

MARITIME HERITAGE OF THE UNITED STATES NHL THEME STUDY--LARGE VESSELS

Potomac (Presidential Yacht)

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)  
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

Historic Name: Potomac (Presidential Yacht)

Other Name/Site Number: USS Potomac (AG25); Ex-Electra

**2. LOCATION**

Street & Number: FDR Memorial Pier,  
Jack London Square

Not for publication: \_\_\_\_\_

City/Town: Oakland

Vicinity: \_\_\_\_\_

State: CA County: Alameda

Code: 001

Zip Code: 94607

**3. CLASSIFICATION**

Ownership of Property  
Private: \_\_\_\_\_  
Public-local: X  
Public-State: \_\_\_\_\_  
Public-Federal: \_\_\_\_\_

Category of Property  
Building(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
District: \_\_\_\_\_  
Site: \_\_\_\_\_  
Structure: X  
Object: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property  
Contributing

\_\_\_\_\_  
1  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1

Noncontributing  
\_\_\_\_\_  
buildings  
\_\_\_\_\_  
sites  
\_\_\_\_\_  
structures  
\_\_\_\_\_  
objects  
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A



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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Military (Naval) Sub: \_\_\_\_\_

Current: Education Sub: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Government  
 Transportation  
 Museum

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: N/A

Materials:  
 Foundation: Steel  
 Walls: Steel  
 Roof: Steel  
 Other Description: N/A

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The former presidential yacht U.S.S. Potomac (AG-25), ex-United States Coast Guard Cutter Electra, is moored at FDR Memorial Pier on the Oakland Estuary in Oakland, California. Potomac has undergone restoration to refloat her and return her to her circa 1939 appearance, when she operated as the yacht of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), 32nd president of the United States of America. She will soon commence operation as a working museum vessel.

**Electra As Built**

Potomac was laid down and originally launched as the United States Coast Guard ship Electra, 17th vessel of the Argo class of Coast Guard patrol boats. As launched in 1934, Electra was a 165-foot long riveted steel-hulled vessel with a 23.9-foot beam, 13.3-foot depth of hold, and a 8.1-foot draft. Electra displaced 337 tons.

Electra was designed with sharp lines for speed, with a raked bow and a rounded "cruiser" stern. Her machinery was housed midships and consisted of dual Winton diesel engines of 670 HP which drove twin propellers. Her galley and mess areas were aft; crew quarters were forward. Her superstructure housed the radio room, heads, and the commanding officer's quarters. The pilothouse was located atop the superstructure. Electra carried four boats. The vessel was armed with two 1-pdrs. aft and a 3-inch gun forward. [1]

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**Electra as Remodeled into Potomac**

Electra was removed from service late in 1935. She was remodeled by the United States Navy for use as a presidential yacht and was renamed U.S.S. Potomac (AG-25). The vessel's armament was removed, and a new, welded steel superstructure housing a central saloon, the presidential stateroom, with a private head complete with bathtub, and two separate galleys, was installed. A major feature of the new superstructure was large glass windows set into brass frames with handcranks to open them for cross-ventilation. Directly below the new superstructure, the former boiler and mess area was converted into four passenger staterooms, each with two bunks and individual heads.

The vessel was originally fitted with two stacks. The after stack carried auxiliary engine exhaust. During the conversion, the exhaust manifolds were relocated to the forward stack, and the after stack was gutted to house a hand-operated elevator for the President's use. A watertight door in the stack provided access to a new, welded steel boat deck which linked the original superstructure forward with the new superstructure aft. Davits were installed on the new boat deck for two Coast Guard surf dories, a motor whaleboat, and two 22-foot "Chris-Craft" motor boats inasmuch as the President did not consider lifeboats "smart." [2]

A towing bitt on the fantail was removed and a large settee was built into the curve of the fantail for the seating of guests. The bulwarks in the fantail were raised to support windows to protect guests from the wind. Additional berths were added below decks in the crew areas for the President's mess stewards, the original Coast Guard radio equipment was replaced with standard Naval equipment with a greater range and more powerful transmission, and additional ballast was added to compensate for the additional weight above decks.

During the course of the vessel's use as the Presidential yacht, additional alterations and additions were made between 1936 and 1945. These included numerous minor modifications to stop vibration noise in the President's stateroom, the addition of two 50-cal. Luis antiaircraft machine guns (later changed to two 20-mm antiaircraft cannon), and degaussing gear. During WWII the vessel was used primarily as a Naval sonar research vessel. Special transducers and motor generator units for the sonar equipment were installed.

