

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

37 L ST, SE (Cinema Follies)

HABS No. DC-885

Location: 37 L St., SE, Washington, District of Columbia

The coordinates for this building are 38.523810 N, -77.002909 W and were obtained through Bing maps (www.bing.com/maps/) on August 4, 2016. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: 37 L St, SE is a two-story, flat-roofed, brick structure with a single-story rear wing that was constructed as a warehouse between 1893 and 1903. Between 1975 and 1977, the building was occupied by the Cinema Follies, an adult film theater that catered to gay men. The Cinema Follies was frequently targeted by the Metropolitan Police Department during this short period. In the process, the theater became a rallying point for local gay activists who demanded that the police end its decades-long practice of harassing queer people and businesses. Cinema Follies was thrust into the spotlight again in October 1977 when a fire claimed the lives of nine patrons. 37 L St, SE is one of the last remaining buildings tied to the South Capitol Street area's once-thriving queer nightlife scene.

Description: 37 L St., SE is a two-story, flat-roofed, brick building with a single-story rear wing. The building was constructed as a warehouse between 1893 and 1903.¹ The structure's front (north) façade faces L St., SW while its south and west elevations front alleys. The structure's exterior brick walls are plastered with tan-colored stucco scored to resemble stone blocks; the stucco is cracked and missing in places.

The structure's front façade is marked by strong symmetry – with a single garage door opening in the center and two flush doors on each end. The doors have paneled pilasters and pointed pediments – all made of wood that has been painted white. On the second story, two equally-sized rectangular windows overlook the first story garage door while a larger rectangular window overlooks each of the first story flush doors. All four windows are evenly-spaced, outlined by plain wood trim, and have sills formed by a belt course. A plain cornice extends just below the façade's parapet.

Other openings include a garage door and a flush metal door on the rear elevation's first story. Another door on the second story opens onto a wood deck on the rear wing's roof. On the west elevation, there are multiple similarly-sized,

¹ The original permit to build the structure could not be located. An 1893 real estate map shows a group of stone buildings on the southwest corner of L and Half Streets, SE. A building matching the current footprint of 37 L St, SE first appears in a 1903 map. G.M. Hopkins & Co., "Real estate plat-book of Washington, District of Columbia. (Washington, DC: G.M. Hopkins, 1893), volume 2, plate 17; *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, District of Columbia: Complete in Four Volumes* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist, 1903), volume 2, plate 17.

evenly-spaced window openings, which are mostly covered with stucco. The window openings all have protruding sills.

The structure's east elevation is obscured by vegetation and adjacent structures.

History: 37 L. St, SE first appears in the 1903 *Baist's Real Estate Atlas* as part of a small complex of brick and frame buildings on the southwest corner of L and Half Streets, SE. The complex was owned by the United States Sanitary Company, which manufactured steel wagons and carts to haul waste. According to maps from the 1920s, the building at 37 L St, SE was later used to store scrap iron and other waste, a function in keeping with the industrial character of the neighborhood which also included garages and fuel yards.² By 1938, the structure had ceased to function as a warehouse and had been converted into a dairy – first for Washington Maid Ice Cream and then for Wakefield Dairy.³ In the 1940s, Wakefield Dairy built an addition to the structure that connected it with their old plant at 41 L St, SE. Both the addition and the 41 L St, SE building were later demolished though the date of their demolition has not been determined.

In 1975, the structure at 37 L St, SE opened as the Cinema Follies, an adult film theater for gay men. In addition to screening movies around the clock, the seventy-five seat theater hosted a range of special programs for its customers. Follies members interested in live entertainment could watch burlesque dancers or meet pornographic film actors who made regular appearances. More outgoing members might participate in events like the Body Beautiful or Glory 'O' contests, which each awarded hundreds of dollars in cash prizes.⁴ Few Cinema Follies events were as anticipated as the Roman Orgy. The theater's management teased members in a letter announcing the event, "Yes, another Roman 'O'. Everyone knows what that means – Stars on stage – champagne – Towels – Champagne breakfast – noise makers – hot dancers and more, more, more."⁵ Cinema Follies' bold programming helped the theater amass an estimated – but no doubt exaggerated – membership of twenty thousand people within two years of opening and another thirty-five thousand by 1981.⁶

As its popularity increased, the theater attracted unwanted attention from the Metropolitan Police Department. In the early morning hours of February 7, 1976, MPD raided Club East II, a bath house, and the Cinema Follies simultaneously. Officers seized two pornographic films and jailed the manager of the Cinema

² *Baist's Real Estate Atlas* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist, 1928), volume 2, plate 17.

