

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1101 KENYON ST, NW (Nob Hill)

HABS No. DC-882

Location: 1101 Kenyon St., NW, Washington, District of Columbia

The coordinates for this building are 38.554743 N, -77.014053 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: 1101 Kenyon St, NW is a two-story brick structure located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. Between 1957 and 2004, the structure housed Nob Hill, a bar catering to African American gay men. When it closed, Nob Hill was the oldest continuously-operating LGBTQ nightlife establishments in the District and one of the oldest gay bars in the country.

Description: 1101 Kenyon St, NW is a two-story, flat-roofed structure built as an apartment and store in 1926. Located in a residential neighborhood, the structure is attached to the east end of a series of turn-of-the-century row houses. Nob Hill's front entrance faces southeast towards the corner of 11th and Kenyon Streets, NW. The building's south and east elevations front Kenyon and 11th Streets, respectively; its rear (north) elevation faces an alley. The building's exterior walls are primarily 5:1 common-bond blond brick.

When it was constructed, the building's storefront level featured three oblong store windows that projected three feet from the building line. Each of the store windows is now covered with wood and Formstone siding (except for a wide rectangular picture window) and topped with a shed roof with wood shakes. The original entrance is enclosed with a wood vestibule topped with a shed roof with wood shakes. Based on historical images from the 1970s, the addition appears to have replaced a marquee awning that hung above the original entrance.¹

There are five flush doors on the first story. Other first story openings include four differently-sized, unevenly-spaced windows. On the second story, there appear to be nine rectangular and square windows that are differently-sized and unevenly-spaced, including a small window with a balconette above the main entrance. All the second story windows are covered with plywood and have brick lintels. A belt course of rowlock bricks also serves as a sill for each of the second floor windows. The parapet is accentuated with a brick cornice and burgundy-colored metal coping.

The structure's south elevation faces a patio enclosed by a wood and metal fence. A door on the rear elevation's second story opens onto a metal staircase. The staircase

¹ "Nob Hill entrance," Gay Businesses and Venues Collection, Rainbow History Project Archives Online, <https://rainbowhistory.omeka.net> (accessed August 12, 2016).

leads to a concrete patio and an unattached garage, which are enclosed by a wood and chain-link fence.

The structure's exterior bears little ornamentation. Wood signs above the three show windows read, "BAR & GRILL" and "Dining, Dancing..." A prominent air duct on the eastern façade bears the words "WONDERLAND BALLROOM" in large wood letters. Above a door on the southern elevation, two metal lion head ornaments are affixed to the brick. Based on historical photographs, the ornaments once anchored an overhang that has been removed.

Inside, the main dining area is large and open with booths built into the show windows and a long bar on the opposite wall. Behind the bar, a narrow hallway leads to an exterior door and a stairway. The upstairs has two small bathrooms and another open dining area with a bar, an elevated stage, and two skylights.

History:

In 1926, James Witt hired D. Sutton to design a store and five-room apartment at 1101 Kenyon St, NW.² The structure was subsequently occupied by two dry cleaning and laundry businesses before opening as Nob Hill around 1953.³ The building originally served as a meeting space and private social club for queer African American men. In 1957, Nob Hill opened to the public but still catered to black gay men, especially those attending the nearby Howard University.

Nob Hill emerged at the tail end of a period when racial discrimination was still legal in Washington, DC. Like almost every other segment of life, the District's queer nightlife scene in the first half of the twentieth century was divided along racial lines codified by federal law. These laws combined with virulent anti-black racism to exclude African Americans from popular queer-friendly nightlife spots like the Chicken Hut (1720 H St, SW) and Johnnie's (500 8th St, SE). Whether guided by legal segregation or a self-help ideology, black Washingtonians founded parallel institutions in their own neighborhoods. A distinct queer black nightlife scene developed north of downtown along upper 7th and 14th Streets.⁴ The Cozy Corner (708 Florida Ave, NW) and Nob Hill (1101 Kenyon Street, NW) became favored evening hangouts among gay students at nearby Howard University.⁵ The Black Nuggett (2504 14th St, NW), Bob's Inn (3316 14th St, NW), and the Howard

² Application for Permit to Build, Permit No. 7922, March 29, 1926. Washington, DC Building Permits, Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. Microfilm.

³ *Polk's Washington (District of Columbia) City Directory* (Richmond: R.L. Polk, 1940); *Polk's Washington* (Richmond: R.L. Polk, 1954).

⁴ Holmes, Kwame, "Chocolate to Rainbow City: The Dialectics of Black and Gay Community Formation in Postwar Washington, DC, 1946-1978," PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011, IDEALS database, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/26383>, 116.

