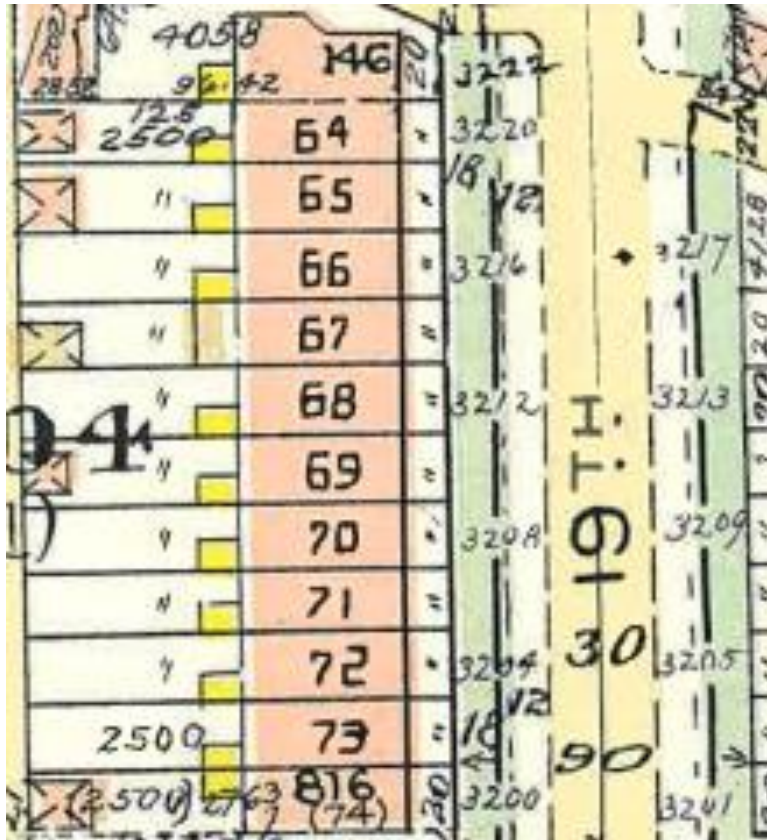

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Mount Pleasant Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **3212 19th Street NW**

Meeting Date: **May 25, 2023** (x) Alteration
Case Number: **23-329 and 23-330** (x) Permit

The applicant, property owner Natalie Bonanno, requests the Board’s review of an after-the-fact permit application to add stone pavers to the leadwalk, main-entry steps and front porch and to replace two dormer windows.

The subject property is one of a row of a dozen 1911 brick houses designed by Albert H. Beers. It was among his last commissions, as he passed away that year. Beers had previously been closely associated with developer Harry Wardman, but these porch-fronted houses were erected by Maryland-born builder and banker Lewis E. Breuninger. Although they had the same basic floor plan, height, porch, cornice and ridge board, Beers varied the windows and dormers.



Windows

Based upon photos going back two decades, the original dormer windows were divided-light, with configurations appropriate to the shape of the openings. The sash in the rectangular openings with flat or hipped roofs was fifteen lights over one, as appear in Google Streetview photos of this property as recently as June 2019, more than a year after the property was purchased by the applicant. The applicant had obtained a permit for window replacements in September 2018, and it called for fifteen-over-one windows at the attic, as one would expect, but one-over-one windows were installed.¹



The historic preservation regulations for windows state that, at the principal facades of small buildings that contribute to the character of a historic district, “If windows cannot reasonably be restored, replacement windows shall be approved if they reasonably match the historic windows in all respects...” including configuration (10C DCMR § 2308.2(a)). This is repeated in the Board’s design guidelines *Window Repair and Replacement*: “The configuration of panes and pattern and profiles of muntins should replicate the appearance of the original windows.” This idea is carried through to the window repair and replacement guidelines: “Replacement windows on primary elevations should closely match the historic [i.e., original] appearance. New windows should fit properly within the original openings, replicate the pane configuration, dimensions and profiles of the sash, framing elements and muntins, and match the finish and visual qualities of the historic windows.”

Paving

The District of Columbia’s *Construction Codes Supplement* (12A DCMR) is structured to enumerate those projects that are *exempt* from permit requirements; other work, like window

¹ The description of work for permit B1813872 is “Replace existing windows in kind with wood or aluminum clad wood, and replace and add larger deck on rear of house. Attic windows to be 15-over-1 sashes. Lower floors to be 1-over-1.”

replacement, needs a permit. Paving requires a permit unless the work is to create a patio or to replace a private sidewalk or drive *in kind* outside a historic district. (12A DCMR §§ 105.2, 105.2.5).

