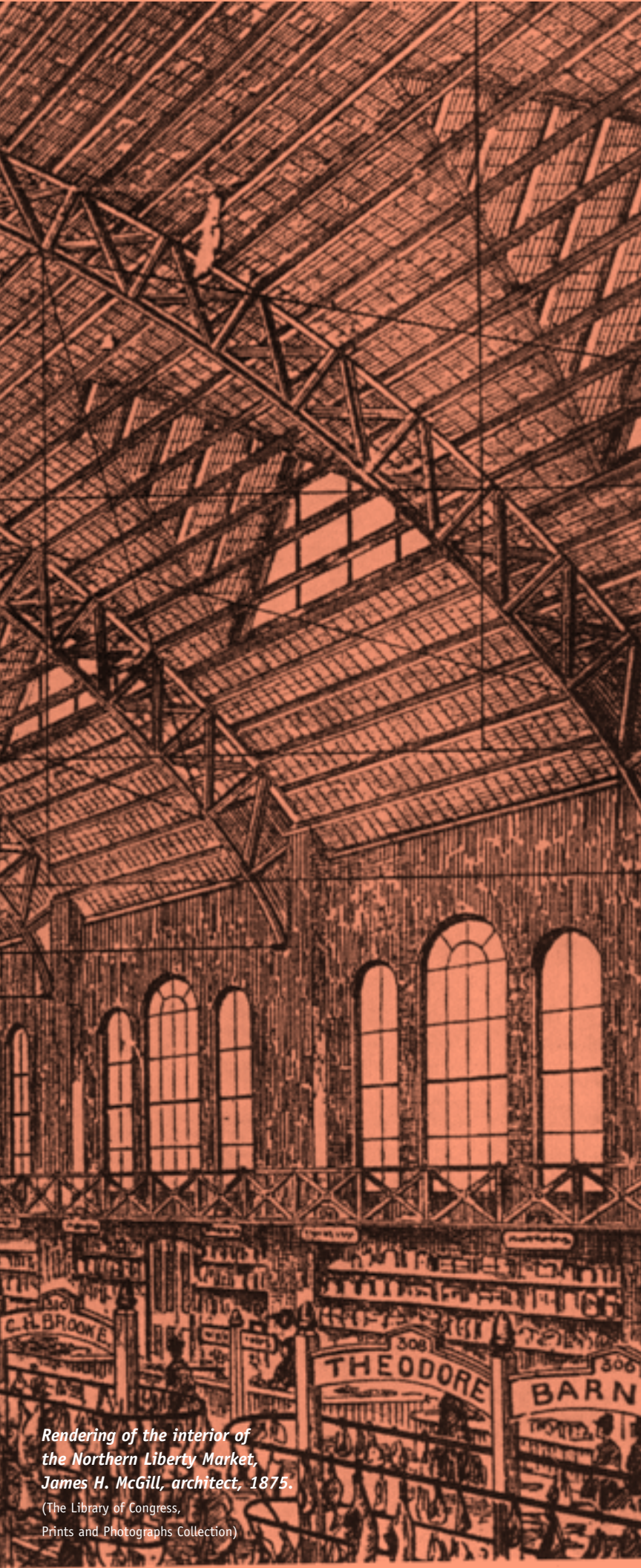




District of Columbia
Office of Planning

DC Historic Preservation Office
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024 202-442-8800



Rendering of the interior of the Northern Liberties Market, James H. McGill, architect, 1875.

(The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection)



The Mount Vernon Triangle area as it appeared on the 1792 Plan of the City of Washington.

(The Plan of the City of Washington as drawn by Andrew Ellicott, 1792, The Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

Mount Vernon Triangle is part of a larger section of the city commonly referred to as the East End. Its name is a contemporary designation coined for the triangular shape of the area formed by New York and Massachusetts Avenues radiating east from Mount Vernon Square to New Jersey Avenue. The historic district, located between 4th and 5th and I and K Streets, NW, is a sub-section of the Mount Vernon Triangle area. Although there are other historic buildings in the Triangle, the historic district provides the most cohesive collection of buildings that together tell the story of the larger area.

