

REC'D
D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING
2010 DEC 21 AM 11:52

To: Sharon Schellin, Secretary to the District of Columbia Zoning Commission

Date: December 21, 2010

Fax Number: 202-727-6072

Re: Case No. 09-21 (Text and Map Amendment to Create and Implement the Union Station North District)

Dear Ms. Schellin:

Please accept my written testimony for the January 6, 2011 hearing on the Union Station North District. I appreciate your including me in the list of speakers for the hearing, and understand that my comments must be less than three minutes.

If it's easier for you, I am happy to email you my testimony. My email address is wrightwm@verizon.net, and my phone number is 202-744-4781.

Sincerely,

Bill Wright

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 09-21
EXHIBIT NO. 27

**ZONING COMMISSION FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC HEARING FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONSIDERING:**

Case No. 09-21 (Text and Map Amendment to Create and Implement the
Union Station North District)
January 6, 2010

Statement of William Wright

My name is Bill Wright, and I live at 2253 12th Place NW. My interest in Union Station comes from research I did for my dissertation, which focused on the building's place in the history of modern Washington. Since moving to the District in 1995, I have also provided tours of the station, written articles and presented papers, and helped others with research on related topics, such as the history of the neighborhoods around the terminal. Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony.

There is no scene more famous in the history of Union Station than the one from "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." Soon-to-be heroic Jefferson Smith, played by Jimmy Stewart, has just arrived in the District, ready to fulfill his life-long dream of touring the capital. But even before he leaves the building, what he sees stops him dead: through the glass of the station's front doors, rising above the formal park bordering both sides of Delaware Avenue, is the breathtaking dome of the U.S. Capitol.

The two emotions beautifully conveyed by Stewart—respect and inspiration—have been central to Union Station since planning for it began. For more than a century, those developing both the building and its surroundings have been committed to showing respect for the Capitol, for the adjacent neighborhoods, and for visitors and residents. Architects, local government officials, and corporate leaders have been equally dedicated to ensuring that the area inspires anyone going to, from, or simply past the terminal, to helping them appreciate the beauty of our city, particularly its architecture, and the importance of Washington in the nation's history.

This tradition has produced enormous benefits, which makes the proposal to raise drastically the height limits north of the station deeply troubling. The generations who have protected the station and the adjacent areas, even during its most difficult times, have understood the importance of a gateway that proudly represents Washington. Yet this current plan, by allowing new buildings to lurk behind the terminal like teenagers fooling around in the back of a family portrait, will undermine the work of more than a century. It will permanently prevent future Jefferson Smiths from feeling the respect and inspiration provided by one of the capital's defining places.

Creation of the Station and Adjacent Areas

Union Station was created to help fulfill a longstanding goal of residents, Congress, and many others: to make the capital, in the words of *Harper's* magazine, "worthy of the nation."¹ Few projects had greater potential to change the city in the 19th century. Because the

¹ *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Dec. 1859.

railroad was the dominant method of travel, "to each place the railroad terminal was its hallmark, standing for all the cultural, productive, and commercial facts of which the people were capable."²

In the late 1800s, Washington's two stations suggested that the city was not capable of too much. One depot, owned by the Baltimore & Ohio (B&O) Railroad, stood at New Jersey Avenue and C Street NW; the other, which served Pennsylvania Railroad and trains coming from the south, was located at Sixth and Constitution, on the land now home to the West Wing of the National Gallery of Art. Because the latter building was served by tracks along Sixth Street, it further damaged the city by sending more than 100 trains rattling and puffing across the Mall each day.

Both terminals were far too small, having been built when the city had only half its 1900 population of 275,000. Lucrative convention business skipped Washington because railroad agents knew, as one put it, "we cannot get the passengers in." During inaugurations, a lack of platform space meant awkwardly unloading thousands of guests in car yards miles from downtown. A vice president of the Pennsylvania Railroad admitted to Congress in 1902 that his company's building was a "mere flea-bite compared to what it ought to be."³

The scenes greeting those who did come were no better. A traveler leaving the B&O station initially saw the Hotel Cosmopolitan, which provided the kind of accommodations to be expected at an establishment near the smoke and noise of locomotives; once on New Jersey Avenue, the view was a wooden fence hiding a lumber yard and a billboard for "Quaker Oats—Nature's Perfect Food." The neighbors of the Pennsylvania depot were no more attractive: other second-class hotels, a meat packing plant, and many sites promoting liquor, including saloons, a wholesale store, and signs promoting two competing brands of whiskey.

