THE HISTORY OF THE ADMIRAL DUPONT
1700 17TH STREET, NW
AND THE SITE ON WHICH IT STANDS

Prepared by:

Stephen A. Hansen
Preservation Matters, LLC

November 2015
The location of The Admiral Dupont at 1700 17th Street, NW (Square 154, Lot 1) originally fell in Jamaica Farm, a tract of land owned by early Washington proprietor, Samuel Blodget, Jr. Born in in 1757 in Goffstown, New Hampshire, Blodget was a merchant, economist and amateur architect. Following service in the Revolutionary War as a captain of the New Hampshire militia and gaining George Washington’s admiration, he built a fortune in the East India trade. In 1789, Blodget moved from Boston to Philadelphia where he became a director of the Insurance Company of North America, but soon turned his attention to real estate speculation in the site of the future capital city.

In 1790, George Washington chose the site just below the fall line on the Potomac, the furthest inland point navigable by boats and included the ports of Georgetown and Alexandria, for the location of new capital. On March 30, 1791, Blodget and eighteen other key landowners signed an agreement with Washington, where they would be compensated for any land taken for public use. Half of remaining land would be kept by the proprietors to develop and sell as they saw fit.
Map of the City of Washington showing named land tracts with owners' names in 1792. Jamaica Farm (Jamaica) is outlined in red. Library of Congress.

Estate of Samuel Blodget, Jr. showing lots owned by Blodget in his former tract of land Jamaica Farm. Library of Congress.
In 1791, President Washington appointed Pierre Charles L'Enfant to lay out the new Federal City. L'Enfant's resulting plan specified that most streets would be laid out in a grid. To form the grid, some streets would travel in an east-west direction, while others would travel in a north-south direction. Diagonal avenues named after the states of the union would traverse the grid. The diagonal avenues were to intersect with the north-south and east-west streets at circles and rectangular plazas that would later honor notable Americans and provide open space. As a result, New Hampshire Avenue serves as the western border of Square 154, giving it its trapezoidal shape.

Blodget’s lots in Jamaica were difficult to sell and the area remained mostly uninhabited expect for a few small farm plots to the west. The problem was Slash Run, sometimes called “Shad Run,” a stream that ran a zigzag path down from the north, coming within a block to the east of Dupont circle, and then wound its way down to Connecticut Avenue and Desales Street (now the location of the Mayflower Hotel), where it then turned west and ran into Rock Creek. Slash Run created marshy ground through much of its course, with such dense growth of bushes and vines that the only way through was by cutting or slashing, hence the name “slashes.” The swamp created by Slash Run covered hundreds of acres in the northwest section of the city, whose “nightly vapors rendered the surrounding heights tenantable only at risk of malarial fever.” An eastern tributary to Slash Run ran through the center of Square 154. Fortunately, one of the improvements made in the 1870s by the Board of Public Works, headed by Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, buried Slash Run and enclosed it in a sewer line, helping to drain the area and make it habitable.

The first building on Square 154 appears on Albert Boschke’s 1857 Map of Washington City in the southeast corner of the square. But when Square 154 was first surveyed for tax purposes in 1874, that house was not included in the tax assessments. But, six other houses were included in the 1874 tax assessment. Falling on what was then lot 3 were two wood-frame dwellings at 1717 and 1719 R Street, and a third small building behind 1717 R Street, and on lot 4, three wood-frame houses falling between 1723 and 1727 R Street.

Albert Boschke 1857 Map of Washington City showing the course of Slash Run through Square 154 (outlined in red). A singular building appears in the southeast corner of the square. Library of Congress.
1874 tax assessment survey map of square 154.

1874 tax assessment showing existing houses on square 154.
BY THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR, as many as 40,000 former slaves had made their way to Washington from Maryland and Virginia. Some built settlements which were to become the foundations of later African-American neighborhoods. Two of these settlements were located in southern Anacostia near Battery Carroll and Fort Greble. Square 154 formed part of another such settlement. The southeast half of Square 154, with its modest wood-frame houses, provided relatively affordable rentals for a small community of freed slaves to start new lives in the city.

The newly-formed communities of freed slaves tended to be well-defined, providing formal and informal support and services not generally available to them elsewhere. Households were likely to expand beyond the immediate family to include extended family members, boarders, and friends also newly arrived from Maryland and Virginia. Boarding provided an important means for new arrivals to become acclimated to life in the city. Through their hosts, boarders were introduced to employment opportunities, social groups, the church, and friends. This network enhanced their mobility and also provided financial assistance for the unemployed, sick, and elderly.

The households formed in Square 154 by freed slaves resulted in what were considered unconventional living arrangements for the times, with groups of single men or women sharing a house, a single man or a group of men sharing a house with a widow. In 1877, Fannie Minns, working as a messenger, Lizzie Olvis, and Elizabeth Smith occupied the house at 1715 R Street (#1 on map below). Fannie later married Jerry Evans, a manual laborer, who lived next door at 1717 R Street (#2). At 1721 R Street (#3), Joseph Burke, a blacksmith shared quarters with Mary E. Newman, a domestic maid. At 1723 R Street (#4), Sarah Beverly, a widow, shared the house with Willis Herndon, a manual laborer. At 1725 R Street (#5), Anna Gaskins, also a widow, shared the house with laborers Nathaniel Gilmore, Jesse Harris, Frank Wilson, and John Robinson, a driver. At 1727 R Street (#6) lived Joseph Holmes, a waiter, Mack Jenkins, a hostler, and Samuel and Emma Taylor, all laborers who eventually bought the house.

