

A Brief History of 1420 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC



Prepared by Jennifer Farley



DC Historic Designs

*Historic Preservation and
Architectural Design Specialists*

2323 Ashmead Place, NW
Washington, DC 20009-1413
Tel: (202) 355-4503
Fax: (202) 332-1176

www.dchistoricdesigns.com

The Historic 16th Street Area

1420 16th Street is a contributing residence to the Sixteenth Street Historic District. The significance of 16th Street dates back to the beginning of Washington, DC with the plan for the new Federal City conceived by French engineer and planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1791¹. The street itself was given a 160-foot width to match grander avenues of Washington, indicating by its size that the street was equally important as the major diagonal thoroughfares in L'Enfant's plan. Renovations in paving and landscaping were carried out between 1871 and 1874, directed by Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, appointed to head the Public Works System under the territorial government. Mr. Shepherd was a wealthy business man and property owner in his own right, and therefore gave extra attention to the wealthy neighborhoods which he owned.



1420 16th Street, NW.

Between 1860 and 1865, the residential population of the District of Columbia increased from 75,000 to 131,000. In addition to new government workers, the arrival of freed slaves contributed to the growth.² The residences that sprung up around 16th street represented a higher socio-economic stratum. It was the wealthy who moved to be in close proximity to the White House and the inner circles of the president. Early zoning prohibited commercial businesses in this area, and as a result of the lost commercial base, tax revenues were low. Eventually the tax assessor's office re-evaluated the property values on the street.³ The General Assessment of 1908-1909 appraised 1420 16th Street at \$2.00 per square foot. "Home owners suddenly found themselves paying taxes 150% higher than comparable residential properties elsewhere in Washington, D.C."⁴ People began to sell their homes and spaces eventually gave way to apartment complexes and hotels. Height restrictions were also raised from two and three stories to eight. Row houses were intermixed with a number of larger apartment buildings and hotels, creating the exciting street front that is seen today.

The Architect

Nathan Cornith Wyeth (1870-1963) lived through rapidly changing times in America architecture. His professional years spanned the end of the Victorian era, to Neoclassical, and the early Modern style. Born in Chicago, "he was carried, a babe in arms, out of the great Fire."⁵ Wyeth's contemporaries included, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Bernard Maybeck. Each in their respective cities, these architects were responsible for higher architecture where new strength and technology were required: Sullivan and Wright in Chicago, Maybeck in San Francisco, and Wyeth in Washington D.C. Each city was rebuilt using stricter codes and strong infrastructure, utilizing steel, brick, and concrete.

¹ National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. "Sixteenth Street Historic District (Boundary Expansion)." 2006. Washington, DC: National Park Service.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Gabbett, Harry. "Nathan C Wyeth, Architect for D.C., Is Dead Here at 93." *Washington Post*. 31 Aug. 1963: B3.

Wyeth's formal training began at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's school in New York City. From there, he moved to France and was accepted into the Ecole de Beaux Arts, University in Paris. The Ecole de Beaux Arts would become a world famous institution for its focus on Western European architecture, bringing into fashion Neo-Classical sign and re-emphasizing geometry and proportion. Its influence on American architects in the nineteenth century resulted in a rebirth of interest in classical Greek and Roman orders, as witnessed in the design of many of the buildings for the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Another famous alumnus of the school, Henry Hobson Richardson, is remembered for his unique interpretation of the Romanesque Revival style, now today as "Richardsonian Romanesque."



Nathan Wyeth

Between 1934 and 1946 Wyeth served as Washington D.C.'s Municipal architect. During this time, he oversaw the government planning of the city through various large scale projects. He helped design the Senate and House Office Buildings, worked on the remodeling of the White House's west executive offices, the Battleship Maine monument in Arlington Cemetery, and the Tidal Basin Bridge.⁶ Some of Wyeth's favorite projects during his term as Municipal Architect, however, were at a residential scale. He was charged with remodeling several homes into international embassies, including the Afghanistan, Russian, Mexican, Canadian, and Chilean properties.⁷ With Wyeth's experience in stately designs, he could easily adapt these grand buildings for both public receptions and office space.

1420 16th Street

1420 16th Street was constructed in 1907 during a period of architectural design known as the "Eclectic Movement." Immediately following the Victorian period, the Eclectic Movement drew on the full spectrum of architectural tradition – Ancient Classical, Medieval, Renaissance Classical, or Modern for stylistic inspiration."⁸ Due to Wyeth's education under the *Ecole de Beaux Arts*, University of Paris, and the fact that he spent most of his career dealing with Washington's own architectural history, it is not surprising to see a combination of various American styles and Classical orders in his residential work. 1420 16th Street subtly draws on the then passé Romanesque Revival Style (1880-1900), while including many distinctive traits of the Colonial Revival period (1880 to 1955).

