
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-19

Equitable Life Insurance Company (Fannie Mae Headquarters)

3900 Wisconsin Avenue
Square 1823, Part of Lot 0801

Meeting Date: October 26, 2017
Applicant: NASH- Roadside 3900 Wisconsin LLC
Affected ANC: 3C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Equitable Life Insurance Company at 3900 Wisconsin Avenue a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and request that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance 1956-1963.



The Equitable Life Insurance Company building, built as the company's corporate headquarters, was designed by architect Leon Chatelain, Jr. It was constructed in two phases in 1956-58 and 1963 in an impressive Academic Georgian Revival-style building modeled after the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. The building provided a symbol of solidity and heritage for the city's oldest insurance company, and represents the last phase of the 20th-century Colonial Revival style movement two decades after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg inspired the style's widespread popularity across America.

Historic and Architectural Background

The Equitable Life Insurance Company was founded in D.C. in 1885, and over the decades, grew along with the insurance industry. Following World War II, the industry entered an age of major expansion and significant profit as it invested life insurance funds in housing mortgages. During the 1950s, Equitable Life Insurance Company benefitted from an uptick in life insurance, and experienced success as a company, setting records in sales, gross income, assets and stock prices. In 1956, the company purchased a tract of land on Wisconsin Avenue for a new headquarters building and hired architect Leon Chatelain, Jr., of Chatelain, Gauger & Nolan to design it.

Chatelain, who sat on the company's board of directors, designed the headquarters building in an academically correct Georgian Revival style. This choice of style was likely the result of many considerations. At the time of the building's dedication, the company president noted that the style fit with the neighborhood and that colonial buildings "had held up well, would be timeless, and reflect the old roots of the insurance business." The popularity of the Colonial Revival style had not waned since the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s and 1930s, and by the 1950s was increasingly popular for commercial, institutional, religious and government buildings. During the 1950s, large buildings in the style often reinterpreted mid-eighteenth-century icons, such as Mount Vernon, Monticello, Independence Hall and the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. Although the Equitable company was the only insurance company in Washington to design its offices in such a Colonial Revival style, other insurance companies elsewhere had adopted the style for their own headquarters. Two insurance companies in Richmond, Virginia designed their insurance headquarters in 1952 and 1956 using the Governor's mansion in Williamsburg as a direct model.

The application suggests that the site's location adjacent to "Friendship," the early 20th-century estate of the newspaperman John McLean may also have inspired the company's choice of style. Demolished in 1942, the McLean House was designed in a Colonial Revival style by architect John Russell Pope and shortly thereafter replaced by the mid-20th-century Colonial Revival-style McLean Gardens, garden apartments built by the federal government to house incoming war workers. Finally, as the oldest insurance company in Washington, Equitable clearly wanted to establish itself symbolically as such, choosing an architectural style that had direct visual associations with early American roots.

No matter the source of inspiration, Chatelain, an accomplished designer who worked in many styles, was comfortable working in the Colonial Revival style. The building, designed with the expectation that it would be expanded in the future, originally included the central, 2-1/2-story, hipped roof main block and connector wings extending to either side, and the whole set back from Wisconsin Avenue. In 1963, as expected, the building was expanded through the addition of end pavilions, using brick that had been manufactured in 1956-58 in expectation of the building's future additions. While significantly larger overall and deviating from it in many ways, the Equitable Building was still clearly and deliberately modeled after the Governor's Palace. Chatelain sent employees of his firm to Williamsburg to measure the palace. Both buildings feature at their center, a tall, five-bay-wide, central block with a steep hipped roof with hipped dormers, and central wood cupola. Each building has large brick chimneys to either side of the roof, though the larger Equitable building features four, rather than the two of the Governor's Palace. And, although the Equitable Building is a steel structure, its brick-clad walls are laid in a Flemish bond, like that of the Governor's Palace, featuring a generous use of glazed

bricks on the planar surfaces, and highly crafted rubbed and gauged bricks around the entry doors and windows. Unlike the Governor's Palace where short hyphens connect the main block to end pavilions, the Equitable Life Building initially included two long connector wings on either side of the central block with no end pavilions. The end pavilions would come shortly later.