By 1877, two additional houses were built on the southeast corner of Square 154. Caleb L. Saers ("Sayers"), a white contractor and house builder, owned and occupied a house at 1711 R Street (#7). Immediately to the west of Saers (#8) was a house owned by James H. Saville, a white lawyer and Chief Clerk of the Treasury Department that was occupied by a widow, Margaret Wells. Later, he rented the house to two African-American men, Thomas Carter, a porter and Otho Martin, a barber. Saer’s house had been razed by 1913 and the rest of the wooden houses along the 1700 block of R Street were ultimately razed for the construction of the Rocksboro Apartment building at 1717 R Street in 1923 and the Pierre at 1727 R Street in 1939.

* * * * *

- 5 -
In 1877, THE LARGE VACANT LOT on the southeast corner of 17th and R Streets was subdivided into six new lots with addresses 1701-1710 17th Street, NW (lots 1 and 15-19) by brothers John Joy Edson, a banker and developer, and Joseph Edson, a lawyer. That same year, six two-story brick houses built on speculation, each with frontage of 161/2 feet on 17th Street, basements, and with “modern improvements” (gas and indoor plumbing) were constructed on the six new lots. The corner building at 1700 17th Street was the deepest of the six buildings, double the depth of the others and running 82’ deep along R Street. The extra depth was probably so that the building could serve as a store, with enough floor area to accommodate merchandise and living accommodations above.

When they were constructed, the houses between 1702 and 1710 17th Street took advantage of a relatively new architectural feature—bay fronts. In 1870, Congress passed the “Parking Act” and designated part of the right-of-way immediately next to private property in parts of the city as park areas to be maintained by the adjacent property owner. This area was to be landscaped and to this day is still referred to as “parking.” The following year, Congress passed the “Projection Act” that allowed for bay windows, corner towers, and porches to project over lot lines into the parking area.

By 1877, Square 154 was part of a racially-integrated neighborhood. The construction of the brick row houses on speculation attracted white buyers who then initially rented the houses to other whites. For the first few years, tenants changed on a yearly basis and included grocers in the longer corner building, widows, a horseshoer, an English carpenter, and several government clerks.

The 1877 Boyd’s Directory of the District of Columbia lists Basil Baden as a grocer located at 1700 17th Street. He had just purchased the house from Maria Roberts, a bookkeeper, for the sum of $4,000. But, Baden did not stay in business there for long. In 1878, with no warning, Baden simply vanished, leaving his wife and several children. “Gone West” was all that anyone could conjecture as to his whereabouts. Ultimately, they were right; Baden had left for Kansas City and then had gone on to Hot Springs, Colorado where he was last heard from, planning on going into the cattle business. Then after nine years of no further word from Baden, he was presumed to be dead and his wife Amelia was finally appointed administrator of his estate.

A year after Baden disappeared, Timothy Gannon, a grocer and Irish immigrant along with another grocer, Samuel Young, had set up their store in the house. But by 1882, Gannon had moved his grocery business to the busier southwest corner of 17th Street and Massachusetts Avenue, now the site of Embassy of Peru. That same year, Gannon was arrested for running an unlicensed bar in the store.

****

- 6 -
DUE TO ITS PROXIMITY to Howard University, by the beginning of the 1880s 17th Street began to attract middle-class African-Americans, many of whom were Howard alumni themselves. Howard University, named after Civil war hero General Oliver O. Howard, was founded in 1866 by missionaries as a training facility for African-American preachers. Within a year, the school’s focus had expanded to include liberal arts and medical training. Originally built on only three acres with a single-frame building in 1867, Howard University would see the education of 150,000 freed slaves by 1872.

By 1881, all the houses between 1700 and 1710 17th Street were owned and occupied by African-Americans. Like their neighbors on R Street, they too were born into slavery, but were mulatos, of mixed white and black ancestry, and therefore had somewhat more of an advantage in bettering their socioeconomic status. The new residents of 1700-1710 17th R Street were independent businessmen, leaders in African-American education, both locally and nationally, government clerks, politicians, and noted clergymen.

By 1881, Christopher Columbus “C.C.” McKinney, born in South Carolina in 1832, had purchased 1700 17th Street and set up a grocery under the name of C.C. McKinney & Son. McKinney had one son, Christopher Jr, and three daughters. Christopher Jr., known as “Professor” C.C. McKinney, it seemed had little interest in the grocery business. Also born in South Carolina in 1856, Christopher Jr. was an active organist and choir director in the prominent African-American churches around the city, including Shiloh Baptist Church and the Second Baptist Church (then on 3rd Street between H and I Streets). After his father sold the grocery business to a German immigrant, Ernest H. Schmidt, Christopher Jr. found work as a copy clerk in the Department of the Navy to supplement his income as a musician.

Attrel Alexander Richardson purchased the house at 1702 17th Street where he would later live with his wife, Flossie. Richardson was born in North Carolina in about 1848 and worked as a packer and folder at Coast and Geodetic Survey for 30 years. Richardson initially rented the house to Henry Piper, a messenger for the Treasury Department where he lived with his wife Emma and his 13 children.

Henry Piper was born around 1837 in Fairfax County, Virginia. His family arrived in Washington in 1843, but his mother died in 1846 leaving Henry and several siblings to fend for themselves. While not formally schooled, Henry mastered the basics of a rudimentary education under the tutelage of Alexander Hays, an emancipated slave from Maryland and one of the early pioneers in African-American education in Washington. During the “Great Rival” of 1858, Piper joined the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. With a prominent and active African-American congregation, the church played a prominent role in the struggle for freedom, civil rights, as well as the founding of educational institutions. Piper eventually
became a church trustee and superintendent of the mission Sunday school. From 1853 to 1857, Piper served in the U.S. Navy in various capacities and won the confidence and esteem of his associates and superiors.

