

# WARDMAN's WASHINGTON

# Celebrating a Century of Wardman Row-House Neighborhoods

## Harry Wardman

Harry Wardman (1872-1938), the son of textile workers, left his native Bradford, England alone, at the age of seventeen. Arriving in New York in 1889, he took a job as a floorwalker in a department store but left after only a few years, first to work in Wanamakers in Philadelphia, and shortly afterward as a carpenter. In 1895 he moved again, this time to Washington where job opportunities were greater and wages slightly higher than in other parts of the country. Washington, somewhat insulated from economic swings by the presence of the federal government, had recovered more quickly from the nation-wide depression of 1893.

In Washington, Wardman went directly into the construction trade, purportedly laying floors at the new Willard Hotel. Diligent and ambitious, by 1899, he had become a builder in his own right. Three years later, at the age of only thirty, he was established as a row-house developer, a fitting occupation for a man born in a country where the row house is the dominant dwelling type.

Wardman's early row houses were built in existing neighborhoods: Georgetown, Downtown, and Brightwood. Within a few years, he was collaborating with capital-rich individuals such as financiers/developers E.F. Saul and patent attorney Harry Wilson. These partnerships enabled him to purchase large tracts of land outside the old city and to construct as many as 300 houses in a single project. With these projects, Wardman introduced residential mass production to Washington on a scale not previously known. His strategies for economical construction included using land efficiently, often fitting buildings onto oddly shaped lots; ordering parts, especially ornamental trim, from catalogues; owning a lumberyard; and, in many instances, building rows of identical houses.

Wardman bought and sold land at a frenzied pace, sometimes keeping property for only a day but always selling at a profit. According to the "Real Estate Market" report of *The Washington Post*, Wardman's transactions for the week of June 11, 1905 totaled \$300,000.

During the First World War, Wardman's residential construction diminished markedly but he recovered quickly after the war, building hundreds of "community houses"—that is, smaller rows, consisting of three, four, and sometimes five houses—in the 1920s in English Village, Fort Stevens Ridge, Kalamona, and Woodley Park. By 1925, Wardman claimed that his buildings housed ten percent of the city's population. If accurate, that would have amounted to 46,000 people. That same year, *The Buffalo Evening News* reported, "Harry Wardman, almost alone, has solved the housing problem in Washington after carrying the capital through the period of war expansion."

Although Wardman is best known for residential development, his oeuvre includes office buildings, banks, automobile showrooms, at least one hospital, the Capital Parking garage, and the British Embassy, which was built on land he donated to his native country. Overextended by the late 1920s, Wardman was bankrupt by the Crash of 1929. An incurable optimist, he declared, "I can quit but I don't want to. I still have five hundred lots and I'm going to build on them." And so he did until his death from cancer in 1938.

His unparalleled success can be attributed not only to hard work and efficient implementation of mass-production techniques, but also to uncanny real estate acumen, a high regard for quality of design and construction, considerate treatment of all his associates, and—of course—being in the right place at the right time.



Harry Wardman ca. 1906 (above)  
Courtesy: The Historical Society of Washington,  
Harry and Lillian Wardman Collection

Plot for 100-126 V Street, NW and 128-136 Rhode  
Island Avenue, NW, "Highview", 1911,  
Albert H. Beers, architect (right)  
Courtesy: National Archives, DC Building Permits



"We House One-Tenth of Washington's Population,"  
Advertisement from Boyd's Directory of the District of  
Columbia, 1925 (top)

Wardman Advertisement, ca. 1910 (above)  
Courtesy: Mesrobian Family Architectural Archives

## The Row House

The richest crop for any field  
Is a crop of bricks for it to yield.  
The richest crop that it can grow,  
Is a crop of houses in a row.

Anonymous English Jingle of the 1870s



"The Six Buildings", 1795, demolished 1970s, one of the city's earliest  
speculative rows (the seventh building was added in 1801) (above)  
Courtesy: The Historical Society of Washington DC

As commonly used, the term "row house" refers to all attached houses. For the purposes of this study, "row house" applies to groups of two or more attached houses that are identical, or nearly identical, in floor plan and have been mass produced for sale to the speculative market. While they are built for every segment of the speculative housing market, from small and simple to large and lavishly detailed, they are never custom designed for specific occupants. The row house is primarily an urban phenomenon; a response to the need to use land efficiently.

L'Enfant conceived of Washington as a compact city of row-house neighborhoods where people would live close to their place of employment. The nation's capital was, from its inception, a speculative venture and the most profitable speculative housing is the row house. Fortunately, the street "walls" created by row houses elegantly define L'Enfant's streets and vistas.

