



Becoming a Capital City

The Photographs of Terence Vincent Powderly

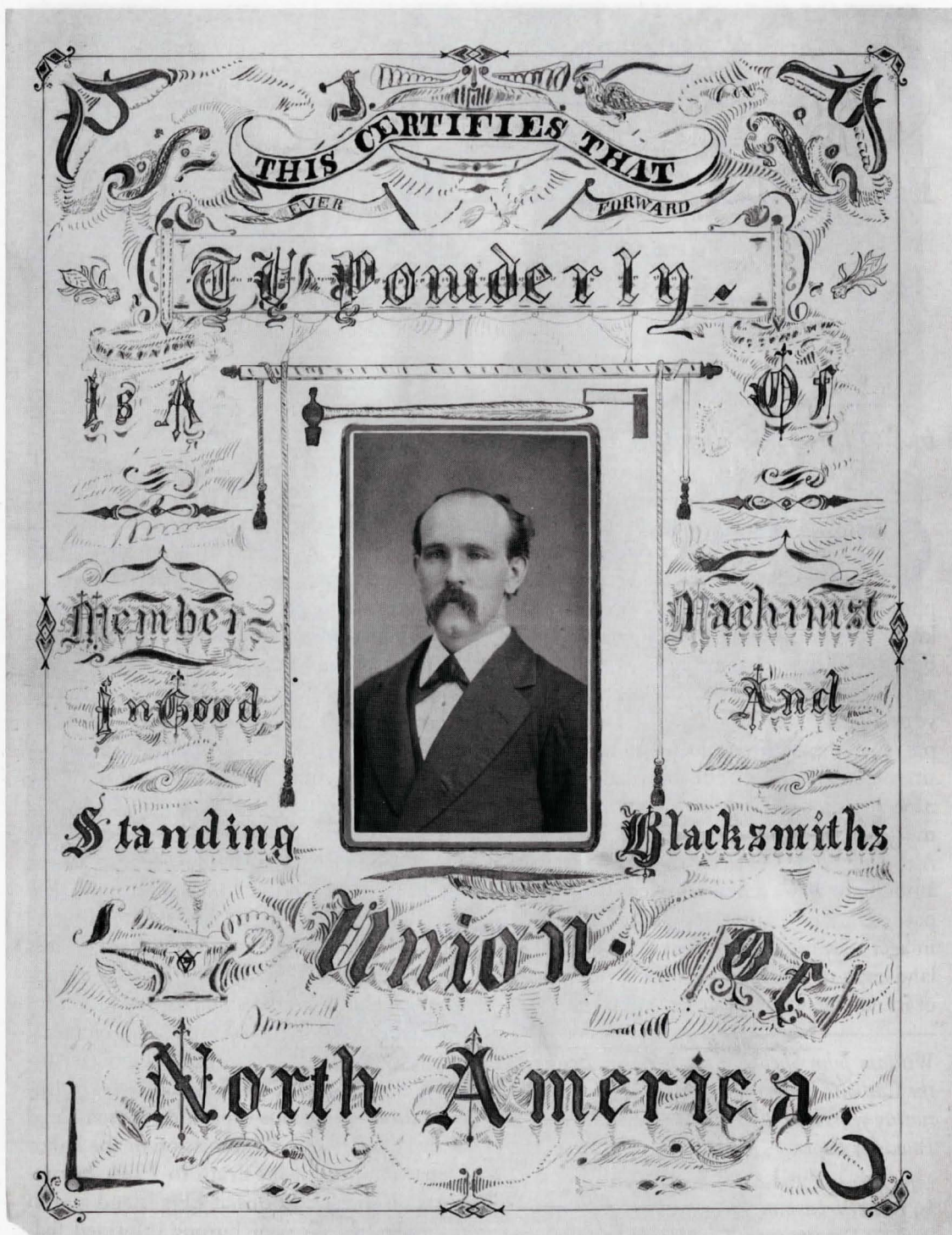
by William John Shepherd and Mary Beth Corrigan

One of the most significant visual records of early twentieth-century Washington was created by amateur photographer Terence V. Powderly, widely known as one of the leading figures of the labor movement, who moved to Washington at age thirty-nine in 1898. In 1941, seventeen years after his death, his family transferred his papers to the Archives of the Catholic University of America. This gift included more than nine hundred images of his adopted home, most of them taken between 1913 and 1917. Although not by design, his photographs amount to a documentary record of the impact of modernization upon everyday life. His images of street scenes, architecture, and the landscape of Washington offer a rich portrait of its emergence as a leading capital city.

William John Shepherd has been an archivist at the Catholic University of America for more than twenty years and has worked extensively with the Powderly Papers.

