

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1824 HALF ST, SW  
(Pier 9)

HABS No. DC-886

Location: 1824 Half St., SW, Washington, District of Columbia

The coordinates for this building are 38.86743 N, -77.01033 W and were obtained through Bing maps ([www.bing.com/maps/](http://www.bing.com/maps/)) on August 4, 2016. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: 1824 Half Street, SW is a simple, two-story, flat-roofed cinderblock and brick structure in Buzzard Point, an industrial area located near the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. Constructed in 1947, the building served as a warehouse for a number of businesses before being converted into the Pier 9, a popular disco catering to gay men, in 1970. The disco helped to transform the industrial area bordering South Capitol Street into a hub of the District's queer nightlife scene and a haven for its LGBTQ patrons.

Description: 1824 Half Street, SW is a simple, two-story, flat-roofed cinderblock and brick structure that was built as a warehouse in 1947. The structure is the southernmost unit of six connected warehouse buildings that are banked into a hillside. The front elevations of the connected units are stepped back from 1824 Half St, SW, but the rear elevations of all six units are continuous. The structure's front façade faces west to Half Street, SW, and the back (east) entrance opens onto Water Street, SW, which runs parallel to the nearby Anacostia River.

The structure's walls are primarily 6:1 common-bond red brick though the front façade has been painted black. The brick from the southern façade meets the brick from the eastern façade at an angle, forming distinctive tooting or pigeonhole corners. Each of the structure's elevations features a stepped parapet (with a higher section in the center) capped with black and rust-colored metal coping. Three evenly-spaced, similarly-sized small rectangular insets sit just below each elevation's parapet.

Many of the structure's original window openings, which are mostly rectangular and irregularly-spaced, have been filled in with closely matching brick. The filled-in window openings on the front façade's first story have protruding rowlock brick sills. The remaining windows include a mix of types, most notably fixed single-pane square and rectangular windows and fixed eight-pane rectangular windows with wood muntins. Other openings include louver vents of assorted sizes and three scuppers connected to downspouts that run down the front façade's center and edges.

The front façade also has two black metal flush doors – each covered by a long convex awning and surrounded by wrought iron fencing. There are two additional flush doors on both the side (southern) and rear (eastern) elevations. In the rear, a garage door opening has been filled in with cinderblock.

Historical images suggest that the structure's front façade has been significantly altered since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Most notably, the westernmost door was surrounded by black panels that extended to the top of the second-story windows. Above the door, the words "THE PIER" were painted in stylized white lettering. Except for the black doors, the front façade was painted white. The second story windows were fixed eight-pane rectangular windows with brick sills identical to those remaining below the first story window openings.

History:

The commercial structure at 1824 Half Street, SW was designed and built by George C. Burns in 1946-1947 as a warehouse for the Tropical Oil Company.<sup>2</sup> Over the next two decades, the structure was occupied by a number of businesses, including the Home Moving and Storage, Commercial Office Furniture, and Nash Marine Supplies companies.<sup>3</sup> Located near the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers known as Buzzard Point, the site was surrounded by industrial buildings and sat directly across from the towering PEPCO power plant.

In 1970, the warehouse found an unexpected occupant in the Pier 9, a disco catering to gay men. The Pier 9's gritty industrial setting might have made its success appear improbable initially. However, the club debuted just as the District's nightlife scene was being swept up by a new craze. Mega discos were a new type of nightlife spot of unprecedented scale that could best be created in "airplane-hangar-sized" warehouses like the one at 1824 Half St, SW.<sup>4</sup> Besides space, warehouses offered cheap rents, commercial zoning, and open interior layouts that could be easily redesigned. For queer Washingtonians, in particular, Pier 9's remote location protected them from the watchful and judgmental eyes of others. One Pier 9 regular, Peter Jefts, appreciated the club's locale because "it was in the middle of nowhere, and you didn't have to worry about people driving by and seeing you."<sup>5</sup>

As one of the most popular nightlife establishments in the District, the Pier 9 helped to transform the industrial areas flanking South Capitol Street into a haven for queer Washingtonians. The club was soon joined by other LGBTQ-oriented discos like the Grand Central (900 1st St, SE) and the Lost and Found (56 L St, SE); theaters like Waaay Off Broadway (55 K St, SE) and the Cinema Follies (37 L St, SE and 24 O St, SE); and the Club Washington bathhouse (24 O St, SE).<sup>6</sup> None of these establishments, though, seriously rivaled the Pier 9 in popularity.

