

“HOUSES WITH NOVEL POINTS”: KENNEDY BROTHERS, PRINCETON HEIGHTS, AND THE MAKING OF NORTHERN PARK VIEW

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When one thinks of the typical Washington rowhouse, the first name that comes to mind is usually Harry Wardman – even though he was one of many builders developing the city during beginning of the 20th century. Rarely do today’s residents think of the builder Edgar Kennedy or the architect Alexander Sonnemann. Their contribution to the growth of Washington is still largely unnoted beyond their connection with the Kennedy-Warren.

Even more obscure would be the thought that anything of architectural importance would have occurred in the neighborhood of Park View and its now forgotten subdivision of Princeton Heights. Yet it is in this section of D.C. that Kennedy, with Sonnemann’s designs, furthered his experiment in creating subdivisions on a large scale.

Edgar S. Kennedy first came to Washington in 1884 and went into the building business. He quickly established himself, becoming partners with Isaac N. Davis in the firm of Kennedy & Davis in 1886. The partnership survived until 1903, when the business was incorporated with Kennedy being president and Davis the general manager. Upon Davis’ death in 1905, Kennedy’s brother William became involved as general manager. The name was formally changed to Kennedy Brothers, Inc., in 1909.



Edgar S. Kennedy

Alexander H. Sonnemann was one of 17 children from one of the original families in what became Chevy Chase. He received his architectural training from his father who was an architect-engineer and had helped with the design and construction of the Capitol Dome. When Sonnemann was 23 he went into private practice. This was in 1895.

In reviewing building permits, Kennedy’s association with Sonnemann can be traced to at least March 5, 1906.

Although the association may have been earlier, Edgar Kennedy is listed as his own architect on permits issued in 1905. From this time the names of Sonnemann and Kennedy would be closely linked. While each would occasionally be involved in projects without the other, their collaboration was extremely close. One need look no further than the locations of their professional offices for an example underscoring the strength of their working relationship.

During the first year of their professional relationship, Kennedy’s office was at 1413 G Street, NW, and Sonnemann’s was on the opposite side of the block at 1424 New York Ave. In 1907, Sonnemann relocated to 1413 G Street. Kennedy moved to 1334/1336 H Street, NW, in 1910, and again Sonnemann followed in 1913. They continued to work out of this

address until 1919. This can leave little doubt that they consulted each other frequently, even on projects they weren't officially working on jointly.

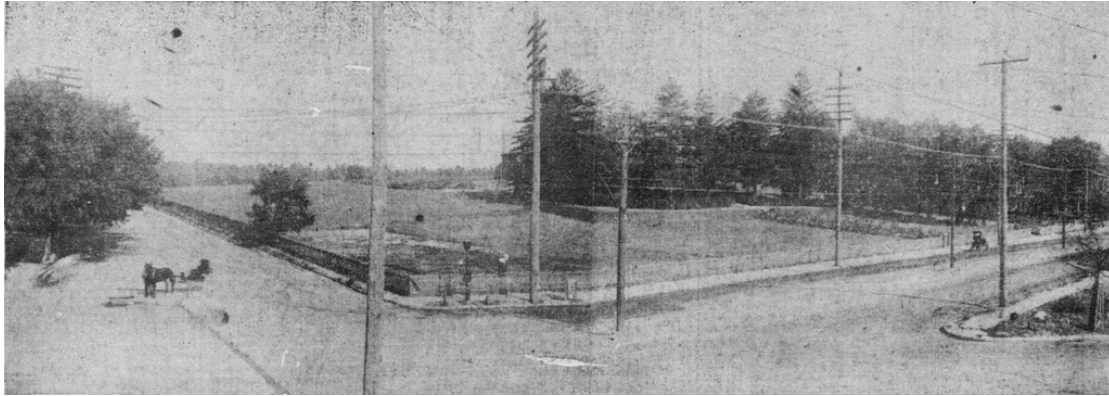
It was also in their collaboration that both Kennedy and Sonnemann were remembered. In reading their obituaries, both men's legacies are nearly copies of the other's: the Kennedy-Warren; Hotel 2400 – which was built as Meridian Mansions and is now known as the Envoy; and the development of Kenwood, Md. – including the Kenwood Golf and County Club. Added to this list, Kennedy's obituary also lists Princeton Heights. This omission from Sonnemann's obituary may have had more to do with the memory of the surviving family and friends than anything else.

