
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-12

917, 919, and 921 6th Street NW

Square 484, Lots 0811, 0812, and 0813

Meeting Date: June 24, 2021
Applicant: DC Preservation League
Affected ANC: 6E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board not designate the properties at 917, 919 and 921 6th Street NW a Historic Landmark. The group of buildings are directly associated with the historical and physical growth of the broader Mount Vernon Triangle neighborhood and would be more appropriately interpreted as contributing buildings within a historic district.

Background

This is the second landmark application filed for the three dwellings at 917, 919 and 921 6th Street NW. The first application, filed in 2005 by the DC Preservation League, grew out of a larger planning initiative launched in 2003 by the District government including the Office of Planning. As part of this study, the Historic Preservation Office prepared a National Register Multiple Property document (MPD) titled *Mount Vernon Triangle, Architectural and Historic Resources, Washington, D.C., 1791-1946*. The MPD provided historic context on the area's physical and social growth, and it identified associated property types relevant to the area's development. Under this cover document, the DC Preservation League prepared a historic district application—the Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District—for the collection of buildings around 4th, 5th, I and K Streets NW which the Historic Preservation Review Board designated in 2005. At the same time, DCPL also prepared separate landmark applications on several other buildings associated with the historical and physical patterns of development within the boundaries of the Mount Vernon Triangle area that were not within the boundaries of the historic district. One of these landmark applications was for the buildings at 917, 919 and 921 6th Street NW. Although immediately adjacent to it, the 6th Street buildings were not included within the boundaries of the historic district because they were not contiguous to it.

The Board did not designate the 6th Street dwellings as a Historic Landmark as it determined that the buildings did not meet the criteria for designation (see 2005 Decision document in HPRB Letters folder). Based upon additional research and documentation undertaken since 2005, the DC Preservation League has prepared both an amendment to the Mount Vernon Triangle Historic District (Landmark Case 21-11) which would expand the boundaries to include the three dwellings in the district, as well as a new landmark application (Landmark Case 21-12) for the three dwellings and the subject of this hearing.

History and Architecture

The amended nomination presents new information on the individual histories of these houses and provides extensive documentation of them. The nomination illustrates how these properties collectively broaden, enhance and contribute to our understanding of the Mount Vernon Triangle area as a notable working-class neighborhood that was part of, and/or depended upon the commercial activity of the 7th Street corridor and Northern Liberties Market as it evolved from the pre-Civil War era until the mid-20th century. The information presented in the nomination collectively enhances our knowledge of the social and cultural history of the neighborhood whose residents, including African Americans and members of the German and Italian immigrant communities, represented a diversity of backgrounds.

The nomination shows that the history and architecture of the three dwellings are directly associated with the socio-economic forces of growth that created Mount Vernon Triangle as a notable mercantile community. The first residents of the dwellings, including African Americans and members of the German community, appear to have been entrepreneurial, self-starter and upwardly mobile businesspersons. Their professions in the food and mercantile industries, their desire to build their houses in the neighborhood, their civic roles, and rising stature, clearly contributed to the growth of Mount Vernon Triangle as an important working-class, merchant community adjacent to the commercial 7th Street corridor and Northern Liberties Market.

The three-story Victorian brick dwelling at 917 6th Street NW, was constructed in 1895 by Louis P. Krey, the son of German immigrants and an established businessman, on the eve of his marriage. Krey had moved to the area around 1887 when he was a partner in a nearby furniture store; four years later, Krey left the furniture business for the food industry and established a wholesale poultry partnership, Krey, Price & Company, near Center Market. With the city's increasing population and food needs, the wholesale poultry industry was thriving, enabling Krey to build his solid brick dwelling conveniently adjacent to the 7th Street retail corridor and just north of his wholesale business across from Center Market. As his success in business continued in the early 20th century, Krey took on leadership roles in various business-related and charitable organizations, remaining with his family, including a wife and three children, at 917 6th Street until his death in 1920.

The history of the dwelling at 921 6th Street is similarly associated with the area's German immigrant and merchant community. Elizabeth Killian, of German descent and a successful milliner and business owner, built the three-story brick Victorian on 6th Street in 1886. For years before that, she and her husband, John Killian, and their children and several boarders lived at 1208 F Street downtown where she ran a millinery and he operated a restaurant. After her husband's death in 1885, Elizabeth Killian decided to leave downtown for Mount Vernon Triangle likely due to its ties to the German-American community, as surmised in the nomination. As specified by Killian, her new house was built to accommodate boarders, and for almost thirty years she would operate it as a rooming house where many of her tenants were of German descent.

While the early histories of 917 and 921 6th Street and their associations with the German-American community closely align with the known trends of development in Mount Vernon Triangle, the history of the dwelling at 919 6th provides important new insight into the cultural and physical development of the area. In 1855, at a time when the neighborhood east of the Northern Liberties Market at Mount Vernon Square was sparsely built up of mostly modest frame dwellings, free Black Washingtonian and laborer Arnold Somerville and his wife Elizabeth Curtis Somerville purchased (and maybe built) a two-story wood frame dwelling on 6th Street where they headed their family of three children. The Somerville family, who counted themselves among the small percentage of pre-Civil War, free-Black property owners, lived adjacent to both African American and German immigrant neighbors in those early years.

Following Arnold Somerville's death in 1867, after that of his wife's, the house descended to their children and would remain in the family until 1916. In 1886, Elizabeth (Somerville) Thomas and her husband, Charles Thomas, waiter, improved the family dwelling by raising the two-story wood frame house to three stories and building a new façade, essentially encasing the older frame house within a new brick one. The original wood structure remains visible at the rear of the dwelling today. This substantial upgrade to the pre-Civil War dwelling, along with a review of the family's professions—waiter, seamstress, school teacher—reveal that Arnold Somerville's pre-Civil War, free Black status and ability to own property helped propel the family after the war into the ranks of the middle-class.

Evaluation

The nomination argues that the three houses, built at different times for different clients, meets D.C. Designation Criterion B and NR Criterion A for their “association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage of the District.” In particular, the nomination finds that two of the three houses have important connections to the German-American community which played a key role in the area's retail history, and one of the houses—919 6th Street—is a unique example of a frame dwelling owned by members of the city's antebellum free Black community and is an extraordinary surviving example.

The nomination further finds that the group of three dwellings meet D.C. Designation Criteria D, E and F and National Register Criterion C because they “embody the distinctive characteristics of types, periods, style and method of construction.” In particular, the nomination argues that the houses are excellent examples of the vernacular Queen Anne style and that 919 6th Street provides a good example of the adaptation of a wood frame house as it was upgraded and adapted into a more modern and stylish house.

HPO agrees that the three dwellings and their histories are closely associated with the development of Mount Vernon Triangle. However, HPO does not believe that the properties meet the designation criteria for listing as a Historic Landmark. The reasoning, which is much the same as that found in 2005, is below:

D.C. Designation Criterion B: Although the three buildings are associated with the nineteenth-century residential development patterns of the Mount Vernon Triangle neighborhood, the properties are not associated with any particular pivotal event, activity, or person that characterizes the development of Mount Vernon Triangle. According to the National Register

Guidelines, “Mere association with historic events or trends is not enough, in and of itself, to qualify under Criterion A. The property’s specific association must be considered important as well.” The dwellings at 917 and 919 6th Street served as the residences to members of the German-American community who worked, lived and built their houses there, and thus contributed to its growth, but the houses were not the scenes of a particular event or significant activity marking important associations with the German-American or merchant community.

The early pre-Civil War, free-Black ownership of the house at 919 6th Street is more notable. No complete study of houses built or owned by free Blacks before the Civil War has been compiled in D.C., but it is most assuredly one of a small collection and even smaller surviving collection and tells an important story. The 1886 upgrade of the house from a frame to a brick one, illustrates the family’s growing prosperity and contributes to our understanding of the racial character of the neighborhood throughout the nineteenth century. Still, this story is part of the broader history of Mount Vernon Triangle and contributes more to that neighborhood history than to the story of these three houses.

D.C. Designation Criterion D, E and F and National Register Criterion C: All three of the buildings 917, 919, 921 reflect a vernacular Queen Anne style of architecture that is representative of the dwelling forms of the period and within the Mount Vernon Triangle area. The buildings all share character-defining features of the style, including projecting bays and decorative brickwork and, as noted in the nomination, “embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction.” However, according to the NR Guidelines, in the case where such properties “represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction” the properties are not individually eligible, but are more appropriately part of a district.

In terms of 919 6th Street’s importance as a frame structure-cum-brick one, HPO contends that the character-defining features of the frame house (i.e. the steeply pitched gable roof) were removed, and little evidence of the frame structure remains visible except at the rear. The house reads as an 1880s vernacular Victorian house and is not a particularly illustrative example of this transition from frame to brick.

Recommendation

HPO does not recommend the dwellings at 917, 919, 921 6th Street NW for designation as a Historic Landmark; however, the buildings do contribute to the history and architecture of Mount Vernon Triangle and HPO believes that they should be considered within that broader context as contributing buildings within a historic district.