

WARDMAN's WASHINGTON

Celebrating a Century of Wardman Row-House Neighborhoods

BRIGHTWOOD – FORT STEVENS RIDGE



Wardman's Buildings in Brightwood/Fort Stevens Ridge, DC Building Permits Database, Brian Kraft, compiler (above)
The name Brightwood once signified an expansive area of upper northwest Washington, including Brightwood Park, Shepherd Park, and part of Potomac.

Harry Wardman's career began and ended in Brightwood, a neighborhood shaped more by him than any other developer. Much of Brightwood was still forest and farmland when Wardman began building in this upper-northwest area of Washington at the turn of the century. Only a few subdivisions had been platted, most along Seventh Street Road (now Georgia Avenue), a long-established artery that connected Washington City with the District line. Forty years later, at the end of Wardman's career, Brightwood had been transformed into a fully developed suburb of Washington. Wardman's first houses, begun in early 1899, were detached, Queen Anne cottages at Longfellow and Ninth Streets.

The semi-detached, brick dwellings at Seventh and Quackenbos Streets, part of the 700-house Fort Stevens Ridge complex that he began developing in 1924, were among the last buildings he constructed before his death in 1938. Today, Wardman's mark on Brightwood is evident not only in the sheer number of dwellings that he constructed — with their varying house types, architectural styles, interior plans, and decorative details — but also in the creation of "minor" streets like Roxboro, Somerset, Tewksbury, and Seventh Place, whose intimate scale provides a heightened sense of community. Originally built as a covenanted neighborhood, Fort Stevens Ridge is now home to a diverse ethnic and cultural mix of residents.

Fort Stevens Ridge

WARDMAN TO BUILD 1,000 NEW HOUSES

Effort Is in Fulfillment of Promise at Rent Act Hearings.

Harry Wardman announced yesterday that 2,000 dwellings will be erected on the Fort Stevens site, recently acquired by him. This property, located east of Georgia Avenue, is bounded by Fifth Street, Longfellow Street, Cedarwood Street, and Seventh and Eighth Streets on the northwest end. Brightwood Street runs through the center of the property.



Realtor Real Estate Map, 1925 (left)
Courtesy: The Historical Society of Washington, DC

Wardman and his long-time business partner Thomas P. Bones purchased the fifty-acre tract of land bounded by Underwood and Quackenbos Streets on the north and south, and Fifth and Ninth Streets on the east and west, from the Fort Stevens Terrace Company, Inc. in 1924. The real estate map shows that Wardman began construction of "Fort Stevens Ridge" — named for the celebrated Civil War fort at Thirteenth and Quackenbos Street — shortly after he purchased the land. Wardman developed Square 3199 first, possibly because Rittenhouse Street was a major thoroughfare and divided the property in half.

"Wardman to Build 1,000 New Houses," The Washington Post, March 7, 1924 (far left)

In 1920 Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover challenged Washington's real estate developers to build more moderately priced housing to alleviate the post-World War I housing shortage. Wardman seized the opportunity, telling a U.S. House committee looking into the rent situation that he would build 1,000 houses if he could be financed. He first proposed building community houses, which were three attached houses designed to give the appearance of one. The Zoning Commission held a public hearing to consider permitting the construction of community houses in A-restricted areas, which allowed only detached or semi-detached dwellings. According to newspaper accounts, residents of Manor Park objected to Wardman's plans, protesting that the community houses were merely row houses broken into smaller groups. Wardman countered that community houses could solve the housing problem for people with limited means, and that they could be "designed in such a way as to produce a desirable effect." Wardman, however, was forced to build semi-detached houses.

2 Somerset Place

One Outstanding Feature

\$350 Cash
\$55 Monthly

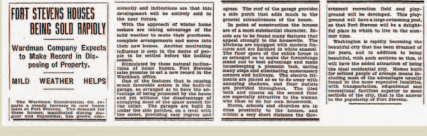
"One Outstanding Feature," The Washington Star, April 7, 1926 (above)

619-617 Somerset Place, NW, 1927, Milnes Mesrobian, architect (right)

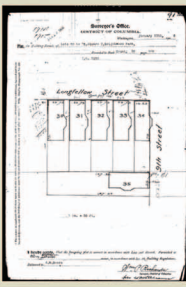
"Fort Stevens Houses Being Sold Rapidly," The Washington Post, November 13, 1927 (right below)

The high, semi-detached houses on the 600 block of Somerset Street (north side) illustrate an innovative plan that located built-in, street-level garages under the porches, thereby freeing the basement for other use. The garages are attached at the houses' front corners and link the entire block. Over the years, residents have converted the garage doors to windows or pedestrian doors, countering Wardman's claim that the placement of the windows provided easy egress and access from the street.

Wardman's ads targeted the homeowners by highlighting the houses' modern features, easy housekeeping, and well-placed electric fixtures. He also publicized the recreational facilities that were being constructed on the adjacent government reservation, amenities that Wardman rarely provided for his development. Easy access to public transportation, schools, shopping, churches, and parks made the community a most desirable place for "refined people of average means."



