

CHRS House and Garden Tour - May 13 and 14, 2017

Terrace Court, NE Outdoor Mini Tour

Welcome to Terrace Court, NE in Square 759 (2nd/3rd/A/East Capitol streets, NE). These eight alley dwellings, built in 1889 in "Terrace Court" were probably named for nearby "Washington Terrace," a row frame buildings around the corner on 3rd Street, NE.

In 1889, Benjamin H. Warder owned two large lots in Square 759; he resubdivided them to create six smaller rowhouse lots fronting on A Street NE, a new alley, and eight lots on the new alley. Later in 1889, his contractors, George E. Emmons and Charles W. King, built six brick rowhouses at 213- 223 A Street, NE, and eight alley dwellings, 1 through 8 Terrace Court, NE. The A Street houses were built in the more expensive press brick, and are larger than the alley dwellings. The alley houses are 13 feet wide and 28 feet deep, two stories, two bays wide (a door and a window), built in common brick, with American bond coursing, 6:1, with corbelled cornices (stepped brick decoration at the top of the house), segmental arches (rounded brick lintels) over the door and windows, with a scrolled spandrel (carved horizontal wood panel at the top of the window or door). These building elements are common to Capitol Hill houses of this period, including the rowhouses at 213- 223 A Street, NE. The alley houses remained unpainted until the late 1940s.

The Terrace Court houses, like most 19th century alley dwellings, are two stories, with four rooms: a living room and kitchen on the first story and two bedrooms on the second story. In the rear yard was a water hydrant and a toilet inside a shed; residents used stoves for heating and kerosene lamps for lighting until the late 1940s.

Alley dwellings satisfied a demand for low cost rental housing. In the 19th century, alley residents were primarily African Americans, and sometimes immigrants. Warder owned the alley houses until his death, and afterward they remained rental properties until 1946. Terrace Court residents were typical of alley residents: In 1900, although an elderly white couple and their four adult children lived in one house, African Americans lived in the other seven houses; six were married couples and one was a widow. Like other alley residents during this time, African American residents worked in unskilled jobs as a porter, laborer, servant, or laundress. Between three and seven people lived in each house, including boarders living in four houses.

Reformers demanded eliminating alley dwellings or opening up "blind alleys" to promote public health. Between 1873 and 1877, the Board of Health ordered nearly 300 alley dwellings demolished. Congress supported reform by restricting new alley dwellings: After July 22, 1892, no alley dwelling could be constructed unless the alley was at least 30 feet wide and supplied with sewerage, water mains, and light. In addition, all alley dwellings must be at least 20 feet back from the alley center-line, requiring a 30-foot wide road and five feet on each side for a walkway. (The Terrace Court alley dwellings would not have satisfied the 1892 requirements.) No new alley dwellings were built on Capitol Hill after 1893. In 1904, reformer Jacob Riis visited Washington alleys and issued a report urging action. Between 1906 and 1911, 375 alley dwellings were demolished and 315 repaired. First Ladies Ellen Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt advocated eliminating alley dwellings. The Alley Dwelling Authority was created in 1934 with a mandate to discontinue alley dwellings by 1944 and to care for displaced alley residents. Facing a wartime housing shortage, the deadline was extended to 1955.

But by 1946, residents had begun to buy the Terrace Court houses to live in, obtaining building permits for renovation, bringing in utilities, adding an indoor bathroom (either inside the original house or in an addition). All the owners agreed on a design: painting the exterior

walls white, adding green shutters (the same color scheme as George Washington's Mount Vernon), installing electric coach lanterns next to the doorway, and planting shrubs in front. Interiors were individually designed, some with built-ins and a fireplace; interior woodwork was left natural or painted "Colonial white." A 1949 newspaper photograph shows Early American wood furniture, (Windsor side chairs and a Windsor settee) at 8 Terrace Court. Mrs. Louis H. Harris, who lived at 1 Terrace Court, explained that, "We all thought that, in addition to improving the area, we would have comfortable, conveniently located, 'city apartments' at economical cost." As of 1953, 83 houses in 11 alleys on Capitol Hill and in Georgetown had been renovated.

