
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-04

16 Grant Circle NW

Meeting Date: March 26, 2015
Applicant: Off Boundary Preservation Brigade
Affected ANC: 4C
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board deny the designation of 16 Grant Circle NW as a Historic Landmark in the District of Columbia. The HPO further recommends that the nomination not be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The house at 16 Grant Circle, a solid, representative example of a balloon-framed American foursquare-type house, provides valuable information on the development of Grant Circle and its surrounding area, and as such, would be considered a contributing resource within the pending Grant Circle Historic District. Despite such a contribution as part of a larger whole, the single dwelling does not, on its own, meet the District of Columbia criteria for designation in the D.C. Inventory, nor does it meet the National Register criteria for listing in that Register.



Historical Background

The two-story, stucco-clad frame house at 16 Grant Circle NW, built in 1913, was the first building constructed on Grant Circle in the Petworth subdivision of northwest D.C. The subdivision, carved out of a 387-acre tract of land that constituted the merging of two former estates, 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),

in an effort to adopt a more comprehensive approach to street planning in the area outside of the original city limits. In 1888, the Brightwood Railroad Company—owned by the Petworth real estate syndicate—received a charter to construct a horse-drawn streetcar, setting the stage for the area’s development. However, largely due to the Panic of 1893, improvement in Petworth including the area around Grant Circle and Sherman Circle to its north would languish into the early 20th century.

By the second decade of the 20th century as development in Washington was pushing northerly, it was beginning to approach Grant Circle. In 1913, carpenter Leo J. Long purchased a lot at the northeast corner of Grant Circle and New Hampshire Avenue NW and thereon constructed his dwelling, the first building on Grant Circle. Long, a carpenter and small-time builder, likely saw the opportunity to have a house on a grand, urban circle, yet still with sizeable square footage (5,800 square feet). This is not inconsequential, as the lot was likely affordable and large enough for him to build a shop at the rear and have room for the storage of building materials. The HPO survey of Washington County found this to be common trend; regularly, the first buyers of lots in residential subdivisions outside of the city were associated with the building trades, most likely for the same reasons (i.e., affordable and sizeable lots with room for workshops and materials).

Leo Long, who is listed as the architect, owner and builder of 16 Grant Circle on the D.C. Permit to Build, was born in Virginia but moved to D.C. by the early 20th century, and was a modestly active speculative builder between 1912 and 1916. According to the permits, Long speculatively built five dwellings, including the Grant Circle house, a frame foursquare at 2305 Woodridge Street NE; a frame front-gabled house at 1343 Franklin Street NE; and the duplex foursquare at 5060-5062 Sherier Place NW. He is also listed as builder on other houses and on 16 garages. His work is advertised in period newspapers and, in particular, highlights Long’s pebbledash stucco garages.

Shortly after construction of 16 Grant Circle, development around the Circle intensified. Between 1915 and 1924, all of the other sixteen residences (built in groups of rows), and two architecturally impressive churches were constructed. Today, Grant Circle remains intact to this original period of construction.

The owners of longest tenure at 16 Grant Circle were the family of William M. Fielding and Nettie G. House Fielding. Mr. Fielding was a salesman for the C.A. Gambrill Manufacturing Company flour mill of Baltimore until his death in early 1927. At that time, the Fieldings shared the home with their grown daughters, Nellie, a file clerk for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; Mary, a milliner and dressmaker; and Florence, a secretary and stenographer for a succession of organizations. About 1924, Florence married George A. Kieny—a sometime clerk, assistant engineer at a hotel, and time-keeper at the Bureau of Standards—and the couple resided with the family. After George’s death in 1961, the Fielding sisters sold the family home.

Architecture

The two-story house at 16 Grant Circle is an anomaly in that it is the only detached dwelling on the Circle. Within its larger environs, however, the house is not a complete outlier. While the Petworth neighborhood is largely defined by its two-story, early 20th-century brick row houses, the neighborhood also contains dozens of detached buildings of both frame and brick construction, including some commercial buildings. Generally, these detached dwellings date

from the area's first phase of suburban development, preceding the denser rowhouse building forms. The construction of the different dwelling types actually overlapped, as with the 1920s bungalows that were erected contemporaneously with many of the brick rows and duplexes. Stylistically, the neighborhood exhibits a broad range of late 19th- and early 20th-century styles in its detached buildings, including Queen Anne and Free Classic Revival, Craftsman, Colonial Revival, and "Dutch" Colonial.

The freestanding dwellings of Petworth come in a variety of dwelling forms. One of these, and that which best represents 16 Grant Circle, is the American foursquare. Defined by Gowans (*The Comfortable House*, 1986) and others, the foursquare is characterized by a nearly square footprint—typically deeper than wide—a hipped roof usually with one or more dormers, and a full-width (or nearly so) front porch. Applied to it were most of the residential styles popular from its origin in the 1880s to its demise at the end of the 1930s: Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Prairie, Craftsman, Mediterranean, etc. The form was popularized by pattern books and kit-house plans and thus appears across America. There are numerous examples of the American foursquare in Petworth beyond 16 Grant Circle, as well as in contemporaneous suburbs of the Palisades, Brookland, Woodridge, Congress Heights, etc.

Evaluation

The nomination asserts that the property merits designation because it is "one of the finest examples of a detached Colonial Revival Hip Roof Cottage and/or House" in the neighborhood. The house is more accurately described as an example of a foursquare house form with Craftsman-inspired detailing (not Colonial Revival).

When it comes to building types and architectural styles, D.C. Designation Criterion D requires that an eligible property "embody" the distinguishing characteristics of its type or style. The Board has held this to mean more than simply being an example of a style or type, as any building could then qualify. In recent years, the Board has denied applications to designate 1224 13th Street NW, 3530 Springland Lane NW, 1349 Kenyon Street NW, 1305-1311 H Street NE, 3637 Patterson Street NW, 819-821 7th Street NE, 5136 Sherier Place NW and 136-152 U Street NW on the grounds that, as architecture, they were not important enough examples or of special distinction in their neighborhoods. An architectural landmark must be a particularly noteworthy example and must be significant to the District of Columbia even if it represents the development of a particular neighborhood.

On the other hand, the Board has occasionally honored certain modest properties for exemplifying the formative development phase of a neighborhood (a handful in American University Park, for instance). Generally, such designated properties represent an important first phase of a neighborhood's growth and one that was indicative of the intent of the developer, and thus met D.C. Criterion B, for association with patterns of growth that contributed to the character of the District of Columbia.

The house at 16 Grant Circle does not alone stand out in this way as representing the initial phase of construction on Grant Circle or as an important trend in the growth of the neighborhood. It instead contributes to a collective understanding, along with its neighbors, of the development of Grant Circle and the larger Petworth neighborhood. Thus, while not eligible for listing as an Historic Landmark, the house at 16 Grant Circle would undeniably contribute to a Grant Circle Historic District.