³ *Baist's Real Estate Atlas* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist, 1938), volume 2, plate 17; *Baist's Real Estate Atlas* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist, 1946), volume 2, plate 17.

⁴ Edward Dawson Letter to Cinema Follies Members, 14 May 1984, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Edward Dawson Letter to Cinema Follies Members, 27 November 1982, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁵ Cinema Follies Club flier, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁶ Donia Mills, "Washington Called the Gay Capital," *Washington Star*, October 30, 1977; William Oates, Jr. letter to Marion Barry, 6 July 1981, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Follies for obscenity.⁷ Police returned to the theater in April and seized additional films. Cinema Follies owner Bill Oates, though, was unwilling to bow to police pressure – even as he stood trial for obscenity. He instead claimed that he was being persecuted “for showing normal gay relations.”⁸ The Cinema Follies promised a \$100 reward to the member who wrote the best letter against the club’s ongoing harassment by police.⁹ The club also issued “Know Your Rights” passes for a free courtroom screening of *Sex Olympics* and *Pool Party*, two pornographic films confiscated during a January 1976 raid. The theater invited members to wear costumes, bring friends, and pack the courtroom to show their support. As with many of the arrests made during the police’s crackdown on gay theaters and baths, the Bill Oates and Cinema Follies trial ended without a conviction. The jury could not reach a verdict, and prosecutors’ threats to retry Oates never materialized.

Though they celebrated the outcome of Oates’s trial, gay activists continued to use the raids at the Cinema Follies to protest the police’s long history of anti-LGBTQ harassment. *Washington Blade* reporter Frank Akers feared that police harassment and raids was just the first step in a larger campaign to repress queer Washingtonians and render them invisible. “The Cinema Follies is Washington’s last stronghold for gay male film devotees... What happens after the Cinema Follies is gone?” Akers asked. “Speculation is running rampant. The gay baths seem a likely target, then perhaps the bars, and eventually such gatherings as MCC [the Metropolitan Community Church], GAA [the Gay Activists Alliance], and even private meetings in people’s homes.” He worried, “It could be a question of the imminent collapse, through erosion, of the gay ecology.”¹⁰

Frank Kameny, the city’s most prominent gay activist, called on Mayor Walter Washington to apologize for the raids and take steps to ensure that similar acts of harassment would not happen again. He further called on the mayor to order police to return confiscated films and remind them that “they exist to protect and not harass the gay community.”¹¹ Paul Kuntzler of the Gay Activists Alliance and Richard Maulsby of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club too demanded that public officials condemn the police’s actions.¹² Their lobbying apparently worked. The *Blade* reported that DC Council members John Wilson and Marion Barry “responded sympathetically and favorably” to letters protesting the raids. In a March 1976 meeting with the GAA, Mayor Washington affirmed that he was committed to “restor[ing] good relations” between the District’s police and its LGBTQ residents.¹³ The dialogue that followed the Cinema Follies’ raids marked

⁷ “D.C. Police Harass Private Gay Clubs,” *Washington Blade*, March 1976.

⁸ Cinema Follies Club flier, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁹ Cinema Follies Club Reward Flier, Box 121, Folder 3, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ Frank Akers, “Police Harassment of DC Film Clubs Continues,” *Blade*, June 1976.

¹¹ “Police Harassment of Gay Clubs Continues,” *Blade*, April 1976.

¹² Untitled article, *Blade*, March 1976.

¹³ *Ibid.*

a productive turning point in the relationship between MPD and queer establishments, and signaled a tenuous partnership between Washington's queer residents and city officials.

