
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-01

Tabard Inn

1737, 1739 and 1741 N Street NW
Square 158, Lots 58, 59 and 807

Meeting Date: February 27, 2020
Applicants: Hotel Tabard Inn
Affected ANC: 2B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Tabard Inn at 1737-1741 N Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance, with a period of significance from 1887 to 1970.

Historical Background

The three buildings at 1737, 1739 and 1741 N Street NW are buildings contributing to the significance of the Dupont Circle Historic District. They were built during the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth, at the height of Dupont Circle's growth as a fashionable neighborhood defined by its avant-garde, high-quality and architect-designed townhouses and mansions attracting persons of wealth and prominence. These townhouses are part of a particularly distinctive collection of residences making up the 1700 block of N Street, south of the Circle, historically home to high ranking military officers, politicians and other professionals. As the home of the Tabard Inn since 1922, however, the converted dwellings have historical and cultural significance that goes beyond their collective role in the development and growth of Dupont Circle and merits designation as a landmark.

The Tabard Inn was established at 1739 N Street in 1922 by entrepreneur Marie Willoughby Rogers. At the time she was recently widowed; her husband, a prominent geologist, had died unexpectedly while on a mission with the U.S. Geological Survey. Mrs. Rogers, who had previously operated a small restaurant in New York City, initially intended to operate the townhouse as a guest house and a place 'just to give parties.' Within months of its opening, however, she had introduced a tearoom, and the guest house was operating more formally as an inn. She sought to imbue the hostelry with the ambiance of an English Country Inn and named it after the inn in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In 1928 and 1937, Rogers expanded the business into the adjacent houses at 1741 N Street and 1737 N Street, respectively, connecting the three internally. In 1963, the *Washington Post* described the Tabard as "a quaint four-story establishment with a marvelous maze of halls, passageways, and staircases," a description still accurate.

Marie Rogers's business reflects the era of the American Tea Room Movement. As described in the nomination, this movement traces its roots to Scotland where, in 1878, Catherine Cranston, sister of prominent tea merchant Stuart Cranston, opened a restaurant offering lunch and afternoon tea in an intimate and artistic setting to serve as a "counter-attraction to gin shops."

The concept was popularized throughout Great Britain and served as the inspiration for similar tea rooms in the United States. Although often run by men and located in large hotels and department stores, tearooms catered to women, particularly white women of a certain social status, as most restaurants—where alcohol was served—did not welcome women, especially unaccompanied by male family members.

During the 1910s, independent tearooms, increasingly run by women, were opened to a broader clientele. Often in converted residences or small commercial establishments, tearooms offered a domestic feel and home-cooked meals. By the 1920s, and especially during Prohibition, tearooms were profitable business ventures that even supported their own trade publications, largely to provide women with advice on how to succeed in business. The Tabard, which regularly advertised itself as a tea house, fit the model, but was not alone in the District. The economic pressures of the Great Depression and material shortages of World War II shuttered tearooms nationwide but, as a whole, those in Washington survived. For three years during World War II, the Tabard was requisitioned by the military to serve as officer quarters for the Navy's Women Appointed for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). But at war's end, it resumed its normal operations.

Rogers oversaw operations until her death in 1970. The building was then threatened with demolition. Most independent teahouses in the city had already succumbed to redevelopment and other forces. But in 1974, the Tabard Inn was rescued by Fritz and Edward Cohen, who purchased the property and re-opened the inn and restaurant. Still operating today under the ownership of Mrs. Cohen and her employees, the Tabard Inn is a survivor, distinguished as the oldest inn in the city to be continuously owned and operated by women.

Evaluation

The Tabard Inn meets D.C. Designation Criterion A (Events) as the “site of events that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture, or development of the District,” and D.C. Designation Criterion B (History) for its association with “historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia.” In particular, the Tabard Inn is associated with the development of small, independent inns and teahouses that emerged during with American Tea House Movement of the early twentieth century. Woman-owned and operated from the outset, the Tabard Inn is an excellent and rare survivor of this business model. In addition, the Tabard served as quarters for the WAVES during World War II, representing an important period in the history of the city when women were recruited to D.C. to contribute to the war effort and housing was requisitioned to accommodate them. For these reasons, the property meets National Register Criterion A.

The three buildings comprising the Tabard Inn are good representative examples of the architect-designed townhouses built in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Dupont Circle and occupied by persons of a certain social standing and financial means. As such, they are solid contributors to the Dupont Circle Historic District. The application asserts that the property is also eligible under National Register Criterion C for architecture. In order for them to qualify for listing in the National Register under Criterion C, individually or collectively, an argument would need to be developed showing that they each embody distinctive characteristics of a building type or style, or they represent the work of master architects. HPO does not believe such an argument has been made, nor does it appear necessary, as the property's primary

significance lies in its historical and cultural significance as an early-twentieth-century woman-owned teahouse and inn. The buildings remain important contributors, architecturally, to the Dupont Circle Historic District.

Period of Significance

The period of significance should extend from 1887, when the first of the three townhouses was constructed, until 1970. The terminal date, which is fifty years before the present, allows sufficient time to have elapsed to consider the property in its historic context. It corresponds with the death of Mrs. Marie Rogers who established the inn in 1922 and operated it until that time. Although 1970 provides an appropriate end date, it is notable that the Tabard then survived the threat of demolition to re-opened in 1974 and continues to today.

Integrity

The Tabard Inn at 1737, 1739 and 1741 N Street NW retains high integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Significant alterations have related to the adaptation of the former homes to accommodate the expanding business.

