
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-02

Slowe-Burrill House
1256 Kearny Street NE
Square 3930, Lot 3

Meeting Date: April 30, 2020
Applicant: Benjamin C. O’Connell and Dawn C. Myers (owners)
Affected ANC: 5B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Slowe-Burrill House, 1256 Kearny Street NE, 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 1922 to 1937, the period of Lucy Slowe’s occupancy of the home.

The property meets National Register Criterion B and District of Columbia Criterion C for its association with the life of a person, educator Lucy Diggs Slowe, significant to the history of the District of Columbia and the nation.

Background

The cross-gabled Queen Anne frame house at 1256 Kearny Street was built for prosperous Irish immigrant James T. Ward and his wife Hannah. The house was probably completed in 1893, and the couple remained there until selling the property in 1918 to salesman/bookkeeper William E. Gordon and his wife, Mary Berres Gordon. The building retains high historic integrity to this early period, although it has been added to at the rear, but it is not for its architecture that it is especially important. The next occupants, from 1922 to 1937, were an African-American couple, Lucy Diggs Slowe and Mary Powell Burrill. Their tenure is the property’s period of significance.

The women met a decade earlier, when both were teaching high school English. In 1918, they moved in together, establishing a domestic partnership that would continue until Slowe’s death. Mary Burrill had been one of the first African-American graduates of Emerson University and then taught at Armstrong Manual High School in Washington. For four years, she directed the Washington Conservatory of Music’s School of Expression, where she taught elocution, public speaking and drama. She did most of her teaching career at her alma mater, the M Street School (which became Dunbar High School), until her retirement in 1944. There, she taught English, history, speech and drama, and directed plays and musical productions, influencing generations of young minds, several of whom became educators and writers. On her own time, she was a playwright, publishing two one-act plays, and she regularly attended Georgia Douglass Johnson’s “S Street Salon,” a weekly gathering of black writers.

The Kearny Street property is especially significant as the home of her partner, Lucy Slowe. Slowe's career is one of remarkable achievement and overcoming obstacles. Her biography reads as a succession of superlatives. Second in her class at the Baltimore Colored High School, she was its first female graduate to enroll at Howard University, where she graduated as valedictorian. While at Howard, she was one of the nine founding members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, the first sorority for African-American women. Slowe was the sorority's first vice president and drafted much of its constitution.

Slowe began teaching English at her alma mater, the Baltimore Colored High School, and during summers earned her Master of Arts at Columbia University. After obtaining the degree, she moved to Washington to teach at Armstrong. Impressed with her abilities, the school board tasked her with planning the District's first junior high school for African Americans, Shaw. She served as its principal until 1922. Even so burdened with responsibilities, she continued to cultivate her love of competitive sports, winning the first women's tournament of the American Tennis Association, probably the first major sports title for an African-American woman. She went on to garner at least sixteen titles and awards at tennis.

In 1922, Slowe accepted the position of Dean of Women at Howard University, the first African-American woman to hold such an office, and teaching simultaneously. She oversaw construction of the first dormitories for women at the campus. She found most women were enrolled in the university's teacher preparation program, and while she naturally appreciated the role of educator, she encouraged her charges to pursue less traditional paths of study, such as mathematics, science, and medicine. She advocated for each person's right of developing her own potential, as well as the obligation to contribute her abilities to the improvement of the world. Broadening her view beyond Howard, she founded and served as president of the National Association of University Women, then established the Association of Advisors to Women in Colored Schools and the Association of Deans of Women and Advisors to Girls in Negro Schools, and finally, assisted civic leader Mary McLeod Bethune in the creation of the National Council of Negro Women, where she served as the secretary. She was also active in the Young Women's Christian Association and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Unfortunately, Slowe met considerable obstacles from the sexism of a new university president, Mordecai Johnson, who had her removed from the Board of Deans, ensured that she had lowest salary among them, and reduced the resources available to women students. On top of this, he insisted that she move onto campus. While deans of women elsewhere frequently had quarters at school, Slowe had proven she was a real administrator, and not a house matron. She pointed out that the male deans had no such residency requirement, and she steadfastly refused to comply, remaining in her Brookland home. She also pursued a student's sexual harassment complaint against a professor, seeing to it that he was dismissed.

Lucy Slowe died of kidney disease in 1937. In 1942, a dormitory for single, female war workers was erected in LeDroit Park and named Lucy Diggs Slowe Hall. It became a Howard University dorm after the war. By that time, a public elementary school was under way, also to be named for the District's accomplished former teacher. Slowe's childhood home is also distinguished by a Virginia state historical marker.

Over the fifteen years of their occupancy on Kearny Street, Lucy Slowe and Mary Burrill hosted parties and intellectual gatherings attended by female Howard students and prominent writers and artists, including Jean Toomer and Georgia Douglas Johnson. According to Robert Malesky, “That Kearny Street home became a refuge for Howard’s female students, and Slowe regularly hosted get-togethers there to talk, counsel and encourage her young charges, often meeting beneath the trees in her back yard or gathered around an open fire in the living room. The women also received many other guests there, mostly educators such as Mary McLeod Bethune, but also politicians and activists from around the country.” Especially with her signal refusal to move onto campus, the Brookland house is the best spot to commemorate Lucy Diggs Slowe’s many and varied contributions. For that reason, it merits designation under National Register Criterion B and District of Columbia Criterion C for its association with Slowe.

The nomination also puts forward an argument for National Register Criterion B and District of Columbia Criterion C for history, because Slowe and Burrill had “the most prominent female same-sex relationship in Washington DC during the early twentieth century.” This is a less compelling argument, only because, as the nomination goes on to say, “they were very private [and] they escaped significant public scrutiny that could have impacted their social standing and careers.” Their orientation was certainly known to friends, and the nomination suggests that it may have been a motivating factor for the university president’s insistence upon her relocation to campus. But it remained a private matter, not a prominent one; their prominence was not for being LGBTQ, even if that adds to our understanding and appreciation in retrospect.

In a roundabout way, Lucy Slowe’s sexual orientation aided her professional advance. Not in a formalized marriage, she was free to assume her deanship at Howard. Had she married traditionally, she would have been dismissed, as it was expected that a woman prioritize home life over career, and that neither could be adequately served if both were attempted—another double standard not applied to men.

Slowe’s relationship is important to us today as an example. Recognizing it as a central part of a accomplished, multi-talented, whole person is an important corrective to traditional historiography that erased or denigrated LGBTQ people. Her story reminds us that LGBTQ people have always been an integral part of society—pillars of the community as well as challengers of the status quo, making contributions in all walks of life.