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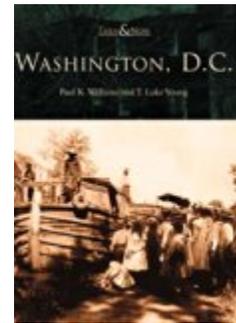


**Charles Suddarth Kelly.** *Washington, D.C., Then and Now: 69 Sites Photographed in the Past and Present.* New York: Dover Publications, 1984. 147 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-486-24586-7.

**Alexander D. Mitchell.** *Washington, D.C. Then and Now.* San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 1999. 144 pp. \$17.98 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57145-191-0.

**Peter R. Penczer.** *Washington, D.C., Past and Present.* Arlington: Oneonta Press, 1998. 264 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9629841-1-2.

**Paul K. Williams, T. Luke Young.** *Washington, D.C. Then and Now Series.* Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2002. 96 pp. \$19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-1475-8.



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## Picture Books and the Changing Face of Washington

### Picture Books and the Changing Face of Washington

The reader can be forgiven for any confusion stemming from the very similar titles of these picture books. They take their place in what is a virtual sub-genre of publishing: books which seek to compare and describe historical and contemporary Washington, D.C., appealing to tourists and Washington history enthusiasts of both professional and amateur status. They are selective and superficial in a sense, yet they serve a need for coherent introductory overviews to convey the character of the city and its history. Of these four books, the first three rely heavily on the strategy of “re-photographing” sites depicted in archival photographs from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, reproducing the early works on the left page, and placing the new views on the right page. In all three cases, attempts were made to locate the same vantage points as in the early works. Penczer and Kelly were assiduous in this effort, whereas Mitchell’s barely credited photographer, Simon Clay (represented by a mere note in the acknowl-

edgments), was rather less so. The Arcadia volume by Williams and Young also relies on visual comparisons of the past and present, although they do not adhere to the strict protocols of self-conscious re-photography documentation.

Penczer’s fine pictorial paperback is a pleasure to peruse, despite its losing battle with its own format. It contains historical images paired with his re-photographs from the 1990s to 2002. The comparisons are indeed a revelation. The excellent reproduction quality serves the author-photographer in good stead and, as the blurb on the back promises, we can marvel at how much has changed over the years in many cases, and how surprisingly little has been altered in a few others. The text seems solidly factual and illuminating, albeit all too brief in some cases. This brevity is often starkly highlighted by the presence of a block of text above the “before” picture on the left side of a double-page spread, juxtaposed with a blank space over Penczer’s new photograph on the right. While this style sometimes succeeds, producing a

clean, spare design, repetition of the effect is distracting, and one wishes he had written at greater length to fill the large empty spaces with factual details about the current status of the site or building. Indeed, in some cases it actually looks like something is missing, as in a printing error, rather than resulting from a conscious design decision.

Nevertheless, these economical gems of text are usually just enough. The clear intention of Penczer and each of the other authors was to produce a picture book, not a thorough, detailed narrative of what transpired between the “before” and “after” views in each picture-pair history of each picture pair. In one glaring exception, however, Penczer writes far too little about the pictures, having strayed into an odd digression about a dirigible. The 1928 picture for “Looking west on E Street from Eleventh Street” happens to show the *Graf Zeppelin* in the sky; he describes this aircraft’s appearance over Washington and the reactions of the populace, provides details of its size and history, and concludes, predictably, by mentioning the famous explosion of the *Hindenburg* in 1937. But there is no explication of the changes evident in his new photograph of the same site or identification of the buildings shown. And this is one of the few instances in which the text continues from the left to the picture on the right! Certainly this is a fascinating story, but it has nothing to do with changes in the Washington cityscape.

Amazingly enough, Alexander D. Mitchell IV is also delighted with dirigibles, and illustrates one in his own book, adding the same extraneous remark about the *Hindenburg* disaster. This time it is the American airship *Akron*, hovering above the Lincoln Memorial in 1933. On the facing page he explains the changes in the site of the later photograph, and justifies the pairing through a remark about low-flying jet aircraft (unfortunately, the photograph by Clay does not show a plane in flight to illustrate the point, a more difficult if literal feat).

These two books invite further comparisons. Mitchell’s designer solved the problem of combining short texts with horizontal photographs by choosing a horizontal format for the book. There are no conspicuous blank spaces, and the text is organized so that there is a caption for each photograph, rather than just one for the “then and now” pair. If Penczer (and/or his editor or designer) preferred a single block of text for each picture duo, the horizontal format would have served them better by effectively limiting the vertical dimension of the blank spaces.

Kudos to Penczer for being date-conscious—not only

does each “before” photograph have a date (if only approximate), but he provides the precise dates of his own photographs. Mitchell’s attention to dates is sporadic. Surprisingly few old photographs are duplicated from one book to another, although all of these three begin with the John Plumbe 1846 photograph of the unfinished Capitol. Penczer and Mitchell show the same picture of the lockkeeper’s house on Constitution Avenue (originally B Street), but Penczer helpfully assigns an 1895 date, which Mitchell does not provide.

