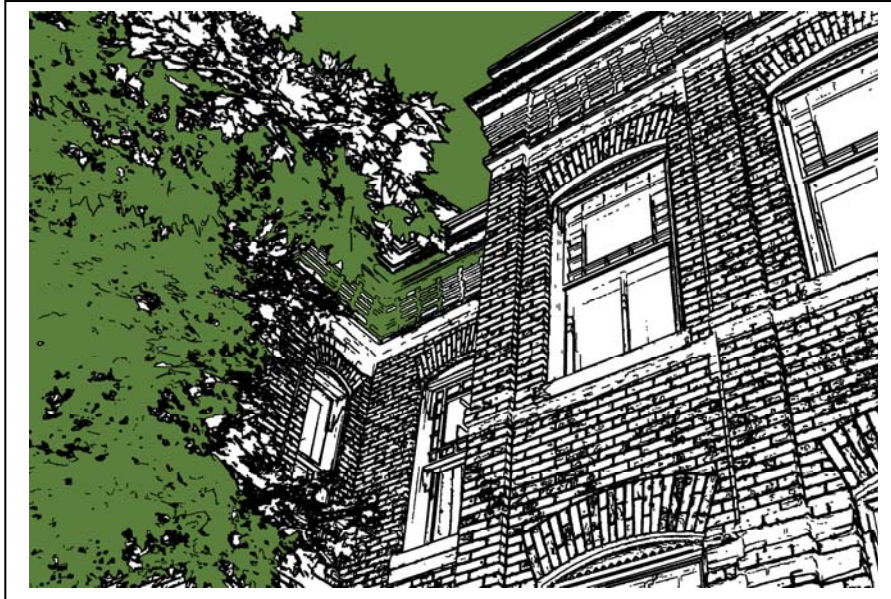


# A Brief History of 1525 O Street, NW

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Prepared by Jennifer Farley



## *DC Historic Designs*

*Historic Preservation and  
Architectural Design Specialists*

2323 Ashmead Place, NW  
Washington, DC 20009-1413  
Tel: (202) 355-4503  
Fax: (202) 332-1176

[www.dchistoricdesigns.com](http://www.dchistoricdesigns.com)

## The 14<sup>th</sup> Street Historic Corridor

1525 O Street is located in the Greater 14<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District, an area historically famous for one of the first major public transportation lines in Washington DC. Since 14<sup>th</sup> Street was originally laid out in 1791 by French engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant, this corridor has helped move mass numbers of people in and out of the Federal city. On November 15, 1862, the Washington & Georgetown Railroad Company laid the 14th Street Line, first requiring horse-drawn trolleys, and later, electric cars. This advancement opened up the area to both future commercial and residential entrepreneurs.



*Photo courtesy of LeRoy O. King, Jr.*

Immediately after the Civil War, with an exodus of freed slaves and southern refugees migrating towards the city, Washington's rapid growth was estimated at nearly 500 hundred people per day.<sup>1</sup> The attempt to accommodate such a large number of people began to highlight the shortcomings of Washington's infrastructure. Washington's street car system would be more than thirty years behind that of New York City.<sup>2</sup> The population growth necessitated a rise in residential structures as well as a need to modernize. During the post-war Reconstruction period, the Territorial government appointed City Commissioner Alexander "Boss" Shepherd to head the Board of Public Works. Boss was responsible for laying the closed sewer system and paving such major city thoroughfares as Massachusetts Avenue, Rhode Island Avenue, and Pennsylvania Avenue.<sup>3</sup> As a result, property values rose proportionately to their proximity to these improvements.

The Greater 14<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District is known also for its early multi-cultural composition. Many early residents were African Americans and prominent citizens in the area. Church Street, N.W. was occupied in 1880 by a musician, shoemaker, driver, sailor, and laundress, several in houses designed by Black architect John Lankford."<sup>4</sup> This multi-cultural character of the area was also enhanced by the number of black churches in the area – Nineteenth Street Baptist, Vermont Avenue Baptist Church, and St. Luke's

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<sup>1</sup> Hotaling, Emily, and Kim Prothro. *The Greater 14th Street Historic District*. Rep. no. 10024-0018. Washington DC: National Park Service, 1994. Print, Pg 9.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 15

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 13

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 23

Episcopal Church (now a National Historical Landmark at the corner of 15th and Church Streets<sup>5</sup>), all of which are within walking distance from the house at 1525 O Street.

