
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 11-08

Immaculata Seminary
4340 Nebraska Avenue, NW
Entire Square 1728 (presently Lot 1)

Meeting Date: October 27, 2011
Applicant: Tenleytown Historical Society
Owner: The American University
Affected ANCs: ANC 3E
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate Immaculata Seminary, 4340 Nebraska Avenue, NW, a historic district to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, with revisions made to the nomination to reflect the recommendations below regarding contributing and non-contributing resources. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district.

Background

The Immaculata Seminary was founded in 1904, as the Seminary of Our Lady Immaculate, by the Roman Catholic teaching order the Sisters of Providence. Opened in 1905, the first building, an imposing, Baroque, stonemasonry, school/residence edifice on a prominence over Wisconsin Avenue, signaled a departure from the principally small, and usually frame, rural, residential buildings that had preceded it in the neighborhood. The building was also the first step, beyond a small parish church and school, toward the creation of a Catholic institutional enclave that ultimately comprised a new, enlarged Saint Ann's Church, Saint Ann's Academy, the Convent of Bon Secours,¹ the home of the former Archbishop of Washington—and a much expanded Immaculata. These coalesced with other Tenleytown churches and public schools to create a still-larger constellation of institutions around this section of Wisconsin Avenue.

Cardinal Gibbons of the Baltimore Archdiocese pushed for the establishment of a “select school for girls” in Washington that would also accept out-of-town students. His influence, and that of his cousins, both influential Sisters of Providence, resulted in the establishment of Immaculata at Tenleytown, in preference to an expansion of Saint Cecelia's school at Upshur Street and Connecticut Avenue. The school soon drew “young ladies” from out of state, extolling to their parents the virtues of the school's architecture and facilities, its extensive grounds and landscaping, the views from its elevated site, the educational and cultural advantages of its

¹ Bon Secours was designated a landmark in 2004.

proximity to downtown Washington—and the benign supervision and “training in the social virtues” of the Sisters of Providence.

The campus’s original “fine expanse of park and meadow” suggests the still-rural state of the Tenleytown area and the fact that the school stood on the remnant of an old farm or estate. Dumblane or Dunblane was the estate of Clement Smith, a wealthy Georgetown merchant. In 1818, he purchased the 55-acre parcel, part of the Stoddert and Addison’s eighteenth-century “Friendship” tract. The Dunblane house, a cubic, Greek-Revival-style cottage, is thought to have been constructed *circa* 1839, the year of Smith’s death, by a new owner, John Mason, of the prominent Virginia family. From 1885 to about 1890, the property was the club and starting place for the Dumblane Hunt, a society fox hunt that met twice a week in season. By this time, the house had received a north wing.² Dunblane is a rare country house of this period and style surviving in the District of Columbia. Comparable rural estate houses of the period include the landmarked Greek-Revival Brooks Mansion, and Gothic-Revival Lincoln Cottage.

Dunblane was soon put to educational use by the Sisters of Providence. In 1914, Dunblane, “an old mansion of historical interest, located on the crest of Mount Marian, [had] been entirely remodeled and fitted up for the exclusive use of the Preparatory Department... [with a] homelike living room, cheerful recreation-halls and class-rooms, bright, airy dormitories, and individual bed rooms, thoroughly appointed lavatories and lockers... [l]arge sunny verandas and extensive playgrounds...” An L-shaped rear addition was added as the school expanded in the 1930s, followed by a Modern 1974 addition, which is arguably a separate building, attached by a hyphen.

As the school’s promotional materials indicate, the original Immaculata building, now Capital Hall, was sited not only to dominate the view from Wisconsin Avenue, but also to leave much of the remaining parcel open for landscape and play fields. Subsequent development was clustered compactly, slowly rolling out into a typical campus form, with the sole, major accessory structure, a 1921 garage, placed discretely in a back corner of the property off a service drive. The principal elements guiding the form and orientation of the complex were the course of Wisconsin Avenue and a perpendicular cross axis, the old carriage drive and allée leading to Dunblane house. This driveway, which appears in late-nineteenth-century maps terminating in a circle in front of the cottage, became the entrance to Capital Hall, which was erected straight across and on center with the road. The driveway remained the principal pedestrian path connecting to what became Dunblane Hall. Even after its disappearance, it remains the axis along which the campus quad is aligned.

The school’s first major expansion came in 1921, with the construction of an emulative wing to the original Immaculata Seminary building (now Capital Hall) that doubled its dormitory space. Just as important was the erection of a new, freestanding Italian Romanesque chapel. Like many of its Italian forebears, this building has a modest brick exterior that opens to a beautiful interior. The chapel was a space central to the life of a resident religious community and to a traditional Catholic education, as evidenced by the fact that such an edifice was even constructed while a diocesan parish church stood only across the street. A later link from Capital Hall clumsily

² In recent years, the house’s north wing was gutted by fire and reconstructed. The main block and the school wings remained.

attaches to the center of one of chapel's fronts, done for reasons of convenience of passage and privacy, largely for aging, resident nuns.

