

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: PRESERVING THE CHARACTER OF THE
WOODRIDGE COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR

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The Washington, DC neighborhood of Woodridge developed in the early twentieth century as a streetcar suburb on the northeast edge of the city. A vibrant commercial corridor was established along Rhode Island Avenue NE to support the growing population. While the corridor has many of the architectural features of a thriving streetscape, it is struggling economically. The city recognizes the corridor as a valuable asset and has recommended redevelopment and reuse of the older building stock, streetscape improvements, and compatible infill; however preservation is not appropriately addressed in the planning documentation. The goals of this study are to document the history of the corridor in order to fully understand its historic value and to recommend preservation tools to protect the historic character while promoting the economic development goals of the city.

PRESERVING THE CHARACTER OF THE WOODRIDGE COMMERCIAL
CORRIDOR

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Washington, DC neighborhood of Woodridge developed in the early twentieth century as a streetcar suburb on the northeast edge of the city, with single-family detached houses built on large lots. Woodridge is bounded by Bladensburg Road to the south, 18th Street to the west, Michigan Avenue to the north, and Eastern Avenue to the east, with Rhode Island Avenue running through the center of the neighborhood. In the 1920s, a vibrant commercial corridor developed along Rhode Island Avenue, between 20th and 24th Streets, to support the increasing population.¹

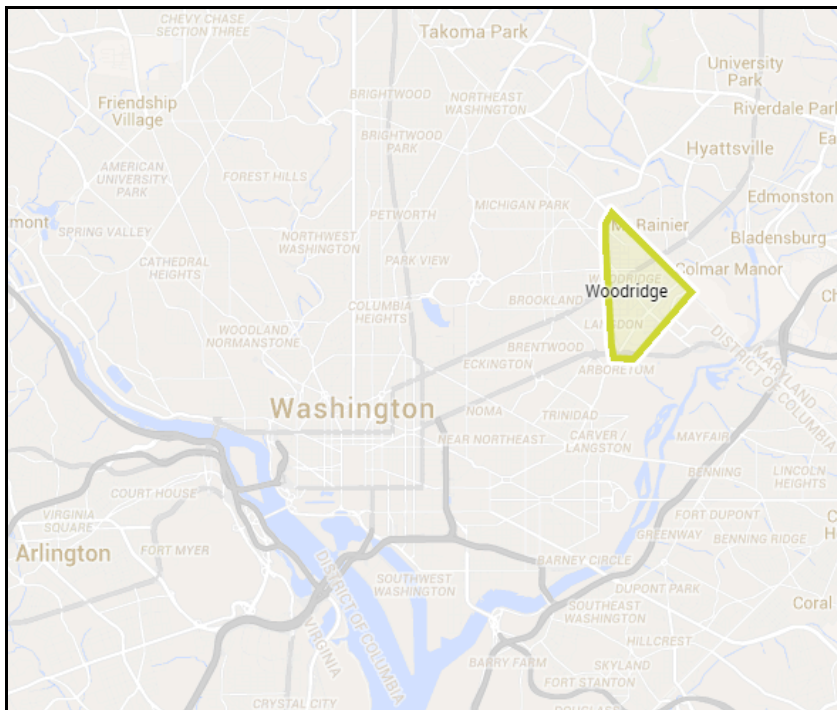


Figure 1: Map of Washington, DC with Woodridge outline. The Woodridge neighborhood is located in the Northeast quadrant of Washington, DC along the Maryland border. Map courtesy of Google Maps with modifications by the author.

¹ Brian Kraft, “Woodridge: Failed Railroad Suburb Blossoms with the Streetcar,” *DCNorth*, October 2003; DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; 1930 United States Census, District 0353, Sheet No. 2, Washington, DC.

Commercial corridors of the early twentieth century in towns and cities across the nation were characterized by simple, small-scale buildings meant to serve commercial, professional, and public services. The grand embellishments of the Victorian eras were past and commercial buildings were marked by their practicality, emphasizing classical design elements of unity and balance rather than over the top ornamentation. Real estate developers built rows of identical storefronts quickly and inexpensively, often along streetcar lines.²

Figure 2: Map of the Woodridge commercial corridor. The Woodridge commercial corridor is located on Rhode Island Avenue NE between 20th and 24th Streets NE. Map courtesy of Google Maps with modifications by the author.

The Woodridge commercial corridor was one such community. The three blocks of the corridor, which include about forty-six structures, were built along the streetcar line and housed resources and services that the new neighborhood needed. Groceries, hardware stores, bakeries, and barber shops were operated and built by local residents, many of whom were first- and second-generation immigrants. Community members came together to establish key services including the neighborhood's first bank, post office, and library. Fraternal organizations, church congregations, and local residents used the upper floors of commercial buildings as meeting spaces. As Woodridge residents worked to improve the appearance and resources of their community, they also discouraged racial diversity through the first half of the century. However, the neighborhood experienced a drastic racial change in the 1950s as middle and upper income African American families replaced white families.³

Today, the Woodridge commercial corridor is physically intact, with an appearance similar to that of the 1920s. Historic features and a dense, human scale provide a unique identity for the neighborhood, particularly in comparison to upper northeast Washington in general, which is characterized by industrial uses and low density, automobile-focused development. While the Woodridge commercial corridor has many of the architectural features of a thriving streetscape, it is struggling economically, lacking the goods, services, and opportunities that the neighborhood needs. The corridor also lacks a documented history. The historic structures speak

³ "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919-November 1922; Brian Kraft, "Woodridge: Failed Railroad Suburb Blossoms with the Streetcar," *DCNorth*, October 2003; DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; Keith Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of Washington, District of Columbia*, 2nd Edition (Washington, DC: Intac, 1997), 509.



Figure 3: Woodridge commercial corridor, 1948. Photo taken at Mills Avenue and Rhode Island Avenue NE facing west. Photo courtesy of the John P. Wymer Photograph Collection, Historical Society of Washington, DC.

quietly on their own, but coupled with stories of people and events that shaped its development, the buildings could provide a strong sense of place for the surrounding community.

The city has developed planning documents that recognize the Woodridge commercial corridor as a valuable asset and recommend ways to reinvent the area. These documents include policy focus areas and implementation plans that promote redevelopment and reuse of the older building stock, streetscape improvements, compatible infill, and higher overall economic health through access to local jobs, goods, and services. These plans have resulted in a few positive actions including establishment of the Rhode Island Avenue Main Street Program and completion of the Ward 5 Heritage Guide. The main street program has promoted public-private

partnerships that have brought new amenities to the corridor. Though the planning documents recognize the historic value of the corridor, they do not recommend the use of any direct preservation tools.⁴ As there is no historic district or site designations within the corridor, none of the buildings are protected against incompatible modifications. The first goal of this study is to explore and document the history of the Woodridge commercial corridor in an effort to fully understand its historic value. The second goal is to recommend ways that the history can be communicated and interpreted along the corridor in order to enhance neighborhood identity. Finally, the third goal is to recommend preservation tools to protect the historic character of the corridor while also promoting the economic development goals of the city.

⁴ District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning & Economic Development, “Rhode Island Avenue – Diamond of the District,” May 2011; District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, DC Office of Planning, “2016 District of Columbia Historic Preservation Plan,” 2013; District of Columbia Office of Planning, “Comprehensive Plan – Chapter 24 – Upper Northeast Area Element.”

Chapter 2: The Development of Woodridge

Early Suburban Development

The development of Woodridge was a result of broad changes in population and transportation occurring throughout Washington, DC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The District of Columbia had been established one hundred years prior in 1790 when Congress passed the Residence Act allowing President George Washington to select the site for the nation's capital. Washington selected ten square miles along the Potomac River, however over the next century, only a portion of this area was developed as the Federal City. The Federal City was designed by French engineer Pierre L'Enfant and was bordered by Boundary Street to the north (now Florida Avenue) and the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers to the south. The city developed within this dense urban core, leaving Washington County, the land outside L'Enfant's plan but still within the original ten square miles, as a rural frontier, characterized by farms and large estates. In the second half of the nineteenth century, landowners began subdividing the county by plotting streets and lots on plat maps and submitting these maps to the city as official records.⁵ One hundred and twenty-five subdivisions were platted during this time, including Woodridge, which was first recorded in the plat record in 1889.⁶

⁵ Matthew B. Gilmore and Michael R. Harrison, "A Catalog of Suburban Subdivisions of the District of Columbia, 1854-1902," *Washington History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, *Commemorating the Centennial of the McMillan Plan, Part II* (Fall/Winter, 2002/2003): 27, accessed April 4, 2015 URL, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073520>.

⁶ Matthew B. Gilmore, "Washington, DC: A City of Neighborhoods," *Perspectives on History*, *The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (December 2003), accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.historians.org/annual-meeting/supplement-to-the-118th-annual-meeting/washington-dc-a-city-of-neighborhoods>.

Washington County developed haphazardly, with individual landowners making decisions about how to subdivide lots and arrange street patterns. Washington County officially became part of the city in 1871. Shortly after, Congress and city officials began to realize the high expense of paving roads and providing utilities

