HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Mount Pleasant Historic District**	(**x**) Agenda
Address:	**2021 Klingle Road NW**	
Meeting Date:	**July 9, 2015**	
Case Number:	**15-427**	(**x**) Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	**Tim Dennée**	(**x**) Permit

The applicant, property owner Carlos A. Monje, Jr., requests the Board's review of a permit application to remove aluminum siding from this 1896 house and to replace it with fiber-cement siding.

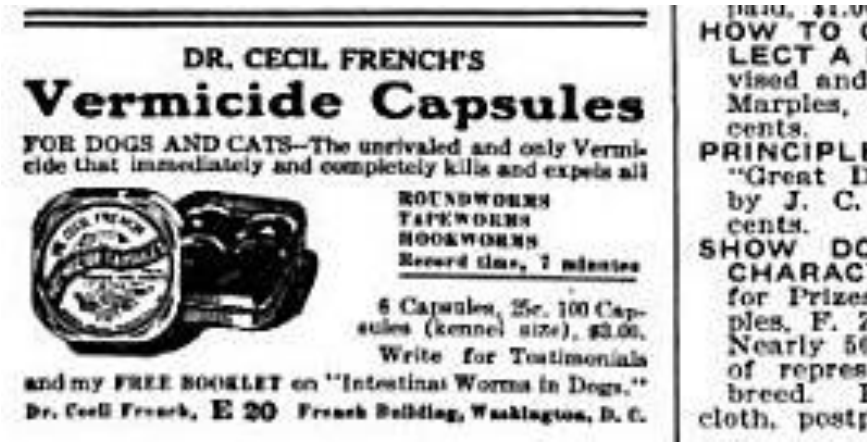
Under separate permit, the project commenced with some window replacements and alterations and siding repair, but the owner and contractor decided that removal of the aluminum siding would be necessary. As recommended by the design guidelines for "Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings," the applicant and his contractor consulted with staff regarding replacing the aluminum with fiber-cement. They balked at the anticipated cost of cedar replacement siding as an alternative, but staff advised that the original siding almost surely remains beneath the aluminum and suggested that the upper floor, at least, would likely have been shingled.

The house's historical background

The residence at 2021 Klingle Road was designed by architect Victor O. Mindeleff for Dr. Cecil French, a veterinarian and professor of veterinary medicine, a naturalist, zoologist, and purveyor of proprietary medicines and live animals.

Mount Pleasant was subdivided in stages. The earliest development in the historic district occurred north of Lamont Street along what is now Mount Pleasant and 17th Streets, a western extension of Pleasant Plains. As late as 1894, only three small frame houses, plus the old Ingleside mansion, stood west of what is now Mount Pleasant Street.

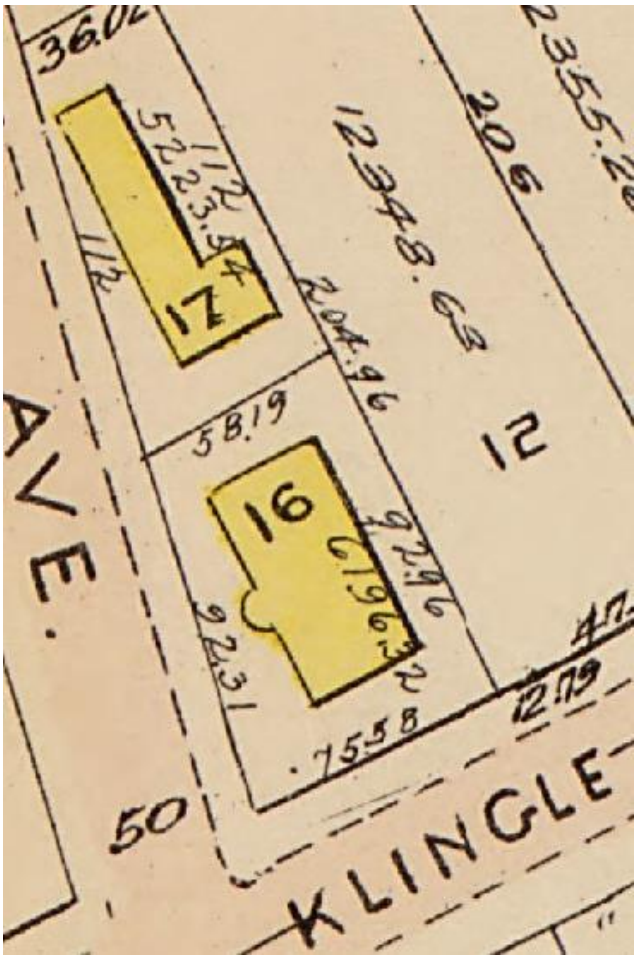
The London-born Cecil French had trained at the Royal Veterinary High School in Munich and McGill University in Montreal, arriving in Washington via Canada in 1894. He was soon elected president of the Washington Kennel Club and of the Washington Cat Club, and was a member of the Humane Society. "Perhaps in all this city no one person has so good a right to claim the friendship of dogs, and all pet animals, as Dr. Cecil French," opined the *Washington Post* after his first year of practice. "[I]t is safe to say that at present no person in this city is so well versed in the diseases of this animal [the dog] and their treatment… During the summer a novelty which caused every passer to smile was the trough in front of Dr. French's office, bearing the sign, 'Ice Water for Dogs.'"



