HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 15-18

The Furies Collective
219 11th Street SE
Square 969, Lot 66

Meeting Date:	January 28, 2016
Applicant:	Robert Pohl (owner) and the D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC:	6B
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Furies Collective, 219 11th Street SE, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and request that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

The property meets National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B ("History") for association with a historical period, social movement and group that contributed significantly to the culture and development of the District of Columbia and the nation, specifically for its role as the headquarters of the Furies Collective and *The Furies* newspaper.

Background
The two-story brick house at 219 11th Street SE was designed by prolific Washington architect Nicholas T. Haller and constructed in 1913 for property owner William Murphy. One of two semidetached dwellings, it was built for speculative purposes. Although a contributing building within the Capitol Hill Historic District, its principal historical significance is its early 1970s association with the Furies Collective, as both a residence and publishing office.

Originally calling themselves "Those Women," appropriating the dismissive name applied to them by a neighboring group of heterosexual feminists, a group of a dozen lesbians formed themselves into a collective in the spring of 1971. Renaming themselves the "Furies," after the Greek goddesses of vengeance—particularly avengers of violence against women—the twelve included Ginny Berson, Joan Biren, Rita Mae Brown, Charlotte Bunch, Sharon Deevey, Helaine Harris, Susan Hathaway, Nancy Myron, Tasha Dellinger Peterson, Coletta Reid, Lee Schwing and Jennifer Woodul.

As the eventual name of their group indicated, the women were a socialist or anarchist collective, living together, sharing clothes and other property in common, and sharing household chores as well. They pooled their earnings, too, although each retained most of her own; the proportion of each's wages to be contributed to the common pot was decided by group discussion and consent. The women encouraged each other to take jobs commensurate to their level of education, in order to increase the resources available to all.

Ginny Berson described the demographics of her group as "[R]ural and urban; from the Southwest, Midwest, South and Northeast. Our ages range from 18 to 28. We are high school drop-outs and Ph.D. candidates. We are lower class, middle and upper-middle class. We are white. Some of us have been lesbians for twelve years, others for ten months." Most members had been involved in earlier feminist and anti-war collectives.

The Furies defined themselves as separatist, but unlike many previous utopian and religious movements, they did not set themselves physically apart from society. In that sense, they were more like African-American separatist groups, who were a likely inspiration. They did seek perfectibility or salvation, but a greater consciousness and self-reliance. The Furies offered not an alternative to mainstream society but a challenge to it, seeking to attack capitalism, racism, imperialism and all their manifestations, indeed, to end "all oppressions by attacking their roots—male supremacy."

Their separation had two principal dimensions, personal relationships and political work. One of their aims was to show "lesbianism as a positive alternative, not something weird to be ashamed of." But identity and image-making were not ends in themselves. The collective believed that lesbianism was a political choice more than a sexual one, and a necessary choice for true liberation, in that women who remained in and favored heterosexual relationships would always be compromising with and compromised by a sexist power structure. As lesbians, the Furies saw themselves as outcasts from all groups, thus more able to perceive such compromises and free to act as vanguard of a social revolution in which they had the most to gain. Beyond the level of personal relationships, the group felt it had to separate itself in its political work from pro-feminist groups of other stripes.

To set such a lofty goal as the fundamental transformation of society, the Furies realized that they had to make common cause with like-minded groups, hoping to empower them and knit them together into a national party. Their outreach was both local and national. They all pitched in running a Women's Skills Center that offered classes in English, Spanish, auto repairs, home repairs and self-defense. The group also organized a women's film festival and sporting events.

Toward the end of 1971, just prior to their move to the 11th Street house on Capitol Hill, the Furies expanded their outreach to publishing. Some members had had experience on feminist publications, and they saw a need to fill a void left by the failure of the D.C. feminist printing collective Econocopy. They would write, edit, print and distribute their own national newspaper, teaching themselves the necessary skills as they went along. Their first publication, however, was a 1972 final issue of the United Methodist Church youth magazine *motive* on the subject of lesbian feminism. They may have printed pamphlets on feminist topics, too.

