
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-13

Palisades Playground

5200 Sherier Place NW
Square 1415-S, Lot 802

Meeting Date: April 28, 2016
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture
Affected ANC: 3D
Staff Reviewer: Ruth Trocolli and Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Palisades Playground a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that it request the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance stretching from about 8000 B.C. until 1936, the former being the approximate date of the beginning of the “Archaic” period of prehistoric occupation, and the latter date the completion of much of the park design, including the fieldhouse. The period includes millennia of use by Native Americans, a historic and mostly agricultural era, and the early years of the playground itself.

The property merits designation under National Register Criterion D and District of Columbia Criterion G (“Archaeology”) for having yielded or being likely to yield information important in history and prehistory, but especially information about American Indian occupation over a period of thousands of years. The property also merits designation under National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for embodying the distinctive characteristics of a type and period of construction and an expression of urban planning and siting significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Finally, it meets National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B (“History”) for representing one important aspect of the physical, social and even political development of the Palisades neighborhood.

Palisades Playground was established in 1922. Its present layout and its primary structure, however, are mainly the products of an unusual Depression-era collaboration among several organizations.

Although the nomination covers the development of the Palisades neighborhood in brief as background to the creation of the park and particularly the Conduit Road Citizens’ Association’s efforts to that end, the document should probably account for aspects of that history that especially touch this parcel. For instance, the right-of-way of the Washington & Great Falls Electric Railway, which was carved from the broader Washington Aqueduct easement and promoted residential development in this vicinity, bounds the playground. Another part of the

park, a distinct assessment and taxation lot (826) not proposed for designation because it was only functionally joined to the larger parcel relatively recently, is the site of the former “Jesse Baltimore House,” a 1925 frame foursquare demolished in 2007. This Sears “kit” house was representative of the second wave of suburbanization in the Palisades, it is contemporaneous with the park’s early years, and it is worth mentioning in the context of the history of the parcel, even if razed and not designated as part of the landmark.

Going farther back, even beyond the historical agricultural use of the area, there is, of course, documented prehistoric occupation by Native Americans. The nomination cites the presence of prehistoric artifacts and features as one of the rationales for designation. But the narrative to describe and support this most compelling aspect of the property’s story must be further developed. In addition, prehistory should be reflected in the period or periods of significance, as suggested above.

Archaeology

In an 1889 article in a new scholarly journal, *American Anthropologist*, S.V. Proudfit reported that among the most important Native American Indian village sites in the District of Columbia, is one in the Palisades area that stretches

along the eastern shore of the Potomac from the lower reservoir to the Little Falls. This site lies on a table-land overlooking the river and at the base of another line of hills which rises from the eastern side of the plateau. The extent of this village is nearly equal to that of Nacotchtanke (Bennings), and it affords the same abundance of relics, which do not differ materially in character from those found at the latter place.¹

Proudfit and others of the era collected a wealth of artifacts from what is now the Palisades Playground and surrounding area, items that are now curated at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. Among them are native stone tools such as axes and hoes, fragments of pottery vessels, stone projectile points and knives, beads, ornaments, and other types of artifacts.

A century later, archaeologists of the consulting firm Engineering-Science assessed the archaeological potential of the Palisades Playground. They determined that the property is “extremely sensitive to the presence of both significant prehistoric and historic sites” and of “extreme importance” for the “information that could be provided concerning the little known aboriginal use and settlement the region.”² The team excavated fifteen post-hole tests (small subsurface tests of about six-inch diameter using a post-hole digger) across the property to ascertain the integrity of archaeological deposits. They determined that the soil profiles show

¹ Proudfit, S.V., “Ancient Village Sites and Aboriginal Workshops in the District of Columbia,” in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 2, pp. 241-246.

² Artemel, Janice et al., *Preliminary Archeological Survey, 23 Recreation Facilities, Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Engineering-Science, 1984).

little evidence of plowing and other disturbance, increasing the potential for significant, intact archaeological resources related to those found by Proudfit and others. Documentary research indicated that important historic resources from the colonial period through the nineteenth century could be present, and historic artifacts were found during the testing.