Left: Terence V. Powderly posing with his luggage on his Petworth lawn in September 1911. His work with the Department of Immigration required extensive travel, a prospect that delighted him, and he often took his camera.

The photographs also reflect his lifelong passions. Born in 1849 to Irish immigrants in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania, Powderly was a self-taught man whose sense of solidarity with his fellow workers led him to unionism and public service. Powderly assumed two positions of leadership at a relatively young age. In 1878 the citizens of Scranton elected him to the first of three terms as mayor. The next year his fellow unionists chose him as the leader of the Knights of Labor, a general union of skilled and unskilled workers. Although he helped the Knights extend their reach throughout the nation, Powderly was far less militant than most of the union's members, who participated in several strikes without his sanction. In 1897, four years after the Knights' membership ousted him from leadership, Powderly secured a presidential appointment from President William McKinley as the U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration. In various capacities, he remained at the Immigration Commission or the Labor Department until his death in 1924. His reports on the conditions at Ellis Island and in the industrial areas of Europe informed federal policy during the peak years of European immigration.¹



Powderly's first certificate of membership in the International Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths. Several industrial accidents in northeastern Pennsylvania spurred the young machinist to join the union.

Powderly loved his home in Washington. When he moved to the city, he bought a lot on Fifth and Quincy streets, N.W., in Petworth, where he built a large Victorian house. (Although the house never moved, the city changed its address several times, from 502 Newark Street to 502 Quincy Street, and finally 3700 Fifth Street. It is now the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House, 503 Rock Creek Church Road, N.W.)² By that time, Petworth had become a suburb with easy access to downtown Washington via the Brightwood streetcar and a landscape that retained its agrarian character. Surrounded by large yards, the house also overlooked the picturesque grounds of the Soldiers' Home. In 1901, shortly after he and Hannah, his wife of nearly twenty-nine years, moved in, she died at the relatively young age of forty-seven. (Hannah had given birth to a single child in 1876, a daughter who lived only three days.) In 1919 he married his longtime secretary Emma Fickenscher, who survived him by many years and died in 1940.

The grief-stricken Powderly chose to remain in the new house and entertained guests frequently, including prominent labor leaders such as United Mine Workers president John B. White and the legendary coal miners' angel, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones. Powderly offered Jones respite from her organizing activities, and she stayed for extended periods, socializing with Powderly's friends and often borrowing money from him. He also introduced her to Walter and Lillie May Burgess, whose farmhouse in Hyattsville became Mother Jones' home from 1928 until her death in 1930.³

Powderly, who never lost his interest in local politics, served in the Petworth Citizens' Association with a stint as president beginning in 1903. The group advocated for improved streetcar service, electrical lighting, an expansion of the neighborhood public school to alleviate overcrowding, and a park outside the Soldiers' Home. The association also gave Powderly a forum to air his views on the city's development. According to the *Washing-*

ton Post, Powderly argued at a 1909 neighborhood Fourth of July picnic that the Fifteenth Amendment, with its guarantees of citizenship, conferred the franchise on Washingtonians, including women. (The account did not mention his views regarding African Americans). He also identified himself with the City Beautiful movement, the planning initiated by Senator James McMillan that preserved the capital's natural assets to create the park system. Powderly explained to his audience that rowhouses degraded the city: "The city beautiful has no rows of houses identical, nor street after street where you can look down and see but one style of dwelling. It is not sanitary and certainly not beautiful."⁴

Shortly after Hannah's death, Powderly took up photography as a hobby. The Powderly papers donated to Catholic University that so richly document his leadership of the Knights of Labor also included a rich photo collection consisting of approximately two hundred prints, mostly images of his friends, and 3,500 glass-plate negatives taken by Powderly himself. He frequently photographed his friends and neighborhood, and captured street scenes, parks, monuments, and buildings. He also took his camera, film, and tripod to Europe, where he documented notable landmarks, everyday life, and industrial conditions, probably to supplement his reports to the Immigration Commission. In the United States, he photographed conditions in Chicago, Jacksonville, Scranton, and elsewhere, but these photographs are relatively few compared with his images of European cities.

Powderly fastidiously encased each negative in an envelope that included notes on the photograph, including the date and place as well as technical information on the aperture and shutter speed. The Petworth house had no darkroom; Powderly probably processed his photographs at the shop of Reid S. Baker located at 1332 F Street, N.W., where he also purchased his cameras, film, and plates.⁵

The nine hundred D.C. images reflect



The newly built Powderly house in Petworth. Victorian style was popular in the "streetcar suburbs."

