

Scenes from the Past...

In what is coined the Strivers Section Historic District today, the 1700 block of Seaton Street, located between U, V, 17th Streets and Florida Avenue, was first developed in the early 1870s, and completed by 1908. It was the subject of noted photographer Gordon Parks in 1942, as part of his work documenting the effects of racism and poverty for the federal Farm Security Administration. Adjoining both the Greater U Street and Dupont Circle Historic Districts, the Strivers Section Historic District was recognized and listed as a local historic district in 1983.

Seaton Street today was initially known as Riggs Street, as seen on an 1887 map of Square 150. It was then renamed a short time later to Seaton Road, in honor of William Winston Seaton, mayor of Washington from 1840 to 1850. Later, its name was changed to Seaton Place, but now is known by the name of Seaton Street—at least if one depends on the street sign itself. Curiously, the city's official tax rolls show some of the houses as being located on Seaton Place, while others are shown as being on Seaton Street!

The oldest buildings along the one-block street are located from Nos. 1701 to 1719 Seaton. Erected between 1872 and 1873, this row of ten, two-story brick dwellings featured raised basements (ground floor) and Italianate detailing including a bracketed wood cornice. Another group of row houses on the south side, Nos. 1700 to 1716, were also built relatively early, between 1874 to 1875. It originally consisted of a row of ten, two-story, flat fronted brick dwellings on high foundations to appear as if it were one long building. The end buildings, at Nos. 1700 and 1716, were articulated as "end pavilions" with projecting center gables, with the center buildings forming the main block of the group. Today, the homes are all painted different colors, and one end pavilion (No. 1716) is no longer standing.

Development on the street ceased for nearly 15 years, until 1890, when the 13 row houses between Nos. 1741 and 1757 were erected simultaneously by builder James H. Grant as speculative housing. Five of the houses, Nos. 1731 to 1739, were also built in 1890, but by owner John C. Davidson and with the assistance

Cont., SCENES, p. 21



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division
This scene of residents taking a break in front of 1739 Seaton Street on a hot summer day was captured by well-known photographer Gordon Parks, who documented activities along the street in June of 1942 as part of his work for the Farm Security Administration.



photo—Historical Society of Washington
Amateur photographer John Wymer captured this view on November 11, 1949. Little has changed since, with the exception of recent renovations, including the removal of the wooden staircases and the lowering of the doorways to sidewalk level. Many of its residents today are second and third generation inhabitants of their homes.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division
The conditions at the rear of the dilapidated houses along Seaton Place were also documented by Parks.



map—author's private collection
This Hopkins map from 1887 shows Riggs Street, later renamed Seaton Place, only partially developed but subdivided into lots smaller than those in the squares surrounding. It is bounded by U, V, 17th Streets and Florida Avenue.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division
This grandfather and his granddaughter caught Parks' eye.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division
Seen here is a peanut vendor selling his wares on the block.



photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division
Parks took this dramatic image of a young boy in a doorway of his; he had lost his leg after being hit by a streetcar.

SCENES

From p. 12

of architect George S. Cooper. The 1900 census reveals that all the built segments of Seaton Street at the time housed "Black and Mulattos" occupants.

However, much of Seaton Street remained vacant until 1902, most likely due to the economic depression of 1893 and 1894, and the years of recovery that followed. Eighteen houses were built that year by owner Charles W. King with the assistance of architect Nicholas T. Haller, comprising Nos. 1722 to 1758. The three large homes at Nos. 1723, 1725, and 1727 were built in 1905 as "townhouse flats" by building partners Joseph J. Moebis and H.J. O'Connor. Each included an apartment that was indicated by using a 1/2 after the residential address. The two estimated the three dwellings would cost \$7,000 to build, or approximately \$2,333 each. The last house to complete the block was No. 1720, built in 1908 by owner C.T. Bride with the assistance of architect J.C. Adkinson and builder J.T. Loveliss. The 1920 census reveals that all the residents along Seaton Street were "Black or Mulatto" working class citizens at the time.

From the late 1940s to the late 1970s, Seaton Street, was the focus of disagreements between tenants, home owners, and the city government over the terrible conditions of the houses. It was well-documented as part of the 1942 Farm Security Administration's "New Deal" Program, and later in an essay on "Wartime Washington" by photographer Gordon Parks (b. 1912), whose photographs are now housed in the Library of Congress. Recognized as the first major black photo-

journalist, Parks later went on to become a staff photographer for Life magazine.

In the August 3, 1950 issue of the Washington Star, a short notice, headlined "Square 150 Rehabilitation Unit to Resurvey Job," appeared announcing the anticipated revival of Seaton Street and the entire Square 150, which contained a somewhat amusing statement on the street itself:

"The Commissioner's Committee appointed to rehabilitate Square 150 will make a resurvey of the block next Monday, E.M. Dulin, chairman, announced today. "Square 150 is bounded by U, V, and 17th Streets and Florida Avenue, N.W."

"There are 124 buildings in the square, and 20 of them have been or are in the process of being repaired. The worst part of the square is Seaton Street, which runs from Seventeenth Street to Florida Avenue, N.W."

Nine years later, on September 25, 1959, the Washington Daily News ran a story by Martha Strayer, headlined "Massive Aid: the World Comes to a D.C. Street." She reported that, in an effort to better conditions, almost every department in the government made a commitment to provide education, better sanitation, and relief to the unimaginable conditions. At the time, the one block street housed 200 children.

Unfortunately, the schemes laid out in the article did little to correct the situation of deteriorating conditions and overcrowding. The Washington Afro-American newspaper on November 16, 1963 reported, including with a photo captioned "Can This Street be Saved?," that although the houses were scheduled for demolition by city planners, apparently due to deteriorating conditions, the residents had organized

a "clean-up, fix-up campaign in hopes of making a poor man's Georgetown out of the block long street between You and Vee Sts., 17th and Florida Ave., NW."

The "acknowledged block of blight" was saved demolition in 1965, when the National Capital Planning Commission voted against the idea in February of that year. According to a May 2, 1965 article in the Washington Post, the reason given was the lack of public housing for the 130 families on the block at the time. Commission staffers still wanted to revitalize the Adams Morgan area, and at one time investigated purchasing the empty property at 16th Street and Florida Avenue, previously the so-called "Henderson Castle" site which had once stood a mansion that had been demolished in 1949.

The urban renewal demolition plan proposed in 1965 failed as well, and Seaton Street continued to remain a slum. A short story that ran in May 11, 1976 issue of the Washington Post offered some insight on the situation and concern about the block: The DC government had charged Centre Properties, Inc., the owners of 27 row houses, with an impressive 799 housing code violations. Apparently, tenants had been resisting eviction and halting conversion of the badly deteriorated houses into "stylish town homes." The tenants had organized a lawsuit against the current owners and the previous owner, James Ruppert, to give them first chance to buy the houses before they renovated them for resale.

At least some of the residents won the lawsuit in the DC Superior Court (10 of the original families) in April of 1977, and had a short time to raise funds to remain in their homes. In May of that year, at least nine of those families were able to pur-

chase their homes, according to a November 30, 1978 article in the Washington Post, some of whom can still be proudly found on the block today.

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