
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-06

Twelfth Precinct Station House

1700 Rhode Island Avenue NE

Square 4134, Lot 21

Meeting Date: May 27, 2021
Applicant: District of Columbia Department of General Services
Affected ANC: 5B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate Twelfth Precinct Station House a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO does not recommend forwarding the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, because it is unlikely the Register would accept the property as of sufficient historic integrity, because of the recent gutting of the interior and possibly the demolition of the garage wing and attachment of a residential tower.¹

Background

The history of policing in the District of Columbia may be divided into three broad eras. First, during the antebellum years, small constabularies for each of the jurisdictions had little of a footprint beyond the occasional neighborhood lock-up houses that, in Washington City, fed arrestees to a central guardhouse. Second, in 1861, the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) was established to address the surging wartime population and its attendant problems. This consolidation of the Washington, Georgetown and Washington County police prefigured and encouraged the consolidation of the governments as a whole a decade later. Reporting to a central headquarters, urbanized areas were divided into precincts with their own station houses. Initially, the sparser rural areas were served inadequately from these city precincts and eventually received the occasional substation. As these latter areas grew up, and the automobile eased transportation, they eventually received new precinct designations and their own station houses. Finally, in 1969, the precinct system was abandoned in favor of districts that better redistributed services over a matured city and replaced the small, outdated, pre-automobile facilities.

Because so little remains of the first era, and the third era is too recent to evaluate properly, it is second era—roughly the first century of MPD—that is of preservation interest. It can be broken down into several smaller periods that reflect changes political, architectural and technological. During the 1860s and 1870s, the police department was not permitted to build its own facilities. While this problem remained for some years for police headquarters, construction was authorized for community-based station houses beginning in the early 1880s. The Office of

¹ The Department of General Services retained the historic building to minimize harm to the neighborhood character and submitted the present application as mitigation for the construction of an attached residential tower.

Building Inspector developed a rectilinear three-story red-brick Romanesque station. The Sixth Precinct (429-431 New Jersey Avenue NW, demolished in the 1950s) was the prototype, and the subsequent buildings were variations on the theme. Housing a booking room and lock-up on the first floor, a sergeant's office occupied much of the second. Sleeping quarters were on top and a stable out back. Pure Victorian, inspired by medieval architecture by way of American armories, the design signaled strength and authority but could be inserted compatibly among city rowhouses. The last of these, the extant Fifth Precinct at 500 E Street SE, was completed in 1903. The stations were connected first by telegraphy and then by telephone.

With the advent of the City Beautiful movement, the District Commissioners sought to bring public buildings up to date aesthetically as well as functionally. Beginning in 1897 and extending into the 1910s, commissions for schools, firehouses, offices and other facilities were awarded to various architects in private practice, resulting in a high-quality and eclectic collection of civic landmarks. This coincided with the creation of new precincts on the city's outskirts. A Tenth Precinct was established in 1900 covering all the area north of Florida Avenue from Rock Creek to Benning Road. Its 1901 station house was a diminutive Italian Renaissance palazzo designed by A.B. Mullet and Company. The Eleventh followed in 1909, replacing Anacostia's rented substation with another palazzo, larger and stuccoed, by Wood, Donn & Deming. Among their functional improvements were more-humane holding cells. By the close of this period, the streetcar had induced much greater settlement of the suburbs, and the automobile was common. Together, these influences would create a demand for new stations on larger and far-flung sites.

A new District of Columbia Office of the Municipal Architect nearly coincided with the establishment of the United States Commission of Fine Arts, charged with the review of designs for federal and District government buildings. The Commission favored the popular Colonial Revival style for community-based facilities because it was seen as compatible with domestic architecture, especially in the suburbs. The Municipal Architect agreed, or at least complied, with the exception of a 1922 Harbor Precinct station in Southwest that was modeled on shingled New England lifesaving stations. The creation of a Twelfth Precinct that same year excised the northern portion of the Ninth Precinct and the western part of the Tenth, for a service area covering the development fanning out from the Rhode Island Avenue arterial. A Colonial Revival Thirteenth Precinct station followed in 1926.

The precinct map was reorganized in 1930, which began a gradual vacation of the Victorian stations. The first subsequent facility was an Eighth Precinct station shifted to Tenleytown. The Colonial Revival style prevailed with subsequent municipal architects, until the First Precinct was relocated to the Deco 1941 Daly Building at Judiciary Square. The first postwar station was the Fourteenth Precinct (1948) at 42nd and Benning Road NE, fully Modern in style and with an integral garage, consistent with the other public facilities designed by the team of Municipal Architect Merrill Coe. There were then no major new facilities until the establishment of the police districts in 1969, which brought a wave of new construction and abandonment of the old.

The nomination, of course, focuses on Rhode Island Avenue's Twelfth Precinct station house, completed in 1923. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, largely new residents of Langdon and Woodridge formed a Rhode Island Citizens Association to advocate the speedy

extension of the avenue itself and for the whole panoply of community improvements. Almost immediately, enhanced fire and police service were requested, and the association established a police and fire committee. As a consequence of continued residential growth, the District purchased a site at 17th and Rhode Island in 1917, and the first D.C. Municipal Architect, Snowden Ashford, drafted designs for a police station the following year. It would have been his first, had the establishment of the new precinct not been delayed until 1922 because of wartime material shortages and a postwar recession.