Park View can trace its origin as a neighborhood to the efforts of John G. McGrath, who began meeting with his neighbors in 1907 and pressing to form a Civic Association for the betterment of the community. This came to fruition in March, 1908, when the Park View Citizens Association first met. Deriving the community's name from its splendid views of the Soldiers' Home, Park View encompassed the earlier areas of Bellevue, Scheutzen Park, and Whitney Close. In short, the 1908 boundaries would have been between the Soldiers' Home's grounds on the east, Georgia Avenue (then Brightwood) on the west, roughly Gresham Place on the south, and the Cammack Estate on the north. There was little reason to believe in March, 1908, that the Cammack lands would soon play a significant roll in the development of the community. No one could have foreseen Cammack's death on June 15 of that year, or that the estate on Brightwood Avenue would not remain in the Cammack family.



Detail: Map of Washington. New York: C.S. Hammond & Co., 1903

The undoing of the homestead, which would make Princeton Heights possible, was a struggle over the terms of Cammack's will which pitted his daughter, Anne, against his second wife over the \$1,000,000 estate. Ultimately, his daughter was granted stocks and bonds valuing \$200,000 in addition to the \$50,000 left to her in trust as reported in August, 1908. The balance remained with his second wife. The estate settled, it seems little time was spent contemplating the fate of the property at Georgia Avenue and Rock Creek Church Road. By September, 1909, it was announced that it had been sold, and that the buyers were Kennedy Brothers.



View of the Cammack Estate from Georgia Avenue (right) and Rock Creek Church Road (left), looking southeast. From the *Washington Star*, September 12, 1909.

In 1909, the former Cammack land “ha[d] long been regarded as one of the most desirable and valuable pieces of unimproved ground in the District, and [was] practically the last remaining acreage tract of extensive proportions in any ‘near in’ section of the city.”¹ It consisted of nearly 20 acres, was next to the Soldiers’ Home grounds, and was on a street railway line. In the midst of a housing boom, many areas further from central Washington were already being developed. The most remarkable thing about the estate’s development isn’t that it was being opened up, but rather that it was sold as one parcel and to one developer ... and was expected to involve an expenditure of more than \$1,500,000.

It is no surprise that Edgar Kennedy was interested in the land. A review of his other building projects indicates that he had a clear preference for purchasing larger tracts of land when possible where he could create communities rather than just rows of houses. It was reported in 1909 that the affairs of Kennedy Brothers “consist[ed] of buying ground and building houses and selling them to the better class of residents.”² What is a bit surprising is that Kennedy was able to take on a project on the scale of Princeton Heights while involved in so many other projects. During the period Kennedy purchased the Cammack land, he was extensively building high-end homes in Mt. Pleasant, was involved in building some expensive homes in Woodley Park, nearing the build out of a row of homes on A Street, NE, just east of Lincoln Park on Capitol Hill, and was also purchasing land bordered by Sixth, Seventh, D, E, and Maryland Avenue, NE.

The square north of Maryland Avenue had space for 118 houses of twenty foot fronts and was in itself an ambitious project. As reported in 1910, this project was started by the erection of twenty, nine-room houses fronting on Maryland Avenue. The structures were of the colonial design, with front porches and overhanging Spanish roofs covered with green slate. They were equipped with electric and gas lights, hot water heat and automatic water heaters. In addition to the laundry list of high end finishes, the structures had two-story rear porches and “cold storage rooms under the front porches.”³

The Princeton Heights property, by comparison, was reported as being nearly three times as large. When the scope of Kennedy’s projects is reviewed, it would have been considered reasonable had he merely held on to the Cammack property until some of his other projects were finished. It would also have been reasonable if Kennedy had initially begun Princeton

Heights on a small scale. After all, “the entire tract [was] to be subdivided, new streets opened and improved by the erection of 335 modern homes.”⁴ Yet, it was reported at the same time as the purchase that architects were already working out the plans and details of this subdivision. It was expected that “when carried to completion this vast building enterprise [would] add a frontage of nearly two miles of new homes. Taken in connection with other large building operations in which they [were then] engaged”⁵ it was expected that it would place Kennedy Brothers foremost among Washington’s leading builders.

A review of building permits and records at the DC Office of Tax and Revenue gives an indication of the scale of the project as well as the speed with which the project initially commenced. News of the sale and impending development was published in local papers on September 12, 1909. By October 20 Kennedy Bros. had been issued five building permits for 69 dwellings to be built along the south side of Rock Creek Church Road, the east side of Georgia Avenue, and both sides of the northernmost block of Warder Street. The first 30 homes would be finished in 1910 and were located on the south side of the 700 block of Rock Creek Church Road. This was followed by another 33 in 1911 located along the south side of the 600 block of Rock Creek Church Road and the west side of the 3650 block of Warder Street.

