

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-22

### **Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls**

3801 Nebraska Avenue NW  
Square 1722, Lots 800-806, 809, and 810

Meeting Date: May 26, 2016  
Applicant: U.S. General Services Administration  
Affected ANC: 3D  
Staff Reviewer: Anne Brockett and Ruth Troccoli, Ph.D.

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the property historically known as the Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls at 3801 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. a historic district in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as a site of local and national importance with Periods of Significance of 3000 BC-1600 AD and 1916-1952.

With occupation beginning as early as 3000 BC, the property was first used as a prehistoric camp site for Native Americans. After the development of the District of Columbia, the land was used for farming was eventually purchased as a campus for the Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls in 1916. During World War II, the site became a Naval security and communications installation which played a vital role in securing the United States' victory over Germany. Familiarly known as the Nebraska Avenue Complex, the property currently houses offices for the Department of Homeland Security on a 39-acre parcel at the intersection of Nebraska and Massachusetts avenues on Ward Circle.

The property was previously determined eligible for the National Register by the U.S. General Services Administration, with State Historic Preservation Office concurrence. In addition, two archaeological sites have been identified on the property, the Navy Chapel Site (51NW224), determined eligible under Criterion D and subsequently destroyed following data recovery, and the Gatesly Site (51NW228), determined eligible by SHPO as eligible under Criteria A and D.

#### **Prehistoric Context**

As documented through archaeological investigations at the Navy Chapel Site (51NW224), the property was home to a prehistoric camp that was repeatedly occupied from the Late Archaic through Woodland periods, c. 3000 BC-1600 AD, but the most intensive period of use was during the Late Woodland, ca. 900-1600 AD. Occupants of the campsite quarried quartz and quartzite cobbles from nearby gravel deposits and fashioned them into stone tools, evidence of what archaeologists call a lithic workshop. The site was destroyed following data recovery for utility construction and therefore is no longer eligible; however, other prehistoric site are potentially located on the property.

#### **Seminary History**

The Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls had been established in the Shaw neighborhood in 1875 as the first secular female boarding school in Washington D.C. However, after a move to larger

premises and subsequent takeover of a number of city buildings for school uses, it became clear that the school had outgrown its urban environment. Founder and Headmistress Elizabeth Somers purchased property in far northwest Washington for the creation of a new campus, begun in 1916.

The school had always been progressive in its education of young women, particularly encouraging students to participate in the political life and cultural events of the city. In 1927, the school added a Junior College, an early example of this type of institution for women in the United States. The school operated as both a seminary, a four-year program with an emphasis on home economics and roughly equivalent to a high school education, and as a two-year preparatory school for those planning to take college entrance exams.

The campus plan and the design of its buildings are the work of New York-based architect, Wesley Sherwood Bessell, a 1908 graduate of Columbia University's architecture program who had some experience in designing campus plans and educational buildings. The architecture of the campus is low-scale and predominantly constructed of brick with limestone and wood trim. Notable buildings from the school era include the Main Building (renamed Building 1 during Navy occupation), which was constructed of brick in 1916 with a central block flanked by wings, a slate roof with cupola, and hipped-roof dormers. A sandstone door surround features the school's name and shield engraved in its pediment. The Georgian Revival form and detailing of this building, which initially contained classrooms, dormitory space, and administrative offices, set the tone for the rest of the campus design.

Gatesley House (Building 8) was added in 1921 as the Headmistress' residence. Designed by Bessell to harmonize with his Main Building, the house is now owned by the U.S. Navy and serves as an officer's residence. The Gatesley Site (51NW228), located the rear yard of the house, consists of domestic midden deposits that were encountered in filled utility trenches. The artifacts were discarded in approximately 1921 and fall within the date range of 1914-1942. The site was determined eligible under Criteria A and D for its potential to yield significant archaeological information related to the history of the property.

When the Bessell-designed Elizabeth J. Somers Memorial Chapel was dedicated in 1925, *Architecture* magazine described it as one of the "finest examples of Georgian Colonial Revival architecture in Washington." The brick building features a pedimented portico supported by Doric columns, dentil coursing all around, a square belfry, and a large Palladian window over the altar.

The year 1929 saw the construction of the Field House (Building 14) and Gymnasium (Building 12), both designed by Bessell. The stucco and brick Field House was used as a recreational facility and now serves as a cafeteria. With its soaring timber frame ceilings, large fireplace, and built-in seating, the Field House was the center of campus life for students of the Seminary.

### **Naval Use of Site**

Like many privately owned buildings in the Washington area, the Seminary was condemned and purchased under the War Powers Act in 1942 in support of the war effort. While the Seminary moved into temporary quarters in the surrounding Spring Valley neighborhood, the site was appointed as the U.S. Naval Communications Annex (NCA), which would become the center of Navy cryptanalysis during World War II and the early Cold War period.

