
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-01

Capital Traction Company Union Station

3600¹ and 3601 M Street NW

Square 1203, Lot 47; Square 1202, Lot 840; and part of the 36th Street right-of-way

Meeting Date: January 24, 2019
Applicant: Prospect Street Citizens Association and D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 2E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Capital Traction Company Union Station a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the Board request that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1894 to 1973, the era of its construction and its use by the Capital Traction Company and the Capital Transit Company.

The property merits designation under National Register Criteria A and C and District of Columbia Criteria B (“History”) and D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) as one of the of the best examples of a streetcar depot and barn built or extant in Washington and perhaps the most important of them all.

The majority of Washington’s streetcar barns and stables have been destroyed in whole or in greater part. This is one of perhaps eight terminals that remain, some of which date much later and are more closely associated with bus storage. It is a handsome and imposing station, unique in that it initially accommodated three independent streetcar lines that served the District and northern Virginia and that employed both cable and electric propulsion. It tells the story of the conversion of streetcars from horse to cable to electric propulsion. It also illustrates the consolidation of Washington’s streetcar lines, from an initial grouping of the termini of several independent lines, to their merger into the Capital Traction Company, and to that company’s emergence as a streetcar monopoly in 1933 as the Capital Transit. The building continued to serve Capital Transit as bus-company offices after the retirement of streetcars in 1962.

The property meets the registration requirements for streetcar terminals and car barns set forth in the multiple-property document *Streetcar and Bus Resources of Washington, D.C., 1862-1962*, in which the property was described as the most significant extant example of a terminal or depot.

¹ The street address for the former streetcar station is an anomaly. It is almost certainly the only address on the north side of an east-west street in the city’s northwest quadrant that has an even street number. The building also stands *east* of the 36th Street right-of-way, meaning that its number should instead be something like 3511 M.

The station

By the early 1890s, Congress was pushing for consolidation of the several independently owned streetcar lines in Washington and the elimination of horse-drawn cars. Long trips could mean switching between lines with different rolling stock, fares, motive power and speed. The lines often did not meet or cross conveniently, and their independence meant that they were not necessarily laid according to the most efficient plans. When the oldest system, the Washington & Georgetown, sought a new Georgetown terminal for its cable-drawn car line, Congress authorized an extension of the line from the original terminus at 32nd Street to 36th Street, so that the new station could also serve as the terminus of the Washington, Arlington and Falls Church line that had to cross the Aqueduct Bridge.² But the station was also planned to accommodate the termini of the electrified lines of the Metropolitan Railroad and the Rock Creek Railway Company (the latter of which merged with the W & G while the transit hub was under construction). Each line would have its own facilities in different parts of the building.

But there was a problem: the new site was not large enough for the depot. Then as now, the north side of the 3500 and 3600 blocks of M Street was a hill, but then a more gradual one, at the foot of which a handful of small buildings fronted the roadway on flattish areas carved from the slope. The builders undertook a major excavation to level more of the hill. Once underway, it was discovered that the exposed cliff was not solid bedrock, but a mixture of bedrock, “rotten rock” and looser sand and clay. Concrete walls had to be erected to retain the cliff behind the station and an associated stable, and to support replacement stairs down the steepened 36th Street right-of-way.

The streetcar station was designed to be a landmark. It was unique in that it was intended to serve and visually represent four streetcar companies, “the first edifice of its kind in the country.” Three stories tall, it was larger than any Washington terminal that preceded it or followed. A 140-foot tower, characteristic of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, echoed the steeples of Georgetown University above and was meant to be seen from Virginia. Although the tower accommodated a public elevator—itsself a still-rare feature—it was mostly for show. The building surely would have been landmarked before now, if not already protected as contributing to the character of the Georgetown Historic District.

Creative masters

The original designer of the station, Waddy Butler Wood, was a prominent architect of his time and prolific. His works, a number of which have been landmarked, are still admired. For the sake of the designation of his better works under National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion F, he can be considered a creative master. This project propelled him toward other car-barn commissions. Any catalogue raisonné of his work would include the Capital Traction Company Union Station, but with an asterisk. The issue is that the considerable 1910-1911 alterations of the building—while of quality, carefully blended with his base building, and consistent with the expansion of the historic streetcar operations—are not his work. Capital Traction instead engaged Beale and Meigs, who renovated the facade and interior.³ They

² A remnant of a W&G terminal stands at 3222 M Street as a façade of Georgetown Park.

³ The principal work of the \$80,000 renovation was the reconstruction of much of the roof, the strengthening of the floors, façade alterations including the widening of the vehicle doors, the installation of passenger and freight

reconstructed much of the third floor and roof and removed many of the arched windows from the second floor to update the building stylistically from the outmoded Romanesque Revival. So, although the building is probably the most important streetcar barn in Washington, it should not be considered a master work of Wood's, because his design has not survived sufficiently intact.

