

Scenes from the Past...



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division
Pre-World War II aerial view shows that the Wardman Park Hotel was a busy place during the daytime hours.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and photographs Division
The Washington cat show was one of many such events held at the Wardman Park Hotel throughout the 1920s. Seen here are Edna B. Doughty and Louise Grogan with their extravagant Persian cats.



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Kurt Smith, general manager of the Sheraton Park Hotel, takes control of the hotel's miniature locomotive for its first trip around the grounds. A full load of guests boarded the train for a ride around the hotel's 16-acre property when this picture was taken for the July 9, 1956 edition of *The Washington Star*.

The evolution and history of the Wardman Park Hotel and Towers, which today does business as the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel and Conference Center (located at Connecticut Avenue and Woodley Road in Woodley Park) is obviously quite complex. One common element, however, that surfaces during research of the complex is the dozens of campy pictures of activities held on its property throughout its glorious history, some of which are seen here.

Prolific developer Harry Wardman constructed the 1,200 room, spoke-shaped Wardman Hotel, beginning in 1916, despite many local critics that said its location was not suitable for a hotel and promptly coined it "Wardman's Folly." It was designed by Frank Russell White, and modeled after the Homestead Resort in West Virginia, Wardman's favorite resort at which he enjoyed many rounds of golf.

The hotel was constructed facing Woodley Road on Wardman's vast property just west of his own mansion, built in 1909 at a cost of \$60,000, located at the Connecticut Avenue corner. Wardman's mansion featured a green clay tile roof, an interior entirely composed of mahogany, and an enormous ballroom that was the scene of many festivities.

A decade later, in 1928, while Mrs. Wardman was away in Paris supervising the education of their daughter Helen, Harry Wardman gathered his servants to work for 48 hours straight to remove all of their mansion's furnishings so that it could be promptly razed and shortly thereafter replaced with the Wardman Tower apartment building that would be connected to the hotel complex. In 1979, the large, main hotel building was demolished and a new hotel building constructed. The former apartment towers being the only building remaining



photo—MLK Library, Washingtoniana Division
Miss Joan Vermett, a 20-year-old Miss Washington Contestant from Arlington, Virginia, and her companion Miss Ray Heath, enjoy the pool at the Wardman Park Hotel on their lunch hour in the 1960s. They were photographed floating in the middle of the pool on an innovative "floating verandah" made of a newly developed product called "Styrofoam," manufactured by the Dow Chemical Company.

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today of the original structures, is now part of the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel complex.

Throughout its history the 1928 Wardman Tower building has been the home to nationally known figures, including U.S. Presidents Hoover, Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson; Vice Presidents Charles Curtis, Henry Wallace and Spiro Agnew; Chief Justices Frederick M. Vinson and Earl Warren; Senators Charles Robb, Barry Goldwater and Robert Dole.

Other famous residents also called the Tower home, including Hollywood legend Marlene Dietrich and Perle Mesta, who elevated dinner parties from mere social gatherings to lavish soireés that were the place to be seen and mingle with other movers and shakers. Washington's elite preferred this building because of its excellent hotel service in combination with its spacious apartments.

Before the United States entry into World War II, espionage and intrigue enveloped the historic hotel with a beguiling British spy named Cynthia, who operated out of the premises as she spied on the French Vichy Embassy. Cloaked in the darkness of night, she would visit her lover, an embassy employee whom she had compromised, and steal top-secret documents, transporting them back to the hotel and photographing them in a lab she had set up in her room.

In 1947, the first televised broadcast of "Meet the Press" took place in the Wardman Tower, where it continued to be televised for decades. Its moderator, Lawrence Spivak, was a Tower resident. In the early days of television, NBC television and other networks broadcast many programs from the hotel, including "The Camel News Caravan," "The Today Show" (Frank Blair segments), and the "The Arthur Murray Dance Program."

In the late 1940s, the hotel pool was utilized by the 5th Marine Reserves who were taught how to swim with their clothes on. The Sheraton Corporation purchased the hotel and apartment property in 1953 and renamed it the Sheraton Park Hotel. Three years later, it offered miniature train rides to guests attempting to navigate the extensive grounds.

Since its opening, the facilities have been used for 11 presidential inaugural balls, with the notable exception of Gerald Ford who, upon becoming president after Nixon's resignation, chose not to celebrate the somber occasion. Nixon actually used the Wardman Tower during his first, unsuccessful bid for presidency against Kennedy, and in a peculiar coincidence, jurors for the Watergate trial were later housed in the Tower.

Images of Army Special Forces soldiers repelling down the side of the Sheraton Park Hotel have also been located, taken during a training exercise on October 3, 1962, about the same time two, 20-year-old beauty contestants demonstrated an innovative floating cocktail table in the hotel's swimming pool. And, seven years later, on October 13, 1969, a photographer captured an image of Cold War-era Pershing missiles on display in front of the hotel.

A public sale of the Sheraton Park Hotel furnishings took place in June of 1979, preceding the demolition of the original building, and just a year later the Sheraton Washington Hotel opened the new building with its extensive convention and exhibition facilities. More recently, Marriott International took over management of the property, renaming it the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. As Washington's preeminent convention hotel, the 1,338-room hotel is the Washington area's largest and the eighth-largest in the United States.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC



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This June 8, 1948 pool scene shows Floren Harper with several "suitsors" during a publicity stunt shortly after the end of World War II.

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