

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-17

### **Observatory Hill Historic District**

2300 E Street NW/2301 Constitution Avenue NW  
Square 34, Lots 802, 803, 804 and part of 805/Reservation 4

Meeting Date:	October 27, 2016
Applicant:	U.S. General Services Administration
Affected ANC:	2A
Staff Reviewers:	Anne Brockett and Ruth Troccoli, Ph.D.

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The Observatory Hill Historic District is associated with the formation and growth of a number of federal agencies and institutions, including the U.S. Naval Observatory, Naval Museum of Hygiene, Naval Medical School and Washington Naval Hospital, United States Public Health Service (USPHS), National Institute of Health (NIH), Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). While housing the staff and programs of these agencies, Observatory Hill witnessed significant developments in the fields of oceanography, astronomy, medicine and national intelligence. Collectively, its buildings and archeological features clearly convey the historic district's significance in architecture, archeology, education, health/medicine, landscape architecture, maritime history, military, politics/government and science.

The upper part of the 14.6 acre campus was previously determined eligible for National Register listing as the Potomac Annex Historic District (Washington Naval Hospital) in 2001. The lower campus, known as the E Street Complex was determined eligible in 1993. Notably, the proposed combined historic district includes the Old Naval Observatory (Building 2), which was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1965.

The majority of the proposed Observatory Hill Historic District is held by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) for use by the Department of State. However, Quarters AA, BB, and CC and their associated garages are held by the U.S. Navy and used for Officer housing. In 2005, Congress turned over Building 6 (Contagious Ward), Building 7 (Male Nurses' or Corpsmens' Quarters) and Building 22 (Utility Building) to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), where they now abut the recently constructed USIP headquarters building.

The nomination relies heavily on documentation submitted in two D.C. Landmark applications filed by the D.C. Preservation League in 2011 (for the Old Naval Observatory) and 2013 (for the E Street Complex). Both of those nominations were withdrawn subsequent to the submission of the combined, comprehensive nomination.

### **Description**

Observatory Hill sits prominently above the surrounding landscape and is characterized on the upper campus by historic yellow and tan brick buildings with traditional styles and details, mature trees, and curving roadways. The buildings rely on Georgian Revival elements, featuring symmetrical edifices with central blocks flanked by hyphens and wings, columned porches and porticos, multi-paned sash windows, gable roofs with dormers, and brick quoins. Excepting the

1844 Old Naval Observatory, all contributing buildings on the upper campus were built between 1906 and 1911.

The lower campus was significantly altered for the construction of the E Street Expressway in the 1960s, which demolished the 1903 North Building, and through extensive site grading that altered the site's topography. Three contributing buildings remain, however – the Georgian Revival Central Building (1921) constructed of red brick with arched windows, an imposing pedimented stone portico supported by Corinthian columns and the East and South Buildings (1933), constructed of limestone with Ionic columns and metal sash windows.

The landscape of Observatory Hill is considered a contributing site. Initially laid out by prominent architect William Strickland in 1844, the many individual components and features that make up the grounds are thoroughly described and evaluated in the nomination form. Important elements include the Prime Meridian axis, Maury Circle, historic lampposts, and trees such as oaks, a cherry and others dating from c. 1860 through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to the NHL Old Naval Observatory, the proposed district incorporates 12 contributing buildings, an archaeological site, the historic landscape and a bronze statue of Benjamin Rush by Roland Perry. The 10 non-contributing buildings and single structure are all small-scale support facilities that convey little information on the history of the property (see Table 1).

### **History and Significance**

Observatory Hill meets DC Criteria (a) Events and (b) History and National Register Criterion A for its national significance in the areas of education, health/medicine, maritime history, military, politics/government and science. As the home of the nation's first Naval Observatory (1844-1893), Observatory Hill was a world leader in scientific research and the development of the new field of oceanography soon after its establishment. During the post-Civil War period, Observatory staff made important contributions to the field of astronomy, using the world's largest refractory telescope, and set the official time for the nation. These advances in oceanography and astronomy in turn led to advances in navigation, which contributed to the nation's growing military and commercial strength in the maritime sphere.

After the Observatory moved to Massachusetts Avenue, the campus became home to the Naval Museum of Hygiene and Naval Medical School and later the Washington Naval Hospital (1894-1942). Observatory Hill was the site of significant contributions to medical research and practice during this time. The facility, housed in Buildings 1-7 on the upper campus, established high standards in the care of Navy personnel and the training of Navy medical professionals and evolved into the preeminent naval medical facility in the United States. It served a key role during World War I, treating thousands and undertaking research and medical training not only relevant to the war effort, but to the medical field in general, particularly through advances in areas such as tropical medicine, chemical warfare, aviation medicine, and contagious diseases.

