Putting Together a House History

Assembling a house history is like putting together pieces of a puzzle. What do the clues tell us? What don’t they reveal? Where do they mesh together perfectly? Where do they conflict? Having discussed sources of information, research techniques, and questions to be considered, we believe it best to conclude, not with more advice, but with an illustration of the possibilities awaiting a house historian. Therefore, we present below a condensed version of a house history prepared by Ruth Ann Overbeck. Included in it are references to the sources used to prepare this history and to earlier chapters in this book that contain general discussions of the concepts applied in this case study.

517 East Capitol Street, S.E., Washington, D.C.
Square 841, Lot 807

When Washington, D.C. was created in 1790, George Washington requested landowners within the proposed city limits to embark on an adventure filled with financial peril. By yielding to the government’s plans, most of the original land owners and several generations of subsequent speculators endured heartbreak and financial loss.

The plan called for the release of the owners’ rural properties. In exchange, the federal government would give them the following: a plat of their land showing the layout of streets, city squares (blocks) divided into lots and alleys, and grounds to be reserved for public buildings and parks; payment for half of the lots created in the city squares; and assignment back to the owners
of the other half by the federal government. The owners could then sell or retain the lots as they and the market dictated.

Significant short-term adversity lay ahead for the land owners. The government marketed the lots it kept in direct competition with the private owners; it did not compensate them for the land used for streets, alleys, public buildings, or grounds; nor did it permit them to engage in large-scale agricultural endeavors within the city limits. To oversee the infant capital city and the surrounding federal district, the federal government appointed a group known informally as the D.C. Commissioners. [Local histories summarize the city's creation. Records of the D.C. Commissioners contain primary sources such as letters and minutes of meetings. See chapter 4 for information on locating and using such sources.]

Through this process, square 841 was platted. William Prout owned the land from which it was carved. Prout was not typical of the city's first proprietors—elite families who had owned the land for generations. Born about 1755, Prout became a respected Baltimore merchant. He moved to the District of Columbia shortly after 1790 and established a general merchandise store in Georgetown. By 1795, he advertised the business for sale and relocated on Capitol Hill near his wife's ancestral home. Prout's acquisition of Capitol Hill land and his marriage to Sarah Slater appear to be strongly linked. [Information on Prout was derived from contemporary newspapers and censuses; again, see chapter 4. Prout family ages are derived from tombstones.]

In September 1795, Prout signed the Division Agreement that transferred square 841 to the federal government. Over the next few years, the property changed hands several times. First, New England speculator James Greenleaf acquired the rights to hundreds of city lots, including all those in square 841. He then mortgaged the lots to a European consortium dominated by Dutch businessmen and bankers. Because the consortium could not raise all the money necessary, it released some lots, among them square 841, almost immediately. [Deeds and records of the D.C. Commissioners contain land transaction information. Local histories have details of the speculation activities. These sources are discussed in chapter 4.]

The square's last eighteenth-century owner was a Philadelphia-based real estate speculation combine of Robert Morris and John Nicholson. The two owners declared bankruptcy; law suits followed; and square 841 was one of the properties listed in an equity case settled in 1810. [See the case study on Friendship House in chapter 5; Duncanson's bankruptcy is tied to these]
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or the land owners. The govern-
ment set aside land for streets, alleys, public build-
ings, and to create a nucleus of population for the group. At that time, no building stood on square 841. Then, and for several decades, the square's location five blocks east of the U.S. Capitol was too far removed from the nucleus of population to attract interest from speculators or developers. The Philadelphians, however, were used as a market for land in hopes of a profit. Burd, for instance, was associated with the Shippen brothers, some of the first Americans to encourage suburban development on a significant scale. Thus, square 841 remained unimproved in the hands of its absentee owners. [Court cases, deeds, and tax records contain information on the land transfers and the lack of improvements. Carl Bridenbaugh noted the Shippen's activities in Cities in the Wilderness. Refer to chapter 6 for more information about land use and speculation.]

