

HABS No. DC-340

Michler Place
North side of F Street between
17th and 18th Streets, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS
DC,
WASH,
490-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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ARCHITECTURAL DATA FORM

STATE District of Columbia	COUNTY	TOWN OR VICINITY Washington
HISTORIC NAME OF STRUCTURE (INCLUDE SOURCE FOR NAME) Michler Place		HABS NO. DC-340
SECONDARY OR COMMON NAMES OF STRUCTURE		
COMPLETE ADDRESS (DESCRIBE LOCATION FOR RURAL SITES) North side of F Street between 17th and 18th Streets, NW		
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE SOURCE) 1870-1876	ARCHITECT(S) (INCLUDE SOURCE)	
SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL, INCLUDE ORIGINAL USE OF STRUCTURE) Built for "Boss" Alexander Shepherd, named for General N. Michler, superintendent of public buildings and grounds 1867-1871, first man to hold that office after authority was placed under the Army Corps of Engineers.		
STYLE (IF APPROPRIATE)		
MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS) Brick		
SHAPE AND DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE (SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS ON SEPARATE PAGES ARE ACCEPTABLE) Row of 12 houses of unified design, originally 2½- and 3½-stories with dormered mansard roofs; two units at each end and two central units had the additional story		
EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE Houses separated by large scroll motif at roofline; decorative window hoods; doorways had entablatures on scrolled consoles		
INTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (DESCRIBE FLOOR PLANS, IF NOT SKETCHED)		
MAJOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS WITH DATES Lowering of street grade exposed basement floors of most buildings, which were converted to commercial fronts; greatly altered over the years with much decorative detail lost; eastern 5 houses demolished 1965 and after.		
PRESENT CONDITION AND USE		
OTHER INFORMATION AS APPROPRIATE		
SOURCES OF INFORMATION (INCLUDING LISTING ON NATIONAL REGISTER, STATE REGISTERS, ETC.) Schwartz, Nancy B. <u>Historic American Buildings Survey District of Columbia Catalog, 1974.</u>		
COMPILER, AFFILIATION Alison K. Hoagland, HABS (edited by Druscilla J. Null, HABS)	DATE 8/3/83	

Addendum to

Michler Place
North side of F Street between 17th
and 18th Streets, N.W. (Nos. 1739-51 remain)
Washington
District of Columbia

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Addendum to:

MICHLER PLACE

HABS No. DC-340

(Page 2)

Location: North side of F Street between 17th and 18th Streets, NW.
(nos. 1739-51 remain).

Square 169
Lots 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818

Present Owner: Lots 812, 813, 814, 815: Burka Properties, Inc., 5021
Cedar Lane, Bethesda, Maryland 20014.

Lot 816: Norman and Lillian T. Burka.

Lots 817 and 818: Sam and Edith H. Burka, 2445
Laytonsville Road, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Present Use: Commerical.

Significance: Michler Place was originally a coordinated row of thirteen
attached houses constructed by A. R. Shepherd, Governor of
the Territorial Government of the District of Columbia.
Built in the Second Empire style, which reached its highest
popularity from 1869-1877, Michler Place is architecturally
representative of Washington City's struggle to develop as
a truly national urban center.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1870-71.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1870, the lots were owned by Alexander Shepherd, who was, at that time, ward Alderman for Washington City. Shepherd was just beginning his speculation in land development.

Michler Place once served as residences for the elite: officers stationed at the new State, War and Navy Building (HABS No. DC-290), and journalists. Joseph McFarland, Washington correspondent for Forney's Press and William Copeland of the New York Journal of Commerce were original owners.

During the twentieth century Michler Place became increasingly commercial in character. Between 1965 and 1972 six of the original row were demolished.

4. Builder: Mr. Morsell. (Testimony from the Investigation Into the Affairs of the District of Columbia, 42 Congress, 2nd Sess.)
5. Original plans and construction: No original drawings or plans have been located.
6. Alterations and additions: After 1940, the block became increasingly commercial in character, and the houses were converted for use as offices, beauty shops, dry cleaners, restaurants and liquor stores, etc.

Between 1965 and 1972, six of the original rowhouses were demolished.

- B. Historical Context: Michler Place was built by Alexander Robey "Boss" Shepherd in 1870-1871. Shepherd was, at that time, the second Governor of the Territorial Government of the District of Columbia. The row of houses were most probably named for Lieutenant-Colonel Nathaniel Michler, a Commissioner of Public Buildings and Grounds (1867-71) and friend of President Grant. The Civil War had imposed serious physical, as well as political, demands on the District of Columbia.

