
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case Nos. 02-05, 02-07 and 02-16 through 02-19

Engine Company 22/Truck Company 11
5760 (5764) Georgia Avenue, NW (Square 2935, Lot 5; Parcel 87/5)

Engine Company 27
4201 (4235) Minnesota Avenue, NE (Square 5076, Lot 800)

Engine Company 31
4930 Connecticut Avenue (3601 Everett Street), NW (Square 1983, Lot 807)

Engine Company 16/Truck Company 3
1018 13th Street, NW (Square 248, Lot 814)

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

Fire Alarm Headquarters
300 McMillan Drive, NW (Square 3126, Lot 6; Parcel 108/6)

Meeting Date: January 27, 2011
Applicant: The Capitol Fire Museum
Owner: District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department
Affected ANCs: ANC 1B, 2F, 3F, 4C, 5B and 7D
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the following six properties as historic landmarks of the District of Columbia to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites: Engine Company 22/Truck Company 11 at 5760 Georgia Avenue, NW; Engine Company 27 at 4201 Minnesota Avenue, NE; Engine Company 31 at 4930 Connecticut Avenue, NW; Engine Company 16/Truck Company 3 at 1018 13th Street, NW; Engine Company 26 at 1340 Rhode Island Avenue, NE; and Fire Alarm Headquarters at 300 McMillan Drive, NW.

It is further recommended that the applications be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Background – The Multiple-Property Document

In cooperation with the D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, a survey of early firehouses and related properties was conducted in the 1990s. The resulting historical

context, *The History of Firehouses in Washington, D.C., 1806-1945*, became the basis for a multiple-property document, *Firehouses in Washington, D.C.*, adopted by the Historic Preservation Review Board. Multiple-property documents are “cover documents” and not nominations in themselves; they serve as a basis for evaluating the National Register eligibility of related properties (and by extension, their local eligibility as well). MPDs discuss the development of a property type or a geographically related group of properties and provide the basis for assessing and comparing them. To this end, they generally establish categories of types and/or periods of the resources addressed and criteria for being considered worthy examples of each type. As a practical matter, they obviate the need to retell the entire story of the development of the property type for each nomination that might follow.

The firehouse MPD sorts the pre-1946 firehouses into four chronological categories, classified by a combination of their architecture—and to a lesser degree, their reflection of technological and planning advances—and by who was responsible for their operation and design. The first category is “Pre-Civil War Firehouses,” consisting of the private, volunteer companies, but including only one extant example (Vigilant in Georgetown). The second category is the “Victorian Period Firehouses” (1865-1897), small, red-brick, two-bay, two-story, boxy buildings erected in built-up areas to serve and fit in among buildings of similar scale and materials. The third subtype/period is the “City Beautiful Movement/Eclectic Period” (1897-1916), in which private architects were engaged to design distinct, even unique firehouses, typically larger and freestanding. During this time, the hose towers, vertical spaces used for hanging the wet cotton hoses to dry, were often elaborated into true towers expressed on the exteriors as part of their eclectic revival architecture.¹ The fourth class is the “Inter-War/Colonial Revival Period Firehouses” (1925-1945), which represented a return to the idea of replicable model firehouses, now created by the Office of the Municipal Architect. These stations were mostly brick, Colonial “bungalows” built in the suburban areas of the city and taking advantage of larger lots to spread out while keeping truck bays and crew areas efficiently arranged on one level and without the need for fire poles. This generation of firehouse was commenced just as the use of horse-drawn equipment ended, and the stations were designed solely with motorized apparatus in mind.

The MPD concluded that all of the extant pre-war firehouses are of sufficient significance to merit designation for their use and their architecture, and that although each has been altered, all retain sufficient physical integrity to convey their original and historic character.

