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THE LOSS OF THE FRANCIS SCOTT KEY HOUSE: WAS IT REALLY?

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"The Case of the Lost Landmark: What So Proudly They Nailed Is Gone," trumpeted The Washington Post in a banner headline atop its May 13, 1981, feature section. The exposé by Tom Zito divulged the disappearance of the historic Francis Scott Key house in Georgetown after it was dismantled in 1947 for a highway project. The villain: the National Park Service, which had stored the bricks and lumber from the lawyer-poet's residence for future reconstruction but could now find no trace of the relics.

Thanks to the wire services, the agency's embarrassment was soon published nationwide beneath such headlines as "Missing: One Landmark" (over an editorial in The [Phoenix] Arizona Republic)¹ and "Park Services Misplaces House" (in The Wichita Falls [Texas] Times). The last article, taking a typical view of Washington extravagance, feared for the consequences of the disclosure: "Now, there's no telling how much of our money they're going to spend trying to find all that material from the Key home."²

At negligible cost to the taxpayers, a small but intrepid team of Park Service preservationists (including the author) responded to the publicity by crawling under bridge abutments and scanning maintenance storage areas rumored to be Key house repositories in a hasty search for remnants. The failure of these efforts to unearth so much as a Keystone, board, or brick was duly reported in broadcast interviews by radio and television reporters taking ill-concealed delight in such bureaucratic bungling--or so it seemed to their discomfited subjects.

Fortunately for the latter, public reaction was more helpful than hostile. A self-described psychic from Florida communicated--quite incomprehensibly--the premonitions she experienced when concentrating on the house and offered her continued assistance in the search if further background information were provided.³ Another Floridian proudly reported her knowledge of the exact whereabouts of the house: near her son's farm in rural Maryland.⁴ (The home she recalled turned out to be Key's birthplace, not his later residence in Georgetown.) Even the congressional subcommittee reviewing the Park Service budget soon after the non-discovery of the house was mild in its interrogation of the Service's regional director about the matter. No knuckles were rapped, no heads rolled.

Still, the media publicity could hardly have boosted the Park Service's standing as the nation's principal historic preservation agency. One outside specialist, publicly opposing the dismantling of another threatened Washington building for reconstruction elsewhere, cited the precedent of the Key house as typical of such efforts: "The stonework is mislaid, usually by the National Park Service, which once boasted of its legal mandate to preserve historic structures."⁵ The photograph accompanying the original Post article did not help matters. Captioned "Francis Scott Key's house...before disassembly," in fact it dated from a half-century before, when the house still resembled the stylish Federal residence of its famous owner. Implicit was that the Service had lost the appealing building in the picture.

What happened to the Key house? And was it really a loss?

The house was built by Thomas Clarke, a local merchant and real estate investor, near the west end of Bridge Street (later M Street) in 1795.⁶ Of brick, it rose 2½ stories above the street in front and 3½ stories behind where the ground sloped down to the Potomac River. The front door, with semi-circular fanlight and classical pedimented surround, occupied the leftmost of three bays, which were otherwise defined by windows beneath keystone lintels. Two dormers with roundheaded windows and trim matching that of the entrance broke each slope of the gabled roof. Brick chimneys rose at each end, the prominent projecting one on the west forming an arch over a central second-story window. A one-story wing extended from the same end, and frame porches at the rear overlooked the river. On the grounds were a coach house, smoke house, and "other usefull outhouses."⁷

Sometime between 1805 and 1808 this comfortable upper-middle-class dwelling became the residence of Francis Scott Key and his growing family. Born in Frederick County, Maryland, in 1780, Key graduated from St. John's College in Annapolis, remained in the state capital to study law, married there in 1802, and moved from Frederick to the District of Columbia in 1805 to form a legal partnership with his uncle Philip Barton Key. From his Georgetown home the young attorney journeyed to Baltimore in 1814 to negotiate the release of Dr. William Beanes, seized by the British invading Washington during the war then in progress. There, after observing the British bombardment of Fort McHenry, he penned the verse titled "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Key's family left the Georgetown house about 1830, reputedly because the digging of the new Chesapeake and Ohio Canal through their back yard disturbed their domestic tranquility. Key retained his law office in the wing, however, and after his death in 1843 the house continued in the hands of his heirs for another decade. The next owner, who operated a hotel and restaurant there during the Civil War and a blacksmith and machine shop next door, was probably responsible for the alterations that appear in our earliest photograph of the facade, taken in 1890. Most evident is the conversion of the central window on the ground floor to an additional door, suggesting multiple occupancy of the house by that date.

