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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 11-05

### Southern Railway Building

1500 K Street NW  
Square 199, Lot 0832

Meeting Date: February 25, 2016  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League  
Affected ANC: 2B  
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Southern Railway Building, 1500 K Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance with a Period of Significance of 1929.



### Preservation background

The Southern Railway Building is one of many historic downtown office buildings that have long been identified as being eligible for listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. In particular, the *D.C. Downtown Office Building Survey*, prepared by Design Forum in conjunction with the D.C. Preservation League for the D.C. Historic Preservation Office in 1991-1992, identified and researched the city's extant office buildings in downtown, developed a historic context for understanding them, and established

criteria (based upon National Register criteria) for evaluating them. The final report for this survey (1992) found that, based upon preliminary research, the Southern Railway Building meets several sub-classifications of National Register Criteria A and C. In addition, the final report recommended that certain clusters of office buildings, including those around McPherson Square, be considered for historic district designation.

In part based upon that recommendation, the D.C. Historic Preservation Office began a study in 2008 to research more fully and document downtown office buildings, including those around McPherson Square, and to consider them for historic landmark and historic district designation. As a result, several historic landmark nomination applications were prepared, along with an amendment to the Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District. While several of these landmark nominations for downtown office buildings have been to the Board and approved over the past many years, others are on file pending review. The historic district amendment would expand the boundaries of the Fifteenth Street Historic District to include bank-related and other office buildings that are consistent with the banking history and context of the historic district, but that do not necessarily front 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The expansion area includes a cluster of financial-related buildings around 14<sup>th</sup> and G Streets NW and the collection of buildings around McPherson Square, including the Southern Railway Building.

### **Architectural and historic background**

The Southern Railway Building is an imposing eleven-story office building designed by architect Waddy B. Wood in a reduced Classical Revival style and constructed in 1928-1929. The building is located at the southwest corner of 15th and K Streets on the west side of McPherson Square. Along with the Investment Building, the United Mine Workers building, and the Davidson, B.F. Saul and Continental Bank buildings across the square, the Southern Railway Building illustrates the rise of commercial office building construction in this part of downtown during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The smooth limestone-clad Southern Railway building consists of an eight-story main block and a distinctive temple-form, rooftop attic story, designed to conform to the city's zoning requirement that limits the cornice line to 110 feet and rooftop setbacks to 130 feet. The main block of the building is divided vertically into equal-sized bays separated by giant-order pilasters above a raised base. Simple punched window openings at the end bays and at the top level of the main block balance the verticality. The setback above the main block of the building features a colonnade with windows between the columns, and on the 15th Street elevation, two, distyle-in-antis pavilions at either end. Classically inspired and low-relief limestone sculpture is reserved for certain elements of the building, including door surrounds, belt courses and cornice lines. Metal panels and metal doors, similarly decorated with low-relief classical detailing, decorate the windows and door of the building's main floor level. The interior of the building is highly ornate with rich classical detailing in the public areas, such as the entry lobby, the elevator lobby and corridors.

The architect of the Southern Railway Building, Waddy Butler Wood (1869-1944), was a talented and prominent local architect who practiced architecture in Washington for 48 years, from 1892 to 1940, during a period of great development in the city. He is well recognized within historic preservation as a master architect for his talent and his quality designs for a

variety of building types ranging from single-family dwellings to large-scale private and government office buildings. Wood's first major commission came in 1895, when he was retained by the Capitol Traction Company to design the company's new car barn on M Street in Georgetown, a relationship that continued with designs for streetcar stops and car barns such as the East Capitol Street Car Barn and the Decatur Street Car Barn. Wood's charisma and upper-class status gave him access to Washington society, and he was soon designing houses for some of the city's most distinguished residents. In 1902, Wood formed a partnership with Edward Donn, Jr. and William I. Deming, and over the next ten years the popularity of the firm grew, with Wood serving as the principal designer. The firm dissolved amicably in 1912, but Wood continued to work independently, capturing prestigious commissions. He focused on commercial and government work, undertaking residential work only for the mansions of Washington's elite. During this period, Wood designed buildings for large corporations such as the Potomac and Electric Power Company (999 E Street NW), the Union Trust Company (738-740 15<sup>th</sup> Street), the Masonic Temple (801 13<sup>th</sup> Street), the Southern Railway Company (1500 K Street), the Commercial National Bank (1405 G Street) and the Department of the Interior.

The highly visible Southern Railway Building was constructed as the executive headquarters building for the Southern Railway Company which was then one of the country's most successful railroad conglomerates. Like the well-appointed train cars that were built at the height of the railroad era, the Southern Railway Building stands as a monument to the Southern Railway Company.

The Southern Railway Building was the first purpose-built building by the company in the city. Upon its founding in 1894, the Southern Railway Company established its headquarters in the District at 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in a building that had been constructed in 1871 as the offices for the *National Republican* newspaper. In 1887, the building was purchased by the Richmond and Danville Railroad, and when this railway company was subsumed into the Southern Railway in 1894, the building at 13<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue became the new company's headquarters. In 1899, Southern Railway enlarged the building, creating an imposing seven-story structure with a prominent central tower that vied with its neighbor, the still extant Old Post Office Pavilion. This first Southern Railway Building, long a landmark on Pennsylvania Avenue, suffered a major fire in 1916, resulting in its demolition a few weeks later. A new, not very distinctive building was erected to replace the charred ruins. This building was replaced ten years later, in 1926, when the federal government acquired the property as part of its plans for the Federal Triangle.

In March 1928, the Southern Railway Company purchased eleven lots at 15<sup>th</sup> and K Streets, demolished a series of three- and four-story commercial and residential buildings on the site, consolidated the lots, and succeeded in having the height limit raised by the Zoning Commission from 90 to 110 feet. Construction of the Waddy Wood-designed building, with a rooftop setback at 110 foot height rising to 130-feet per zoning regulation, was completed within one year and was officially opened in August 1929. Construction of this large office building for the Southern Railway Company continued the transformation of McPherson Square from a Victorian-era residential neighborhood surrounded by detached mansions to a business district defined by medium to large twentieth-century office buildings. In 1983, the Southern Railway merged with the Norfolk & Western whose headquarters were in Norfolk, Virginia, resulting in the sale of the

former headquarters. Still referred to as the Southern Railway Building, it was renovated in 1988 and again in 1995, and it presently serves as a private office building with a number of tenants.

### **Evaluation**

The Southern Railway Building meets D.C. Designation Criteria A and B (Events and History) and National Register Criterion A for its association with the railroad industry and in particular for its role as the headquarters of the Southern Railway Company, one of the country's largest railroad conglomerates at the time of the building's construction. The building also meets D.C. Designation Criteria A and B for its associations with the transformation of this part of downtown from a primarily residential neighborhood of detached dwellings in the nineteenth century to a commercial and business district in the early twentieth.

In addition, the Southern Railway Building with its giant-order colonnade and distinctive rooftop setback designed to conform with the city's zoning code meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism), Criterion E (Artistry), and Criterion F (Creative Masters), as well as National Register Criterion C, as an excellent example of its building type and style, and as an excellent representation of the work of master architect Waddy B. Wood. The steel-frame and limestone-clad building is designed in a reduced Classical Revival style, whose classical form and treatment, and spare surface decoration reflect a transitional, post-City Beautiful and pre-Modern aesthetic that characterizes 1920s office building design in the city.

The building retains high integrity of location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling and association. The proposed period of significance for the building is appropriately its date of completion, 1929.