The property does not then meet District of Columbia Criterion F.

The retaining walls

The walls that keep Prospect Street from crushing the station represent a prodigious amount of excavation, shoring and concrete-pouring. An initial retaining wall of two stories' height was constructed at and west of 36th Street to reinforce the bank around a public stairway and a stable associated with the streetcar station. Other than using poured concrete as a primary material, the retaining-wall construction was conventional, a battered wall faced with stone where it would be exposed to public view. A much more extensive wall, along three sides of the new terminal, reached as much as 60 feet above the M Street elevation, also built of concrete, but nearly vertical and stepped periodically. A portion of this wall may be seen through the grates east of the 36th Street stairs. Like the station itself, the walls already contribute to the historic character of Georgetown. But even the concealed portions of wall contribute to the character of the landmark, especially as they were necessary for its construction and subsequent preservation.

With the station itself, the walls contribute to the property's eligibility under the criteria for architecture/building type and for history, as associated with institutions and patterns of growth and change that contributed to the development of the District of Columbia.

The "Exorcist steps"

The stairway in the 36th Street right-of-way presents the most challenging claim to significance under the established designation criteria. As a structure, it clearly contributes to the historical and architectural significance of the site. It was not formally part of the streetcar facility but part of the public right-of-way, a restoration of the public's river access impeded during construction. Yet, it was built as part of the project, tucked between the retaining walls and the station, and intended as a passage through them. As the station had its own internal circulation, the stair served the facility secondarily.

The nomination argues a distinct historic significance for the steps' having been featured in the 1973 film *The Exorcist*. Based on a popular novel, the movie was probably the highest-grossing horror film ever produced, and it received an Academy Award nomination for best picture. The film influenced pop culture, and its association adds color to this corner of Georgetown.

It is difficult to assess the historic significance of a site used for filming a portion of a movie.⁴ *The Exorcist* was filmed in numerous locations, with most interiors shot in a Manhattan studio,

elevators, and the construction of a new turntable and consequent rearrangement of track. Some of the drawings are in the collections of the Library of Congress.

⁴ The following text may assume familiarity with the plot. When consulted in early 2015 about the stairway's eligibility for designation, HPO staff opined that it was conceivable, but recommended that a plaque would be a

and exteriors shot in Georgetown, Manhattan, and even northern Iraq. Georgetown is the setting for most of the story, with several streets and university interiors and exteriors featured.

The scenes filmed at the stairs are pivotal to the story, but for that reason, the proposed boundary is inadequate. The residence of the demonically possessed girl was placed at the house nearest the top of the stairs, 3600 Prospect Street. In the story, two people die from falls from that home's bedroom window and down the stone steps. Because a lot actually separates the stairs from the residence, a false east wing was constructed to extend the building for the purpose of exterior shots; it was deemed implausible for even a supernatural force to hurl a body clear over an intervening lot.⁵ To honor the primary exterior location for the filming of *The Exorcist*, the majority of the site should not be excluded. Any effort to designate it should incorporate 3600 Prospect Street and Reservation 392. To divide it diminishes the significance of the parts. If designated despite reservations about significance, such a landmark would overlap the boundaries of the present one.

A film location has a kind of meta-significance; within the horror story, only fictional persons fall down the steps and "die." An analog in another medium might be a real-life building that inspires and figures prominently in a novel. Further, the totality of the movie is greater than any single part. It is thus difficult to evaluate the filming of each scene as an important historic event (National Register and District of Columbia Criteria A) based on the popular and critical reception of the movie. While many landmarked properties in the U.S. have been used as film locations, we have yet to discover one that was designated for that reason. It is conceivable that filming may be a sufficiently important event, but it seems more applicable to a site used repeatedly or continuously in film production, like a permanent set on a studio lot.

Already honored by an Oscar nomination and considerable profits, the film itself would surely qualify for various designations as a work of art, landing on lists such as top horror movies. It has stood the test of time (even if its special effects now look a bit cruder to our eyes). But this does not necessarily rub off on the 36th Street stairway as a participant in the "artistry" of "creative masters" of cinema. The world of film regularly showers honors on notable works of recent vintage; unlike the National Register of Historic Places, it has no 50-year rule to require the perspective of time for evaluating works in their historical context.⁶ Properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the National Register unless the property is of "exceptional importance." Although the whole property far predates 1973, the nomination is claiming a distinct and recent source of significance for the stairs. Even if the movie is of exceptional importance in its field, the stairs alone cannot be called an *exceptionally* significant historic site. Still, the District of Columbia age criterion is not as strict as the National Register's, and at least the movie's significance is established in the history of cinema. It is certainly the case that the stairs' association with the movie add to the significance of and interest in the property.

more appropriate way of honoring the site for its association with the movie. Such a plaque was installed a few months later.