The building was more visibly devoted to commercial use by 1895, when the wing advertised "ice cold sodas" at five cents a glass. The owners or tenants now sought to capitalize on its history, having painted "The Key Mansion" in large block letters across the facade. A new business establishment directly abutted the wing on the west, and the Capital Transit Company trolley barn rose across the street. Over the next decade the house reflected the changing character of the neighborhood as it successively advertised the presence of a dry goods and notions dealer, a shoemaker, and a nearby drug store--the latter's billing covering the east end of the structure. An ice cream stand appeared against the first floor of that end, balancing the shop in the wing opposite.

Pained by the increasingly tawdry aspect of a structure with such patriotic antecedents, a band of prominent citizens in 1907 formed the Francis Scott Key Memorial Association. Their purpose: "the purchase and preservation of the historic house of Francis Scott Key as a lasting memorial in honor of the author of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"⁸ The officers included Admirals George Dewey and Winfield Scott Schley of Spanish-American War fame, Henry B.F. MacFarland, president of the D.C. Board of Commissioners, and Francis Scott Key-Smith, a great-grandson of the poet and the project's prime mover.

The association leased the house, bedecked it with flags and a portrait of Key, and on Flag Day 1908 ceremoniously opened it to the public with a 21-gun salute from a Marine vessel in the Potomac. But the drab, unfurnished building attracted few visitors and contributors to its purchase and restoration fund. The association enlisted Charles H. Weisgerber, promoter of the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia, to direct fundraising efforts. Weisgerber designed an elaborate membership certificate for donors, painted a portrait of Key as a premium for those signing up at least 30 contributors, appealed to patriotic organizations and Key's alma mater, and tried to organize Francis Scott Key societies throughout Maryland. When public enthusiasm and support were still lacking, the association abandoned its efforts and vacated the premises.

In 1912-13 the house underwent major transformation for commercial use. The gable roof was cut off at the cornice and replaced with a flat roof sloping to the rear. The facade was totally removed and rebuilt with new brick above a plate glass storefront. The distinctive exterior chimney and wing were demolished, to be supplanted by another brick commercial structure

abutting on the west. Seizing the opportunity to rescue some of the original building fabric, Charles Weisgerber purchased from the remodeling contractor a quantity of the sash, doors, lathing, beams, and other woodwork and removed them to storage in Philadelphia and Berlin, New Jersey. Included was a roof beam with the carved date 1795.

In 1931 the federal government acquired the block containing the building as a part of the new Palisades Park. The land was to be cleared and landscaped to enhance the Potomac shoreline above the modern Francis Scott Key Bridge, completed just to the east in 1923. The Key house was now barely recognizable as such; even the flag maker and retailer then in residence made no outward effort to capitalize on the Key connection. But others remembered what the structure had been.

Washington's Evening Star newspaper announced the federal purchase of the Key house and the interest of U.S. Grant III, director of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks, in restoring it.⁹ Declaring that there was no government money available for the work, then estimated to cost \$20,000, Grant invited fund raising and donations by private patriotic societies. The Washington Monarch Club, the Spirit of America League, the Civil Legion, and the U.S. Daughters of 1812 soon responded with inquiries and indications of support. Writing from Philadelphia, Charles Weisgerber even suggested that his salvaged woodwork might be sold as souvenirs to raise cash for the restoration.¹⁰ In the midst of the Depression, however, donated funds proved even less forthcoming than they were 25 years earlier. The National Park Service, which inherited the house in a 1933 governmental reorganization, shifted hopes to the possibility of a federal Depression relief appropriation for the project.

Money was not the only problem. William Partridge, an architectural consultant to Grant's office, had argued that the house was too far gone to be restored with any "sentimental value," that it would detract from the approach to Key Bridge, and that a memorial flagpole on the site would be more suitable.¹¹ Enough members of the Georgetown Citizens' Association held similar views to withhold that influential organization's support.¹² But the most striking dissent came from the instigator of the original restoration campaign. When the National Capital Park and Planning Commission voted in favor of the Park Service's plan, Key's great-grandson publicly announced his disagreement.

"I do not believe, taking the proper definition of the word 'restore', the building can be restored," Francis Scott Key-Smith wrote the commission. "A new building very much or even identically like it can be constructed on the site of the old, using what is left of the old in the construction, but when this is done, it will not be the old building, nor will it be the house Key lived in with his family, nor the floors upon which he walked, nor the windows through which he looked, nor the doors through which he entered, nor the roof that sheltered him and his family." Key-Smith feared that reconstruction would lead to public confusion about the authenticity of such original landmarks as Monticello and Mount Vernon. With the concurrence of other descendants, he urged that the structure be demolished and replaced by a memorial fountain or obelisk.¹³

