

Old Varnum House Makes Way for New Structure

Other Buildings in New Jersey Avenue Block, South of Capitol, Doomed as Progress Leads to House Office Addition. Thomas Jefferson Went to Be Inaugurated From Temporary Home in Ancient Boarding House.

BY JOHN CLAGETT PROCTOR.

THE passing of so many landmarks in the District of Columbia, especially in recent years, is to the old-timer a very sad condition of affairs. Unavoidable, no doubt, and in line with improvements in many instances, yet in others seemingly demolished without excuse. Indeed, to see some historic building removed, perhaps to be replaced by a gasoline station, or some similar structure, almost fills one with the emotion George P. Morris must have felt when he wrote:

"Woodman, spare that tree!
Touch not a single bough!
In youth it sheltered me,
And I'll protect it now."

However, as badly as we might feel over losing the old buildings which have been of so much pleasure to us since our youth, yet we may console ourselves in the fact that history in Washington is always in the making, for within its portals events of the greatest national and international character are always transpiring, and the very nature of things demands modification and change. Indeed, this old world of ours itself is continually changing and has been so ever since the dawn of creation.

And so, for the many perishable landmarks we so highly prize today, we only too well know that even with the most careful attention their life can be extended but a century or two, and, indeed, when that time shall come, we fully realize that only the highlights of our present historic Washington will be recalled. But they are precious to us now, and it is for us to perpetuate their memory just as long as possible.

Hardly a day or a week passes by but that we read in The Star of the removal of some famous old building, upon the site of which is to stand some public or private building, and almost before we can get a last look at the doomed structure, find that the work has already commenced.

This happened to be the case with the writer a few days ago when he drove down New Jersey Avenue, just south of the Capitol, where the addition to the House Office Building is to be erected, for he found that razing the lower building of the Coast and Geodetic Survey had already commenced, while the main building seemed empty and ready for the Lord High Executioner, otherwise known as the Wrecking Contractor.

The old Ben Butler House, lately occupied by the Public Health Service, seemed vacant and ready to pass into the discard, while the

Congressional Hotel and the historic Potomac Hotel at the south end of the block were being vacated preparatory to clearing the site for a building similar and architecturally in keeping with the House Office Building erected on the east side of New Jersey Avenue, between B and C streets.

The Potomac Hotel building on the northwest corner of New Jersey Avenue and C Street, or the Varnum as we knew it in days gone by, is one of the oldest and most historic buildings in Washington. Originally it consisted of three dwellings erected from about 1796 to 1800 by Thomas Law, a wealthy and notable man of his time, and one of the early speculators in real estate in the new Capital City.

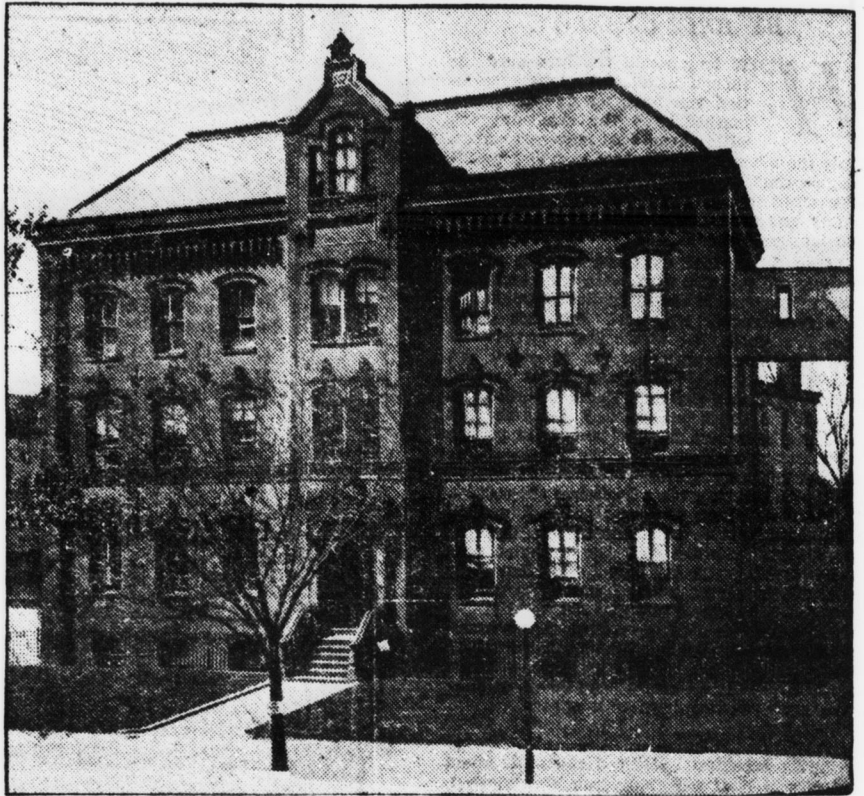
If it is true that Mr. Law resided in the northern of the three houses as early as the Summer of 1796, and there is no doubt that he did, then it is quite evident that the two houses to the south—including the corner one—must have been erected a year or two later, for in Mrs. Thornton's diary she records under date of Saturday, February 1, 1800, that: "Mr. Law called—showed us a copy of a letter written by a Member of Congress to Mr. White, to know if he could procure lodgings in one house for the Vice President (Mr. Jefferson) & nine Members of Congress—Mr. Law has offered one (which is not yet begun) that will be ready—they to find a tenant & fix the rent."

