
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-06

Washington Yacht Club

1500 M Street SE

Square 1080-S, parts of Lots 801 and 802/part of Reservation 343-D

Meeting Date: April 30, 2020
Applicant: Washington Yacht Club
Affected ANC: 6B
Staff Reviewer: Anne Brockett

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Washington Yacht Club, located at 1500 M Street SE, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as a site with local significance.

The Washington Yacht Club (WYC) is significant under National Register criteria A and C and District of Columbia criteria B and D for history and architecture, respectively. Represented by its clubhouse, boat facilities, and outbuildings, the WYC is an early and representative example of a boat club devoted to the sport of motorized boating, and specifically to affordable motorboating. The WYC also meets National Register criteria consideration B for relocated properties. While moving historic resources can disqualify them from designation, marine facilities are an exception, as discussed below.

Background

The WYC sits within Anacostia Park, which is jointly administered by the District of Columbia Department of Parks and Recreation and the National Park Service. The club has a license to occupy its .33 acre parcel, which is bordered by M Street SE to the north and the Anacostia River to the south, and is accessible from both. To the east and west are its fellow historic boat clubs, the Eastern Power Boat Club (founded 1903), District Yacht Club (c. 1955), and Seafarers Yacht Club (1945), along with the non-historic Anacostia Community Boathouse, which together form what is known as Boathouse Row or the Anacostia Boathouses.

The Washington Yacht Club property includes the clubhouse, constructed in 1915, a 1955 workshop, a 1920s electrical shed, and a portion of the Anacostia seawall, all of which contribute to its significance, as well as a non-contributing shed and docks.

In 2015, HPO determined the Anacostia Boathouses eligible for designation, recognizing the importance of the four historic clubs. Following that decision, HPO applied for a National Park Service Underrepresented Communities Grant in order to formally nominate the boathouses, but was unsuccessful. At this time, only the Washington Yacht Club is prepared to move forward with designation as an individual landmark, for which it qualifies.

History

The Washington Yacht Club was founded on April 27, 1910 by a group of white District of Columbia boaters looking to establish affordable facilities along the Anacostia River in proximity to their homes on the east side of the river. Unlike some extant clubs like the Capital Yacht Club on the Washington Channel, the Corinthian Yacht Club at the mouth of James Creek, or the Potomac River clubs, members of the WYC were solely devoted to motorized boating, rather than sailing or rowing, which were then immensely popular at the time. The rise in motorboating can be compared to the growth of automobiles to some extent – the earliest owners were wealthy and could afford not only the vehicle, but a chauffeur to drive it. Similarly, early motorboats were required to be operated by a pilot and owning and maintaining a boat was an expensive enterprise.

However, the founders and subsequent members of the Washington Yacht Club were proudly working class. Early members included mechanics, clerks, a carpenter, and a boat livery operator. Club members built their own boats by hand and constructed all their own facilities, rarely if ever contracting out work. They have maintained this tradition, contributing to the upkeep of buildings and grounds through mandatory work parties.

The club's first location was at the foot of Naylor Road SE, where members leased a site for boat docks from the District in 1910 through 1915. Due to the ongoing reclamation of the Anacostia Flats, the club was forced to relocate to a site on newly reclaimed land about 100 feet west of the Pennsylvania Avenue bridge pier. The new lease allowed for construction of more than docking amenities, and club members immediately started constructing a 20' x 30' frame building, which forms the center portion of today's WYC clubhouse.

The WYC did not remain here for long, however; it was once again required to relocate, this time to its current site on the west bank of the Anacostia. In 1925, the WYC towed its clubhouse across the river on a scow to the new site, which was inaccessible by car at that time. Club members immediately set about constructing docks to provide a water approach to their club.

The clubhouse was expanded to the rear in 1929 to provide a room for a steward. Restrooms and a concrete block galley were added the following year. By mid-century, boating was considered a mainstream activity. The *Washington Star* ran its "Fore and Aft" column from the 1930s through the 1950s, reflecting the popularity of boating in the District. By the late 1950s and 1960s, recreational boating was touted as the top family sport in the U.S. by both the boating industry and recreation professionals. During this period, the Washington Yacht Club experienced several decades of contentment.

Responsibility and Resilience

The Washington Yacht Club's activities over its 110 year history emphasize its members' sense of civic-mindedness, from reporting unpermitted dredging and dumping to the City's Engineer Commissioner, to serving as on-call marine security during WWII, and to volunteering to assist the U.S. Attorney in a series of robberies from the city's boat clubs.

Most importantly, members of the WYC have consistently served as stewards of the Anacostia River. In part, their efforts have been to protect property from damage, but their

accomplishments have brought attention to and assisted in the clean up of the ailing river. In 1923, the WYC advised the Washington Gas Light Company, which operated on a nearby parcel, that it would report the company for polluting the Anacostia if they didn't cease dumping a tar-like substance into the river. By 1931, the club had formed a Pollution Committee, which worked in collaboration with other boat clubs and the Isaac Walton League to clean up the river. In 1943, the WYC called out the L. P. Steuart Co. for leaking gallons upon gallons of oil per day in to the river. Other oil spills were reported over the years and the club's environmental outreach efforts are ongoing. The club has maintained its certification by the National Park Service and District Department of the Environment as a Clean Marina since 2003.