Taken aback by this unexpected family opposition, the Park Service moved to defend the restoration project. Architect Charles E. Peterson, emphasizing the surviving fabric of the house and the Service's ability to document missing elements, saw "an opportunity because of the many evidences remaining to do an unusually accurate and authentic reconstruction."¹⁴ Historian Verne E. Chate-lain believed that Key's local residence made him one of Washington's few

early hometown heroes, and that restoration of his house would be more fitting than erection of another memorial in what was already a city of monuments.¹⁵ Director Arno B. Cammerer, concerned about adverse public reaction if the building were demolished, felt bound by the Park and Planning Commission's recommendation to press forward with restoration planning and was reassured by the support of his professional staff.¹⁶

Thomas T. Waterman, an assistant to Charles Peterson who would also achieve prominence in the nascent discipline of historic architecture, was assigned to the project. Among his first tasks was a trip to view the materials rescued by Charles Weisgerber in 1913. Portending the ultimate fate of the house, very little was left.¹⁷ But Waterman and Peterson were impressed with the extent of photographic and material data available and felt that gaps could be filled by evidence from contemporary Georgetown houses. By April 1935 working plans were nearly complete for the restoration, then estimated to cost \$55,000.¹⁸

In late 1936 the other buildings on the block were torn down, leaving the Key house standing alone as it had originally but even more stark in its aspect. As hopes for any restoration funding dimmed, further doubts were raised about the validity of the project. "Only two things...would justify the restoration of any ancient structure reduced to the present physical state of the Key House...historical significance and architectural importance," argued Stuart M. Barnette, another Park Service historical architect, the following year. "It is my opinion that neither the ruins are of great architectural importance, nor was the man great whose name is associated with the structure." Barnette proposed dismantling the walls, entombing the original materials in the basement, and marking the relandscaped site with a suitable tablet. If

funds were forthcoming after the Service had attended to its many more important structures throughout the country, the material and data would still be available.¹⁹

Receiving more serious consideration was a proposal for adaptive restoration of the structure in 1939-40, after the Park Service acquired the defunct Chesapeake and Ohio Canal running through its back yard. A recreational boating facility was wanted on the canal in Georgetown, and the Key house was well situated for such use. The rather elaborate plans rendered for the boating concession were not wholly compatible with the historic character of the house, but the Service adopted the concept as a means--however imperfect--of killing two birds with one stone. Publicity brought expressions of support from the Progressive Citizens Association of Georgetown and interest from prospective boating concessionaires.

Money was no more available than before, however, and the adaptive restoration scheme was soon made moot by plans for an elevated highway along the Georgetown waterfront. In September 1941 the National Capital Park and Planning Commission approved a proposed ramp from the highway to Key Bridge across the site of the Key house. Urgent military necessity was cited: the need to expedite traffic flow across the river to the Pentagon, then under construction.²⁰

By this time Park Service officialdom would have welcomed almost any way out of the controversy over the deteriorating eyesore in its custody. Not wishing to impede the nation's defense, Acting Director Arthur E. Demaray hastened to obtain the concurrence of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes: "In view

of the importance of the proposed highway project and the fact that approximately 50 per cent of the structure has been altered and is not original, it is recommended that the house be demolished and that an appropriate marker be placed on or near the site." Ickes readily assented.²¹

The highway project proved less urgent than first portrayed; traffic reached the Pentagon without it throughout the ensuing war. As the Key house lingered on, awaiting destruction by the highway builders, the Park Service publicly belittled its significance. Congressman Mike Monroney of Montana was told that the extensive modifications to the structure made its restoration infeasible and that the nearby Key Bridge already served as an appropriate memorial.²² Chief Historian Herbert E. Kahler assured Mrs. Reau Folk of the Ladies' Hermitage Association that the house had "no direct association with the chief event worthy of commemoration in the life of Francis Scott Key."²³

But the wartime stay of execution gave proponents of the house--notably the local Columbia Historical Society--time to mobilize in its behalf. Society president F. Regis Noel made a radio address and published a booklet urging that the trolley barn across the street be demolished for the highway project instead and that the house be restored for his organization's headquarters. When redesign of the highway was found to be impractical, a compromise was found: relocation of the Key house to a vacant lot on the same street just east of Key Bridge.

In March 1947 legislation providing for a Francis Scott Key National Monument on the new site was introduced in Congress by Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio and Senator Millard Tydings and Representative J. Glenn Beall of Maryland. The bills authorized \$65,000 for constructing, furnishing, and landscaping "a replica as nearly as may be practicable of the house in which Francis Scott Key lived from approximately 1808 to 1828, using such portions of the existing house as may be feasible...."²⁴ Although the Park Service estimated the cost of this undertaking at over \$100,000, it came out in favor of the proposal, asking only that the replica be designated a "national memorial" rather than a national monument because of the non-original site.