As the 1955 deadline approached to vacate all alley houses, homeowners who rehabilitated their alley houses mobilized to save their homes; the Washington Court Dwellers Association was organized and retained an attorney. At a hearing before the Commissioners in 1953, Olga Jamison Brown and Walter Wood, Terrace Court homeowners, testified that they should be allowed to continue to live in the alley houses which they had transformed into modern, safe structures. Terrace Court homeowners won; the deadline to vacate alley dwellings was repealed in 1954.

Working class housing

Working class housing in rural and urban areas in the 19th century often featured two rooms: a kitchen and a work-sleep place, (and sometimes a sleeping room), plus an outhouse, a stove for heating and cooking, a sink with a cold-water faucet or a hand pump, and oil lamps or candles. Terrace Court houses fit the pattern of working class housing during this era, and water was provided in an outdoor hydrant.

Colonial Revival

Many historians believe that Americans sought, and still seek, a distinctive national "American" style, and that buildings from the Colonial era, interpreted in each decade, fill this need. "Revivals" of colonial houses began in the early 19th century, and gained further momentum from the world's fair in Chicago in 1893 (World's Columbian Exposition), where millions of people saw states' pavilions featuring adaptations of Colonial houses (e.g., John Hancock's house in Boston, the tower of Independence Hall). Sears Roebuck's kit houses, in addition to the bungalows, included many popular "Colonial" designs such as "The Adams" and "The Martha Washington." Colonial Williamsburg opened in 1932 and further boosted interest in colonial architecture. Colonial Revival has remained popular ever since; its association with George Washington and other founders is a powerful cultural force, and Americans continue to respond.

Further reading:

- James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
- Charles Frederick Weller, *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements and Shanties of the National Capital* (Philadelphia, Pa.: John C. Winton Co., 1909). [reprint available]
- DC Historic Preservation Office, *DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey* (2014). www.planning.dc.gov/page/historic-preservation-review-board > DC History.

Figure 1. Square 759, with lots as laid out at the founding of the city, showing lots 12 and 13, purchased by Benjamin H. Warder and resubdivided in 1889. DC Office of the Surveyor, 3/759.