It was not an easy task for African-American Washingtonians to obtain jobs in the federal government. Access to even the lowliest positions—laundresses and laborers—required connections to prominent whites or blacks with ties to the government. In early 1861, Piper informed Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase that he was “a poor, uneducated colored man” seeking “a situation in your Department.” To bolster his application, Piper told Chase that he was “very well acquainted” with William Slade, the head servant in the Lincoln White House. Slade was a member of Piper’s church, and who, like Chase, was also from Ohio. After three years and multiple letters of reference, in the spring 1864 Piper was finally hired as a messenger at the Treasury Department, where he continued to work until 1906.

Piper became one of the city’s earliest African-American political activists and elected officials. Shortly after the Civil War, he joined the Union League of America, becoming its president in 1867. Two years later, he was elected an alderman to the city government’s common council. At that time, the local government consisted of a mayor and an eight-member board of aldermen, a 12-member common council, and a mayor elected by both the aldermen and the common council.

When the local government was reorganized by Congress in 1872, it established a legislative assembly with an upper-house composed of eleven council members appointed by the President, and a 22-member house of delegates who were popularly elected. Piper ran as a Republican delegate and was up against two formidable white opponents—Republican banker and real estate speculator Hallett Kilbourn, a Republican as well, and John M. Binkly, a Democrat—but won by a margin of 23 over both candidates. Piper became one of the council’s most outspoken advocates of racial equality in the schools and public accommodations.

Piper’s wife Emma died in 1880 after a short but painful illness at the age of 42 and the funeral was held in the house at 1702 17th Street. Piper Died 1906 and his funeral was held at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. Attrell Richardson died in 1918 and his funeral was also held at his home at 1702 17th Street.

* * * *

SEVERAL HOUSES ON THE BLOCK were purchased by some of the earliest graduates of Howard University, who taught in and served as administrators of the city’s black schools. Although teaching positions were high status jobs for African-Americans at that time, they were not the first choice for teachers in their own schools. In 1880, at a meeting on African-American teachers in public schools held at the Madison Street Colored Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, J.D. Kennedy, ex-member of the Louisiana state legislature stated:
We do not come, hat in hand, begging for colored teachers as a favor; we demand it as taxpayers and wealth producers. If we are good enough to pay our mites into the coffers of the nation and State; is we are good enough to serve in the armies of the country in times of danger like that of 1862, we are good enough to be teachers in the public schools.

By 1881, Richard T. Moss had purchased the house at 1704 17th Street and moved from his home at 433 6 1/2 Street, SW. After attending Howard University Preparatory School, Moss entered Howard University and graduated in 1876 at the age of 20 with B.A. and was the class salutatorian. He began teaching, and by 1879 was teaching the fifth grade at the Mott School, named for Lucretia Coffin Mott, an American Quaker, abolitionist, a women's rights activist, and a social reformer. Moss eventually became the school’s principal.

Moss was a staunch advocate for education reform. As the speaker for Howard University’s 1883 graduation ceremony, he read an exhaustive paper attacking the present curriculum of the public schools, claiming that it left young men unprepared for life, and declared it foolish that a person should spend 15 years of his life ostensibly preparing for duties of public life, and yet be less fit for such duties than those who had not had any such preparation. He thought that too little time was devoted to the demands of the present and that the past absorbed too much of a student’s studies and lamented the lack of European-style technical schools that combined an academic education with trade skills.

Richard Moss returned to Howard University and received an M.A. in 1886. By 1889, he was teaching at the Stevens School and became principal there in 1891. Built in 1868, the Stevens School, located at at 1050 21st Street, N.W., is the oldest surviving public elementary school building in the District. Named after Pennsylvania Congressman and abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, it was built for African-American students as part of the city's racially segregated public school system. Still, the school was considered to have comparable facilities to those provided for white students. Even though Moss was a great educator, he seemed to have had trouble as a school administrator at Stevens School. In 1891, the prominent African-American newspaper the Washington Bee reported: "Moss, the principal of the Stevens School has not the
control of his pupils. When a school controls the principal, he should step down and out.” Moss’s inability to maintain order in the school may have been related to the fact that he was burning the candle at both ends; he had once again returned to Howard University and was working on medical degree that he completed in 1892. Unfortunately, Moss died the following year, probably from exhaustion.

Robert Lynwood Mitchell purchased the house at 1710 17th Street around 1881. Like Richard Moss, Mitchell was also a teacher and principal at the Mott School. Mitchell was born in Virginia in 1856 and was a graduate of Howard University’s class of 1872. While at Howard, he met and married fellow classmate, Mary Orick, who was described by the Washington Bee as “a lady of remarkable refinement, as well as industrious.” Together, they had four children, three girls and a boy. Two of the children also became teachers.

Mitchell left Mott School and returned to Virginia to become secretary and treasurer of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, now Virginia State University. Mitchell eventually resigned this position to assume charge of his father-in-law’s livery business.

The Mitchells settled in a commodious brick house on South Braddock Street in Winchester, Virginia. Mitchell proved to be a successful businessman and at one point had up to forty employees. In addition to the livery business, he also had a large farm a few miles outside of Winchester where he raised enough food to feed his family and supply the local markets. In what was probably racially-motivated act, an arsonist set fire to the stable and Mitchell lost thirty or forty carriages and many fine horses. Robert Mitchell died in Winchester in 1917.

Possibly the most prominent figure on the block was Anna Julia Haywood Cooper who bought the house at 1706 17th Street in 1889. Cooper was an author, educator, speaker and one of the most important African-American scholars in United States history. But unlike her other neighbors who were also educators, she had no formal connection with Howard University.

