Buzzard Point, DC: A Brief History of a Brief Neighborhood

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Mid -1920s, from a glass-plate negative (HSW)

Sachse, 1884 (LOC)
Foreword

This short study of the almost forgotten (but soon to be resurrected) area of southwest Washington DC known as Buzzard Point grew out of a landmark nomination for the Buzzard Point Power Plant researched and written in 2014 on behalf of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly. There was no dedicated study of the history of this curious neighborhood beyond its very early years (after which chronicles of southwest Washington move to the more northerly parts), and I decided to continue the work to fill this hole. Due to the work’s origin in the power plant that part of our story has been given somewhat disproportionate attention but I have left it that way; the information is interesting and useful. (Sections on the history of electrical power generation in Washington and the design/construction company Stone & Webster have been removed here but will be found in the nomination on file with the city’s Historic Preservation Office.)

The supporting material used in this study has been deposited with the Historical Society of Washington. The Capitol Riverfront BID and the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly generously underwrote the expenses of printing this booklet, and Mr. Baubak Baghi helped prepare the manuscript. I offer them my sincere thanks, as also to the institutions listed below.

Illustration sources: Library of Congress, Prints and Maps Division (LOC); Historical Society of Washington, Kiplinger Library (HSW); National Defense University library, Special Collections (NDU); National Archives, National Capitol Planning Commission (NARA); author (HMW)

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Baist, 1909 (LOC)
The Very Slight Rise and Later Decline of the Buzzard Point Neighborhood

The earliest history of Buzzard Point has been frequently chronicled and need only be summarized here.¹ That American Indians congregated at the area, as along other nearby waterways, was shown by the discovery of their implements during improvements to the mouth of the James Creek Canal in 1866.² The explorer John Smith recorded sighting the point in 1608. The land passed from its first colonial owner, George Thompson (from 1663) to Thomas Notley (1671), and ultimately (1770) to Notley Young (west of James Creek, known as Duddington Pasture³) and Daniel Carroll (east of the creek), major landowners in the new Federal District.

With the unique government-private distribution of the newly-platted building lots in the District, Massachusetts merchant James Greenleaf and two partners in 1793 purchased about 400 lots in southwest Washington from Young and 20 from Carroll for housing development. Setting an example for other, hesitant speculators, George Washington bought four lots in square 667, the same square as today’s power plant.

The area considered as Buzzard Point originally extended from both banks of the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia (Eastern Branch) Rivers northward to N or M Street.⁴ The segregation of the land west of James Creek as the U.S. Arsenal removed that portion from the popular concept of the neighborhood, and as the southernmost area deteriorated and lost its housing stock the name came to be associated only with the barren area south of Q Street, while the still-populated community north of Q tended to take the names of its larger public housing projects. Here we will use the name Buzzard Point only for the area east of Ft. McNair and south of Q. The neighboring territory east of South Capitol was only vaguely included in Buzzard Point and that usually in planning documents – the 1946 development plan, for example – it being more usually tied to the Navy Yard by locals.

A word must be said also regarding the memorable name of this area. “Turkey Buzzard Point” marked the Point in a map of about 1673 published by Augustine Herman and most later ones⁵ – clearly an indication of its fauna. An Evening Star article of 1894 refers to the Point as “for many years the roost of immense members of that ‘black and ominous’ bird, from which the point derives its name.”⁶ The correct name is Buzzard Point, although it has always been varied as Buzzards Point and (more commonly and improbably) Buzzard’s Point.

This peculiar name has regularly attracted uncomplimentary attention, leading to satire and occasional proposals to find a more genteel moniker. On news that the Point was being called Greenleaf’s Point, an early resident declared: “Truly the new name is more grateful to the ear and more becoming this lovely scene where wed the Potomac and the Anacostia.” The National Park and Planning Commission entertained a similar proposal in its remaking of the area in 1932.⁷ A published suggestion of 2013 (“The Point”) was quickly shot down by traditionalists.

¹ A thorough and convenient account is that of Brian Kraft, Old Southwest; see also Evening Star, 21 Dec 1901, p. 32; 30 July 1916, p. 48. This report is taken from these sources unless otherwise referenced. For more detailed studies, see Evening Star, 17 Apr 1910, p. 10; Clark, Greenleaf and Law . . .; and Arnebeck, Through a Fiery Trial.
² Evening Star, 20 Dec 1866, p. 3.
³ Duddington was the name of the earlier Carroll estate, which covered much of southern Capitol Hill.
⁴ See, for example, such a reference in Nat. Republican, 13 May 1876, p. 1. The new elementary school (predecessor to the Syphax School) on O Street was described as being at Buzzard Point (Evening Star, 28 Jan 1871, p. 4). NCPPC planners of the 1920-30s included all blocks south of M.
⁶ Evening Star, 3 Feb 1894, p. 17. “No buzzards are there now” (Evening Star, 30 July 1916, p. 48). Evening Star, 17 Apr 1910, p. 20 says it was called “Buckman’s Point” in colonial times, and an unnamed 1803 map reproduced in Kraft, Old Southwest, shows the name “Wind Mill Point” there; all others use Buzzard Point.
⁷ For an example of satire, see Wash. Post, 22 July 1929, p. 16; (quotation) taken from Clark, Greenleaf and Law . . ., quoted in Emery, “Washington Newspapers”; (renaming proposal) Wash. Post, 13 Aug 1932, p. 14. “The dwellers down that way accept the name without protest, and not one of them suggested . . . that for the sake of euphony and property values the name should be changed” (Evening Star, 30 July 1916, p. 48).
James Creek, descending lazily from near the Capitol, entered the River in a wide mouth exactly at the Point, bifurcating the land there. The somewhat distinct point west of the Creek was for a while called “Young’s Point” from its owner, Notley Young, and then “Greenleaf’s Point” after its next owner (now more commonly “Greenleaf Point”). It is this name that appeared in the 1861 Boschke map and subsequent Baist maps. After the U.S. Arsenal (today’s Ft. McNair) took the entire area west of the Creek “Arsenal Point” became another popular name. The eastern point remained Buzzard Point.

Mercantile activity around Buzzard Point, envisioned by Washington and planned by L’Enfant, never occurred. The many docks of the original city plan were not built and Greenleaf’s “Twenty Buildings” sat uncompleted and derelict. A problem with this plan was that the area – swampy if not pestilential – became too shallow for good harborage. In spite of recurrent dredging, incoming ships avoided Buzzard Point as they approached the Navy Yard into the twentieth century. Inland building lots at the Point sold for 2 or 3 cents/front foot in 1800, while speculation drove waterfront lots as high as $8/front foot, but this soon dropped to 1 cent and $1-2 respectively. In 1910 selling price of the same lots stood at almost the same: 4 cents and 90 cents-$2.

In 1804 the government sited the U.S. Arsenal at Greenleaf’s Point, removing all land west of James Creek from general commercial and residential use. A Federal penitentiary was constructed within the grounds in 1831, leading the low area at the mouth of the Creek (outside the Arsenal area) to be called “Penitentiary Marsh”. And finally, the muddy, diffuse James Creek was straightened, enclosed within stone retaining walls, and connected to the Washington City Canal in 1866, a project envisioned by L’Enfant. This last work not only improved the canal’s usefulness and added 20 acres of firm land to the Point and the Arsenal, but helped “abate the nuisance in the shape of an extensive marsh lying between the Arsenal and Buzzard Point . . . Residents escaped the usual sickness originating from the marsh last season.”

Not canal, wharves nor Arsenal brought prosperity to Buzzard Point, nor in fact to the southwestern quadrant of the District, which by the 1850s was known generally as “The Island”

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8 Originally St. James Creek, shortened to “James” in the early years of the District, in honor of James Greenleaf according (speculatively?) to Evening Star, 21 Dec 1901, p. 32.  
9 There were three constructed in the general area of Buzzard Point by 1803 and another, larger one in the 1820s; see Kraft, Old Southwest, pp. 13, 26.  
10 In the area of the development earlier planned but not built by Carroll to the east of James Creek – “Carrollsburg”. A number of houses were projected, some few were finished, but many being left in a half-finished state fell into decay, after having been occupied by negroes and low whites” (Rives, “Old Families and Houses”).  
11 A contemporary writer attributed this to contractors dumping dredge mud from the canal into the nearby Anacostia (Evening Star, 23 Feb 1874, p. 1). In 1883 President Arthur and his party were grounded for several hours on the bar (Evening Star, 21 July 1883, p. 1).  
12 Wrote landowner Thomas Law in 1804, arguing for construction of the Washington City Canal: “Hemp, timber, flour . . . etc. may be conveyed from the Potomack to the Navy-yard on the Eastern Branch [via the canal] without taking the circuitous and hazardous route by Turkey Buzzard point, which requires also two tides” (Law, “Observations”).  
13 Evening Star, 17 Apr 1910, p. 20. Squares and lots were designated which were mostly under water – “water lots” – and found initial buyers. It would be interesting to learn what happened to the ownership of these non-existent lots. The southernmost squares were the only ones below Q with the more narrow rowhouse-sized building lots – the squares above T Street (except Square 661, with little residential Augusta Street down its center) all had much larger lots. Perhaps those lower squares were platted later, when building practices had changed.  
14 There had earlier been some artillery mounted at the tip of the Point.  
15 In spite of a completed canal being shown on virtually all commercial maps of the District printed before that time, and which seem to have copied from each other and ultimately the L’Enfant plan, more careful maps such as Boschke and military topographical maps confirm that James Creek remained only that until 1866, and that (a few careless cartographers notwithstanding) it did not connect with the canal system.  
16 Evening Star, 22 June 1866, p. 1; 20 Dec 1866, p. 3; 21 Dec 1901, p. 32. The 1866 work also created the sea wall along the eastern tip of Greenleaf Point. Besides the latter article, a good history of the Arsenal will be found in Evening Star, 17 Apr 1932, p. 82. The masonry wall below P Street contained only the west side of the canal, according to a very detailed account in Evening Star, 17 Dec 1887, p. 1, and later photos.  
17 For many years a marsh and unbridged creek/canal separated the neighborhood from the Arsenal; the standing brick wall along Ft. McNair’s original eastern boundary was built in the very late 1920s, judging from
for its isolation from the rest of the city. 18 “From the Navy Yard westward along the Eastern Branch to Greenleaf’s Point was a wild stretch of land with here and there a hovel or a house – and the stouring of brick kilns,” recalled an elderly resident in 1901 of the pre-Civil War period. 19

A careful study of the area published in 1910 found no history of buildings there before 1830 except “some simple wharves and shacks along the shore,” and citizens petitioning on behalf of a railroad project in 1859 stated that “the condition of that portion of the city has been an eyesore for the last quarter of a century.” 20 A count of structures in the city made by Montgomery Meigs in 1853 found exactly eight frame houses and one shop in all of Buzzard Point (below Q Street). 21 There was no passageway over the Creek/canal below N Street, 22 and so no direct access to the Arsenal.

Newspaper references to the Buzzard Point community from the mid-nineteenth century mostly pertain to: stray farm animals; crime; drowning and boating accidents; boats stolen, lost or sunk; illegal fishing and swimming; hunting (duck, pigeon, rabbit) and concomitant shooting accidents. The riverbank was a popular spot for mass baptisms (“by colored people”), for baseball and bowling games, and for illegal prize fights. The only (legal) businesses mentioned were “a drinking house” and a single brick yard. 23 The few descriptions of area housing range from “a neat little frame house” to “an unsightly frame shanty.” A submerged torpedo was once found in the water off the Point.

The rural life of the area – certainly not unique in the District of that time but even then notable – is illustrated by an account of a river pleasure cruise in 1860: “As the steamer rounded the Arsenal Point and entered the Anacostia River, the attention of those on board was directed to the daring aquatic feats of a faded gray horse and two curs, evidently pertaining to the lik denoted Buzzard’s Point, into which they were perceptibly incited by a voice and pair of hard bare heels owned by a codling in abbreviated overall, also a Buzzard’s Pointer.” 24

The 1866 draining of the James Creek marsh, which hopefully opened much new land “for occupancy by buildings, workshops, etc.”, accomplished little in that line. A survey of District buildings conducted by the Water Department in 1875 listed 36 residences (of which 7 were brick), 8 “shanties” and 6 businesses in the neighborhood. The businesses comprised a brickyard, a stoneyard, a factory, two slaughter-houses, and one shop. 26 These structures were concentrated along South Capitol and First Streets. Detailed maps (Boschke 1861, Barnard 1865, Sachse 1884, Hopkins 1893, Baist 1903 and later) never show more than a scattering of mostly frame buildings there.

The Police Census of 1894 (the earliest reported) found 323 inhabitants living south of Q Street (including the south side of Q) 27 – 117 whites and 146 blacks, generally living side-by-side in the same squares. Contemporary accounts depicting the community as largely black

18 So labeled on the Boschke map of 1861.
20 Respectively: Evening Star, 17 Apr 1910, p. 20; 12 Feb 1859, p. 2. “That portion of Washington has up to this time been entirely neglected by the corporate authorities, perhaps because . . . there has been no real demand for its due improvement” (Evening Star, 13 Apr 1859, p. 2); “a portion of Washington . . . so far a closed book” (Evening Star, 10 Nov 1859, p. 2); “this portion of Washington, so eligible for business purposes, . . . has been avoided as if infected by the plague” (Evening Star, 22 June 1866, p. 1).
21 See Kraft, Old Southwest.
22 Kraft (p. 26) found a notice of a bridge at S Street in 1844 but it did not appear in later maps.
23 Although much is made of brickyards in the area – which had the largest concentration in the District -- most of them were located outside of Buzzard Point as I define it here, along South Capitol north of Q or in nearby Southeast. Lumberyards also figure in contemporary accounts, perhaps informal ones (see, e.g., Evening Star, 22 May 1917, p. 15); only one appeared in City Directories below Q Street.
24 Evening Star, 26 June 1860, p. 3.
25 Evening Star, 20 Dec 1866, p. 3.
26 Kraft, Old Southwest.
27 Including those on the south side of that street, somewhat inflating the number compared to these below taken from the decennial census.
(“Here is a colony of colored people, the families of men who carry hods . . . and run sand scows on the river; “the point is inhabited by negroes employed in the soap factory near by”) probably refers to the area between M and Q.

The isolated and rural quality of the area was as evident then as now. The detailed maps of infrastructure improvements included in the 1880 Engineer Annual Report show that not one type of civic work – pavement, gas lines, water mains, sewers, trolley, schools, police or fire stations, even street trees – extended south of M Street.

The Washington Post’s reporter Russell Gray (“Washington By-Ways”) visited the neighborhood in 1886 and has left a charming picture of this long-lost community. Having walked south on 1st Street past “a varying succession of houses and vacant lots,” Gray noted about three blocks of “miserable hovels” south of M Street and that at about Q the street began to gently slope downward as it left the last cluster of houses.

It [1st Street] is bordered on either side by true market gardens in the highest state of cultivation. One no longer wonders where the celery comes from: here are whole squares given up to its culture. The fields are interspaced with orchards of small fruit trees and occasionally these miniature farms have buildings set back from the road and profusely surrounded with chickens, stables and farm implements. [He compared this peaceful scene to Holland.] Some of the architecture about Buzzard Point is peculiar. It cannot be described by any of the familiar terms of architecture. One of its marked features is lattice work. The more lattice work and picket fence the more the owner is looked up to in the community.

[He noted a “most curious habitation” hidden at the Point and at “the extreme end of the promontory” the famous fertilizer factory, to be discussed later. On returning northward he found South Capitol Street quite different from the bucolic Point:] South Capitol has brick kilns instead of market gardens.

[Following this enjoyable excursion, Gray summarized his observations:] I do not believe that five strangers a month ever find their way into this extreme southern end of town, and I hope I will not be accused of lack of pride in the growth of the city when I say that a real-estate boom probably never set foot among the long levels of that section.

The 1900 census counted 231 persons (many of them children) living south of Q Street, almost exactly divided between black and white and generally on the same blocks, almost all along the eastern streets. A number of the whites were immigrants. By far the most common occupations were: gardener/farmer, day laborer, carpenter, dressmaker, and servant; “at school” is also commonly seen. Bookkeeper, fireman, policeman, engineer stand out as exceptional. A certain number lived on boats – not the yachsmen of today but those of the working class. An elderly man who had lived on his boat at the Point “for several years” died of heatstroke in 1909, and the 1940 census listed no fewer than ten white people living on houseboats, including one whose occupation was “fisherman”.

“I am assured by an old resident who made a recent pilgrimage to the spot [1901], that it was almost impossible for him to recognize places familiar to him in boyhood.”

Gray’s wishful description of 1886 contrasts sharply with accounts of the 1910s and this probably indicates a severe decline in the fortunes of the neighborhood:

Travel down among the market gardens and the untilled fields toward Buzzard’s Point. If one goes down that way he finds that some streets change into dusty and muddy roads, narrow and crooked, only foot paths and [sometimes] not even so much improved as that. There are acres and acres of land overgrown with weeds – weeds as tall as a man – dense, tangled masses of them. Around the junction of Potomac Avenue and Half Street the weed jungle really begins and continues southward. A roadway the name of which is not known to people who live in that “down-town” district, runs from W Street and loses itself in the weeds. (Evening Star, 3 Aug 1912, p. 11, abridged)
In going down in the land of old Carrollsburgh one may turn to the south from N Street. You will walk under one of the finest arcades of elms in the city. If you pass south down Half Street your way will be bordered by houses until you come to O Street. After that your way will be dusty and shadeless. Dwellings become sparse and there are wide stretches of garden lands, abandoned brick lands and ruined brick-making plants and fields of weeds between them, but close to the tip of that strange country there is a cluster of little homes and a store, and within a few feet of the point stands a dwelling with a little garden of carefully tended flowers and there a pleasant family finds comfort, happiness and health. It is the southernmost home in Washington. (Evening Star, 30 July 1916, p. 48, abridged; the article includes a photo of the house and the family.)

