
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 18-09

St. Paul's Methodist Church South/Tabor Presbyterian Church

150 S Street NW
Square 3104/Lot 820

Meeting Date: March 22, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 5E

After consideration of the application, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church South for listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Places and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1927-1948.

The modestly scaled asymmetrical red brick church with its gable front and corner tower fits neatly into its Bloomingdale streetscape of brick rowhouses, just as its history closely reflects and embodies that of the community. There is currently a raze application pending on the church building, and that application precipitated the landmark nomination for the property. St. Paul's Methodist Church South/Tabor Presbyterian Church is also located within the bounds of the proposed Bloomingdale Historic District, currently on-file with HPO.

Summary

St. Paul's Church is a late-Victorian church built in the Bloomingdale neighborhood in 1904-1905, as it was growing into a distinct community defined by long rows of architecturally distinguished three- and four-story rowhouses. For 22 years, St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church served this community, home primarily to middle-class white residents. In 1927, as African Americans began to settle the blocks west of 1st Street NW, St. Paul's sold the building to Tabor Presbyterian Church, organized just three years earlier by the Presbyterian of Washington City to serve African American congregants from the Le Droit Park and western Bloomingdale neighborhoods. Tabor remained in the church building for almost 50 years, playing an active role in the neighborhood, particularly as it served as the home meeting place for the Bloomingdale Civic Association during a period of racial tension and shifting demographics in the community.

Historical Background

Following the introduction of the city's first electric streetcar line, the Eckington & Soldier's Home Railway in 1888 and the development of Eckington on the east side of North Capitol Street, the rural area west of North Capitol Street that would become Bloomingdale was subdivided for residential development in a series of residential plats. These subdivisions, located just beyond the northern limits of the city, west of North Capitol Street and east of Le Droit Park, were quick to develop as speculative developers and builders bought up the newly

divided lots and began filling them with substantial brick rowhouses. By 1897, the emerging Bloomingdale neighborhood numbered 403 residents, most of whom were clustered in the new residences along the blocks near the intersection of 2nd and T Streets. Over the course of the next decade, the area developed with uninterrupted rows of houses lining the blocks from Florida Avenue on the south to beyond V Street on the north. By 1909, Bloomingdale was, according to the landmark application, the city's fifth most populous neighborhood, and home to white, middle-class families, who rented or owned their houses. As it grew, the neighborhood was served by a variety of services and amenities, including a firehouse, schools, commercial buildings and churches.

St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, one of five churches erected in Bloomingdale, was constructed in 1904-1905 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The M.E. Church, which had four congregations in the District at the turn of the twentieth-century, sought to establish a fifth one in Bloomingdale. Upon completion, the church was named St. Paul's and immediately began to grow its congregation, reflective of the community.

St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, located on a sizeable corner lot at the intersection of 2nd and S Streets, was intended to be a temporary sanctuary that would later become the church's Sunday school, while another, more elaborate sanctuary would be built adjacent to it—a plan that never came to fruition. As built, the modest-scaled red brick church, designed by the architectural firm of Speiden and Speiden, features asymmetrical massing typical of the late Victorian era with a front-facing gable and a robust Medieval-inspired corner tower, defined architecturally by its rusticated base, small windows, and cornice with a crenelated parapet.

At the time of the church's construction, Bloomingdale was developing as a solidly white neighborhood whose residents were served by the neighborhood's segregated schools and playground, and who were active in the whites-only citizens association. Just to the west, however, an African American community which had originated during the Civil War around Howard Town had expanded into Le Droit Park and was, by the 1910s and 1920s, pushing east into the western edge of Bloomingdale. As this area (west of 1st Street NW) became increasingly African American, white residents in-turn began to leave. In an effort to maintain the white homogeneity and stability of the neighborhood to the east, Bloomingdale developers and property owners east of 1st Street began placing racial restrictions and covenants in their deeds. Although many of the covenants in Bloomingdale were broken and challenged over time and were eventually deemed unenforceable by the Supreme Court, they ultimately did serve to prevent black settlement on Bloomingdale's unit blocks throughout the 1920s to 1940s. Meanwhile, however, the area west of 1st Street, including the site around St. Paul's Church, became increasingly African-American, as the city's growing black population sought to find adequate and unrestricted housing.

In 1927, like many of the white residents who left the neighborhood, the white congregation of St. Paul's Church sold its Bloomingdale building and moved further northwest. Tabor Presbyterian Church, an African American congregation, which had just been established three years earlier, moved in. Tabor Church was the first African American congregation in Bloomingdale and became a center for the African American community. In 1928, a group of African American residents formed the Quincy Place Association which a year later had become the Bloomingdale Civic Association (BCA). Tabor's first pastor, Rev. Richmond Fairley, also a Quincy Place resident, became an active member of the association and the association began

holding its meetings at Tabor Church. Tabor would remain the meeting place of the BCA for decades and a center of the community.

Like all civic associations, the Bloomingdale Civic Association represented the neighborhood's African American population, and pushed for infrastructure and transportation improvements, fought crime, and played an important role in addressing racial disparity in Bloomingdale and beyond. As noted in the nomination, the BCA pushed to have the whites-only Gage School transferred to the "colored" school division; advocated for a larger playground at Shaw Junior High School, and later for the integration of the Langley School Playground; lobbied for equal employment within the police department; and honored and supported many African American civic leaders in the community. Local activist Walter A. Pinchback, son of Louisiana governor P.B.S. Pinchback, who lived across the street from Tabor Church, was president of the association in the late 1930s, a time when the civic association helped African Americans advance in local government.