These first houses were 20 to 35 foot wide, three-story houses containing eight rooms and two baths. They were “planned and designed to avoid the usual monotony of long rows by arranging on the same square several groups entirely detached, each group being of different colored brick and finished at the ends with semi-detached houses. The architectural effect [was] further heightened by the fact that there [was] neither a continuous line of porches nor bay windows, but these two features [were] grouped and alternated as to produce harmony without sameness.”⁶ This formula would be applied to the entire development.

The initial asking price for these homes was between \$5,500 and \$5,750. This was significantly more than the homes selling a few blocks to the south on Newton street. While much more modest, the typical home in Park View then sold for between \$3,800 and \$4,200. This is a good indicator of the quality and value of the Kennedy homes. Still, it was an attractive price for a Kennedy home, since their smaller homes north of Maryland Avenue started between \$5,200 and \$6,000 and Kennedy homes in Mt. Pleasant were valued between \$7,500 and \$10,000.

As the builders put it, “such questions as ‘How can they do it?’ and ‘What can be the matter with the house that their builders can give so much more for the price than any others?’ [were] asked so often” by prospective buyers familiar with their slogan: “‘Kennedy’ means to a House what ‘Sterling’ means to silver,”⁸ that they decided they needed to explain. To reassure the public that these homes were indeed of exceptional quality and value, the builders ran ads in the September and October, 1910, papers



Ad from the *Washington Times*, September 15, 1910

explaining that the homes were selling for more than \$1,000 below comparable real estate then on the market. They then proceeded to give an accounting of how that was possible.

Pointing out that they were able to buy the 20 acre tract as one parcel, were building on a large scale, were well organized with equipment and labor, and paid for materials with cash, Kennedy Brothers estimated that they were able to save \$1,350 per house in building costs. Passing these savings on to home buyers was explained as not only doing good business, but basic to their core business principle of giving home owners as much as possible for their money, not as little.

It also illustrates that the focus of Edgar Kennedy was actually to build a community, and building homes and businesses was his means to that end. He clearly states in the same ad that the goal of Princeton Heights was “to make a neighborhood ... that will be the best in the city when the cost of the homes to the purchasers is considered.”⁹

As the initial build out of Rock Creek Church Road was nearing completion, the next homes to be put up were on Quebec Place, starting at Georgia Avenue and working toward Park Place. Work on Quebec did not progress at the same speed set during the first phase of development, largely due to the additional need to build the street and put in basic utilities. The building permits for Quebec were issued between November 3, 1911, and April 26, 1915, with completion dates ranging from 1913 to 1915. Interspersed with this construction was the build out of the homes on the 3630 block of Warder, with permits being issued on November 21, 1914, and April 26, 1915. The Warder homes were completed in 1915 and 1916 respectively.

This slower pace did, ultimately, afford the 700 block of Quebec to be among the more unique built by Kennedy. On this stretch one finds both “Colonial” and “Spanish” style homes, with some intermingling of the two styles. In addition to the multiple styles, homes consist of tan brick, red Flemish bond brick, and stucco. This is also the street where Kennedy changed from building three-story homes on the north side of the street, to two-story homes with an attic on the south side of the street. The two-story “Colonial” style of home introduced here in 1911 became the standard for the rest of Kennedy’s Princeton Heights development. In Kennedy and Sonnemann’s deft hands, even the seeming hodgepodge of architecture on Quebec Place had an unbroken sense of rhythm as the different styles were unified in the use of common materials, basic forms, scale, and use of similar architectural vocabularies bringing harmony to the street that would not have been possible from a less talented design team.

The last Princeton Heights homes to be built prior to cessation of building operations during World War I were



3674 Park Place ca. 1920. Image from Library of Congress

along the 3664 and 3648 blocks of Park Place, across from the Soldiers' Home. Permits were issued for these rows on December 24, 1915, and May 12, 1916, with completion for both being in 1917. The row between Quebec Place and Rock Creek Church Road is particularly noteworthy for being the only entire row designed to include garages.

When construction began again after the War, Kennedy chose not to complete Princeton Heights. Instead, he sold the four lots on the 3645 side of Warder to Clarence. H. Small and the remaining lots to Herman. R. Howenstein. Howenstein paid nearly \$500,000 for the remaining 135 building lots in 1919. In examining the structures Small and Howenstein added to Princeton Heights, the Small homes tend to be of the same quality or better than Kennedy homes, while Howenstein's contribution falls just short of the Kennedy standard.

More research is needed to determine why Kennedy chose to leave Princeton Heights for others to finish. He was clearly proud of the work the company had done there as evidenced by its inclusion in his obituary's list of accomplishments. The answer could be that he simply needed cash. One must keep in mind that Princeton Heights was not Kennedy Bros. only project during this period. He continued to develop new projects even after Princeton Heights was begun.

