

**Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society
before the DC Preservation Review Board on May 25, 2017
Emerald Street Historic District Historic Designation Case 17-05**

Good morning. My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society in support of the Emerald Street Historic District nomination. We believe that Emerald Street satisfies National Register Criterion A (Community Planning and Development) and Criterion C (Architecture).

Emerald Street retains its original setting as laid out in 1892 and its original design scheme of two-story brick rowhouses, built between 1892 and 1923. The rowhouses retain the integrity of materials and craftsmanship, including press brick Queen Anne and Colonial Revival forms. Emerald Street retains its integrity of feeling and association as a one-block residential street, looking very much as it did the day the last house was completed.

Emerald Street is in Square 1029, bounded by 13th and 14th streets, NE and E and F streets, NE. It was laid out as part of the L'Enfant Plan in 1797 with 26 lots, and an alley running east to west, as shown in the plat that you have (Figure 1). But nothing was built in Square 1029 for almost 100 years, and the lots and alley existed only on paper. But by the 1890s, several factors had converged to create a huge demand for middle-class housing on Capitol Hill: In 1878, the Organic Act was passed, ensuring once and for all that Washington would remain the nation's capital. Civil service reform, enacted in 1883, ended the spoils system and ensured stable employment for federal workers. The building trades and small business were growing.

To respond to the demand for middle-class housing, developers searched for affordable land near amenities and transportation, and Capitol Hill offered developable land. In the early 1890s, Square 1029 was advertised for sale, and William Mayse and Louis D. Wine, both active real estate investors, formed a syndicate and in 1891 bought the entire square for \$72,000. The square was a blank slate with no improvements, so it could be subdivided in the way that would be most profitable. To sell land for middle-class housing, they needed to re-subdivide the square into rowhouse lots, and to profit they needed the maximum possible number of rowhouse lots. To create more lot frontage, they expanded the east to west alley into a new 60-foot wide one-block street, and laid out rowhouse lots along both sides, and on all four streets surrounding the square, 169 lots in all, as shown in Figure 2. Because lots fronting on a major street were worth more per square foot than lots fronting on a one-block street, they maximized profits by exploiting this difference in value in two ways:

(1) lots on the major streets are larger than the lots on the one-block street, and
(2) they had the eight lots at each end of Emerald Street flipped 90 degrees to front on 13th Street and 14th Street. You can see both of these methods in operation on the plats that you have. (Figures 2 and 3). Mayse and Wine, and other developers, used both these techniques in resubdividing squares in the 1890s.

The dimensions of the lots reflect 1890s development patterns in another way. The lots are 16 or 17 feet wide, and 64 and 71 feet deep, generally typical of Capitol Hill rowhouse lots of this period, and the rowhouses are approximately 30 feet deep. These dimensions make it difficult for homeowners to have garages in the rear yard, while still leaving room in there for other activities. Because few people in Washington owned automobiles in 1892, Mayse and Wine would not have considered space for garages in creating their rowhouse lots.

In 1895, Francis S. Carmody, a contractor, subdivided Square 1029 again to add one more lot at 14th and Emerald streets, for a total of 170 lots.

Mayse and Wine named their new street in square 1029 "Emerson Street," possibly because it's between E and F streets, although no information could be found on why they selected the name "Emerson." The street was called Emerson Street until 1950, when the Commissioners wanted to change the street's name and considered calling it "E Place, NE." A public hearing was scheduled to learn people's views. Although no records could be found from the hearing, someone must have made a compelling case for "Emerald Street," which is the name the Commissioners selected in 1950.

Mayse and Wine more than doubled their money in a very short time. By 1893-1894, there were 43 new owners, including several developers, who had bought all but four lots in the square.

One developer, George P. Newton, built 28 brick rowhouses on Emerald Street by the end of 1893, and went on to build 32 more houses on Emerald Street between 1894 and 1896, plus 32 houses on 14th, E, and F streets. The maps in Figures 4 and 5 show who built the houses, beginning in 1892. Newton's rowhouses on Emerald Street are red press brick, in stretcher bond, with thin mortar joints, in the then-popular Queen Anne style. Press brick gives a smooth, monumental appearance, and lends itself to surface ornament. Queen Anne style is eclectic, exuberant, with a lot of variety in ornament. Architect Judith Capen describes the style as "... variety in pressed brick, and as belt and string coursing ... brick door and window hoods. To enliven the roof line, row houses acquired large and elaborate roof cornices." Newton's houses on Emerald Street express the Queen Anne style through a corbelled table at the cornice, string courses as window sills, and window openings with wood fluted pilasters, with scrolled spandrels above. Over the door and window openings are brick segmental arches with pearl molding, as shown in the photographs. Newton is listed as the architect on some houses and the architect N. T. Haller designed others. Newton's Emerald Street brick rowhouses, 16 x 30 feet, were two-story with a an ell in the rear, and often with a bay, but generally no basement. Their estimated cost was \$2,000 each. In 1893, he advertised one of his houses on Emerald Street as two-story pressed brick, six rooms and bath, near the streetcar, offered for \$2,700: \$200 down and the balance "in small monthly notes." The records for his houses at 1364-1372 E Street, NE built in 1905, indicate that they took seven months to complete. Construction began by digging trenches for foundations, pouring concrete, then laying floor joists, building party walls, installing ceiling joists, laying brick on the front walls, installing purlins and rafters, sheathing the roof, laying flooring, setting partitions and lathing and plaster, trimming.

