



Bernard C. “Jack” Young
Mayor

COMMISSION FOR
HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL
PRESERVATION

Tom Liebel, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



Chris Ryer
Director

August 11, 2020

REQUEST: Stabilize and restore exterior to 1840s-era appearance

ADDRESS: 612-614 South Wolfe Street (Baltimore City Landmark, Fells Point Historic District)

RECOMMENDATION: Approval with final details to be reviewed at staff level.

STAFF: Lauren Schiszik

PETITIONER/OWNER: Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill and Fell’s Point, Inc.

SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT:

The site is located on South Wolfe Street, just south of Fleet Street in the Fells Point Historic District (*Images 1 and 2*). Fells Point is significant as one of the original three settlements that merged to form the beginnings of Baltimore City. The area is directly linked to early maritime trade, which was central to Baltimore's growth and development. Besides the significance of Fells Point in the eighteenth century, the community has been a constantly growing and changing urban place. Many of the earliest houses were added on to in the Victorian era creating a unique blend of pre-Revolutionary War and post-Civil War architectural styles and characteristics. Fells Point has been a diverse neighborhood of many ethnic groups, each influencing the growth and development of the area throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of the later structures are of architectural significance and are consistent with the waterfront character of Fells Point, even if stylistically different.

The wooden houses at 612-614 South Wolfe Street are some of the oldest standing buildings in Baltimore City and represent a rare surviving example of what was once a typical building type in the Mid-Atlantic. These early 1 ½ story, one room frame dwellings were rental properties that housed a variety of workers in Fells Point throughout their existence. Small, “open plan,” frame dwellings were more common in the architectural landscape of the 18th century.¹ The buildings were historically part of a larger row of four 1 ½ story wooden rowhouses with steeply pitched gable roofs, all of which can be seen on the 1890 Sanborn Map (*Image 3*). By 1902, the other two wooden houses in the set had been replaced with the two-story brick rowhouses that stand at 608 and 610 South Wolfe Street today. While there were at least seven of these structures on the 600 block of South Wolfe Street in 1890, today only three remain. A single 1 ½ story wooden house standing at 604 South Wolfe Street is the only other remaining house of this type in Fells Point.

¹ Lanier, Gabrielle M. and Bernard L. Herman, Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). p. 12.

When originally constructed, the houses were only one room deep, with a loft above accessed by a tight winder stair case in the corner.² Both buildings had one-story rear additions that appeared in the 1890 Sanborn Map; archaeological and architectural investigations have revealed a fuller understanding of alterations and additions to the buildings over time.

The houses at 612-614 South Wolfe Street were constructed on land that was part of the 18th century estate of Edward Fell and that passed down through his family. This rental housing served generations of working-class people in Fells Point, including African American ship caulkers and their families in the mid-19th century: John Offer, Henry Scott, Richard Jones, and John Whittington. Other residents through the years were white and Black laborers. Weaver, laundress, grocer, and shucker were some other professions of the inhabitants of these homes.³

The Preservation Society acquired the houses in 2005 and have been working to stabilize and interpret the houses since that time.

SITE CONDITIONS:

Constructed at the turn of the nineteenth century between 1798 and 1801, the houses are rare surviving 1½ story frame structures, with side gable roofs and shed dormers (*Image 4*). The houses are clad in lap wood siding with wood shingle roofs. The houses were used as storage in the late 20th century and suffered from lack of maintenance over a long period of time. The rear roof and wall of 612 is partially collapsed, and the rear wall of 614 is currently unenclosed, held up with temporary framing and tarps following the demolition of the rear addition in January 2020.

BACKGROUND:

- The buildings were designated as Baltimore City Landmarks in 1987.
- Detailed interior and exterior measured drawings were completed in 1992 by architectural historians Gabrielle Lanier, Bernard Means, and others.
- The Dell Corporation undertook an architectural study and documentation of the buildings and some interior stabilization occurred in 2005.
- The buildings were included in the Fells Point local Historic District, which was designated in 2007.
- In 2007, the Maryland Historical Trust placed these properties under a preservation easement.
- In September 2008, the Commission reviewed plans to stabilize and rehabilitate the buildings and construct a rear addition. While some stabilization occurred, no addition was constructed.
- Additional interior stabilization was added in 2011.
- In 2015, Phase I archaeological testing was completed in the interior of 614 S. Wolfe Street in anticipation of the installation of supporting piers inside the structures.
- The Dell Corporation undertook a historic paint finishes analysis in 2016.