Powderly's broad, lifelong interests in work, transportation, and commerce as well as his view of everyday life in the capital. Altogether, they provide a rich portrait of the emergence of Washington as a premiere world capital. Early in the twentieth century it was still a city where local farmers cultivated, harvested, and sold their crops in the District. Vibrant shops stimulated a brisk commerce for residents and visitors. Meanwhile, city planners were well on their way toward implementing the vision of the City Beautiful movement, with grand new

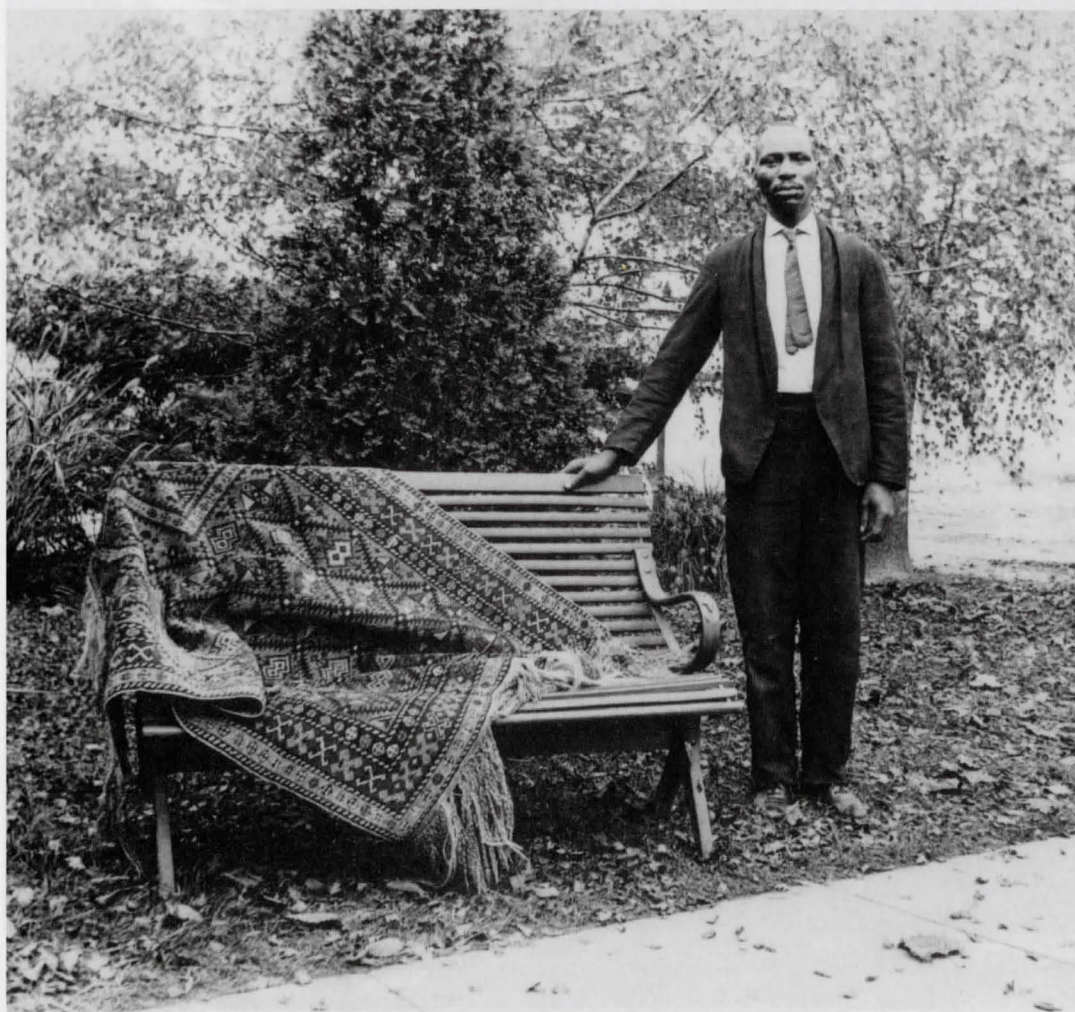
edifices and tourist-oriented accommodations that attracted visitors from across the nation. There were also numerous public events, particularly parades as the nation entered World War I.⁶ The photos selected for this essay offer a perspective on the modernization of Washington, as seen by a man highly sensitive to its impact upon daily life.⁷

The authors would like to thank Jane Freundel Levey, Jane Stoeffler, and Shane McDonald for their contributions to this article.

Petworth was still decidedly rural when Powderly moved into his house. This calf lived on one of the farms north of Florida Avenue.