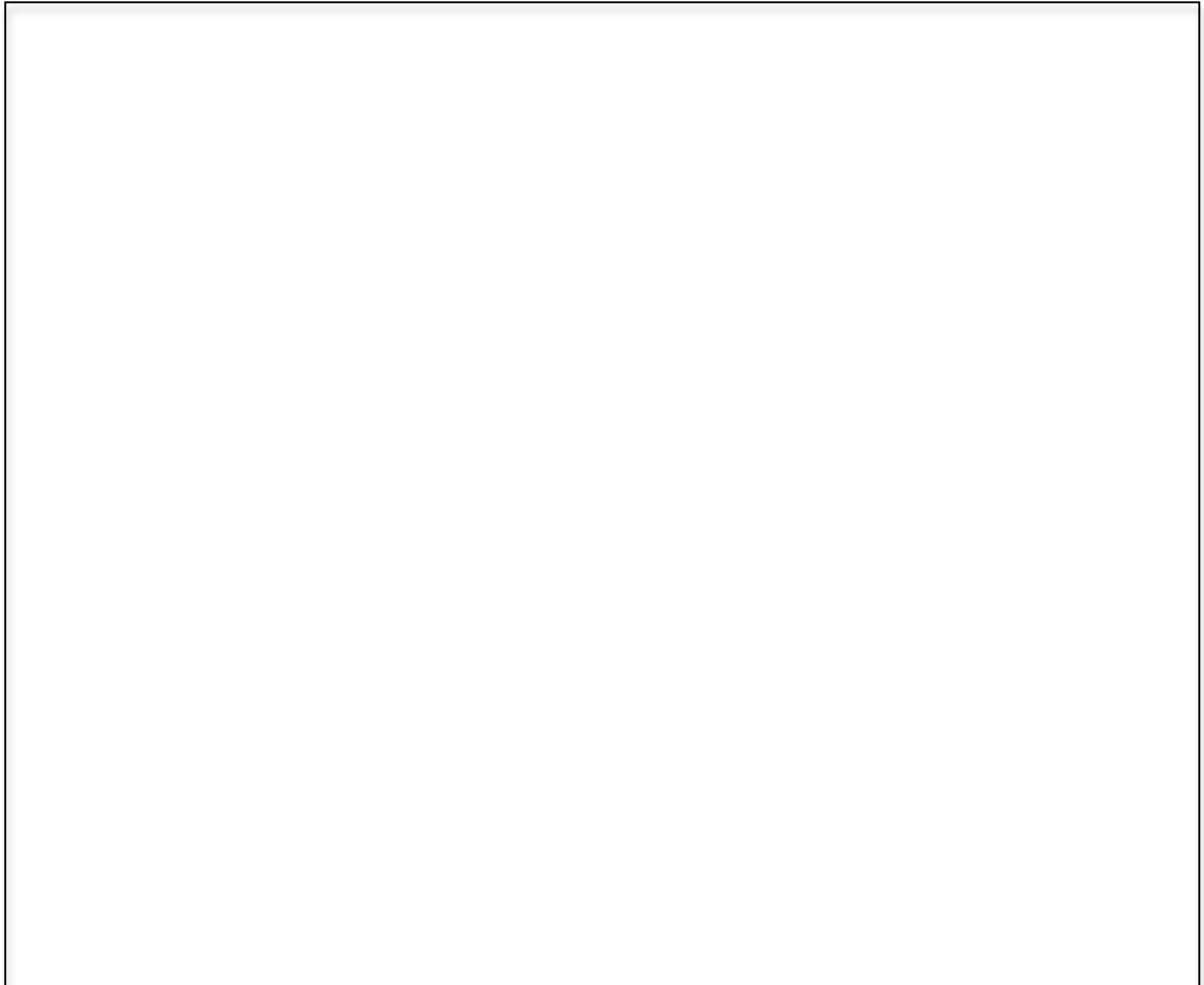


Figure 4: Suburban Subdivisions of the District of Columbia, June 1892. Woodridge, subdivided in 1889, is shown in the upper right corner while Boundary Street is shown in the lower left. Map courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and included in “A Catalog of Suburban Subdivisions of the District of Columbia, 1854-1902” by Matthew B. Gilmore and Michael R. Harrison.

within such a disconnected and unorganized development scheme. The city was also concerned that the streets in these subdivisions did not align with the streets of

Washington, which were neatly organized in an orthogonal pattern cut with large diagonal avenues. Hence, in 1893, Congress passed the Highway Act, extending the street plan established by L'Enfant to the area formerly known as Washington County. The first iteration of the legislation required existing subdivisions to modify their streets and property lines to conform to the plan. As landowners were unhappy about having to change their property boundaries, Congress passed new legislation in 1898 that allowed existing subdivisions to remain intact but required all new subdivisions to adhere to the grid and diagonal pattern.⁷

The extension of Washington's streetcar system was the major driver of development in Woodridge and its neighboring subdivisions. Even though Woodridge was platted in 1889, it was not until the Maryland and Washington Railway began traveling down Rhode Island Avenue in 1897 that residential development really took off.⁸ The absence of pre-streetcar development in Woodridge is evidenced by a city tax assessment in 1893-1894 that stated that only one of the 186 lots in the Woodridge area had a house.⁹ Over the next twenty years, hundreds of homes were built and the neighborhood of Woodridge extended well beyond its original boundaries. A real estate atlas from 1907 indicates that Woodridge occupied the area south of Rhode Island Avenue and a subdivision called Sherwood was located north

⁷ Gilmore and Harrison, "A Catalog of Suburban Subdivisions of the District of Columbia, 1854-1902," 27, 45; Gilmore, "Washington, DC: A City of Neighborhoods."

⁸ Leroy K. King, Jr., *100 Years of Capital Traction: The Story of Streetcars in the Nation's Capital* (Taylor Publishing Company, 1972), 52.

⁹ Brian Kraft, "Woodridge: Failed Railroad Suburb Blossoms with the Streetcar," *DCNorth*, October 2003, 36.

of the avenue. By 1915, Woodridge appears to have subsumed Sherwood and occupies the area both north and south of Rhode Island Avenue.¹⁰

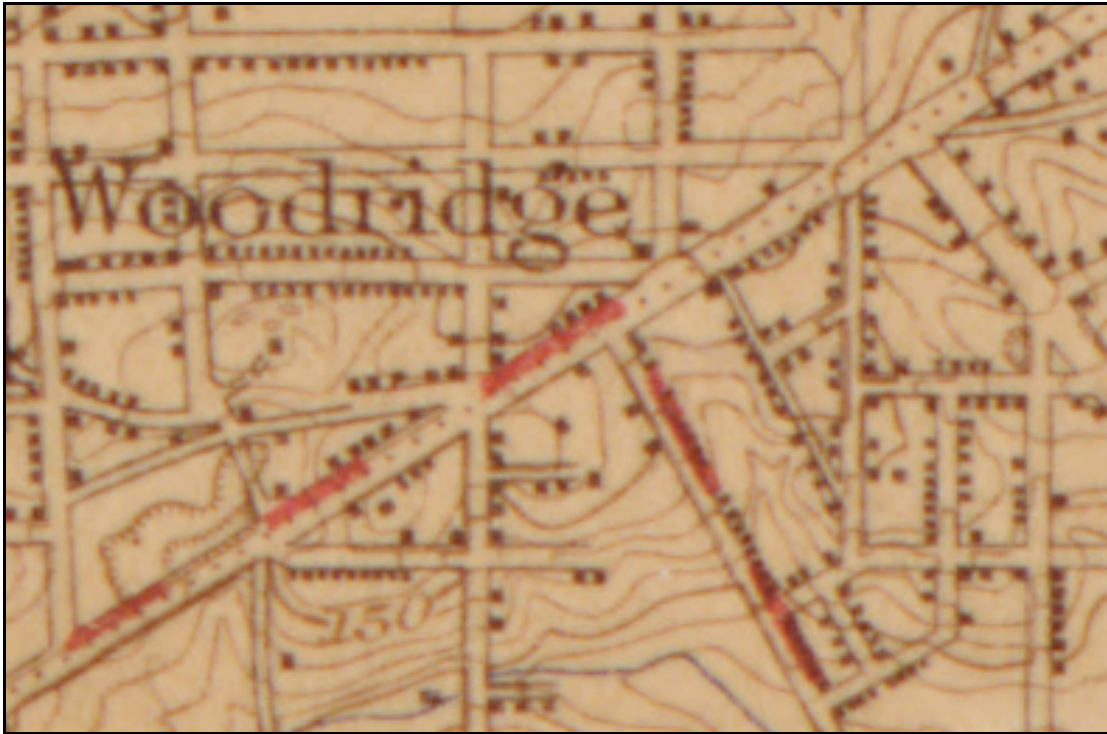


Figure 5: 1913-1915 Geological Survey. Hundreds of buildings are located in Woodridge. Map courtesy of the Department of the Interior, U.S Geological Survey.

Woodridge and the adjacent subdivisions of Langdon and Brookland became the new frontier for real estate developers cashing in on a suburban experience in the nation's capital. These neighborhoods offered the best of city and suburban living. Large detached homes with modern amenities and manicured lawns were located a short walk to the streetcar. Real estate ads in 1906 boast a one-fare, 25-minute trip on the City and Suburban route to the Treasury Department.¹¹ This was the beginning of

¹⁰ 1907 *Baist's Real Estate Atlas, District of Columbia*, Vol. 4, G.W. Baist; 1913-1915 Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey.

¹¹ Ad for Woodridge, D.C, *The Washington Times*, May 6, 1906. Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.

a trend of urban flight and suburbanization that would accelerate dramatically in the mid twentieth century.

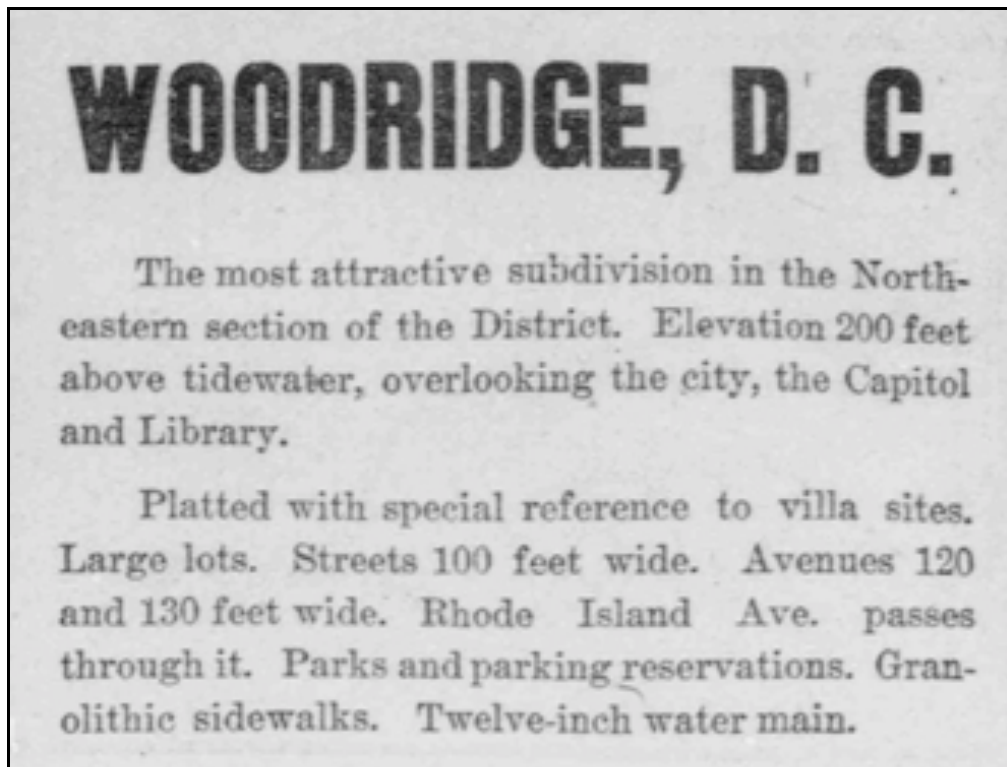


Figure 6: Ad for new homes in Woodridge. The Washington Times, May 6, 1906.

The initial residential development of Woodridge can be attributed to a few prominent developers who purchased large farms, subdivided the land, and laid out roads and lots. Real estate developers working in Woodridge and the surrounding neighborhoods were praised by the Washington Times as “broad-minded business men who are anxious that the Capital City should not only keep abreast of the times, but should forge to the front as a leader of American cities.”¹² Henry A. Vieth was one such businessman. According to an officer of the Langdon-Woodridge Citizens Association in 1914, the early development of Woodridge should be attributed to

¹² “Men Who Have Been Prominent in Development of the Suburbs,” *The Washington Times*, May 6, 1906. Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.