Newton enjoyed a nice lifestyle; according to the newspaper society pages, he traveled for family vacations to Ocean City and Atlantic City. He drove a Cadillac runabout, a two-seater automobile. Newton borrowed to buy land and build houses, giving his lenders a first deed of trust to secure their loan, and sometimes a second deed of trust. These loans were interest-only, usually at five or six percent, and ballooned after three to five years. When Newton sold the completed houses to buyers, they often assumed the first and any second mortgage securing Newton's lenders, and Newton took a second or third mortgage from the buyer securing an installment note payable to him, plus a small cash down payment (as described in his advertisement) Lenders expected part of the principal to be paid down at the end of the three- to five-year term, and then might renew the loan for another term. In looking through land records for the early 1890s, these appeared to be typical lending practices, but to us, these loans appear to be a precarious method to finance housing. The now-familiar level amortization monthly payment mortgages first became common only after the Housing Act of 1934. Between 1897 and November 1906 Newton built and sold between 400 and 500 houses in Washington. It

would have been a challenge to keep track of all these financial transactions plus the contractors' and suppliers' bills to construct these houses. Newton's accounting system was to note payments made to vendors on the back of each vendor's invoice. After the houses were sold, he discarded all the invoices. He did keep cancelled checks, and his agents collected the payments from buyers. In the fall of 1906 he realized that he had a lot of short-term debt coming due, and had almost no cash, and in November 1906 he declared bankruptcy. He told his creditors that he was unsure if he was making or losing money on his houses, and when they wanted more information on houses he sold, he referred them to the Recorder of Deeds. By the time he filed for bankruptcy, his Emerald Street houses had all been sold, and there were no Emerald Street-related assets or liabilities listed in Newton's bankruptcy file. The bankruptcy court sold his Cadillac for \$265.

The rowhouses in Square 1029 attracted their targeted middle-class residents. As of the 1900 Census, the first census after building began in 1892, residents of Square 1029 were 100 percent white and worked in typical middle-class Capitol Hill occupations, many as government clerks. Others worked at the Government Printing Office, as printers, compositors, bookbinders, and pressmen who lived in the square. Two worked in the building trades, a carpenter and an electrician. George P. Newton, who listed his occupation as contractor, lived at 526 14th Street, NE, in a house that he built. Other occupations included policeman, fireman, teacher, insurance agent, grocery clerk, bookkeeper, milliner, and one physician. Fifty-two percent of household heads owned their houses (most had mortgages) and 48 percent were renting.

In 1910, all residents were white. When Union Station opened in 1907, residents took advantage of the new employment opportunities, working as engineers and firemen and one as a mail clerk at the railway office. Residents continued to work in the federal government, one operating the elevator at the US Senate, and others as clerks and watchmen, and for the Government Printing Office as printers, bookbinders, pressmen, proofreaders, for the Navy Yard as machinists, and in the construction trades (carpenter, painter, plasterer, electrician). Leo Sommerfield operated his grocery store at 501 13th Street, NE, in the house that he built. One resident worked as a bottler in a brewery; another was a patent attorney, and another was an architect. George P. Newton had moved to 447 Irving Street, NW. Forty-four percent of heads of households owned houses (most with mortgages), and 56 percent were renting.

In 1920, residents continued to work as clerks in the federal government, and in the same types of industrial occupations at the Navy Yard and the Government Printing Office. Two residents worked at the U.S. Shipping Board, a new federal agency established in 1916. Residents also worked in retail sales, as streetcar motormen and railroad engineers and firemen. One managed a bowling alley and another a shooting gallery. All residents were white, except African-Americans Eugene E. Weyman, an engineer, his wife Maude F. Weyman, a public school teacher, and her father, William H. Fleming, a porter in a department store. They lived at 1316 E Street, NE, which they owned. They moved before 1930. Forty-seven percent of heads of households owned houses, and 53 percent were renting.

