
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-18

Wardman Flats

301-319 R Street NW; 1708-1712 3rd Street NW; 1709-1721 4th Street NW; and 300-312 and
322 Florida Avenue NW
Square 519, Lots 38-54; 64-73 and 801 and condos 2001-2010

Meeting Date: September 28, 2017
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 5E
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The HPO recommends that the Board designate the group of properties collectively called Wardman Flats in Square 519 as a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that a nomination, with revisions, be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance with a Period of Significance of 1902-1903.



The Wardman Flats is a collection of rowhouse flat buildings in the Truxton Circle neighborhood, conceived of and built by Harry Wardman as his first significant project as a developer in Washington. Designed, constructed and placed on the market in a five-month period between December 1902 and April 1903, the Wardman Flats established Wardman's model for building well-designed and quality construction in an efficient and cost-effective

manner that would come to define his career. With Wardman Flats, Harry Wardman and his architect, Nicholas R. Grimm, introduced an innovative design approach to duplex housing that accommodated an emerging market of lower, middle-class residents. By designing the flats in a form that was indistinguishable from that of single-family rowhouses, Wardman offered residents a new and socially uplifting alternative in rental housing.

History

The Wardman Flats are the first large-scale development project of Washington's most notable developer, Harry Wardman. Wardman was born in England to a dry goods merchant where he worked as a teenager, immigrating via New York to Washington by 1892. Once in this city, Wardman worked as a carpenter, beginning his career in the building industry where he would eventually reign as Washington's most prolific residential developer in its history. Throughout the 1890s, Wardman transitioned from carpenter to builder, largely building residential rowhouses for other developers. He also built "sanitary housing," consisting of two-story duplexes, for the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company. By 1899, Wardman made his foray into the developer field by building two frame houses on speculation in Brightwood. Over the next few years, Wardman would operate as developer on several other small projects, while continuing his association as builder with other developers.

In 1902, Wardman undertook his first major development project, that of Wardman Flats in Square 519, consisting of several groups of 27 rowhouse flats. Built by Wardman on land owned by him, and designed by Nicholas R. Grimm (Wardman's then preferred architect), the buildings were all designed as two-unit flats for two families, with one on each floor. Unlike the earlier sanitary houses that Wardman had built for WSIC that had two separate entrances, these flats were creatively designed with only one entrance, giving the flats the outward appearance of being single-family dwellings. In building Wardman Flats, Wardman established, for the first time, a system of construction with an economy of scale and vertical integration that came to be known as "the Wardman method" and defined Wardman's success as a developer. Wardman Flats catapulted Wardman into the development world and contributed importantly to a city-wide boom in the construction of flats. By 1905 Wardman became a developer exclusively. He developed and built so extensively over the next several decades that at his death in 1938, it was estimated that ten percent of the District's population lived in a building constructed by him.

The Wardman Flats were built at a time of growth in the federal government and a need to house the growing numbers of government workers. This growth included both white and blue-collar workers who were not as affluent as the traditional middle-class resident and who could not afford to buy single-family dwellings. Nonetheless, they aspired to housing that met modern standards of comfort and sanitation, and some social standing. Recognizing the limitations in the rental housing market—apartment buildings were not always family friendly, boarding houses were transient in nature, and "sanitary housing" was intended for the city's poorest residents—Wardman offered an important rental housing option by building rowhouse flats, and in the case of Wardman Flats, almost an entire block of them. Once completed, Wardman marketed his flats to investors who then rented them out. Overall, the residents of the Wardman Flats met the profile of the new wave of federal government workers; they were native-born whites who held white and blue-collar jobs.

Architecture

The Wardman Flats consist of 27 buildings in Square 519, bounded by Florida Avenue to the north, 4th Street NW to the west, R Street NW to the south and 3rd Street NW to the east. Twenty-six of the 27 buildings were designed by architect Nicholas R. Grimm and developed and built by Harry Wardman in 1902-1903; the condominium at 1717 4th Street was constructed around 2014 on a long-vacant lot of a demolished flats building. The Wardman Flats are all two-story, brick buildings distinguished by standard late-Victorian rowhouse forms and detailing, including projecting bays and towers, rusticated lintels, and single entry doors. These entries, however, lead not into a single-family dwelling as in the standard rowhouse, but into two separate apartments, with one flat per floor. The flats were constructed in several independent groups with each group occupying the four streets forming the square, with minor variations in form and details.

Evaluation Criteria

The Wardman Flats meet D.C. Designation Criteria B (History) and C (Persons) and National Register Criterion A because the flats are associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, achievements and patterns of growth and change that contributed to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or nation. In particular, the Wardman Flats are the earliest, large-scale and cohesive residential development of Harry Wardman. In addition, the flats, erected on an under-developed square just within the city's limits and intended to accommodate the expanding population of lower-to middle-class rental residents, illustrate the residential patterns of growth within the city.

The Wardman Flats meet D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register C as they embody the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction, or are expressions of urban planning, siting, or design significant to the appearance and development of the District. Specifically, the Wardman Flats are an excellent example of the rowhouse flat, a type of residential building that provided quality housing at affordable rental rates for the city's lower, middle-class residents. Wardman Flats represents an innovative example of the type by the developer-architect team of Harry Wardman and Nicholas R. Grimm.

Boundaries and Contributing/Non-Contributing Count

The nomination for the Wardman Flats proposes that the boundaries include the entirety of Square 519, consisting of 28 buildings, of which 26 would be contributing and two, non-contributing. The nomination notes that the two non-contributing buildings--322 Florida Avenue and 1717 4th Street NW—are outside of the Period of Significance and were not associated with Wardman. The building at 322 Florida Avenue NW is a two-story dwelling, built in 1921, with a later single-story store addition attached to it, both built upon the site of earlier 1887 dwellings. The three-story condominium building at 1717 4th Street NW filled a vacant lot that historically included one of the attached Wardman Flats buildings along 4th Street.

Staff recommends that the boundaries be drawn to exclude the lot upon which 322 Florida Avenue sits (Square 519 Lot 801). The lot occupies the site of four historic lots that were improved with dwellings that were built before Wardman purchased the rest of the square and were never associated with Wardman. With revised boundaries, the landmark would include the 26 contributing Wardman Flats and the one, non-contributing infill building at 1717 4th Street NW.

Period of Significance

The Period of Significance is limited to the dates of construction for the group of buildings. The design and construction was begun and was completed in 1902-1903.

Integrity

The Wardman Flats retain integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. All of the contributing buildings retain their historic massing, materials and details. Some changes, such as roof and window replacements exist, and as does one infill building, but these changes do not compromise the overall character and cohesiveness of the collection.