
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-08

The Episcopal Home for Children

5901 Utah Avenue NW

Square 2319, Lot 829

Meeting Date: February 25, 2021
Applicant: The Episcopal Home for Children (owner)
Affected ANC: 3G

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Episcopal Home for Children 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, with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1929 to 1957. It is recommended that the nomination be revised to develop a local orphanage context and to re-scale the graphics to make them more legible.

The Episcopal Home is an excellent example of an overlooked and largely vanished type of institutional campus, the orphanage, designed by one of Washington's most prominent architects with a specialty in that field.

A recent war, a precarious economy and low life expectancy led to the establishment in 1815 of little Washington City's first "orphan asylum," at 10th Street NW near Pennsylvania Avenue, under the auspices of a charitable society, with a separate girls' orphanage established shortly thereafter three blocks east. Georgetown, an older municipality, immediately followed suit with its own female orphanage. A new Washington City Orphan Asylum ("Protestant") was constructed on H Street in 1828, and Catholic institutions were established before the Civil War.

Later in the nineteenth century, private charities supplemented the existing in-town institutions, establishing additional orphanages along sectarian and even ethnic lines. These took advantage of the lower land costs of suburban and rural areas of the District of Columbia, which also provided recreation space for their charges. A Baptist home in Brookland, an Episcopal home in Anacostia, and a German home on Good Hope Hill accepted children of other persuasions, but emphasized Christian education and the placement of children with Christian families. They also had in common the fact that they did not accept African-American children, consistent with the thorough racial segregation of the District's institutions. Unlike Northern cities, there was little provision made for Black orphans until the Civil War, when private charities began to house and educate the children of deceased freedpeople and soldiers. Established on the future site of the Ellington school in 1863, the Colored Orphans' Home relocated to 8th Street, opposite Howard University, at the end of 1866 and remained until the 1920s.

The Episcopal Home for Children was founded in 1894, originally known as the Bell Home for Poor Children, after its principal benefactor, Prof. Alexander Melville Bell, father of Alexander Graham Bell. The institution's founders and directors were Rev. Willard Goss Davenport and his wife, Mary Davenport, of the Emmanuel Episcopal Church of Anacostia, who established a summer outing program for underprivileged urban youth between the ages of six and sixteen at Bell's donated summer house in Colonial Beach, Virginia. Possibly inspired by the Chautauqua movement, the Bell Home was very much in keeping with Progressivism in general and with the development of playgrounds in particular, offering moral uplift and health benefits from fresh air and exercise. With Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ewing's donation of an Anacostia property in 1895, the institution became an orphanage "open to all homeless and needy children, regardless of creed"—but not without regard to race, and limited to available space for about 50. The Home offered both practical training and recreation, and the placement of children with families.

The Bell Home's Talbert Street SE location was developed on a cottage model, similar to the contemporaneous, connected "Allison" cottages at the Saint Elizabeths Hospital campus, built as a sanitarium for infirm soldiers. The Bell Home consisted of three buildings, homey boys' and girls' residences, and a central building containing the kitchen, meeting rooms, heating plant and servants' quarters. In 1907, the institution's name was changed to the Episcopal Home for Children, reflecting its informal association with the church. By 1928, the demand for spaces in the orphanage had doubled, the superintendent was living in the former servants' quarters, and the suburban site allowed no expansion. With the support of the Episcopal diocese, fundraising began for a new site to provide "light, airy buildings, outdoor playgrounds, adequate provision for indoor recreation, special facilities for the care of infants and very young children, an infirmary and adequate quarters for the administrative staff."

Edwin Gould, son of New York financier Jay Gould, donated a nine-acre site at Nebraska and Utah avenues. His Edwin Gould Foundation for Children advised the Home on expansion. (Another indication of how socially connected was the Home was the fact that two First Ladies were connected with it.) The Home engaged Appleton P. Clark Jr., Washington's "dean of architects" with experience with every building type over 45 years in the field. Clark was selected because he had recently undertaken a national study tour of state-of-the-art orphanages to inform his master plan for the "Hillcrest Children's Village" on Nebraska Avenue, which replaced the antiquated Washington City Orphan Asylum, at 14th and S streets NW since 1870.

