

# Groff Court Neighborhood Walking Tour

## Part 1: [background info for tour guides]

### **Diller B. Groff (1841-1910)**

Groff was born and raised in Lancaster County, Penn. During the Civil War, he served in a unit of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, rising to the rank of captain. In 1870, he moved to DC, and began building houses.<sup>1</sup> Eventually he moved on to larger projects, building out most of a number of squares in Northwest, including Brightwood Park, and in Northeast, including the 600 block of Maryland Avenue (1889, 1891). For several years Groff and his family lived at 1901 11th Street, NW and later at 1107 I Street, NW. He was active in the Brightwood Park Citizens' Association and the Brightwood Park Methodist Episcopal Church, 8th and Jefferson Streets, NW. He donated land for a new church, completed in 1900, and left the church \$500 in his will.<sup>2</sup>

In 1904, he and his brother, Samuel A. Groff, were accused of defrauding the US Postal Service, in connection with its purchase of Samuel Groff's invention. The Groffs' criminal trial was front page news, and the *Washington Post* event sent an artist sketch the defendants, attorneys, and witnesses. The Groffs were convicted and sentenced to each pay a \$10,000 fine, and to serve two years at the federal prison at Moundsville, W.Va. The "postal fraud prisoners" enjoyed excellent meals prepared by a chef - fellow prisoner (for which they paid extra) and had access to newspapers and magazines. When the Groffs were released from prison in 1906, the press covered the event. While in prison, Groff had suffered a stroke, and after his release, he said that he wanted to take care of health. It appears that he never again engaged in any significant real estate activity. Groff died in 1910, after suffering another stroke. He was relatively prosperous, leaving an estate valued at over \$96,000 (\$2.2 million in 2014 dollars). He is buried at Rock Creek Cemetery.<sup>3</sup>

### **Groff's buildings**

Groff's building program in Square 779 (3rd/4th/E/F Streets, NE) was typical of his real estate business. As of 1887, Square 779 was mostly vacant, with only a few frame buildings. Between 1889 and 1891, Groff began to build out the square with 11 rowhouses at 516-536 4th Street, NE, 10 rowhouses at 319-337 F Street, NE, six rowhouses at 324-334 E Street, NE, and nine alley dwellings at 506-522 Groff Court.<sup>4</sup> During this time, other builders, including Edgar S. Kennedy, constructed rowhouses, filling out Square 779. In 1892, Groff built other houses nearby including 220-234 E Street, NE and 510-518 3rd Street, NE (press brick and Ohio stone, "white pine trim, cabinet mantels, latrobes, electric bells and speaking tubes"), at an estimated

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Busch, "Biographic Brief of Diller B. Groff," (1993). [www.gamebr.net/caroline/grof.html](http://www.gamebr.net/caroline/grof.html). Internet; accessed 3 Jan. 2015. "Groff Will is Filed," *Washington Post*, 13 Mar. 1910, 8.

<sup>2</sup> "Birthday to be Marked by Brightwood Church," *Washington Post*, 24 May, 1924, 12. "Groff Will is Filed," *Washington Post*, 13 Mar. 1910, 8. GET CITE FOR CIT ASSN

<sup>3</sup> "Let Me Go Scott Free," *Washington Post*, 27 Jan. 1904, 2. "Off to Don Stripes," *Washington Post*, 8 Feb. 1905, 1. "Diller Groff's Fine Paid," *Washington Post*, 15 Sept. 1906, 14. E.E. Wheelock, "Groffs Regain Liberty Today," *Washington Post*, 16 Sept. 1906, 1. "Groff is Alive Legally," *Washington Post*, 28 Oct. 1910, 14. [www.bls.gov/inflation](http://www.bls.gov/inflation).

<sup>4</sup> DC Building permits # 1463 (23 Jan. 1891), 1814 (5 Apr. 1890), 1410 (8 Feb. 1890), 757 (25 Sept. 1890), 758 (25 Sept. 1890), 1463 (23 Jan. 1891), 1167 (10 Dec. 1889).

cost of \$12,500. (both designed by Germuiller). In 1894, he built 329-333 E Street, NE for approximately \$8,000, which he apparently designed himself.<sup>5</sup>

In June, 1890 he sold the rowhouses at 319- 333 F Street, NE to A.K. Cralle and others for \$26,800.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1890s there was a big demand for housing and Washington real estate was booming. The good times ended in the depression of 1893: Railroads, a major industry, had overbuilt, were losing money; and could not make the payments on their bond debt, and some went bankrupt. Many banks, which had invested in railroad bonds, failed and people lost their savings (there was no FIDC). Nationwide, 500 banks and 15,000 businesses failed. There was widespread unemployment; with nationwide rates of 14% to 18% between 1893 and 1897 (compared to 3% unemployment in 1892). Many people turned to soup kitchens for food. The economy did not fully recover until approximately 1897. In DC, demand for new buildings plummeted.