⁵ Rainbow History Project, *Gay D.C. Walking Tours: African Americans* (Washington, DC: Rainbow History Project, 2003).

Theatre (2504 14th St, NW) all welcomed female impersonators.⁶ Except for Nob Hill, all of these establishments were damaged or destroyed in the 1968 riots.⁷

Following the riots, Nob Hill began competing with membership-based social clubs and a new wave of queer bars and restaurants. Northwest Washington continued to be the epicenter of queer black nightlife with La Zambra (1406 14th St, NW) opening in 1970 followed by the Brass Rail (811 13th St., NW) in 1973, the ClubHouse (1296 Upshur St, NW) in 1975, and the New Yorker (1212 New York Ave, NW) in 1981. Two notable geographic exceptions were the Delta Elite (3734 10th St, NE), which opened in Northeast in 1976, and the Bachelor's Mill (500 8th St, SE), which opened in Southeast in 1978. In the 1970s and 1980s, queer black Washingtonians also began to be admitted sparingly to bars and nightclubs that primarily served middle-class white gay men. Against this renewed competition, Nob Hill acquired a reputation as the "granddaddy of black gay clubs."⁸

The title at times proved to be more derisive than reverential. Nob Hill continued to attract customers with its intimate atmosphere, drag shows, male dancers, and Gospel Hour showcase of local choirs.⁹ One observer described the lively and spirited atmosphere at the bar on a typical weekend night: "Nob Hill... catches fire on Sunday gospel nights when local groups tear the place up with a spicy piano and high, searing bar-glass-shimmying notes. It's a gimmick – a hand-clapping foot-stomping, tambourine-whomping lure that has filled the club for years."¹⁰ Other Washingtonians, though, regularly dismissed the bar as elitist and dated. In an article for *Blacklight*, one local described the bar's clientele as a clique of "high government workers, ministers, and school teachers [who] scrutinized with a very critical eye" visitors who "did not possess the correct social and economic qualities."¹¹ Others pithily referred to Nob Hill as "Snob Hill" and "The Wrinkle Room."¹²

Nob Hill nonetheless outlasted almost all of its competitors, remaining a quiet fixture in the District's queer nightlife scene until it closed in February 2004. That same year, 1101 Kenyon St, NW reopened as the Wonderland Ballroom, a neighborhood bar.¹³

⁶ Kwame Holmes, "Chocolate to Rainbow City: The Dialectics of Black and Gay Community Formation in Postwar Washington, DC, 1946-1978," PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011, IDEALS database, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/26383>, 116.

⁷ Holmes, "Chocolate to Rainbow City," 116.

⁸ Bill Alexander, "Gay Bar Wars," *Washington Post*, February 5, 1981.

⁹ *Betty & Pansy's Severe Queer Review* (San Francisco: Bedpan Productions, 1993), 29-30; Randy Shulman, "Top of the Hill," *Metro Weekly*, May 21, 2003.

¹⁰ Alexander, "Gay Bar Wars."

¹¹ Don Cotter, "Cliques," *Blacklight*, vol. 2, no. 3, December 1980-January 1981.

¹² Sean Bugg, "Closed for Business," *Metro Weekly*, February 25, 2004; Justin Moyer, "On the Hill," *Washington City Paper*, January 26, 2001.

¹³ *About Us – The Wonderland Ballroom* (<http://www.thewonderlandballroom.com/about/>), accessed August 12, 2016.

Sources: Published Sources and Reports

Rainbow History Project, *Gay D.C. Walking Tours: African Americans*
(Washington, DC: Rainbow History Project, 2003).

Collections, Repositories, and Archives

Historical Society of Washington, DC: clippings

ProQuest: newspapers

Rainbow History Project: photographs

Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library: building permits
and directories

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 south and east façades of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.