Anna Cooper was born in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina to an enslaved mother, Hannah Stanley, and her white slaveholder, George Washington Haywood. At the age of nine, Anna enrolled in St. Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute, where she successfully petitioned to be able to take classes traditionally offered only to boys. In 1869, at the age of 11, she became a student teacher at the institution.

At age 19, Anna met Reverend George A. Christopher Cooper from Nassau, British West Indies and they were married a short time later on June 21, 1877. He was the second African-American ordained clergyman in the Episcopal Church in North Carolina. Only two years later, George Cooper died and left Anna a widow at the young age of 21.

In 1881, Cooper enrolled at Oberlin College, where she again refused to take the inferior “ladies course” in favor of the “gentlemen’s course.” Cooper received her B.A. in 1884, and then returned to Oberlin and earned a M.A. in mathematics in 1887.
After attaining her master’s degree, Cooper moved to Washington, DC in 1888 and began teaching at the Washington Colored High School. The school was founded in 1870 as the Preparatory High School for Negro Youth as an educational mission run out of the basement of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. It would later become the M Street School, and then Dunbar High School after the death of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1906. At the time, it was the only all-black high school in DC. The building is now the Perry School.

The academic reputation of the M Street School was well-known and many African-American families moved to Washington D.C. simply to send their children to the school. Within a few years of its establishment, many of the faculty members were African-American, and were well paid for the time. The goal of the school’s leaders was to prepare the students for higher education at colleges and universities. Over the years, the school produced a large number of college graduates and its alumni included many prominent educators and public figures.

During her first year teaching at the M Street School, Cooper bought a house in Ivy City. Ivy City at the time was a small neighborhood in Northeast Washington, D.C. laid out in 1873 as a suburban development specifically for African-Americans. But after only a year there, she purchased the house at 1706 17th Street.

During her time as a teacher at the M Street School, Cooper also founded the Colored Women’s League of Washington in 1892. That same year, she also published her landmark book, A Voice From the South, that argued that womanhood was a vital element in the regeneration and progress of African-Americans. In response to their unwillingness to allow women of color into the YWCA, she was instrumental in opening the first YWCA chapter for black women.

Cooper became principal at the M Street School in 1902. But her outspokenness both in and outside of the school garnered contempt from white colleagues and supervisors. She was dismissed from the school in 1906 after a controversy erupted surrounding her character and behavior. But when a new superintendent was appointed in 1910, Cooper was re-hired at
the school as a teacher.

Cooper decided to return to school again and enrolled at the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1924. Upon receiving her Ph.D. in history, she became the fourth African-American woman ever to earn a doctoral degree. While continuing to teach at the M Street School and working on her doctorate, she was also raising five children whom she had adopted in 1915 after her brother had passed away.

Cooper’s retirement from the M Street School in 1930 was by no means the end of her career in education. The same year that she retired, she accepted the position of president of Frelinghuysen University, a school founded to provide classes for DC residents lacking access to higher education. Cooper worked for Frelinghuysen for twenty years, first as its president and then as registrar, and left the school only a decade before she passed away in 1964 at the age of 105.

Next door to Anna Cooper at 1708 17th Street lived James L. Jasper. Jasper was born in 1851 in Fairfax, Virginia. In 1875, Jasper found employment with the U.S. Post Office Department, where he was promoted numerous times. In 1878, he married Annie Parker, also a native of Virginia, and together they had nine children.

Influenced by his devoutly religious parents, Jasper was called to the ministry at an early age and became actively involved with the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, once located at the corner of 19th and I Streets, NW and is now on 16th Street, NW. Founded in 1838, the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church was the first, and today the oldest, African-American Baptist congregation in Washington, D.C. Since its founding, the church has figured prominently within the historical and social fabric of Washington, D.C.'s African-American community.

Through taking evening classes at Howard University, Jasper received a certificate from its theology department in 1905. The following year, he was ordained at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church by a counsel composed of the church’s pastor and two delegates from each of the city's black Baptist churches. In 1906, Jasper established the First Baptist Church of North Brentwood, Maryland that started with only 19 members. Services were first held in a private home until the church moved into a one story building in 1907.

With only a small, if any, income as a minister and with a large family to support, Jasper continued to work as a mail clerk at the Post Office Department. Yet by 1910, Jasper had acquired numerous properties, including his 17th Street home, N.W., and a summer residence in West Lanham Hills, Maryland. He became a pioneer in the construction of houses in North Brentwood, acting as a small-scale developer at a time when housing discrimination based on race was common. This example of
self-help is still a common theme in the tight-knit community of North Brentwood—the first incorporated African-American community in Prince George’s County.

Jasper continued to live at the house on 17th Street until his retirement from the U.S. Postal Service when he moved to North Brentwood permanently and resided with his daughter, Addie, and her family. He remained pastor of the First Baptist Church until 1935 and continued to own the 17th Street house into the 1940s.

In 1889, Mary McKinney, the daughter of grocer C.C. McKinney at 1700 17th Street, married Wyatt Archer at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. Mary at the time was a principal in one of the city public schools. Uncommon for a black wedding at the time, the description of the wedding appeared in the society page of the predominantly white newspaper the Evening Star, and closely followed the description of a party given by Dupont Circle’s high society socialite, Mary Leiter. The article noted that the bride was given away by her father who was wearing a neat-fitting traveling suit.

Archer was born in Petersburg, Virginia in 1859 where he attended public school. He attended Howard University Commercial Department between 1870 and 1871 and then its Pharmaceutical College, graduating with a degree in pharmacology in 1888. He then took a job with the U.S. Treasury Department and was promoted from one rank to another until he reached the esteemed position of a clerk.

