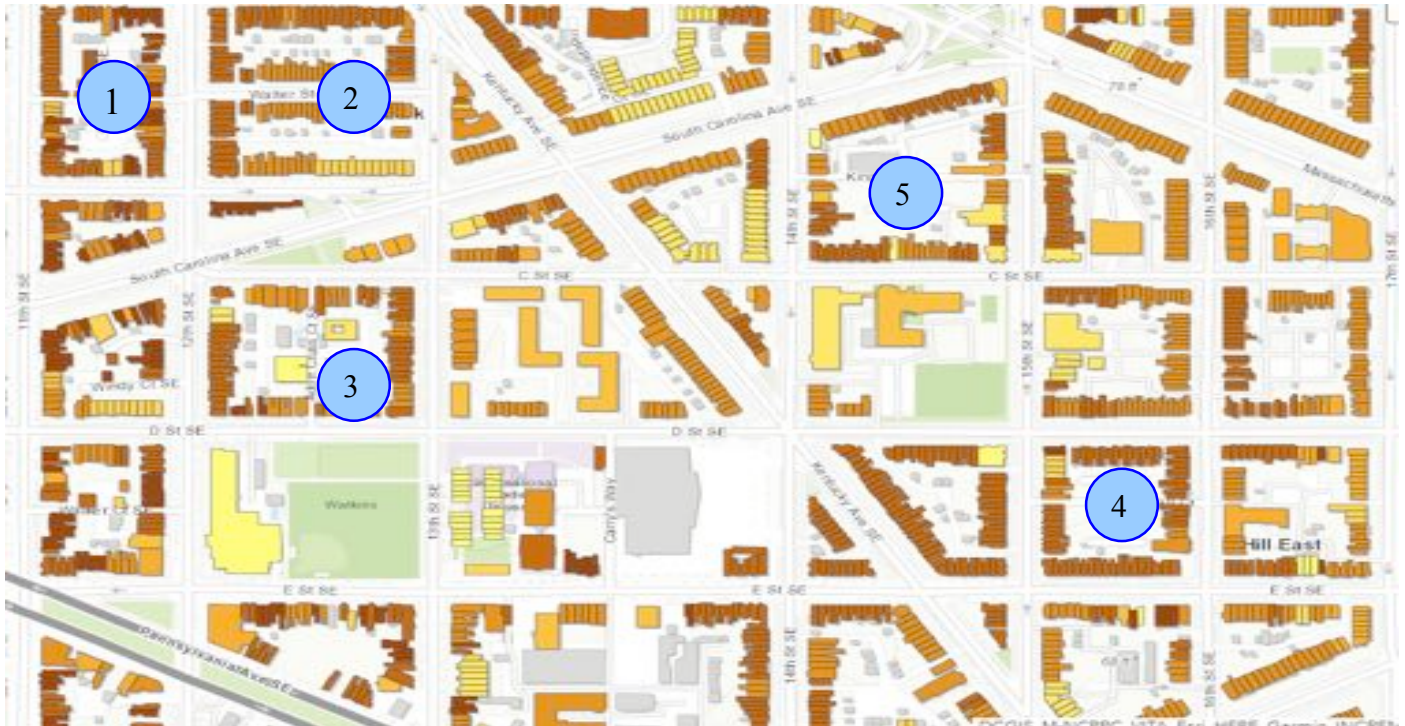


Capitol Hill Alleys Walking Tour

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1. Gessford Court, SE, 11th/12th/A/Independence Avenue, SE
2. Walter Street, SE, 12th/13th/A/Independence Avenue, SE
3. Adolf Cluss Court, SE, 12th/13th/C/D streets, SE
4. 15 ½ Street/Duval Court, SE, 15th/16th/D/E streets, SE
5. Kings Court, SE, 14th/15th/C/South Carolina Avenue, SE

1. Gessford Court, SE, Square 990, 11th/12th/A/Independence Avenue, SE. In the 1880s and 1890s, when Capitol Hill alley dwellings were built, several small developers constructed alley dwellings on a speculative basis to be low-cost rental housing. In the 19th century, alley residents were primarily Blacks, and a few immigrants. As of 1897, there were 237 inhabited alleys in the city, housing 18,978 people, of whom 73% were Black.