In 1839, Charles H. Miller, a Washington butcher, bought three-quarters of square 841 plus thirteen other Capitol Hill lots, all unimproved and all within five blocks of the Capitol. As befitted his occupation, he then considered a “nuisance,” he lived somewhat removed from his nearest neighbors. (A restrictive covenant written in the 1850s for a suburb of Washington forbade “nuisance” industries such as piggeries and slaughterhouses. The covenant made lawful what was already customary, locating such sites away from population centers.) Miller died sometime before 1860, but his estate remained unsettled for a decade. [Deeds and tax records yield real estate information; censuses and city directories include information on the family. See chapter 4 for a discussion of these sources.]

After the Civil War, Washington changed dramatically. Official Washington had to reunite the divided nation and cope with an enormous influx of people: veterans, war widows, and orphans seeking jobs; northern war profiteers trying to keep alive government contracts acquired during the war; and emancipated slaves and European immigrants searching for new homes. Housing was scarce, and a building boom ensued. New residential construction moved outward from the old population centers. [Local histories provide the broad scope of development. Insurance maps provide a way to measure and compare extant housing density, and tax records document the immediate neighborhood. See chapters 2 and 4 for background on these sources and techniques.]

The trustees of Miller's estate subdivided several lots in square 841. The new parcel they designated as lot 19 was larger than the city's average subdivided lot. It measured 21 feet wide by 138 feet deep, faced north, and
was one lot in from the corner of East Capitol Street and Sixth Street, South East. [Deeds and plats provide these details.]

Hugh McCaffrey entered the history of square 841 in 1870 when he purchased two of its subdivided vacant lots. He paid a total of $2,148.77 for lot 19 and the corner lot, lot 20. This substantial sum reflects the speculative aura then prevalent in Washington as well as the potential of the oversized lots to be subdivided further.

Documentation on McCaffrey is contradictory. Three different birth dates indicate that he was born in Maryland, probably in 1822. The son of Irish-born parents, he moved to Washington and worked as a machinist. When the 1850 census was taken, both he and a machinist from Germany were boarding in the Nicholas Sanderson household. Nearly all the household's men, including McCaffrey, worked at the nearby Navy Yard. Sometime before 1858, McCaffrey married Irish-born Kate and fathered at least four children before 1870. The McCaffreys profited in the expansive economy in Washington. By the war's end, they owned a grocery-liquor store advertised in city directories as late as 1871. [City directories, 1860-1875, and census records, 1850-1880.]

During 1872 and 1873, McCaffrey had a matched pair of Victorian flat front rowhouses built on lots 19 and 20. How involved he was with their actual construction is unclear. Once the East Capitol Street houses were complete, however, he gave his occupation as "house contractor" and no longer listed his store in city directories. (McCaffrey's early use of the title "house contractor" is one of this house history's most significant "finds." Washington's building tradesmen lagged decades behind those in other eastern cities in adopting the term.) When new, the tax assessor valued the three-story-plus-basement house at 517 East Capitol Street at $4,000 and its lot at $1,305. These sums represented a solidly upper-middle range of Capitol Hill's middle-class housing for the era, and the building confirms that status. [Tax records establish construction date and valuation as well as comparative data.]

McCaffrey's houses were built in the version of bracketed Italianate style that had begun to sweep Washington by 1870. The bricks on the flatfront facades were laid in running bond, reminiscent of the older Federal style. Ornamental brackets at the roofline cornices and door hoods, decorative sawn work applied to the entablatures, the front door's pair of two-panel vaults, and the tall windows with two-lite sashes belong to Washington's bracketed Italianate period. Most of the original fabric of 517 East Capitol's
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1. Entablature
2. Rowhouse party wall obscured by
continuous brick facade
3. Italianate bracket with drip pendant
4. Sawn wood applique
5. Two-lite-over-two-lite double hung sashes
6. Door hood of cornice supported by
ornamental brackets
7. Pair of two panel vaults
8. Marble stoop

facade remains intact, in excellent condition. Its red pressed bricks were not intended to be painted, but numerous trim colors would have been appropriate. [See chapter 2 for architectural dictionaries, chapter 3 for information on examining a home's exterior, and chapter 5 for the use of photographs as documents.]

