
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-20

Nixon-Mounsey House
2915 University Terrace NW
Square 1324 Lot 804

Meeting Date: March 24, 2022
Applicant: Mary Garrard and Norma Broude (owners) and the D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 3D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Nixon-Mounsey House 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 under National Register Criteria B (persons) and C (architecture). The period of significance extends from 1950, the date of construction of the house, to 1962, the death of architectural designer, resident and civil rights activist, William D. Nixon.



Architectural and Historical Background

The Nixon-Mounsey House at 2915 University Terrace NW is an architecturally striking Art Deco/Streamline Moderne house characterized by its pale-yellow brick walls, its sculptural and undulating form replete with curved projecting bays and entrance stoop, its glass block windows and its flat roofline. The house was designed by African American designer William D. Nixon

and built in 1950 as a home for his daughter, psychiatrist Ethel Nixon-Mounsey, her husband, Frank E. Mounsey, their children, and Nixon himself. The house is unusually intact on the exterior and interior and is one of just a few notable Deco/Moderne houses in the city. Selected for inclusion in James Goode's 2015 publication, *Capital Houses*, the residence, in its form and materials, embraces a sleek and modernist aesthetic best classified as Streamlined Moderne, a late phase of the Art Deco style.

Set along the steep University Terrace, just north of its intersection with Garfield Street, the house rises two visible stories on its west façade and a full four stories at the rear where the grade drops off. The two-story central entrance bay opens into a spacious two-story foyer with a spiral staircase set into the curved wall with the glass block windows, allowing for an abundance of light and privacy. On the south side where the terrain begins its drop, the sculptural quality of the house is fully revealed; the south projecting bay with its curved walls and glass block windows rises three full stories above a basement, while the front entrance bay and rear projecting bay, also with curving walls, recede from and flank it. On the east elevation, which is a flat planar wall surface, all four stories of the house are visible, including the sub-basement, where a garage was planned but never completed.

In 1949, Frank E. and Dr. Ethel Nixon Mounsey purchased a one-half acre lot of land on University Terrace to build a house that would be designed by Ethel's father. The half-acre lot was historically part of an African American community that emerged after the Civil War adjacent to Battery Kemble where formerly enslaved persons were able to buy small tracts of land to farm and establish homesteads. By the late nineteenth century, the sizeable African American community included a school (Chain Bridge Road School, a DC Landmark) and a cemetery (Union Burial Ground). When the Mounseys, who were Black, purchased the lot, the historic African American community had all but disappeared as affluent whites had begun, in the 1920s, to purchase lots to build their own houses and to introduce racial deed restrictions.

Nonetheless, the Mounseys were able to purchase this particular lot—said to have been still in the hands of descendants of the original post-Civil War owners and thus free of racial covenants. William Nixon was not formally trained as an architect but had spent his career teaching art and drawing at Dunbar High School where he also built stage sets for student performances, graduations and other ceremonies. According to the landmark application, Nixon had designed several other buildings, including residences in the city and a vacation cottage for his family in Venice Beach, Maryland, a hotel in Thomas Point, Maryland, and another family vacation house in Herndon, Virginia. It is not known specifically what inspired Nixon to design the home in a Moderne mode, which at that point was nearing the end of its popularity, but he clearly had a deep understanding of the style to have accomplished such a successful house in plan, sculptural quality and materials.

During his teaching career and afterwards, both before and while in residence on University Terrace, Nixon played an important role in advocating for African American civil rights. He was a leader in several African American institutions and organizations, including serving as president of the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants (Colored). As president, Nixon fought for the desegregation and integration of Washington's public places and businesses, organizing boycotts of

schools, police departments, stores and theaters. Nixon also served as chairman of the Committee on Special Assignments for the Federation of Civic Associations, fighting for fair housing.

Tragically, Dr. Ethel Mounsey died two years after the family moved into the house, perhaps explaining the unfinished basement. According to the application, Ethel, who was a psychiatrist, had been contemplating opening a private practice in the lower level of the house before she succumbed to leukemia. After her death, her husband and three children continued to live in house with her father, until his own death ten years later. Mary Garrard and Norma Broude, co-sponsors of this application, purchased the house in 1976 and have been residents and stewards of it since then.

Evaluation

The Nixon-Mounsey House meets D.C. Designation Criteria C (individuals), D (architecture and urbanism) and E (artistry). The house is an excellent example of the Streamlined Moderne/Art Deco style, particularly as applied to a detached dwelling form. Although the Moderne style can be found in industrial buildings and is well-represented in apartment buildings in D.C., its use for single-family dwellings is uncommon. Indeed, the Nixon-Mounsey House is one of just a few notable examples (others include the Theodore Dominick House at 3210 Reservoir Road; the Gelman House at 3718 Calvert Street; and the Cafritz House at 2301 Foxhall Road). The Nixon-Mounsey House—with its rounded corners and projecting bays, its flat roof, and its use of then-modern materials like glass block windows and aluminum detailing—is a distinctive, yet quintessential example of the Streamlined Moderne aesthetic.

The Nixon-Mounsey House is significant for its associations with William D. Nixon, son of enslaved parents, a lifelong educator, the designer and a resident of the house, and an important player in African American civil rights movement. Before and during his residency on University Terrace, Nixon led and organized efforts to de-segregate the city's fire department and public school playgrounds, local restaurants, movie theaters. and the Washington Redskins football team. For these reasons, the Nixon-Mounsey House also meets National Register Criteria B and D.C. Criterion C for association with significant persons.

The Nixon-Mounsey House retains a high degree of integrity with only minor alterations to the exterior, including the introduction of stainless-steel handrails to the entrance stairs, recladding of the entry canopy with a polished metal, replacement of jalousie windows on the south side elevation, construction of a wooden deck, and the infilling of open garage doors at the rear of the house. Although the interior is not included in this application, it is remarkably intact.