Mount Vernon Triangle evolved from extremely modest pre-Civil War beginnings of scattered wood frame dwellings occupied by early settlers involved in the manual trades to a more stable, but still working-class neighborhood in the latter half of the 19th century. When the Northern Liberties Market moved from Mount Vernon Square to 5th and K Streets, NW in 1875, merchants and entrepreneurs began to invest in the community by establishing new and varied businesses and replacing the area's older frame structures with more permanent brick ones.

During the early to mid-20th century, as automobile suburbs began to emerge to the north and east of the city, Mount Vernon Triangle became a heavily trafficked automobile commuter route, and the mixed-use mercantile community became increasingly commercial and industrial as residents moved out and automobile-related businesses moved in. In more recent decades (1960s and 70s), the area became the focus of urban renewal efforts, and many of the historic buildings were demolished to make way for I-395 through the city, or simply cleared.

The Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District is a physical remnant of this unique 19th and early 20th century mercantile

At the time of its construction in 1869-71, this house at 3rd and I Streets, NW was the largest and most expensive dwelling on the square. The Wiley House, named for its original builder Mrs. Emily Wiley, is a rare survivor from the period.



neighborhood in Washington, DC. The district—a tight collection of 24 historic buildings amid vacant lots and recently constructed high-rises—provides a microcosm of the formerly lower-scale, but densely developed area east of Mount Vernon Square. The historic district provides a sampling of buildings that were erected by the members of this community—working-class entrepreneurs of mixed races, including a sizeable German and Italian immigrant population, many with ties to the local merchant community.

The buildings of Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District range in date from the early 1870s to 1946 and represent a variety of architectural types and styles from all but the initial phase of the neighborhood's growth.

PRE-CIVIL WAR HISTORY:

Despite being prominently featured on the L'Enfant Plan, the Mount Vernon Triangle area was beyond the northern edge of the populated city during its early years of settlement. Early development in the city clustered around the existing town of Georgetown, the new Capitol building and the Executive Mansion (the White House), leaving the Mount Vernon Triangle area in the "Northern Liberties," a common designation for areas beyond the limits of the city. This outlier area experienced little early development save for a few scattered wood frame buildings within the vast open land.

Growth in the Northern Liberties began with the 1810 creation of the 7th Street Turnpike. Chartered by Congress, the turnpike ran as an extension of 7th Street from Center Market on Pennsylvania Avenue to the District line, where it traveled northwest to Rockville, Maryland.

Seventh Street became the primary transportation artery leading to the center of the city, and eventually an important commercial corridor. In 1843, residents of the area successfully petitioned the city government for permission to establish a public market on the unimproved open space of today's Mount Vernon Square. Two years later, the first in a series of market buildings, known as the Northern Liberties Market, were erected on the 7th Street side of Mount Vernon Square.

During the pre- and post-Civil War era, the commercial 7th Street corridor and the Northern Liberties market prospered, attracting the area's first residents—a relatively small, but seemingly prosperous group of entrepreneurs, independent tradesmen, and artisans. Most of this early development was densely concentrated around 7th Street and the market. However, by the mid-19th-century development was spreading east, especially along Massachusetts Avenue and I Street. According to the 1873-74 Faetz and Pratt Real Estate Assessment records, the buildings in the squares east of the market and making up Mount Vernon Triangle were modest structures of frame construction, valued at between \$400 and \$1,200.

The earliest buildings in Mount Vernon Triangle were modest frame structures, such as the group that once lined the 400 block of I Street, NW, shown in this circa 1930 photograph.

(Courtesy Historical Society of Washington)



The Northern Liberty Market, designed by architect James H. McGill, opened in 1875. Its construction prompted immediate development in the vicinity, encouraging a unique combination of residential, commercial and industrial building activity.

(Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington)

Douglas Row, an elaborate row of three Greek Revival-style dwellings, was constructed in 1856 at the eastern edge of Mount Vernon Triangle by Senator Stephen Douglas, Senator Henry M. Rice and Vice President John C. Breckenridge. In constructing the row on a remote corner of the city along New Jersey Avenue at 2nd and I Streets, Douglas and his colleagues may well have been speculating on the city's future growth either east from Mount Vernon Square, or northwest from Capitol Hill. Despite the fact that the area never evolved into a wealthy residential neighborhood, the row itself offered a mini-enclave of elite Washington boasting many notable residents throughout its history. During the Civil War, Douglas Row was converted into a 400-bed hospital for wounded Union soldiers. After the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant, General William T. Sherman, Gustave Lansburgh (the founder of Lansburgh Department store), and Mayor Matthew G. Emery all made their homes there at various times. The row of brick dwellings was demolished in several phases during the 20th century. The final coup occurred in 1965 when the surviving remnant was leveled, along with other antebellum houses in the area, for the construction of I-395.



NORTHERN LIBERTY MARKET AND MARKET-INSPIRED DEVELOPMENT:

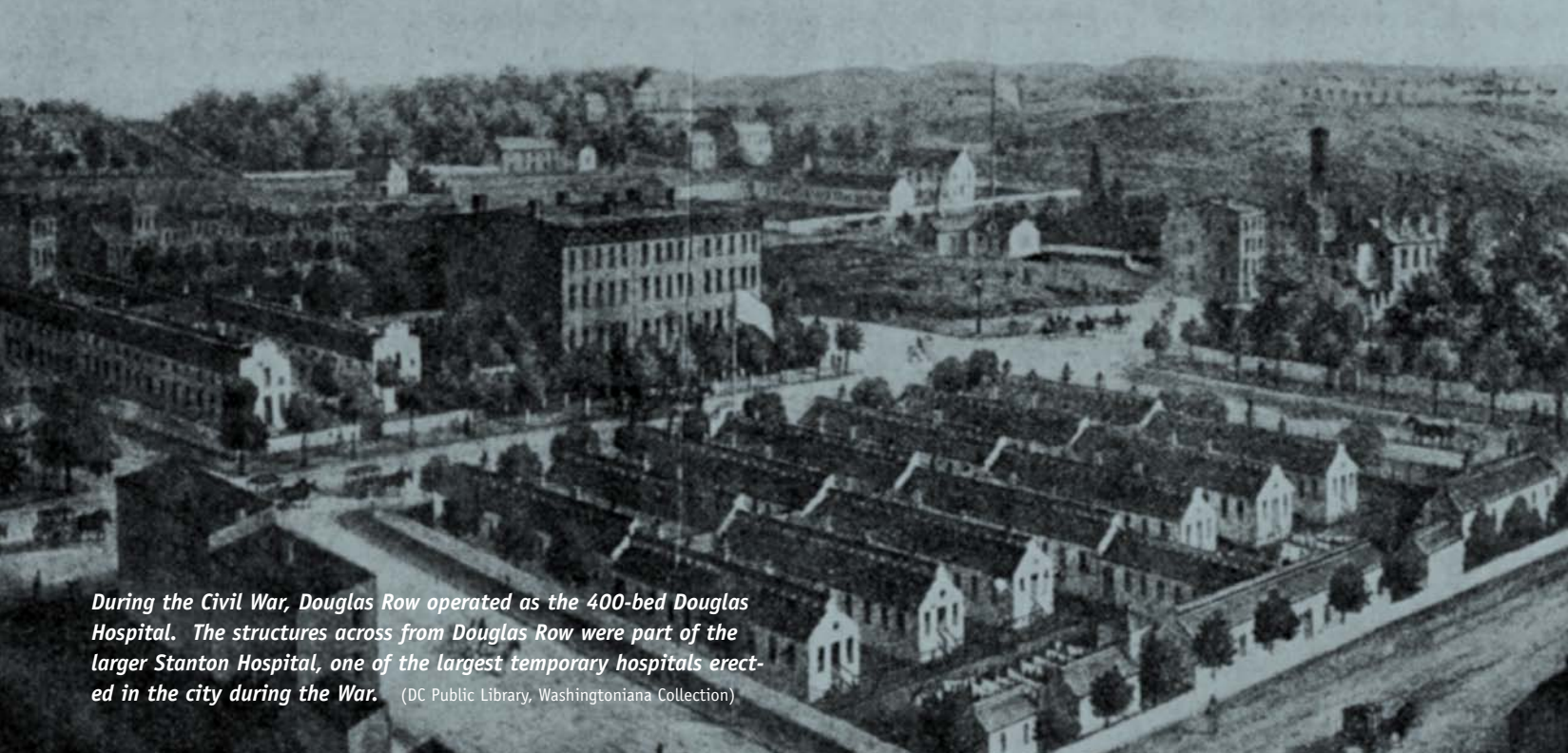
In 1872, the Northern Liberties Market at Mount Vernon Square was demolished, ultimately providing the principal impetus for growth in the Mount Vernon Triangle area. Many of the vendors who opposed demolition of the market at the Square formed the Northern Liberty Market Company. The company purchased a lot of land for a new market building two blocks east at the northeast corner of 5th and K Streets and in 1875 completed construction of a new iron and steel market building, named Northern Liberty Market. The market, housing 284 vending stalls, was greatly anticipated as a competitor to Central Market on Pennsylvania Avenue and immediately attracted merchants and tradespersons.

