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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 23-10

### Swedish Ambassador's Residence

3900 Nebraska Avenue NW

Square 1596, Lot 832

Meeting Date: December 21, 2023  
Applicant: Square 1596 Partners LLC (owner) and the D.C. Preservation League  
Affected ANC: 3E

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the Old Swedish Ambassador's Residence a historic landmark, and that it request the forwarding of the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1924 to 1972.

The property, then a nearly vacant eleven acres between the newly platted Nebraska Avenue and Verplanck Street, was acquired in 1922 by David Lawrence, a Philadelphia-born newspaperman who was then head of his own, Washington-based Consolidated Press Association news service. In 1923, Lawrence hired prominent local architect Arthur B. Heaton to design a fashionable Spanish Colonial Revival mansion facing the avenue. Although American University Park had been laid out north and west of the property long before, suburban development was just getting under way, and the Lawrence tract had the character of a country home.

Lawrence's hacienda merits designation for its architecture, under National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criterion D. Heaton's design was, as most Spanish Colonial and Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, eclectic in its influences, yet it was nonetheless academic. Most is representative of the restraint in color and surface and of the materials (stucco, variegated terra cotta tile) and forms (prominent chimneys but especially the stepped and curved Spanish gables front and back) which became widely known as the "Mission style" in the United States during the 1910s to the 1930s, drawing upon the colonial past of the Southwest, as well as from Spain and its other colonies. Somewhat rambling and asymmetrical, the residence nonetheless has a strong center, among its primary Baroque flourishes being the elaborately cast and carved, arched, front and rear entrances. The rear entry surround incorporates a second-story window. The front entrance originally incorporated Lawrence's family crest, but that was replaced by a crest representing the Swedish government.

The house is a larger and more important example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style than the Heurich-Parks House (3400 Massachusetts Avenue) that the Board designated for its architecture

in 2015. It is reflective of the influence of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in helping spread the style throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Expansive, high-style architecture and such an extensive lot were naturally associated with owners of means and connections. David Lawrence was founder of his own news service, then of the magazine *U.S. News & World Report* and the Bureau of National Affairs, a news agency that was eventually acquired by the Bloomberg Group. Lawrence was known as a shy man, despite being an opiated columnist, but he befriended Woodrow Wilson and bedeviled Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. The Lawrences were occasionally mentioned in the society columns. They rented the property to heiress Elinor Morse Ryan in the winter of 1936 while her Valley View Farm residence on Foxhall Road was being completed. The Lawrences made a permanent move to their Centreville, Virginia estate in 1944, selling the property to a real estate company which marketed it for a private home or institutional use, such as an embassy. A 1946 fire, however, put the house out of commission for a couple years during repairs.

In 1950, the government of Sweden purchased the Nebraska Avenue property as a residence for its ambassadors. The Swedes acquired only the four and a half acres nearest Nebraska Avenue. The residence now began hosting scores of official dinners, as well as accommodating Princess Christina's and Prince Bertil's visits in 1965. The house was unoccupied between 1972 and 1974, when the Nixon administration advised the Swedish government not to send a new ambassador because of a dispute over America's war in Vietnam. It was again occupied by the ambassadors from 1974 until 2019, when the residence was consolidated with the chancery in a new "House of Sweden" on the Georgetown waterfront. For this reason, the nomination also claims importance for association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history, i.e., National Register Criterion A and D.C. Criterion B.

### **Boundary, period of significance, and contributing features**

The proposed end of the period of significance is an arbitrary one. The ambassadorial interregnum of 1972-1974 being a significant bump in the relations between the U.S. and Sweden, but the residence was as important in the subsequent years as it had been before. But 1972 is an acceptable end point, because it is a bit more than 50 years past. It also allows for the significance of the post-fire remodeling of the late 1940s. A property primarily important for its architecture will often have as its period of significance consisting only of the year of its completion. Yet, the proposed period recognizes decades of significant use. But while they are unique to Washington, the sheer number of embassies—and their division into chanceries and residences—is sufficient discouragement to make a practice of designating each.

The proposed boundary is smaller than that of the lot during the Lawrence tenure or the embassy ownership. The portion of the Lawrence property around Van Ness Street was little used until houses were built in the 4400 block in the late 1990s. The Swedish ambassador's residence occupied the four and a half acres nearest Nebraska. The proposed landmark boundary is still smaller, with the present assessment and taxation lot 832 created recently, so that the deep rear yard could be carved into developable lots.

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<sup>1</sup> The exposition was hardly responsible for *originating* the style beyond former Mexican lands of the Southwest. Appleton Clark's landmark Lanier Heights fire station (Engine Company No. 21), for instance, was erected in 1908.

The boundary at least captures the single contributing building—the house—as well as character-defining landscape features such as the driveways, the Nebraska Avenue fence, front and rear flagstone terraces, and the rear walk and steps down the parterre, the latter of which appear to date to the early days of Swedish government ownership. The large garage, with its attached greenhouse, was designed in a sympathetic stucco and tile, but it dates to the mid-1980s.

### **Integrity**

Although the interior was extensively remodeled in the late 1940s, that project falls well within the proposed period of significance. Other changes have been mostly additive. The property retains integrity of location and still strong integrity of setting, even if that has been diminished with subdivisions and proposed construction. The house and immediate front and rear yards retain strong integrity of design, workmanship, materials, setting, feeling and association.

### **Name**

While the landmark may be as appropriately called the Lawrence Residence, HPO suggests that the nomination be revised to be for the *Old Swedish Ambassador's Residence*. Although HPO discourages unnecessarily long titles or unnecessary modifiers, it may be wise to distinguish this property from any present or future diplomatic properties owned by the government of Sweden.