



CHAPTER 1

GPO's Buildings

"From this place words may fly abroad..."

One of GPO's most distinctive attributes is that it has occupied the same location in northwest Washington, DC, through a succession of structures, for its entire history. It has inhabited the same four principal buildings that it occupies today for half that time.

Within a few years of taking over the structure built in 1856 by Cornelius Wendell, GPO began expanding its footprint on the corner of North Capitol and H Streets. Over the last three decades of the 19th century additions and annexes to that building filled much of the half square (block). In 1899 Congress acquired property on the G Street corner and began construction of Building 1, completed in 1903.

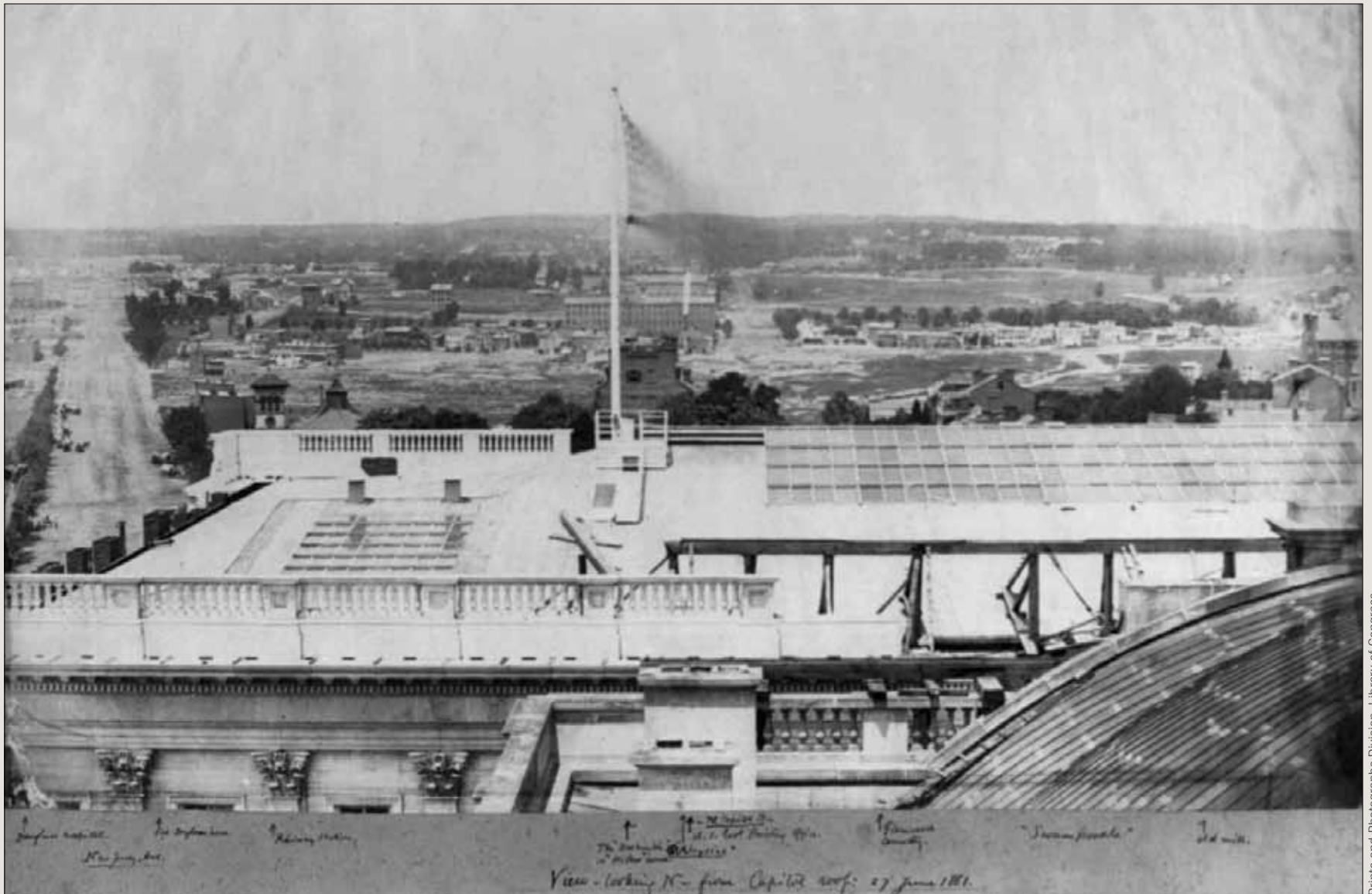
Nearly 20 years later, in 1921, the roof of Building 1 was raised to add an 8th floor. In 1928 an 8 story extension was built at the west end of Building 1, labeled Building 2.

