
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	400 U Street NW	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Landmark/District:	LeDroit Park Historic District	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
ANC:	1B	<input type="checkbox"/> Denial Calendar
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Permit Review
Meeting Date:	March 29, 2018	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	#18-201	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
		<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

The applicants, owners Jon Weingert and Alison Welcher, seek permit review for a new six-foot tall solid wood fence on the 4th Street side of 400 U Street NW, a semi-detached corner house in the LeDroit Park Historic District.

Property Description and Context

The subject property is a brick, Gothic Revival house attached on its west side to a matching house. Like all of the houses on this block, it was designed by architect James H. McGill as part of the original 1870s LeDroit Park development. It exhibits a high degree of integrity and is typical of the McGill houses which were styled and marketed as suburban villas standing in park-like landscapes. To achieve the effect, the house is set back from its street-facing property lines, creating a 13-foot yard on U Street and a 10-foot yard on 4th Street. The existing low iron hoop fence approximates the property line on U Street and is 30 inches forward of the 4th Street property line.

Proposal

The proposed fence would be wood, six feet tall, of a board-on-board method of construction where exterior and interior boards alternate on either side of the fence rails. The fence would enclose most of the 4th Street yard from the rear of the house to the rear property line. Starting at the southeast corner of the house the fence would cross and then follow the brick lead walk towards 4th Street. Short of the property line, the fence would turn south and run 55 feet just behind the line of existing ornamental trees. At the rear property line, the fence would turn west and run 15 feet along the side of the front porch at 1910 4th Street terminating at the corner of that house's east and north facades.

Evaluation

LeDroit Park was an ambitious and unique development, marketed as a suburb of Italian and Gothic villas set in a manicured landscape of walks, lawns and ornamental plantings. The development followed the ideas of Andrew Jackson Downing who came to national prominence in the 1850s for his innovative combination of romantic architecture with sweeping man-made landscapes. The developers of LeDroit Park were free to build a Downing-like suburb because they sited it outside of the city limits and its public space laws. As a result, LeDroit Park was laid out with large building lots, and developed with generously spaced villas within ample lawns and gardens. The lawns and gardens were instrumental in the design and marketing of LeDroit Park as a tranquil respite apart from the crowded rowhouses and alleys of the city. LeDroit Park is the only example in the District of this type of romantic, Victorian-era suburb.

400 U Street, like many of the other McGill houses that survive today, still strongly reflects its original design. The yards that surround the house are character defining features of the historic district which should be preserved, or if altered, altered compatibly with their historic character.

The proposed fence would substantially enclose a landscape--forward of a principal façade--which contributes to the character of the historic district. The fence is incompatible with the character of LeDroit Park in height, solidity and location because it would interrupt the open setting and landscape, which is an integral aspect of this property's character. Alternatively, a compatible fence has already been cleared for permit by staff which would enclose part of the rear yard, and occupy a secondary deferential position compared to the house. Whereas the proposed fence would be a uniform barrier around most of the landscape, the fence approved by staff would be a component of the landscape.

The Board's regulations define principal facades as those which face a street, meaning that a corner house like 400 U Street has two principal facades, the front and side of the house.¹ The proposed run of the fence would put it in a prominent location almost at the sidewalk, forward of the principal elevation on 4th Street, and at the foreground of the site. Constructed as a tall, nearly solid fence would establish an incompatible visual barrier and effectively remove most of the yard as a character defining element from the historic district.

The Board has not approved a fence of this type and prominence on a McGill house in LeDroit Park. As there are nearly 50 other McGill era houses in the historic district -- others of which are corner properties such as this -- the Board should anticipate that these owners would expect to be able to duplicate tomorrow whatever is approved for 400 U Street.²

HPO first received a permit application for a side yard fence at 400 U Street in October 2017 and reviewed the application according to the regulations of delegated review.³ The Board's adopted landscape guidelines do not address this type of fence.⁴ Instead, the guideline focuses on rowhouse yards which typically include front yards in public space and rear yards on alleys; side yards of corner houses are not addressed. HPO conducted a site visit with the applicant and identified a location for a fence that would be approvable under delegated review and it was based on this that staff approved a permit for a fence on the condition that would align with the house and 1910 4th Street, be no taller than six feet and be of a lattice design at least 50 percent open. HPO determined that this type of fence would be compatible for the following reasons:

1. It would be a component of the landscape rather than a barrier,

¹ DCMR 10C, Historic Preservation, Section 9901 Defined terms, Principal Façade: A building elevation that faces a street or public open space, or any other major building elevation that possesses significant architectural composition or features. (a) Generally, a mid-block rowhouse has a single principal façade (the front), while a corner rowhouse has two principal facades (the front and side);"

² A few with the most prominent character defining landscapes: 201 T Street, 1901 3rd Street, 1903 3rd Street, 1922 3rd Street, 1946 3rd Street, 330 T Street, 517 T Street, 531 T Street.

³ DCMR 10C, Historic Preservation, Sections 320.1 and 320.2

⁴ *Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts* (1997). Another document available on the Internet, *LeDroit Park Conserved* (1979) was produced for the Department of Housing and Community Development prior to the establishment of the Board.

2. It would be sufficiently setback from the street so that it would not be more prominent than the adjacent principal facade, and
3. The lattice would provide a visually light, ornamental effect within the landscape.

As part of this evaluation and determination, HPO reviewed multiple examples of existing fences in LeDroit Park provided by the applicant. Those examples are included in the applicants' submission to the Board as exhibits C thru DD. They fall into the following categories:

1. Not compliant with building code or public space regulations (Exhibits C, D, O)
2. Rowhouse rear fence aligned with house (Exhibit E, F, G, H, M, N, P, Q, R)
3. Grandfathered fence not approved by Board, aligned with house (Exhibits I, J)
4. Grandfathered fence not approved by Board, not aligned with house (Exhibit K, L)
5. Side fence not forward of principal facade (Exhibit S, T, U, V, W, X)
6. Party fence behind principal façade (Exhibit Y, Z, AA, BB, CC, DD)

The exhibits show that fences can be visible in LeDroit Park; the compatibility question is not *if* they are visible, but rather where they are located relative to the house and landscape. As well, not all yards are important features that contribute to the character of the historic district, and each property – particularly those involving the original McGill-designed villas -- should be evaluated for the particular way in which it contributes to the historic district.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board advise the Mayor's Agent that a fence enclosing a character-defining yard forward of a principal façade is not consistent with the purposes of the preservation law, because it is not compatible with the character of the LeDroit Park Historic District.

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