In 1889, Archer contracted to build a new, two-story, brick, detached house for himself and his new bride immediately behind, and on the same lot, as his father-in-law’s at 1703 R Street. The house was designed by the prominent architectural firm of A.B. Mullet & Co. The firm’s founder, Alfred Bult Mullet, is perhaps best known as the architect of the Old Executive Office building, but Archer’s house was probably designed by one of his two sons who were in business with their father.

Mary Archer died in 1890. Funeral services were held at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church where the couple had been married only the year before. In spite of his wife’s untimely death, Archer became socially prominent and quite wealthy dealing in real estate in predominantly African-American Ivy City neighborhood.

Archer would again fall on hard times in the next decade. He had become a director of the Capital Savings Bank, the first black-operated bank in the District of Columbia that began operations in 1888. But by 1902, it was in financial difficulty and had stopped paying on checks and was forced to suspend operations and finally failed in 1904. Depositors sued each of the bank’s officers individually. In 1905, Archer found himself in bankruptcy court for debts totaling $100,892.82 in depositor claims and was declared bankrupt.

In 1903, Archer moved to 1714 P Street and rented out the house on R Street, advertising for black tenants. He sold the house in 1918 to Harry W. Kenner who lived and worked at his pharmacy cross the street at 1711 17th

Wyatt Archer house at 1703 R Street, NW circa 1969. Photo: Historical Society of Washington, DC.
Street. Archer died of a stroke at Bellevue Hospital in New York City in 1929 while visiting a niece.

The early 1900s saw the birth of Washington's golden era of apartment living. Apartments had been scorned by the well-to-do as well as by middle-class Washingtonians throughout most of the 19th century, but by 1900 that attitude had changed dramatically. For the working middle class, apartment living offered a more affordable and less permanent option than home ownership. Developers soon responded with a proliferation of apartment buildings across the city.

Zoning along 17th Street, one of the city's wider north-south streets, allowed for taller apartment buildings to be constructed than on other, narrower streets. In 1916, Washington's premier developer and apartment building builder, Harry Wardman, built a five-story apartment building across the street from the site of The Admiral Dupont at 1725 17th Street. That same year, Wardman also built the six-story Copley Plaza at 1514 17th Street. Other large apartment buildings would follow, including the Chastleton at 1701 16th Street in 1919.

With the advent of apartment buildings, 17th Street between Massachusetts and Florida Avenues began to change from residential to mixed residential and commercial. As was the trend along Connecticut Avenue at the same time, commerce was slowly moving north, replacing what were once single-family residences with stores to service apartment residents. By the 1920s, this commercial wave had reached the 1700 block of 17th Street.

Many of the homeowners in the 1700 block of 17th Street took advantage of the opportunity provided by the commercialization of the neighborhood, keeping ownership of their houses and leasing them to businesses and renting the remaining rooms to borders, with a preference for black borders. The result was a succession mom and pop businesses as well as several grocery stores catering to the needs of the many residents of the new apartment buildings.

Chastleton Market, circa 1969. Photo: Historical Society of Washington, DC.
The building with the most consistent use throughout its lifespan was the corner grocery store at 1700 17th Street. After C. C. McKinney sold his grocery business to Ernest Schmidt, the store changed hands several more times until it was bought in 1928 by Lebanese immigrant, Frederick Neam. Neam promptly renamed it the Chastleton Market, undoubtedly to attract the attention and business of the residents of the Chastleton Apartments only a block away on 16th Street.

The Chastleton Market was Neam’s second foray in the grocery store business, having opened Neam’s Market on the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and P Street in Georgetown in 1909 with two other brothers. Fred and his brother, Toufeic, eventually left that business to start their own markets. Neam’s Market in Georgetown would later become a place where famous Georgetown residents shopped for imported cheeses, caviar, and other fine foods and remained in business until 2000. The building then became home to Marvelous Market until 2014. In 1935, Fred Neam bought the building at 1702 17th Street and expanded the Chastleton Market into that building as well.

Harry Kenner converted Wyatt Archer’s house into a store with second-floor four-room apartment in 1925. In a classified ad he ran in the the Evening Star to lease the property, Kenner included the line: “Will consider colored.” This was an interesting comment for a neighborhood historically occupied by African-Americans and for a house built by a prominent African-American, who when he himself leased the house, specifically sought black tenants.

In 1926, Anna Cooper sold her house on 17th Street and moved to a house in LeDroit Park at 201 T Street, NW. The house was immediately converted into a business property.

Around 1926, Richard Moss’s former house at 1704 17th Street was leased to the new Memphis-based Piggly Wiggly grocery store chain. This was the first of two additional grocery businesses on the same block to compete with the Chastleton Market. Piggly Wiggly was noted as the first grocery store in America to let customers get their own merchandise off the shelves rather than handing a list to the clerk behind the counter who would retrieve them. Customers would then wait in line for a cashier to ring up their purchases. By 1944, Piggly Wiggly was replaced by a cabinet maker’s shop called the Furniture Hospital, which was replaced the following year by McGee & Co., a radio repair service. In 1961, Fred Neam bought that building as well.

About a year after Piggly Wiggly opened, A&P (the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company) opened only three doors up the street at 1710 17th Street in Robert Mitchell’s former home, adding yet a third grocery store to the block. A&P lasted on the site until 1952 when it became the Cairo Market, operated by Louis Maizel. Maizel followed Fred Neam’s model and named the business after the nearby Cairo apartment building at 1615 Q Street. Maizel’s Cairo Market was only in business for three years. In 1955, the building became home to Louis Glickfield’s furniture business, Ali Babba’s Cave. Glickfield renamed the business Marlo Furniture and moved to 1323 14th Street, NW. In 1959, a bakery opened in the building that would close within a month.