1 Longfellow Street



900-908 Longfellow Street, NW, 1906, Albert H. Beers, architect (above left)
Detail, Longfellow Street, NW (inset)

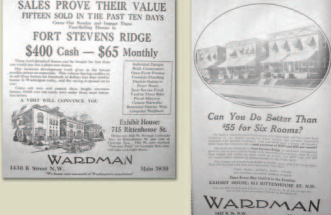
Plot Plan for Houses at Longfellow and Ninth Streets, NW, 1906, Albert H. Beers, architect (above right)

Typical Front Elevation, 5401-15 Eighth Street, NW, 1905, Nicholas R. Grimm, architect (left)
Courtesy: National Archives, DC Building Permits

The row of freestanding, wood-frame houses at the southeast corner of Longfellow and Ninth Streets are typical of the houses that Wardman built in Brightwood from 1899-1900 and are precursors of his later, attached row-house blocks. These single-family, suburban cottages are clustered close together on narrow lots and have bay windows, third-story dormer windows, and wrap decoration. Wardman's architects gave visual interest to the facades of these near-identical houses, which were mass-produced with items that could be ordered from building catalogues, by varying gable fronts with dormer windows. Although the plot plan does not indicate front porches, the building permits show that the porches are original to the houses and that Wardman obtained variances for them after he began construction. Corner lots often featured wrap-around porches and more elaborate decoration.

Wardman's first houses that he constructed as owner/developer are still extant. 901 and 903 Longfellow Street, begun in early 1899, are directly across the street from the Longfellow Street houses pictured here. The young entrepreneur probably financed these houses by constructing the nearby houses at 5522 and 5524 Ninth Street for Edward and Harry McKeer. Begun in the early spring of 1899, the McKeer houses were demolished in early 2005.

3 Rittenhouse Street



"Sales Prove Their Value" Advertisement, The Washington Star, February 6, 1926 (above)

"Can You Do Better Than \$55 for Six Rooms?" Advertisement, The Washington Star, July 7, 1927 (above right)

Wardman placed numerous advertisements in The Evening Star and The Washington Post in an effort to try to sell the homes quickly. Ads focused on the houses' many modern amenities, the low price, and the savings that Wardman could pass along to the buyer by building in mass production. Turning the Zoning Commission's refusal to let him build row houses to his advantage, Wardman boasted, "These semi-detached houses can be bought for less than you would pay for a plain row house." Wardman had his own planning mill and woodworking company, which also cut costs. Years later Wardman's business associate Thomas Bones recalled that the developer did not like being regulated and purposefully limited the design of those early houses on Rittenhouse Street and Roxboro Place. "The first ones were singularly unattractive but solidly constructed. The price was low...."

A 1924 rendering by architect Milnes Mesrobian skillfully depicts the semi-detached dwellings as elegant town houses, with classically inspired pediments, Palladian windows, and open English front porches with wrought-iron railings. While the houses in Square 3199 were built according to the drawing, subsequent ones were built with covered porches as depicted in the July 7, 1927 ad.

5 Seventh Place



Floor plan for Seventh Place houses, March/April, 1934, Milnes Mesrobian, architect (above left and right)

Detail, Preliminary Drawing for Houses at Seventh Place between Quackenbos and Rittenhouse Streets, NW, March/April 1934, Milnes Mesrobian, architect (left bottom)

Rose O. Jackson (left) and Mildred H. Thompson, 6109 Seventh Place, NW (left top)

The semi-detached houses on the 6100 block of Seventh Place (west side) are typical of houses that Mesrobian designed during the 1930s. A comparison of a preliminary elevation and the houses as built shows design changes, such as the omission of the lunettes in the dormers and the east panel decoration, perhaps cost-cutting decisions. The floor plans are commodious and show a side entrance hall on the first floor and three bedrooms with sleeping porch on the second floor.

Seventh Place's intimate scale factors neighborliness and easy communication. Long-time friends and dedicated community activists Mildred Thompson and Rose Jackson have enjoyed their Seventh Place homes for fifty years. Mrs. Thompson was one of the first African-Americans to purchase a house in the Fort Stevens Ridge neighborhood, in 1955. Having grown up just south of the development, at Delafield and Fourteenth Streets, she remembers the Fort Stevens Ridge area when it was forest.

4 13th & Madison Streets

Elevation and Plan for Four Houses to be Built at the Southeast Corner of Madison and Thirteenth Streets, June 10, 1934, Milnes Mesrobian, architect (below)

Courtesy: The Mesrobian Family Architectural Archives

5622-5628 Thirteenth Street, NW, 1934, Milnes Mesrobian, architect (right)

Detail Showing East Side Chimney Arrangement (inset)

The Zoning Commission relaxed its restrictions against row-house construction in the Brightwood area during the Depression years permitting Wardman to build, in 1931-32, a block of row houses on Fourth Street between Ingraham and Jefferson, as well as a group of community houses on Rittenhouse, Sheridan and Fourteenth Streets during 1932 to 1932. These community houses are modest versions of ones that Mesrobian designed for Wardman's English Village and Woodley Park developments a decade earlier.

Wardman's buildings were more substantial in plan, design, and detail on prominent thoroughfares like Thirteenth Street than on side streets like Seventh Place. Their wider floor plan allowed more spacious rooms and an additional bath on the second floor, as compared to the Seventh Place houses. The most distinctive features of the Thirteenth Street houses are the boldly articulated chimneys that at one define and unify the four front facades.



Advertisement for Fort Stevens Ridge, The Washington Post, March 15, 1925 (right)

During the late 1920s, ads for Fort Stevens Ridge featured comics-style characters that emphasized the advantages of home ownership. As the Crash of 1929 loomed ever closer, the fashionable flapper girl joined the conservatively dressed "school marm," who acted as wise advice-giver to the potential homebuyer. Wardman's pace of construction decreased dramatically in 1929, the year he declared bankruptcy. Wardman Construction Company regrouped during the Depression, operating as Federal Construction Company and D.C. Developing Company. Nonetheless, Wardman slowly developed the remaining parcels in Fort Stevens Ridge during the 1930s while continuing to build modest row and single-family houses as well as small apartments in other areas of the city.