The present six nominations are the last of a large number submitted by the Capitol Fire Museum subsequent to the adoption of the MPD. Only one of these was denied landmark status.²

A discussion of each follows. The conclusion of the firehouses MPD adopted by the Board is sound. Taken individually and as a group, these six buildings all merit designation as District of Columbia landmarks eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

¹ In new suburbs lacking emergency call boxes, these towers served as watch towers as well.

² Engine Company 14, at 4801 North Capitol Street, NE, was rejected because it was constructed just beyond the period of the original firehouse survey and, while designed a few years earlier, is a transitional Modern building and did not fit the Colonial Revival mold of the interwar buildings. A nomination for the firehouse at Saint Elizabeths Hospital

- As originally constructed for and still used by the District of Columbia’s professional firefighting force, all of these properties are important. 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. Consequently, the construction of these facilities has encouraged further development of the city. Over the years, the Fire/EMS personnel have fought innumerable fires and effected rescues and rendered medical assistance, as well as shouldering air-raid watch duties, performing acts of charity, and providing “Safe Place” refuges. These firehouses are thus associated “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 utility of each building was, of course, the principal consideration in its construction. But with the possible exception of the Fire Alarm Headquarters, each building is a good and representative example of one of the property subtypes discussed in the multiple-property document. While perhaps less successful artistically, Fire Alarm Headquarters makes up for it with its quirky combination of Jeffersonian and Modern architecture and its unique role as the center of the citywide call-box alarm system. Although there are similarities between the buildings, each was designed to fit its site and suit its neighborhood architecturally. Each has since been a visual landmark of its neighborhood. And as described below and in the firehouses survey and multiple-property document, each property embodies “distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles” and its building type, as well as siting factors important to their function and to the development of the District of Columbia. (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion D and National Register Criterion C).
- Each of the six buildings designed by either private architect Leon Dessez or Municipal Architects Albert Harris and Nathan Wyeth. All are notable works of these men, each of whom was not only prolific but influential in the field and significant to the development of the District of Columbia. (Historic Preservation Review Board Landmark Criterion F).
- Although there have been numerous changes to each building, including interior renovations, door alterations and replacement windows (and in the cases of Engines 26 and 31, the partial removal of their towers), each building is largely intact and still strongly conveys its original character. The few additions to the buildings are all early and within the buildings’ periods of significance. Because their primary and original use continues to this day, it is recommended that the period of significance for each property commence at the time of the building’s completion and terminate fifty years prior to the present date, i.e., 1961. Coincidentally, this date takes in the period of the racial integration of the force.
- The nominated resources range in age from 72 to 114 years, permitting sufficient time to have passed to evaluate each in its historical context in the history and development of Washington and of their respective neighborhoods, and of local and national firefighting. Indeed, by the 1990s, when the Board adopted the multiple-property document, the Board found that sufficient time had elapsed to be able to evaluate and compare them.

Engine Company 22/Truck Company 11, 5760 Georgia Avenue, NW

Engine Company 22, erected in 1897, is Washington's oldest firehouse still in service and the earliest of the buildings being considered for designation today. The building was built to house Chemical Engine Company 2, which was tasked to protect the immense area south of the Maryland border known as "Brightwood," stretching from Rock Creek Park to the new subdivision of Takoma Park. Chemical companies were established in the developing areas that lacked public water service, equipped with engines that pumped chemical fire-suppressants.

In 1907 a one-story structure was added as a bay for a ladder truck, and the following year, the firehouse was reorganized as Engine Company 22 and Truck Company 11. Sometime after 1911, the addition received its own addition of a second floor, to expand the quarters for the larger crew. These companies received motorized apparatus only in 1918, despite the distances they had to cover. Being nearest Maryland towns such as Silver Spring, they were frequently called across the border to assist. But as far from downtown as the station was, the men of Engine 22 also played a major role in the rescue efforts in the 1922 Knickerbocker Theater collapse. As one of the outlying fire stations, 22 Engine was a site for the installation of one of the air-raid sirens provided by the federal government prior to U.S. entry into World War II.

