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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-09

**National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children**

733 Euclid Street NW  
Square 2884, Lot 0836

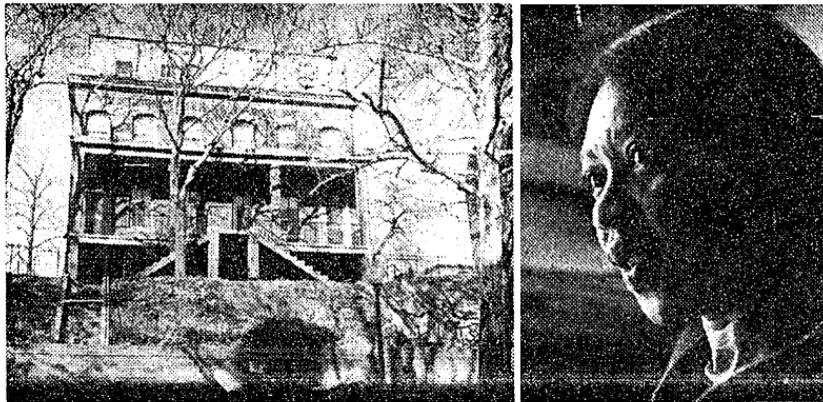
Meeting Date: July 28, 2022  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 1B

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Children and Women (Merriweather Home for Children) at 733 Euclid Street, NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance. The Merriweather Home for Children is eligible under National Register criterion A and District of Columbia criterion B for its historic significance. The period of significance extends from 1930, approximately when the Merriweather Home moved into the building, to 1971, when the Home closed.<sup>1</sup>



The Mary L. Meriwether Home, 733 Euclid st. nw.      The Home's director, Fannie C. Offutt

**Meriwether Home Retains Cosy Air  
After 100 Years of Helping Children**

*Clipping from the Washington Post, December 9, 1963, page B1.*

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<sup>1</sup> A note on names: The non-profit organization that first started the Home in 1863 was called the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Children and Women, and the physical home itself was referred to as the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children. In the 1950s, the Home's name was changed to the Meriwether Home for Children in honor of one of its most prominent benefactors and administrators, Mary Louise Robinson Meriwether (1848-1942). It is undetermined when or why the spelling of the surname changed, but "Merriweather" was the most recently used spelling by the organization itself and is used in the nomination.

The duplex at 733 Euclid Street, NW, stands directly north of the old Banneker High School and less than one block west of Howard University. The building remains the only surviving structure associated with the Merriweather Home, a civic institution founded during the Civil War that provided relief to thousands of African American women and children for over a century. At one point it was one of only two homes in the District that cared for African Americans in need, and by the 1950s was the only private institution in DC dedicated to the care of Black orphans. It was unique among DC institutions for not only serving African Americans, but for being managed and administered by African Americans as well. Throughout the institution's history, prominent Black leaders in DC attached their name, time, and effort to the Home, including Frederick Douglass, Helen Appo Cook, and James Wormley.

At a time when civic charity was segregated, when African American institutions were underfunded, and when so many Black organizations were ignored by White society, the Merriweather Home became a beacon of hope for the most forlorn of a forgotten group. The institution served the city's most vulnerable even as it constantly struggled for its own survival. Pushed from building to building with insufficient funds and inadequate space, the Merriweather Home became a symbol of community perseverance and pride. When faced with budget woes, the older children of the Home helped the younger ones. The elder women aided the staff with chores. For many years, local churches and students at nearby Howard University donated a Christmas tree to the Home.

As a result of its unique connection to and representation of the Social History and the Black Ethnic Heritage of DC, the property meets Criterion A of the National Register of Historic Places. The Merriweather Home spent over a third of its existence at 733 Euclid Street, which was not only its final location but today is its last remaining physical vestige. The property is DC's last connection to an institution that for so long was the only option for some of the District's children.



*Image from Howard University, The Hilltop, October 5, 1967, 3.*

### **Historical Background**

The National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Children and Women formed in 1863 at a time when thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans were moving into the District of Columbia. The Home started as a way to provide relief specifically to the orphaned children and elderly women who arrived in DC. Among the institution's earliest advocates was Elizabeth Keckly (also spelled Keckley), who had been born enslaved but later freed herself and

became the dressmaker and a close confidant of then First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. In her later years, Keckly became a resident of the Home.