A typical 19th century alley dwelling is two stories, with four rooms: a living room and kitchen on the first story and two bedrooms on the second story. Some were frame and some brick; all surviving examples are brick, and were originally unpainted. In the rear yard was a water hydrant and an outhouse; residents used stoves for heating and cooking and kerosene lamps for lighting until approximately the late 1940s.

In 1892, Charles Gessford built # 1 through 21 Gessford Court, 12 x 24 feet. The same year Martin Wiegand built # 16 and 18 on the other side of the alley. [See 1921 map.] Beginning in the 19th century, reformers demanded eliminating alley dwellings or opening up "blind alleys" to promote public health. 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. In addition, at least one alley opening to the public street must be at least 15 feet wide, and all alleys must meet the public street at a right angle. The Gessford Court dwellings would not have satisfied the 1892 law. Because of legal restrictions and the Depression of 1893, no new alley dwellings were built on Capitol Hill until the law changed again in 2016.

2. Walter Street, SE, 12th/13th/A/Independence Avenue, SE. The first rowhouses on the street were built in 1892 by David H. Turner. Turner's project included 17-foot wide rowhouses at 226-234 12th Street, SE and around the corner, 16-foot wide rowhouses at 1200, 1202, 1201, and 1203 Walter Street. See Baist map, 1904. To maximize profit Turner followed a practice used by other 19th century developers: the lots at 226-234 12th Street could just as easily have fronted on Walter Street. However because lots fronting on main streets had a higher per square-foot value than lots fronting on one-block streets like Walter Street, Turner maximized value by rotating these lots to front on 12th Street.

But when Harry Kite laid out his lots in 1912, there was a huge demand for small houses, so he changed Turner's plan to create additional (and smaller) lots, thus gaining more lots and more rowhouses to sell. Between 1907 and 1913, Kite and other developers built a series of affordable two-story two-bay rowhouses with connected porches. Kite sold his small rowhouses very quickly. [See 1904, 1921 maps.]

Around the corner at 12th and C Streets, SE was St. Cyprian Church and school, a parish serving Black Catholics (built in 1893, demolished c. 1970). See the marker in the park at 13th and C Streets, SE. Many Walter Street residents were members.

Walter Street began as a Black community. The census for 1920 and 1930 shows that 100% of residents were Black, a mix of homeowners and renters, skilled and semi-skilled workers. George A. Better (1881-1929) had started his funeral home by 1896, serving Black families. He had relocated to 1203 Walter Street by 1905, and operated the funeral home in the house's front room. W. Earl Better and Ralph H. Better continued the business until the 1960s. They belonged to St. Cyprian parish.¹

1253 Walter Street, at the end of the row, was built as flats and is larger than other Walter Street houses. Several businesses have operated there: Alex W. Sample's drug store (1923), Hyman Rosenbloom Grocery (1930s), Old Iron Gate Market (1970s), Cornucopia Health Food Store (1980s).

Today Walter Street is a friendly small town: Strings of lights cross the street (residents pay the electric bill jointly). There is a monthly happy hour, and an adult relay race on July 4.

3. Adolf Cluss Court, SE, 12th/13th/C/D streets, SE. Carl and Undine Nash bought the uninhabitable, fire-ravaged 1920s Steuart Co. coal and ice warehouse in 2009, and in 2011 began renovations. They succeeded in naming the alley "Adolf Cluss Court" after the prominent late-19th century architect who also designed Eastern Market. The home keeps the footprint and form of the Steuart warehouse and incorporates as much of the original material as could be salvaged, including the original bricks.

4. 15 ½ Street/Duvall Court, SE, 15th/16th/D/E streets, SE. As you enter the alley, note the mural at 422 15th Street, SE. 15 ½ Street ran north and south between D and E Streets, SE. In 1891, John H. Duvall built seven brick two-story rowhouses, 13 x 28, on the west side of 15 ½ Street, 422-432 15 ½ Street) on lots 28-34. [See 1921 map.] They were razed c. 1968.

The Census for 1900, 1910 and 1920 shows that the houses on 15 ½ street were rented. In 1900, all the residents of 15 ½ Street, SE. were White, including German brewery workers. In 1920, all the residents were Black.

In 2016 the zoning rules for dwellings in alleys in the RF zone changed, to encourage building new alley dwellings.² Kube Architects designed new alley dwellings on the site of Duvall's alley dwellings. (2020).

