

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

DEC 14 1990

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Mansion at 2401 15th Street, N.W. other names/site number Meridian Hall

2. Location

street & number 2401 15th Street, N.W. not for publication n/a city, town Washington vicinity n/a state District of Columbia code D.C. county D.C. code 001 zip code 20009

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: [x] private, [ ] public-local, [ ] public-State, [ ] public-Federal. Category of Property: [x] building(s), [ ] district, [ ] site, [ ] structure, [ ] object. Number of Resources within Property: Contributing (1, 0, 0, 0, 1), Noncontributing (0, 0, 0, 0, 0), Total (1, 0).

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a. Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: n/a

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official: Carol B. Thompson, D.C. STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER. Date: 12-10-90.

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official: State or Federal agency and bureau: Date:

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is: [x] entered in the National Register. [ ] See continuation sheet. [ ] determined eligible for the National Register. [ ] See continuation sheet. [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register. [ ] removed from the National Register. [ ] other, (explain:). Signature of the Keeper: Patricia Anderson, Date of Action: 1/28/91

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT: diplomatic buildingEDUCATION: schoolDOMESTIC: single dwelling

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

(enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th-EARLY 20th CENTURY REVIVAL:Tudor Revival

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foundation STUCCOwalls STUCCO

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roof METAL: tinother CONCRETE

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Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The mansion at 2401 15th Street is an asymmetrical, six-bay, four-story-plus-basement mansion constructed of brick and covered (above the basement level) with cream-colored stucco scored to resemble stone; the basement is similarly scored, but painted grey. Cast concrete in the same color is used above portico openings, for window surrounds, and for parapet caps. The flat roof is a combination of tin and slag. Basically rectangular in form, the structure occupies the northeast corner of the intersection of Chapin and 15th Streets, N.W., facing Meridian Hill Park, another of Mrs. Henderson's projects.

More subdued in design and ornamentation than many of the other buildings which Totten designed for Mrs. Henderson, 2401's largely unornamented surface is made visually interesting by the asymmetrical massing of its bays and by variations in bay width and projection, in roofline, and in fenestration. Although the emphasis in the Gothic is vertical, here there is also a strong sense of the horizontal, with the four-story bay providing contrasting verticality.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Period of Significance

1922-1923

Significant Dates

1923

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Significant Person

n/a

Architect/Builder

Totten, George Oakley, Jr.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The mansion at 2401 15th Street, N.W., erected in 1923, is architecturally significant as a notable example of early twentieth century revivalist architecture and as the work of the nationally-prominent architect George Oakley Totten, Jr. Further it was commissioned by Mary Foote Henderson, who, with her husband, Senator John B. Henderson, figured prominently in Washington's social and political circles at the turn-of-the-century. Mrs. Henderson was the "guiding force" behind the development of upper 16th Street into an elegant residential enclave for foreign embassies in the late 1890s and early 1900s and Totten was the architect she chose to assist her in carrying out her ambitious plans for the area.

The exterior treatment of the property at 2401 15th Street, N.W., erected in 1923, suggests sixteenth century English manor, or "great" house design, a style which was widely referenced during the 1920s. Its popularity has been attributed to the sentiment in both England and the United States for balancing increasingly industrialized landscapes with historical and romantic architecture.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Goode, James E. Capital Losses. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1979

McAlester, Virginia and Lee. A Field Guide to American Houses. Knopf, New York, 1984.

Wiffen, Marcus, and Frederick Koeper. American Architecture: 1607-1976. MIT Press, Boston, 1981.

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. Sixteenth Street Architecture, Vol. 1. Published by the Commission, Washington, D.C. 1978.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS): n/a  
 preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested  
 previously listed in the National Register  
 previously determined eligible by the National Register  
 designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:  
 State historic preservation office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other  
Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property approximately 0.20ac

UTM References

A 

1	8	3	2	3	5	7	5	4	3	0	9	8	5	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

  
C 

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B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

  
D 

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The property at 2401 15th Street, N.W. occupies all of Lot 864 in Square 2662.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The property has continuously occupied the lot with which it is historically associated.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Lois Snyderman, Historic Preservation Consultant  
organization n/a date 11/30/90  
street & number 8804 Spring Valley Road telephone (301) 654-6423  
city or town Chevy Chase state Maryland zip code 20815

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All windows are metal casement, with cast concrete surrounds painted grey; the mullions between the casement windows, are, on the main facade, raised and concave shaped, providing additional window pattern; the window treatment is the same on the interior. Windows vary in size and number from bay to bay, with the largest concentrated at the second story level, where the most important public rooms are located.

