

REPORT OF
SITE VISITS
TO

323 A STREET, S.E.
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Prepared

by

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323 A Street, S.E.
Built -- 1878
Style -- Bracketed Italianate

In the fall of 1878 the two-story single family dwelling known as 323 A Street, S.E. was built as rental property. Its developer was Capitol Hill coal and wood merchant Henderson Fowler. Fowler, who lived near the Navy Yard and the Eleventh Street Bridge, began acquiring real estate before the Civil War; and his development of this site is consistent with his other known projects. From his first real estate investment Fowler pursued a safe course by speculating in empty land near property which was already developed. Then, when he determined that the timing was right, he would build. Every development project that thus far has been identified as Henderson's has consisted of a single family residence, modest in size and scale in comparison to its neighbors, yet stylistically appropriate. They are all located on Capitol Hill between East Capitol Street and the Anacostia River.

From a historic preservation point of view Fowler's building at 323 A Street, S.E. is in good to excellent condition. It also is proto-typical of the moderately priced Capitol Hill house of its era. By far the majority of these houses were not designed by architects and this one is no exception. Fowler listed neither an architect nor a builder on the permit he obtained for the project. Still, the overall effect is similar to numerous houses designed by architects. One way that late nineteenth century developers accomplished such a professional look without the expense of retaining an architect was to use "pattern books." These books contained compilations of facade elevations and floor plans which their publishers bought from professional architects. Thus, they placed good designs within the price range of the average person. Fowler either used a pattern book, repeated elements from designs that he had used for earlier projects, "borrowed" ideas from one or more houses that his craftsmen had built for other clients, or combined two or more of his options. In this instance, Fowler chose a bracketed variation of the pervasive "Italianate" style that was so dear to the heart of Capitol Hill developers and builders, ca. 1868 -1880.

The pressed brick flat front facade at 323 A Street, S.E. forms a plain smooth surface against which the embellishments characteristic of the post-Civil War years stand out. Still relatively new in 1878, pressed brick marked technological and aesthetic departures from the rougher textured, unevenly colored, and more random sized handmade brick used in Washington's earliest buildings. Its surfaces' imperviousness to the weather was one of the most important advantages that pressed brick offered. That same factor also made paint unnecessary as a weatherizing agent. So much of Washington was built of pressed brick during the last 40 years of the nineteenth century that it

became known as the "Red Brick City." During the 1890s, however, newly arrived industrial magnates built mansions in pale stone and thereby set a fashion trend that encouraged painting the older red brick.

The facade of 323 A Street, S.E. is so coherent that it acts as a table of contents to the house's history. The placement of its front door connotes its interior side hall floor plan; the tall two-lite-over-two-lite double hung wood sash represent the contemporary American glass making technology which placed larger sheets of glass within the reach of the average person's pocket book, and they also illustrate the philosophy of good health that emphasized expansive windows to admit adequate quantities of light and air; the heavily bracketed wood trim of the house's cornice and porch, as well as the four panel wood door with round-headed upper panels, acknowledge the Italianate style. The facade's flat segmented arch headed window apertures of brick seem out of step with the exaggerated brackets used elsewhere on the facade, but they represent a popular deviation from the "hooded" window look. The louvered shutters were fixed in place and the facade bricks were painted ca. 1970.

Once inside the front door, the house also accurately reflects the era in which it was built. Although use of the side hall-straight stair floor plan preceded Capitol Hill's Italianate era, its relative frequency increased dramatically as the style swept to the fore. This type of floor plan's most common configuration is L-shaped, with the bottom of the L facing the street and constituting the "front" of the house. The main floor of the "front" contains the foyer, stair hall and stair placed along one side wall, and one, sometimes two, parlors ranged along the opposite side wall. To add structural strength the back wall of this front section spans the fullest width of the building and is a load bearing wall. The narrow portion of the house that lies behind the load bearing wall is what is known as the "back building." Its first or main floor typically consists of a dining room that abuts the rear wall of the "front," with the kitchen and any other small service rooms arranged linearly behind the dining room.

Key Floor Plan and Ornamentation Elements at 323 A Street, S.E.

First floor elements

1. a small enclosed foyer with an inner door placed parallel to the front door.

The foyer's primary function in a residence of this scale was to conserve heat. Secondary functions were to provide an interim space between the street and the interior to reenforce the Victorian ideal that home offered sanctuary and privacy; and to contain a shallow

hat tree or umbrella stand. As with the rest of the interior the walls and ceiling were plastered. Here, they also would have been papered, perhaps with a more weather resistant treatment, such as beaded wainscoting, from approximately chair rail height down to the floor. The floor itself was exposed wood. Plaster cornices generally ornamented the ceiling.

2. stair hall and stairs.

The plan of the stair hall and stairs dictated that the stair case be snugged up against the exterior wall and that the stair hall terminate at the load bearing wall that separates the front of the L from the back building. Two large doorways lead from the hall into the parlor, one approximately at the foot of the stairs and the other at the rear of the staircase. At the rear end of the hall a smaller doorway provides access to the dining room.