Vieth, and in particular he should be praised for selling lots at reasonable prices.¹³

Some light-hearted commentary in the August 1919 newsletter of the Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association stated, “Once upon a time our neighbor Veith had lots of Woodridge: now he has Woodridge lots. Others knew a good thing when they saw it and immediately saw him.”¹⁴

Before development began in Woodridge, German immigrants owned much of the farmland on the western side of the area (near the present day 18th Street NE). The Edel farm, owned by Dietrich and Augusta Edel, occupied 40 acres and was purchased by developer John L. Knopp. The Edel farmhouse, constructed in the 1850s and still standing today at 1804 Lawrence Avenue NE, is one of the last remaining farmhouses in the city. The Mills estate was just south of the Edel farm. Clark Mills, and later his son John, owned the tract of land that stretched from the B&O Railroad close to the current alignment of Rhode Island Avenue. Clark Mills is famous for having sculpted the bronze statue that sits upon the Capitol dome. Mills, with the assistance of his enslaved foreman, Philip Reid, cast the statue at his bronze foundry in Woodridge in the early 1860s.¹⁵

Developers Knopp and Vieth both lived in the Woodridge area for many years and were active in the community. Knopp was Vice President of the Rhode Island Avenue Citizens Association in 1921 and Veith served on an advisory committee for

¹³ “Mail Bag (From The Times Readers),” *The Washington Times*, March 9, 1914. Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.

¹⁴ “Neighborhood News,” Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, August 1919, Historical Society of Washington, DC.

¹⁵ Kraft, “Woodridge: Failed Railroad Suburb Blossoms with the Streetcar,” 37; “Ward 5 Heritage Guide,” District of Columbia Office of Planning, Washington, DC, 2014.



Figure 7: Washington D.C. to Rockville - Maryland 1890 Land Owner and Railroad Map. This map shows the early subdivision of Woodridge as well as the estates of Dietrich Edel and Clark Mills. Map published by Fava Naeff & Co. Civil Engineers and Architects, Corcoran Building, Washington DC.

the city government during the implementation of the first zoning laws in Washington in 1920.¹⁶ Similar to the German farmers who occupied the land first, Knopp and Vieth had German roots. Both men were born in the United States but had at least one parent who was born in Germany.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919, June 1920, April 1921.

¹⁷ 1920 United States Census, District 0266, Sheet No. 2, Washington, DC; 1920 United States Census, District 0266, Sheet No. 6, Washington, DC.



Figure 8: Officers and Chairmen of the Standing Committees of the Rhode Island Avenue Citizens Association. John L. Knopp is seated on the right. Photograph in Neighborhood News issue from April 1921. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, DC.

Population and Demographics

The population of Washington, DC had its first major boom during the Civil War, growing by over seventy-five percent and reaching 132,000 in 1864. The newcomers did not leave upon the war's end and rather stayed to work in government jobs.¹⁸ The city grew rapidly over the next eighty years until 1950 when it reached over 800,000 people, with about thirty-five percent of that population working for the federal government.¹⁹

Washington's development as a major metropolitan area is unlike any other American city. It did not have the pull of industry to draw large immigrant

¹⁸ Lois E. Horton, "The Days of Jubilee: Black Migration during the Civil War and Reconstruction," in *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*, ed. Francis Curro Cary. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 65.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "United States Census of Population: 1950, Census Tract Statistics Washington, District of Columbia and Adjacent Area." 1952. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

populations like that of New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Therefore it also did not experience the labor struggles or ethnic political coalitions that defined other east coast cities. Instead, Washington's growth can be attributed to the federal government attracting educated professionals and workers from across the nation as well as from other countries to work in federal agencies and construct the many large government buildings. The federal government, specifically the Navy Yard, attracted some skilled and unskilled industrial workers to work as machinists. With little other industry, small groups of immigrants, especially German, Italian, and Irish immigrants, came to Washington to pursue craft or other entrepreneurial ventures, which provided better opportunities than the industrial wage labor of other American cities.²⁰

The abolition of slavery in Washington in 1862 (prior to national abolition in 1865) resulted in a great migration of Africans Americans to the city. When the Civil War began, Washington was about one-fifth African American and by 1870, it had increased to one-third.²¹ African Americans would go on to shape the culture and politics of modern-day Washington. The African American population held steady through the first half of the twentieth century and then grew dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, reaching seventy-one percent in 1970.²²

²⁰ Francine Curro Cary, introduction to *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*, ed. Francis Curro Cary. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), xvi;

²¹ Cary, introduction, xiii-xvii; Horton, "The Days of Jubilee: Black Migration during the Civil War and Reconstruction," 66.

²² U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing, 1860-2010.
<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

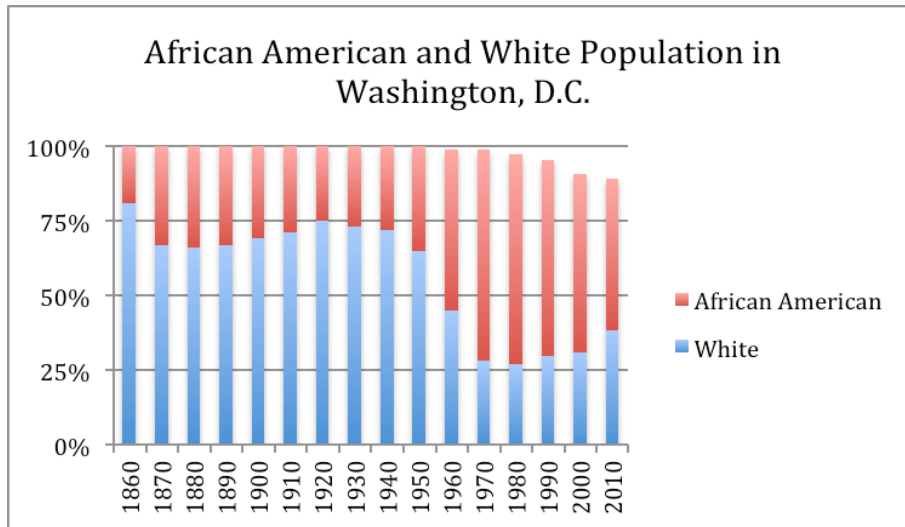


Table 1: African American and White Population in Washington, DC, 1860-2010. U.S. Census Bureau. Graphic by author.

As the Woodridge population grew in the first few decades of the twentieth century, certain demographics were similar to that of Washington at large. For example, in 1920 about one-third of the working population (ages 18 to 65) living in the census district just north of the Woodridge commercial corridor worked for the government. In addition, six percent of this census district was foreign-born, which aligned with the city’s immigrant population. While such a small percentage of first-generation immigrants appears to indicate a lack of ethnic diversity in Woodridge, further inspection of Woodridge census data reveals that more than forty percent of households included a member who was foreign born or had a foreign born parent. Hence, a large portion of the population was of foreign descent. About half of these first- and second-generation immigrant families were from Germany. Other countries represented in Woodridge in 1920 were England, Ireland, Russia, Canada, Scotland, Italy, Sweden, and Norway.

A number of businesses in the Woodridge commercial corridor in the 1920s were owned or operated by first generation immigrants. For example, Anthony Valenti was born in Italy in 1889 and owned a barbershop at 2044 Rhode Island Avenue. He also lived in the neighborhood at 1230 Franklin Street NE. One of the older buildings in the corridor, 2101 Rhode Island Avenue, was located at the corner of Mills Avenue and contained a bowling alley, grocery store, and apartments.²³ Jacob Spund, who was born in Russia and came to the United States in 1907, operated the businesses.²⁴

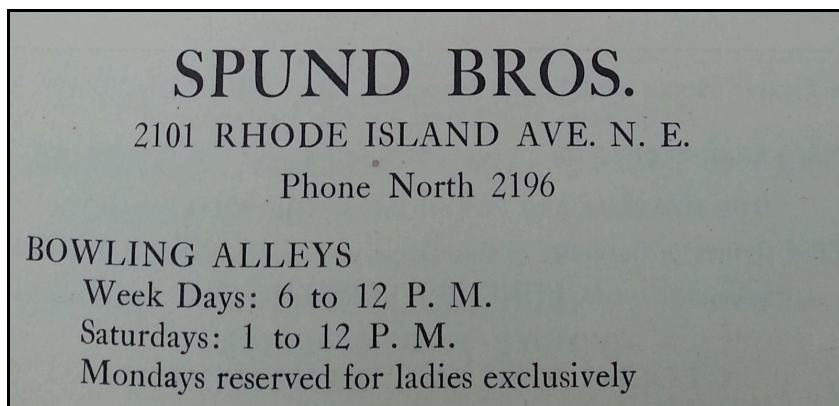


Figure 9: Ad for Jacob Spund’s bowling alley. Neighborhood News issue from December 1921. Historical Society of Washington, DC.

Ethnic and socioeconomic demographics in Woodridge may have been similar to that of the city; however racial demographics were much different. Of the 753 people living in the census district north of the Woodridge commercial corridor in 1920, only three were African American, while the city was one-quarter African American. In 1950, there were six African Americans living in Woodridge, while the

²³ A discussion of the Mills estate, presumably where the street got its name, is included in Chapter 3.

²⁴ 1920 United States Census, District 0266, Washington, DC; 1920 United States Census, District 0343, Sheet No. 7, Washington, DC; R.L. Polk & Co., “Boyd’s Directory of the District of Columbia 1922,” 1259; 1930 United States Census, District 0395, Sheet No. 8A, Washington, DC; R.L. Polk & Co., “Boyd’s Directory of the District of Columbia 1924,” 624.

city, as a whole, was over one-third African American. With only six people, the Woodridge census tract had fewer African Americans than any other census tract in Washington in 1950. But the area soon experienced a drastic racial change. In 1960, the census tract was sixty-nine percent African American and in 1970, that number had risen to ninety percent, while the city in those same years was fifty-four percent and seventy-one percent, respectively.²⁵

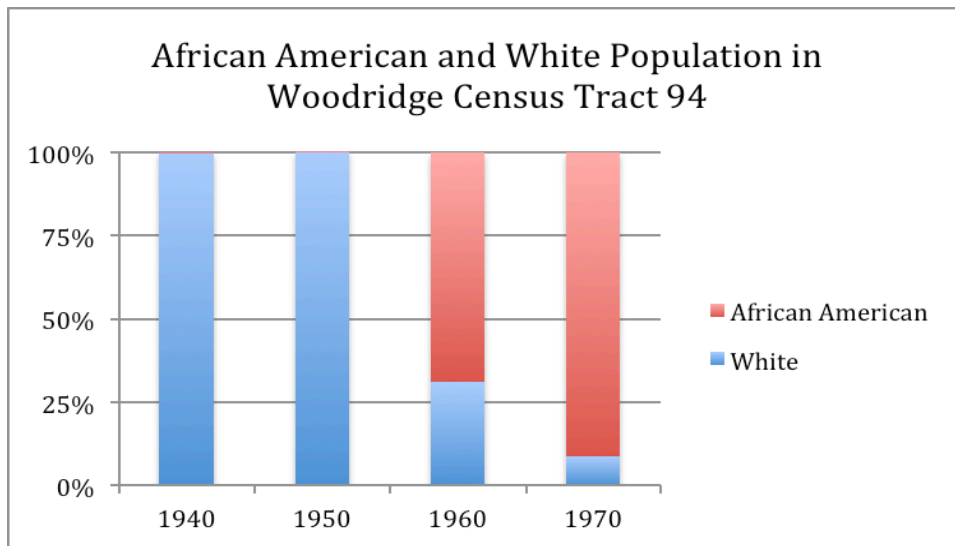


Table 2: African American and White Population in Woodridge, 1940-1970.
U.S. Census Bureau. Graphic by author.

