

Potts Hall history

https://www.mncppcapps.org/planning/HistoricCommunitiesSurvey/Documentations/PG%2068-013-01%20Potts%20Star%20Hall/PG%2068-013-01%20Potts_Star%20Hall%20MIHP.pdf

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Constructed c. 1909, Potts/Star Hall was, and continues to be, one of the largest buildings in Mount Rainier. Completed at the beginning of the twentieth century, this vernacular building reflects the utilitarian and public use for which it was intended. Constructed for Robert E. Potts, a local businessman, the building was originally known as Potts Hall. Community and church gatherings, as well as private meetings all took place in “the largest place of meeting in Mount Rainier” while under the ownership of Potts. In 1921, Potts sold the building to The Star Hall Company, after which the building was known as Star Hall. Shortly after acquiring it, the Star Hall Company conveyed the property to Adah Chapter No. 25 of the Order of the Eastern Star of Mount Rainier. The building served as this Masonic group’s headquarters, in addition to hosting numerous other local groups. In the 1980s, the Terminal Snack Bar was established in the northern portion of the first story. Still in operation, this luncheonette serves a loyal customer base. In January 2010, trustees of the Adah Chapter No. 25 conveyed the property to the City of Mount Rainier, Maryland. The Adah Chapter and the Terminal Snack Bar now lease space in the building from the city; future plans include adapting the building for use as an annex to the City Hall. Potts/Star Hall maintains sufficient integrity to convey its significance as a building associated with the social and cultural development of the City of Mount Rainier since its construction at the beginning of the twentieth century.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The Potts/Star Hall is located in Mount Rainier, Maryland. Incorporated in 1910, Mount Rainier is located in northwest Prince George’s County adjacent to the northeast quadrant of the District of Columbia. Oral tradition maintains that the community was named by its early developers, former army officers from Seattle, who named the area after the famed mountain in Washington state.¹ Mount Rainier developed as an early-twentieth-century streetcar suburb for the middle class, and the community retains a large and diverse collection of vernacular residences and commercial buildings constructed between 1900 and 1939.

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Mount Rainier remained a rural, agricultural landscape until the early 1900s. Both the 1861 Martenet map and the 1878 Hopkins map show relatively little development in the area that would become Mount Rainier. Roads leading east to Bladensburg and west to Washington, D.C., appear on the historic maps.² An early subdivision of the community in the 1890s failed, despite the arrival of a streetcar line in 1897 connecting Mount Rainier with the District of Columbia. Between 1900 and 1910, eight different subdivisions were platted by various companies, and Potts/Star Hall was constructed to serve the new residents of the community.³ Construction slowly developed along the western edge of Prince George’s County. Locally important real estate developers were involved in the development of Mount Rainier, including J. Harris Rogers and his brother James C. Rogers, who were also responsible for developing portions of Cottage City, Edmonston, Rogers Heights, Hyattsville, and Riverdale.⁴ In most cases, lots were sold unimproved and contractors were retained by the new property owners to

design and erect the houses. Other lots were developed by speculative investors. Further subdivisions in the 1920s and 1930s expanded the community to the north and to the east. The commercial area of what is now "downtown," developed around the streetcar station and included grocery, hardware, and supply stores, as well as a bakery, pharmacy, and tailor shop. By the 1930s, new businesses appeared along the commercial corridor of 34th Street and provided access to a movie theater, bowling alley, banking, and auto repair shops.⁵

Potts/Star Hall

On August 16, 1909 Robert E. Potts purchased Lot 4, unimproved, from Annie L. and Horace H. White.⁶ At this time, Potts was a resident of Brentwood, Maryland, a town adjacent to the northeast. Assessment records suggest that Potts had the building constructed by 1910, when records first indicate an improvement valued at \$2,000. Due to its large size and location along Rhode Island Avenue, just northeast of the District line, Potts Hall became a multi-functional building utilized as a local movie theater, community hall, and public meeting site. Potts served as Justice of the Peace for Mount Rainier during the first decade of the twentieth century. The first mention in local newspapers of Potts/Star Hall, then known as Potts Hall, came in October of 1909, when Mount Rainier was still a crossroad village of a few streets and houses. A small group of Episcopalians met in the new building on Rhode Island Avenue to form St. John's Chapel of St. Matthew's Parish, Hyattsville. The officiant was Reverend Henry Thomas of St. Matthew's Parish.⁷ The congregation conducted services in the building for three years. In January 1910, Potts Hall was to be the site of a ten-round boxing match between Tommy Lowe and Johnny Dougherty, which was organized by local promoter Mr. Cleeland.⁸ Potts Hall for one night became the home of the Mount Rainier Amusement and Physical Culture Club. Long before the 3 o'clock bout, more than 200 men had made their way to Potts Hall and joined the club, paying Cleeland one dollar, "which entitled the favored one to all the privileges of the organization, in including the use of the piano."

