District of Columbia Building Permits

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LONG OVERLOOKED as a source of valuable historical documentation of the physical, social, and economic development of urban areas have been the routine records of city administration. One such series of records, District of Columbia building permits, 1877–1915 and 1915–49, has recently been accessioned by the National Archives.[1]

The building permits were issued by the District of Columbia Office of the Inspector of Buildings. They include applications for new construction, repairs to existing buildings, elevators, projections beyond the building line, signs, furnaces, steam boilers, and other work undertaken in the District of Columbia between 1877 and 1949. The series consists of 187 cubic feet of original applications for permits, including architectural drawings, blueprints, and related correspondence, 1877–1915, and 20 cubic feet of microfilmed permit applications, 1915–49.[2]

Both the original District of Columbia building permits and the microfilm provide invaluable data for social, economic, and demographic studies of the city, in addition to unique information for two specific purposes: studying the development of Washington's distinctive urban architecture and planning historic restoration of buildings and neighborhoods. A description of these records and their research potential will demonstrate the unusual values of this series of seemingly routine records of city administration.

Although George Washington proclaimed the first building regulations for the future capital city in 1791, no record of District of Columbia building permits can be found until 1874. *The First Annual Report of the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners* includes a tabulation of permits issued for construction and repairs in the District for fiscal year 1874. In that year, 446 permits were issued for construc-

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[1] District of Columbia Building Permits, 1877–1949, Records of the District of Columbia Government, Record Group 351, National Archives.

[2] Original building permits for the period 1915–49 were destroyed by the District of Columbia government. Oversized blueprints originally filed separately from the permits were not recorded on the microfilm and were also destroyed.

tion, including 324 for new dwellings, 1 for a brick blacksmith shop, 1 for a frame winter-garden, 5 for frame coal and wood yards, 2 for frame blacksmith and wheelwright shops, and 111 for other construction and repairs.[3] The earliest known surviving permits, however, are those now in the National Archives. The first of these is dated February 17, 1877.

Perhaps not coincidentally, a new building code was established for the District of Columbia to be effective in February 1877. Section 6 of this code states:

> No building or other structure, awning, sign, engine, steamboiler, furnace, heater, range, bay-window, show-window, tower, or other projection shall be erected, nor any area, vault, cellar, basement, or excavation appurtenant to a building or other structure be made, nor alteration be allowed in any such improvement, unless a permit for such alteration or improvement shall have been issued.[4]

Under the code, for the first time, fees were charged for building permits.

For the entire period between 1877 and 1950, procedures and forms for District of Columbia building permits remained virtually unchanged. The permits consisted of standard application blanks which the property owner or builder completed and filed when a new building or repair or alteration of an existing structure was planned. If the Inspector of Buildings approved the application, the owner received a license to proceed with construction. A city inspector examined the work periodically to assure that it met city building code requirements and entered his comments on the permit.

Each building permit is identified by lot, square, and street number. Further, each permit for new construction states the name of the property owner, the size of his lot, the architect and builder of the structure, and the cost of construction. Each permit contains also a specific description of the building's appearance, including whether the building's roof was to be flat, pitch, or mansard and the material of which it was to be made; whether there were to be bay windows and their height, width, and amount of projection; the type of foundation for the building; whether there would be "show" windows; and other construction details. Permits for repair or alteration include similar information about the new work. Fortunately, the contemporary researcher is aided in interpreting this information by definitions, published with the 1877 building regulations, for the architectural terms used in the permits.[5] A "tower projection," for example, is "any

[3] *First Annual Report of the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1874), p. 202.

[4] *Fourth Annual Report of the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1877), p. 22.

[5] *Fourth Annual Report of the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1877), p. 19.

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projection for ornamental door-entrance or right angled projection designed exclusively for ornamental windows or for buttresses." A "show window" is "any store window in which goods are displayed for sale."

When construction included plumbing work, a permit from the Inspector of Plumbing was often attached to the building permit. Special permits for elevators, projections, and signs were also often included. Occasionally, useful supplementary documents such as blueprints, elevations, floor plans, sections, site plans, projection plans, and correspondence relating to the permit were fastened to the main document. These enclosures, normally associated with ambitious or controversial projects, are of particular interest to researchers.

The Office of the Inspector of Buildings filed the permits chronologically by date of issue. Also, each permit was entered on a "square card" together with the lot number and street address of the proposed construction, and the date the permit was issued.[6] Each square encompasses one city block; therefore, construction or repairs or alterations on any lot can be easily identified on the appropriate "square card." Unlike street addresses, city square numbers seldom change.

