
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-22

Scheele-Brown Farmhouse

2207 Foxhall Road NW

Square 1341, Lot 855

Meeting Date: January 26, 2017
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture, Inc.
Affected ANC: 3D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Scheele-Brown Farmhouse, 2207 Foxhall Road 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 1865 to 1915, from the date of its construction until it was no longer used by a farm family in the butchering business.

The property merits designation under D.C. Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) and National Register Criterion C, because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a period and type of construction—a modest nineteenth-century vernacular farmhouse—necessary for the operation of a farm and suited to the limited means of the average farm family. In that sense, it stands for all the similar homes and farms that have been lost. It is one of perhaps three dozen true farmhouses remaining of hundreds.

The property is also significant under District of Columbia Criterion B (“History”) and National Register Criterion A in the areas of community planning and development, as not only related to diversified farming for local consumption, but particularly to butchering and the trade in beef and mutton, an industry that dominated the lands surrounding Georgetown from at least the second quarter of the nineteenth century until the first quarter of the twentieth. Few of the homes of prominent butchers remain today, even around Georgetown, the primary butchering area in the District from the 1840s until the 1880s. This one housed two butchering families who also worked the surrounding farmstead.

Background

Like much of America, the District of Columbia was once covered with farms. The baroque Washington City plan devised by Pierre L’Enfant was imposed upon a landscape of wheat and tobacco farms, market and kitchen gardens, meadows and pastures, marsh and woods. Georgetown and a few hamlets were the only “urban” intrusions into a rural landscape. It was then a landscape of slave-worked plantations, substantially smaller than estates farther south, and of small freeholds and tenant farms, and with many landless laborers. Initial areas of development in the federal city—around the Capitol and the Navy Yard, the White House and near Rock Creek—were separated by active farms and fallow meadows. Much of the trade of

the preindustrial city was in agricultural products, especially as an urbanizing population needed sustenance.

As the national capital grew, it would eventually crowd out farmland, but this evolution took a century and a half. In 1850, assuming the U.S. Census reports were exhaustive, there were 282 farms and truck gardens within the District of Columbia, comprising about 90 percent of its land area. Washington City's Fifth Ward, which then included Capitol Hill, still contained more than 87 acres of farmland, but it was a distant second in cultivated area to the city's Sixth Ward along the Anacostia River. Still, agriculture within the city was an economic afterthought compared to farming in the surrounding Washington County, where it was nearly the exclusive activity. It was only in the 1850s that the suburbanization of the county commenced—when the county contained about 400 farmhouses—and a full century later that the last farms disappeared.

The farm upon which Augustus Daniel Scheele would build his home was one of several parcels of the huge former “Whitehaven” and “Alliance” estates that were auctioned as the result of the financial troubles of their former owners. This plot was originally settled by poor Irish immigrants, Patrick and Catherine Garrity, who constructed the first home on the property. After the death of Patrick Garrity and the children's arrival at adulthood, the property was again auctioned, in order to split its value among the heirs.

Augustus Scheele, the buyer, had grown up north of Georgetown and was apprenticed to one of the neighboring families of butchers. The area was already a butchering center, serving both Georgetown and Washington City, handling cattle arriving from Maryland down the Rockville Turnpike and that driven across Chain Bridge from Virginia. Scheele immediately set out to build a new house, which can be seen under construction in a photograph from the autumn of 1865. He may have still been an employee at the time of his purchase of the Garrity property, but by the beginning of the 1870s, he had meat stalls at both the Center and Western markets. Like previous owners of the land, he soon ran into financial difficulties and was forced to sell.

The land was ultimately purchased by Maryland farmer Joshua D. Brown, who then conveyed it to his daughter-in-law, Mary Ellen Brown. Mary Ellen and her husband, Walter, were already leasing the property in the mid to late 1870s. Walter Brown planted orchards and hay, corn, rye, oats and potatoes. But, like Scheele, his main line was butchering cattle, and he expanded the property to Foundry Branch, where he built a new slaughterhouse. The business success of the Center Market butcher shop of Walter Brown & Sons permitted the couple to erect something of a small mansion north of their old house, at the present Field School location. The former Scheele house became a tenant house for farm workers, before the Browns sold that corner of their farm to *their* daughter-in-law, Edith Kengla Brown, daughter of another wealthy local butcher.

In 1903, Edith's husband, Walter M. Brown, convinced her to move the tenant house southwestward, next to the home of William Donaldson, in order to construct a modern residence on the higher ground. Walter planted additional fruit trees on the back of the lot. The couple divorced, however, and Walter's departure from the property in 1915 ended the association of the old Scheele house with farming, orchards and, most important, with butchering.

Evaluation of significance

As there are no farms remaining in the District of Columbia and only a handful of agricultural outbuildings left, the Scheele-Brown Farmhouse represents its own vanished small farm, and by extension, the others that have been lost. It also represents Washington's early meat industry, particularly the business of butchering, in which most of the farmers immediately north and west of Georgetown, including the Scheeles and the Browns, were engaged from the mid nineteenth century to the early twentieth. Such farms were the entrepôts for cattle purchased at and driven from the larger farms of Maryland and Virginia. They were processing centers to get meat, beef and mutton especially, from the hoof to the market, performing a crucial service to a rapidly increasing urban population after the Civil War. In addition to generating greater self-sufficiency and additional family income from raising diversified products, butchers' farms provided fodder and water for their cattle, space for stock pens and slaughterhouses, and a buffer between these slaughterhouses and neighbors.

The Scheele-Brown Farmhouse, named for the first two families that occupied the building and the only residents who farmed the surrounding land while resident there, was constructed in the latter half of 1865. It is one of a few remaining farm dwellings standing in the District of Columbia. Although agrarian Washington County was relatively sparsely populated, farmhouses were once ubiquitous there, occupied by the small landholder and more numerous than the estates of the wealthy. Yet, because they were modest, such buildings were more commonly moved and demolished as the tide of suburbanization swept over fields, pastures and woodlots. The last District farms vanished in the 1950s, but large estate houses have been better preserved, as homes or institutions, than have the modest ones that might be said to have been more common or characteristic. A simple side-gable vernacular house with traces of Greek Revival influence, the Scheele-Brown house represents the modest farmhouses that typified the rural areas surrounding Washington City prior to the proliferation of suburban subdivisions after the 1870s. In addition to providing a dwelling for each owner of the farm, the building almost certainly served as a home to tenants and servants.

The farmhouse's period of significance should be considered to extend from 1865, its construction date, to 1915, the date when Walter M. Brown, the last farmer-butcher occupant of the property, moved away, and it lost its connection to the surrounding Brown farm and to the meat industry. Shortly thereafter, the parcel was sold and became indistinguishable in use from later suburban residences, although it remained a four-acre lot until subdivided for additional house lots in 1961.

Description and evaluation of integrity

The Scheele-Brown Farmhouse is a two-story, three-bay-wide, side-gable, frame house with a rear catslide ell, a full front porch, and an enclosed, rear, kitchen porch. With its rear wing, it is roughly L-shaped in plan. The main block is single-pile, i.e., one room (approximately seventeen feet) deep, with a center hall flanked by two rooms. It is stuccoed in a fawn color, with white-painted wood trim. It has a symmetrical façade with a central main entrance with sidelights. This entry, the flat-board frieze beneath the eaves, and the low-pitched roof are suggestive of Greek Revival influence, but the building is modest and very much vernacular.

The house has later small additions at rear, including a porch enclosed in the 1930s, a one-story post-1962 sunroom, a small extension of the rear wing, and a second-story bathroom probably added in 1942. These do not too greatly alter or obscure the original construction.

Because it was moved about 150 feet in 1903, the farmhouse's foundation dates to that year, as does the front porch, with its Tuscan-order columns. While the chimneys were probably replaced in the move, they appear remarkably close to the form and placement depicted in an 1865 photo of the house under construction, but the fireplace mantels betray their early twentieth-century vintage. The stair, the flooring and interior trim appear to date to 1865, however.

The move and surrounding development have diminished the farmhouse's integrity of setting and materials, but the house is largely of its original massing, fabric and overall appearance, and it remains on its original parcel in its original orientation. At the time of the move, the house remained surrounded by the same farm and orchard. As the farm and slaughterhouse have disappeared as have all others in the District, the significance of the building, as representing both modest farmhouses and butcheries, outweighs the effects of alterations on its integrity of feeling. In comparison, of the few remaining farmhouses, many have been moved, some reoriented, and all have greatly suffered a loss of setting, including the development of the former acreage and the demolition of outbuildings.

Archaeological potential

There has been no archaeological investigation of the Scheele-Brown Farmhouse. Of course, the house's present site is at least 150 feet from the original one—and that original site was probably disturbed by the construction of the Field School parking lot. Evidence of the earlier Garrity house would have been spared by the parking lot grading, but as it stood a little way to the east of Scheele house, as well as south, its remains are unlikely to be located on the present lot 855. Still, there could be remnants of outbuildings or other historic or prehistoric resources in the vicinity.