



CHRS CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF PRESERVATION

NEWS

www.chrs.org

July/August 2023

Antique Mantels with Modern Sensibilities

By Christine Mullins

On April 11, Molly Acorn, described her experience as the founder of Mantel House DC, a company that specializes in finding, restoring, and installing historic mantels in private homes. Like many entrepreneurs, she began her journey as her own customer.

A graduate of the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, Acorn built on her experience as a designer during the COVID pandemic in 2020 when she researched and performed the heavy lifting to replace an old electric fireplace in her own house that had produced what her son called “fake flames.” The new antique marble mantel she installed

has created a cozy ambiance in her new Capitol Hill rowhouse.

Acorn’s business grew as she first advised her neighbors and then began purchasing, refurbishing, and selling antique marble mantels which she first stored in her backyard, in a storage unit, in three storage units, and now in a workshop space in a marble shop, Marmara, in Ivy City. Since 2021, she has sold more than 100 antique mantels to clients across the country via Instagram.

Acorn explained the history of Victorian mantels built from 1837 to 1901 that incorporate several architectural styles including Federal, Gothic Revival, Second Empire, Renaissance Revival, Romanesque

Revival, and Eastlake. The main elements for each mantel typically include a shelf on the top (often in a serpentine design), a decorative central keystone which joins the two large symmetrical vertical marble slabs or spandrels on either side of the firebox, a four-piece cast iron inner arch to protect the marble from the soot, a cast iron frame or surround, a cast iron summer cover placed in front of the fireplace opening, and a marble hearth that grounds the mantel and provides support.

Continued page 2

Dick Wolf Lecture and September Membership Meeting

CHRS is so pleased to present Professor John Rennie Short, Emeritus Professor of Public Policy University of Maryland Baltimore County as the 2023 Dick Wolf Memorial lecturer. He will be discussing his newest book, *The Urban Now: Living in an Age of Urban Globalism*.

The lecture will be held at 7 pm on Friday, September 29, at the Hill Center. It will be preceded by a brief Membership Meeting at 6:45 pm in which the 2023–2024 CHRS budget will be presented and approved. Please join us!

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IN MEMORIAM

Mike Canning (1941–2023)

It is with great sadness that we report the loss of one of our members. Mike Canning passed away on June 1, 2023. After his retirement from the U.S. Information Agency, he was well-known for his volunteer work in our community and his passion for movies. He was the *Hill Rag* movie critic for 30 years and also started a movie club with Capitol Hill Village.

CHRS was lucky to have him present at a Preservation Café (chrs.org/preservation-cafe-hollywood-on-the-potomac-2) and he transformed this lecture into a CHRS Walking Tour, “Hollywood on the Potomac,” which he gave many times. It always sold out and was a fun stroll from the Library of Congress down East Capitol towards Lincoln Park, filled with all kinds of details and movie references. He will be greatly missed.



Mike Canning, right, giving his Hollywood On the Potomac walking tour in 2021.

Mantels, *continued from cover*

Acorn shared images of advertisements from 1855, such as the marble fireplace showroom for the Keystone Marble Works in Philadelphia. Companies that sold marble were in most major cities in the United States at this time and factories included cutting rooms, saw rooms, and polishing rooms. Marble was the material of choice for mantels in most middle class homes, followed by mantels made of less expensive slate or wood that was often painted to resemble marble. Cast iron, which replaced wrought iron, was created from molten iron ore from New York state that was poured into design molds to create intricate decorative patterns. The front of the fireplace was adorned with stylish screens, plates, and summer covers.

Acorn advised Capitol Hill residents to consider several things when choosing an antique mantel for their home—whether they are replacing an existing mantel to install above a working wood-burning or

gas fireplace or installing a non-functioning decorative mantel to accent a wall in their home.

Homeowners should consider the architectural style of their home; the placement or room layout; the scale and proportion of the room; their color, texture, and style preferences; and their overall budget.

