
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-07

Washington Animal Rescue League Animal Shelter

71 O Street NW

Square 616, part of Lot 110

Meeting Date: December 20, 2018
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 5E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Washington Animal Rescue League Animal Shelter a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the Board request 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 to 1977, the era during which the building was constructed and used by the League.

The property merits designation under National Register Criteria A and C and D.C. Criteria B (“History”) and D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for embodying the distinguishing characteristics of a specific building type—a purpose-built animal shelter—the first of that building type in Washington, and apparently the last of the early shelters. The property represents the efforts of prominent local women to address the well-being of the city’s animals.

Laws banning cruelty to animals in the District of Columbia date to 1819, but their enforcement seems to have been generally lax. The government was involved principally in the removal of abandoned animals or of those running free that posed a nuisance. A city pound was established in 1872, to hold strays for redemption for three days, after which they would be killed. Emulating British organizations, societies for the prevention of cruelty sprang up in American cities after the Civil War, concerned principally with the treatment of draft horses. Washington’s own SPCA was chartered in 1870, changing its name to the Washington Humane Society in 1885. The Humane Society lacked a shelter until the end of the 1890s, performing its mission on the streets, even having lawbreakers prosecuted.

Other small shelters opened—and closed—at the beginning of the twentieth century, largely defeated by the cost of maintaining facilities, and by complaining neighbors. Inspired by witnessing animal abuse and by the good work of Boston’s Animal Rescue League, a new group, named the Washington Animal Rescue League, organized in 1914. Led by Mathilde Goelet Gerry, a group of society women set out to rescue horses, dogs and cats (roughly in that order of importance) and have them treated and put in new homes, if possible. The League’s board was composed mostly of women, with prominent men often attached as vice presidents for their influence. The membership was characterized as “100 women and a score of men prominent in Congressional, diplomatic and social circles,” “Washington’s most exclusive social set.” The

first Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and Mrs. Warren G. Harding were both involved in the group's early efforts.

The League established a couple of shelters in succession, each time having to seek larger quarters. As at the city's pound, animals could be adopted, but most were euthanized. But the private group at least supplemented the public animal-control function and, with its ambulance and medical services, was soon thought to improve upon the government's work. The women encouraged the police to report abused animals to the shelter, but largely withdrew from seeking prosecutions of abusers, instead establishing a program to purchase worn-out horses. The League also sponsored educational outreach to children and provided a horses' hoof covers for traction on snowy streets. With the use of horses trailing off in the city, the shelter increasingly took in dogs and cats, and often exotic pets and wild animals. Pick-ups would be made even well into the suburbs.

In 1932, the League finally erected a purpose-built animal shelter in the unit block of O Street NW. The locational decision was a difficult one, as neither zoning nor neighbors favored such a use in many convenient neighborhoods. But its immediate neighbors are still residences; the zoning board found the use acceptable if the number of inmate dogs was limited.

Possibly reflecting the connections of the board of directors, the design for the shelter, by Ralph W. Berry, was submitted for an informal review by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. As it had for city facilities located in the neighborhoods, the Commission favored the overall Colonial Revival flavor of the main block, but discouraged the use of rubble-stone walls, as more suited to picturesque ex-urban buildings. But the architect insisted, creating just such a picturesque edifice, with a utilitarian, brick ell for stables and cages, and garages and a kennel for dogs off a rear yard.

The new facility was lauded as efficient and up to date. It began with 50 cages for dogs and a dozen for cats. With little space now for horses, the League arranged to place retired District-government horses on area farms. Three veterinarians initially served in the clinic and, in addition to emergency calls, the shelter's ambulance made almost daily runs to bring in unwanted and ill animals. The League operated from O Street until 1977, when it opened a new shelter on Oglethorpe Street.

The property is the best extant physical representation of the history of private-sector side of animal control in Washington, with an emphasis on humane treatment, the counterpart to the government-run District Pound and Stable at South Capitol and I Streets, designated in 2014.

Period of significance, integrity and boundaries

Having been constructed in 1932, continuing in its original use for 45 years—and no longer in that use for the past 41 years—the shelter is old enough to be considered in its historic context as a purpose-built animal shelter.

The entire history of the shelter is an appropriate period of significance for the property. It appears to have changed relatively little during that time; most alterations having taken place since. The original layout can be seen in the Sanborn atlas detail on the next page. Aerial photos

confirm that it remained so until the end of the League's tenure. But the dog-exercise area was built over in the mid 1980s, demolishing the sheds and effectively connecting the shelter building to the original garage, which was also altered in the process. For this reason, it should all be considered a single building, but with only the main block and original rear ell being designated the property's character-defining features. A shed roof has also been appended to the side of ell, projecting into the parking lot on the property's east side.

The windows have been replaced with aluminum ones that are nonetheless compatible. The striking, arched main entrance has also noticeably been altered. Calculated as a portal that would admit both humans and animals, the original door presumably was replaced by a storefront system when the building was adapted to its present use.

For the sake of convenience, the entire lot 110 has been proposed as the landmark property. However, the building was erected abutting two rowhouses that stood in the parking lot's location prior to their demolition in the 1940s (the now-exposed common brick of the east end of the shelter's main block, distinct from the stone seen elsewhere, evidences their former presence). For this reason, the historic landmark boundary should be considered just that land west of the building's eastern edge—the lot depicted below—to exclude the non-character-defining paving.