Immediately upon acquisition of the site, the Navy rehabilitated the existing buildings to convert them from school uses to office space and began constructing new buildings to support cryptanalysis activities. Building 3, located to the east of Building 1 and connected to it via passageways, was erected in 1943 by the Navy Public Works Department with Wesley S. Bessell as consulting architect. During the same year the Navy built Buildings 4 (cryptanalysis lab), 7 (dispensary), 11 (gatehouse), and 13 (mess hall). These were followed in 1944-46 by Buildings 5 (extension to lab), 17 and 19 (offices), 18 (code and signal lab), 43 (administrative building), and 20 (operations building). These were designed by architects from the U.S. Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks and the Naval Public Works Department; Building 20 was designed by Leon Chatelain, Jr.

The specific focus of the NCA was to break the codes produced by the formidable German Enigma machine in order to reduce the risk of attack on U.S. vessels by German U-boats. Located in the first and second floors of Building 4, the cryptanalysis machines, called bombes, ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Between February 1943 and May 1944, the NCA personnel were successful in their mission – the Enigma coding system was broken, enabling the United States to learn of the daily instructions given to the U-boat wolfpacks. Once the Enigma code was deciphered, the bombes were used to break other codes, such as those transmitted by the German Army, SS, and Luftwaffe. The cryptanalysis performed at the NCA is credited with turning the tide of WWII Atlantic operations, leading to the eventual surrender of Germany.

The bombes were operated exclusively by WAVES, or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, part of the Women's Naval Reserve. The WAVES worked in three continuous shifts and were housed at a complex of thirty buildings located across Nebraska Avenue. At its peak, the Quarters D complex was the largest WAVES barracks in the United States, housing 3,700 women, 600 of whom worked with the bombes.

Cryptanalysis remained a primary effort on the campus through the 1960s, when these activities were consolidated at the National Security Agency (NSA) in Fort Meade, Maryland. The NCA continued to be utilized for various military communications and security programs in subsequent decades. In April 2005, ownership of the NCA, renamed the Nebraska Avenue Complex, was transferred officially from the Department of the Navy to GSA in order to accommodate the headquarters for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The U.S. Navy retains ownership of the Gatesley House (Building 8).

### **Integrity**

The Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls/Nebraska Avenue Complex retains a high degree of integrity in its design, materials, and workmanship. The facility retains all primary buildings historically associated with the Seminary and Navy uses of the site. These buildings have been individually evaluated and all those built within the period of significance (1916-1952) were determined to be contributing with the exception of Buildings 7 and 15, which have undergone substantial alterations. Many of the Seminary-era buildings have experienced substantial interior retrofits, but those from the Navy era remain largely intact. The interior of Building 1 retains its original curving staircase and arched openings off the main entrance hall.

### **Evaluation of Significance**

The Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls/Nebraska Avenue Complex is nationally significant under DC criterion b and National Register Criterion A (History) for its role in U.S. Naval cryptanalysis of coded German U-boat messages during World War II and as the center for U.S. Naval

cryptanalysis for the Atlantic region during the immediate post-World War II and early Cold War period. The site also yields information on the significant role of women in WWII and their participation in Navy cryptanalysis.

The site is also locally significant for its association with women's education as the first secular female boarding school in Washington, D.C. The progressive curriculum of the Mount Vernon Seminary combined domestic education with academic coursework, adding a Junior College program in 1927, one of the first female Junior Colleges in the United States.

The property is significant under DC criterion d and National Register Criterion C (Architecture) at the local level as a representative example of an educational and military campus developed with buildings reflecting the Georgian Revival style popular in the first half of the twentieth century. The uniformity of massing, design, and classical detailing of the buildings erected during both the Seminary and Navy occupation and the interconnected series of pedestrian and vehicular circulation paths contribute to the property's significance under Criterion C as a distinguishable unified campus.

The property is significant under DC criterion g and National Register Criterion D (Archeology) at the local level for its potential to yield information on prehistoric lifeways, settlement patterns, and lithic reduction in the Potomac River Valley region. The property also has the potential to yield information the consumption and disposal patterns of the residents of Gatesley and the Mount Vernon Seminary.

### **Recommended Designation**

The Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls/Nebraska Avenue Complex Historic District encompasses 38.6 acres with 20 contributing resources – 16 buildings, one extant archeological site, two structures and an object and 22 non-contributing resources, most of which post-date the Period of Significance. The first Period of Significance covers the Late Woodland Period of 3000 BC to 1600 AD, during the prehistoric occupation of the site. The second extends from the establishment of the Mount Vernon Seminary for Girls on the site in 1916 to 1952, when the National Security Agency was created and the U.S. Naval Communications Annex and its cryptanalysis functions began to be relocated.