As the home of the U.S. Public Health Service's Hygienic Laboratory (1903-1930) and the National Institute of Health (1930-1940), Observatory Hill was expanded with the construction of the lower campus. The buildings housed research facilities for the study of infectious diseases, such as parrot fever and influenza, as well as dietary diseases, such as pellagra, which

led to pasteurization regulations still in place today. During this period, the lower campus served as the nation's primary federal center for disease research and advances in health advocacy and knowledge.

When the various federal health, education, and welfare agencies were consolidated under the Roosevelt administration and relocated to the current NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland, the lower campus was vacated. By 1941, the buildings were turned over to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the newly-created agency for the acquisition and analysis of intelligence information. OSS head, William Donovan had his offices in Room 109 of the East Building.

As headquarters for the OSS (1941-1945), which became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (1945-1961), Observatory Hill served as the command and control center for intelligence activities and the seat of executive decision-making for events of great national and international importance during World War II, the Korean War and the early Cold War. The lower campus served as the setting for the evolution of American intelligence collection and analysis into a permanent element of national security, considered an essential government function in peacetime as well as war.

### **Criterion B**

Observatory Hill is significant under DC Criterion (c) Individuals and National Register Criterion B at the national level for its association with Matthew Fontaine Maury and Asaph Hall, whose achievements in oceanography and astronomy while employed at the Naval Observatory raised the scientific profile of the young nation. Maury's research and publications, undertaken at the Observatory in the 1850s, provided an internationally accepted system for recording oceanographic data and advanced navigation during a period of rapid maritime expansion. Using the Observatory's Great Equatorial telescope, Hall discovered the two moons of Mars and made a number of other significant observations, advancing global astronomical knowledge.

Observatory Hill is also significant at the national level for its association with William J. Donovan and Allen W. Dulles, two key figures in the history of the development of the field of international intelligence in America. As Director of the OSS, Donovan is considered the founder modern intelligence for creating and adapting the new agency in the midst of the rapidly evolving events of World War II and contributing to American military and diplomatic successes in that period. Dulles was the first civilian and longest-serving director of the CIA. He guided the agency through a number of highly significant events in the early years of the Cold War, a heightened period of intelligence and covert activities, while the agency was headquartered on Observatory Hill.

### **Criterion C**

Observatory Hill is significant under DC criteria (d) Architecture and Urbanism, (e) Artistry, and (f) Work of a Master as well as National Register Criterion C for architecture and landscape architecture at the local level as a collection of buildings sharing a common architectural vocabulary, interpreted through nineteenth and early twentieth century Classical Revival styles and applied to governmental buildings, within a distinctive landscape setting which bears the imprint of William Strickland. The district is set off from the surrounding neighborhood by its

topographically prominent and walled landscape which includes one of the oldest trees in the city. The Washington Naval Hospital buildings on the upper campus, designed by Ernest Flagg, Wood, Donn and Deming, and the Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks (completed between 1903 and 1911) represent a coherent collection of institutional buildings displaying common characteristics of the Georgian Revival architectural style.

While the lower campus buildings, designed by the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury in two different periods, are not as architecturally cohesive, they are representative examples of Neoclassical and Georgian Revival style institutional buildings and relate well to the other buildings in the district. The district reflects the work of nationally significant architects including William Strickland and Ernest Flagg, as well as the locally significant firm of Wood, Donn and Deming and noted artist Roland Perry.

### **Criterion D**

Observatory Hill is significant under DC criterion (g) and National Register Criterion D for archeology on the local level for resources that have the potential to add to our knowledge of the past, particularly as it relates to use of the property for astronomical research and medical treatment and research and to the lives of people who lived, worked or recuperated at Observatory Hill. Observatory Hill possesses archeological features and deposits that document the property's Old Naval Observatory (1844-1893) and Naval Museum of Hygiene and Naval Medical School and Hospital (1894-1942) periods. Known resources include: a tunnel that leads to the underground Magnetic Observatory (1845); brick piers, foundations and structures associated with the Transit of Venus (1882); refuse deposits from the Naval Hospital; brick building foundations in front of Building 3; and a brick conduit of uncertain association behind Quarters BB. In addition, a range of archeological resource types may be present on the upper campus of Observatory Hill, including: prehistoric camps or special use sites; remnants of 18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century military encampments and associated features; a broad range of sites associated with the Old Observatory, including the Magnetic Observatory and its access tunnel, privies, a cistern, various outbuildings (stables and sheds), remains of specialized structures associated with the Transit of Venus and other astronomical events, and domestic refuse deposits; and archeological resources associated with the Naval Museum of Hygiene and Naval Medical School and Hospital, including specialized refuse deposits.