Beltcourses separate each story and extend across the tops of windows, creating projecting lintels. The basement is separated from the first story by a beveled water table and the roofline is parapeted.

Each bay of the main facade is a different width, the widest being the southmost (or first) bay, at the corner of Chapin and 15th Streets. The most prominent, visually, is the second bay, the square, two-story entrance pavilion; a third story rises behind the pavilion.

Entrance to the mansion is through a portico on the ground floor of the pavilion, which has a second-story balcony and a castellated parapet. Columns at the entrance to the portico are decorated with buttressed pilasters capped with pointed Gothic arches. The portico is divided into two sections by a short flight of steps and an interior archway; both sections have vaulted ceilings. Pavilion doors and windows have segmental arches painted grey, and metal gates and grills have been added to the openings at the ground floor level.

The entrance to the building is ornamented by wooden grillwork in a Gothic pattern which covers the main door and the large windows on

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either side of the door. A curved wooden transom with moulding in the pattern of a flattened gothic arch covers the full width of the entranceway.

The balustrade of the pavilion balcony consists of a row of quatrefoils, a Gothic motif which is repeated on other balconies and on the parapets; the quatrefoils have either rosette or shield motifs at their center. One set of French doors leads from the balcony to the second floor landing and another leads to the ballroom; on the north wall, a third set of doors has been removed and the doorway filled in. Balcony doors and windows are capped with flattened Gothic arches.

Aside from the entrance pavilion, the most prominent part of the building is the four-story bay to the north of the entrance; the bay features a balcony at the fourth story and a one-story square tower. The tower has square columns at each of its corners and each column has a small, "blind", Gothic-shaped window just below the parapet on each of its exposed sides. The balcony has a curved balustrade with quatrefoil motif. Above the balcony are French doors and casement windows, capped by a row of quatrefoils. Two large quatrefoils and a centered finial decorate the parapet above the windows, making the tower a prominent focal point. The window-and-quatrefoil arrangement is repeated on the south side of the tower.

The fifth bay is the only one that projects on all three stories, and the sixth (the northmost) has metal fire stairs across its width.

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The south facade of 2401, which faces Chapin Street, is marked by wide projecting bays at the first and second stories, and a balconied third story. There is a double row of casement windows in each bay and the fenestration at the second story is larger than that at the first, as on the main facade. At the third story, several blocks of the balcony balustrade have been painted grey, resulting in a geometric design of grey blocks and crosses; this same geometric pattern appears in several places on the roof parapet. There is a large rectangular chimney at the southeast corner of the building.

The four-bay north facade is three stories in height at the front of the building and four at the rear. A wide exterior chimney rises the full length of the north facade, tapering slightly above the roofline. The third bay has both ground floor and basement entrances.

The principal interior spaces of Meridian Hall feature neoclassical detail which appear to reflect both Totten's orientation as an architect and Henderson's intent that the building serve the needs of a foreign embassy. The grand central staircase leads to the "piano nobile" which features ornately decorated salons, ballroom, and dining hall. Both the interior and exterior retain a notable level of their architectural integrity.

The interior of 2401 has an asymmetrical floor plan, with most of the rooms grouped to the north of the entrance lobby on either side of a

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long north-south corridor. The plan varies from floor to floor, with larger rooms (and a shorter corridor) on the second floor and no lobby on the third floor. The fourth floor is limited to the so-called "billiard room" in the tower and a row of rooms at the rear of the building, behind and to the north of the billiard room.

The ground floor entrance lobby is highlighted by a grand staircase with turned balusters, scrolled risers, and a heavily carved newel post at the landing; the staircase extends to the third floor, with plain chamfered newel posts at the second and third floor landings. Between the third and fourth floors the staircase is simpler, with plain square balusters. The lobby cornice has a carved leaf and flower motif, and there are projecting cornices at lobby doors and windows.

The room immediately to the north of the lobby also has a decorative cornice and a fireplace with a marble surround, a wooden mantel with wide brackets, a mirrored overmantel, and narrow fluted pilasters on each side. To the south of the lobby, what was once one large space has been divided into several smaller rooms, with some evidence remaining of a decorative cornice.