The wood trim on the stairs was milled by machine. Newel posts and hand rails were made of good to better quality wood, often hardwood. When the wood and workmanship allowed, these items were carefully sanded, then given an oil finish. If not sufficiently dark, they were stained or varnished to resemble walnut or mahogany. In less affluent houses the spindles often were milled of softer wood and were painted to conceal their origin. The exposed wood "case" or wall of the stairs would have been painted or stained, even faux grained, as the quality of the wood and the owners' taste dictated. Another option included the installation of a machine woven carpet known as a stair runner.

Walls and ceilings of stair halls were papered and plaster cornices ornamented the ceiling. In addition, a small gas fueled chandelier was centered in the space between the foyer door and the foot of the stairs. It was suspended from a small plaster medallion that was applied to the ceiling. Once the theme of the plaster work was established in the foyer, it moved with slight variations through the front of the first floor and into the dining room. In cases such as 323 A Street, S.E. where such continuity is lacking one or more repair or modernization efforts can be assumed.

The style of the first floor's machine milled baseboard, cap, and toe molding, as well as doors and door trim, was established in the stair hall. It would have been continued upstairs, with maybe a slight modification downward in costliness. Its original finish would have been one or more of the following: paint,

faux grain, stain, varnish, or oil. The treatment of these elements would have been consistent throughout the formal spaces of the first floor and may even have been carried upstairs. New same-width oak flooring was laid in the stairhall in the 1930s.

3. parlor.

Parlors of this era have high ceilings and are relatively long and narrow, with a mantel and fireplace or two located across the room from, but parallel to, the wall separating the parlor from the hall. In houses such as 323 A Street, S.E. small coal grates or ornamental coal stoves were fitted into the fireplace openings. Here, the slate mantel has been beautifully faux grained to resemble marble and its incising highlighted with gilt.

The Italianate style is one of the earliest in which virtually every room in the house was assigned a specific and limited use that related to maintaining correct social etiquette. During the Victorian era parlors were reserved for the most formal occasions such as parties, weddings, and funerals. They can be, and historically they frequently were, isolated from the rest of the house by closing the large doors that lead into them. This results in an economy of fuel, and saves wear and tear on the most expensive furnishings in the house.

Wallpaper covered the parlor walls and ceilings and plaster cornices and medallions ornamented the ceiling. In 323 A Street, S.E. the scale and motif of the parlor cornice differs significantly from that in the stair hall. Its proportions and ornamentation are consistent with others that have been definitively dated to ca. 1890-1900. In all likelihood this cornice also dates from this later era and its use here may indicate that the original cornice was damaged, perhaps by the tornado that removed roofs from buildings all over Capitol Hill ca. 1893, or maybe from the use of a free standing bathtub in the middle of the bedroom located directly above. New same-width oak flooring was laid in the parlor in the 1930s.

Lighting in this room would have been provided by either one large or two medium size gas fueled chandeliers, again surrounded with a plaster medallion. Here, however, the medallions were significantly larger than that in the foyer. The plaster of the medallions were more fire resistant than the wallpaper on the ceiling in case the gas flared. The medallions also

"caught" the fumes from gas in the chandeliers and the deep carving may even have been "highlighted" by the variations in shading caused by the soot. Certainly, repainting a medallion as needed was less expensive than re-papering an entire ceiling would have been.

4. dining room.

Middle class housing of this era demanded a separate dining room, but even at that the dining room was used more frequently than the parlor. In fact, if a house had no back stair case all interior traffic to the kitchen had to pass through the dining room. The prevalence of a side exit directly from the dining room that led to the rear garden indicates both the popularity of adjourning to the garden after a meal and the fact that the kitchen was not a room to be traversed by anyone other than family. When fireplaces and mantels were installed in dining rooms they generally backed up to the dining room-kitchen wall to share the flue that vented the cook stove. Again, however, the fireplace would have been fitted with a small coal grate or an upgraded version of the Franklin stove.

Ornamentation in the dining room would have echoed that in the stair hall and parlor. In some houses of this era stained and oiled wainscoting, topped with a chair rail, covered the lower portion of the dining room wall.

5. kitchen.

As a rule, built-in cabinetry was too expensive for the kitchen in a house such as this, so its residents chose free standing kitchen furniture as the alternative. Even in affluent homes kitchen walls and ceilings were plastered and painted, but not papered. This use of economical and more fire retardant plaster resulted from the very real possibility of soot or flames from an errant coal or wood fueled cook stove ruining the use of the more expensive covering. In addition, plaster cornices and medallions would have deteriorated under the temperature and humidity generated there, so those elements were also omitted from most kitchens.

Storage of dishes, pots, pans, and other household necessities was relegated to a pantry or occasionally to a small shed-like addition attached at the back of the house.

Second floor elements

Intact second floor layouts and general ornamentation are equally predictable for the side hall plan of this vintage; and again, the house at 323 A Street, S.E. matches almost all of the parameters of the floor plan.

1. stair landing and halls.