With nearly all the building stock dating to the first half of the twentieth century, the leadwalks in Mount Pleasant are almost uniformly made of poured-in-place concrete with an exposed aggregate. This uniformity in part springs from the fact that most houses are a part of a row. The exceptional cases may be the gable-roofed detached houses, which were designed individually and are of a form that predates the predominance of urban rows. A couple of these, including 1886 Newton Street, have been approved for less-formal stone walks, although the stones were more uniform in color and not applied to an existing concrete base.

Portland cement, which became commonly used during the nineteenth century, was something of a wonder material, very strong in compression and durable, it could also be reinforced with steel and used in tension, so that a row might have matching porch slabs, steps and walks. It is also easily worked and inexpensive relative to traditional masonry, and while somewhat porous, does not have a multitude of joints. The durability of concrete hardly needs more evidentiary support than the fact that Mount Pleasant's leadwalks and steps have routinely lasted more than a century.

From time to time, however, because of cracks or spalls, property owners have sought to conceal concrete elements, rather than repair or replace them in kind. This is discouraged by the historic preservation guidelines *Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts*, as they recognize it as characteristic of most early twentieth-century properties (p. 3). "The design of front yards is one of the most character-defining features of historic buildings" (p. 4). "Sidewalks, paths, driveways [etc.]... are some of the more common landscape features... When located in front yards or other areas that can be seen from [a] public right-of-way, their design often contribute[s] to the character of the property and neighborhood.... The design and location of sidewalks and paths located in front yards helps to define the character of the landscape and the neighborhood. Historically they were constructed of concrete, although other materials can be found" (p. 5). "Character-defining landscaping and landscape features... should not be removed or altered without careful consideration.... Existing sidewalks and paths should be maintained and, if necessary, repaired or replaced in-kind, that is, in the same material as the existing. This is particularly important for sidewalks or paths located in front yards or in areas that can be seen from a public street" (p. 8). "Spalled and powdered concrete should be removed and replaced with new concrete, colored and finished to match the existing. Badly cracked, settled or heaved concrete may also require removal and replacement. In some cases, minor cracking can be successfully patched using patching cement. Concrete slabs that show minor heaving or settlement often can be lifted intact and relaid on a new base of sand and gravel" (p. 13). The guidelines do not recommend a substitute material for concrete (p. 14).

The guidelines *Porches and Steps on Historic Buildings* reinforce these ideas at page 12:

Concrete steps or porch floors may chip, spall or erode, making them difficult or dangerous to walk on. Minor damage may be repaired using patching concrete textured, colored and finished as the existing. Extensively damaged concrete steps or porch floors should be replaced in-kind. Pre-cast concrete steps should not be used

unless they match the existing in design, texture, profile, color and other defining characteristics.

These design guidelines are of longstanding, developed in the 1990s and applied since. Other jurisdictions have similar rules about direct repair and replacement, derived from observation of the character of historic districts. Where the pattern is as strong as in Mount Pleasant—generally porch-fronted rows with uniform concrete leadwalks, steps and, often, porch decks. The loss of uniformity in windows and porches on this particular row, in particular, argues for restoring the original character when possible, rather than having the homes diverge further.

Concrete walks are monolithic and generally monochromatic, even if, upon close inspection, historic concrete is generally textured with a brownish pebble aggregate and sand that provides a warm tone. The particolored flagstone overlay here creates an especially striking contrast in its hues and bold mortar joints. The steps' cheek walls were also parged in a lighter color.²

There are practical considerations as well. While a concrete slab has great durability and stability, a thinly bedded facing of smaller pieces tends to come loose as water works its way under it and freezes and from the mechanical action of traffic over the pieces.

When applicants have insisted upon covering concrete *steps*, HPO has sometimes approved thicker stone slabs, of a color similar to the concrete, that each covered an entire tread. Such an approach was approved at 3123 Adams Mill Road in 2019, but the slabs were never installed. Such slabs also tend to be more stable. But this does not address an entire walk or porch or stair risers.

The fact that work proceeded without a permit is problematic in a couple of ways. First, it precluded the work proceeding in accordance with the guidelines, and it foreclosed any possible compromise. Second, it was heedless of the fact that the leadwalk and the steps near the street stand on public property, within the eighteen-foot green “parking” strip, as depicted on the Baist map detail on the first page of this report. The significance of this is that the property owner—the District of Columbia—has a greater say on the manner of work in that zone than it exercises even in its permitting function.

While HPO cannot support the work as compatible with the character of the historic district or sufficiently retentive of (let alone enhancing) the character of the subject property, one possible compromise would be to leave the flagstones only on the porch deck, where they are less prominently visible.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board not recommend approval of a permit for the dormer windows and the paving as is, but support the windows being replaced with compatible fifteen-over-one windows, and the stone being removed from at least the walk and steps.

² Owners who have not first obtained a permit will sometimes also cover the cheek walls, which is even more problematic.