² Ibid., p. 12

³ Shellenhamer, Jason P., Lisa A. Kraus, and Erin Steinwachs “Archaeological Investigation for the Proposed Stabilization of the Caulkers’ Houses (Site 18BC185), Fell’s Point, Baltimore, Maryland” The Herring Run Archaeological Project, 2020, p. 68-74.

- In 2019, archaeological investigations were completed on the site in anticipation of the structural stabilization efforts, and the investigation report was provided to CHAP staff.
- In January 2020, the Commission approved plans to carefully demolish the one-story rear addition at 614 South Wolfe Street with a recommendation that that any report on the archeological investigation be submitted to CHAP. The demolition did entail archaeological monitoring, and a report on the monitoring was provided to CHAP staff.

PROPOSAL & APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES

The applicant proposes to stabilize the two structures at 612-614 S. Wolfe Street, and restore the buildings to their circa 1840 appearance, which is arguably the most significant period in the buildings' history. It was in 1840 and 1842 respectively that the documentary record clearly shows that the structures became home to African American ship caulkers and their families. Due to extensive archival research, the names and basic biographies of the residents of these two structures are known. The archaeological investigation report for the proposed stabilization of the Caulker's Houses, completed by the Herring Run Archaeology Project, illuminates the significance of the African American caulking trade in Baltimore in that time period, and why these two structures are significant in that historical context:

In the early nineteenth century, when African Americans were legally relegated to the extreme margins of society and the economy, Baltimore's ship caulkers were a rare example of free blacks who dominated a skilled trade for the better part of the nineteenth century. By 1838, free black ship caulkers had organized the Caulkers Association to negotiate wages and working conditions with the powerful Baltimore Shipwrights association, an organization of white master shipbuilders and carpenters. As a result, despite numerous challenges, African American ship caulkers had the economic wherewithal to command a living wage in antebellum Baltimore, and to exert a certain amount of political and economic control over an industry and within their community.

The Caulkers' Houses are the last tangible remnant of [the] world the caulkers inhabited and protected for the majority of the nineteenth century. The caulkers' ability to build an autonomous community, complete with an independent, self-sustaining social, religious, and educational infrastructure, was remarkable and extremely unusual. Although free black communities existed in many other urban centers in both the North and the South before the Civil War, only in Baltimore did this coincide with a monopoly on a skilled trade, the potential for a living wage, and the relative freedom to worship, educate, and express political opinions.⁴

Based on extensive architectural investigation and documentation, this pair of houses will be restored to their 1840s appearance. The failing roofs will be reconstructed and clad with cedar shingles to match the existing (and likely original) shingles, and the dormers on the façade will be reconstructed. The dormer on the rear of 614 S. Wolfe St. will be removed, as that was an alteration that was made after the period of significance. The altered first floor window opening at 612 S Wolfe St. will be shrunk to match that

⁴ Shellenhamer, et. al, p. 83.

of 614 S. Wolfe St. The existing failing weatherboards will be removed and replaced with beaded edge boards, to match the surviving original boards on the buildings. None of the doors or windows are original to the houses and will be replaced with period-appropriate features. Surviving extant cornice on the east elevations of the houses will be replicated on the west elevations. The foundations will be underpinned and the deteriorating sill plates repaired or replaced as needed. Additional investigations of the structures will be undertaken as this work is completed. The ground disturbance that will be completed for the foundation work will be monitored by a professional archaeologist and the findings will be published.

The proposed alterations are being considered under the *Baltimore City Historic Preservation Design Guidelines* Chapter 1: Design Guidelines for Building Exteriors, Section 1.1 Identifying and Preserving Historic Building Fabric, Section 1.3 Wood, Section 1.6 Doors, Section 1.7 Windows, and Section 1.8 Roofing and Roof Drainage Systems, and Chapter 5: Guidelines for Archeology, Section 5.1 Archeological Features.

Conformity to Guidelines

The proposed scope of work fully adheres to the following pertinent guidelines.

Section 1.1 Identifying and Preserving Historic Building Fabric:

- Identify and assess character-defining features when considering changes to a historic building. Retain character-defining features, such as roof shape, openings for doors and windows, and unique detailing, when repairing, maintaining, or altering a historic building.
- Repair deteriorated historic fabric rather than replace it whenever possible. Do not modify or alter significant architectural features during the repair process.
- Replace architectural materials and features that are deteriorated beyond repair with new materials and features that visually match the original.
- Replace missing architectural features with new features that visually match the original. Base the fabrication of the new features on matching identical features from the building. Where identical features are not present, base the fabrication on historic drawings, photographic evidence, or comparable examples found on historic buildings in the neighborhood.
- Many changes to a building over time may be historically significant and should not be removed. Intrusive changes that have resulted in harm to historic building fabric or in the loss of historical significance and integrity may be reversed as part of a rehabilitation project.