As Buzzard Point failed to establish a place in the larger society of the growing city its geographic and economic isolation attracted thoughts for new uses for the area. The most novel of these related to trash disposal. In 1865 municipal scavengers simply deposited night soil into the James Creek Canal; Buzzard Point was appointed one of the two new sites for such refuse, and a small dump depot was built on S Street. No one lived there except the commandant of the Arsenal, who fruitlessly complained. This annoying facility was joined in 1881 by the fertilizer factory of Mr. H. Clay Jones, maker of “Jones’ Prolific Guano” (from rendered animal carcases) – a place, noted the neighbors, “very prolific in odors.” With such a reputation, other haulers began routinely dumping manure “and other offensive material” nearby.

Jones’ manufactory was replaced by that of C. B. Jewell by 1888, whose facility at Half and W saw regular inspections by the city’s Health Officer. Jewell’s successor, Norton & Bro. (at the same location), burned in 1900 and was not replaced. The National Sanitary Company’s ultra-modern fertilizer plant, built at the very bottom of South Capitol in 1892 (“The drainage is into the river via the gutter of South Capitol Street”), mercifully burned after three years, and the company then relocated to the far side of the Anacostia. Unfortunately, it was replaced by a municipal garbage reduction plant (of the new “Brown furnace” type) which began operations in 1896.

Dumping and rendering were not the only olfactory and health threats relegated to this unloved part of town. The new (1899) sewer system included an outfall running into the Canal. “These sewers carry a large volume of sewage into the [Anacostia] river each day.” And a galling annoyance was the official designation of the wharf on South Capitol Street as the point from which dead animals, collected by city contractors from the streets, were shipped to rendering plants now moved to Giesboro (in DC) and Virginia. City inspectors visited the wharf in 1893 and reported finding “two dead horses on scow . . . exposed to hot sun, one much swollen and odorous; also an accumulation of bones partially covered by putrid flesh and giving off an offensive stench; [the next week] five dead horses . . . basking in hot sun, swollen and odorous; [the next day] five dead horses on boat, greatly swollen and decomposing.”

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32 Other photos of old houses at Buzzard Point will be found in: Evening Star, 6 Feb 1927, p. 78; and 7 Sept 1930, p. 85. The Historical Society of Washington holds a number in its collection.
33 “This section has become a place of general deposit for manure collected from all parts of the District by parties who shipped it twice a year to farmers down the Potomac. Heaping it up in large piles during the summer and winter, it was left to rot until the shipping season – spring and fall” (Health Officer’s Report in District of Columbia Commissioners Annual Report, 1879, p. 131). The other was at 17th Street on the Potomac (Evening Star, 17 Oct 1873, p. 4).
34 Evening Star, 27 Nov 1865, p. 2; Nat. Republican, 11 May 1881, p. 4.
35 Critic-Record, 25 Sept 1888, p. 4; Evening Star, 7 Nov 1893, p. 6; Evening Times, 5 June 1896, p. 2; Wash Post, 14 Aug 1893, p. 8; 5 May 1900, p. 1. The National Sanitary factory, “one-story high, with a large brick building,” was a minor effort by Paul J. Pelz, who had just designed the majestic Library of Congress building (Wash. Post, 23 Oct 1892, p. 10).
36 Health Officer Report, in District of Columbia Commissioners Annual Report, 1895, pp. 14-15, and 1896, p. 371, which includes a fine photo and sectional drawing of the plant.
38 Evening Star, 5 Aug 1893, p. 4.
One can be dismayed but not surprised to see regular advertisements from about this period: "FOR SALE – Is Your Business Objectionable to Your Neighbors? Then buy on Buzzards Point, 1st St, SW; 10,000 feet for sale cheap."\(^{39}\)

The ancient problem of the James Creek Canal ("this navigable sewer") persisted. Even after the James Creek’s 1866 widening and improvement barges could only travel as far north as P Street (where it measured 60 feet wide and 10 feet deep at low tide);\(^ {45}\) the Canal seems to have never contributed materially to the area’s development. A citizen petition of 1896 summarized its broken promises: "This open sewer, by reason of its foul waters and filth, is fatal to the health and creates a frightful mortality in this vicinity . . . The canal will never be of any considerable value to commerce or business, inasmuch as it is too narrow and shallow to allow the passage of any vessel larger . . . than a sand scow." They wanted it covered over. The canal was filled in as far south as G Street by 1903, from G to N Streets by 1911, and southward to P in 1916. The Evening Star (1911) wondered if the section below P, with its "picturesque possibilities" and still-possible commercial use ("there being lumber yards, sand and gravel dumps and brick works" nearby) could be redeemed. That last portion was used as a city dump until 1930, when the Corinthian Yacht Club, moving to the DC shore from Virginia, received permission to fill it in when it created its new yacht basin.\(^ {41}\)

As the canal failed in its purposes, so also died the idea of useful harborage at the Point. The last recorded suggestion of this type dated from 1859 (the terminal of a proposed cargo steamship line).\(^ {42}\) From this time on work on the river along the Point aimed to facilitate water traffic past Buzzard Point – to the Navy Yard. The Eastern Branch channel was dredged in 1876, 1883, and almost continuously in 1903-13. These projects also allowed the government to fill in the flats on both sides of the Anacosta. The 1908 project no doubt dismayed the local boys: "For many years [the] beach extending from Buzzards Point . . . was a favorite bathing place. The deepening of the channel has totally destroyed the beach," creating a perpendicular bank above a fifteen-foot depth of water. Navigation beacons lit the re-formed channel after 1912.\(^ {43}\)

Another early proposal for Buzzard Point was railroad use. Such a suggestion – linking the inland areas of the city to the Anacosta via rail rather than canal – was first made in 1851 and again in 1859. These were followed by railroad plans in the 1870s and ‘90s.\(^ {44}\) As with every other such development plan, proponents believed the innovation would bring purpose to the neighborhood and a rise in property values (and hence in taxes), and such announcements did lead to occasional, and short-lived, land-speculation.

Other projects also were mooted: a private factory, more federal munitions facilities, an enlarged sewage pumping station, a trash incinerator, an airport, a park, an extension of the Botanical Garden, a public beach for blacks, and a relocation site for the city’s main wholesale market, displaced by the new National Archives building.\(^ {45}\) The McMillan Commission Plan confined its recommendations regarding the Potomac-Anacostia waterfront to more wharves backed by an elevated road (pp. 83-84) and even that was not clearly intended to include the

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\(^{40}\) The work is minutely described in Evening Star, 22 June 1866, p. 1.


\(^{42}\) The 1911 article describes Buzzard Point as "a quaint, semi-rural section . . . covered with market gardens and small orchards." The 1932 Baist map shows the section south of S Street still not filled in; perhaps this was the part used by the yacht club and the P-S stretch had been eliminated in an intermediate project.


\(^{44}\) Daily National Intelligencer, 17 Nov 1851, p. 3; Evening Star, 12 Feb 1859, p. 2; 23 Feb 1874, p. 1; 16 Aug 1890, p. 6.

Point. Note that during this entire period Buzzard Point and L’Enfant’s broad South Capitol Street formed a dead-end – the initial (and current) South Capitol Street (Douglass) Bridge was built in 1950.

These plans grew against a background of the steady deterioration of Buzzard Point’s community base. If the population below Q Street stood at 231 souls in 1900, it had dropped to 185 in the 1920 census (89 white, 96 black), 87 in 1930 (39-48), and finally 34 in 1940 (19-15). The recorded occupations remained humble ones, “driver” replacing “gardener” by 1920, and still showed a sprinkling of immigrants and more exalted professions – bookkeeper, telephone girl, machinist (at the Navy Yard), several fire- and policemen, and gravedigger. The last years included the steward of the nearby Corinthian Yacht Club.46 Although the racial mix remained impressive the addresses show somewhat greater residential separation. The ten persons living on houseboats in 1940 were all white. City Directories from the late 1910s show no businesses and many vacant buildings below Q.

A visitor of 1930 reported the area still dominated by “farm land and trucking land”, and aerial photos of about the same period show tidy plots with occasional houses, a few brick and of some substance.47

The Planned (and Unsuccessful) Industrialization of Buzzard Point

As the old gardening community declined a consensus grew that the best use of the Point was industrial. The new (1920) system of zoning provided a perfect vehicle for this. The Washington Chamber of Commerce’s Zoning Committee in 1920 recommended enlargement of industrial and second-commercial zones, and included all of Buzzard Point below M Street in the former category.48 Press articles spoke of “the owners of property at Buzzard Point” in eager discussion with planners.

Sensitive to the disuse of the area and the need for an industrial section in the District, the National Capital Park and Planning Commission49 charged its staff engineer, Capt. E. N. Chisolm, Jr. to study the possibilities. Chisolm’s report, “Waterfront Development – War College to Navy Yard” was presented to the Commission at its May 1929 meeting50 and served as the basis for the industrialization of Buzzard Point.

Chisolm began by noting that Buzzard Point (the entire section south of M Street) represented “the only undeveloped, cheap priced area within the city proper that is outside of the range of park or boulevard development.”51 It was near existing railroad tracks serving the Navy Yard, the current landowners were favorable to development, and it had been already tagged for more intensive use in NCPSC’s planning of the Washington Channel and in “a confidential railroad study.” It was “the only available site [for] development [of] suitable facilities for interchange of water and railroad commerce,” with space for terminal and transfer buildings. To achieve this plan, he proposed: improvement and further construction of the bulkhead; river dredging; construction of transit sheds and railroad freight stations; new railroad lines; a new service street 150 feet wide; and a bridge crossing the Anacostia River from Q Street.

The NCPSC pursued this plan through 193052 and approved a proposed rail plan at its October 1931 meeting. Congress passed the “Buzzards [sic] Point Railroad Bill” on 18 June 1932. The tracks were laid later that year.53

46 Among the last of these residents was Charles Hunt, a veteran who lived with his brother Thomas in a “two-room shack” and died in a fire in 1937. Apparently long-time Buzzard Pointers, their sister Gertrude had died fifteen years earlier also in a fire. They all lived near the very tip of the Point. (Wash. Post, 3 Feb 1937, p. 5)
47 (Visitor) Evening Star, 7 Sept 1930, p. 84; (photos) from the Special Collections of the National Defense University library.
49 Later changed to the National Capital Planning Commission.
50 And will be found the minutes, in the National Archives, Record Group 328, Entry 1.
51 “Land that has been dormant for many years”.
52 See, for example: Wash. Post, 22 Sept 1930, p. 18; Evening Star, 23 Oct 1932, p. 3.
53 Wash. Post, 29 June 1932, p. 16.
Railroad lines to the Point were the first requisite for its industrialization – new zoning was the second. A request for change of zoning classification from residential to industrial 90-foot D was presented to the Zoning Commission by PEPCO in June 1932, covering only the area of the company’s proposed power station (T to V, 2nd to Water Streets), but was later amended to take in the entire Buzzard Point area south of P Street. At its October 1932 meeting the Commission (at the request of NCPPC) approved a reduced industrial area “to protect the residential development of the Washington Sanitary Housing Corporation and the view from the War College.”

With the important pieces in place, the District and its partners – the local landowners and NCPPC – put out a Welcome sign for major industry to inhabit the neighborhood. “The Commission hopes industrial interests will center at Buzzards Point, turning the desolate area into a thriving industrial zone.” The Washington Merchants and Manufacturers Association and the Washington Real Estate Board already had initiated a joint project toward this end. NCPPC hopefully organized a round-table conference of government and private players (announced by Chisolm) to integrate its plans with a proposed Port of Washington Authority. The Commission heard testimony suggesting a more “dignified” name (Duddington, Carrollsbag) to help attract builders.

