
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 18-11

Langston Golf Course (Historic District)

2600 Benning Road NE

Reservation 343G; Parcel 171, Lot 5; Parcel 160, Lots 8 and 42; and Parcel 162, Lots 5 and 7;
Squares 4458, 4459, 4460, 4461, 4462, 4463, 4464, 4480, 4481, 4482, 4483, 4483E and 4484

Meeting Date: March 22, 2018
Applicant: National Park Service (owner)
Affected ANC: 5D and 5C¹

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Langston Golf Course, 2600 Benning Road NE, a historic district in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, with a period of significance of 1939 to 1955, the era of the course's construction, early use and expansion. The latter date marks the completion of the "back nine" on the northern section of the parcel and on Kingman Island, as well as the construction of the present clubhouse, the only historic structure on the course.²

Langston Golf Course is already listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Because the property is federally owned, the purpose of the present review is local designation, principally to honor a property already recognized on the federal register and to harmonize the local and national lists. The moment is appropriate, given the proposed inclusion of the golf course within the boundaries of a Kingman Park Historic District.

It is arguable whether it should be considered a district or—as a discreet, single-use entity containing a single historic building—a historic landmark. Because of the property's extent, the National Register listed it as a district, and for the sake of uniformity, it is recommended that it be considered a historic district for local purposes.

The property was listed in the National Register in 1991, with a period of significance of 1939 to 1941. The latter date was chosen because of the Register's 50-year rule. In the last section below are recommendations for updating the local designation relative to the National Register listing. HPO does not recommend forwarding an amended nomination to the National Register at this time, but rather incorporating the broader and more detailed understanding of the site presented in the documentation within the National Park Service's 2017 cultural landscape inventory *Langston Golf Course Cultural Landscape*. Both the 1991 and 2017 documents are provided to the Board for comparison.

¹ The northernmost parcel of the golf course, north of M Street, lays within the ANC 5C boundary.

² A maintenance building near the west property boundary is a replacement of an earlier storage/maintenance building that burned in the 1960s. There had been a booth associated with the former miniature-golf course. The bridges, rain shelters and driving-range hut were constructed or altered after the period of significance.

Langston Golf Course was listed in the National Register under Criterion A, and HPO concurs that it merits designation under that criterion and its District of Columbia equivalent 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 or the nation,” specifically, its association with African-American history, sport and recreation in the District of Columbia, and the history of “separate but equal” facilities and their eventual desegregation.

The property may also meet National Register Criterion C (and D.C. Criterion D) as a type of facility or landscape that represents “a distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction,” but the property has been altered enough since the mid 1980s that it cannot be considered a pristine example of 1939—or even 1955—golf course.

Although altered, the property possesses sufficient integrity to convey the values for which it is judged significant, and sufficient time has passed to permit its professional evaluation in its historical context.

Description and background

By the late 1920s, it was known that the construction of the approaches to the new Memorial Bridge across the Potomac River would mean the demise of the Lincoln Memorial Golf Course, the only course in the District where African Americans could play. A group of golfers formed the Capital City Golf Club in 1927, one of the first such clubs for African Americans. The club immediately petitioned the federal government for a replacement course open to African-American golfers and requested one within a new park being created along the Anacostia River. A committee established to study possible locations favored a newly reclaimed area north of Benning Road, known as Section G. The committee considered the site well-suited for the course, because of its proximity to African-American neighborhoods. The effort was bolstered by a 1929 National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCPPEC) recreation plan that proposed the same site to serve as a “colored” neighborhood recreation center with an “Anacostia Water Park.” But funds were scarce, and the filling by the Army Corps of Engineers of the muddy, marshy and noisome Anacostia flats, begun in 1902, was still underway. The golfers would have a decade to wait.

In 1935, NCPPEC submitted the golf course project to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), arguing that it was worthy and “adaptable to the use of emergency relief labor.” Upon approval, the course would be the largest of six new WPA projects for the District of Columbia, and much of the grading and landscaping was accomplished by Civilian Conservation Corps crews. By June 1937, five holes had been laid out, but when the parkland-style course opened in 1939, it contained only nine, all on the west side of Kingman Lake. Over the next sixteen years, the links would be expanded to 18 holes, plus a miniature golf course. Planners had looked at placing holes even on the smaller islands within Kingman Lake. There were also plans to round out the “water park” with a recreation center, swimming pool, tennis courts and stadium, to be located between the golf course and the black public-schools campus. The schools would ultimately get their sports facilities—and the golf course its clubhouse—but these plans were never fully realized.