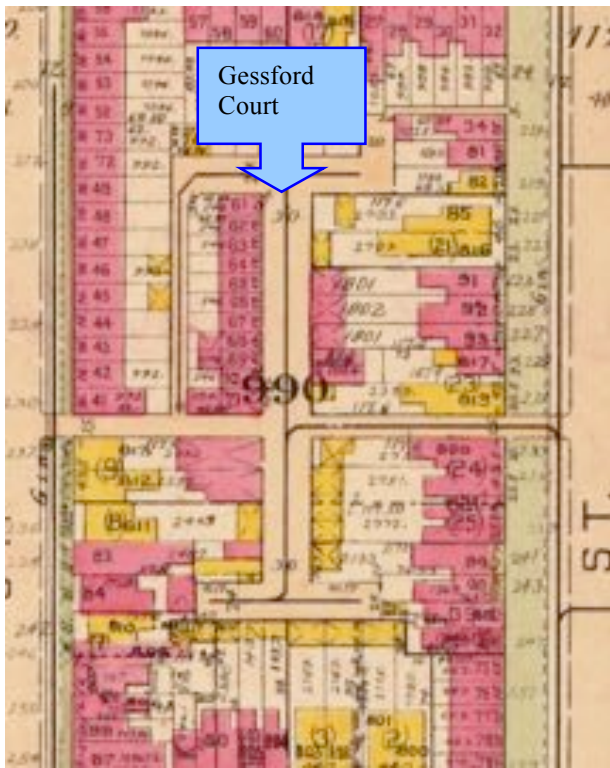
5. Kings Court, SE, 14th/15th/C/South Carolina Avenue, SE. This square has two interior streets: King's Court (east to west) and 14 ½ Street (north to south). There were eight one-story frame dwellings (four duplexes, on lot 15), between c. 1889 and 1921. Black families rented here. By 1928 there was a new building, where a paper box factory operated between c. 1956 and 1982. Now it's home to artists.

¹ City Directory 1905. "Rites for W. Earl Better Scheduled for Today," *Evening Star*, 14 May 1947, 3. "R.H. Better, Undertaking Firm Member," *Evening Star*, 16 Jan. 1957, 26.

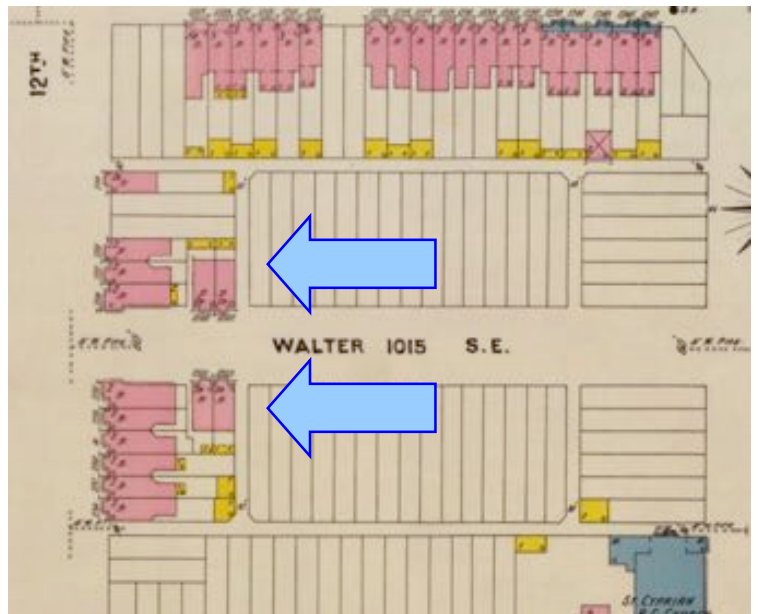
² 11 DCMR, Subtitle E, Chapter 51 Alley Dwellings.

As of 1900, George White, a Black man, owned a frame house at 214 14 ½ Street, SE. [See 1921 map.] He lived there with his wife Rebecca and their five sons. He was a laborer, and his wife worked as a laundress. Very few alley residents owned their homes. By 1938 his house had disappeared.