**Post-Presidential Modifications**

Following the death of President Roosevelt, President Truman replaced Potomac with U.S.S. Williamsburg. Potomac was decommissioned and ultimately transferred to the State of Maryland. The State of Maryland removed the after stack and hand-operated elevator, placing the stack ashore at Cambridge,

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achieved. A three phase rehabilitation included 1) basic structural repairs and refloating, 2) installation of electrical and plumbing systems, and making the vessel seaworthy and operable, and finally, 3) detailed interior restoration, furnishing, and fitting out. [4] The third and last phase is now being completed in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Ship Preservation Projects.

The naval architects who planned the restoration met current United States Coast Guard requirements for operating vessels carrying passengers while saving as much historic fabric as possible. Their philosophy of restoration was to reuse existing equipment where possible; when replacing materials, match them to the original as closely as possible; alter the vessel as little as possible to meet the Coast Guard requirements, seeking waivers from those requirements where possible to maintain the historic integrity of the vessel; and hiding as much new, nonhistoric material and work as possible, while clearly identifying new, non-historic material as such when it cannot be hidden.

Specific restoration goals include replacing 80 feet of the flat keel in the forward part of the vessel, replacing selected frames aft, and then replacing the entire bottom steel plating of the hull (4,500 square feet). The replaced hull plating was welded as opposed to the original riveted steel plate hull. The original riveted hull was retained above the waterline. New diesel engines, of the same type and manufacture as the original, although of a slightly smaller size and horsepower, were installed along with new shafting, steering, and rudders to meet Coast Guard requirements.

The pilothouse was rebuilt and replaced, as were the masts, davits, and the after stack, which houses a hand-operated elevator. The teak deck was taken up and replaced in-kind with new teak decking. The settee was reinstalled on the fantail, and awnings and other external features such as the lifeboats and motorboats are now being restored.

The vessel has received a new electrical and plumbing system, but original fixtures were replaced to provide a "period" appearance. The galleys will also receive period equipment, as will the radio room. The original panelling and joiner's work in the vessel was stripped, repaired, and was reinstalled. The interior spaces are now being restored and furnished with historic photographs guiding the process, with considerable attention focused on the saloon and the presidential stateroom.

While the rehabilitation aimed at making the vessel a floating, operable entity, the intent of the restoration was to have the vessel's exterior and interior appearance match Potomac's appearance in 1939 as closely as possible. Only a few modern intrusions, such as life raft canisters on deck, modern navigational lights, antenna, and radar, are present. [5]

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Maryland, imbedded in a concrete base, as a memorial to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The two motorboats were also removed for use as patrol craft by the Maryland State Police.

In 1959 the State of Maryland sold Potomac to Neptune Lines of Delaware for use as a commercial passenger vessel. In 1960 the vessel was again modified, with a new, welded steel deckhouse containing two passenger cabins being added on the foredeck. Escape trucks to provide egress from below deck were also installed, one passing into the former presidential stateroom and compelling the removal of the President's bathtub.

**Potomac's Current Condition**

Potomac passed through several owners after 1960. Lack of maintenance and deterioration weakened the vessel, and while impounded by the United States Customs Service at Treasure Island on San Francisco Bay, a broken piling pierced her rusted hull, sinking the vessel. Potomac was raised, sold at auction to the Port of Oakland, and brought to her present site in the Oakland Estuary. In September 1982, all interior fittings, including joinery, electrical and plumbing fixtures, machinery, furniture, rigging, windows, portholes, and equipment were removed and placed in storage. During this process the engine room was completely gutted and the engines landed ashore. Potomac was then lifted from the water and placed on blocks.

The hull was sandblasted, the pilothouse lifted off, and the boat deck completely replaced with welded steel. Structural survey disclosed wasted hull plates, frames, keel, and stanchions. These deteriorated sections were cut away (except for the keel). The interior arrangement of the hull was preserved, as were the arrangements and partitions in the superstructure. In the 1936 addition, the presidential deckhouse, the saloon, galleys, and presidential stateroom are retained. The only missing major features were the President's hand-operated elevator and the bathtub in his stateroom. The original teak deck was present but had deteriorated. Forward, the original super-structure was in excellent condition with its original interior arrangements and partitions preserved.