Evidently a tenant was found and the rent made agreeable, for it was in the corner of these houses that Conrad & McMunn started their boarding house, using the adjoining one as a tavern for the accommodation of transients.

THIS early firm of hotel proprietors, like many successful people today, believed in printer's ink, as their advertisement in the National Intelligencer of November 24, 1800, will bear witness, and which reads: "Conrad and McMunn have opened houses of entertainment in the range of buildings formerly occupied by Mr. Law, about two hundred paces from the Capitol in New Jersey Avenue, leading from thence to the Eastern Branch. They are spacious and convenient, one of which is designed for stage passengers and travelers, the other for the accommodation of boarders. There is stabling sufficient for 20 horses. They hope to merit public patronage."

In the same journal, four days later, Mr. Jefferson's arrival in the city is announced, as well as his stopping place:

"Last evening arrived in Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Vice President of the United States, and took up his residence in Messrs. Conrad and McMunn's apartments."



Building occupied by the Coast and Geodetic Survey, erected in 1871. The site will be occupied by the House Office Building.

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Not only did Mr. Jefferson stop here upon his arrival in the city, but he remained during the time the House was voting him into the White House over Aaron Burr, who had tied him in the electoral vote by receiving 73 votes, the same as received by Jefferson; Adams, the incumbent, receiving but 65.

IN this connection, Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith, in her Reminiscences, relates an occurrence of unusual interest, bearing especially upon the ultimate selection of Mr. Jefferson over Burr. She says:

"At this time Mr. Jefferson was vice-President and in nomination for the Presidency. Our infant city afforded scant accommodations for the members of Congress. There were few good boarding-houses, but Mr. Jefferson was fortunate enough to obtain one of the best. Thomas Law, one of the wealthiest citizens and largest proprietors of city property, had just finished for his own use a commodious and handsome house on Capitol Hill; this, on discovering the insufficiency of accommodation, he gave up to Conrad for a boarding house, and removed to a very inconvenient dwelling on Greenleaf's point, almost two miles distant from the Capitol.

"And here while I think of it, though somewhat out of place, I will mention an incident that occurred which might have changed the whole aspect of the political world and have disappointed the long and deep laid plans of politicians, so much do great events depend on trivial accidents.

"This out-of-the-way house to which Mr. Law

removed was separated from the most inhabited part of the city by old fields and waste grounds broken up by deep gulleys or ravines over which there was occasionally a passable road.

"The election of President by Congress was then pending; one vote given or withheld would decide the question between Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Burr. Mr. Bayard from Delaware held that vote. He with other influential and leading members went to a ball given by Mr. Law. The night was dark and rainy, and on their attempt to return home, the coachman lost his way, and until daybreak was driving about this waste and broken ground and if not overturned into the deep gullies was momentarily in danger of being so, an accident which would most probably have cost some of the gentlemen their lives, and as it so happened that the company in the coach consisted of Mr. Bayard and three other members of Congress who had a leading and decisive influence in this difficult crisis of public affairs, the loss of either might have turned the scales, then so nicely poised. Had it been so, and Mr. Burr been elected to the Presidency, what an awful conflict, what civil commotions would have ensued."

FROM this old hotel, Mr. Jefferson walked on

the morning of March 4, 1801, to be sworn in as President. He did not ride up to the Capitol fence as some folks insist upon saying—confusing his first with his second inauguration—and hitch his horse to the fence in a most unusual democratic sort of a way, but he had rather a dignified escort, being attended by a number of citizens, and the Washington Artillery even announced his entrance into the building by a volley from their battery.

It is quite likely that the Alexandria Company of Riflemen also took part in the inaugural escort with the local artillery, since it paraded in front of his lodgings earlier in the day.

For 16 days after the inauguration, Mr. Jefferson continued to reside here, where the affairs of state were carried on, and which for the time being was the Executive Mansion. For the date of his removal to the White House, we are indebted to the Intelligencer of March 20, 1801, which tells us "Yesterday the President of the United States removed from Messrs. McMunn and Conrad's to the President's House."