## The Architect

Robert Isaac Fleming (1842-1930) was born in Goochland Co., Virginia. Fleming began his career in 1861, when at the age of nineteen he apprenticed himself to a local carpenter. However, at the onset of the Civil War, 1861-1865, Fleming enlisted as a Confederate soldier with the Richmond Fayetteville Artillery, during which time he survived several battles and rose to the rank of Lieutenant by the end of the war.

As a carpenter, Fleming gained relative success for both large scale and more intimate projects around the city. The 1900 U.S. Census lists Fleming as an “architect.” Based on his “additive design method,” Fleming felt he warranted the title, and made the self-proclaimed distinction, raising himself above the level of builder.<sup>6</sup> Fleming did not simply copy fashionable houses, but his designs came from a combination of traditional and contemporary influences.<sup>7</sup> Despite his lack of formal training as an architect, Fleming created unique plans by a “cut and paste” method.

Fleming did not just create individual designs for the sole benefit of his wealthy patrons. Unlike other builders of his time, he was willing to vary floor plans in order to build less expensive houses; for Fleming, more affordable designs simply needed a stricter watch over the budget. These houses are exemplified by the development of the 1500 block of O Street. In six row houses, built in 1884 on speculation for Curtis J Hillyer, Fleming positioned “the stair in the hall as was customary, but used an L shaped stair allowing a much wider parlor.”<sup>8</sup> This not only made his work more financially attractive to potential buyers, it also helped modified the general layout of the typical DC townhouse, by shifting the scale and look of the parlor and reception rooms.

While many of Fleming’s structures have unique design characteristics, he often reused details that he knew to be structurally sound, aesthetically pleasing, and cost effective. This allowed him to become a savvy builder and businessman in DC. Many details he used so continuously that they became his trademarks.<sup>9</sup> For example, Fleming continued to build houses with Mansard roofs with dormer windows, with iron roofline cresting, tall, narrow windows with wooden casements, and two story octagonal bay windows, up to twenty years after they were fashionable. Working with high Victorian elements, he contin-

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<sup>5</sup> Hotaling, Emily, and Kim Prothro. *The Greater 14th Street Historic District*. Rep. no. 10024-0018. Washington DC: National Park Service, 1994. Print, Pg 23.

<sup>6</sup> McLoud, Melissa. “Craftsmen and Entrepreneurs: Washington, D.C.’s Late Nineteenth Century Builders” (PhD diss., George Washington University, 1988), pg 182.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*.

ued to design and build relatively plain, uncluttered facades, using motifs with which he had become familiar.<sup>10</sup>

Real estate developer Curtis J. Hillyer, was an Ohio native and 49er, who had gone to California in search of gold. Although unsuccessful during the Gold Rush, he became wealthy as a prominent lawyer in California, and then in Nevada, representing the mining industry. After moving to Washington, he began to invest in real estate, buying much of the land around Dupont Circle. (Hillyer Place was later named for him). His investments included the 1500 block of O Street, NW, which he would later hand over to Fleming for development. At this time, the average development cost for this area was around 10 to 25 cents a square foot, a sound investment even at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

### 1525 O Street, NW



1520 O Street, NW

The building permit for 1525 O Street was granted on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1884 to real estate speculator Curtis J. Hillyer. The permit stated that the estimated costs at that time would be \$33,000 dollars to build six, single-family row houses. Each house was to measure 20' 9" in front and 45' in depth, and to be built by Fleming.<sup>12</sup>

1525 O Street, NW is a composition of various Victorian architectural styles. The "Victorian Style" encompasses many of the popular trends that took place during the latter half of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 to 1901). These styles included the Second Empire style (1855-1885), and the Queen Anne style (1880-1910), and were loosely based on medieval prototypes.<sup>13</sup> However, unlike the "Eclectic Era" that followed, little emphasis was given to historical architectural accuracy. Instead, designs and ornamentation were prone to exaggerations, with multicolored walls, strongly asymmetrical facades, and steeply pitched roofs.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Classical features were still employed, and were generally centered around cornices, door and window moldings.