The 1960 forward deckhouse was removed and scrapped. The panelling and joiner's work (numbered and identified according to the area of the vessel it was removed from), electrical fixtures, plumbing, equipment, furniture, and machinery, including the original brass propellers were stored in containers in the shipyard during restoration.

**Planned Rehabilitation of Potomac**

The intent of Potomac's owners was to restore her as an operating vessel, and a memorial museum, the "floating White House," commemorating Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency. This has been

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Endnotes

1. "U.S.C.G. Patrol Boat ELECTRA-Report on the Condition of," Norfolk Navy Yard (Virginia), December 2, 1935, File No. AG25/L9-3 (1), Ships' History Division, U.S. Navy Historical Center, Washington, D.C., and Paul A. Gow and John W. Waterhouse, "Renovation of the Floating White House," Presentation to the Pacific Northwest Section of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, January 1986 (Revised August 1986), Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac, Oakland, California, pp. 1-2.
2. Gow and Waterhouse, "Renovation of the Floating White House," p. 2-3.
3. Ibid.
4. Discussions with Mr. James McCloud and Mr. Dan Holdgate, Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac, Oakland, California, June 11, 1987.
5. Gow and Waterhouse, passim.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide:     Locally:    

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B X C     D     NHL 1,2

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

Areas of Significance: Period(s) of Significance Significant Dates  
 Politics/Government 1936-45

## NHL Themes

VIIH: Political and Military Affairs 1865-1939  
 The Great Depression and the New Deal

VIIIIC: World War II  
 Politics and Diplomacy During the War

XIVB: Transportation  
 Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures

Significant Person(s): Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Manitowoc Ship Building Company

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The former presidential yacht Potomac (AG-25), ex-United States Coast Guard Cutter Electra, one of three surviving major vessels used as presidential yachts, was solely used by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945), 32nd President of the United States, between 1936 and 1945. While President Roosevelt also used the yacht Sequoia (from 1933 to 1936), Potomac was the principal vessel associated with the President during the majority of his four-term tenure in office. Potomac is of exceptional national significance because of her major association with the social and official life of the President. During his term of office, Potomac was a major symbol of Roosevelt's presidency.

Franklin Roosevelt's association with the vessel was more than tangential. Roosevelt, an avid sailor and former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, used Potomac as his "floating White House," conducting State visits, such as those of the King and



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Queen of Great Britain to the United States in June 1939; policy-setting meetings with his cabinet, Senators, Congressmen, and government officials; and as transportation to significant meetings such as his rendezvous with Winston Churchill in 1940 to arrange the Atlantic Charter. President Roosevelt also hosted one of his famous "fireside chats" from Potomac's radio room. Perhaps more significantly, the President frequently used Potomac as a retreat, making day trips to reinfuse himself with the vigor required by the duties of his office.

Potomac is also of exceptional national significance through her association with critical events in the history of the United States during the crisis years of the Depression and the Second World War. Presidential briefings, meetings, and decisions were made on board Potomac, and Potomac played an integral part in establishing the crucial agreement between the United States and Great Britain prior to America's entry in the war, the Atlantic Charter. Finally, the vessel's significance is enhanced by her brief role in suppressing illegal trade in alcohol after Prohibition as a patrol vessel cruising for "rum runners."

The above statement of significance is based on the more detailed history which follows.

**The Coast Guard Cutter Electra (1934-35)**

The United States Coast Guard Cutter Electra was built by the Manitowoc Ship Building Company of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Laid down on March 5, 1934, with two of her sister ships, the cutters Dione and Pandora, Electra was launched with the other two vessels at Manitowoc's first triple launch on June 30, 1934. After being fitted out, Electra made her trial runs and was accepted by the Coast Guard, being commissioned on October 25, 1934. Under the command of Lt. Cmdr. Arthur Hall, U.S.C.G., Electra made her way through the Great Lakes to the Atlantic. Home-ported in Norfolk, Virginia, Electra commenced her career of patrolling the coast as far north as Boston in search of rumrunning vessels still engaging in their illicit trade despite the repeal of the Volstead Act on December 5, 1933. [1] Electra's Coast Guard career was short-lived, however, for in November 1935 it was announced that she was being transferred to the United States Navy for use as a presidential yacht.