Trees were felled so they could not be used for cover - or impede the Union fire. Roads were torn up by the passage of heavy military equipment. New roads were built to link the city's defense positions. Although the only military action in the District was a skirmish at Fort Stevens, a few miles north of the capital, in July 1864, Washington's buildings and institutions, as well as its landscapes, were a shambles by the war's end. Several years later, cries of "shame" greeted the suggestion the nation celebrate its Centennial in the shabby capital. But when improvements came they came almost overnight. Thanks to Alexander Shepherd, a governor of the District, Washington was reborn. (The City of Washington: An Illustrated History, by the Junior League, p. 201.)

The District in the late 1860's was physically, politically, economically, and socially in difficult times. The city had not come through the war well. Constance McLaughlin Green identified three issues that held back the District's progress. The first--the pressing need to halt and reverse the decline of business through the developing of new commercial and industrial interests. The second--the status of negroes in a city with Southern sympathies. The third--the need to supply Washington City and Georgetown with modern conveniences, such as easy transportation, well-paved, well-lighted streets, adequate sanitation, good schools, and adequate protection from crime without raising taxes and discouraging investment. These problems needed solutions and needed them quickly

for, to quote Green, "...to be dilatory about undertaking these improvements would be to invite a decision in Congress to make a fresh start by establishing the national capital in the West."
(Washington: A History of the Capital 1800-1950, p. 293)

It is certain though, Washington businessman and public leaders believed the possibility of removal to be quite real. Indeed, Shepherd's obituary in the New York Times states, "The ex-Governor is given credit for nipping in the bud a project for the removal of the capital to some Western city which was warmly agitated at one time."

Shepherd's role in strengthening the District's position as a permanent capital is tied to his "comprehensive plan" calling for the altering of street levels to permit an adequate drainage and sewer system, some bridge repairs, county road repairs, and the extensive grading of Washington's central area to allow a view of the Capitol from every point in the city. As Chairman of the Board of Public Works, Shepherd authorized improvements of streets all over the city including those flanked only by vacant lots, as well as those having particular benefit to his own property. Glassie describes the effect of the efforts of the Board of Public Works:

The municipal improvements were accomplished by a fantastic growth in population. Prior to 1870 Congressmen seldom brought their families to Washington. They lived in boarding houses, bachelor style. After 1870, the lame ducks seldom left. The new silver barons, bonanza kings, and railroad moguls all hastened to establish residences in the new city so attractive in appearance and convenience and so compatible in political as well as social climate. Even the Nation, bitter foe of Shepherd, admitted his improvements 'had attracted a respectable class of winter residents who formerly held it Washington in great contempt.' (Victorian Homes in Washington, p. 24)

Mary Clemmer Ames had viewed the war torn city: "Capitol Hill, dreary, desolate, and dirty, stretched away into an uninhabited desert, high above the mud of West End." In 1873 her opinion had substantially changed.

And now! The citizens of the year of our Lord 1873 sees the dawn of that perfect day of which the founders of the capital so fondly and fruitlessly dreamed. The old Southern City is no more. From its foundations has risen another city, neither Southern nor Northern, but national, cosmopolitan.

Where the "Slough of Despond" spread its waxen mud across the acres of the West End, where pedestrians were "slumped," and horses "stalled," and discomfort and disgust prevailed, we now see broad carriage drives, level as floors, over which grand equipages and pony phaetons glide with a smoothness that is

luxury, and an ease of motion... Where streets and avenues crossed and re-crossed their long vistas of shadeless dust, now plat on plat of restful grass "park" the city end to end... The improvements at the West End are more striking. Solid blocks of city houses are rising in every direction, taking the place of the little, old, isolated house of the past, with its stiff porch, high steps, and open basement doorway. (Ten Years in Washington)

Lots A through N of Square 169 in the neighborhood of West End faced south onto F Street, running from 18th Street east towards the middle of the block. In the year 1870 the 13 lots were owned by Alexander Shepherd. Shepherd, at that time, was serving in the elected position of ward Alderman for Washington City, while in his private business life he was expanding his prosperous plumbing business into land development. J. W. Moore, (Picturesque Washington, 1884) credits Shepherd with building nearly 1,000 speculative houses at an investment of more than \$10,000,000. Shepherd was a native Washingtonian, fiercely loyal to the Federal Government and strongly committed to making Washington a city worthy to be the nations capital. His lobbying efforts were reinforced by his large investments in land development and speculation. In 1870 he led a meeting of 150 influential citizens to make a request to President Grant to set up a territorial government having jurisdiction over the entire District and therefore establishing a single, unified government for the first time. Persuaded either by the citizenry or circumstances, Grant presented Congress with the idea for a territorial government and it was soon established. Shepherd's loyalty was rewarded by an appointment to the new government's five-man Board of Public Works. This Board...

