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Howard Road Historic District
Howard Road (Blocks 1000-1100)
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-395

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HOWARD ROAD HISTORIC DISTRICT

HABS No. DC-395

LOCATION: Blocks 1000-1100, Howard Road
Washington, District of Columbia

PRESENT OWNER: Multiple Ownership

PRESENT OCCUPANT: Multiple Occupancy

SIGNIFICANCE: The eleven residential structures in the Howard Road Historic District are the products of a process of urbanization in which a planned, semi-rural black community evolved into an urban neighborhood. Howard Road was originally developed as part of the Barry Farm project, a model community for freed slaves, initiated by the Freedmen's Bureau in 1867. By the turn of the century, many of the original one-acre lots had been subdivided in response to improved transportation and to city-wide population growth. Housing constructed here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was distinctly urban, characterized by narrow, side-hall plans suitable for the narrow street frontages of the new lots. In the Howard Road District, housing from the 1880's to the 1940's clearly illustrates this gradual urbanization, accomplished in large part by local residents and small-scale entrepreneurs investing in the future of their own neighborhood.

PART I. PHYSICAL CONTEXT

The Howard Road Historic District occupies part of two blocks of Howard Road between Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue and Firth Sterling Avenue in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C. M.L. King, Jr. Avenue is a major local thoroughfare, lined with mixed commercial and residential buildings ranging in age from the later 19th century to the present. The area west of M.L. King, Jr. Avenue is primarily residential, with two- and three-story dwellings on narrow frontages, many built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On Howard Road, the most prominent feature is a large public school and playground, located on the north side of Howard Road east of Shannon Place. Scattered mature shade trees and some ornamental shrubbery constitute the principal vegetative features.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural Character and Condition: The Howard Road Historic District consists of eleven residential buildings constructed between c.1880 and 1940. The two earliest (1003, 1004) are single-family houses representing an essentially vernacular building tradition, specifically the I-house form. Dating from the late 1880's to 1912 are seven more single-family dwellings (1009, 1010, 1014, 1018, 1023, 1027, 1119) built with stock materials from stock plans; six display side-hall plans designed for narrow frontage lots. The remaining buildings (1015, 1101/1107) are apartment blocks, built with four and eight units, respectively, after World War I. The Howard Road structures range in condition from extremely deteriorated to fairly well kept. At the time of recording, four were vacant, and had suffered varying degrees of vandalism. With one exception, the occupied structures appeared to be adequately maintained. Outbuildings, where present, consist chiefly of small sheds and garages.

B. Exterior Description (see also architectural data forms):

1. Dimensions: The majority of houses measure between 18-20' wide and 30-40' deep, with the two apartment buildings being rather larger. All are two stories high.

2. Foundations: Nine structures have brick foundations, one has a concrete foundation, and one has a molded cinder block foundation that replaced the original brick.

3. Walls and framing: The two apartment blocks and one dwelling (1027) have exterior brick bearing walls, as does the first story of 1018. The remaining buildings are of wood frame construction, with wooden clapboards or drop siding covered with wide synthetic wall shingles, roll siding, or aluminum siding.

4. Porches: All but one of the single-family houses have full-length, open front porches, and many also have enclosed or semi-enclosed rear porches. The apartment blocks each have two, two-level rear porches.

5. Openings: Fenestration is regular across facades and most rear elevations, but more random on the sides. Main entrances are centered in the apartment block facades and in the facade of 1023; in the remaining structures the main entrances are located to the left or right of center.

Windows are fitted with wooden double-hung sash, the number of lights varying from 6/6 to 1/1. Door and window surrounds, where present, are uniformly simple, with moldings narrow or non-existent. Glazed transom panels and occasional use of very narrow dentil moldings constitute the principal decorative features, when present, at entrances.

6. Roofs: Roof shapes include front and side gables, and flat roofs that slope down toward the rear. Two of the flat-roofed houses (1009,1010) display bracketted cornices; partial returns are characteristic of most of the gable-roofed structures.

7. Dormers, towers, etc.: Two houses (1023,1018) have full-height polygonal bay windows; remaining facades are essentially two-dimensional.

C. Interior Description (see also architectural data forms and sketched floor plans):

1. Floor plans: Dwellings have essentially the same floor plan, consisting of a narrow hall with two rooms to one side, and a kitchen or bath occupying the full width of the rear. This plan is also found in the apartments at 1015 Howard Road, and, with modifications, in the apartments at 1101/1107. Two houses (1003, 1004) have L-shaped plans, with a hall-parlor, single-pile main block, and a kitchen wing extended from the rear. 1023 has a modified double pile plan, with center hall.