**The Presidential Yacht Potomac (1936-45)**

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election to the presidency of the United States on November 8, 1932, brought an avid sailor and former Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1913-1920) into the White House. Franklin Roosevelt's first presidential yacht was Sequoia which he inherited from Herbert Hoover and used from 1933 to 1935. The small size of Sequoia and the potential fire hazard of her wooden hull compelled the President to find another yacht. The ship selected was Electra. In November 1935, Electra was

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transferred to the Navy and taken to Norfolk Navy Yard, where alterations to make her suitable for presidential use were commenced. "The Electra has the advantage of being able to carry more passengers and it will be possible for the President to travel in her with his normal quota of Secret Service." [2]

On January 30, 1936, Electra was renamed Potomac, and on March 2, 1936, U.S.S. Potomac AG-25 was commissioned at the Navy Yard at Norfolk, entering into her duties as the new presidential yacht. The President was a frequent visitor; one crewmember recalls that Roosevelt made frequent fishing trips

nearly every weekend from May until November. He loved to go down to where the river emptied into Chesapeake Bay and anchor. As soon as the President started fishing the crew did too...at times the President was having no luck but crewmen on the bow were. We would take up anchor and move forward so the President would be in the right place. [3]

Potomac was used for longer voyages, the first being a cruise from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to the Bahamas between March 23, and April 8, 1936. [4] President Roosevelt is reported to "have felt more at home aboard the Potomac than in the White House, and it was rumored that...he would rather serve his Presidential terms aboard..." [5] The President himself publicly stated

I try to get away a couple times a year on these short trips on the salt water. In Washington as you know, the working day of the Presidency in these times averages about 15 hours...but at sea the radio messages and the occasional pouch of mail reduce official work to not more than 2 or 3 hours...Above all there is the opportunity for thinking things through--for differentiating between principles and mere methods, between the really big things of life and those other things of the moment that may seem all important today and yet are forgotten by the world in a month. [6]

The New York Times called Potomac the "Sea-Going White House" in 1941, noting the vessel was "President Roosevelt's chief refuge from the heavy strain of his office..." [7]

President Roosevelt also used Potomac for social functions, including state receptions and hosting a variety of guests, including foreign dignitaries and leaders. The most notable guests were the King and Queen of Great Britain, who journeyed down the Potomac to Williamsburg with the President and Mrs Roosevelt in June 1939. Other notable guests included Crown Prince Gustav and Crown Princess Martha of Norway, and Lord Halifax, former Foreign Secretary and then-British Ambassador to the United States. Roosevelt family members, aides, cabinet members (including Cordell Hull, Henry Morgenthau, and Harold

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Ickes) as well as influential advisors and confidants such as Harry Hopkins and William C. Bullitt, were also frequent guests.

Not all of the President's time aboard Potomac was relaxed or social in nature. Not only did Roosevelt use his cruises on the vessel to think over events and policy, he also kept in touch with the government and the world through the ship's radio. Important documents and "essential mail needing the Executive's attention or signature are flown to Potomac by naval plane at sea and to the nearest landing stage when he is on inland waters." [8] At least one of the President's famous "fireside chats" was broadcast from Potomac.

A significant presidential mission was accomplished aboard Potomac in August 1941. Departing in Potomac from Maine, the President secretly rendezvoused with the U.S. cruiser Augusta, which carried him to the harbor of Argentia in Newfoundland, where British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, on board H.M.S. Prince of Wales, met with him between August 9-10. Meanwhile, Potomac cruised the coast with an FDR stand-in fishing on deck while official Navy press releases on the President's activities reported (as they did for August 9) that the ship was "anchored in fog, prospects for fishing appear very poor today. Everything quiet on board, no especial [sic] news." [9] While Potomac provided a subterfuge, Roosevelt and Churchill met and discussed international tensions, and reached a series of agreements which were issued as a joint statement on war aims known as the Atlantic Charter, an eight-point declaration of "certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world." [10]

The addition of a new deck house for the President made Potomac unstable, causing her to roll in open seas and causing concern for the President's safety. With the outbreak of World War II, Potomac was relegated to inland water cruises, finally being used less and less by the President. When not in use, Potomac, fitted with new sonar and hydrophone equipment, engaged in research for the Naval Research Laboratory on Chesapeake Bay through the remainder of the war years. Following the death of Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, President Harry S. Truman agreed to replace Potomac with another, larger vessel, U.S.S. Williamsburg (subject of a separate nomination). Potomac was decommissioned by the Navy on November 18, 1945, returned to the U.S. Coast Guard on November 23, and struck from the Navy List on February 25, 1946.