With the new highway construction at last underway, the remains of the Key house were finally dismantled in the fall of 1947. The Park Service made an extensive photographic record just prior to demolition and removed the salvageable woodwork to a storage area beneath a parkway terminus at Arlington Memorial Bridge. The highway contractor carried the brick and foundation stone to the intended reconstruction site nearby. Upon enactment of the pending legislation and appropriation of the necessary funds, all was in readiness for the house to rise anew.

Both houses of Congress passed the measure, with only one representative objecting to the expenditure for "just a replica."²⁵ The Commission of Fine Arts, whose approval of the reconstruction plans was required, declared itself "heartily in favor of the proposed project," noting the absence of any other building in Washington commemorating the War of 1812.²⁶ The Bureau of the Budget, however, was disposed otherwise. Citing existing federal commemoration of Key via Fort

McHenry and Key Bridge, the questionable funding authorization in the bill, the shortage of original building materials and absence of Key furnishings from the razed house, and the problem of reconstruction on a different site, the bureau advised the White House that the memorial project "would not be truly representative of the Key house" and "would fail to capture the atmosphere of realism desirable in an expenditure of this proportion."²⁷ Acting on this advice, President Harry S. Truman pocket-vetoed the legislation on June 27, 1948.

The veto surprised and dismayed the Key house partisans. Senator Taft called it "outrageous" and promised to reintroduce the legislation in the next Congress, when he hoped and most political observers expected that Truman would be out of office. F. Regis Noel attacked Truman as motivated by personal dislike for the bill's backers, among whom were a number of old-guard Republicans routinely critical of the President.²⁸ Despite efforts by the Columbia Historical Society and others to regroup, however, the campaign failed to revive. Even a concurrent Park Service scheme to label the original house site with a memorial flagpole and inscription stalled for lack of funds and enthusiasm. The site today remains wholly unmarked.

And what of the salvaged materials, stockpiled in anticipation of their reassembly on the new site? After the reconstruction prospects died, so did much incentive for the Park Service to zealously guard the brickpile. With Georgetown in the midst of its restoration boom, it would have been remarkable if the old bricks had not soon found their way into walls, walkways, and patios around town. The woodwork was more securely stored and protected from public

pilferage, but ultimately the space it occupied was needed for other things, and what could not be used elsewhere was informally disposed of.²⁹ In time, few old Service hands remained who could recollect the unrecorded fate of the materials, leading to such embarrassment over the "lost house" as was suffered recently.

Of more fundamental interest than the question of what happened to the Key house, however, is the question of what should have happened to the Key house. The matter may now seem academic; yet a reexamination can be valuable in illustrating some of the factors that need to be considered in reaching sound decisions about historic preservation.

By the time the government acquired it, the house was so changed that the descendants of its famous occupant disowned it. Yet three of its four walls were still basically intact, and sufficient evidence of its original appearance existed to have allowed accurate restoration of the building itself. The structure's environment posed a greater problem. The original outbuildings had disappeared, and the C & O Canal, whose construction supposedly led Key's family to move out, transformed the landscape he knew. The regrading of the street in front and the massive Key Bridge next door were other irreversible alterations to the historic scene. The Key furnishings were long gone, of course, and little or no information existed to enable either their recovery or their reproduction. Without them, the house could never be a literal portrayal of that occupied by Key, although it might have been adapted for historical exhibits or some wholly modern function.

The last course might in fact have been preferable to the traditional furnished house museum approach. The deed for which Key achieved renown was and is fully and fittingly commemorated by the National Park Service at Fort McHenry. His Georgetown residence had nothing to do with "The Star-Spangled Banner" and was of no more than local significance. The laborious re-creation of Key's domestic surroundings would have been a dubious undertaking--at least for the Park Service, which must give priority to sites of national importance. Restoring the structure externally, identifying but not enshrining it as the Key house, and putting it to some good use would have been appropriate actions producing an attractive local amenity.

Park Service planners hit upon such a course with their scheme for the boating facility. Then came the classic confrontation of the highway construction bulldozers versus the historic landmark, with its classic outcome. Assuming for now that the public interest was better served by the freeway ramp to Key Bridge than by preservation of the Key house in place, should the dismantled remains of the house have been reconstructed nearby?

