): 213-236. **F191.C72**
- National Capital Planning Commission. *Worthy of the nation: the history of planning for the national capital*. (1977) **HT168.W3 U52**
- Noreen, Sarah Pressey. *Public street illumination in Washington, D.C.: an illustrated history*. (1975) **TK4137.W3 N62**
- Park, Sharon Collins. *A new attitude towards style: the red brick federal buildings of Washington, D.C., 1878-1887*. (1980) **NA4205 .P37**
- *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*. (Indexes to vols. 1-59 include street names and square numbers.) **F191.C72**
- Reed, Robert. *Old Washington, D.C. in Early Photographs, 1846-1932*. (1980) **F195.R3**
- Reiff, Daniel D. *Washington Architecture, 1791-1861: problems in development*. (1971) **NA735.W3 R27**

- Reys, John W. *Washington on View: The Nation's Capital Since 1790*. (1991) **F195.R34**
- *Research materials for architecture and the built environment located in metropolitan Washington, D.C.*  
**<http://www.lib.umd.edu/Guests/DCARCHres/>**
- Scott, Pamela and Antoinette Lee. *Buildings of the District of Columbia*. (1993) **NA735.W3 S36**
- Scott, Pamela. *A directory of District of Columbia architects, 1822-1960*. (2001) **P 2814**
- Smith, Hal H. "Historic Washington Homes." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 11 (1908): 243-267.  
**F191.C72**
- Smith, Kathryn Schneider, ed. *Washington at home: an illustrated history of neighborhoods in the nation's capital*. (1988) **F194.W34**
- Swales, Francis Stuart. *Washington, the architectural development of a planned city*. (1941) **P 0733**
- *Washington, City and Capital*. American Guide Series. (1937) **F199.F38** (See also the library's collection of guide books, which date from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present.)
- Moeller, C. Martin, Jr. *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. (4<sup>th</sup> Edition).
- **NA735.W3W44 2006**