was empowered to plan and contract for all public improvements, assessing a third of the costs upon adjoining private properties; the only limitation upon the Board's authority was a requirement that the territorial legislature must approve expenditures in advance by appropriating the money or sanctioning bond issues to cover costs not met by assessments. Public indebtedness must not exceed five percent of assessed property value unless a popular referendum expressly permitted. (Washington: A History of the Capital, p. 336)

Unfortunately, the Board of Public Works began to grossly overrun its budget and petitioners demanded an investigation into the Board's activities. Shepherd, particularly came under fire.

The following paragraphs are excerpts from the Investigation Into the Affairs of the District of Columbia (42 Congress, 2nd Session. H.R. Report No. 72, 1872).

"In the course of the investigation much evidence was offered in regard to the F Street improvement, so called. With reference to the plan, the expense incurred, and the effect of the change

of the grades on the property on said street . . . the committee are of opinion on its full and careful examination and personal inspection of the locality that, while the expense was large, many complaints have been made by some of the parties in that locality in regard to its effect upon their property, it adds much to the value of nearly every piece of real estate, opens the whole section with uniform grades to the river, and the change of grade was indispensable in view of the construction of the new building for the State, War, and Navy Departments." (p. IX)

The following allegation was made:

"F, G, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, Nineteenth, Twentieth, and Twenty-first Streets, west— Appropriation asked for these streets was \$91,900. The expenditure of the board, as testified to by their engineers, has been \$230,322.17; being an excess of expenditures over appropriations of \$156,802.14; and an analysis of the testimony shows that the work, when fully completed, will cost \$206,802.14 more than the appropriation. A large part of this work was done before any appropriation was made, except \$600 to trim and grade F Street. When asked by what authority of law these great expenditures beyond appropriation were made, the answer of members of the board was by 'the law of necessity.' In these, as well as in many other particulars, in the opinion of the minority of the committee, the board of public works have violated plain and positive provisions of law." (p. XVI)

Testimony began "in the matter of the grading of F Street, northwest." Although \$600 had been appropriated, the work as undertaken by the Board of Public Works would allegedly cost nearly \$300,000.

Mayor M. G. Emery described Shepherd's involvement in testimony given January 31, 1872:

"An appropriation was made by the council to trim F Street from Seventeenth to Nineteenth, two squares. I was applied to by one of the property-owners, A. R. Shepherd, who was building a row of houses on one of the squares. He came in and asked me to issue an order for the work, saying that his houses were nearly completed. He was a member of the board of aldermen, and he brought me the bill to sign, and asked me to give an order for the work. In conversation with him, I understood that \$600 would be ample to do all that there was to do. I immediately signed the bill, and sent for a contractor . . . the work, as I estimated it, would come to about \$300. A few days afterward I learned that the grade of the street was being changed. I sent for the contractor, and asked him by whose orders he was grading that street. He said he was doing it under the orders of the

board of public works. At the same time my secretary stated that the surveyor of the city had an order, signed by Governor Cook, Mr. Shepherd, and Mr. Brown, which he showed to him in the office authorizing the change to be made." (p. 13)

"I had no idea, when the order was issued, that the pavement, or the sidewalk, or the gutter were to be disturbed. Mr. Shepherd brought in the bill showing that the street was to be graded and trimmed. I asked him what he meant by grading, and if he designed to change the sidewalk or the gutter, and he said no. It is not unusual to have the word grade used for trimming a street. I signed the bill, supposing that it was merely to level up the street and to make it more beautiful than it was." (p. 13)

"Q. What was the effect of the change of grade, as it now is, on Mr. Shepherd's houses?

A. I should think that it lowered the pavement three or four feet, setting the houses higher up, and leaving a little terrace in front of the steps.

Q. Are Mr. Shepherd's houses rendered more valuable by it?

A. I think so. If they were my own, I should prefer the street to be as it is.

Q. Did any of the expenses of the improvement fall upon those houses?

A. One-sixth, I suppose. That is the law.

Q. How many houses has he there?

A. I think there are fourteen in the row." (p. 14)

Despite such damaging testimony, the Committee concluded the investigations by commending Shepherd and his Board for their contribution to the District's development and beautification and urging Congress' generous appropriations to continue their efforts.

