
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-06

Founding Church of Scientology

1812 19th Street NW
Square 109, Lot 30

Meeting Date: June 30, 2022
Applicant: Heritage Properties International (owner)

Affected ANC: 2B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate the Founding Church of Scientology a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of national significance, with a period of significance of 1956 to 1961.

The rowhouse at 1812 19th Street is part of a fine, three-story, four-unit (1810-1816 19th) row designed in 1904 by the prominent Washington architecture firm Wood, Donn and Deming. Among the more notable owners, a couple years after the home's construction, was James Kimbrough Jones Sr., a former Arkansas senator and Democratic National Committee chairman. For much of the 1920s and 1930s, the property was the home of newspaper reporters Henry and Anne Suydam. The property otherwise seems to have had an unremarkable first few decades, frequently rented and even internally subdivided into smaller units. It was a women's boarding house during World War II, and in the postwar era, like many large, nearby homes, it would go into institutional or office use, first as a chapter house for a fraternity. In 1956, 1810 and 1812 19th would become the headquarters for the new Church of Scientology, incorporated in the District of Columbia the prior year.

Although most organized religions originated in the Old World, the Western Hemisphere has seen its share of religious movements, often sects splintering from established churches.¹ The political capital of the United States, the little District of Columbia has not been known for originating such movements, although many mainline denominations sought to establish representative national church edifices here. In the mid 1950s, however, the founder of a nascent school of thought establishing a formal academy and publishing organization in Washington, based on his own philosophy and insights into the improvement of human nature.

A former Navy officer, Lafayette Ronald "L. Ron" Hubbard had a lifelong interest in travel and exploration, which found its way into his scores of short stories and adventure novels. A onetime president of the New York chapter of the American Fiction Guild and vice president of

¹ As indicated, for instance, by this Wikipedia list of U.S. religious movements:
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of religious movements that began in the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religious_movements_that_began_in_the_United_States)

the national body, in 1939 he was selected as a staff writer for the new magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, which ushered in a golden age of the genre. Although proud of his work, Hubbard later stated that his motivation was largely the financing of his “more serious researches.” His background would give him a uniquely modern and American perspective into spirituality.

In the late 1930s Hubbard would write, but not publish, a manuscript stating that humans have a “Dynamic Principle of Existence”: to “Survive!” But they could pass down through generations learned responses, positive and negative, that could check their potential. A decade later, at Bay Head, New Jersey, Hubbard compiled his thoughts and research in another manuscript and in two articles for *Astounding Science Fiction*, the last of which was titled “Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science”. There was an enthusiastic response from a readership in an era of great interest in scientific progress, psychology, self-help, and alternative religions. This encouraged Hubbard to complete *Dianetics* as a full-length book which peaked at No. 4 on the *New York Times* bestsellers list in September 1950. This, in turned, spurred his establishment of a Hubbard Dianetics Research Foundation to train members of the public in techniques to “audit” their personalities and to counsel others.

In 1952, Hubbard removed to Phoenix to rest and study. While there, he “made what he considered to be a major breakthrough in his research into the human mind, when he discovered that many of the past experiences that affected his subjects’ current behavior had occurred in previous lives.” He thus conceived of his philosophy as more broadly a spirituality or religion that he termed Scientology, a study of knowing or truth. Some of the followers of Dianetics were already on board, with groups applying its techniques establishing their own local churches in Camden, New Jersey and Los Angeles, California in 1953-1954. Although Hubbard communicated with these and other groups through his Hubbard Association of Scientologists International, there was as yet no centralized church. That was not to come until his move to Washington in 1955.

A symbolic and practical location for an aspiring church, a Washington address provided proximity to influential connections. Associating itself with America and freedom, the church was founded July 4, 1955 and, for a few months, rented offices at 1826 R Street. It soon moved to 1810 and 1812 19th Street. For a short time, Hubbard’s office was in the first-floor dining room of 1810 19th, but he soon moved to the quieter second-story front room of 1812. It was here that he drafted volumes of administrative policy that structured the church; he created its ceremonies; and he penned a multitude of manuals, policy letters, bulletins and articles. The same building housed the Technical Division, the external communications office and training and lecture spaces. 1810 became the general business and procurement offices. A decade later, the church would have other facilities across the street at 1817 and 1835 as well, and some offices would remain here until 1976. Hubbard, however, left Washington in late January 1961 to deliver lectures in South Africa, after which he removed to England for some years. It was not until 2003 that the church purchased this property to preserve one of the most important sites associated with L. Ron Hubbard and the organization’s formative years.

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Washington newspaper advertisements for Scientology classes from 1957 (above) and 1959 (left).

Significance

The property has some significance for its architecture, as a building contributing to the character of the Dupont Circle Historic District. But its significance as a landmark relates to its history as the first permanent organizational offices, academy, and publishing headquarters of the Church of Scientology, during the second half of the 1950s. For these reasons, the property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B for history, specifically for its association with a religious group or institution that contributed significantly to the heritage and culture of the nation.

The application and designation guidance provided by the National Register of Historic Places states that “Ordinarily... [and along with several other types of properties,] properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes... shall not be considered eligible for the National Register.” Because such resources are so numerous, because all have significance at least to their users, and because of the difficulty of comparing them, historic significance “cannot be established on the merits of a religious doctrine, but rather, for architectural or artistic values or for important historic or cultural forces that the property represents.” The District’s preservation law and the Board’s practice hew to the National Register guidance, because it is detailed and generally accepted across the nation, and because nearly all D.C. landmark and historic district nominations will be forwarded to the Register. The Board has designated several churches, for instance, for their architecture or for events that have occurred at them. In this case, the property is eligible under Criterion Consideration A for religious properties, because of its association with the history of religion, not as merely a single Scientologist church or facility, but as one of the sites most closely related to the founding of the religion.

Because 1812 19th Street is important for its association with the founding and early years of a church, it is also significant for association with its founder, a significant individual, L. Ron Hubbard, the author of the bestselling *Dianetics*, still in print, and of all the foundational documents and ceremonies and teachings of the church, as well as being a successful popular author of adventure novels and early science-fiction stories. It was his office and his headquarters. Among *Smithsonian*’s 2014 list of “The 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time” were eleven religious figures, one of whom was Hubbard.

Two other properties associated with Hubbard and the early development of Scientology have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places: his New Jersey and Phoenix residences prior to his move to Washington. They are listed as of national significance for the reason the same is recommended here: the influence of Hubbard and his religion are hardly confined to those localities or to states; in addition to the widespread distribution of *Dianetics*, for instance, the church is said to have at least 30,000 adherents internationally today. The property thus merits designation under National Register Criterion B and District of Columbia Criterion C.

Integrity and boundary

The building retains high historic and physical integrity from its period of use by the church. It has compatible replacement windows and doors and front-walk paving. The interior plan and many finishes are intact, and it and has to some degree been restored to its appearance during Hubbard’s time there.

The landmark boundary is coterminous with that of the property’s historic lot boundary. Oddly, the abutting property at 1810 19th Street was not included in the nomination, despite being under the same ownership. But the nomination makes a persuasive argument that this property was the intellectual center of the movement, while 1810 was more involved in logistics.

Period of significance

The proposed period of significance is appropriate, dating from the opening of the offices to L. Ron Hubbard’s departure overseas in early 1961. It thus captures the formative years of the formal religion and the development and application of the philosophy. The terminal date must be corrected from 1960 in some places in the text.