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

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Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District/  
Meridian Hill Historic District** (x) Agenda

Address: **3060 16<sup>th</sup> Street NW**

Meeting Date: **September 23, 2021** (x) Alteration  
Case Number: **21-219** (x) Permit

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The applicant, Carolyn Brown (Brown Law Firm PLLC), agent for the property owners, the Renaissance Condominium and Kenesaw Phoenix Cooperatives, requests the Board’s review of a permit application to remove all of the balconies except that over the main, 16<sup>th</sup> Street entrance of the former Kenesaw apartments house and to patch the spots from which they would be removed. The demolition would include two balconies only recently reconstructed. The 25 balcony slabs and supporting corbels would be demolished. The resulting gaps in the beltcourse/cornice would be patched with precast concrete to match the profile elsewhere, and the gaps left from the corbels to be infilled with brick matching the surrounding wall. Renderings have been added that indicate an intention to reinstall the railings atop the cornice/belt course, which would require cutting away much of the returns of the railings.

The Board reviewed a concept application for the work in April, but the ownership has since submitted a building permit application (accompanied by plans titled “concept drawings”) to the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs.

**Background**

There were some repairs to the balconies in the 1990s, but these did not reach structural issues, including corrosion at the abutting window lintels, which anchor supporting and similarly corroding tie rods. This contributes to cracking and spalling masonry, creating a danger of pieces falling from some balconies. In addition to the fact that the building is 115 years old, the slabs appear not to have been sufficiently protected from water originally. One of the balconies on the Mount Pleasant Street side has recently been removed because it failed.

Two other balconies were replaced last year, under an October 2019 permit cleared by the Historic Preservation Office. The work was well done, suggesting that continued replacement of balconies is feasible and, in the alternative, that the contractors could perform a reasonable patch for demolished ones, if that were to be found a compatible alteration or otherwise consistent with the purposes of the preservation law.

Construction of the seven-to-eight-story Kenesaw apartment building commenced in spring 1905 and concluded the following year, providing 65 apartments, from studios to three-bedrooms. Designed by the D.C. firm of Averill & Stone in 1903, issuance of a permit was delayed by the

District Commissioners, who wanted to condemn the land for a park—partly at the behest of Mount Pleasant residents who would use it, many of whom objected to the proposed building’s incongruity with their two- to three-story homes. Indeed, the Kenesaw represented a northern extension of the grander architecture of 16<sup>th</sup> Street, and that was no accident. The investors who comprised the Kenesaw Apartment House Company included prominent merchants, a Post Office Department official, a real estate broker, engineer Frank L. Averill and architect George W. Stone and, perhaps most important, former senator John B. Henderson, backer of much of the mansion and apartment construction in Meridian Hill to that point. For this reason, the Kenesaw—since 1986 a building contributing to the character of Mount Pleasant—was also designated as the northernmost building of the Meridian Hill Historic District in 2014, called out as representative of the first wave of the city’s luxury apartment buildings. The building was recognized as among the first Beaux Arts luxury apartments in the 1994 multiple-property thematic document “Apartment Buildings in Washington, D.C., 1880-1945.” It was also notable for having been erected so early in the sparsely settled suburbs beyond Florida Avenue.



The preservation statute charges the Board with advising the Mayor on the compatibility with the purposes of the law of applications for demolition, alteration, subdivision and new construction. For buildings in historic districts, the law specifies the purposes to “retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use... [and t]o assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district...” While the building’s construction was incongruous with Mount Pleasant neighborhood as it stood in 1905, 16<sup>th</sup> Street now has a number of high-rise apartments and large, stonemasonry institutional buildings, as do Mount Pleasant Street, Harvard Street and Park Road. But the building relates even better to the stone, brick, terra cotta and

stucco mansions, churches and apartments of the early era of Meridian Hill, and their characteristic balconies, balustrades, portes-cochère, etc.

### **Evaluation**

These balconies are character-defining features of the Kenesaw, added by the architect to make the building visually stylish and distinctive and in no way incidental. The historic preservation regulations define a character-defining feature as, in part, the “form and detailing of those architectural materials and features that are important in defining a building’s historic character and whose retention will preserve that character.... The character of a historic building may be defined by exterior features such as facades, roofs, porches, and windows, and exterior materials such as masonry, wood, and metal...” Local and national historic preservation standards support retention of historic features when possible, and direct replacement when necessary. *The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines: Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings* state that, “No matter what material is used, details and ornamentation are character-defining elements of walls and should be maintained, repaired and, if necessary, replaced. Missing details and ornamentation should be duplicated based on photographic or other documentary evidence.”

The balconies are an original, distinctive feature. Removing them would not enhance the property, and the loss of the balconies would degrade, rather than retain, its character and that of the two historic districts. Architecturally, their visual weight balances the heavy cornice below the top story, and they are related to other projections on Beaux-Arts architecture in the two historic districts. The present application indicates that most of each railing would be retained as a shallower Juliette balcony perched on the second-story cornice.

As the preservation law indicates, the Board must address the narrow question of compatibility with the purposes of the law, including contextual compatibility and retention/enhancement, in making a recommendation to the Mayor or Mayor’s Agent. The Board’s primary duty is to review proposed changes, encouraging properties’ adaptation for current use, meaning that preservation may be less than absolute; the Board balances the strict preservation interest with functional necessity, until the threat to the preservation interest is too compelling.

The Kenesaw was erected on its own square bounded by streets, designed in the round with four facades. Sixteenth Street is its proper front, as the major entrance on the major avenue, but no side is truly the back; while the architect withheld balconies from the narrow south end, the other facades merited their application. As discussed at the April meeting, it might have been possible to sacrifice two or three balconies within one of the west courts without compromising too much the building’s composition. Such an alteration may not constitute adaptation in a strict sense, as it does not relate closely to use/function. But it might be argued that these balconies are less character-defining for their location, being partly obscured by the building itself.

There is a great difference between the removal of three balconies and the removal of 25. There is also a significant difference between the substantial cost to remove and patch and that of wholesale replacement. The applicant has discussed with HPO staff the likely costs and a potential economic hardship. Consideration of a claim of unreasonable economic hardship is reserved to the Mayor’s Agent, so the Board should consider only the degree to which the building may be altered while compatibly retaining its character and adapting and enhancing it.

**Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board support replacement of the remainder of the balconies as necessary to match the originals, and that the Board recommend denial of the removal of 25, as proposed, as incompatible with the purposes of the preservation law.*

