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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
**Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 11-18**

Dorsch's White Cross Bakery  
641 S Street, NW (Square 441, Lot 0848)

Meeting Date: November 17, 2011  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League  
Owner: Douglas Development Corporation  
Affected ANC: ANC 1B  
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

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After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate Dorsch's White Cross Bakery building at 641 S Street, 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.



**Introduction**

Dorsch's White Cross Bakery building at 631 S Street, NW has long been considered an important industrial/commercial building in the city by local residents and the preservation community. The building was first surveyed and documented as part of the Northern Shaw Strivers Cultural Resources Survey (Phase I, 1991), and was identified under a subsequent phase of the survey (1993) as being eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places either individually or as part of an historic district. As designated in 1998, however, the U Street Historic District was drawn with its eastern boundary along the west side of 7<sup>th</sup> Street at S Street thereby leaving Dorsch's outside of the district. The boundary justification was based largely on the loss of urban fabric at this intersection west of Dorsch's Bakery.

In 2008, an amendment to expand the U Street Historic District was prepared and filed with the D.C. Historic Preservation Office. The nomination includes the Dorsch's Bakery, the residential, commercial and industrial buildings of Wiltberger Street and those of the 600 blocks of S and T Streets. The nomination justifies the proposed expansion, arguing that despite the loss of historic buildings at the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and S Streets, the surviving buildings east of these vacant lots are intact and lend support to an understanding of the socio-economic evolution of the U Street Historic District. In particular, the proposed boundary increase provides valuable information on the commercial/industrial development of the 7<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, especially in terms of the rise of bakery buildings along Wiltberger Street and within the network of its adjacent alleys. Although still on file, the historic district expansion nomination does not have the support of a majority of the property owners within the proposed boundaries, and so for that reason, has not been brought to HPRB.

In recent years, Douglass Development Corporation purchased the vacant bakery building and is currently proposing to develop the site, including an adaptive use of the historic building. This proposed project, the stalled U Street Historic District expansion nomination, and the desire to ensure the appropriate preservation of this notable building, prompted the D.C. Preservation League to prepare the landmark application on Dorsch's White Cross Bakery.

### **Architecture**

Dorsch's White Cross Bakery is a large industrial brick building constructed in five principal phases between 1913 and 1936 that fills the lots between Wiltberger Street and Wiltberger Alley (west). The two most architecturally prominent sections of the complex, constructed in 1915 and 1922, face S Street and clearly identify themselves as the White Cross Bakery through the decorative display of large, white stone crosses in the central pedimented parapets and along the friezes. These 1915 and 1922 sections, designed by the architectural firm of Simmons and Cooper, and the A.B. Mullett Co., respectively, are similarly executed Craftsman-style brick structures. Pedimented parapets supported by giant Order brick pilasters, large banks of steel sash windows spanning the large bays, and the ornamental stone and glazed tiles forming white crosses characterize the building's principal façade.

The White Cross Bakery building is a high-style industrial building complex for Washington, D.C. The building's style, quality craftsmanship, decorative detailing and use of iconic imagery are rare for the city's industrial building stock. Dorsch's White Cross Bakery, although vacant, remains in good condition and retains its integrity.

### **History**

Dorsch's White Cross Bakery was constructed in several phases over the course of three decades and grew from a small neighborhood concern into one of the city's largest bakery complexes. The bakery was first established by Peter M. Dorsch ca. 1904 in a now demolished building at 1811 7<sup>th</sup> near its intersection with S Street, NW and was one of several bakeries in the vicinity. Dorsch eventually expanded his business, building larger quarters behind his 7<sup>th</sup> Street business, ultimately constructing the architecturally imposing buildings along the 600 block of S Street, NW. At the time Dorsch established his bakery, 7<sup>th</sup> Street was a well-established transportation corridor with the streetcar line providing north-south access into and out of the city. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, stores and small commercial buildings, many run by members of the German

merchant community, lined the Seventh Street corridor as far north as U Street, while rows of dwellings occupied by rising middle-class residents filled in the public streets to either side. In the nearby Wiltberger Street and its adjacent alleys, poorer, working-class residents lived in more modest dwellings next door to stables, blacksmith shops and other light industrial buildings.