The most ornate rooms are on the second floor, where the embassies for whose use the building was erected would have held their public functions. The second floor landing has French doors leading out to the portico balcony and double casement windows on each side of the doors; there is paneling above and below the windows and above the doors. Decorative moulding circles three sides of the room and the



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doors have projecting cornices. Most of the doors are original (here and on the other floors) and are paneled and have architrave surrounds.

To the south of the landing is the most important room in the mansion, the richly-embellished ballroom, its decor now highlighted by gold and white paint. The ballroom has a denticulated chair-rail, with paneling above and below, and a wood parquet floor. Its layered cornice includes a wide band of moulding with an acanthus leaf motif and (below that) a narrower band with an egg-and-dart motif.

The east wall of the ballroom features a projecting chimney breast with an ornate entablature composed of the ceiling cornice, a plain paneled frieze, and a fireplace cornice with vine-and-leaf motif. Below the cornice is a mirrored overmantel, and another paneled frieze with a row of escutcheons. The fireplace opening has a marble surround and is framed by partially fluted Ionic pilasters which rest on paneled, denticulated pedestals.

The focal point of the ballroom is the south wall, which features what appears to be a stage, suitable for use by a small number of musicians or a speaker. A slightly-raised, concrete platform approximately four feet wide has been placed over the ballroom's parquet floor in front of the double row of casement windows in the projecting south bay. A drain in the platform indicates that it may also be the setting for plants, when not otherwise in use. The appearance of a stage is enhanced by the same ornate entablature which decorates the fireplace: moulded cornice, wide frieze, and Ionic column-and-pilaster sets at

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each end of the stage. Both column and pilaster shafts are partially fluted and rest on denticulated and paneled pedestals. The lower third of the pilasters are ornamented with an egg-and-dart pattern in plaster. The stage effect is highlighted by the decorative bracket-and-escutcheon motifs in the center and at each end of the cornice.

On the north wall, French doors lead to the balcony and there is a double door to the landing; on the west wall, casement windows face 15th Street. Bookcases on either side of the fireplace and on the north wall are a more recent addition.

A room accessed from the second floor landing to the north, no doubt a main reception area originally, is also handsomely decorated. Its moulded cornice has an egg-and-dart motif and there is paneling both above and below the chair rail. A projecting chimney breast on the north wall has a wide cornice with a vine-and-flower motif, a large mirrored overmantel, and a plain paneled frieze over a marble-surrounded fireplace opening. Twin pilasters (one paneled and one with a rosette-and-leaf pattern in plaster work) frame the fireplace; they rest on paneled pedestals. This room, once almost as large as the ballroom, has been divided to provide space for a rear hall and housekeeping areas.

The other room to the north of the landing was also divided to create two smaller rooms. The decorative cornice and paneling is repeated in these rooms, although there is no chair rail. The room at the northwest corner also has a fireplace, but one which is much simpler

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in design than those found elsewhere. The fireplace opening has a marble surround and there is a bracketed wooden mantel; narrow fluted pilasters frame it.

The third floor retains its original small sleeping chambers; they are now used as offices. Three of the rooms have simple fireplaces with marble surrounds, plain friezes, wooden mantels with wide fluted brackets, small mirrored overmantels, and narrow fluted side pilasters.

On the fourth floor (formerly the servants' quarters), the billiard room has two walls of windows and a vaulted ceiling. A third wall has a bracketed wooden fireplace mantel, but the fireplace opening has been plastered over.

When the mansion was erected it contained an elevator, removed in the 1960s to allow for the addition of air conditioning. And, as mentioned above, some of the larger rooms have been divided. Except for these relatively minor changes, the interior is unaltered. The exterior is original, the only change being the addition of the firestairs on the main facade. The mansion remains a notable example of the work of one of the city's leading early twentieth century architects.

The mansion occupies most of the lot on which is located, with a small parking area to the north of the building and a narrow strip of lawn at the front, rear, and south sides. The building's setting is now more urban than it was in the 1920s, with other structures having been erected close by. However, the most important streetscape component, Meridian Hill Park, remains, and it continues to provide a gracious setting for the mansion at 2401 15th Street, N.W.

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The original examples were often built around courtyards and featured asymmetrical massing; details included timber framing, heavy stonework, large divided windows, and battlement towers. The influence of the Italian Renaissance on this style was minimal and classical motives, in both original and twentieth century examples, are not plentiful. The subject property presents a uniform exterior interpretation of the style which is notable for both its massing and detail. It is an outstanding example of the manor house design in an enclave of eclectic architecture.