Later years and period of significance

A construction campaign of 1955-1956 doubled the volume of the school's buildings, and these new structures—including a gymnasium and administrative, classroom, dining and dormitory space—clearly illustrate the expansion of the institution at that time and a dedication to its perpetuation. Yet, only a couple of years after their completion, Immaculata ceased its founding mission of boarding school and became principally a local, college-preparatory school. Marian (now Congressional) Hall, with its residential space, may be seen in retrospect as something of a miscalculation, although it again has a dormitory use. With the exception of a few decorative flourishes, such as the tiled entrance to Loretta (now Federal) Hall, these nondescript, Modernist structures relate little to the architecture of the earlier buildings. Their principal formal contribution to the campus lies in helping to tie together the new and old functionally and spatially by defining a quadrangle, which can be viewed and accessed through connecting hyphens.

While these 1955 buildings bound the quad, they are as much part of the larger landscape that surrounds them; the orientation and arrangement of the buildings follows the old Dunblane driveway axis that runs through the center of the quad. But their construction, and the new circulation paths around and between them, were responsible for wiping out the old Dunblane driveway/path itself and the vestiges of the allée, and reorienting arrival and circulation to Yuma Street and Nebraska Avenue and away from the traditional entrance, Capital Hall. This resulted in the removal, too, of the direct drive to Capital Hall's front door and de-emphasized it as a public entrance. This building campaign created a compatible orientation of buildings and a quad within a larger landscape, with views available into it through the lobbies and links of the Modern buildings. But this building campaign also has to be acknowledged for the degree to which it altered the campus's architectural character and the understanding of and flow through the historic landscape.

For these reasons, it is recommended that Immaculata Seminary's period of significance extend from 1904—the date of the founding and commencement of construction—to 1954, the year prior to the 1955 building campaign and shortly before the cessation of boarding, a half century representing the founding era and early growth of the institution.

Significance

Immaculata Seminary merits designation as locally significant under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B for "history," having been a major institution in Tenleytown; an example of the seminary model of boarding school for young ladies founded under religious auspices; and an elite Catholic secondary school and junior college. It further merits designation under these criteria for having preserved Dunblane house as a remnant of the Dumblane estate, illustrating the development of Tenleytown from rural section to suburb and cluster of institutional uses.

Immaculata is also eligible under National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D for "architecture and urbanism," with its Baroque central building long a visual landmark above

Wisconsin Avenue and Tenley Circle and its Italian chapel set in a broad, campus landscape. The campus was arranged on formal principles that predated and overrode the orientation of the imposed suburban street grid. It also acknowledged the historic estate house at the western extreme of the property. Dunblane house is important itself as a rare surviving example of an antebellum country house in Washington and a still rarer Greek-Revival example.

Landmark vs. historic district designation

Whether a property should best be considered a landmark or a historic district is a function of considerations such as size (i.e., land area), number of constituent resources, and the historical relationship between these resources. Guidance provided by the National Register suggests that campuses should generally be considered districts, although there are smaller campuses that consist of little more than a central building or two and surrounding space. In the present instance, a district better accommodates the different origins and ages of the major contributing elements of Immaculata, in a manner similar to the often varied neighborhood historic districts. Although owned by the school for a century and repurposed as a classroom, dormitory, and administrative building, Dunblane house has its own additional and distinct story and significance, much as the springhouse or dairy does on the campus of the recently designation Marjorie Webster School. Based upon the National Register guidance and comparable listings in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, staff recommends that the property be designated as an historic district rather than as the landmark proposed.

Contributing and noncontributing buildings

The historic district should be designated with the following three buildings considered to contribute to its historic character: the original Immaculata Seminary, i.e., Capital Hall, including its 1921 rear wing; the 1921 Chapel; and Dunblane. The three 1955 buildings should be considered *non-contributing*, as beyond the campus's period of significance and representing a phase of school expansion distinctly different architecturally and functionally from the founding era. The 1921 garage should also be considered non-contributing because an addition has considerably altered it and diminished its integrity, nearly doubling its size and closing its original vehicular openings. The sense of clustering campus buildings surrounded by and enclosing landscape, as well as the site's traditional orientation of, and relationship between, buildings should also be maintained and preserved.

This property has not been surveyed archaeologically. Its historic use as an estate and likely prehistoric occupation, because of its elevation and proximity to historic water courses, suggest that there is real potential for the presence of archaeological resources. A significant portion of the site appears to have been little disturbed by construction in the past century.