## Contents

Map of the Study Area 2

Preface 3

Finding 5

I. Historical Narrative 7

II. Significance, Registration Requirements, and Associated Property Types 43
   
   Introduction and Criteria 43
   
   Property Types 48
   
   A. Property Type: Dwellings 48
   
   B. Property Type: Commercial, Retail, Warehouse, and Workshop Establishments 76
   
   C. Property Type: Government Buildings 88
   
   D. Property Type: Places of Worship 98
   
   E. Property Type: Other Facilities 106
   
   F. Property Type: Parks and Playgrounds 110

III. Historical Typology of Structures 113
   
   A. Property Type: Dwellings 113
   
   B. Property Type: Commercial, Retail, Warehouse, and Workshop Establishments 123
   
   C. Property Type: Government Buildings 127
   
   D. Property Type: Places of Worship 130
   
   E. Property Type: Other Facilities 134
   
   F. Property Type: Parks and Playgrounds 135

Bibliography 136
Figure 1. The Study Area
Preface

This study is a preliminary assessment of the built environment of Southwest. Researched and written by QED Associates LLC for the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, it explores the historical significance of Southwest to establish an historic context defined by National Register Bulletin 16B as “a body of information about related properties organized by theme, place, and time.”

Focused primarily on the area from the waterfront north to the Southwest Freeway and west of South Capitol Street, this study defines the area’s historically significant period as beginning in 1791, with Pierre L’Enfant’s commission to draw up a plan for the District of Columbia, and ending in 1973, when construction was completed on the last structure in L’Enfant Plaza. Within the confines of its timeframe and geography, the study provides a “framework for determining the historic significance of sites, buildings, structures, and objects by relating them to the common themes it identifies.”

The study has three major parts. The first is an historical essay that provides a theoretical framework for the development of housing in Southwest from the early federal period through the post-World War II decades. It explores the relationships between housing in Southwest and themes of development, urban poverty, employment, and the physical landscape. It includes an extensive discussion on social reform, housing legislation from the Depression onward, and public and private redevelopment.

The second part discusses the major types of structures in the study area in relation with established preservation criteria for significance. In the third part, the Typology Table presents an annotated classification of representative extant structures according to category. Together, these two sections reveal the richness of the architecture of Southwest, from turn-of-the-20th vernacular to highly sophisticated mid-century modernism. They include Southwest’s diverse roster of DC Inventory and National Register-list of buildings and sites, which range from the vernacular James Dent House, designated for its association with community improvement efforts, to the esthetic and artistic qualities of Town Center East, the work of renowned architect I.M. Pei. Designated properties include 18th-century federal-style houses, 19th-century Romanesque revival and Gothic churches, a colonial revival dog pound, and modernist apartment-town house complexes. The study offers a finding that affirms the historical significance of Southwest, and it concludes with an extensive bibliography.

This study builds on the extensive primary and secondary sources available about the area including three previous studies that have examined the Southwest in anticipation of

---

1 National Register Bulletin 16B, 6.
an historic designation. The earliest, the *Southwest/Lower Southeast Historic Survey Historic Context Statement* by Design Forum Associates in 1994, consists largely of a listing of existent pre-1945 buildings. It recommends that “permit research be conducted for many of these buildings in order to provide a more accurate view of the historical development of the area” and that further study be accorded the later structures in the redevelopment area.²

In 1992 American University sponsored a study, *Archaeological Survey of the Southwest Quadrant of the District of Columbia*, edited by Elizabeth A. Moore and Charles W. McNett. Their extensive exploration of the area, which included an examination of its physical geography and detailed maps, has provided a basis for understanding the geopolitical environment that informs this study’s opening essay.

Parsons-Brinkerhoff undertook a third study, in 2005, on the South Capitol Street corridor south of P Street, for the DC Department of Transportation. It provided more specific recommendations, among them that a Southwest row house historic district in Squares 652 and 653, comprising the Coleman & Richards Row, Banes Row, and Sanitary Houses within the 1300 blocks of Carrollsburg and Half Street (east side), the Randall School, and the PEPCO Buzzard Point Plant, be deemed NRHP eligible.

The current study offers a more extensive historical and architectural discussion, including housing, commercial and manufacturing structures, schools and other government buildings, places of worship, the waterfront, and parks and playgrounds. More specifically,

- It identifies the extant elements that define the physical landscape and explores the historical roles played by Southwest.
- It examines the early federal city and river port with wharves, warehouses, and workshops that sustained a blue-collar neighborhood for more than two centuries.
- It details evolving social visions that dominated housing reform and traces the effects of racial segregation on housing, employment, and public education.
- It provides a portfolio of civic buildings and correlates their functions with the growing role of federal and municipal government over the 20th century.
- It examines Southwest’s modernist residential complexes, which were apparently too recent for their significance to be assessed by the early 1990s studies.

² The stated goals of the *Southwest/Lower Southeast Historic Survey Historic Context Statement* were 1) to survey the remaining pre-1945 buildings in this section of Washington; 2) to augment the existing computerized inventory maintained by the HPO; 3) to identify significant built historic resources, particularly properties eligible for historic designation; 4) to provide a perspective for evaluation of resources through analysis and description of the historic context. See p.16 for recommendations.
Finding

The study affirms the historical value of Southwest’s built environment and recommends that the community and the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly explore options for preservation. Southwest’s layers of landscape constitute a unique historical environment that marks more than two centuries of urban change. Situated in a relatively small geographic area are individual historically important buildings and sites that comprise a living expression of successive waves of social reform struggling to meet human needs in an evolving modern city.

Further research in pursuit of preserving Southwest’s historic fabric would facilitate a coordinated and coherent synthesis of the many themes of historical significance incorporated into the Southwest cityscape. It would allow a holistic interpretation of the built environment that bridged the divide between housing constructed before and during World War II and the massive urban renewal with its historically important modernist buildings and gardens that reshaped the Southwest beginning in 1957. It would also more fully integrate the evolution of the waterfront into the historical narrative and emphasize the symbiosis of a physically and economically healthy environment. Above all, it would provide a unique opportunity to highlight a quadrant of the original L’Enfant Plan that has been largely invisible to Washington’s visitors and residents alike.
Figure 2. Map of Washington, 1818, by Robert King. Southwest was bounded on the north by the Mall and Tiber Creek and on the east by South Capitol Street and by the Washington City Canal, which joined Tiber Creek and James Creek to make the quadrant visually into an island. The city’s population was small, about 13,000, and most of the streets existed only on paper, especially in upper Northwest and Northeast. Library of Congress
Part I. Historical Narrative

Introduction

For several decades in the late 20th century Southwest was a backwater of economic development. Despite a unique modernist collection of middle-class housing, the quadrant was home to the District’s largest concentration of public housing, was plagued with crime, and suffered from poor urban services. Recently, especially since the 1990s and the opening of Metro’s Green Line, the building of the baseball stadium, and the reconnection of 4th Street from the Mall to the waterfront, the quadrant has experienced escalating urban development and a new consciousness about its past. This historical context report examines decisive trends that have shaped Southwest’s history, and offers a narrative that embraces racial, ethnic, and economic groupings and their respective experiences and contributions to the area’s history.

The historical analysis in this section of the report provides context for the more schematic architectural typology and commentary sections that follow. It opens with efforts during the federal period to attract an affluent population and establish a maritime port for the new capital city. After the Civil War and the failure of these expectations, the waterfront and its environs experienced a gradual rise in population and also in poverty. Concerns about public health and deteriorating living conditions drew the attention of social and health reformers at the end of the 19th century and urban planners through the 20th. Repeated efforts at housing reform culminated with the razing of some 600 acres in the late 1950s and early 1960s, involving the destruction of a large swath of the quadrant’s historical social and economic fabric. The narrative concludes with the emergence of a unique modernist environment dominated by middle-class housing; an urban waterfront focused on recreation; the formation of the District’s first racially integrated neighborhoods; and new public housing for the poor in the 1960s that set the stage for contemporary development.

Beyond a narrative, this section argues for the historical importance of environmental change along the waterfront and successive visions of urban reform represented in the area’s built environment. The co-existence of useful and fully occupied housing that reflects the aesthetics, building innovations, styles, and social values of reformers, developers, and innovators from the late 19th through the 20th centuries interested in housing for the “poor” alone constitutes a unique urban landscape. However, the juxtaposition of these historically important efforts with the modernist buildings of the
mid-20th century and the public housing of the 1960s is a visual commentary on shifting values and attitudes toward poverty, race, and class within a relatively small and contained area that is possibly unique in the country.

In the Beginning...

The Southwest quadrant, since 1800, has been a place of great expectations repeatedly tempered by disappointing realities. It began life with promise, owing to its fine geographical setting as the southern riverfront portion of the central federal district planned by Pierre L’Enfant. Early Southwest’s largest private landowner, Notley Young, held the land south of C Street stretching from the undeveloped shoreline to an interior of gardens, pastures, and woods with a plantation manor house, and slave quarters; and in 1797, on a peninsula along the west side of Greenleaf Point, the District built an arsenal. Congress acquired most of the remaining land and through its appointed commissioners offered much of it for sale, as a way of raising funds to construct public buildings and also to encourage development of what was otherwise a landscape of fields and woods.

