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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
**Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 11-15**

Congressional Club  
2001 New Hampshire Avenue, NW (Square 189, Lot 0801)

Meeting Date: July 28, 2011  
Applicant: Congressional Club  
Owner: Congressional Club, Inc.  
Affected ANCs: ANC 1B  
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

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After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the Congressional Club at 2001 New Hampshire Avenue, NW as a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance.



Introduction:

The Congressional Club, chartered by Congress in 1908 as a social club for the spouses of the Members of Congress and the Senate, the President's Cabinet and the Supreme Court Justices, is a buff brick Neo-Classical Beaux Arts building located at the intersection of New Hampshire Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, NW and still home to the organization. The building is a contributing resource within the boundaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District and is thus protected by the D.C. Historic Preservation Law. The Congressional Club, Inc.—the owner and applicant of this application—is seeking the enhanced designation in the D.C. Inventory of

Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places primarily for honorary reasons. The club would like to have bestowed upon the building and the organization the same honor awarded to other elite women's organizations in this city including the Washington Club (NR, 1972); the Sulgrave Club (NR, 1972); Woman's National Democratic Club (NR, 1973 national-level significance, 2003); the General Federation of Women's Clubs (NR/NHL, 1991); and the Daughters of the American Revolution, Memorial Continental Hall (NR/NHL, 1972).

#### Architectural History:

The Congressional Club building, designed by Ecole des Beaux Arts-trained architect George Oakley Totten, Jr. and constructed in 1914, exemplifies the vision of Mary Foote Henderson, club member and pioneering development advocate for the beautification of Sixteenth Street. As a student of and strong believer in the City Beautiful Movement and resident of the street, Mary Henderson sought to transform Sixteenth Street into a premier gateway to the nation's capital with the same grandeur as the capital cities of Europe. Through her social connections, passionate public pleas, written testimonials, Congressional appearances and deep-pocketed speculative development, Mary Henderson promoted the idea of developing Sixteenth Street into "the model street of the country, one of the greatest of National boulevards." At the same time that the United States was projecting an image as a world leader, Mary Henderson promoted the idea that Sixteenth Street could be an international showpiece of the finest in American architecture and landscape architecture.

So, in 1914, when the Congressional Club had outgrown its building at 1432 K Street and formed a committee to search for an alternative space, Mary Henderson (an active member of the club as the wife of Senator John Henderson), seized the opportunity to provide the club with a new building as a way of furthering her efforts to develop Sixteenth Street into a grand avenue. To that end, Mary Henderson offered the club the services of her preferred architect, George Oakley Totten, Jr. to design a new clubhouse building on a lot of land donated by her at the intersection of Sixteenth Street and New Hampshire Avenue. For its triangular-shaped site, Totten designed a Classically detailed, wedge-shaped building with a dome-covered rotunda at the apex. The building is constructed of buff brick with limestone trim and is set upon a rusticated base supporting smooth brick wall surfaces above. The U Street and New Hampshire Avenue elevations feature large, tri-Partite "Palladian" on-center of the principal block.

The new Congressional Club building was of comparable scale, quality of materials and design to other buildings Mary Henderson was constructing along the corridor. By 1914, Henderson had already built four Beaux Arts mansions on Sixteenth Street at Meridian Hill, all of which she had either sold or rented to foreign governments for use as embassy buildings, plus a pair of dwellings (now demolished) further north around Lamont Street. At the same time, Henderson was leading an effort to clean up lower Sixteenth Street near the White House, which at the time included numerous small and dilapidated frame dwellings. Mrs. Henderson focused her energies on the upper and lower extremes of the avenue, declaring that "if the two slum sections of the street below Scott Circle and above Florida Avenue could be cleared out, that section between these two...would take care of itself."

The site at the upper end of 16<sup>th</sup> Street below Meridian Hill and its improvement with a new clubhouse building for the elite Congressional Club was thus a critical link in Mary Henderson's goal of developing Sixteenth Street from the White House to beyond the city's original boundary at Florida Avenue into a boulevard of national significance. The Club's direct associations with Members of Congress, the President's Cabinet and the Supreme Court would bring great prestige and cachet to the avenue and help catapult Henderson's vision beyond her own personally financed development projects into a broader, yet socially elite sphere of influence.

### Social History:

The Congressional Club, chartered by Congress in 1908, was established in the middle of what many scholars consider to be the heyday of the Women's Club movement. Women were motivated to join clubs for a variety of reasons, from joint pursuit of hobbies to collective political advocacy. One of the most important common aspirations of clubs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was to provide a social and physical sphere that had rarely been available to women before. The Congressional Club was established along those lines to provide a politically neutral meeting ground that fostered community among a distinct group of women—the wives and daughters of United States Congressmen and Cabinet members. Although a purely social club, the club was exceptional in that it offered a new kind of community for these notable and highly public women.

For more than 100 years, the Congressional Club has helped integrate the growing numbers of wives (now spouses) and families accompanying Congressmen to Washington. In the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Congressmen often boarded in rooming houses during Congressional sessions; however, with longer terms in office and longer sessions, Congressmen found the prospect of relocating to the capital more attractive. Their families would come, too, and often faced formidable challenges in entering Washington society. The Congressional Club offered Congressional wives an entrée into Washington society and all of the formalities associated with it. Although many members took on reformist and social causes creating names for themselves, namely in the Suffragist and Prohibitionist movements, and despite some efforts to re-direct the mission of the Club to embrace a greater purpose, the Club never officially served as an advocate for any cause. Officers of the Club were steadfast in maintaining the purely social mission of the Club in order to preserve the originally intended purpose to provide an apolitical and non-partisan community forum to a politically diverse group of women. Over the years, activities at the Club ranged from parties to performances and pageants to educational lectures and classes.

During the Wilson Administration, the Congressional Club essentially became an extension of the White House by hosting diplomatic events. Following the death of Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and at a critical time in American history, the Congressional Club was asked by the Division of Protocol of the Department of State to officially take over from the White House the public entertaining of official events.

One notable exception to its purely social mission came during World War I when the Congressional Club issued a national "Call to Service." The club used its significant influence to "arouse the organized womanhood of the country to begin war work immediately."

The Congressional Club also proved to be a training ground for our country's early women Congressional representatives as five Congressional Club members served in Congress between 1923 and 1941.

Evaluation:

The Congressional Club meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (Events) and B (History) and National Register Criterion A with Social History as the Area of Significance as it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. In particular, the Congressional Club, chartered by Congress in 1908, was established as the only social organization devoted to Congressional spouses. The club served (and continues to serve) as a politically neutral meeting ground that fosters community among a distinctive and select group of women.

The Congressional Club meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (architecture and urbanism) and National Register Criterion C with Architecture and Community Development as the Area of Significance as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles and is an expression of urban planning efforts significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. The Congressional Club is associated with the City Beautiful Movement and Mary Foote Henderson's effort to transform Sixteenth Street into a grand boulevard lined with impressive architecture to serve as an appropriate ceremonial gateway to the nation's capital.

The Congressional Club is significant at the National Level of Significance since its membership represented every state in the United States and its venue was meant to provide a neutral meeting ground for women whose husbands were serving their country. The Congressional Club is also significant at the national level as an expression of the City Beautiful Movement and the urban planning efforts of visionary and developer Mary Henderson to transform Sixteenth Street into a truly national boulevard and gateway to the nation's capital.

The Period of Significance for the Congressional Club extends from 1914 when the building was constructed until a point fifty years from the present, as long as the Club continues to occupy the building.