Penczer’s book boasts more satisfactory reproduction quality, sharp and clear, while Mitchell’s book has generally poorer, fuzzier reproductions. For the most part, Penczer’s new black-and-white pictures are more successful than Clay’s color work. One might guess that Clay’s pictures were taken on one of two different days, one sunny and bright, the other dismal and gray. Although the added element of color might at first glance make Mitchell’s book seem more attractive, it is a deceptive first impression. Penczer’s book holds together better as a more integrated, tight compilation, and he seems to be a better photographer than Clay. Penczer’s 1997 black-and-white photograph of the Capitol is radiant with contrasting light and shadow—and the reassuring presence of many human figures—while Clay’s color version is flat, gloomy, and lonely, made on a day when an oppressive blanket of clouds hung over it and tourists stayed away. This is redeemed somewhat by another, better view, made on a nicer day, two pages later. But Clay’s picture of the National Gallery of Art’s West Building is one of the dreariest I have ever seen. The before-and-after views of the Library of Congress in Mitchell’s book show us little. Pairing an early undated black-and-white image of the Library’s interior with Clay’s nearly identical color view, as nice as the latter is, seems pointless—unless the very minor point is that recent renovation work did not succeed in duplicating the original tonal contrast of some decorative details. Another nearly pointless exercise in juxtaposing the old and new shows a section of the Shakespeare Library facade. Clay’s flat color image fails to highlight and articulate either the incised text or the relief sculpture panels under the windows, which look magnificent in the early view. Clay’s photograph does convey, however, that the strikingly beautiful, deeply fluted vertical elements between the windows were replaced with flat blocks separated by horizontal lines, leaving us to wonder why anyone would want to destroy this powerful, rhythmic visual effect. Yet Mitchell does not mention this ill-advised alteration. This omission epitomizes a

primary fault with Mitchell's approach: he often concentrates on single buildings, comparing new and old photographs of the same subject which exhibit little discernible difference. Why bother? The old is black-and-white, the new is color. Nevertheless, some of Clay's photographs are fine. His view of the red brick Government Printing Office building is especially strong because he chose to step out of the re-photography mode for a new perspective when he thought it was warranted.

Finally, Mitchell deserves criticism for a minor but significant gaffe: it is amazing to find, in a book about Washington history, the name of the city's most famous photographer misspelled. One should not have to be a photographic historian to know that one "t" sufficed for Mathew Brady. His caption for the contemporary view of Ford's Theatre asserts that it sponsors only "occasional performances," a misleading characterization which makes one slightly nervous about the general accuracy of his text.

Kelly's 1984 book is the model for the above two works, and it seems certain that both Mitchell and Penczer were familiar with it. Kelly, like Penczer, took his own photographs, and took pains to locate the precise spots in which earlier photographers stood and to select lenses of comparable focal length (Penczer summarizes the equipment he used to achieve the desired effects). Kelly's volume has the look of a classic, yet is somewhat marred by poor, flat reproductions; Penczer's are consistently better. Although Kelly's book appeared just nineteen years ago, we can be astonished and chagrined that some of the sites which he photographed in the 1980s already have been altered or eliminated. Some of the buildings in his "after" photographs have disappeared, showing the rapid rate of change in Washington since 1984. The Kelly compilation therefore serves partly as an intermediate record of change, an invaluable supplement to the books of 2000-2002. The texts of all three books are informative and complement each other, since the three authors, for the most part, selected different early photographs to emulate for their re-photography projects—a pleasant surprise. Penczer's book is the biggest of the four and includes a nod to the often neglected Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

An entirely different sort of presentation is found in *Washington, D.C.* by Williams and Young. While the

first three books concentrate on specific sites, utilizing a logical but flowing, uninterrupted organizational structure, Williams and Young employ a thematic arrangement with chapter titles: "People and Entertainment," "Commercial Activities," "Institutional Roles," "Parks and Recreation," and "Residential Life." Each section is introduced by a few brief header notes, but the themes are not developed to any great extent. Each photograph or pair of photographs has a caption with a title, many of which fail to be as pithy or witty as the authors intended. Views of the Government Printing Office, for example, bear the caption titles "Printing a List and Checking It Twice!" and "Can I Get That in Print?" The "then" photographs are printed in sepia, a common conceit to symbolize the old, while the "now" pictures are a neutral black-and-white. Whether or not the archival originals actually were this color, some of the "then" pictures prove to be quite handsome in sepia. As might be expected when one tries to squeeze many images into a comparatively small-format publication like this, some of the images are just too tiny. The reproduction quality varies, with some images on the muddy side, and some of the "now" pictures (mostly by Young) are rather uninspired. On the other hand, the book is reasonably lively and has definite charms.

The concise texts of all four books are breezy, yet crammed with miscellaneous information. The pleasant surprise is that they all manage to be so distinctive, with less overlap and duplication of specific imagery than might be expected. If one had to select just one among these volumes as a gift or as an addition to a library, the choice might be difficult. Despite their shortcomings, they are all worth having. Taken together, they suggest that there is a wealth of historic photographs of the Washington area in local libraries and archives to be tapped, and that this genre has not been exhausted. We can be confident that there are more "Washington then and now" books to be published.

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