

Square 1075 alley dwellings in 15 1/2 Street, SE

During the Civil War era, alley dwellings typically came about when one lot was subdivided into two lots: one fronting on the street, and another fronting on the alley. The alley dwelling was often a rental property owned by a landlord who lived on the street fronting the alley. By the 1880s and 1890s, when Hill East alley dwellings were built, this pattern changed. Numerous small developers constructed alley dwellings on a speculative basis, and no longer lived near their alley dwelling rental properties. Hill East alleys were constructed during the later speculative building period. Most alley dwelling owners were professionals, business owners, contractors. There were a few government workers and one U.S. Army officer. The demographics of Hill East alley dwelling owners appear to track the city as a whole

Square 1075, 15 ½ Street (1891) - The Development of the Alley

Here, in Square 1075, there is an “I”-shaped alley, the longest part, 15 ½ Street, running north and south between D and E Streets, S.E. And, as exemplifies the trend toward speculative alley dwellings, in 1891, John H. Duvall built seven brick two-story rowhouses, 13x28, on the west side of 15 ½ Street, 422-432 15 ½ Street, on lots 28-34. In 1891, he also built six wider brick rowhouses fronting on 15th Street (15x28 at 422-432 15th Street). A pedestrian alley, 10.5 ft wide separated the rear yards of the alley dwellings from rear yards of the houses fronting on 15th Street.

All seven houses on 15 ½ Street existed between 1891 and 1967-1968. The 1968 real property tax assessment no longer shows improvements on lots 28-34 in Square 1075. However, the houses that were built in front, at 422-432 15th Street, are extant in 2010.

15 ½ Street Demographics

The Census from 1900-1920 shows that the houses on 15 ½ street were rented to tenants. In addition, several real property tax assessments from 1893-1922 show a single owner for all seven houses and the 1930-1931 assessment shows a single owner for five of them. The assessments for most of these years also show a single owner for all six rowhouses in front (422-432 15th Street). We know therefore that this grouping of 13 houses was rental property during much of this timeframe.

In 1900, all the residents of 15 ½ Street, S.E. were white. Richard Schneider, born in Germany, lived at 413 15 ½ Street with his wife and four children. He was a brewer. Three brewery laborers also lived on 15 ½ Street, two of whom were also German. They probably worked at the nearby brewery, which was Capital Brewery Company at 14th and D Street, SE.

In 1910, six houses were occupied, five by white families and one by a black family. No brewery workers appear on the 1910 Census. In 1920, all the residents were black.

The Brewery

There was a brewery in Square 1042 (where Safeway is now) beginning in the 1850s. Local historian Cindy Janke found that George and Thereas Beckert [Theresa?] purchased half of Square 1042 in 1850 (for \$628.07) and started brewing beer there sometime in the 1850s. Along 14th Street was Beckert's Garden, which included a restaurant, saloon, bandstand, dance pavilion, amusement park, playground, and a picnic area. Later, the brewery and gardens were operated separately by sons in law of Beckert. And John Guethler then operated the garden and brewery together in the 1870s.

In 1884, there was a building permit for a dancing pavilion and outhouses on the east end of Square 1042 (today's Safeway site). The 1888 city directory listed Henry Rabe's Washington Brewery at what they called "Washington Park," advertising picnics, festivals, and outdoor amusements. It is worth noting that listings for the Navy Yard Brewery and Washington Brewery in the 1880s and National Capital Brewery in 1890, were all listed at the same location. So we know there were changes in both who owned the businesses and in what they were called. A 1917 photo shows the National Capital Brewery (designed by A.C. Wagner and constructed between 1890 and 1891). This brewery was a combined enterprise between Albert Carry and the Robert Portner Brewing Company. Carry, who had operated a brewery between E and F and 4th and 5th Streets, NE since 1886, sold that brewery in 1889 and then acquired the land in Square 1042 in 1890 for this new endeavor. This brewery was a prominent five-story brick structure that was as tall as an ordinary seven or eight-story building because of its tall floors, covering an area 94 x 136 feet. It had handsome stone trimmings and a graceful cupola. Attached to the main building were several roomy and substantial outbuildings, including an engine house, stable, and cooperage (where the beer kegs were stored). The company used nine wagons and 30 horses to deliver its beer—100,000 barrels a year.

1331 D Street, SE is Colonial Revival building constructed in 1899 as an apartment building. We have been told by HPO staff that at one time this was where the brewmaster lived. We don't know for certain, but it would certainly have been a convenient location and we do know that buildings related to the brewery were built as late as 1912 (when the ice storage building was constructed in the alley). Whoever lived here enjoyed an especially handsome and highly-ornamented building, with its Roman brick facade, decorative cornice with patterned frieze, and fluted pilaster at the door surround. If it was the brewmaster's home, this would be the only remaining building from that most exciting era.

In 1891, the Washington Evening Star reported that the brewery did not make its beer for shipment. Their beer was a good pure quality of beer for local use so it can be drawn from wood and not adulterated with any chemical whatsoever in order to make it a beer that keeps well. A 1910 ad suggests the true meaning of temperance is not total abstinence, but rather drinking pure, healthful beer in moderation.

Not everyone drank beer in moderation. One night in August 1886, at the brewery's employee picnic, things got really out of hand; after a lot of drinking, there was a major fight with beer glasses flying and overturned tables and chairs.

This brewery was also known as the Diamond Brewery in later years.