Figure 3. Wheat Row as it appeared in the late 19th century. Clark, Greenleaf and Law in the Federal City

notable buildings constructed by the James Greenleaf syndicate or persons associated with it, survive from the pre-1800 period. The four Georgian style row houses built in 1794 on 4th Street south of M. and named after John Wheat, an early occupant, today stand embedded in the late 1960s modernist complex of Harbour Square. Two blocks away, along 6th Street, within the modernist Tiber Island complex, stands the residence designed in 1794 for businessman Thomas Law and his wife, Eliza Parke Custis, granddaughter to Martha Washington. While Wheat Row reflects the attached, clustered housing typical of the city’s urban streetscape into the 21st century, the Law house, with spacious grounds overlooking the river, has a setting repeatedly replicated over the centuries in the less densely populated sections of the city to mark the owners’ class, and wealth.
Hopes that the District might someday become a great national port through water access to the interior states also date from the days of Pierre L’Enfant, when George Washington helped organize the Potomack Company, chartered to improve navigation up the Potomac deep into Pennsylvania. The project, not completed until 1850, as the C & O Canal, came too late to attract the bulk of the interior trade, which went to Baltimore and New York City. However, the shores of Southwest from the federal Arsenal north almost to the mouth of Tiber Creek, around 14th street, became an active local port lined with docks and wharves that kept the city supplied with produce, seafood, ice, wood, coal, and other essentials. It was by all accounts a ragged and colorful shore, backed by warehouses and storage yards, bars, commercial establishments, and houses, connected to the city by a few streets that pierced the bluffs along the shore.

Although the port experienced a brief surge during the Civil war, when Washington was a major troop-staging area, river traffic stagnated in the postwar period. The failure of a great port to materialize along the Southwest and Southeast Potomac and Anacostia shorelines markedly reduced the potential scale and pace of commercial and residential development in Southwest. The quadrant received a trickle of newcomers, who, as the Boschke map of 1857 (see next page) indicates, tended to settle either along the Mall or along the waterfront, with only scattered population in between. Cheap land encouraged small manufacturing and commercial enterprises ranging from brickyards to tanneries, interspersed with shanties, working-class row houses, and crowded alleys that since the 1850s housed the quadrant’s growing number of poor residents. Housing in Southwest tended to be modest, and working-class dwellings were small, one or two stories in height.

The Stigma of Southwest

Increasing public and official discussion of unhealthy conditions and the spread of disease from noxious mudflats along the riverfront encouraged the District’s expanding post-Civil War population wave to move inland, north and west from the Mall area, rather than into the Southwest. Sediment typically entered the Potomac, a broad and shallow stream, but during the 19th century the loads began rising, especially in Southwest. Merchants and ship owners complained that the shoaling of the river’s two ship channels impeded navigation. The river’s banks, from Buzzard Point to Tiber Creek, had once been lined not with shoals and flats but with sandy beaches and lofty bluffs.

Human factors contributed to the plague of mud. The widespread clearing of land for

---

5 Wennersten, 32ff (population), 58 (disappointing port), 28, 30, 75, 84 (bluffs, mud flats, marshes).
agriculture, roads, buildings, and other activities stripped away protective plant covering and leveled the riverfront bluffs from the mouth of Tiber Creek to Buzzard Point. Although maps of the late 1880s still show some hills as high as 40 feet around 12th Street near the waterfront, the persistent combination of leveling and filling gradually produced today’s relatively flat waterfront topography, and in the process it also added sediment to the river.⁶

Figure 4. Boschke Map, 1857, showing settlement pattern in Southwest. Library of Congress

To compound the injury of increased mud was the concomitant increase in human and animal sewage. Sewers appeared early in the District’s history but were few in number until after the Civil War, when the rising populations of humans, animals, and workplaces made them imperative. In general the movement of sewage operated by gravity and traveled from the relatively elevated northern parts of the city to the lower-lying southern portions. During the period of the territorial government (1871-74) the District reworked the shallow and often clogged Washington City Canal, circumscribing the perimeter of Southwest, into the Tiber Creek sewer. It also built many feeder lines to drain the burgeoning near Northwest and Northeast, most of which connected with the Tiber Creek

⁶ The exception being Banneker Park across from the fish market. For a personal recollection of the Potomac River channels and shore during the early 19th century see “The Potomac as It Was, Washington Post, Aug. 3, 1890, 16.
sewer, while other lines ran south from the Tiber Creek sewer through Southwest, emptying into the Potomac River along the waterfront.

Figure 5. Sewer map, 1872-74. Published by the Department of Public Works, the map shows the new sewers (red lines) built in Southwest and the mud flats that lined most of the shore.

The Southwest waterfront received a large share of the city’s effluent, none of it disinfected or treated to remove solid matter. Before germ theory was widely accepted, Washington’s residents commonly assumed that the mudflats and shoals mixed with untreated sewage to create miasmas that bred disease, especially during the hot summers. City health officers affirmed the general view that Southwest suffered an elevated incidence of malaria and other water-related maladies.

Disease was compounded by noxious odors, particularly during the warmer months. The increased amount untreated sewage flowing into the river reinforced a growing stigma and general avoidance of the quadrant by the wealthier classes of the city.7 Ironically, Southwest’s greatest asset, the riverfront, became a handicap. As the city grew, Southwest languished, labeled as unhealthy and dismissed as distinct, separate, and best suited for housing immigrants, marginal businesses, and the poor.

7 Wennersten, 87.
Advent of Social Reform: City Beautiful and the Sanitarians

In many American cities, by the second half of the 19th century, neighborhoods and sections appeared that were similar to Southwest, characterized by poor housing, high rates of communicable disease, and marginally employed populations often living in environmentally endangered circumstances like waterfronts. In the older cities of the Northeast and Midwest, and in San Francisco on the West Coast, large new immigrant communities began to develop after the 1880s. Coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, Russia, China, and in a lesser number Japan, poor immigrants clustered in self-defined urban ghettos both as protection against de facto discrimination and to provide mutual support. As immigration from abroad soared, African-Americans also migrated from the South to more northern urban centers and westward to California. In contrast with European immigrants and to a lesser degree Asian immigrants, they encountered de jure as well as de facto discrimination. In cities across the country there emerged sections designated by their ethnicities and race. Many cities had a Little Italy or a Chinatown, and those with an African-American population had a segregated Black Belt – mostly, but not all, poor.

Newcomers to the cities were often poor. Cities had always been home to poor people, though until the beginning of the industrial era cities were surprisingly small, and poor and wealthy residents tended to share neighborhoods. The segregation of the poor that accompanied industrialization, along with immigration, migration, and rising urban populations, produced something new, a degraded and segregated section of the city called a “slum,” defined as an area that was “a menace to the health, safety, morality or welfare of its occupants.”

To combat haphazard urban growth and deteriorating conditions, citizen activists from around the country founded the City Beautiful movement. Focusing on architecture and urban planning, and inspired by the White City of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, the City Beautiful movement sought to rationalize and beautify cities. Convinced that living and working in physical environments that incorporated, respected, and expressed humanistic values was a prerequisite for the future of democracy, proponents urged the development of parks, playgrounds, and monumental structures that reflected historically important events and people, as well as broad boulevards that provided vistas and ease of movement and buildings that incorporated light, air, and open spaces.

The influence on cities was enormous, nowhere more than in Washington. The design of the National Mall with museums lining it on two sides, and the familiar white marble and

---

stone edifices and monuments that characterize the city and identify it as the capital of the country owe their origins to this movement. City Beautiful also influenced thinking about the Southwest waterfront, whose physical shape was being transformed by the dredging of Washington Channel and the use of the spoils to create East Potomac Park as a place of public recreation, very different from the commercial use of the shoreline from 14th Street to the Arsenal.

At the same time as the City Beautiful movement was reshaping the physical environment, advocates emerged from the medical and scientific communities demanding greater attention to issues of public health. The increased understanding of germ theory and its relationship with communicable diseases, poor diet, and the decayed urban environment of the poor led to a demand for more sanitary conditions in the slums. The Sanitarians, as they were called, focused on deleterious housing conditions for the poor, including overcrowding, filth, smoke from cooking and heating, the absence of adequate air and light, and the insufficiency of basic sanitation.

City Beautiful advocates joined with the Sanitarians to take a philosophical leap. The Platonic equation between beauty and good, which had been implied if not clearly articulated by the City Beautiful movement, linked with the Sanitarians’ focus on public health to gain a new dimension. While the promotion of urban beauty was always in the service of instilling moral and civic qualities among city dwellers, when tied to the Sanitarians, who aggressively preached reforms in urban public health, the emphasis shifted from urban aesthetics to moral philosophy. The collaboration of the Sanitarians and the City Beautiful movement offered reformers a holistic synthesis that specifically linked disease contagion and the deleterious conditions of urban life – from inadequate sewer systems to inadequate housing and public health – with housing reform as the physical embodiment of a moral good.