With the opening of the market at 5th and K Streets, the demographics of the 7th Street corridor spread east. Immigrant Germans who worked as dry goods merchants and craftsmen formed the nucleus of a substantial German community, just as immigrant Irish and German Jews found their place in Mount Vernon Triangle. African Americans were also well represented in Mount Vernon Triangle, and though they tended to live off of the public streets within the area's alleyways, they worshiped prominently in area churches, such as Second Baptist Church at 3rd and I Streets.



Built in 1856, Douglas Row (also known as Minnesota Row) stood out as the area's most distinguished housing stock.

(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collection)

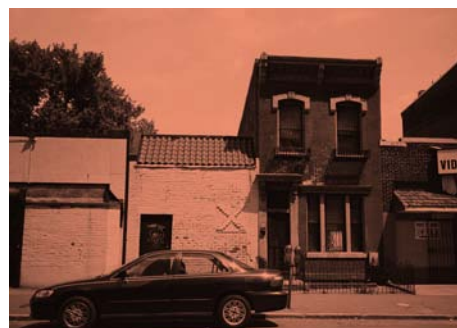


During the Civil War, Douglas Row operated as the 400-bed Douglas Hospital. The structures across from Douglas Row were part of the larger Stanton Hospital, one of the largest temporary hospitals erected in the city during the War. (DC Public Library, Washingtoniana Collection)

The immigrants brought with them an entrepreneurial spirit that is told in the district's historic buildings, such as the pair of dwellings at 453 and 455 I Street. John E. Wyess, a prominent military surveyor and artist who was active in German-American affairs in the city, purchased a lot near the corner of the new market at 5th and I Streets, and constructed the Second Empire-style dwelling at 453 I Street sometime around 1876. Wyess, who made his mark on the building by incising his initial "W" in the pediment of the dormer window, rented the house to fellow German Charles Herman and his family. After just a few years of renting, Herman, then an architect employed by the Architect of the Capitol, purchased the adjoining lot and built his own similarly designed house.



The two buildings at 453-455 I Street were each built by members of the German immigrant community. John E. Wyess, builder of the house on the right, had his initial "W" incised into the dwelling's second story window hood molding.



This modest building, historically housing a tailor shop on the first floor and living quarters above, typified the commercial/residential buildings of Mount Vernon Triangle of the mid-to late 19th century.

Similarly, Conrad Kiefer, (1828-1909), a self-employed tailor and naturalized citizen who had emigrated from Germany in 1858, built the small Italianate building at 921 5th Street in 1878. Here, Kiefer lived on the second floor with his family, while operating the first floor as his tailor shop.

John McDermott, an established carriage builder in the city and speculator in city real estate anticipated the potential for business in the area afforded by the new market. Between 1883 and 1885, McDermott, whose carriage manufactory was located at 310 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, built three large flour and feed stores in adjoining and substantial, three-story brick buildings.



Constructed immediately across from the market, these three brick buildings at the corner of 5th and K Streets historically operated as feed and flour stores.