In 1930, all residents were white except for Native Americans Katherine McCuttin age 56, no occupation, born in Arkansas, and Elizabeth McCuttin, age 18, born in Oklahoma, a typist with the US government, who were boarding with a family at 1391 F Street, NE. They moved before 1940. Residents' occupations included government clerk, typist, stenographer, school teacher, machinist, carpenter, plumber, electrician, plasterer, paperhanger, steamfitter, waiter, street railway conductor, and retail sales. Fifty-two percent of heads of households owned houses, and 48 percent were renting.

In 1940, all residents were white; most of those in the workforce were employed full-time during 1939, and working for the US government as office workers, or for the Navy Yard or Government Printing Office. Residents continued to be employed as retail, construction trade and streetcar workers. There was a slight increase in residents working as truck drivers or auto mechanics. Thirty-five percent of heads of households owned houses and 65 percent were renting.

By the 1950s, Emerald Street was suffering from disinvestment; foreclosures and citations for unsanitary houses proliferated.

Emerald Street again illustrated community planning and development when it underwent Urban Renewal after the riots following Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968. H Street, NE was extensively damaged, and District government decided to rebuild by creating an H Street Urban Renewal Area, which included Emerald Street, as shown on Figure 6. Emerald Street escaped the fate of Southwest Washington, where urban renewal resulted in large-scale demolition. Instead a decision was made to retain it as a low-rise residential area, and the houses were to be rehabilitated, and the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) eventually rehabilitated 39 houses on Emerald Street. RLA had detailed requirements for structural components, party walls, fire-resistant construction, air circulation, kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms, closets, interior stairs, central heating, hot water heater, and 1000 AMPS electric service. Dishwashers and air conditioning were not required. RLA rehabilitated and sold houses to new owners for \$25,000; the owners had to agree not to resell the houses for at least two years. In researching Emerald Street's history in the twentieth century, I had the very good fortune to learn from an expert on Emerald Street's history.

In 2000, I served on a Superior Court grand jury. Grand jurors get to know each other, and one who I remember well was Rev. Catherine Bego, who told us that she lived on Emerald Street. As a minister, she offered insights into the cases we were hearing, and she lived on a street with this beautiful name. After grand jury, we lost track of each other. When I began researching Emerald Street's history in 2016, I was very happy to learn that she still lived there. Rev. Bego had moved to Emerald Street as a child in 1945, lived through the riots and Urban Renewal. She has an amazing memory, and offered invaluable insights into community life and the activities of RLA during Urban Renewal, important information that is only hinted at or cannot be found at all in the agency's annual reports. For example, RLA demolished all the sheds on properties they renovated, in order to deter rats. In addition, Emerald Street's unusual concrete retaining walls and sidewalks were installed by RLA, which offered every home owner a free concrete retaining wall. Almost everyone accepted the offer, and these retaining walls became part of Emerald Street's history and streetscape.

Finally, Emerald Street retains its integrity and beautiful residential streetscape. We urge the board to approve the nomination. Thank you for considering our comments.

National Register of Historic Place Registration Form: Emerald Street Historic District

Figure 1. District of Columbia Office of the Surveyor. Square 1029 plat dated August 5, 1797, prepared by James R. Dermott. 4/1029.