Slight differences distinguish this floor plan from those of Washington's pre-Civil War rowhouses, notably the inclusion of a foyer. Once inside the foyer's inner doors, the first floor layout contained a side stairhall running alongside the double parlor and terminating at the dining room door. The kitchen occupied the rear of the first story. On the second floor, the master bedroom and adjacent clothes room spanned the front of the house. Four smaller rooms opened onto the long side hall, which led to the rear second floor door. By contrast, the third story was only two rooms deep. [Historic American Buildings Survey's collection of Washington residential floor plans and years of on-site research provide a data base for comparisons. See chapter 10 for general comments on Victorian use of space.]

The interior decor was in the latest middle-class Victorian fashion. Twelve-foot high ceilings gave the first floor hall and rooms a sense of expansiveness, and the ceilings themselves contained elaborate plaster ceiling medallions from which gas-lit chandeliers were hung. Original light fixtures were removed years ago, but the large medallions remain gloriously intact. A pair of plaster doves, an unusual design element in Washington's extant Victorian houses, grace the hall's diamond shaped medallion. The circular medallions in the parlor and dining room are the more usual floral motifs. Deeply curved crown moldings contained an inch-wide band of waterlaid gilding. Pine paneling facing the side of the staircase was first calcimined, then stained and faux grained to simulate oak and a pair of faux marbled slate mantels surrounded the coal grates in the parlor fireplaces. Only the dining room's original wallpaper pattern is known. Predominantly white on a deep red background, its bold rococo pattern repeated at approximately two-foot intervals. [See chapter 3 for techniques on examining the interior of a home.]

Several mysteries remain about the original design of the house. Its interior rear staircase between the first and second floors apparently opened into the dining room rather than into the kitchen as most of Washington's known rear stairs did. McCaffrey may have presumed the house would have boarders who would want direct access to the dining room from their second floor bedrooms.

Many Washington houses of the era were built with indoor bathrooms.
Its red pressed bricks were a different color from those of Washington's own red pressed bricks. Once inside the house, the visitor would have been greeted by the grand entrance hall, leading to the dining room and the parlor. The grand staircase was made of wood, and its railings were adorned with intricate carvings. The hallway was lined with large windows, allowing natural light to flood the space.

At 517 East Capitol, an exterior wooden staircase led from the second story to the main floor. Fitted underneath the staircase at grade level was a small closet-like room, entered by a door with a quarter moon carved in it. Unlike privies, the enclosure had no built-in bench. Was this adjunct built to hold a chair fitted with a chamber pot? If so, did it supplement the indoor toilet at the rear of the second floor or was the house built without an interior bathroom? [By 1865, real estate ads in Washington newspapers cited indoor bathrooms as a standard feature. See chapter 4 for information on using newspapers in research and chapter 9 for information on plumbing systems.]

The concrete basement floor raises another question. Cement or concrete was relatively new to Washington's building industry in 1872 and certainly was not used routinely in middle-class residences. Modern Portland cement was not available in the city before 1890. Therefore, if the floor is original, it would have been cast with natural cement. [Chemical analysis of a core sample from the floor would determine content and date the concrete. See chapters 3 and 8 for information on interior features and construction techniques.]

Once the pair of houses was completed, McCaffrey moved his family into the corner building and rented out 517 East Capitol. The earliest tenants were members of the Nicholas Sanderson family with whom McCaffrey himself had lived almost thirty years before. Catharine Sanderson, Nicholas's widow, and all her children were at least third-generation native Washingtonians. Six of the at least ten Sanderson siblings moved to East Capitol Street with their mother. Mrs. Sanderson died shortly thereafter, and John W., the only known son, moved elsewhere on Capitol Hill. [City directories and censuses have family and mobility data.]