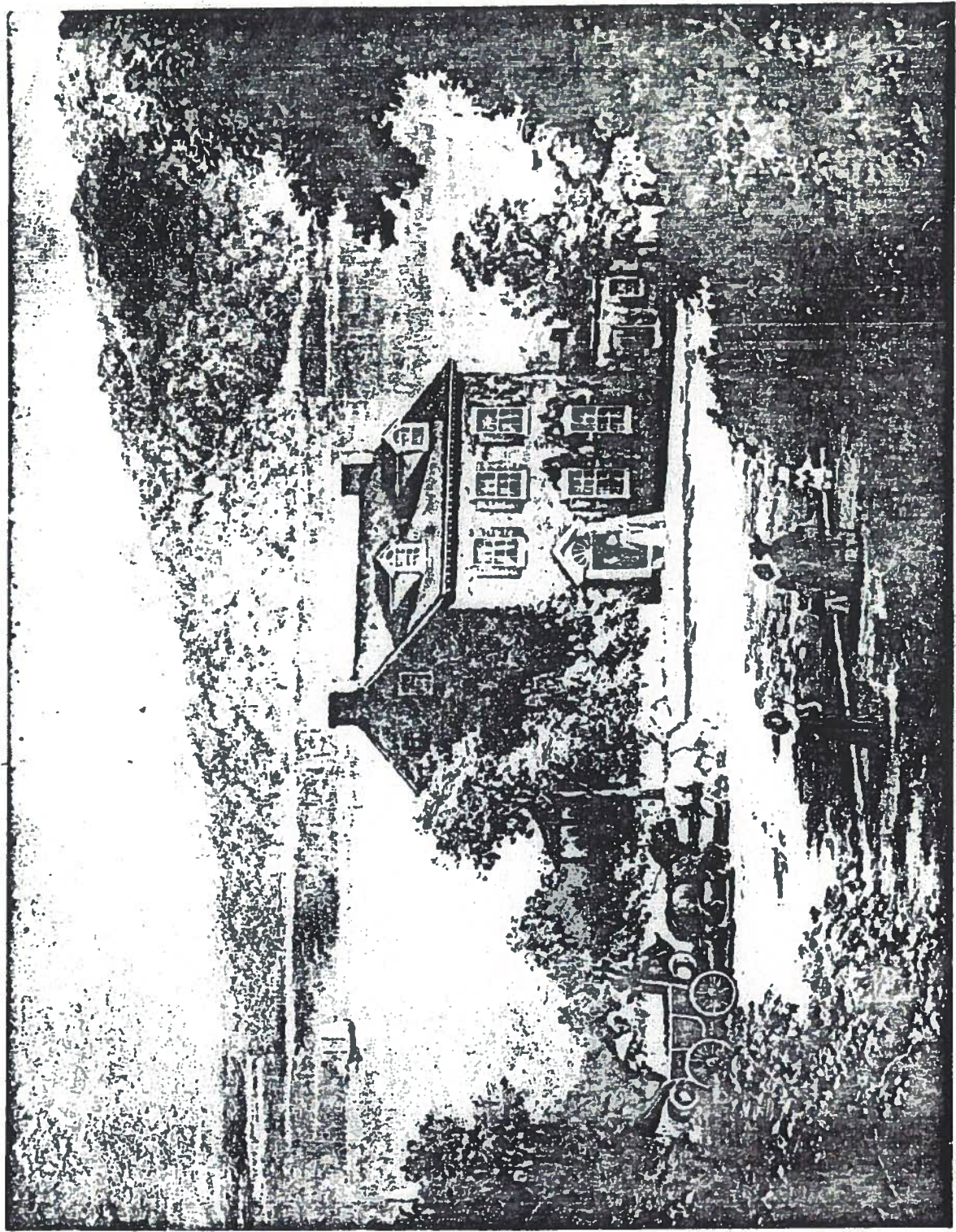
At least from today's preservation perspective, the answer is clear. Despite the incorporation of some original materials, the replica would have been a new structure masquerading as old. In a few circumstances--carefully spelled out in the Park Service's current policy manual--historical reconstructions can be justified. One requirement is that the reconstruction occur on the site of the original. Another is that reconstruction be essential to public understanding of a nationally significant person, place, or event. The proposed Francis Scott Key National Memorial could meet neither criterion.

Key's physical memorials exist at Fort McHenry, at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History where the flag he watched is the centerpiece, and more conventionally, at his grave in Frederick, Maryland. His greatest memorial is the national anthem. Surely Harry Truman did the nation a service by sparing it the national tribute to Key's memory legislated for Georgetown. Never more than a local landmark, the Key house was already lost.

