

The use and history of the city's police and fire call boxes has often provoked much curiosity by residents and visitors alike, with over 875 of the abandoned boxes having recently been scraped and painted by the DC Department of Transportation. They can usually be found on street corners, and are now part of an exclusive program spearheaded by Cultural Tourism DC, coined "Art on Call," that aims to rejuvenate, celebrate, and rehabilitate the street furniture into neighborhood icons melding both art and history. Over 36 neighborhood groups are participating to date, and in July, the Historic Mount Pleasant organization unveiled the first complete project, nine call boxes outfitted with intricate bronze sculptures by local artist Michael Ross. [Ed. Note: See David Barrows' revelatory commentary about Ross and his work in this issue's "Neighborhood Art" feature.]

Elaborate fire and police call boxes like those pictured here are believed to have been first installed throughout Washington beginning in the 1860s. They complimented a large system of gas street light illumination, first installed in the city streets in 1848. The peak of gas illumination was reached in 1926, however, when there were 12,371 gaslights burning in the city. The fire call box seen above in the vintage image was installed at the corner of 18th and Kenyon Streets in Mt. Pleasant sometime after 1910, and was typical of these early designs—a round or octagonal cast iron base, a call box, and a tall lamp post atop which concealed a gas burner. Red glass with etched white lettering was illuminated from behind with a constantly burning gaslight. They were manufactured by the Gamewell Corporation of Upper Newton Falls, Massachusetts, which also manufactured the police call boxes added later to the alarm system.

The early fire call box required the sender to break the glass, turn the key and open the door, then pull down the hook inside to transmit the alarm to a central alarm office where the box number was tapped out on a bell, flashed on a red signal light, and punched out on a paper tape register much like a stock ticker. There was also a telegraph key and sounder inside each box, which the chief or chief's driver could use to order a greater alarm or all-out fire signal to the central alarm office. The early round pedestal designed for Washington is called a "Nott" base and was the original pedestal used for holding fire alarm boxes; it was painted black with the alarm box painted red. Some early fire call boxes were mounted directly on trees or building walls.

A 1923 decision to convert the gaslights to electric was gradually implemented over the following decade, and the last three gaslights were turned off on June 23, 1934. Washington's fire call boxes then adapted a large, white globe electric light fixture placed atop the light pole. Later still, these globes were replaced with small orange industrial globes still seen on some of the boxes today.

Each fire alarm box had a spring wound movement like an alarm clock which, when the switch was pulled, sent in four rounds of its location code number to the central alarm office which is still located near the McMillan reservoir. The first call boxes installed Washington in the 1860s were

Scenes from the Past...



This photograph shows the original configuration of a fire call box with its red glass globe concealing a gas fixture. It was taken shortly after 1910, the year in which the house in the background was built, at 1801 Kenyon Street (looking west across 18th Street).

photo—Historic Mt. Pleasant files, City Museum; courtesy, Historical Society of Washington.



photo—Paul K. Williams—The InTowner.

This Summer 2004 view of the same location shows the fire call box at 18th and Kenyon Streets after the removal of the gas fixture that once sat on top of the pole. Artist Michael Ross' bronze sculpture, A Village Comes to Life: Mount Pleasant After the Civil War is permanently installed in the interior of the box.

apparently painted black, and always kept locked. A sign over the box on the pole notified where the key could be found,



photo—Gene Thomas; courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Library.

This police officer was photographed at 18th and G Streets at box No. 32 in 1950, demonstrating the use of the interior phone found in each police call box.

usually at a corner grocery store or other retail establishment. Each key was numbered and trapped in the door until the department arrived so they could see who

opened the box to send the alarm. Starting in the late 1880s the color scheme changed when police boxes were introduced, which were painted blue, and the older fire call boxes were painted red.

Fire call boxes had a simple pole and protected light on top, which was constantly illuminated to aid public and police in locating the boxes at night. Fire call boxes provided a protected switch for residents and pedestrians to pull in the event of a fire, signaling the department in a central dispatch office that a fire had been spotted in that particular block. These boxes were painted red, and identified with a unique number for identification. By the early 1930s newer fire boxes were used which added a quick action door on the front allowing the user simply to pull down the door and pull the hook to send in the alarm.

By the mid-1890s, when the cables were placed underground in conduits, the city started using ornamental iron posts to mount the boxes, and possibly a few old gas street light bases. By the late 1910s, Washington began using a telephone handset in the police boxes, which was for the exclusive use by police officers for voice communication with their police precinct. Police boxes can be easily identified by their one sided, flat panels with a curved top, and without an extended pole. Fire call boxes, on the other hand, can be identified by their house-like shaped box area, operable doors or an open frame, and extended pole on top. Police officers often knew which box numbers were prone to false alarms or pranks by local children.