2401 15th Street exemplifies the eclectic nature of the work of George Oakley Totten, Jr., the architect of Mrs. Henderson's Meridian Hill mansions. In a departure from the Beaux Arts classicism which Totten generally favored, his design for this structure also echoes the modern Gothic style popularized by the Boston architectural firm of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson in the early 1900s, when they used it in their award-winning design for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point; the leading practitioner of the style was Ralph Adams Cram.

Described by one biographer as Mrs. Henderson's "official architect", Totten used variations on the Renaissance Revival style to design more than a dozen elegant mansions for her; in the process, he gave upper Sixteenth Street the architectural character it had previously lacked.

In recognition of the area's significance, a Sixteenth Street National Register Historic District has been established. A linear district, it extends from Scott Circle to Florida Avenue and contains "one of

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Washington's best preserved and most visually interesting streetscapes as well as fine examples of buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". (p.23, Historic Districts of Washington, D.C.)

A partial list of the buildings designed by Totten for embassy use at the request of Mrs. Henderson would include 2401 (the subject property), 2437, and 2535 15th Street, and 2460, 2600, 2622, 2640, 2801, and 3145-47-49 16th Street; another of her buildings, at 2620 16th Street, N.W., was demolished. The Venetian-style structure at 2600 16th Street, N.W. was, for many years popularly known as the Pink Palace; it is now a more sedate beige. It was the first building that Totten designed for Mrs. Henderson. The government of Ecuador currently uses the mansion at 2535 15th Street as its Embassy, and the Spanish Embassy occupies the mansion at 16th & Fuller Streets, N.W. A 1977 Washington Post article on the Turkish Embassy at 1606 23rd Street, N.W. (designed by Totten in 1915) notes that "Totten's only rival to the title of embassy architect par excellence is J.H. de Sibour, who worked in the same period".

Other Totten buildings in Washington include the old University Club at 900 15th Street, N.W. and the Congressional Club at 2001 New Hampshire Ave., N.W. In 1902, Totten was also called upon to remodel the Castle for the Hendersons. Overseas, he designed the American Embassy in Turkey and a mansion for the Turkish sultan.

George Oakley Totten, Jr. (1866-1939) was one of the many young American architects who studied at the leading French school of architecture, the Ecole des Beaux Arts, in the mid-to-late 1800s and

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early 1900s. Included in their number were such architectural luminaries as C.F. McKim, John Russell Pope, Louis Sullivan, Henry Hobson Richardson, and Richard Morris Hunt. Upon returning to the United States, they established a new, eclectic style of architecture which combined a variety of classical elements:

"The doctrines and teaching techniques of the Ecole dominated French architecture until the 20th century. ....The American architects who were trained in Paris at the Ecole....are legion....All were influenced by its academic design principles....., which emphasized the study of Greek and Roman structures, composition, symmetry....." (p.66, What Style Is It?)

Totten received his undergraduate degree from Columbia University in 1891 and his Master's from Catholic University in 1892. In 1893 he won Columbia University's McKim Traveling Fellowship, which enabled him to study in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux Arts from 1893-1895.

In 1895, Totten moved to Washington and served (from 1895- 1898) as the Chief Designer, Office of Supervising Architect, Treasury Department, under Supervising Architect William Martin Aiken. During Aiken's tenure in the position, Totten was regarded as his protege. In 1897, Totten represented the United States at the International Convention of Architects in Brussels. Underscoring the importance of the assignment, the Inland Architect expressed the opinion that Totten (who was 31 at the time) was too young to represent the profession in such a distinguished gathering.

The limitations of employment at the Supervising Architect's office soon proved unappealing to Totten, as it previously had to many creative designers. In 1898, he left government service and opened

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his own office; he quickly became known for the large, elegant mansions that he designed for wealthy clients in Washington and elsewhere. Although Totten did a number of public buildings, his career was confined largely to the design of costly residences. He served as President of the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Architects and as the American delegate to several of the International Congresses of Architects between 1897 and 1939.