NOTES

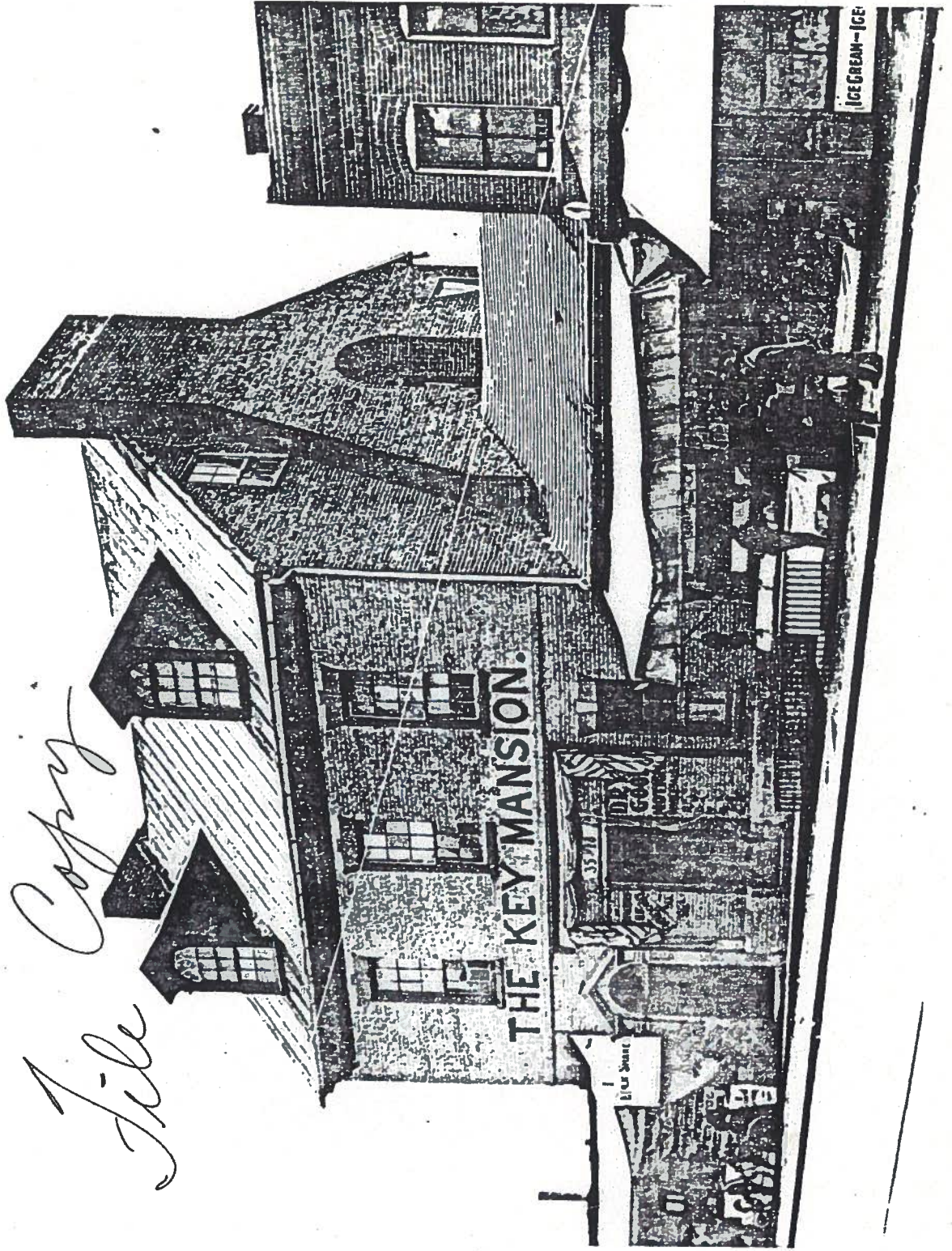
1. May 20, 1981, p. A6.
2. Carroll Copelin, May 20, 1981, p. 7A.
3. Letter, Carolyn Acre to National Park Service, May 18, 1981, Francis Scott Key House File, National Capital Region, National Park Service. (Cited hereafter as FSKH File.)
4. Letter, Henrietta C. Shirey to National Park Service, June 3, 1981, FSKH File.
5. Letter, Donald J. Lehman, Washington Star, June 6, 1981.
6. Walter Storey Chandler vs. Anne Clarke et al., Chancery Record Book 55, pp. 431 ff., Maryland Hall of Records, Annapolis; dated roof beam from house at Star-Spangled Banner Flag House, Baltimore. Clarke died the following year. The oft-published construction date of 1802 is incorrect.
7. Auction sale advertisement in Chandler vs. Clarke.
8. Walter Fawcett, "A Memorial to Francis Scott Key," Baltimore American, May 24, 1908, p. 10D.
9. October 29, 1931.
10. Letter to U.S. Grant III, December 11, 1931, FSKH File.
11. Memorandum to C.W. Eliot and E.N. Chisholm, April 12, 1932, FSKH File.
12. Letter, B. Agee Bowles to U.S. Grant III, April 4, 1932, FSKH File.
13. Letter to T.S. Settle, October 26, 1933; letter to A.B. Cammerer, December 1, 1933, FSKH File.
14. Memorandum to A.B. Cammerer, November 23, 1933, FSKH File.
15. Memorandum to A.B. Cammerer, November 1, 1933, FSKH File.
16. Memorandum to H.C. Bryant and Verne E. Chatelain, October 31, 1933, FSKH File.
17. The dated roof beam was found at The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House in Baltimore, where it remains today.
18. Memorandum, Charles E. Peterson to John Nolen, Jr., April 19, 1935, FSKH File.
19. Memorandum to Branch Spalding, May 17, 1937, FSKH File.
20. Memorandum, John Nolen, Jr., to Arthur E. Demaray, October 2, 1941, FSKH File.

