

If Walls Could

8th and I's would tell a few

by Capt. M.D. Visconage

On a damp morning in March of 1801, two men rode out on horseback along what was the outskirts of Washington, D.C. They travelled down a muddy Pennsylvania Avenue to "square #927" on the new plats of the city. The location seemed to be just what they were looking for -- it was only a mile and a half from the new Capitol building itself. The second key factor was the close proximity to the Washington Navy Yard. Soon after surveying this plot of land, President Thomas Jefferson and Lt. Col Commandant William Ward Burrows, concluded

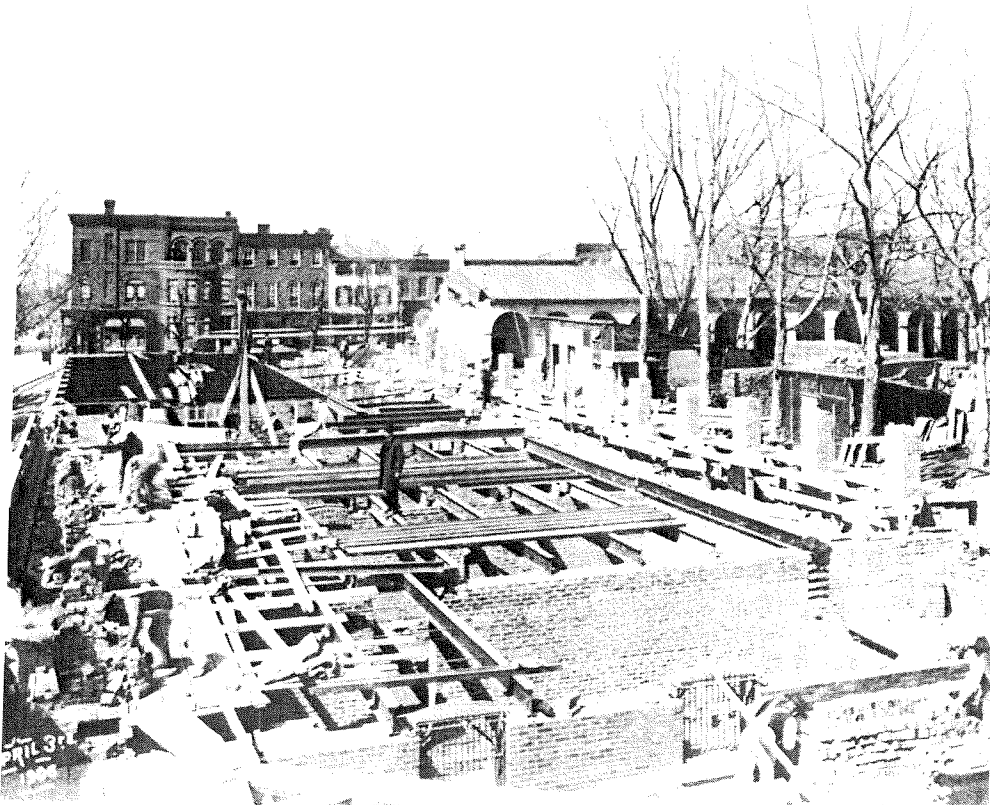
that this square block area on the corner of 8th and I streets would serve the Corps' purposes.

The young government paid \$6,247.18 for the site and shortly thereafter, Marines, who had been billeted in tents and crude shelters since their move from Philadelphia, began work on the first of a long series of barracks structures that would house them. Congress appropriated \$20,000 for the initial construction on the site, an amount that the Secretary of the Navy knew was insufficient. The solution was for the Marines to construct those first buildings with their own labor.

George Hadfield, who had already worked on several other new government buildings in the city, was the architect for the original design of the Post. His design was one that essentially has lasted, though the buildings themselves have changed. A series of arcaded, one story buildings surrounding a central parade ground made up the old Barracks. Along the west side of the parade field were the long covered walkways of the quarters and a large "center house" at the middle of the line for the officers of the unit. Along the east side were store rooms, stables, latrines,

baths and more quarters. Completed in 1806, it was designed as the headquarters and training site for the small Marine Corps and would house 500 Marines -- the designed capacity of the Barracks until the mid 1970s. Finally there was the Commandant's Home, constructed of brick in the federalist style. It is the only original building remaining today.

