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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-08

**Lafayette Elementary School  
5701 Broad Branch Road NW  
Square 3648, Lot 809**

Meeting Date: May 25, 2017  
Applicant: District of Columbia Department of General Services  
Affected ANC: 3G  
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

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The HPO recommends that the Board designate Lafayette Elementary School, 5701 Broad Branch Road NW, a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a positive recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1931 to 1942, the period of construction of its earliest sections.

The property meets D.C. designation Criterion D (architecture and urbanism) and National Register Criterion C for “embody[ing] the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction,” specifically as an exemplar of a particular type and era of public school, the “extensible” school of the late 1920s to mid 1940s, and the largest and one of the most complete of the elementary schools of its type. As such, it is eligible for designation under the multiple-property document *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960* as an example of the property subtype “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Albert L. Harris, 1921-1933.”

The property also merits designation under D.C. designation Criterion B (history) and National Register Criterion A 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.” It is a landmark and community center of the Chevy Chase neighborhood, the result of and partly responsible for its early development. The size of the school and the rapidity with which it was built out are testament to growth of the community during the interwar period.

Named in honor of the Marquis de Lafayette, the school was begun in 1931 and subsequently expanded to accommodate rapid growth of the Chevy Chase suburban community. Lafayette was one of several schools erected in 1931-1932, the consequence of a five-year plan for new schools enacted in 1925. This major building campaign was intended to relieve overcrowding, catching up on a backlog that predated World War I, but construction was already being outpaced by additional population growth because of the expansion of the federal government during the Depression. But the Depression also made available new capital funds. The first wing of Lafayette was scarcely finished when the need for more space became obvious. It took a decade before sufficient funds were available to build out the entire school, and it is therefore 1942 that is the appropriate terminal date for the property’s period of significance.

Thirty-five years later, the building was modernized with comprehensive interior renovations, including a more-open floor plan and the conversion of the auditorium/gymnasium to office and classroom space. A new gym and a new classroom wing were added as well. But these structures have recently been demolished, in yet another renovation/reconstruction campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The primary historic significance of the school, of course, is its function, educating the youth of Chevy Chase and surrounding areas. By virtue of its size, function and siting, Lafayette, like other public schools, soon became a visual landmark of its neighborhood, as well as a community center.

Architecturally, Lafayette Elementary is most important as one of the most fully realized examples of a model “extensible” school. Extensible schools were a clever response to demographic changes and fiscal constraints and to the architectural challenge of having to expand. Developed in the late 1920s by Municipal Architect Albert Harris, and first essayed in the prototype Langdon Elementary (designed 1928, completed 1930), the idea was to design buildings that would be built out incrementally, as the need demanded and funds allowed, but at each stage resulting in a pleasing, self-contained composition. There were different forms of the extensible school, but the most ambitious for elementary schools was the H- or U-shaped building enclosing an entrance courtyard, providing plenty of outdoor space and natural light. At complete build-out, this model elementary school consisted of two, mirror-image, eight- to twelve-classroom wings joined by hyphens to a central administrative and auditorium wing, as at Lafayette. And like Lafayette, they typically began with a single wing, architecturally and functionally self-contained, combining both teaching and administration. Many of the schools never grew beyond this stage (while in one or two cases, the result was an asymmetrical plan, as only the administrative block was added), but Lafayette is a complete example and the largest of the extensible elementary schools.

The most common architectural style for extensible schools—and for schools of the second quarter of the twentieth century—was the Colonial Revival. The adoption of the Colonial Revival style coincided with Harris’s tenure as municipal architect; his predecessor had dabbled in the style but had favored Tudor and Elizabethan modes as more evocative of historic academic uses. But the Colonial Revival had been adopted in the 1920s for local schools, reflecting a nationwide revival of interest in the country’s early years and spurred by a particular fascination with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. The adoption of the Colonial vocabulary was strongly encouraged by the United States Commission of Fine Arts. The Commission considered the style appropriate as native to the region and of a domestic scale suited to use among suburban residential buildings, and distinct from the more classical and monumental high schools.

A comprehensive historical survey of D.C. public schools in the 1990s produced a multiple-property thematic document that describes their physical development and set out standards for the designation of examples from the first century of the school system based on their significance as worthy illustrations of the development of the building type influenced by changes in urban planning, pedagogy, architectural fashion, regulation, and the modes of contracting design services. This multiple property document was adopted by the Board in 2002

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<sup>1</sup> A review, pursuant to Section 9b of the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act, of the most recent alterations concluded that the work would cause some adverse effects, and it was agreed that the preparation of the present nomination would serve as appropriate mitigation.

and by the National Register of Historic Places in 2003. It contains registration requirements for each of the school-facility subtypes.

Lafayette Elementary School meets the registration requirements of the subtype “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Albert L. Harris, 1921-1933”:

In order for schools to qualify under this property type, they must be representative of the design concepts of Albert L. Harris, the second Municipal Architect, and the urban design influence of the Commission of Fine Arts. Designs by architects in private practice should be evaluated within the context of their main body of work as well as the manner in which they met the requirements of the Municipal Architect and the Commission of Fine Arts. Subsequent additions should complement the original design, and not detract from it in any significant way. Extensible designs should be recognized at all stages of development as should interior design to accommodate new educational methods and programs....

The property retains good integrity, despite the removal of a number of interior walls during the 1970s renovation. The 1970s additions—which postdated the proposed period of significance—were removed to make way for the 2016 additions.

The landscape has been much altered, with circulation paths changed even during the period of significance, as the building was expanded. These paths were largely reconstructed in the 1970s renovation and affected by the 2016 one as well. The principal landscape feature today is the berm that sets up the main entry sequence.<sup>2</sup> There has been some re-grading here, but that feature merits protection. There are some nice trees on the property, but nearly all postdate the period of significance.

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<sup>2</sup> The wooded area to the north of the school is owned by the United States government and is not within the proposed landmark boundary.