This euphoria in the end did not result in a great deal of industrial development. Gulf Refining Company built an oil and gasoline storage plant on the 1700 block of South Capitol/Water Streets in 1933. PEPCO’s magnificent new power plant (described separately), of the same year, was the most enduring and significant construction resulting from this plan. A “Map of South Washington” prepared “for proposed track extensions” at the time shows many industrial concerns spotted to the north of Q Street and east of South Capitol but absolutely none south of Q. Notes on a 1938 Baist map (in the Washington Historical Society) indicate “Leased to NCHA [National Capital Housing Authority] – Temp Housing” on squares 605, 607, 661 and 663; the last two are also marked “Heurich”, the name of a large local brewer.

The only other new development the area attracted was the splendid new Corinthian Yacht Club, displaced from its earlier site on the Virginia side of the Potomac by various river projects to the mouth of the old canal, which the club itself now reshaped and deepened. The Evening Star’s enthusiasm for this project is still infectious, and its description of the site’s previous condition telling: “Gone are the abandoned rusting frames and battered bodies of defunct automobiles. Gone are the tin sheds of squatters and disreputable characters . . . The club grounds are rounding rapidly into shape, roads are being built, a railway [for lifting boats from the water] is being installed, provision is being made for ample parking, . . . what was once a jungle of matted vines and scrub growth being cleared and made into a park . . . Buzzards Point has had its head lifted.”

The New, Desolate Buzzard Point

The NCPPC’s plans cannot be said to have destroyed the old, semi-rural Buzzard Point because it was rapidly disappearing in any case, but they failed to establish the area as a center for industrial use. More railroad tracks were laid in 1939 and 1942. Commented

54 Wash. Post, 10 June 1932, p. 20; Evening Star, 24 Sept 1932, p. 17; Wash. Post, 12 Oct 1932, p. 16. As part of the power plant project portions of Water and U Streets were also closed (see PEPCO documents in the NCPC Planning Files; National Archives, RG 328, Entry 545-30, Box 52)
56 (Gulf) Wash. Post, 25 Nov 1930, p. 4; 7 May 1933, p. 8; (map) NCPC Planning Files (National Archives, RG 328, Entry 545-30, Box 52).
57 Evening Star, 15 Nov 1930, p. 22.
58 There surely was no resident population after 1940, and the lovely old house at the point itself, mentioned in several news items as dating from 1800, can be seen burning in an aerial photo of the early 1930s (Special Collections of the National Defense University Library)
Commission member Nolan on the latter occasion: “The area is already becoming crowded with spur tracks.”\(^{59}\) The area’s population had dwindled to near zero – a few people lived on boats.\(^{60}\)

Other proposed uses, often distasteful, came and went: a trash transfer station, a “penal wharf”, a city-owned gravel plant, and that perennial losing-idea commercial and pleasure wharves.\(^{61}\) A commercial (as opposed to members-only private) marina, Buzzard Point Boat Yard, was established immediately south of the power plant in 1945; the Corinthian Yacht Club lost the lease on its federally-owned location in 1964 for refusing membership to an African-American applicant and disbanded, to be replaced by the James Creek Marina in 1991.\(^{62}\) In fact, through the 1940s and ’50s most newspaper items relating to Buzzard Point pertained to boats (sales, repairs) and boating (regattas, club parties, drownings).

The venerable Hall’s Restaurant moved to the Point in 1961, displaced by urban renewal from its 7th and K Streets SW location, and is still remembered there by some; it closed in 1971. During World War II the area between Ft. McNair and 2nd Street, over Canal Street and the old canal bed, was acquired from the District by the War Department and entirely covered with wooden temporary government buildings, only demolished when the Fort expanded eastward in 1985 and again in 2004.

A developer purchased the land just southwest of the power plant (land owned by the Corinthian Yacht Club, the old Hall’s Restaurant site and some adjoining parcels including an auto junkyard) in 1967 for apartments. He engaged well-known local architect Cholthiel Woodard Smith for the project but nothing came of it.\(^{63}\) The few scruffy small warehouses and other miscellaneous buildings one encounters in Buzzard Point now – all north of the power plant between South Capitol and First Streets, and a few others just south of Q Street – date from the 1940-60s. Two large and intrusive office buildings adjacent to the river are from the 1970s.

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\(^{59}\) NCPPC minutes, 19-20 Dec 1942.
\(^{60}\) Wash. Post, 14 Apr 1950, p. 21 has a photo of the census enumerator talking with residents of one of these boats, which appears to be more a yacht than a working vessel.
Maps

Unidentified, 1841 \textit{(NDU)}
From an unsourced, poor copy; this early map shows the topography and marshes.

Boschke 1861 \textit{(LOC)}
Note that James Creek does not connect with the Washington Canal

Aerials 1

Shoreline and planned reshaping, 1911 \textit{(Washington Times, 30 Sept 1911, p. 5)}
Jarvis stereograph, photographed southward from the Capitol dome, 1865 (HSW)
The earliest photograph of Buzzard Point, in the central distance
Aerials 2
1928 *(NDU)*

Mid-1930s *(NDU)*

After 1950 *(NDU)*

Note “tempo” buildings alongside Ft. McNair
Street Scenes

South Capitol Street looking south from P Street, late 1920s (NARA)

Coal yard next to the power plant, 19406 (LOC)

James Creek Canal, 1916? (WHS)
Looking south from N Street
Capt. Joseph Johnson house, 49 T Street, 1935 (LOC)
“The oldest house on Buzzard Point” (built early 1890s)

William Jackson house, 1916? (HSW)
“The southernmost house in Washington”
Mrs. William Jackson, son and daughter, 1916 (HSW)

“Close to the tip of that strange country there is a cluster of little houses and a store, and within a few feet of the point stands a dwelling with a little garden of carefully tended flowers and there a pleasant family finds comfort, happiness and health. It is the southernmost home in Washington.”
Vignettes of Life at Buzzard Point in the Old Days

Taken from contemporary news articles and abridged

“It was hog-killing time on Buzzard’s Point last week,” remarked a member of Capt. George H. Williams’ command [of the Metropolitan Police], speaking of a leave of absence granted George N. Fitton. “George killed a number of hogs, and some of them weighed as much as 200 pounds,” he added. (Evening Star, 9 Jan 1916, p. 28)