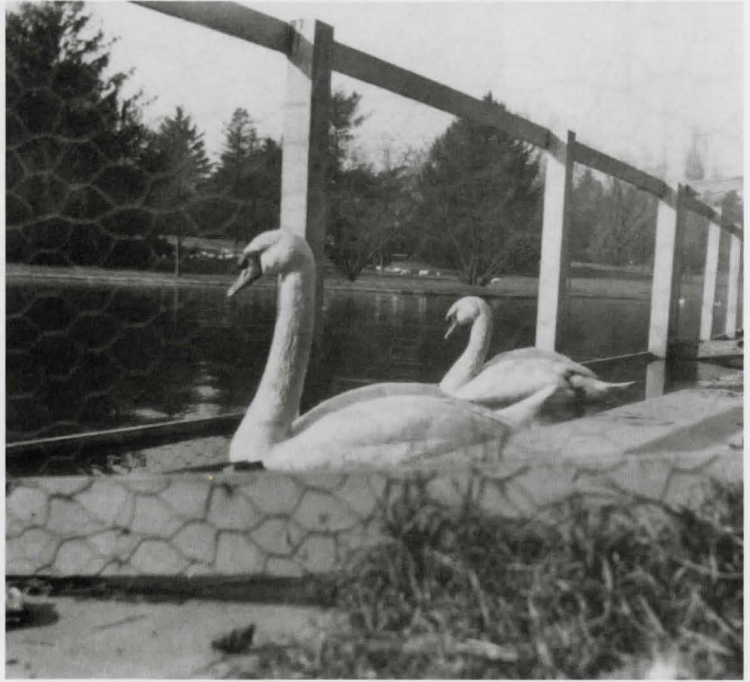
Powderly photographed this man, perhaps a rug salesman, outside the house.





Photographed in 1909, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones often visited Powderly at his Petworth home. After his death, she frequently stayed at a farm in Adelphi, Maryland, where she died in November 1930.

Under Powderly's leadership, the Petworth Citizens Association petitioned for a park on land adjoining the Soldiers' Home, where he photographed these geese.



This photograph of a trolley on the Brightwood line was taken in August 1908. Powderly probably used the line, which ran along Brightwood Avenue (now Georgia Avenue, N.W.), to travel to work.





Horse-drawn hay trucks were still a common sight in a city that depended upon the produce of local farms. At his stand on F Street, a farmer sold produce directly to workers and other visitors to the capital.