**Alley Housing**

Washington was outside the main pathway of European and Asian migrations that had inspired the first northern urban reformers at the turn of the 20th century. Instead, the city attracted a steady influx of African-American migrants from Georgia and the Carolinas. The most northerly Southern city, and legally segregated like the rest of the South, it had familiar hot summers, lots of open space, no skyscrapers, and no tenement housing. It was more like Atlanta than New York.

Washington’s poor often lived hidden away in alley houses, in contrast with the very visible tenements of the northern cities. Some of the alley houses dated to before the Civil War, when slaves and poor immigrants found cheap quarters behind large street-fronted establishments. An idealized antebellum painting of slave life depicts one such early alley
with dwellings, tucked away behind the big house of a white family on F Street in Northwest, where middle-class Washington life was centered in the 1850s.

Crowded and odiferous back-alleys proliferated in Southwest and other quadrants as the city grew rapidly after the Civil War. Out of sight from the street, Washington’s poor and marginalized residents shared space with stables and small workshops, usually without benefit of running water, proper sanitation, or drains. Alley dwellings were especially common in Southwest, which received a steady influx of African-Americans from the South, who landed at the 7th Street wharf and took the trolley to nearby rooming houses or to family or friends. Malnutrition, poor health, and communicable diseases, mixed with prostitution, alcoholism, and gambling, gave Washington’s alleys a poor reputation. In language that was evocative and judgmental, reformers regularly referred to the urban poor, especially alley dwellers, as “wretched and miserable.” The poor lived “huddled together in blocks of closely packed houses” that lacked light, water closets, or privacy and that smelled

---

from refuse and too many people in too small a space.\textsuperscript{11} Even in the more open alleys, people lived in ramshackle buildings with whole families occupying a single room for sleeping, cooking, eating, and socializing.

In April 1896 the South Washington Citizens’ Association’s committee on streets and alleys reported on substandard living conditions in Southwest. Citing an earlier petition presented to the commissioners of the District, requesting improvements “in the square between Four-and-a-half and Sixth, I, and K streets southwest,” an area that today contains the Duck Pond and several empty parcels of cleared land, the petition noted “that in the alley running through the square there are twenty-two stables and two tenement houses, one containing ten and one eleven families, and that there is not a sewer with which the houses can connect. The property owners would not be permitted to put a sewer in the alley, and connection with the street sewer is impossible.”

The Commissioners failed to act, so the association prepared to “make a fight for the betterment of the sanitary conditions of the place.”\textsuperscript{12} Between 1875 and 1877, the Board of Health condemned 985 alley houses. In 1892 and 1894 Congressional restrictions were placed on building alley houses, and in 1904 reformers engaged Jacob Riis, whose photographs of alley dwellers aroused a public outcry. By 1911 reformers had succeeded in gaining a $78,000 Congressional appropriation to clear and reclaim Willow Tree Alley in SW, one of the city’s most notorious alleys. First Lady Ellen Wilson led the citywide reform coalition that sought legislation to end alley dwelling, which was passed in 1914 and finally went into effect in 1918.\textsuperscript{13}

The Working Poor

Demolishing the worst of the alleys and prohibiting new construction in the remaining alleys did not alone ensure that displaced residents would move to more desirable living environments. Morally certain that adequate light and air, facilities for maintaining cleanliness, and personal privacy were requisites for practicing the Christian virtues of probity, sexual purity, and hard work, reformers pressed for laws and regulations in the design of new housing at affordable prices.

Their emphasis on sanitation and “sanitary” reform gained a practical imperative as an understanding about communicable diseases increased. Alley dwellers were the city’s working poor. Men did pick-up work in yards and on construction sites. Women were in domestic service at households across the city. Servants carried washing in and out of alley houses to laundresses, who in the days before washing machines and dryers

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{12} “Bring on Another Pie,” Washington Post, April 7, 1896.
practiced the largest single occupation available to poor women. The interactions made everyone in the city vulnerable to the spread of infections – from measles to tuberculosis – that thrived in the alleys.

Figure 7. Alley dwelling, 1935, photo by Harris & Ewing. Library of Congress

Every District resident may have been at risk of disease spread by poor alley dwellers, but not all the poor were alley dwellers, nor were they all African-Americans or infected with communicable diseases. From the perspective of early 20th century reformers the poor fell into three broad categories: the working poor, who sought to work but lacked skills and opportunity or who diligently worked at occupations that could not fully support them and their kin; the unfortunates, consisting of the aged, the handicapped, and others who had a legitimate claim on charity; and finally those who were incorrigibly lazy, drunk, gamblers, prostitutes, and lay-a-bouts for whom the reformers need feel no compassion.

It was the first category – the deserving working poor – that constituted the reformers’ primary target population. Both African-American and white working poor were considered capable of attaining Christian virtue once situated in adequate housing. They were the most likely among the poor to be responsible tenants and they were also the group best able to pay their fair share of the costs of building better housing.

**Limited-Profit Housing Companies**

Concerned citizens, especially among the well established who felt a morally inspired social responsibility for contributing to the larger society, had long argued that capitalism and rapaciousness were not necessarily fully congruent. It was possible for individuals to choose to limit investment returns in pursuit of socially desirable goals. By mid-19th century in England and on the continent there had been experiments in building housing for the poor that incorporated the principle of a limited dividend. Toward the end of the century the concept had made its way across the ocean, and despite the free spirited
capitalism then rampant in the country, limited-dividend companies began to appear.

Referred to as five-percent philanthropy, limited-dividend or philanthropic housing companies occupied a middle position on the reform spectrum. They were not outright charitable activities characteristic of the settlement houses, free clinics, and public recreational facilities that reformers rallied around. Nor were they associated with the press for an expanded government presence that resulted in health and safety regulation. They celebrated a virtuous capitalism through investment in real estate.

Real estate had always been a potentially lucrative investment. Its costs were primarily land and construction. The investment in land and construction plus any other incidentals was recalibrated for convenience as a cost per square foot for a completed building project. Sales or rental prices were calculated on the cost per square foot times the number of square feet in the unit for sale or rent, plus profit. Today in Washington, a building owner can request a rent increase under the rent control laws if the company’s return on investment in a property is less than 12 percent. The limited return companies essentially forfeited any profit of more than five percent.

The difference between a five percent return and a higher return reduced the cost of a rental unit for the prospective tenant. Ideally, it brought the price closer to the level affordable by the working poor. By making better housing available at modest cost for the poor who could afford the cost, moreover, it freed apartments lower down the scale of desirability for each successively poorer group, lifting even the poorest one step higher. This early form of “trickle down” economics simultaneously rewarded the most worthy among the poor and validated capitalism and moderate profit-making as Christian virtues.

**Washington Sanitary Improvement Company**

Limited-dividend projects began to appear in the United States by the middle of the 19th century. The most active five-percent developer in Southwest was the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company (WSIC), founded in 1897 by the Civic Center in conjunction with the Board of Trade, the Central Relief Committee, and the Women’s Anthropological Society. It was incorporated in Virginia because the District then lacked the necessary incorporation laws. As its president the company elected Gen. George Sternberg, who had just completed a distinguished Army career and a stint as Surgeon General of the United States. Sternberg’s Army work on contagious diseases led him to conclude that improved housing for the poor was the necessary precondition for control over infectious disease in the civilian population. Well-respected, well connected, and adroit at raising funds, Sternberg was certain that he could serve investors with a guaranteed return and also provide for well-constructed housing.
The company’s mission expressed the righteous intent of the city’s established and forward looking community to provide housing for the poor in order to improve the general well-being. The WSIC established a capital fund supported by subscription and built its first developments to replace dilapidated Civil War barracks for African-American tenants near Dupont Circle and on Bates Street NW in 1897, and its first sanitary housing in Southwest on Van Street in 1904.

The buildings established standards followed in houses on Half Street SW (still extant). The pattern was for double houses with 17.6 foot frontages. Each of two flats, one per floor, had a separate entrance, cellar, bathroom, and yard. The front room was 13.2 by 14 feet and the back bedrooms 12 by 13.2 feet each. The kitchen, measuring 10 by 12.4 feet, included appliances. Houses rented for between $12.00 and $12.50 a month and smaller three room apartments for $9.50. As an incentive, one month’s rent was rebated if there were no repairs necessary on the unit at the end of the year.14

Figure 8. Sanitary housing in Southwest. Peter Sefton

The configuration and interior design of the houses reflected widespread middle-class assumptions about the family and proper gender roles. Prevailing social mores sharply distinguished “home” from the hurly-burly of “downtown” city life and from the often-bruising experiences of manufacturing, hauling, and fabricating. It idealized the home as a retreat where each man was king of his domain, however humble, and where each woman had the opportunity to create a peaceful, culturally rich, and healthy environment for her husband and children.15 The front room was a common space where family, adults, and children as well as visitors mingled. In the sanitary houses a hallway or back foyer, however small, spatially separated the bedrooms from the front room. A bedroom designated as solely for the use of the parents circumscribed the accepted place for marital sex, eliminating the open practice of sexual activities that characterized crowded living and constituted one of

---

the reformers’ most strident attacks on the life of the urban poor.