Many buildings came and went during the first one hundred years of the Barracks, some burned down and were rebuilt, others were added to accommodate changing needs. At various points in the 1800s, the post included a hospital, cemetery and shooting gallery. In 1902, however, a report by the city Sanitary Commission recom-



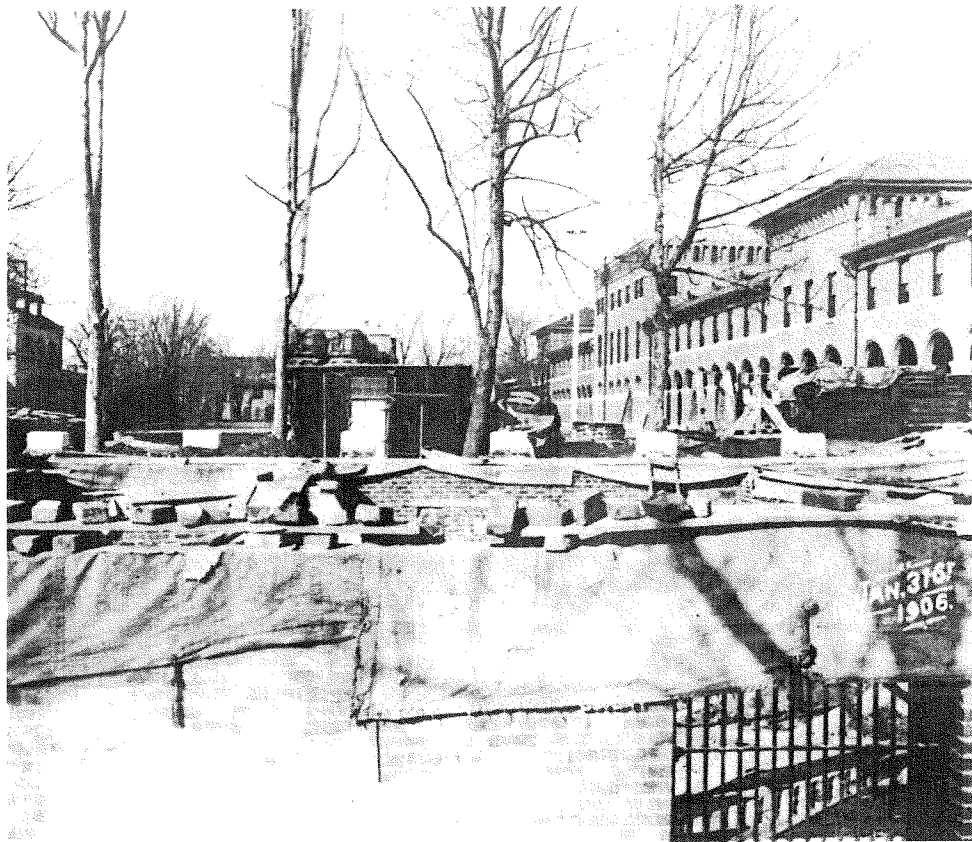
In 1906, construction to building nine, presently where the U.S. Marine Band resides, was under way. (Official USMC Photo)

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mended that the buildings of 8th and I be torn down and replaced. Architects Hornblower and Marshall were contracted to design the new post. Preserving the original concept of a quadrangle formed around the parade field, they were able to achieve a uniform appearance in two-story Roman revival style. A dramatic arcaded design was incorporated in the buildings along the east and south sides. A band hall was part of the new design along the south edge and five officer' quarters were constructed along the western end of the field--the southern most of which would serve as the new "center house." Completed in 1908, this rebuilding left the Barracks as it is known today.

The buildings used by the Marines at the historic post have come and gone -- just as the Marines who served there. But even the brick barracks buildings with their covered walkways and the general's quarters that visitors see today don't tell the whole story of the Barracks in 1987. In the last 15 years, the changes to the organization and physical plan to the Barracks have been perhaps greater than any other period in it's 186 year history. These changes began at a time when the Corps itself began to rethink it's role and reorganize after the Vietnam era. Consequently, this "Oldest Post of the Corps" has been a historic site which has continued to



The Barracks arcade design has not changed much over its 186 year history as seen here. (Official USMC Photo)

reflect the changes in the Corps today.

In 1975 commitments from the Military District of Washington were broadened, and the organizational units at the Barracks were restructured. In December 1977, two ceremonial companies, A and B, were created, a Headquarters and Service Company, Drum and Bugle Corps Company and MCI Company--bringing the unit strength up to just over 1000 Marines.

This restructuring left behind a unit organization that had become familiar to many who served there. The old Ceremonial Guard Company had fulfilled all ceremonial commitments--color guards, joint service detachments, burial details, the Silent Drill Platoon and also provided one of the two ceremonial companies seen during the parades. Marines from the Ceremonial Guard Company were actually billeted in the Washington Navy Yard in the building that now houses the

Marine Corps Historical Center.

MCI Company, in addition to their educational mission, provided the second marching company used for the parades. They also provided the numerous Marines needed for supporting the parade such as; escorts, seaters and Marines used for parking details. The HQSVC Company contained the remaining elements of the barracks such as the staff sections, the Drum and Bugle Corps, and standing guard section. The two story barracks building (bldg. #8), which parallels the parade deck, served as the quarters for the Marines of these two companies.

With the change to the organizational structure came a change to the physical structure of the Barracks as well. In 1972, land was acquired for a new BEQ facility just across the street from Barracks on I street. The construction of the Southeast Freeway, only a few hundred yards from the barracks, made possible an option for the

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The General Officer quarters replaced the one story arcade buildings along 8th street during 1908. They have not changed much in appearance since the day they were built.



-Historic Walls-

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government to buy the land occupied by a row of decaying town houses for the new BEQ.