The Home's first location was north of Georgetown at the Burleith estate, which had been confiscated by the federal government from a man who had joined the Confederacy. The Home depended upon both federal financial aid and private donations as it cared for between forty-seven and sixty-nine children and about four women annually in its first years. In 1866, though, the estate was returned to its prior owner, even after federal officials vowed that would not happen, and the Home was forced to relocate. It moved to a purpose-built structure at the site of the present-day Banneker Recreation Center near Georgia Avenue. By the 1880s, the Home was caring for well over 100 children and seven elder women annually as the District's population and urbanity increased into the Industrial Era. Its building, though, had been rushed through construction, and its wood frame and small size proved to be both inadequate and a fire hazard.

In the 1880s, Congress paid for a new, much improved brick building for the Home roughly where the old Banneker High School stands today. It was at this building in 1907 where Elizabeth Keckly died. Though she had been an expert seamstress, passages in her memoirs about life in the White House had upset Mary Todd Lincoln when it was published in 1868. Mrs. Lincoln's ire caused sales of the book to stagnate and had brought Keckly to near financial ruin.

As the Home entered the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century new ideals emerged about orphanage designs and ideals. Reformers advocated for orphanages to have more outdoor space, more adaptable interior spaces, and easy access to fresh air. At the point those ideals became popular, though, the Merriweather Home was forced to move into a smaller, less adaptable building with less outdoor space than its previous location. It was by then one of only two organizations dedicated to African American children in the District. The federal government had forced the Home to move in order to build the Banneker High School and Banneker Recreation Center.

The Merriweather Home moved across the street to 733 Euclid Street, NW, which it purchased in 1930 and which is the subject of this landmark nomination. The Second Empire-style duplex had been erected circa 1879 in a subdivision plotted after the Civil War. The duplex was among the first buildings constructed in the area as evidenced by its notably high siting at the height of the hill before Euclid Street was graded. The house served as a private residence before the Home moved in. In 1931 the Home added a two-story rear addition to the property, but it was still smaller than its previous location. Possibly as a result of its move to a smaller building, and likely related to its continuous financial difficulties no doubt exacerbated by the Great Depression, the Home stopped accepting women after 1932 and concentrated solely on helping children.

Ever since its founding in 1863, the Home was perpetually underfunded. It constantly dangled on the edge of financial collapse and only received essential funding from the government after tireless and intense lobbying. The organization's annual reports from the late nineteenth century were filled with sorrowful stories of having "to turn away numerous and frequent applicants" and of seeing the "children's outings...almost entirely discontinued." The residents of the Home, though, pitched in to help. The elder women, "though too old and infirm to maintain themselves in homes of their own...are able to be very useful in assisting in the care of the younger children,

in mending knitting, [and] ironing...while many of the younger children above six years old are occupied during part of the day in...light housework.”

By the mid-twentieth century, fostering became a common alternative to orphanages and the Merriweather Home’s population decreased to around thirty children. The smaller space and numbers made 733 Euclid feel like a family in a house. In 1958, the *Evening Star* observed that “[b]y approximating the atmosphere of a true home, it prepares the children for a new life with foster parents.” A 1963 *Washington Post* article described the interior of 733 Euclid: “The grandmotherly portrait of the Home’s first director, Mary L. Meriwether, now stands on a lace-covered table in the living room, beside a vase of artificial red roses...Sunlight filters through the leaves of some flourishing houseplants in the big playroom. The little tables in the dining room are a cheery pastel and are brightened with flowers. Upstairs in the dormitories, dolls and bears will stand guard over beds.”



*Children at the Merriweather setting the table in 1963. Image from Cultural Tourism DC, “Lift Every Voice: Georgia Ave./Pleasant Plains Heritage Trail,” stop 12.*

By the 1970s, though, the financial problems and persistent lack of interest by the District and federal governments had finally caught up with the Home. It was near bankruptcy, unable to properly care for the children, and a judge ordered the Home closed. For over a century the Home had done as much as it could with the little it had. In subsequent years, 733 Euclid hosted the Emergence Community Arts Collective (ECAC) which became a pillar of the community and helped indirectly continue the broader mission of the Merriweather Home.

## **Significance**

Though the building itself at 733 Euclid Street is notable for its relation to the early development of suburban housing in DC, the property's significance as a landmark primarily relates to its history as an African American orphanage. Landmarked orphanages of any kind are rare in DC, with recent examples being the Episcopal Home for Children (5901 Utah Avenue, NW), which was landmarked in 2021 for its local significance, and the Hillcrest Children's Center (formerly the Washington City Orphan Asylum on the grounds of the National Presbyterian Church, 4101-4125 Nebraska Avenue, NW). The Merriweather Home at 733 Euclid Street would be the first and only landmark in DC associated with an African American orphanage, and considering the building is the only such example of its kind left in the District, it would forever hold that distinction.

