



# **WASHINGTON**

---

# **UNDERGROUND**



## **Archaeology in Downtown Washington DC**



**A walking and  
metro guide to  
the past...**

---

**2003**



# ARCHAEOLOGY IN DC

URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY | IN OUR OWN BACKYARD

(see Guide Map in the center of this brochure)

Archaeology is the study of people's lives through things they left behind. Although it's not likely to be the first thing on the minds of most visitors to Washington, archaeologists have been active here for over a century. William Henry Holmes (1846-1933), curator of the U.S. National Museum (now the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History), profoundly influenced the scientific development of modern archaeology. In the DC area, Holmes conducted an extensive archaeological survey along the shores of the Potomac River, discovering numerous sites of the region's earliest inhabitants.

Interest in the ancient history of local American Indians has remained high since Holmes' time. Archaeology of the development of the city itself, or urban archaeology, got its start much more recently. In February of 1981, archaeologists spent several cold weeks inaugurating a new era of archaeology in DC, conducting excavations prior to construction of the old Civic Center at 9th and H Streets, NW. Since then, numerous archaeological excavations have been conducted in downtown Washington.

Explore the locations of some of the archaeological findings in Washington's historic commercial hub and learn about the things that lie *under* some of Washington's oldest and newest buildings.



## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



Each entry discusses a specific site or different aspect of Washington's history that has been explored in archaeological excavations. Each entry provides the location (address or cross streets) as well as the nearest metro station, with corresponding locations shown on the guide map in the center of this brochure.



# URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

---

**VARIOUS SITES**  
throughout the city

**Metro** (various lines)  
throughout the city

---

In addition to the individual people and households that archaeologists study, the entire city can be seen as one large archaeological site. Most excavations in Washington were conducted prior to construction of a building, highway, or other venture. Individually, these excavations tell us about the lives of ordinary people, from Native Americans to early European settlers to the growing population of the new capital. Together, these sites tell us how the city as a whole developed from an idea to a cosmopolitan capital city.



The landscape of Washington today bears little resemblance to the lay of the land when L'Enfant first developed his plan for the capital city. Since its founding, Washington has seen extensive changes to its landscape: hills were cut down, streams were diverted and buried, canals were dug then later filled in, and the continual march of construction moved beyond the original bounds of L'Enfant's design (Boundary Street is now Florida Avenue) to the edges of the diamond-shaped District of Columbia.

People often are surprised that artifacts and archaeological sites still exist beneath a modern city. But wells, cisterns, sewer pipes, house foundations, former backlots, and old streetcar lines can all be found preserved here. Each time archaeologists have a chance to excavate in downtown Washington, we learn more about these changes, how people responded to them, and the lives they led. Each discovery tells us more about our nation, our capital city, and ourselves.



## RARE ACHIEVEMENT

**CONVENTION CENTER**

at Mt Vernon Square

**Metro (Green-Yellow)**

Mt Vernon Square

How would you live under “black codes” that restricted your activities and the occupations open to you? You would probably be careful to carry your certificate of freedom with you to protect you from being kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Although many rights were denied, it was legal in Washington for people of color to own property and a small number managed to do so. In 1840 Smith Harley, an African-American well-digger, paid \$400 for a new row house on 8<sup>th</sup> Street near the corner of L Street. He and his wife Ellen lived there with their two children until they sold their property in 1850. George Garrison, who worked as a waiter and whitewasher, bought the house next door in the same year. Garrison’s name appears in the Manumission and Emancipation Record. Mrs. Ann Miller of Georgetown certified that she’d known Garrison since his infancy and that he was born free.



A very limited amount of archaeology tells us that the Harleys and Garrisons owned pretty much the same household objects as their white neighbors. The Harleys and the Garrisons are, so far, the only pre-Civil War free people of color that archaeologists can associate directly with excavated

remains. Such finds are an important foundation for archaeology in the District and will be useful as more examples are found to build up a more complete picture of life in the city before the Civil War.



## SELF-MEDICATION

**OLD CIVIC CENTER**  
at 9th and H Sts, NW

**Metro (Red-Orange-Blue)**  
Metro Center

The Cholera epidemic that hit Washington in 1832 killed close to 500 people. Smallpox outbreaks in 1833, 1841, 1848, 1849, and 1850 added to deaths caused by the ever-present “consumption” (tuberculosis) and other illnesses.