Section 1.3.1 Wood Siding:

- Retain original wood siding where it is in good or repairable condition.
- Where the replacement of siding is approved by the Commission, new siding should match the historic wood siding in shape, profile, finish, design, detail and dimension.

Section 1.6.2 Door Replacement:

- Replace non-original, non-historic doors with new doors that are appropriate to the period and style of the building.

Section 1.7.3 Window Replacement:

- Replacement windows shall match the historic windows in size, type, configuration, form, detail, and overall appearance.

Section 1.8.2 Roof Replacement:

- Replace historic roofing materials with materials that match the existing roofing whenever possible.

Section 5.1 Archeological Features:

- Minimize ground disturbance to reduce the possibility of destroying unknown archeological resources. When ground disturbance is necessary, hire a qualified archeologist to monitor and document the excavation.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS:

The applicants have shared their proposal with the Fells Point Design Review Committee, and the FDRC has given a favorable recommendation, with a request that the applicant ensure that the exterior paint color is from an historic line, and that the applicant share the proposed color with the FDRC.

The properties are also under a preservation easement with the Maryland Historical Trust, and the Easement Committee has also reviewed and issued a letter of approval for the project, with requirements for the submission of greater details about materials, and with the condition that any excavation would be monitored by a qualified archeologist and that a report on any findings be provided to the MHT.

ANALYSIS:

The proposed restoration of the exteriors of these buildings fully complies with CHAP guidelines, and is based on in-depth architectural, documentary, and archaeological investigations.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval, with final details to be approved at staff level. Any additional reports or published findings should be provided to CHAP staff.