CITY-WIDE INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS AND MOUNT VERNON TRIANGLE:

In addition to the Northern Liberty Market at 5th and K Streets, Mount Vernon Triangle benefited enormously from the massive, city-wide improvements implemented by Alexander R. “Boss” Shepherd and his Board of Public Works, as well as by the extension of the city’s streetcar network. By 1884, a horse drawn streetcar line ran along Massachusetts Avenue and another one ran north-south along 4th Street. In 1888, New York Avenue became the route of the city’s first electric streetcar line that ran from the east side of Mount Vernon Square along New York Avenue to the new subdivision of Eckington at Boundary Street. While the accessibility of the area to a variety of streetcar lines and the area’s proximity to both Capitol Hill and downtown fueled some residential speculative development geared to the city’s middle-class, the decidedly working-class nature of the existing mercantile neighborhood and the commercial/light industrial uses of the existing buildings clearly discouraged heavy residential speculation in the area. Unlike other northwest Washington neighborhoods that were developed with long rows of middle-class residences by the city’s most well-known archi-



The building at 472 K Street, built in the mid-1870s, was one of the first buildings to be constructed in response to the promise of the new Northern Liberty Market. Its use as a saloon run first by German-born William Rupertus and later by Irishman Joseph Lane is illustrative of the cultural composition of Mount Vernon Triangle.

tect/builder teams, the development of Mount Vernon Triangle tended to be much more modest and small-scale, with single houses or pairs of dwellings characterizing new residential construction.



The Eckington and Soldiers’ Home streetcar line, shown here in the 600 block of New York Avenue on the company’s opening day in 1888, contributed to development in Mount Vernon Triangle.

(Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington)

Without operative builders looking to speculate on a large scale, it was largely the local residents, who were already living and working in Mount Vernon Triangle, who invested in the community. By the 1880s, Mount Vernon Triangle was fully maturing, with buildings filling the area’s streets and alleys. In particular, Prather’s Alley, located at the interior of the square bounded by 4th and 5th and I and K Streets, NW, was becoming a bustling industrial center. At first, several rows of two-story brick alley dwellings shared Prather’s Alley with private stables and commercial enterprises established by the local merchant community. In the 1870s and 1880s, however, German businessman Charles Schneider established a bakery in the alley that would eventually expand into one of the city’s largest, incurring the loss of the alley’s former dwellings and stables.

In 1904, John J. Bowles opened a dairy bottling plant in Prather’s Alley further industrializing the minor street and contributing to the historic district’s industrial heritage.

Bowles began his dairy business in the 1890s transporting milk from his Jersey herd in upper Montgomery County, Maryland into the city to be bottled and delivered to customers by a squadron of horse-drawn wagons. In 1904, Bowles moved his bottling operation from H Street, NW to Mount Vernon Triangle where he began to enlarge his already prosperous business. Bowles’ “Jersey Dairy” bottling plant on Prather’s Alley was designed by German



The Northern Liberty Market and surrounding Mount Vernon Triangle area is shown at the center of this detail of the 1884 Sachse Birds' Eye View of Washington.

(Courtesy Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

architect Julius Germüller and contained 5,000 square feet of space. At the time of the building's completion, Bowles had moved to the neighborhood, living in the now-demolished house at 458 K Street that stood next door to and in front of his alley enterprise. Next door to his own house Bowles built the three-story brick building at 460 K Street to provide lodging for his dairy workers.

John Bowles continued to operate his dairy until 1925 when the buildings were sold to become a "milk bottle exchange." Here, milk bottles, which were expensive to manufacture, were washed out for re-use. Periodic drives to recover the 20,000 milk bottles in Washington used each day, urged consumers to return them to the exchange.

By the turn of the 20th century, Mount Vernon Triangle was well established as a mixed-race, multi-ethnic, working-class community. Along the streets adjacent to Northern Liberty Market, residents represented a myriad of skilled trades, such as carpenter, butcher, tailor, tinner, watchmaker, plasterer, jeweler, grocer, restaurateur, dressmaker, cabinetmaker and the like. Along the more upscale Massachusetts Avenue, residents tended to be rising middle-class government workers and clerks. Many of these white-collar workers came to the neighborhood when the federal

government opened its Government Printing Office headquarters on nearby North Capitol Street around 1900. Although the government had a printing office on North Capitol since the mid-19th century, the new and larger building had a profound effect on the residential growth of Mount Vernon Triangle. Based upon the 1900 census records, a large number of the residents in Mount Vernon Triangle worked as printers and clerks at the new facility.