The earliest row houses were built in Southwest Washington near the Navy Yard, on Capitol Hill near the seat of government, and along Pennsylvania Avenue, NW—the route from the President's House to the Capitol. By the middle of the nineteenth century, row houses were present in every quadrant of the city, yet developers rarely built more than six or seven in a row. Not until after the Civil War did row-house construction approach the scale found in more populous East Coast cities. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were several Washington developers who built hundreds, and in a few instances even thousands of row houses, in the course of their careers. In the early twentieth century, entire row-house neighborhoods were built within the short period of a decade or less.

The row house is a reflection of the two industries upon which Washington's economy has historically been based: government and real estate. As the size of the federal government has grown, the need for middle-income housing has increased. As the need for housing has increased, the real estate industry has prospered. It is, therefore, possible to read Washington's economic history in the city's row-house-lined streets.

Harry Wardman, a name synonymous with residential real-estate development in Washington, had a dramatic impact on the constituent city during the first three decades of the twentieth century, a time of severe housing shortages. During that time, Wardman was responsible for constructing approximately 3,000 residential buildings, the vast majority of which were row houses.

The city's first serious housing shortage began during the Civil War when soldiers and those working in support services for the war effort flocked to the nation's capital. Single-family houses were subdivided into rooming houses. Hotels were crowded. And yet little residential construction occurred as material and manpower were directed toward the war.

A dramatic expansion in the federal government after the war, and the influx of people to the nation's capital seeking jobs in the new programs, served to exacerbate the housing shortage. In response, the streets of the L'Enfant-planned city quickly filled with rows of attached red brick houses. By the end of the nineteenth century, little vacant land remained in the original city. In order to construct much-needed government buildings, residential buildings in the downtown core were demolished. New housing construction was pushed to the city's periphery, primarily north of Florida Avenue (then Boundary Street), where large estates were sub-divided into housing tracts.



Wardman Buildings in Bloomingdale, Brightwood, and Columbia Heights, from DC Building Permits Database, Brian Kraft, compiler  
(Row houses — orange, Community houses — pink, Apartment buildings — yellow, Street railway lines — gold) (above)

Extension of the trolley-car lines outside the old city prompted this movement. In many instances, developers either owned the trolley companies or were successful in influencing the location of routes. Bloomingdale, Columbia Heights, and Brightwood are just three of many neighborhoods that developed along trolley-car lines to accommodate the growing ranks of middle-income government workers.

With the onset of the First World War, Washington experienced yet another influx of population and another housing crisis. This time, however, housing construction occurred not only along streetcar lines but also along automobile routes. Wardman's Fort Stevens Ridge was among the first of the city's suburbs to offer houses for the middle-income speculative market that included garages.

Today, in the twenty-first century, Washington is again experiencing a housing shortage as people recognize the desirability of urban living. Houses in Bloomingdale, Columbia Heights, and Brightwood/Fort Stevens Ridge are being bought, renovated, and occupied at a rapid pace, a process that bodes well for their preservation for another 100 years.

## Nicholas R. Grimm



48-52 Seaton Street, NW, 1904,  
Nicholas R. Grimm, architect (top)  
1758 13th Street, NE, 1903,  
Nicholas R. Grimm, architect (right)



Nicholas R. Grimm, Wardman's first architect, was born in Kentucky in 1863 and by the age of twenty-five was working as a draftsman for Washington's public-school system. His relationship with Wardman began a decade later when the Japanese Legation hired Grimm to design and Wardman to build a stable at 1310 N St. NW. By that time, Grimm was an experienced architect, having designed about a dozen freestanding houses and as many row houses. A year later, in 1899, Wardman hired him to design two modest frame Queen Anne Revival houses at Ninth and Langfellow Streets, NW.

The relationship between Wardman and Grimm proved to be fruitful and profitable. During its six years, Grimm designed almost 200 single-family row houses, 150 row-house flats, and ten apartment buildings for Wardman; all the while designing just as many of the same housing types for other developers. After their partnership ended abruptly in 1905, they both continued to be prolific contributors to Washington's built environment for more than a quarter of a century. During a career that spanned approximately six decades, Grimm designed 1,266 buildings, the vast majority of which were residential. His last recorded building, however, was a post office at 17 Florida Avenue, NE built in 1930.