Eric L. Holcomb
Executive Director

MAPS & IMAGES

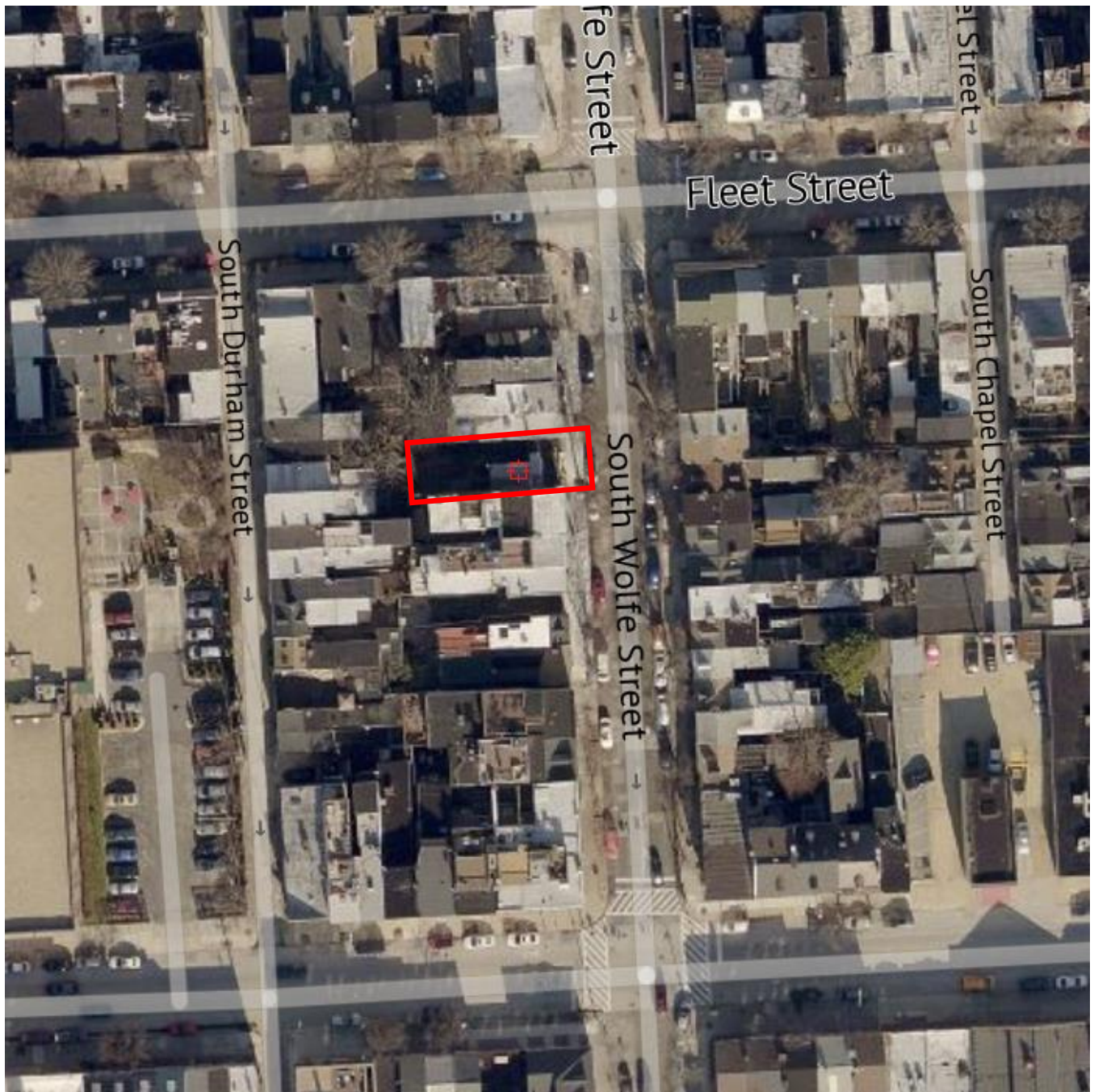


Image 1: 612-614 South Wolfe Street, Aerial View, 2019

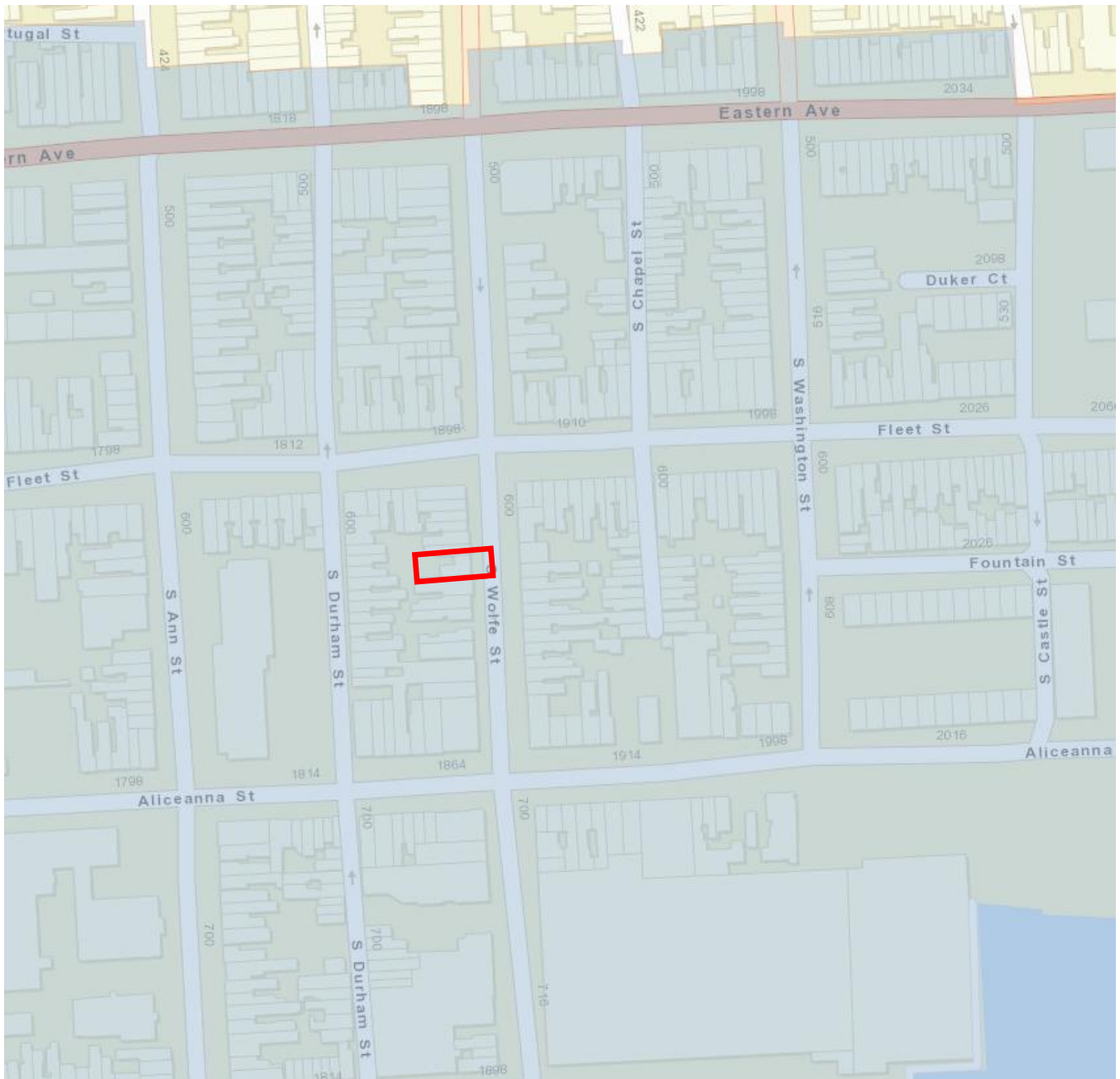


Image 2: Fells Point Historic District