$5 Reward – Strayed away on the 11th of July, a large Bay Horse, with black feet, black mane and tail; carries his tail on one side. The above reward will be paid if left at Felix Hornig’s, Butcher, Buzzard’s Point. (Evening Star, 3 Aug 1857, p. 2)

Fire – About noon to-day, the slaughter-house belonging to Mr. Hornig and occupied by Mr. Charles Elul, situated on Buzzard’s Point, east of the Arsenal, was totally destroyed by fire, which was communicated to the building by two children playing with matches. The loss of about $700. For some reason, unexplained, the number of the [alarm] box was struck incorrectly, and consequently the fire department was not on hand with the usual promptness. (Evening Star, 27 Nov 1868, p. 4)

To most people of the District Buzzard Point is looked upon as an out-of-the-way place, not a part of the territory of the Capital. But on Thursday night the people of this neglected section [demonstrated that they] are alive and not disposed to be outdone by their more favored neighbors. Not having the benefit of a race course or a yacht club, a foot race was improvised, and a large crowd assembled to witness the sport. The contestants were Jim Rolley, the celebrated runner, and Fielder Tim, one of the natives. In the pools Rolley sold at 84 and Tim at 27. Betting on the result of the race was very lively, at about ten to one on the professional. To the great surprise of many and the joy of the people of the Point Tim came in the winner. Tim is quite jubilant and now challenges any man in the District to run against him. (Nat. Republican, 9 Sept 1876, p. 4)

Another old-time character who found a nameless grave in Potter’s Field [near the DC Jail] was Susan Diggs. This aged woman was a mendicant and is remembered by some of the old citizens. She went from door to door begging for food, and finally, in the fifties she was taken sick in her shanty near Buzzard’s Point and died. When found on a pile of dried marsh grass in her dilapidated abode she had been dead several days. (Evening Star, 21 Mar 1903, p. 29)

A colored military company called the “Eastern Starlight Cadets”, composed of young men who work in the brick-yards on Buzzard Point, have recently procured flashy uniforms and side arms, and were to celebrate the 4th of July by parading. The heavy rain prevented [that], and they finally decided to celebrate the occasion by getting three big kegs of beer and going to a large common at the corner of 1st and N Streets SW. They soon got drunk and began fighting with their new swords and their fists. Several persons passing [by] were also assaulted, and when the police arrived some had bloody noses, bruised eyes and swelled heads, and their clothing was cut with the sabers. [They were arrested and fined for “a most outrageous occurrence.”] (Evening Star, 12 July 1882, p. 4)

The big houseboat belonging to Charles K. Heath, which was anchored off Alexandria and was used for games of chance until the combination of the Maryland and Virginia authorities stopped them, has been laid up for the winter in the cove between the mouth of the old James Creek canal and Buzzard’s Point. A watchman is aboard the craft. (Evening Star, 17 Dec 1907, p. 18)

Ella and College Lucas, colored, were arrested last night by Sgt. Williams and locked up on charges of petit larceny. The two are charged with stealing a calf and some chickens from James Carter and James Alexander, butchers, who live on Buzzard’s Point. The calf was missed yesterday morning and the chickens disappeared some time previously. [When the police] broke in upon the surprised suspects there was a scuffle upstairs and on making an examination [they] found the calf, which was killed and skinned, in bed, after wrapping bedding around it. The hide was concealed in a bucket. (Wash. Times, 21 Nov 1898, p. 8)
Warner H. Wright appeared in the police court yesterday [with] two charges against him – [keeping an] unlicensed bar and selling liquor on Sunday. Wright is proprietor of a wholesale grocery and liquor establishment at the corner of Half and S Streets SW, on the farthest projection of lonely Buzzard’s Point. His place is in the immediate vicinity of the garbage crematory and “horse heaven,” where dead animals are deposited. The employees of these industries are said to be Mr. Wright’s best customers, for both solids and liquids. (Morning Times, 26 Feb 1896, p. 8)

Yesterday’s warm wave caused hundreds of boys to seek relief in the water, and two of the number who went in near Buzzard’s Point were drowned. Buzzard’s Point has been a favorite swimming place for the boys who live in South Washington and in hot weather it is not an unusual thing to see fifty or more of them in the water at a time. Two or three dozen boys enjoyed the bathing off the point yesterday, and the two boys unfortunately went out beyond their depth. (Evening Star, 27 June 1904, p. 3)

HORTICULTURAL WEEKLY EXHIBITIONS At the exhibition of week before last the plants in flower sent in by:

Dr. B. Foreman, a curious Rose (lusus naturae).

Thomas Blagden, fine Beets, Onions, and Verbena, fine white and black Currants.

F. Van Bergen, of Buzzard Point, some large Apricots. (Daily Nat. Intelligencer, 16 July 1853, p. 3)

Yesterday there were three baptizings in the Potomac by colored people; two near Buzzard Point and one near the steamboat wharfs. Immense crowds of colored people, with some whites, were present on each occasion. There were also several colored people baptized in Rock Creek yesterday. (Evening Star, 29 Apr 1867, p. 3)

At an early hour yesterday morning a prize fight took place at the brick yards on Buzzard Point between two young white men named Geo. Newman and Wm. Skidmore. The mill was witnessed by over 200 people. Policemen arrested the parties this morning. The fight was a most brutal one. Newman bit Skidmore on the face and legs badly, and Skidmore kicked Newman in the face, tearing the skin off from the point of his nose to his forehead. The fight was about a young girl, who was claimed as the company of both at an excursion on Decoration Day. (Evening Star, 5 June 1882, p. 1)

“In dear remembrance of my dead child, Fannie. She leaves to mourn her mother, Bessie Brown, her father, Shack, a host of good friends and Cousin Lon.” Finding this note on a freshly packed grave on Buzzard’s Point yesterday Policeman Davis settled down to unravel what appeared to be an unauthorized burial of a baby or young child. After confiding to his superiors the details of his serious mission Policeman Davis went back and ordered the body exhumed. It was found to be the body of a dog. (Evening Star, 17 Sept 1926, p. 1)
The Buzzard Point Power Plant