GPO's steady growth continued and after an energetic effort from the Public Printer plans were approved in the late 1930s to replace the rabbit warren of structures on the H Street side with the new Building 3, opened in 1940. Across North Capitol Street a large Art Deco warehouse was completed in 1938. With that, GPO's total working floorspace in the central facility came to 33 acres.

Beginning with the opening of Building 1, the GPO buildings have had a distinctive architectural presence. Although they were planned as industrial buildings, their appearance in the context of neighboring houses, commercial structures, and Government buildings is on the one hand commanding (due to their size) and at the same time not overwhelming. Visitors over many decades reported surprise that "those big red buildings" were, in fact, a large working factory inside. And in the neighborhood's recent history, architects have taken cues from the massing, materials, and details of the façade of Building 1 and the rear elevations of Buildings 2 and 3 in designing neighboring commercial buildings.



Cornelius Wendell built this building in 1856 when he was elected printer to the House of Representatives. Congress purchased it following the signing of Joint Resolution 25 (36th Congress), which directed the establishment of GPO on March 4, 1861. Wendell was paid \$350,000 for the building and its equipment. It faced H Street NW, part way down the block between North Capitol Street and 1st Street NW. The area was sparsely developed, and was known as "Swampoodle" because nearby Tiber Creek regularly overflowed, making the surrounding land swampy.



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

This 1861 photograph from the Library of Congress looks north, up North Capitol Street, from the roof of the Senate side of the Capitol. At the center of the photo (behind the flagstaff in the middle distance), the smokestack and the bulk of the Wendell building are visible. Beyond, the Romanesque arches of the windows of St. Aloysius Church are visible. The photo shows how much of this section of northwest Washington was still completely undeveloped, and gives an idea of the extent of the cluster of ragtag houses and shanties that formed Swampoodle (across North Capitol Street between G Street and H Street NE).



The first recorded expansion of the Wendell building was in 1865, and more additions followed steadily. By 1881, the complex covered most of the half square between H Street and Jackson Alley and most of the depth of the present-day buildings. By this time the Wendell structure was subsumed, and the entrance to the building shifted to North Capitol Street.