One of the most unique aspects of the second floor layout is the small landing at the top of the stairs. It acts as a temporary platform from which to access either the front or the back building via the short flight of steps that leads up to the principal level of the second floor. This feature was used in Capitol Hill houses for no more than eight to ten years, preceded and succeeded by a level floor throughout the second story. The same-width oak flooring was laid on the second floor stair landing and halls in the 1930s, at the same time as that on the first floor.

The hall in the front portion of the second floor parallels the stair case and terminates at a small room built above the foyer. The front-most two doors that lead off the second floor front hall are at right angles to each other, one of which leads to the small room above the foyer, while another provides entry to the largest second floor or front room. The rear second floor hall stretches the length of the back building until it terminates at the door of the back bedroom. The wall is located adjacent to the party wall against which the staircase was built. All rooms in the back building are arranged linearly along side it with the exception of the rear room. The rear room itself is the exception rather than the rule as the hall commonly "dead-ends" into the rear wall. Skylights were not used universally in 1878, so that this hall's only source of natural light tended to be through the window in the rear wall or the transoms above the bedroom doors.

2. front rooms, small and large.

In the original concept of this floor plan the small room above the foyer is a completely separate space, with a door to the hall and sometimes another door to the adjacent large front room. When the only door is to the hall, this small area originally functioned as a sewing room or a trunk or other storage room. Alternatively, when the small room also had access directly to the adjacent large room it served as a nursery, the sleeping chamber for live-in help who had to render

assistance to those who slept in the large room, or even as a dressing room. In this instance the partition wall between the small and large rooms has been partially removed and an archway has been created. This spatial configuration typifies Capitol Hill houses built ca. 1890 - 1912. During the 1960 and '70s it again became fashionable. Given the background of the recent sellers of 323 A Street, S.E., and the fact that five children shared the bedroom at the front of the house during at the turn of the twentieth century, the likelihood of the alteration being accomplished during the earlier period is high.

3. rear rooms.

Typically three rooms, two medium size and one small one, line the rear hall of the second floor. The medium size rooms traditionally were bedrooms. By 1878, when Fowler applied for his permit, the city required virtually all new residences in its vicinity to be hooked up to the city's water and sewer system and to contain a toilet. The latter was usually placed in the small room alongside the end of the hall. The room that presently stretches across the rear width of the house is an anomaly in size and shape and may be the result of the extension behind the kitchen.

Relatives of the Tappan family relate that nine people resided in this house about the turn of the twentieth century. They allocated the rear bedroom to the parents, the bedroom to the north of the bathroom to the bachelor brother of one of the parents, the bedroom north of that to the widowed mother of one of the parents, and the front bedroom (including the small room over the foyer) to the five children.

4. closets.

Clothes closets were not routinely built into Capitol Hill houses until ca. 1890. Even then, they were often triangular in shape with one shelf and three or four hooks attached to a board nailed into the wall. The triangular closet in the rear bedroom is typical of the location and size of this type of storage space. Its facing of beaded board, however, is atypical and suggests that it was a post-construction alteration.

On occasion a built-in closet was installed in the second floor's front stair hall and filled in the space between the end of the stair rail and the small room. Although many of them were added early, even

prior to 1900, they normally are not original to the house.

General Comments

In at least one aspect, Fowler's development of this project was at odds with his coal business. He apparently did not install a boiler and radiator heating system, this despite the fact that Washingtonians had embraced the concept of central heating before the Civil War. Even if Fowler preferred not to utilize a gas-fired system which the Washington Gas Light Company had made possible during the 1850s, it seems strange that he decided not to install one fueled by coal. The extra cost of digging and constructing even a partial basement may have been the controlling factor.

The primary alterations which have occurred relate to plumbing, central heating, and the kitchen and these changes make virtually no impact on the house's historic facade. The most recent rehabilitation for which documentation survives was in 1931 when noted black architect Romulus C. Archer, Jr. designed the contemporary brick addition at the rear of the kitchen. The radiator heat system which was installed under Archer's direction necessitated this and perhaps other more minor alterations.

The "pony stable" at the rear of the property is another anomaly. No permits exist for it. Much of its material, such as the wide boards used as vertical siding, implies that it is quite old. Still, it doesn't show up on most early published plat maps. Note that the two horizontally placed "stall" pieces consist of house shutters. Oral history interviews are probably the only source of information on the subject.

Guidelines for the future.

Even though so many original elements of the interior have survived numerous questions remain unanswered. Wood finishes, color schemes, light fixtures, curtain and drapery hardware, and the original equipment of the bath and kitchen are among unknowns. Also, no permit has been found to document the installation of the bathroom in its present location. Some of these items may never be learned. Others, however, can be determined during the rehabilitation process if time is taken to examine surfaces carefully. Recent occupants of the house removed some of the wallpapers, the most recent layer of which were patterns a la colonial Williamsburg interpretations of ca. 1940. Still, scraps of original wallpaper may survive inside closets, especially near their ceilings.

If one or both will consent, an oral history interview of the Tappan sisters might yield an enormous amount of information about both the building and its social history.