
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 18-14

Petworth Neighborhood Library (Petworth Branch Library)

4200 Kansas Avenue NW

Square 2915, Lot 802

Meeting Date: September 27, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Department of General Services
Affected ANC: 4C

After consideration of the Historic Landmark application, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Petworth Branch Library for listing in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Places and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The red brick, Georgian Revival-style library building at 4200 Kansas Avenue was built in 1939 according to designs by the Office of the Municipal Architect then under the leadership of Nathan C. Wyeth. It was one of several libraries built as part of an effort by the city to expand library services to city neighborhoods. Its design is emblematic of the work of the Office of the Municipal Architect and is an excellent example of its type, style and period of construction.

Construction of the Petworth Library (historically known as Petworth Branch Library) was long in the making. The first expressed desire for a library in the community came in 1927 when the Petworth Women's Club library committee, with support from other neighborhood and school associations, called on the District commissioners to endorse a building program for library extensions in the District including a branch for Petworth. Two years later, George F. Bowerman, librarian for the District of Columbia, presented a plan for thirteen new branch libraries to be erected over fifteen years. In 1930, Bowerman would expand his proposal to an even greater number, including ten "Class A" branches that included Petworth. Five years later, with little prospect for funding due to the Great Depression, Bowerman reduced the proposal to just five branches with Petworth remaining on the list.

The site for Petworth Library at the intersection of Kansas and Georgia avenues and Upshur Street NW was already owned by the District; in 1930, the Board of Education had granted to the D.C. Public Library this triangular portion of a 35-acre site that included MacFarland Junior High School and Roosevelt High School. The approximately \$150,000 needed for construction and equipping the branch was, however, still lacking. In 1936, Congress finally authorized it for the city's 1937 budget. The Office of Municipal Architect immediately drafted plans for the new building, securing approvals from the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the District Commissioners in December 1936 and July 1937. In January 1939, twelve years after the community had petitioned for a library, the Petworth Branch Library was opened to great acclaim.

The library consists of a two-story, three-part red brick Georgian Revival-style structure with a central pavilion and side wings. As designed, the central pavilion featured a steep hipped roof with dormers and

a wooden cupola and side wings covered by gable roofs and buttressed by wide end chimneys. The building's overall massing, and details, including limestone quoining, classical door entablatures, twelve-over-twelve windows under jack arches and other brick detailing offer a high-quality and academic interpretation of the Georgian Revival style for which Wyeth is known. The style reflects the influence of the contemporary restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, as well as the Commission of Fine Arts' preference for domestic-feeling "colonial" architecture for neighborhood-serving public facilities. The interior of the building also features a high degree of detailing from paneled fireplace surrounds to wainscoting and vaulted passageways between rooms.

In 2009, Petworth Library underwent a major renovation. The District Department of General Services restored the historic wood windows and constructed the building's cupola, which, although part of the original building design, had never been built. New systems and facilities including updated elevators and bathrooms were installed, while historic finishes and furniture were restored.

Designation criteria

The Petworth Library meets D.C. Designation Criteria B (History) and D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register Criteria A and C at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1938 to 1939, representing the building's period of construction.

Under D.C. Designation Criterion B, the library is "associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation." The Petworth Library was included in and completed as part of a 1930s library expansion program. Petworth Library came to fruition largely through the efforts of head librarian Dr. George F. Bowerman, who proposed the extension of the city's library system to include neighborhood branch libraries, and through the work of local civic associations who continued to press for funding for the Petworth branch. The Georgetown Branch Library (1935) is the only other library known to have been completed as part of this 1930 building plan; it too was designed by the Municipal Architect's Office under Nathan Wyeth and reflects an academic Georgian Revival style.

Petworth Library also meets D.C. Criterion D and National Register Criterion C, as an excellent example of the Georgian Revival style as applied to a branch library building and an excellent example of the work of the District's third municipal architect, Nathan Wyeth. The Petworth Library was designed to conform to the Colonial Revival style of architecture that had been adopted by the Office of Municipal Architect for its public buildings and to be contextually compatible with the adjacent red-brick Roosevelt and MacFarland school buildings which preceded it on the site. The library, however, was rendered in a more domestic manner, particularly on the interior, where spaces are warm and intimate and include residential-like features such as fireplaces and wood paneled wainscoting. Deemed flexible and economical, Colonial Revival was seen as a fitting complement to the city's residential neighborhoods. Wyeth's buildings are consistently characterized by their high quality of design, construction and materials.

Boundaries

The Petworth Library shares a lot (Lot 802 in Square 2915) with MacFarland Junior High School and Roosevelt High School, separated from the other properties by the fence line that surrounds Roosevelt's stadium.