
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 18-08

Chevy Chase Playground and Field House

5500 41st Street NW

Square 1744, Lot 1 and Square 1745, Lot 1 (Reservation 431)

Meeting Date: October 31, 2019
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture
Affected ANC: 3E
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Chevy Chase Playground, 5500 41st Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO 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 1932, the date of the fieldhouse's construction.

The property meets National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") particularly for the fieldhouse's embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and a building type that is an expression of urban planning significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Specifically, it is one of a handful of 1930s park fieldhouses designed to resemble a Tidewater Colonial hall-and-parlor house. Thus, it is among the earliest purpose-built public recreation facilities remaining in a District of Columbia-owned park, representing as well the development of the Chevy Chase neighborhood.

Background

The District's earliest public playgrounds were outgrowths of school uses, and playgrounds and schools are still frequently co-located, even if often administered separately. The Victorian schools were not sited or designed with play space in mind, but school lots were later expended and adapted to recreation uses; one of the earliest public-school playgrounds was created at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) by the turn of the twentieth century.

During the first decades of the 1900s, public recreation space was often makeshift or informal. The Progressive Era brought a greater interest in exercise in the form of play, as an antidote for the enervating effects of cities. Play was seen as an opportunity to cultivate the physical and moral nature of children, and parks themselves constituted "breathing spots" in the city. Settlement house leaders and private philanthropists first met a need for dedicated summer playgrounds in the period 1901-1903. In the latter year, the Neighborhood House and the Colored Social Settlement house joined a Public Playgrounds Committee. In 1906, the Committee hired as its supervisor of public playgrounds Dr. Henry Curtis, a child psychologist,

former director of New York City playgrounds, and an officer of the new Playground Association of America. Curtis surveyed existing facilities and formulated plans for new ones. The provision of active play space in Washington received a boost from the 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that recommended that elementary schools be programmed with playgrounds, assuming available space. Funding requests for specific schools went to Congress immediately.

Like other public facilities, early playgrounds were racially segregated. In 1921, a United Citizens Playground Committee completed a study and recommended that the District Commissioners adopt a system of equitable distribution of playgrounds around the city, urging the immediate provision of three facilities for white children, at least two more for African Americans—and preferably a third in Southeast. The federal government became more active in the provision of parks with the 1924 establishment of the National Capital Park Commission. NCPC gained access to federal funds for land acquisition and construction with the passage of the 1930 Capper-Crampton Act, and so began the realization of a plan for recreation and community centers. Three years later, President Roosevelt transferred the stewardship of District parks to the National Park Service.

As with Washington schools, the construction of playgrounds lagged behind population growth. By the 1930s, when another population surge began, the situation was critical. But with Depression-era government spending, the District began to catch up. Many of the facilities of the era were provided with money from the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Public Works Administration.

Before 1930, some D.C. parks contained sheds to store equipment. The extant facilities from that era, however, include only buildings that were later repurposed for recreation use. But park administrators now needed facilities that could accommodate offices for playground “directors,” storage rooms, restrooms, and general-purpose spaces to facilitate year-round activities.

Municipal Architect Albert Harris designed a prototype fieldhouse in 1930, and the first building, at Mitchell Park, was completed in 1931. Of frame construction, a story and a half tall with a full-width front porch, it was based on the eighteenth-century Tidewater hall-and-parlor house. Six such structures would eventually be erected, five of which are extant.¹ As public works, the designs had to be reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which favored the Colonial Revival style as suitably domestic in character for government facilities situated in residential neighborhoods. These were clearly influenced by the very topical Colonial Williamsburg restoration project and its new “archaeological” interest in even modest and vernacular colonial buildings of that region.

A 2014 survey of D.C. Parks and Recreation facilities categorized this small group of 1930s Colonial Revival buildings as “Type I,” eligible for designation as the oldest purpose-built playground centers, a significant building type from the perspective of park planning. The Historic Preservation Office subsequently classified them as eligible for designation, as well as subject to preservation review under Section 9b of the law, with three now designated. Many

¹ The Palisades fieldhouse is a later and larger variation, with the “hall-and-parlor house” a side wing of a larger structure.

later fieldhouses and rec centers—because they were not among this earliest, formative class and were often less interesting architecturally—were considered ineligible or more questionable. But the Harris model influenced even these, as several of the hip-roofed and Modernist fieldhouses of the 1940s and 1950s were abstractions of his porch-fronted traditional building, much in the way that D.C. schools’ Colonial and Classical Revival porticoes were abstracted into streamlined antae in schools of the late 1940s.

The Park

Following the 1921 study by the United Citizens Playground Committee and its recommendations for park acquisition, a Chevy Chase Recreation Club approached the Chevy Chase Land Company about obtaining a parcel for the first playground northwest of the Taft Bridge. In March 1923, the Land Company agreed to lease the present site—between Western Avenue, 41st Street and Livingston Street—for three years for token consideration, with the intention that the Recreation Club would purchase the land or have the city do so at the expiration of that time. The club immediately laid out a baseball diamond, a football/soccer field, tennis and basketball courts, and a running track. The park was dedicated May 26.

The Recreation Club was unsuccessful in reaching its target to fund the purchase and improvement of the parcel and of another directly across the Maryland line. Having sunk a considerable investment into the facilities, however, residents prevailed upon the new National Capital Park Commission to acquire the park for the public (white residents, that is), at a cost of \$70,000. In 1927, the District Commissioners closed the northern stub of 42nd Street that had separated the property from the tiny Square 1745, expanding the park.

A symmetrical plan for the triangular park was proposed, but it was realized as a more informal layout in which an axis from the rear of the field house divided the softball field from the tennis courts. A 1944 plan indicates that a path meandered from 41st to Western northeast of the tennis courts, separating them from volleyball and basketball courts, swings and climbing equipment, and a picnic area at the northern apex of the park. Shortly after World War II, the site was reordered, with the baseball diamond and tennis and basketball courts in their present locations, divided by a north-south walk. One of the improvements of the early 1930s was a wading pool, reconfigured (now a spray park), but remaining in some version since.

The Fieldhouse

The fieldhouse at Chevy Chase Playground dates to 1932 or 1933, as Supervisor of Playgrounds Sybil Baker announced plans for one at the end of 1931, and then, in the summer of 1934, described Chevy Chase as the system’s best playground, “a model ground.” That makes this fieldhouse a contemporary of the 1932 Park View Playground fieldhouse, the second example of Albert Harris’s one-and-a-half-story Tidewater hall-and-parlor-house model. But Chevy Chase’s was the first fieldhouse to be constructed of brick, a characteristic shared only by the Lincoln Playground fieldhouse erected with Civil Works Administration funds in 1934. It was oriented toward the intersection of Livingston and 41st, with its back wall parallel to Western Avenue.

The building retains good integrity, although it received a compatible rear ell in 2011 and has had roofing, windows and doors replaced. The northeastern room—the “hall”—rises the full

height of the building and contains an end fireplace and a stair that leads to the loft over the “parlor” or southwestern room.

Other structures have come and gone over the years, including fences, sheds, backstops and dugouts. The oldest elements are concrete paving and steps, although the present materials do not appear to date to the circa 1932-1933 period of significance. Despite the playground’s equipment and paving having been replaced, the property retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance as one of the earliest extant city playgrounds and park buildings in Washington, considered in its time a model for other Depression-era parks.