



History of the SWG Headquarters Building

The story of the building behind the ornate brick Italianate facade at 415 East Capitol Street is in many ways the story of Capitol Hill. Its owners, its use, and its architecture typify development on “the Hill.”



The land on which the building now stands was part of a larger parcel (Lot 9, Square 817; 53-foot frontage) platted in the federal city’s earliest land division and inherited by Martha Hale Prout McKnight from her mother’s large family farm. The lot remained unsold for 20 years, apparently too far from the population cluster around the U.S. Capitol to appeal to investors. In July of 1850 McKnight finally sold Lot 9, the deed being one of the first to contain a woman’s name as grantor.

The purchaser was Lawrence Hessler, an immigrant laborer from Germany, married, with two children. The Hesslers quickly built a wood- frame house, valued at \$450.00 for tax purposes, probably on the west third of the lot. Early in the 1850s Hessler began to list his occupation as “gardener,” using his several properties to supply produce to nearby boarding houses, restaurants, saloons, and hotels, and to sell at Center Market on Pennsylvania Avenue. When Washington’s population burgeoned during the Civil War, land this close to the Capitol became too valuable to devote to gardening, and the Hesslers began to rent or sell their properties on East Capitol, moving eastward to the more open spaces around Lincoln Park.

In November of 1873 the east part of Lot 9 was sold to Rudolph Bleifuss, who appeared in the city directory as a “barkeep.” The German- born Bleifusses (her name was Kate) paid \$1,600.00 for the east 20 feet of Lot 9, the part which currently bears the address 415 East Capitol Street. The Bleifusses borrowed \$5,000.00 for improvements from a building and loan association serving the city’s German- speaking community.

The east 20 feet contained a wood-frame house that may have dated from the 1850s or could have been added during the Civil War (when the Hesslers’ real estate taxes increased). Whether any of the original structure remains in the present building is unclear. While the proportions, massing, and scale of the present building reflect modest pre- Civil War architecture, most of the facade details are true to the early 1870s, and all except the back seven feet or so of the rear addition also seem to date from the 1870s. The building’s pressed brick, bracketed

cornices, highly ornamented window hoods, two lites of glass per sash in the second floor front windows, and flat sloping roof are consistent with the Italianate style as interpreted in Washington, D.C. The overall effect is similar to numerous designs published in post-Civil War “pattern books,” which builders often used in lieu of professional architects.

Rudolph Bleifuss’s restaurant at 415 East Capitol appeared in a city directory for the first time in 1875, and for the next decade listings for the property’s use vacillated between “restaurant” and “saloon.” The Bleifusses lived at the same address.

In September of 1886 the house was sold to another German couple, Edward and Helene Abner, who paid some \$7,000.00 for it. The Abners were well known in the German-American community, having owned other restaurants. They apparently built an addition on the rear seven feet or so; projecting show windows were altered, and by 1903 the footprint and exterior of the building looked almost identical to its features now.

The Abners sold the property in 1905 to their tenants, Charles and Adolphine Engels, who had been the proprietors of “Abner’s Restaurant” and lived on the premises. The Engelses and their descendants continued to own 415 East Capitol until 1977, renting it to various tenants. After Charles Engels’s death, the property was leased to John Mergner. Four of the Mergners’ adult children, three of whom were federal employees, shared the family quarters—a pattern typical of Capitol Hill during the early years of the twentieth century. Between the 1930s and the 1950s the house probably ceased to contain a restaurant and became one of the many houses providing room and board that lined East Capitol Street.

Capitol Hill residents James and Florence Anton bought the property in September of 1977. Part of a generation often referred to as “urban pioneers,” they established an antique shop and refurbished the building’s interior. By 1976 historic preservation goals had imposed restrictions on exterior change. Not only had East Capitol Street become a “special street,” but the Capitol Hill Historic District, whose some eight thousand primary buildings included 415 East Capitol, had become a reality. The Society of Woman Geographers bought the property in December of 1991 for use as a museum and headquarters building, continuing to rent the upstairs apartments.

This description is based on a summary history by Ruth Ann Overbeck of Washington Perspectives, Inc., March 1992, submitted by Mary van Balgoovy, on behalf of The Society of Woman Geographers