
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 12-04

Brigadier General George P. Scriven House

Square 97, Lot 56

1300 New Hampshire Avenue NW

Meeting Date: April 25, 2013
Applicant: National Society Colonial Dames XVII Century (property owner)
Affected ANC: 2B
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Brigadier General George P. Scriven House, 1300 New Hampshire Avenue NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1893 to 1918. The house is already a building contributing to the character of the Dupont Circle Historic District.

The property meets District of Columbia Criterion C and National Register Criterion B for association with the life of a person “significant to the history of the District of Columbia or the nation.”

Background

Brigadier General George P. Scriven and his wife, Bertha Bragg Scriven, were the third owners and second residents of 1300 New Hampshire. The impressive, three-story, mansard-roofed, corner townhouse was erected in 1884 as a speculative project by builder George Whiting. The house typified the sort of high Victorian, upper-middle-class home found in the fashionable neighborhood of Dupont Circle in the decades after the Civil War.

The Scrivens purchased the house in 1893, when George was still a year from promotion to captain. While already studying engineering, Scriven had entered West Point in 1878. He served with infantry and artillery units before a transfer to the Signal Corps. On detached service with the State Department, he was military attaché to the U.S. legations in Mexico City and Rome, and an official observer of the First Greco-Turkish War. His career was rising as the United States was entering its imperialist phase. From 1898 to 1911, Scriven served as chief signal officer—in charge of Army communications—in a succession of increasingly important posts: the Department of the Gulf, Cuba, the relief expedition to China, the Department of the East, and the Philippines.

Scriven was elevated to his highest post and rank in early 1913, when promoted to brigadier general and chief signal officer for the Army. The Army Signal Corps was founded to manage

battlefield visual communications and reconnaissance, but quickly expanded from such tactical applications to managing an extensive telegraph network and using telephony and photography for various purposes. At the time that Scriven took charge, the Signal Corps was adopting two more emerging technologies, radio and aviation. General Scriven is most associated with the development of heavier-than-air aviation.

Balloons had been used for reconnaissance by the U.S. Army as early as the Civil War. The Signal Corps established a balloon section in 1892, but it received little financial or staff support. The Army spent a considerable amount of money on Prof. Samuel Langley's experiments with heavier-than-air craft, without success, just as the Wright brothers made their historic first flights. In 1907, the Signal Corps established an Aeronautical Division and first used Wright planes.

When Scriven served as chief signal officer in the Philippines, he reported on the vulnerability of the fortress Corregidor to aerial surveillance and attack—although it was unclear at the time what force using what means could attack from the air. As chief signal officer he inherited the Aeronautical Division, but even as one of the older signal officers, he adapted to the times and embraced the new technology. He joined the Aero Club of Washington, a local chapter of one of the private organizations that was pushing for the advancement of the use of the airplane and for increased Congressional funding of the air arms of the Navy and Army.

With Europe at war, and recognizing that Great Britain and other powers were having more success directing the development of the technology, Congress approved in 1915 the establishment of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) to promote coordination between government, industry and academia in the field. The other members of NACA elected General Scriven to the chair, and he presided for the organization's first two years. His principal goal was the establishment of a NACA laboratory to test flying equipment, and he supported NACA requests for government funding in return for the NACA's support of the Aeronautical Division. The lab opened after Scriven retired, but his early support was considered pivotal in its establishment. He had apparently been the right person for the job; although of limited personal experience with flying, he possessed an unusual combination of engineering, diplomatic and bureaucratic experience that served the NACA well. The NACA lasted until 1958, when it was folded into the new National Aeronautic and Space Administration.

General Scriven also authored several books, mostly texts for the further education of military officers.

Evaluation

The nomination asserts the significance of the property for its association with General Scriven, an important individual. The claim has merit for the reasons stated above. The period of his residence is appropriate as the property's period of significance, and the property retains high physical integrity from the period.

The nomination also asserts a national level of significance for the property. Scriven was certainly the head of an important national and even international establishment, the U.S. Army

Signal Corps. It was an era of great innovation as well as of greater intervention in foreign lands, including the entry of the United States into the First World War. Scriven also presided over the early development of Army aviation. But his role in the Signal Corps and in aviation history must be understood in the context of the organization and the state of military aviation of the time.