The railroads created other problems. There were only two places in the city where the tracks passed over the streets; everywhere else, walkers and carriage riders crossing the right-of-way might at any moment face a locomotive rumbling down on them. Not all of them made it safely to the other side: in the 1890s, an average of three people each year were killed at the grade crossings. Other disruptions were less lethal but more constant. In Southwest Washington, the Pennsylvania's freight facilities clouded the neighborhood, disrupting homes, schools, and even churches. It was more than noise: One minister told city leaders that ash, cinders, and dust from the coal-fired engines were constantly "settling upon the pews and furniture, and soiling the clothes of the occupants, accompanied by an offensive odor."⁴

The 1903 legislation that created Union Station addressed all these problems. Sen. James McMillan crafted the bill, which balanced the interests of the railroads, Congress, and the community.

² Lawrence Grow, *Waiting for the 5:05: Terminal, Station, and Depot in America* (New York: Main Street/Universe Books, 1977), pp. 8-9.

³ "Report of Hearings of June 12 and 18, 1902 on S. 4825," 57th Cong., 1st Sess. (Jun. 1902), p. 6.

⁴ *Baltimore & Potomac Railroad Company v. Fifth Baptist Church*, 108 U.S. Reports (1883), p. 317.

At the heart of the project was the station, designed by Daniel Burnham and his associate Peirce Anderson. It brought all the railroads serving the city under the same massive roof. The largest building of its kind in the world when it opened in 1907, it enabled the city to serve almost any crowd. (Peak traffic in World War II, when as many as 250,000 people passed through on the same day, was almost overwhelming.) This expanded capacity not only made travel more convenient, it encouraged the growth of the local economy, which was increasingly fueled by tourism.

In exchange for this opportunity to do more business, the B&O and the Pennsylvania agreed to eliminate the grade crossings along their tracks. Street travel became safer and faster, since trains no longer endangered or delayed walkers, carriages, and, increasingly, cars.

The new station's style was as impressive as its size. Its use of marble, granite, and gold leaf and its neoclassical design helped create a gateway appropriate for the capital of what many now saw as the most powerful country in the world. Walking from the platform to the main waiting room, one 1930s guidebook wrote, gave a visitor "a proper attitude towards the importance of Washington."⁵

Yet the architects, railroad engineers, and city officials carefully controlled the station's prominence. Its site at Massachusetts and Delaware Avenues was originally +23' datum, and was therefore going to need substantial filling to create room for the tunnel that would carry southern trains under Capitol Hill. The higher the building sat, the easier it would be for locomotives to climb the hills north to Maryland, and the simpler and cheaper it would be to run the cross-town streets under the viaduct for the tracks. However, every extra foot in elevation created higher costs for filling and, most important, greater competition with the Capitol. The final plan put the front of the station at +58' datum, allowing the terminal to defer to the area's most important building.

The building's contributions to a more inspiring capital actually extended far beyond its walls. Though planning for reconstruction of the city's railroads had begun before the formation of the McMillan Commission, the two initiatives soon intertwined. Their most obvious coupling came on the Mall, where the 1908 removal of all the Pennsylvania's facilities was possible because of the opening of Union Station.

Other improvements took place much closer to the new building. As early as 1901, Burnham argued that the area could not "get along" without what became Columbus Plaza. He believed a public space in front of the terminal would provide a formal gathering place for large crowds, such as those welcoming or seeing off the president, and would allow clear views of what he rightly anticipated would become a Washington landmark. In 1903, Congress purchased the necessary land in front of the terminal; in 1907, a commission it established to locate a memorial to Christopher Columbus chose the plaza as the ideal site. Their reasoning: the explorer had connected Old World and New, and visitors to the capital of the latter should be reminded of his achievement.

⁵ J. Frederick and Helen Essary, *Washington Sketch Book* (Washington, Ransdell Incorporated, 1932).

