
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic District Case No. 15-07

Grant Circle Historic District

4-33 Grant Circle;

Reservation 312 (Grant Circle); Reservations 312A and 312I (Triangle Parks)

Meeting Date: April 2, 2015
Applicant: Off Boundary Preservation Brigade
Affected ANC: 4C
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Grant Circle Historic District to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and that the historic district nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The historic district meets District of Columbia Designation Criteria A (Events) and B (History) for being “the site of events that contributed significantly to the development of the District of Columbia,” and for being associated with “patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia.” The Historic District also meets D.C. Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) because it is “an expression of urban planning, landscape architecture, siting and design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia.”

Similarly, the Grant Circle Historic District meets National Register Criterion A for its broad patterns of urban development in Washington, D.C., including its primary period of development as a residential suburb and its subsequent evolution from a predominantly white to African American community.



Boundaries and Architecture

The Grant Circle Historic District, located in the Petworth Neighborhood of northwest Washington, D.C, includes Grant Circle and its associated triangle parks (Reservations 312, 312A and 312I), seventeen residential, and two religious properties all of which have direct frontage on the circle itself. The boundaries are drawn along the alleys at the rear lot lines of these properties and encompass both the primary and secondary resources of those lots. In total, the district includes three sites and 19 properties comprising 29 buildings. The historic district nomination identifies the three sites and 27 of the buildings as contributing and two of the buildings as non-contributing.

Grant Circle with its associated triangle parks to its north and south, created by the intersection of Fifth and Varnum Streets and Illinois and New Hampshire Avenues, is a major urban and visual feature of the Petworth neighborhood and a significant element in the layout of the city's streets beyond the original Federal City (L'Enfant Plan). The circle is a 1.84-acre urban park with a two-lane traffic rotary ringing its circumference. The park is dominated by flat turf interspersed with trees and low shrubs, and is crossed by radiating and circumferential paths. Major trees within the circle include an outer ring of American elms, several mature pines and hemlocks, and a magnificent Cedar of Lebanon within the central circle. In fact, during construction of Metro's Green Line which runs directly under the circle, the city undertook significant protection measures to save the cedar. The triangle parks to the north and south feature lawn, mature and young trees, hedges and sidewalks. The northern park also includes a small playground.

Architecturally, Grant Circle is defined by a cohesive collection of early 20th-century rowhouses (built 1915-1919) that share continuity of scale, material and character, and by its two notable religious properties—St. Gabriel's Catholic Church at 26 Grant Circle and Petworth Methodist Church at 33 Grant Circle. One freestanding dwelling, 16 Grant Circle (1913-1914) which occupies a lot at the northeast quadrant of the circle, stands as an anomaly to the collection of attached dwellings. At the time of this report, there is a pending raze application on 16 Grant Circle, as well as a pending D.C. Landmark Nomination.

The houses of Grant Circle follow a traditional rowhouse form of early 20th-century Washington, D.C. They are two-story, brick dwellings set upon raised basements and covered with false mansard roofs with dormer windows. They all feature single-story porches that span the facades, and offer decorative details that are derivative of the Colonial Revival and Italian Renaissance Revival styles. Although these houses are not architecturally distinctive in terms of their dwelling form or style, they together represent an intact and uniform collection of dwellings that share the same chronology and character, and that frame the circle, creating a notable and remarkable urban space.

The religious properties are more architecturally dramatic. Petworth United Methodist Church, built first in 1915-1916, is an eclectic and exuberant interpretation of the Gothic Revival style. The church, designed by architect Maurice F. Moore, is based on a modified octagonal plan, is constructed of variegated brown brick with concrete and terra cotta trim, is crowned by a domed lantern and features Gothic Revival-style flying buttresses alternating with Gothic, pointed arch stained glass windows. The church, architecturally striking, has a strong presence on the circle.

St. Gabriel's Catholic Church, consisting of four major buildings (church, school, rectory, and convent) occupies a 2.38-acre campus on the circle. Each building was designed in the late Gothic Revival style by architects Maginnis & Walsh. Together they present a uniform and architecturally impressive religious campus on the circle.

The proposed boundaries pull in seven garages associated with the primary residences on Grant Circle.

History

The Grant Circle Historic District is part of the larger Petworth subdivision. This subdivision, carved out of a 387-acre tract of land that constituted the merging of two former estates—one of which was named Petworth—was platted in 1888, and officially recorded in January 1889. It was the city's first subdivision to be planned in accordance with the 1888 Subdivision Act, a Congressional act requiring new subdivisions to conform to the plan of the City of Washington (the L'Enfant Plan). Congress approved the act in an effort to adopt a more comprehensive approach to street planning in the area outside of the original city limits. Following passage of the act, other subdivisions, such as Brightwood, the Palisades and Ingleside were also platted. None of these, however, presented a street plan as grand as Petworth, complete with circles and diagonal avenues that aligned directly with those of the L'Enfant Plan.