Twenty-first century archaeological investigations verify and clarify the results of the earlier studies. Recent investigations conducted by Stantec Consulting Services, Inc. in 2015 included systematic shovel testing in a grid pattern across undeveloped areas of the property.³ A geoarchaeologist was also consulted, and five soil cores were extracted and analyzed. Together, these investigations documented well-developed, generally intact soil columns that contained both historic and prehistoric artifacts across the property. Artifacts were even recovered from tests in areas near the recreation center building and the playing fields, demonstrating that these areas retain some archaeological potential. Native American artifacts were found in all areas tested and date from the Archaic through Woodland time periods, circa 8000 B.C. to A.D. 1700. A wide variety of stone tool materials were present, including quartz, quartzite, rhyolite, chert, and sandstone. No prehistoric pottery was recovered in the tests. Artifacts from the historic period were found close to where structures are depicted on nineteenth-century maps, such as Boschke's 1861 *Topographical map of the District of Columbia*. The results of the investigations indicate that the property contains intact archaeological deposits, suggesting that there is a high potential for Native American subsurface features such as those from habitations, fire pits, food processing areas, tool-making areas, or from camps or villages.

Both the professional archaeologists and the early artifact collectors recognized the research potential of an intact site for understanding Native American lifeways. The site offers the potential for stratified deposits from multiple time periods over several millennia. The question of why this area was such a hotbed of prehistoric activity is critical to understanding the importance of the site officially designated 51NW217. The property is located on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River and has two small stream valleys that create pathways down the bluff. Proximity to the river provided access to fish and other riverine food sources and to raw materials for making stone tools. The river was a center of seasonal activity during annual fish runs, for instance, when people traveled from the interior to harvest and dry shad. The Potomac itself was a pathway for travel via canoe. While the general outline of how such a site would be used by prehistoric peoples is generally understood, we have little knowledge of the particulars of the people who visited or lived at the site, or details about their societies, politics, demographics, religion or other less-tangible characteristics. Site 51NW217 has the potential to answer important archaeological questions, because despite modern development on the property, it is well-preserved and retains stratigraphic integrity.

The site demonstrably meets the significance and integrity criteria for designation locally and in the National Register. The richness and importance of the site compares favorably with other archaeological sites that have been designated in Washington or that have been determined eligible for designation. While future investigations may occur as mitigation for effects of alterations to the park, protecting and preserving irreplaceable ancient resources for future generations where possible is the appropriate ethic.

³ Kreisa, Paul P. and Geri Knight-Iske, *Palisades Recreation Center Phase IB Archaeological Assessment Management Summary* (Laurel, Maryland: Stantec Consulting Services Inc., 2015).

The background of the Palisades Playground and its fieldhouse

The District's earliest public playgrounds were outgrowths of school uses, and playgrounds and schools are still frequently co-located, even if often administered separately. The Victorian schools were not sited or designed with play space in mind, but school lots were later expended and adapted to recreation uses; one of the earliest public-school playgrounds was created at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) before the turn of the twentieth century.

During the first decades of the 1900s, public recreation space was often makeshift or informal, and playgrounds merely open lots and fields. The Progressive Era brought a greater interest in exercise in the form of play, as an antidote for the enervating effects of industrialized cities. Play was seen as an opportunity to cultivate the physical and moral nature of children, and playgrounds themselves constituted "breathing spots" in the city. The provision of active play space in Washington received a boost from the 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that recommended that elementary schools be programmed with playgrounds.

