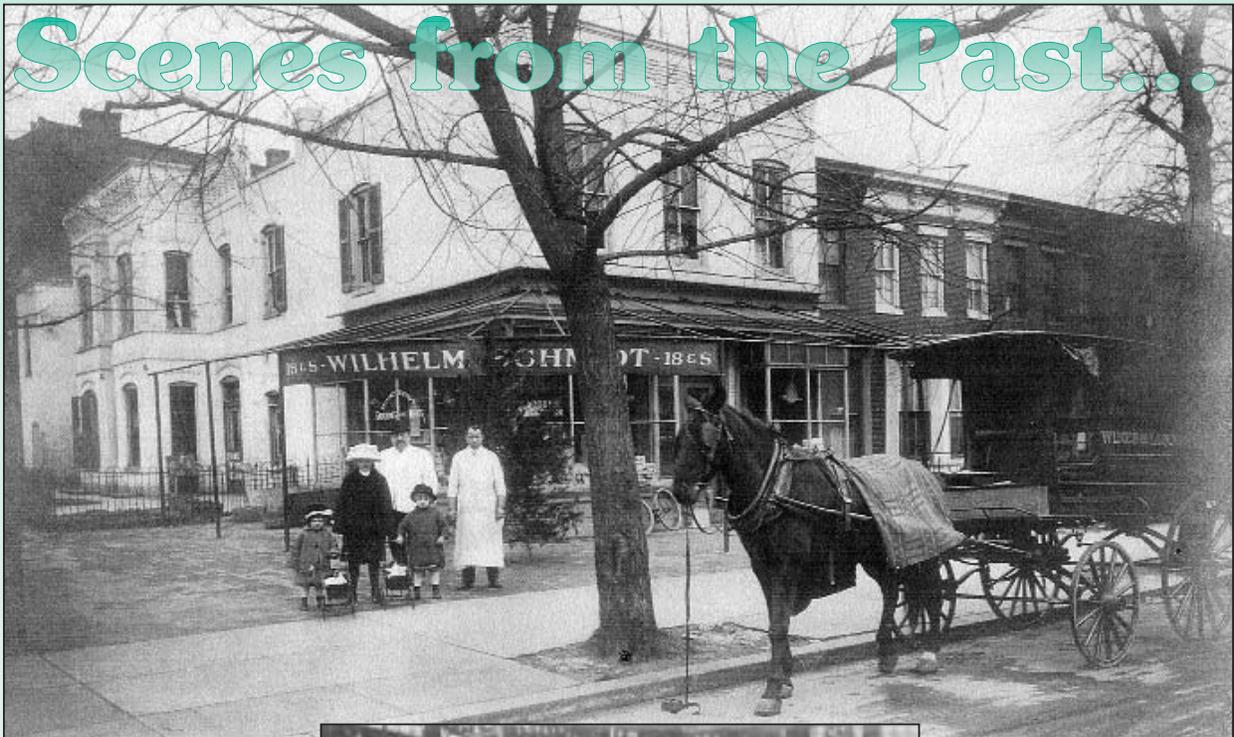


Scenes from the Past...



Like many buildings and houses in the District of Columbia, the well-known building on the northeast corner of 18th and S Streets was not built as the result of one particular building permit, but rather evolved over time from a modest house with a series of additions and alterations. It served for many years as the original location of the famed Lauriol Plaza, a Mexican restaurant now located a block north, in a new building at 18th and T Streets.

Interestingly, the original configuration of the corner building was that of a brick front townhouse, matching those located between 1743 and 1753 S Street today. They were all built simultaneously sometime before 1874, the year they were valued at \$3,000 each, a substantial sum for the time. They are situated well behind the building line, providing deep front yards. The two end houses, 1759-1761 S Street, at 18th Street, were later added onto at both the front and rear to form a grocery store, and later a restaurant; they also later had a dual address of 1801-1805 18 Street when their orientation was changed to face west. An adjoining building at 1807 18th Street was built by Susan Fletcher in 1889, the same year three rear wood frame kitchens were added to the corner buildings.

Nearby, the house at 1739 S Street was built beginning in October of 1892 for well-known architect Nicholas T. Haller to his own designs.

Susan Fletcher was the owner of record of the corner building in September of 1900 when Wilhelm Schmidt applied for a permit to construct three large show windows on the corner, one measuring over 22 feet long, all at a cost of \$600. A grocer, Schmidt would operate a business at the location for about 30 years, which also carried the finest array of wines and liquors, delivered by a horse-drawn wagon, seen in the image above.

A separate dwelling on the site built in 1889 was the subject of a complaint by a Mrs. M.C. O'Brian of 1912 13th Street years later. In a letter dated July 29, 1908,



photo—courtesy, Chris Hinkel—family private collection.
When he wasn't running the grocery business at 18th and S Streets, Wilhelm Schmidt was driving in his 1910 Franklin, seen at right at the German Orphan's Home 1925 annual picnic in Upper Marlboro.



she claimed that the dwelling built behind 1807 18th Street had been recently utilized as a stable, which she found "very objectionable." The building inspector noted in his reply that the owner was to apply for a stable permit or face "prosecution if necessary."

Wilhelm Schmidt is pictured about 1908 inside his store in the liquor room. Signs on the wall indicate that no one under the age of 21 was allowed in the room, and on the floor one can see stacks of "Old Possum Hollow" whiskey. Schmidt ran a successful business at the site for nearly three decades, and when he died in 1935, he left an estate worth an estimated \$400,000, an impressive sum not long after the Depression was coming to a close.

photos—courtesy, Chris Hinkel—family private collection.
The building at the northeast corner of 18th and S Streets was originally built as a rowhouse in the early 1870s. By the turn of the 20th century, however, it was home to Schmidt Grocery Store, seen above about 1920 with its delivery wagon out front.

Grocer Wilhelm Schmidt is seen at left about 1918 inside his store's "liquor room" discussing a customer's order with an employee.

store indicated that Wilhelm Schmidt lived above his business, typical at the time. He resided there along with his wife Johanna and five daughters ranging in age from 4 to 22. Wilhelm had been born in 1872 in Germany and had emigrated to the U.S. in 1888, according to the census taker. His wife Joanna had been born in 1875 also in Germany, and emigrated in 1893. They both became U.S. citizens in 1896. By 1930, the City Directory indicates that Wilhelm and Joanna had moved into a house at 4225 17th Street in the Crestwood neighborhood.

The 1700 block of S Street also witnessed a considerable chain of events beginning in 1921, when John Buckley of 1719 S Street sued to prevent his neighbor, white homeowner Irene Hand Corrigan, from selling her house at 1727 S Street to Helen Curtis, the wife of prominent black ophthalmologist Arthur Curtis. The dispute made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1926, and it opened the way for nearly three more decades of enforcement of race-restrictive covenants. The legality of covenants upheld, however, did not prevent several elite African-Americans from eventually owning homes along the block a short time later. They included such notable individuals as attorney William Houston, who resided at 1744 S Street beginning in 1925. Ironically, his son Charles became the dean of the Howard University Law School and played an important role in a 1948 Supreme Court case in which the race restrictive covenant would be finally ruled unenforceable. His M Street High School classmate, George Hayes, also

Always conscientious community members, the Schmidts set up a food stand for the rescue workers aiding the victims of the Knickerbocker Theatre disaster in January of 1922. [Ed. Note: This seminal event in the city's history was featured in this space in the November, 2002 issue, and is available in the back issues archive of our website, www.intowner.com.]

The 1920 census taken at the corner

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RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

ROSA MEXICANO ¡Viva Rosa!

Setting aside the question, “Is it for real?,” you have got to admit that Rosa Mexicano in MCI Land is about as lively a DC scene as you’ll find. Doubt it? Just try to find a seat, any seat, when mealtimes are in full swing. Unless you have a reservation. And good luck getting one.

With a chip on my shoulder—just who is this Mexicano interloper?—I stopped in very, very early on a Saturday evening, beating out the dinner crowds by at least an hour. Brilliant, even garish, neon-bright colors wash over everything, setting the stage for what must seem like a Hollywood production. Wheeled carts are at the ready, poised for use in the Great Guacamole Extravaganza. Waiters in blue tops huddle, talk, carry trays, pour water. A faux waterfall trickles down the rear, lapis-blue tiled wall, which is aflutter with pink butterflies. And the menu—it reads a little like pages ripped from my very old, well-used Diana Kennedy Mexican cookbook.

Indeed, if you are primed to face the typical list of Tex-Mex dishes—from fajitas to bulging burritos—you are in for a shock. True, the kitchen tosses in such oddities as a jumbo lump crab cake under the moniker “tortita de jaiba,” and at lunch that ubiquitous, tired-out, overworked, wish-it-would-go-away dish, the Caesar salad, called here the Ensalada Cesar, makes its appearance. But for the most part, the food looks and tastes like the chef has done his homework.

But first things first. If you’ve got the money, invest in the guacamole show (\$10 per order, a bit steep for an appetizer), an at-the-table display of putting the avocado in its place: a chunky salad that is assembled just before your eyes. The waiter rolls up the cart, selects the proper avocado,

readies his mortar and pestle, and voila: after several flourishes and plenty of additions of this and that—chopped chiles, tomatoes, and fresh cilantro—you and friends have a well-seasoned guacamole with a basket of chips.

Chips? Unlike every other Mexican or Tex-Mex restaurant in town, Rosa Mexicano does not automatically serve you the standard complement of nibbles with drinks; the chips are reserved for those ordering guacamole, a distinction that does seem a bit petty. But never mind. Once you order, you’ll overeat anyway, so missing out on these few extra calories is no burden.

Check out the specials first, though I can tell you one dish to avoid: the chorizo-filled quesadillas appetizer. Expecting a large flour tortilla folded neatly over a spicy sausage filling, I was startled to receive instead three miniature corn tortillas wrapped over an oily, orange-tinted crumbling of meat that had little flavor. The flavor of the dish came instead from the accompanying delicate, chili-based sauce to the side, which was a little like eating whipped chipotle butter.

While these quesadillas were unexceptional, getting the main course was like striking pure gold: The Budin Azteca, a layered tortilla “cake” with shredded chicken and chihuahua cheese between each tortilla. The stack sits in a pool of poblano chile sauce, and the whole and its parts add up to an extraordinary entrée. After this, I decided, the restaurant, the big-ticket food, the chef, the waitstaff and the reception committee could do no wrong. Even if every meal thereafter were a take-out event,

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photo—Paul K. Williams—The InTowner.

As this May, 2004 view of the 18th and S building shows, the premises is once again home to a popular restaurant, this time Rosemary’s Thyme Bistro.

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moved to the block, and played the major role in the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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

A Note Regarding the Source

InTowner reader Chris Hinkle contacted this writer and provided the rare and personal vintage photographs of his ancestors, longtime Washingtonians, accompanying this feature. We are grateful that his sharing of family history can benefit and educate a new generation of residents. The publisher welcomes contributions of a similar nature from readers.