**

During the Depression, the crime rate in the neighborhood began to rise, and neighborhood proprietors were both victims and perpetrators of crimes themselves. In 1932, three armed black men held Fred Neam and a customer at bay while they rifled through the cash drawer and escaped with more than $200. Neam was robbed again that year of $100 worth of cigarettes and $8.50 in cash.
In 1935, Fred Neam was arraigned on nine liquor violation charges, the most number of charges against a single individual since the formation of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. Charges included the sale of liquor on Sunday, not affixing tax stamps on bottles, and allowing a 16-year-old girl to sell liquor. The girl had actually sold liquor to an undercover policeman. Neam pleaded not guilty to all charges and was released on $1,000 bond pending trial. The Control Board found Neam guilty of a number of the violations and revoked his liquor license. Two year later, Neam was arrested along with five other men on gambling charges—police had raided the Chastleton Market and found a gaming table.

In 1952, Herman Zeitchik, part-owner of Chastleton Market, was shot at four or five times when he ran after the man who had just robbed the store and restrained him. That same year, Cairo Market proprietor Louis Maizel was sentenced to serve time for receiving and trying to resell $1,200 worth of stolen groceries.

*****

AFTER WORLD WAR II, restaurants began to appear along the 17th Street corridor. Annie’s Paramount Steakhouse opened in 1948 at its first location at 1519 17th Street in the building that now houses JR’s Bar & Grill. Trio Restaurant opened two years later in 1950 at 1537 17th Street. Annie’s became a popular watering hole for the Irish, Greeks (Annie was of Greek heritage), Italian, and other nationalities living in the neighborhood apartments and rooming houses in search of a quick dinner and a beer.

Perhaps no family has had as much an impact on businesses in the immediately vicinity of The Admiral Dupont than the Pena family. Manuel and Adelina Pena immigrated from Spain and opened a deli, “Casa Pena,” at 1636 17th Street (now located at 1633), which later became known as “Spanish Market.” It became the go-to store for the Spanish and Latin American diplomatic corp.

In 1950, the Pena’s daughter, Adelina (named after her mother), and her husband, Bob Callahan, opened the Mexican restaurant, La Fonda, at 1637 R Street in the house Adelina’s parents had purchased in 1945 and where they had raised their family.

By 1962, La Fonda had grown so much in popularity that it moved to the larger corner building at 1639 17th Street. The Callahans then opened a new restaurant, El Bodegón, in the former La Fonda building, serving Span-
ish food. El Bodegón featured flamenco shows several nights a week and became a popular CIA hangout in the late 60's and 70's.

In the early 1980s, the Callahans also purchased the vacant Fish Market restaurant across the street from La Fonda at 1637 17th Street and opened the Dupont Italian Kitchen restaurant. El Bodegón closed its doors in March 1997 and in 1999, the Callahans revamped La Fonda into a new restaurant named Sol. Although now home to the bar Cobalt, the Callahans still own the building. The senior Adelina Pena died in 2009 at the age of 104.

*****

In 1960, ROBERT MITCHELL'S HOUSE at 1710 17th Street would find yet another a new use. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, some rundown areas of the city such as Georgetown, Adams Morgan, and Dupont Circle became home to self-professed members of the Beat Generation, known commonly as Beatniks. The Beatniks were inspired by such authors as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, whose writings influenced the post-World War II generation. Rejecting what they considered the standard narrative values of materialism, they expressed their alienation from conventional, or “square” society through interests in avant-garde literature, art, and music. Beatniks were stereotypically known for wearing black turtleneck sweaters, stove-pipe trousers, dark glasses, and berets.

Coffee houses provided the perfect venue for Beatniks interested in poetry, live music performances, art shows, movies, green "tea" (marijuana) and sometimes even coffee. But the coffee house tradition began in Washington long before the Beatnik culture arrived. The Hamilton Arms Coffee House opened in 1939 at 1232 31st Street NW in the heart of old Georgetown. Hamilton Arms, tucked away within the brick-lined streets of residential Georgetown, offered living and working space for an early bohemian enclave. Along with the coffee house, it was home to the Hamilton Arms Curiosity Shop, and a pottery shop, the Pottery. Georgetown's first pot party took place there in the late 50s, along with several other recreational firsts.

When the Hamilton Arms Coffee House closed in 1957, the Beatnik coffee house culture found a new home in Coffee 'n' Confusion. The first iteration of Coffee 'n' Confusion opened at 912 New Hampshire Avenue NW, a storefront that once housed a small grocery store, the Neighborhood Market. It offered coffee, tea, poetry readings, debates, bongos, folk songs, checkers, and chess for its colorful clientele of students, poets, and musicians. It was found to be in violation of numerous zoning laws and was closed down only a week after it opened. It soon reopened in the basement of the Zantzinger Building at 945 K Street NW, a murky space which had previously housed a series of short-lived restaurants. Jim Morrison, singer, songwriter, and poet, and best remembered as the lead singer of The Doors, was a frequent visitor and once read some of his poetry there.

Coffee 'n' Confusion was followed the next year by the opening of the Cauldron at 3263 M Street, NW in Georgetown. The Cauldron featured live jazz and folk music, open mic nights, primitive dance exhibitions, and showed classic movies. That same year, Potter's House opened in the former Embassy Lunch Restaurant at 1658 Columbia Road NW. It offered coffee, a simple food menu, poetry readings, live folk music, and displays and shows by local artists.
The open space created in converting 1710 17th Street into an A&P and then Marlo Furniture’s showroom provided an ideal space for a cafe. In January 1961, the Unicorn Café Expresso opened in the house adding to the list of Beatnik coffee houses. Its founding owners were a technical writer and artist, George Kapralof, and a graphic researcher for the Smithsonian, Roger Kaufman. Their initial menu offered coffee and tea, pastries, and from time to time borsch. The Unicorn was proudest of its expresso machine that was capable of brewing at least 50 kinds of coffee.

