

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Property Address:	<b>1739 Church Street NW</b>	<b>X</b>	Agenda
Landmark/District:	<b>Dupont Circle Historic District</b>		Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	<b>September 23, 2021</b>		Concept Review
H.P.A. Number:	<b>21-443</b>	<b>X</b>	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Anne Brockett</b>		New Construction

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Owner Nicholas Kessides seeks the Board’s approval of an after-the-fact permit for installing handrails in front of this rowhouse in the Dupont Circle Historic District. The house is one of nine built in 1908 by speculative developer James Ellerson to the designs of architect W.J. Simmons.

**Project Description**

The owner completed exterior work at this property without permits and was cited by HPO inspectors in October 2020. Work included replacing the front doors to the basement and first floor, replacing porch flooring and railings, adding front step handrails, and installing a rear security door. Rather than implement fines or a hearing, HPO issued a Correction Order (CO) to assist the owner in making changes appropriate to the historic character of the building. The CO allowed for the replacement of the porch floor, porch railings, and basement door as completed, but required replacement of the main front door and the handrails at the front steps in order to meet relevant guidelines and be compatible with the building and district.

The owner received a permit in May 2021 for all work except the installed front step handrails, for which he now seeks the Board’s approval to retain. With 1-inch square balusters, 3¼ inch square posts, and a 2¾ inch top rail, the manufacturer describes the installed Key-Link Lancaster Series as “our largest and most robust aluminum railing series.”

**Evaluation and Recommendation**

The handrails are incompatible with the historic district due to their larger than appropriate dimensions. The balusters, and particularly the posts, are overly bulky for handrails in a historic district and the height of the posts, which stand several inches above the handrail, is also out of character.

In the District of Columbia, handrail design evolved over the decades along with the architectural styles of houses. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, steps and handrails tended to be wood, with handrails often only on one side, while on Victorian houses of the 1870s-1890s, they were cast iron with substantial newel posts, horizontal pipe rails on both sides, and decorative pierced risers. On porch-front houses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the subject property - when present - they were subtle, slender handrails with modest support posts at either end. They often had scrolls at the ends and generally were without pickets. HPO has approved many replacements railings of each era and type and permits issued for them by DCRA.

The Board’s guideline *Porches and Steps on Historic Buildings* refers to replacement features, but the principles outlined can and should be applied for newly installed handrails:

Removing existing details and ornamentation from porches and steps, without replacing them, is not appropriate because brackets, columns, railings, moldings and other details and ornamentation significantly contribute to their character. Replacing deteriorated details and ornamentation in a material that is not compatible with the original ... is also not appropriate. If the deteriorated portion cannot be repaired, the replacement should be in the same material or an appropriate substitute material. *The replacement should be designed to be the same as the original in proportion, scale, texture and other defining characteristics* (emphasis added).

The guideline goes on to state that “Steps and railings have sometimes been removed and replaced with ones that are not compatible with the character of a building. If so, the appropriate steps and railings should be removed and replaced with ones of compatible design.”

The HPO’s publication *Metal Repair and Fabrication for Historic Properties* starts with the statement: “For historically designated buildings, reconstructing, replacing or installing new metal stairs, fences or metal ornamentation requires a DC building permit. The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) reviews these permits to ensure that the original appearance and character of a property will be retained or enhanced in a manner that is historically appropriate.” Had HPO been given the opportunity to review the handrails prior to their installation, it could have advised the owner of their incompatibility. Because the installation is complete should not be used as an argument for keeping them when they are incompatible.

Nor should the fact that other incompatible examples exist within the historic district be considered grounds for approving the subject railings. There is no uniformity on this block in handrail design, but with a few exceptions, the handrails are compatible with the scale of the buildings and streetscape. As shown in the submission, there are a handful of inappropriate stairs and railings on this block, but these were not installed with HPO review.<sup>1</sup> However, the other 40+ rowhouses all have original or compatibly replaced railings. Should owners come forward with applications to replace incompatible railings in the future, they would be required to meet the same standards applied here.

The comparative dimensions of the Lancaster Series handrails are clearly larger than others on the street and visually intrude on the character of the block. Historic and compatible handrails of the 20<sup>th</sup> century typically have post dimensions of less than 2 inches square and pickets, when present, of less than an inch. Posts are sometimes flat, rather than square, and the top rails are modestly proportioned, further reducing their visibility. HPO would support handrails (or preferably a single handrail) of this design with or without pickets. While it may seem trivial, this introduction within the streetscape affects the overall historic character of Dupont Circle and when allowed to remain, creates a precedent for incompatibility.

*The HPO recommends that the Board deny the permit for the handrails as installed as incompatible with the character of the Dupont Circle Historic District.*

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<sup>1</sup> No permits were located for either 1779 or 1764 Church Street NW, although they were likely installed during major renovation projects in 1998 and 1999, respectively.