## Albert H. Beers



Wardman House, 2640 Woodley Road, NW, 1909 (demolished 1928), Albert H. Beers, architect (top)  
Courtesy: Jerry A. McCoy Collection, Willard R. Ross Real-Photo Postcards

The Dresden Apartment House, 2126 Connecticut Avenue, NW, 1909, Albert H. Beers, architect (middle)  
2318-2334 Nineteenth Street, NW, 1910, Albert H. Beers, architect (bottom)

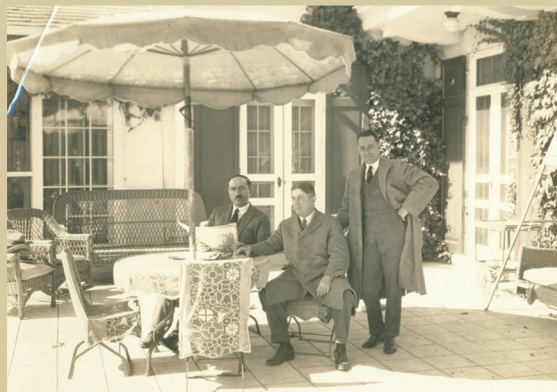
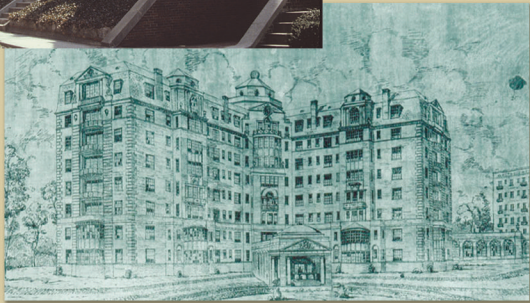
Albert H. Beers (1869-1911) practiced architecture in his native city of Bridgeport, Connecticut for several years before moving to Washington in 1903. His relationship with Wardman began two years later with the construction of a row of houses in the 1400 block of Ninth Street, NW, now demolished. For many years his office was at 1342 New York Avenue, NW, the same building in which Wardman's office was located.

Beers was Wardman's main architect from 1905 until 1911, but the year 1909 was an especially significant one for their partnership. That year, Beers designed the Northumberland at New Hampshire Avenue and Sixteenth Streets, NW, still one of the city's most luxurious apartment houses; and, a landmark building at each end of the newly completed Taft Bridge over Rock Creek Park. The Dresden Apartment House rises at the southern end of the bridge, while Wardman's own home stood at the northern end, on a knoll at the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and Woodley Road, until its demolition in 1928.

Beers designed approximately 1,000 dwellings for Wardman. Amazingly, this represents only about half of Beers' work during this period. He was employed by nearly a dozen other developers, most notably the Zepp Brothers and Harry Kite, for a total output of 2,412 buildings. This versatile architect designed dwellings of every type, size, and for all socio-economic groups. Most important for this study, while collaborating with Wardman, Beers may have been responsible for introducing the front-porch row house to Washington, a type that remained the prevailing single-family residence in Washington for the next three decades.

When, in 1911, Beers died suddenly of pneumonia at the age of fifty-four, Wardman claimed that Beers had "drawn more plans for houses than any other man in Washington."

## Mihran Mesrobian



2422-2432 Tracy Place, NW, 1922, Mihran Mesrobian, architect (top)  
Elevation for the Wardman Park Annex, 1928, Mihran Mesrobian, architect (middle)  
Mihran Mesrobian (seated left), Harry Wardman (seated center), and an Unidentified Colleague, ca. 1925 (bottom)  
Courtesy: Mesrobian Family Architectural Archives

Mihran Mesrobian (1889-1975), a Turkish-born Armenian, graduated from the École Impériale des Beaux Arts in Constantinople in 1908. He worked as a municipal architect in Smyrna from 1909-1912, designing apartment buildings, then as an architect to the sultan in Constantinople and, in that capacity, helped restore thirty palaces, including the famed Dolmabahçe. He was drafted into the Turkish army during World War I and served as an army corps engineer under Mustafa Kemal Paşa Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Mesrobian continued designing apartment buildings after the war, but in the face of renewed hostilities between the Turks and the Armenians, immigrated to America in 1921. He went directly into Wardman's office where Eugene Woggaman was chief architect at the time, assuming that position only five years later.

While in Wardman's office, Mesrobian designed hundreds of semi-detached and community houses in Fort Stevens Ridge, English Village, Woodley Park, and Kalamona; at least three hotels, the elegant Carlton and Hay-Adams, as well as the Wardman Park Annex, which was built on the site of Wardman's house; and several apartment buildings including a section of Cathedral Mansions.

Although Mesrobian left Wardman's office after the developer declared bankruptcy in 1929, he continued to design for Wardman until the developer's death in 1938. Mesrobian continued a productive career, working for several other developers and designing, among scores of buildings, the Dupont Circle Building, Sedgwick Garden Apartments, and many garden apartment complexes in Northern Virginia.

## Acknowledgements

### CURATORS

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The exhibit is part of a larger project "WARDMAN'S WASHINGTON," which looks at the growth of the nation's capital from the perspective of a single developer's achievements. All contemporary photographs are by the curators.

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