Although spread wide, the Signal Corps was actually a fairly small outfit, at least in the periods between major conflicts. At the turn of the century, the authorized number of officers was 46. The Corps drew up plans to form provisional divisions in case of war, but these were never fully realized. A great deal of the responsibility of the chief signal officer was bureaucratic and political in nature: fighting to retain, and hopefully enhance, funding and authority. In truth, this kind of bureaucratic know-how was probably General Scriven's greatest quality. The Signal Corps was easy for politicians to overlook in peacetime; its balloon corps was barely maintained, and one of the two Signal schools closed in 1905.

Scriven's immediate predecessor, Brigadier General James Allen, may be said to be the "father" of the U.S. Air Force, for advocating and achieving the establishment of the Aeronautical Division during his tenure, but Major George O. Squier, who would become Scriven's successor, was instrumental in bringing it about. Allen and Squier had also both had a hands-on role in the development of telephony and wireless telegraphy.¹

One cannot judge the leaders of the early aviation program without looking at the program's results. There were two primary constraints on the development of U.S. air power in the years 1907 to 1918. First, Congress was parsimonious with appropriations for aircraft and training. Second, the granting of a broad patent to the Wright brothers had chilled airplane innovation, as Orville aggressively litigated to protect the patent rights and had consequently limited incentive or funding to improve upon the brothers' early designs. The Wrights built airplanes with pusher engines whose controls were less intuitive and that were more likely to cause fatalities in a crash. But the Curtiss JN-3s that the Army acquired in 1915 also proved unsafe, a fact that was withheld from the pilots and was later the subject of an investigation. In the 1916 punitive expedition against Pancho Villa, nearly all of the Army's planes, used only for reconnaissance and communications, crashed. By the time the U.S. entered World War I, it was ill prepared in numbers and quality of planes compared with its allies and enemies. U.S. pilots mainly flew British and French planes in the European theater. And limits on expenditures, partly stemming from a desire to stay out of the war, had curtailed the development of dirigibles, which would have been of real use at perhaps only this moment.

These failings cannot be laid solely at General Scriven's feet, as he had only limited influence with Congress, despite the advocacy of private entities such as the Aero Club, and he had a similarly limited ability to get around the Wright patents and Army procurement. Still, a figure of *national significance* for promoting air power at that time would probably have to have been someone who had more successfully surmounted such obstacles. But Scriven had a larger organization to consider, not just the Aeronautical Division, and sought additional funding for flyers as much to prevent the money being taken from the rest of the corps.

¹ Squier had also been one of the officers who flew with Orville Wright from Fort Myer, Virginia in that series of 1908 test flights.

Beginning in 1913 Congress debated the Hay Bill, which ultimately increased the size and funding of the Aeronautical Division and changed its name to the Aviation Section. The bill was passed in 1914 as war was breaking out in Europe. Much of the testimony involved the possibility of separating Army aviation into its own corps. General Scriven had opposed the idea, saying that the aviators were young officers lacking the administrative experience necessary to run such a corps, and that aviation's proper home was with the engineers of the Signal Corps, whose mission was reconnaissance and communications, and experimentation in those lines. While many of the younger pilots favored separation, nearly all of the pilots who appeared before Congress agreed with Scriven. Whether Scriven was correct, or the pilots were deferring to their superior, it can be said that even later apostles of air power did not, at that moment, foresee the rapidity and scope of the changes coming in the use of aircraft. Yet, in the crucible of war, the inadequacy of American preparations and the possibilities of aviation were impossible to ignore. Before the end of the conflict, President Wilson overturned the verdict of Congress of four years earlier and issued an executive order establishing an Army Air Service separate from the Signal Corps. This followed by more than a year the retirement of General Scriven and his replacement with now Brigadier General George O. Squier, the electrical engineer and inventor, former assistant chief of the Corps, U.S. observer of the European air forces, and the most recent chief of the Aviation Section of the Corps.

Washington, D.C. is naturally favored with the presence of many prominent residents, mostly in the fields of politics, government and the military. Like General Scriven, their influence cannot be said to be merely local. But the pertinent question is, how important are the properties associated with them? Does the prominence of the individual elevate his residence or place of work to a level of national note? In most cases, as in this one, the answer is probably, no. But at a local level, it seems perfectly appropriate.