District of Columbia building permits and square cards can be used for diverse types of research and are particularly valuable for economic, social, and demographic studies. The development of urban neighborhoods has gained attention recently as a subject for extensive investigation. District of Columbia square cards provide an excellent index to repair and construction in any neighborhood or section of the city, information basic to any monographic study of an extant urban unit or one obliterated by urban growth or renewal. Further, the relative amounts of construction undertaken in different areas and the estimated costs of this work may indicate the relative affluence, growth, and popularity of particular neighborhoods, as well as the expansion of the city. Data on construction each year in the entire District of Columbia is available through sequential study of the permits. This information might be useful as an index of overall growth within the city boundaries. Because of the standardized format of the permits and their complete coverage of major construction from 1877 to 1949, their information can be readily and accurately quantified.

The quality of new construction, the rapidity with which improvements such as plumbing became common, and other information on

[6] In about 1930, one series of square cards was retired from use and a new series was begun. Permits were entered on this second series of cards until about 1950. The cards, approximately 4 × 6 inches, are arranged by square number.

In about 1950, the Office of the Inspector of Buildings initiated a new filing system for building permits. Instead of a chronological filing order based on the date the permit was issued with an index arranged by square number, the decision was made to file the permits by square number. The Office of the Inspector of Buildings still uses this system. Oversized blueprints are rolled and filed separately.

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urban life since the late nineteenth century can also be documented in the permits. By 1900, the increasing volume and variety of the permits reflect the growing size and complexity of the urban area. The permits themselves document the increase in average cost and scale of construction at that time.

Building permits also provide valuable information about local business enterprises. Any additions or major repairs to business establishments as well as construction of new buildings for commerce or industry were subject to District of Columbia building regulations, and building permits were required for such work. The Kennebec Ice Company's application to build a wooden wagon shed,[7] an ammonia company's application for a new factory,[8] and H. A. Lockwood & Fauth & Company's application for a wooden observatory[9] are among permits issued during the first two months of the new District of Columbia building regulations. In that same period, the W and G Railroad Company was granted permission to enclose an open shed for thirty days for a circus performance. The description found in the building permit of construction and location of this shed at New Jersey Avenue and C Streets, NW., within a block of the Capitol Building, offers useful insight into past life of the city.[10]

Perhaps the most important use of the building permits, however, is for architectural studies and historic restoration. The permits document construction within the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the years of Washington's greatest expansion and the development of its distinctive Victorian townhouse style and most impressive mansions. The permits furnish extensive architectural data on each building, including dimensions, materials, and dates of construction. Information about previous structures on the building site is sometimes given.

The permits therefore offer an invaluable record of the appearance of well-known buildings which have been demolished. The now-destroyed homes of Henry Adams and John Hay, for example, designed by Henry Hobson Richardson and constructed on adjoining lots at the prominent corner of 16th and H Streets, NW., across Lafayette

[7] Permit of February 22, 1877, for a wagon shed to be erected at a cost of $300 at the corner of Potomac and Water Streets, Georgetown.

[8] Permit 57, of March 9, 1877.

[9] The wooden observatory was to be at the southeast corner of First and B Streets, SW. The company's application for a building permit was initially denied. The following letter addressed to L. W. Plowman, Inspector of Buildings, is attached to the permit: "Messrs. Hammond and Gettinger inform us of your refusal for a permit for our proposed wooden Observatory. We would erect it of brick if it was not for the irradiation caused by the brick walls which seriously interferes with the performance of the Telescopes. We have concluded to cover the outside of the wooden observatory with tin and hope this will meet your approval. Very respectfully yours, Fauth and Co." This letter with its insight into both science and building methods of the nineteenth century carries the recommendation of J. E. Hilgard "In charge U. S. Coast Survey Office" and is in turn endorsed by Plowman. The application of Fauth and Company was approved. (Permit 90 of March 21, 1877.)

[10] Permit of February 23, 1877.

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Square from the White House, are documented in building permits of July 23, 1844.[11] (Fig. 1)

Documents associated with the permits, including plans and drawings of all kinds, are irreplaceable tools for reconstructing a building's original appearance. They afford specific data on dimensions and shapes of rooms, locations of stairs or elevators, heating and lighting, and details of style and appearance of the structure. The permits occasionally contain complete site plans of a project as well, including outbuildings and neighboring structures.

Information in the building permits is already being used extensively for historic restoration. For example, permits of April 5, 1900, and November 12, 1902, for the New Willard Hotel at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenues, NW. are being used in study and plans for adaptive use of the famous hotel. The permits contain such useful documents as a blueprint plan of the upper floors, ground floor plans, an elevation of the F Street facade (Fig. 2), a section through the 14th Street front of the building, details of the main entrance and the proposed vault, a longitudinal section, and a plan of the basement.