⁵ That lot is a former piece of the 36th Street right-of-way. As the steepened hill prevented any passage of vehicles, the upper end of the block was set off as a public park. The reservation has since been effectively joined to 3600 Prospect Street by its enclosure with a solid fence.

⁶ It has been observed that many Oscar winners do not stand up well to retrospection.

For the reasons stated above, the property does not appear to meet National Register Criterion Consideration G (properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years) or the federal and local designation Criteria A for historic events that have contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation.

Archaeology

The nomination indicates that the property merits designation under National Register Criterion D and District of Columbia Criterion G for archaeology, as having “yielded or may be likely to yield information significant to an understanding of historic or prehistoric events, cultures, and standards of living, building, and design.” Specifically, it is asserted that the property is “likely to yield information important to our understanding of the historic development of the site and its transformation into a transportation hub.”

The typically concealed nature of archaeological features makes meeting this criterion more difficult than meeting more obvious architectural criteria for above-ground structures. An eligible archaeological site combines a measure of the unknown (the information to be yielded) with a measure of the known (the likelihood of its presence and ability to yield it). Designated and eligible archaeological sites have often been “ground-truthed” by a partial unearthing, or at least by a careful assessment of original potential and of subsequent disturbance.

In this case, there has been no archaeological assessment of the property beyond the historical research. In its prodigious earth-moving, the creation of the property wiped out any archaeological potential that predates the 1894-1895 excavation. Sprinkled about the foundations there could be a few artifacts associated with construction of the buildings, plus some objects since discarded, including in basement areas.

More important, the foundations of the 1895 stable may be present on Lot 840. If this structure were extant and had retained sufficient integrity, it would contribute to the character of a landmark transportation complex. But is not clear whether even traces remain. The nomination does not discuss in detail the stable or its importance to the larger facility, making it difficult to assess whether extant features can now contribute to the property’s overall eligibility. Its construction permit and historic maps provide us with its location, dimensions, materials and roof form, and indicate a bit about locations of openings. From these, we may make educated guesses as to its original floor plan (modified when it became an auto shop). Given this, we must consider what other research questions might be asked of the foundations or related deposits, if they exist. We might confirm the material of the floor (probably concrete), but it is not clear how such remains yield much information about this transportation hub beyond the documentary evidence and knowledge of other stables.

The property does not appear to meet National Register Criterion D and District of Columbia Criterion G.

Integrity

The concrete and stone retaining walls and the public stairs remain, with little alteration or repair. The stair treads have probably been re-set, and railings replaced. The Capital Traction

Company's stable was demolished in 1955, but the much more important station and car barn stands. The most important alterations to the station's exterior—widening of doors and alteration of windows and roof—occurred in 1910-1911, part of the expansion and streamlining of operations. A set-back fourth story was added in 1998, but it was built in a sensitive manner that evoked the multiple pitched roofs of the Wood design without lending a false history to the building's appearance. Doors and windows have been replaced. Some interior elements remain, but the upper stories were converted to commercial office uses, which removed or concealed features. In all, the property retains excellent integrity, more than sufficient to convey its historic character as a late Victorian streetcar station.

According to the streetcar multiple-property document, “to be eligible in the area of electric traction under Criterion C, the resources [streetcar terminals or depots] must retain sufficient contributing elements that represent the original design and function of the resource. The projecting towers or oriels, arched openings for streetcar entry, and masonry walls are contributing elements that must be intact on the nineteenth-century examples of the property type.”

Period of significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance extending from 1894, the commencement of construction, to 1973, the filming of *The Exorcist*. Based solely on the narrative relating to streetcar use of the site, an early 1960s date would be appropriate, as Washington's streetcars were then phased out. But the proposed end date of 1973 is still suitable, as it appears to be the time at which the Capital Transit Company vacated its offices at this former station.

The Board and the National Register have adopted the multiple-property thematic document *Streetcar and Bus Resources of Washington, D.C., 1862-1962*, which provides context and evaluation criteria for designating these public-transportation resources. The creation of the Capital Traction Company Union Station was an early step in the coordination and consolidation of the city's streetcar system. Consolidation continued as the car barn remained in use, with the Capital Transit Company acquiring all active streetcar facilities by 1933 and commencing a shift to bus service. As both modes of travel are considered historically important, the continuity of Capital Transit's use of the property after the retirement of the streetcars is sufficiently important to justify so late a period of significance.

Boundaries

The proposed boundaries are appropriate. They are reasonable to encompass all the structures contributing to the character of the Capital Traction Company Union Station without capturing intrusions or noncontributing resources. Although including the entire depth of Lot 840 in Square 1202 is unnecessary to protect the western retaining wall(s), the lot is small and conveniently included in its entirety, as it can easily be identified and described.