

Funkstown: Foggy Bottom History No. 6

By Frank Leone



Snows Court, November, 1935 (National Archives) – showing passageway to I St, (with Washington Gas Light gas holder tanks looming in the background).



Shows Court, July 2021 (FLeone) – same view today.

Introduction to Foggy Bottom's Misunderstood Alleys – Snows Court and Hughes Mews

On Christmas Eve 1938, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt brought gifts and good wishes to “the poverty and gloom of Snows Court, a community of alley dwellers ... a tucked-away, often forgotten slum.” Snows Court today is a thriving and tight-knit community within the block bounded by I, K, 24th and 25th Streets. Hughes Court (now Hughes Mews) is located across 25th St. These alleys, inhabited for 170 years, are a treasure of Foggy Bottom (FB). The FB Historic District currently contains 29 of DC’s 108 remaining alley dwellings (second only to the Georgetown, which has 40). As noted by the *DC Alley Survey*, our neighborhood “provides one of the best physical representations of the historic character and feeling of the city’s interior residential alley fabric.”

During and after the Civil War, the city’s growing population, including many newly emancipated African Americans, created a need for additional housing. City plats had been laid out as long narrow properties, with houses facing the streets. The rear of the properties had room for kitchens, stables and dependencies, with the alleys providing access. To house more people, these properties were subdivided and alley-facing houses were built.

The original alley houses were often constructed of wood, and lacked indoor water, sewage, or heat. Later brick houses, often two floors high and two bays

wide, were built, although many of these also still lacked plumbing. Reformers argued that the alleys were overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe, fostered criminal and immoral behavior, and posed a threat to the community. They argued houses should be demolished and alleys should be made into minor public streets. Daily life was difficult for alley residents, many of whom worked as laborers and domestic servants or took in laundry. But the alleys were also functioning communities, with homes, stores, churches, routes for horse-drawn wagons delivering ice, and distilleries. And as often has been the case with urban redevelopment, the demolition of the dwellings destroyed communal relationships and typically was not followed by provision of new homes.

In response to increasing public concerns, D.C. in 1892 prohibited new sub-standard alley dwellings. Several waves of efforts to eliminate alley housing followed, supported by President Theodore Roosevelt, First Lady Edith Wilson, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, among others. From 1900 to 1950, alley houses were demolished or replaced by livery stables, then garages, parking lots, and apartment buildings

Snows Court can be accessed by a driveway at 25th St, and a passageway at I St. It was named for C.A. Snow, publisher of the *National Intelligencer*, DC's most important newspaper of the mid-1800s. He built a greenhouse and four wood frame dwellings in this alley during the 1850s to house his Irish gardener and others. During the Civil War, Snow's houses were used as army barracks. Following the war, construction of new alley houses continued. The Court's population was about 200-250 residents from 1880 to 1908. Over time, the alley population transitioned to nearly all African American families

In 1914, Snows Court alley structures changed again when Wilber F. Nash built a large three-story commercial stable, with ramps up to the second floor to house the horses. Foggy Bottom's Nash's stable is one of eight commercial stable buildings remaining in DC alleys in Historic Districts. In 1960, the developer of the Madison Hotel bought the property, eventually constructing the 925 (25thSt.) Apartments, now using the stable building for storage, and establishing the current short term *Zip Car* rental parking lot.

Although numerous dwellings in Snows Court and Hughes Mewes were destroyed, gentrification in the 1950s saved the remaining houses. These alleys were included when the FB Historic District was established in 1987.

DC Office of Planning, *The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey*, 2014, <https://www.nps.gov/shpo/downloads/dc-alleysurvey2014.pdf>; James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*, Univ. Ill. Press, 1982; Charles Frederick, and Eugenia Winston Weller, *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements, and Shanties of the National Capital*, J.C. Winston, 1909.