In 1963, Equitable Life Insurance Company sought to expand their headquarters, and again hired Chatelain's firm to design it. The addition, designed seamlessly with bricks that had been manufactured during the initial phase of construction and set aside for future additions, introduced the two end pavilions at the north and south ends of the connector wings, completing the building's five-part massing. The addition illustrates extremely high quality craftsmanship in its brickwork for which craftsman Atlee Whiteleather received an award in 1964. With its molded, rubbed, and gauged brickwork, the engaged door surround in the north end wall of the north pavilion provides an excellent illustration of this quality craftsmanship.

The site was designed with the building set back on its lot, with an extensive front lawn in front, and a low brick wall running along Wisconsin Avenue between the lawn and the sidewalk. Two openings for vehicular access are flanked by brick piers with stone urns atop and lead to a circular drive paved in Belgian block, an original feature.

In 1975, the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) purchased the property from Equitable and built a large addition across the entire rear of the building (1978), designed by Carl Warnecke & Associates. As part of the addition, Fannie Mae added the fountain that currently sits in front of the building at the top of the circular drive and a landscaped courtyard. A large parking structure, also dating from 1978, is located at the west side of the property, beyond the addition, with a landscaped outdoor patio between them.

Evaluation

The Equitable Life Insurance Company is important for its associations with the insurance industry and as an excellent example of the Georgian Revival style for commercial architecture. The property meets D.C. Designation Criteria B (History) and National Register Criterion A for its association with historical periods and institutions that contributed significantly to the development of the District of Columbia and the nation. Specifically, the building is associated with the expansion of the nation's insurance and mortgage business that took place during the mid-20th century. The population increase and stable economy following World War II brought with it commercial and organization growth, and like its competitors, Equitable sought to establish itself as a sound and prosperous business whose mission was to provide security for the future through mortgages and life insurance.

The building meets D.C. Designation Criteria D (Architecture) and E (Artistry) and National Register Criterion C because it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of its style, and possesses high artistic or aesthetic value significant to the appearance of the development of the District of Columbia or the nation. The Equitable Life Insurance Building provides an excellent example and high artistic expression of the Georgian Revival style. It was designed during an era of widespread enthusiasm for an idealized Colonial past that prized the incorporation of historic design into modern buildings. The building, modeled after the Governor's Palace, represents an Academic representation of the Colonial Revival style that was particularly popular

for commercial, government and institutional buildings in the 1950s. It also represents the last phase of the Colonial Revival style that had persisted nationwide for decades, having reached its height of popularity in the years after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the late 1920s and 1930s. The building further represents the end of an era, as the revival-style movement gave way to an era of new styles, forms, and materials associated with Modernism.

A period of significance from 1956 to 1963 represents the two phases of construction of the Equitable Life Building designed by Leon Chatelain. The 1978 rear addition and parking garage by Fannie Mae obscures the original building and, though considered historicist for its time, does not contribute to the character of the revival-style building.

Boundaries

The application proposes boundaries that form part of lot 801, the lot upon which the building was historically constructed. The boundaries are drawn around the Equitable Life Insurance Company building, taking in the wall along Wisconsin Avenue, the front lawn and the circular drive. The boundaries also take in the 1978 addition appended to the rear of the building, though this addition falls outside of the Period of Significance and is considered non-contributing.

The boundaries exclude the rear parking structure and the open area north of the building between it and the present drive leading to the parking garage. While the parking garage is an intrusion on the site and justifiably excluded from the boundaries, the open space at the north end of the building with its lawn and mature shade trees is part of the historic site and setting and provides an important perspective on the high-quality craftsmanship of the building's north elevation.

Recommendation

HPO staff recommends that the Board designate the property as a Historic Landmark with revised boundaries such that the north boundary line follows the north boundary line of Lot 801 westerly until it intersects with the proposed western boundary line of the landmark as illustrated in the landmark application.