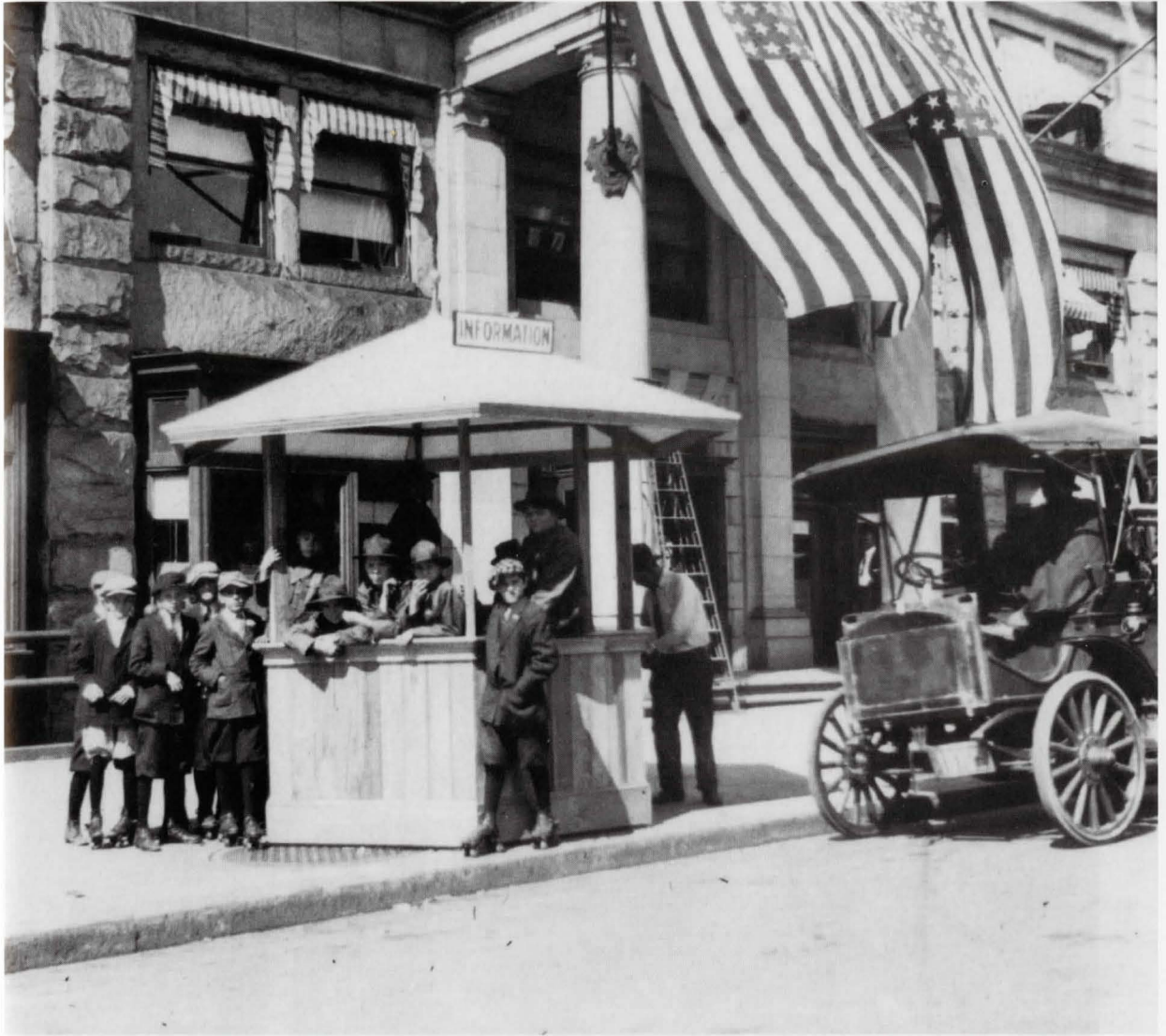




A busy street scene outside the popular Woodward & Lothrop department store at 11th and F Streets, N.W. The chain closed in 1994 after 114 years of operations. Below: A peddler's cart parked in front of the National Theatre, which was later rebuilt to meet new fire safety standards following the Knickerbocker Tragedy.







This Information stand greeted tourists in front of Powderly's office at the Department of Labor.

Rail lines of all kinds fascinated Powderly, but as a civic leader he had a special interest in maintenance of the streetcars. In the photograph above left, he caught laborers repairing the streetcar lines on G Street. Powderly also apprenticed as a blacksmith, and identified with craftsmen such as this blacksmith working on the repair of the Capital Traction line.

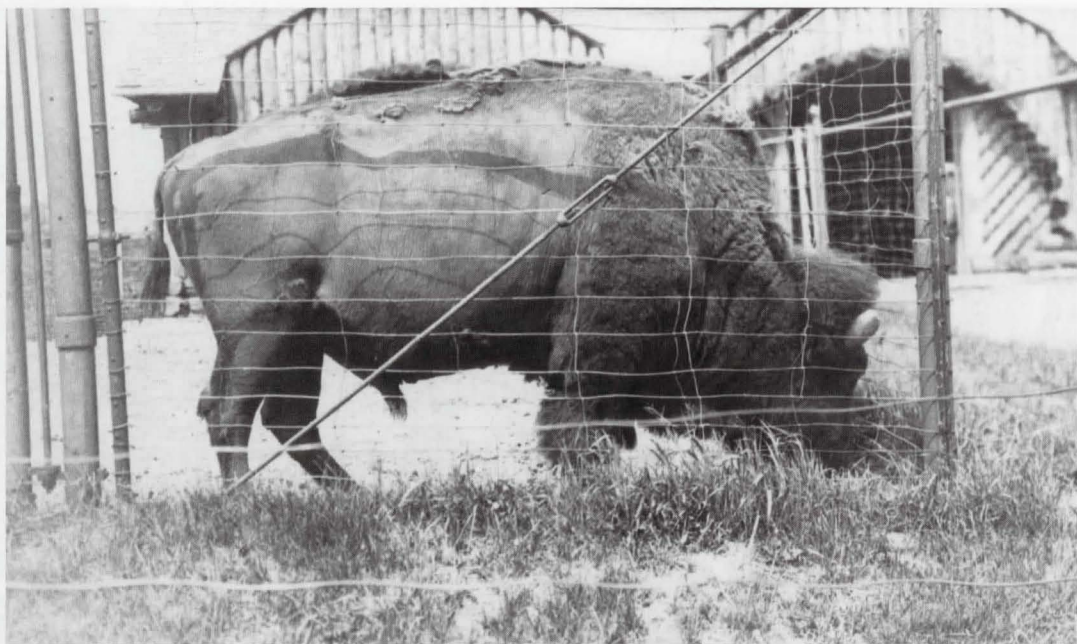


E Street, N.W., businesses decorated with bunting before the inauguration of William Howard Taft in 1909. At center is the Washington Post building; at left is the Willard Hotel. Detail below.