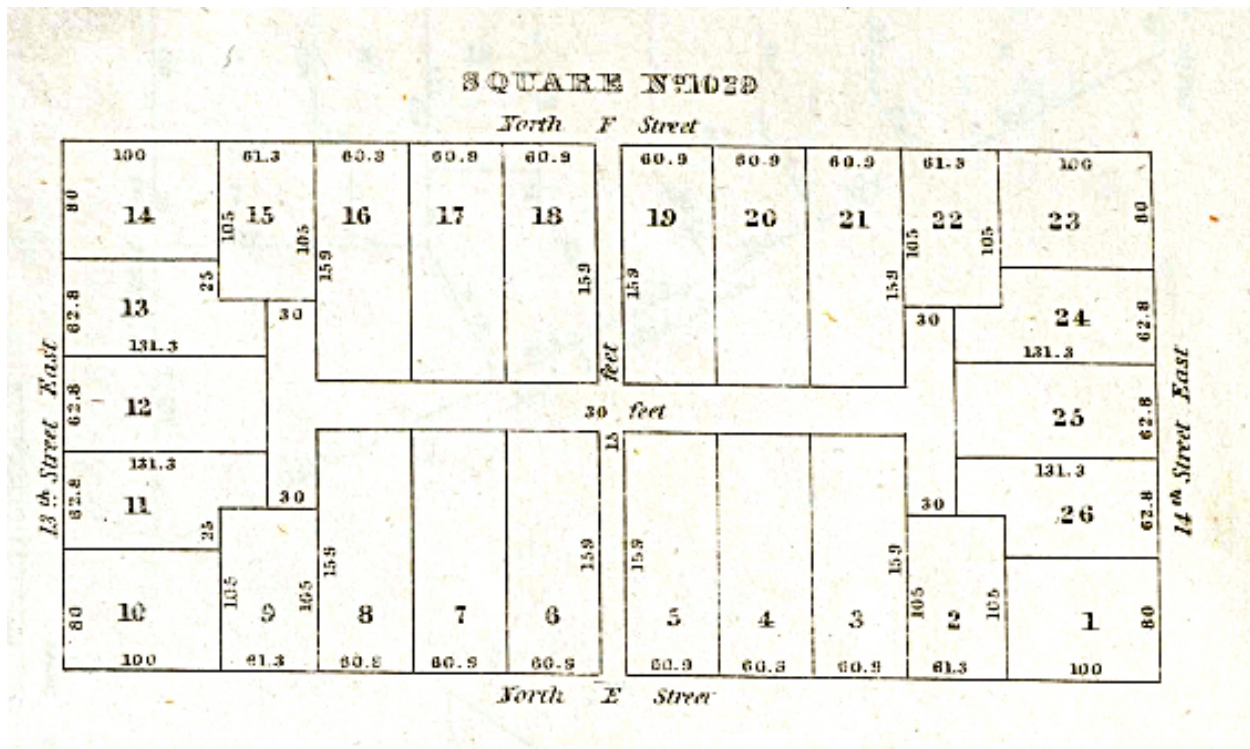
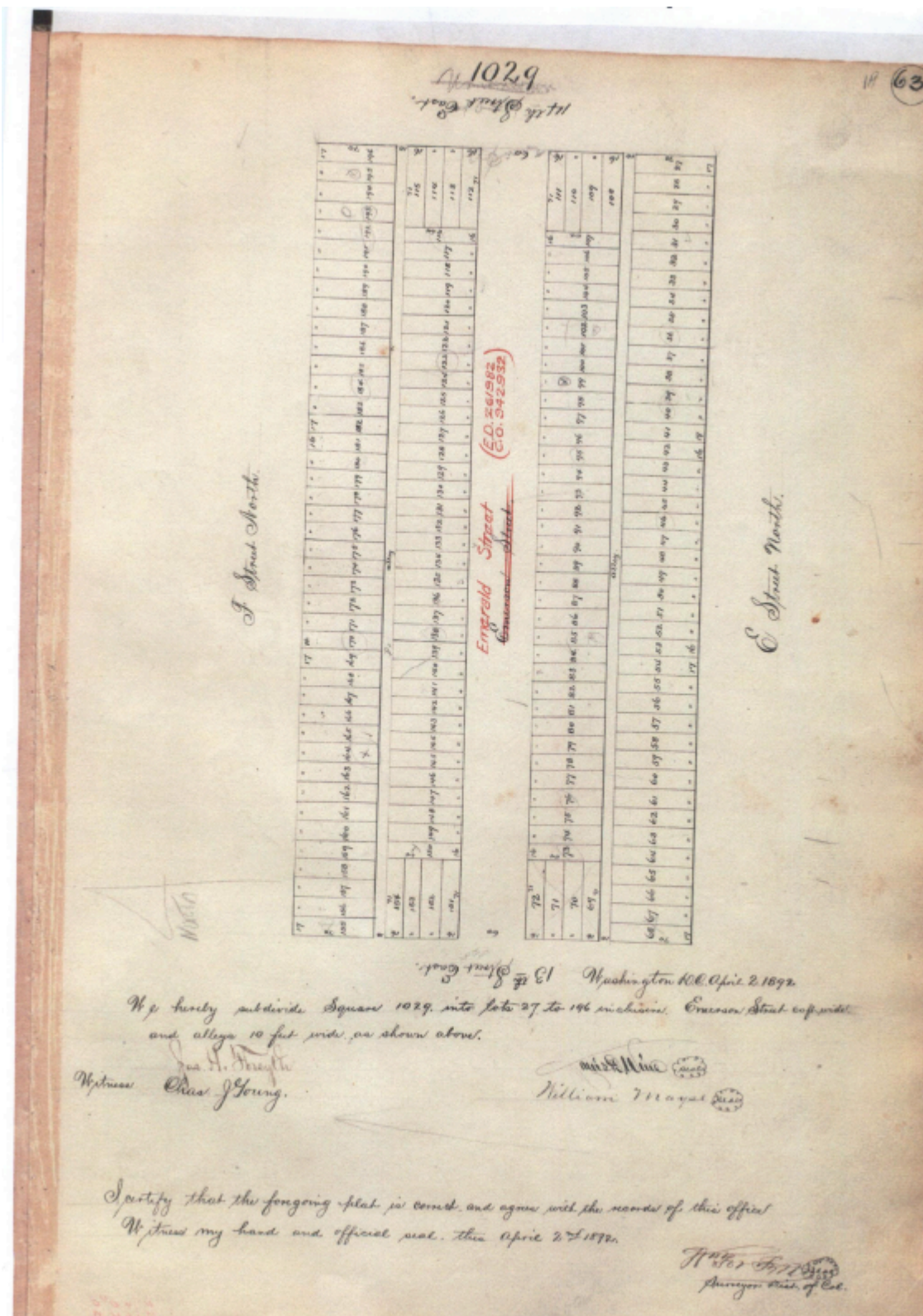


Figure 2. District of Columbia Office of the Surveyor. Square 1029, subdivision filed by William Mayse and Louis D. Wine, 2 Apr. 1892. 19/63.