The 1888 Act was relatively short-lived as it quickly became evident that the strict imposition of an extension of the L'Enfant plan on a terrain of already existing and non-conforming subdivisions, as well as topographic conditions that were different from those of the original city, posed significant problems. After several years of debate, Congress introduced and passed the Permanent Highway Act of 1893—a law that authorized the creation of a permanent system of streets for the area outside of the original city. This street system would come in the form of maps and would take many years to complete. As finalized, the Permanent Highway Plan incorporated existing platted subdivisions into its plan and introduced new streets that followed a modified grid that better conformed to the natural topographic conditions of the formerly rural landscape. The subdivision of Petworth stands out as the most notable of the subdivisions platted in the short interval between 1888 and 1893 and is a significant event in the history of urban planning in D.C.

Simultaneous to platting Petworth, the same real estate syndicate chartered the Brightwood Railroad Company, setting the stage for the area's development. However, largely due to the Panic of 1893, construction in the area would languish into the early 20th century. Similarly, improvements in city infrastructure, including the cutting and laying of streets around Grant Circle and Sherman Circle to the north, were not immediate. A 1900 USGS Map in the nomination clearly illustrates the gradual improvement of the streets comprising the subdivision of Petworth.

By the second decade of the 20th century, the street grid just south and west of Grant Circle was filling with houses and was approaching the circle itself. In 1913-1914, the circle's first house was constructed—the freestanding dwelling at present-day 16 Grant Circle—and within the next decade and a half, the circle and its adjacent blocks were fully developed, along with grading, paving and landscaping of the circle and triangle parks. During the 1920s, the housing shortage in Washington prompted a surge in development in Petworth; by the 1930s, the neighborhood,

including Sherman Circle to the north of Grant Circle, had been built out almost to capacity. Unlike the later development in Petworth, Grant Circle was essentially affected by several small developers and two religious organizations.

From the outset, Grant Circle and the larger Petworth neighborhood were home to a predominantly white middle-class population, complete with schools and a neighborhood-based commercial district. For several decades this socio-economic dynamic persisted with little pressure for change. However, in a short three-year period, from 1950 to 1953, the racial composition of Grant Circle shifted as first one and then another owner of Grant Circle sold their houses to African Americans, setting off a “white flight.” The transformation of a neighborhood from white to black during the 1950s and 1960s is typical both locally and nationally, and yet the speed in which it occurred and the personal accounts of the change from longtime residents are profound. Despite the racial reversal, Grant Circle remained an established, middle-class neighborhood, providing an excellent illustration of the emergence of an African American middle-class in the city.

Evaluation

The Grant Circle Historic District meets D.C. Designation Criteria A, B and D and National Register Criterion A with three distinct periods of significance: 1888-1889; 1913-1939; and 1951-1964. The first period, 1888-1889, represents an important period of urban planning in D.C. The 1889 subdivision of Petworth, laid out in accordance with the 1888 Subdivision Act provides an exemplary and profound illustration of that Act’s short-lived intent. The Grant Circle Historic District boundaries, drawn tightly around Grant Circle, comprise a critical element of the Petworth subdivision and serve as an appropriate microcosm for the larger neighborhood. Although justifiable as drawn, it would also be architecturally and historically legitimate to expand the boundaries further afield at a future date.

The second period, 1913-1939, represents that period of time in which Grant Circle reached maturity. During this period, the Circle and its associated triangle parks were improved and landscaped, while cohesive collections of houses and two religious properties were built around it. Together, the buildings frame the rotary and create a striking urban space in a suburban residential neighborhood and thereby embody the distinguishing characteristics of urban planning and design.

The third period, 1951-1964, is associated with the transformation of the neighborhood from a white to an African American middle-class one and is thus associated with the historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth and change that contributed to the heritage and culture of the District of Columbia.

The nomination identifies 3 sites and 29 buildings (27 contributing, 2 non-contributing), including both primary and secondary resources. Seven of these secondary resources are garages at the rear of the lots. The nomination considers five of these as contributing and two as non-contributing. Staff recommends that the Board allow staff to make a final determination on the contributing/non-contributing status of the garages based upon further study into the significance of the alleys and the quality of buildings on those alleys.

Further, should the historic district be designated, staff recommends the development of Grant Circle Historic District Guidelines.

