



HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT JOURNAL

LIVING IN AN HISTORIC DISTRICT: DECK THE HALLS!

December 2023

Our Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) Newsletter strives to inform community members by illuminating [historic district permit requirements](#), technical issues and solutions, and other aspects of the historic district, including its history.

By Jonathan Herz

What is Permitted?

In the Mount Pleasant historic district, changing the exterior appearance of your home usually requires a building permit and clearance from the DC [Historic Preservation Office \(HPO\)](#). Even if you grew up in an historic district, odds are that you will need help navigating the seemingly arcane and detailed requirements for almost anything more permanent than holiday lights. But if you're just decorating for the holidays, there is no need to worry about permits.

Most maintenance and interior work will not require HPO review and approval. Small projects, like in-kind replacement of deteriorated elements (e.g., roofing, windows and doors, front steps and other site elements and repointing masonry) can be approved over the counter by HPO staff. But, major work, including significant demolition and changes to the exterior of a building, must be approved by the [Historic Preservation Review Board](#) (HPRB), which is advised by the HPO.

It is vital that your architect or contractor is familiar with historic district requirements. Work in an historic district not approved by the HPRB or HPO is unlawful even if you have obtained a building permit for alterations, repairs, or construction. The [Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978](#) establishes criminal penalties for willful violations, including fines of up to \$1,000 for each day a violation continues. Anyone who does work in violation of the act is required to restore the building or structure and its site to its appearance prior to the violation.

Fortunately, it's easy to avoid these problems. The [HPO can provide technical assistance](#) early in the planning stages through informal discussions with a preservation specialist on topics like products, services, or renovation



techniques. They will also explain preservation standards and the review process, identify any potential preservation or design concerns, and work collaboratively to explore mutually agreeable solutions.

Often, the HPO will ask the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) and the neighborhood historic preservation organization for comments on the proposed work. In Mount Pleasant, the is available to review all cases going to the HPO and HPRB and encourages applicants to contact us early in the project development so we can identify potential issues, provide technical advice, and facilitate approvals. The Committee also welcomes questions about preservation-related work that does not require a permit.

So go ahead and be creative with your decorations. No one will be reviewing and judging them – unless you decide to enter a [Best Holiday Lights](#) competition like the one recently judged for Mt. Pleasant Street businesses by the Village and [DC's Main Streets](#). [Last year's winners](#) included Overall Best in Show, Purple Patch Restaurant.

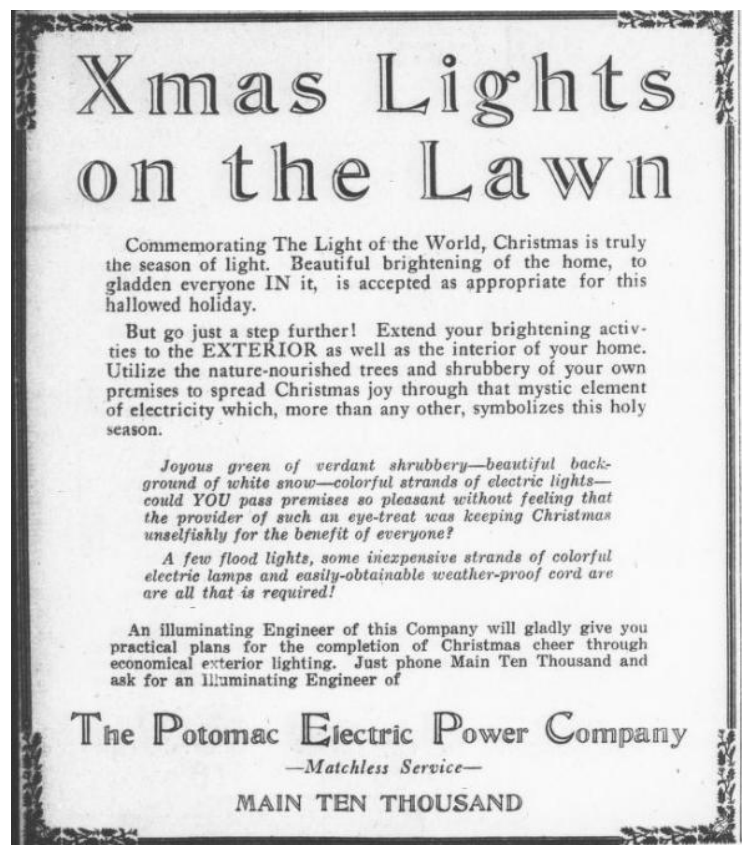
MT. PLEASANT HISTORY

Electric Christmas Lights

In 1882, [Edward Hibberd Johnson](#), the vice president of the Edison Electric Light Company decorated the tree in his New York City home with specially-made electric bulbs. [The New York Times](#) later wrote, "A BRILLIANT CHRISTMAS TREE, HOW AN ELECTRICIAN AMUSED HIS CHILDREN... Mr. Johnson has been experimenting with house lighting by electricity for some time past."