The house continued to be full of Sandersons, however. Nine people lived there when the 1880 census was taken. The census states that Hannah Sanderson was single and twenty-five years old. Working as a clerk in the U.S. Treasury Department, Hannah faced a four-mile roundtrip commute. She likely made the trip via the streetcars, which connected Capitol Hill to the White House, the Treasury, and other executive offices. [Local histories and streetcar route maps are described in chapters 4 and 5.]

Hannah was listed as head of the household despite the fact that she was not the oldest person in residence. Agnes, at twenty-seven, was "keeping house" for the brood, a position that evidently demoted her status below that of wage earner. The rest of the adult females in the house were Agnes and Hannah's sisters: Mary, twenty-three and a teacher; Rosa and Evelyn,
twenty-one and nineteen respectively and with no occupations given; and
Ellen, thirty-two, the only wife and mother among the siblings. George
Castell, Ellen's husband, was a mechanical engineer who had been unem-
ployed for half of 1879. We have no clue to the reason the Sanderson women
retained such control that Castell was not listed as head of their household.
More typically he or his wife, rather than Hannah, would have assumed
that position following Catharine's death. Also, no information exists about
how the Castells and their year-old daughter Nannie found some privacy
or where Katie Hogan, the twelve-year-old niece and schoolgirl who com-
pleted the household, fit in. [1880 census. See chapter 10 for further in-
formation on family structure.]

In 1886 John H. Rogers acquired the residence and front eighty-four feet
of lot 19. McCaffrey had subdivided lots 19 and 20 by lopping off the rear
of each lot. In 1887 he apparently used proceeds from his sale to Rogers
to build two more rowhouses on the new rear lots. [Land division and trans-
fers appear in deeds and plat books, and building permits, implemented in
Washington in 1877-1878, give dates for the new houses.]

Rogers and his wife Roseanne became 517's first owner-occupants. They
moved from New York to Washington shortly after 1880. Like the Sand-
ersons, their income came from government employment. Rogers, a political
appointee, held several different positions with the House of Representa-
tives before becoming one of their printing clerks. He must have been sure
of his relationship with Congress; in 1882 The Evening Star, a local new-
paper, noted that most government clerks hesitated to buy housing in Wash-
ington. Rather, they preferred to board or rent because of the uncertainty
of the tenure of their appointments. [See chapter 4 for information about new-
paper research.]

Rogers's earning power remained stable for almost a decade after he pur-
chased 517 East Captiol. His annual salary ranged from $2,500 to $2,912,
depending on whether or not Congress voted bonuses to its employees. In
1895 a former member of Congress replaced Rogers's boss as chief clerk of
the House of Representatives, and Rogers no longer had a job. His only
known job that year was during March when he tallied votes for Congress.
[Payroll information from House of Representatives monthly reports provided
information of Rogers's employment history. See chapter 4.]

When he died at the turn of the century, Rogers's will left the family home
to his wife, daughter Annie, and a sister-in-law, who had predeceased him.
His heirs had to cope with two deeds of trust that Rogers negotiated in 1895.
PUTTING TOGETHER A HOUSE HISTORY

Although the mortgages were supposed to have been paid off in 1897, Roseanne Rogers did not receive their release papers until she sold the house in 1905. She evidently applied some of the sale proceeds to the mortgages, then moved to a nearby rental property. [See deeds, city directories, and probate records as described in chapter 4.]

In November 1905, John Warner, a widower, purchased 517 East Capitol. Because of the commoness of his name and lack of other identification, such as a wife’s name, Warner cannot be traced biographically. Apparently neither he nor his heir(s) ever occupied the premises, but their forty years of ownership are the longest yet recorded for the property. During most of that time, they had the same tenants. [Land transfer information and John Warner’s widower status appear in deeds.]