The newspaper was published from the basement of 219 11th Street SE. The upstairs provided meeting and training space for the Furies' other work, plus living space for some of the members (the others lived within a few blocks). The group intended the publication to reach out to and unite lesbians across the country. Meant to be a monthly, *The Furies* was produced more erratically, as its staff struggled with the undertaking while holding down other jobs to support themselves, plus teaching and taking classes and engaging in other activism. Initially, all

members of the collective took part in the newspaper. Articles included ideological pieces, criticism, personal essays, advice on self-reliance and self-defense, and accounts of life in the collective. Articles were accompanied by poetry, photographs and drawings. The publication was sold by subscription or by the copy and distributed largely by mail. It advertised events, lesbian-owned businesses, and other lesbian-feminist publications nationwide.

After ten or eleven issues, *The Furies* newspaper folded in spring 1973. It suffered from the earlier break-up of the collective itself. The centrifugal force of so many active young women probably made inevitable the dissolution of the Furies as a group and as a publication, as did the need to grow a movement beyond the original dozen members. While new publishing staff joined the newspaper, it proved too difficult to continue given members' other priorities and responsibilities. Most eventually resigned and others moved out of town.

The paper chronicled the end of the collective, which was formally dissolved in spring 1972. The conclusions of writers/members Ginny Berson and Coletta Reid were largely positive: the members had each grown rapidly in personal and political awareness for the experience of being together, and they were still cooperating in many ways, but were now also working on other projects. The members were said to be unusually like-minded, which had made their work more efficient. But there were inevitably personal frictions, sometimes magnified by the group decision-making process. The members found it more comfortable, for instance, to not all live together. And if the personal was political, so could the political be personal. Berson's diagnosis of the fundamental problem the group faced was the ingrained class expectations of the middle-class members, including herself, whom she said oppressed the lower-class members. There are hints of other differences. While the newspaper never renounced separatism, a theme emerged favoring the efficacy of political work over maintaining purity of ideology, and someday being able to cooperate with other interest groups.

Evaluation

The primary historical significance of 219 11th Street SE is its association with the lesbian-feminist Furies Collective and the Furies' publishing efforts. Although there were other properties associated with the collective, this was its principal headquarters, classroom, meeting place and residence for the greatest length of time and the place most associated with the publication of *The Furies* newspaper and the production of the lesbian-feminist issue of the magazine *motive*.

The group is significant as one of the first lesbian-feminist activist groups, one of the more long-lasting and high-profile collectives, and a group with a powerful legacy despite small numbers and a limited duration. Especially through the publication of *The Furies*, the collective influenced lesbians and feminists nationwide and even worldwide; influenced by the Furies, a Dutch group published its own newspaper, and the two publications shared articles. Other collectives sprang up in a spirit of emulation and cooperation. Former Furies went on to found Olivia Records and the long-lived Lammas Women's Books & More which, in addition to being a bookstore, served as a cultural mecca for a quarter century.

Coletta Reid later wrote that "The Furies should be remembered for developing a theory of lesbian-feminism—a primary catalyst for the formation of lesbian-feminist groups and

collectives all across the nation." The group's foremost critical contribution may have been its emphasis on the character of power and oppression cross-cutting all categories of society: sex, class, race, etc. The lasting significance of the group is less about others adopting its specific program. It lies more in the raising of lesbian-feminist consciousness both personally and as a class, and increasing lesbian political capacity as a group. The work of the Furies promoted not only the lesbians' social equality but also their unique perspective and agency in the struggle against sexism. Perhaps the Furies' greatest contribution was their raising societal awareness of the degree to which sexuality is a social construct, moving the idea from a scientific one to a popular one with real consequences to society—affirmation for LGBTQ individuals and greater social and legal equality.