Early versions were only for the rich, but [General Electric \(GE\) made electric tree lights more affordable in 1903](#) with pre-assembled sets – still expensive at \$12. Department stores in the larger, electrified cities would rent outfits for the season for \$1.50. Called "festoons," the GE sets consisted of eight green, pre-wired porcelain sockets, eight miniature Edison colored-glass lamps, and a screw-in plug for easy attachment to a nearby wall or ceiling light socket. Interestingly, the 2-pronged electrical plugs we use today were first developed to facilitate connecting strings of Christmas light festoons.

In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge pushed the button to light the [first National Christmas Tree](#) in Washington D.C., a 48-foot balsam fir covered with 2,500 specially-manufactured electric bulbs. By 1926, the Potomac Electric Power Company (Pepco), with the clever slogan, [Matchless Service](#), was encouraging Washingtonians to "Utilize the nature-nourished trees and shrubbery of your own premises to spread Christmas joy through that mystic element of electricity which, more than any other, symbolizes this holy season." The only problem was that these early sets were [small, dangerous and extremely impractical for the average family](#). In 1927, GE introduced true outdoor lighting and, along with local electric companies, began to sponsor neighborhood "decorating with color-light" contests to promote business. In this century - until this year - the National Zoo's Zoolights, were ["Powered by Pepco."](#)



We Have a Winner!

The [December 17, 1930 Evening Star](#) displayed the Brighter Washington Christmas Committee of the Electric League cups to be awarded for outdoor Christmas lighting in two categories: the most artistic residential community and the most outstanding business section or community. The board of judges included an architect, the president of the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company, and the president of the Federation of Citizens' Associations.

The following year, the [Mount Pleasant Citizens' Association Electric League Cup](#) was awarded to William S. Hodges of 1707 Irving St. NW "for having the most attractive lighting about his house."

The [November 30, 1931, Washington Times](#), noted that the "Chanukah Fete" was celebrated "various synagogues throughout the week," but with candles, not electric lights.

WINS ON HOME LIGHTING

William S. Hodges, 1707 Irving Street, Is Awarded First Prize.

William S. Hodges, 1707 Irving street, yesterday was awarded first prize by a Mount Pleasant Citizens' Association committee for having the most attractive Christmas exterior lighting about his house.

The Electric League cup will be presented Mr. Hodges at the association meeting Saturday evening, January 9.

Honorable mention was accorded the residence of Hamlin R. Cochran, 1642 Hobart street, and the Presbyterian Home, 1818 Newton street.

The members of the committee making the award were Dr. A. A. Chenay (chairman), Mrs. Elizabeth M. Byers, Raymond J. Bowen, William T. Talbott and J. T. Miller.

Below are:

1. [The Evening Star December 17, 1930](#) article on the Electric League cups.
2. [The Evening Star December 30, 1931](#) article about the best Christmas decorations in Mt. Pleasant.
3. [The Washington Times November 30, 1931](#) article about the "Chanukah Fete."



Miss Virginia K. Thayer, secretary to one of the members of the Brighter Washington Christmas Committee of the Electric League, exhibits the cups to be awarded for outdoor Christmas lighting, the large cup being for the most artistic residential community and the smaller one for the most outstanding business section or community. The board of judges includes Robert F. Beresford, architect; Lloyd B. Wilson, president of the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co., and Dr. George C. Havenner, president of the Federation of Citizens' Associations.

On the same "Chanukah Fete" page, note the Eastern Air ad: \$20 for "A Day in NEW YORK and home for dinner, Via 18-passenger Curtiss Condors, with a crew of 3 – pilot, co-pilot and hostess," and "The Inauguration of Xmas Lights On Central 7th Street."

THE BRIGHTEST SPOT IN WASHINGTON

TOMORROW
You're Invited to Attend
The Inauguration of Xmas
Lights On Central 7th Street

Majestic Week!

1 DOWN
Delivers any
Majestic Radio
this week only!

this week only!

Until closing Saturday you can take your choice of any MAJESTIC RADIO model in our stock on a DOWN PAYMENT OF ONE DOLLAR!

Balance on Jordan's Famous Budget Plan

ARTHUR JORDAN

PIANO COMPANY

1239 G St. Cor. 13th



Rooms, and many of them with
boarding conveniences, are listed for
rental in the "Hotels and Boarding
Places" column of today's Classified
Section.

Transportation worries can be
solved automatically through the
"Automobiles and Trucks" column of
today's Classified Section. In
this column you will find the many GOOD BIDS listed in
today's Classified Section.



tend
Xmas

th Street

Central Seventh Street
by white way! Thou-
a this popular busi-
Christmas Shopping

always outstanding
e prices, as usual,
y, skillfully and well.
everything imagina-

... we promise that
... more interesting,
... an ever before.

Promptly at 5 p. m., Tuesday, the
District Commissioners and Officers

of the Central Seventh Street Association will meet at 7th and Eye Sts. N. W. to give the signal that will transform Central Seventh Street into Washington's most brilliantly illuminated Xmas Shopping Center.

Street

(st.)
