
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 19-06
Scottish Rite Temple Amendment (boundary increase)
1733 16th Street NW
Square 192 Lot 808

Meeting Date: May 23, 2019
Applicant: Dupont East Civic Action Association
Affected ANC: 2B

Preservation Background

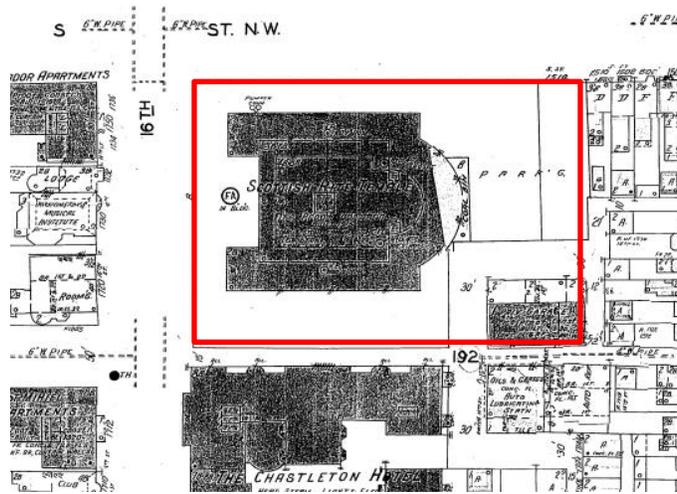
The Scottish Rite Temple is listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites as a Historic Landmark and is also a contributing resource in the 16th Street Historic District. The property was included in the city’s first list of landmarks, issued by the Joint Committee of Landmarks in 1964, and the predecessor to the current D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites created when the city enacted the D.C. Preservation Law in 1978. The Joint Committee’s list was organized into categories of significance, with the temple listed in Category III. In 1968, following the establishment of the National Preservation Act of 1966, the Joint Committee began preparing and forwarding nominations to the National Register of Historic Places for the properties in categories I and II only, and thus a nomination for the temple was not prepared.

The Sixteenth Street Historic District was identified on the Joint Committee’s 1964 list as a notable area in Category III. In 1977, acting on a proposed expansion of the Category III Dupont Circle area, the Joint Committee designated both Sixteenth Street and Dupont Circle as separate Category II historic districts, eligible for nomination to the National Register. Both were listed in the Register in 1978, and those nominations required clear boundaries for what had been sketchily defined “areas.” The Scottish Rite Temple is called out in that nomination as “one of the most unusual buildings in the Historic District” and is credited with having been voted “the fifth most beautiful building in the world by a group of members of the Association of American Architects.”

Boundaries

Under the D.C. Preservation Law adopted in 1978, the new legal protections for a historic landmark extend to the building and its site, commonly interpreted as the lot where the building is situated. At the time of its designation, the temple sat on the lot shown in red outline below. The landmark boundaries of the Scottish Rite Temple include approximately 2/3 of present-day Lot 108 in Square 192. Lot 108, which extends from 16th Street east to 15th Street on the northern half of the square, is the result of a 2013 subdivision by the Supreme Council combining a series of old lots in Square 192 into a single lot. Extending from 16th Street easterly to a point that is in

line with an alleyway that ran north-south through part of the northern half of the square, the landmark boundaries comprised the Scottish Rite Temple building itself; a carriage house/garage complex located at the southeast (rear) of the property (Old Lot 808); and open space to the east (in part historically occupied by rowhouses).



1959 Sanborn Map showing landmark boundary overlay

These boundaries included the original lots which the Scottish Rite purchased in 1910 to build its temple, as well as additional adjacent lots it purchased in the decades after completion of the temple (1915) until the time that boundaries were established for the 16th Street Historic District (1977).

The landmark boundary follows the eastern edge of the 16th Street Historic District.

The amended application proposes to extend the landmark boundary eastward to encompass the entirety of Lot 108 bringing the eastern edge to 15th Street. The eastern 1/3 of Lot 108 is presently included within the 14th Street Historic District. While the application proposes this boundary increase, it does not address or specifically cite which D.C. and National Register designation criteria it might meet.

