
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-

Colony Hill Historic District

1700-1800 blocks Hoban Road, NW; 4500 block Hoban Road, NW; 4400 block Hadfield Road, NW; 1800 block (even) 44th Street, NW; and 1701-1717 Foxhall Road, NW

Meeting Date: January 28, 2021
Applicant: Colony Hill Neighborhood Association
Affected ANC: 3D

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Colony Hill neighborhood in northwest D.C., a historic district to be entered into the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C with Community Planning/Development and Architecture as the areas of significance and with 1931-1941 as the period of significance.

Colony Hill was conceived by a single developer in 1930-1931 and largely built out in the following decade, a period of significant suburban expansion within the District. In collaboration with two well-known and established architects and a noted landscape architect, developer Boss & Phelps planned a self-contained residential-only subdivision laid out according to progressive suburban planning trends geared to the automobile age. This “automobile suburb” respected and enhanced the rolling topography with curvilinear roads providing access to gracious lots that held detached, single-family dwellings (with garages) all designed in the Colonial Revival style. The architectural style, already commonly used in the District and nationwide for domestic, educational and institutional buildings, had gained greater popularity as the nation looked to celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of George Washington, and with the much publicized progress of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. The restoration of eighteenth-century buildings in Williamsburg established a highly academic approach that inspired architects across the country. This attitude is clearly expressed in the name and the dwellings of Colony Hill, where each home is individually designed using forms and details inspired by various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts. The houses, perched on or nestled in their designed landscapes, all feature high-quality, authentic materials and Georgian and neoclassical features and details.

Historical and Architectural Background

Colony Hill emerged during a significant period of suburban expansion in the District of Columbia. The city’s population, which had been growing steadily since the Civil War, saw even greater growth after World War I, causing a major housing shortage in the city. To accommodate the increasing population, real estate developers purchased large and small tracts of land outside the city limits and subdivided them according to the Permanent Highway Plan. The Highway Plan (Act passed in 1893; maps finalized in 1907) took form as a series of maps depicting the extension of the radial and grid streets beyond the original city limits. As revised, the final maps introduced new streets according to a hybrid grid/picturesque plan that preserved natural features and pre-

existing conditions, such as historic roads and 19th century platted subdivisions, partly through the creation of curvilinear right-of-ways.

Early twentieth-century residential subdivisions were developed along existing or extended streetcar routes. The advent of the automobile age offered greater mobility, allowing for suburban residential growth throughout the District and beyond the prescribed streetcar routes. The car encouraged greater dispersal of less-dense neighborhoods of single-family, detached dwellings on large lots beyond the tighter concentration of housing (rowhouses, duplexes and detached dwelling forms) convenient to the streetcar stops.

As noted in the application, the 1920s saw the rise of “community design” nationwide, as teams of developers and designers created aesthetically cohesive and racially homogenous upper-class suburban communities. These emerging suburbs introduced progressive street layouts that took advantage of natural features and promoted park-like settings for individual houses. Developers often established building restrictions limiting use, establishing building setbacks and minimum construction costs, and, in certain cases, specific architectural treatments that contributed to a cohesive aesthetic. They also regularly included socially restrictive covenants in the deeds denying persons of color, of certain nationalities, and of certain religions access to the neighborhood, often limiting residency to White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, responding to and promoting the institutionalization of a racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant environment nationwide.

Wesley Heights, developed by W.C. and A.N. Miller, was one of the first large-scale examples of a planned suburban community in the District. The Millers re-imagined the 1890-platted Wesley Heights subdivision for the automobile age, introducing architect-designed houses, expressed in a variety of styles, into the natural and enhanced rolling terrain. Boss & Phelps followed suit, first with their Foxhall Village and, shortly thereafter, with Colony Hill. In both cases, Boss & Phelps took the step of re-subdividing the tracts from what was published in the Permanent Highway Plan, to accommodate a more progressive and picturesque layout of streets. For Foxhall Village, the developers presented an English-inspired village of meandering parkways with planted medians fronted by a stylistically cohesive collection of Tudor Revival-style rowhouses. Foxhall Village is a historic district recognized for its architecture and community planning.

Already established developers in the Washington real estate scene and nearing completion of their most-comprehensive undertaking at Foxhall Village, Boss & Phelps sought to develop a complementary suburb adjacent to it. On a relatively compact twelve-acre site across Foxhall Road, Boss & Phelps planned Colony Hill. The firm chose to employ the Colonial Revival style as its singular architectural expression in celebration of the nation’s past. To do so, it hired the highly accomplished architect and AIA national vice president, Horace Peaslee, along with noted architect Harvey P. Baxter. A cohesive landscape plan was in the hands of the city’s first licensed woman landscape architect, Rose Greely. Together, the accomplished designers, whose biographies are highlighted in the nomination, collaborated to create Colony Hill, highly acclaimed at the time of its development and recognized today for its outstanding examples of Colonial Revival-style houses set within a designed landscape. Greely, an expert on early American gardens and landscapes, focused on lining the public streets with trees and introducing small trees, shrubs, and other plantings on lawns. On lots raised well above street level, she introduced retaining walls

that merged with walls bordering driveways and walks, matched to the masonry used on the houses.