The Twelfth Police Precinct covered a section of the northeast quadrant of the city, relieving the Ninth and Tenth precincts of some of their former service areas. The final boundaries were not fixed until the new station went into operation at the end of 1923: “Bladensburg Road on M Street to the eastern branch along the Mount Olivet road, on S Street east of Trinity college to Glenwood cemetery, along Harewood road to Rock Creek Church road to Riggs road, and northward to the District line.”

In August 1922, Chief of Police Major Daniel Sullivan had announced that construction of the station house would at last begin the following month and finish the following year. New drawings had been prepared by Ashford’s successor, Albert Harris, and these reflected Harris’s taste and perhaps the influence of Commission of Fine Arts review. Gone was Ashford’s neoclassicism, in favor of the Colonial Revival, rising in popularity since the nation’s centennial, with restorations of historic buildings and their use as prototypes for new construction. Stylistically, the Twelfth Precinct paralleled Washington’s firehouse and elementary-school projects of the same time. Inspired by Tidewater manor houses, they were considered of suitably domestic character for residential neighborhoods. In the finished Twelfth Precinct, there is a notable similarity to Harris’s extensible elementary schools, with the front gable and Palladian window over a central portico—a model for the model, one might say. A bit of value-engineering reduced the bids below the \$60,000 appropriated by Congress. *The Washington Post* compared the finished station to a “magnificent colonial home,” albeit with a three-bay garage attached at rear. It officially opened on January 1, 1924, but its complement of 51 officers was already at work.

The precinct house outlasted the wholesale reorganization of police service areas in 1969, but was a station for less than four more years, interim quarters for the Fifth District while a new station was pending. More recently, the building housed MPD’s Youth Services Division until 2015. The building was converted to transitional housing in 2018-2019 with a six-story addition that necessitated demolition of the garage.

Significance and designation criteria

Like a school or firehouse, the primary significance of a police station lies in its function. In addition to their best-known crime-fighting and public safety functions, D.C. police were responsible for regular population counts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and were involved with distributing charity. They have played an important role at every major city event, inaugurations, protests, fires. Police were charged with enforcing all manner of criminal and safety laws, even when some of these were discriminatory. But even adverse police-public interactions are of historical importance. A neighborhood precinct house was seen

as an improvement that added value to a community, as evidenced by the Rhode Island Avenue Citizens Association’s long advocacy for the station.

For these reasons, the Twelfth Precinct Station House merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B (history), for being “associated with historical periods... institutions... [and] patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia...”

The Twelfth Precinct is also significant for its place in the physical evolution of local police stations. It was the second station designed by the Office of the Municipal Architect and the first done in an academic Colonial Revival style. It was also the first laid out to reflect the requirements of the automobile era.

Nearly all the structures used by MPD and its predecessors during the first century of the District of Columbia are gone. None erected before 1925 is still used by MPD. There are no D.C. precinct station houses individually designated; most of the nineteenth-century ones are demolished, but some are contributing buildings.² The most recent police headquarters was landmarked in 2018 as part of the 1941 Municipal Center.

For being a rare building type and the first of its style and layout, the Twelfth Precinct Station House meets National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D (architecture and urbanism).

Period of significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance of 1923, the station’s date of construction. For a property of historical significance beyond a single event, a longer period of significance—coinciding with a period of significant use—is typically appropriate. HPO proposes a terminal date of 1969, when the old Twelfth became the temporary headquarters for the new Fifth District. A reorganization of that year erased not only the Twelfth Precinct, but all precincts. A new Fifth District police station was completed at 1805 Bladensburg Road in 1973 and the old Twelfth vacated. A period of significance longer than a single year may justify some of the alterations to the original design that occurred over the first four and a half decades, natural adaptations of building in continuous use.

Integrity

Although the property has been considerably altered, the Twelfth Precinct Station House retains sufficient historic integrity to convey its significance. The immediate setting of the building has been substantially impacted by the construction of an adjoining residential tower in 2019, but the building retains its location and broader setting within a residential neighborhood. It also retains sufficient integrity of design, craftsmanship, and materials for the appreciation of its original state. In its recent rehabilitation, the interior of the building was gutted, destroying any evidence of its original interior plan and interior historic fabric. But the exterior has been preserved to retain many significant elements of its Colonial Revival design, a significant aspect of the third generation of purpose-built precinct station houses in the city. The entrance portico remains, as

² The First Precinct did share the Daly Building with police headquarters for almost thirty years. There is also a 1930s U.S. Park Police Substation that contributes to the character of the federally owned Rock Creek Park Historic District.

do the punched window openings, distinctive parapets/belfries at both ends, Flemish-bond brick elevations, most of the masonry detailing, the gable roof and roof dormers, and the stone inscription reading “Police Station 12.” The original sash windows have been removed, but the replacements replicate the original configuration. Other alterations include the modification of the front (south) belfry, the loss of the original revolving door from the front entrance, and removal of a few stone details. The most important change is probably the demolition of the one-story garage wing, a modest but significant attribute of a suburban police station of the automobile era. Despite these changes, the historic character of the building’s exterior remains legible.