overlaid in blue, with 612-614 South Wolfe Street outlined in red

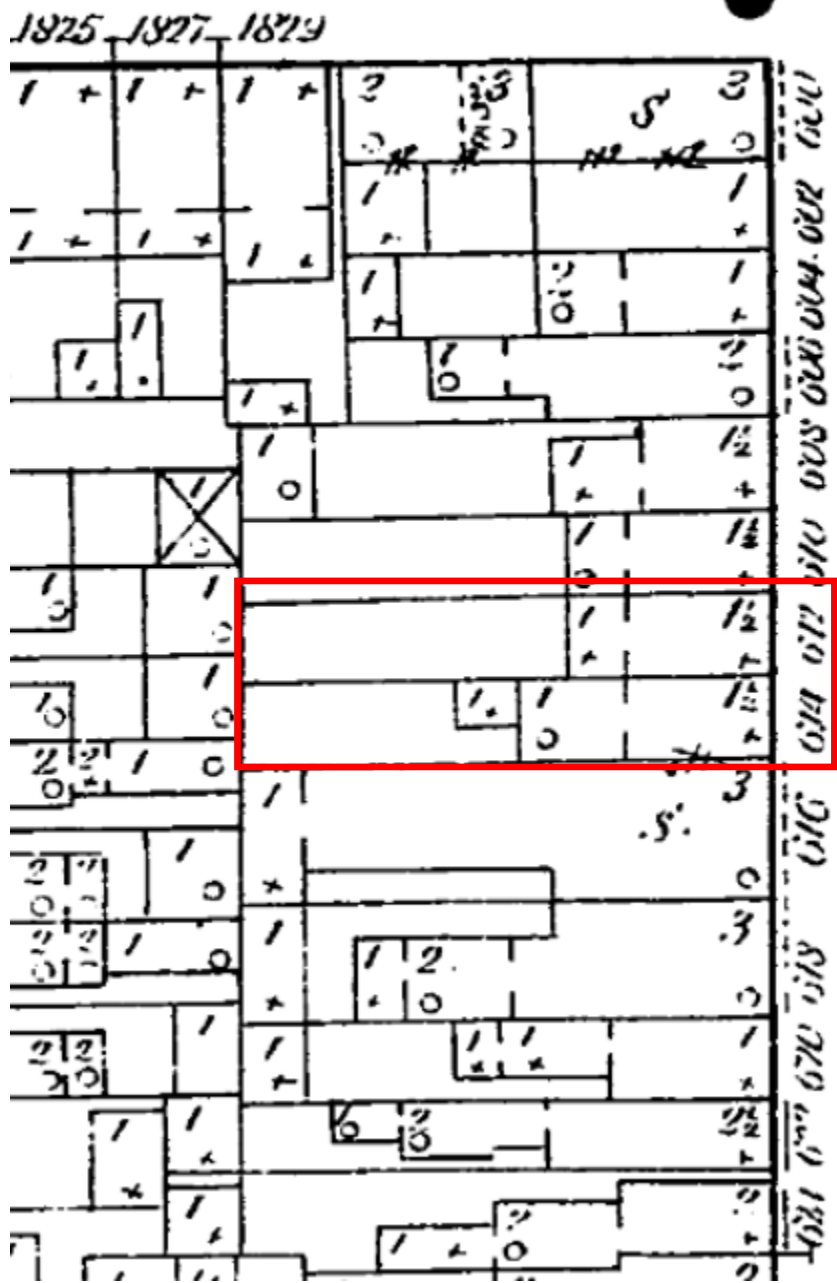


Image 3: 1890 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map



Image 4: 612-614 South Wolfe Street façades, July 2020