Under construction, the property was referred to as the Benning Road or Kingman golf course. But coinciding with construction of the nearby Public Works Administration-funded Langston Terrace Dwellings, the golf facility was ultimately designated to honor John Mercer Langston, a nineteenth-century American abolitionist, attorney, Freedmen's Bureau inspector general, founding dean of Howard University Law School, congressman from Virginia, and U.S. minister to Haiti.

Upon its dedication, Langston was one of only about 20 courses in the nation open to African Americans. The disparity between these and the thousands of whites-only courses was immediately apparent to golfers who had caddied on the latter. Too small to host tournament play, the course was also poorly maintained, it long lacked a proper clubhouse, and there were persistent complaints about the concessionaire who operated the park during its first 35 years. It was only with the desegregation of D.C.'s public golf courses in 1955—following the Supreme Court's landmark school desegregation cases—that Langston and its clubhouse were completed.

Still, the course is said to have been played by Joe Louis, Althea Gibson, Jim Thorpe, Billy Eckstine, Maury Wills, Bob Hope, Gerald Ford and “every professional African American golfer except for Tiger Woods.” One of its regular players and instructors was pro Lee Elder, who later operated the course from 1978 to 1981, after twice unsuccessfully seeking the concession.

Period of significance and contributing features

The property was listed in the National Register in 1991. The standards for documentation of nominated properties have since grown more rigorous. In addition, more time has passed. The 1991 nomination set a period of significance of 1939 to 1941. The latter date was chosen only as an application of the Register's 50-year rule, probably a too-strict application even then. The three-year period is unnecessarily long to commemorate the initial construction of the course, and too short to represent a substantial period of use.

According to the National Register guidance, a period of significance is “the length of time when a property was associated with important events, activities or persons, or attained the characteristics which qualify it for listing designation. Period of significance usually begins with the date when significant activities or events began giving the property its historic significance; this is often a date of construction.” From the perspective of 2018, two major events of 1955—the completion of the course's eighteen holes and clubhouse and the desegregation of the District's public golf courses—stand out in importance and as an appropriate end to the period of significance.

Rather than rewriting its nomination of Langston at this time, the National Park Service has filled out the documentation of the property in a cultural landscape inventory (CLI), part of the agency's robust effort to evaluate and plan for its many historic landscapes. The CLI improves upon the 1991 nomination in many ways, including arguing for extension of the period of significance to 1955. It concurs with the nomination, however, in citing the property's special significance under National Register Criterion A.

The nomination had identified only one contributing feature: the entire site. With a proposed period of significance extending to 1955, however, the CLI has recognized the “minimally altered” clubhouse as the sole contributing building, the rest having been demolished or postdating the period.

Despite alterations to fairways and greens, the CLI also considers as contributing features:

- the spatial organization of the site; its current layout of holes and their relation to Kingman Lake;
- the continual land use since 1939;
- the course's parkland topography;
- vegetation, such as the overall ground character of turf, green, rough, traps and water hazards; the line of trees between Holes 1 and 18, and between Holes 2 and 17; tree stands throughout the course that separate holes; and tree stands around most of the shoreline of Kingman Lake, demarcating the perimeter of the course;
- the extant roads, driveways and parking lot laid by the mid 1950s and their role in circulation and progression of play; and
- views along fairways and to the river.

The property contains many small features considered noncontributing because of their late date or low significance.

An amendment, or rather, a comprehensive rewriting of the National Register nomination would not be inappropriate at some point, as there is additional historical data that could be included. Yet, for the immediate purposes of local designation and for understanding the effects of alterations proposed in the future, HPO does not recommend forwarding an amended nomination to the Register at this time. Rather, it is recommended that the Board adopt the existing nomination but incorporate in its local designation status the CLI's documentation and evaluation of period of significance and contributing features.