By 1873, the situation had worsened. The beauty of the improvements could no longer distract Shepherd's critics from the reality of his outrageous spending. The Panic of 1873 caused the banking house of Jay Cooke and Company to fall and initiated a nationwide depression. The District could no longer establish credit and the debts mounted with no end in sight. The territorial Governor, Henry D. Cooke resigned and President Grant immediately appointed Shepherd governor. Prompted by the District's imminent financial problems, Congress opened investigations that year. The 3,000 pages of

published testimony laid heavy blame on Shepherd: negligence, impropriety, jobbery, illegal actions, and on and on. When the Committee submitted its conclusions, there was no official censure of the District officials--for their relationship with their appointer, President Grant, was too close to permit reprimand. But the financial mess could not be condoned. The territorial government was disbanded, Shepherd disgraced, and home rule postponed for over 94 years.

In 1876, his business failed and capital depleted, Shepherd and his family emigrated to Mexico where he made a second fortune in silver. He died on September 12, 1902 at Batopilas, Mexico.

Nathaniel Michler (1827-1881) was a career soldier. A native of Pennsylvania and son of Peter Michler, a wealthy landowner, he studied at Lafayette before entering the U.S. Military Academy in 1844. Upon graduation in 1848, he was brevetted a Second Lieutenant of Topographical Engineers and assigned to making surveys and reconnaissances in Texas and New Mexico (1848-51) and on the Mexican Boundary Survey (1851-57). After promotion to 1st Lieutenant in 1856, he was in charge of several water surveys and of running the Boundary Line between Maryland and Virginia (1858-61). With the onset of the Civil War, he was promoted to the rank of Captain and transferred to the Corps of Engineers in 1863. He had participated in the Departments and Armies of the Ohio and the Cumberland, when enroute to join the Army of the Potomac he was captured near Rockville, Maryland and paroled in 1863. He was then promoted to the rank of Major the next year and he was in charge of the Topography Department of Army of the Potomac. Later, he was engaged on the defensive works connected with the Wilderness Campaign, Battles about Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor, and Siege of Petersburg. He was brevetted three more times in the next year, rising to the rank of Bvt. Brig. General U.S. Army as a citation for his gallant and meritorious services during the Rebellion. He was present at the capitulation of General Robert E. Lee with the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomatox in 1865.

After the war, he was engaged in selecting a site for a vacation Presidential mansion and Public Park in District of Columbia and for making the necessary preliminary surveys and drawings. As a member of the Board of the War Department, he was responsible for preparing plans, specifications, and estimates for a new building (1866-71). Concurrently, he served as Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds and certain U.S. Improvements in District of Columbia (1867-71).

In 1867, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. After he held a variety of assignments including Chief Engineer on the staff of the General Commanding Division of the Pacific, Military Attache to the U.S. Legation at Vienna, Austria and Superintending Engineer of River

and Harbour Improvement in northern New Jersey, northeastern New York, and western Vermont. He died July 17, 1881 in Saratoga Springs, New York at the age of 54. There is no record of his having married.

Shepherd may have named the row of houses for Michler in appreciation for Michler's support in the 1871 Governor's race, as a political reward for supporting Shepherd's efforts to keep the capital in Washington, or in connection with the site of the new war department building sited on the corner of 17th and Pennsylvania, across 17th Street from Michler Place.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. General Statement: Located in the area known as the West End, Michler Place consisted of a row of 13 residences constructed as a single unit. They were designed in the style known as Second Empire, with plain brick facades ornamented with cast iron detailing. The quality of the composition indicates the work to be the product of an accomplished architect. Testimony from the Investigation Into the Affairs of the District of Columbia (42nd Congress, 2nd Sess.) confirms this theory as there are specific references made to the existence of an architect for the project, but exactly who he was remains unknown. The builder, a Mr. Morsell, is identified.

