HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 15-12

Control Point Virginia Tower
Southeast corner of 2nd Street and Virginia Avenue SW
Square 582, Part of Lot 856

Meeting Date:	March 24, 2016
Applicant:	CSX Transportation, Inc. (property owner)
Affected ANC:	6D
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Control Point Virginia Tower a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that it request the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1904, the approximate date of construction, to the 1930s, when the tower's switching system was converted to electric power.

The property merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B, for being associated with the reorganization and rationalization of the railroad facilities in the nation's capital, as well as meeting National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism"), for embodying the distinguishing characteristics of a building type that is an expression of engineering and urban planning significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Specifically, it is a rare local example of an interlocking-control tower once necessary for train switching but now obsolete.

Background and evaluation
The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was the first railway incorporated in the United States (1827) and the first common carrier. Its initial line (the "Old Main Line") west from Baltimore to the Ohio River valley was completed in stages beginning in 1828 and ending in the early 1850s. Meanwhile, the State of Maryland granted another charter for the company to build a line to Washington, which was constructed in the early 1830s. After the Civil War, the B&O added the Metropolitan Branch, providing a more direct line from the capital to the west. Additional and competing lines were constructed by other companies north-south through Maryland and deep into Virginia, connecting to Washington and Alexandria.

Terminals were typically promoted by local interests, but the arrival of the railroads was a double-edged sword. While such shipping served exporting farmers and industries, it also brought in the lower-priced products of more efficient competitors, which reshaped local economies. The B&O lines, competing railways, and later interurban electric lines also contributed mightily to the development of far-flung suburbs of Washington.

Its goes without saying that the rails, engines and rolling stock are the essential pieces of a railway, yet railroads spawned other necessary facilities. Trestles and tunnels were needed to cross obstacles; control towers to operate switches and gates at crossings; train sheds, roundhouses, turntables and shops for the storage and repair of engines and cars. Coaling stations and water tanks fed steam boilers, followed by powerhouses for electrified interurban lines and diesel storage for fueling most modern engines. Passengers needed stations for awaiting trains and purchasing tickets, and freight required its own depots and loading equipment. With railway mergers, railroad companies occupied ever-larger and more modern office buildings for headquarters and operations centers.[1]

Technological advances, changes in the nature and intensity of use of rail lines, and general wear and tear have all contributed to the loss, abandonment and reuse of the majority of historic railroad structures. While the alignments of major lines have generally been perpetuated, the rails, the ties, and even the ballast are periodically renewed. The tracks also have a characteristic sameness to them, once they became standardized as to gauge and rail profile. Historic engines and rolling stock, except to the extent that they end up in museums or are still operated on scenic lines, are mostly gone as well. Thus, it is the remaining buildings and bridges, rather than the tracks themselves, that are the preservation priority, the best visual representation of a past that's distinct from today. This is certainly the case in Washington. Although we are blessed with one of the greatest passenger terminals in the nation, a 1996 survey of railroad buildings commissioned by the D.C. Historic Preservation Office is principally a catalog of long-gone structures. It is the demolition of one more major structure—the removal of the 1870[2] Virginia Avenue tunnel in order to widen it for modern traffic—that occasions the present nomination, a "Section 106" mitigation of that necessary undertaking.

The two-story brick "Control Point Virginia Tower" was erected sometime between 1904 and 1906 as one piece of the massive reconstruction and rationalization of District railway facilities intended to unite the redundant, dispersed and sometimes disconnected lines and depots of the various railroad companies. This reorganization was one aspect of a "City Beautiful" plan for Washington, which improved the National Mall and resulted not only in the construction of a large "union" station, but also of massive classification yards in Alexandria County.[3] The bringing together of so many lines required the management of their connections and crossings. In 1903, the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad, a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was authorized to construct a twin tunnel south from the Union Station site, under Capitol Hill, to New Jersey Avenue and D Street SE. By the latter point, the First Street tunnel was curving west to join its north-south line to the main line at Virginia Avenue. It was where the two met that the Control Point Virginia Tower was needed.