In the 1950s, middle and upper income African American families began replacing white families with similar incomes in the northeast Washington neighborhoods of Woodridge, Brookland, and Fort Totten.²⁶ For the decades prior, white residents of Woodridge had been trying to keep other races and cultures out. Property deeds in some parts of the neighborhood included covenants to exclude African American, Chinese and Jewish residents. Property owners without covenants

²⁵ 1920 United States Census, District 0266, Washington, DC; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing, 1940-1970. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

²⁶ Keith Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of Washington, District of Columbia*, 2nd Edition (Washington, DC: Intac, 1997), 509.

were encouraged by the all-white Rhode Island Avenue Citizens' Association to maintain the homogeneity of the community. The Association referred to real estate agents willing to pursue non-white sales as "greedy enemies of the neighborhood." In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled racial covenants unenforceable.²⁷

Though the law forbade racial covenants, African Americans moving into the neighborhood still had doubts. In 1952, a public school teacher named Frank P. Bolden bought a house in Woodridge for his family. The Boldens were the second African American family in the neighborhood. "First I moved my wife and the baby's crib, then the children, and then a World War II weapon," said Bolden in a 1983 Washington Post article. Bolden went on to become the athletic director of the DC public school system as well as an influential community leader. In 1983, he was elected President of the Federation of Civic Associations, an organization created to fight segregation and pursue better housing, schools, and jobs for African Americans.²⁸

The residential development discussed in this chapter led to the establishment of the Woodridge commercial corridor in the 1920s. Woodridge was transformed from a rural landscape to a suburban community within just a few decades. The extension of Rhode Island Avenue and the streetcar system in the 1890s and the promotion of the area by real estate developers created a housing boom. First- and second-generation immigrants as well as Washington natives saw the opportunity to establish a commercial corridor that could provide the goods and services that the new residents needed.

²⁷ Kraft, "Woodridge: Failed Railroad Suburb Blossoms with the Streetcar," 38.

²⁸ Patrice Gaines-Carter, "Woodridge Leader is New Federation President," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 1983.

Chapter 3: Significance of the Woodridge Commercial Corridor

The Woodridge commercial corridor developed mainly in the 1920s, with some construction in the decades before and after.²⁹ Even though Woodridge was established in 1889 and a housing boom occurred around the turn of the century, by 1909 only one business had been established, a small grocery store at Mills Avenue.³⁰ However, by the early 1920s, the corridor had become an anchor for the surrounding residential community, providing a central location for local entrepreneurs and professionals to pursue their work, spaces for religious, fraternal and civic organizations to socialize and discuss the growing pains and successes of the new community, and the goods and services to support the rapidly expanding population and to furnish new suburban homes.

Today, the Woodridge commercial corridor is a historic main street that embodies the collective identity of the neighborhood. Economically, the corridor is struggling; however symbolically, it is the neighborhood's social and cultural core. For the last four years, the Rhode Island Avenue Main Street Program (RIA Main Street Program) has hosted a fall festival within the Woodridge commercial corridor, an indication that these three blocks are the heart of the community.³¹ (The RIA Main Street Program covers two and one-half miles of the avenue from 3rd Street NE to Eastern Avenue.) At the 2014 fall festival, live music and the smell of southern

²⁹ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, District of Columbia Public Library.

³⁰ "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919.

³¹ The Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) administers the DC Main Streets Program to promote the revitalization of tradition business districts in Washington, DC. The programs is consistent with the Main Street Four-Point Approach® created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which focuses on organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring to achieve revitalization goals.

cooking filled the air, while local artists marketed their work and neighborhood organizations handed out information to hundreds of people. On another Saturday in autumn, a small group of residents sat outside of Zeke's Coffee at 2300 Rhode Island Avenue in folding chairs that they had brought from home. None of the establishments in the corridor have outdoor seating so this group of friends decided to supply their own. The RIA Main Street Program office is located in a building within the corridor and the organization appears to have designed their logo to resemble the streetscape. Although the main street program covers about twenty blocks along the avenue, the three blocks of the Woodridge commercial corridor are a key asset, representing the program at large. These factors, though anecdotal, indicate that the Woodridge commercial corridor is the social core of the community and that it has potential to become the economic center once again.

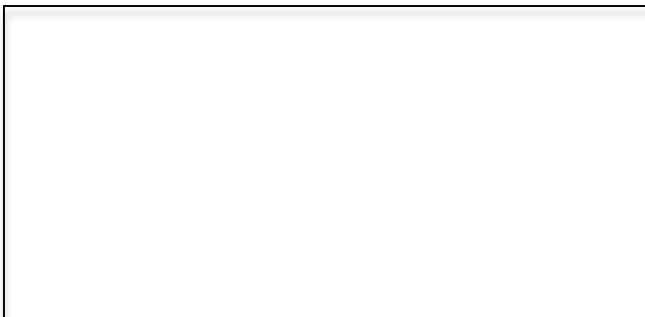


Figure 10: Rhode Island Avenue Main Street logo and photographs of the Woodridge commercial corridor, 2015. Logo courtesy of <http://riamainstreet.org/>. Photographs by author.

The density, consistency of human scale, and intact historic facades and rooflines, all make the architecture of the Woodridge commercial corridor unique to Rhode Island Avenue and northeast Washington. These areas are typically characterized by industrial complexes, auto repair shops, underutilized land, and generally low-density development. The Woodridge commercial corridor is a rare gem in northeast Washington; moreover, it is an example of early twentieth century suburban development that occurred in and around Washington as well as in expanding urban areas across the country.³² The corridor possesses architectural and historic significance due to its contribution to these widespread patterns of community development and the stories it tells of the people who lived and worked there.

The traditional main street commercial corridor, which had been the center of towns in the United States for over one hundred years, was nearing the end of its popularity in the 1920s as the rise of automobiles and suburbanization gave way to strip malls and sprawling retail development outside city limits. Commercial corridors from the 1920s are differentiated from those of earlier times by their lack of ornamentation and historical reference. The buildings were constructed as simple, compact spaces meant to serve specific commercial or social functions. In contrast, many nineteenth century commercial corridors are characterized by the shophouse building, in which commercial functions operate out of the ground floor, and residential space, often occupied by the shopowner, is located above. The shophouse model was gradually eliminated in the early twentieth century, as professional

³² Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1987), 13-17, 21, 24, 29, 39.

services became more common and commercial land values increased.³³ There is no evidence of shophouses in the Woodridge commercial corridor. A few buildings can be defined as the two-part commercial block, a type similar to the shophouse; the upper floors were used for social and civic purposes, however, rather than residential functions.

The vernacular buildings in the Woodridge commercial corridor have similarities to commercial buildings of the same era in other areas of the country. It is the ordinary buildings of an era, rather than high style architecture, which truly define the historical character of localities and of the nation.³⁴ The building types in the Woodridge commercial corridor are consistent with those in *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* by Richard Longstreth. In the following sections, the buildings in the corridor are categorized using Longstreth's typology. Detailed information about the early history of many of the buildings is also included.³⁵ Categorizing the buildings helps to establish the corridor's connection to broad patterns of early twentieth century commercial development; while understanding the history will be key in communicating the special character of the corridor. Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations will explain how this architectural and historic context can be used to improve the neighborhood's identity and preserve the corridor's character.

³³ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1987), 13-17, 24, 29, 39.

³⁴ Ibid, 21.

³⁵ A map of the location of buildings discussed in this chapter is included in Appendix 1.

One-Part Commercial Block

The most common building type in the Woodridge commercial corridor is the one-part commercial block. This building type was typical in rapidly developing turn-of-the-century communities because it offered developers a quick and inexpensive way to generate income in young neighborhoods where the need for goods and services was high. These tiny storefronts were seen as temporary, as developers hoped to replace them with larger, more profitable buildings as the commercial corridor grew more economically viable. Remarkably, these “temporary” storefronts have lasted nearly a century in Woodridge. Most of the one-part commercial block buildings in the corridor are situated in rows of identical, or nearly identical, buildings constructed by the same architect and developer. This allowed the developer to sell or lease storefronts to several businesses while creating a dense urban core to attract residents from the surrounding communities. In suburban Washington as well as across the country, grouped units such as these were a common feature along streetcar lines.³⁶

One of the key characteristics of the American main street is its human scale. In 1961, Jane Jacobs defended older neighborhoods at a human scale, arguing that they foster social and ethnic diversity, healthy social interaction, and entrepreneurship.³⁷ Dominated by the one-part commercial block, the Woodridge commercial corridor has an especially small scale. The buildings are packed closely together and about half of them are particularly tiny at one story high and between fifteen and twenty feet wide. The rest of the buildings, with the exception of a few

³⁶ Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street*, 54-55, 59, 62.

³⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

three or four story apartment buildings anchoring block corners, are one or two stories and less than fifty feet wide.



Figure 11: Streetcar on Rhode Island Avenue, southwest of Irving Street NE, 1948.

Photograph courtesy of the John P. Wymer Photograph Collection, Historical Society of Washington, DC.

W.S. Plager, a local architect, designed over a dozen buildings in the corridor including many of the one-part commercial blocks.³⁸ Not only did Plager work in the neighborhood, but he also lived in Woodridge at 1930 Kearny Street NE, about two blocks north of the commercial corridor. Plager designed the buildings at 2004 and 2006 Rhode Island Avenue in 1928 and 1920, respectively.³⁹ Joseph Bateman, a long-time business owner in Woodridge, operated his plumbing, heating, and cooling business out of 2004 Rhode Island Avenue in the 1940s. Prior to occupying 2004,

³⁸ The Woodridge commercial corridor contains forty-six buildings in total.

³⁹ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; 1930 United States Census, District 0353, Sheet No. 2, Washington, DC.

Bateman had operated his business one block down at 2212 Rhode Island Avenue (also a one-part commercial block designed by Plager) for a number of years.