1029

SCALE 1"=50'

13TH STREET EAST

14TH STREET EAST

15TH STREET EAST

E STREET NORTH

F STREET NORTH

G STREET NORTH

H STREET NORTH

I STREET NORTH

J STREET NORTH

K STREET NORTH

L STREET NORTH

M STREET NORTH

N STREET NORTH

O STREET NORTH

P STREET NORTH

Q STREET NORTH

R STREET NORTH

S STREET NORTH

T STREET NORTH

U STREET NORTH

V STREET NORTH

W STREET NORTH

X STREET NORTH

Y STREET NORTH

Z STREET NORTH

1029

SCALE 1"=50'

Figure 4. Dates of construction in Square 1029. Baist map annotated by Elizabeth Purcell.

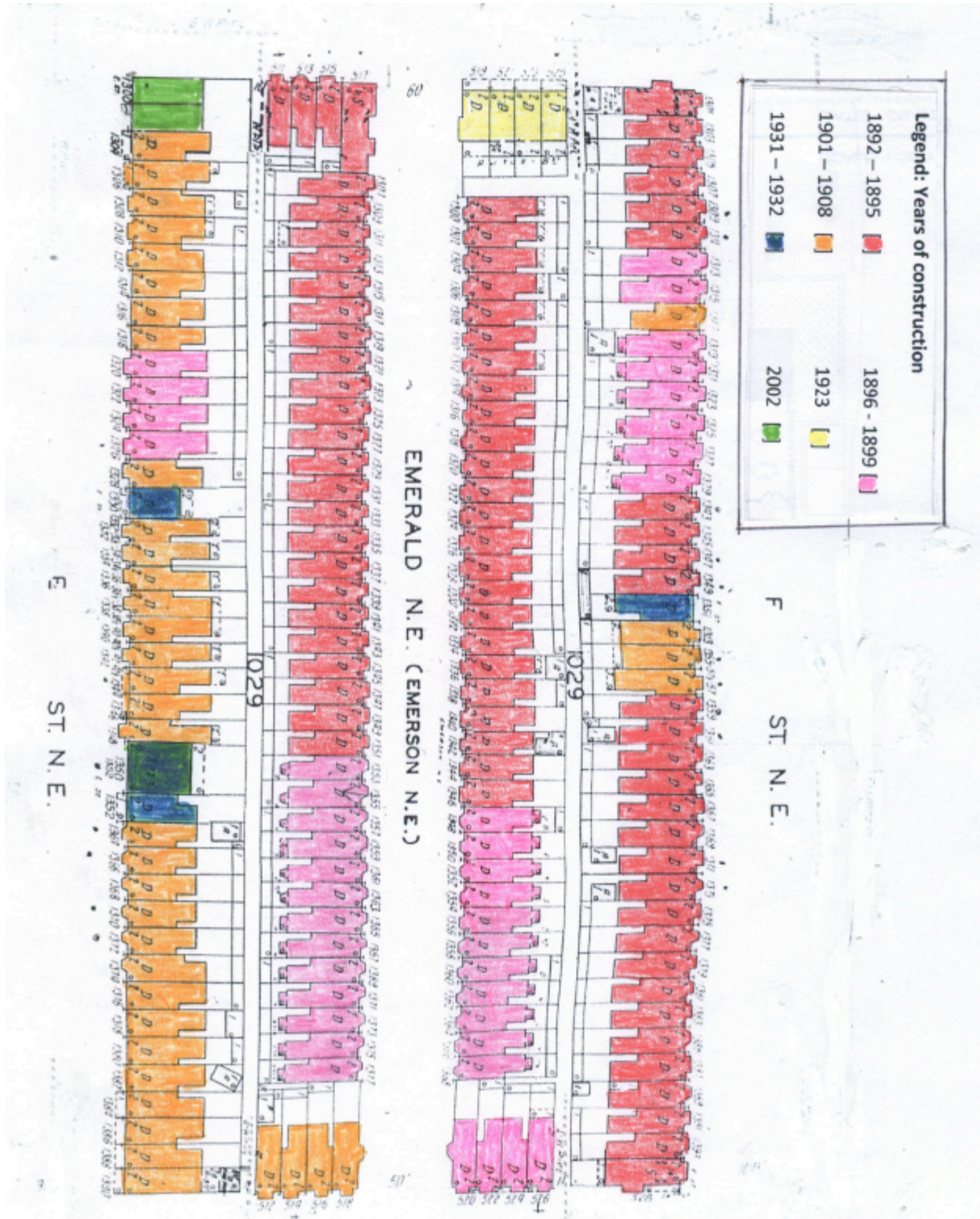


Figure 5. Square 1029 builders. Baist map annotated by Elizabeth Purcell.

