
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 19-07

Barry Farm Dwellings

1100-1371 Stevens Road SE; 2677-2687 Wade Road SE; 2652 Firth Sterling Avenue SE
Part of Squares 5865 and 5866

Meeting Date: June 27, 2019
Applicant: Empower DC
Affected ANC: 8C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board not designate the remaining Barry Farm Dwellings to the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The property no longer possesses sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant.

Background

The Barry Farm Dwellings housing complex is currently under demolition. More than half of the 1942-43 housing units have been demolished already, and raze applications are pending for the buildings included in this application. In 2011, HPO evaluated the complex for National Register eligibility and determined the property not eligible under National Register Criteria A, B, and C due to lack of integrity for the purposes of Section 106 (of the National Historic Preservation Act). Archeological investigations to identify and evaluate the eligibility of archeological sites under Criterion D began in 2016 and are being conducted to comply with Section 106.

History and Architecture

Built in 1942-43, Barry Farm Dwellings was a 442-unit public housing complex constructed by the Alley Dwelling Authority (subsequently operated by the National Capital Housing Authority) as permanent low-income rental housing for African Americans. The World War II-era complex was erected on a portion of the 375-acre Barry Farm, a post-Civil War subdivision. The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal government agency, purchased the rural tract in 1867 and planned a residential subdivision to house some of the 40,000 African Americans that had come to the city during and after the Civil War. Renamed Hillsdale in 1874, the Barry Farm settlement consisted of one-acre lots that the Bureau sold to freed people along with enough building materials for each family to build a modest, two-room house to be paid off in two years. During the following decades, Barry Farm/Hillsdale would become a thriving, self-contained African American community with housing, churches, recreational facilities, schools and other amenities.

In 1941, the Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA) acquired 34 acres (and 32 houses thereon) within Block 8 of Barry Farm for construction of public housing for African Americans. Already in short supply due largely to racial restrictions, the scarcity of housing for blacks was a crisis during World War II, as tens of thousands arrived in Washington to work in the defense

industries. Opened in 1942 and completed in 1943, the Barry Farm Dwellings public housing complex offered residency on a prioritized basis: those persons who had been displaced by war-related projects were given first priority, while those who worked in war-related jobs, or who were employed by the military, were given secondary preference. Barry Farm Dwellings provided 442 of the 2,034 units constructed for African Americans in Washington during the war, making it the largest subsidized, rental housing complex built for African Americans at that time. Despite its extent, Barry Farm Dwellings and the other World War II-era housing complexes only minimally relieved the housing shortage as D.C.'s black population increased by 30 percent during the war. According to the application, of the 30,000 publicly financed housing units built between 1940 and 1948 in D.C., only 4,000 were dedicated to African Americans.

The plan for Barry Farm Dwellings followed the principles of design for public housing that had emerged in the U.S. in the 1930s, based upon the European social housing movements of the 1920s. These principles sought to promote physical health and mental well-being through site planning and design that maximized natural light and air and introduced communal spaces for social contact and recreation.

At Barry Farm Dwellings, large “superblocks” of attached duplexes having repetitive building forms were arranged in a variety of layouts that incorporated common courts and open spaces within and between the clusters. These superblocks were set within the improved network of 1867 streets, named for anti-slavery members of Congress, Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner and Benjamin Wade, and for District of Columbia assistant commissioner for the Freedmen's Bureau, Col. John Eaton. They retained many of the trees that had been part of the post-Civil War settlement.

The scarcity of building materials during the war and the expedited construction schedule resulted in regularized building forms with only minor architectural elaboration that is characteristic of subsidized housing nationwide and indicative of an emerging modern aesthetic. The rows of houses had exposed concrete block walls surmounted by gabled and flat roofs. Windows were punched without any trim or decorative work, and central entry doors providing access to the duplexes were covered by simple shed- or flat-roofed porches. The only decorative flourish was bands of brick spanning the windows at the second-story and in the street-facing end walls. The most pronounced attribute of Barry Farm was the uniformity of design and site planning: rows of simple dwelling forms oriented to and away from the street in a variety of repeating patterns with open courts, stepped terraces and lawns between.