The residence at 2401 15th Street, N.W. (referred to as "Meridian Hall" by the current owners) was erected in 1923 by Mrs. Henderson as part of her plan for the aggrandizement of 16th Street. It was constructed at a cost of \$125,000 by Lipscomb Building Corporation, for use as a single-family residence. The site on which the mansion now stands was the location, at the time, of several small houses occupied by Blacks. Mrs. Henderson acquired the property in 1920 and razed the existing structures soon after. According to Mr. Jesse S. Shima, Mrs. Henderson's Property Manager from 1925 until her death in 1931, she built the mansion "to beautify 15th Street and make it a better place to live." The residence which she commissioned architect George Oakley Totten, Jr. to design for the site was to be sold or rented to an embassy, as were the other mansions which she commissioned in the area.

According to Mr. Shima, shortly before Mrs. Henderson's death she gave the property at 2401 15th Street to him as a token of her appreciation for his many years of service. He returned it to the estate a year later, however, partly because the gift caused "squabbling" in the Henderson family and partly because (as a Japanese immigrant) he could not (at that time) become a citizen and, therefore, could not own property in the District of Columbia. The mansion remained in the

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possession of the Henderson family for 20 years, until 1943, when (in a development which Mrs. Henderson would no doubt have abhorred) it was sold for use as a "Rooming and Board House Business". (D.C. Land Records, September 1943).

Mrs. Henderson was not immediately successful in finding a tenant for 2401 and, in fact, the property remained vacant for four years after it was built. In 1928, however, it was leased to the Egyptian Legation for three years, fulfilling Mrs. Henderson's plan for the building. In 1931, the Nicaraguan Legation succeeded the Egyptians, occupying the building for two years. In 1954, it was rented by the Italian government for use by their Technical Delegation and the Italian Commercial Counselor and his staff occupied the mansion from 1960-1970.

In between occupancy by foreign governments, 2401 provided space for a variety of institutional and commercial uses, including The House of Seven Arts in 1934; the Nelson School for Boys, from 1936 to 1939; the above-mentioned rooming house business in 1942-43; the Kaiser Institute in 1948; and, in the 1970s and 1980s, office space for a law firm. 2401 is now, once again, serving an institutional use, as office and classroom space for the Woodrow Wilson International Center, a community-based, nonprofit organization providing a variety of social and educational services to Washington residents, particularly those in the Hispanic community.

Although Mary Foote Henderson (1841-1931) did not reside in the mansion at 2401 15th Street, N.W., she is especially important in understanding the significance of the property and the role it played



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in the development of the area. Mrs. Henderson was an extraordinary woman who was deeply committed to the beautification of the nation's capital. Mrs. Henderson wrote and spoke extensively on building and landscape design and was particularly concerned with achieving uniformity in building color and height and with landscaping city streets, planning for parks, and beautifying entrances to the city. In 1927 her speeches and letters on the subject of urban design and civic improvement were collected and privately published in a book entitled Remarks About the Management of Washington in General and 16th Street in Particular.

Although Mrs. Henderson was interested in the betterment of the city as a whole, much of her energy and fortune was devoted (as noted above) to turning 16th Street (where her residence, Henderson's Castle, was located) into a grand boulevard lined with elegant foreign embassies and private homes. In explaining her vision for 16th Street, she compared it to a world-famous Parisian boulevard:

"Something like the Champs Elysees, 16th Street is central, straight, broad and long;....its portal at the District line is the opening gateway for motor tourists to enter the Capital. On the way down its seven mile length to the portals of the White House, each section of the thoroughfare will be a dream of beauty; long, impressive vistas; beautiful villas, artistic homes, not only for American citizens, but diplomats of foreign countries. Whatever there is of civic incongruities will be wiped out. It will be called Presidents' Avenue....." (pp. 23 - 24, Remarks)

In 1888, when Henderson's Castle was erected at the corner of Florida Avenue and 16th Street, it was considered to be "outside" the city. Most of 16th Street was unpaved and its upper reaches were

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undeveloped, except for a few farms, brick kilns, and small frame houses occupied by Black freedmen. It was not a fashionable section of the city, but Mrs. Henderson fervently believed that it could, one day, join Massachusetts Avenue and DuPont Circle as a favored address.

Her efforts to make 16th Street into an exclusive thoroughfare took many forms. At her own expense, Mrs. Henderson planted shrubbery along much of its length. When there was talk in 1900 of building a new, larger White House, she commissioned plans for the building and urged the Congress to build it on Meridian Hill, across from Henderson's Castle. In 1912, when plans were being drawn up for a memorial to Lincoln, she sought to have it built on Meridian Hill and even provided the Congress with plans for the monument. She also urged the federal government to commission busts of all the Presidents and Vice-Presidents, for placement along 16th Street.

In 1913, Mrs. Henderson was successful in her efforts to have 16th Street renamed "The Avenue of the Presidents". But her triumph was short-lived, since the Congress quickly reversed itself and ordered the original name reinstated, partly because 16th Street residents objected to ordering new stationery and calling cards.

In 1910, in one of her most important victories, Mrs. Henderson successfully lobbied the Congress into purchasing twelve acres of her property on Meridian Hill for use as a park. Situated just opposite the Castle, the development of the site for park land was a key element in her plan for the beautification of 16th Street.

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Meridian Hill Park (which was designed to complement the nearby Renaissance Revival mansions commissioned by Mrs. Henderson) was modeled after the Borghese Gardens in Rome and the Villa d'Este Gardens at Tivoli, just outside of Rome. Laid out in 1914 by architect Horace E. Peaslee and landscape architect George Burnap, the park took several decades to complete because of frequent changes in design and escalating construction costs. It eventually included a fountain, a grotto, several pieces of sculpture, a cascading waterfall, and extensive plantings. In 1935, Meridian Hill fountain was dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Henderson, a fitting tribute to her vision and tenacity. Meridian Hill Park, an outstanding example of urban park design, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The most important part of Mrs. Henderson's "grand design" for 16th Street was her plan to make the area around Meridian Hill a favored location for foreign embassies. To that end, she acquired substantial acreage, tore down the local "shanties" (as she called them) and built more than a dozen large mansions with the intention of leasing or selling them to foreign governments for embassy use; the structure at 2401 15th Street was one of these. It was a daring venture, since, up to that time, Washington's great private homes and embassies had been built largely in the DuPont Circle and Massachusetts Avenue areas.

As evidence of the success of her plan, a 1925 magazine article described 16th Street as "Embassy Hill - now Washington's favored residential district for statesmen....established members of Mrs. Henderson's colony (include) France, Spain, Mexico, Cuba, Estonia, and (the) Netherlands." (National Republic, May 1925.)

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In 1923, Mrs. Henderson offered one of her properties (now the Spanish Embassy, at 2801 16th Street) to the federal government as a residence for the Vice President, in the hope that the presence of this high-ranking official would add to the neighborhood's prestige; her offer was rejected. In 1931, she tried again, this time offering the mansion at 2437 15th Street for the same purpose, but her offer was again rejected. There is no indication that the mansion at 2401 15th Street was built for Vice Presidential use, although it was intended for use as an embassy.

Mrs. Henderson was extremely interested in the design of her mansions, sometimes drawing preliminary sketches for the buildings before turning the assignment over to her architect. Whenever possible, an embassy was built in the "style" of the nation that was to occupy it. The result was an eclectic mixture of richly detailed structures built on a grand scale, "making the area one of the most architecturally prominent in the city" (p.108, J. Goode).

Her concern for the beautification of Washington and its transformation into a capital city worthy of the nation no doubt reflected the influence of the turn-of-the-century "City Beautiful" movement and its principal exponent, architect Daniel H. Burnham. Basing his proposals on his designs for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Mr. Burnham advocated a return to the use of classical design in public and semipublic buildings and

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emphasized the importance of city planning. His services were sought by several of the nation's larger cities, including Washington.

"Now more planner than architect, Burnham was called upon to serve on the McMillan Park Commission to rehabilitate L'Enfant's violated and neglected city plan for Washington. An enlargement of L'Enfant's original scheme....by Charles F. McKim and Burnham ....was accepted in 1901....L'Enfant's Mall (was cleared) of all encroachments....The marshes of the Potomac were reclaimed....and mirrored images of classical temples appeared". (p. 27, Whiffen and Koeper).

Mrs. Henderson was aided in her efforts to beautify 16th Street by her influential and wealthy husband, Senator John B. Henderson, (1826-1913). As James Goode notes in Capital Losses, "Few families have had a greater influence on Washington's....architecture and development than the Hendersons." (p.107, J. Goode).

Senator Henderson first gained prominence, when, as a member of the Missouri legislature in 1861, he voted to oppose Missouri's succession from the Union , although he had taken office as a States-Rights Democrat. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1862, Henderson sat on several important committees, aided Secretary of State Seward in his efforts to purchase Alaska, and drafted the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery. When Senator Henderson was defeated for reelection in 1870 after casting the deciding vote against the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson, he and Mrs. Henderson (whom he married in 1868) returned to his home state of Missouri, where he practiced law.