The main room of the Unicorn featured a wall mural in the back commissioned by Kapralof and Kaufman. Entitled “The Virgin Feeding the Unicorn,” it was painted by Uruguayan artist Jorge Dumas who settled in Buenos Aires and was a student of Argentina master, Jasquin Torres Garcia. Other art featured an exhibit of paintings by owner George Kapralof on display on the walls and in the windows.

The Unicorn featured flamenco guitarists, bongo drummers, and folk singers. One evening, members of the Ukrainian Chorus, who were visiting Washington after performing in Baltimore, dropped by and sang until the early hours of the morning. Patrons could also play chess, read the magazines and papers, talk or just take in the ambience. The establishment made a splash, even with the non-Beatnik crowd. As the Washington Post noted in a 1961 review of the Unicorn, “no one will bother you. It’s a lot of fun.”

Shortly after it opened, the Unicorn was purchased by a neighborhood resident Elliot Ryan who wanted to make the establishment even more of a venue for live music. He initiated a Wednesday night “hootenanny” where folk singers gathered and sang. Jazz musicians were featured on Monday nights and on weekends. Ryan booked such folk artists as Tim Cameron, Allen Damron, Mario Illo, John Everhart, Robbie Basho, Pete LaFarge, and Eric Darling of the Weavers. Local guitarists like John Fahey and Max Ochs regularly showed up for impromptu performances. Joan Baez stopped in one night to sing onstage.

Following the example set by the Cauldron and Potter’s House, the Unicorn also showed Sunday afternoon movies, ranging from Charlie Chaplin to art films and foreign works, to more popular titles like “The Room Upstairs” and “The Ruse.” Due to financial problems, Elliot Ryan closed the Unicorn in the spring of 1964. Elliot would later become a significant figure in Washington, DC’s rock and roll scene as creator and publisher of Unicorn Times. Named for the coffee house, the publication initially had its offices at 1721 21st Street, NW and covered the music scene in the nation’s capital from 1973 to 1986.

Washington artist Jack Dilinger hangs some of his paintings along the sidewalk outside the Unicorn Café for an outdoor art show. Photo: Washington Post

Advertisement for a Hootenanny at the Unicorn in the Washington Post. 17 Mar
Bob and Adelina Callahan bought 1710 17th Street in 1964 and leased out the storefront to City & State TV for several years. In 1968, the building had been raised and the lot was serving as auxiliary parking for El Bodegón.

* * * * *
BY THE EARLY 1960s, crime was becoming worse along the 17th Street corridor. The 1600 and 1700 blocks of Corcoran Street became known as “Stab Alley.” In a Washington Post interview, Adelina Callahan recalled during her youth, Corcoran Street was too dangerous to walk on, but Corcoran Street was soon to become a showcase of renovated Victorian town houses.

In spite of the crime, parts of the neighborhood began to recover by the mid-1960s. In 1965. Charlotte Levine and John Gerstenfeld undertook the rehabilitation of old row houses in the 1700-block of Corcoran Street. The resulting development, Corcoran Mews, featured gas-lit entrances and a total of 35 rental apartments, intended primarily for young singles. Similar conversions were happening on nearby P, Q, and Church Streets, north of Scott Circle and to the east of Dupont Circle.

In 1965, Jack and Sylvia Kotz began to aggressively buy up derelict buildings along the 17th Street corridor between Corcoran and S Streets. The Kotzes bought the Chastleton Market from Fred Neam as well as 1706 17th Street. The building on 1704 17th Street was probably already razed by this time as the deed mentions a right of way had been granted over the entire lot of 1704 17th Street for access to the alley behind.

The following year the Kotzes's motives in buying up contiguous lots along 17th Street became clear. In 1966, they successfully had the lots they had bought up between Corcoran and R Streets rezoned to allow for both commercial use and parking. In June of that year, the Kotzes were granted a permit to erect a 11,680-square-foot, one-story masonry building for a Safeway store at 1701 Corcoran Street. The new store was noted for its early American design both inside and out, complemented inside with chandeliers, drapes, coach lanterns, exposed brick and wood-grain paneling. Safeway then closed its store at 1619 17th Street when the new one was finished.

The gradual gentrification of the 17th Street neighborhood came to a sudden halt with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. Soon after the assassination, the 1968 DC riots began. They began near what was then known as “Black Broadway” along the U Street Corridor near Howard University and then spread through black neighborhoods down 14th and 17th Streets, NW and along H street, NE and Anacostia.

With much of the 17th Street strip suffering from the aftermath of the riots, Annie's Paramount Steakhouse and Trio Restaurant stayed open. "We were one of the only ones left down here, other than Trio's," Annie Kaylor told MetroWeekly in 2006. "People wouldn't cross Q Street at that period…. When the riots started, they stormed 17th Street." “That's when the gay community made this area gay,” added longtime Annie's bartender Leigh Ann Hendricks told MetroWeekly. "No one else would come over here. This was bad. Along the strip, businesses had their windows broken out…. The gay community, they still came here. They continued to come here because this is where they felt comfortable. This is where they could be themselves. They said, ‘Riots aren't going to keep us out. This is our place. This is where we like to go.’"
Eventually, the gentrification process began again and continued to the west of 14th Street, around many of the older black residents. Yet, the 17th Street neighborhood remained somewhat edgy and crime-ridden. In December of 1973, 33-year-old Curtis Boyd who lived at 1706 17th Street, along with two other friends, was gunned down at the corner of 17th and R Streets at 2:00 am.