Wanting to retain the cottage arrangement of the Anacostia site, Clark devised another "village" master plan of detached buildings, connected by basement-level corridors, set in a green quad. The new construction was grouped facing the intersection but set beyond a deep lawn. Most of the site was graded and landscaped to be given over to recreation, including a baseball diamond. Colonial Revival was the prevailing architectural style of the 1920s, typical of the suburban houses being erected in the vicinity, and Appleton Clark's favored mode of the era. Here Clark designed two-and-a-half-story Georgian buildings of a suitably domestic character and scale (attic stories even partially screened by parapets), with the exception of the central administrative building's monumental portico addressing the street intersection. The children's buildings principally accommodated dormitories and quarters for a house mother, and the central building housed an office and a reception room for prospective parents, and such domestic spaces as a kitchen, pantry, dining room, living room, sewing room and porches.

Clark's planning for the Episcopal Home slightly preceded his commission to relocate the Baptist Home for Children from its original Brookland site to Bethesda. He would set down his collected wisdom in the 1945 book *Institutional Homes for Children*.

All this sudden orphanage construction was fortuitous, as the Great Depression would exert great pressure on families and social services. But the privations of the era denied the Episcopal Home (and Hillcrest) some of its anticipated facilities. It had to forgo the building for infants, a proper infirmary, and a utility building. In fact, there was little physical growth of the facilities before 1957, when the institution ceased functioning as an orphanage and shifted to a residential and educational program for a smaller group of children with emotional challenges. In 1960, the Home finally desegregated, and during the following decade it added a day program serving the entire District of Columbia, renamed the Episcopal Center for Children.

Designation criteria

At more than ninety years old, the property is more than old enough for sufficient time to have passed to evaluate the property in its historic context. In fact, given all the closings and relocations of District orphanages just ahead of residential and commercial redevelopment, there is little remaining of the historic institutions and an orphanage building type beyond Clark's Episcopal Home and half-realized "Hillcrest," whose site has been altered with the construction of the National Presbyterian Church, but was recently landmarked as part of that complex.

HPO concurs with the nomination that the property merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B for history, as a significant local social-service institution of long standing, a rare and perhaps most-intact example of a District orphanage, and a reflection of Progressive-era reforms in the humane care of children. The property also meets National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D (architecture and urbanism) for its type, a high-quality and high-integrity example of a Georgian Revival campus complex for an orphanage, a specialty of Appleton Clark, who published on the subject and has been previously recognized as a master architect.

Period of significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance of 1929, when the campus was designed and construction commenced. At the very least, the period should be extended to 1930, because the facility did not open until just before Christmas of that year. However, 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 instance, such a period might terminate in 1957, when the Home ceased being an orphanage.

Boundary

The nomination proposes a boundary that includes the three 1929-1930 buildings and the noncontributing library/media center—and excludes the larger playground landscape. The original property boundary is obviously more appropriate for designation, especially as outdoor recreation was a central feature of the orphanage. However, the eastern section of the lot lacks character-defining features other than lawn, some mature trees, shrubs, a basketball court, a pool and a rail fence. Historic aerial photos do not indicate formal playing field elements in the past, only a single, probably multi-use court. The property's most important landscape features are

the quad between the buildings, with its ring of mature trees, and the front lawn and its driveways, all captured within the boundary. Thus, the proposed boundary is acceptable.

Integrity

The property retains strong integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling. In short, it is a campus largely intact to its 1929-1930 construction. The three original buildings and their basement-level connectors remain, as does most of the landscape, matured. There are small, one-story additions to the Administration Building and the Girls' Building, a few unfortunate mechanical units, and the typical repairs and replacements over decades. A one-story library/media center was constructed nearly twenty years ago, but it was sited consistent with the Appleton Clark master plan, on the edge of the established quad. Some play equipment has been installed in the quad, and a pool and basketball court have taken the place of an earlier playing court of some kind. The interior photos show that the original floor plans, some of the millwork and flooring, the Administration Building bathroom and some of the heating system are largely present. Many of the finishes probably date to the mid twentieth century, still possibly within the recommended period of significance.