About 1910, Henry F. Belt and his wife Roberta, or “Bertie” as she was nicknamed, moved into Warner’s house. A carpenter, Belt exemplifies Capitol Hill’s history of being home to a sizeable segment of Washington’s building trades population. Belt died about 1918, but his widow lived on in the big house until at least 1948. [The National Register nomination for the Capitol Hill Historic District contains an occupational summary for the area. City directories contain limited data.]

City directories carry no evidence that Bertie Belt had anyone living with her, but do state that many of her neighbors ran boarding houses or “tourist homes.” Fragmentary information, however, proves conclusively that both family and paying “guests” resided with her. Her sister, Mrs. Lucy Minor, was a long-time member of the household. None of the numerous postcards and letters that turned up during a 1983-1984 rehabilitation of the building were addressed to Lucy, but “Cousin Bertie’s” correspondents invariably asked her to pass on their regards to her sister. Some of the letters referred to the hard work the two women had to do and how tired they must be at day’s end. One pointed to a long period of roaming house operation by noting that Bertie’s decision to switch to taking in “tourists” instead of “regulars” should ease the burden.

The women were not without help. Laundry slips confirm that at least two bundles a week were sent out. When an unidentified Cecelia Graves was too pressed with her own duties to work at Mrs. Belt’s, she sent a note recommending her bearer, an unnamed young girl who wanted work, as her temporary replacement.

In all probability, Mrs. Belt provided “board” as well as rooms. Receipts indicate that a local dairy regularly delivered substantial quantities of but-
ter, milk, and eggs and that Mrs. Belt purchased fresh produce and poultry directly from rural suppliers, who also delivered. A note sent one Friday alerted Mrs. Belt that there were only two more young chickens and, at 5 1/4 and 4 1/2 pounds, they were not quite as heavy as those being delivered that day. The poultry raiser, “Grace,” then added that she did not think the chickens would gain much during the ensuing week. In closing, Grace requested Mrs. Belt to drop her a card stating whether or not to send the chickens the next Friday. [Chapter 10 discusses background sources for the home as a workplace.]

Invitations, birth announcements, and notices about Presbyterian church events provide glimpses of life at 517 East Capitol Street. Most of the correspondence focused on the weather, travels, social gatherings, and family heartaches and illnesses. Letters from a cousin in Houston were the exception. Beginning in the summer of 1939, more than two years before the United States officially entered World War II, the cousin expressed grave concern about the upcoming war. A final letter, postmarked June 12, 1947, contained the cousin’s sympathetic response to Bertie’s announcement that she had to leave the house, which had been her home for so long.

Mrs. Belt’s departure coincided with a change of ownership for 517 East Capitol. At the war’s end in 1945, Richard A. Warner, John Warner’s heir, sold the East Capitol Street property to Rose J. Waggaman. Both Warner and Waggaman lived across the city from Capitol Hill. Waggaman, however, was a secretary who worked next door to 517 East Capitol Street—at the real estate firm of Joseph Herbert and Sons. [Deeds and city directories provide cursory information about this period.]

Mrs. Belt continued to live at 517 East Capitol until the property changed hands again in March 1947. Its new owners were the Joseph Herbergs, owners of the next door real estate firm. Mrs. Belt moved sometime before September 1948. That was when the first building permits for the house were issued. One was for plumbing, the other for the construction of two new “non-bearing partitions.” The permits gave no locations for the partitions, but physical evidence abounds to show a bathroom was installed in a corner of the dining room. [See chapter 4 for information on building permits.]

These efforts to facilitate a multifamily use were made almost concurrently with the first documentable interest in the neighborhood as a historic area. History was repeating itself. Those squares closest to the Capitol drew immediate attention—this time from preservationists and speculators. A location
based fresh produce and poultry.

A note sent one Friday alerted the boys to an offer on Saturday, 5 1/4 and 1 1/2 yds as those being delivered that day. She did not think the spring would be

Missing background sources for the

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five blocks from the Capitol seemed far away, but change was coming. [Contemporary newspapers and reminiscences of realtors document this period of transition. General information about these types of sources may be found in chapters 4 and 5.]

