
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-20¹

Perna Brothers Chesapeake Street Houses

4112, 4114, 4116 and 4118 Chesapeake Street NW
Square 1732, Lots 40, 41, 42 and 43

Meeting Date: February 23, 2017
Applicant: Tenleytown Historical Society
Affected ANC: 3E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Perna Brothers Chesapeake Street Houses, 4112-4118 Chesapeake Street NW, as a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board request the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1909, the buildings' date of construction.

The properties merit designation under D.C. Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") and National Register Criterion C, because they embody the distinctive characteristics of a period and method of construction—cut-stone double houses or duplexes unusual for Washington and especially for Tenleytown—that are representative of the work of master stonemasons.

The properties are also significant under District of Columbia Criterion B ("History") and National Register Criterion A in the areas of community development, as representing the broad pattern of development of Tenleytown from a rural to a semi-urban community, not only in terms of densification, but also ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

The property is eligible for listing as a specific property subtype, "Building Clusters," identified in the multiple-property documentation form "Tenleytown in Washington: Architectural and Historic Resources, 1791-1941," adopted by the Board and the National Register in 2008. The document called out these particular houses as an eligible resource.

Background

The two double houses at 4112-4114 and 4116-4118 Chesapeake Street were constructed in 1909 probably to a design by architect William L. Conley. More important, the builders of the homes were the Frank (Francesco) and Louis (Luigi) Perna, the owners of the land and the project's stonemasons.

The Pernas immigrated to the United States from Calabria around 1890, relatively early for Washington's Italian community, which concentrated more in the Swampoodle neighborhood during the construction of Union Station. The Italian stonemasons were much in demand in this

¹ This nomination is being placed on the Board's proposed consent calendar because the State Historic Preservation Officer has discussed it and its implications with the two owners of the properties and has received no objections, and because Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3E has reportedly voted unanimously to support it.

city, where public buildings, major commercial buildings, churches, bridges and retaining walls were commonly constructed of stone.

The Perna brothers performed extensive work for the federal government, including buildings at Fort Myer, Fort Washington, and the National Zoo. They may have even repaired the Washington Monument. They erected many of the city's churches, and were especially known for their residential work, both grand mansions and the foundations for more modest homes. Their handiwork can be seen throughout the District today. The Chesapeake Street houses are important in that they illustrate the taste as well as the craftsmanship of the Pernas, because, as it was their own project, they could independently select the character of the stone. Called "brownstone" in the building permit, the material runs from brown to red, a variegation of shade that appears in their other work and suggests a reaction to Victorian uniformity of color. The stones are random ashlar, with the faces rusticated perhaps to suit a less-urban neighborhood.

The double houses truly stand out among their mostly frame single-family contemporaries in Tenleytown. Because it was a more costly and less accessible material, dressed stone was scarce in the Washington suburbs at the turn of the twentieth century.² Stone was largely used as a facing material on estate houses and, later, on the large homes of affluent suburbs such as Forest Hills. The reason these residences arose here is that the Pernas lived in the immediate neighborhood and operated their stone yard on this square. They intended this speculative venture to accommodate renters, an investment unlikely to pay off in this neighborhood before commuting was encouraged by new streetcar lines in 1890 and after.

Although attached, and similar in workmanship to grander houses in Dupont Circle and other, denser and close-in neighborhoods, these homes were calculated for use by some of Tenleytown's blue-collar residents—no longer farmers and shopkeepers, but laborers, streetcar drivers, plasterers, seamstresses, meat cutters, and firemen and police. Two of the four houses were almost immediately converted into two or more units, one of them a boarding house. The immediate rental of the properties may have encouraged Richard Ough and Sons to erect a row of nine duplexes on the 3900 block of Windom Place in 1910.

Frank Perna sold his share of the business to Louis in 1919, and Louis and his sons carried on until 1973, operating quarries in Maryland, constructing bridges across Rock Creek and on the GW Parkway, and erecting buildings at Georgetown University, etc. The Chesapeake Street houses represent in microcosm the family's work, plus its importance to the physical and economic development of Tenleytown.

As mentioned above, a multiple-property thematic document was developed a decade ago in order to provide the background of the development of the former hamlet of Tenleytown and the surrounding area, and to identify standout properties that might be considered the best and the most representative of the area's disparate resources. The document explicitly identified these properties as eligible for listing, as representing an unusual cluster that, so near Wisconsin Avenue, could be seen a transitional between earlier rural and suburban houses and later multi-family residential.

² A sample of Washington's rural houses during the Civil War suggested that less than ten percent were of masonry of any type, including brick and fieldstone, as well as any of cut stone.