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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 23-06

### Little Tavern Shop No. 27

530 Morse Street NE

Square 3591, Lot 812

Meeting Date: September 28, 2023  
Applicant: LCOR (owner) and the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office  
Affected ANC: 5D

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The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate Little Tavern Shop No. 27 at 530 Morse Street NE a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The building has been restored and nominated as part of the amenity package for a planned-unit development (PUD) at Union Market.

The building is eligible under District of Columbia Criteria B for History and D for Architecture and Urbanism. The nomination is for a building that is of local significance with compromised integrity, and the HPO does not recommend forwarding it to the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

### Description

Little Tavern Shop No. 27 is a one-story commercial building clad with white porcelain-enameled steel panels on the walls and green porcelain-enameled steel “shingles” on the gable roof. The distinctive, steeply pitched gable slopes down to the storefront, where a small front gable announces the main entrance. Two shed dormers project from the main roof, facing north and south. The curved corners of the building feature green-and-white faux quoining. The large-pane aluminum windows and glazed front door are new, but they fit the original opening locations and sizes. The original rear ell sits under a flat roof with stepped parapet along the east elevation.

As part of the PUD, the exterior of the building was partially restored, with replacement steel panels installed where the originals were too damaged. The north and west walls were removed to construct a substantial, ten story building. The upper residential floors sit atop a tall retail base painted black in contrast to the Little Tavern. Inside, the Little Tavern is a vacant shell. Where the north and west facades were removed, concrete-block walls with large openings into the new building denote their original locations. A one-story glassy addition that had been on the west side during the building’s use as a Little Tavern was replaced with a similarly scaled connection between the original building and new construction.

### History and Context

Beginning in the 1920s, fast-food chain eateries based around serving hamburgers began to emerge in the United States: White Castle, White Tower, Blue Bell, Krystal and others. Little Tavern is

the District of Columbia's own version of this type of quick-service chain, easily recognizable for both its appearance and its food.

The Little Tavern Shops, Inc. chain was the brainchild of restaurateur Harry F. Duncan. After forays into fast-food hamburger service in St. Louis, Duncan opened the first Little Tavern in Louisville in 1927. In 1928, he moved to Washington and opened the first local Little Tavern at 814 E Street NW. Over the next 80 years, the Little Tavern chain became a regional empire with 27 shops operating in the District of Columbia and many more in the D.C. suburbs, Baltimore and Annapolis.

Shop No. 27 was the last Little Tavern built in the District, opening in March 1963. Its location on Morse Street positioned it to take advantage of the 24-hour activity of Union Market, as well as student customers at nearby Gallaudet University. This patronage allowed Shop No. 27 to outlast all other Little Taverns in the city.

The building's design is based on the prototype Little Tavern developed in 1930 by architect George E. Stone and engineer Charles E. Brooks of Baltimore's Stonebrook Corporation. Together with Duncan, they developed the chain's signature look: a Tudor Revival house in green and white. Luther R. Ray, founder of the Structural Porcelain Enamel Company, took the design to its final iteration in 1937, adding the streamlined modern porcelain-enamel panels, curved corners in green and white to mimic quoining, and projecting neon signs. Under a 1938 patent, this design became "one of the most recognizable commercial buildings in the Washington Metropolitan Area."<sup>1</sup>

Like the crenelated roofline of White Castles or orange pylons atop A&Ws, fast food buildings evolved into their own best advertisements. Little Taverns adopted the form of a cozy little cottage with an unmistakable deep green roof and gleaming white walls. Through its architecture and modern materials, complete with standardized signage, the Little Tavern building type allowed potential patrons, including those in cars, to quickly identify it as a fast food restaurant serving recognizable food in a hygienic setting.

Little Tavern's Shop No. 27 was the last in business in Washington, closing in 1991. A Subway sandwich shop operated in the building until 2017, when the PUD was initiated. Recognizing the significance of the building, the Historic Preservation Office and Office of Planning worked with the developer to save and restore the Little Tavern. Although it is connected to the large new structure on the lot, Shop No. 27 remains as an excellent example of a once-prolific regional restaurant chain that built a regional brand around the design of its buildings as much as on the food and service it provided.

### **Significance and Integrity**

Little Taverns were one of the first fast-food chains in the country (1927), following in the footsteps of White Castle (1921), A&W (1922) and Toddle House (late 1920s), and decades ahead of the today's corporate giants Burger King (1954) and McDonald's (1955). The first Little Tavern in Washington opened in 1928 and the last in 1963. New shops continued to appear regionally up until the 1990s, with over fifty spread across the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area.

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<sup>1</sup> EHT Traceries. *First Half of the Seventh Phase of an Architectural Survey in Arlington County, Virginia*. Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, 2003, p. 22.

Little Taverns based their business on a recognizable building type, a familiar menu, and affordability. Tied together, the boldly colored Tudor cottage and the standardization of appearance, food and uniforms amounted to “place-product-packaging,” an early form of corporate branding. In this context, Little Tavern buildings, including Shop No. 27, served as a recognizable representation of what they offered.

Washington Little Tavern Shop No. 27 meets District of Columbia Criteria B for History and D for Architecture and Urbanism. It is associated with the historical development of the fast-food industry and demonstrates how society’s attitude toward dining transformed, largely as a result of the popularization of the automobile. Shop No. 27 embodies the distinguishing characteristics of the Little Tavern building type. Not only is it an exemplar of the patented Tudor cottage once so familiar in Washington, its design provides an excellent example of how fast-food buildings could be exploited as company advertisement.

In terms of integrity, Shop No. 27 is in a unique position as having been both restored and highly altered. Its setting has been altered by the connected large building, but the connection is done in such a way as to serve as a subdued background, and there is nothing incompatible about an urban Little Tavern abutting another building. The front and east sides and the signature roof have been fully restored to their original appearance and colors, incorporating new matching materials where the original porcelain enamel panels were too damaged to reuse. Because of its restored appearance and the manner in which the addition was designed, Shop No. 27 retains its integrity of feeling, materials, location, and design and remains as an easily recognizable Little Tavern Shop, with its rooftop signposts awaiting a new neon sign to once again welcome customers.

Of the 27 Little Taverns built in D.C., only five remain: 3333 M Street and 1301 Wisconsin Avenue NW within the Georgetown Historic District; 655 Pennsylvania Avenue NE in the Capitol Hill Historic District; 718 H Street NE; and the subject property.