**[insert GRAPH OF BLG PERMITS 1888-1900]**

### **Groff Court alley dwellings**

In the nineteenth century, there was a big demand for low-cost rental housing. Investors built alley dwellings to rent to tenants, primarily African-Americans. Alley dwellings built in the city between 1870 and 1892 were usually brick or frame, two stories. The typical floor plan for a Washington alley house was a kitchen and another room on the first floor, two bedrooms on the second floor, and in the back yard, a water hydrant and an outhouse. The Groff Court alley dwellings were typical alley dwellings, in their origin, tenant occupancy, and the disappearance of some dwellings.

The original nine Groff Court dwellings were brick, built in 1890 for a total cost of \$4,500.<sup>7</sup> Each building was two stories, 12.33 x 28 feet. These houses resemble Groff's two-story brick houses at 324-328 E Street, NE, also built in 1890: The alley dwellings are also two stories, have the same segmented arch window openings, and similar stepped brick at the cornice, but are simpler and smaller (only two bays wide) and without a basement. [CHECK UTILITIES]

These buildings, like many alley dwellings, were built as rental housing. Groff still owned all nine houses as of 1893. By 1899, he had transferred them to John Cook, trustee. Real estate advertisements in 1894 and 1895 show 506 and 518 Groff Court offered for rent at \$9 per month. Curiously, although several Groff Court houses were rented to African Americans, 506 Groff Court was for white tenants only. From Census records, we know that all nine houses

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<sup>5</sup> DC Building permits # 1738 (19 Mar. 1892), 1739 (19 Mar. 1892). "Ten Millions This Year," *Washington Post*, 27 Mar. 1892, 10. "Building Permits Issued," *Washington Post* 5 Sept. 1894, 7. One of Groff's houses is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1879, Groff built a three-story brick Queen Anne house at 1800 Vermont Avenue, NW for Edwin P. Goodwin, an insurance agent. later served as classrooms for Frelinghuysen University, a school for African-American adults. DC Inventory of Historic Sites (2009). DC Historic Preservation Review Board. [www.planning.dc.gov/page/landmarks-and-districts](http://www.planning.dc.gov/page/landmarks-and-districts). Internet; accessed 9 Jan. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Brightwood Park" (advertisement), *Evening Star*, 22 May 1891, 3. Hopkins \*\*\* 1887. "\*", *Washington Post*, 18 June 1890, 7.

<sup>7</sup> The *Washington Post*, 26 Sept. 1890, 7.

were rented as of 1900 and 1910.<sup>8</sup> In 1922, five of the houses were offered for rent at \$60 per month or sale for \$5,000. In 1953, 512-520 Groff Court were to be sold in a trustee's sale (foreclosure). Between 1902 and 1976, the houses were owned by investors. A neighborhood cleanup in 1978 suggested that people had begun to buy houses in Groff Court to live in, and the 1980 and later tax assessment shows owner-occupants on Groff Court.<sup>9</sup>

Five of the original nine dwellings # 512-520 Groff Court (lots 122-126) remain. Three dwellings south of # 512 (lots 119-121) disappeared between 1985 and 1990 and were replaced by 501 and 503 Groff Court. Immediately to the west, are 500-508 Groff Court, built on previously vacant land. [WHAT HAPPENED TO 522? ]

### **Groff Court demographic note**

Groff Court residents were typical of alley residents during the early 20th century: African-American renters working in unskilled occupations. [GET 1920, 1930, 1940 CENSUS IF POSSIBLE]

In 1900 and 1910, all the residents of Groff Court were African-Americans who rented. Most of them were from Maryland, and some from Virginia or DC. Men worked at unskilled occupations including laborer, wagon-driver; one was a butcher. Many women worked as cooks or servants or as laundresses at home. By modern standards, conditions were crowded: A median of five residents per house, with a high of ten and a low of one.<sup>10</sup> Logan School, at the corner of 3rd and G streets, NE was built in 1891 for African-American students.