A growing number of religious buildings, public institutions and other support facilities arose in the last decades of the 19th century to service the neighborhood. By then, several churches (Second Baptist Church, Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Central Presbyterian Church), two schools (Seaton School and Banneker Colored School), and a firehouse (Engine House No. 6) accommodated the needs of the local residents. Just after the turn of the century, the Carnegie-funded Central Library of the District of Columbia was completed on Mount Vernon Square, bringing a sense of prestige to the larger neighborhood around Mount Vernon Square.

In 1891, during this period of extensive growth in Mount Vernon Triangle, the Northern Liberty Market changed hands. The new owners added a second floor auditorium, able to seat 5,000 people, and changed the building's name to Convention Hall.



By the early 20th century, Schneider's Bakery, shown in this 1968 photograph, had expanded from Prather's Alley onto the 400 block of I Street, NW. (Courtesy Historical Society of Washington)

GROWING COMMERCIALIZATION OF MOUNT VERNON TRIANGLE

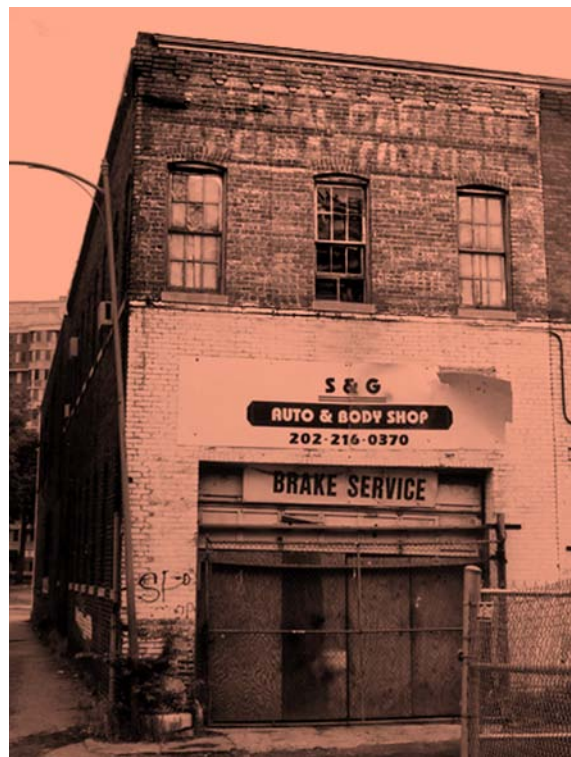
During the second and third decades of the 20th century, Mount Vernon Triangle began to see an increase in commercial development. Several new businesses joined existing ones in Prather's Alley, just as others expanded beyond the confines of the alley to the public streets. In 1912, William Beuchert contributed to the neighborhood's commercial growth by building a new blacksmith shop on the alley, along with an associated warehouse building. William Beuchert, born in Germany and naturalized in 1885, was a baker-cum-entrepreneur who became a notable member of the city's merchant community. In 1906, Beuchert owned a stable in Prather's Alley and by 1909 was buying and selling lots on the alley. By 1910, he had settled his family of eleven children in a now-demolished house at 430 K Street, where he continued to expand his local operations.

In 1917, Beuchert traded land with John J. Bowles, the dairy bottling man, in an effort to assemble a larger parcel adjacent to his existing business. In 1918, he erected an automotive repair garage to face I Street. The new Central Auto Works, a two-story brick building with a repair bay on the first floor, opened on April 1, 1919. Throughout the 1920s, Central Auto Works was a full-service shop that performed mechanical repairs as well as paint and bodywork and even constructed custom bodies.

The Jefferson Apartment building at 315 H Street, NW, designed and constructed in 1899, was not typical of the more modest residential development in Mount Vernon Triangle, but was likely built to attract the increasing numbers of government workers coming into the city.



Suburbs began to emerge to the north and east of the city, turning the historically residential New York Avenue into a busy automobile commuter route. Entrepreneurs like Beuchert responded to the growth of the new mode of transportation by building automobile-related resources, including garages and gas stations along the broad New York Avenue commuter route, as well as the smaller side streets. Many of these new businesses replaced residential buildings. Then, as less-desirable businesses moved in, the remaining residents moved out, leaving room for more industrial development.



