

Scenes from the Past...

The 52 O Street Studios, a well-known artist's collaborative today, was originally built as a warehouse for the Sanitary Grocery Company in 1914. It was designed by Clement Didden, and built in partnership with his son, George. When the building was completed in November of that year, they sold an interest of it to Albert Carry, a wealthy German immigrant whose daughter Marie had married George Didden in 1905. The two families would continue to own the building until after World War II.

Architect Clement Auguste Didden was born in 1837 in Brakel, Germany, where he was educated in architecture at the Holzminden School of Architecture in Minden, Germany. In 1862, Clement went to London to pursue his craft and then made his way to South Africa where he designed residences in Cape Town for wealthy German diamond mine owners. He emigrated to New York in 1866, and there married Marie Klenck. One of their four children, George Anton Didden, would join them in an architectural and real estate business in Washington that included building 52 O Street, NW in 1914.

While he was in New York, C.A. Didden had worked for well-known architect Richard Morris Hunt, responsible for Trinity Church, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Vanderbilt's estate in Asheville, North Carolina, coined "Biltmore." Clement moved to Philadelphia in 1871 to work for the firm of Fraser, Furness & Hewitt, and was then sent to Washington to



Known today as the 52 O Street Studios, an artist studio collective, the large building at 52 O Street, NW was originally constructed in 1914 for the Sanitary Grocery Company.

open a branch of that firm.

In 1876, Didden started his own firm with a partner, and eventually with his son, George A. Didden. Together, they were responsible for many buildings built all across the city. George's grandson by the same name resides on Capitol Hill today, and is the CEO of the National Capitol Bank.

Carry, George Didden's father-in-law, had been born in Germany in 1852, and became an apprentice in the brewing industry. He emigrated first to Ohio and then made his way to Washington after the Civil War. In 1886, he was established enough to purchase the Humphrey & Jueneemann's brewery and beer garden on 4th Street, NE, between E & F Streets, for an impressive \$90,000; he sold it just six years later for \$400,000.

On the site of 52 O Street prior to its construction was a coal and wood yard owned by Frank P. Faunce. He had obtained a building permit in 1901 for a small brick office building and wooden storage sheds to protect his piles of coal and wood which were

purchased by neighbors to heat their homes and to cook meals.

When the warehouse and office building was completed in 1914, Didden and Carry rented 52 O Street to the Sanitary Grocery Company, which utilized it as a warehouse. That local company was purchased by Safeway in the 1920s, although it continued to operate under its own name. The Safeway Stores was born in Los Angeles just before World War I as the Sam Seelig Company. The Safeway we know today was created with the 1926 merger of Marion Skaggs' Cash Stores with the 600 Safeway stores of the Sam Seelig Company.

The building was apparently split down the middle, as it was also rented to the John C. Letts Grocery Company at the same time as Sanitary, until 1921, when the Letts Grocery's side was rented to Hoover & Rhine Meats beginning that year. In 1925, the building was

rented as a furniture warehouse for the Hecht Company, with one side becoming the location for the Freund Plumbing and Heating Company. In 1938, the building was occupied by the District Wholesale Drug Company, and the District Wholesale Liquor Company, which would continue to occupy space there until the 1970s.

According to the 1941-1943 City Directories, a portion of 52 O Street was also rented to the Decca Record

SANITARY GROCERY CO (INC), Edward G. Yonker Pres and Treas, Main Office 52 O NW, Tel North 1287, Branches: 100 1/2 C SE, 350 Cedar NW, 1311 E SE, 30-01 Eastern Market, 317 8th NE, 2414 18th NW, 103 11th SE, 200-2 F NW, 1836 1st NW, 1201 4 1/2 SW, 703 5th NW, 2100 and 3100 14th NW, 3312 and 4201 Ga AV NW, 526 and 1101 H NE, 3103 and 3418 M NW, SW COR M Pleasant and Lamont NW, 2031 Nichols AV SE, 828 9th NW, 317-319 Northern Liberty Market, 1000 and 1634 N Capitol, 90 and 1462 P NW, 676 Pa AV SE, 2002 B AV NE, 1424 7th NW, 401 7th SW, 164 Tenn AV NE, 27 3d NE, 207 13th SE, 800 and 1247 20th NW
Sanitary Officer District Charles R. Holman, chief

map—Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

This 1915 City Directory office lists all the locations of the Sanitary Grocery Company at the time, including their new office building at 52 O Street, NW.

