

# Scenes from the Past...



vintage photo—George M. Kober, *The History and Development of the Housing Movement in the City of Washington, 1927*; courtesy, Kelsey & Associates private collection.

This image of “insanitary shacks with box and barrel privies” was taken at an undisclosed location, but just “six blocks from Dupont Circle” in 1902.

Few of today’s residents of Northwest DC may realize that less than 100 years ago the area was still plagued with myriad slums, dilapidated wooden housing, and outdoor privies. The wooden house with the precarious stairway illustrated here was photographed in 1902, at a location “just six blocks from Dupont Circle.” It was left atop a cut mound of land following the massive street leveling undertaken as part of Alexander (“Boss”) Shepherd’s civic improvements in the 1870s, vulnerable to serious erosion.

The city government had mapped the number of outside privies a few years before, in 1894, to help determine the possible cause of various diseases infecting the population. As the map shows, up to 26 outdoor privies were located on each square, which must have been nearly intolerable in the hot, humid summer months with windows routinely left open day and night. A group of prominent citizens met in 1897 to form the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company to address the situation and to provide housing for some of the residents of 191 dwellings located in 35 Dupont Circle alleys. It was to operate much the same as a low-income housing Community Development Corporation does today, such as MANNA, Inc. Interestingly, the general incorporation law in the city at the time did not allow such an entity, and the organization was formed under the laws of Virginia.

The Sanitary Improvement Company immediately set out to purchase land, and did so along the 100-300 blocks of Bates Street, NW. It was then a vacant, two-block street, surrounded North Capitol, 3rd, P and Q Streets. Nine lots were purchased on May 28, 1897 from Oscar M. Bryant for a total cost of \$5,362.25, or 45-cents per square foot! General George M. Sternberg, a member of the company’s board of directors, drew up plans for the first nine houses “in which no detail was omitted which would tend to provide the best accommodations from the standpoint of hygiene.” (George Kober, *The History and Development of the Housing Movement in the City of Washington, 1927*.) The first nine houses were erected at a total cost of \$14,967.50.

Over the next five years, the entire two-block section of Bates Street was purchased, and matching houses were constructed to Sternberg’s specifications, as seen in the image photographed shortly after the street’s completion in 1902. Each house was 17 and-a-half feet wide, and concealed the fact that it contained two flats, one per floor. Each flat was self-contained, and featured a

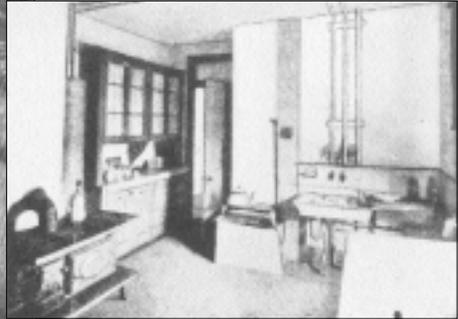


map—courtesy, Kelsey & Associates private collection.

The reproduced portion of an 1894 map of squares surrounding Dupont and Logan Circles shows, in large numerals, the total number of outside privies or outhouses that were located in each square (denoted by three-digit). The total number ranged from one to 26 outhouses per block!

separate entrance at both the front and rear. Kitchens were equipped with a boiler and a wood-burning range, and each flat featured an indoor bathroom and three closets. They were occupied by both white and black tenants.

Incredibly, the first eight homes were completed and



vintage photo—Kober, *The History and Development . . .*; courtesy, Kelsey & Associates private collection.  
This rare image of one of the kitchen’s in a 3 room flat along Bates Street was used as an example of modern living when publicized in 1901. Note the wood burning stove at left.



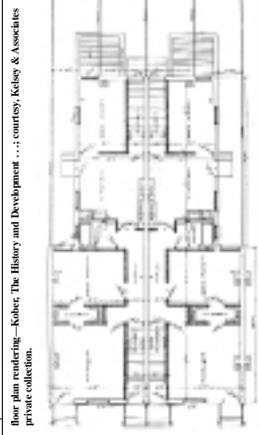
photo—Paul K. Williams (April 2002)—*The InTowner*.

While some of the homes on Bates Street today have been converted into single family homes, as shown above, most of the dwellings still feature separate flats on each floor with their own entrance onto the street.

This plan, at left, of two, ground floor units for the double flat houses along Bates Street was considered luxury living by those who would rent the flat for \$16.00 to \$19.00 per month upon their completion in 1901.

the landlord is willing to share profits. Quite a number of . . . tenants have used their rebate

Cont., SCENES, p. 13



floor plan rendering—Kober, *The History and Development . . .*; courtesy, Kelsey & Associates private collection.



vintage photo—Kober, *The History and Development . . .*; courtesy, Kelsey & Associates private collection.  
View of Bates Street, NW as seen shortly after the block was completed in 1901.

# PURSGLOVES ON FOOD & DRINK

By Ruth and David Pursglove

## DINING ON THE POTOMACK IS OVERALL SPLENDID

Among the many problems with dining in the Washington area is the scarcity of truly good restaurants with a view. The late and sorely lamented Windows in Rosslyn was fine but pricey. The view was great, especially on July 4th during the fireworks.

