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

Landmark/District:	Georgetown Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	3234 N Street NW	
Meeting Date:	May 3, 2018	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	18-234	(x) Permit

Dale Overmyer, architect and agent for the property owner, SOFLO LLC, requests the Board's review of a permit for alterations to the building's façade and to a front parking court. The alterations would include repaving the parking area; replacing the main entry doorway and basement door; constructing an entry portico and steps; constructing new retaining walls at the basement areaway; replacing a secondary door with a window; and repairing trim and siding.

As a Georgetown project visible from a public thoroughfare, this work is subject to review by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. CFA recently forwarded to the District of Columbia a recommendation of no objection to the issuance of a permit for the work.

While the repaving of so much of the front yard is troubling, at least the chosen materials and the addition of some green space improves the parking court. But when the project was first proposed in January 2017, HPO staff had objected to the construction of a Greek Revival portico and doorway as incompatible with the character of the historic building. HPO renewed the objection when the project returned to CFA in December. As the staff is not authorized to clear what it believes to be incompatible work, the matter is being referred to the Board.

Background and evaluation

The house appears to have been constructed in the late Federal period. Although largely gutted, it retains some random-width flooring, an early fireplace and an early stair (see photos next page). The relationship of the entrance to the stair indicates that both are in their original locations. The house may have been expanded eastward, but the footprint of the main block is the same as it was during the late 1850s, when the neighborhood was surveyed for Albert Boschke's topographical map of the District of Columbia.

Although it has a front pediment and frieze, the building is not of the Greek Revival style (and it is not simply a matter of having a doorway that is consistent with the period of construction). The house's composition, and particularly the pedimented central pavilion, is instead derived from another species of classicism, Renaissance architecture was an inspiration for Georgian-era construction, as well as for Italianate villas beginning in the 1840s, but not the Greek Revival. This building lacks the brackets or cornice modillions typical of the latter style, but it did have a hemi-hexagonal bay attached to the pavilion, a common feature of that style and era. Of course,



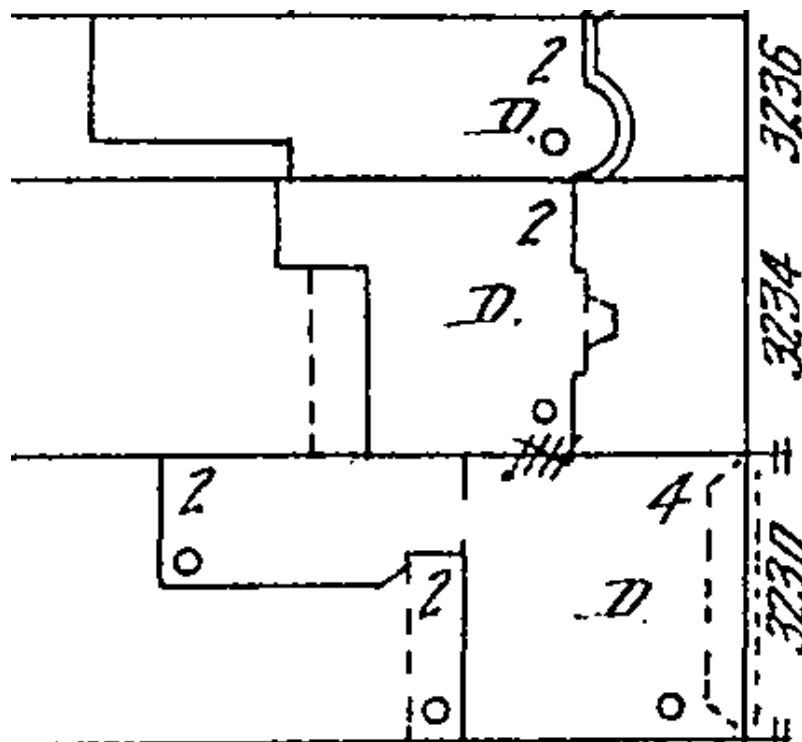
**Above: The entry hall and a fireplace at 3234 N Street.
Below: Center pavilions on Georgian and Italianate homes.**



it was and remains a modest, vernacular home and probably lacked high-style elements, hence the simplicity of detail.

Earlier historic maps are not detailed, but some extant late-nineteenth-century maps generally depict porches on buildings, when they existed. The 1888 Sanborn insurance atlas, for instance, shows a rear porch at 3234 N Street, but none on the front. The 1903 atlas similarly reveals no front porch, but it is detailed enough to depict the façade's projecting pavilion, with a hemi-hexagonal bay as one commonly sees on Italianate-style houses.

In 1906, the owners constructed a full-width front porch, incorporating the bay. Probably before 1950, both porch and bay had been removed, likely for the purpose of clearing and leveling the front yard for parking.¹



A detail from the 1903 Sanborn atlas.

According to the District of Columbia's historic preservation design guidelines, "Adding a front porch or steps to a historic building, except in those cases where the original has been removed, will significantly alter the appearance of the front facade and thus is not appropriate." This represents the standard philosophy and practice of preservation in the United States, expressed in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation as "Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will

¹ The full-width front porch (and another rear porch at the end of the west ell) appear in the 1928 Sanborn atlas. The front porch and bay are nowhere to be seen on the 1959 Sanborn map, and their removal and the creation of the parking area would appear in the CFA's case card files if they had been proposed in 1950 or thereafter.

not be undertaken.” If such a porch has been removed, then one should be able to prove it with historic documentation and/or physical evidence, from which one could reconstruct it.

For instance, at least some evidence of a substantially wider doorway opening would be readily apparent today. Otherwise, the creation of the proposed one would require the loss of additional historic fabric in addition to the visual change.

The fact that some other Georgetown buildings have porticoes is not relevant, as those buildings possess their own identity and character. Examination of the examples of porticoes in the packet makes clear that these are different contexts—either center porches in buildings designed with a central emphasis or offset porticoes in three-bay-wide townhouse forms.

The proposed portico is too grand and heavy for this house, and it unbalances the rough symmetry. An offset portico is out of place and competes with the house’s central pavilion. The consequence would be that a new, speculative feature becomes one of the most character-defining features of the property, giving it a false history. For a property that has suffered from considerable demolition and the alteration of its setting by the front-yard paving, this constitutes too much additional change that does not “retain and enhance” this home’s character, contrary to the purposes of the preservation law.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board recommend approval of the permit application, with the exception of construction of the proposed portico and the reconstruction of the main doorway and with the condition that these be excluded from clearance of the application. Unless it can be demonstrated by further evidence that such alterations represent a return to the nineteenth-century appearance of the building, they are a conjectural and incompatible alteration to this property that does not retain its historic character.