The Cinema Follies at 37 L St, SE, however, did not survive to benefit from this partnership. In the early morning hours of October 24, 1975, theater owner Bill Oates and contractor Marty Crowetz were downstairs setting up for the theater's second anniversary celebration while patrons enjoyed a movie in the upstairs theater. A natural gas heater near the entrance exploded suddenly, and the fire quickly grew uncontrollable as it interacted with a cleaning solvent that had recently been applied to the carpet.¹⁴ Oates and Crowetz scrambled to extinguish the flames before one ran out to get help from firefighters at the closest fire station. By the time they returned, the fire had engulfed the entrance and shot up the staircase, blocking the firefighters from rescuing the men trapped upstairs. The patrons tried to exit through a rear door but were unsuccessful.¹⁵ Thick smoke blanketed the theater. Nine men died.

In the aftermath of the fire, the Cinema Follies again became a rallying point for queer Washingtonians. Almost immediately, Paul Kuntzler publicly pressured the fire department to inspect LGBTQ nightlife establishments for fire code violations to ensure that the Cinema Follies tragedy did not repeat elsewhere.¹⁶ The *Blade* took the tragedy as a bittersweet moment. The fire killed nine men, including a World Bank economist, a Midwestern minister, and a Congressional aide.¹⁷ The paper, though, took comfort in the fact the incident finally "forced many people to rethink their stereotypes of gays – and in doing so, to recognize these men as members of their families, their friends, their co-workers and their neighbors." The paper added, "Because it was tragic and painful, [the fire] proved that gay Washington can be a critical factor in responding to a crisis [and] link arms together and provide a locus for caring." At a memorial service for the victims, the Metropolitan Community Church's Rev. Larry Uhrig simply echoed that he was "gladdened that, finally, a community is able to bury its dead."

Though the 37 L St, SE building survived the fire with minimal damage, the Cinema Follies never returned permanently. Instead, the theater relocated to 24 O St, SE where it remained until the early 2000s. Like many LGBTQ establishments boarding South Capitol Street, the Cinema Follies' second theater was demolished

¹⁴ "Fire Stirs Strong Community Reaction," *Blade*, November 1977.

¹⁵ Fire inspectors and witnesses later claimed that the door was padlocked. Paul Kuntzler reported that the door had been locked in order to prevent robbers and "unwanted police" from sneaking into the building. However, Marty Crowetz maintained that the door was not padlocked and that the patrons simply could not figure out how to open it in all of the confusion. Laura Kiernan, "Flames were Shooting Up Stairwell," *Washington Post*, October 27, 1977; "Negligence Investigated as Fire at SE Club for Homosexuals Kills 6," *Star*, October 25, 1977; Lou Romano, "Follies Probe Continues, Fire Dept. Begins Checks," *Blade*, December 1977.

¹⁶ Kuntzler claimed that most LGBTQ establishments attempted to operate under the radar of law enforcement and, therefore, had not been inspected for potential violations. Ron Shaffer, "Leader Sees Loss for Gay Community," *Washington Post*, October 25, 1977.

¹⁷ Galen Ross and Lou Romano, "Fire Stirs Strong Community Reaction," *Blade*, November 1977.

to make way for Nationals Ballpark and related redevelopment projects. The original location has been used as a garage for a cab company since the early 1980s. Though its time as the Cinema Follies Theater was short-lived, the structure remains one of the last tangible vestiges of the queer nightlife scene that once animated the area.

Sources: Collections, Repositories, and Archives

Library of Congress: newspapers, manuscript collections

NewsBank: newspapers

ProQuest: newspapers

Rainbow History Project: oral history interviews

Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library: maps

Historian: Amber Bailey, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2016

Project

Information: Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of the commercial structure at 1824 Half Street, SW was undertaken as part of the 2016 HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by HABS and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) to allow a graduate student to work on a HABS history project. Amber Bailey (Loyola University Chicago), 2016 Fellow, produced historical reports for several buildings related to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) nightlife in Washington, DC. HABS is within the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service (Catherine Lavoie, Chief, HABS; Richard O'Connor, Chief, HDP). Project planning was coordinated by Lisa P. Davidson, HABS historian and Chair, HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship Committee.



Figure 1: The north façade of 37 L St., SE (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 2: The north and west façade of 37 L St., SE (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.