While the federal government sought to relieve the housing shortage during and after the war by building public housing, it also offered incentives, such as federal mortgage guarantees, for private developers to enter the housing market on a larger scale and with greater confidence. As a result of such programs, private developers constructed hundreds of thousands of new dwelling units—primarily small, affordable single-family homes—that formed the nucleus of postwar suburbanization. These developments, overwhelmingly restricted to whites, encouraged white flight and disinvestment from the city, including in and around Hillside. In the late 1950s, when urban renewal programs, such as that of Southwest, resulted in the displacement of low-income residents, eighty percent of the new public housing built to accommodate them occurred east of the Anacostia River, including the area around Barry Farm. Over time, the concentration

of low-income apartment housing in the area, isolated from city services and amenities, exacerbated the flight of more middle-class residents who could afford to move elsewhere.

During the early 1980s, Barry Farm Dwellings underwent a major renovation whereby the exposed concrete block walls were covered with stucco, the front porches were removed, windows and doors were replaced, and the flat roofs on some of the buildings' end units were replaced with gable roofs. Interior modifications were also carried out at that time.

In the 1990s, the Department of Housing and Urban development launched a national program, HOPE VI, to replace public housing with private, mixed-income developments. In 2018, demolition began at Barry Farm Dwellings; fewer than half of the original housing blocks survive, in a compromised state.

Evaluation

The application argues that the surviving buildings of Barry Farm Dwellings meet National Register Criterion A (and thus corresponding D.C. Designation Criteria A and B) for the following reasons: Barry Farm Dwellings occupies a portion of Barry Farm, established by the federal government to provide model housing for African Americans in the wake of the Civil War; Barry Farm Dwellings was built as low-income, permanent housing for African Americans during World War II overcrowding; several Barry Farm residents were active in the battle for school desegregation; and Barry Farm Dwellings became the site of a nationally recognized tenant organizing effort. Staff has evaluated each of these points below.

1) Barry Farm Dwellings is associated with post-Civil War housing for African Americans

None of the first-generation houses of the post-Civil War Barry Farm survives above ground within the bounds of the original subdivision, and no houses from the subdivision survive in the 34-acre portion of the property acquired by the federal government in 1941 for construction of the Barry Farm Dwellings. Although several streets and their names from the 1867 plan remain within the proposed landmark boundaries, they alone do not embody the distinguishing characteristics of the settlement of modest frame dwellings on large lots with gardens. The property thus does not retain the physical associations with the post-Civil War settlement and is thus not eligible under D.C. Designation criteria A or B for that reason.

The property may, however, have potential for both historic and prehistoric archaeological resources, though much of the original ground surface has been compromised. Grading of the area was aggressive—high points were cut down, and the soils were used to fill low spots. Still, according to a Phase IA and IB archaeological survey conducted as the result of Section 106 consultation, six potentially eligible sites associated with the post-Civil War settlement have been identified to-date. A follow-up archeological plan for Phase II evaluation survey work has been approved by HPO. Should any of the potentially significant archaeological sites be determined eligible for the National Register, SHPO consultation to determine avoidance, minimization, and/or appropriate mitigation efforts will ensue.

2) Barry Farm Dwellings is a notable example of World War II-era public housing for African Americans

Barry Farm Dwellings is significant for its associations with public housing, particularly permanent housing for low-income African Americans during World War II. In plan, layout and design, Barry Farm Dwellings was representative of war housing nationwide, and the complex provided an excellent representation of the design philosophy and material shortages that inspired its development pattern. However, the entire complex was substantially altered in the 1980s, and at least half of the housing units were razed in 2018-2019 along with many of the site's mature trees. The surviving rows of housing within the proposed boundaries are a remnant of the larger complex, are in altered and poor condition, and lack physical integrity (see Integrity section below). As stated in the National Register Guidelines and the D.C. preservation regulations, a property must retain integrity in order to meet the criteria for designation. Barry Farm Dwellings no longer sufficiently represents the qualities for which it was significant and therefore, the buildings within the proposed boundary do not meet D.C. Designation Criteria A or B.

