

# What Once Was

## Col. Truesdell's "Widow's Mite"

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Perhaps no one person had as much influence on the development of Kalorama Triangle as did Col. George Truesdell. Truesdell was born in 1842 in Fairmount, New York, and was a Civil War veteran, having been commissioned as a major and paymaster in the army. After the war, he worked briefly as a civil engineer in New Jersey.



Col. George Truesdell. *photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

Upon his arrival in Washington in 1872, Truesdell immediately started buying and selling land. In the 1880s, he bought 15 acres of a tract of land known as Widow's Mite between Columbia Road and Connecticut Avenue. After Truesdell built his less-than-modest summer cottage, "Managasset," fronting on Columbia Road, he subdivided the remaining part of the land in 1887 as "Truesdell's Addition to Washington Heights." At the same time, he had begun developing the neighborhood of Eckington in Northeast DC near Glenwood Cemetery, where he built his winter home.



Truesdell's Managasset estate. *photo—courtesy Historical Society of Washington, DC.*

During the 1890s, in a time before the phrase “conflict of interest” seemed to have no meaning in business or politics, Truesdell served as a District commissioner while the commission itself was considering routing the extension of Connecticut Avenue through his own property, which would have made him a very wealthy man. Although Connecticut Avenue was eventually chartered to run next to and not through Truesdell’s property, he would still eventually profit from it.

In the 1890s, Truesdell began subdividing and selling off parts of his own estate in Widow’s Mite, lot by lot. In 1896, he proudly made public the fact that he was cutting his Widow’s Mite estate in half by donating ground to the District for the extension of 20th Street. The *Washington Post* stated that “although this land is very valuable, the Commissioner has given it to the public simply because he realizes the importance of opening Twentieth Street.” But, this was hardly a charitable act on Truesdell’s part. He would have been required to forfeit the land under the Highway Act of 1893 that was extending streets beyond the original 1790s city plan that ended at Florida Avenue.

Additionally, the extension of 20th Street created new and improved street frontage on Truesdell’s property with paving, sidewalks, water and gas lines, street lights, and sewers — all at the cost of the city — that he would then be able to divide into large and very expensive lots to sell.



Mendota Apartments at 2220 20th Street, NW. *photo—author’s collection.*

Taking advantage of a new city street through his property, in 1901 Truesdell sold the plot of land on which his greenhouse had once stood at the southwest corner of Kalorama Road and 20th Street to the Iowa Apartment House Company. On this lot, the first apartment building in Kalorama Triangle, the Mendota, a Sioux Indian word meaning “mouth of the river,” was constructed at 2220 20th Street and opened in 1902.

By 1911, Managasset had become an old-fashioned and outdated house and the Truesdells were no longer occupying it. Truesdell started planning to build a new home for himself — a \$100,000 house on the site of his current home, Managasset. The three-and-a-half story house was to be of brick and stone facing with steel and concrete framing. But at the same time that Truesdell was planning his new house, the Washington Heights Citizen’s Association, in desperate need of a park, was attempting to acquire Managasset and its grounds for use as a public nursery and playground. Neither plan succeeded. Truesdell’s new house was never built on the property, nor did it become a nursery and playground.

Managasset was ultimately razed to make way for Truesdell’s new plan for the site, the Altamont Apartments at 1901 Wyoming Avenue, NW. The Altamont was designed by architect Arthur B. Heaton in the then very popular Mission Revival style and named after Truesdell’s summer home near Deep Creek Lake, Maryland. When the Altamont was completed in 1916, it became Truesdell’s new home.



The Altamont at 1901 Wyoming Avenue, NW. *photo—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

The 1920s saw a rise in the demand for middle-class housing in Kalorama Triangle and Truesdell again sensed opportunity, as the remainder of Widow's Mite still had ample room for more apartment buildings. The first of these, the Montello at 1901 Columbia Road, was built in 1921 — the year Truesdell died. In 1923, builder Ernest Walker erected three more apartment buildings surrounding the Altamont between 19th Street, Kalorama and 20th Street. The tallest and most architecturally detailed building, now the Shawmut, fronted on 19th Street; the Woburn fronted on Kalorama Road; and the Knowlton was on 20th Street, across from the Mendota. With the completion of these last three apartment buildings, the unoccupied 17th century tract of land that Truesdell had bought only 40 years before had been completely developed.