In the mid 1880s, the Hendersons moved back to Washington and the Senator continued to be active in public affairs, serving as a

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delegate to the International Pan-American Conference in 1889 and as a Regent of the Smithsonian Institution. In 1887 they bought 110 acres of a tract of land known as Meridian Hill, located on 16th Street. The tract had been part of an early subdivision, laid out in building lots in 1867 and sold for 10¢ a foot. In 1888, the Hendersons erected the imposing three-story red sandstone residence with numerous towers and battlements which soon became known as Henderson's Castle. The Castle dominated the northwest corner of 16th Street and Florida Avenue until 1949, when it was razed to make way for townhouses. One of the Castle's 16th Street retaining walls remains.

Although 15th Street is now more urban, with the addition of rowhouses and apartment buildings that antedate 2401, the building has retained both its architectural and site integrity. Almost 70 years after its erection, Meridian Hall mansion remains a fitting monument to Mrs. Henderson's vision and a reminder of an earlier era in the city's history.

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Luther King, Jr. Library.

Interview with Mr. Jesse Shima on the history of 2401 15th Street,  
N.W.

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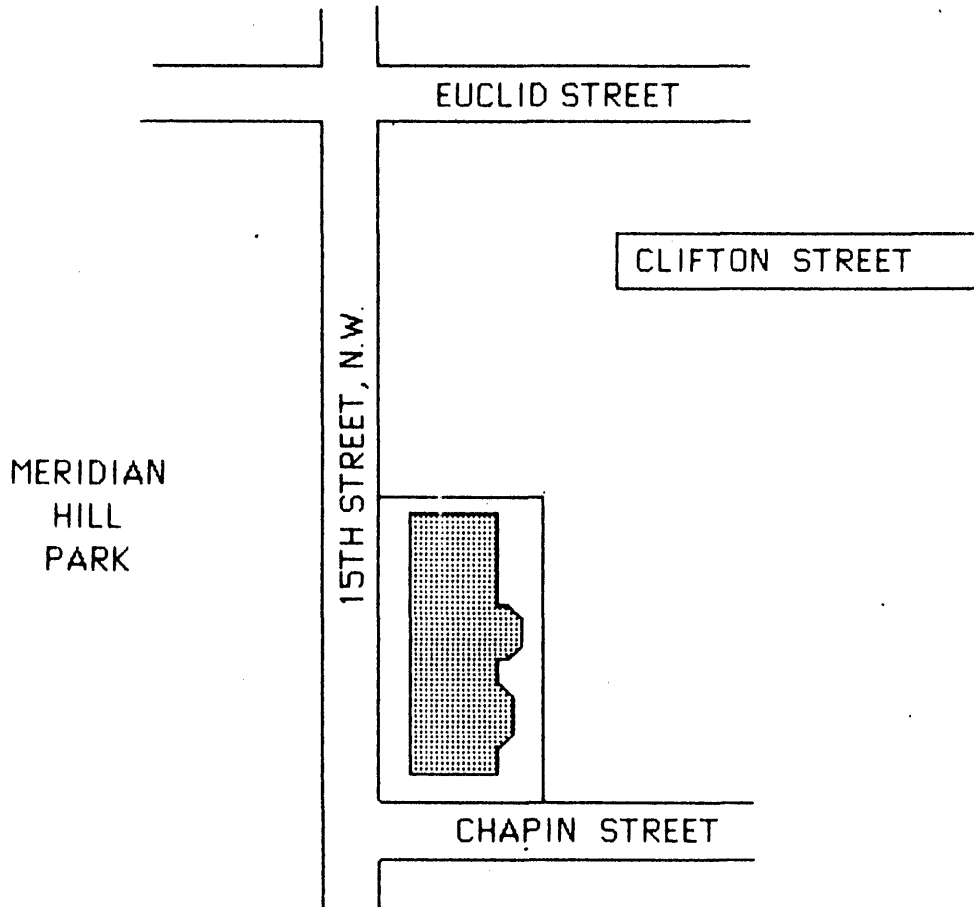
Note: The material listed above is archived in the Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Library, in the Columbia Historical Society Library, or in the locations indicated.