African American orphanages are an important yet rare property type not only in DC, but among National Register properties across the country. The nation's first orphanage created specifically to serve African Americans was the Colored Orphan Asylum, founded in New York City in 1836. After decades of moves and merges, that organization still exists, though none of its remaining past properties are landmarked. State-run Black orphanages listed on the National Register include the Central Orphanage of North Carolina in Oxford, NC (which is still in operation) and the West Virginia Colored Children's Home in Huntington, WV (the landmarked building was demolished in 2011).

Other similar properties added to the National Register for their local significance include the Lincoln Colored Home (Lincoln Colored Old Folks and Orphans Home) in Springfield, Illinois; the Shiloh Orphanage in Augusta, Georgia; the Memorial Industrial School in Winston-Salem, NC; the St. Louis Colored Orphans' Home (Annie Malone Children and Family Services Center) in St. Louis, Missouri; and the Iowa Federation Home for Colored Girls in Iowa City, Iowa. Similar to the Merriweather Home, the Iowa Federation Home also moved into a building previously used as a residence. That organization occupied a circa 1890s Queen Anne-style home between 1919 and 1951. That building was also added to the National Register for Criterion A only.

Many of those African American orphanages faced comparable problems to those of the Merriweather Home. All were regularly underfunded and overcrowded. The Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, which has no associated landmarked sites, opened in Brooklyn, NY, in 1866. During World War I its finances became so inadequate that the organization could no longer afford to fix pipes or buy coal for heating. In the winter of 1918, a frozen pipe burst and caused two children to get frostbite which resulted in amputations. New York authorities ordered the facility closed, blaming the incident on the institution rather than on inadequate funding and support, as would similarly lead to the forced closing of the Merriweather Home.

Other African American orphanages started at similar times and for similar reasons as the Merriweather Home. The Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn began in 1866 as the Home for Freed Children and Others, and likewise assisted formerly enslaved women and orphaned children. The Lincoln Colored Home in Springfield, Illinois, began in 1898 as the Lincoln Colored Old Folks and Orphans Home. That institution was also administered and managed by African Americans like the Merriweather Home. The Central Orphanage of North Carolina opened in 1882 during the Jim Crow Era when other orphanages in the state did not accept African Americans.

The role of these African American institutions has been rarely studied by historians. When they are, the scholarship rarely goes beyond the community level.<sup>2</sup> In DC, the Merriweather Home has been included in Cultural Tourism DC's "Lift Every Voice," Georgia Ave./Pleasant Plains Heritage Trail for its importance to the local Black community and for its connection to Elizabeth Keckly. However, gaps still exist in the scholarship connecting the Merriweather Home to the larger context of African American civic organization, community engagement, and charity administration in the District of Columbia. The relationship between the Merriweather Home and Black churches and nearby Howard University, as well as the Home's impact on local leaders, former orphan residents, and others in post-Civil War Washington has rarely been explored in depth. Preservation of 733 Euclid Street will not only retain the final physical remnants of the institution's history, it may also inspire further study of the Merriweather Home's contributions to DC's history.

### **Boundary**

The Merriweather Home is associated with the full duplex at 733 Euclid Street, NW, which occupies Lot 0836 in Square 2884. The lot was originally two separate lots in the nineteenth century that were later combined. The entirety of the lot encompasses the entirety of the duplex and is owned by a single owner. To the east and west are neighboring rowhouses which do not connect directly to the duplex, making the building appear as a distinct, cohesive structure along the northern side of Euclid Street.

### **Period of Significance**

The proposed period of significance is appropriate, dating from the Merriweather Home's purchase of 733 Euclid Street, NW, in 1930 to its closing in 1971. This date range covers only the years the Home occupied the property. Before 1930, 733 Euclid served as a residence. Its construction in circa 1879, though notable, does not warrant individual listing for design. After 1971, 733 Euclid Street served other purposes related to community engagement and culture. Those uses, including by the Emergence Community Arts Collective, may cause the period of significance to be reevaluated after sufficient time has passed at a future date.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of scholarship regarding the importance of Black orphanages at the community and state level include: Marian J. Morton, "Institutionalizing Inequalities: Black Children and Child Welfare in Cleveland, 1858-1998," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 141-162; David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, "Race, Foster Care, and the Politics of Abandonment in New York City," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (November 1997): 1844-1849; August Butler, "Making a Home Out of No Home: 'Colored' Orphan Asylums in Virginia, 1867-1930," PhD dissertation (College of William and Mary, 2019); and Christy Clark-Pujara, "In Need of Care: African American Families Transform the Providence Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans during the Final Collapse of Slavery, 1839-1846," *Journal of Family History* 45, no. 3 (2020): 295-314.