

# Washington Perspectives, Inc.

## HISTORICAL SUMMARY

423 Sixth Street, SE  
Washington, DC

prepared for

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commissioned by

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# Washington Perspectives, Inc.

## HISTORICAL SUMMARY

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Prior to the platting of Washington in 1790, land on which the house at 423 Sixth Street, SE stands had been part of the Cerne Abby Manor portion of Daniel Carroll of Duddington's plantation. Before the actual platting could begin, an enterprising Baltimore merchant and real estate speculator named William Prout bought the property. In the division of land which followed the platting, lot 1 in square 845 was one of those parcels allocated to the federal government for resale.

Morris and Nicholson, a major speculative combine, next obtained the lot. They later defaulted so once again, the lot was in the hands of the government as represented by the Commissioners for Washington City. It was at one of the Commissioners' public auctions in 1800 that Hugh Densley acquired the lot for \$200.

Densley, who located in Washington as early as 1796, was a plasterer by profession and worked both on the President's House and the Capitol. Instead of paying cash for his purchase, he requested the Commissioners to withhold the sum from his wages. Densley was not only a successful craftsman with several apprentices

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bound to him, he also was a partner in grocery and general merchandise enterprises. One of his businesses, for example, furnished beeswax and rosin for use at the President's House.

A moderate speculator in Federal City property, Densley's normal investment pattern was to buy empty lots in areas with some development, erect improvements, then sell at a substantial profit. In this instance, the development was the handsome Duncanson estate which faces South Carolina Avenue between Sixth and Seventh Streets. Densley had his Sixth Street house ready to sell in three years. His purchaser was Robert Alexander who paid \$1,000 for the house and lot in 1803.

Alexander, born and raised on his ancestral plantation in Virginia, was the twelfth of 16 children. His family seems to have been rather successful for Alexander brought four slaves with him when he came to Washington. As three of the four were females and the fourth a little baby, it appears they were domestics rather than laborers or field hands.

By 1803, Alexander can be identified positively as a Washington resident. At the time, he was about 22 years old. Although his career in Washington was brief, he made a significant impression on his neighbors and associates.

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A carpenter-builder by trade, Alexander aspired to become an architect. Three notable examples of buildings on which Alexander worked are still standing. Quarters A (the Tingey House) in the Navy Yard is the first project with which he is known to have been associated. A dispute which had an unhappy ending and probably influenced his later decision to leave Washington arose from his contract with the Navy as a carpenter.

Although Alexander claimed to have served in a supervisory capacity and to have spent some of his personal funds to cover expenses while procuring materials for the project, the Navy refused to honor his claim, stating that there were inadequate contractual agreements and records to support it. The noted architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who figured prominently in Alexander's short life, tried unsuccessfully to intercede on his behalf.

In 1805, Alexander worked on the house for the Marine Commandant at Eighth and G Streets, SE under another noted architect, the American-trained George Hadfield. He also was recommended to work on the window sashes of the Capitol, but records do not indicate whether or not he was hired.

The young Virginian was involved actively in the life of his community as well. A founder of Naval Lodge #4

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of the Masonic Order, he expressed his support of education by subscribing \$15 to endow a permanent school for youth. In addition, he served as a first lieutenant in the Columbian Infantry, one of the local militia units. In 1806 he was elected a member of the board of directors of the Anacostia Library and also to the vestry of Christ Church.

It was on Alexander's advice that the vestry decided not to repair the tobacco house in which the congregation had worshipped for almost a decade, but rather to build a permanent church building. Although Benjamin Latrobe often has been cited as the architect of Christ Church, more and more evidence has been mounted in recent years to support the theory that the architect was in reality Robert Alexander. Certainly, he played a strong role in its design, if he indeed was not the architect.

At some point during this era, perhaps as early as 1803, Alexander married Helen Brown. Little is known of her other than the fact that she was related to Dr. Gustavus Brown, one of George Washington's personal physicians. There is some indication that she was considerably older than her husband and that she, like he, came from Virginia.

Alexander and his wife evidently lived a more comfortable life than most Washingtonians. In addition to

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Elizabeth, Thezeah, Jane, and Hanson, the four slaves he brought with him from Virginia, Alexander purchased a 19 year old woman named Christiana for \$91.51 in 1806. He dabbled modestly in real estate speculation and paid more for a group of household items than he had for Christiana. In one purchase, he acquired three feather beds and furniture, a milch cow, seven hogs, a mahogany desk, one walnut dining table, two cherry dining tables, six silver teaspoons and six silver tablespoons, all for \$150. The fate of the livestock is unknown, but keeping cows was a common Capitol Hill practice at that time and the immediate neighborhood was settled so thinly that the animals would have presented minimal problems.