The Marriott at the Virginia end of Key Bridge is at least okay for dining and fine for drinks, with spectacular views down the Potomac and up into the Potomac gorge. Kennedy Center Terrace rooftop is a bit pricey but the food, if you are careful to order that which kitchens are hard-pressed to mishandle, is not nearly so unappealing as some snobs declare.

But our two favorites are (1) La Tomate, looking from ground level onto the bustling, cosmopolitan Dupont Circle scene of Connecticut Avenue, and (2) Potomack Landing at the Washington Sailing Marina south of National Airport.

Potomack Landing, mentioned here several times, features excellent decor and atmosphere—abetted in part by architecture that capitalizes on the view—and perhaps the best crab cakes in an area known for crab cakes.

The seafood dishes are excellent, as they would have to be in a waterside location. But the other fare is equally fine, accompanied by a good and reasonably priced wine list.

We first were at Potomack Landing early one evening for drinks at a handsome, well-stocked bar. We returned a few weeks later for mid evening dinner in one of the attractive dining rooms. At 8 p.m. there was a short but growing line to get in without reservations. (Reservations are accepted.) We were there to try the highly-reputed crab cakes. Little wonder they are the best-selling item. Pure lump crab with just enough Chinese bread crumbs to give them a toasty edge.

Here's a restaurant that has made its considerable reputation on one item. But it doesn't allow it to be destroyed by a let-down on other items. Of course, the theme is seafood (sailing marina location), but even the steaks and lamb chops were well-turned out.

A while back we kept several small sailboats at the marina, and spent too much time there. When hunger struck, we and

all others, went to the snack bar/lounge/restaurant with its seemingly dirty floors and definitely dirty French-fried aromas. Usually it was a hotdog and yellow mustard and a plastic glass of watery bad beer. For celebrations of victory in a race, we would select the gourmet offering: chili topping on the hotdog. It has come a long, incredible way.

Guest Services, Inc. headquartered in Fairfax now has the management contract to operate the marina and the restaurant which has been totally rebuilt from the ground up along spiffy lines and renamed Potomack Landing, and boasts a huge dining area divided into manageable dining rooms. It features a handsome bar stocked with the best viands.

All dining rooms and bars offer views across the marina cove, the Potomac River and the airport. And all areas—dining rooms, function room, bar—are repeated outdoors.

At the Fairfax headquarters of GSI a team headed by a corporate chef creates recipes and designs menus for use in the some 200 sites GSI owns or operates for governments and corporations. Then—and here's challenging but fun part—the team devises local variations to meet the culture and demands for sites as diverse as center-city art gallery dining and rustic mountain lodge dining. (Such as the buffalo meatballs accompanied by a bourbon sauce originally created for the firm's dining rooms at Mount Rainier, Washington, and now served also at their Canaan Valley Resort in West Virginia.)

That art gallery dining? Guest Services, Inc. provides upscale, full-service dining at many art galleries and museums. One close to readers of this newspaper is Café des Artistes at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Potomack Landing has its own skilled in-house chef who adapts those menus to local tastes and available foodstuffs.

Two popular happenings are the \$26.95 Sunday brunch with jazz, from 10:30 to 2:30. And, the mid-afternoon specials served between lunch and dinner: generous portions of interesting, well-prepared, snacks and tidbits at \$1.95, including Caesar Salad, or six generous Buffalo Wings with bleu cheese, celery sticks and carrot sticks or a half-pound Angus Burger with fries or bowl of chili with onions,

Cont., PURSEGLOVE, p. 15

## SCENES

From p. 12

for interior wall decorations, and the company has authorized the purchase of picture rods for all the sitting rooms" (Kober).

The Sanitary Housing Improvement Company went on to build 68 homes at the corner of Q, 3rd, and P Streets, as well as several five-room apartments along Bates Street over the next three decades. On April 22, 1924, the company built seven houses along Bates Street containing four- and five-room apartments for a total cost of \$46,224, or approximately \$6,800 each.

Until 1924, none of the houses along Bates Street had electricity, but were heated by fireplaces and the kitchen stove and lit by gas. A number of tenants had expressed a willingness to pay a slightly higher rent in exchange for the installation of electricity, and the following year, the

company contracted for this improvement at a total cost of \$17,755 for all 368 flats and one, eight-room house!

Individual homes were eventually sold to tenants, and by the 1950s, an Italian immigrant population dominated Bates Street, according to a homeowner on the street today, named Mary, who used to live around the corner as a teenager at the time. Some of the former, two-flat homes have been converted into single-family homes, while the majority remain two apartments owned by one of the occupants. While the shutters are long gone, the street widened, and the wooden bay windows covered with siding, the street remains a charming and desirable place to live, with a past as affordable rental housing that will likely surprise even a long-time resident of the neighborhood.

—Paul Kelsey Williams  
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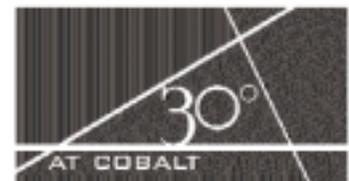
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