HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 18-07

Mitchell Park Field House
1801 23rd Street NW
Square 2529, part of Lot 821

Meeting Date:	October 31, 2019
Applicant:	Historic Washington Architecture
Affected ANC:	2D
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Mitchell Park Field House, at 1801 23rd Street NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1931, the date of the fieldhouse's completion.

The property meets National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism") for embodying the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and a building type that is an expression of urban planning significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Specifically, it is one of a handful of 1930s park fieldhouses designed to resemble a Tidewater Colonial hall-and-parlor house—in fact, it is the earliest of and the model of the type. Thus, it is also among the earliest purpose-built public recreation facilities remaining in a District of Columbia-owned park, representing as well the development of residential Sheridan-Kalorama.

Background
The District's earliest public playgrounds were outgrowths of school uses, and playgrounds and schools are still frequently co-located, even if often administered separately. The Victorian schools were not sited or designed with play space in mind, but school lots were later expended and adapted to recreation uses; one of the earliest public-school playgrounds was created at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) by the turn of the twentieth century.

During the first decades of the 1900s, public recreation space was often makeshift or informal. The Progressive Era brought a greater interest in exercise in the form of play, as an antidote for the enervating effects of cities. Play was seen as an opportunity to cultivate the physical and moral nature of children, and parks themselves constituted "breathing spots" in the city. Settlement house leaders and private philanthropists first met a need for dedicated summer playgrounds in the period 1901-1903. In the latter year, the Neighborhood House and the Colored Social Settlement house joined a Public Playgrounds Committee. In 1906, the Committee hired as its supervisor of public playgrounds Dr. Henry Curtis, a child psychologist,

former director of New York City playgrounds, and an officer of the new Playground Association of America. Curtis surveyed existing facilities and formulated plans for new ones. The provision of active play space in Washington received a boost from the 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that recommended that elementary schools be programmed with playgrounds, assuming available space. Funding requests for specific schools went to Congress immediately.

Like other public facilities, early playgrounds were racially segregated. In 1921, a United Citizens Playground Committee completed a study and recommended that the District Commissioners adopt a system of equitable distribution of playgrounds around the city, urging the immediate provision of three facilities for white children, at least two more for African Americans—and preferably a third in Southeast. The federal government became more active in the provision of parks with the 1924 establishment of the National Capital Park Commission. NCPC gained access to federal funds for land acquisition and construction with the passage of the 1930 Capper-Crampton Act, and so began the realization of a plan for recreation and community centers. Three years later, President Roosevelt transferred the stewardship of District parks to the National Park Service.

As with Washington schools, the construction of playgrounds lagged behind population growth. By the 1930s, when another population surge began, the situation was critical. But with Depression-era government spending, the District began to catch up. Many of the facilities of the era were provided with money from the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Public Works Administration.

The Building

Before 1930, some D.C. parks contained sheds to store equipment. The extant facilities from that era, however, include only buildings that were later repurposed for recreation use. But park administrators now needed facilities that could accommodate offices for playground "directors," storage rooms, restrooms, and general-purpose spaces to facilitate year-round activities.

Municipal Architect Albert Harris designed a prototype fieldhouse for Mitchell Park in 1930, and the building was completed in 1931. Of frame construction, a story and a half tall with a full-width front porch, it was based on the eighteenth-century Tidewater hall-and-parlor house. Six such structures would eventually be erected, five of which are extant—but Mitchell Park was the first.[1] As public works, the designs had to be reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which favored the Colonial Revival style as suitably domestic in character for government facilities situated in residential neighborhoods. These were clearly influenced by the very topical Colonial Williamsburg restoration project and its new "archaeological" interest in even modest and vernacular colonial buildings of that region.

A 2014 survey of D.C. Parks and Recreation facilities categorized this small group of 1930s Colonial Revival buildings as "Type I," eligible for designation as the oldest purpose-built playground centers, a significant building type from the perspective of park planning. The Historic Preservation Office subsequently classified them as eligible for designation, with three

[1] The Palisades fieldhouse is a later and larger variation, with the "hall-and-parlor house" a side wing of a larger structure.

now designated. Many later fieldhouses and rec centers—because they were not among this earliest, formative class and were often less interesting architecturally—were considered ineligible or more questionable. But the Harris model influenced even these, as several of the hip-roofed and Modernist fieldhouses of the 1940s and 1950s were abstractions of his porch-fronted traditional building, much in the way that D.C. schools' Colonial and Classical Revival porticoes were abstracted into streamlined antae in schools of the late 1940s.

Mitchell Park's fieldhouse does not, in fact, have a hall-and-parlor *plan*. The modest three-bay building has a single main room upstairs and down, with a small restroom and an enclosed stair at the north end. The first floor is now mainly a playroom for young children. A central front door is supplemented by a second entrance centered in the south end. The original porch and exterior end chimney remain. There is an integrity issue, in that the building suffered a fire in 1972, which necessitated some replacement of siding and even some framing in the front wall and roof. The windows were replaced, but would almost certainly have been by now anyway.

The immediate context of the building has changed over time. Since the 1974 fire, new paving, steps, and a fenced garden have been placed around the building, and the edges of these form the proposed landmark boundary.

In all, the property retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance as a model for, and one of the earliest extant, city park buildings in Washington.

The Site

The nomination does not state why the fieldhouse alone, and not the larger park, is nominated for designation. For only one of the other playgrounds proposed for designated in recent years, Lincoln, was the building alone nominated. The rationale then was that the remainder of the playground had insufficient integrity. The same might be said for some others, including Mitchell Park.

Mitchell Park opened April 10, 1919 with "small playgrounds apparatus" erected on land willed to the city for park purposes by Elizabeth Patterson Mitchell. At that time, the parcel was less than half its present size. The eastern portion of the present park—immediately east of the fieldhouse—was still occupied by the 1795 Anthony Holmead house, razed 1929 by its owner, the government of Germany. During World War II, the U.S. government seized the property from the Germans and annexed it to the park. So, the park's eastern portion postdates the proposed period of significance, 1931, the date of the fieldhouse's completion. It contains only a small baseball backstop facing a grassed field and a garden area with benches.

Next to the fieldhouse, the oldest elements of the park are the exposed-aggregate-concrete steps up from S Street. But these probably postdate 1931, as do the fences, the paving, the playground equipment, the basketball court, the curbs/retaining walls and benches. As seen in the 1995 photograph reproduced in the nomination, a hip-roofed frame storage shed stood south of the fieldhouse for about a half century from the 1950s.

The Holmead house foundations are a landmark archaeological site, designated locally in 1986 and listed in the National Register in 1995. In fact, the entire park is subject to the historic

preservation law as a property within the Sheridan-Kalorama Historic District and as a District of Columbia government property.