In 1924, Congress established the National Capital Park Commission (the predecessor to today's National Capital Planning Commission, first to be renamed the National Capital Park and Planning Commission) to continue implementation of the Senate Park ("McMillan") Plan, among whose recommendations was the provision of a green ring of parkland around the city. Even before that date, a United Citizens Playground Committee was advocating for a system of playgrounds equitably distributed among the city's communities. This committee was composed of representatives of active neighborhood groups, among which was the Conduit Road Citizens' Association (today's Palisades Citizens' Association). Although the Palisades was one of the less densely populated areas of the city, it lacked dedicated and programmed play space for children. The association's advocacy first secured the purchase of lots south of MacArthur Boulevard and overlooking the river and canal. The parcel was expanded, but like other early playgrounds, it initially lacked facilities. In spite of being largely unimproved, this park quickly became a focus of community activity, including the site of the association's now-famous annual Independence Day celebration.

Before 1930, some D.C. parks contained small buildings to store equipment. The District of Columbia's extant facilities from that era, however, include only buildings that were later repurposed for recreation use. Now, park administrators saw a need for facilities that could accommodate offices, storage rooms, restrooms, and general-purpose spaces to facilitate year-round recreation activities. Between 1930 and 1933, Colonial Revival-style recreation center buildings were designed by or under the direction of Municipal Architect Albert Harris. Harris developed a small "field house" model that was based on the Tidewater hall-and-parlor house with a full front porch. These were clearly influenced by the very topical Colonial Williamsburg restoration project and its new "archaeological" interest in even modest and vernacular colonial buildings of that region. District government buildings were already subject to review by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which encouraged stylistic consistency among building types and promoted the Colonial Revival as especially suited to the scale and character of most low-density residential areas. Several of these fieldhouses were erected, most are extant, and some have been

designated landmarks.⁴ The Harris model was influential in its own right, as several of the hip-roofed and modernist fieldhouses of the 1940s and 1950s were abstractions of his porch-fronted traditional building, much in the way that D.C. schools' Colonial and Classical Revival porticoes were abstracted into streamlined antae in schools of the late 1940s.

In 1933, control of parklands in the District of Columbia was transferred to a young National Park Service,⁵ which added design and administrative capacity to that of planning bodies such as the District Commissioners and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The Park Service commenced designing facilities for the playgrounds, including fieldhouses and bath or pool houses, and they were influenced stylistically by both the Commission of Fine Arts' preferences and by Harris's prior work. Whether produced by Harris's shop or the Park Service, a 2014 survey of D.C. Parks and Recreation facilities categorized this small group of 1930s Colonial Revival buildings collectively as "Type I," eligible for designation as the oldest purpose-built playground centers, a significant building type from the point of view of park planning. Many later fieldhouses and rec centers—because they were not among this earliest, formative class and were often less interesting architecturally—were considered ineligible or more questionable.

By 1931, continued demand from the Conduit Road Citizens' Association brought forth a plan that expressed the community's preferences for tennis courts on the western half of the site, surrounded by three small buildings, with two baseball fields at the eastern end. NCPPC was actively planning for the site when the design portfolio was handed to the Park Service, but the Commission still coordinated efforts. Although the plans underwent substantial revisions through 1935, the final version returned to placing the tennis courts in the park's northwest, where originally envisioned. The number of courts was one of the factors that pushed the baseball field near, and on an axis with, a fieldhouse.

The piece that remained constant through the federal design process was the position of the fieldhouse in the southeast corner of the parcel. This was a departure from the 1931 plan, but it made complete sense, not only in that a corner spot allowed more efficient use of the site, but that particular corner affords a downriver overlook. The view is responsible for the building's orientation and its rear terrace. These features were consistent with the Park Service's expanding interest in the Potomac River valley and NCPPC's mission to make publicly accessible green spaces, especially in prominent spots.

At the same time Palisades Playground's first plan of 1931 was produced, Albert Harris produced his first Colonial Revival fieldhouse at Mitchell Park. That hall-and-parlor-house model was more or less copied at a half-dozen other parks by the late 1930s, and any fieldhouse at the Palisades almost certainly would have looked the same, without a particular confluence of events and organizations. The Conduit Road Citizens' Association had eventually persuaded NCPPC to provide a fieldhouse, but it was a Great Depression infrastructure and make-work program that made the present building possible. A Public Works Administration park-improvement program suddenly opened the door to a larger facility than the Citizens' Association had imagined.