PEPCO announced plans for a new auxiliary power plant in June 1931. “The plant would be extensible and, beginning with one or two power units . . . would be enlarged as demand . . . grew.” Company officials looked not only at the general increase in demand but also the danger of having only one major generating facility – Benning – which, if incapacitated by some catastrophe would leave the capital city dependent on far-away Baltimore for power.64 Sites rumored under consideration were Geisboro Point (present Bolling AFB), a riverside place near Alexandria, and Buzzard Point.65

Buzzard Point had its attractions and problems for the company. It was centrally located. It was near a good supply of water (the generators would be worked by steam). Coal could be easily and cheaply brought there by the new railroad tracks and the (envisioned) wharves. On the other hand, the design would fall under purview of the Commission on Fine Arts and the NCPPC; the requisite tall stacks would certainly become lighting rods for criticism. (“Some industrial plants in Germany, attractively designed to conceal smokestacks by a pyramid effect, have been studied with the possibility of applying the idea here.”) And, inasmuch as the Park Service was then buying all the land along the river for future parkland, more design restrictions would ensue; pipes from the attached water intake plant would have to be placed underground. The Public Utilities Commission approved the new plant on 5 October 1932.66

The stack question proved to be the most mettlesome – PEPCO wanted three stacks of 225 feet but after a conference between the company and a raft of local and federal agency representatives the plant included only one stack of 180 feet. Even this was announced to aviators as a hazard and marked with red obstruction lights.67 At the instance of CFA the exterior decoration was built in limestone instead of the proposed cast stone.

PEPCO gave the design/construction of its new plant to the respected engineering firm Stone & Webster. The architect was George R. Wryen, presumably a company designer.68

Construction of the Buzzard Point plant (the southern portion of the present building, facing V Street) commenced in October 193269 and PEPCO inaugurated the facility on 16 November 1933 with a lunch for government and business elites. The cost totaled $4 million70 and generated 35 megawatts from turbines, but was planned for increase to 250 MW capacity. When the local chapter of the American Association of Engineers visited a few months later the visitors declared the plant “a model of efficiency,” incorporating numerous improvements over past systems. Contemporary accounts did not mention the associated water intake plant built at the same time.71 A small gatehouse, of the same materials and style as the plant, sits at the northwest corner of the original building; it cannot be dated but seems contemporaneous.

A Washington Post profile beamed over this addition to the city’s infrastructure: “Architecturally, the new structure, by its simple lines and pleasing proportions, would ornament any part of the city. Even the stack of light brick which indicates the purpose of the building adds to its attractiveness . . . What impresses the visitor to this modern plant is the bigness of everything . . . Simplicity and safety have been guiding principles with the engineers . . . Precautions have been taken against the hazards of lubricating-oil fires, incident to the high temperature of steam operating the turbine generators."72

Stone & Webster also provided the first addition to the plant in 1939-40,73 taking capacity to 120 MW at an expense of $5 million. Additional turbines installed in 1942 and 1945 yielded a total capacity of 270

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64 The Benning plant had gone out of operation twice – in 1914 because of low water in the Anacostia, and in 1933 from high water (Wash. Post, 12 Nov 1933, p. F8).
65 Commission of Fine Arts minutes, 18-19 Nov 1932; Evening Star, 21 June 1931, p. 18.
66 PUC minutes, 5 Oct 1932 (p. 759), as PUC No. 3023.
68 Per the Commission of Fine Arts minutes, 6 Jan 1933. “In general the Commission regarded the plans well designed and approved them.”
69 Building permits, 15 Mar 1933/#161300; 29 Apr 1933/#162359. The long strings of construction inspection reports attached to both allow minute tracking of the progress.
70 All sources give the anticipated cost as $5 million; perhaps the newspaper article was mistaken.
71 Evening Star, 17 Nov 1933, p. 3; Wash. Post, 25 Feb 1934, p. 20. A detailed discussion of the project’s labor cost will be found in Evening Star, 13 Nov 1933, p. 17.
72 Wash. Post, 12 Nov 1933, p. F8. A fine set of photos of all aspects of the original plant and with it several additions will be found in the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, the Theodor Horydyczak photos.
73 Building permits, 8 Nov 1939/#227892; 31 Dec 1941/#250089, both with letters of approval from the PUC.
MW. The intake plant also saw some upgrades. An ugly open coal yard lay adjacent to the plant, and occupied as much acreage.\textsuperscript{74}

Further expansion of the plant (outside the surrounding building) eventually saw its generating capacity rise to 380 MW, divided between Buzzard Point Combustion Turbine Plant East and West. It was converted to oil-powered combustion turbines in 1968 but then used less and less until it was largely taken off-line in 2012.

\textsuperscript{74} Wash. Post, 17 July 1939, p. 17; 25 Jan 1940, p. 20; Evening Star, 26 June 1940, p. 25; 21 Aug 1945, p. 12; 10 May 1946, p. 23. Evening Star, 30 May 1943, p. 22 has a good photograph of the interior. The Horydczak photo collection at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, documents all aspects of the plant.
Buildings at Buzzard Point

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<tr>
<th>Square</th>
<th>Houses - frame</th>
<th>Houses - brick</th>
<th>Businesses</th>
<th>Shanties</th>
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Source: Kraft, Brian D., *Old Southwest.*
# Population of Buzzard Point

*All residences south of Q St SW (but only 1894 including south side of Q)*

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<td>1800</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>1900</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Telephone girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>96</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2100</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>U</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Steward (Corinthian Yacht Club)</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anacostia R</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most common jobs: gardener, day laborer, carpenter, dressmaker, servant, "at school"; after 1920, also driver.

Source: Police census (in 1895 MPDC Annual Report), census rolls.
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http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@FIELD(SUBJ+@band(+Real+property++Washington++D+C++++Maps++))

or in Kraft, Old Southwest.

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District of Columbia building permits
City Directories
NCPC files (at National Archives, Record Group 328)
Ft. McNair History files (at National Defense University Library, Special Collections)
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Consultants

Ms. Susan Lemke, National Defense University Library, Special Collections
Mr. Mike Ewall, Energy Justice Network

Washington Herald, 11 Feb 1909, p. 10