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<sup>1</sup> "Front entrance of The Pier," c. 1971-1974, The Pier Photograph Collection, Rainbow History Project Archives Online, <https://rainbowhistory.omeka.net> (accessed August 5, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Application for Permit to Build, Permit No. 292189, January 22, 1947. Washington, DC Building Permits, Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. Microfilm.

<sup>3</sup> *Polk's Washington (District of Columbia) City Directory* (Richmond: R.L. Polk, 1954); *Polk's Washington* (Richmond: R.L. Polk, 1960); *Polk's Washington* (Richmond: R.L. Polk, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Anne Dolan, "Washington's New Super Bars," *Washington Star*, October 7, 1975. Newsbank.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Jefts interview by Allen Young, April 24, 2012, transcript, Oral History Collection, Rainbow History Project, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Rainbow History Project, *Gay D.C. Walking Tours: South Capitol Street* (Washington, DC: Rainbow History Project, 2003).

The *Washington Star* called the club “probably the best disco in town” while the *Post* declared unequivocally that the Pier 9 was “one of the best ongoing parties yet invented.”<sup>7</sup> Such press coverage helped cement the club’s reputation as one of the most glamorous nightlife spots for both queer and heterosexual Washingtonians.

Pier 9 owed its success to the unconventional and multi-faceted experience owners Donald Culver and Bill Bickford created for patrons. Culver produced displays he called “Lasermania,” which the *Post* remembered in his obituary as “the best light show in town.”<sup>8</sup> The super disco also boasted four bars, upstairs and downstairs dancefloors, a catering service, an in-house theater troupe, and Pier 9-branded merchandise.<sup>9</sup> The owners planned to launch a gym, the Studio 9 male boutique, and the Stage 9 flea market in Washington as well as a private credit card and sister clubs in Baltimore and Cleveland. Most notably, the owners cleverly skirted the District’s strict liquor laws forbidding people to walk around with drinks by installing telephones at each of the tables lining the dance floors. The maneuver technically adhered to the law but still allowed patrons to flirt and cruise for romantic partners, and the telephone-clad tables remain one of the Pier’s most well-remembered features.<sup>10</sup>

Besides providing a venue for queer socializing, the Pier 9 also became an important site for LGBTQ activism. In 1975, the disco co-sponsored a fundraiser for Technical Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, a Vietnam veteran who was discharged from the Air Force after revealing that he was gay.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, the disco hosted a roast of Anita Bryant, who was campaigning in Dade County, Florida to repeal an anti-discrimination law that included protections based on sexual orientation. The event sold two thousand tickets, was covered extensively in the *Star*, and was attended by DC council members Marion Barry and Nadine Waters.<sup>12</sup> The club also co-sponsored annual benefits for the Children’s Hospital.

Pier 9 remained open through the 1970s and into the early 1980s. The exact date the club closed has not been determined. 1824 Half St, SW has served as the venue for Ziegfeld’s/Secrets, a drag queen revue and male strip club since 2001, continuing its decades-long history as a gathering space for queer Washingtonians.

Sources:      Published Sources and Reports

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<sup>7</sup> Phyllis C. Richman, “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1979. ProQuest; “Popular Places to Go,” *Washington Star*, November 6, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Pearson, “Donald M. Culver Dies; D.C. Nightclub Owner,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Zito, “Anything’s Cool at the Discos,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 1974; *Gay Blade*, November 1970; “News from the Bars,” *Gay Blade*, October 1970.

<sup>10</sup> “More Bars in D.C.,” *Gay Blade*, May 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Dolan, “Washington’s New Super Bars.”

<sup>12</sup> “You see, in one way, she’s done something terrific for us,” *Washington Star*, April 13, 1977.

Rainbow History Project, *Gay D.C. Walking Tours: South Capitol Street*  
(Washington, DC: Rainbow History Project, 2003).

Collections, Repositories, and Archives

Library of Congress: newspapers

NewsBank: newspapers

ProQuest: newspapers

Rainbow History Project: oral history interviews, 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 west façade of 1824 Half St, SW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 2: The south and east façades of 1824 Half St, SW (Commercial).  
Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.