Proposed Boundary Increase Rationale

The application proposes to amend the eastern edge of the landmark for the following reasons:

- 1) The Scottish Rite Temple was built on a site approximately one-mile north of the White House that was identified as open space on the L'Enfant Plan. The development of this open space, both historically and currently, conflicts with the L'Enfant Plan. Protecting this site as "open" would uphold the vision of the L'Enfant Plan and should be embraced. Further, the D.C. Parks and Recreation Master Plan suggests acquiring land for under-

parked neighborhoods. Retaining this open space would help to fulfill that Department of Recreation Master Plan recommendation.

- 2) John Russell Pope insisted on open sightlines for his projects. The amendment notes that Pope expressed this opinion in his design for the Lincoln Memorial, proposed for Meridian Hill Park, just north of the Scottish Rite Temple site, or the Old Soldiers' Home north of the city. Of these sites, Pope wrote that both "possess unhampered expression of purpose...by reason of their independence of surrounding important architectural dictates, consideration or comparisons."
- 3) In 1910, the Masons purchased a series of lots upon which they constructed the temple building, completed in 1915. Beginning in 1920, and continuing for many decades, they acquired numerous lots on S Street and 15th Street in the northern half of Square 192. After acquiring the properties, the Masons systematically demolished the rowhouses on those lots, many of which were home to African Americans. This act of demolition contributed to historic preservation efforts that ultimately resulted in the designation of the 14th Street Historic District.

Evaluation

Based upon a review of the application, HPO has the following comments on the three assertions made in the application:

From the outset, the Plan of the City, as designed by Peter L'Enfant in incomplete concept form in 1791, was modified and adjusted in the process of laying out the city. The refinement of the plan completed by Andrew Ellicott in 1792 after L'Enfant's dismissal, already included many changes to the original printed version of the L'Enfant Plan. One such change, of note here, includes the elimination of the open space centered on 16th Street from S to T Streets, the block just north of 16th and S Streets, NW—the site of the Scottish Rite Temple. The temple site would be adjacent to the southeast corner of this contemplated square.

Later nineteenth and twentieth-century alterations to the 1791 and 1792 Plans involved the elimination of streets, the introduction of others, and the re-organization of reservations, circles and other open spaces. Some of these developments, such as the introduction of minor streets, and implementation of the McMillan Commission Plan (1901) which re-envisioned the city's monumental core and imposed new order on the historic plan, have great significance in the city's urban planning history and are considered contributing features of the plan. Much academic research and scholarship has been devoted to the L'Enfant Plan and subsequent plans, and as the city continues to develop, urban planning efforts consider an appropriate re-shaping of the city, in accordance with its historic plans. City circles and Reservations have been re-configured and L'Enfant Plan streets that had been closed are being re-opened.

The 1997 designation of the Plan of the City in the D.C. Inventory emphasizes that the historic landmark is the plan as it has evolved, during the National Register period of significance from 1790 to 1942. The D.C. designation states:

“The designated plan is neither the archived historical map of the city (which exists in several versions including the original), nor an idealized diagram of the urban layout depicted on those maps. It is the layout of the city in its implemented form, including the streets, parks and other public spaces of the city as they evolved historically and exist in reality.” [italics original]

Features such as the never-realized plaza on upper 16th Street are not part of the L’Enfant Plan historic landmark. There is no historic argument for or planning rationale for a deliberate re-creation of such conjectural elements in isolation of existing or historic conditions. The proposed amendment to the Scottish Rite Temple calls for “protecting” an open space that never existed on paper beyond the original 1791 Plan and was never created as part of the city plan. During the mid-19th century, when the area was first developed, the site was divided into squares and lots in accordance with the 1792 Plan. It was developed during the late 19th century with rowhouses and then, in 1910-1915, with the Scottish Rite Temple.

Expanding the boundaries to include the open space behind the temple building will not contribute to the “restoration” of L’Enfant’s vision for open space on the site. The site was never officially set aside for public space and never developed as such. A “restoration” of open space as envisioned by L’Enfant would further engender the removal of the temple building and surrounding blocks and would be totally conjectural.