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However, there "was a sad lacking of the usual paraphernalia that is generally found in such places." Despite this, the scene that night was lively as the "fortunate brothers were permitted to enter this gymnasium and amuse themselves as best they might until time for the 'big doings.'" Amateur pianists took their turn entertaining, which "seemed to meet with the approval of the crowd for they were encored several times." Unfortunately, the bout never transpired as the local Deputy Sheriff Thomas Mohler interrupted the proceedings and shut the club down claiming that a club charter had not been applied for. Membership dues were returned despite Cleeland's best efforts to persuade the sheriff that the "club was duly organized and none but members were admitted to what was not going to be a prize fight, but merely an exhibition of the manly art of self-defense."⁹

In December 1910, Potts Hall was chosen as the best place to hold an investigation and public hearing in the murder of Robert Laupp, proprietor of the Ram's Horn Inn. This high-profile case demanded a large space for the hearing. "Because of the feeling and the intense interest aroused over the prospect of a public hearing, Justice of the Peace Robert E. Joyce yesterday announced that the investigation will be conducted in Potts Hall, the largest place of meeting in Mount Rainier. It is expected that the two factions will gather in large numbers."¹⁰

The size and location of Potts Hall also made it an attractive venue in which to hold town meetings. In 1911, a heavily attended Mount Rainier town meeting documents the public involvement in the development of the community. An article in *The Washington Post* states, "The meeting was advertised well. Late Monday night the town was flooded by White and

Plank retainers, with circulars urging all citizens and taxpayers 'interested in the welfare of Mount Rainier' to attend. Voters of every political complexion tested the capacity of Potts Hall."

11 Feeling threatened by a changing political environment, then Mayor Robert E. Joyce, presided over the "stormiest town meeting that the oldest inhabitants could recall" with a revolver holstered at his waist. The mayor started the meeting by stating, "If any of you men brought any fireworks to this meeting, you had better take them outside, for this is not to be a political meeting."¹² The tumultuous meeting commenced with little reassurance for the citizens of Mount Rainier that public services and safety would improve.

Meetings of the political scope did occur at Potts Hall. In 1912, the Progressive party held a meeting at which Senator Moses E. Clapp of Minnesota declared, "the Roosevelt policies have been carried out on a stretcher by the Taft administration."¹³ About 200 hundred people attended the meeting, during which Doc Garges was elected president of the Mount Rainier Progressive Club.

The building continued to play an integral role in the development of Mount Rainier through the second decade of the twentieth century. Citizens of Mount Rainier met there in 1914 to petition the Maryland legislature to bond Prince George's County for \$15,000 to enable them either to add to the present school building or erect an additional one.¹⁴ In 1915, one of the big society events of the season in Mount Rainier,

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the annual smoker and turkey drawing, was held at Potts Hall.¹⁵ On Easter Sunday of 1916, the first services of the Mount Rainier Methodist Episcopal Church South were held inside Potts Hall.¹⁶

On July 14, 1916, Robert E. Potts, now a widower, conveyed the property to The Star Hall Company, at which time the building became known as Star Hall.¹⁷ Shortly after taking ownership of the building, the company installed a duckpin bowling alley on the first floor, as evidenced by the 1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map. This function continued for many years as seen in a 1929 article in The Washington Post that publicized the first annual banquet of the Mount Rainier Duckpin Association, held at Potts/Star Hall.¹⁸

Although the name and owner of the building changed, its importance within the Mount Rainier community did not. Various functions were held at the building for the benefit of local organizations and groups, and not just limited to Mount Rainier. Dances were held for the benefit of the Brentwood Athletic Club, community public safety meetings for Mount Rainier and Brentwood organized at Star Hall, and financial rallies held in which \$9,000 worth of bonds were subscribed. In April of 1921, a group of Baptists met at Star Hall to organize a new Baptist church. After a sermon by Dr. Baylor, thirty people signed cards indicating their desire to become members. Star Hall provided a large, centrally located meeting place for the congregation until their first church was completed.