For each block of houses the company allotted a flat to a tenant manager or sub-manager. Writing to his investors, Sternberg observed that “our tenants, all of whom belong to the class of day-laborers, and some were formerly inmates of these shanties, have responded promptly to improved environments, and under the guidance of the sub-agents, have taken good care of their homes.” According to a 1907 report published by the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, the company placed 214 of its “colored” units under the management of an African-American woman, as an experiment modeled on recommendations by the social reformer Octavia Hill.

By 1914, Sanitary housing duplexes filled the 1200 block and most of the 1400 blocks of Carrollsburg Place, Half Street, and South Capitol Street, as well as the unit blocks of M and N streets. Gen. Sternberg claimed that his company’s efforts were providing good, low-cost housing and, beyond that, by their mere presence were causing the demolition of shacks and other kinds of substandard housing. He proudly urged “all citizens who are interested in the sanitary and moral improvement of the laboring classes to visit the houses on Van Street – between M and N Streets and Third and Four and a Half Streets, S. W.,” to see “the contrast between the two sides of the street… as the insanitary shacks have been demolished, because after the introduction of water and sewerage into the street consequent upon the erection of the company's houses, the owners of these ‘tumble down frame shanties’ under the law were obliged to provide water and sewer connections, and obviously preferred to demolish them.”

In 1904 Sternberg and his associates formed a second firm, the Washington Sanitary Housing Company, incorporated in the District, which lowered the guaranteed return to four percent per annum. The object of the new company in the language of Gen. Sternberg was “to build sanitary houses for a deserving class of the population which can not afford to pay the rentals of from ten to sixteen dollars per month, which the better class of wage-earners pay for the flats of the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company. To bring the rentals within the reach of this class, it is necessary to build on cheaper land, and to leave out certain features – bay windows and cellars – which add to the expense of construction.”

Sometime between 1905 and 1910 the company found “cheaper land” – 45 cents an acre – at a site adjacent to the James Creek Canal, a deathtrap for the unwary or intoxicated and notorious for its odors, since it was simply the continuation of the Tiber Creek sewer.

---

16 Kober, 39.
17 The Southern Workman, 44 (1907), 591.
18 Kober, 39.
19 Kober, 38.
Although the District government covered over the canal north of N Street SW in 1908, Sternberg lacked the capital to begin building. A subsequent citywide building boom during the 1920s offered investors superior real estate opportunities that forced the company to increase the dividend to five percent. Even that was not enough to draw capital. Changing social mores that eroded the traditional base for support of urban reform, especially limited capital investment companies, depressed the pace of urban renewal to its lowest level in thirty years. The company could not afford to build houses on the land adjacent to James Creek until 1936, and then only with funds from the Alley Dwelling Authority.

The Housing Debate

The cessation of war in 1918 was followed by an economic and building boom through the 1920s until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, when the flow of private capital nearly stopped and building construction of all types, commercial and residential, almost came to a halt.

Yet the need for new housing continued, especially in Washington. The inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt in 1934 was followed by an influx of New Dealers that exhausted the middle-class housing supply. The housing available to African-Americans, however, was under even greater stress. Although Washington was home to a well-established, middle-class African-American community, during the Depression large numbers of African-Americans had migrated to Washington to escape the hunger and hopelessness of sharecropping in the rural areas of the South. With housing restricted by race within the city, and with a growing number of African-Americans among the city’s new migrant population, poor African-Americans had little available decent housing.

Appropriately enough, it was from Washington that attempts to create new housing began to appear through a variety of New Deal programs. New Deal economics challenged the traditional belief that the nation should let individuals, committees of concerned citizens, or private philanthropy and socially conscious investment solve the problems of the cities and the poor. Only the national government, argued the New Dealers, had the means to address such vast issues. They made housing central to their legislation, which fueled acrimonious debates in Congress and elsewhere about the government’s role in the nation’s housing markets, especially for the poor.

Powerful interests were allied against direct government intervention. Historically, land was America’s greatest source of new capital. In the early decades of the 20th century developers turned Florida swamps into golf courses and vacation retreats, and urban

---

commercial, industrial, office, and living space multiplied exponentially. Washington was no exception. From the days of Pierre L’Enfant, when Congress sold lots in Southwest to pay for the new capital’s federal buildings, real estate developers played a critical role in the District’s economy. During the 1920s through 40s they were responsible for the city’s northward thrust and the construction of the first high-rise apartment houses in Kalorama and then beyond.

The major developers belonged to an interlocking group of clubs, churches, and civic organizations among which was the prominent Board of Trade. In a city that lacked an elected government the board’s membership, co-extant with the city’s male white elite, could exercise de facto power over land use, zoning, density, and building variances. Moreover, membership on the board and other club-like organizations, established a link between the District’s developers and the banking community, forming a network essential for the flow of capital from Washington and New York banks that provided private investment funds for land purchase and development.

Wealth and stature also gave individual members access to the Congressional committees responsible for the District. This comfortable clique of white male Washingtonians had little interest in extending the formal reach of federal laws, regulations and oversight into the housing market. Aware of the potential competition that government engagement might provoke, the elite claimed that federal involvement with the private capital markets was a form of “creeping socialism” that was particularly invidious when used for building public housing for the poor, and would lead to a decrease in the overall growth of the nation’s wealth and a decline in the personal freedom of its citizens.

Despite opposition, the Roosevelt administration and Congress backed the New Deal housing programs, which directed most of their attention to providing construction loans for commercial and residential buildings, including low-cost housing, in order to give employment to the vast and growing number of jobless men across the nation. By injecting federal loan money into a labor-intensive industry the New Dealers sought to create jobs and enlarge the nation’s stock of sound housing. They saw housing for the poor as one, but an essential, part of this huge national effort.

**Low-Cost Housing and the Alley Dwelling Authority**

Social reformers who argued for “uplifting the poor” remained active and potent political agents alongside the New Dealers. Their number was augmented by members of the maturing professional fields of urban planning and design, which had appeared after World War I. The overlapping interests of reformers, New Dealers, and planning and design professionals led to coalitions that could drive the direction of policy and legislation, especially in the desperate times that greeted the first Roosevelt
administration. With support from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the president was persuaded to establish the Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA), a federal entity charged with razing alley dwellings in the District. It was established by an executive order in 1934 and gained legislative authority and an expanded mandate later in the year.

Despite earlier reform efforts, Washington’s alleys had never fully disappeared, although some of the most notorious had been demolished, and construction in alleys had been prohibited. In areas like Foggy Bottom, where large numbers of Irish and German immigrants settled in the mid-19th century, alleys were black or white, but with the increasing relocation of middle-class whites to neighborhoods like Cleveland Park, during the early decades of the 20th century, the African-American population became more concentrated in the city center, with the poorest living in alleys from which the whites had long since fled.

![Figure 9. Alley dwellings in Southwest, 1937, with the Capitol in background. Detail from photo by Arthur Rothstein. Library of Congress](image)

The Depression worsened the problem of alley housing. Race relations in the District echoed the tensions of the Depression, which heightened racial animosities everywhere as increased numbers of whites competed with African-Americans in a downward job market. The District’s whites had more employment options than their African-American neighbors. Segregation, nevertheless, led to creation of a vibrant African-American economic and social structure that sustained part of the black middle class by offering security to a small professional class and lower-end government jobs to others. For the poor, alley life provided a meager form of social support and resources. While violence, gambling, and prostitution were an undeniable part of life in the crowded houses of the alleys, these criminal activities also constituted an irregular economy that supplemented or supplanted lost sources of legal income.

- **Sternberg-Kober Apartments**

As the Alley Dwelling Authority moved from executive order to legislated existence, its mandate and financial resources expanded. The ADA gained the authority to both

---

21 Borchert, 117.
demolish alley dwellings and build new low-income housing. From the beginning the ADA had only modest funding, especially in contrast with the huge sums authorized in legislation like the National Housing Act, also passed in 1934. Despite its limitations, however, the ADA became highly visible in the District’s housing market under the direction of John Ihlder, a longtime social reformer and Roosevelt ally.

One of the ADA’s early projects was in Southwest, where it provided the capital needed to complete Gen. Sternberg’s project on the land purchased adjacent to James Creek. When Sternberg Gardens received its ceremonial opening in November 1937, Gen. Sternberg had already died, having been succeeded as head of the company by his friend and associate, George Kober. The architect for the project, Appleton Clark, praised Sternberg as man and visionary whose service on behalf of the less fortunate was a model for the nation. The 65-unit apartment complex located between O and P on 3rd Street was fully rented before it was completed and was followed in the early 1940s by an equally successful second phase.