The WYC has remained committed to its place on the Anacostia despite the city's near abandonment of the river. Over the 20th century - the club's efforts notwithstanding - the Anacostia became one of the most polluted rivers in the nation. At the same time, it became a symbol of the city's racial and economic divide. The exodus of African American residents to the east side of the river, necessitated through planning decisions, urban renewal, race restrictive covenants, and other policies - all of which helped to institutionalize racial segregation in Washington DC - rendered the Anacostia River a physical boundary between blacks and whites, haves and have-nots. These changes left the Washington Yacht Club on the borderline of the District's division, where it exemplified the issues of a segregated city.

When John "Sonny" McLean was admitted as the first WYC member of color in the 1970s, membership at the club dropped precipitously. White members who did not wish to be associated with African Americans or the suffering Anacostia River anymore left to join other clubs. The turnover of the club's membership to mostly African Americans only reinforced the racial and economic divide symbolized by the Anacostia and now implied in the loaded phrase "east of the river." As John Wennersten explains in *Anacostia: The Death and Life of an American River*, "Recreational boating in the Washington metropolitan area reveals stark polarities of race and class on the rivers." The Anacostia provided the only opportunity for black mariners to find facilities and clubs that would welcome them.

However, despite periodic drops in membership, difficult times during several wars, an energy crisis that severely impacted the boating community, and a river burdened with environmental and social issues, the WYC remains proudly welcoming of all.

Boat Club Architecture

While boat clubs exhibit a wide variety of architectural styles, depending upon age and location, the building type invariably exhibits certain character-defining features, including the following:

- The primary facade faces the water
- They are frequently found in pairs or groups at locations that offer safe mooring and good accessibility to navigable waters
- They are nearly always elevated, either over boat bays (more for canoe or rowing clubs), storage space, or other support facilities
- They feature full width or wraparound porches facing river, bay, or lake. Porches are often seen on upper and lower levels and sometimes overhang the floor below.

- Interiors include a large gathering space for meetings and events on the upper level as well as a locker/changing room and a galley (kitchen) on either upper or lower level
- Site features include the pilings, piers, floats, gangplanks, and catwalks that make up the docking facilities which are found in a variety of arrangements.

The WYC exhibits all of these features on a modest scale and in a vernacular style, in keeping with the club's tradition of affordability and self-sufficiency.

Another commonality among clubhouses and other marine-related resources is the frequency with which they are moved. Whether for real estate purposes, government decisions, a changing shoreline, or for other reasons, there is a distinct history of these resources being moved. The nomination cites several examples of moving boathouses, U.S. Coast Guard Stations, and boat clubs, both nationally and regionally. As discussed, the Washington Yacht Club relocated three times due to the reclamation work along the banks of the Anacostia, taking along its 1915 clubhouse on its last move. Similarly, the Eastern Power Boat Club moved twice due to the reclamation and once because of the Navy Yard expansion during WWI. In 1922, the Capital Yacht Club relocated for the first time and built its clubhouse on the Washington Channel; it has relocated twice since due to development activities along the southwest waterfront. The WYC, Eastern Power, and District Yacht Club all used the river to transport their buildings to their sites by towing them on barges. The nomination cites other examples of moved maritime resources and successfully argues that the fact that these resource types are moved does not diminish their significance but contributes to their story of survival in maritime settings.

Significance and Integrity

The WYC is significant under National Register criterion C and District of Columbia criterion D for architecture. The clubhouse and its support facilities embody the characteristics of the boat club as a building type. Its vernacular edifice is elevated and faces the river with a wide front porch. It includes the representative features of a meeting/dining space, locker room, galley, flagpole, and boat docks. Although modified through additions and applied finishes, the Washington Yacht Club retains its integrity. Its original gable roof form is evident and many of its original materials remain beneath the current ones. The building clearly conveys its historic use, character, and significance.

The WYC also meets National Register criteria consideration B for relocated properties. Marine resources, including boat clubs and boathouses, have a long history of being moved, often as a result of natural or human-caused modifications to the shoreline, like the reclamation of the Anacostia Flats. Rather than detracting from its significance or integrity, the WYC's several moves add to the story of the Anacostia River's continued use for recreational boating and the WYC's commitment to remain on it.

The Washington Yacht Club clubhouse meets National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia criterion B for history. The building represents a very early example of a boat club devoted to the sport of motorized boating, which took off in the United States in the first two decades of the 20th century. In an era when motorboating was largely the sport of the wealthy, the WYC was – and is – dedicated to making motorboating affordable. It is historically associated with the Anacostia River, for which it has served as steward over its 110-year history.

Like the Anacostia, the club has faced challenges connected to infrastructure, racial segregation, the dichotomy of federal-city relations, and the newer threats of development and gentrification. The Washington Yacht Club clubhouse epitomizes not only the resilient spirit of Anacostia boating, but to some degree, that of people of Washington as well.