2. Stairways: Stairways are straight and quite narrow (approx. 2-1/2 feet wide), with the exception of that in 1023, which is of the quarter-turn type with winders. Square or factory-turned newel posts and balusters are characteristic features.

3. Interior features: Hardwood floors, and lath-and-plaster walls and ceilings are found in all buildings. Linoleum is a common floor covering, particularly in kitchen and bath areas. Window and door surrounds constitute the principal decorative features in single family houses, with simple moldings, some reeding or fluting, and a variety of bulls-eye corner blocks. Paneled pocket doors remain between front and rear parlors in several houses. Several wooden fireplace mantels, with reeded and turned elements, remain (for example in 1023). Plaster ceiling medallions with foliate motifs, as well as narrow plaster ceiling molding strips, are present in 1009.

4. Hardware: Hardware, such as doorknobs, window latches, etc., are of common type, usually of brass. Box locks are present on bedroom doors in 1023, and glass knobs in apartments at 1101-1107. Many such features have been removed from the vacant structures. Heating is primarily supplied by floor-mounted radiators; physical evidence in some houses indicates stoves were also used. Light fixtures, when present, are primarily of mid-20th century origins; a few older brass fixtures remain as well.

PART III. HISTORICAL DISCUSSION

The Howard Road Historic District was originally contained within a larger area known as the St. Elizabeth tract, which like other areas of Anacostia at the end of the 18th century was predominantly agricultural, settled in plantations and farms (Hutchinson 1977: 31-32). In 1800, a portion of the tract was purchased by Captain James Barry, a Baltimore-based merchant who had moved to the new capital of Washington soon after it was surveyed. He bought several city lots, shorefront properties and a wharf at the foot of New Jersey Avenue. In January of that year he purchased the north half of the St. Elizabeth tract, and built a country home on the Anacostia River at Poplar Point (Hutchinson 1977:27).

This part of the District of Columbia retained its agrarian character through the middle of the 19th century. Although dominated by slave-owning plantations and tenant farms, it also witnessed the growth of a fairly substantial free black community, because laws regulating race relations were somewhat more lenient in Washington County than in Washington City (Hutchinson 1977:33). Property in the vicinity of present-day Congress Heights, for example, was originally contained in a 24-acre farm owned by Tobias Henson, a free black who appears to have purchased the land from Thomas Jenkins in 1813 (Hutchinson 1977:41). Gradually, however, the area also began to experience the effects of the growth of Washington City and the expanding activities of the Federal Government. Uniontown (now Anacostia), was developed in 1854 as a speculative investment by a number of local landowners. It was Washington City's first suburb, and portions have been designated the Anacostia National Register Historic District (LeeDecker and Friedlander 1984:26). The southern half of the original St. Elizabeth tract, then owned by Thomas Blagden, a Washington real estate entrepreneur, was sold to the Federal Government in 1852. This became the U.S. Government Insane Asylum, which opened in 1855 (Anderson et al. 1981:4).

During the Civil War, slaves freed by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and by Union troops in the South streamed toward Washington, eventually triggering a local white backlash (Hutchinson 1977:81). In response to the need to care for these displaced people, and generally to ease the transition of former slaves into a free society, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands was organized in the Department of War in 1865. On April 23, 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau issued

Special Order 61, which authorized \$52,000 toward the purchase of land in the District of Columbia on which to establish a model community for freed slaves (Anderson et al. 1981:3). That year, the Bureau purchased 375 acres of the St. Elizabeth tract from Captain James Barry's heir, Juliana Barry.

The "Barry Farm" tract was essentially rectangular, approximately 1 1/2 miles by 1/2 mile, with the northwest boundary being the east bank of the Anacostia River. By mid-1868 the tract had been surveyed into an irregular grid of one-acre lots of varying dimensions. New streets were also laid out, from either side of Nichols (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave). East of Nichols, the Barry Farm roads curved to follow topographical features, such as the Stickfoot Branch of the Anacostia. On the other side of Nichols, however, the new streets were laid out in rectilinear fashion. Howard Road was the northernmost street on the west side of Nichols, running slightly over 1/2 mile northwest and west to the end of Poplar Point, between the Stickfoot Branch on the south and the Anacostia River and upper boundary of the Barry Farm Tract on the north. Howard Road's 40 lots, comprising Block 9 in the original survey, had relatively broad frontages, and therefore less depth than the more numerous, narrow lots laid out elsewhere in the tract.