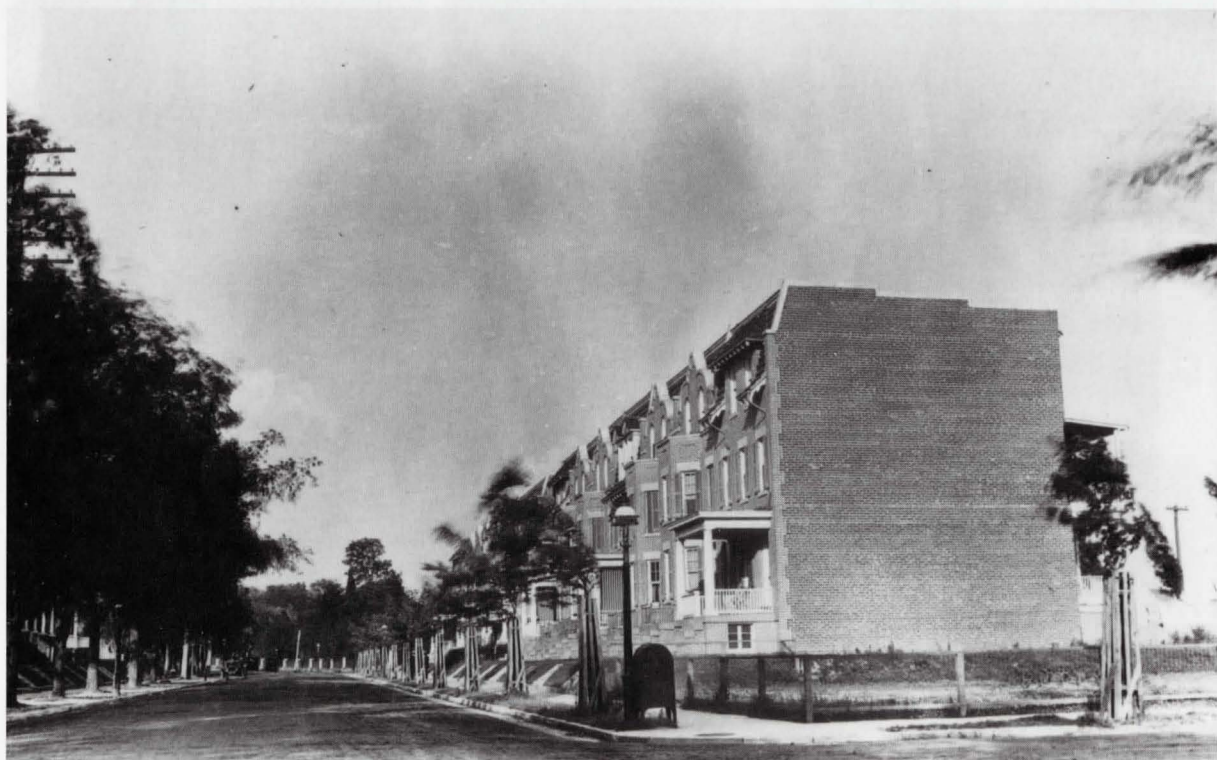


Three Union army veterans posed for Powderly in September 1915. They were in town to participate in the Grand Army of the Republic Parade marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War.



This buffalo was one of more than 1,300 animals exhibited at the National Zoo. Two million people visited the zoo in 1919, the year of its twentieth anniversary.