In June of 1921, the Star Hall Company conveyed the property to three trustees of the Adah Chapter No. 25 of the Order of the Eastern Star of Mount Rainier: William E. Tilp; Fred E. Weber; and George A. Tovey.¹⁹ The Order of the Eastern Star, organized in 1876, is the largest fraternal organization to which both women and men can belong, with over 1 million members worldwide. This organization's purpose is to provide a fraternal environment where women and men with high moral and social character can contribute time, energy, and knowledge to work together for charity, truth, and loving-kindness for the good of all mankind throughout the world.²⁰

These men, Weber, Tilp, and Tovey, were pillars of their community. Fred E. Weber was mayor of Mount Rainier in 1915 and 1916.²¹ William E. Tilp, a resident of Mount Rainier, was a recognized expert in chicken judging, having served as an evaluator for the National Poultry and Pigeon Association show of 1917 in the Buff Leghorn chicken category. George A. Tovey, a resident of Anacostia, served as Mount Rainier Fire Chief and operated a local hardware store.²²

The Prince George's County Federation of Women's Clubs and local councils of Daughters of America used the building for their meetings throughout the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, Star Hall served as Council, No. 21 of the Daughters of America's headquarters. A chapter of the Masons began using the building as their headquarters, the West Gate Masonic Lodge #220, as early 1932.²³ On January 18, 2000,

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West Gate Lodge of Mount Rainier, then with 105 members, moved out of the Potts/Star Hall and merged into a nearby lodge.²⁴

In the mid-eighties, Mr. Kim leased space on the first story of the building from the Adah Chapter and opened The Terminal Snack Bar. Still owned and operated by Mr. Kim, The Terminal Snack Bar serves a loyal customer base. According to the owner of the business, the first-story window openings were already closed when he started his business nearly 25 years ago.

On January 27, 2010, trustees of the Adah Chapter No. 25 conveyed the property to the City of Mount Rainier, Maryland for \$400,000.²⁵ The Adah Chapter and the Terminal Snack Bar now lease space in the building from the city.

1 Howard S. Berger, "Mount Rainier Historic District," National Register of Historic Places nomination form (April 2006 and April 2007), 8:7.

2 Simon J. Martenet, "Atlas of Prince George's County, Maryland, 1861, Adapted from Martenet's Map of Prince George's County, Maryland" (Baltimore: Simon J. Martenet C.E., 1861) and G.M. Hopkins, "Atlas of Fifteen Miles Around Washington, Including the County of Prince George Maryland" (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, C.E., 1878).

3 Berger, "Mount Rainier," 8:8.

4 Berger, "Mount Rainier," 8:10-11.

5 Berger, "Mount Rainier," 8:13-14.

6 Annie L. and Horace H. White to Edward E. Potts, Prince George's County Land Records, 51:367.

7 St. John's Chapel, "St. John's Chapel Founded," Church History, http://stjohnsmountrainier.org/parishinfo_about.html (accessed March 16, 2010).

8 "Fight is Stopped," The Washington Post (1877-1922), January 2, 1910, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

9 "Fight is Stopped," The Washington Post (1877-1922), January 2, 1910, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010).

10 "Schuler as Witness," The Washington Post (1877-1922), December 2, 1910, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010). 11 "Mayor 'Totes' a Gun," The Washington Post (1877-1922), April 26, 1911, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010). 12 "Mayor 'Totes' a Gun," The Washington Post (1877-1922), April 26, 1911, <http://www.proquest.com/>

(accessed April 2, 2010). 13 "Clapp Attacks 'Regulars'" The Washington Post (1877-1922), September 28, 1912, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010).
14 "City News in Brief.," The Washington Post (1877-1922), January 7, 1914, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 16, 2010). 15 "Hyattsville Society," The Washington Post (1877-1922), November 28, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 16, 2010).
16 "Services at Churches," The Washington Post (1877-1922), May 1, 1916, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 16, 2010). 17 Robert E. Potts to the Star Hall Company, Prince George's County Land Records, 171:180.
18 "Mt. Rainier Bowlers In Banquet Tomorrow," The Washington Post (1923-1954), May 14, 1929, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 2, 2010).
19 Star Hall Company to William E. Tilp, Fred E. Weber, and George A. Tovey, Prince George's County Land Records, 171:247.
20 "General Grand Chapter, Order of the Eastern Star," <http://www.easternstar.org/index.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

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21 "Weber Again Mt. Rainier Mayor..." The Washington Post (1877-1922), May 2, 1916, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 17, 2010).
22 "Suburban: Mount Rainier..." The Washington Post (1877-1922), February 8, 1921, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 17, 2010).
23 "Post's Bowling Round-Up," The Washington Post (1923-1954), April 16, 1933, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed April 6, 2010).
24 "Collington Masonic Lodge #230 History," <http://www.collingtonmasoniclodge.org/history.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).
25 Frances Bernstein, Daisy Malinosky, and Virginia Stanford to The City of Mount Rainier, Maryland, Prince George's County Land Records, 31429:453.