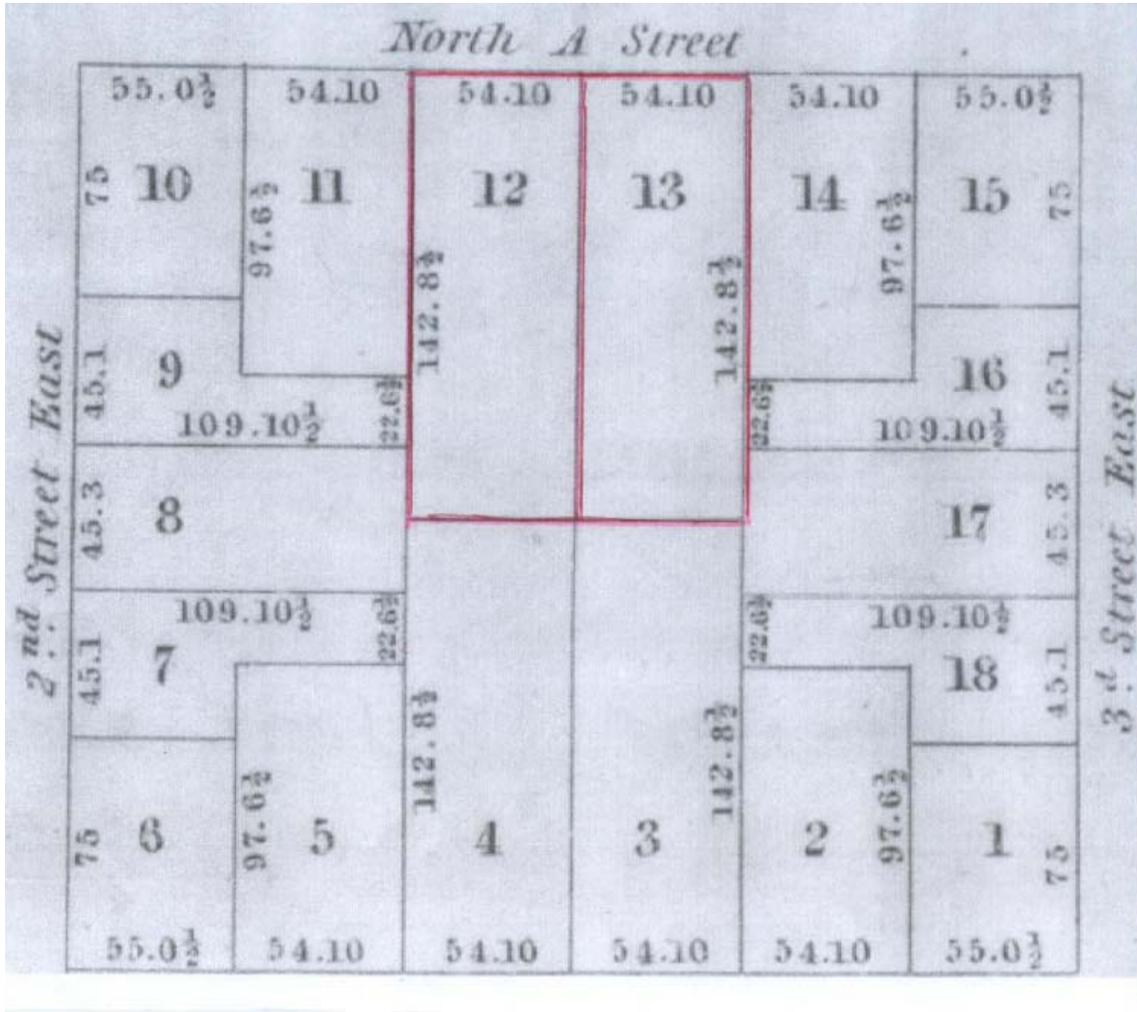
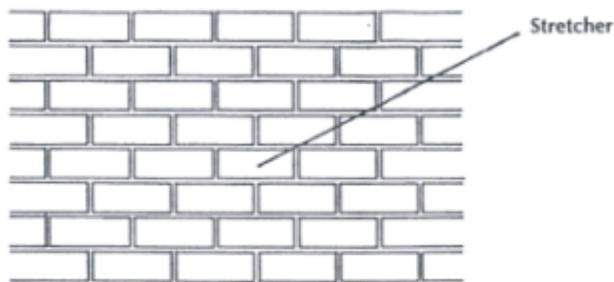


Figure 3. Brick coursing.

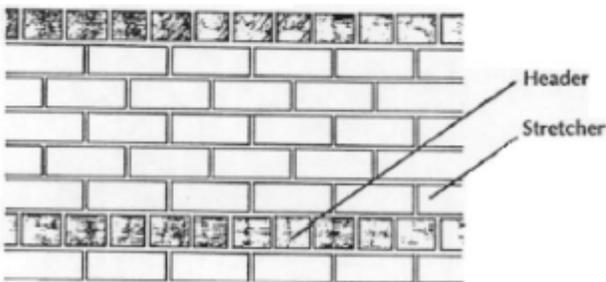
Top: Running bond (aka stretcher bond) used in press brick buildings. Running bond is always a veneer, tied to a wall bricks behind, and is not supporting the building. Benjamin H. Warder's rowhouses at 213- 223 A Street, NE are built in running bond.