As was the case in many squares with alleys, in 1900 and 1910, the residents street-facing houses were white. Their occupations include police and firemen, stenographers, hotel manager, and employees of the Government Printing Office and Treasury Department. Almost all of them were renters.<sup>11</sup>

As of 1912, there were 258 inhabited alleys in the city with 3,148 houses. There were 30 inhabited alleys in Northeast with 336 houses.<sup>12</sup> A series of reform movements, starting in the late nineteenth century, worked toward improving or eliminating alley dwellings. Alley dwellings and alley life had come to be viewed as unsafe, unsanitary, and for these reasons, undesirable. Reformers argued that alleys were hotbeds of crime, and that alleys fostered prostitution, drunkenness, and disease. There is some anecdotal evidence to support these contentions. In 1904 and 1958, women fought in the alley. In 1922, Daughtery Stewart, 516

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<sup>8</sup> Census 1900 (ED 115), 1910 (EC 171). Most of the records from the 1890 Census were destroyed in fire.

<sup>9</sup> DC Real Property Tax Assessment, 1893-1894, 1899-1900, 1902-1903, 1980-1980, 1917-1918, 1921-1922, 1927-1928, 1930-1931, 1940, 1950, 1953, 1955-1956, 1970, 1976, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995. *Washington Post*, 14 May 1894, 3; 6 Oct. 1895, 15. *Evening Star* (advertisement) 27 June 1922, 27. Trustee's sale notice, *Evening Star*, 23 Apr. 1953, 62. ). In 1960, 516 Groff Court was offered for rent at \$65 per month; in 1965, 516 Groff Court was offered for \$85 per month; in 1972 518 Groff Court was for rent; in 1973 514 Groff Court was for rent at \$110 per month. *Evening Star*, 14 Aug. 1960, 59; 1 Aug. 1965, 97; 4 Aug. 1972, 37; 8 July 1973, 47.

Walterene Swanson, "Neighbors Clean Up Groff Court Area," *Washington Post*, 28 Sept. 1978, sec. DC, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Census 1900 (ED 115), Census 1910 (ED 171).

<sup>11</sup> Census 1900 (ED 115), Census 1910 (ED 171).

<sup>12</sup> Monday Evening Club, Directory of alleys, Washington, D.C. (1912). .

Groff Court, was accused of possessing intoxicants unlawfully; he was later cleared. In 1973, a man living at 516 Groff Court was accused of killing a child.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Words, Blows, and Knife Thrust, *Washington Evening Star*, 12 Jul. 1904, 9. "Wrong Address Upon Warrant Frees Suspect," *Washington Evening Star*, 12 Aug. 1922, 24. "Woman Indicted in Ear-Biting," *Washington Evening Star*, 7 Aug. 1958, 4. "Guard Charged With Killing Boy," *Washington Evening Star*, 12 Dec. 1973, 334.

## Part 2:

### Groff Court Neighborhood Walking Tour - Draft Handout

Estimated time: 1.5 hours

Meet at 324 E Street, NE

1. Start: 324 E Street, NE 324-328 E Street (1890) (total cost: \$12,000)

Topics: Groff's real estate activity, life story

2. Around the corner to 518 4th Street, NE ((518-534 4th Street (1890)

Topics: Demand for housing 1890s, growth of Capitol Hill

Depression of 1893: - building activity falls off

3. Groff Court (1890)

Enter alley from 4th Street, NE (next to 518 4th Street) Same year as 324-328 E Street:

Topics: alley life

Court simpler: 2-bays, common brick, American bond coursing. Likely floor plan: \*\*\*; outhouse, no running water, no utilities until [CHECK THIS]

Look at newer houses on Groff Court [NEED INFO ON THESE]

**[changes in Groff Court - newer dwellings: need info on them-- when built, design - need info on this]**

Topics: Alley dwellings: economics, rental property, tenants: African-Americans, immigrants.

Demographic note

Alley reform movements, and resulting changes in law.

4. 306-314 E Street, NE. Walk west on Groff Court to 3rd Street, then turn north at the end of the alley. Edgar Kennedy houses (1890)

Topic: Kennedy Bros.

5. End: 220-234 E Street, NE (Groff project, Germuiller design, 1892), from 306-314 E Street, walk one block west to 220-234 E Street, NE.

Topics: Three-story, more costly, great detailing, use of pressed brick. What was the market? *Brickbuilder* magazine.

For additional reading, see:

James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1982.)

HPRB, "DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey," [www.planning.dc.gov](http://www.planning.dc.gov) > HPRB > DC History.

**Diller B. Groff, builder** (1841-1910)

Groff was born and raised in Lancaster County, Penn. During the Civil War, he served in a unit of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, rising to the rank of captain. In 1870, he moved to DC, and began building houses. Eventually he moved on to larger projects, building out most of a number of squares in Northwest, including Brightwood Park, and in Northeast.