Company and utilized as a distribution warehouse. The Decca Record Company was one of the most famous record labels of the Swing era, remembered for its jazz, swing, and popular music recordings. Compared to Victor, EMI, or Columbia, Decca got a late start, but it quickly made up for lost time.

The Decca trade name was first used in 1914 for a portable gramophone manufactured by the English company of Barnett Samuel & Sons Ltd., called the Duplephone. Many of these machines were used to provide entertainment to British soldiers in the trenches during World War I. Later, Barnett Samuel & Sons changed its name to Decca. There were actually two branches of Decca. The first established in England and the second some years later in the United States. Edward

Lewis established the Decca Record Company in England in 1929 and remained the chairman of the company until his death in 1980.

English Decca achieved international recognition after World War II when it introduced an improved disc that used what it called full frequency range recording (FFRR).

In 1934, five years after the establishment of the British company, Jack Kapp started the American branch of Decca. The new label released its first product in the middle years of the Great Depression, and tried to appeal to cost-conscious consumers by selling records for a mere 35-cents each. The first recording artist signed by Kapp for the new label was Bing Crosby.

Artists signed to Decca in the 1930s and 1940s included Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, the Andrews Sisters, Ted Lewis, The Mills Brothers, Billy Cotton, Guy Lombardo,

Chick Webb, Bob Crosby, Jimmy Dorsey, Connie Boswell and Jack Hylton. In 1942, Decca released "White Christmas" by Bing Crosby, which became the best-selling single of all time.

By 1946, Kapp's leadership and entrepreneurial skills transformed Decca into a \$30-million-a-year business, but

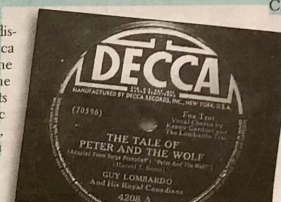
success had its price.

In 1959, American Decca had become so valuable it was purchased by the Music Corporation of America (MCA). Records with the Decca brand name appeared for a few more years, but soon this familiar label became part of recording history.

In the late 1970s, long before the neighborhood gained the attention of developers or urban pioneers in a post-riot inner city, 52 O Street was converted into a low-cost artist studio collective. The beams in the building today are still labeled with a series of numbers and letters that reflect its past warehouse use by a multitude of companies. The artists that now occupy the building range from emerging to well-established. They join with groups in three other buildings in the neighborhood for twice-yearly "Open Studios" events to highlight their works and to also open the building for those curious about its past.

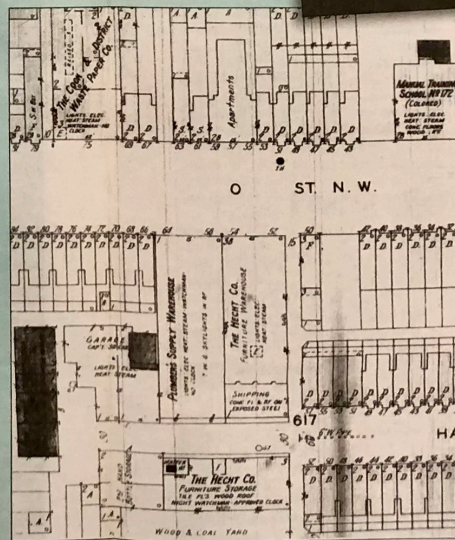
—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates,
Washington, DC

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photo—Paul K. Williams—The InTowner.

Although built for the Sanitary Grocery Company, 52 O Street has been occupied by a wide variety of tenants, including offices for Letts Grocery, a meat company, Hecht's department store warehouse, a drug company, and even a distribution center for Decca Records.



map—Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

This 1928 Sanborn Map shows the building at 52 O Street in the center, when it was divided and used for a furniture warehouse for the Hecht Company (Nos. 30-52 O Street), and as a Plumbers Supply Warehouse (Nos. 56-64 O Street).