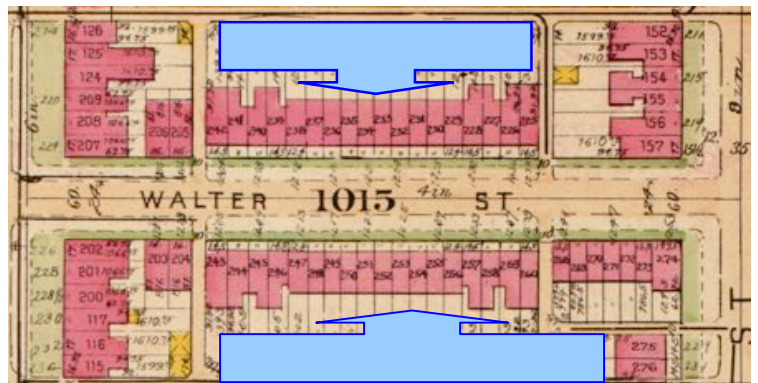
Gessford Court, SE Square 990, Baist, 1921



Walter Street, SE, Sanborn, 1904, showing Turner's houses



Walter Street SE, Baist, 1921, showing Kite's houses



St. Cyprian Roman Catholic Church, 1238 C Street, SE. 1896-c. 1970. LOC LC F81 377



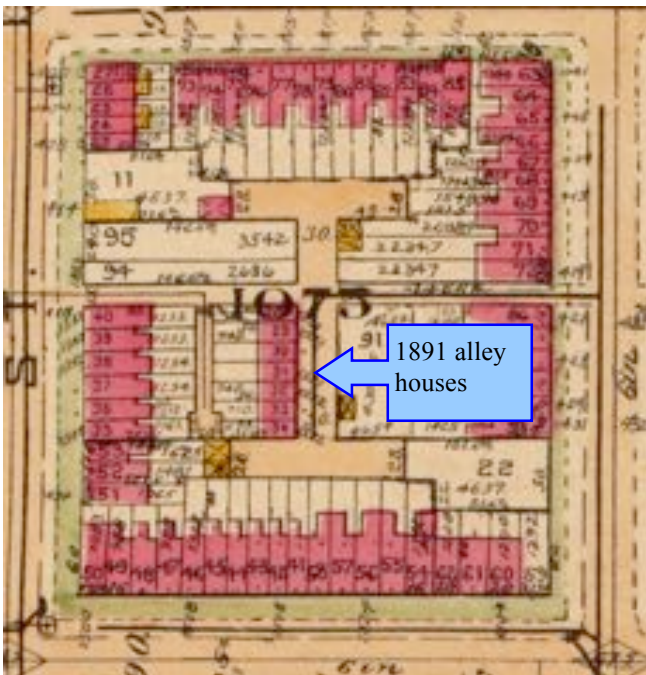
Walter Street wedding – Amanda & Aaron 2020



Adlof Cluss Court, SE Square 1017



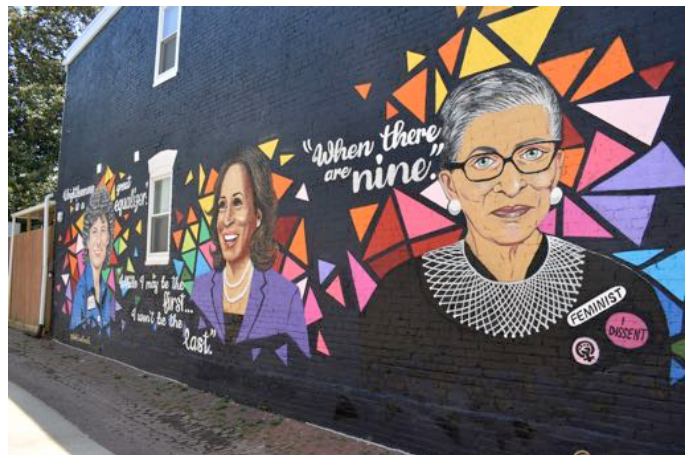
15 1/2 Street/Duvall Court, SE, Baist, 1921



Kings Court, SE, Square 1060, Baist, 1921



Sally Ride, Kamala Harris, Ruth Bader Ginsberg Mural



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). [available in reprint]
- DC Historic Preservation Office, *The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey* (2014). chrs.org/historic-alley-building-survey-hpo/
- CHRS walking tours, including alleys chrs.org/category/chrs-activities/walking-tours/