The combined development became known as the Sternberg-Kober Apartments. It consisted of low-rise red brick buildings that sought to mediate between the high-rise apartment buildings that had developed over the past decades, especially in the Northwest, and the single-family homes that dominated suburban growth. Built in a cluster formation and large enough for family living, the structures broke with the rigid grid pattern of big houses in the front and alley houses in the rear. Multiple front doors sub-divided the complex into smaller apartment groupings. The front doors opened to common hallways with staircases leading to four or six apartments per floor. The earlier buildings had roomy rear sleeping porches and the later buildings were set back and wrapped around U-shaped front gardens. Both projects shared open green space in the rear. The apartments themselves had windows in every room, multiple bedrooms, separate kitchens furnished with appliances, and modern full bathrooms.

- **K Street Houses**

Using its expanded authority, the ADA also built a 16-unit complex on K and 6th streets in 1937, directly contracting for construction rather than through an existing limited-return company like the Washington Sanitary Company. The Sternberg-Kober development had been built for African-Americans, and the K Street units were the first built for whites. A *Washington Post* story about the complex described one of the new tenants as a nurse with five children who moved from a house near Half Street that was $9 a month cheaper but not nearly so nice and modern.  

---

• **James Creek Dwellings**

The ADA used the K Street model for the much larger James Creek Dwellings project at 1st and M streets. Southwest had a low population density, especially in the area south of M Street and east of Delaware Avenue parallel to the route of the James Creek Canal. The land, however, was not vacant. Anticipating the future, the ADA evicted the residents and flattened 10 acres in Squares 650 and 652 including several alleys, row houses, and some light industrial buildings, to build the 278 unit James Creek Dwellings.

The James Creek Dwellings were two-story attached townhouses ranging in size from one to six bedrooms. The building style represented the most cost-efficient approach at a time when families still often had four and five children and needed adequate sleeping space to ensure the privacy and sanitary conditions that were deemed essential for a healthy home environment. Providing modern sanitary facilities and up-to-date kitchens, gardens in the front and rear, and footpaths that bisected the adjoining back gardens and moderated the grid pattern streets, the townhouses formed an inviting instant family neighborhood and community. Funded through a combination of direct contributions from the federal government and real-estate tax exemptions from the District, the rents were graded according to the tenants’ ability to pay, beginning as low as $11 per month. From their opening in 1942, the houses were reserved for African-American war workers, many of whom worked at the nearby Navy Yard where steady work and government wages provided a degree of financial security. The new townhouses were not only financially viable but also a welcome change from the crowded temporary housing that was the wartime alternative.

**Transition and Change**

By the time the ADA became the National Capital Housing Authority (NCHA) in 1943, Southwest, south of M Street between Half Street and Delaware Avenue, down 3rd Street and along P Street, had experienced a steady process of rebuilding for more than thirty years. Incorporated into the new housing were the ideas and ideals of what constituted a proper environment to realize a better life for the poor, or at least the working poor. The different styles of housing reflected the evolving use of materials and changes in

---


24 Further to ease the wartime housing situation along the waterfront, the Alley Dwelling Authority built 146 temporary units as the Syphax Homes, demolished in the late 1950s to clear the site for the Syphax Gardens public housing project.

25 The name change, which occurred on June 1, 1943, reflected a change in status arising from federal legislation “giving the local authority the status of the 600 local public housing authorities in other communities.” “‘Alley’ Is Out: D.C. Housing Unit Changes Its Name,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 1943, B1.
standards and tastes. Over time they included more amenities in the kitchen, larger rooms, and central heating. They also reflected the views of social reformers – Sanitarians, City Beautiful advocates, and moralists of all kinds – who uniformly objected to degraded living conditions and who sought a more rational, modern, and attractive environment conducive to fostering improved character, a healthier lifestyle, and a democratic society.

The lifetime of the ADA saw a fundamental change in thinking about low-cost housing. The New Dealers did not so much supplant the old moralism of the social reformers as shift the focus from housing per se to employment. The new approach was incorporated into the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937, which supplanted the National Housing Act, passed in 1934, the same year as the ADA’s creation. National in scope and far better funded than the ADA, the Wagner-Steagall Act established the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which increased the flow of federally guaranteed mortgages to underwrite new housing as a means to increase construction and employment. Like the ADA, it devolved authority for new construction on state and city governments. The law also required a 1:1 relationship between construction of new living units and the demolition of substandard units, which reassured the real estate and development community that government sponsored housing would not flood the market and that occupied land would be flattened for rebuilding. The Act would be a model for the future, but the future of urban renewal and low-cost housing was held largely in abeyance while the nation went to war, from 1941 to 1945.26

The Postwar City

Nothing happened as expected after the war. Rooted in depression thinking compounded with wartime exigencies, the housing experts had no coherent models to cope with the explosion of postwar affluence and the impact of the automobile on the city. Housing developments flooded the suburban areas of all the country’s major cities, along with an insatiable appetite for new cars. Freed from serious restrictive zoning requirements and with cheap open land available, new housing developments turned fields and farmland into neighborhoods and communities increasingly distant from the city center but readily accessible by private car.

During the war years private savings had accumulated, erasing the personal poverty of the Depression era. Employment was again plentiful and overtime common for civilian industrial workers. Wartime rationing and the focus on war-related production, however, had also left a significant unsatisfied consumer demand. New consumer credit, accessible

through the FHA and also under the Veterans Readjustment Act of 1944, provided access to federal mortgage guarantees for returning veterans. Many veterans bought a suburban house when they found city residences in short supply, almost immediately after which (or possibly before) they bought a car in order to navigate suburban life and to commute.

Schools, businesses, and services followed their customers. It soon became evident that the pre-war model of an urban core surrounded by greenbelts was outdated. Instead, the car was making the suburban environment its own center and clogging the downtown with traffic from commuters. The nation began planning for an expansion of its road system that would push development ever further into the countryside, while commercial, industrial, and government installations began adding suburban outlets or relocating in campus-like settings outside the city center, further shifting the historical model of core and periphery into a more disaggregated metropolitan model.

Expanding suburbs had critical financial consequences for core cities, which depended largely on property taxes. City officials saw the flight of middle-class residents and businesses as diminishing their financial base and found themselves left with obsolescent industries, deteriorating commercial downtowns, increased demands for services to satisfy an increasingly poor population, and old, dilapidated housing.\(^\text{27}\) Housing for the poor, which had dominated reform effort during the early part of the century, and the need for generating employment, which had been the focus of the New Dealers, gave way to concern for the future of the city, especially its deteriorating downtown.

Urban Renewal

The city’s search for more tax dollars encouraged interest in clearing large sections of decaying urban neighborhoods. While few would contest that new buildings and modern amenities would improve the city’s appearance, it was also true that the elimination of obsolete industrial and commercial spaces and the replacement of outdated, low-density housing with newer, high-density housing and attractive office spaces held the potent promise of higher tax revenue. Clearing broad swaths of blighted areas created open space, the urban analogue of the empty farmland available outside the city. New buildings designed and organized for 20th-century life might successfully compete with the lure of the suburbs. An alternative that could reduce the flow of residents and businesses flocking into newly built suburban spaces, it was the city’s hope for the future.

Washington was no exception, although its position as the nation’s capital gave it special attributes. Washington had always been a planned city. Beginning with Pierre L’Enfant’s plan and on through the well-received and influential Report of the Senate Park Commission by Senator James McMillan of Michigan in 1902, public monuments, parks, and government buildings dominated the cityscape. Unlike any other major city in the country, however, there was no local elected government. Washingtonians did not even vote in presidential elections until 1964. Congress exercised direct authority over the District through appointed commissioners. Since the city’s finances were determined by Congressional vote, tax losses were felt less keenly than in other cities. Like other cities across the country, however, postwar Washington suffered decayed neighborhoods, an increasingly blighted downtown, and the loss of population and businesses to the rapidly expanding suburbs encircling the city.

The Legal Framework for Urban Renewal

Despite the emerging consensus for a holistic approach to address urban blight, before 1945 there was no legal framework and no federal funds available. The limited tools of the Wagner-Steagall Act never envisioned the postwar situation in which the problems of the city expanded beyond housing the poor and the need to use construction to “prime the pump” of employment. However, between 1945 and 1952 Congress enacted legislation that addressed urban renewal nationally and with regard to Washington in particular. Three acts of Congress shaped Washington’s postwar experience in urban renewal, which was to remake the Southwest.