By the spring of 1807, Alexander was determined to leave Washington. No later than February 9, he had leased his house to Benjamin Latrobe and was already in New Orleans. There he sought and obtained a contract to build Latrobe's design for the United States Customs House.

Sailing by packet from Philadelphia to Washington, Latrobe and his family reached Washington in time to move into the house on July 1, 1807. Latrobe's household at this time consisted of his second wife, Mary Elizabeth Hazelhurst, and their children John H. B. (b. 1803), Julia (b. 1804) and Benjamin Henry, Jr. (b. 1806).

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In addition, Latrobe's daughter Lydia who was born to his first wife in 1791, evidently lived briefly with the family in Washington before her marriage in 1808.

During his tenancy on Sixth Street, Latrobe designed an addition to the building to house his office. Unfortunately he roofed it with a new type of cement. The material proved worthless and the roof sprang leaks which ruined a number of his drawings.

Latrobe and Alexander continued to keep in close touch throughout this period. As a joint venture, they endeavored to get the contract to construct an aqueduct system and in addition, then to supply the city of New Orleans with water. When Alexander failed to procure the contract, Latrobe commented that the reasons for the failure were probably Alexander's lack of knowledge about the French language and manners then necessary to conduct business in the Crescent City, facilities which their successful competitors from New York possessed.

In 1809, Alexander, who owed the Bank of Washington \$500, had Navy captain Joseph Cassin and Latrobe sign as his securities. In his instructions to them, he stated that if the bank called the note immediately, the men were to offer the house and lot at Sixth and South Carolina for sale at auction on ten days notice. Cassin served as Alexander's attorney in other matters, too.

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At the age of 30, Alexander died. He succumbed to the yellow fever epidemic which raged in New Orleans in 1811. Shortly after that, Latrobe and his family moved from the Alexander house and its occupants for the next 20 years are a mystery. The house remained in the Alexander family and by 1819, taxes on it were being charged to his heirs. Robert Alexander, Jr. may have been born in the house on Sixth Street immediately prior to the family's removal to New Orleans. When he grew up, he became a physician and practiced medicine in Alabama, married Elizabeth Ann Clark of South Carolina, then moved to Virginia where he died in 1836.

The other heir was Sigismunda Mary who was born in Virginia on her father's ancestral estate in 1808. Her first name, incidentally, was one which had already been in the family for at least two centuries. As an adult, she married her cousin Pearson Chapman and moved to his ancestral home in Maryland.

James Carbery became the next owner of the house on Sixth Street. He may have resided there prior to his ownership because he lived in the near vicinity as early as 1822. Since he paid Mrs. Chapman and her husband \$1,300 in 1833 for property assessed for tax purposes at \$2,000, it is possible that prior rent was applied to what seems like an otherwise substantial underpayment.



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Carbery came to Washington from southern Maryland, following in the footsteps of his eminently successful brother Thomas, Washington's sixth mayor. James was also active in local politics and served as Common Councilman from 1826 to 1829. In addition, he pursued a career at the Navy Yard as a timber and ship inspector, ship architect and ship engineer. After his death in 1852, Thomas Carbery inherited the Sixth Street property, but continued to reside in northwest where he had lived ever since locating in Washington.

Twenty years as rental property ensued for the house on Sixth Street and continued throughout the subsequent ownership of James C. Hall, a northwest physician who held extensive rental units throughout the city.

William W. Danenhowe, Jr., the next owner, lived in the house. Member of a successful Washington family of realtors and lawyers, Danenhowe had the house extensively remodeled in 1889. Documentary evidence indicates a possibility that the house faced Sixth Street until this time. The two-story tower addition and roofline alterations date from this effort which cost Danenhowe \$800. Danenhowe died in 1896 and apparently his widow chose to use the house as rental property.

After Elizabeth Danenhowe sold the property in 1902, a series of four owners, all of whom seem to have lived

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outside of Washington with one possible exception, continued the rental policy.

On July 24, 1920, William Henry Olds and his second wife bought the property. Olds, son of the creator of the Oldsmobile automobile line, was the descendant of a long line of Scandinavian royal families. Mrs. Olds has survived her husband by a significant number of years and still occupies the premises, firmly convinced now as she was when she moved into the house as a young bride, that she occupies the house with the nicest view on all Capitol Hill.

May 11, 1979

Researched and prepared by,

*Ruth Ann Overbeck*  
Ruth Ann Overbeck  
President

The house is a Category III Landmark of the National Capital. The discrepancies between this report and the landmark designation report have been called to the attention of the National Capital Planning Commission, the agency originally responsible for the designation. When the designation was granted a number of years ago, the house had been submitted with historical information based on secondary sources now known to be unreliable. The validity of this present summary can be substantiated by numerous primary sources. The house's importance has not been diminished, but rather considerably strengthened by the information now available and presented in this report.