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# Northeast Capitol Hill Walking Tour

Beyond the Boundaries  
on 14th Street,  
Constitution Avenue, C  
Street, and Ames Place

by Beth Purcell

On October 20, 2007, Elizabeth Nelson, Donna Hanousek and Beth Purcell led a walking tour featuring the history and architecture of rowhouses beyond the boundary of the historic district in Northeast. Some of the featured homes included:

The one-story brick rowhouses at 1337-1353 C Street, NE, designed and built by Charles Gessford in 1886. They are 11 feet wide and 25 feet deep, with a stepped design at the cornice. Gessford is one of the best known Capitol Hill architect/builders. Some of his rowhouses include "Philadelphia Row" (132-144 Eleventh Street, SE) and Gessford Court, SE.

The rowhouse development at 1400-1434 C Street/311-319 Fourteenth Street, NE/ 310-340 Fifteenth Street, NE., was designed by Albert H. Beers in 1910. These rowhouses have Flemish bond brick. The houses also have a two-bay front porch, with a projecting cornice in front of the parapet wall, and two alternating designs: an eyebrow raking cornice on center and a stepped pediment with the step in the center. Architect Beers is credited with Harry Wardman's breakthrough designs for porch-front rowhouses. This design, for another builder, is an example of early porch-front houses.

The 200 block of Fourteenth Street, NE, illustrates the transition from nineteenth century rowhouses to the 1920s "daylighter" porch-front rowhouses. 220 Fourteenth Street, NE, built in 1893, is a square-bay, three story with sandstone lintels



Hill residents on the Oct. 20 *Beyond the Boundaries* Walking Tour. More tours are in the works—watch the News for a schedule. Photo: Elizabeth Nelson

and foliate stone carving on the keystone above the front door (a Richardsonian Romanesque feature) and cast-iron stairs (grapevine design). Next door, at 216-218 Fourteenth Street, NE, are classic 1920s "daylighter" porch-front rowhouses, in the Colonial Revival style. They feature common bond "tapestry brick" popular in the 1920s (beige brick with vertical lines, said to resemble a tapestry). The porch-front extends over the entire width of the house. The houses have slate mansard roofs with a gable dormer. Unlike many nineteenth century rowhouses, daylighter houses are only two rooms deep, allowing air and sunlight into all the rooms in the house. The front porch encouraged outdoor activities and interaction with neighbors.

All of Square 1056, including the 1400 block of Ames Place, NE, was built by Kennedy & Davis in 1907-1908. Alexander H. Sonneman, who remained active through 1954, designed these Flemish bond brick rowhouses, with two alternating designs: an angled bay (often with a one-bay porch) and flat-front with a porch. Sonneman worked

for many Washington developers, including Harry A. Kite.

In 1936, Joseph St. Clair wanted a new building for the restaurant he planned to open at 129 Fifteenth Street, NE. He hired Lewis Wentworth Giles to design a one-story brick commercial building. The building has tapestry brick and transom windows across the front. Giles was one of the best known African-American architects in Washington. In addition to many churches, apartments, and office buildings, he designed small projects for many customers, such as this building.

The tour also featured rowhouses built by two well-known developers, Harry A. Kite and Herman R. Howenstein. Kite and Howenstein each built hundreds of beige brick porch-front daylighter rowhouses, many on Capitol Hill. The rowhouses at 207-261 Fourteenth Place, NE were built by Harry A. Kite in 1914, early in his career, with Flemish bond brick (with iron spot brick headers), and a scalloped pediment on every third house. Howenstein's 1907 rowhouses at 232-238 Fourteenth Street, NE, also built early in his

## Walking Tour *continued from previous page*

career, are flat-front brick houses. Examples of his later rowhouses are nearby at 1430-1436 North Carolina Avenue, NE. These beige brick porch-front rowhouses, classic daylighter houses, were built in 1924.