An 1885 city ordinance required new construction in Washington D.C. to be of brick masonry. Brick was locally manufactured and could be juxtaposed with terra cotta or plaster ornament. Insurance companies began to favor its use in the first steps toward fire prevention, promoting the new standard to minimize loss. For these reasons, the presence of wood frame construction is a rarity in DC today⁹ and is often an easy means of dating a wood-frame building prior to 1885.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ McAlester, Virginia & Lee. *Field guide to American Houses*. New York: Knopf, 1984, p 143.

⁹ "Class-Buildings - the Red Brick City around 1900." [CLUSS](#). 13 July 2009.

The choice of masonry patterns was an important element in architectural design. For stylistic reasons 1420's front façade uses a Flemish pattern (Figure 1.1), placing a brick header in between each runner, i.e. the short end of the brick is visible and alternates with the length of the next one. The back of the building, where a garage was added in October of 1925, uses a Common or American bond (Figure 1), alternating five rows of runners with one course of brick headers.¹⁰ Often, with the customer not willing to pay for the same aesthetic choice as the front, the builder would choose this simpler bond, requiring less brick and proving more economical.

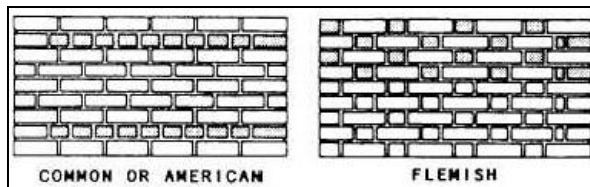


Figure 1. Brick bond patterns used for 1420 16th St.

The use of various types of windows for 1420 16th Street are perhaps the clearest manifestation of the Eclectic Movement. The windows on the second floor subtly pay homage to the Romanesque Revival, while those on the third and fourth floors of the residence tie the house to the newer Colonial Revival style, specifically the Adam style-- a popular style for urban townhouses in England and the United States between 1720 and 1820. Colonial-Revival houses favored windows with double hung sashes with six panes per sash and separated by thin wooden supports or "mullions."

Original Colonial-period homes often had thinner outer walls of wood-frame construction. These thinner walls allowed windows to sit flush with the outside surface of the house. With the use of brick in Colonial-Revival construction, some structural modifications were required. Colonial-Revival houses constructed of brick required recessed windows, pushed back toward the interior of the façade and surrounded by a thick brick frame. This construction, along with improved glass technology negated the use of shutters. For decorative purposes, the lack of shutters was often replaced with heavy stone sills, embellished keystones over the windows, and stone belt courses between or below a row of windows.

The elaborate second story is evidence of *piano nobile* design—a layout in which the first floor was designated for reception and service rooms, and the second, as the main floor for the salons and living quarters of the family. Larger windows than those on other floors are usually the most obvious feature of the *piano nobile*. The use of this type of layout completely disappeared in DC by the late 1920's, leaving 1420 16th Street with an historically resilient character.



Figure 2: Romanesque arched windows

1420 16th Street incorporates three large French doors on the *piano nobile*. These doors are covered with a wide segmental Romanesque-style arch supporting fanlight windows, and each set with a keystone (Figure 2). The end of each arch terminates with square stones simulating a column capital. Historically dating back to the Roman Empire, and continuing through Islamic architecture, lintels—the horizontal pieces that lay across the tops of windows and doors to support weight above—took on the form of an arch in order to carry more weight and provide better support. The central stone in this arch -- the "keystone"-- was the fundamental block completing the force structure necessary to keep the opening from collapsing. By employing the wide arches and elliptical fanlights

¹⁰ American Bond was used at Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello.

for the second floor only, the architect connected the exterior elaborations with the interior hierarchical use of space. The third story lintels are flat, but still utilize center keystones for their important symbolic and aesthetic details and to visually relate this level to the second.

Wyeth included a classical entablature-- a beam made from composed moldings-- just below the roof line of his design (Figure 3). The use of this detail, rather than the use of a roofline balustrade (railing), used in many Colonial Revival-style buildings, helps draw the eye upward. Wyeth possibly found the use of a roofline balustrade to be too heavy for the relative size of this house and therefore decided against its use.

