
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Designation Case No. 17-05

Emerald Street Historic District

1307-1377 and 1300-1368 Emerald Street NE; 517-519 13th Street and 518-520 14th Street NE
Square 1029 Lots 73-107; 116-150; 111; 112; 151; 200; and 201

Meeting Date: May 25, 2017
Applicant: Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6A
Affected ANC: 6A
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Emerald Street as a historic district to be entered into the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites at the local level of significance, and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

Historic and Architectural Context

Emerald Street NE is a one-block-long “minor” residential street located between 13th and 14th and E and F streets NE at the center of Square 1029 in east Capitol Hill. The 60-foot-wide street is lined with several intact and attached Queen Anne-style rowhouses on both the north and south sides of the street which were principally built within a six-year period, between 1892 and 1898, by the same developer/builder.

Located near the eastern end of the L’Enfant Plan and as originally platted in 1797, Square 1029 was divided on paper into 26 large lots with an I-shaped, 30-foot alley running east-west through the square. For the first century of the city’s history, the square was owned by a succession of persons, but remained undeveloped like many others around it. In 1891, the entire square was purchased by real estate investors William Mayse and Louis D. Wine who began the re-subdivision of the square. Like other businessmen of the period, Mayse and Wine were investing in real estate at a time when the city’s growing population and government workforce demanded housing for the rising middle-class. Both Mayse and Wine had come to D.C. in the post-Civil War years to work for the federal government, became active in civic affairs, and eventually entered into the speculative real estate market. By choosing an undeveloped square as their investment, Mayse and Wine were free to re-imagine its development potential in accordance with new building regulations and trends, without the inconvenience and expense of having to remove existing buildings, or re-lay existing streets and alleyways.

In April 1892, the plat for Mayse and Wine’s re-subdivided Square 1029 was officially recorded by the Office of the Surveyor. The subdivision provided for 170 narrow, rowhouse-sized urban lots (sixteen feet wide) by eliminating the wide interior alley and replacing it with the 60-foot wide minor street bisecting the square from east-to-west. Two narrow service alleys, required by law, were placed parallel to Emerald Street, between the lots fronting on the new street and those on the larger E and F streets. By replacing large interior alleys with minor streets, developers could maximize the number of lots on a given square and earn a greater return on their

investment, at a time when the construction of dwellings on alleyways was being challenged. Although instances of minor streets replacing alleyways occurred before the subdivision of Square 1029, this trend became more common after 1892 when Congress passed a law restricting the construction of alley dwellings on the interior of squares. This law was passed largely in response to the efforts of social and urban reformers who sought to eliminate the insanitary living conditions of alley dwellers.

In planning their subdivided square, Mayse and Wine were strategic in their design and arrangement of lots to fully maximize their development potential. By establishing sixteen-foot-wide lots, for instance, they were able to take advantage of a law that required lots to be at least that width to have houses with projecting bays. And by arranging lots at either end of Emerald Street to face 13th and 14th streets, they were able to maximize their prices, as lots facing major streets sold at a premium.

Within months of the April 1892 subdivision of the square, George P. Newton, a recent immigrant from England, entered the speculative building market. Beginning in 1892, Newton bought dozens of lots on Square 1029 and began construction of a series of rowhouses, eventually building 62 of the 75 houses on Emerald Street and 27 more on E and F Streets. Newton also appears to have collaborated with a relative, Watson J. Newton, on the other ten lots on Emerald Street (1333-1351 Emerald Street NE). Newton would continue to develop houses speculatively in D.C. until declaring bankruptcy in 1906, largely due to sloppy bookkeeping, after which time he built houses for other owners. Although Newton built long rows of houses in other areas of the city, his development of Emerald Street, along with E and F Streets on the same square, was the most comprehensive of his speculative ventures. Newton lived on the block at 526 14th Street NE in a house that he built.

According to the historic building permit applications, George P. Newton worked with architect Nicholas T. Haller on some of his Emerald Street buildings, while on others he acted as both owner and architect. There is no evidence that Newton had the design skills to serve as architect and it is more likely that he simply listed his name having already procured drawings from a designer or builder. Haller, a prolific late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century architect in the city, is known for his eclectic designs that ranged from ornamental high Victorian buildings with to more classical building forms. Even in these more traditional models, however, Haller held onto a Victorian playfulness, sometimes introducing architectural elements in frivolous fashion. One of Haller's best-known extant buildings in D.C. is the Atlas (Warder) Building downtown at the southeast corner of 9th and G Streets forming the west end of the "LeDroit" block. On Emerald Street, Haller's designs follow the standard pattern for the street with ornamentation limited to rusticated stone window lintels and corbelled brick cornices.