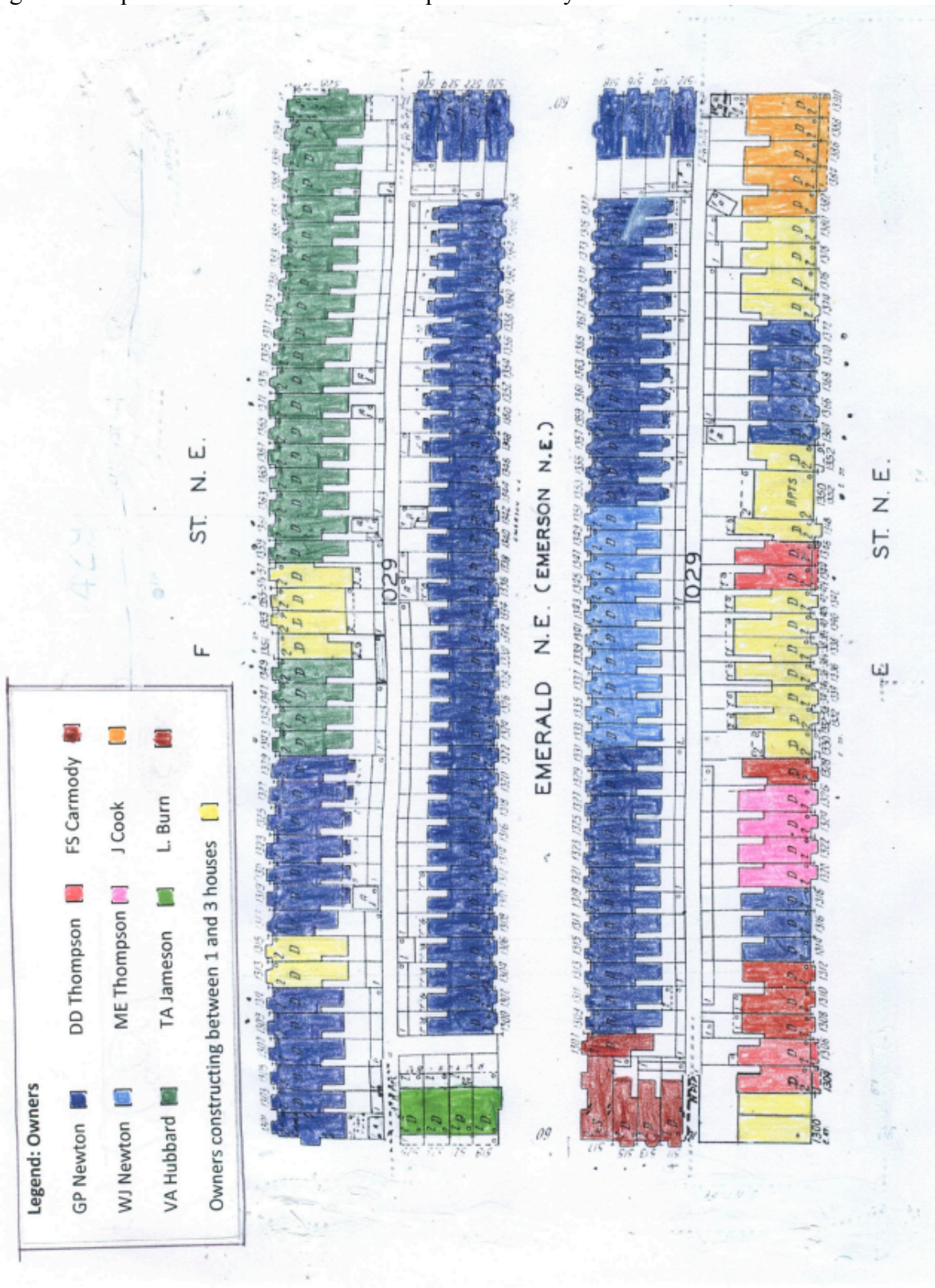
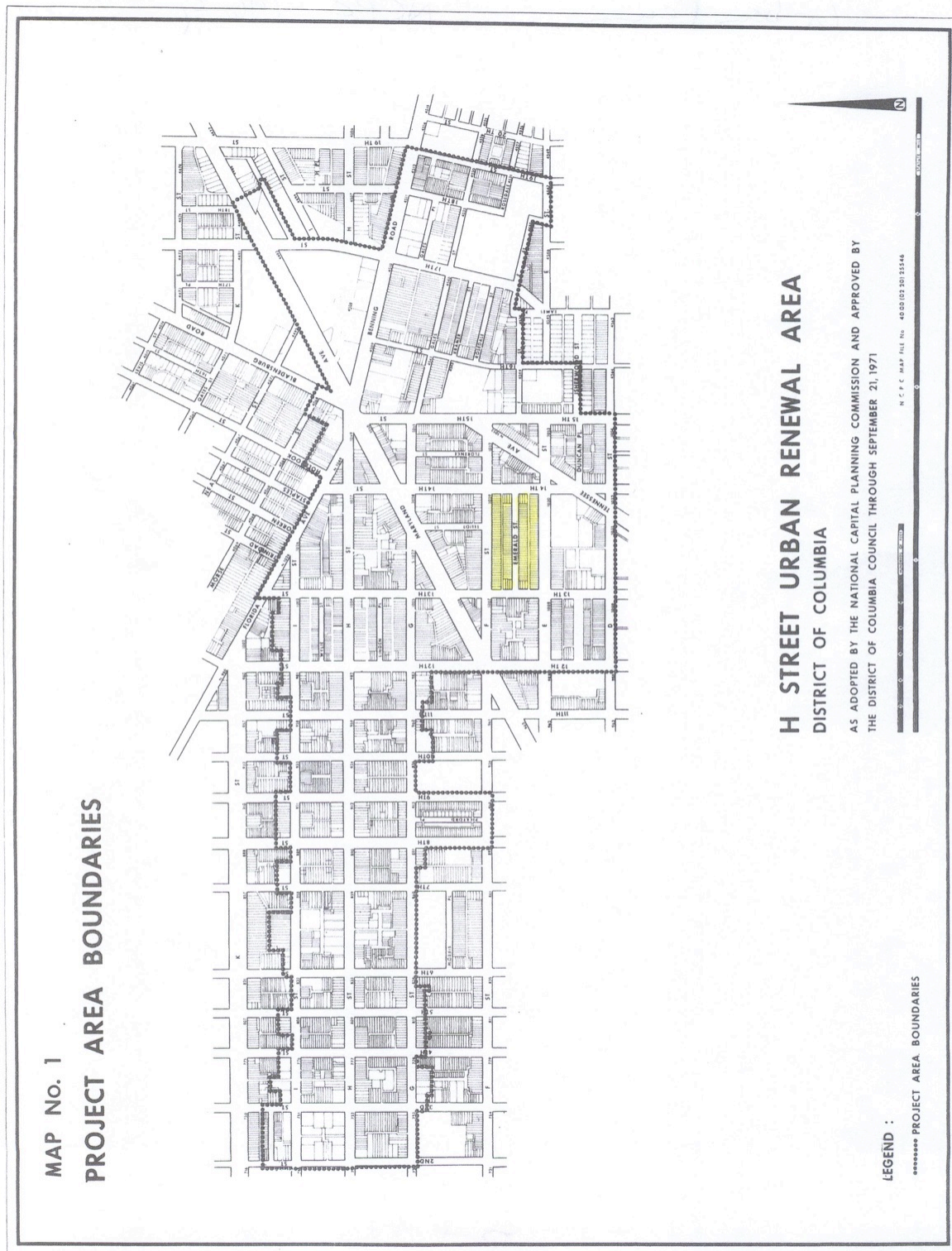
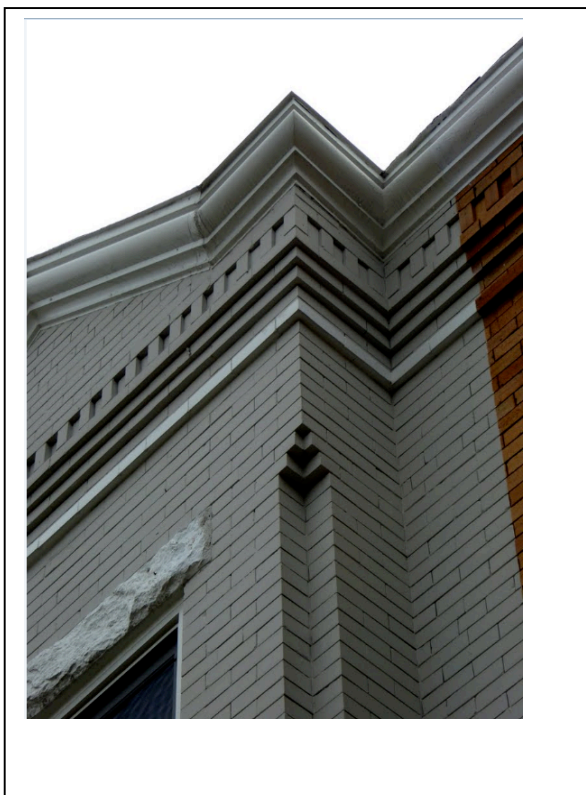
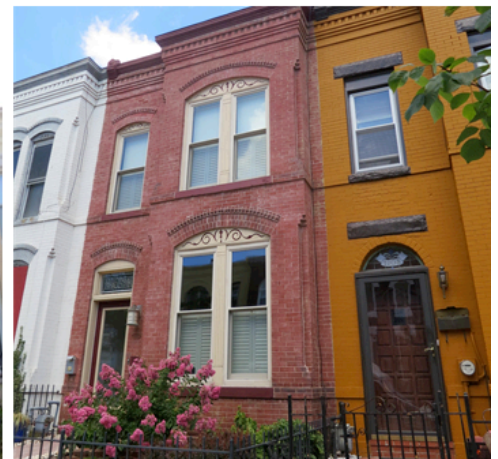