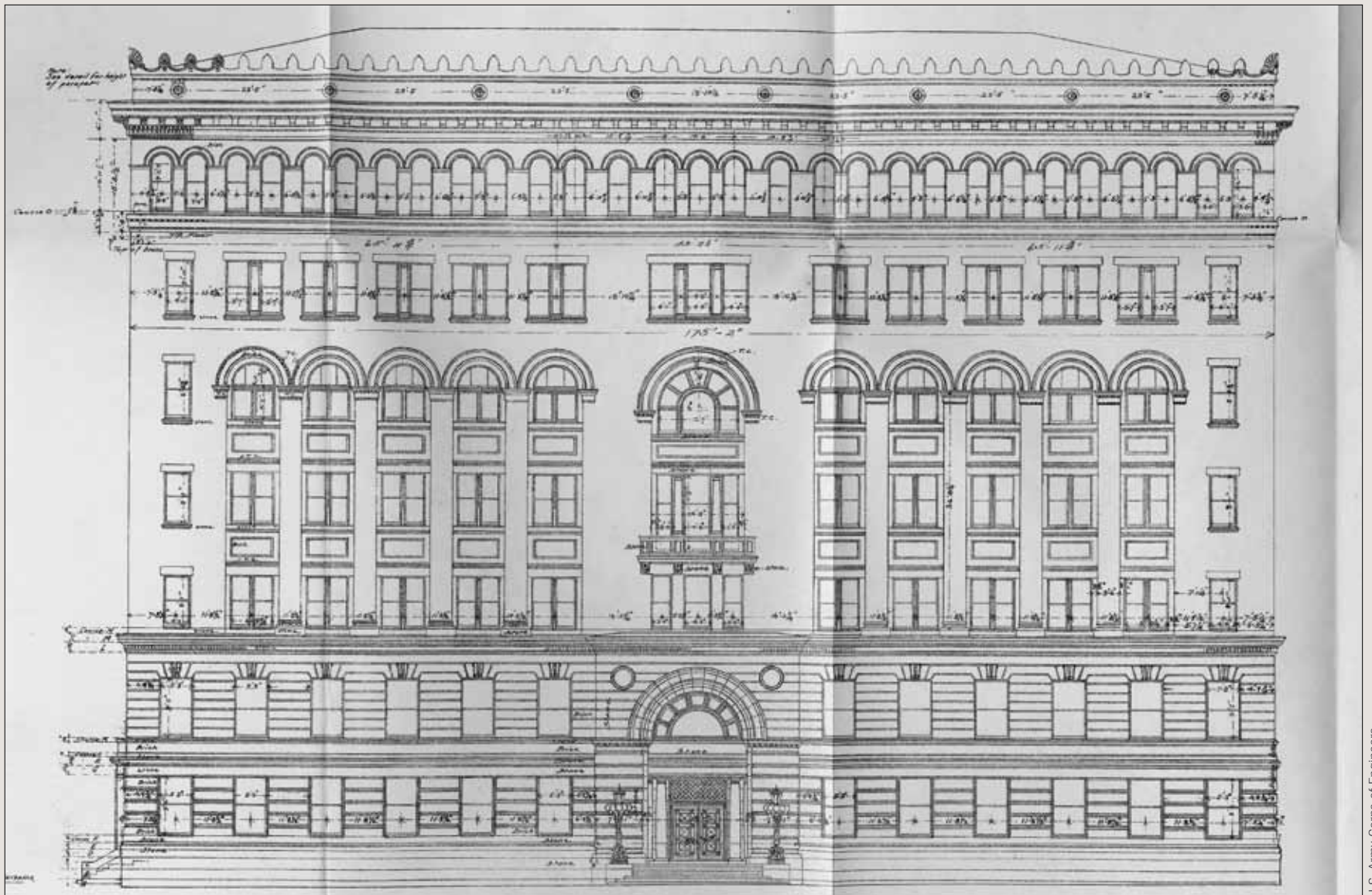


GPO continued to grow. By 1900 the inner courtyard had been built in, and in 1896 an annex had been built across the rear, eight stories tall, but very narrow. The photo shows that the neighborhood had become a residential district of modest row houses and small businesses.