**Post-Presidential Career of Potomac**

Potomac was to be fitted out as a Coast Guard buoy tender on the Potomac River. Instead, the vessel, in the midst of provisioning, was decommissioned by the Coast Guard and laid-up at Baltimore. Late in 1946 Potomac was sold to the State of

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Maryland. Operated by the State's Tidewater Fisheries Commission, Potomac patrolled Chesapeake Bay, inspecting fisheries and making occasional official cruises with the Governor of Maryland.

In 1960, rising fuel costs compelled the State of Maryland to sell Potomac to Warren G. Toone, owner of Neptune Lines of Delaware, who operated her as a passenger and freight-carrying vessel between Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. After a short career, Potomac was sold to the Hydro Capital Company of Newport Beach, California, who in turn sold the ship to entertainer Elvis Presley. Presley in turn donated Potomac to St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. St. Jude's auctioned the vessel. Thereafter, Potomac changed owners several times, finally ending up in San Francisco, where she was seized by the U.S. Customs Service after a drug raid. The impounded vessel was towed to Treasure Island Naval Base on San Francisco Bay, where her rusted hulk was pierced by submerged pilings, sinking Potomac in 35 feet of water on March 18, 1981.

Potomac was raised by salvage divers. She was then sold at auction for \$15,000 to the Port of Oakland, which has restored her as floating museum and Roosevelt memorial. Potomac will be operated on the bay as an educational vessel when not berthed at the FDR Memorial Pier on the Oakland Estuary. The rehabilitation, restoration, and operation of Potomac was undertaken for the Port of Oakland by the Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac, a non-profit organization headed by the President's son James Roosevelt, and prominent San Francisco Bay Area labor union officials.

**Endnotes**

1. Manitowoc (Wisconsin) Herald Times, October 29, 1934, and November 9, 1935.
2. "To the Navy for the President," The U.S. Coast Guard 9 (2), December 1935, p. 32.
3. Letter, Paul M. Harless (former Potomac crewmember) to Sesan Rodgers, U.S.S. Potomac Association, North Augusta, South Carolina, April 5, 1986, pp. 3-4.
4. "The President's Cruise in Bahama Waters on Board U.S.S. Potomac, Escorted by U.S.S. Monaghan and U.S.S. Dale, From 23 March, 1936 to 8 April, 1936," manuscript, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
5. Fred E. Crockett, Special Fleet: The History of the Presidential Yachts (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1985) p. 66.
6. New York Times, March 30, 1941.

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7. Franklin L. Kluckhohn, "Sea-Going White House," The New York Times Magazine, May 18, 1941, p. 12.
8. Ibid., p. 21.
9. "Presidential Activities, U.S.S. Potomac, (Report #6)," August 9, 1941. Manuscript, U.S. Navy Historical Center, Washington, D.C.
10. Joseph Alsop, FDR: A Centenary Remembrance (New York: The Viking Press, 1982) p. 180.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES****Manuscripts**

Historical Files (Including Crew Reminiscences and Photocopied Materials from the FDR Library), Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac, Jack London Square, Oakland, California.

Ship History Files, U.S.S. Potomac AG-25, Ship's History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.

**Published Accounts**

Alsop, Joseph, FDR: A Centenary Remembrance (New York: The Viking Press, 1982).

Crockett, Fred E., Special Fleet: The History of the Presidential Yachts (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1985).

Kluckhohn, Frank L., "Sea-Going White House," The New York Times Magazine, May 18, 1941, pp. 12,21.

**Newspapers**

The Manitowoc Herald (Manitowoc, Wisconsin).

The New York Times (New York, New York).

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- 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: National Maritime Initiative

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Less than one acre (.1 acre approximate).

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing

A 10 563500 4182130

Verbal Boundary Description:

All that area encompassed within the vessel's extreme registered dimensions.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the entire area of the vessel as she floats at her berth.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: James P. Delgado, Maritime Historian

Organization: National Park Service

Date: June 30, 1987 (Rev. June 1, 1990)

Street & Number: Box 37127

Telephone: (202) 343-9528

City or Town: Washington

State: DC

ZIP: 20013-7127