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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District:	<b>Greater U Street Historic District</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>933 Westminster Street, NW</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Meeting Date:	<b>February 24, 2011</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Case Number:	<b>11-131</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Eldra D. Walker</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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Property owners James A. Rinaca and Ryan C. Kidder seek the Board's concept review for a proposed basement entrance at 933 Westminister Street NW. While drawings have not yet been developed, the basement entrance at 915 Westminister Street NW, a neighboring property with a similarly-shaped projecting bay, would serve as the design model.

### **Property Description**

Constructed in the 1890s, 933 Westminister Street is one of several residences built for owner Henry A. Willard in this square. The well composed properties reflect the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque and Queen Anne styles and exhibit the characteristics of mature row house development in Washington, DC: the row features canted, rectangular, and circular projecting bays, dormers with pressed metal details, patterned brick, turrets, and varied fenestration patterns. The properties on this side of Westminister have very shallow front yards and their first floors are built close to grade. Numerous original cast iron stairs have survived, but 933's stairs have been modified over time.

### **Proposal**

The proposal calls for constructing an exterior basement stair. To access the area beneath the primary stair, a portion of the rectangular bay would need to be removed and reconstructed as a canted, corbelled corner similar to that existing at 915 Westminister, Street NW. The existing stair, which is centered with the primary entrance, would be replaced by narrower stairs positioned off-center from the main entrance; the design would also be based on the original condition at 915. The basement window sills would be lowered by one and a half feet to allow more light into the basement.

### **Evaluation**

The Board encourages the design of compatible basement entrances and has developed guidelines entitled "Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows," to assist property owners. A compatible basement entrance, as outlined in the guidelines, should adhere to the following design principles:

1. New basement entrances should be visually discreet and subordinate to the main entrance;
2. New basement entrances should not result in alterations to main entrance stairs, porches, or projecting bays;

3. New basement entrances should respect existing topography and site characteristics; and
4. Basement windows should be compatible with the architectural character of the building, and window wells should have minimal visual impact on the site.

In this case, the proposed basement entrance is not consistent with the second design principle, as it would alter the primary stairs and the projecting bay. Despite the modifications to the original stair and their current state of disrepair, the stair retains its relationship to the primary entrance, which is consistent among properties on the row. The proposed replacement stairs would be smaller in size and would be shifted off-center from the primary entrance. The Board's guidelines advise that "Even if a deteriorated stair requires repair, selective replacement of elements, or disassembly for reconstruction, this does not constitute grounds for altering features to provide new basement entrances." To insert the new basement stair, visible portions of the projecting bay would be permanently altered and removed. The guidelines state that "Altering the shape, dimensions, materials or other visual characteristics of a projecting bay to accommodate a new basement entrance is not appropriate."

Lowering the window sills to create larger basement window openings could be compatibly achieved if the enlarged window openings adhere to the fourth design principle. For instance, the new openings should be subordinate in size to the upper story windows and the lintel heights and widths should not change. Overall, the openings should have "minimal visual impact on the building's façade and [should] not result in a perceptible increase in window dimensions as seen from the street."

The guidelines state that "Primary entrance stairs ... and projecting bays are among the most significant character-defining features of historic property, possessing a high degree of craftsmanship, material richness and architectural styling. They should not be disfigured to add basement entrances." Supporting a proposal which calls for alterations to the stairs and prominent loss of and damage to historic fabric would set a harmful precedent for DC historic districts. The HPO encourages the applicant to consider other means of basement access, such as interior stairs.

### **Recommendation**

The HPO recommends that the Board advise the applicant to consider alternative means of access to the property's basement.