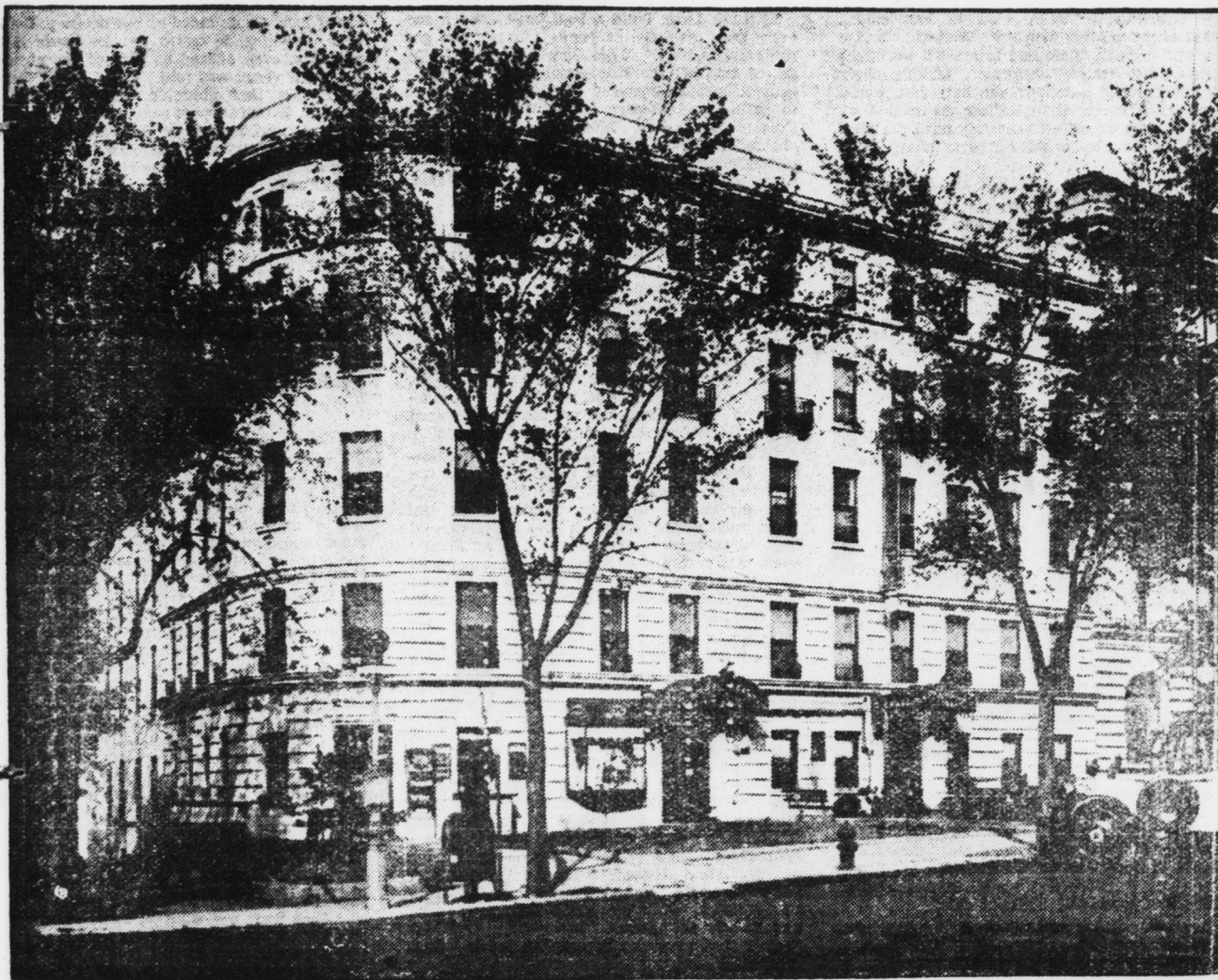
Incidentally, it was in one of the original buildings forming this old hotel that Samuel Harrison Smith issued the initial number of the National Intelligencer, on October 31, 1800, and which has proved of so much value to those interested in early Washington history.

Thomas Law, the builder of this old hotel, was one of the earliest investors in real estate in this city, and though he undoubtedly lost heavily, yet unlike a number of the others, he did not go entirely broke. Of the many brainy and forceful men who early took up their residence here and brought their fortunes along to help build the Nation's Capital, Thomas Law was without a peer.

A member of an English family of talent and influence, he was the son of Edmund Law, who became Bishop of Carlisle in 1769. One of his brothers became Bishop of Elphin and another the Bishop of Chester, and subsequently of Bath and Wells. Lord Ellenborough, his elder brother, was an eminent lawyer and acted as the principal counsel for Warren Hastings in the great impeachment trial before the House of Lords, and afterward attorney general and lord chief justice of the King's Bench.

THOMAS LAW was born in 1756, and at the age of 17 entered the service of the British East India Co. in Bengal. His advancement here was rapid and in 1783 he was appointed collector, judge and magistrate of Behar, a province with more than 2,000,000 inhabitants, an office which he administered for six years with great success, afterward, at the request of Lord Cornwallis, the governor general, serving for two years on the revenue board at Calcutta. His health failed him in 1791 and he returned to England. He sailed for America three years later.

In India Mr. Law instituted many reforms



The Potomac Hotel, formerly the Varnum, from which Jefferson left to be sworn in as President, March 4, 1801. It was erected by Thomas Law.