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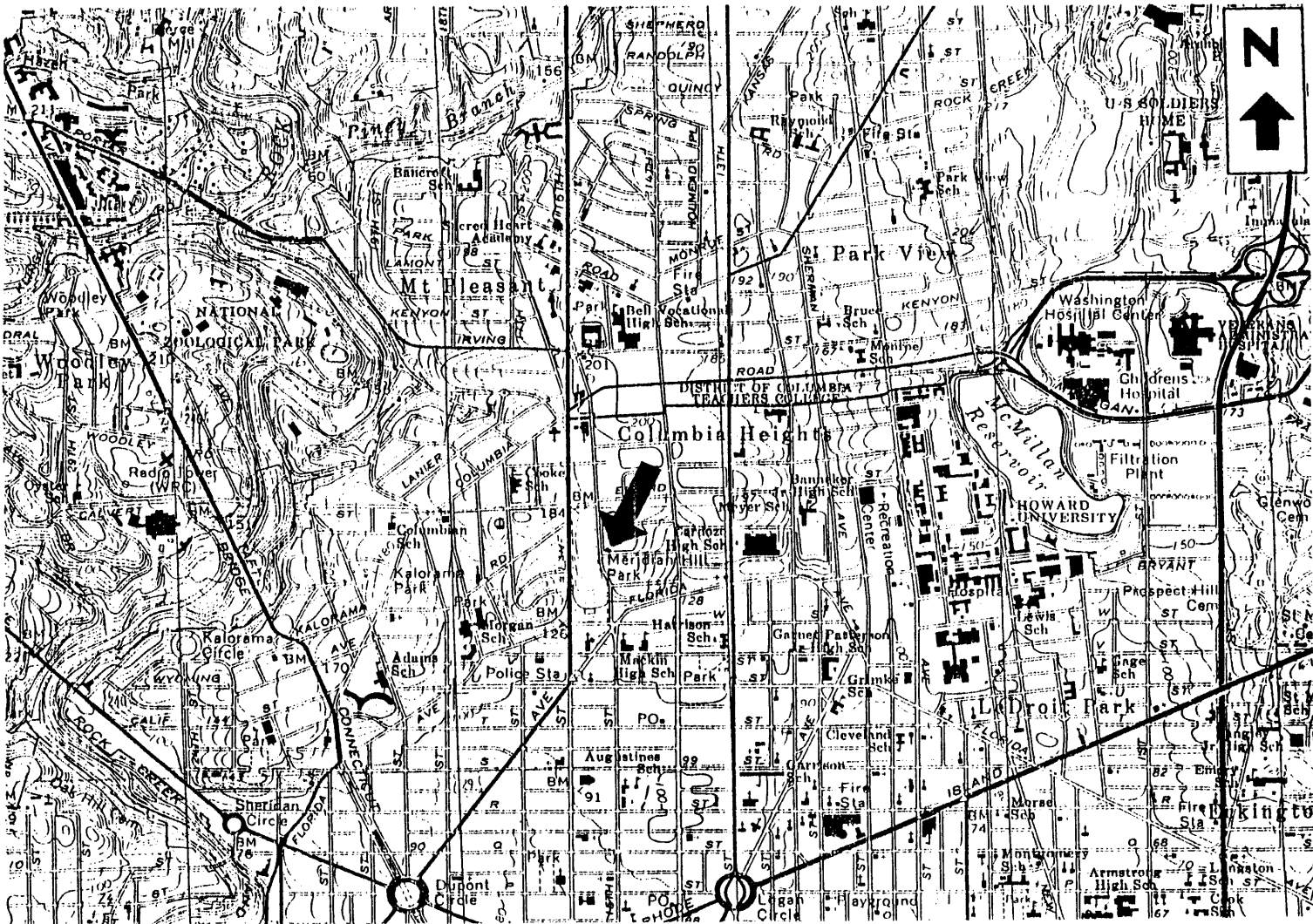
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Detail of USGS map. Refer to Section 10 for UTM data.

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Photo Inventory

- Photograph #1: Main facade taken from southwest.
- Photograph #2: Main facade taken from west.
- Photograph #3: Tracery entrance screen taken from west.
- Photograph #4: North elevation taken from northwest.
- Photograph #5: Tower detail.
- Photograph #6: Main facade, entrance.
- Photograph #7: Interior, 2nd floor ballroom.
- Photograph #8: Interior, Cornice detail.
- Photograph #9: Interior, ballroom.
- Photograph #10: Interior, fireplace, reception room.