John Russell Pope is a nationally known architect for his many residential, civic, religious, and institutional building designs, including, notably, the National Gallery of Art, the Jefferson Memorial, and the National City Christian Church in D.C. Pope’s work has been the focus of several books and articles, and many buildings designed by him are listed in the National Register.

The amended application notes that Pope wanted “unhampered” views and open sightlines for his designed buildings. This assessment appears to be based upon a single source--Pope’s written comments on a design proposal for a Lincoln Memorial on either Meridian Hill or the Old Soldiers’ Home. No additional background on Pope and his work is provided. Lacking any historical background on Pope and his buildings, it is not possible to conjecture about what Pope wanted for the Scottish Rite site. What is known is that Pope designed the building on its site hemmed in by both the street and rowhouses on lots at the rear of the temple. He presumably

designed the building within those constraints and not with the expectation that those buildings would be removed in the future to enhance views to the temple building.

The argument to expand the boundaries to allow for an “unhampered expression” of the building according to Pope is purely conjectural. The open space was developed in the late 19th century with rowhouses, the last of which remained in the 1980s, and cannot be classified as a significant historic, cultural or designed landscape.

The application notes that the boundaries should be expanded to include the site of the rowhouses along both S and 15th Street which were demolished by the Supreme Council. The argument is that the demolition of these historic rowhouses galvanized the community and encouraged the rise of historic preservation in the neighborhood. That community effort culminated in the designation of the 14th Street Historic District.

The site of the demolished rowhouses was included in the 14th Street Historic District so that the boundary would align with that of the 16th Street Historic District, leaving no gap between them. The purchase and demolition of the rowhouses by the Supreme Council in the late 20th century is not relevant to the significance of the Scottish Rite site itself. The National Register notes that boundaries should “encompass an appropriate setting” but should exclude “peripheral areas that do not directly contribute to the property’s significance.” (National Register Bulletin, Defining Boundaries for National Register Properties, p.2).

Designation Criteria

This nomination was prepared as an amendment to a landmark that has no written nomination associated with it. Although the amended application does not address the designation criteria, it makes sense to look at them as they relate to the existing landmark, and in assessing the proposed amendment. Based on the site’s known history and documentation, it is reasonable to determine that the Scottish Rite Temple meets D.C. Designation Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism), E (Artistry), and (F) Creative Masters and the equivalent National Register Criterion A and C, and that the Period of Significance should be established as 1915 when the temple was completed on its present site.

The Scottish Rite Temple meets Criterion B for its association with social movements, groups, institutions, patterns of growth and change in the District. The Scottish Rite Temple is associated with the establishment of the Scottish Rite and the formation of the headquarters of the Supreme Council in the District of Columbia. The land that makes up the expanded boundaries has not been shown to have played a significant role in the history or events tied to the temple. In addition, the land was acquired after 1915, and thus falls outside the likely Period of Significance for the temple.

The Scottish Rite Temple meets Criterion D, E, and F as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a building type and style; is an expression of architecture and urban planning; possess high artistic value; and is the work of a master architect. The proposed expanded boundaries do not contribute to the significance of the Scottish Rite Temple under these criteria. The open space is not notable as a designed or cultural landscape. In addition, acquisition of the land by the Supreme Council falls outside of the Period of Significance of 1915.

The property has not been evaluated under Criterion G (Archaeology), and it is possible that the site (existing and expanded) may yield information significant to an understanding of historic or prehistoric events of the District. In particular, the proposed expanded area—the site of demolished 19th-century rowhouses—may provide information on the lives of the African American, working-class residents who lived there. However, should the site provide such information, its significance would be related to the broader neighborhood history, and not associated with the Scottish Rite Temple and the significance for which it has been designated a historic landmark.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board deny this amendment to the Scottish Rite Temple designation. While a new submission for a well-researched, fully documented National Register nomination for the Temple would be welcome, existing information provides a sufficient understanding of the landmark to allow the Board to determine that the boundaries should not be expanded as proposed.