
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Document

American University Park in Washington, D.C.: Its Early Houses, Pre-Civil War to 1911

Meeting Date: March 24, 2011
Applicant: Tenleytown Historical Society
Affected ANC: ANC 3E
Staff Reviewer: Kimberly Prothro Williams

After careful review of the Multiple Property Document *American University Park in Washington, D.C.: Its Early Houses, Pre-Civil War to 1911*, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board adopt the historic context report and forward the document to the National Register of Historic Places for adoption.

Background Information

The National Register Multiple Property Document *American University Park*, prepared by the Tenleytown Historical Society, presents a thorough history of the late nineteenth-century subdivisions comprising present-day American University Park and develops a context by which to evaluate the various subdivisions' early houses for listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. The document, which follows the format established by the National Register, identifies three major themes that together provide a well-documented history of American University Park as a residential suburban neighborhood in the greater Tenleytown area of Washington, D.C.

The three contexts are as follows: 1) Rural Origins of American University Park; 2) The Residential Subdivision and Early Development of American University Park, 1896-1911; and 3) The Residential Development of Asbury Park/Robeyville in American University Park. In addition to these contexts, the Multiple Property Document has identified two Associated Property Types as follows:

1) Residential Buildings

- Pre-Subdivision Farmhouses (pre-1896)
- Early Subdivision Houses (1896-1911)

2) Building Clusters

As per National Register guidelines, the Multiple Property Document has developed Registration Criteria for the identified property types and sub-types. It includes a list of known and extant resources within American University Park, under each property sub-type. These lists of resources are not exhaustive (others may be identified in the future), but they are comprehensive, based upon survey findings. Inclusion on these lists does not mean that the resources have been

determined eligible for designation, but that they have been identified as an associated property type or sub-type and would qualify for evaluation under the multiple property document.

American University Park, Its Early Houses: Pre-Civil War to 1911 principally focuses on the area's pre-Civil War history and its nineteenth-century subdivision as American University Park. The context provides a chronological narrative of the development of the residential subdivision, including its initial growth spurt and its failure less than a decade later. The context does not analyze or evaluate the mid-twentieth-century speculative development patterns or residential architecture of AU Park.

Preservation Background

In 2002-2003, the Tenleytown Historical Society undertook the "*Historic Resources Survey of Tenleytown, Washington, D.C.*," with grant funds provided by the National Park Service and administered by the D.C. Historic Preservation Office. The survey was conducted by Kelsey & Associates, Inc., under contract to the Tenleytown Historical Society and included American University Park. The following year, to complement this survey, Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3E awarded the Historical Society a grant to photograph American University Park, Friendship Heights and Tenleytown. This survey included representative houses in the Tenleytown area, along with the houses of early American University proper and the houses of Asbury Park/Robeyville in the greater American University Park neighborhood.

Based upon these surveys and continued research into the history of Tenleytown, the Tenleytown Historical Society prepared the Multiple Property Document, *Tenleytown in Washington, D.C., Architectural and Cultural Resources: 1770-1941*. In 2008, the Tenleytown MPD was officially adopted by the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board and the National Register of Historic Places.

As part of its continued preservation and documentation efforts, the Tenleytown Historical Society followed up the Tenleytown MPD with the present Multiple Property, using a Humanities Council of Washington D.C. Community Heritage Grant.

Historical Information

Early History

American University Park is a residential neighborhood in northwest D.C. bounded on the south by Massachusetts Avenue and the American University campus, on the north by River Road, on the west by Western Avenue, and on the east by Nebraska Avenue. The neighborhood developed as a series of subdivisions that were initially platted in the late nineteenth century, but that were principally built out in the 1930s and 1940s. The neighborhood consists of approximately twenty blocks or squares and a large collection of single-family dwellings representing a variety of revival styles. These houses occupy regular lots surrounding the approximately twenty Victorian-era dwellings that were built in the subdivision's initial phases of development.

Prior to its emergence as a residential suburb, the area that would become American University Park was largely rural. Like Tenleytown, the area traces its early European-American settlement to 1713 when Charles Calvert granted “Friendship,” a 3,124-acre tract of land to James A. Stoddert and Colonel Thomas Addison. Through inheritance, a significant portion of the “Friendship” tract descended through the Addison family into the hands of John Murdock. In 1760, John Murdock built a frame house for himself which he called “Friendship” and which enjoyed expansive views south towards the Potomac River and the port of Georgetown. This one-story, hall-and-parlor plan house stood on the south side of present-day Massachusetts Avenue. It was demolished in 1925 for the construction of the chancellor’s house on the campus of the American University.

Prior to the Civil War, 800 acres of the Friendship tract north of Murdock Mill Road came into the ownership of W.D.C. Burrows. During the Civil War, Union forces constructed Fort Bayard, one of the 26 forts in a defensive ring around the nation’s capital, adjacent to the Burrows’ family land at the western corner of the city’s ten-mile-square boundary. The Burrows land abutted Fort Bayard and was used for barracks and parade grounds during the Civil War. Fort Bayard is now a park and forms the northern edge of American University Park.