In 1935, as more whites left Bloomingdale, the Church of the Advent at 2nd and U Streets turned its building over to the African American congregation of St. George's Chapel. The other churches in Bloomingdale—all located east of 1st Street where racial restrictions were common--did not house African American congregations until after such restrictions were deemed unenforceable.

In the early 1970s, after some soul-searching, Tabor Church congregation voted to merge its church with Sherwood Presbyterian Church, and in 1975, the congregation left Bloomingdale to form the new combined church of Northeastern Presbyterian Church. After 1975, several church denominations moved into and out of the building.

Evaluation

The application for St. Paul's proposes that the property merits designation under DC Designation Criterion B (History) as the earliest and best surviving example of a neighborhood church in Bloomingdale, and for its relation to patterns of demographic change in the Bloomingdale community and the city. The application notes that the church played a prominent role in the community's social history, particularly in its struggle for social justice and civil rights, particularly as the church served as the home of the Bloomingdale Civic Association as it fought for racial equality. The Bloomingdale Historic District application, currently on-file at HPO, highlights the social significance of Bloomingdale as the combined legal efforts in and by the community during the height of segregation in housing contributed significantly to the 1948 Supreme Court decision that deemed racial covenants unenforceable.

Staff agrees that St. Paul's Church contributes to this important social history of Bloomingdale. St. Paul's is the first African American congregation to establish itself there as the neighborhood was beginning to experience racial transition. As the immediate blocks around the church shifted from white to black, the church, too, went from housing a white congregation to an African American one. As the racial composition solidified, the church became the nucleus of the African American community, hosting meetings of the Bloomingdale Civic Association, speeches and other events related to Civil Rights. The civic association, established as an advocate for its jurisdiction's African American residents, fought for racial equality in schools, playgrounds and area infrastructure.

The Board has designated other churches in the city as Historic Landmarks for their contributions to the social history of their neighborhoods. For instance, in 2014 the Board designated Park View Christian Church in Park View for its role as the first church in the Park View subdivision, and for its role in the establishment and first meeting place of the Park View Citizens' Association under the leadership of the church minister, as well as for its association with the beginning of the federal Head Start program. After its formation, the Park View Citizens' Association continued to meet in the church for the next few years. Similarly, in 2010, the Board designated the Saint Paul AUMP Church at 401 I Street SE as the only Washington, D.C. church associated with the oldest independent African American denomination in the country, and as the last surviving church in the Navy Yard area. In addition, the church, which was designed by an African American architect, survived two periods of urban renewal of the Navy Yard area and is a physical reminder of the area's African American history.

Based on the information presented in the nomination and as gleaned from the Bloomingdale Historic District application, St. Paul's played a critical role in the social and cultural history of the neighborhood, whether it directly influenced that history or not. The church building went from housing a white congregation to a black congregation as African Americans settled in the streets surrounding the church. The establishment of Tabor Church in-turn encouraged more African American settlement. As the neighborhood's then-only African American church, it opened itself up to the Bloomingdale Civic Association, formed to lobby for the needs of the area's African American residents, including issues and activities associated with Civil Rights. The application does not provide evidence as to whether the church or BCA was directly involved in the legal fight against racial covenants in Bloomingdale--the single-most notable aspect of the area's social history—but the church certainly engaged in and supported its community's fight for equal rights and provided a venue for doing so.

The application for St. Paul's finds that the property merits designation under DC Designation Criterion C (Architecture and Urbanism) as an excellent embodiment of the "neighborhood" church; and under Criteria E (Artistry); and F (Creative Masters) for its high quality of design and as the work of the architecture firm of Speiden & Speiden. Staff finds that the church is a well-designed late-Victorian neighborhood-scaled church that fits neatly into the surrounding streetscape and illustrates the talent of the architects and quality craftsmanship. The building's Medieval-inspired tower is particularly striking and unusual, though mimicked by Speiden & Speiden in its designs for Petworth Primitive Baptist Church (1911), built many years later. The architecture firm Speiden & Speiden are recognized as notable architects whose many works, including churches, have contributed to the design significance of the city. Still, the church, which was initially intended to serve only temporarily as the sanctuary, and its later 1953 addition, does not retain the integrity or quality of design emblematic of the work of Speiden & Speiden, required for designation under the above criteria.

Proposed Bloomingdale Historic District

St. Paul's Church is located within the bounds of the proposed Bloomingdale Historic District and within the Mid-City Planning Area Element of the Office of Planning's Comprehensive Plan (2006, updated 2011). The Comprehensive Plan recognizes the historic character of the Mid-City area, particularly the Eckington/Bloomingdale/Truxton Circle neighborhoods, and has further identified Bloomingdale as a potential historic district. For the past many years, HPO has been consulting with the community about historic district designation, and in July 2017, HPO received an application for a Bloomingdale Historic District. The historic district application

provides the urban planning, architectural, and historic context that establishes the significance of Bloomingdale, under the D.C. Designation criteria. St. Paul's Church figures into this context and is discussed in the application, along with the other churches in the neighborhood. The historic district application clearly establishes St. Paul's Church as a contributing building to the historic district.

Period of Significance

The application proposes a Period of Significance for St. Paul's/Tabor Church from 1904 to 1975, with the end-date being the year that Tabor Church vacated the building. This end-date extends beyond the 1892-1948 Period of Significance proposed for the Bloomingdale Historic District which corresponds with the Supreme Court ruling that held that the enforcement of racial covenants violated the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and represents the end of Bloomingdale's prominent role in the struggle to abolish racially restrictive housing covenants. After 1948, as the Bloomingdale neighborhood became predominantly African American, including its churches, the import of St. Paul's Church/Tabor Church as a community center decreased.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board designate St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church/Tabor Presbyterian Church under D.C. Designation Criterion B and National Register Criterion A at the local level of significance with a period of significance from 1927 to 1948.