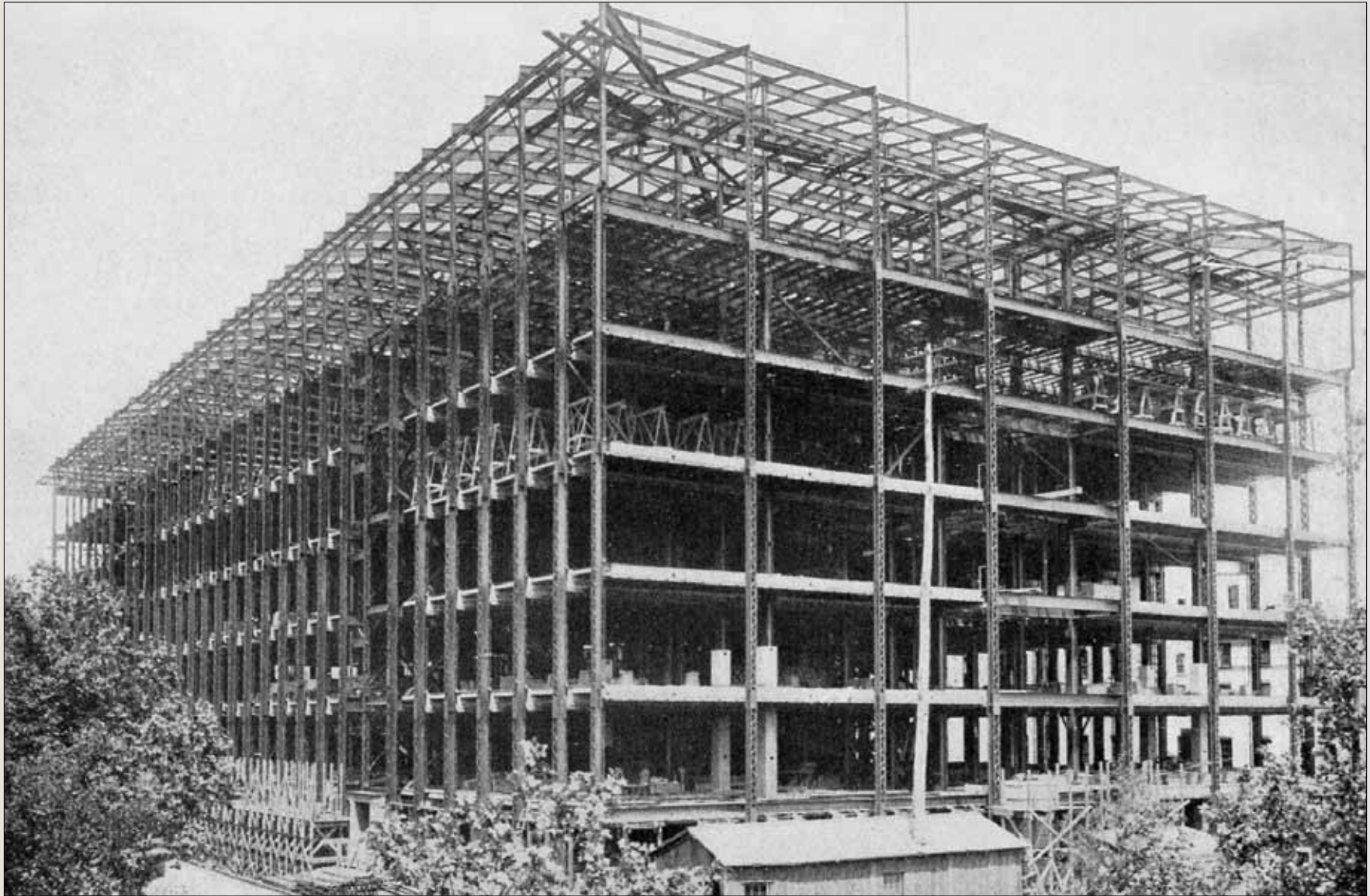


Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress

This 1897 photo from the Library of Congress was taken from the corner of G Street NE and North Capitol Street. The GPO complex is visible behind a row of houses that would be demolished in 1899 to make way for the new GPO Building 1. Workers in the foreground are laying track for the North Capitol Street streetcar line, which ran to the Soldier's Home, north of Michigan Avenue.



Congress authorized a new extension for GPO in 1898. Designed by James G. Hill and built under the direction of the Army Corps of Engineers, the building that became known as Building 1 was finished in 1903 and fully occupied in 1904. This elevation shows the approved design for the North Capitol Street façade.



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Building 1 was built to be fireproof, with a steel and masonry superstructure, finished with brick and terra-cotta on the exterior and brick and ceramic-faced brick inside.



When Building 1 opened in 1903, it comprised 7 floors and basement, at the corner of North Capitol and G Streets NW. The floor space was over 377,000 square feet, about 10½ acres.



GPO's growth continued throughout most of its first 100 years. When George H. Carter became Public Printer in 1921, he directed an operating surplus to the conversion of the leaking and unusable attic story of Building 1 to a full 8th floor.



When the 8th floor was complete, it provided space for the cafeteria, Harding Hall, a bowling alley, a photoengraving plant, and storage.



Another of the features of the 1922 renovation was a roof terrace where employees could relax or eat lunch, behind the agency's electric sign.



Public Printer Carter said, "A broad stairway leads to the roof where a permanent canopy has been constructed for the additional comfort of employees, who can there enjoy the fresh air and the finest view of Washington and the surrounding country that is to be had anywhere in the city."



In 1926, Public Printer Carter persuaded Congress to authorize an extension to Building 1, at the rear of the building between G Street and Jackson Alley, known as Building 2.



Building 2 is the same height as Building 1 and when finished was hard to detect as a different structure.



This night view shows Building 1 lit in celebration of Inauguration Day for President Coolidge, March 1925.



In 1929, an enlargement of Harding Hall was authorized. The roof was raised, a balcony was added, and the new hall seated 1,800. It was dedicated in May 1930.



The North Capitol Street front of Building 1, with the raised roof of Harding Hall visible upper right, circa 1940. The electric sign proclaimed GPO's location from the 1920s until 1960.



In 1935, Public Printer A. E. Giegengack won approval for a new eight story building to replace the old building on the H Street side, and for a new warehouse across North Capitol Street at the corner of G Place. Building 4, the warehouse, opened first, in 1938, on this site. Most of old Swampoodle had been swept away 20 years earlier in the construction of Union Station (to the east) and the main Post Office (to the south). Building 4 replaced another jumble of 19th century structures.



Building 4 runs the depth of the block between North Capitol Street and 1st Street NE. A dedicated railway siding was approved by Congress, built over 1st Street, connecting the warehouse to Union Station for the delivery of materials, particularly paper, and the shipment of stock.



Building 4 is one of comparatively few Art Deco buildings in Washington. Its 9 foot tall bas relief sculptures on the G Place side and over the entrance were carved by Elliot Mens and Armin A. Scheler.



The collection of buildings on the H Street NW corner that began with the Wendell Building was finally razed in 1938.



This view from the roof of Building 2 looks over the rooftops of the old building complex, with the tall narrow annex at left. Swampoodle is more densely residential, and the city has grown up all around. The tracks of Union Station are visible in the middle distance.



Public Printer Giegengack laid the cornerstone of Building 3, the new main building at the corner of North Capitol and H Streets, NW, on February 21, 1939.



Excavation of the basement of Building 3. The row houses on H Street NW stretch across the upper part of the photo.



An architect's proposal for Building 3, which closely mimics the Romanesque style of Building 1 on the North Capitol Street side, with a rather stern Art Deco façade on H Street.



The final design removed much of the Italianate detail and, while matching the mass of Building 1, presented a more stripped down, modern appearance.



When completed in 1940 Buildings 3 and 4 brought GPO's total floor space to over 33 acres.



Building 1 reflected in the glass of its new neighbor across G Street NW in 2016.