Next, Acorn outlined seven steps homeowners should follow when installing a new mantel based on their ultimate goals: 1) design their new space; 2) perform an inspection for gas or wood burning fireplaces; 3) perform the demolition or removal; 4) source and procure the new mantel; 5) conduct restoration as needed; 6) arrange for transportation as needed; and 7) perform the installation.

The parameters for each step will vary depending on your goals and building parameters. Know that you may need to revise your initial plans. Capitol Hill homeowners are familiar with the surprises we discover behind our painted walls of our 100-year old homes during any demolition.

For example, a new fireplace typically requires a brick mason

to repair any existing brickwork and mortar and bridge any gaps in the firebox to fit a new mantel. Old cast iron pieces may need to be sandblasted to remove rust or powder coated and refinished to create an even color distribution. Custom pieces may need to be created. Transporting marble and other pieces requires a certain expertise.

Although the process can be more complicated than you can imagine, Acorn said the result is usually transformational. Even a non-functional chimney can create a beautiful and inviting centerpiece for your home. A flameless fireplace can create an imaginative and decorative space for candles, bobbles, bookshelves, wallpaper, and tiles.

You can access the presentation link at: chrs.org/mantels-pc. CHRS Preservation Cafés are free to CHRS members and non-members. Subjects for this Fall are to be determined, but they will be held on September 26, October 24 and November 28, so please keep an eye out for updates! ☆

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To reach any of the above, please contact the Society offices at (202) 543-0425 or via e-mail: caphrs420@gmail.com.

ABOUT CHRS

Capitol Hill is a special place. We promote, preserve, and enhance the character of our historic neighborhoods.

Since its founding in 1955, CHRS has worked continuously to make Capitol Hill the desirable location it has now become. Due to CHRS's efforts, Capitol Hill won designation as a historic district in 1976. Today, that legacy of standing up for the community continues with our work in planning, zoning, historic preservation, and public safety.

CHRS is a volunteer organization, made up of Hill residents who love their historic neighborhoods and want to ensure that the unique character of the Hill is around for future generations. Come join us!

To learn more or join, please visit:
www.CHRS.org

Zoning Briefs

By Nick Alberti

On June 7, 2023, 3 members of the CHRS Zoning Committee met in person to discuss 2 cases. Representatives from 1 case participated to present their proposals. The Committee voted to support both cases and to oppose none.

BZA #20923, 504 F Street NE. The Committee voted to support the applicant's request for a special exception relief for lot occupancy requirements to construct a three-story rear addition to an existing, attached, three-story principal dwelling unit in the FR-1 zone.

The proposal will increase lot occupancy from 57% to 70% and will extend 7.75 feet from the rear of the existing structure. Based on shadow studies, it appears that the addition will have little effect on light available to the neighboring residences.

There are six letters of support from neighbors; the Committee notes that there is no letter of support from one adjacent neighbor at 502 F Street NE. The BZA hearing is currently scheduled for July 12, 2023.

BZA #20928, 616 7th Street NE. The committee voted to support the applicant's request for a special exception for rear yard requirements

and an area variance for the lot occupancy requirements to construct a rear deck addition to an attached, two-story with cellar principal dwelling unit in the RF-1 zone.

The existing structure takes up more than 70% of the lot. The dimensions of the rear yard are approximately 15.5 x 8.5 feet. The proposed deck would occupy most of the rear yard and would stand 5.5' off the ground. The three immediate neighbors to north have the rear decks of similar dimension to the proposed deck.

The rear yard is currently used to house HVAC equipment. There is currently no access to the yard from the residence's interior. The committee concludes that the applicant meets the requirements of a variance due to the position and small size of the rear yard which makes reasonable uses of the yard impractical without the proposed deck.

They have 7 signatures from neighbors supporting the project—one adjacent neighbor has not yet signed off but has verbally expressed support for the project (they are still working on getting the signature). The BZA hearing is scheduled for September 20, 2023. ★

CHRS 2023–2024 Board Election Results

The Elections Committee is happy to report that the following officers were re-elected: Angie Schmidt, as President; Christine Mullins as First Vice President; Tina May as Second Vice President; and Nick Alberti as Treasurer. Libby Quaid was elected as Secretary.