In 1950 Herman F. and Louise T. Karasek purchased 517 East Capitol Street. For the second time in its history, the house was owner occupied, and for the first time in about fifty years, children were part of the household. The adult Karaseks came to Washington to work for the federal government, in this instance the Department of Commerce. He was from South Dakota; she, from Oklahoma. They each received college degrees before leaving their home states. The couple moved to Capitol Hill during World War II and had lived nearby before they purchased 517 East Capitol Street.

The decade of the fifties was a busy one for the Karaseks. First, Herman resigned from the Department of Commerce to work in Congressman Francis Case's successful campaign for a Senate seat. When the election ended, Herman decided he needed the time to work on the rental properties he and Louise were amassing and to continue his real estate sales activities. From 1950 to 1956, the Karaseks owned and operated a nearby convenience store or "Mom and Pop" store. In a familiar pattern for post-World War II Capitol Hill residents, the Karaseks accumulated a significant amount of real estate and at one time owned nineteen properties in Washington and nearby Maryland and Virginia.

Louise Karasek's career typifies that of many World War II-era professional women. Although she arrived in Washington with both B.S. and M.A. degrees in foreign languages, her occupation invariably appears as secretary. When her three daughters were born, between 1942 and 1945, Louise Karasek resigned from the Department of Commerce to raise them. She participated in civic organizations, PTAs, and especially the nearby Metropolitan Baptist Church. While her daughters were young, Louise worked with her husband in their home-based insurance agency, on some aspects of their real estate investments, and ultimately eased back into the outside work world, first as a substitute teacher, then as a full-time teacher. In 1960, with her daughters almost grown, Louise Karasek returned to work at the Department of Commerce as a secretary and staff aide. Herman Karasek continued as a part-time real estate agent. One of Washington's last city directories lists both Karaseks as retired, but still living at 517 East Capitol Street, S.E., in 1970. By 1983 they decided to move to Florida. When the property passed
from the Karaseks, it marked the end of the second longest ownership. [Letters and interviews of Louise Karasek, and city directories document the Karasek's occupancy.]

A late-twentieth-century life style ensued for the occupants of 517 East Capitol Street. Gone were the last of its roomers. Its new owners, Zorita and Richard Simunek, both have multifaceted careers. Like most of the previous owners, the Simunecks came to Washington to begin their careers with the federal government, he as an agricultural economist, she as a graphic designer. Their avocation of real estate investment and rehabilitation subsequently turned into a full time profession for Zorita, and in 1985 Richard became a consulting economist.

The Simunecks’s approach to the house was to get to know it. They first determined that the bathroom which had been installed in part of the dining room in 1948 was expendable. It was removed, and the kitchen was gutted. A partition wall dividing the double parlor was removed. At that point, clue after clue emerged.

The parlor had been partitioned so long ago that the plaster crown moldings had not been painted before the partition was installed. With the wall removed, the waterlaid gilding in the crown molding became apparent. Evidence of each tread of the rear staircase was visible on the brick kitchen wall, and the dining room door leading to it still hung on its hinges. A circa 1900 mantel had been installed against the dining room wall. After it was removed, the Simunecks discovered a wealth of paperwork from Mrs. Belt’s residency. The mantel evidently had been her favorite place to store important papers. Laundry and dairy receipts as well as other bits of the house’s social history emerged. The dining room wallpaper also came to light when the plaster ceiling had to be replaced. The imprint of the wallpaper pattern showed clearly against the ceiling plaster when the last layer of paper was removed. The pattern was identical to fragments found on the wall.

Slowly, but surely, the history of the house surfaces. It is a history that illuminates the time, place, and people the house has served.

*Comparative data on building contractors came from Melissa McLeod, “Craftsmen and Entrepreneurs: Builders in Late Nineteenth Century Washington” (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1987).*