

Scenes from the Past...

While most residents of the city may think that disagreements over building renovations and additions are something only witnessed in the past generation or two, the history of a house owned by an ambitious woman on Thomas Circle in the 1880s shows that the matter is anything but recent.



courtesy—Smithsonian Institution

The 1875 engraving of the house on Thomas Circle, at 1402 Massachusetts Avenue, shown here, was done before a controversial addition was made to the house that seemingly doubled its size and created ire amongst neighbors and building permit officials alike.

The grand house was originally constructed at the apex of Massachusetts Avenue and M Street in 1874, facing Thomas Circle, then one of the most desirable residential

circles in the city. It was designed by, and built for, architect Peter J. Lauritzen. He sold the house by 1876, however, to B. Edward J. Eils, who lost it in default just a year later. It was then sold at auction for \$5,000 to Theodore N. Gill in 1877, at which time it was assessed at \$12,000. He, in turn, sold it for \$25,000 to Mrs. Annie A. Cole in 1879, pocketing a tidy profit.

Mrs. Cole was the daughter of Horatio and Annie King of Maine, her father having served as Postmaster General during the Buchanan's administration. She had married George E. Cole, the one-time Lieutenant Governor of Oregon, who had died by the time she took up residence at 1402 Massachusetts Avenue. In 1888, she hired well-known architect Alfred Burt Mullet, to design a "bay window" addition to her home on the very apex of her property. The permit was issued on September 7th of that year, but would eventually have several revisions.

Cole was about to take advantage of legislation that allowed for projecting bays over the building line, as can be seen in the revised plan of the addition, reproduced here. It would feature four bays protruding over the building line as part of the rather large triangular addition. Limitations allowed for bays to be only five feet in depth and no more than 14 feet in length, but exceptions had often been made in prior years. Mrs. Cole began her ambitious project despite growing resentment from neighboring homeowners who claimed she would block their views of the landscaped circle.

By November of 1888, with work progressing, it was the United States that brought suit against Mrs. Cole and the city for violating building regulations. An assistant city attorney for DC allowed Cole to proceed with her project throughout the pending litigation, knowing the risk was to have it removed should she lose the case. Not to be outsmarted, Cole apparently paid for surveys of many of her neighbors' homes, finding various violations, and when she lost her case nearly a year later, argued that if she were forced



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to remove the completed addition, so should others in the city be forced to remove theirs. The ruling against her was never enforced, for obvious implications. It took a later amendment to the District's deficiency bill of 1891 to clarify the language in the building permitting process.

The result of her project can be seen in the circa 1928 photograph of the house and large, curved addition seen here. Interestingly, in 1895, Mrs. Cole traded the original



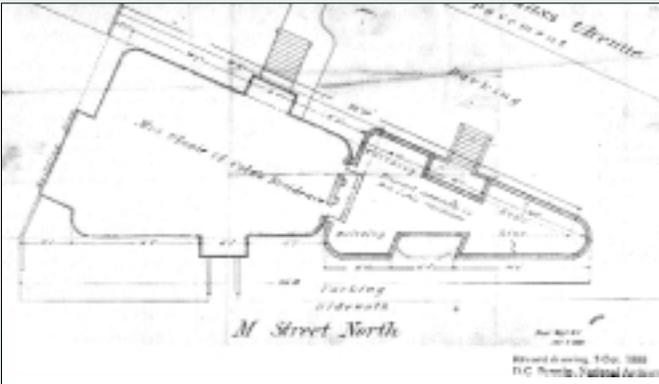
courtesy—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

portion of the house at 1402 Massachusetts to Rev. Thomas DeWitt Talmage in exchange for a house in Brooklyn, New York. The newer portion was designated 1400 Massachusetts, and was later sold in 1903 to William Walker. Cole had successfully created two houses from one, and would no doubt profit handsomely.

Mr. Marcus Notes later purchased No. 1400 for \$20,000 in 1920, and the adjoining house at No. 1402 for \$30,000 in 1922. They remained two separate homes in that family until 1971, and had been photographed in the 1940s as an example of a poorly maintained Washington rooming house, shown here. Perhaps the most ironic part of the homes' history came in 1971, when they were both promptly demolished to make way for the new headquarters building of none other than the National Association of Home Builders. That building was orientated on the western portion of the larger triangular site, and the location of the original homes at 1400 and 1402 remained an urban park of sorts until the expansion of the organization's building, due to be completed later this fall, was undertaken.



courtesy—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



courtesy—National Archives, Washington DC Building Permits

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