On the site, two five-story buildings housing 450 Marines in three man rooms, provide two levels of underground parking for over 230 cars, a gym, PX, barber shop, SNCO and enlisted clubs, and a mess hall were built.

This was a major change in life of Marines assigned to the "Oldest Post." Prior to the completion of the towers in 1975, Marines other than those in Ceremonial Guard Company living in the Navy Yard were crammed into squad bays within "building eight" on Post. The accommodations were spartan. Space in building eight was tight. Life at the post reflected the living standard throughout the Corps at the time. Only sergeants rated small two-man rooms that were a slight improvement over the open bays. SNCO quarters were small

cubicles. The barracks was drafty -- cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Building eight not only served as the quarters for the Marines, it included office spaces for all of the staff sections, a mess hall and SNCO quarters. The staff sections lived with desks literally placed end to end. Little had been done to improve the Building since it's construction in 1902.

Along the south edge of the parade deck, "building nine" housed the band hall for the United States Marine Band, its office spaces. And for the use of the entire barracks; a gymnasium, SNCO and enlisted clubs, PX, barber shop, and even a two-lane bowling alley for some years during the 1950s. After the completion of the BEQ, the band was able to use all of Building nine for its requirements.

Construction of the new BEQ also eased the logistics and communications problems caused by having a separate element of the command -- Ceremonial Guard Company -- billeted (and with

company offices) several blocks away in the Washington Navy Yard. Fortunately, with the enlarged mission and revamped organizational structure came a physical structure which would finally allow consolidation-- the new BEQ towers.

As the new BEQ was completed, the staff sections were able to expand into the spaces left vacant by the troop billeting areas. Ironically, with the move to new quarters, "Marine Barracks" -- the area surrounding the parade field seen by hundreds of thousands of people each year -- is no longer a "barracks" at all, but only the office spaces for the post.

These office spaces, however, were still in rough and deteriorating condition. Walls and ceilings were damaged and plumbing and electric wiring was in many cases 50 to 80 years old. This condition sparked the most recent renovation of the historic Post. In December of 1985, at a cost of 2.65 million dollars, the first full renovation began. The interior of Buildings eight and nine were stripped out as new interior

walls were constructed, old plumbing removed, central heating and air conditioning, and new wiring installed. The renovation was completed ahead of schedule in July of 1986.

Centerhouse, perhaps the most recognized symbol of the barracks to Marine Officers, has had a history of restructuring and renovation too. The vary name of the post's BOQ/officers club is an irony of renovation. Originally occupying the center position along the western side of the post, the building burned down on several occasions in the 1800s. During the rebuilding in 1902, the house was moved to the end of the row, but still retained it's original title as "center house." In 1984, Centerhouse was remodeled, adding a few modern conveniences, but it's interior structure remained the same.

The officers quarters and Centerhouse occupy the eastern edge of the parade deck and are traditionally occupied by the Assistant Commandant of the Marines Corps, The Commanding Officer of the Barracks, and two other senior general officers. All of these buildings have been improved, but remain essentially in their original form.

There have been reconstructions of the parade deck itself over the last decade and a half. Considered a sacred piece of ground to those at the Barracks, preferred treatment of the field is a relatively recent development. In 1814, holes were dug in many locations around the field by the British forces who occupied the Barracks during the War of 1812. Reportedly, the quartermaster of the Corps at the time had buried his funds somewhere in the area before fleeing and the British set



Centerhouse (far left), had been burned down several times in its history before being moved south. (Official USMC Photo)

about looking for the booty.

Earlier in this century, the field was the home for a baseball diamond, training and cannon maneuvers, several 3-inch deck guns and machine gun drill. Before the 1902 renovation it was also briefly home to a swimming pool. In 1984 the preened, pruned and occasionally spray painted (when the grass develops occasion brown spots) parade field was completely bulldozed to level the area and install an automatic sprinkler system. The opportunity was also taken to re-lay and widen "centerwalk"-- the focal point for most of the parade's action -- and to replace "troopwalk" which parallels Building eight.

Finally, the Home of the Commandants has been allotted funds for a complete renovation. A national historic landmark, the Commandant's Home has never been completely renovated and successive repairs have become a daily process in some cases. Broken pipes, a leaking basement and wiring defects have been making the historic home a

troublesome place to actually live. The renovation should begin in 1987 and be completed by 1990.

In light of the improvements and renovations, the nature of the civilian community surrounding the Barracks has changed as well. What had been an area of urban decay in the 1960s has become a neighborhood of renovated and increasingly valuable townhouses. Eight street's rough and tumble bars, pawn shops, and topless dance halls have been overtaken by many small businesses and restaurants.

Even at a historical landmark such as Marine Barracks 8th & I, change continues to take place. Like the rest of the Corps, the past decade and a half have been filled with growth, change and improvement. The whole Marine Corps is reflected at 8th & I -- for the benefit of the American public. Like the rest of the Corps, the Barracks continues to merge the best of the old Corps and the new. The resulting physical and organizational changes amount to living history at the "Oldest Post of the Corps."