The following At-Large members were re-elected: Delancey Gustin, Gary Peterson and Jim Thackaberry. Maygene Daniels, formerly Secretary, continues to serve on the board as Chair of the Membership Committee. Welcome everyone! We look forward to a great year.

Historic Preservation Briefs

By Beth Purcell

Interested in learning more about historic district designation?

Contact CHRS at info@chrs.org.

The Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB or the Board), considered the following cases at its virtual hearings on May 25 and June 1 and 22, 2023. HPRB is responsible for determining if proposed changes to a building are consistent with the DC Preservation Act. A “concept review” is a preliminary determination of a building owner’s plan to alter the building, and if the concept is approved, the owner will return to the HPRB for a final review.

639 A Street SE, HPA 23-239. This two-story two-bay porch-front frame house, apparently one of a pair, was built in 1874 or earlier. It is a contributing building. The applicant proposed a rear and side addition and a new two-story garage. CHRS supported the project, which the board approved on consent in May 2022 (PS 22-277). For prior coverage, see CHRS News July–August 2022, May 2023.

At the hearing on June 1 the contractor testified that he encountered unexpected safety problems, did not notify the project architect about these problems, and removed rotted fabric. On March 17, 2023 a stop work order was issued for work exceeding the scope of the permit. As of April 12, 2023, DOB/SCOUT showed “4-12-23 Applicant Is Making Permit Application To Reconstruct Of The Building, After ESP Demo. SWO Re: Demolishing Entire House (Only Facade Remains), Garage, And Excavation Work.”

On June 1, the Board considered the applicant’s proposal to remove and rebuild the dogleg wall, and to remove and replace the existing second floor and roof framing. The Board stated that it is the owner’s responsibility to report and correct problems, and that unexpected situations arise in many projects.

It is not the building inspector’s responsibility to find problems. The Board also noted that the photographs in the file showed that not all the fabric removed was rotted, that the demolition was “a real shame,” and that fines (said to be approximately \$4,000 by one witness) should be high enough to deter violations.

Because the plans were essentially the same as the plans that the Board approved in 2022 we supported the project. The Board is authorized to determine whether a project is compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District, and the Department of Buildings has the authority over building permit violations. The Board approved the application “holding our nose.”

On May 25 and June 22, the Board approved the following cases on the consent calendar:

647 G Street SE, HPA 23-096, concept/rear addition; cellar addition; areaway. The applicant submitted plans meeting the Board’s requirements. For prior coverage, please see CHRS News February, April, and May 2023.

1236 Walter Street SE, HPA 23-253, concept/two-story rear addition.

202 10th Street SE, HPA 23-356, two-story rear addition, replacing stained glass windows in transoms with clear glass windows. This was our only concern about the project. This Queen Anne rowhouse, two-story press brick plus basement with a square bay and triangular pediment is one of five (200–208 10th Street SE) built by Charles Gessford (see box) for his son George Gessford in 1891. These are contributing buildings.

Charles Gessford, Capitol Hill Master Builder

Charles Gessford (1831–1894) was Capitol Hill’s premier master builder in the nineteenth century. Gessford, who lived in a house that he built at 661 South Carolina Avenue SE, was one of the first to build bays topped with a triangular pediment (including 202 10th Street SE). His work includes Queen Anne-style brick rowhouses with triangular pediments on tall narrow facades: 655–667 South Carolina Avenue SE (1888); 419–425 M Street NE (1889); 638–642 East Capitol Street (1890); 200–208 10th Street SE (1891), 200–228 11th Street SE (1891), 418–426 C Street NE (1892); 824–832 D Street SE (1892). Gessford often added stained glass transoms to his more expensive Queen Anne houses.

His other Queen Anne rowhouses include: 307–311 4th Street NE (1886); 501–507 F Street NE (1888); 137–145 11th Street SE (1892), simpler flat front houses: 401–405 12th Street SE (1890); and smaller rowhouses: the one-story 11-foot wide dwellings at 1337–1353 C Street NE (1886), and alley dwellings in Gessford Court.