Police call boxes, on the other hand, were sealed boxes that a patrol officer would use a key to enter and flip a switch to notify a central command center that his patrol was proceeding as normal and that no assistance was necessary. Police officers pulled a different box switch on their patrol route every 30 minutes. They also featured a telephone that officers could use to communicate problems to the central command. Their patrol routes were called "Carney Blocks" after an officer that devised the system, with the overall effort coined the "Patrol Signal System" or "PSS." The police call box was painted blue with a grey base. All early police boxes were on party lines so the officers would have to pull the box lever to identify which box he was at on the circuit. There was also a pointer in the early boxes for Ambulance, Paddy Wagon, Riot, Fire, etc., so special signals could be sent in. The locked front door had a citizen's key, which by inserting the key in the door, a wagon call could be sent in for accidents, etc., by passersby who would obtain a key from a corner grocery store or prominent business.

Paul Ponzelli, a retired police officer, recalls call boxes in Georgetown having heavy rings affixed to the base in which occasionally an officer might handcuff a suspect and use the phone to call the central command center to send a car to take the individual to the station, all the while continuing his rounds. Ponzelli also revealed that two call boxes were executed in polished brass, one being located in front of the White House, and one being at Union Station. The latter was used by President

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RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

RED GINGER CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICAN BISTRO Carrying a Torch (as in torch ginger)

Decidedly under new ownership, the Red Ginger Bistro—formerly owned and cooked for by the renowned Sharon Banks and husband—has a decidedly less aggressive atmosphere and a pared-down menu. It also seems to attract a much smaller crowd, if a recent Sunday night sets any example. At 7:15, I was the sole patron. Never mind, by 8 p.m. others had straggled in and pretty soon the Red Ginger, if not echoing with conversation and music, had its fair share of patrons tucking into the new owner/chef's menu.

His concept: A mix of Caribbean, Latino and down-South goodies that may pique appetites as well as puzzle the culinary mind. How to explain the appetizer mussels steamed with oven-dried tomatoes and chorizo sausage appearing one line up from oysters encrusted with plantains, which for all the world sounds like a kitschy version of New Orleans' fabled Oyster Po' Boy. Other appetizers sounded fairly mundane, and, for example, even if the shrimp quesadilla fairly burst with flavor, quesadillas are too commonplace to bother with at such a fancy restaurant.

And even if such appetizer combos

sound a bit unusual, you will applaud the chef's flashy take on Jamaica's jerk chicken. His offering of Jamaican Jerk Chicken "Lollipops" resounds with the throb of heat upon heat, tempered by a dollop of roasted corn and black bean salsa. Gleaming with a luscious marinade, these crunchy drumsticks may well be one of the best interpretations of the jerk theme I've ever tasted. It's even money that says these may be the chef's best starter.

A glance through the sides listing tips you off: This guy must have his roots in Louisiana—collard greens, corn grits, mashed sweet potatoes and roasted corn suggest serious soul food. Yet the entrées take you off to the islands again, with a few stops in Mexico. Whatever else may tempt you, indulge yourself with the rack of lamb rubbed with red mole paste—mole being one of Mexico's best-loved and most unusual contributions to the food world. Imagine anyone dreaming up a paste of ground unsweetened chocolate, herbs, and chilies, and all this in countless variations on the theme. Here, the grilled lamb bears the same haunting flavor of this combination

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Theodore Roosevelt when his train arrived at the station to signal the White House that he required a motorcade to the Executive Mansion. The box remains in a private collection. The Gamewell Corporation advertised heavily with a fear campaign theme, and, as a result, thousands of cities worldwide installed their systems.

Throughout the tenure of the PSS system, the yearly City Directories recorded detailed annual statistics. For example, in 1925, it reported that 806 fire alarm boxes were in service, with a total of 2,670 alarms pulled that year, 278 of which were false. The city had added 24 new fire call box locations that year alone. In addition, it was recorded that there were 489 police call boxes operable in the city that same year. The two types of call boxes were wired together and to their respective central commands by an astonishing 7,344 miles of underground cable.

Many other cities had call box systems manufactured by such companies as Gamewell. Several different styles of bases and boxes were made but were individually designed for that particular city. San Francisco still operates a call box system with both the police and fire boxes attached to a single pole. The early gas light poles and call boxes in some cities like New York and Boston had the operating instructions etched in the red glass atop the box. Washington is one of very few cities that have any remnants of the system left in the original locations on the streets. Of the 1,500 initially installed, approximately 875 remain today, found in all quadrants of the District.

In most cities, walkie-talkies and two-way car radios caused the initial downfall of the police and fire boxes. The call boxes in Washington were maintained by the Department of Public Works with many remaining in use until 1976, when the 911 system of emergency contact was fully established. Many of the police and fire call



photo—Gary McLeod; courtesy, Capital Fire Museum

The two types of call boxes included a police call box (left) painted blue and gray and a fire call box (right) painted red and gray.

boxes were abandoned after the 1968 riots, however, when civil unrest destroyed many of those in the affected areas, while others were continually used for false alarms.

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[Editor's Note: The Art on Call program of Cultural Tourism DC is being coordinated by Paul Williams. Interested participants can find out more information on the program, or if there is an active group working on call boxes in your neighborhood, by calling (202) 462-3389 or by email at Callboxes@aol.com. See, also, "Mt. Pleasant to Unveil Call Box Sculptures Celebrating its History," InTowner, July 2004, page 1.]