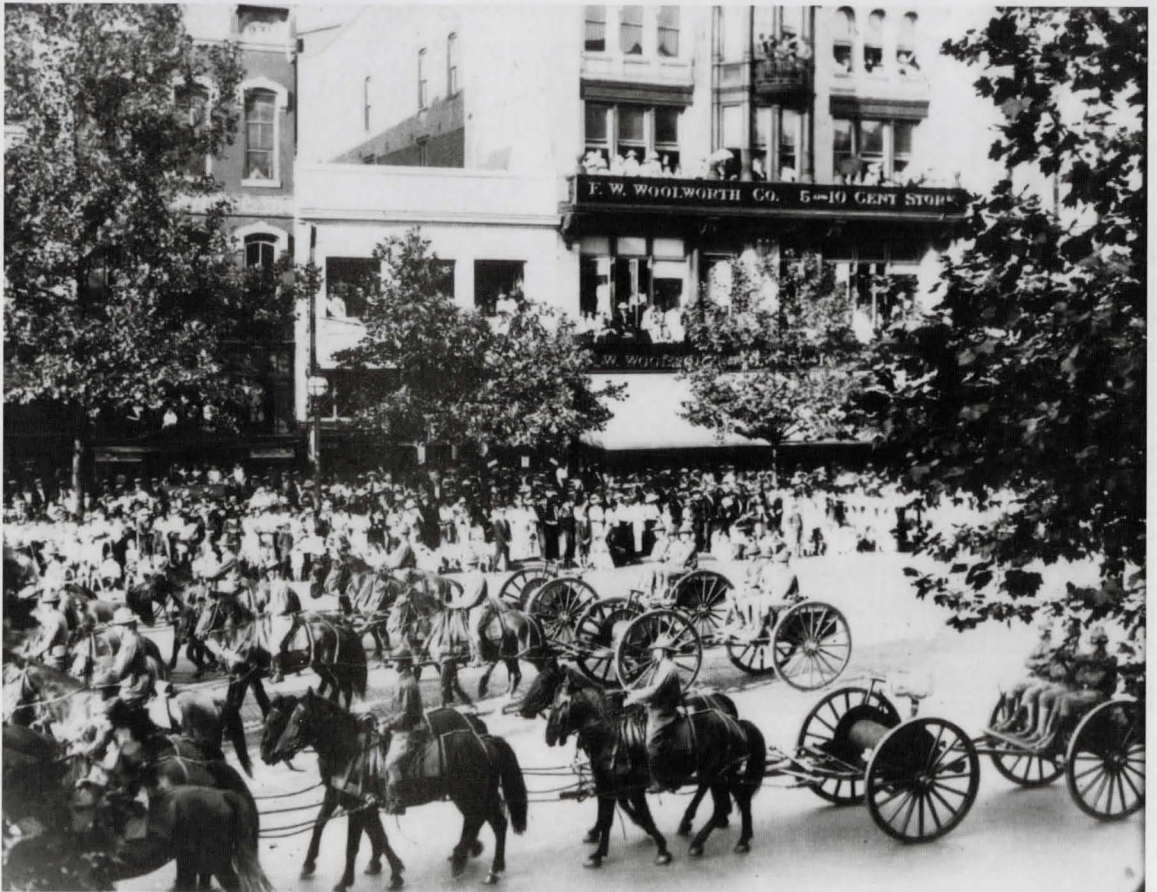
Powderly rarely photographed rowhouses, which he detested: "Each house should have its own air space, and a yard encircling it completely."



When at least 40,000 people gathered on March 5, 1917, for President Woodrow Wilson's second inauguration, this vendor supplied souvenirs.

