
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-03

Southeast Branch Library

403 7th Street SE
Square 875, Lot 1

Meeting Date: March 25, 2021
Applicant: Capitol Hill Restoration Society
Affected ANC: 6B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Southeast Branch Library a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance with a period of significance of 1922, its date of construction.

The Washington Public Library was authorized by Congress in 1896 and soon occupied rented space. Steel manufacturer and great benefactor of libraries Andrew Carnegie pledged \$250,000 for a purpose-built central library for the District of Columbia, if Congress would provide the land. Carnegie's total donation grew considerably to construct the Mount Vernon Square facility and, at that facility's dedication, he seemed to write a blank check for more: "[W]hatever branches are to be established, I shall insist upon the privilege of supplying the funds. The giving of public libraries in the District of Columbia is my province, and you are to let me know when to provide them."

Such an invitation invited competition among neighborhoods for their own branches. The East Washington Citizens' Association and Southeast Washington Citizens' Association campaigned for multiple locations in Southeast, intending to serve Capitol Hill, one of the city's oldest and most densely populated neighborhoods, now expanding with the streetcar lines. However, the remote Takoma Park won the first branch in 1911, its residents having raised funds for a parcel as a match to Carnegie's donation. It would be a decade before the District Commissioners bought the more costly 7th Street lot for a Southeast branch, walkable from ten schools and countless residences. The Carnegie Corporation ultimately contributed \$67,000 for construction.

This followed an era during which private architects had completed commissions for public buildings such as schools and firehouses; the design of municipal facilities had been brought under a new Office of Municipal Architect more than a decade prior. But the involvement of Carnegie's corporation appears to have been responsible for the recommendation of École des Beaux Arts-trained Edward L. Tilton, an alumnus of McKim, Mead & White whose Boston Public Library led him to a specialty in the building type and an association with Carnegie's library-building efforts in the northeastern U.S.

While not ideal for accessibility, Tilton perched a little classical-revival temple of learning atop the rise at the center of the lot, reached by a broad stair, a tall portico creating an impression of a larger building. The exterior walls are brick, more suited to the neighborhood than the stonemasonry employed at Mount Vernon Square. With the exception of a massive central charging desk, the interior was more intimate, divided into warm, well-lit, wood-trimmed reading rooms by shelved partitions. An elaborate fireplace provides a cozy focal point for what was the children's reading room and story space.

Significance and designation criteria

The Southeast Branch Library is significant as a community planning effort of two neighborhood associations, the District Commissioners, the Office of the Municipal Architect, and the Carnegie Corporation. It is only the third of the District library buildings—only the second branch library—and third of the four buildings financed by Andrew Carnegie or his company. The facility has served many thousands of residents and the pupils of a dozen schools over a century and has been a neighborhood focal point and community meeting place. It is additionally significant for the particular attention paid, in its design and operation, to the education of children. Architect Tilton designed a reading room for young children and a space for librarian-read stories, separate from reading rooms for older students and adults, a feature we now take for granted. The library stocked books from the reading lists of nearby schools. For these reasons, the Southeast Branch library merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B (history), for being “associated 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...”

The library also merits designation under National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D (architecture and urbanism), for being a high-quality and largely intact century-old purpose-built library by a specialist in that field of design. It is a quality example of classical-revival architecture suited to an institution, with a scale and materials calculated to fit a red-brick residential neighborhood, and sited on a rise and fronted with a tall portico to assert its place as a neighborhood landmark and community center, much like a neighborhood school.

Period of significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance of 1922, the library's date of construction. For a property of historical significance beyond a single event (including its construction), a longer period of significance—coinciding with a period of significant use—is typically appropriate. In this case, however, the use has been continuous to this day, leaving no obvious terminal dates, except perhaps for the 1955 renovation, which would not capture the original features lost. In the interest of emphasizing the significance of the original design elements, a single year is acceptable.

Integrity

The property retains high integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling. There have been considerable changes to the original minimally designed landscape: plants, retaining wall, accessibility ramp, fences, railings and parking. The grand stair is the sole character-defining structure in the landscape. The exterior of the building, however, is nearly intact to its 1922 appearance. The interior was altered during renovations in 1955 and 1982, with

a basement corridor eliminated and a stair replaced by a dumbwaiter; an elevator added; the massive charging desk, original furniture and many shelving units remove; and the main floor opened up with the removal of reading room partitions. But the classical woodwork and elaborate fireplace remain.