How would you take care of your family’s health? You may have believed that many new medicines available were more effective than folk medicine and home remedies that you grew up with. Most proprietary medicines, such as “Dr. Hamilton’s Infallible Ague and Fever Drops,” contained medicinal herbs and could include narcotics such as opium or cocaine suspended in alcohol. Physicians were bleeding patients and prescribing purgatives but also used alcohol and narcotics to make patients more comfortable.

Archaeologists tested several backyards before the completion of the old Civic Center in 1983. Like many others in the city, the family that rented at 919 I Street dumped some of their trash along the back edge of their yard.

Between about 1844 and 1857, bones from the kitchen and ash from the stove accumulated along with other household refuse. Among the refuse were over 70 apothecary bottles, well over half of the bottles identified by the archaeologists. Such evidence of self-medication is fairly common on sites from this period, but this is an unusually high concentration.



### Fun Fact:

BOTTLE GLASS IS ONE OF THE MOST COMMON ARTIFACTS FOUND ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES, ALTHOUGH INTACT BOTTLES ARE RELATIVELY RARE. SEE SITE “I” FOR ANOTHER LOOK AT BOTTLES IN DOWNTOWN WASHINGTON.



## GAUGING THE MARKETPLACE

**BUTT-BURNETT POTTERY**

**Metro** (Green-Yellow-Red)

at 8th and "Eye" Sts, NW

Gallery Place/Chinatown

Standing in this neighborhood in 1850, you hear the thudding of horses along the unpaved and rutted streets, passing grocery stores and homes. Perhaps it is the wagon you've been waiting for to deliver a cord of wood so that you can fire this kiln loaded with your new merchandise. As a potter in the middle of the 1800s you would be faced with a number of challenges. Competition from English potters was increasing and you would have to decide how to respond. What could you produce to compete with the fine English wares?

Enoch Burnett took over Richard Butt's successful pottery here in 1843 and made American salt-glazed stoneware crocks, jugs, and beer bottles until 1862. Such items were used and reused for preserving and storing food and their broken remains are found on sites throughout the city.

Archaeologists were thrilled to excavate this craft site, recovering thousands of pieces of Burnett's wares from a "waster pit," where the potter had discarded unusable items. Just as interesting were the thousands of pieces of kiln furniture used to stack pots during firing. Such finds offer rare clues to craft and industry in the middle of the century.



**Fun Fact:** POTTERS THREW SALT INTO THE KILN AS CERAMIC VESSELS WERE BEING FIRED TO CREATE THE GLAZE, EASILY RECOGNIZABLE BY ITS "ORANGE-PEEL" SURFACE.



## CROWDED INTO HOUSING

**ESSEX COURT**

at 6th and "Eye" Sts, NW

**Metro** (Green-Yellow-Red)

Gallery Place/Chinatown

Imagine being one of the tens of thousands of people who poured into the city during and after the Civil War, no longer enslaved and looking for a new life. You may have found a place to live in the hastily built and crowded alley dwellings. There you would find ways of "making do," a practiced way of life for African Americans. According to the 1880 census, African-American laundresses and laborers were the heads of household here in Essex Court. Small amounts of archaeological testing found some children's toys, cosmetic jars and a man's porcelain shirt stud, probably lost in the laundry.

Perhaps you'd have relatives in southern Maryland in which case you'd be the "city cousin" and guide your rural relatives when they came to visit or look for work. Like others, both black and white, you'd probably move frequently between the city and countryside. If you were lucky, you'd work and save enough to move back to a place like Charles County and eventually buy farmland.

One small testimony to connections between urban and rural whites was found in St. Mary's County. Archaeologists recovered a soup bowl with an inscription that read "Atlantic Lunch." This artifact came from the Atlantic Hotel on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania, which was a meeting place for county people for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Fun Fact:** IN THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, CHINATOWN WAS LOCATED AT WHAT IS NOW FEDERAL TRIANGLE, WHICH PREVIOUSLY HAD BEEN A "RED LIGHT DISTRICT" (SEE SITE J). WHEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BEGAN CONSTRUCTING BUILDINGS THERE IN THE 1930S, CHINATOWN WAS RELOCATED NORTHWEST TO THE AREA WHERE ESSEX COURT IS LOCATED.

LOOK FOR THE CHINATOWN GATEWAY ARCH, THE WORLD'S LARGEST SINGLE-SPAN ARCH, NEARBY AT 7<sup>TH</sup> AND H STREETS.



## ‘PARDON OUR DUST...’

**SQUARE 530**

**Metro (Red)**

btw 3-4th and F-G Sts, NW

Judiciary Square

In the late 1860s, Horace Greeley wrote of Washington: “*the rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting, the mud is deep and the morals are deplorable.*” Less than 20 years later, another writer observed Washington was a handsome city with “*dazzling vistas and public edifices reminiscent of grand European capitals.*”

What happened to Washington in those intervening years? In 1871, Washington City, Washington County and Georgetown formed a Territorial Government and organized a Board of Public Works. Under the leadership of Boss Shepherd, their ambitious plan eventually covered the fetid canals, built water mains and sewers, and graded the streets. But the work was accompanied by controversy and difficulties. Two senators were among residents who returned to find their houses resting high above street level.



Archaeologists found evidence of this disruption during excavations of Square 530. Richard Burr and his family bought 618 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in 1853. Analyzing pollen preserved in the soils, archaeologists found that the Burrs had planted grass and a pine tree in their yard. Other nearby lots, however, were full of weeds, especially goosefoot, a plant that

thrives on kitchen compost. Around the time of the public works, 3 to 6 feet of fill was brought in to raise the yard levels to keep them from flooding. This fill covered the Burrs’ manicured lawn.





## SEEKING SAFE WATER

**MCI Center**

at 6th-7th and F-G Sts, NW

**Metro** (Green-Yellow-Red)

Gallery Place/Chinatown

Imagine that you lived here in the 1800s in the days before trash collection and landfills. You and your neighbors would throw your garbage into the streets, alleys, empty lots and your own backyards. Perhaps you would also be one of the city residents complaining about the stench of the streets filthy with decaying vegetables and dead animals.

In 1875 the Board of Health reported that the public water supply was much cleaner since the aqueduct and the reservoir were flushed out. Among the debris were “*dead cats, dogs and babies. . . in the greatest abundance.*”

It was not until the 1890s that there was a sustained effort to supply clean water to city residents. Perhaps you could have afforded the expense to build a cistern or dig a well to supply your family with clean water. By doing so, you would unknowingly dampen the threat of cholera and other diseases which spread by contaminated drinking water.



In the blocks now covered by the MCI Center, archaeologists dug in several back yards and found evidence of city life in an era when the connections between sanitation and public health were less well understood. Archaeologists collected over 80,000 objects and animal bones discarded as household trash. They also found three cisterns for storing water and two wells built between the 1850s and 1880s.



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE



\* \* \* Government of the  
 District of Columbia  
 Anthony A. Williams, Mayor  
 Office of Planning - May 2005  
 This map was created for planning  
 purposes from a variety of sources.  
 It is neither a survey nor a legal document.  
 Information provided by other agencies  
 should be verified with them where appropriate.

 Arch  
 Parks



## SITES IN DOWNTOWN DC

aeological Sites





## CHANGING NEIGHBORHOOD

**BLOCK CORNER**  
9th and E Sts, NW

**Metro** (Red-Orange-Blue)  
Metro Center

What if you could stand across the street for a few hundred years and see this corner change? In the 1790s you'd watch Dr. John Crocker build a fine brick home complete with stables, smokehouse, outbuildings, and a cistern to hold clean water. By 1800 the house was the city post office. Soon after, newspaper publisher Joseph Gales, who also served as Mayor, lived here until he and his family moved to Lafayette Square. From the 1830s until the Civil War you could watch Congressmen and others come and go from this fashionable boarding house. You would notice the creek that formed one boundary of the property.

In the 1860s you might be sad to see the house demolished to make way for new retail buildings as the streets were graded and the stream channeled into a stormwater drain. In the early 1900s you'd call this a vibrant area with clothing shops, theatres, movie houses, burlesques, tattoo parlors, restaurants and penny arcades. You might wave to Harry O. White, who managed vaudeville acts here until at least 1916 and lived at 506 9<sup>th</sup> Street.



Upstairs he left behind tickets, photographs, business cards and other items, including an advertisement for *Wilfrid the Wizard Presenting an Artistic, Wired and Comedy-Magical Production*. Vaudeville faded away and by the 1960s and 1970s this area was well known for pornographic theatres and shops. The New Gayety Theatre closed in 1987.



## IN THE PATH OF HISTORY

**PETERSEN HOUSE**

516 10th St (at F St), NW

**Metro** (Red-Orange-Blue)

Metro Center

If you were Louisa Petersen, perhaps you would remember moving to this neighborhood with your parents to the house they built here in 1849. Perhaps you heard stories of the old country and dreams about the future and realized that you were joining other families who had come from Germany to make a new life in the United States.

If you looked through the remains that archaeologists have recovered lifetimes later, you'd finger the straight pins and buttons of bone, shell, metal and glass and be reminded of your father William's trade as a tailor. How much would you remember about the brothers Henry and Julius Ulke, among all the boarders who lived with your family? They were photographers but they were also amateur entomologists. Would you associate the microscope slide in the archaeological collection with their study of insects?

Whatever else you might remember of life at 516 10<sup>th</sup> Street, you would never forget April 14, 1865. The night that President Abraham Lincoln was carried to your home after being shot at Ford's Theatre life changed forever for your family. You wrote in your diary about the immense sadness and grief felt by the family and the way that people tore up carpets and other items from your home as grim souvenirs of the House Where Lincoln Died.

**Fun Fact:** NUMEROUS SITES IN WASHINGTON, DC ARE ASSOCIATED WITH LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION AND THE ESCAPE OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH. LOOK FOR THE DC HERITAGE TOURISM COALITION'S "CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS" TRAIL MARKERS. ALSO, SEE SITE "J" (FEDERAL TRIANGLE) IN THIS BROCHURE FOR AN HISTORICAL TIDBIT ON LINCOLN'S ASSASSIN.





## SECOND-HAND ECONOMY

SLATE ALLEY

12th-13th and E-F Sts, NW

Metro (Red-Orange-Blue)

Metro Center

Cash-poor? Unable to get enough paid work? You may have tried your hand at picking, or dealing in the junk trade. You could collect paper from law offices and printers to sell to butchers and other merchants. Or clothes to sell to brokers who in turn sold them to paper or cloth mills, where the rags were shredded and woven into “shoddy cloth.” Bones could be ground into meal for fertilizer or be made into buttons. Glass bottles could be sold to retailers or brokers.

Sometime between 1825-1855, residents in Slate Alley dug a pit in their yard and filled it with 544 bottles of all types as well as hardware, window glass, bricks, nails, and bone. The archaeologists who made this discovery believe that it is evidence of “junking,” which could be a full time occupation. In a census for 1880, some men living in alleys listed their trades as “rag picker,” “junk dealer” “peddler” “jobber” “huckster” or “horse trader.”



**Fun Fact:** ALL ARTIFACTS FOUND DURING AN EXCAVATION ARE WASHED, LABELLED WITH IDENTIFYING NUMBERS, AND INVENTORIED. THEN THEY ARE PACKED AWAY FOR LONG-TERM STORAGE SO FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGISTS CAN LEARN FROM THEM AS WELL.



# THE OLDEST PROFESSION

FEDERAL TRIANGLE

Metro (Orange-Blue)

Penn & Const at 6th St, NW

Federal Triangle

*“My name is Nellie Starr. My native place is Baltimore, State of Maryland. I have been in Washington City, D.C. since a week before Christmas. I am about nineteen or twenty years of age. I am not married. I have known John Wilkes Booth about three years; he was in the habit of visiting the house where I live kept by Miss Eliza Thomas, No. 62 Ohio Avenue in the City of Washington. The house is one of prostitution.”*

(part of Nellie Starr’s statement to the police, April 15, 1865)

From the 1860s through the 1880s, black and white, native and foreign-born families tried to make a living in this neighborhood.

F a m i l y households and brothels, commercial businesses and industries co-existed here in



“Hooker’s District” alongside the canal (under Constitution Ave), which had turned into little more than an open sewer. In 1862 the city supported 450 registered “bawdy houses,” which were legal until prostitution was outlawed in 1914.

Prostitution changed from madam-owned houses to capitalist businesses with corporate ownership in the 1890s, when the area turned into a red light district with rows of brothels. Before 1890, archaeology reveals very little difference between the daily lives of working class households and brothels, although the families owned more toys and more tools. But later the prostitutes ate better and dressed better than their working class contemporaries. Some of their purchasing power, however, was spent on proprietary medicines such as Valentine’s Meat Juice, promoted as a cure for sexually transmitted diseases.



## MAKING DO

**ALLEY NEIGHBORHOODS**

throughout the city

**Metro** (various lines)

throughout the city

By the late 1800s, many people were concerned about poor living conditions in alleys all over the city. Social reformers turned their attention to advocating housing improvements. One reformer wrote, “*the people studied are admirably resourceful in their use of edible wild plants for food*” — able to “*get a few of these plants from vacant lots and along the river bank.*”



For a time, there was plenty of local wild food to be found. The Federal Writers Project reported in the 1930s that, “*Marshes of wild rice extend over much of the Anacostia River*

*estuary, and, along the lower Potomac, wild celery, Peltandra, and various waterweeds.... Waterfowl, cranes, rails, pigeons, grouse, bobolinks, and blackbirds were sold in the Washington market as late as 1912; and, finally, with the draining and clearing of the land for real-estate development, many bird haunts ceased to exist.*” In some parts of the city, archaeologists have found evidence of wild foods gathered and used into the 1900s.

After decades of advocacy, one 1940s report states:

*With all the notoriety, the alleys remain fundamentally unchanged; some of the homes are comfortable, some are fair and some are, to use an over-used adjective, ‘deplorable.’ The people who live there represent many different grades of culture; some are coarse migrants, some suspicious and bitter, and other gracious and poised.*

Today, in the Capitol Hill and Foggy Bottom neighborhoods, alley dwellings are highly desirable housing.





## FOR MORE INFORMATION

---

For an online version of this walking guide, go to  
[www.heritage.umd.edu](http://www.heritage.umd.edu) and click on the DC link.

For more information on archeology and heritage in and around our nation's capital, visit the following websites:

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
[www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

NPS ARCHEOLOGY & ETHNOGRAPHY PROGRAM  
[www.cr.nps.gov/aad](http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad)

NPS NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION,  
REGIONAL ARCHEOLOGY PROGRAM  
[www.nps.gov/rap](http://www.nps.gov/rap)

DC OFFICE OF PLANNING,  
OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
<http://planning.dc.gov/preservation/index2.shtm>

DC CITY MUSEUM AND THE  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DC  
[www.citymuseumdc.org](http://www.citymuseumdc.org)

DC HERITAGE TOURISM COALITION  
[www.dcheritage.org](http://www.dcheritage.org)

DC VISITOR INFORMATION CENTER  
(located in the Ronald Reagan Building at  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue)  
[www.dcvisit.com](http://www.dcvisit.com)

CENTER FOR HERITAGE RESOURCE STUDIES,  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, COLLEGE PARK  
[www.heritage.umd.edu](http://www.heritage.umd.edu)



## OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

---

**Civil War to Civil Rights** | **Downtown Heritage Trail**  
(DC Heritage Tourism | Coalition's Walking Tour)

---

The DC Heritage Tourism Coalition has established this well-marked trail in downtown DC to link the history of the city to the history of the nation. Some of the sites along this trail include:

LILLIAN & ALBERT SMALL JEWISH MUSEUM (6TH & G STS)  
JOHN WILKES BOOTH ESCAPE ROUTE (9TH & F STS)  
SURRET'S BOARDING HOUSE (6TH & H STS)  
CLARA BARTON HOUSE AND OFFICE (6TH & H STS)  
FREEDOM PLAZA AND NATIONAL THEATRE (13TH & E STS)

In Freedom Plaza, see part of L'Enfant's original plan for the city of Washington portrayed in marble, sandstone, and granite. Also, a time capsule honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is located in the southwest end of the plaza.

Also visit these other sites of interest:

- ◆ CITY MUSEUM OF WASHINGTON, DC  
(Mt. Vernon Square)
- ◆ NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS  
(13th & H Sts)
- ◆ CHINATOWN GATEWAY (7th & H Sts)
- ◆ SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM and the  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY (8th & F Sts)
- ◆ NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM (401 F St)
- ◆ JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY (701 3rd Street)
- ◆ FORD'S THEATRE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE  
(511 10th St)



# CREDITS

---

This guide was produced cooperatively by the National Park Service, National Center for Cultural Resources, Archeology and Ethnography Program; the District of Columbia Office of Planning, Historic Preservation Office; the Center for Heritage Resource Studies, University of Maryland, College Park; and the Society for American Archaeology.

Text by Barbara J. Little. Production design and additional text by Donald G. Jones.

Photos courtesy of the District of Columbia Office of Planning, Historic Preservation Office, and the National Park Service.

Locator map courtesy of the John Codd, District of Columbia Office of Planning.

Cover map courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.



Thanks to the organizations that performed the archaeological work on these sites:

Engineering Science

John Milner Associates

National Park Service, National Capital  
Region, Regional Archeology Program

Parsons Engineering Science, Inc.

St. Mary's City Commission

Soils Systems, Inc.

Thunderbird Archeological Associates, Inc.