### **Period of Significance:**

Observatory Hill has multiple overlapping periods of significance spanning more than 100 years, from 1844 when the Naval Observatory was completed on the site to 1961 when the new CIA Headquarters was established in Langley, Virginia and the role of Observatory Hill as an incubator of notable agencies, including the Naval Observatory, Washington Naval Medical School and Hospital, USPHS, NIH, OSS and CIA ended. While there is archaeological potential for resources from prehistoric, colonial, and federal periods, substantive deposits from those periods have not been identified to date and a different period of significance for below-ground resources is not warranted.

### **Integrity**

The district retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance for the period from 1844 to 1961. All major buildings constructed within that period remain, with the exception the North

Building/U.S. Hygienic Laboratory (1903), demolished circa 1963 for the construction of the E Street Expressway. The expressway construction also reduced the campus along its northern and western edges, affecting landscape features. The remaining buildings retain a high degree of exterior integrity. Replacement windows and roof cladding generally replicate the original appearance. Interiors, generally modest in character, have undergone successive alterations to suit changing tenant requirements. The landscape has also undergone successive alterations as the site developed from the park-like Observatory compound to the intensively developed medical and research campus of the early twentieth century. While the steady expansion of parking areas and concomitant loss of vegetated area has somewhat diminished the landscape's historic character, Observatory Hill retains its prominent site and campus-like feeling and remains a visual landmark in Foggy Bottom. Despite the highly developed nature of the site, intact eligible archaeological deposits remain, further demonstrating the property's integrity.

### **Recommendation**

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Observatory Hill, at 2300 E Street NW/2301 Constitution Avenue NW, as a historic district in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and support the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as a district of national importance with a Period of Significance of 1844-1961. Observatory Hill meets all seven criteria for D.C. Designation and all four National Register Criteria.

**Table 1 – List of Contributing and Non-Contributing Features**

<i>Resource Name</i>	<i>Resource Type</i>	<i>Date Built</i>	<i>Architect/Builder</i>	<i>Period of Development</i>
<b>Contributing Resources</b>				
Old Naval Observatory (Building 2)*	Building	1844	Lt. James M. Gilliss	Old Naval Observatory
Washington Naval Hospital (Building 3)	Building	1906	Ernest Flagg; Wood, Donn and Deming	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Naval Medical School (Building 4)	Building	1906	Ernest Flagg; Wood, Donn and Deming	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Female Nurses' Quarters (Building 1)	Building	1908, 1926	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Contagious Ward (Building 6)	Building	c. 1908	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Commanding Officer's Quarters (Quarters AA)	Building	c. 1909	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
East Junior Officer's Quarters (Quarters BB)	Building	c. 1909	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
West Junior Officer's Quarters (Quarters CC)	Building	c. 1909	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Male Nurses' or Corpsmen's Quarters (Building 7)	Building	1911	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Sick Officers' Quarters (Building 5)	Building	1911	Naval Bureau of Yards and Docks	Naval Medical School and Hospital
Central Building	Building	1921	Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury	Hygienic Laboratory
East Building	Building	1933	Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury	NIH
South Building	Building	1933	Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury	NIH
Landscape	Site	1844-1961	William Strickland	Old Naval Observatory, Naval Museum of Hygiene, Naval Medical School and Hospital, Hygienic Laboratory/NIH, Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, OSS, CIA
Archeological Site 51NW176	Site	1844-1942		Old Naval Observatory, Naval Museum of Hygiene, Naval Medical School and Hospital
Benjamin Rush Statue	Object	1904	Roland Perry	Naval Medical School and Hospital
<b>Noncontributing Resources</b>				
Transformer Substation (Building 25)	Building	1942, c. 2002		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Garage for Quarters AA (Building 332)	Building	1943		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Garage for Quarters BB (Building 333)	Building	1943		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Garage for Quarters CC (Building 334)	Building	1963		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Northeast Gatehouse	Building	After Period of Significance		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Southeast Gatehouse	Building	After Period of Significance		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Southeast Guardhouse	Building	After Period of Significance		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Utility Building	Building	After 1950		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Garage	Building	After 1950		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Garage	Building	After 1950		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Bus Kiosk	Structure	After Period of Significance		Naval Bureau of Medicine and Surgery