He borrowed to build his houses; when the Depression of 1893 hit, he was left with houses that no one would buy. He died a year later and was buried at Congressional Cemetery. He lived at 661 South Carolina Avenue SE at the time of his death.



202 10th Street SE.

The house at 202 10th Street SE has stained glass in the transoms over the front door, and on three sides of the bay on the first story. Please see photograph. On Capitol Hill, the transom window over the front door sometimes has the house number inside a lozenge (diamond shape set diagonally), like 202 10th Street SE, and floral patterns. Often the side windows are a simpler variation on the front door window.¹ This house is an excellent example of Gessford's

craftsmanship and classic stained glass windows, character-defining features of this Queen Anne rowhouse. The windows appear to be in good condition. See information on their care and repair in the footnote.

The applicant proposes to replace all these stained glass windows at 202 10th Street SE with clear glass windows. We noted that HPRB has acted to preserve stained glass windows in historic buildings on Capitol Hill and should protect these stained glass windows. For example, in 2011, the World Mission Society, Inc. purchased the historic church building at 700 A Street NE and, following its religious principles, began to remove the building's stained glass windows. The Mayor's Agent Order in the Matter of World Mission Society, Inc. upheld the Board's order saving the stained glass windows in HPA No. 12-263.

Following our comments to retain the stained glass windows, the applicant pledged to retain them, as documented in the staff report. ★

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¹ Neal A. Vogel and Rolf Achilles, *The Preservation and Repair of Historic Stained and Leaded Glass*, National Park Service. Lyle Schauer, *The Stained Glass Windows of Capitol Hill*. www.chrs.org

Tourist Homes on East Capitol Street

By Beth Purcell

Visitors to Washington fifty years ago could stay in a “tourist home” where they were offered a furnished room with a bed and access to a bathroom on the same floor. They would eat their meals elsewhere. Amenities could include running water in the room, extra showers, oil heat, hot water, air conditioning, and parking spaces or a garage. Some tourist homes doubled as rooming houses and welcomed long-term residents. Large houses on Capitol Hill, especially on East Capitol Street, convenient to the Capitol and other points of interest, were suitable for tourist homes. Tourist homes flourished approximately between 1920 and 1960.

We found advertising postcards for two tourist homes: The Senate Tourist Home, 320 East Capitol Street and Cochran’s Tourist Home, 625 East Capitol Street.

Mrs. Mary J. Wilkerson built the house at 320 East Capitol Street in 1877 and lived there with her maid. By 1893 she was suffering from insanity and died by suicide by jumping off a moving steamship. Earlier residents also included Mrs. Ada M. Bittenbender, active in the temperance movement (1890). The house was a tourist home as early as 1905.¹ Frank L. Sizer and his wife Mary K. Sizer operated the Senate Tourist Home at 320 East Capitol Street from 1932 to 1951. It had 10

furnished rooms, six bathrooms, plus hot water heat and air conditioning.²

625 East Capitol Street was a tourist home as early as 1909.³ Between approximately 1940 and 1959 Avonia H. Cochran and his wife Emma Sanders Cochran ran Cochran’s Tourist Home, “a home away from home.” They advertised modern conveniences and air-cooled rooms. At some point 625 and 627 (both built in 1887) were combined. When offered for sale together in 1961, they had 25 attractively furnished rooms and seven baths. By 1981 625 East Capitol Street housed 15 male high-school age Congressional pages. Investigations revealed shortcomings in supervising



IMAGE COURTESY BETH PURCELL

LEFT: Postcard of the Senate Tourist Home, 320 East Capitol Street, NE [The Dexter Press, Pearl River, NY (1932–1951). Cardcow.com 731280]. RIGHT: 320 East Capitol Street NE today.

the pages, who allegedly skipped school and attended wild parties. The Congressional page system ended in 2011.⁴

Today both houses are private homes.