Bottom: American bond (aka common bond), has a row of headers (narrower side of the brick) between rows of stretchers (longer side of the brick). The headers add strength to the wall, which is structural. This example is 5 rows of stretchers for every 1 course of headers, sometimes referred to as "American bond 5:1." The Terrace Court dwellings are American bond 6:1. Source: Historic Preservation Office, "Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings," 3.

Typical Brick Coursing

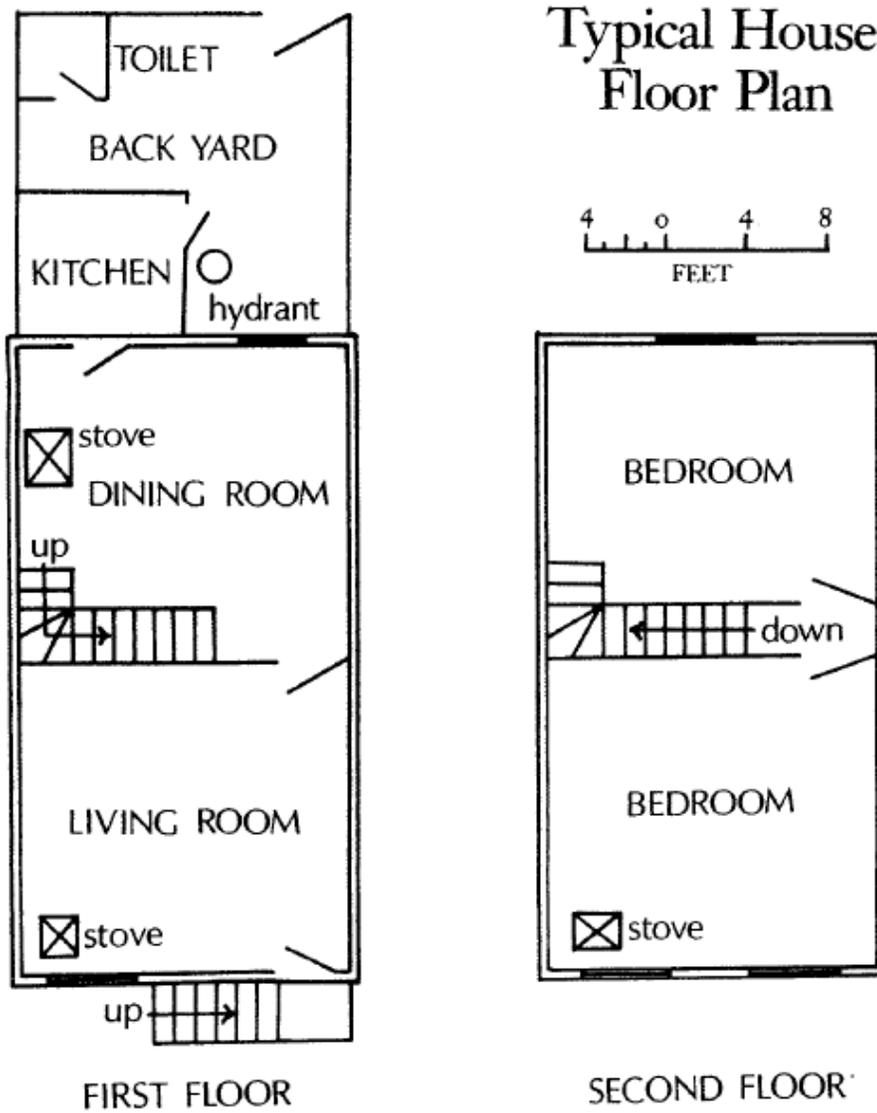


Running bond consists of all stretchers.



Common bond consists of five rows of stretchers and one row of headers.

Figure 4. Alley house floor plan. James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1982, 88)



DRAWING 2.
Floor Plan of a Typical House. From Leonor Enriquez Pablo, "The Housing Needs and Social Problems of Residents in a Deteriorated Area" (M.S.W. thesis, Catholic University of America, 1953), p. 22. This house is somewhat wider than most alley houses.