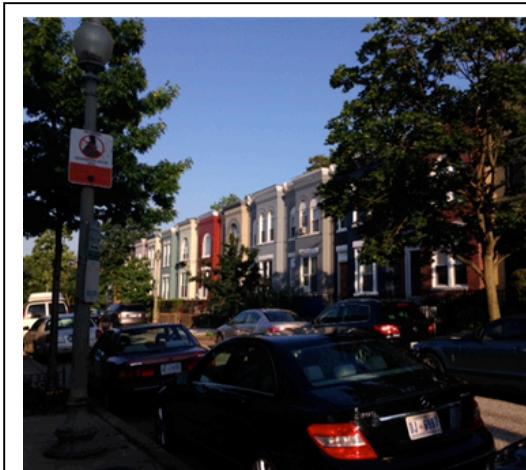
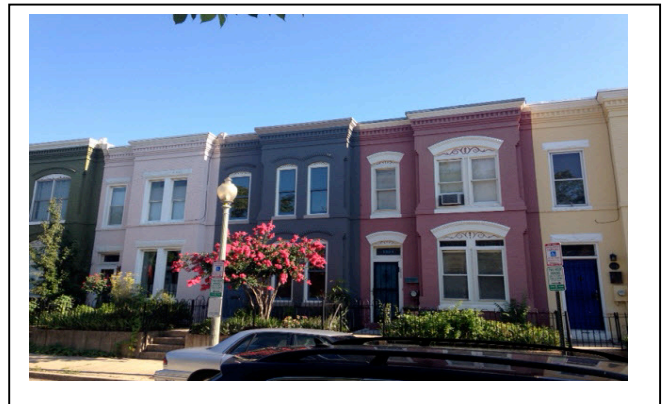
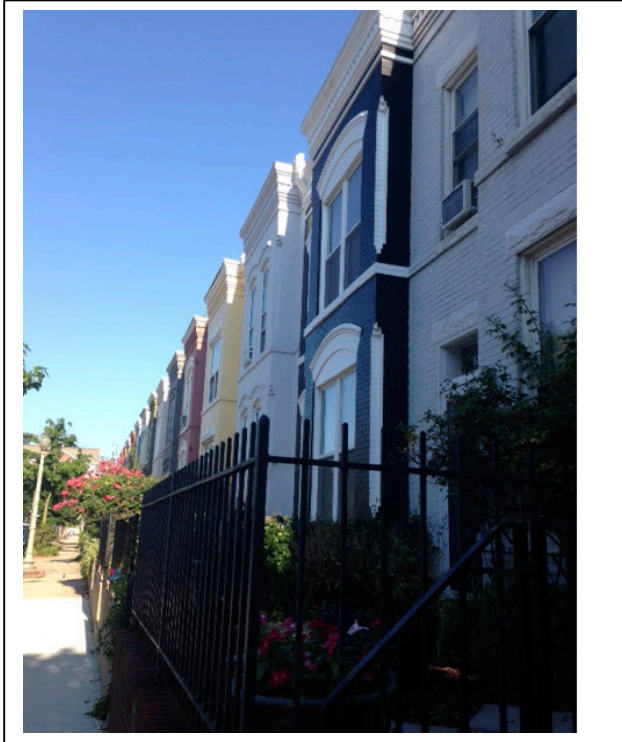


Figure 6. National Capital Planning Commission. H Street Urban Renewal Area (1971), with annotation showing Square 1029.







A "Gem" on Capitol Hill