The firehouse was probably designed by Leon Dessez, one of a small group of members of the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects that received multiple commissions for public buildings during the "Eclectic" period. A pioneer in the use of concrete and steel construction, Dessez was suited to the creation of functional and hard-wearing buildings. He was also an early member of both the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission. Congress's permission of commissions to go to private architects ushered in an era of architectural experimentation and individuality. Dessez drew heavily on Italian Renaissance classicism in his designs, including this earliest extant firehouse built during Washington's City Beautiful era.³

Engine Company 27, 4201 Minnesota Avenue, NE

Engine Company 27 was the penultimate Washington firehouse commission for Leon Dessez, the most prolific private firehouse architect. It was erected in 1908 to accommodate Chemical Company 1, which was disbanded in 1914 when 27 Engine was formed. The building is a stripped-down version of Tenleytown's 20 Engine—which itself could be called a simplified, hipped-roofed, "villa" version of the Dessez's downtown Renaissance *palazzi*, Engine 3 and Old Engine 11. The handsome but simple 27 Engine originally had arched openings, but they were widened and flattened after the building was belatedly equipped with motor vehicles in 1924. The design was undoubtedly considered appropriate and sufficient for the remote, low-density neighborhood of modest frame houses known as "Benning," including the area today known as Deanwood.

³ There were red-brick Victorian fire stations built contemporaneously including some by Dessez. This building shares many common characteristics with these, including plan and massing, but it is distinct for its architectural vocabulary.

Standing far to the northeast of downtown, 27 Engine served as another of the air-raid warning stations during World War II.

Engine 27 is most important for being the second African-American fire company in Washington, having received its officers from the first, No. 4 Engine, in 1945. Black firemen could only rise to command in these units, which had grown to only four in number when the racially segregated system began to be dismantled in the 1950s. This unit received a commendation as fire company of the year in 1962 for saving nine lives at a Grant Street fire.

Engine Company 31, 4930 Connecticut Avenue, NW

Constructed in 1930 “to harmonize with the architecture of surrounding residential structures,” 31 Engine’s architectural vocabulary reflects as much the influence of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts as that of the Office of the Municipal Architect, which was searching for an efficient, cost-conscious, modern, model firehouses that could be replicated in various suburban areas. The Commission promoted consistent, classically derived styles for public buildings and preferred the Colonial Revival for neighborhood-serving edifices such as schools, libraries and firehouses. World War II and its economic aftershocks had slowed residential development and made less capital money available for public projects. By the mid 1920s, however, suburban residential development was exploding, and the government had to meet a demand for additional fire service.

Engine Company 31 was among the new generation of modern stations built with motorized apparatus in mind. Arranged on one floor except for its central hose tower, the station was essentially the same design as the L-shaped plan of Albert Harris’s landmarked 29 Engine in the Palisades. Unfortunately, its neoclassical steeple, which was one of the visual landmarks of Chevy Chase, was removed decades later for safety reasons. The spread-out, one-story design was suited to the new suburbs where buildings were lower and less densely packed and land was more affordable. Putting sleeping quarters on the same level as the truck bays obviated the need for jumping down fire poles and better sealed off the men from rising truck fumes. Engine 31 incorporated two innovations, electric “automatic” vehicle doors and a warning light to replace the siren warning motorists of the departing apparatus.

The warning light was undoubtedly a response to increasing opposition to firehouses from immediate neighbors. As previously, the construction of a firehouse was seen as an inducement to development in an area, but as trucks could reach greater distances faster than horse-drawn engines, and their sirens created a great deal of noise, most residents preferred to live within a reasonable distance of—and a reasonable distance from—a firehouse. Engine Company 31 was the first built in Washington subsequent to a successful suit challenging the right of the government to site such facilities in any residential location.

For many years, the fire station also housed Rescue Squad 4, which performed building, automobile and swift-water rescues throughout an enormous area, including most of upper Northwest and the Rock Creek Park.

