

Foggy Bottom

Out of a damp and odorous past has grown a highly desirable residential section

By WOODS HANSEN

LIKE THE TOURISTS who seek out "Greenwich Village" in New York City, then wonder where the village is, visitors to Foggy Bottom find they've been misled by the label.

It's rare that you find any mist there and this uneven stretch of northwest Washington really isn't a "neighborhood" in the sense of being cohesive. There are no neat borders to herald your arrival, no central shopping or business centers as points of community focus, and the architecture is pure hodge-podge ranging from restored Federal to Government modern.

As a residential district, which it is only in part, Foggy Bottom used to be billed as another Georgetown, nearly as chic but less expensive and even more convenient to city offices. Except for a few of the old houses, the frankly imitative developments, the restored "mews" or alley town houses and the fact that Foggy Bottom extends out of Georgetown south of Pennsylvania avenue and along Rock Creek drive, it barely resembles its neighbor to the west and the north.

Which isn't to downgrade Foggy Bottom. The area has interest enough to recommend it without having to borrow gloss from next door. It has a history of its own, too.

In the early days of the Federal City and before, the area included much river marsh. It got its name from the natural disadvantage of being low and wet. Foggy Bottom found favor only with waterfowl shooters, whether sportsmen or market gunners, and it was famous for mosquitos of a size and voracity that made them a source of pride as well as pain to Washingtonians.

It became the location of the city's garbage wharf, where kitchen refuse was loaded from wagons to barges for ultimate disposal down the river. It also came to harbor a gas plant with attendant storage tanks.

On still days, the combined odors of marsh, garbage wharf and gas plant lent the area a fragrance that few people found tolerable, let alone desirable.

Eventually the marsh was reclaimed and the garbage wharf passed out of use, but the gas house hung on—from 1857 until the late

1940s when the Washington Gas Light Co. converted to the use of natural gas.

Demolition of the gas tanks eliminated from Foggy Bottom much of its unattractive air and in a few short years private restoration was booming. It even was organized.

The beginning wasn't easy. Benjamin D. Burch, a real estate man who is believed to have restored the first house at 2423 I street N.W. and subsequently did about 30 others, recalls that, although on that first one he had a firm Federal Housing Administration commitment to insure a mortgage, he still had a terrible time finding a lender who would take a chance on it. With a location more convenient than Georgetown, however, lender resistance was short lived.

"It couldn't help but become a desirable area," Mr. Burch says today.

Early in the process, the new Foggy Bottom Restoration Association established the boundaries for its area as Pennsylvania and Virginia avenues and Twenty-fourth and Twenty-seventh streets N.W.

Urban renewal interest flickered briefly in the association's area, but private progress was so rapid that surveys taken couldn't find enough surviving blight to justify Government action.

With desirability on the rise, apartment buildings soon were, too. "I foresaw that what

happened was going to happen," Mr. Burch says. Like any intelligent builder, he had checked the zoning in the area before getting involved. But he admits he didn't foresee that apartments would go up in the numbers they have.

Today, a walk through the area will reveal here and there a block or a half-block enclave of attractively-restored houses joist-by-curtain-wall with a towering, high rise, contemporary apartment building or two.

South of Virginia avenue—the boundaries of Foggy Bottom go far beyond the association's rather arbitrary ones—urban renewal has been undertaken. The \$25 million Columbia Plaza project, not yet started, falls into that category. To rise on a site between Twenty-third and Twenty-fifth street just south of Virginia avenue, it will include 800 apartment units, a 400-room hotel, a shopping plaza and underground parking for 1,500 cars.

Watergate, a \$66-million co-operative apartment community not under renewal, has

already been started on the site of the old gas plant. Here, near the intersection of Virginia avenue and the Potomac, some of the units will cost as much as \$200,000.

Just down the river from Watergate is the location of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which is expected to be a focus for many cultural activities in the Nation's Capital.

But the neighborhood stand-out that probably will insure perpetuation of the Foggy Bottom name and give it an international reputation, is the mammoth State Department complex. Foreign ministry offices have a way of getting called by a nickname and "Foggy Bottom" carries such quaint connotations, especially to a world not always respectful of the United States, that it seems a likely choice.