In 1973, Wyatt Archer's house at 1703 R Street became home to Earl Robert "Butch" Merritt, Jr. Merritt was from humble beginnings outside Charleston, West Virginia and had come to Washington as a young man, not long after President Kennedy was assassinated. He then discovered Dupont Circle, and as a gay male felt at home with its diversity of people, and decided to first take an apartment at 1818 Riggs Place and then one at 2122 P Street. He found work as a clerk at a drug store at 15th and H Streets.

In 1970, Merritt had become friends with Carl Shoffler, who was also hanging around Dupont Circle at the time. Shoffler was a hippie with long hair, blue eyes, and a couple of years older than Merritt. But he was actually Detective Shoffler of the Metropolitan Police Department, who was working undercover to recruit Merritt to spy on the District's GLBT community. Merritt also worked as an informant for the FBI and ATF as an undercover agent spying on the "New Left," the Weathermen, and the Institute for Policy Studies. Shoffler would then go on to make a name for himself as the detective who arrested those breaking into Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate in June 1972. To this day, Merritt claims he is the one who tipped off Shoffler to the Watergate break-in two weeks before it happened.

Merritt's association with the Watergate affair continued after tipping off Detective Shoffler. In July of 1972, acting under an undisclosed higher authority, DC Metropolitan Police detectives asked him to find out all he could about Douglas Caddy, the gay and pro-Cuban attorney who lived across the street from Merritt at the time at 2121 P Street, and who was representing some of the Cuban Watergate defendants. It was to be Merritt's biggest job, but he never enjoyed being a spy. The following year, he had quit the spy business and was again working as a cashier at Whelan Drug at 1201 Connecticut Avenue., NW.

* * * * *

THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE CONSTRUCTION of The Admiral Dupont began to be laid in 1975. That year, Dupont Associates, registered only as a general partnership, purchased the lots along the 1700 block 17th Street from the Kotzes. They then moved ahead to clear the entire southeast corner of the block. In 1976, Wyatt Archer's house at 1703 R Street was condemned and razed.

In 1980, the Callahans sold the last lot on which The Admiral Dupont would be built at 1710 17th Street to Dupont Associates. Their hold out on selling the last lot may have forced The Admiral Dupont developer, Simon A. Hershon, to pursue a project elsewhere. In 1979, Hershon along with another general
partnership, Circle Associates, began the process to build the Chancellor, a Victorian-Style condo building with 51 luxury-priced units across town at 3 Washington Circle.

The Foggy Bottom and West End Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) objected to the plan to tear down the Lewis Hotel School at 2301 Washington Circle and six townhouses located at 2305-2315 Washington Circle to build the Chancellor. They had hoped to landmark the buildings, but Hershon sought a court order to force the city to grant the needed demolition permits. In a concession to the ANC, Hershon agreed to preserve the facades of the six row houses and retain the historic low scale around the circle. Construction on the Chancellor began in 1980, but the redesign of the original project escalated Hershon’s costs and the units were priced out of the market. Unable to sell the units, the project was taken over by First National Bank of Maryland and auctioned off. It was then bought by First National for $7.3 million—the bank was the only bidder.

Undaunted by his failure at Washington Circle, in 1980 Hershon turned his attention back to 17th Street, and in association with Dupont Associates, again attempted another large condominium project, The Admiral Dupont, on the site of the former townhouses at 1700-1710 17th Street. The six-story, mixed-use building was completed in 1981.

The ground floor of The Admiral Dupont was designed to house shops, cafes, and offices. The upper floors were mixed residential and office suites. Condominium units were priced from $110,000 to $135,000.

The building’s earliest tenants on the ground floor were the Aster Florist shop, the Women’s Comprehensive Health Center, and 7-Eleven. Aster Florist was started by Constance and Wesley Beahm in 1934 at 1528 Connecticut Avenue. When the Beahms retired in 1979, the business was taken over by their son, John, who soon moved the business to the Admiral Dupont.

Chung Do Hahm, a Korean immigrant, opened a 7-Eleven store in The Admiral Dupont in 1982. When it opened, Hahm, his wife and three of their four children were initially the only employees, and
Hahm found himself in the store around the clock.

In the early 1980s, 7-Eleven stores were not always a welcome addition to a neighborhood. A 7-Eleven that opened on 8th Street, NE was the target of robberies, muggings, shoplifting and homicides and was forced to close. In 1982, with a population that at the time was 70 percent black, only five of the 27 7-Eleven stores were operated by black owners. The rest were Asian-born and were viewed as outsiders who employed only family members and not community residents. Yet, historically immigrants coming into the neighborhood as entrepreneurs, such as Fred Neam and Ernest Schmidt, was nothing new for the neighborhood. The year his store opened, Hahm told the Washington Post that he got along with his neighbors, his business was doing well, and he did employ others besides family members.

Ten years after Hahm opened 7-Eleven, his store was one of six ordered to be handed over immediately to the parent company, Dallas-based Southland Corporation, after an arbitration panel found that they had defrauded the company by manipulating their sales figures. The franchises countered that the move was racially motivated, as all the accused were of Korean, Thai, and Ethiopian backgrounds. Hahm denied that he had defrauded Southland and told the Washington Post that he did not know what he would do once Southland reclaimed his store. “They say I cheated them out of money but I didn’t cheat them. I feel so bad. I don’t have a future. I can’t even think about it.”

Today, The Admiral Dupont remains a prestigious address for both residents and businesses. On the ground floor, Aster Florist is now home to Panini Café and Lounge, the Women’s Comprehensive Health Center has been replaced with Medics USA, and the 7-Eleven store is once again open for purchase by an enterprising entrepreneur.