

The Hart Houses on Claude Street

Thanks to the daughter of Walter H. Hart, who contested her father's will in 1937, we can learn something about the history of the houses from 202 to 224 Claude Street. As described in Virginia Vroblecky's book, *Listening to Our Trees: A Walking Tour of West Annapolis and Wardour*, after Luther Giddings' estate was divided between his two daughters and the lots of West Annapolis were platted, Charles F. Lee and his wife, Lottie Lee, purchased many of the lots in West Annapolis in 19 , including those along Claude Street. In 19 , the ambitious real estate developer, Walter Hart, purchased the lots on the east side of Claude Street from Lee. By the time of his death in 1937, Hart was collecting rents for this row of 12 furnished houses. Over the course of the nine years it took to finally settle Hart's estate, the executors of the will had to submit reports to the Court on the rents collected, maintenance performed, and sales of Hart's properties. The records show that the Claude Street houses were being rented for both long term and short term rentals, some for as little as four days and many for June Week, and give the cost of repairs, furnishings (including replacement of frigidaires) and laundry (for June Week). Apparently, here and in his other properties in Annapolis, Hart was running a rental management business.

The houses were all built on lots that were approximately xx ' wide and xx ' deep. The small houses, before the many additions, followed three different styles: gable roof end toward the street; gable roof parallel to the street; and bungalow with dormer windows and front porch. While construction of the house at 201 Melvin Avenue (corner of Claude) had preceded these houses and appears to be a Sears kit house, it does not appear that the Claude Street houses are Sears houses. Although similar, their plans and construction materials may have been offered by Johnson Lumber Company (or one of the lumber companies it has acquired). The floor plans consisted of a living room, dining room, and kitchen plus two bedrooms on the second floor and bathroom. All had an oil furnace and a driveway and one car garage, a few of which still exist.

Walter H. Hart was born in England in 1865, married, had two daughters, was incarcerated for fraud for 9 months, divorced from his wife, and emigrated to Philadelphia around 1895?. Shortly thereafter he marries again and in 1910 is living in Camden, NJ. By the time of the 1920 Census, he is living in Eastport. Why or how he chose to move to Annapolis is not known, except possibly looking for business opportunities created by the expansion of the Naval Academy and construction of state government buildings at that time. His office was in the Hart Building at 12 Church Circle, beside Charles F. Lee's office on the corner of South Street. By 1930, he was divorced and in 1932, he purchased 131-133 Charles Street (now known as the Adams-Kilty House). There, on the morning of March , 1937, he was found dead from a heart attack.

The Hart houses along Claude Street, as well as Hart's career, open a window onto the suburbanization of Annapolis and the transformation of West Annapolis between 1930 and 1960. Few houses existed among the open fields and sandy streets, including Claude Street, shown in a 1930 aerial photograph. With the continued growth of the Naval Academy, state government, and jobs in D.C., West Annapolis and Wardour lots were filled with houses, streets were widened and paved, and in 1952 the village of West Annapolis was annexed to the City of Annapolis. Along Claude Street, many of those first buyers remained in their houses for 30 to 50 years, planting dogwood trees and building additions and modifications – all of which have added to the special qualities of "upper" Claude Street.

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