The District of Columbia Redevelopment Act

The District of Columbia Redevelopment Act, passed in 1945, was the earliest legislation. It established a five-member commission, the District of Columbia Land
Redevelopment Agency (RLA), empowered to seize property under eminent domain. The RLA engendered little initial controversy. It also remained without an appropriation for the first several years of its existence. By 1950, however, it was funded and became an active agent in the Washington debate between neighborhood revitalization, as had happened successfully in Georgetown, and the flattening of large swaths of land to build a new urban environment. Despite significant opposition, the RLA successfully argued for large-scale redevelopment, which was considered the politically radical stance. Subsequently, during the process of assembling land, the extent of the agency’s right to seize property under eminent domain was unsuccessfully challenged all the way to the Supreme Court.28

The Housing Act of 1949

The National Housing Act of 1949 augmented the locally relevant 1945 District redevelopment act. The postwar economy bore little resemblance to the 1930s, and the discussion of urban problems had a significantly different trope. Conflicting interests fueled an intense political debate over the proposed law, which President Truman viewed as his signature piece of “fair deal” legislation. Efforts to pass the act from 1945 until 1949 were often acrimonious and included arguments familiar from the earlier debate over the Wagner-Steagall Act, despite the changed circumstances. Loud voices characterized the direct involvement of government in the housing market as “creeping socialism.” Others were concerned that the government would distort competition in pricing for construction and land as well as in the rent and sale of properties. Still others argued that the government’s responsibility for the “public good” mandated that it provide adequate housing for the poor and that only through the government’s right of eminent domain could land be effectively and economically assembled for the widespread urban renewal necessary to “save the cities.”

A spirit of compromise marked the final bill. Congress adopted the principle of Wagner-Steagall, which devolved authority to state and city levels but it eliminated the 1:1 relationship between new housing and demolished housing, to open the way for large-scale renewal projects. It reached out to Congressional members from rural constituencies by extending the FHA to new non-urban areas and it increased FHA financing, which reassured the mortgage brokers. It reassured bankers by specifying the outside limit of new government-supported housing, which eliminated any threat of government competition, and it linked slum clearance and urban renewal, which affirmed the new

28 Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School, Berman vs. Parker, 348 U.S. 26, decided November 1954. www.law.Cornell.edu, viewed August 24, 2014. The case provided a basis for wide scale urban clearance and was critical to urban renewal projects across the country. The case also provided a rationale that was central to the state’s use of eminent domain to assemble land for the federally funded road construction under the 1955-6 Highway Act
breed of urban planners. It also gave the federal government a widely expanded role in mortgage insurance and in the construction of public housing. It extended federal funds for more than 810,000 public housing units over the next few years.

- **National Capital Planning Act**

The legal framework of the 1949 housing act provided the basis for large-scale urban renewal and the construction of public housing across the country. For Washington, however, the housing acts of 1945 and 1949 were further enhanced in 1952 when Congress passed the National Capital Planning Act. The act gave federal status to the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), which as the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCP) had previously been a line item in the District budget. Elevated to the status of an independent agency, it would take the lead in the investigation of alternative renewal options for the District and commission studies and plans for implementation.

Taken together, the three pieces of legislation provided federal funds for Washington to plan for renewal and the purchase of land in pursuit of renewal. They also established legal authority to exercise the right of eminent domain and acquire land and buildings in a blighted area for renewal. Finally, they specified the right to sell the land to developers for new construction as part of an approved renewal plan.

**The Press for Dramatic Renewal**

Passage of the legislation began the process for radical urban renewal in Washington, although flattening wide swaths of land was quite controversial and alternative approaches had forceful advocates. Strong voices and thoughtful plans were on the side of the more modest approach of neighborhood revitalization piloted in Georgetown, which had become a renewal success story. However, the neighborhood revitalization approach offered neither the dramatic possibilities of rebuilding nor the financial opportunities that such a dramatic action might offer. In the postwar years, when the Cold War dominated geopolitics and threats of nuclear attack reinforced a sense of vulnerability, the vision of creating a national capital that epitomized the success of the “free world” under U.S. leadership had a powerful and emotionally potent appeal. With a legal framework in hand and a predisposition toward patriotic emotionalism, characteristic of the period, radical renewal in Southwest Washington moved center stage.

---

29 Legal Information Institute.
30 Legal Information Institute for the text of the three acts.
The NCPC’s *Comprehensive Plan for Washington, DC* of 1950 had already designated Southwest one of three areas as having a high ratio of “obsolete dwellings,” along with “overcrowding and other potential threats to public health.”32 The plan used descriptive language that had originated with the social reformers of the early 20th century and that by the postwar years had become the standard vocabulary to describe undesirable neighborhoods. It resonated with listeners and readers, bringing to mind the ills of slums captured in images made familiar through photographs and film since the 1930s.

When the *Comprehensive Plan* was completed in 1950, the commercial center of Southwest was 4th Street, which had been promoted from a half street in 1934 to the delight of residents.33 With small shops lining its sides it was the crossroads of racial and ethnic interaction for the area. It also divided the community. East of 4th Street was African-American, while on the west side was a white and historically immigrant population. Although relatively few, the Eastern and Southern European immigrants who had come to Washington during the early decades of the 20th century, especially the small community of Jews, had moved into Southwest before World War II, often as the proprietors of local stores and small establishments. By the 1950s, their children had become part of the move to the suburbs.

As the children of the immigrants grew up and moved out, the previously all white west side of 4th Street began to gain African-American residents. Southwest was not unique. Throughout the city the proportion of African-Americans was increasing, in a shift driven by restrictive housing covenants in the surrounding suburbs, the greater poverty among African-Americans that kept them from buying suburban houses and cars to reach them, and the ongoing African-American migration from the South.

Many of the streets on the predominantly white west side of 4th Street had been lined with well-maintained modest dwellings, mostly row houses, and they remained well-maintained under African-American ownership. Most of the seriously deleterious housing in Southwest was east of 4th Street in the poorest African-American section. These slums of Southwest lay uncomfortably close to the seat of government. In 1943 a *Washington Post* article had reported on the visit of Congressmen to Southwest and their discovery of its unsavory housing so close to the Capitol.34 By the 1950s the emotional distaste for slums close to the Capitol was even stronger, and its message of a sordid city was incompatible with the image of the United States as preeminent among nations.

32 *Worthy of the Nation*, p.314.

A sincere desire to improve the city combined with a shrewd sense of investment made flattening the “slums” attractive. In one sweep it would rid the city of old, low-tax residential buildings that housed failing or low-profit businesses and the poorer residents. It would rebuild with new schools, shops, and services surrounded by trees, lawns, recreational facilities, and leafy walkways that were the suburban dream. The streets would have no crime and no dirt. Safety, space, and cleanliness, hallmarks of the suburban vision, would rescue the city from obsolescence.

A more suburban environment that addressed the city’s falling revenues and the dreams of housing reformers was complemented by the profit to be made by the developers. The compromises in the 1949 housing act, like the compromises in the Wagner-Steagall Act, protected the interests of market-based real estate developers. Not only was public housing capped at 810,000 units over the next few years, which, in light of the pent-up demand for housing that characterized the postwar years, would not substantially affect the for-profit sale and rental housing markets; but the authority to engage in urban renewal would devolve to state and local governments. Most importantly, and immediately relevant to developers in Southwest, the legal framework made the city the local authority for securing and assembling land in preparation for renewal, and private developers responsible for building in the renewal zones.

**Adopting the Plan**

Relatively little divisive public discussion had marked the initial designation of Southwest as one of three potential renewal zones in the NCPC’s 1950 Comprehensive Plan. Although Southwest’s housing stock included well-kept houses, the Comprehensive Plan had strongly suggested that the area’s proportion of overall poor housing warranted its inclusion among the three most distressed parts of the city. Intense public debate accompanied the various plans for renewal. The Commission considered two approaches to the rehabilitation of Washington’s decayed neighborhoods. The first was a “neighborhood rehabilitation approach” in which the neighborhood was upgraded block by block and house by house; the second was a drastic flattening and rebuilding. After several studies and public discussion the Commission endorsed an intermediate approach that included widespread renewal. The RLA had won the day with the decision for radical flattening. In light of the 1950 report, however, the RLA plan included a mixture

---

36 *Worthy of the Nation*, p. 314.
37 The Commission considered a proposal by Elbert Peets in 1951, a neighborhood approach with limited new development that stayed close to the area’s profile as a low income neighborhood. In 1952 the Commission requested a proposal from Louis Justement and Cloethiel Woodard Smith. They offered a dramatic plan that aimed at “the whole process of rebuilding the city in a purposeful and accelerated fashion.” See *Worthy of the Nation*, 314-15.
of residential, commercial, and government buildings, a waterfront developed for recreation, and a plan for what would become L’Enfant Plaza extending to Independence Avenue. It offered a unified and holistic approach that was in the forefront of urban planning for distressed or blighted areas. The Commission had succeeded in moderating some of the RLA’s most radical elements by including a commitment to low and middle-income housing, which had been sought by the neighborhood revivalists.  

The Waterfront

Parts of the RLA plan adopted by the Commission accorded with what was already emerging in postwar Southwest, such as the need for a mixture of commercial, residential, and public buildings. There was also general agreement about the waterfront, which was to become a recreational environment contributing to the quadrant’s overall economy and offering employment opportunities as well. The call for a recreational waterfront was itself hardly new. As early as the 1920s, by which time the Army Corps of Engineers had dredged Washington Channel and used the spoils to make East Potomac Park, a consensus had emerged that the waterfront’s future lay in recreational rather than industrial and mercantile use.

