

CONNECTICUT AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-698

HABS
DC
WASH
591-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CONNECTICUT AVENUE

HABS No. DC-698

HABS
DC
WASH.
591-

Location: The historic segment of Connecticut Avenue begins at the northwest corner of Lafayette Square (H Street and Jackson Place) extends northwest at 335 degrees to the historic boundary at Florida Avenue near 20th and S streets, NW; Around the turn of the century, the roadway was extended to the northwest and now reaches to the District line.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government while the paved roadways and sidewalks and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. Dupont Circle, Farragut Square and a few of the smaller reservations are maintained by the National Park Service, while the medians and the remaining reservations are managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: Major thoroughfare and commercial street; artery from the downtown core to the Maryland line.

Significance: Extending from Lafayette Square, Connecticut Avenue evolved from a residential street to a major commercial thoroughfare. It passes through the Dupont Circle and Massachusetts Avenue historic districts.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Alterations and additions:
 - 1872: The avenue within the historic city was paved with concrete.
 - 1896: Congress authorized extension of the avenue north of Boundary Street (Florida Avenue).
 - 1908: Taft Bridge constructed across the Rock Creek.
 - 1928: Roadway widened to create more lanes for increasing automotive traffic.
 - 1945: Underpass approved to tunnel Connecticut Avenue under Dupont Circle; Streetcar underpass completed 1949, automotive underpass completed 1951.
 - 1964: Streetcar ramps at Dupont Circle filled in to form landscaped medians.
 - 1973: Metrorail's Red Line constructed beneath Connecticut Avenue with stations at Farragut Square and Dupont Circle.

B. Historical Context:

On L'Enfant's plan of 1791, the avenue now known as Connecticut Avenue is one of four that radiate from the area set aside for the President's House. On the plan, the avenue stretches from the northwest corner of the rectangular open space now known as Farragut Square to the city boundary--today's Florida Avenue. Just north of the point from which Rhode Island Avenue begins, L'Enfant indicated a yellow-shaded triangle, No. 6 in the general vicinity of today's Reservation Nos. 150 and 150A. Two blocks northwest of this shaded area it intersects with today's Massachusetts and New Hampshire avenues at a large amorphous open space. The avenue is a mirror image of Vermont Avenue, which also begins at Lafayette Square and heads northeast at the complementary angle.

On Andrew Ellicott's 1792 plan for the city, the avenue remains nearly identical to that of L'Enfant. The angle has been altered slightly to 155 degrees southeast and the shading at the reservations has been removed. The intersection of New Hampshire and Massachusetts avenues has been defined as a circle and the area designated as the president's park has been decreased in size so that the avenue extends south of Farragut Square to today's Lafayette Square.

Although on both plans, Connecticut Avenue is one of the shortest avenues within the historic city limits, today it extends about five miles to the Maryland border, making it one of the longer routes in the city. Within the historic city limits, the avenue evolved slowly from a virtual wilderness, to a fashionable residential street and finally to an upscale office and commercial strip.

Even before the road was graded or paved, it connected with Piney Branch Road at Boundary Street. The Boschke map compiled on the eve of the Civil War in 1857-61, shows a largely undeveloped avenue, with the exception of the southernmost three blocks, which featured several residences. During the war, the population of the city doubled, and improvements to this avenue and the rest of the city began in earnest. In 1867, the Army Corps of Engineers was assigned to run the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G), which oversaw the improvement of avenues and other federal land. The first officer assigned to lead the OPB&G, Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Michler, described the avenue in his 1868 annual report:

"Connecticut Avenue . . . is in a direct line to those beautiful grounds along Rock Creek which have been selected for a national park [Rock Creek Park]. When opened and repaired throughout it will be one of the finest drives in the direction of that proposed public improvement. The reservations along it should be enclosed and adorned. An act to incorporate the Connecticut Avenue and Park Railway Company has already become law."¹

The railway lines were not installed until 1874 when the Metropolitan Street Railway purchased by the Connecticut Avenue and Park Railway Company and installed tracks from Georgetown along P Street to the large circle at the intersection of Connecticut and Massachusetts avenues. The tracks continued one-third of the way around the circle, then turned south to run on Connecticut Avenue to K Street. In 1884, the tracks were extended along Connecticut Avenue north to Boundary Street.

Just before the tracks were installed, the entire avenue was paved with

¹ Annual Report . . ., 1868, 13.

concrete from Lafayette Square to the city limits between 1871-72. This improvement was undertaken by the Board of Public Works of an experimental territorial government installed in 1871 that relieved the OPB&G of its responsibility for the city's avenues. During the three years the territorial government remained in power, before being dissolved in debt and scandal in 1874, its Board of Public Works, led by Alexander Shepherd, oversaw the grading and paving of miles of streets, laying of sewers and gas lines, and the planting of thousands of street trees.