⁴ Park View and Lincoln playground fieldhouses have been designated; Twin Oaks is pending.

⁵ The property still federally owned, although it was transferred to District of Columbia administrative jurisdiction.

An early concept was plainly modernist; portions of the rambling L-shaped building might have proven to be interesting early specimens of the International Style, but the auditorium/gym section was a blank box. Revisions were Colonial Revival in style, however, almost certainly a consequence of Commission of Fine Arts encouragement of conservatism and consistency among the parks. Fiscal constraints or the wish for a tighter plan may have reduced the footprint somewhat, but the resulting building had a better relationship to the overlook and other park elements. Floor area was recaptured with an upstairs game room and projection room under the traditional gables. It may have been the CFA, too, that had encouraged a symmetrical, three-part plan. But the utility and administrative spaces were instead placed in one expanded wing (with a basement) that also became the main entrance. Fronting the wing, a porch signaled the entrance location. It is unlikely a coincidence that the finished wing resembled Albert Harris's fieldhouse model, and the whole resembled a telescoping Chesapeake house.

The finished fieldhouse had a projection-equipped auditorium/gym with a full stage, twin sex-segregated game rooms, an administrative office, and ample restrooms and storage. Even with the elimination of a food-concession space, this fieldhouse was a big step beyond Harris's model, except for its obvious stylistic similarity. Without the Citizens' Association pushing, the NCPPC coordinating planning, and the Public Works Administration providing the funds (not to slight the contributions of the Park Service and CFA), it is unlikely it would have come about. After all, the Harris model continued to be constructed elsewhere and was later abstracted into simpler forms.

Even innocuous landscape elements like fire pits are indicative of the uniqueness of the park and the federal involvement in its creation. Campfires were not associated with the typical urban playground, but more in keeping with a suburban locale and its visual and physical connection to the expanding federal parkland along the Potomac.

Thus, Palisades Playground was related to its contemporaries as well as unique. A 2014 Determination of Eligibility submitted by EHT Tracerics on behalf of the Department of Parks and Recreation concluded that:

The Palisades Recreation Center was designed and constructed in 1935-1936 through an extensive program of park improvements that was coordinated by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. It was constructed as part of a recreation system that was composed of several function-specific, themed facility types. The recreation center and its park setting were designed by the National Park Service, Branch of Plans and Design, and as the first recreation center to be built under the program, it is significant for its contribution to the development of the modern park system in the District. Architecturally, the recreation center serves as a characteristic example of the Colonial Revival style in American architecture, which was applied to the design of park structures in the District during this period. The construction of the recreation center also reflects the role of the Works Progress Administration in developing public infrastructure during the 1930s.

The DOE also acknowledged the role of the fieldhouse as a community center for the Palisades, "a meeting place for numerous local clubs and groups, and... a venue for various cultural

events.” Of course, this role in the social development of the neighborhood was the natural result of the Citizens’ Association’s efforts to bring it about.

Historic integrity

The Palisades Playground design retains considerable historic integrity. The natural evolution of such a park has generally resulted in new features—play and “spray” equipment for young kids, a soccer field, a skateboard area, garden beds, etc.—being positioned around original features such as the tennis courts and baseball field. The elements of the field and courts have, of course, been renewed, so other than participating in the overall plan, they should not be considered contributing elements because of their lack of integrity. Other aspects of the plan, such as the overlook remain.

The fieldhouse has high physical integrity. The major exterior alterations are superficial—the removal of decorative shutters and the installation of steel security doors—but these do have substantial adverse effects upon the building’s appearance.

The nomination identifies seven minor landscape objects as contributing, including four park benches at the overlook and three fire pits. These elements do appear to be early, although the benches, at least, are likely not as old as the fieldhouse. The condition of the fire pits is such that they have lost a great deal of integrity; they are nearly archaeological features themselves. And if neither fire pits nor benches can be placed within the period of significance, that fact might render them technically noncontributing.