
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
FINAL STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-06

Scottish Rite Temple amendment (boundary increase)

1733 16th Street NW

Square 192 Lot 108

Meeting Date: May 23, 2019
Applicant: Dupont East Civic Action Association
Affected ANC: 2B

The Scottish Rite Temple is listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites as a historic landmark and is also a resource contributing to the character of the Sixteenth Street Historic District. The property was included in the city's first list of landmarks, issued by the Joint Committee of Landmarks in 1964. The Sixteenth Street Historic District was also identified on the Joint Committee's 1964 list as a notable area, but it was not designated as a historic district until 1977 and listed in the National Register in 1978. The Scottish Rite Temple is called out in the Sixteenth Street nomination as "one of the most unusual buildings in the Historic District," and it is credited with having been voted "the fifth most beautiful building in the world by a group of members of the Association of American Architects." While there is no National Register nomination for the temple, the Commission of Fine Arts publication *Sixteenth Street Architecture Volume 1* includes a generously illustrated 33-page discussion of the temple, its construction history, and character-defining features.¹

Proposed Boundary Increase

The amendment application proposes to extend the historic landmark boundary eastward to include the entirety of Lot 108, reaching to 15th Street, within the Fourteenth Street Historic District and including all the property that the Supreme Council currently owns, portions of which were acquired in the decades after completion of the temple.

The present application does not cite designation criteria under which the additional area may be evaluated. It proposes to extend the area for the following reasons:

- 1) The Scottish Rite Temple was built on a site approximately one-mile north of the White House that was identified as open space on the published 1791 L'Enfant Plan. Therefore, it is argued, the development of this open space, both historically and currently, conflicts with the L'Enfant Plan. Protecting this end of the site as open would uphold the vision of the L'Enfant Plan and should be embraced. The D.C. Parks and Recreation master plan recommends acquiring land for under-parked neighborhoods. Retaining this open space would help to fulfill that Department of Recreation Master Plan recommendation.

¹ The temple is also described in standard reference works on Washington Architecture, including *Buildings of the District of Columbia* (Pamela Scott and Antoinette Lee, 1993), and many others.

- 2) John Russell Pope desired open sightlines to his projects. The amendment notes that Pope stressed this in his design for a Lincoln Memorial proposed for Meridian Hill Park or the Old Soldiers' Home, which both "possess[ed] unhampered expression of purpose... by reason of their independence of surrounding important architectural dictates, consideration or comparisons."
- 3) In 1910, the Masons purchased a series of lots upon which they constructed the temple building, completed in 1915. Beginning in 1920, and continuing for many decades, they acquired numerous lots on S Street and 15th Street in the northern half of Square 192. The Masons systematically demolished the rowhouses, many of which had become home to African Americans. This act of demolition contributed to historic preservation efforts that ultimately resulted in the designation of the Fourteenth Street Historic District.

Evaluation

1) Pierre L'Enfant's concept plan of 1791 was modified and adjusted in the process of laying out the city. Andrew Ellicott's refinements of 1792 already included many changes to the original printed version of the L'Enfant Plan. One such change was the elimination of an open space centered on 16th Street from S to T Streets, the block north of the eventual temple (the temple would have been adjacent to the southeast corner of this contemplated square). Later alterations to the 1791 and 1792 Plans involved the elimination of streets, the introduction of others, and the re-organization of reservations, circles and other open spaces. Some of these developments, such as the introduction of minor streets and implementation of the McMillan Commission Plan have great significance in the city's urban planning history and are considered contributing realized features of the plan.

Much academic research and scholarship has been devoted to the L'Enfant Plan and subsequent planning, and as the city continues to develop, urban planning efforts consider an appropriate re-shaping of the city, in accordance with its historic plans. City circles and Reservations have been re-configured and L'Enfant Plan streets that had been closed are being re-opened. The 1997 designation of the Plan of the City in the D.C. Inventory emphasizes that the historic landmark is the plan as it was built and has evolved, during a period of significance from 1790 to 1942. The D.C. designation states:

The designated plan is neither the archived historical map of the city (which exists in several versions including the original), nor an idealized diagram of the urban layout depicted on those maps. It is the layout of the city in its implemented form, including the streets, parks and other public spaces of the city as they evolved historically and exist in reality.

Features such as the never-realized open space on upper 16th Street are not part of the L'Enfant Plan historic landmark. During the mid-nineteenth century, when the subject area was first developed, this site was divided into squares and lots in accordance with the 1792 Plan. It was partially developed during the late nineteenth century with rowhouses around the Scottish Rite site. There is no historical argument or planning rationale for re-creation of such conjectural elements in isolation of existing or historic conditions. The proposed landmark amendment calls

for “protecting” an open space that never existed except on the paper of the 1791 Plan, and for recreating it at a different location that is not on the 16th Street axis.

Expanding the boundaries to include the open space behind the temple building will not contribute to a restoration of L’Enfant’s vision. The anticipated nearby square was never officially set aside for public space and never developed as such. The present open space is not in the same location. A “restoration” of that version of the plan is entirely conjectural and would require the demolition of numerous historic buildings.

2) John Russell Pope is nationally known for his many residential, civic, religious, and institutional building designs, including Washington’s National Gallery of Art, the Jefferson Memorial, and the National City Christian Church. Pope’s work has been the focus of several books and articles, and many buildings designed by him are listed in the National Register.

The amended application notes that Pope wanted “unhampered” views and open sightlines for his designed buildings. This assessment appears to be based upon a single source—Pope’s comments on a design proposal for a Lincoln Memorial on either Meridian Hill or the Old Soldiers’ Home. The nomination offers no support for the idea’s application to the Scottish Rite Temple, and no background on Pope and his work is provided. Lacking direct evidence, it is impossible to conjecture about what Pope wished for the Scottish Rite site. What is known is that he designed the building on a site hemmed in by rowhouses and streets. Whatever his preferences, he presumably designed the building within those constraints and not with the expectation that those buildings would be removed in the future to enhance views.

The argument to expand the boundaries to allow for an “unhampered expression” of the building according to Pope is purely conjectural. The present open space was densely developed in the late nineteenth century, was occupied by rowhouses and alley buildings when the temple building was constructed between 1910-1915, and remained at least partially occupied by rowhouses through the 1980s.

3) The application notes that the boundaries should be expanded to include the site of the rowhouses along both S and 15th Street which were demolished by the Supreme Council. The argument is that the demolition of these historic rowhouses galvanized the community and encouraged the rise of historic preservation in the neighborhood and led to the community effort that culminated in the designation of the 14th Street Historic District. The nomination includes two articles about preservation protests following demolition in the 1980s, but this does not necessarily support a connection with the designation of the 14th Street Historic District in 1994. Half of the rowhouses along S Street were demolished by the Supreme Council by the mid-1950s, well before the rise of historic preservation in the neighborhood.

Also, the historic and visual qualities of the parking lot and green space on the east end of Lot 108 are not such that the area can be classified as a significant historic or cultural landscape. The lawn originated as a small patch at mid-century, expanding in the 1970s as more rowhouses were demolished, and completed in the early 1990s, after the last houses were razed. It is a flat, grassy area, with established hedges in the older, western section, a couple of ornamental trees, some shrubs, flower beds and foundation planting. Its notable, yet relatively recent feature is a bust of

George Washington. The southeastern section of the lot hosted a community garden from 1990 to 2011, before being graveled. A parking lot serving the temple had a similar history, begun immediately behind the apse in the 1950s and expanded some over the years, including replacing the community garden. Their recent vintage, changing extent, and lack of exemplary design or significant elements make the lawn and parking lot—although latterly associated with the temple—insufficiently important to reflect the values for which the 1915 temple is deemed significant. Instead, they are appropriately included within the existing historic districts.

The purchase and demolition of the rowhouses by the Supreme Council in the mid-20th century is not relevant to the significance of the Scottish Rite Temple itself. The National Register notes that boundaries should “encompass an appropriate setting” but should exclude “peripheral areas that do not directly contribute to the property’s significance.” (National Register Bulletin, Defining Boundaries for National Register Properties, page 2). The site of some demolished rowhouses was included within in the Sixteenth Street Historic District when it was created in 1977, following the boundary of what was then the Temple’s lot. When the Fourteenth Street Historic District was designated in 1994, its boundary was drawn to align with that of the Sixteenth Street Historic District, encompassing the remaining site of the rowhouses and leaving no gap between the districts.

Designation Criteria

This nomination was prepared as an amendment to a landmark that has no written nomination associated with it. Although the amended application does not address the designation criteria, it makes sense to look at them as they relate to the existing landmark, and in assessing the proposed amendment. Based on the site’s known history and documentation, including the information in the CFA 16th Street publication and other sources, it is reasonable to determine that the Scottish Rite Temple meets D.C. Designation Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism), E (Artistry), and (F) Creative Masters and the equivalent National Register Criteria A and C, and that its period of significance should be established as 1915, the date construction was complete.

The Scottish Rite Temple meets Criterion B for its association with social movements, groups, institutions, patterns of growth and change in the District. The temple is associated with the establishment of the Scottish Rite and the formation of the headquarters of the Supreme Council in the District of Columbia. The land that makes up the expanded boundaries has not been shown to have played a significant role in the history or events tied to the temple. Acquisition of the land by the Supreme Council falls outside of the temple’s period of significance.

The Scottish Rite Temple meets Criteria D, E and F, as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a building type and style; is an expression of architecture and urban planning; possesses high artistic value; and is the work of a master architect. The landscape within the proposed extended boundary does not add to the significance or understanding of the Scottish Rite Temple under these criteria. The open space is not notable as a designed or cultural landscape.

The property has not been evaluated under Criterion G (Archaeology), and it is possible that its site (existing or expanded) may yield information significant to an understanding of historic or

prehistoric events of the District. The proposed expanded area—the site of demolished nineteenth-century rowhouses—may provide information on the lives of the African American, working-class residents who lived there. Should the site provide such information, its significance would be related to the Fourteenth Street or Sixteenth Street historic districts in which the properties are already located, and not associated with the Scottish Rite Temple and the significance for which it has been designated a historic landmark.

Boundary Confirmation

Having established that the rowhouse sites do not contribute to the significance of the Scottish Rite Temple, the Board should take the opportunity provided by this application to clarify and confirm the boundary of the historic landmark. The Board should apply the standard historic preservation methodology for such determinations, considering the extent of the temple property at the time of its construction in 1915 and the time of its identification as a historic landmark in 1964.

The Scottish Rite Temple was included in *Landmarks of the National Capital: Preliminary List*, the city's first provisional list of landmarks, issued by the Joint Committee on Landmarks in 1964. This list was the predecessor of the current D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites created when the city enacted the D.C. Preservation Law in 1978; the Inventory incorporated the already designated landmarks and districts. The Joint Committee's list was organized into categories of significance, with the temple listed in Category III. The Sixteenth Street Historic District was also identified on the Joint Committee's 1964 list as a notable area of Category III significance.

The Joint Committee did not designate properties as we do now; it merely put them on a list by name and address. Site boundaries were of little importance because designation then conferred no protections. In 1968, two years after the establishment of the National Preservation Act, a D.C. State Historic Preservation Review Board was established, and through it, the Joint Committee, acting as state review board, began forwarding nominations to the National Register of Historic Places. Stated landmark lots or boundaries became necessary for this purpose. But the Joint Committee prioritized nominations for the properties in categories I and II only, so a nomination for the temple was never prepared. When the designation listing was incorporated into the DC Inventory, it remained with no boundary specified.

Logically, boundaries should reflect the extent of the property at the time of the Temple's completion in 1915, which was Assessment and Taxation Lot 800. Lots 40-42 (purchased 1920), 105 (1921), 106 (1952), 28 (1954) and 29 (1963) were acquired by the Scottish Rite in later years, as noted. As the 1965 Baist real estate atlas indicates, these eastern lots had not been formally consolidated with the temple by subdivision, or even informally, by the creation of an A&T lot.

Sixteenth Street was designated in 1977 as a Category II historic district. The district was listed in the National Register in 1978, with clearly delineated boundaries for what had previously been a sketchily defined area. The Sixteenth Street boundary behind the temple was established along the line of an Assessment and Taxation (A&T) Lot 820 which, in 1976, was newly superimposed on the several lots the Masons had acquired by then, including the alley/stable garage complex on Lot 808, purchased in 1969.