As indicated by the examples of Wesley Heights and Foxhall Village, Colony Hill was not the first or only designed automobile suburb to be developed in the District then or in subsequent years. However, it does stand out, along with its complementary Foxhall Village, as one of the most fully realized such communities, where a single developer conceived and built a collection of houses according to a singular design aesthetic.

Evaluation

Colony Hill meets D.C. Designation Criterion B and National Register Criterion A for its association with important urban planning trends in the District of Columbia. Colony Hill is an excellent example of a planned community of the automobile age. Its street plan, with its curving roads, deviated from that established by the Permanent Highway Plan and introduced a more progressive approach that sought to blend suburban development with the natural environment. As a planned community, Colony Hill stands out from other residential neighborhoods of the 1920s to 1940s where developers and builders would more typically purchase land, subdivide it, introduce minimal restrictions such as required building setbacks or residential-use clauses, and then sell the individual vacant lots. Builders might purchase multiple lots this way and build a series of houses according to a variety of similar or repetitive plans reflecting the prevailing revival styles of the era. Such a process describes much of residential Washington from North Cleveland Park and Chevy Chase to Sixteenth Street Heights and Shepherd Park in northwest, and to Randle Highlands and Hillcrest in southeast.

Less often, developers would present a more comprehensive approach, building out an entire neighborhood to one architectural theme and market the houses. This describes the approach taken by the Millers in Wesley Heights (and later in Spring Valley), and by Boss & Phelps in Foxhall Village and Colony Hill. These all provide excellent examples of planned automobile suburbs of quality design—Wesley Heights with its highly artistic array of houses expressing a variety of domestic revival styles and materials, and Foxhall Village and Colony Hill for their stylistically uniform collections of houses in the Tudor Revival and Colonial Revival styles, respectively.

In preparing this staff report, HPO looked beyond those examples for other comparisons. While there are other planned communities from this period, only one other example, Colonial Village, proved to be an apt comparison. Colonial Village, conceived by owner/builder Edson W. Briggs Company in 1932, featured large lots fronting on meandering parkways with grassy medians and roundabouts in a wooded and hilly area adjacent to Rock Creek Park at the northern tip of the District. There Briggs intended a residential community “dedicated entirely to the reproduction of historic Colonial homes and others true in character to the period of the Thirteen Colonies.” In 1931, the company built, to the designs of architect Eimer Cappelman, in “period exactness” a “Reproduction of Washington’s Headquarters at Valley Forge” at 7926 West Beach Drive as a model home. Briggs followed up with other houses reflecting the aesthetic. In other instances, the firm sold lots individually and in multiples to builders and buyers along with a set of restrictions that required the construction of detached houses with a minimum cost of \$20,000. Noticeably absent from these restrictions was a requirement to design in the Colonial Revival style. Still, the neighborhood was largely built out in the 1930s with Colonial houses comparable in quality to

those of Colony Hill. However, unlike Colony Hill, which was nearly completed as conceived in the ten-year period between 1931 and 1941 and is thus more stylistically cohesive, Colonial Village was less fully realized in its initial years. Many lots went undeveloped into the 1950s and beyond, and when built upon, introduced a more modern sensibility to the neighborhood, diluting the stylistic uniformity of the neighborhood.

Colony Hill meets D.C. Designation Criteria D (Architecture and Urbanism) and F (Creative Masters) and National Register Criterion C (Architecture) for its uniform collection of outstanding examples of the Colonial Revival style set within a landscape designed by a team of noted designers. Colony Hill is significant as a collaborative work of nationally prominent architect and AIA vice president Horace Peaslee, well-regarded local architect Harvey Baxter, and respected landscape architect Rose Greely. Together the team developed a picturesque community with houses in an academic expression of the Colonial Revival style featuring historically accurate massing and proportions and authentic detailing. The work of landscape architect Rose Greely, an expert on early American gardens and landscapes, is apparent in the tree-lined streets, the houses well-sited in the hilly terrain with ample yards with trees and shrubs, retaining walls, fences, gates, and lamp posts complementing the architecture

As noted above, it was common practice from the 1920s to the 1950s for suburban developments to include racially restrictive covenants in their deeds. Colony Hill was no exception. Combined with its evocation of early American high-style architecture, the creation and restriction of the development may be seen as a whitewashing of the past. This designation does not glorify or excuse such racial exclusion, but it recognizes Colony Hill for its quality design within the context of urban planning, development and architecture.

Period of Significance

The period of significance for Colony Hill extends from 1931 to 1941, its initial period of construction, when 37 houses were built according to the Colonial Revival design aesthetic and the vision of developers Boss & Phelps. Although the thirteen dwellings built beyond this date are all stylistically sympathetic to the original design intent, they were not part of the collaborative design approach, and thus 1941 represents an appropriate end date to the period of significance.

Boundaries and Integrity

The boundaries of Colony Hill largely conform to those of the subdivision as laid out by Boss & Phelps north of Reservoir Road and east of Foxhall Road, including the interior streets of Hoban Road, Hadfield Lane and 45th Street. The street layout, the landscaping, and the individual dwellings all retain a high degree of integrity.