Typical of the style of the Second Empire, the units were arranged with end and center pavilions. Each pavilion consisted of one house, the center pavilion consisted of three houses, and two connecting wings consisted of four houses each. The houses forming the pavilions were one story higher than their counterparts, larger, and more elaborately decorated. The houses were built very low and close to the grade of F Street. The street grade at the time of construction appears to have been approximately three feet above its present level. Soon after the buildings' completion, the street was leveled, necessitating the addition of a short run of steps to the original set. These stairs were placed perpendicular to the facade and approached the main entrance at the first story. Doors were tall with bracketed canopies. In the four connecting units on either side an English half-basement was used with large (or double) projecting bay windows opening onto F Street. The bottom ledges came near to the level of the street grade. Windows at the first story were tall two-over-two lights, paired double hung sash. The style was known as "imitation French" to readers of architectural component catalogs of the day. They were capped with a cast iron eyebrow, as were the first and third story windows at the west pavilion (1751) and central pavilions (1739 and 1741). There is an extra pendant on the caps at the first story on the pavilion buildings. Dormer windows were also two-over-two lights, double hung sash (except at the east pavilion where pairs of arched heads one-over-one light sashes were used). Their prominence was accentuated by arched tops with central crests. The east pavilion featured a two-layered mansard roof (upper level convex, lower level concave), while the

remaining units employed a more simple mansard design with steep, straight sides tiled in slate patterned into a central horizontal diamond band. Metal cornices were heavy in mass and bracketted at both ends of all by the units except those abutting the pavilions.

The Second Empire style reached its zenith in America during the period directly corresponding with the Presidency of U.S. Grant (1869-77), and the style is often referred to as "General Grant." The style features a revival of the mansard roof originated in the 17th century by Francois Mansart, which permitted usable attic space while avoiding the visible, and hence taxable, additional story. The American version of the style is marked by the use of mass-produced architectural components. Catalogs offering these ornaments became available from the mid 1850's. The components were manufactured in inexpensive cast-iron as a substitute for carved stone, and provided the possibility of sophisticated decoration on the most modest of structures. Later, galvanized sheet metal took over the market from cast-iron; by stamping and molding, it permitted complicated shapes with minimum expense, weight, and flammability.

The Corcoran Gallery (now the Renwick Gallery, HABS No. DC-49), designed by James Renwick in 1859, was one of the first major public buildings to use the Second Empire style. Other prominent examples of the style include the Main Hall at Vassar College near Poughkeepsie, New York (1860) also by Renwick, and the Boston City Hall (HABS No. MA-860) by Gridley Bryant and Arthur Gilman. Gilman went on to become a consultant to the office of Alfred B. Mullett, architect responsible for most of the substantial federal buildings designed during Grant's administration, including the State War and Navy Building (now Old Executive Office Building HABS No. DC-280) of 1871-75. Marcus Whiffen, (American Architecture Since 1870) writes, "Few American cities are without houses in the Second Empire style, which got a hold in domestic architecture in the middle '50's." Michler Place can be seen as typical of the style of fashionable urban residential design of its period.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interviews with:

Mrs. Eldon Billins
Perry, Fisher, Executive Director, Columbia Historical Society
Donald J. Lehman, retired GSA historian
Elizabeth Miller, Columbia Historical Society
Dorothy Provine, National Archives

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A

"Michler Place" - General data for proposed rehabilitation project, prepared by Construction Management Division, Office of Operating Programs, GSA. Assisted by Nicholas Satterlee and Associates. July 1974, Michler Place Files.

- Columbia Historical Society
Investigation into the Affairs of the District of Columbia
(42nd Congress, 2nd Session, H.R. Report No. 72, May 13,
1872.
Vertical files
Records of the Columbia Historical Society
- District of Columbia Government
Building and Zoning Division, Central Files.
Office of Real Estate Assessor, Records.
- Historic American Buildings Survey
Verticle Files
- Joint Committee on Landmarks of the National Capital
Verticle files - Michler Place
- Library of Congress
Papers of Alexander Robey Shepherd, Manuscript Division
Vertical files, Manuscript Division
- National Archives and Record Service
Record Group 66, D.C. Building Permits
Record Group 42, Commission of Public Buildings and Grounds
- Correspondence
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McCullum, George. Biographical Register of the Officers
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War 1867-1871.
"Removal of the National Capital" House Report #52, 41st
Congress, 3rd Session, 1871.
"Report in Relation to Site of Presidential Mansion and
Public Park" Senate Misc. Document #21, 39th Congress, 2nd
Session, Vol. I, 1867.
- Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Public Library
Vertical street and obituary files
New York Times Obituaries

B. Secondary and published sources:

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National Capital as a Woman Sees Them. Hartford. A. D. Worthington
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Lehman, Donald J. Executive Office Building: Historical Study No. 3, G.O.P. September 1970.

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Whippen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to Styles. M.I.T." 1969.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of this site was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey by the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A on September 29, 1978, and was edited to conform to HABS format for transmittal to the Library of Congress by Eleni Silverman, Architectural Historian, HABS, in June of 1984.

