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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: **April 22, 2021** (x) Alteration  
Case Number: **21-219** (x) Concept

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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 conceptual 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 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. The ownership suggested an alternative which would demolish just those balconies on the north and west sides of the building, numbering 17, and to replace the rest with precast to match.

There were some repairs to the balconies in the 1990s, but these did not reach the internal issues. The submitted photos indicate some of the problems, which are structural, including corrosion at the abutting window lintels, which anchor supporting and similarly corroding tie rods. This contributes to cranking 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.

Construction of the seven-story<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the fall of the grade from east to west, these seven stories stand on a raised basement that provides commercial space on the Mount Pleasant Street side.

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.

These balconies are character-defining features of the Kenesaw, added by the architect to make the building visually stylish and distinctive. 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...”

The balconies are an original, distinctive, characteristic feature. Removing them would not enhance this contributing building nor sufficiently retain its fabric or character. Architecturally, their visual weight balances the heavy cornice below the top story. Practically, the present proposal raises a question of what happens to that cornice, or to other major exterior elements, when they too require repair.

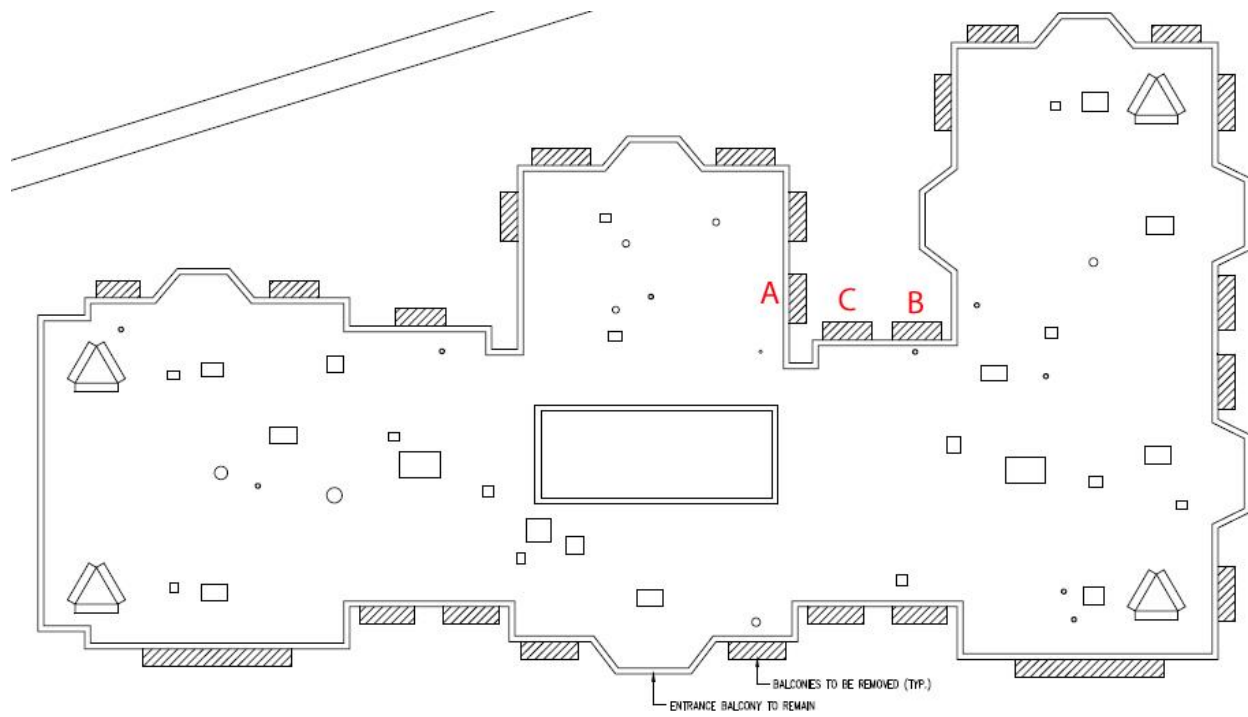
As the preservation law indicates, the Board must address the narrow question of compatibility with the purposes of the law, including contextual compatibility and retention/enhancement, in making a recommendation to the Mayor or Mayor’s Agent. The Board’s primary duty is to review proposed changes, 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. It is conceivable that a couple balconies might be sacrificed without compromising too much the building’s composition. Consider those in the west court in the photo below and plan on the next pages. Balcony “A” is set well back from Mount Pleasant Street and crowded against the perpendicular balconies, and it has no twin on the opposite side of its wing. “B” is similarly set back, but partly obscured by a bay projection. “C” is probably the most conspicuous and compositionally important of the three because of its position, but it conceivably could be sacrificed because of its setback, if its neighbors were approved for demolition as well. Such an alteration may not constitute adaptation in a strict sense, as it does not relate closely to use/function.

Of course, there is a great difference between the removal of three balconies and the removal of 25 (or 17). 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 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. The applicant may proceed with a permit application to the Mayor’s Agent as necessary. HPO has been seeking financial assistance for the project through the Historic Homeowner Grant program, in the hope of making a Mayor’s Agent hearing unnecessary.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board support replacement of the balconies but recommend against their removal, as proposed, as incompatible with the purposes of the preservation law.*



The west courtyard.