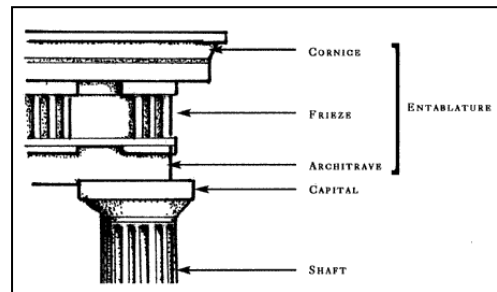


Figure 3. Classical entablature

The entablature on 1420 16th Street (Figure 4) has an intricate composition. The lower portion, or “architrave,” consists of dentils (sequential rectangular boxes). The dentils reference a classical ideal of beauty in geometric patterns. Their detail in the roof reflects Wyeth’s training in the *Ecole de Beaux Arts* tradition and its favor for Neo-Classical motifs. The middle portion of the entablature, or frieze, is decorated with modillions, or horizontal brackets that support the cornice. These modillions can also be described as stylized rafter tails, mimicking wooden rafters translated into stone. In classical construction the entire entablature would originally have been stretched out across a series of columns, as seen in the smaller scale of the front porch, but it is no longer has a structural use, but simply decorative.



Figure 4. Entablature on 1420 16th St.

Above the entablature is a concave roof. It has a side gabled configuration that is joined on either side by a parapet; a low wall that avoids a sudden drop off from the roof edge (Figure 5). This configuration was part of an urban tradition from Dutch colonial construction. The side gable roof appears in about 25 percent of colonial revival buildings.¹¹ Although the building is partially freestanding, these low walls help signal the boundaries of the home from its neighbors. It also helps incorporate the interior chimney into the roofline.

In addition to large residential buildings, prestigious public institutes were scattered throughout Washington D.C.’s Sixteenth Street Historic District. 1420 16th Street is complimented by its neighbor at 1530 P Street, the Carnegie Institute.¹² It sits across the street and shares some of the same stylistic characteristics. Both buildings are heavily indebted to the *Ecole de Beaux Arts* tradition. “The conception was grand and monumental, regardless of the actual size of the building.”¹³ Both attain a power of authority through their ornamentation and prove that construction does not need to be large in scale in order to pay justice to the use of columns and classical orders. The style of architecture shared between these two buildings contributes to the architectural integrity of the neighborhood.

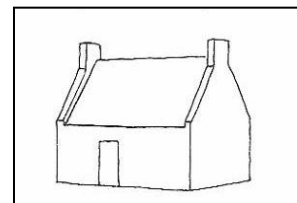


Figure 5. Gabled roof with parapet

¹¹ McAlester, p. 322.

¹² This hall was built by the firm Carriere and Hastings in 1937.

¹³ National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. “Sixteenth Street Historical District.” 1978. Washington DC: National Park Service.

Wyeth's influence on this residence did not end with its completion. In 1914, when then owners, the McGowans, wanted to extend the existing porch, Wyeth was hired, along with contractor Andrew Murray, to widen the platform to its current base (Figure 6). At this time, he added the existing columns and stone cornice. The estimated cost was 628 dollars and work began on July 28th 1914 and completed September 23, 1914. Today, similar alterations would easily cost somewhere above \$40,000.

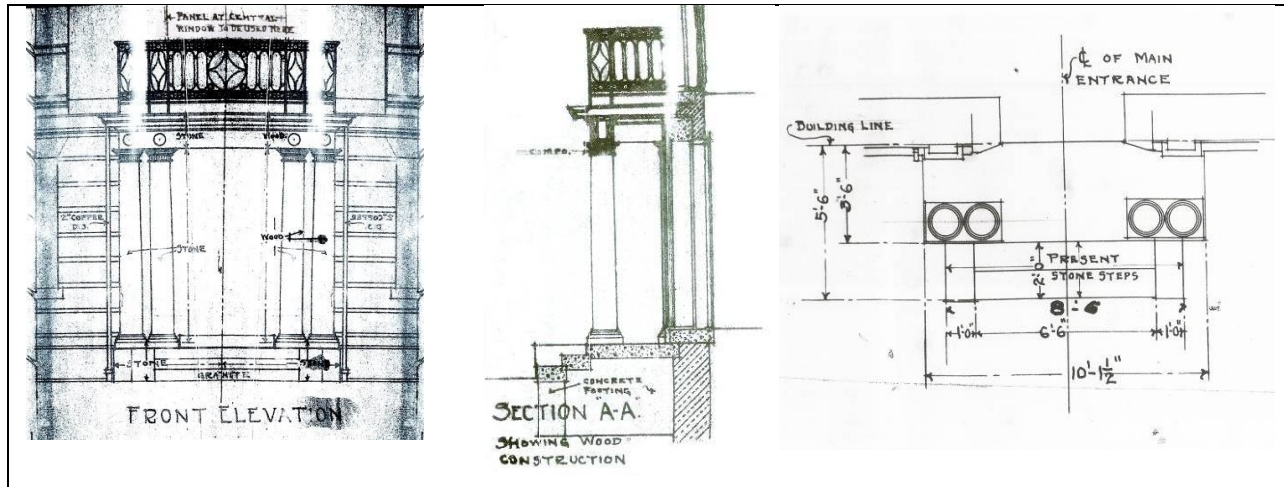


Figure 6. Wyth's 1914 design for the new porch.