Even basic building permits for undistinguished residential and commercial properties have significant value for architectural history. The permits preserve names of forgotten architects and builders who influenced the appearance of the city. Trends in architectural design and patterns of localized styles and influence can be traced readily through the permits. Further, the permits cover areas of Washington, such as Capitol Hill and Georgetown, where historic preservation is a lively interest, and have been used extensively by homeowners in those areas to document dwellings undergoing restoration.[12]

Although information included in District of Columbia building permits is unique, related records provide supplementary information helpful to researchers. Plat-books such as *Hopkin's City Plats*[13] show the outline of structures and lots for every square in the city during the 1880's and later. A color code on each plat indicates the material from which the buildings are constructed as well as other summary architectural information. A. Boschke's "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia Surveyed in the Years 1856, '58, and '59" shows the location

[11] Builder Charles Edmonston applied for both permits on this date. Permit No. 151 is for Henry Adams's house, to be built for $35,000 on lots 2 and 3 of square 186. Permit No. 152 is for John Hay's dwelling, to be built for $70,000 on lots 1 and 2 of the same square.

[12] A further, secondary use of the permits might be in biographic studies. The fortunes of prominent Washington residents that owned, built, or altered property between 1877 and 1949 might be suggested in the permits. In 1892, for example, Frederick Douglass applied for a permit to build a second story addition to his home in Anacostia, District of Columbia. The permit for this construction is among District of Columbia building permits (Permit 239 of July 29, 1892). This document was useful to the National Park Service in its historical evaluation of the Anacostia property and restoration of the home.

[13] G. M. Hopkins, *A Complete Set of Surveys and Plats of Properties in the City of Washington, District of Columbia, Compiled and Drawn from Official Records and Actual Surveys* (Philadelphia, various dates).

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Permit July 23rd

Form A. No. 151

APPLICATION FOR PERMIT TO BUILD.

[BRICK AND STONE.]

Washington, D. C., July 22 1884

To the

INSPECTOR OF BUILDINGS:

The undersigned hereby applies for a permit to build according to the following specification:

1. State how many buildings to be erected, one
2. Material, brick
3. What is the Owner's name? Henry Adams
4. " Architect's " H. H. Richardson
5. " Builder's " Chas. E. Emerson
6. " location? Lot 243 Sq. 181
7. " nearest street? H St. & 16th St. N.W.
8. " purpose of the building? dwelling
9. If a dwelling, for how many families? one
10. Is there a store in lower story? no
11. Will the building be erected on solid or filled land? solid
12. Size of lot, No. of feet front, ; No. of feet rear, ; No. of feet deep,
13. Size of building, No. of feet front, 44; No. of feet rear, ; No. of feet deep, 56;
No. of stories in height, 3 stories; No. of feet in height from sidewalk to highest point of roof, 52'
14. No. of feet in height from level of sidewalk to highest part of wall, 52'
15. No. of feet in height from sidewalk to eaves, 45'
16. Size of back building, feet long; feet wide; feet high; No. of stories, ;
style of roof,
17. Material of foundation, brick
18. Thickness of external walls, cellar or basement, 22"; 1st story, 17"; 2d story 17"; 3d story 17"; 4th story ; 5th story
Thickness of party walls, cellar or basement, 17"; 1st story 17"; 2d story 17"; 3d story 17"; 4th story ; 5th story
Are the party walls solid or vaulted? solid
19. What will be the materials of front? pressed brick; if of stone, what kind?
20. Will the roof be flat, pitch, or Mansard? Mansard & flat; Material of roofing, slate & tin
21. What will be the material of cornice? brick & copper; Ornamental projections?
22. What will be the means of access to roof? scuttle
23. Are there any hoistways? none; How protected?
23. How is the building heated? hot air
25. Are there any bay windows? ; height ; width ; projection ; form
26. Are there any tower projections? ; height ; width ; projection
27. Are there any show windows? ; form ; projection
28. What will be projection of steps from building line?
29. Are there any vaults? Dimensions
30. Will there be an area? ; width, ; how protected,
31. Will there be cellar steps? ; how protected,
32. Is the lower story to be used for business purposes of any kind? No
33. What is the estimated cost of the proposed improvement? $35,000

Signature, Charles E. Emerson

Address, 927 N. Y. Av.

FIG. 1. Permit for Henry Adams's dwelling, designed by Henry Hobson Richardson. Building permit 151 of July 23, 1884.