***Cecil French, D.V.S. and a 1915 ad in* The Dog Fancier.**

French established that office in the 700 block of 12th Street NW, but when it came time to build a home, he chose Mount Pleasant. Rather than locate nearer 14th Street, the route of the closest streetcar, Dr. French chose instead a large corner lot overlooking the new Rock Creek Park and an old ford road running across it. His decision was not accidental or a matter of mere aesthetic preference; the lot was just uphill of the National Zoo, and the neighborhood was still settled sparsely enough that he could establish in his back yard a boarding kennel for dogs and cats. French's "sanitarium for dogs," as the *Washington Post* called it, was to be

divided into twenty separate wards, and each dog will have the privilege of private quarters. Each ward will be of about 3x7 feet, and will be approached from the inside. Each ward will, however, have a door opening into the yard, which will in turn be divided into twenty separate sections, each dog having his own private yard… In winter the hospital wards will be heated by the hot water system, and in summer ventilated by means of electric fans. In one end of the building will be located the shampooing-room, where the animals may be thoroughly cared for in the tonsorial line… An operating-room will adjoin the shampooing-room, where all surgical operations required can be performed… The ambulance will also be located at the hospital and connected by telephone with the city…



A detail of a 1911 Baist real estate atlas depicting the French House and Dr. French's dog hospital, the latter located where 2011 Rosemount Avenue now stands. The wider portion of the kennel building may be the stable for the ambulance. This may be the garage referred to when the home was sold in 1918.

French also took a keen interest in Rock Creek Park itself, leading an effort to stock it and other city parks with deer, pheasants, squirrels, geese, ducks, swans and quail, helping restore a former agricultural and milling center to a more naturalistic character.[1] He also fought a city muzzle law for dogs as unnecessary, citing the example of his beloved Great Dane rescuing his toddler son from drowning in the creek.

[1] We can probably thank Dr. French for today's deer, squirrel and goose pests, although it is interesting to imagine how denuded of fauna the district must have been at the time because of hunting and land clearance.

Dr. French procured animals for the National Zoo, and he parlayed such initially ad hoc commissions into a regular business of purchasing and shipping animals, everything from infant squirrels to musk oxen, "for zoological, propagating, scientific and ornamental purposes." He published textbooks and popular treatises on the care of dogs while selling proprietary medicines for domestic animals as the French Remedy Company.

The Klingle Road house appears to have remained the Frenches' primary residence until about 1913, but they did not sell the property until 1918, partly because Dr. French spent two years in Europe during the war. Although a naturalized U.S. citizen, he received a commission in the Canadian army in France, after first shipping out to Serbia to serve as an ambulance driver. Then full-grown, his son, Ernest, became an aviator for the Royal Flying Corps and was taken prisoner by the Germans in 1917. At the time of its sale, their property, then known as 2007 Klingle Road, was described as "detached cottage style, having eight rooms and attic, heated with hot water and having electric lights. There is also a large garage," on the 75- by 300-foot lot, and a vegetable and flower garden, but no mention of the former kennel. The purchasers were U.S. Army physician Taliaferro Clark and his wife, Margaret. The Clark family remained only two years. Years later, as director of the Public Health Service, Dr. Clark would become notorious for studying the effects of untreated syphilis on African-American men at the Tuskegee Institute. A subsequent occupant of the house was William H. Grovermann, a retired jeweler who had been responsible for the care of the White House silver during the second Cleveland administration and the McKinley administration.

To design his family home, Cecil French engaged local architect Victor Mindeleff.[2] The men shared at least one thing in common: they were both natives of London. Mindeleff is not exactly a household name today, but he was well known in his time, not only as an architect, but also as a painter,[3] landscape designer and, after his work with the Bureau of Ethnography, an expert on Pueblo Indian architecture.[4] At his death in 1948, he was called one of Washington's most notable architects.

Victor Mindeleff

Although he became the president of the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Mindeleff was as well known for the landscapes within which he set his houses. His biographical blurb for the A.I.A. gave as his specialty "the designing and supervision of detached dwellings, with accessory features of gardens, etc., including the complete layout of country places and community planning adjusted to varied topography." Perhaps his best-known commission was for the original campus of Glen Echo Park. He also designed the residential row now known as the landmark President's Office of the George Washington University. One of his side projects was decorating the Pension Building for Theodore Roosevelt's second inaugural ball.

[2] The house's builder was E.D. Farnham.

[3] Mindeleff mostly painted floral still lifes in watercolor, a reflection of his interest in flowers. He exhibited in Washington and New York. C.G. Sloan & Co. auctioned 30 of his works in 1895. He also painted a series of panels at the Army and Navy Club. For his success with gardens he gave the credit to his talented wife, Jessie, who was a gardener and a watercolorist.

[4] He and his brother, Cosmos Mindeleff, authored "A Study of Pueblo Architecture: Tusayan and Cibola," published in the Smithsonian's annual report in 1891. Victor also penned the article "Origins of Pueblo Architecture."

While some clients requested and received only run-in-the-mill rowhouses and stores, Mindeleff could be wonderfully innovative. Consider how modern his 1422 Belmont Street looks for 1895 or his 1727 Lamont for 1902. The former house may be one of those works that a later writer characterized as having "a decidedly Puebloan cast." Mindeleff had also adopted genuine classicism before almost anyone else in Victorian Washington; his model villa and office at 715 Randolph Street for the Petworth Real Estate & Improvement Company predated the 1893 Columbian Exposition. On that project, and for a contemporaneous residence at nearby 3701 New Hampshire Avenue (now a commercial building), he demonstrated the use of concrete as the primary structural and decorative material.

The same year he designed 2021 Klingle, Mindeleff was appointed architect for the U.S. Life Saving Service, the forerunner of the Coast Guard. For two decades thereafter he designed mostly Shingle Style rescue stations and towers along the East Coast and Great Lakes. He had already worked out this rustic architectural mode in private commissions in Washington. Assuming that shingles are revealed beneath the aluminum siding of the French House, this is one example. The Shingle Style was, of course, characterized by the liberal use of wood shingles or shakes on walls and roofs. Walls were not always completely covered with them, however; as with the contemporaneous and related Queen Anne style, Shingle houses often had shingles applied only to the upper story. The lower floor might be a fieldstone base or an arched porch, for instance, as at the landmark "Owl's Nest" in Forest Hills. Shingle Style homes—and it was an overwhelmingly residential fashion—typically had prominent, low-sweeping roofs, emphasizing their geometry and the texture of yet another field of shakes. The Shingle Style eschewed boxy planarity and embraced asymmetry, reflecting medieval and early American architectural influences. But unlike the Queen Anne, Shingle buildings were less about turrets and applied Eastlake, stick or neoclassical decoration, and more about expressing volume and textured surfaces. The rusticity of the Shingle Style was well suited for a property perched on the rim of Rock Creek Park.[5]

One can trace Mindeleff's efforts to render his Romanesque-influenced masonry work into frame construction, something that John Ruskin would have condemned as lacking "truth," but which provided interesting reveals and shady porches. Compare his semidetached 1466 Belmont Street NW, designed in 1894, with the 3325 Holmead Place cottage of two years earlier (see next page) and with the French house. In each case, the principal feature is a porch recessed behind a projecting balcony and beneath an arch. Holmead Place has a Gothic arch, suggestive of cruck framing. Both of the earlier homes may be seen as prototypes for the French house, but the latter is freed from the idea that the arch is structural, and its upper porch is nestled into the roof of the principal one.[6]

Evaluation of the proposal

Like architect Victor Mindeleff, the French house has been long underappreciated. The principal reason is that it has been obscured behind aluminum for decades. That material does create shadow lines, but its uniformity, inflexibility, corner details, panning, finish, and limited color selection make it a poor substitute for wood. It is also generally limited to a simulated beveled

[5] There is a later Shingle Style house encased in aluminum at 3303 18th Street.
[6] The veranda with floor-length windows is a picturesque feature of cottages going back to Downing and Vaux.

weatherboard profile and typically has a broader-than-traditional exposure. For these reasons, the historic preservation design guidelines for "Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings" state that "[m]etal siding is almost never appropriate…"

1466 Belmont Street NW

3325 Holmead Place NW

Like other incompatible alterations predating the historic district, existing aluminum siding is grandfathered. The design guidelines advise caution when removing a later wall covering, in case it has attained historic significance in its own right. "If, however, the non-original material is inappropriate to the character of a historic building, and is not considered significant, the building owner should consider its removal." It is only when it is removed that the subject of a more compatible siding type arises.

According to the guidelines, "[w]alls and above ground foundations are among the most important character-defining elements of historic buildings." The particular character and texture that the wall materials provide may be of special importance to this type of picturesque house.

The applicant proposes to replace the aluminum with fiber-cement siding. "Covering primary walls with a new material is almost never appropriate since it will alter the character of the wall

and may accelerate deterioration." Although these guidelines were written in the mid 1990s, before fiber-cement siding had become common, this principle remains valid. In order for substitute siding products to be compatible, "their reflectivity, finish, size, profile and other visual characteristics [must] simulate the existing wood and… [be] installed in a manner so that the depth and character of window and door surrounds remains the same."

While fiber-cement is superior to aluminum in several ways—it can have a hand-painted finish, there is usually more choice with exposure, and the trim is solid—it still has its drawbacks, even relative to aluminum. Because of its weight, it is usually very thin and reads flat on a building, without much of a shadow line. It also looks more uniform than wood, and the trim, especially when the fiber-cement is installed over old siding, seldom effectively mimics traditional corner boards, rake molds and window and door casings. The staff and the Board recommend approval of fiber-cement siding in many applications, but limited to the following: on new construction, including accessory buildings; on rear additions, rear porches and some side additions; on walls that are not prominently visible from the street; and on walls that are too close to neighboring buildings to permit regular access for maintenance or to dry quickly from rain. Fiber-cement, typically in panel form, may be used in locations distant from an observer, such as on a mechanical penthouse.

Although it comes with extra weight and cost, James Hardie Building Products, Inc. has developed thicker fiber-cement siding, but it is limited to a beveled weatherboard profile and a "V-rustic" profile. The latter comes only in a seven-inch exposure. There have been fiber-cement products with a cove profile, but they are so thin as to be wholly unconvincing as substitutes for real German lap. Fiber-cement board would wash out the character of the historic building and make it look too much like new construction.

Happily, the solution is hiding right beneath the aluminum. The design guidelines allow for consideration of substitute materials when in-kind replacement will "not be technically or economically feasible," yet the applicant appears to have the original siding in place. It is German lap, with a cove in the upper third. The photographs submitted by the applicant show four places where the original siding is exposed, all apparently at the edges of openings. While such locations on a frame building often show more water penetration and nail holes, only one photo depicts boards with rotted ends and serious splitting. The rest appear thick and sound. The staff recommended that the contractor investigate beneath the siding on the upper floor as well. While aluminum has not been removed there, the attic space over the porch has been accessed, which would presumably allow one to see skip sheathing and perhaps the backs of shingles through the studs of the exterior wall.

A photo of the west side of the house shows new casement windows and a former opening which is being sealed. Between them remains the old siding beneath new house wrap, indicating that it remains sound enough for the contractor to nail new siding to it. Instead, it could almost certainly be exposed, patched, sanded and repainted, with spot replacement as necessary. This is consistent with the design guidelines and with the general preservation philosophy of retaining historic fabric and restoring the original appearance.[7] This is the standard that has been applied

[7] That is, consistent with the D.C. preservation law's purposes to "retain and enhance" contributing buildings and to alter them compatibly (D.C. Official Code § 6-1101(b)(1)) as well as with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation 2, 5 and 6.

to frame houses in all historic districts, and it has not proven economically infeasible even in Anacostia, where frame houses predominate.

It is conceivable that some fiber-cement board might be used on portions of the building that are not prominently visible from surrounding streets. Original siding might be salvaged from such a spot for reuse elsewhere, perhaps obviating the need for the purchase of any wood replacement siding. The east side wall may be such a location, as the house's setback renders that wall little viewable from Klingle Road and not at all from Rosemount Avenue. It may be worth considering as well the use of fiber-cement shingles on the upper story—if removal of the aluminum indeed shows that portion of the house to have been shingled, but those shingles are found to be missing or deteriorated. Such decisions may be handled at the staff level, but await further exposure of the original siding.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board recommend approval of a permit to remove the house's aluminum siding as consistent with the purposes of the preservation law, but denial of a permit to cover the original siding with fiber-cement siding as incompatible and inconsistent with the purposes of the law.