In 1891, a John M. Ruth built the alley's first known bake ovens and bakery building. Soon, several competing bakeries would emerge along the alleys, supplanting the earlier residential buildings. In 1893, German baker Michael Holzberlein established a bakery at 1849 7<sup>th</sup> Street and by 1908, had moved his business into Wiltberger Alley when he constructed a still extant and sizeable two-story brick bakery building along Wilterger Alley (east). Peter M. Dorsch, owner and founder of the White Cross Bakery, followed the same trajectory when he expanded his business from 1811 7<sup>th</sup> Street east into Wiltberger Alley. In addition to Dorsch's and Holzbeirlein's the Corby Baking Company and the General Baking Company, both still standing, established themselves on either side of Georgia Avenue just a few blocks north of Florida Avenue.

When the White Cross Bakery first began operation, it produced 200-300 loaves of bread daily; within a decade following completion of the major 1922 building addition, the company was turning out 100,000 loaves each day, in addition to baking 40 different varieties of cakes. The bakery delivered its products throughout the city and into the suburbs, using its own fleet of REO Speed Wagon trucks.

In 1936, Peter Dorsch sold his bakery to the Continental Baking Company. The Continental Baking Company, a large national company that grew by acquiring important bakeries in major cities, entered the Washington market in 1921 when it purchased the Corby Bakery and began making Wonder Bread at its plant on Georgia Avenue. By the 1930s, the company had made the famous innovation of offering Wonder Bread pre-sliced, revolutionizing the bread market. At the same time, Continental expanded its product lines with the introduction of new Hostess brand cake products, including the Hostess Twinkie. While continuing to use the former Corby facility at 2100 Georgia Avenue as its principal Wonder Bread factory, Continental Baking Company expanded the former White Cross facility by a large addition (1936) and moved production of its Hostess cake products into the complex.

In 1953, the former White Cross Bakery was one of 17 major bakeries in the city—considered at the time as the city's largest processing industry. The Continental Baking Company and its successors continued to use the White Cross Bakery building into the 1990s.

### **Evaluation**

Dorsch's White Cross Bakery meets D.C. Designation Criterion B (History) and National Register Criterion A (with Commerce and Industry as its Areas of Significance) as it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. In particular Dorsch's White Cross Bakery lends support to our understanding of the commercial evolution and development of the Seventh Street corridor in the District of Columbia and the socio-economic and architectural manifestations of that development. In addition, the

history of Dorsch's bakery provides important information on the baking industry in the city and on other bakeries in the vicinity.

Dorsch's Bakery meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (architecture and urbanism) and National Register Criterion C (with Architecture and Community Planning and Development as its Areas of Significance), as it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type of architecture. In particular, the White Cross Bakery provides an excellent example of a well-designed industrial bakery complex whose owner, Peter M. Dorsch, recognized the importance of branding and architecture. The building's distinctive white crosses incorporated into the building and its overall Craftsman detailing make it one of the most architecturally notable industrial/commercial buildings in the city, and one of only a few surviving bakery buildings.

In addition, prior to the construction of the bakery complex, there were frame and brick dwellings fronting S and Wiltberger streets, as well as in the alleyways. There may be remains of some of these dwelling beneath the slab-based building. For that reason, this square has medium-to-high archaeological potential for historic period archaeological remains.

The Period of Significance for Dorsch's Bakery extends from 1913 when the first phase of the bakery building was constructed until 1936 when Peter M. Dorsch sold his bakery to the national Continental Baking Company chain.

Although vacant, Dorsch's White Cross Bakery retains its integrity and conveys the qualities for which the property is deemed significant. Sufficient time has lapsed to permit for professional evaluation of the property.