### Some Capitol Hill Architects and Builders

**Albert H. Beers**, architect (1859-1911). Originally from Bridgeport, Connecticut, at the time of his death he lived at 757 Park Road, NW, Washington, D.C.; his office was at 1342 New York Avenue, NW. Beers designed many apartment buildings and rowhouses for Harry Wardman and is credited with Wardman's breakthrough designs for "daylighter" porch-front rowhouses. Two of their projects appear on the National Register of Historic Places. He also worked with other builders, including Harry A. Kite.

**Charles Gessford**, architect/builder. (1831-1894). Gessford, who lived at 661 South Carolina Avenue, SE, was one of the best-known builder/architects on Capitol Hill. His work includes "Philadelphia Row" (132-144 Eleventh Street, SE) and Queen Anne-style brick rowhouses (824-832 D Street, SE; 638-642 East Capitol Street). He also built alley dwellings (Gessford Court). He borrowed to build his houses; when the Depression of 1893 hit, he was left with houses that no one would buy. He died a year later and was buried at Congressional Cemetery.

**Lewis Wentworth Giles**, architect (1894-1974). Giles was a well-known African-American architect who graduated from Armstrong Technical and studied architecture at the University of Illinois. After serving in World War I, he worked in the office of Isaiah Hatton from 1918 to 1921. In 1921, he opened his own office at 1200 U Street, NW. He designed many churches (Rock Creek Baptist Church, 4201 Eighth

Street, NW; New Mt. Olive Baptist Church, Fifty-eighth and Grant Streets, NE), offices, apartment buildings and houses in Capitol Hill, Brookland, Eastland Gardens, Capitol View and Deanwood. Later, his home and office was at 4428 Hunt Place, NE, a house that he designed.

**Herman R. Howenstein**, builder (1877-1955). Howenstein was a major Washington developer in early twentieth century. He built many "daylighter" porch-front rowhouses including many on Capitol Hill, beginning in the early twentieth century. His rowhouses often feature a straight slate mansard roof with a gable dormer. Later, with a partner, he built and owned a number of large apartment buildings, including 1301 and 1321 Massachusetts Avenue, NW; as well as the Wakefield, Potomac Park, Chatham, Highview (2505 Thirteenth Street, NW), and the Embassy (1613 Harvard Street, NW). In 1933 and 1934, lenders foreclosed on Highview and the Embassy. The foreclosure sale proceeds were less than the mortgage balances. Howenstein and his partner had personally guaranteed the mortgages, and were liable for this deficiency, which they could not pay. As a result, they both went bankrupt in 1935. Howenstein had \$13.80 in cash plus the stock in H. R. Howenstein Co. (also bankrupt) and owed almost \$400,000. He died in 1955, after a long illness.

**Harry A. Kite**, builder (1882-1931). He was a prominent Washington developer who built many "daylighter" porch-front rowhouses all over Washington including many on Capitol Hill, as well as apartment buildings (Kew Gardens, 2700 Q Street, NW).

**Alexander H. Sonneman**, architect (1872-19??). He was born in Montgomery County, Maryland, and attended high school in Rockville. He studied architecture

with his father (who had taught architecture at the University of Giessen, Germany) and began practicing architecture in 1901. He worked extensively for Harry Kite, designing rowhouses and apartment buildings including Kew Gardens, 2700 Q Street, NW. In 1910 he designed two-story Mediterranean Revival rowhouses with front porches and over-hanging red tile roofs for the entire Square 862 (Seventh/Eighth/D/E Streets, NE, including Lexington Place, NE). Sonneman remained active through 1954. ✧

## CHRS Board Membership Update

*by Dick Wolf*

There is a change in Board membership due to the resignation of Peter May. Peter was appointed to a one-year term as a Board Member at-Large. He has just been selected to replace John Parsons as the Land Use Coordinator for the National Capitol Region of the National Park Service. In that position Peter will sit on both the Zoning Commission and the National Capitol Planning Commission. We wish Peter much luck and success in his new and very influential job. Thank you, Peter, for all your fine work as a member of the CHRS zoning committee.

In Peter's place we have appointed Lisa Alfred who is a Hill East resident and active in their concerns regarding planning, zoning, historic preservation, transportation, and the development of Reservation 13. We will benefit from her advice and experiences. ✧