Built by William Beuchert in 1912, Beuchert's Blacksmith Shop at the rear of 443 I Street is one of the few surviving industrial alley buildings in the historic district. Though now fading, painted signs on the building's wall advertising carriage and wagon repair work provide evidence of the building's historic use.



Builder Charles W. King built these three buildings at 457-459 Massachusetts Avenue in 1888 for middle-class, single-family residency. King actually lived in the center of the three houses, while renting out the other two.

SECOND WAVE OF COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMES TO MOUNT VERNON TRIANGLE

In 1930, with the impending demolition of Center Market, the Northern Liberties Market Association made every effort to attract Center Market vendors to its market at 5th and K Streets, including re-naming itself the “New Center Market.”

In November of that year, one hundred Center Market dealers had already leased space at the 5th and K market, while other merchants relocated in close proximity, namely in small commercial buildings along 5th Street. In response, Morris Wittlin and Samuel Deckelbaum,

During the 1920s, the second floor auditorium of the Convention Hall housed the “world’s largest bowling alley” shown here in a 1923 advertisement.

(Courtesy Historical Society of Washington)



owners of the Washington Supply Market located near the old Center Market, planned construction of a new, concrete-frame, brick-clad and limestone building containing five storefronts and an office loft katty-corner to the 5th and K market building. On April 29, 1932, *The Washington Post* carried a full-page display ad proclaiming the opening of “A Modern Food Center” that included a photograph of the new building, and a



The Wittlin & Deckelbaum Building was built in 1932 to attract merchants to the 5th and K Street market after the closing of Center Market on Pennsylvania Avenue.

testimonial from builder-engineer Morris Gumenick. Gumenick extolled the building’s “ultra-modern” features such as central electric refrigeration, a glass-enclosed, temperature-controlled meat cutting sector, and the “total elimination of vermin.”

As Mount Vernon Triangle became increasingly commercial, and the emerging suburbs and their bucolic image more enticing, the demographics of the neighborhood began to shift. Those local merchants, businessmen and government workers who lived in Mount Vernon Triangle abandoned their residences, leaving them as multi-family boarding houses that attracted less stable, and poorer residents. This trend intensified after World War II, with the explosion of housing construction and home-ownership loan programs. During this post-War building boom, the established and stable residents left their houses in mass numbers for the affordable and subsidized suburban homes on the fringes of the District, and in Maryland and Virginia, leaving only the poorest residents behind.