During the years before the Depression the City Beautiful Movement had been a major influence on planning. Planners stressed the visual appeal of a rebuilt shore infrastructure, one worthy of a beautiful and healthy city, and imagined a harbor filled with pleasure craft and lined with seafood restaurants offering local catch and water views to Washingtonians, who would make the waterfront their destination of choice to relax and play. Live-aboard communities had already become a part of the waterfront, when steamboats still plied the river between the world wars, bringing passengers, freight, and produce to the 7th Street wharf and carrying Washingtonians and tourists on cruises to Mount Vernon and Potomac River amusement parks. An acute wartime housing shortage from 1941 to 1945 led to an increase in the number of live-aboards at the marinas operated under contract from the National Park Service at Buzzard Point, at the mouth of James Creek and between 7th Street and the fish market. During the few years between the war and the RLA’s adoption of the Commission’s plan in 1952, the housing situation had not significantly eased, and the live-aboards were included as a part of the plan both as a practical matter and as an attraction to the waterfront.

---

38 *Worthy of the Nation*, 317.
What was new in the plan was a focus on the economic importance of the waterfront. By the 1950s the first faint outline of a consumer society that would characterize the second half of the 20th century was beginning to emerge. Rationing was over. Waiting time for durable purchases like autos, washing machines, refrigerators, and home television sets had disappeared. Americans took their new cars and went on vacation. They went to see views, meet new people, and eat new foods. An economically important waterfront was a viable possibility, especially one that capitalized on Washingtonians’ new consumer aspirations.

**RLA: Acquiring and Clearing Land**

A viable waterfront, albeit one used for recreation rather than trade, revived the speculative dreams for Southwest that once had moved Pierre L’Enfant, George Washington, and James Greenleaf. Although it was speculation on a wholly different scale, it had surprising historical analogues, including government subsidies for acquiring the land.
In the urban-renewal legal framework that underpinned Washington’s Southwest development, once the NCPC had adopted a plan the project became the responsibility of the RLA, which held legislated authority and appropriated federal funds for all aspects of implementation. Implementation included the cost of assembling and clearing the land through eminent domain and the settlement of numerous court cases challenging the RLA’s exercise of eminent domain, especially over the buildings that sat on property within the renewal area.\(^{41}\)

In a spirit reminiscent of the days of George Washington, James Greenleaf, and the early Congresses that sold undeveloped District land to real estate speculators, the RLA’s legal framework required that the land be bought, cleared, and sold for development to private developers whose plans were in accord with the overall vision of the Commission. Since land and construction were the two principal costs of urban renewal in Southwest, acquiring land through eminent domain at a lower price than would have been possible for the private developer, and then selling the assembled land to a private developer, constituted a government subsidy for private development. This form of an indirect subsidy had been incorporated into the 1949 housing act as part of the compromise to satisfy real estate interests and secure Congressional approval. It had also been part of the earlier Wagner-Steagall Act and had been used by the ADA to subsidize the Sternberg-Kober Apartments in 1937.

### The New Southwest

Between 1954 and 1959, the New York real estate developer William Zeckendorf, a vivid and sometimes outrageous figure who dominated the real estate market of his day, assembled a team, including the firm of Webb & Knapp and the young I.M. Pei and Harry Weese, to develop a detailed plan for Southwest that accorded with the

---

\(^{41}\) Eminent domain accords the government or its authorized agent the right to seize land needed for the “common good” in return for “just” compensation to the landowner. The RLA paid a “fair market price” for the land and buildings it acquired, but the market value was based on the then current value of the land and buildings. Since Southwest was relatively poor, the buildings were modest and generally not new even in the most respectable sections of the renewal area. Consequently, their assessed valuation was relatively low. Had a private developer sought the same land and buildings, the promise of a future rise in value after renewal would have significantly increased the purchase price beyond the current valuation. Additional costs such as possible lawsuits, delays, or competitive bids from other developers could have further increased the cost of assembling land and buildings. The RLA encountered some of the same problems, and in the case of Berman vs. Parker had faced a Supreme Court challenge to the right to acquire buildings on condemned land. In addition, the RLA contributed to the cost of relocating tenants who were not owners. Again, had the private developers been faced with recalcitrant tenants, they may well have negotiated higher “buy outs.” The “fair market price” assessed under eminent domain therefore reduced the cost to the developers. The difference between what private developers would have paid to assemble and clear the land and what it cost them to buy the cleared land from the RLA constituted a subsidy to the developers and a loss to the owners and inhabitants of the property.
Commission’s 1952 general requirements. It was a grand scheme, larger than anyone had expected. The Zeckendorf-Pei Plan incorporated such modern concepts as the superblock, the integration of green space into neighborhoods, distinct separation of commercial and residential zones, and a residential scheme that integrated mid-rise apartment buildings with town houses.

In Zeckendorf’s vision, everyone would get something of what they wanted from the renewal area. A wide tree-lined boulevard reminiscent of L’Enfant’s plan and modern Paris would run from Independence Avenue along the Mall to Banneker Park, the waterfront’s last remaining bluff, named for the renowned African-American surveyor who laid out markers around the perimeter of the District. Lined with theaters, hotels, restaurants, and new museums, and connecting the Mall and the waterfront, it would fulfill the long-sought end to Southwest’s isolation from the main arteries of the city and provide a monumental route across to the Mall befitting the grandeur of an international capital city and the spirit of L’Enfant’s original plan.\textsuperscript{42}

Figure 12. William Zeckendorf. Library of Congress

The renewal plans also included a model living and working environment planned by the finest architects, including Harry Weese, I.M. Pei, Chloethiel Woodard Smith, Charles Goodman, David Condon, Donald Lethbridge, and Morris Lapidus.\textsuperscript{43} They would build a hotel, houses, and apartments for the future with an aesthetic shaped by a modernism spreading across the country.

Modernism’s ancestry reached back to Le Corbusier in France, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in Germany, and their shared mentor and teacher, Peter Behrens. Bold clean lines, free of expensive and painstakingly handcrafted details, made modernist architecture appealing for the rapid reconstruction of whole neighborhoods in European cities destroyed during the war. Costs were kept to a minimum through use of new techniques of concrete construction and materials like aluminum and large plate glass that had not been generally applied to buildings.

Southwest offered an ideal environment to introduce America to the modernist vision. It had a moderate climate suitable for large windows, and for doors that joined the indoors with gardens. Raised, glass-enclosed lobbies heightened the sense of invitation that made

\textsuperscript{42} Worthy of the Nation, 319-23.
\textsuperscript{43} See Parts II and III, below, for discussion of individual buildings and architects.
the outside into the inside. Often adorned with balconies, the buildings gave magnificent views of the waterfront, the Capitol, the Library of Congress, and the Washington Monument. The use of superblocks freed the modernist structures from rigid grid patterns that subdivided city blocks into relatively small lots. Instead their complexes of multi-leveled buildings that included mid-rise apartment houses and town houses would cluster around gardens. The gardens were enclosed with private walkways, recreational facilities, especially pools, and quiet leafy spots for sitting that would provide space for repose.

Like many such schemes, the costs far exceeded expectation. In addition, there was a downturn in the economy. Despite the discounted rates for land offered by the government, the costs of land assembled by the RLA exceeded expectations and delays were endless, compounded by postponed court cases and government regulations for exercising eminent domain and then clearing the land. Zeckendorf followed in the footsteps of Greenleaf and became financially overextended. With the downturn in the economy he went broke.44

Southwest, however, did not lose its lure. Developers “flocked to the Southwest after the collapse of the Zeckendorf empire.”45 They competed for individual building commissions. More important, a surprising amount of Zeckendorf’s initial vision remained in place as men and women with somewhat more limited or at least more realistic visions built the new Southwest.

By the late 1960s the frenzy of building was over. It had produced a unique collection of mid-century modernist buildings – mid-rise apartment houses and townhouses. With a variety of styles and architectural details, they all included access to park-like gardens, most with swimming pools, that made real the promise of a quiet retreat in a modern urban setting. Leafy walkways twisted between buildings, often following old utility paths that had, in turn, been laid out in 19th-century alleys. A park ran along the waterfront, home to a large marina that replaced the three smaller ones built in the 1930s and 40s. On the water was an expanded live-aboard community, yacht club, and restaurants accessible from the water and from the new Water Street constructed parallel with Maine Avenue. Cul-de-sacs, curved roads, garages, and wide streets mimicked the contours of the countryside, denying the old urban for the new. The car was as welcome as the pedestrian. Modernist churches, a library, and that new form of suburban shopping, a neighborhood mall, marked the Southwest as a 20th-century town in a city.

---

45 Worthy of the Nation, 320.
Moving Out the Poor

The new Southwest renewal zone did not include the poor, even the working-class poor. By 1957, the RLA had advised the Commission that owing to land prices that were higher than expected no public housing would be built in the redevelopment zone.\textsuperscript{46} In addition, rentals and sale prices of condominiums and cooperative apartments would be higher than previously expected. No one was very surprised. In sharp contrast with earlier times, postwar urban renewal was never about supplanting deleterious housing with new housing for the poor. It was the “health” of the city, not a healthful environment for the poor, that was at stake.