Updating the façade was not uncommon in houses constructed during the early twentieth century. The most common means of updating the appearance of a house is to add, remove, or alter a porch. Many Queen Anne houses, for example, now sport elaborate neoclassical porches added in the early 1900's.¹⁴ However, this porch extends only to the second story, making it closer to the Colonial-Revival style, rather than the full portico, or covered walk that is supported by like columns in Neoclassical structures.

The vertical supports utilized at 1420 16th Street are two pair of Doric columns. The older Doric order is often described in masculine terms because of its robust figure and is known for its use in the Greek Parthenon (449BC). It has a relative lack of decoration when compared to the Ionic capital, with its twin scrolls, or with the Corinthian column, characterized by its leafy capital and became popular during the grand building phase of the Roman Empire (Figure 6).

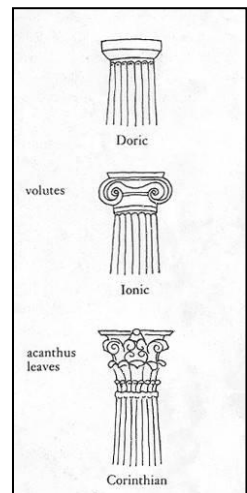


Figure 6. Classical column orders.

¹⁴ McAlester, p. 14.

The Residents of 1420 16th Street

1420 16th St. N.W. was home to a number of colorful characters. The home was built for John B. McGowan and his wife Evelyn. McGowan was a Rear Admiral in the US Navy. He retired from military service in April 1913 and died in 1915. Mrs. McGowan continued living in the house as a widow, accompanied by her daughter Anna, who is mentioned in the 1908-1909 General Assessment of the house.

Anna was succeeded by Charles Stanley White, a prominent surgeon in the area through the first part of the twentieth century. Dr. White was born July 1, 1877. White served as an intern at Columbian University Hospital, then Columbia Hospital, and became Superintendent of the Emergency Hospital by 1908. He did post-graduate work at Harvard, and later became Assistant Professor of Surgery at George Washington University, Medical School. He was also co-editor of the *Washington Medical Annals*.¹⁵



MAY 1941
Charles Stanley White, M.D.
Professor of Surgery
Since 1901

Dr. White's residency was succeeded by Dr. Claude Moore in 1943. A 1955 article published in *The Sunday Star* about one of his tenants headlined: "'Peace' Means 'Hello' at Sixteenth St. Heaven of the Cult of 'Mother God.'" The article tells about Dr. Bernese Williamson, an African American Woman and proclaimed doctor of metaphysical science, who rented from Dr. Moore and began to preach her religious ideologies to a small group of followers. She believed in the "open mind" and the eradication of many imposed religious conventions. "Members live by a pledge to remember their spiritual nature. They greet each other with the word, "Peace." They adopt spiritual names ... All students sign a pledge to give honest service to their employer for their pay, not accepting tips or vacation-with-pay."¹⁶ The headquarters of her establishment, 1420 16th St, was named "Hisacres," and is described as a "New Thought Center" for open-minded individuals who were willing to follow in these ideals.



¹⁵ Nichols, John B. [History of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia 1817-190](#). Washington DC: Medical Society, 1909.

¹⁶ "New Thought." [Google](#).

Bibliography

16th Street. Washington DC: D.C. Office of Historic Preservation, 2000.

"Busy Nathan G. Wyeth Deigns The Washington of Tomorrow." *Washington Post* 7 Jan. 1940: n. pag. Print.

"Cluss-Buildings - the Red Brick City around 1900." CLUSS.
<<http://www.adolfcluss.org/index.php?lang=en&topSub=washington&content=w&sub=3.5>>. Last checked July 13, 2009.

Gabbett, Harry. "Nathan C Wyeth, Architect for D.C., Is Dead Here at 93." *Washington Post*. Aug. 31 1963: B3. Print.

McAlester, Virginia. *Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Knopf, 1984.

"Nathan Wyeth Will Become City Architect." *Washington Post*. 12 Jan. 1934: 15. Print.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Sixteenth Street Historic District (Boundary Expansion). 2006. Washington, DC: National Park Service.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Sixteenth Street Historical District. Washington DC: National Department of the Interior, 1978.

Nichols, John B. History of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia 1817-190. Washington DC: Medical Society, 1909.

"New Thought." Google. 20
<http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:ZCXHSKsmHEkJ:www.novelguide.com>. Last checked July 2009
Washington DC City Directory,