"Interlockings were constructed… at grade crossings with other rail lines, at locations where trains would cross over from one track to another…, at locations where major branch lines and heavily used sidings join the main line, and at lift bridges. Interlocking towers housed an interlocking machine that would align switches and signals through a series of trackside pipes."

[1] Last month, the Board designated the headquarters of Southern Railway Company. That company had another, smaller office building in "Old Town" Alexandria.
[2] The tunnel was extended after the turn of the century.
[3] The former Potomac Yards in what is now the northern portion of Alexandria.

Hand-operated mechanical switching gear was soon housed in tower structures to protect both equipment and operator, and to allow the operators to observe the switch signals and oncoming trains. Although the design of the equipment provided some mechanical advantage, the first such switches were powered by human arms, a complex matter to transfer the movement from the second story of the tower to the ground and across the tracks, and thus a physically difficult task. But at the turn of the century, the interlocking mechanisms, as within the new Virginia Avenue tower, were pneumatically assisted. An important aspect of the workings of the tower was that the interlocking function was synchronized with visual signals that confirmed to the operator that the switch was completed successfully. Early twentieth-century equipment contained electrical contacts to signal automatically when the parts had properly met.

It was not until the 1930s that Control Point Virginia Tower was revamped with a fully electronic control panel and signal board with motorized switching equipment. This important change in the mode of operation is an appropriate reason for terminating the property's period of significance at that time. In the 1980s, interlocking controls went digital, and several could be operated remotely from a single center. It was then that the District lost several of its towers. The nominations mentions six roughly contemporaneous towers in Washington: "A", "C", "F", "K", "QN" and Virginia. Only one other of these, "K", so named because it is just south of K Street on the approach to Union Station, still stands. But there was one more, the Anacostia Tower, which controlled the merging of several lines before the Anacostia River crossing to M Street SE. This wood-frame building was demolished by CSX about 2008.

Anacostia Tower. Photograph by Brad Taylor, 2002.

Control Point Virginia Tower is significant as a scarce building type, one of only two remaining interlocking control towers in the District of Columbia. Because such towers are no longer essential to train-switching operations, they are a threatened class, indeed, a vanishing category of building. It is significant as one of the few extant utility structures that was directly involved in the physical movement of the trains. More broadly, it is important as one of the fixtures of a vast re-organization of Washington's rail facilities after the turn of the twentieth century.

As architecture, the tower is mainly interesting for comparison to examples elsewhere. It is an example of the transition between Victorian massing and Colonial Revival details of the sort that one sees in contemporaneous rowhouses. It is also similar in its scale and its loadbearing brick masonry atop a concrete foundation.

The exterior of the building has high historic integrity, while the interior has been considerably reworked because of the changes to its operating equipment over a century. There are some condition issues, but CSX plans imminent repairs, which is reason for the scheduling of this hearing at this time.

Boundary

The nomination proposes the following boundary: "the inside face of the stone retaining wall on the west and north faces, the east edge of the steel grate platform to the metal hand rail trackside on the south face, and the inside face of the stone retaining wall to the metal hand rail trackside on the southwest corner," said to be approximately 16'6" by 18'6."

As the nomination is presently legally noticed, the boundaries *could* be set anywhere within Assessment and Taxation Lot 856. It would actually be better to settle on an arbitrary boundary, a parallelogram of such and such feet on a side, and a bit more extensive, for a couple of practical reasons. First, the modern grate platforms and handrails may not always be there. Second, although it may seem unlikely, it is conceivable that a building with such a boundary as proposed could be entirely enveloped in development that wraps around it. The HPO had recommended extending the boundary to the 2nd Street right of way, so that the building could always retain street frontage and visibility. Indeed, as part of the justification for such narrow boundaries, the nomination indicates the presence of 2nd Street as one of the constraints.