While creating this subdivision, Kennedy and Sonnemann designed and built the Argyle Apartment building located at Seventeenth Street and Park Road in 1913. This project cost an estimated \$150,000. They were also building the innovative and high-end Meridian Mansions Apartments at 2400 Sixteenth Street between 1916 and 1917 at a cost of \$950,000 – making it the most expensive apartment building in the City at that time. These expenditures would have had a direct impact on construction elsewhere, and could explain the timing for the last row of homes started in Princeton Heights.



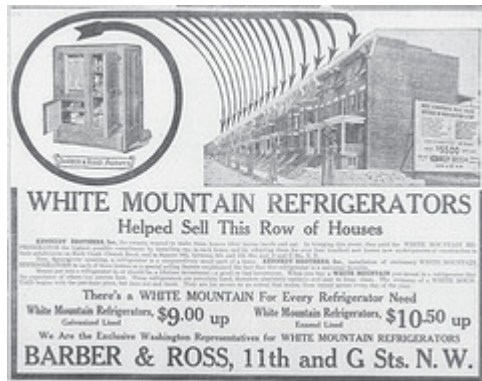
The Argyle ca. 1921. Image from Library of Congress.

Throughout it all, the development of Princeton Heights was regularly followed by local papers with glowing descriptions often including phrases such as “equipped with every modern improvement,”¹⁰ “up-to-date,”¹¹ and “containing many novel points.”¹² Features that earned such praise, in addition to the harmonious and non-static facades, were the adoption of floor plans that permitted daylight and fresh air to flow into every room of the home, the inclusion of cold storage rooms, and amenities such as refrigerators, automatic gas water heaters, and two-story rear porches.

Cold storage rooms were conveniently located under the footprint of each home's front porch maximizing storage space and still provide ample green space in the front of each

home. While the early homes had electric and gas lighting fixtures, this changed to electrical lighting only by the end of the venture. Some even credit Kennedy as being the first Washington builder to abandon the use of gas lighting in area homes. Among the more impressive features included in some of the later homes was that of a fireproof, passively heated, attached garage. Such a feature was still considered novel in 1919, two years after Kennedy Brothers had completed their last homes in Princeton Heights.

It's also significant to note that it was not just Kennedy Bros. informing the public of their own worth. As indicated earlier, the press followed the development with interest and frequent praise. Likewise, local businesses also referred to Kennedy when promoting their own products to emphasize the quality of their goods.



Ad stating that White Mountain refrigerators helped sell Kennedy homes on Rock Creek Church Road. From the *Washington Times*, June 12, 1910.



York Theater at night, ca. 1920. Image from Library of Congress.

Though Kennedy Brothers did not complete the build out of the neighborhood, they did finish two additions along Georgia Avenue in 1919 – the same year as the sale to Howenstein. These were Harry M. Crandall's York theater with Reginald E. Geare as architect and the apartment building directly north of it, again using Sonnemann.

At the completion of the project, Edgar Kennedy could be proud that he'd planned out a community in which he'd constructed 162 contiguous homes in 20 separate rows and in several different styles. He'd also managed to build a theater and an apartment complex. Kennedy was able to do this without sacrificing quality, aesthetics, or home owners' quality of life, and was able to do it all economically and at a price within reach of many Washingtonians. A greater accomplishment still, perhaps, was his ability to work out the scheduling and details of developing what was one of Washington's largest subdivisions. It was a skill he would use in future large-scale projects, including the Kennedy-Warren and Kenwood, Maryland.

¹ "2 Miles of New Homes, To Be Built on Cammack Tract by Kennedy Bros., Inc.," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1909.

² "Washington Yesterday and To-Day," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1909.

³ "Twenty-three Houses Planned," *The Washington Herald*, March 20, 1910.

⁴ “2 Miles of New Homes, To Be Built on Cammack Tract by Kennedy Bros., Inc.,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1909.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Cammack Estate Subdivided,” *The Washington Herald*, March 20, 1910.

⁷ “More Than \$1,000 Under the Market [advertisement],” *The Washington Times*, September 17, 1910.

⁸ “Seven of the Many Reasons Why the ‘Kennedy Houses’ on Capitol Hill are Selling so Rapidly [advertisement],” *The Washington Time*, March 12, 1910.

⁹ “More Than \$1,000 Under the Market [advertisement],” *The Washington Times*, September 17, 1910.

¹⁰ “Building 330 New Homes, Kennedy Bros., Inc., Engaged in Work Involving \$1,650,000,” *The Washington Post*, September 6, 1914.

¹¹ “Up-To-Date House Finds Ready Sale,” *The Washington Times*, September 17, 1910.

¹² “Houses With Novel Points,” *The Washington Post*, January 2, 1916.