In 1904, he and his brother, Samuel A. Groff, were convicted of defrauding the US Postal Service, in connection with its purchase of Samuel Groff's invention. The Groffs' criminal trial was front page news, and the *Washington Post* event sent an artist sketch the defendants, attorneys, and witnesses. The Groffs were sentenced to each pay a \$10,000 fine, and to serve two years at the federal prison at Moundsville, W.Va. The "postal fraud prisoners" enjoyed excellent meals prepared by a chef - fellow prisoner (for which they paid extra) and had access to newspapers and magazines. When the Groffs were released from prison in 1906, the press covered the event. While in prison, Groff had suffered a stroke, and after his release, he said that he wanted to take care of health. It appears that he never again engaged in any significant real estate activity. Groff died in 1910, after suffering another stroke. He was relatively prosperous, leaving an estate valued at over \$96,000 (\$2.2 million in 2014 dollars). He is buried at Rock Creek Cemetery.<sup>14</sup>

**Edgar S. Kennedy, builder** (1862-1953) Kennedy arrived in Washington in 1884. After working for builder Isaac N. Davis, Kennedy and his brother William founded Kennedy Brothers in 1909. He built thousands of rowhouses, including in Mount Pleasant and North Lincoln Park, and 118 houses on E Street, NE (1914). His best-known project may be the Kennedy-Warren, 3131-3133 Connecticut Avenue, NW (1930). The rowhouses at 308-314 E Street, NE (1890) were early in his career. Like many other developers, he went bankrupt in the 1930s. He is buried at Elmwood Cemetery.<sup>15</sup>

**Julius J. Germueller, architect** (active 1882-1925). Little is known about Germueller. He designed many small residential and commercial buildings in Northwest and Northeast for Groff and others. His rowhouses for Groff in the same square as Groff Court include 516-536 4th Street, NE (1890), 337 F Street, NE (1890) and 330-334 E Street, NE (1891). He designed other rowhouses for Groff nearby, at 220-234 E Street, NE and 510-518 3rd Street, NE (both in 1892).

Germueller's other projects in Northeast Washington included: dwellings on D Street, NE between 8th and 9th streets (1892). He designed several buildings for Diller B. Groff, including the rowhouses at 723-725 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, NE (1896). And nearby, a store and residence for Diller B.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Busch, "Biographic Brief of Diller B. Groff," (1993). [www.gamebr.net/caroline/grof.html](http://www.gamebr.net/caroline/grof.html). Internet; accessed 3 Jan. 2015. "Groff Will is Filed," *Washington Post*, 13 Mar. 1910, 8.

<sup>14</sup> DC Building permits # 1463 (23 Jan. 1891), 1814 (5 Apr. 1890), 1410 (8 Feb. 1890), 757 (25 Sept. 1890), 758 (25 Sept. 1890), 1463 (23 Jan. 1891), 1167 (10 Dec. 1889).

<sup>15</sup> "Edgar Kennedy, 91, Built Many Homes, Apartment Buildings," *Washington Evening Star*, 22 Aug. 1953, 6. Kent C. Boese, "Historic Park View: A Walking Tour," Park View United Neighborhood Coalition. [www.wdchumanities.org](http://www.wdchumanities.org). Internet; accessed 9 Jan. 2015. "Buys E Street Residence," *Washington Post*, 13 Sept. 1914, sec. R, p. 1. "\$5,000,000 Hotel Soon to be Begun," *Washington Post*, 19 Oct. 1930, sec. R, p. 1. "\$40,000 Note Sale Asked by Receiver," *Washington Post*, 4 Aug. 1934, 7.

Groff at 538 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE (1896?). His commercial projects included several stores on H Street, NE, including three two-story buildings between 12th and 13th streets (1892), and a commercial buildings at 633-635 H Street, NE for Amour Behrend (1913).<sup>16</sup>

Other handouts:

Map of square 779, showing Groff and Kennedy projects (1906 Sanborn map)

Building permit summary for square 779 ?

*Brickbuilder* magazine sample

Ching or HPO handout on brick coursing

### **Walking Tour of Groff Court neighborhood - June 13, 2015**

Please come on a tour of this historic neighborhood, featuring Victorian houses, famous Washington builders, economic boom and bust, scandal, and life in the alley.

**When: Saturday June 13, 2015, 10:00 am**

**Place: Meet at 324 E Street, NE**

Details: [caphrs@aol.com](mailto:caphrs@aol.com) 202 53-0425

Rain or shine, free, open to the public

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<sup>16</sup> Two-story building on H Street, NW between 4th and 5th Streets. "The High Water Mark," *Washington Post*, 1 May 1892, 7.