\textsuperscript{46} Worthy of the Nation, 323.

market-rate real estate development and government-supported public housing. The future of the rebuilt city lay with the wealthier classes, who would support higher rents in buildings with substantial tax assessments.

Despite the victory of private development, the city and the poor were locked together. The poor could not provide the desired tax base, but they also could not afford the move to the suburbs, which generally lacked affordable housing. Besides, owning a car, even a used car, was not yet affordable for almost everyone, and without efficient metropolitan public transportation, which was still decades in the future, travel to and from any but the oldest inner suburbs served by buses required a car.

During Southwest’s urban renewal the resident population of some 600 acres of city was moved out – businesses, small apartment houses, rooming houses, single-family homes, warehouses, retail establishments, shops, small-scale manufactories, schools, and churches. Everyone who lived or worked in the alleys, the less dense but long settled streets stretching back to Independence Avenue, everything along the waterfront, and up from the waterfront on both sides of 4th Street back up to the Mall, had to move. Although the District government offered resettlement social services most of the burden of figuring out where to go and how to get there fell on the residents.

The seizure of land and buildings by eminent domain meant paid compensation to landowners, not renters. The amount of a landlord’s compensation reflected contractual relationships that the landlord had to satisfy with people who occupied the buildings and land. For the mixed population of whites and African-Americans who lived or worked in the renewal area but owned no land, there was little or no direct compensation. Undoubtedly, it was easier for white residents than for African-Americans, who had fewer choices of where to go in the still segregated Washington-area housing market and constituted a larger number of the poor who could ill afford the cost of resettlement.

The Other Southwest

Contemporary discussions expressed concern for displaced people. Articles in the Washington Post discussed the difficulties of finding affordable replacement housing. The National Capital Housing Authority estimated that 17,200 families could expect to be displaced and that alternative housing was available for less than half that number. However, the drama of flattening so extensive an amount of land and building a new

49 The Washington Metro did not open until 1976. In the early 1950s there were still people arguing that investment in mass transport was unnecessary.
urban environment, mixed with the undoubtedly better housing that would result. largely overwhelmed the objections to wholesale displacement. Given the political environment, few would have suggested that the state was engaged in a morally indefensible process of using eminent domain to displace poor citizens and indirectly provide a subsidy for real estate speculators to develop to a community for the more affluent. More moderate arguments were muted. Without a locally elected government or vote in Congress, the District lacked the local political power blocs familiar in poor neighborhoods in other American cities. Southwest had never had the Northwest’s political clout in the city. Despite the presence of some well-known figures who lived in the quadrant, Southwest was a largely working-class area with low density and a large African American population. Few had any opportunity to hobnob with Congressman or become members of Washington’s elite clubs whose networks of relationships influenced the flow of money and legislation that shaped the District.

Bringing Back the Poor

Southwest became an urban renewal model for the nation, and large-scale renewal projects followed in New York, Chicago, and Boston. All cities faced the issue of the displaced poor as their new housing drew middle-class residents into areas previously filled with cheap, low-quality housing occupied by the poor. Pressure from social activists alarmed at the growing scarcity of affordable housing for the poor brought Congressional response. The 1954 Housing Act included an amendment to earlier legislation that authorized building new public housing adjacent to areas designated for urban renewal or undergoing urban renewal that included the use of public funds.

52 Office of Urban Renewal, pp.1-3.
By the second half of the 1950s, it became increasingly imperative to address housing for Southwest’s displaced residents as well as the District’s larger community of poor. Alternative sites in the District were repeatedly proposed to the District’s commissioners and rejected. Proposals rejected included those to build public housing in Maryland and Virginia and move the poor out of the District. After acrimonious debates the Commissioners identified two sites within the District that met the federal criteria, and the National Capital Housing Authority began to draw plans for construction.

Not surprisingly both sites were in Southwest. Relatively little attention had fallen on the parts of Southwest unaffected by renewal. The area south of M Street, from Half Street to 3rd Street, along parts of Delaware Avenue and along P Street opposite Fort McNair, was psychologically another Southwest, distinct and separate from the renewal zone. It had been reshaped largely by reformers from the early part of the century right up through the war years with the building of the James Creek Dwellings. With its own history and a largely African-American population, this small area underwent changes that paralleled but rarely intersected with the new modernist renewal. The houses built by the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company under Gen. Sternberg passed into private ownership. In 1955, with the spread of the cooperative movement, the Sternberg-Kober Apartments became a cooperative, the St. James Mutual Homes.  

It was on land adjacent to the James Creek Dwellings, south of M Street, that the National Capital Housing Authority built Syphax Gardens, named after a 19th-century African-American educator who had been Superintendent of the Colored Schools. The new housing complex opened in 1960, one year after the completion of Capitol Park, the first of the modernist buildings in the renewal area. It included two small-scale red brick walk-up apartment buildings of not more than three or four stories with 174 units. The apartments, which ranged in size from one to three bedrooms, wrapped around front gardens and blended well with the town houses of the James Creek Dwellings and the nearby red brick apartments of the St James complex.

Along M Street, bounded by 3rd Street and Delaware Avenue, another public housing complex had opened a year earlier in 1959. Built by the government and meeting none of the obstacles to construction that slowed building in the renewal area, the public housing project proceeded rapidly from planning to completion. A large development of 500 units, named after James Greenleaf, the failed developer whose Wheat Row houses had been incorporated into the modernist Harbour Square (discussed in Parts II and III), the Greenleaf complex included mid-rise buildings, small apartment houses, and attached homes that resembled suburban garden complexes. Straddling M Street, the project included a midrise building for senior citizens on one side and a three-story apartment

complex across the street. Notable on the north side of M Street was a community of flat-roofed, two- and three-story, attached garden apartments that ranged in size from two to five bedrooms. With adjacent backyards separated by low fences, outdoor drying racks for clothing, and barbeque grills, the garden apartments captured the feel and look of suburbia.

**Conclusion: Visibility and Invisibility**

A section of Greenleaf’s small garden-apartment-style attached houses on 3rd Street north of M Street faced I.M. Pei’s Town Center East buildings, which embodied the postwar modernist renewal. Although the developments were across the street from each other they may as well have been separated by a chasm. The two Pei buildings, linked by a garden, were bounded on 3rd Street by a high brick wall that provided privacy for the residents and invisibility to people living in Greenleaf Gardens.

The wall symbolized a Southwest that had emerged from a century of urban renewal, an amalgam of social and economic groups that shaped and reshaped the modern city from the beginning of the late 19th century onward. It was a place where working-class residents stood in line for buses connecting Southwest with other parts of the city, and where garages opened to reveal luxury cars that middle-class households drove to their offices. Distinguished block by block by subtle and not-so-subtle markers of class and race, urban renewal had made room for rich and poor, African-American and white, immigrant and native born, young and old. From housing built by reformers in the early part of the 20th century to the housing of the postwar decades, the Southwest was a map of social visions that intertwined public and private housing.

Even as the vision of urban reformers shifted from the poor to the middle class and back to the poor, housing remained at the core of the reform vision. From new public housing to upscale apartments with balconies and swimming pools, the quadrant’s successive experiences of reform and renewal produced livable housing that reflected the times. In a relatively small part of the quadrant bounded by 3rd Street on the south, G Street on the north, and stretching from Half Street to the 12th Street fish market, housing that met standards set by early reform-minded Sanitarians and the bold plan of Zeckendorf made neighbors and neighborhoods that co-existed and even thrived.

Southwest’s urban history tells a story in brick, stone, aluminum, and concrete that encapsulates national and international trends. Architectural design, styles, and construction ranged from the well-made Sanitary housing, with hardwood floors and back gardens, to the green landscapes of Carrollsburg and Tiber Island that invite the visitor onto raised porticos and into glassed-in lobbies. The styles echoed values of family life and gender roles that shaped changing social mores. Public-housing apartments with
more than three bedrooms reflected the large families of the poor in contrast with the smaller apartments that dominated middle-class modernist housing. Even after the introduction of mid-rise apartment houses in the decades after World War II, the American affection for a single-family home was reaffirmed in the attached houses of Greenleaf and the town-house complexes that were part of the renewal area.

Neither a museum nor a Utopia, post-1960 Southwest was a living environment that integrated and adapted multiple visions of social reform to the changing needs of urban life. A recreational waterfront that included a fish market dating back to the 19th century and live-aboard communities that began in the 1930s linked the past with modernist restaurants, car parks, and concrete walks that stretched to the Titanic Memorial and the walls of Fort McNair. Superblocks provided modernist compounds with inner gardens that encouraged small-scale communal life despite the increasingly transient experiences of a 20th century city. In public and private housing developments traffic-free pathways became pedestrian passages and shortcuts to the waterfront and shopping on M Street, while cars moved easily along extra-wide streets. The successive layering of urban reform had resulted in a collection of neighborhoods unmatched in Washington and possibly in the nation.