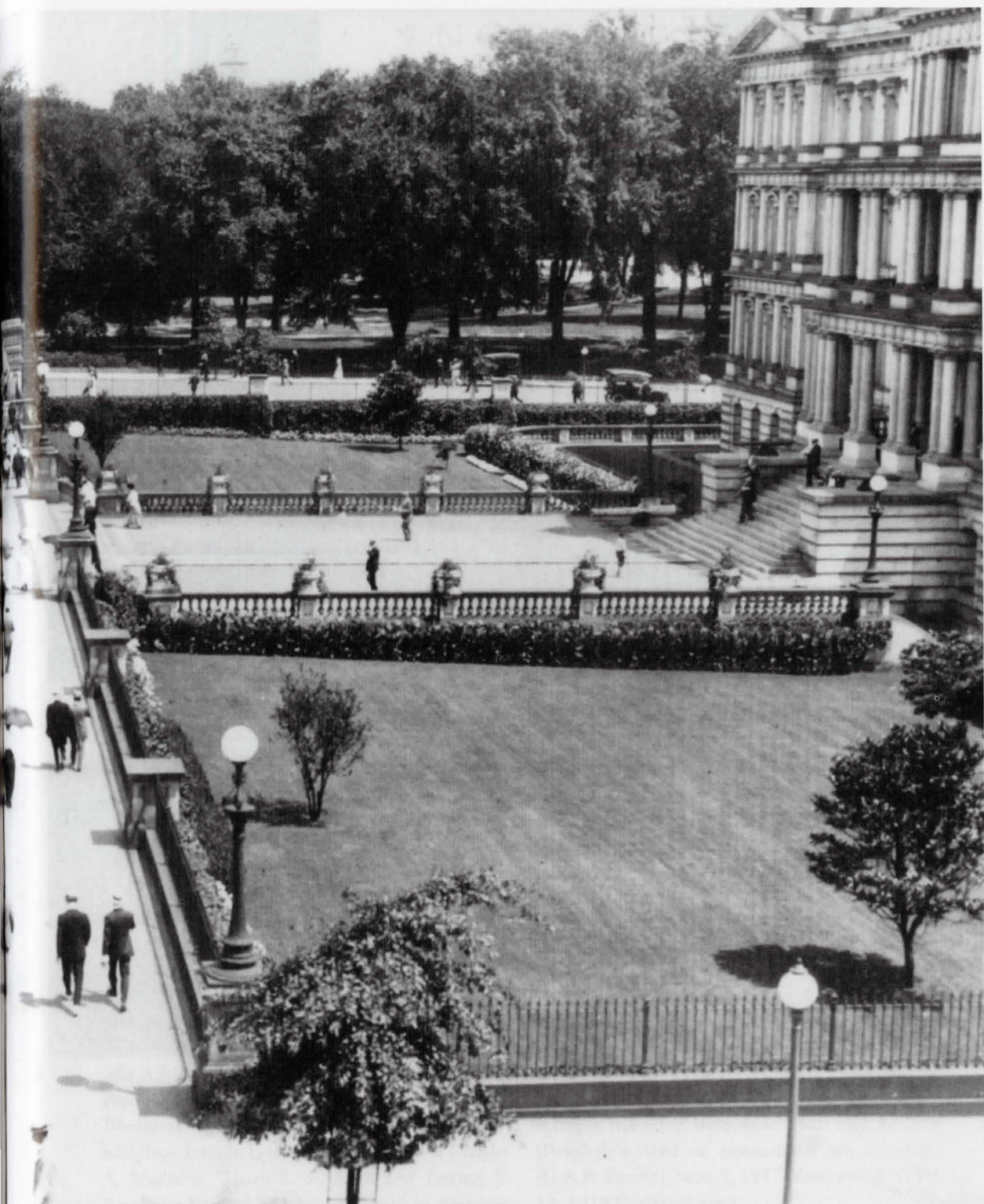


Six months later, in September 1917, Powderly joined 200,000 people viewing a military parade in honor of nine hundred draftees going off to World War I.





The view of Pennsylvania Avenue looking east from 17th Street shows how landscaping enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the city.





The Washington Monument framed by columns of Memorial Continental Hall, part of the DAR Complex, which was completed in 1915.

NOTES

The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives of the Catholic University of America encourages researchers to examine the photographs of Terence Powderly. Nearly thirty-five years after receiving the collection, the Catholic University Archives received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to convert the glass plate negatives into safety film. Archivists indexed records of each image with a positive proof and the data from Powderly's original notes. In 2002, the photos collected by Powderly were digitized by the Washington Research Libraries Consortium (WRLC) in Collington, Maryland. Five years later, the WRLC uploaded photos taken by Powderly so that the entire digital collection consists of 1,200 images. These can be accessed by visiting <http://www.aladin0.wrlc.org/gsdll/collect/powderly/powderly.shtml>.

Researchers are also encouraged to consult the Powderly Papers to explore this subject. A collection guide or finding aid is online at <http://archives.lib.cua.edu/findingaid/powderly.cfm>. Those wishing to research original Powderly materials at the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives of the Catholic University of America in Brookland, Northeast, are encouraged to call 202-319-5065, send an email to archives@mail.lib.cua.edu, or access the archives visitor's page at <http://archives.lib.cua.edu/visit.cfm> for directions, hours, rules, and other relevant information.

1. Several studies explore Powderly's leadership of the Knights of Labor. These include: Henry Vincent Brown, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Philip F. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker during the Era of the Knights of Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Charles A. Madison, "Uriah S. Stephens and Terence V. Powderly: Plumed Knights of Labor," in *American*

Labor Leaders: Personalities and Forces in the Labor Movement (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950), 44-69; Richard Oestreicher, "Terence V. Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," in *Labor Leaders in America*, edited by Melvin Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 30-61; and Robert E. Weir *Behind Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

2. "Mother Jones at Terence Powderly's Home," *Labor's Heritage* 11:2 (Fall 2000/Winter 2001), 16. The most thorough treatment of Powderly's years in Washington appears in Vincent J. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly: Middle Class Reformer* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978). A briefer examination of those years appears in Craig Phelan, *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000).

3. Saul Schniderman found the unpublished diary of Lillie Mae Burgess, which recounted her years as Mother Jones's caretaker, at the West Virginia & Regional History Collection at West Virginia University. It became the principal source of three articles for *Labor's Heritage*: Saul Schniderman, "Mother Jones Final Sojourn: My Search for Where 'the Miners' Angel' Died"; "Mother Jones 100th Birthday"; and "Mother Jones at Terence Powderly's Home" *Labor's Heritage* 11:2 (Fall 2000/Winter 2001), 4-17.

4. *Washington Post*, Jan. 15 and July 22, 1903, Feb. 7 and Nov. 16, 1904, and July 6 and Nov. 10, 1909.

5. *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia* (1915), 144.

6. Diane K. Skvarla, "Nineteenth Century Visitors," *Washington History* 1 (Spring 1989): 6-23.

7. The source material for the captions includes excerpts from the *Washington Post*, July 6, 1909 (Powderly's views on rowhouses); July 25, 1915 (G.A.R. Parade); Sept. 5, 1917 (draft parade); Dec. 12, 1919 (National Zoo).