
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-10

PEPCO Substation No. 13

1001 Harvard Street NW
Square 2852, Part of Lot 33

Meeting Date: January 25, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 1A

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate PEPCO Substation No. 13, 1001 Harvard Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1907, its construction date.

PEPCO Substation No. 13 meets D.C. Designation Criterion B (History) and the similar National Register Criterion A for its critical role in the provision of reliable electric service to a growing city. It is one of the earliest—and earliest extant—distribution substations in the city, and the first erected outside the original city boundaries. It is one of a small class of historic buildings representing this vital infrastructure.

The Harvard Street substation also merits designation under D.C. Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and the similar National Register Criterion C as an outstanding example of a substation building type, designed in a combination of arts-and-crafts and classical-revival styles to mask the industrial equipment, as a response to neighborhood complaints about siting such a facility in a residential-adjacent commercial zone. Substation No. 13's design was a departure from the earlier, utilitarian structures that had housed similar equipment, and it set a standard—philosophically, rather than in its particular design—for substations to come.

Background

The Potomac Electric Power Company traces its history in this city to 1891 when it first organized as the Potomac Electric Company. Over the course of the next decade, the company merged with other electric companies and, in 1902, combined forces with the Washington Railway and Electric Company (WRECo) to become PEPCO. In 1907, PEPCO established a new central generating power plant along Benning Road, and a series of substations to distribute the electricity throughout the city. Mostly, the substations are responsible for reducing the voltage transmitted from the generating plants and then feeding it to transformers near the customers. Much of the sensitive equipment had to be placed under cover to protect it from the weather, while providing additional security and visual screening.

This nomination sets forth a context for considering the design evolution of PEPCO's substations, classifying them into chronological periods by type. The earliest, built before 1928,

were generally utilitarian buildings, or extensions of existing streetcar barns. But as PEPCO erected independent substations in the city's expanding neighborhoods, it developed a policy of designing them with architectural sensitivity to the surroundings. This policy emanated from a 1906 proposal for this substation at Harvard Street and Sherman Avenue, which initially met community opposition. This was the company's first substation outside the city's core, and prominent D.C. architect Frederick B. Pyle was asked to design a more domestically scaled building suited to the new neighborhood. He came up with a low, broad-eaved building, a combination of arts-and-crafts and classical-revival styles, to mask the industrial use. The only standout industrial features are a couple of rooftop ventilators, like one might see on a barn, used to cool the equipment. The building set a standard for sensitivity of design that carried through the 1950s.

Substations were designed in an industrial Art Deco mode in the 1930s, before being blended into their commercial and residential surroundings for aesthetic and security reasons during World War II and the postwar era.

Evaluation

Electricity quickly became a vital utility in American cities at the turn of the twentieth century, and the generation plants and distribution substations are the principal artifacts of its physical infrastructure. This nomination provides a context for the design and construction of PEPCO substations city-wide that is instrumental to understanding the building type and designating the best examples.

The Harvard Street facility is arguably the most important example of a D.C. substation, being one of the earliest—and earliest extant—distribution substations in the city, and the first erected outside the original city boundaries. It was also the first designed by an architect to mask its use to fit it sensitively into a commercial and residential setting.

The building retains good integrity, but as with the other substations, its appearance is marred by the security screens added over the window. Later additions affected its setting, and their attachment was responsible for the removal of the north and west eaves.

The nomination proposes to designate only a portion of the lot, that containing the 1907 building, and not the 1921, 1929, 1937 and 1944 additions. The 1920s additions have some architectural character that is consistent with PEPCO's industrial designs of the 1930s, while the later additions are nondescript boxes. As the property's principal significance lies in the groundbreaking 1907 building, a period of significance of 1907 is defensible, even if it may consign to eventual demolition some decent additions that illustrate the evolution of the substation and of PEPCO facilities of the period.