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<sup>10</sup> McCloud, Melissa. "Craftsmen and Entrepreneurs: Washington, D.C.'s Late Nineteenth Century Builders" (PhD diss., George Washington University, 1988),pg 188

<sup>11</sup> "Lawyer Expires on Train." *Washington Post* [Washington D.C.] 6 Aug. 1906;1.

<sup>12</sup> , The permit covered construction on lots 76 through 81; square 195

<sup>13</sup> McAlester, Virginia. *Field guide to American houses*. New York: Knopf, 1984 pg 429.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

The roofline of 1525 O has decorative masonry features that resemble a medieval fort, with two sets of parapets— a low cut wall that guides the roofline, guarding a cliff or sudden drop off— with one immediately over the second story and another, repeated on the third floor and set back from the immediate face of the building.



Decorative brick work along the roof.

The patterned masonry was a common feature attributed in the Queen Anne Style. Often, brick Queen Anne-style houses were ornamented with molded terra cotta panels. Such decorative tiling is seen on either side of the 1525 O Street house. While 1525 does not include such details, an altering decorative arrangement between all six of Fleming’s row houses was intended to create a scene of a general streetscape, rather than a focus on any individual house.

In an urban setting where houses are built so close together, light was an important commodity. Unlike some of Fleming’s more traditional designs, the front windows of 1525 O Street were systematically constructed to frame the viewer’s gaze. The upper sash makes an attempt to direct the resident’s sight through a central pane while surrounding it with sixteen individual rectangles. This quadrangle pattern builds upon itself until the resident can see an infinite number of geometric layouts in the framing. Comparative to the art of stained glass, these windows are inlaid with wood mullions instead of lead, and the apparition of beauty is achieved through shape instead of color.

Geometry was very important to the Arts and Craft movement, the architectural period that followed the Victorian era. In the early twentieth century, the Prairie style (1900 -1920) appeared with an emphasis on wood-working. Many of the emerging windows in new construction held those same horizontal and vertical mullions as the 1525 residence. Fleming recognized growing discontent with industrial styles, and moved to soften his construction with the character of detailed windows.

### The Residents

While the entire history of the residents of 1525 O Street is yet to be uncovered, what is known is that Caroline M. Blackburn owned the house prior to 1932, and then turned it over to her daughter, Florence M. Blackburn.

**Grand Jury Indicts  
Rheem and Brewer**

**Charges Embezzling of  
\$162,150 in Firm's  
Unpaid Notes.**

Edmund D. Rheem, left, and Newton Brewer are charged with embezzlement and withholding unpaid notes in indictments returned yesterday. Both were officials in the bankrupt firm of Swartzell, Rheem & Hensley Co.

Caroline Blackburn's name appeared in the *Washington Post* on May 13, 1931.<sup>15</sup> in connection with the indictment of two individuals, Edmund D Reheem and J. Newton Brewer, of Swartzell, Reheem, & Hennesy Co., for the embezzlement of \$162,150 in unpaid promissory notes. In January of 1931, Reheem and Brewer were caught trying to defraud the Shoreham Hotel by using those notes belonging to Mrs. Blackburn, and thirty-one others. The money was taken from the Hotel and crediting it to Clarence B. Reheem through the Washington Loan and Trust Co. Caroline was unhurt by the scandal, but had her name printed in the *Washington Post* on May 13, 1931.<sup>16</sup>

In 1974 the house came under the ownership of Metro-Graphics Inc., a printing firm started by brothers Louis and Sylvester (Chick) DeThomasis. In spite of their serious lack of knowledge for the printing business, the two brother's determination turned the firm into one of the better success stories in the DC metropolitan area. They were among the first to hire handicapped workers and prided themselves on never turning down a job. The only work they ever refused was a customer who asked that their printing be delivered by a whole employee rather than an amputee. In this one case, Metro Graphics politely turned down the assignment.<sup>17</sup>



**YOUTH AND GLAMOR**—S. (Chick) De Thomasis, left, senior vice president of Metro-Graphics, Inc., and his brother, Louis, president of the firm, take time out to show film star Jane Russell, a recent customer, around their growing company.

The DeThomasis brothers posing with actress Jane Russell.

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<sup>15</sup> "Reheem and Brewer Indicted by District Grand Jurymen." *Washington Post* 13 May 1931: 1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1993)*. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Fouquet, David. "D.C. Firm Puts Accent on Youth." *Washington Post* 21 Nov. 1965, *Times Herald* ed.: K2. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>.

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