



Historic Property: Western Union Telegraph Company Tenley Site, Washington, DC

Period of Significance: 1945-1996

National Register of Historic Places Eligibility: Criteria A & C; Criteria Consideration G.

Significance & Effects Statement:

The former Western Union Telegraph Company Building and Tower were built in 1945 in anticipation of Western Union’s microwave relay system build out of 1946-48. The Western Union Telegraph Company purchased the property located at 4623 41st Street NW in the District of Columbia 11 September 1945. The “Tenley Site” as it became known was part of Western Union’s “New York-Washington-Pittsburgh radio relay triangle.” Western Union built a two-story concrete block building facing 41st Street, with a hexagonal tower rising on the west façade that was capped by a 12-foot metal turret within which Western Union placed antenna arrays. There is a four-legged lattice tower on the two-story building on which there are two horn-reflector antennas and multiple modern parabola and omnidirectional whip antennas. Most of Western Union’s microwave antennas were located on towers built on hilltops within the “radio relay triangle”; the Tenley site was one of only a few urban antenna sites collocated on buildings. According to one history of American telecommunications, the Tenley Site was “a ninety-foot tower resembling a monument.” In addition to being part of the first US private-sector microwave relay communications system, the Tenley Site also served as a component in the Cold War-era national security communications network.

Western Union owned and operated the site until 1996, when Micronet, Inc., purchased it. One year later, American Tower Systems, L.P. (predecessor to American Tower Corporation, Inc.), acquired Micronet and all of its assets, including the Tenley Site. On 29 July 1999, tower permitting company John P. Allen of Fernandina Beach, Florida, filed a FCC Application for Antenna Structure Registration for a proposed 750-foot tower; three weeks later, a revised FCC Application for Antenna Structure Registration was filed by American Tower Systems, L.P., providing the FCC with revised ownership information. In December 1998, before filing its Antenna Structure Registration, American Tower Systems executed an easement agreement with Washington Gas Light & Co. in which the company stated, “American Tower Systems intends to build, construct, maintain and operate a communications facility, including a communications tower, with antennae, cables, wires, other equipment on its property. Washington Gas owned a small parcel at 4621 41st Street, between the Tenley Site at 4623 41st Street and a second American Tower property at 4617-19 41st Street.

American Tower indicated in its FCC Application for Antenna Structure Registration that no environmental assessment was required, i.e., the undertaking would not adversely affect historic properties. According to the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office, there does not appear to be any record of Section 106 consultation for the proposed American Tower facility. The partially built American Tower structure appears to adversely affect the former Western Union Telegraph Company Tenley Site and under the National Historic Preservation Act constitutes an “anticipatory demolition.”



**American Tower structure (left),
Western Union structures (right).**



**Western Union Tenley Site: American Tower structure in front of
building.**



**Western Union Tenley Site: American Tower structure
(left), Western Union building and tower (right).**

**Western Union Telegraph Company Tenley Site:
Site conditions July 2002**