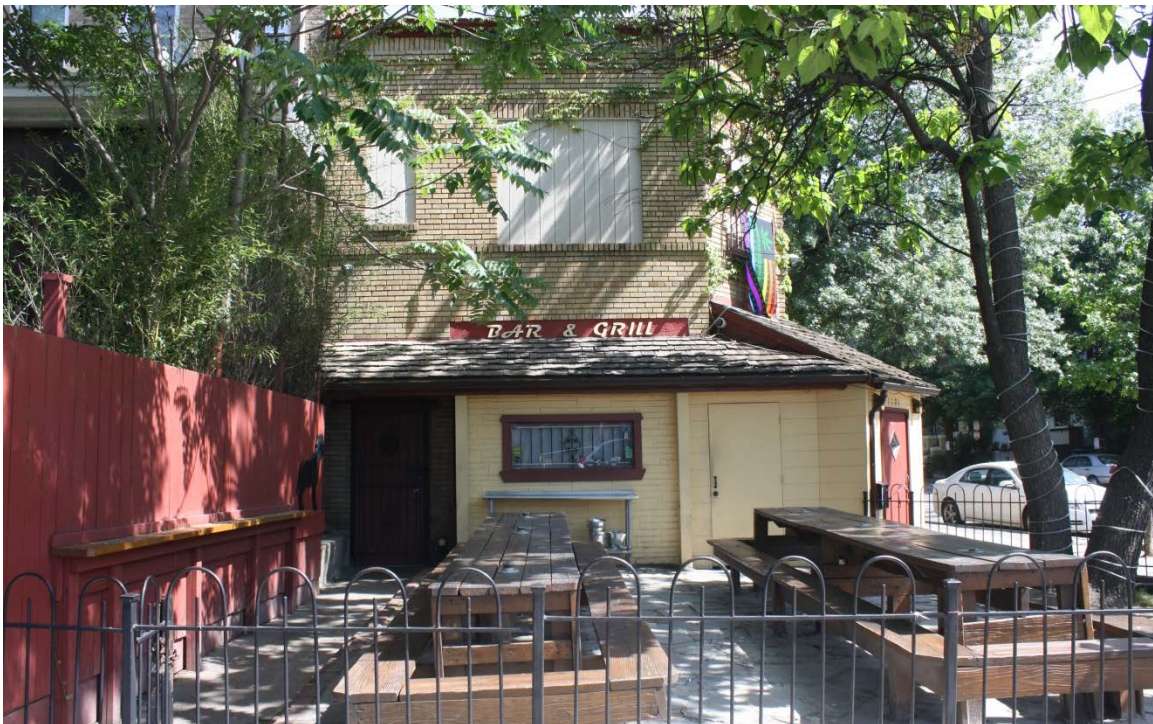


Figure 2: The south façade of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 3: Rear (northern) facade of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 4: Interior of first floor of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by the author, 30 June 2016.



Figure 5: Stairway inside 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by the author, 30 June 2016.

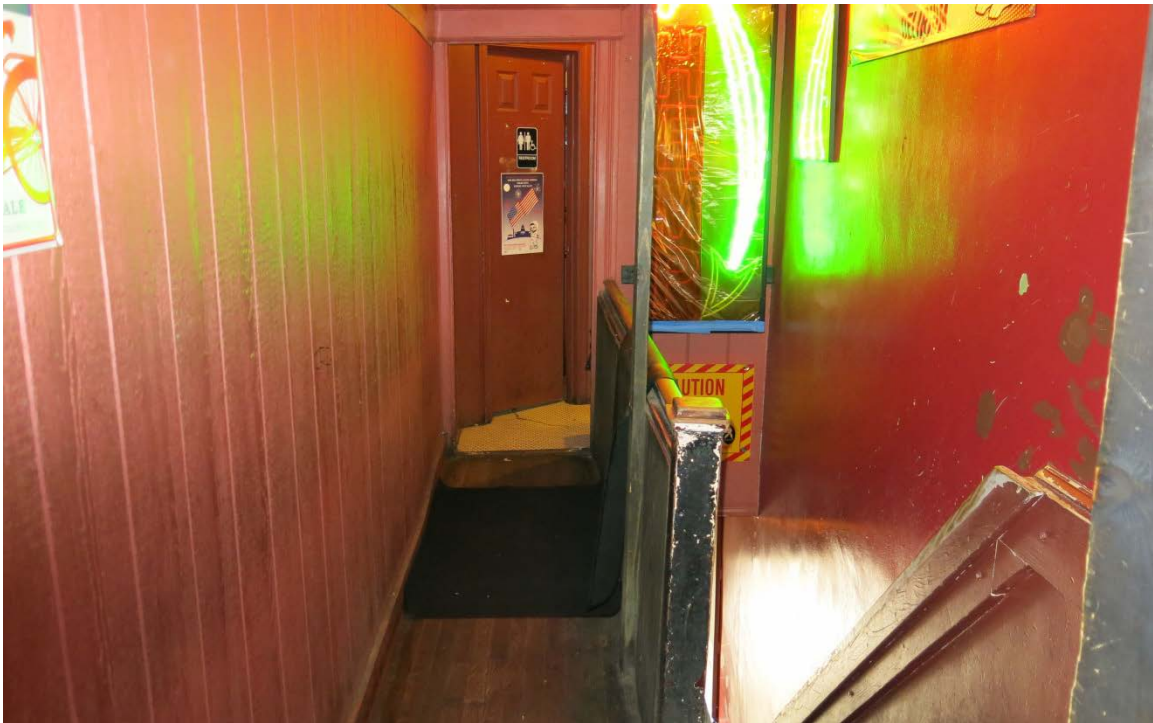


Figure 6: Second floor of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by the author, 30 June 2016.