The OPB&G continued to oversee the improvement of the city's parks, and worked in tandem with the Board of Public Works, under the leadership of Orville E. Babcock, a good friend of Shepherd who replaced Michler in 1871. The large circle at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue, enclosed in the 1860s with a "poor wooden fence," and the square at the base of the avenue used by Union troops during the Civil War as an encampment, were both fully improved in 1873. After improvement, these parks featured paths, trees and shrubs, drinking fountains, post-and-chain fences and gas lamps. The avenue was actually paved right through the improved square between I and K street until 1881 when a statue honoring Civil War hero, Adm. David G. Farragut was erected in its center (See HABS No. DC-671). The park to the north, known as Pacific Circle since 1873, was renamed Dupont Circle in 1882 when it was selected as the site for the statue of Adm. Samuel DuPont that was erected in 1884 (See HABS No. DC-669).

In addition to improving the more obvious open spaces such as Dupont Circle and Farragut Square, Babcock also sought to identify the many open spaces along the avenue created by the superimposition of diagonal avenues over the grid. These triangles, quadrilaterals, and circles were technically the property of the federal government ever since Ellicott numbered the city squares for sale and development in 1792, although prior to the late nineteenth century, few had been identified as such. The open triangle in the approximate vicinity of L'Enfant's yellow-shaded reservation No. 6 (Reservation No. 150) was identified as federal property in 1880 and was immediately graded, soiled, sodded, and enclosed with a cast-iron post-and-chain fence.

The paved streets and improved parks attracted residents to the area. In 1875, the British Legation built its headquarters on the northwest corner of Connecticut Avenue and N Street, a daring move since the site was still remote and unpopulated. In anticipation of the prosperity that would come to the roadway, Alexander Shepherd chose to live along Connecticut Avenue in an elegant rowhouse built in 1873 facing onto the newly improved Farragut Square. Development rapidly spread north to Dupont Circle where Senator William Morris Stewart built his magnificent "Stewart's Castle" in 1873. Stewart and his friends had formed the "California Syndicate," a group of rich westerners who pooled their wealth, garnered largely from gold and silver mining, to purchase land around the new park. Stewart was also a friend of Shepherd's and must have appreciated the improvements to the neighborhood. More fashionable residences followed, such as Phillips Row, built south of Dupont Circle in 1878 and the 1881 James G. Blaine House that still faces onto the circle from the west.

As mansions sprung up around Dupont Circle in the 1870-80s, more rowhouses, a school, and a church filled in the blocks at the lower end of the avenue to serve the growing population. In 1877 the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary purchased the block where the Mayflower Hotel now stands to build the Academy of the Visitation, a Catholic grammar school. Also at that time, the convent donated part of their property to create DeSales Street which intersects the

avenue between L and M streets and was named for St. Francis DeSales (1567-1622), the founder of the order.

One block north of the Catholic school, local Presbyterians erected the Romanesque Revival Church of the Covenant in 1887 at 18th and N Streets. Although it did not actually front on the avenue, its soaring tower visually dominated the area. One of the pastors of the church formed the Witherspoon Memorial Association, which oversaw the 1909 erection of a statue of the Presbyterian patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence in a small open space in front of the church that had been recognized as federal property in 1903 (Reservation No. 150A). Also in 1909, the Longfellow Memorial Association dedicated a seated statue of poet and author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the larger triangular park across the street (Reservation No. 150). In the elaborate dedication ceremony, Longfellow's granddaughter unveiled the statue; the gift to the city was accepted by Attorney General Wickersham who attended in place of the ailing President William Howard Taft.²

In 1908, a bridge carrying Connecticut Avenue over Rock Creek (named after William Howard Taft in 1931) was completed, making the roadway an artery to the rapidly developing region northwest of the city. The increased accessibility of these suburbs prompted residential development beyond the Florida Avenue boundary and contributed to the gradual commercialization of the southern end of the avenue. The Tschiffly Drug Store that moved to the avenue in 1910 was a forerunner of this commercial migration. As specialty shops moved to the avenue, proprietors formed the Connecticut Avenue Association in 1922 in an effort to draw customers from other shopping districts, such as that along F Street. Soon the area became one of the city's most elegant shopping streets drawing comparisons to New York's Fifth Avenue, London's Regency Street, and the Champs Elysees in Paris.³ Several of the older homes were maintained and used as commercial spaces, but as new stores and offices were built, many of the older structures were destroyed, such as the Visitation School razed in 1923 to make way for the elegant Mayflower Hotel.

Farther north toward Dupont Circle, the area continued to be a fashionable residential address early in the twentieth century, prompting yet another type of change. Victorian mansions were systematically replaced by mansions of the popular Beaux-Arts style. As if to illustrate the changing ideals of beauty, the Victorian bronze statue of Adm. Dupont was removed in 1917 to be replaced in 1921 with a classically inspired marble fountain.

The rise of the automobile, competing for space with the trolley car also engendered change. In 1925, the Washington Star described new roadway plans that included a median for streetcars with 20' lanes on each side for slower traffic.⁴ These plans took effect in 1928 when the road was widened. As the L'Enfant/Ellicott plan was designed, the avenue rights-of-way were much wider than was necessary at the time they were built. In the 1870s the parking commission oversaw the landscaping of the spaces within the rights-of-way outside of the areas necessary for roadbeds. Generally, each right-of-way included the

² Goode, Outdoor Sculpture, 103.

³ "Connecticut Avenue Rivals Smartest Shopping Districts," Washington Post, March 20, 1965.

⁴ Washington Star, June 6, 1925.

central roadbed, flanked by grassy strips--often planted with trees--that were in turn flanked by sidewalks. The roadway, sidewalks, and grassy strips between were under the jurisdiction of the commissioners of the District of Columbia. The land between the sidewalk and the property lines--although actually owned by the federal government--could be landscaped by occupants of abutting properties. As a result, when roads were widened no property transfer was necessary since the land was rightfully the property of the federal government. When Connecticut Avenue was a residential area, its narrow roadbed was lined with maple trees, and the residences along it had deep front yards. When it was widened in 1928, the rows of trees were eliminated along with much of the front yards.

Despite the widened roadway, traffic congestion on Connecticut Avenue increased drastically in the 1930s. Massachusetts Avenue was also developing as a major artery, creating a particularly irksome bottleneck at Dupont Circle. Calling it "one of the last ten-point circles in captivity," Washington Deputy Engineer of Streets S. R. Harrison discussed a proposal to alleviate congestion at the circle in his address to the American Road Builder's Association in 1947. Citing the fact that the circle averaged more than 52,000 vehicles per day and so many pedestrians that "walk" signals had to be installed at crossings, he wrote, "I am quite sure that all of you would agree with my fellow Washingtonians who must drive through this maze during morning and evening rush periods, that this experience in urban motoring is a rather trying one."⁵ The treatment he prescribed would segregate through traffic on Massachusetts Avenue in an inner lane; cars approaching or leaving any of the other streets would be limited to an outer lane. The two lanes would be separated by medians that would follow the contour of the circle with breaks only at Massachusetts Avenue. Connecticut Avenue, having the highest volume, would be carried under the circle through an underpass serving both automotive traffic and the streetcar line.

Construction ensued the following year, necessitating excavation of much of the park. The streetcar underpass was completed in 1949--giving Washington the distinction of having the first underground conduit cars in the country--and the roadway underpass was completed in 1950. Underground waiting platforms were built for streetcar passengers with four sets of stairs leading down to them from the adjacent sidewalks and reservations. During the construction period, two more of the historic homes facing the square fell to the wrecking ball as commercial buildings encroached on the former residential enclave.

Streetcar service was discontinued in the District in the early 1960s, so in 1964, the ramps along Connecticut Avenue were filled in and replaced with decorative median strips that featured raised tree and flower beds with patterned concrete retaining walls. The four pedestrian entry stairs still remain in the adjacent reservations and sidewalks. When the worsening traffic situation prompted the construction of the Metrorail subway system, Connecticut Avenue was chosen as a rail route, and tunnels were built under the avenue from Farragut Square to several miles beyond the historic city boundary. Stations were built under both Farragut Square and Dupont Circle, creating even greater access to this commercial area. The commercial growth of the avenue continued in the 1950-80s so that many modern office buildings that reach the maximum permissible height now line the southern blocks of the avenue and surround Dupont Circle.

⁵ Harrison, 14-15.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: From building line to building line, the avenue is 130' wide.
2. Length: The segment of the avenue within the historic city boundaries is approximately 1.1 miles long.

B. Elements within the right-of-way:

1. Roadway: Almost 100' wide, the paved roadway between the curbs makes up the vast majority of the right-of-way. Most of the avenue supports three-lane, two-way traffic and parallel street parking. From N to Q streets, however, the four center lanes, divided by a concrete median descend on ramps to the Dupont Circle underpass. North of the circle, Q Street crosses over the depressed roadway. Single outer lanes, delineated by narrow concrete medians, remain on grade and feed in and out of the traffic circle. Wide medians constructed in 1964 to replace the streetcar ramps north and south of the circle consist of raised concrete planters with magnolia trees and seasonal flowers. Traffic signals are located down the center of this avenue on the raised medians and between painted dividing lines.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: The entire area between the roadbed and the building lines is paved with a concrete-paver sidewalk. Intermittent tree cutouts planted with young oaks and maples provide the only vegetation on the avenue besides the planted medians and reservations.
3. Major Reservations:
 - a. Connecticut Avenue begins on the northwest side of Lafayette Park, Reservation No. 10 (See HABS No. DC-676).
 - b. At 17th and K streets, Connecticut Avenue traffic is diverted around Farragut Park, Reservation No. 12 (See HABS No. DC-671).
 - c. At the intersection of 19th and P streets and New Hampshire and Massachusetts avenues, through traffic on Connecticut Avenue is tunnelled under Dupont Circle, Reservation No. 60 (See HABS No. DC-669).
4. Smaller reservations: The following list describes the locations of the reservations identified along this avenue by 1894, the date they were first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement (if known), and a description of historical and current appearance as of summer 1990. They are maintained by the National Park Service.
 - a. Reservation No. 554: East of the avenue, west of 20th Street, north of R Street, NW. This triangular reservation was acquired in 1933.

It has never been landscaped as a park. It shares the block with a small business establishment and is entirely covered with concrete. It is occupied by numerous newspaper vending machines and is used by street vendors.

- b. Reservation No. 149: West of the avenue, east of 20th Street, north of Q Street, NW. Officially identified in 1872, this freestanding triangle is surrounded by concrete perimeter walks, quarter-round coping, and sodded strips with trees. An area paved with flagstone on the west side has a central drinking fountain and a concrete-support wood-slat bench. The reservation is planted with an evergreen hedge and several ornamental trees.
 - c. Reservation No. 150A: East of the avenue, west of 18th Street, south of N Street, NW (859 square feet). This freestanding triangle was identified and improved with a fountain and flowerbed in 1903. It features a portrait statue of John Witherspoon designed by sculptor William Couper and erected in 1909. The 10'-tall bronze statue of the Presbyterian minister and signer of the Declaration of Independence stands on a granite pedestal. The pedestal is placed on a small sodded area separated from the surrounding street by quarter-round concrete coping.
 - d. Reservation No. 150: West of the avenue, east of 18th Street, north of M Street, NW (5,200 square feet). This large, freestanding triangle was officially identified as federal property when it was improved in 1880. It now features the seated statue of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The portrait statue was designed by sculptors Thomas Ball and William Couper and the Van Amringe Granite Company. The 6'-tall seated figure faces east and is placed on a pink granite pedestal. The reservation has been graded so that the south side is several feet above the street level. Brick retaining walls with concrete coping surround the south end of the reservation and a flagstone terrace covering most of the reservation is approached by rounded flagstone steps in the southeast corner, a wide set of steps on the northeast side and a narrower set on the south side. Deciduous hedges and shrub massing separate the terrace from the street and a metal picket fence further accentuates this separation around the north corner and much of the northeast side of the reservation. Several ornamental and shade trees form a canopy over the park. Metal-frame wood-slat benches face into the park in three groupings of three, and a drinking fountain is located at the north end of the reservation.
- C. Framing elements: A mix of modern and historic high-rise hotels and offices line the avenue with a variety of ground-level shops and restaurants that punctuate the right-of-way with canopies and extending bays. North of Dupont Circle, building heights are somewhat lower, with several street cafes spilling on to the sidewalk area.
- D. Vistas: The magnolia trees on the medians south of Dupont Circle block the vista

from Farragut Square to the Dupont Circle fountain. All potential vistas of the White House are blocked by trees or statuary. The Farragut statue is visible from the northwest corner of Lafayette Square and from the southeast side of Dupont Circle. The Dupont Circle fountain is visible from all points north of it on the avenue.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

District of Columbia Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Early Views:

ca. 1929: Survey photographs of each reservations on the avenue (NPS Reservation Files).

C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1867-1933.

"Connecticut Avenue Rivals Smartest Shopping Districts." Washington Post. 20 March 1965.

Goode, James M. Capital Losses. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

Goode, James M. The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974.

Harrison, S. R. "Modern Street Intersection Design, Washington, D.C."

Washington, D.C: American Road Builders' Association, Municipal
Bulletin No. 131, 1948.

Record Groups 42 and 66, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA
RG42 and RG66).

Reservation Files. Office of Land Use. National Capital Region Headquarters.
National Park Service.

Washington Star. June 6, 1925.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.