Tourist homes operated at other locations in the city and on Capitol Hill. Other East Capitol Street tourist homes included: 304 (Hammond's Tourist Home), 317, 608, 631, 640 (Money's Tourist Home), and 643.⁵ ★

¹ "Frenzied Leap to Death," *Washington Post*, 3 Sept. 1893, 3. "Personal Paragraphs," *Washington Post*, 16 Oct. 1890, 4. "Visitors Blew Out the Gas," *Washington Post*, 4 Mar. 1905, 3. (Visitors accidentally inhaled gas from gas lights.)

² "Frank L. Sizer, 75, Tourist Hotelman," *Evening Star*, 22 Sept. 1957, 62. Cardcow.com 731280.

³ Cardcow.com 855266. "Tourist Center Woman Robbed of \$12,000 Ring," *Evening Star* 7 Oct. 1959, 73. "Hospitals are kept busy," *Evening Star*, 4 Mar. 1909, 18. (An out-of-town visitor staying at 625 East Capitol Street was injured while boarding a streetcar.) Classified advertisement, *Evening Star*, 18 June 1961, 63.

⁴ Walter Pincus and Joe Pichirallo, "Allegations Focus Congress' Attention on Reforms in Supervision of Pages," *Washington Post*, 19 July 1982, A2. "Pages of the United States House of Representatives." *Wikipedia*. Internet; accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

⁵ *Evening Star* classified advertisements, *City Directories*.



IMAGE COURTESY BETH PURCELL

LEFT: Postcard of Cochran's Tourist Home, 625–627 East Capitol Street SE c. (1940–1959). [MWM Co., Aurora, MO. Cardcow.com 85526.] RIGHT: 625–627 East Capitol Street NE today.



Celebrating the Fourth of July on the Hill

As part of our ongoing outreach efforts, Society volunteers fielded a contingent in this year's Capitol Hill 4th of July Parade. Out of concern for the environment, we substituted consumable lollipops for the plastic Mardi Gras beads flung in days of yore. These were well received and are much lighter to carry and pull along in our garden cart.

Hip-Hip-Huzzah! to event organizers, the Jeanne Phil Meg Team at Compass Realty—they made it look easy. And many thanks to everyone who marched with us. More photos can be seen at chrs.org/capitol-hill-july-4th-parade-2023.



CHRS CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF PRESERVATION

Capitol Hill Restoration Society
420 10th Street SE
Washington, DC 20003

Mark Your Calendar!

Please check website for current information—cancellations or postponements will be posted as they are known.

AUGUST

2 Wednesday, 7 pm
Zoning Committee Meeting, Kirby House, 420 10th Street SE.

12 Saturday (deadline only)
Art Walk 2023—Artist Registration Deadline. Details: chrs.org/art-walk-2023.

SEPTEMBER

5 Tuesday, 6:30 pm
Historic Preservation Committee meeting, 420 10th Street SE, first floor.

6 Wednesday, 7 pm
Zoning Committee Meeting, Kirby House, 420 10th Street SE.

9–10 Saturday–Sunday, 12–5 pm
Art Walk 2023. Details: chrs.org/art-walk-2023.

16–17 Saturday–Sunday
Fall Walking Tours time and subjects to be determined.

20 Wednesday, 6 pm
Board meeting, Northeast Library, 330 7th Street NE.

29 Friday, 7 pm
Dick Wolf Lecture. This year's speaker will be Professor John Rennie Short, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland Baltimore County. Hill Center, 921 Pennsylvania Avenue SE. Details: chrs.org/2023-dick-wolf-lecture.



CHRS CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF PRESERVATION

OCTOBER

2 Monday, 6:30 pm
Historic Preservation Committee meeting, 420 10th Street SE, first floor.

4 Wednesday, 7 pm
Zoning Committee Meeting, Kirby House, 420 10th Street SE.

7–8 Saturday–Sunday
Fall Walking Tours time and subjects to be determined.

18 Wednesday, 6 pm
Board meeting, Northeast Library, 330 7th Street NE.

CHRS 2023 House Expo
Coming October 28! More details at chrs.org/house-expo-2023.