21. Memorandum, Arthur E. Demaray to Harold L. Ickes, October 8, 1941, FSKH File.
22. Letter, Arthur E. Demaray, July 31, 1943, FSKH File. The Francis Scott Key Bridge may seem an unrelated tribute to the poet unless one crosses it at rush hour, when it has been termed The Car-Strangled Spanner.
23. Letter, December 19, 1944, FSKH File.
24. S.J. Res. 84, H.J. Res. 150, 80th Congress.
25. Rep. Robert W. Kean, Congressional Record, 80th Congress, 2nd Session, March 1, 1948, p. 1938.
26. Letter, Gilmore D. Clarke to Elmer B. Staats, June 18, 1948, Bureau of the Budget Bill File (S.J. Res. 84, 80th Congress), Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Library. (Cited hereafter as Bill File.)
27. Letter, Elmer B. Staats to William J. Hopkins, June 24, 1948, Bill File.
28. "Taft to Push Replica of Key's House," Washington Post, September 5, 1948.
29. Interviews, Rudolph Bartel, retired chief of maintenance, and William H. Haussmann, retired architect, National Capital Parks, National Park Service, May 26, 1981.

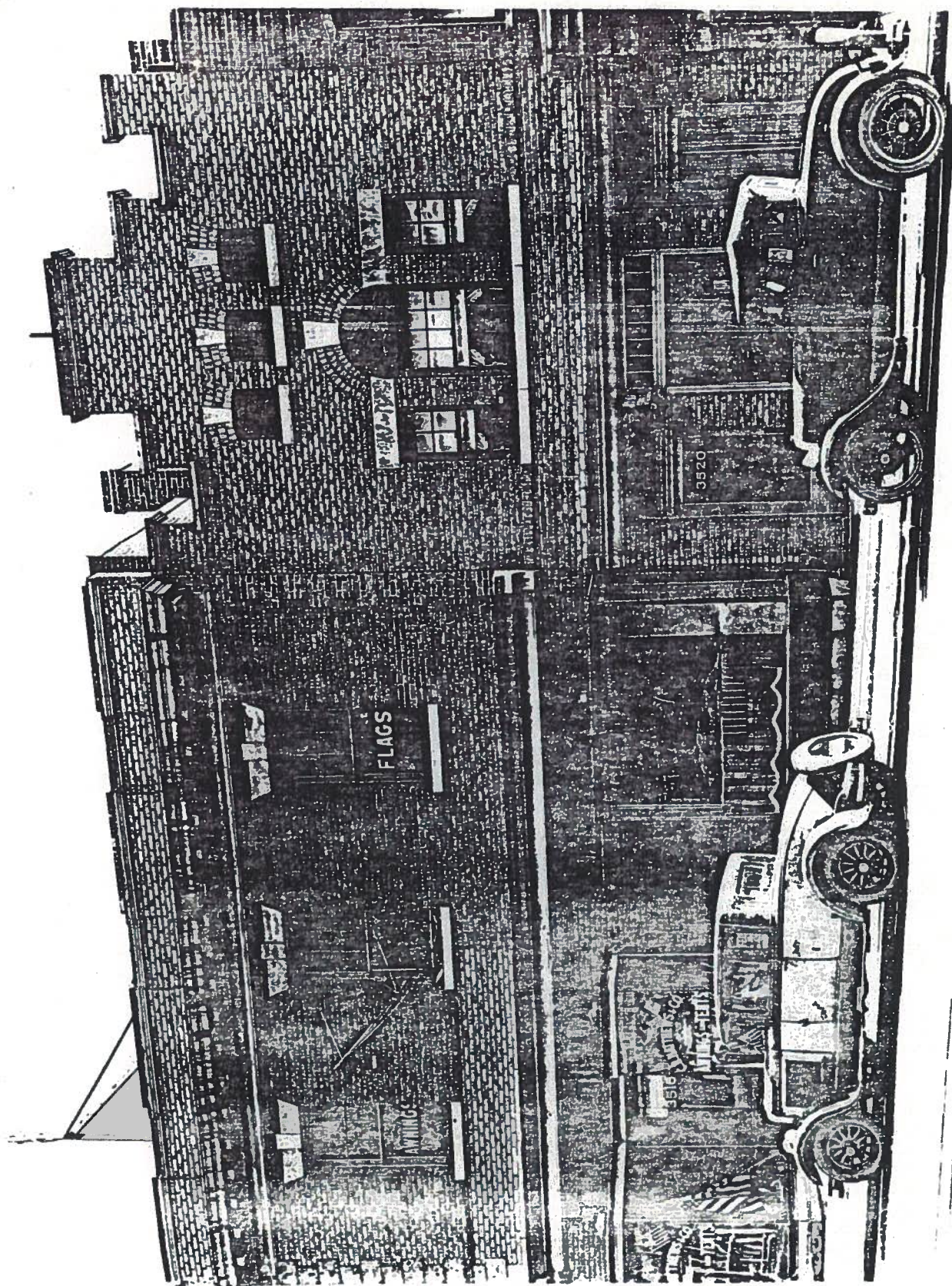


The home of Francis Scott Key, author of the National Anthem, on the banks of the Potomac River in Georgetown. (From an old painting.) A modern bridge now crosses the Potomac at the point where this historic home once stood.

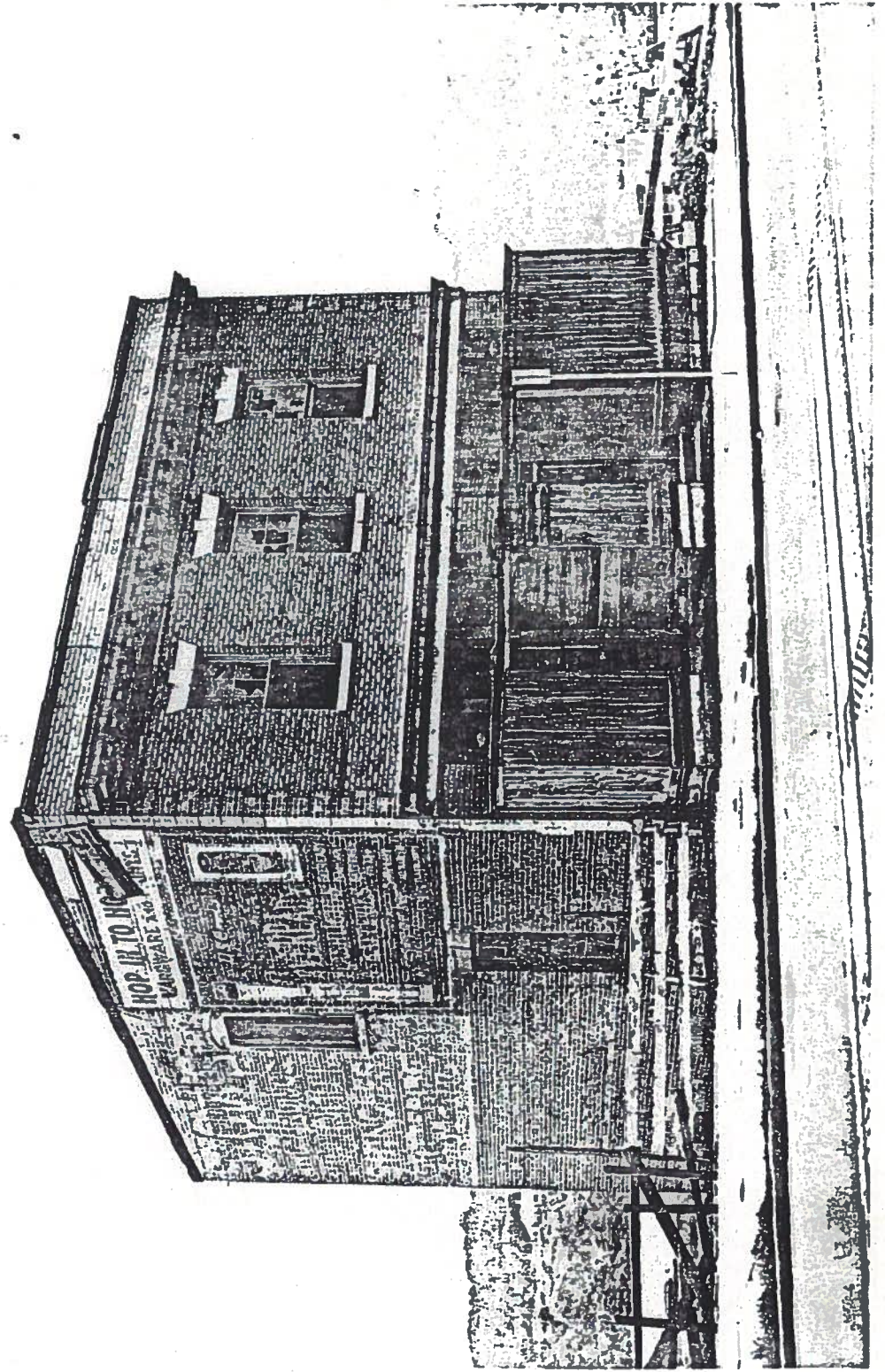
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c. 1900



1932



1947