The Freedmen's Bureau offered the Barry Farm lots for sale at prices ranging from \$125 to \$300 per family. Included in the purchase price were sufficient lumber and other materials to construct a "house 14x24 feet, 8 foot posts with double roof, to contain two rooms divided by a partition 8 feet high, making each room 12x14 feet. Sash for two windows (double sash 12 lights) for the main or front room and for two windows (single sash 6 lights) for the other. The two rooms to communicate by a door and one outside door to be made for main or front room. The roof to be shingled" (Anderson et al. 1981:8). The Bureau also required that dwellings constructed in the new community be evenly spaced, facing the street with a 20-foot setback.

The carefully defined specifications for dwellings and the formal attributes of the plan (i.e., rectilinear lots, prescribed setbacks) have been ascribed to the military impetus behind the Freedmen's Bureau (Anderson et al. 1981:3). However, Warner (1978:136-137) contends that uniform setbacks and a grid plan, which ensured street frontages to all lots, represented "necessary minima for a satisfactory residential environment" for the suburban middle class. Regularity, uniformity, and rectilinear configurations were also hallmarks of reform-minded

nineteenth century architects and planners. Social reformers believed that the built environment could influence human behavior (see Rothman 1971). Thus, at Barry Farm, freed slaves would be inculcated with duly industrious work habits and socially appropriate behavior if placed in a carefully disciplined, regular environment.

Construction at Barry Farm took place under the direction of Superintendent George F. Marble. Freedmen scraped down payments together but were often unable to complete purchases, so actual construction proceeded sporadically. Future occupants worked at night after having put in a full day at jobs in the city (Hutchinson 1977:83). Although construction went forward unevenly, Blocks 3, 8, and 9 appear to have been occupied earlier than other parts of the project, possibly due to their proximity to Washington city (Anderson et al. 1981:8).

Despite arduous beginnings, the Barry Farm community, subsequently renamed Hillsdale, prospered. A public school was opened in 1871 at the intersection of Nichols and Sheridan Avenues (Hutchinson 1977:86). A second school, the James G. Birney School, was built in 1901 on Nichols between Howard Road and Talbert Street (i.e., immediately northeast of the historic district). Churches were built, and members of the community achieved local political prominence (Ibid.:86, 93).

Inhabitants found work at a series of skilled and semi-skilled trades. Men worked at the Navy yard and at St. Elizabeths Hospital, took seasonal jobs, and found employment as farm laborers, gardeners, blacksmiths, cooks and carpenters (Hutchinson 1977:89). Women became laundresses, seamstresses, and domestic servants (Ibid.). By 1880, teachers, white-collar workers, midwives, and a range of artisans and small entrepreneurs had moved into the neighborhood (Ibid.:90). At least 15 residents had received appointments to Federal positions, coveted because the steady pay meant that bank credit could be more easily obtained (Ibid.).

The extent to which the first homebuilders in the Barry Farm project were required to follow the Freedmen's Bureau's design specifications for a "house 14 x 24 feet" is not entirely clear. The materials included in the lot purchase price were specifically cut conform to the stated design, but there is no indication that, by purchasing more materials, from the Bureau or elsewhere, new residents could not expand upon the original model as they so desired. According to one account, "families who could

afford to do so purchased additional lumber and built according to family size and needs. Others built additional rooms as the family increased in size" (Hutchinson 1977: 83).

It is likely that as the Barry Farm community prospered its inhabitants, on Howard Road and elsewhere, would improve or build new residences as soon as they were financially able. Among the results were "A-frame houses...two stories in height, usually divided into two rooms. The lower one, a combination living and dining room, had a fireplace for cooking; the upper room provided sleeping quarters (Hutchinson 1977: 82-83). (It should be noted here that the Freedmen's Bureau intended its original houses to have stoves, and made stove-pipe caps available for sale to new lot purchasers (Anderson et al. 1981:10). On Howard Road, abandonment of the Bureau's original specifications resulted in construction of two similar dwellings of the I-house form (a form which may have been the subject of the description quoted above), each three bays across the front, two rooms wide and one room deep, with an ell to the rear (1003, 1004 Howard Road). Construction of such houses suggests the lingering semi-rural character of the Barry Farm area in the late 19th century; and perhaps also the retention of past memories among former slaves whose antebellum agricultural environment certainly included numerous examples of the I-house (see for example, Glassie 1968:64ff).

Toward the end of the 19th century, transportation developments occurred that were to have an effect on the Barry Farm/Hillsdale community. The 1890 reconstruction of the Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge, followed by extension of an electric street railway line over the Navy Yard Bridge and along Nichols Avenue "attracted families in search of homes and the advantages of suburban living" (Hutchinson 1977: 100). New and increased interest in real estate in Anacostia area led to development of a "new community," called Congress Heights, located south of the Barry Farm tract proper, and, gradually to the subdivision of original Barry Farm lots (as well as, presumably, lots outside the original Barry Farm boundaries).

This activity included Howard Road, northernmost of the Barry Farm streets, where original lots had relatively broad street frontages which (see Warner 1978: 139-40) could easily be subdivided into lots with narrower frontages without changes to the street or to utility lines. The original Barry Farm plat of Block 9 (Howard Road) contained 39 numbered lots plus one more at Poplar

Point. By the 1899-1900 tax assessment, Block 9 was listed with eighty lots. Of the six original Barry Farm lots (4 through 9) now the site of the Howard Road Historic District, four (#4,5,7,8) had been at least partially subdivided by 1900, with the remaining two lots experiencing the same fate by 1912.

A preliminary examination of city directories, census and tax records for two periods (1899/1900 and 1909/1910) indicates that the subdivision and redevelopment of lots in the Howard Road neighborhood was not the work of large disinterested outside developers, but to a significant degree that of local, small-scale entrepreneurs, both male and female, many of whom lived on, or near, their subdivided lots (see Klein et al., forthcoming 1985). In the Howard Road Historic District, one of the most active developers was Samuel Lucas, who was responsible for construction of at least three houses (1014, 1018, and 1023) and contractor for a fourth (1027). Lucas' primary occupation was that of florist, and he erected a sizeable complex of greenhouses on the rear of Lot 6, behind 1018 Howard Road. The remainder of the lot he subdivided into a series of narrow frontages, most of which were acquired for extension of Shannon Place to Howard Road in the 1920's. Another resident, Harriet Boston Frazier, inherited Lot 4 from her father, Isaac Boston, around 1898. She subsequently sold the west 25' of her lot to Richard H. Lewis, and the east 25' of her lot to a laborer, Lloyd Sharps, who had the house at 1010 Howard Road built in 1894. A third lot owner, Sylvia Phillips, acquired all of Lot 9 and a portion of lot 8 between 1884 and 1887. There was a dwelling on Lot 9 at the time (1003), and Phillips had a second (1009) built in 1889. Her property was not subdivided, however, until 1912 (District of Columbia, Surveyor's Office, Record Book 47:126). A part of Lot 8 was eventually acquired by Minnie Smoot, a prominent local undertaker, who built a four-unit apartment building here in 1929 (1015 Howard Road). This somewhat episodic, highly individualized, partitioning of lots could produce a rather heterogeneous streetscape, in terms of lot size and length of frontages. On the other hand, the presence of owner-occupied properties, and of owners who lived near their rental properties, probably contributed to the neighborhood's cohesion in the early decades of the 20th century.

Of the eleven buildings in the Howard Road Historic District, nine remain as end-products of this process of development in which what had originally been a planned, semi-rural community was transformed into an urban neighborhood. The single-family houses in the district, in particular, seem to reflect the

choices of small, local developers described by Warner (1978) for Boston's "streetcars suburbs": most such builders and developers were "amateur[s], and as such were "willing follower[s] of popular housing fashions" (Warner 1978:130). They relied for inspiration chiefly on recent new housing in their vicinity, on local contractors' sketches, and on stock plans from builders' manuals. "Most of the work...displayed some individuality in choice of ornament and detail, but was repetitive in basic house and lot plan" (Ibid.:131). The fact that at least two contractor/builders (Samuel Lucas and Basil Frazier) were residents of the neighborhood may also have influenced the designs ultimately selected.

Of the seven single-family houses in the Howard Road Historic District built between 1887 and 1912, six (1009, 1010, 1014, 1028, 1027, 1119 Howard Road) were situated on narrow (approximately 25') frontages that resulted from the subdivision of original Barry Farm lots. They had similar overall dimensions (approximately 18' x 40') and nearly identical, typically urban, floor plans in which rooms were ranged one behind the other on one side of a narrow stairhall. The seventh house (1023 Howard Road) had a basically square plan, its 26-foot width easily accommodated in the relatively larger frontage of its lot. The houses were simply finished with plain moldings (including the popular "bull-eye" corner blocks on interior window and door surrounds), plastered walls and ceilings, staircases with factory-turned newels and balusters, and modestly embellished fireplace mantels. The exteriors appear to have been decorated with little more than a bracketted cornice or partially returned gable, with no attempt made to ornament or otherwise emphasize openings. Although plain, the houses of Howard Road were neither mean nor poorly constructed, and they appear to have met the needs and the resources of those for whom they were built.

Despite the manifold changes wrought by urbanization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as late as 1929 much of the terrain in Southeast Washington was still open. Structures clustered along the nineteenth century routes: Nichols Road, Good Hope Road, Hamilton and Bown Roads (now Alabama Avenue), Benning Road, Ridge Road, Livingston Road, Wheeler Road and Anacostia Road (U.S. Geological Survey 1929). According to Hutchinson (1977:135), Anacostia in the 1920s "retained much of its rustic charm and semirural character" although for many black families, "living conditions were still primitive."

The area supported extremes of settlement, however. Construction of two apartment buildings (1015, 1101/1107) on Howard Road (1929, c.1940) suggests an increasingly intense use typical of urban environments. The Suitland Parkway, built in 1940's, physically divided the Barry Farm/Hillsdale community (Hutchinson 1977:138), and Howard Road was truncated. Single family homes were razed, and high density public housing units, incompatible with the low scale and low density character of the turn-of-the-century neighborhood, were introduced (Ibid.). Redevelopment projects elsewhere in Washington resulted in demographic shifts, further disturbing the older, stable neighborhood and taxing the limits of already hard-pressed municipal services and community resources.

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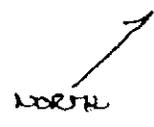
V. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Howard Road Historic District was recorded by Louis Berger & Associates, Inc. for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1984-1985. The project was carried out in compliance with a Memorandum of Agreement between WMATA and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Project personnel consisted of Amy Friedlander, Historian (LBA); Martha H. Bowers, Architectural Historian (LBA); and Paul Myatt and Phil Portlock, Photographers (WMATA).

POPLAR POINT

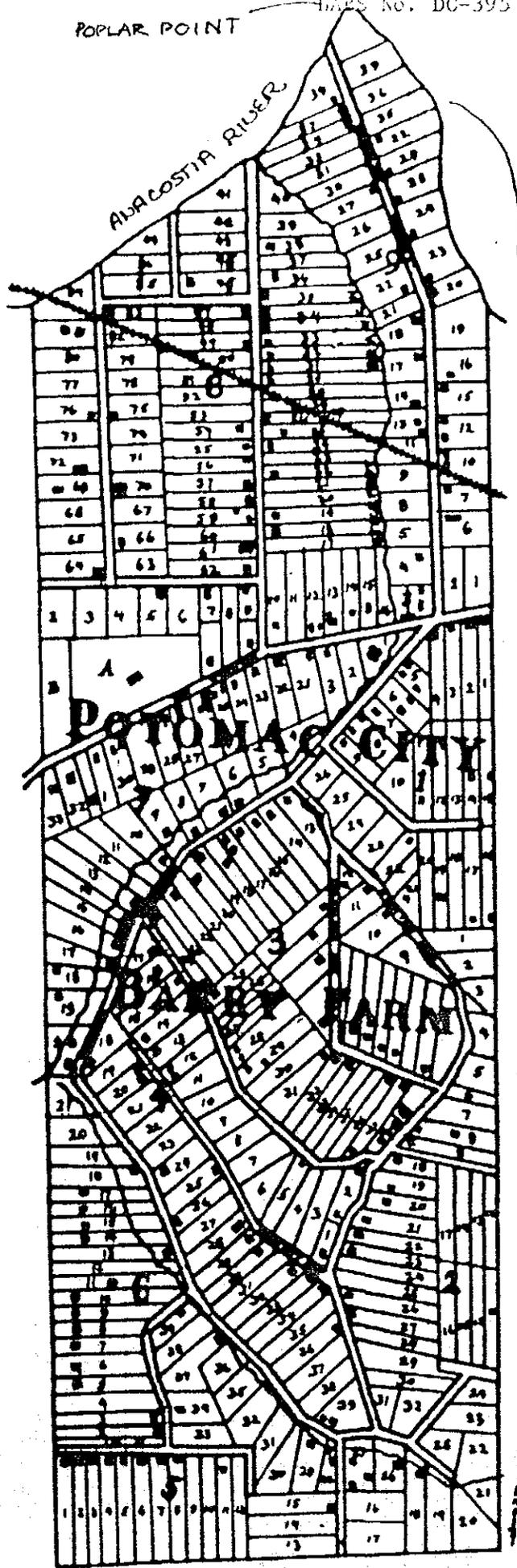
ALACOSTIA RIVER

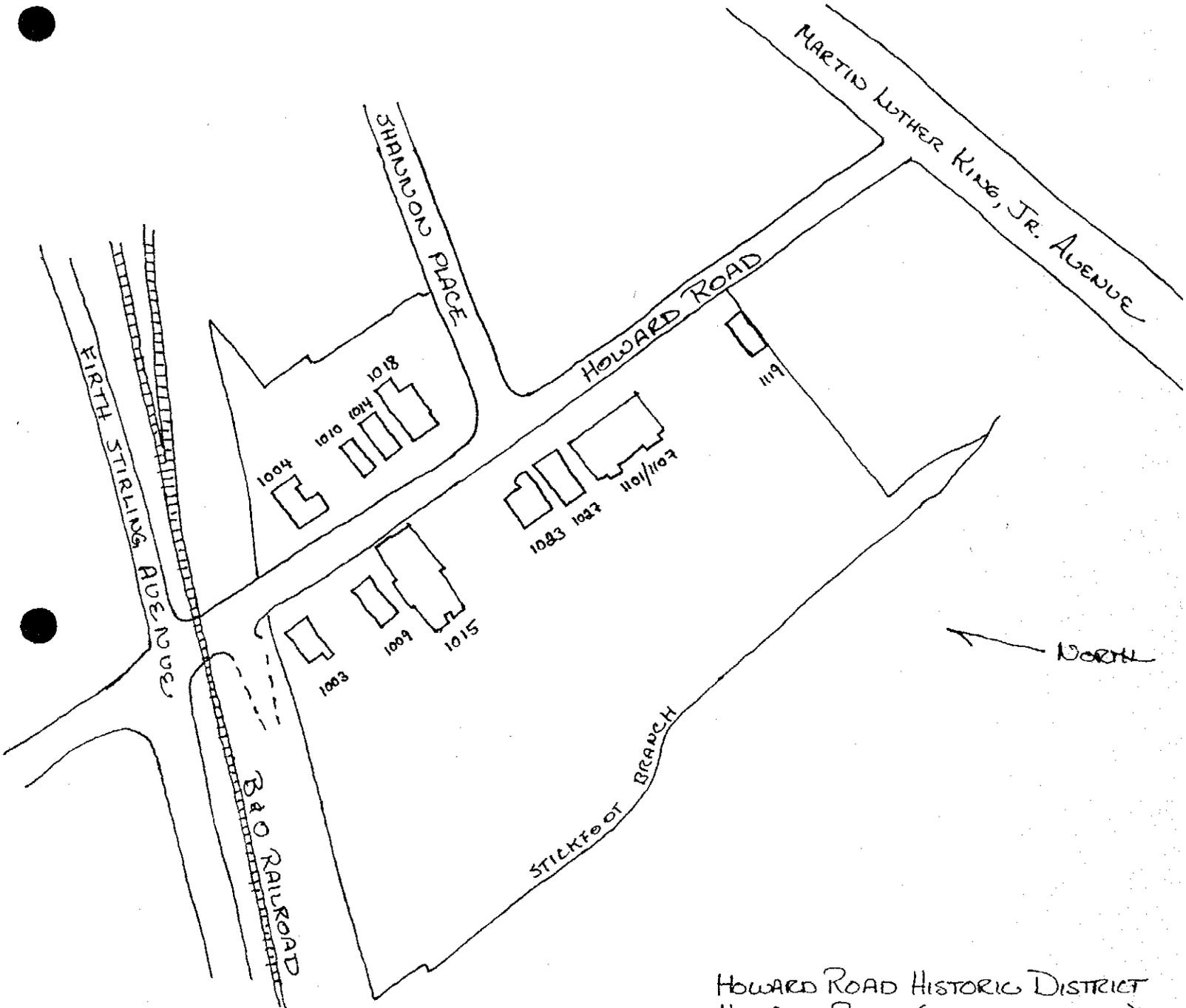
HOWARD ROAD



POTOMAC CITY
AND
BARRY FARM
1887

FROM G. M. HOPKINS, A COMPLETE
SET OF SURVEYS AND PLATS
OF PROPERTIES IN THE CITY
OF WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA, 1887.





HOWARD ROAD HISTORIC DISTRICT
HOWARD ROAD (BLOCK 1000-1100)
WASHINGTON, D.C.
HABS No. DC-395

NO SCALE