
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case Nos. 02-18

Engine Company 26/Truck Company 15
1340 (1346) Rhode Island Avenue, NE (Square 3956, Lot 802)

Meeting Date: February 24, 2011
Applicant: The Capitol Fire Museum
Owner: District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department
Affected ANCs: ANC 5B
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate Engine Company 26/Truck Company 15 at 1340 Rhode Island Avenue, NE. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Engine 26/Truck 15 is the last of the pre-World War II D.C. firehouses nominated for landmark designation.¹ Consideration of the landmark nomination was continued from January's hearing at the request of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission.

History

Nathan Wyeth, Albert Harris's successor as Municipal Architect, had completed the design for what would become Truck Company 15 in mid 1936.² Part of a Depression-era construction campaign, it was completed the following spring and immediately occupied. A "copy" of the Engine Company 29 house, it was the last truck house built in the city.³ Its design suggests either Wyeth's appreciation for his predecessor's model or the role he himself had had in creating it while still Harris's subordinate. Like Engine 31, the steeple has been removed from the hose tower. Unlike both 29 and 31 Engines, however, this station has a second wing, and thus a cruciform plan rather than L- or T-shaped plan, as another bunkroom and lockers were added for the Engine 26 crew who arrived in 1940. This concept of a balanced but easily expanded building plan is reminiscent of Albert Harris's plan for "extensible" elementary schools, designed in the same Colonial Revival mode and built during the same period of the city's suburban growth.

Truck Company 15, later nicknamed "the Farm," was constructed to bolster fire service to the suburbanizing northeast quadrant of the city. Like the other suburban firehouses of the time, it was designed as a Colonial Revival-style, one-story "bungalow." The style was considered suited to this region, with its Georgian tradition. Most important, it was favored by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts for neighborhood-serving government buildings, including elementary schools, distinct from the more formally classical buildings built downtown or meant to serve larger areas. The form of the low-slung, interwar-period firehouses was consistent with the style, and permitted by the availability of larger building lots in the suburban neighborhoods and adaptation to all-automotive apparatus. Larger lots allowed them to spread out and to experiment in plan. Putting sleeping

¹ Of course, all District government projects are reviewed for their potential to affect historic properties; many renovations of firehouses, landmarks and not, have been reviewed by the Historic Preservation Office.

² The limestone cartouche above the vehicle doors identifies the building only as "Engine Company No. 15."

³ A few existing truck companies have been moved into engine houses that were built more recently.

quarters on the same level as the truck bays obviated the need to jump down fire poles and better sealed off the men from rising truck fumes.

In the citywide reorganization of fire facilities of 1939-1940, the closing of almost-new 15 Engine was even considered momentarily, but in the end, Engine Company 26 moved here from its picturesque but antiquated house at 2700 2nd Street, NE.

When the District Commissioners ordered the racial integration of the firefighting force in 1954, 15 Truck/26 Engine was one of the all-white houses to whom some African-American firemen were transferred. This firehouse was one of those temporarily closed in 1971 because of a shortage of men due to budgetary problems and illness.

Evaluation

Engine Company 26/Truck Company 15 merits designation as a District of Columbia landmark eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

- As originally constructed for and still used by the District of Columbia's professional firefighting force, it is important foremost for its use. Along with the improvement of construction codes, the availability of firefighting services and advancing firefighting technology has spared American cities, including Washington, from large fires that once wiped out whole neighborhoods. The construction of these facilities has encouraged further development of the city, seen as a necessity for new neighborhoods. Over the years, Fire/EMS personnel have fought innumerable fires, effected rescues, rendered medical assistance, taught fire prevention and safety, performed acts of charity, and provided "Safe Place" refuges. This firehouse is thus associated with "institutions... [and] patterns of growth and changed that contributed significantly to the heritage culture [and] development of the District of Columbia." (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion B and National Register Criterion A)
- The building is a good and representative example of the Colonial Revival style, designed by the Municipal Architect and approved by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. It was designed to fit its site and suit its neighborhood architecturally. (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion D and National Register Criterion C) The building is thus eligible for listing in the National Register under the multiple-property thematic document *Firehouses in Washington, D.C.* as one of the few examples of "Inter-War/Colonial Revival Period Firehouses."
- Although there have been changes to the building, most notably the loss of its steeple, it remains largely intact and still strongly conveys its original character. The addition was built within the building's period of significance and was necessitated by the move of Engine 26 to this firehouse only three years after the initial construction. The addition made this building an innovation upon Albert Harris's Colonial Revival firehouse model.
- Because its primary and original use continues to this day, it is recommended that the period of significance for the property commence at the time of the building's completion, 1937, and terminate 50 years prior to the present date, i.e., 1961. This date takes in the period of the racial integration of the force.
- Engine Company 26/Truck Company 15 is 74 years old, permitting sufficient time to have passed to evaluate it within its historical context in the development of Washington and its respective neighborhoods, and that of local and national firefighting.