Bateman, his wife Catherine, and their ten children lived in Woodridge for over thirty years. Catherine, who was born in Ireland, was an active member of Saint Francis de Sales Catholic Church, which is located across the street from Bateman's former business.⁴⁰ Fred M. Haas operated a hardware and automobile store at 2006 Rhode Island Avenue in 1920. Haas had first operated his business a few doors down at the Odd Fellows Hall (discussed below).⁴¹

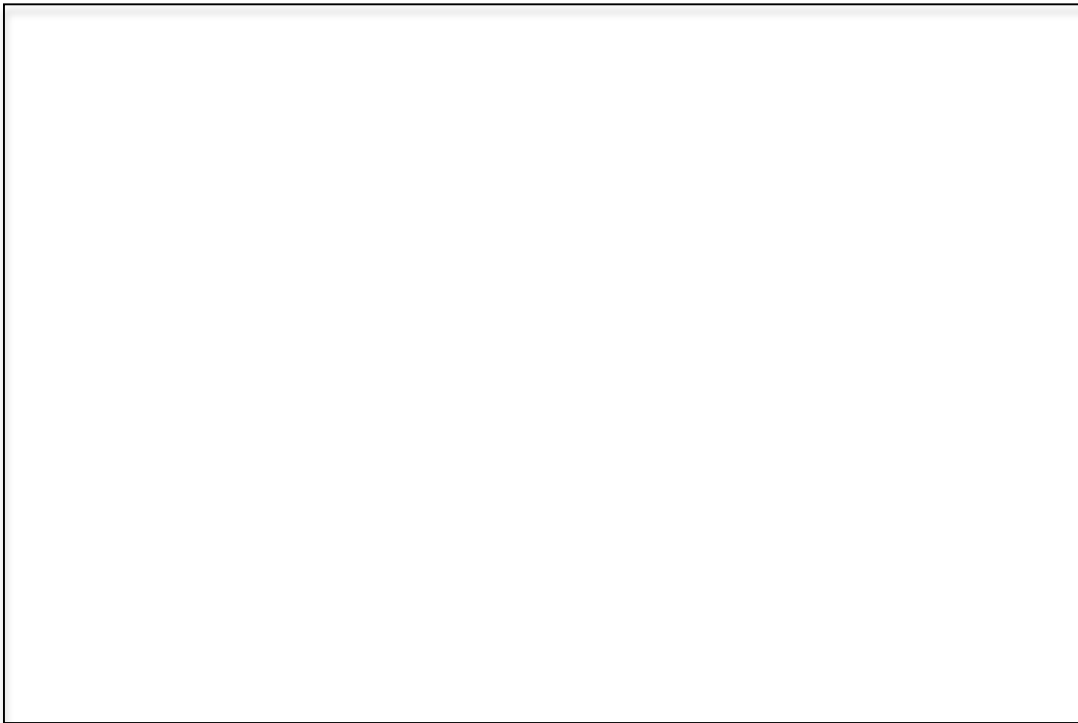


Figure 12: Fred M. Haas Hardware at 2006 Rhode Island Avenue NE, c. 1924.

Photograph courtesy of the Rhode Island Avenue NE Insider blog.

<http://rhodeislandavene.com/2014/11/09/2006-ria-ne-old-and-new/>.

⁴⁰ R.L. Polk & Co., "Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia 1929, 112; "Joseph Bateman's Funeral Today," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 1939, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), 23; R.L. Polk & Co., "Polk's Washington City Directory," 1948, 40; "Mrs. Bateman, D.C. Resident 45 Years, Dies," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 1951, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), B2.

⁴¹ "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919, May 1920.



Figure 13: 2004 – 2008 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015. The white building in the middle is the former Fred M. Haas Hardware store. Photograph by author.

Plager designed the row of one-part commercial block buildings from 2208 through 2216 Rhode Island Avenue. The building permits for the structures are all dated April 7, 1925. The buildings are nearly identical with the exception of alternating parapet roof shapes. Plager also designed other types of buildings in the corridor including the temple-front bank building at 2027 Rhode Island Avenue and a large three-story brick apartment building at 2245 Rhode Island Avenue.⁴²

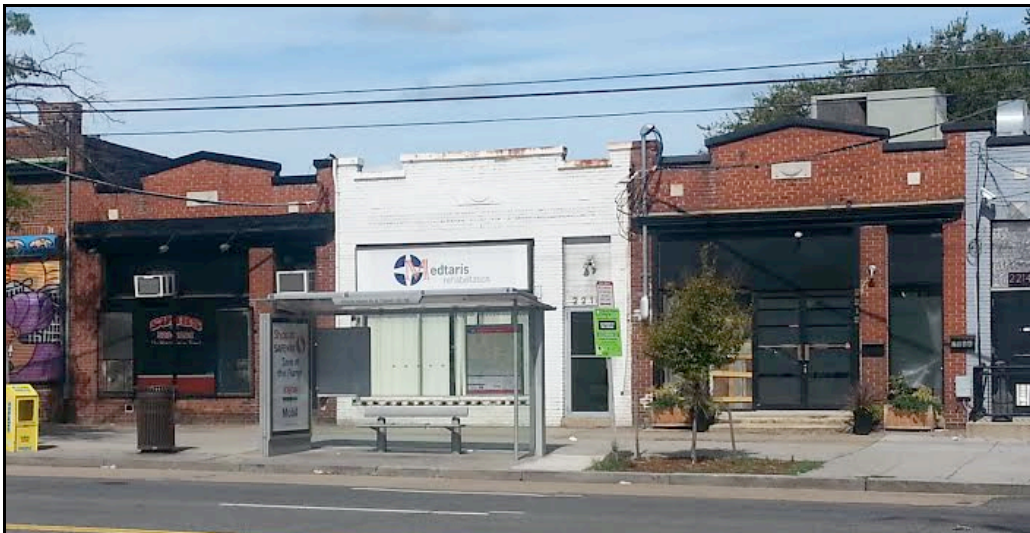


Figure 14: 2208 – 2212 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015. Photograph by author.

⁴² DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC.

Next door to Plager's row at 2206 Rhode Island Avenue is a one-part commercial block that is larger than its neighbors, though it has a similar shaped parapet roofline. The building was constructed in 1929 as the neighborhood's first public library. Called the Woodridge Subbranch, architect Conrad M. Chaney designed the structure specifically to be used as a library and it served the community until 1958 when a new facility was erected a few blocks away. The Rhode Island Avenue Citizens Association had been pursuing a library branch since 1921. In 1929, the association and the DC Public Library system began searching for an existing building to house the library but could not identify a suitable option. A local businessman and member of the Association, M.O. Bull, allowed the library to be built on his property on Rhode Island Avenue. In addition to providing books and



Figure 15: 2206 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015 (formerly the Woodridge Subbranch Library. Photograph by author.

periodicals to the community, the library became a meeting place for local organizations including the Woodridge Book Club and the Woodridge Music Club and a resource for local students and teachers.⁴³

A frame dwelling, built in 1906, is located next to the library building at 2200 Rhode Island Avenue. It remains from a period prior to the commercial corridor when houses, rather than businesses, lined the avenue. The house was used as office space in the 1920s. Specifically, Bull and another real estate agent, F.A. Linger, operated their businesses out of the dwelling. Bull owned more than a dozen properties in the corridor and also sold houses throughout the neighborhood.⁴⁴

Six especially small one-part commercial block buildings are located at 2117 Rhode Island Avenue through 2127 Rhode Island Avenue. They were built in two phases: 2117 through 2121 were constructed in 1922 and 2123 through 2127 were constructed in 1923. All of the buildings are nearly identical: brick construction, seventeen feet wide, and fifty feet deep. The only difference is that the first set has flat roofs while the second has front-gabled roofs. All were owned by Fred D. Giesler, a German immigrant who came to the United States in 1902.⁴⁵ Buildings of such modest size were appropriate for simple business ventures including an ice cream shop, restaurant, cleaners, and real estate office. Ben Lee's Laundry was one

⁴³ "Woodridge Library History," DC Public Library, accessed on May 3, 2015, <http://dclibrary.org/node/744>.

⁴⁴ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, January 1921; "Detached Homes in Brookland," *The Washington Times*, March 10, 1917, Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.

⁴⁵ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; 1930 United States Census, District 0314, Sheet No. 10, Washington, DC.

such enterprise.⁴⁶ Entering the laundry business was common among Chinese immigrants in Washington at this time, as racial discrimination allowed for few jobs outside low-wage, menial labor.⁴⁷ Although it is clear that Woodridge was ethnically diverse, it did not welcome racial diversity. The 1940 census record for the district just north of the corridor indicates only two Chinese residents.⁴⁸



Figure 16: 2123 – 2127 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015. Photograph by author.

⁴⁶ “2 Chinese Wounded; Brother is Accused,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1931, Proquest Historical Newspapers: *The Washington Post* (1877-1997), 1; “Show Window Broken in Eight High’s Stores,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 1942, Proquest Historical Newspapers: *The Washington Post* (1877-1997), 21; “City News in Brief,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 1943, Proquest Historical Newspapers: *The Washington Post* (1877-1997), 13.

⁴⁷ Francine Curro Cary, introduction to *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation’s Capital*, xix.

⁴⁸ 1940 United States Census, District 0266, Washington, DC.

Two-Part Commercial Block

The second most common building type in the Woodridge commercial corridor and the most prevalent type of small-to-moderate commercial building in the country is the two-part commercial block. Usually two-to-four stories, this type is characterized by a distinct division between the public, commercial space on the first floor and the private residential, office, or meeting spaces above. It was a common form from about the 1850s through 1950s with the pre-1900 buildings generally more ornately embellished than those to follow. As all of the buildings in the Woodridge commercial corridor were constructed after 1900, they are generally devoid of ornamentation, have little historical reference, and instead emphasize classical elements of design through unity, order, and balance. Lack of adornment was a sign of the times as well as a practical matter for developers. Design in the first few decades of the twentieth century was simple in comparison to the previous Victorian periods. Longstreth states, “At a time when simple design was ever more held as a virtue, ornate buildings that were small and provided no more than basic services would have been considered pretentious.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, developers anticipated replacement of these buildings and therefore saw no reason to spend money on unnecessary adornment.⁵⁰

The most distinctive two-part commercial block buildings in the corridor housed fraternal organizations: the Masonic Temple at 2031 Rhode Island Avenue and Odd Fellows Hall at 2020 Rhode Island Avenue. Photos and newspaper articles indicate that the first floor was used for commercial activities and the upper floors as

⁴⁹ Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street*, 62.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 24, 29, 39.

meeting places. Both buildings have distinct indications of separation through a belt course, which acts as a cornice for the first floor commercial area. The Masonic Temple was built in 1922 for the Woodridge Chapter Royal Arch Masons. In the 1930s, W.L. Grimes Pharmacy and Mardfeldt's Store occupied the first floor commercial space.⁵¹

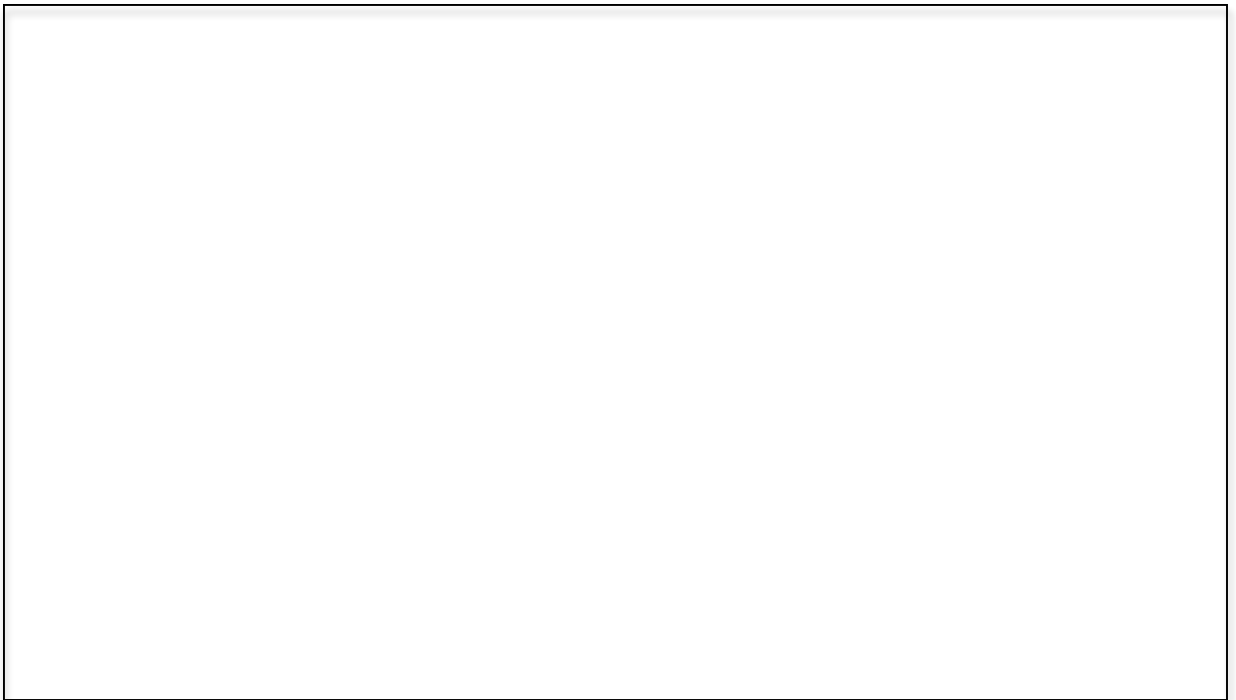


Figure 17: Masonic Temple at 2031 Rhode Island Avenue NE, c. 1930-1939. Photograph courtesy of the General Photograph Collection of the Historical Society of Washington, DC.

The Odd Fellows Hall, built in 1908, is most likely the oldest commercial building in the corridor and therefore has more embellishments than the other structures. The ornaments include arched pediments over the windows, corbeling, and

⁵¹ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; "Woodridge Unit To Be Host to F.A.A.M. Lodge: East Gate Chapter to Be Feted Tuesday at the Masonic..." *The Washington Post*, May 31, 1936, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), F4; "Woodridge Citizens Plan Establishment of Bank," *The Washington Times*, August 28, 1921, Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, 11; "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, October 1920.

a heavy cornice with modillions. In addition to the Odd Fellows, local churches, including Barnabus Episcopal Church and Sherwood Presbyterian Church, used the upper floors as congregation space. Like the Masonic Temple across the street, the first floor of the Odd Fellows Hall was used for commercial functions. In 1919, Fred M. Haas operated a hardware and automobile accessory store out of the first floor. When Haas moved his business several doors down in 1920, Louis M. Raskin moved in and opened the Woodridge Dry Goods Store.⁵²



Figure 18: Odd Fellows Hall at 2020 Rhode Island Avenue, 2015.
Photograph by author.

⁵² DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC; "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919, October 1920, December 1920, January 1921.

The building at 2103 Rhode Island Avenue is another two-part commercial block that fulfilled a public purpose for the new community. This building served as Woodridge's first post office from 1920 through 1927. Like the library and the bank (discussed below), the post office was established as a result of local resident advocacy. In 1919, the Woodridge area community, which included about 1,200 homes and 6,000 people, had to use the Brookland post office, which was inaccessible for most residents. The Rhode Island Avenue Citizens Association requested that a carrier station be installed on Rhode Island Avenue, east of 17th Street. City officials listened and on October 19, 1920, the Woodridge Station opened at 2103 Rhode Island Avenue, next door to Spund's grocery and bowling alley.⁵³ The building at 2103 was owned by Dr. Charles J. Bowne.⁵⁴ Though it is not clear due to changed address numbers, a review of building permits indicates that the building may have been constructed around 1916 as an apartment building with shops underneath. Motter & Searles dry goods and furnishings shop was located there in May 1919.⁵⁵ The post office moved up the block to 2211 Rhode Island Avenue in 1927, where it continues to operate today.⁵⁶

⁵³ "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, September 1919, November 1920.

⁵⁴ Bowne practiced medicine in Washington from 1919 until just before his death in 1967. He lived in and worked out of the brick and tile dwelling at 2001 Rhode Island Avenue, just a block south west of the post office. The house still stands today as an office for a local union.

⁵⁵ DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington DC ; "Neighborhood News," Rhode Island Avenue Suburban Citizens Association, May 1919.

⁵⁶ "Official Invited to Citizen Carnival: New, Mooney and City Heads Asked to Woodridge Festival," The Washington Post, June 24, 1927, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), 20.

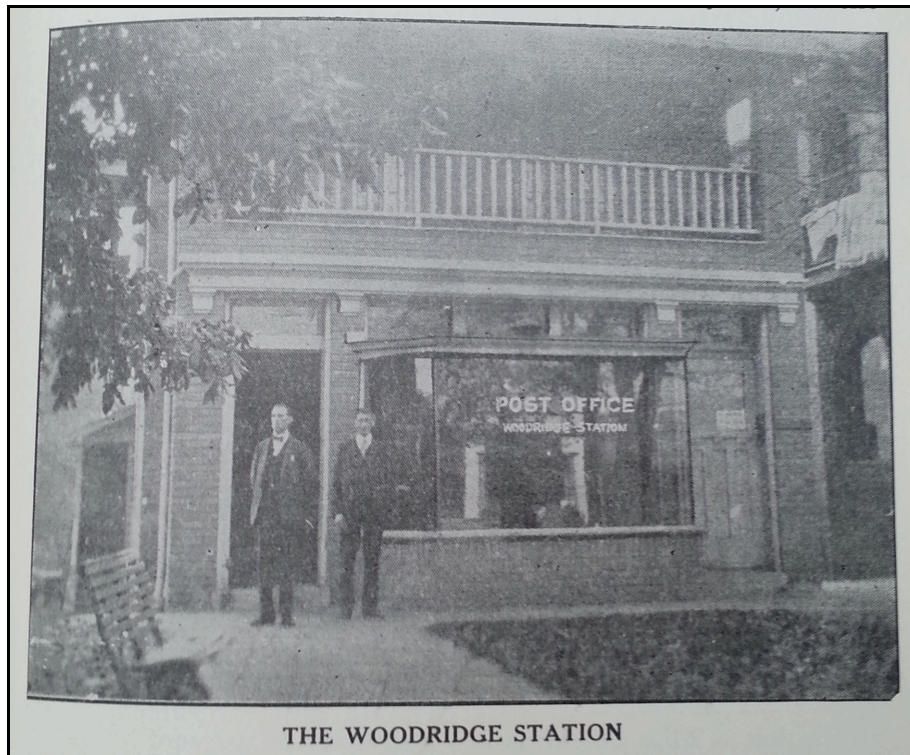


Figure 19: Post office at 2103 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 1920. Photograph in Neighborhood News issue from November 1920. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Washington, DC.



Figure 20: 2103 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015. Photograph by author.

Other Types

Most of the buildings in the Woodridge commercial corridor fit the one- or two-part commercial block type, but several substantial structures do not. For instance, a temple-front, neoclassical bank building is located at 2027 Rhode Island Avenue. Temple-front banks were first seen in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century with the rise of the Greek Revival style. This style became popular again in the early twentieth century, but with great freedom of adaptation.⁵⁷ The bank at 2027 has common temple-front features including a recessed entrance fronted by twin columns. Bankers, local merchants, and residents came together in 1921 to



Figure 21: Bank building at 2027 Rhode Island Avenue, 2015. Photograph by author.

⁵⁷ Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street*, 100.

organize the first community bank for the Woodridge and Langdon neighborhoods. While the new building was under construction, the Woodridge-Langdon Commercial and Savings Bank began their operations at the Odd Fellows Hall across the street. They moved into the new bank building when construction was completed in 1923. As with many buildings in the corridor, the bank was designed by Plager.⁵⁸

St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church, located at 2015 Rhode Island Avenue, is not characterized as a commercial building, but it is included in the study area due to its architectural, historic and cultural significance to the community. The Romanesque Revival church and rectory, designed by the architectural firm Murphy and Olmsted, was built between 1927 and 1931. St. Francis de Sales is the direct successor to Queen's Chapel, known as the first Catholic place of worship in Washington, DC. Richard Queen and his family established a private chapel on their property in 1772 to serve Catholics in northeast Washington and Maryland. Over the next one hundred years, the church was destroyed and rebuilt several times: during the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and the Civil War. In 1908, the chapel was rebuilt again at Evarts and 20th Streets NE and renamed St. Francis de Sales. The church made its final move to Rhode Island Avenue in the 1920s in order to obtain more space for the growing congregation and to be accessible via the streetcar.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ "Federal Expenses Drop \$120,000,000," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 1921, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), 26; "Woodridge to have a Community Bank," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1921, Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), 25; DC Building Permits Database (1877-1949), Washingtoniana Room, Washington, DC.

⁵⁹ "The History of St. Francis de Sales Church, Washington, DC," Saint Francis de Sales Catholic Church, accessed May 3, 2015, [http://www.stfrancisdesaleswdc.org/SFdS_History\[1\].pdf](http://www.stfrancisdesaleswdc.org/SFdS_History[1].pdf); The Woodridge Civic Association, "Woodridge Community Historic Tour, Washington, DC," 2008.



Figure 22: St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church at 2015 Rhode Island Avenue NE, 2015.
Photograph by author.

The early residents of Woodridge built the commercial corridor and the local economy themselves. Architects and developers like W.S. Plager and M.O. Bull designed and constructed the buildings while businessmen and other residents used the spaces for commerce as well as community activism. Residents worked with the city to have buildings, like the bank and library, constructed to meet specific needs. A variety of first- and second-generation immigrants pursued entrepreneurial ventures out of the buildings, contributing to the economy as well as the diversity and vitality of the neighborhood.

Chapter 4: Planning Framework: Zoning, Historic Resources, and City Plans

The Woodridge commercial corridor is zoned as a commercial district that permits low-density development, including office employment centers, shopping centers, medium-bulk mixed-use centers and housing (Zone C-2-A). There is no limit on the number of stories permitted, but buildings cannot exceed a height of fifty feet.⁶⁰ Most of the buildings in the corridor are well under the fifty-foot limit. No properties are designated as historic sites (either on the National Register of Historic Places or the DC Inventory of Historic Sites) and there is no historic district designation. The city of Washington, DC has developed a number of planning documents that address future development of the Rhode Island Avenue corridor. The plan most specific to the Woodridge commercial corridor is Rhode Island Avenue: Diamond of the District (small area plan), which was prepared by the DC Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (ODMPED) in May 2011. In addition to this small area plan, Chapter 24 of the DC Office of Planning's Comprehensive Plan provides limited recommendations for solutions to the problems ailing Rhode Island Avenue and the surrounding area. The Comprehensive Plan was created in 2006 and the Office of Planning tracks the status of recommendations on a quarterly basis. The DC Historic Preservation Office developed the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Plan in 2013, which includes action items with implementation targets through 2016.

⁶⁰ District of Columbia Office of Zoning, "District of Columbia Zoning Map," <http://maps.dcoz.dc.gov/>; District of Columbia Office of Zoning, "Zoning in the District of Columbia," http://dcoz.dc.gov/dcoz_brochure_013111.pdf.

Rhode Island Avenue: Diamond of the District

In developing the small area plan, the ODMPED performed outreach to gain insight into the objectives, preferences, and concerns of both the District government and local stakeholders. Specifically, they performed a survey to gather data about residents' perceptions of the area and the types of development activities they would like to see. Through this research, ODMPED was able to characterize the economic and physical conditions of Rhode Island Avenue from 3rd Street NE to Eastern Avenue. The objective of the plan is to offer a variety of investment opportunities that will improve the issues identified and strengthen the identity of the corridor.

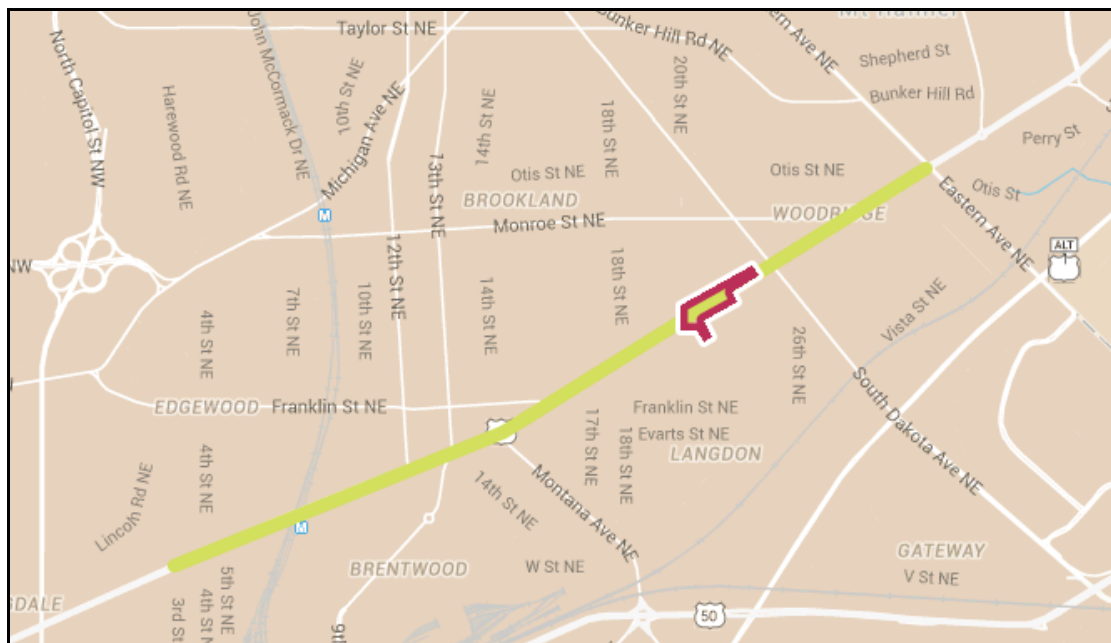


Figure 23: Map of Rhode Island Avenue. The area highlighted in green is the study area of the Rhode Island Avenue: Diamond of the District report (3rd Street NE and Eastern Avenue). The Woodridge commercial corridor is outlined in red. Map courtesy of Google Maps with modifications by the author.

Approximately 200 local residents were polled to rank neighborhood characteristics regarding the availability of goods and services and the aesthetic qualities of Rhode Island Avenue as well as perceptions of identity and pride. Over

seventy percent of the participants ranked the following characteristics as poor or very poor: variety of goods and services, physical appearance, sense of comfort and safety, neighborhood identity, and community pride. Crime along the avenue often occurs at night in underutilized commercial areas where buildings are either closed for the evening or vacant. Bringing activity, during both day and night, back to the commercial areas may deter criminals who rely on the assumption that no one was watching.⁶¹

With the exception of home improvement services and hardware items, most residents purchase goods and services from Maryland, Virginia, or other areas in the city outside of the Rhode Island Avenue corridor. This is especially an issue in northeast Washington, but it is also a problem across the city. Washington loses one billion dollars a year in retail taxes to Maryland and Virginia. Residents are interested in obtaining more food options along Rhode Island Avenue including fresh, organic markets and sit-down restaurants. The lack of local resources also means a dearth of local jobs, with only ten percent of people who live in the upper Northeast also working there.⁶² These conditions contrast with the economy of the Woodridge commercial corridor in the 1920s. In its first few decades, the corridor had a number of groceries and specialty food stores and many of the shop owners both lived and worked in Woodridge.

The environment and conditions of the corridor have been greatly affected by automobile activity. Rhode Island Avenue is a common route for commuters to and

⁶¹ District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning & Economic Development, “Rhode Island Avenue – Diamond of the District,” May 2011.

⁶²Ibid.

from Maryland as well as for trucks traveling across town. About 20,000 vehicles drive through the Woodridge commercial corridor each day.⁶³ Rhode Island Avenue has a few well-defined commercial areas, with the Woodridge commercial corridor being the most dense and pedestrian-friendly. Most of the areas, which are typically four blocks or less, are separated by large swaths of low-density development -- which often includes vacant buildings, empty lots, and auto repairs shops -- making the corridor appropriate for cars but unsafe and unpleasant for pedestrians.

The ODMPED separated Rhode Island Avenue into sub-areas for research and recommendation purposes. The Woodridge commercial corridor is in the northeastern section of Sub-Area 3; the commercial buildings are indicated in pink in the Sub-Area 3 study map. The small area plan makes several recommendations for this area, which



Figure 24: Sub-Area 3 of the small area plan. The Woodridge commercial corridor is highlighted in pink. Map courtesy of the District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning & Economic Development from the Rhode Island Avenue – Diamond of the District report.

⁶³ Ibid.

they call a potential arts district that will “give new meaning to historic fabric.” The recommendations include redeveloping and reusing existing structures to create a commercial and arts district; prohibiting license issues to storefront churches, check cashing services, and other similarly redundant uses which tend not to enliven the streetscape; establishing a DC Main Street Program, with specific priority to the Woodridge commercial corridor, to attract preferred retail, promote façade enhancements, improve identity, and increase jobs and sales; and target at least 9000 square feet of infill.⁶⁴

Comprehensive Plan: Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of the Comprehensive Plan also recognizes the Woodridge commercial corridor as a valuable asset to the community. It states that the area is underserved by retail outlets and foresees pedestrian-friendly mixed uses that meet the needs of residents. Overall the plan’s policies aim to conserve residential character, improve neighborhood-shopping areas, and protect and promote historic resources. However, it does not specifically highlight the historic value of the Woodridge commercial corridor, and while it lists a number of historic resources that merit protection, none of these are within the corridor. It does recommend designating the corridor as a DC Main Street and adding Rhode Island Avenue to the Great Streets Program.⁶⁵ Both of these recommendations have been carried out since the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ District of Columbia Office of Planning, “Comprehensive Plan – Chapter 24 – Upper Northeast Area Element,” 2006; The Great Streets program, a multi-agency revitalization program led by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, utilizes public actions and resources to foster private investment towards economic development.

plan's inception. While these programs may aid in preservation, they do not provide protection if the threat of demolition or change arises. The merits and shortfalls of these programs are discussed in Chapter 5: Impacts of the DC Main Street and Great Street Programs.

2016 DC Historic Preservation Plan

The 2016 DC Historic Preservation Plan proposes a variety of solutions to preservation issues across the city, but the plan does not specifically reference Woodridge. There are a few citywide initiatives that could impact Woodridge, however most will not. The plan focuses mainly on documenting designated historic resources as well as identifying and documenting eligible historic resources within the original L'Enfant Plan (which does not include Woodridge). Initiatives with potential positive impact include completing basic documentation of outer neighborhoods dominated by single family housing, performing a survey of areas formerly known as Washington County (however, this recommendation only focuses on farmhouses and country homes), and identifying historic resources on DC Main Streets with the intent of developing preservation incentives to promote reinvestment in historic retail locations.

Both the Comprehensive Plan and the DC Historic Preservation Plan recommend exploration of conservation districts.⁶⁶ The intent and process behind conservation districts is similar to that of historic districts, but conservation districts

⁶⁶ District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, DC Office of Planning, "2016 District of Columbia Historic Preservation Plan," 2013; District of Columbia Office of Planning, "Comprehensive Plan – Chapter 24 – Upper Northeast Area Element."

regulate fewer architectural components. Conservation districts aim to retain character through consistency of height, scale, mass, and orientation. Major additions, new construction, and demolition would be subject to review by the DC Historic Preservation Review Board. Historic districts, on the other hand, require review of any alteration that changes the appearance of the building, which includes most façade changes (i.e. materials, ornamentation, etc.) as well as major additions, new construction, and demolition.⁶⁷

The DC Historic Preservation Plan proposed a conservation district pilot program in 2015 with possible expansion in 2016. However, in October 2014, the chief of staff of the DC Office of Planning, Tanya Stern, stated that they are currently not moving forward with the conservation district idea.⁶⁸ One recommendation from the DC Historic Preservation Plan that was executed is completion of the Ward 5 Heritage Guide. Ward 5 covers an extensive area of about twenty neighborhoods in northeast Washington including Woodridge, Langdon, Michigan Park, Fort Totten, and Brookland. The document describes the history of the ward, identifies historic or culturally important places, and provides a framework for developing strategies to capitalize on and, if necessary, protect, historic resources. St. Francis de Sales Church, the Odd Fellows Hall, the Masonic Temple (also called the East Gate Lodge #34), and the Woodridge Langdon Bank Building are listed as cultural and heritage

⁶⁷ Buckley, “Preservation in a Growing City: A Consideration of Conservation Districts for Washington, DC Neighborhoods” (University of Maryland, 2013), 94-111.

⁶⁸ Mark Jenkins, “Conservation districts’ would place limits on redevelopment in D.C.,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/conservation-districts-would-place-limits-on-redevelopment-in-dc/2014/10/07/f266d9fc-4d92-11e4-babe-e91da079cb8a_story.html.

resources.⁶⁹ The Ward 5 Heritage Guide is the first step in interpreting and communicating the history of Woodridge. No other planning or survey documentation has identified sites in the Woodridge commercial corridor as historically or culturally important.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ “Ward 5 Heritage Guide,” District of Columbia Office of Planning, Washington, DC, 2014.

⁷⁰ A Woodridge Community History Tour was developed in 2008 by the Woodridge Civic Association in conjunction with the DC Office of Planning, Historic Preservation Office and the Humanities Council of Washington, DC. The tour brochure highlights twelve sites, one of which is St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church. No other sites in the Woodridge commercial corridor are included.

Chapter 5: Impacts of the DC Main Street and Great Streets Programs

The Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) administers the DC Main Streets Program consistent with the Main Street Four-Point Approach® created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Rhode Island Avenue NE, from 3rd Street NE to Eastern Avenue, became part of the DC Main Streets program in December 2013.⁷¹ By grant agreement with DSLDB, the program must have an operational board with committees, a full-time staff person dedicated to program implementation, and an adequate operating budget.⁷² In 2014, the RIA Main Street Program received a grant from DSLBD for \$200,000 -- \$75,000 for start-up costs and \$125,000 for regular operations. Unless the grant program changes, the RIA Main Street Program will receive \$125,000 per year going forward. A portion of the \$125,000 must cover the salary for the full-time staff person. In addition to the salary, the grant money assists with operating four committees: Economic Restructuring, Design, Promotions, and Organization. These committees are run by volunteers.

Commercial property owners within the RIA Main Street Program can obtain grants for storefront improvements including repairs and maintenance and the installation of doors, windows, signs, storefront systems, awnings, and lighting. This money is separate from the operating budget and can be obtained by the main street

⁷¹ Friends of Rhode Island Avenue (FoRIA) Northeast, “FoRIA Wins Rhode Island Avenue Main Street Bid,” accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.friendsofria.org/2013/12/18/foria-wins-rhode-island-avenue-main-street-bid/>.

⁷² Department of Small and Local Business Development, “DC Main Streets Program,” accessed May 3, 2015, <http://dslbd.dc.gov/service/dc-main-streets-program>.

program from the Department of Housing and Community Development.⁷³ Since the Woodridge commercial corridor is not a designated historic district, nor are there any individually designated properties, there are no regulations in place to ensure buildings are protected from demolition or incompatible alterations. However, the requirements of the storefront improvement grants stipulate that alterations must comply with the RIA Main Street Program design guidelines. Grant funds could be withheld if alterations were not in line with the guidelines. However, the design guidelines are currently still in draft form, even though storefront improvement funding has already been administered.⁷⁴

In addition to ensuring adherence to the design guidelines, the Design Committee also works on streetscape improvement projects. In their October 2014 meeting, the committee discussed putting large historic photos in vacant storefront windows and transforming the historic fire call boxes along Rhode Island Avenue into public art or interpretive historic signage.

Great Streets is another grant-funded program through which businesses on Rhode Island Avenue can obtain capital improvement funding. Great Streets is a commercial revitalization program that leverages public resources to foster private investment towards economic development. The program first began in 2006 to support revitalization in the H Street NE corridor, and in 2013 was expanded to eleven other corridors, including Rhode Island Avenue. Great Streets is a multi-

⁷³ Telephone interview with Reuben Hameed, chairman of the RIA Main Street Design Committee, September 16, 2014; Phone interview with Kyle Todd, Executive Director of the RIA Main Street Program, September 17, 2014; Department of Housing and Committee Development, “Storefront Façade Improvement,” accessed May 3, 2015, <http://dhcd.dc.gov/service/storefront-facade-improvement>.

⁷⁴ Telephone interview with Reuben Hameed, September 16, 2014.

agency program, led by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development and in conjunction with the Office of Planning and the District Department of Transportation. There are two types of investments administered by the program, the Small Business Capital Improvement Grants and the Catalytic Investments.⁷⁵

The Catalytic Investments are designated for large-scale development and have only included four projects thus far. None of these projects are in the Rhode Island Avenue corridor. The Small Business Capital Improvement Grants are available to businesses within Great Street corridors and consist of an \$85,000 grant for approved capital improvements.⁷⁶ The Woodridge commercial corridor has already seen the impact of Great Streets funding. Good Food Markets, LLC received a capital improvement grant in 2014 when they transformed a former soul food restaurant into a small market. Good Food Markets, which opened in the fall of 2014 at 2006 Rhode Island Avenue NE, addresses some of the food-related concerns voiced in the small area plan. The market serves fresh groceries and prepared foods at prices that are competitive with larger grocery stores. Some of the items are organic and many are locally sourced; however the main focus is to provide healthy, affordable options in an area that has long been a food desert. At only one thousand square feet, the store is about the size of a typical Washington convenience store. The owners hope to bring the neighborhood market concept, where a small market

⁷⁵ DC.gov Great Streets, “About Great Streets,” accessed on May 3, 2015, <http://greatstreets.dc.gov/page/about-great-streets>; DC.gov Great Streets, “Small Business Capital Improvement Grants,” accessed on May 3, 2015, <http://greatstreets.dc.gov/page/small-business-capital-improvement-grants->.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

addresses the specific needs of local residents, to Washington.⁷⁷ Upon a recent visit to Good Foods Market, I experienced first hand the great variety of healthy food options and was surprised when one of the employees told me to notify them if there is anything I want that they currently do not carry. If so, they would stock that item for me.

The Great Streets program provides incentives for private investment in traditional commercial corridors, however there is no guarantee that the capital improvements occurring with the use of these funds will be consistent with the character of the neighborhood. Though there may be some strings attached to the type and quality of improvements, businesses are not required to comply with neighborhood design guidelines.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Phone interview with Reuben Hameed, September 16, 2014; Rhode Island Avenue NE Insider, “Good Food Market Coming to RIA NE,” accessed May 3, 2015, <http://rhodeislandavene.com/2014/06/19/good-food-market-coming-to-ria-ne/>.

⁷⁸ DC.gov Great Streets, “Small Business Capital Improvement Grants,” accessed on May 3, 2015, <http://opgs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/opgs/publication/attachments/FY15-GreatStreetsNOFA.pdf>.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This report portrays the people and events that influenced the early development of the Woodridge commercial corridor. The design of the buildings in the corridor is intrinsically linked to their historic function. Residents may see the temple front of the building at 2027 Rhode Island Avenue and assume that it was once a bank. However, they may not know that community members came together to establish it as the first bank in Woodridge in the 1920s. They also likely do not know that the bank initially operated out of the Odd Fellows Hall across the street, which was often used for ad hoc purposes such as this. They may be interested to learn that it was designed by W.S. Plager, a resident of the Woodridge community who designed over a quarter of the buildings in the corridor. Though unique along Rhode Island Avenue, Plager's designs align with common themes of early twentieth century commercial architecture across the country.

Most of the individual buildings in the Woodridge commercial corridor may not meet the requirements of local or national historic site designation. However, taken as a whole, the corridor tells an important story about the history of early suburban development in Washington, and it is architecturally unique within upper northeast Washington. The consistency of scale and density creates character that would be threatened by the development of incompatible or larger scale buildings. Most of the buildings date back to the origination of the corridor in the 1920s and retain much of their original architectural integrity. The buildings reflect the lives of the early residents who advocated for public services like the bank, library, and post office. Many of the buildings were designed and owned by local Woodridge

residents. Though Washington is not known as a city built by immigrants, many of the early establishments in Woodridge were owned and operated by first- and second-generation immigrants. Communicating history such as this gives Woodridge an identity. This identity is key to the revitalization of the Woodridge commercial corridor.

Not only do small scale, historic buildings contribute to neighborhood identity, but they also have economic benefits. In May 2014, the National Trust for Historic Preservation produced a report called *Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring How the Character of Buildings and Blocks Influences Urban Vitality*. The report analyzed forty economic, social, cultural, and environmental measures in three cities, including Washington DC, and found clear connections between older, smaller buildings and urban vitality. Urban vitality consists of qualities including higher levels of human activity (i.e. pedestrians on the street, the presence of open businesses, and residential density), more businesses and jobs -- particularly start-ups and non-chain businesses - - greater gender and ethnic diversity among business owners, and a wider range of resident age and income. The report was significant in that it provided empirical evidence to support the long-standing, untested hypothesis that “Neighborhoods containing a mix of older, smaller buildings of diverse age support greater levels of positive economic and social activity than areas dominated by newer, larger buildings.”⁷⁹

With the right factors in place, such as public-private partnerships and mechanisms to improve neighborhood identity, the small scale of the Woodridge

⁷⁹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation Green Lab, “Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring How the Character of Buildings and Blocks Influences Urban Vitality,” May 2014, 3, 28-35.

commercial corridor can assist in achieving the economic development goals set by the city. Good Food Markets, discussed in Chapter 5, is an example of a business meeting the needs of the community within a very small space. In addition, the Woodridge commercial corridor consists of three small blocks surrounded by miles of underutilized land along Rhode Island Avenue. If residents have certain needs that would be better satisfied by larger scale development, areas outside the corridor, but still accessible to Woodridge residents, may be available.

Many of the recommendations in the city's planning documents may bring positive economic changes to Woodridge, yet few of them would help retain the neighborhood's historic character. The recommendations that may help retain character are the DC Main Street and Great Street designations and the completion of Ward 5 Heritage Guide. The DC Main Street and Great Street programs are providing public money for the enhancement of storefronts. Ideally, this funding would promote maintenance and alterations that are sensitive to the existing character, but the designations do not ensure compatibility. The Design Committee of the RIA Main Street is working to improve neighborhood identity by animating the streetscape with art and history. The Ward 5 Heritage Guide is the first widely accessible document that addresses the history of Woodridge and highlights buildings along the commercial corridor that have historic and cultural value. Communicating the history of a neighborhood can cause residents to feel connected the physical place and in turn can result in them feeling accountable for its well-being. This may cause residents to stand up for maintenance of the historic character. Though these are small steps towards preservation, none of the actions protect the buildings in the corridor from

demolition or incompatible changes.

In summary, the planning documents have the following limitations related to preservation of the historic character:

1. There are no recommendations for historic designation or survey work.
2. The Great Streets program does not require adherence to design guidelines.
3. The RIA Main Street Program design guidelines are still in draft form.
4. Zoning allows for heights (fifty feet) that may be insensitive to the historic character of the corridor, which is currently characterized by a low, human scale.
5. The conservation district pilot program is on hold.

In reaction to these limitations, the residents of Woodridge as well as local organizations, such as the Friends of Rhode Island Avenue, should pursue the following recommendations:

1. Petition the DC Office of Planning to reinstate the conservation district pilot program and recommend the Woodridge commercial corridor for designation. This report provides a foundational history that could be used to nominate the corridor. While some additional research and survey work may be needed, the history in this report establishes the basis for what was formerly an undocumented history. Conservation district designation would require review of any alterations that impact the height, scale, mass or orientation of buildings within the district. It would help ensure protection of the small scale of the corridor, which is one of its most character-defining features.
2. The RIA Main Street Program should finalize the draft design guidelines. The

content of the guidelines should ensure compatibility with the historic context of the corridor. The program should require property owners obtaining main street funds to adhere to the guidelines and should withhold funding if changes do not comply.

3. The history of the corridor, as documented in this report, should be communicated to residents, business owners, and visitors. The history could be portrayed on signs or plaques throughout the corridor. The Woodridge Community Historic Tour, a walking tour developed in 2008 by the Woodridge Civic Association, could be updated to include sites within the corridor. Finally, the history should be publicized online, specifically on social media such as neighborhood blogs. The RIA Main Street Program website as well as other neighborhood sites such as the Friends of Rhode Island Avenue would be ideal venues to distribute the history to relevant stakeholders.

Appendix 1: Location of Buildings within the Woodridge Commercial Corridor



Figure 25: The Woodridge Commercial Corridor, 2015. The buildings indicated in green were discussed within the report. Map courtesy of Google Maps with modifications by the author.

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