Planners worried equally about what should stand just to the east and west. Burnham and Anderson saw the terminal as the center of a three-building combination forming the Capitol complex's northern border. Though the eastern wing would not appear until 1990s with the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building, the western one opened in 1914 with the new city post office. Also designed by Anderson, it was further testimony of the terminal's influence, since it made sense financially and logistically to locate the post office where the mail arrived. At the same time, it showed a continuing commitment to balancing practical considerations with aesthetic ones: it continued station design elements such as materials and style, but its smaller scale meant it deferred both to the station and the Capitol.

It took a quarter-century to create the lush, enjoyable landscape that now lies between Columbus Plaza and the Capitol. Development of Union Station had removed most of the buildings in the area, leaving mainly empty lots (one contemporary called them "mud holes and filthy sinks"⁶) or deteriorating row houses. Some businessmen wanted to profit from the thousands of potential customers who came through every day, proposing billboards opposite the Post Office and large apartment buildings along D Street. Most people rejected these ideas as highly inappropriate for this location. This was where "the people of all parts of our country...get their first view and impression of the capital," one Senate report explained, and so "no site in the District equals this one in importance or is more worthy of appropriate development."⁷ Instead, Congress decided to extend the Capitol Grounds down to Massachusetts Avenue, and by the late 1930s, the land was much like it is today.

While many of the discussions involving Union Station have focused on visitors, planners have always been careful to consider the needs of residents. Initially, for example, the railroads did not want to pay for an H Street underpass, but local pressure forced its addition to the project so neighborhood travel patterns would suffer less disruption. More generally, government officials had learned from South Washington that commercial interests had the money to overpower a neighborhood, and set up rules to prevent a recurrence near the terminal. The Union Station Act banned railroad spurs to the east of the station, making it uneconomical for heavy industries to locate there. Disruptive businesses like freight yards were directed north of Florida Avenue, to largely undeveloped land some distance from existing homes. Residents also defeated proposals to run more spurs to the west of the station, protecting local institutions like Gonzaga and Sibley Hospital, then located along North Capitol Street.

The introduction of zoning in 1920 reinforced these patterns. East of the station, most of the land remained "residential" though certain corridors, most notably Massachusetts Avenue and H Street, were "first commercial," a less restrictive category that typically meant stores and offices. Land immediately adjacent to the station and north of H was "second commercial," which also permitted light industries and warehouses. The area around Florida Avenue was largely "industrial." The east side of North Capitol, down to Massachusetts Avenue, was largely "first commercial;" the west side was primarily "residential." Increasingly, land along or near North Capitol from Massachusetts to the Capitol Grounds hosted services for tourists, such as hotels and restaurants.

⁶ *Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 1908, p. 4

⁷ *Report to Accompany S. 2336—Enlargement of the Capitol Grounds*, 61st Cong. 2nd sess. (Mar. 1910), Volume 5583, Report 401, p. 3.

Planning for Union Station and its surroundings also focused on ensuring that its elements worked from multiple directions. The clearest illustration of this point is the Columbus Memorial, the design of which works best when viewed *from the Capitol*. Columbus and the other figures face that direction, making their symbolism clearly visible, and the monument's scale fits well with the massive building behind. More generally, the many postcards and photographs of the station, particularly aerial shots, show how well the station and the post office create a northern boundary for the Capitol complex.

Recent changes have restored the initial hopes for Union Station. The 1988 rehabilitation and reuse made the building once again a glorious gateway to Washington and a center of community life. That project recognized the importance of commercial considerations, but also controlled them. For example, an early proposal for converting the concourse into the main shopping area called for another level of stores; reviewers at the National Park Service opposed this plan, since it would make it impossible to see that the space had formerly been part of a train station.

Nearby development has brought back a liveliness lost during the immediate post-war period. The design of the Marshall Building, particularly the way the walls near the atrium form a corner, emphasizes the idea that it, the station, and the Post Office are the end of the Capitol complex. New office space, particularly along North Capitol, recognizes the financial interests of developers and the city, but the buildings themselves do not compete with the terminal.

"Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" ends before Jimmy Stewart heads down from the Capitol for his trip back to the Midwest. Had that moment been included, it would have shown how beautifully Union Station ends a trip to Washington. It would be a profound loss if the current proposal allows commercial construction to deface a scene that has inspired millions of people.