As nearby Tenleytown grew into a sizable village during the second half of the nineteenth century and became the commercial and social center of the surrounding agricultural community, the area that would become American University Park remained sparsely developed. Like the Burrows family, most area residents were small-scale farmers who cultivated their land for personal consumption and for sale in the local market. A few farmhouses of this era survive in addition to the Burrows farm, including 4624 Verplanck Street, 4716 48th Street, 4308 46th Street, and 4330 Yuma Street.

Before the end of the nineteenth century, this rural landscape began to transform. In 1890, the Georgetown and Tennallytown Railway opened along present-day Wisconsin Avenue, providing the necessary transportation for the expanding population of the city to move north beyond the city center. In 1893 Congress passed the Permanent Plan of Highways that established a system of paper streets beyond the original city boundaries, allowing for the subdivision of land into suburban communities. Massachusetts Avenue was cut and paved between Florida Avenue and Wisconsin Avenue with the expectation that it would be extended beyond that to the district boundary.

Perhaps more significant, in 1889, following a ten-day search for a site in the city, the Methodist church purchased 90 acres of the old Murdock estate south of present-day Massachusetts Avenue where it planned construction of a university. The site included the old Murdock homestead, and the route for the anticipated extension of Massachusetts Avenue to the District of Columbia line. The American University was incorporated in 1891 and chartered by an Act of Congress in February 1893.

Real estate developers and speculators anticipated that the University, along with streetcar access, the new roads and the area’s natural beauty, would provide strong inducements to homebuyers.

The American University Park Subdivision

The American University Park subdivision was the product of real estate investors John D. Croissant and David D. Stone. Well aware of the Methodist church plans to build a university, the two businessmen teamed up to capitalize on it and purchased land north of the university property for subdivision into residential lots. Croissant was clearly optimistic about the area surrounding the new university, as he had already platted the nearby American University Heights and was actively engaged in its promotion.

As platted in 1896 and 1897, the streets of American University Park and the First Addition to American University Park conformed to the Permanent Plan for Highways for this section of the city. The plats generally followed a grid plan due in part to the relatively level terrain of land, with the exception of Massachusetts and Western Avenues and the pre-existing windy and narrow Murdock Mill Road.

Immediately after platting the subdivision, Croissant and Stone began the sale of lots and the construction of several suburban “cottages”—commodious, two-and-a-half-story frame dwellings with projecting bays, towers and wrap-around porches—and set about promoting the new American University Park. In 1897, they published a heavily illustrated brochure which touted the subdivision’s attributes, in particular its proximity—“only five blocks” —to American University and “only two and one-half blocks” to the electric streetcar line.

Other than graded streets, some trees and the promise of a streetcar, the developers offered no amenities (i.e. gas lighting, sewage removal, water mains, etc.). Still, the general feeling was that American University Park had the ingredients to become a successful residential neighborhood. As noted in the *Washington Post* in April 1899, “The phenomenal growth of this lovely suburb of Washington is a matter of much comment, and it is safe to predict that it will shortly be one of the most popular residential sections.”

By May 1900, however, the lack of transportation had caught up with the developers. The streetcar line had not been constructed and Croissant had resorted to providing wagon service from Tenleytown to American University Park. Even this wagonette service was less than initially advertised. Compared to ten houses built in 1897 alone, only six more were constructed in the period between 1898 and 1903. After 1903, new house construction effectively came to a grinding halt, with the exception of one house built in 1911. Despite initial predictions that American University Park would be “one of the most popular residential sections” in the District, the residential subdivision essentially consisted of one lonely house per block for the next twenty years.

Asbury Park/Robeyville

While the early development of American University Park reached a hiatus in the first decade of its development, its existence inspired another small subdivision which met with greater success. Asbury Park, subdivided in 1898, included a two-and-a-half-block area between 44th and 45th Streets and including Alton Place and Albermarle Street. In 1902, carpenter-builder James Robey and his family purchased seven lots of land in Asbury Park and, between 1902 and 1911, erected seven houses for their own residences and two for neighbors. Although today considered part of AU Park, this two-block cluster of historic houses is often referred to as “Robeyville.”

The Interwar Period

Beginning in the mid-1920s and continuing through the 1940s, as an expanding population demanded more housing, small and large-scale builders alike bought up undeveloped lots within existing subdivisions upon which they built large collections of houses on a speculative basis. American University Park reached maturity during this period as builders constructed houses to appeal to the city’s growing white, middle-class residents. Architecturally, the houses from this period represent a repetitive variety of forms and styles ranging from two-story, three-bay, brick Colonials to one-and-a-half-story bungalows, and brick and stone Tudor Revival-style houses.

Although a thoroughly suburban neighborhood in the city today, there are approximately twenty houses that survive as reminders of the area’s pre-Victorian and Victorian past. One of these, the Hilleary Burrows House on River Road was designated a D.C. Landmark in 2001 and, following its restoration, received a Mayor’s Award for Historic Preservation.

This Multiple Property Document, *American University Park in Washington, D.C.: Its Early Houses, Pre-Civil War to 1911*, establishes the appropriate historic contexts by which to understand and evaluate the areas other early houses for preservation purposes.