

Proposed Meridian Hill Historic District

The proposed Meridian Hill Historic District is generally bounded by V Street on the south, Irving Street on the north, 17th Street on the west and the rear of those properties fronting 15th Street on the east. It is located on a significant rise of land, situated at the original northern edge of the city, as laid out by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791. The principal artery through Meridian Hill, 16th Street, is located on-axis with the White House and offers stunning views of it and beyond. The proposed historic district contains 62 buildings, one site (Meridian Hill Park) and one structure (Henderson Castle wall). Fifteen of these properties are listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites.

At its center, the proposed district includes the grand neo-Classical style Meridian Hill Park with an important array of grand Beaux Arts-style mansions, foreign legations and large apartment buildings framing either side of it and extending further north. A clustering of imposing church edifices dominates the northern end of the district at 16th Street and Columbia Road, providing a visual “gateway” to the city from the north.

The early 20th century development of Meridian Hill as a prestigious neighborhood of private residences and foreign legations was principally the brainchild of Mrs. Mary F. Henderson and her husband, Senator John Henderson. Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing for several decades, Mrs. Henderson campaigned for and financed the construction of the area's grand mansions and foreign legations, transforming the area from a rugged and under-developed post-Civil War settlement into an impressive gateway to the nation's capital.

In particular, Henderson successfully lobbied Congress to purchase a three-block tract of land on Meridian Hill to build the formidable European-style Meridian Hill Park that became the framework around which she and her husband created a socially prominent enclave of wealthy statesmen and foreign emissaries. The successful development of Meridian Hill as an elite enclave in the early 20th century greatly enhanced the desirability of 16th Street. Apartment building developers capitalized upon the “exclusive” nature of Meridian Hill and began to build luxury apartment buildings along both 15th and 16th Streets, across from and north of Meridian Hill Park.

The proposed historic district contains a collection of mansions of exceptional architectural value largely built between 1905 and 1928 that reflect the eclecticism of the Beaux Arts style of architecture. In particular, the proposed historic district includes eight of twelve embassies built through the collaborative effort of Henderson and notable D.C. architect George Oakley Totten, Jr. as well as other private mansions commissioned by some of the city's most socially prominent individuals.

Alongside the mansions is an important array of luxury apartment buildings, built primarily in the 1920s through 1940s. These apartments provide an important visual lesson in the increasing acceptance of apartment building living amongst the city's wealthy and socially elite. Finally, several monumental religious edifices clustered at the district's northern end form a conspicuous conglomerate whose spires, visible from a distance, identify the urbanistic import of 16th Street and create a northern “gateway” to the city.