Figure 7: Second floor dining area of 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by the author, 30 June 2016.

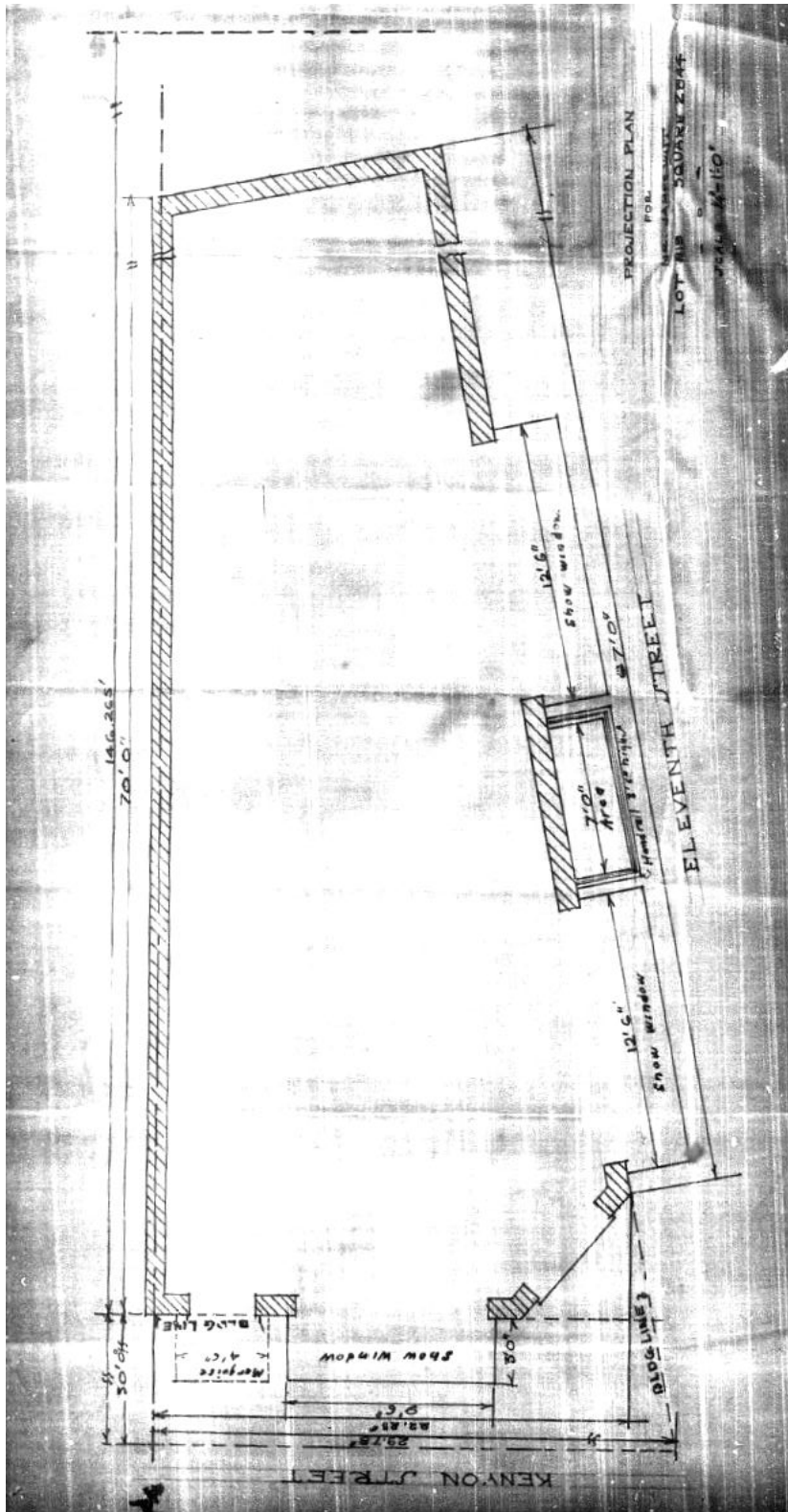


Figure 8: Projection Plan for 1101 Kenyon St, NW (Commercial), 29 March 1926.

Source: DC Building Permit #7922, Washingtonia Collection, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC.