

# Scenes from the Past...

The site on which the Bishops Gate condominium complex is situated today at 1715 15th Street, NW, between R and S Streets, was once owned by Mr. Joshua Pierce, an early DC land owner. The site has a varied past, however, with myriad buildings and uses throughout its history. In his will, dated April 11, 1869, Pierce instructed two friends that the vacant lots on Square 207 be utilized for some sort of institution in the future. The Washington Hospital for Foundlings was incorporated the following year, but took 15 years to raise funds and construct a home on the site; a DC "Permit to Build" was finally granted on March 16, 1885.

The handsome building for the Foundlings, seen in the above photograph, was designed by architect Robert I. Fleming. It was built at a total cost of \$23,500.

Subsequent building permits were granted for a variety of extensions to the hospital and grounds, including a brick laundry facility in 1901. In 1896, the Washington Hospital for Foundlings had 30 children in residence, admitted 69 new children, and discharged 17 by adoption. Sadly, the number of children that died in the hospital that year was 54.

An article in the July 2, 1898 edition of The Washington Post, headlined "30 Crying Babies," described a complaint by neighbor Edward Dunkerly to the "Commissioners of the District Government" over his family's lack of sleep. His letter was quoted and offers some insight, albeit a bit dramatic, into life on the 1700 block of 15th Street in 1898. It reads in part:

"If you want to see how we suffer through the crying of the babies at the Foundling Hospital, come to my house at 1715 [sic] Fifteenth Street northwest.

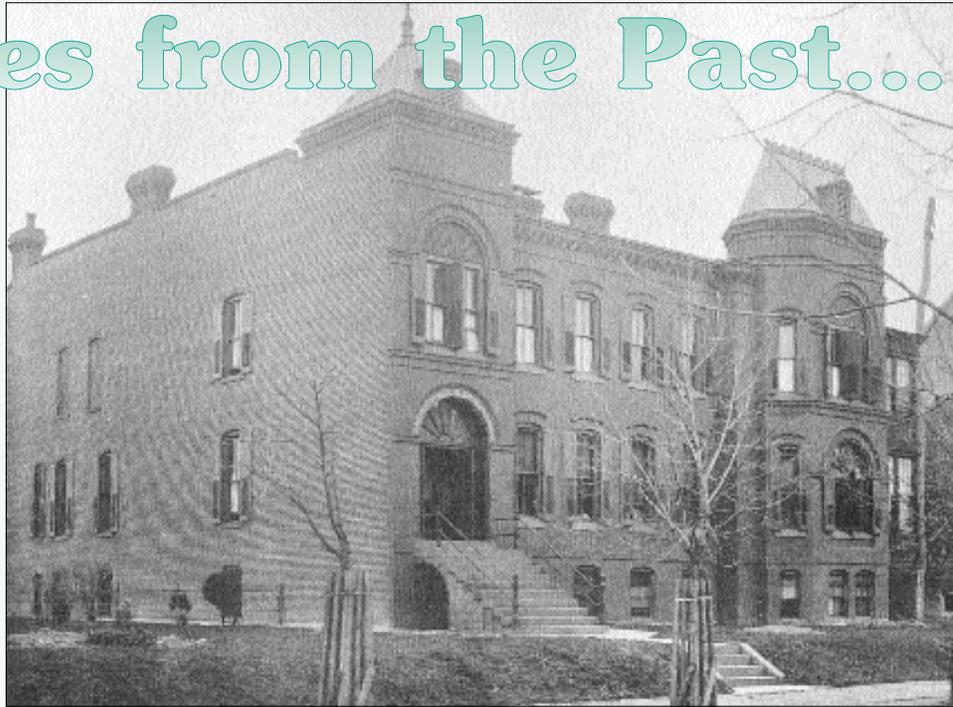


photo—courtesy, Kelsey & Assoc. Private Collection.

We have not had one whole night's rest for over two weeks and one or more of us have been walking the floor some nights for that length of time and expect to do so for the next four months at least. I have just spent \$20 to keep out the sound of this crying, having closed ten of my windows with four distinct thicknesses, which still fails to keep out the noise. I am afraid I will have to wall them up with brick before the summer is over, and how we shall live in the hours I cannot tell. We are now deprived of light and air in these rooms, and I assure you they are not fit for a dog."

The 1900 census reveals that 62 year old "Miss" R.B. Kate was the official "Matron of the Home," and evidently oversaw 16 workers, including nine nurses, one boarder, a janitor, two laundresses, a waitress, a cook, along with 34 "inmates," or infants. All of the babies had been born since 1898, and several had no names assigned and had been recorded as "unknown" as to the whereabouts or identity of their birthplace or their parents.

Perhaps based upon the complaints of the neighbors, the Washington Home for Foundlings decided to move its operation in 1927 to 42nd and



photo—source, I.Charities and Reformatory Institutions in the District of Columbia (1898); courtesy—Kelsey & Assoc. private collection.

This elegant building housing the Washington Hospital for Foundlings that once stood on 15th Street, between R and S Streets.



photo—courtesy, Historical Society of Washington.

Amateur photographer John Wymer captured this image on October 4, 1949 of the partially completed St. Augustine's Church on 15th Street. The Gothic-style school building in the center remains, but the church structure's foundation and raised basement, which was the only portion yet was by this time enclosed and roofed over to accommodate a meeting hall which also served as the sanctuary.



photo—Paul K. Williams, July 15, 2002

Present view of what is now the Bishops Gate condominium complex. The building shown on the left with the roof garden and large concrete cross, closer to S Street, is the former convent which is now another condominium residence separate from Bishops Gate.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

## RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley\*

### THAI KINGDON Thaied Down

If you think the area has become saturated with Thai restaurants, you wouldn't be far off the mark. It seems that Americans—or at least, Washingtonians—can't get enough of the hot/sweet/sour/salty cooking that is the trademark of good Thai cooking. But that's the rub: Not many local Thai eateries really get it right.

Pandering to Western tastes, what most Thai kitchens do is toss in the sugar—Americans, they believe, have an oversized sweet tooth and hate the heat from chilies—and eliminate anything that may seem exotic. That may be why there's a joke among some Thai cooks that when the staff sees a Westerner come in to their restaurant, they immediately turn down

the heat (remove the chilies) and make it simple. Perhaps they figure most Westerners wouldn't know the difference anyway.

Up until a few years ago, DC's venerable Thai Kingdom restaurant, one of the old-timers around town, did make an effort to play it straight. But it tastes like times have changed. Based on memories, I had insisted on dinner here recently, thinking of its once-succulent duck and pork dishes. But when my friend and I dined here, we found that the food was unmemorable at best. At worst, several dishes we didn't even finish. Maybe that was the chef's night off,

Cont., DINING, p. 15

## SCENES

From p. 12

Brandywine Streets, NW, following which St. Augustine's Catholic Church demolished the structure in March of 1929 to make way for a proposed school, convent, and large church building.

The beginnings of St. Augustine's had been established when a small school was founded for African-American Catholics in 1865 on 15th Street, between L and M Streets. A year previous, on June 30, 1864, a small group had approached President Lincoln directly, and had been granted permission to hold a fund-raising festival on the 4th of July that year on the White House grounds. By 1874, the congregation had completed an impressive \$100,000 structure on the 15th Street site, where the Washington Post building sits today.

The congregation continued to utilize this church until it was sold on January 17, 1946, at which time the altars, alter rails, pulpit, baptismal font, pews, and all statues were removed and installed in what they referred to as the "auditorium" at 1715 15th Street, which had been used for a variety of purposes since it opened in 1933. The "auditorium" space was actually the raised basement foundation of their planned church structure that was, ultimately, never realized. It had been designed to seat 1,000 parishioners.

Somewhat earlier, in June of 1929, a portion of the 1715 15th Street site had been developed, including a convent with an oversized cross atop the roof parapet; that building survives to this day, but as a condominium not part of the Bishops Gate complex. The site also included a school building and a small chapel, which is today Unit No. 5 of the Bishops Gate condominium. Apparently, St. Augustine's had decided to build a chapel for the convent and the students as an interim measure until the large church building planned for the southern portion of the property could be realized, which had been delayed due to the Great Depression.

The architect listed as responsible for the design of the complex was Maurice F. Moore, completed at a cost of \$400,000. The blessing for the new school took place on December 1, 1929, with the Reverend John M. McNamara officiating. The basement auditorium was constructed slowly, with an interim roof at the first floor level and divine services commencing with a Midnight Mass on December 25, 1933. Masses were held there regularly until June of 1946, when the auditorium was

converted to a sanctuary in conjunction with the sale of their former church in the 1100 block of 15th Street. The convent and chapel on the site housed the Oblate Sisters of Providence, who taught at the adjoining school on the property.

In January of 1930, an architectural conception of the new complex was discussed in an Evening Star article by architectural critic Benjamin F. Betts. The article discussed the fact that Washingtonians were fortunate to have designs like the church based upon ancient Greek and Roman concepts and stylization, and noted that New Yorkers were witnessing such "sacrifices of beauty" as the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building!

A letter to the city from the church, dated October 16, 1933, indicated that the plans for the completion of the large church building on the property had been halted because of lack of funds. Nearly 30 years later, in 1961, due to pressure from desegregation and a decrease in the size of congregations, the African-American, St. Augustine's Catholic Church and the white, St. Paul Catholic church were combined. The new church organization was called "Saints Paul and Augustine." The congregation met in the former church of St. Paul at 15th and V Streets, NW, in a building constructed in 1886 that still exists today.

The former school at 1715 15th Street remained in existence until 1966. The March 7, 1980 edition of The Washington Post reported that "the merger caused whites to leave the church and angered blacks because they had been required to sit at the rear of the St. Paul Church." The congregation remains racially mixed to this day, but absent the onus of segregated seating.

The property at 1715 15th Street was sold by the church to the Urban Land Corporation in the spring of 1980 in anticipation of developing a condominium complex. The cost was \$1.4 million. The former school, chapel, and courtyard walkways were then restored and converted to residential use by the architectural firm of Michael & Michael, while a new building of condominium units was constructed atop the former auditorium and church foundation. However, the foundation for the church that was never built can still be seen along the alley on the south side of the condominium complex.

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

## JR's Grill Menu

Tuesdays  
Half Price Burgers  
all day

Fridays  
Buy ONE sandwich  
get one FREE

Saturdays  
Lunch & ReRun  
Central @ Noon  
with FREE All-You-Can-Eat Pancakes

Sundays Noon - 3pm

### ALL YOU CAN EAT PANCAKES

Assorted flavors & toppings \$5.00

Don't see something you want? Ask, and we'll do our best to make it for you.

Serving  
Mon thru Saturday  
Noon - 7:00pm  
Sunday  
Noon - 3:00pm  
Chef Patty Galindo  
1519 17th St. NW  
(202) 328-0090

JR's

Bar & Grill

WASHINGTON, DC

1707 17th Street, NW  
JRSDC.com

# BIGGER BETTER BINGO

featuring  
Lena Tude

## TUESDAY

8:30pm

CASH PRIZES

Benefiting Boies Lambda Phi

### Retro Night

w/ Jason Royce

10:30pm - 2:00am

\$2 Cocktails & Coors Lt. Draft all night

cobalt

cobaltdc.com