3) Several Barry Farm residents were active in the battle for school desegregation

According to the application, Barry Farm Dwellings meets National Register Criterion A for its association with the desegregation of public schools. Several of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the D.C. Public Schools (*Bolling v. Sharpe*), a companion case to *Brown v. Board of Education*, lived at Barry Farm Dwellings. While this is notable historical information, the specific homes of the plaintiffs and this neighborhood's efforts to support the legal case were not especially pertinent to either the *Bolling v. Sharpe* or *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions. Sousa Junior High School, the white school that rejected enrollment of African American students in 1950 and thus inspired the first court case, is most closely associated with the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Sousa has been recognized for that significant historical event by listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places as a National Historic Landmark.

4) Barry Farm Dwellings became the site of a nationally recognized tenant organizing effort

According to the application, a tenant council called the Band of Angels was organized to represent low-income residents at Barry Farm as a result of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and his call for participation by the poor in making this program a success. The Band of Angels fought to improve economic and housing conditions at Barry Farm, policing activities, and other issues in the complex. Although this is notable in the history of Barry Farm, such organizing efforts were not uncommon city-wide as tenant associations, civic or citizens' groups and other organizations emerged to advocate for infrastructure and other improvements for residents of specific neighborhoods or housing complexes.

Boundaries

The proposed boundaries include 32 rows of buildings (approximately 205 units) on either side of Stevens Road. These include the most intact extant collection of buildings, roads, alleys, public courts and open spaces of the original complex of Barry Farm Dwellings. The collection comprises somewhat less than one-half the number of units that made up Barry Farm Dwellings before demolition of the complex began in 2018.

Integrity

The proposed boundaries include part of the larger housing complex that has been demolished or is slated for demolition. The fact that the boundaries are part of a larger whole does not itself disqualify the property for designation. A remnant may merit designation if it sufficiently represents the most important aspects of a whole that is architecturally, culturally or socially significant. In this case, the surviving buildings retain their original location and layout, a significant philosophical and planning element of public housing from the 1930s and 1940s. The rows of simple duplex forms arranged in a series of repetitive patterns with courts and opens spaces providing ample light and air were key design elements in public housing and are still clearly apparent in the buildings along Stevens Road. Despite retaining their location, orientation, relationships and many aspects of setting, the buildings themselves have been altered significantly and, even in their altered state, are in poor to deteriorated condition. Many have boarded-up windows and appear vacant. Later stucco is stained and cracked throughout, and in many cases is spalling in wholesale sections. As built, the rows of buildings featured exposed concrete walls and simple detailing such as flat and shed-roof porches and bands of ornamental brick work, all of which reflected the war-time shortage of materials and funds and emerging proto-modern design aesthetics of the period. In the 1980s, these character-defining features were compromised when the exposed concrete walls and decorative brick flourishes were covered with stucco. Porches were removed, and front doors were embellished with stucco-clad surrounds with stepped and arched pediments of a vaguely postmodern design. The historically flat roofs of the end units on street-facing rows were raised and converted to gables, eliminating the most salient feature of the modern aesthetic of the buildings. All of the original windows and doors have also been replaced.

Recommendation

Although the surviving buildings of Barry Farm Dwellings are directly associated with the development of public housing for African Americans during World War II—a significant event in the urban planning, architecture, and social history of the District—the buildings do not retain sufficient integrity to convey the values and qualities for which the property is judged significant. HPO thus recommends that the Board deny the designation of Barry Farm Dwellings to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites.