

1296 UPSHUR STREET NORTHWEST
(The Clubhouse)
1296 Upshur Street Northwest
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS DC-884
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1296 UPSHUR ST, NW
(The Clubhouse)

HABS No. DC-884

Location: 1296 Upshur St, NW, Washington, District of Columbia

The coordinates for this building are 38.941697 N, -77.029091 W and were obtained through Google Earth in February 2019. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: 1296 Upshur St., NW is a single-story, flat-roofed, L-shaped brick structure that was built between 1930 and 1945 as a garage and automobile showroom. From 1975 to 1990, the building was the venue for the ClubHouse, a nationally-known nightclub owned by and catering primarily to queer African Americans. In the 1980s, the club became an important site for HIV/AIDS activism, sponsoring the District's first forum on AIDS among African Americans. The club also served as the first home for Us Helping Us, a support group and public health organization for queer black men living with HIV/AIDS.

Description: 1296 Upshur St, NW is a single-story, flat-roofed, L-shaped brick structure that was constructed as a garage and automobile showroom between 1930 and 1945. The structure's main (north) elevation fronts Upshur St, NW. Its west elevation fronts 13th St, NW and is connected to a building at 4121 13th St, NW. 1296 Upshur St, NW is stepped back from 4121 13th St, NW in the front, but the two buildings' rear elevations are continuous. The buildings are banked into a hill side, leaving an exposed basement story that is visible from a rear courtyard. The structure's walls are 5:1 common-bond brick.

The building's main elevation features a sloped parapet with two stepped flat sections. The parapet is topped with black and rust-colored metal coping. The elevation has three door openings of varying styles: a flush wood door surround with fluted pilasters and a triangular pediment, aluminum double doors, and a glass and aluminum door with a sidelight and transom window. The other two doorways on this elevation have been filled in with brick. Other openings include five evenly-spaced square windows (all covered with plywood or perforated concrete block) and two differently-sized sliding sash windows. All the windows have rowlock brick sills. The structure's west elevation has two metal flush doors and three evenly-spaced sliding sash windows.

The building's rear elevation opens onto a courtyard that is used as a surface parking lot. The courtyard borders a dead-end alley and is enclosed by adjacent buildings. The rear elevation's first story features five metal flush doors and five garage door openings, including two that have been filled in with cinder block. Other openings on the first floor include ten differently-sized but evenly-spaced

windows with brick sills and lintels. On the second story, there is a row of evenly-spaced square and rectangular windows with brick sills and lintels. All the windows are set directly into the brick wall with slightly projecting brick sills and flush jack arches.

A brick chimney projects upward from the façade's eastern edge. A second chimney along the structure's western edge is also visible. The interior was not accessible for this project.

History: 1296 Upshur St, NW was constructed in three phases between 1930 and 1945. During the first phase, a garage was erected near the southeast corner of 13th and Upshur Streets, NW.¹ By 1937, an ell fronting 13th St, NW had been added to the original structure.² During this time, the building functioned as a garage and showroom for Semmes Auto Sales.³ According to local real estate maps, the structure was enlarged once again in the late 1930s or early 1940s when another addition expanded the Upshur Street, NW façade. From the 1940s through the late 1960s, the building was the warehouse and main showroom for the Malcolm Scates Furniture Company.

In July 1974, the Metropolitan Capitolites, a social club for black queer Washingtonians, selected 1296 Upshur St, NW as the site for its new nightclub venture: the ClubHouse. The MCs had already gained a local following for their popular house parties, which they started throwing in the 1960s as an alternative to discriminatory white bars. When they outgrew the house parties, the group started their own bars, the Zodiac Den and the Third World (both at 221 Riggs Road) – intimate bars with sizeable reputations but limited capacity. The large showroom at 1296 Upshur St, NW proved to be the perfect solution to the Metropolitan Capitolites' perpetual problem of space. More than that, the ClubHouse provided the MCs with the opportunity to realize their vision for a place “that would not only rock the body with musical vibrations but sooth the soul with spiritual vibrations as well.”⁴ The MCs added to the intrigue and anticipation surrounding the ClubHouse by requiring those who sought admission to apply to become members.

When it finally opened in May 1975, the ClubHouse counted four hundred charter members.⁵ At its height, the club's membership swelled to more than four thousand– with thousands more who attended as their guests. On a typical

¹ Application for Permit to Build, Permit No. 135258, August 12, 1930. Washington, DC Building Permits, Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. Microfilm.

² The rear ell now uses the address 4121 13th St, NW. Though 4121 13th St, NW and 1296 Upshur Street, NW remain connected, the author treats the former as a separate structure because the ClubHouse operated out of the buildings fronting Upshur Street.

³ *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, District of Columbia: Complete in Four Volumes* (Philadelphia: G.W. Baist, 1937), volume 3, plate 18.

⁴ ClubHouse Advertisement, *Blacklight*, vol. 3, no. 4.

⁵ Rainbow History Project. "The ClubHouse, 1975-1990." Rainbow History Project Archives Online. Accessed August 22, 2016. <https://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/clubhouse>.

weekend night, more than eight hundred people filed into lines that wrapped around the block for the chance to party in the converted warehouse.⁶ The nightclub gained an international reputation for its in-house dance troupe, which performed at one of Marion Barry's mayoral inaugurations; legendary DJs who pumped music through a sound system set up by audio engineers from New York's Studio 54 and helped introduce house music to the District; and special celebrations like Mother's Day banquet and the Children's Hour, an all-night theme party that helped establish Memorial Day weekend as the most significant time on many queer African Americans' celebratory calendars.⁷ The ClubHouse counted among its famous guests Phyllis Hyman, Patti LaBelle, and Rudolf Nureyev.

The ClubHouse also served as an important location for LGBTQ activism in the District. In 1979, the club helped fund the Third World Gays Conference, which brought together black, Latino, Asian, and Native American LGBTQ people to stimulate dialogue and encourage solidarity in order to confront the issues facing them as racial and sexual minorities. The ClubHouse also became a regular stop on the campaign trail for Marion Barry as he courted LGBTQ voters. The club showed their support by hosting fundraisers for Barry's mayoral campaigns. In the 1980s, the ClubHouse played a prominent role in local HIV/AIDS initiatives. Most notably, in September 1983, the club hosted the AIDS Forum for Black and Third World Gays, which was one of the first times during the AIDS crisis that public health workers reached out to the African American community. Two years later, ClubHouse manager Rainey Cheeks began hosting self-help and meditation sessions at the club for black gay men living HIV/AIDS. The group was later incorporated as Us Helping Us, which remains one of the largest HIV/AIDS public health organizations in Washington, DC.

Despite the club's efforts to curb the spread of the disease, HIV/AIDS irreversibly devastated the ClubHouse. The disease dampened the celebratory mood of the entire queer nightlife scene that had emerged in the District in the 1970s and early 1980s. AIDS cast an ominous shadow over the ClubHouse, in particular, claiming the lives of an estimated six hundred members and scaring off heterosexual patrons who had once partied alongside their queer counterparts without issue.⁸ Faced with a dwindling audience and considerable financial pressures, the Metropolitan Capitollites decided to close the club in 1990. 1296 Upshur St, NW later reopened as the Raggae Clubhouse, a nightclub for teenagers, in the early 1990s. As of August 2016, the building is unoccupied and undergoing interior renovations.

⁶ Roxanne Roberts, "Last Call at the ClubHouse," *Washington Post*, May 28, 1990.

⁷ Rainey Cheeks interview, August 3, 2002, audio recording, Oral History Collection, Rainbow History Project.

⁸ Sidney Brinkley, "The ClubHouse plans on 'going out in style,'" *Blade*, May 25, 1990.

Sources: Published Sources and Reports

Rainbow History Project, *Gay D.C. Walking Tours: African Americans* (Washington, DC: Rainbow History Project, 2003).

Rainbow History Project. "The ClubHouse, 1975-1990." Rainbow History Project Archives Online. Accessed August 22, 2016.
<https://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/clubhouse>.

Collections, Repositories, and Archives

Historical Society of Washington, DC: clippings

Library of Congress: newspapers

ProQuest: newspapers

Rainbow History Project: oral history interviews

Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library: building permits and maps

Historian: Amber Bailey, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2016

Project

Information: Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of the commercial structure at 1824 Half Street, SW was undertaken as part of the 2016 HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by HABS and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) to allow a graduate student to work on a HABS history project. Amber Bailey (Loyola University Chicago), 2016 Fellow, produced historical reports for several buildings related to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) nightlife in Washington, DC. HABS is within the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service (Catherine Lavoie, Chief, HABS; Richard O'Connor, Chief, HDP). Project planning was coordinated by Lisa P. Davidson, HABS historian and Chair, HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship Committee.



Figure 1: The front (north) façade of 1296 Upshur St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 2: The west façade of 1296 Upshur St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.



Figure 3: The rear of 1296 Upshur St, NW (Commercial). Photograph by Lisa P. Davidson, 10 June 2016.