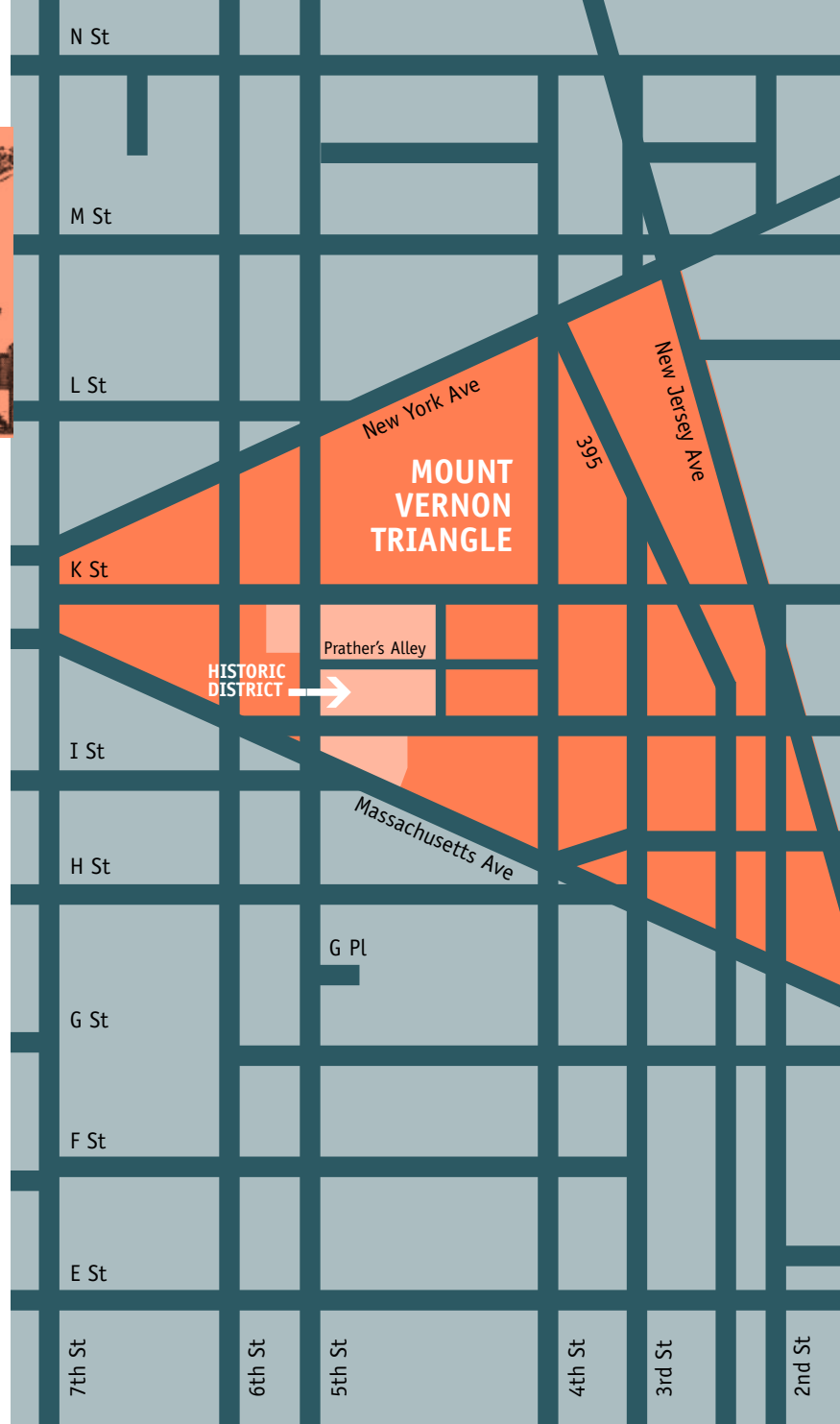


In 1926, the Lord Baltimore Filling Station Company built a corner gas service station at 6th and K Streets, NW. The station followed a standard company model, shown in this period rendering. Although the building is still extant, the drive-through open canopy has been filled in.

Then in 1946, all but the first story of the Convention Hall/Center Market building was consumed by fire. Although the first floor of the building was salvaged to later become the Wax Museum and a concert venue, the loss of retail space had a ripple effect on surrounding area merchants who depended upon the market as a magnet for customers. Many businesses left, marking the beginning of the commercial demise of the area. In 1949, the streetcar ceased to operate and the tracks on New York Avenue were paved over for buses. By 1950, a number of residential buildings along New York Avenue had been razed and were replaced by vacant lots.

Civil disturbance in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968 brought further devastation to New York Avenue, as numerous buildings in the blocks east of Mount Vernon Square were burned during the riots. In the same decade, Interstate 395 was constructed through Mount Vernon Triangle, towards the east end. Essentially, the highway bisects the area, heading south from 4th Street and New York Avenue, through six city blocks to the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and 2nd Street. Construction of the highway eliminated what was left of Douglas Row—the area’s finest pre-Civil War-era architecture and historically the home of several prominent Washingtonians.

A scattering of individual buildings and the small, but cohesive collection of buildings forming the Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District survived this 20th century destruction. Generally modest and in need of repair, these buildings—each with its own story—represent most phases of the area’s 100-year evolution and provide a valuable illustration of the growth of a unique mercantile community at the center of the nation’s capital.



This brochure was developed by the DC Preservation League in cooperation with the DC Historic Preservation Office as part of a series to provide information for residents and visitors on the social, cultural and architectural history of Washington’s Historic neighborhoods.

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Architectural Historian/Autor: Kimberly Prothro Williams; Researcher: D. Peter Sefton

Design: Hennesseyink.com

