
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-15

Washington City Canal Lockkeeper's House (Amendment)

17th Street and Constitution Avenue NW

Meeting Date: October 27, 2022
Applicant: National Park Service, Department of the Interior
Affected ANC: 2A

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board adopt the additional documentation for the Lockkeeper's House nomination as an amendment to its current listing in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO recommends that the Board support forwarding the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance under National Register Criteria A and C and under a revised name: Washington City Lockkeeper's House.

Preservation Background

The Lockkeeper's House was named a DC Landmark in 1964 by the Joint Committee of Landmarks and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. The 1973 National Register nomination provides minimal historical and architectural context on the building and site. This amended nomination, prepared by the National Park Service and completed in 2022, provides much more extensive documentation on the history of the canal, the architectural history of the building, and the social history of the lock and the role of the building from Lockkeeper's House (1837-1872) to Watchmen's Lodge (1902-1972) after the canal was filled in and West Potomac Park was created. This amended nomination was undertaken as part of a major and recently completed rehabilitation of the Lockkeeper's House by NPS that also included moving the building slightly on its site. The move, 36 feet to the south and 35 feet to the west, is the second in the history of the building, and was necessitated by construction of the flood levee wall for the 17th Street closure on the Mall. (The first move in 1915 was due to the widening of 17th Street.) The move and renovation project has brought the building back to life from an unoccupied relic to a visitor's center with a museum display on the history of the canal and set upon a well-landscaped plaza.

History and Architecture

The Lockkeeper's House at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue NW is a 1-1/2-story, three-bay, gable-roofed stone building that was built in 1837 as the home for the lockkeeper responsible for tending the lock at Tide Lock B, the lock which connected an extension of the C&O Canal in Georgetown to the Washington City Canal. This city canal, completed in 1815, had been conceived by George Washington and early city planners as essential for the "prosperous development" of the capital city; indeed, L'Enfant included a canal on his 1791 Plan for the City connecting the Potomac River at the mouth of Tiber Creek (near the present-day 17th Street) to the Anacostia River to the southeast. As envisioned, this interior channel would allow for easier transport of goods and building supplies into the center of the city while also offering visual appeal, including a never-built waterfall at the base of the Capitol building. Although the canal

suffered from design flaws from the outset, it did enable building materials to be readily brought to the fledgling city, including to the base of the Capitol for its construction.

In 1828, as construction of the C&O Canal from Georgetown to the Ohio River valley began, Washington City officials pushed and supported construction of a canal extension between the C&O Canal terminus at Georgetown and the Washington City Canal. This was done to encourage greater commercial development in the city where such growth was “languishing” and to prevent further competition from Alexandria which was building its own canal to Georgetown. From 1837 until the mid-1850s, the Washington City Canal ferried barges of raw materials like lumber, barrels, crates, kegs and boxes as well as a variety of trade items along its waterway from west to east. Based upon various sources and accounts, the level of canal traffic was low and variable during those years however, and by the mid-1850s, the canal was in deep demise. The canal bed lacked adequate water, was silting in and was the repository for raw sewage and “night soils” creating a major health hazard. In 1872, the Board of Public Works filled the canal in, leaving the lockkeeper’s house as the sole above-ground remnant of the canal. Although the building no longer served any official function, it remained occupied by a series of tenants and “squatters.”

As the Corps of Engineers began reclaiming the Potomac Flats in the last years of the nineteenth century and transformed it into East and West Potomac Parks, planners recognized the historic value of the surviving lockkeeper’s house. In 1902, the Corps purchased the building from the C&O Canal Company and rehabilitated it into a headquarters for park “watchmen,” (renamed the United States Park Police in 1919). The building was staffed with park police and the intersection of 17th Street and Constitution Avenue became the official entrance to Potomac Park. As the park grew to include the Lincoln Memorial and Reflecting Pool and more, it attracted increasing numbers of visitors, enhancing the importance of the building as “watchmen’s lodge.” For decades until 1972, the building provided space for the park police, restrooms for visitors, and storage space for the National Park Service.

As constructed in 1837, the Washington City Lockkeeper’s House follows the same building massing and design pattern as other C&O Canal lockkeeper’s houses. A study of these structures has identified two distinct types of lockkeeper’s houses: Type I comprises those built before 1836 and Type II comprises those built after 1836. Two major design features differentiate the two types: 1) Type I lockkeepers’ houses were 1-1/2 stories in height, while Type II lockkeeper’s houses were banked into sloping terrain whereby the canal side would be 1-1/2-stories and the opposing side 2-1/2 stories with a full walkout basement; and 2) Type II lockkeeper’s houses featured end chimneys versus a central chimney found in the earlier Type I examples. The Washington City Canal Lockkeeper’s House originally featured a full 2-1/2-story south elevation; this fully exposed basement was removed when the building was moved in 1915 and placed on a new foundation, a condition that was retained as part of the 2017 move. Since its 2017 move and subsequent rehabilitation/renovation, the building functions as a visitor contact station for the National Park Service, serving as a gateway to Constitution Gardens and the National Mall. The lockkeeper’s house is located on a small plaza with designed hardscape and landscaping with seating walls, sidewalks and plantings around it.

Evaluation and Periods of Significance

The Washington City Canal Lockkeeper’s House meets National Register Criterion A for its association with early nineteenth-century water transportation in D.C. and the evolution of the

Washington City Canal before and after construction of the C&O Canal Extension. The period of significance for this context extends from 1837 when the building was constructed to 1872 when the canal was filled in. The property also meets National Register Criterion A for its association with the reclamation of the Potomac Flats and the building of West Potomac Park. The period of significance for this context extends from 1902 when the building was purchased by the Corps of Engineers and re-purposed as the Watchmen’s Lodge, and 1972 when the building ceased having a dedicated use.

The property meets National Register Criterion C as an excellent example of a C&O Canal lockkeeper’s house and the last surviving above-ground remnant of the C&O Canal’s Washington Extension. The building is especially characteristic of what historians define as “Type II” lockhouse design, as the C&O Canal Company incorporated new preferences in building design and materials into the construction of its lockhouses along the lower reaches of the canal. The period of significance under Criterion C—its 1837 date of construction—is incorporated within the period of significance under Criterion A.

For the reasons above, the property meets DC Designation Criteria A, B, D and E.

The property has also been evaluated under National Register Criterion Consideration B for buildings removed from their original location. When the property was listed in the National Register in 1973, the building had already been moved from its original location. In both instances, in 1915 and 2017, the building was moved to points within the same general location and the orientation of the building was retained. Further, the Washington City Canal Lockkeeper’s House retains full integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

Boundaries

The boundaries of the Washington City Canal Lockkeeper’s House have been enlarged to include the previous location of the lockkeeper’s house, physically outlined at the site by stone pavers, as well as the new plaza area with its hardscape and landscaped areas that now serve as interpretive spaces and the immediate setting for the building. These new boundaries encompass .42 acres of land and were filed with the National Register by NPS as part of the 2017 building move.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board approve the amended nomination for the Lockkeeper’s House and forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with minor revisions including a revised name.



View looking SW from 17th Street and Constitution Avenue showing the Washington City Canal Lockkeeper's House on its new site within a landscaped plaza area. The original 1837-1915 location of the building, demarcated by dark-colored stone pavers, is visible at the left of photograph and the 1915-2017 location of the building similarly demarcated is visible at right of the photograph.