Together, the houses, facing each other on either side of the narrow Emerald Street, constitute an intimate collection of late-nineteenth-century, Queen Anne-style brick rowhouses. The rowhouses, arranged in several groups, all feature similar two-story massing with two-story projecting bays. But each group offers its own stylistic treatment with alternating and repeating rhythms of window shapes, configuration and details, and ornamental brick and stone work. For the most part, the roofs are flat with brick corbelling at the cornice, but in one group on the south side of Emerald Street and also on 14th Street, the houses feature projecting pedimented parapets above the two-story projecting bays.

As intended and until the 1940s, the modest-sized single-family dwellings of Emerald Street attracted white, middle-class residents where the head of household held an array of professions from grocery clerk to teacher, policeman, milliner and more. By 1945, several African Americans had made their home on the street, and as happened throughout the city, white residents left, some becoming absentee landlords. By the 1950s, Emerald Street was suffering from disinvestment, a trend that continued for years, exacerbated by the 1968 riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The H Street Urban Renewal Area, created to revitalize riot-damaged areas of the city, included Emerald Street and ultimately led to the rehabilitation, rather than removal, of the street's nineteenth-century buildings.

Evaluation

The proposed Emerald Street Historic District meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (events) and B (history) and National Register Criterion A for its association with "patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia." In particular, the proposed district is associated with the development of one-block-long minor streets during the late nineteenth century, largely implemented in response to a need to house the city's growing middle-class population. Emerald Street in Square 1029, with its narrow rowhouse-sized lots, was created like other minor streets in the city by real estate speculators and developers who in an effort to provide this housing, took advantage of building regulations to maximize profit, while at the same time providing architecturally stylish, yet modest houses that were affordable and appealing to the middle-class buyer. The replacement of interior alleyways and the introduction of minor streets in the city's squares during the late nineteenth century is a significant urban planning innovation, and Emerald Street provides a prime example.

The nomination also states that Emerald Street is eligible under the same criteria for its associations with urban renewal and the rehabilitation of the street and its houses by the Redevelopment Land Agency. Staff agrees that urban renewal is an important part of the street and the city's history and should be told. However, the nomination does not provide adequate context for urban renewal to justify its inclusion, nor does the proposed period of significance for the historic district (1892-1923) include the urban renewal period.

The proposed Emerald Street Historic District meets D.C. Designation Criteria D (architecture and urbanism) because the street "embodies the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types or methods of construction, and because it is an expression of urban planning, landscape architecture, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia." The rowhouses of Emerald Street provide an excellent representation of the city's Victorian-era rowhouse building form executed at a modest and intimate scale, yet with the same massing, architectural treatment and decorative flourishes found in grander examples elsewhere in the city.

The proposed Emerald Street Historic District also meets D.C. Criterion E (artistry) as its buildings "possess high artistic and aesthetic value that contribute significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District of Columbia." The attached rowhouses, arranged in several individual groupings, all share the same two-story massing, but offer a variety of treatments of projecting bays and pediments, brick corbelling, rusticated stone lintels, and of door and window types. This varied, yet orderly treatment provides a highly artistic and noteworthy rhythm to the

small-scale street. For the same reasons stated above, Emerald Street Historic District meets National Register Criterion C.

Period of Significance

The proposed period of significance for the historic district extends from 1892 to 1923. This spans the period from the re-subdivision of the block to create Emerald Street, to 1923, when the last lot within the proposed boundaries was built upon.

Boundaries

The application for the Emerald Street Historic District includes all of those lots with frontage on Emerald Street. This includes those 71 lots facing Emerald Street, and those four lots at either end of the street whose side lot lines extend along Emerald Street from the intersection with 13th and 14th Streets NE. The nomination justifies these boundaries by arguing that those 75 lots together embrace all of Emerald Street. However, the four lots on the 13th and 14th Street ends of the street are themselves the end units in the groups of attached rowhouses facing those streets. These four groups (as well as other houses forming the city square) are historically and architecturally consistent with the character of the entire block, and some, built by Newtown, closely resemble those on Emerald Street.

According to the National Register guidelines, the determination of boundaries should consider visual barriers that mark a change in the historic character and that break its continuity; visual changes to the character of the area due to different styles or periods of construction; and clearly differentiated patterns of historic development. In applying these Guidelines, the four groups of houses on 13th and 14th Street, which are architecturally and historically consistent with Emerald Street, could also be considered for inclusion in the proposed boundaries.

Given the boundary limits presented in the application, staff recommends that the Board accept the boundaries as proposed, to include all those buildings that bound Emerald Street.