
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-10

All Souls Church, Unitarian

1500 Harvard Street NW
Square 2577, Lot 0043

Meeting Date: September 24, 2020
Applicant: All Souls Church, Unitarian and DC HPO
Affected ANC: 1A

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board approve the National Register nomination for All Souls Church, Unitarian, a Historic Landmark listed in D.C. Inventory of Historic Places, and further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register with a Period of Significance from 1924 to 1974.

Preservation Background

All Souls Church is listed in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and is a contributing building in the National Register-listed Meridian Hill Historic District. The church was designated a Historic Landmark by the Joint Committee of Landmarks in 1964 with the intent to forward a nomination to the National Register; however, like some other such Joint Committee-designated properties, no National Register nomination was ever prepared.

In 2017, the DC Historic Preservation Office received a grant from the National Park Service's Underrepresented Communities Grant Fund to undertake a historic context report for Washington's LGBTQ Resources, and to prepare four National Register nominations (two new ones and two amendments) on properties having LGBTQ significance. The context study, completed in September 2019, identified and developed several themes associated with LGBTQ history and culture and established a preliminary guide to determining, identifying, evaluating and nominating resources with important associations with the gay rights movement. The report provided a list of eligible properties under each theme. All Souls Church was identified under the theme of Religion and Spirituality and is one of the four properties that HPO has selected for forwarding to the National Register (the other properties are the Slowe-Burrill House; Annie's Steak House; and Saint Elizabeths Hospital).

For the purposes of the grant, the National Register nomination for All Souls is considered an amendment, since the property is already a recognized Historic Landmark. However, because there is no existing National Register nomination to update with LGBTQ history and significance, this is a new nomination that outlines several aspects of All Souls history and significance, including Architecture; Community Planning and Development; Social History (African American) and Social History (LGBTQ).

The nomination, co-sponsored by All Church, Unitarian was prepared by HPO with assistance from the church leadership and members of the congregation.

History and Architecture

All Souls Church, Unitarian, a red brick Colonial Revival-style church built in 1922-24, is the third church building erected by and for Washington's first unitarian congregation. Established in the District of Columbia in 1821 as the First Unitarian Church of Washington, the church began in this city as a branch of the Unitarian denomination that was already well-established in New England. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the church was looking to both expand beyond its original church building, and to establish itself as a national church for the denomination. To that end, in 1877, First Unitarian adopted its present name, All Souls, and built a new church building at 14th and L Streets downtown (demolished in 1924). Forty years later, in anticipation of a celebration of its centennial, All Souls began planning for the construction of a new church building. It settled on the present site at the height of Meridian Hill which was then being developed with large mansions and foreign legations to either side of the grand neo-Classical Meridian Hill Park, then under construction.

The church issued a design competition requiring that the denomination's national church should "typify Unitarian ideas and ideals, harmonize with the architecture of Washington and fit into the surroundings of the chosen site." The winning entry, submitted by the Boston architectural firm of Coolidge and Shattuck was closely modeled after James Gibbs' St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, reflecting the popularity of the style in both eighteenth and twentieth-century America. The construction of All Souls conformed with the City Beautiful planning efforts then being undertaken on Meridian Hill and was representative of the popularity of the Colonial Revival style for the city's public and institutional buildings.

From its inception, All Souls has offered a progressive outlook on the social, cultural and political issues of the day. From its pre-Civil War stance against slavery to its active role in the civil rights movement and its early embrace of LGBTQ rights, the ministers and congregation of All Souls have been vocal critics and active participants in the fight for equality. During the 1940s through the 1960s, All Souls Church embraced a social justice agenda and progressively became a racially integrated church. Its ministers, like the congregation, preached against racial discrimination, organized protest activities, engaged deeply with the local community to fight poverty and discrimination, and took on positions of leadership throughout the civil rights movement.

Beginning in 1970, All Souls became an early leader in the gay rights movement. The church was the physical home to the newly established Community Church of Washington (CCW), the District's first-known LGBTQ worship group. All Souls not only opened its spaces for worship, spiritual support, and meetings for gay groups such as CCW, it actively sought to educate its congregation and alter its own language and practices towards LGBTQ equality. During the late 1970s, All Souls began performing "uniteMENT" ceremonies for same-sex couples, ultimately becoming the first religious entity in the city to embrace equality of marriage for all. Since 1993, All Souls has called itself a "Welcoming Congregation," a church term affirming that "gay, lesbian and bi-sexual members and friends are an integral part of the life of our congregation and are welcome as part of our church family."

Evaluation

All Souls Church, Unitarian meets National Register Criterion A at the local level of significance with Community Planning and as the Area of Significance for its association with the development of 16th Street and Meridian Hill as a local manifestation of the City Beautiful Movement. All Souls also meets National Register Criterion A under Social History (LGBTQ) as the Area of Significance for being in the forefront of the gay rights movement during the 1970s, offering sermons and church-sponsored programs, lectures and events that sought to normalize homosexuality within the church community and more broadly. All Souls meets National Register Criterion C with Architecture as its Area of Significance as an excellent example of the Colonial Revival style, particularly as it relates to religious buildings.

The Period of Significance extends from 1924 when the present church building was erected on the site until 1974, a period just short of fifty years from the present and the point when All Souls took on a leadership role in the national church denomination, advocating for gay rights at an early stage of the gay rights movement.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the National Register nomination for all Souls forwarding to and listing in the National Register.