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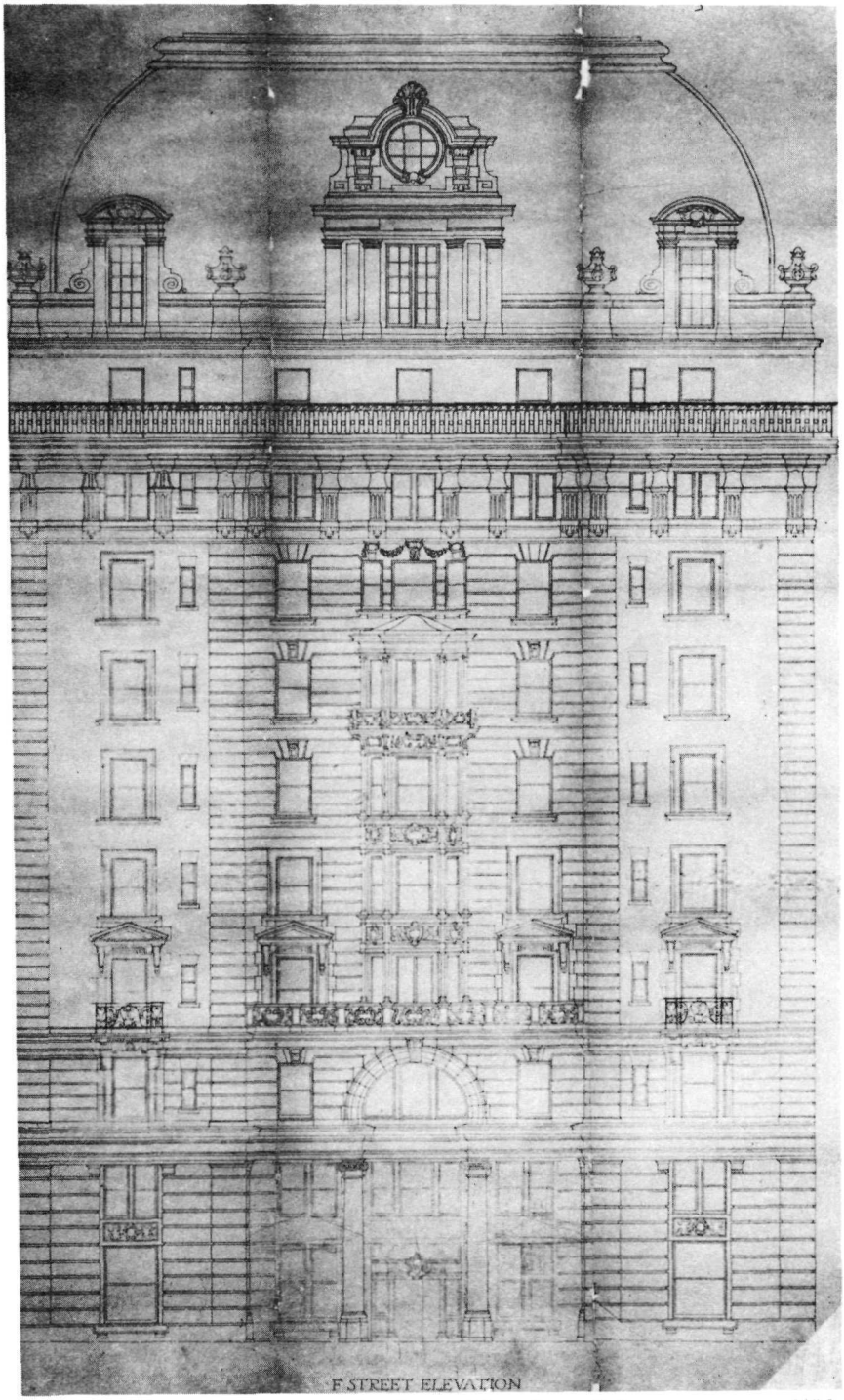

FIG. 2. The New Willard Hotel F Street Elevation. Ink on paper. 40½″ by 24¾″. Building permit 926 of November 12, 1902.

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of structures at an earlier date. Although each building is recorded only by a small mark, the map furnishes evidence of settlement density in all areas of the District in the late 1850's and indicates whether a particular structure had been built at that time. Deeds for land provide historical information about the ownership of city lots. District of Columbia tax and assessment records and Georgetown city tax records, 1871–79, and assessment records,1800–19 and 1835–79, help researchers trace buildings back to the city's origin.[14]

Clearly, District of Columbia building permits have many varied uses for research. They contain unique, quantifiable data on the architecture, economy, and development of a major urban area for nearly three-quarters of a century and are invaluable for the restoration of historic buildings and neighborhoods. Though they are routine records of city administration, the building permits are rich sources of information about past urban life.

[14] Certain editions of Hopkin's plat-books and Boschke's topographical map are available in the National Archives Cartographic Archives Division, the Library of Congress Geography and Maps Division and the Martin Luther King Memorial Library of the District of Columbia. Tax and assessment records of the District of Columbia and Georgetown are available in the National Archives Natural Resources Branch and at the Washington National Records Center. Scattered volumes of later District of Columbia tax and assessment records to 1915 are in the Martin Luther King Memorial Library.

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