Engine Company 16/Truck Company 3, 1018 13th Street, NW

Completed at the beginning of 1932, this three-story, four-bay-wide fire station, often referred to as the “big house,” became the new home to 16 Engine, formed in 1904. The last of the historic firehouses erected downtown, it was designed as something of a showpiece, with a higher level of interior and exterior detail and finish than its contemporaries in the outlying neighborhoods. The impressive, open tower is wholly decorative, as the hose tower is accommodated to the side and within the body of the building. Engine 16 is the most important firehouse design of Municipal Architect Albert Harris, who was responsible for the earliest of the interwar-period stations.

Its construction reflects the beginning of an effort to consolidate fire facilities and de-accession older houses completed about 1940. It was not unique merely for its size alone. The third story was created for a “police and fire clinic, complete with operating room, recovery room, laboratory, and meeting room, capable of accommodating six doctors and numerous patients” but more recently has accommodated Emergency Medical Services offices and a battalion chief. This important, centrally located station was one of the first to be equipped with a two-way radio in 1940.

Engine Company 26/Truck Company 15, 1340 Rhode Island Avenue, NE

Nathan Wyeth, Albert Harris’s successor as Municipal Architect, had completed the design for what would become 26 Engine in mid 1936. Another part of the Depression-era construction and consolidation campaign, it was completed the following year and immediately occupied by 15 Truck. Another “copy” of the Engine Company 29 house, 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 T- rather than L-shaped plan, as another bunkroom was added for the Engine 26 crew who arrived in 1940 from their picturesque but antiquated house at 2700 2nd Street, NE. This concept of a balanced but easily expanded building plan is reminiscent of Albert Harris’s plan for “extensible” elementary schools.

Fire Alarm Headquarters, 300 McMillan Drive, NW

Fire Alarm Headquarters was erected in 1939 as part of the continuing building campaign and reorganization of fire department facilities. It is unique among the historical buildings for not being built to house a fire, truck or chemical company. Instead, it was built to serve as the hub of the fire-alarm callbox system. The telegraphic signals originating at callboxes near the scenes of conflagrations or accidents were transmitted to Fire Alarm Headquarters and relayed to the nearest fire station.

This was only the latest of the series of fire alarm headquarters that had existed since the callbox system was instituted in the nineteenth century. The McMillan Drive operation replaced a facility on the fifth floor of the District Building, from which alarms had issued for more than three decades.

This specialized use allowed the building a certain freedom as to site location that firehouses did not enjoy. A spot at the edge of the McMillan Reservoir probably offered an advantage in that the property was already government-owned, although the total cost of site acquisition, preparation, construction and equipment was said to total \$600,000, largely supported by a Public Works Administration grant and loan. But the elevation of the parcel offered sightline advantages, too. Among the equipment introduced to the new building was a two-way radio set, which at the time was to be connected to only a couple of other points *via* a transceiver at the top of the Washington Monument. The outfitting of each station—and ultimately the engines and trucks—with such radios took place gradually thereafter. The half-story atop the building, another unique feature, may have been intended only to light a control room below, but the central belvedere also likely served as a watchtower. (Unfortunately, while exterior elevation drawings survive, interior plans do not.) The building's high elevation and, more important, the web of the alarm system, made Fire Alarm Headquarters Washington's logical wartime "Warning and Control Center" for potential air raids.

Certainly the most eccentric of the fire department structures, the Fire Alarm Headquarters was designed by Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth. Still a "brick bungalow," like its engine-company contemporaries, it shares some features of the Colonial-Revival buildings of the interwar period, such as its primary materials and the arched openings. The belvedere and round windows on the upper portion of the building were presumably inspired by Jefferson's Monticello, but the building is fundamentally a utilitarian one, and Wyeth was clearly grappling with both financial limitations and the dawn of Modernism.