
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 23-04

Scottish Rite Temple amendment

1733 16th Street NW

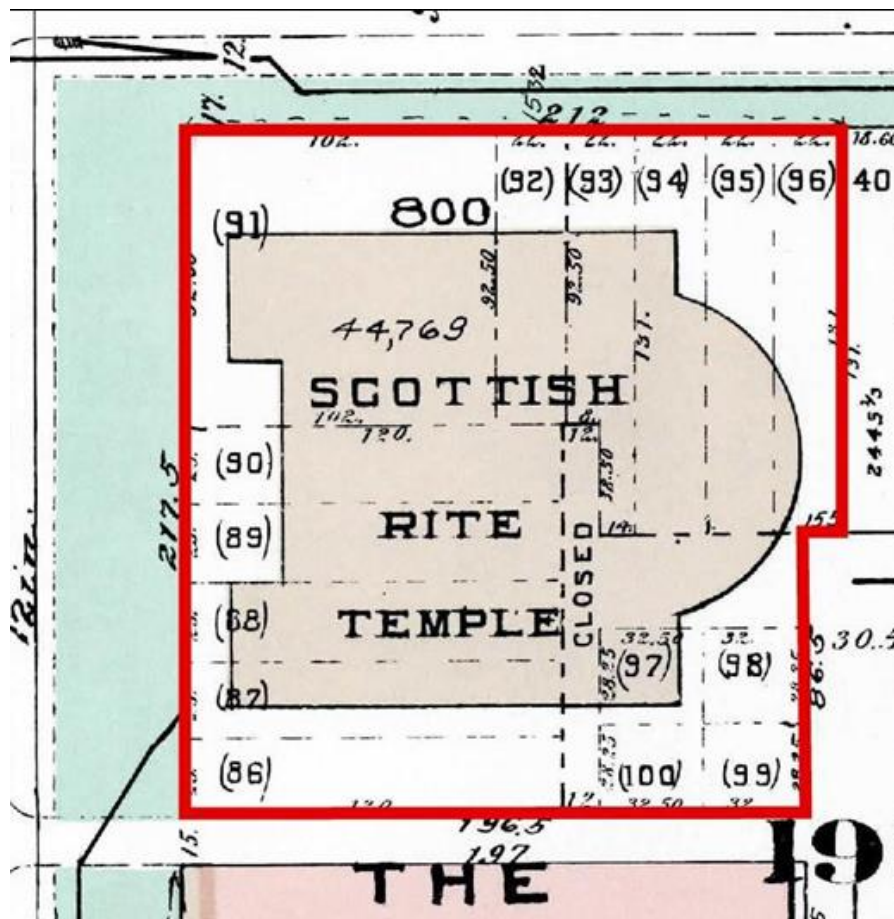
Square 192, Lot 110

Meeting Date: March 23, 2023

Applicant: The Supreme Council, 33rd Degree, Southern Jurisdiction¹ (owner)

Affected ANC: 2B

The purposes of the present application are to amend the Scottish Rite Temple landmark designation by: 1) proposing as a period of significance the year 1915, the date of completion of the temple; and 2) proposing as a boundary for the landmark one coterminous with that of the former assessment and taxation Lot 800 in Square 192.



¹ The official full name of the owner-applicant is the Supreme Council (Mother Council of the World) of the Inspectors General Knights Commander of the House of the Temple of Solomon of the Thirty-third Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry of the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States of America.

Also known as the “House of the Temple,” the Scottish Rite Temple was included in the city’s first list of 279 landmarks, issued by the Joint Committee of Landmarks of the National Capital (or “Joint Committee”) in 1964.

No nomination in a format similar to those of today was necessary for landmark designation at that time. Landmark designation was then by address of the building; no boundary was established to demarcate the extent of surrounding land, and there was no law enabling preservation review of projects and subdivisions. The Joint Committee designated properties by name and address alone, and mapped them as points, not polygons, the action then being honorary rather than regulatory.²

The Joint Committee did consider the construction dates important and provided a code for each property to indicate either historic or aesthetic value, or both, with the Scottish Rite Temple considered only aesthetically significant. The Joint Committee also introduced a ranking system—categories I, II and III—with the temple assigned to lowest, Category III, “landmarks of value which contribute to the cultural heritage or visual beauty and interest... and which should be preserved if practicable.”

Previous boundary determinations

On May 23, 2019, in HPA No. 19-06 the Board considered and voted to deny the application of Dupont East Citizens Action Association (“DECAA”) to set the entirety of Lot 108, stretching from 16th Street NW east to 15th Street NW, as the boundary for the temple landmark. The Board decided instead to draw the boundary corresponding to assessment and taxation Lot 800, on which the temple sat when it was originally constructed.

DECAA sought judicial review of the Board’s decision in DC Superior Court, which vacated the Board’s decision. The Superior Court held that the temple landmark had an existing site boundary, which it declared to be “equivalent to the boundary of Lot 820 as it existed in 1979.” The Superior Court further held that in reducing the existing boundary based on DECAA’s boundary expansion application the Board had acted beyond its authority. The District appealed the Superior Court’s ruling to the DC Court of Appeals, and the appeal is currently pending.

On remand from the Superior Court, the Board on February 23, 2023 again considered DECAA’s boundary application and again voted to deny it, leaving the boundary where the Superior Court had declared it to be.

Documentation and significance

The Scottish Rite Temple is called out in the 1977 Sixteenth Street Historic District nomination as “one of the most unusual buildings in the Historic District.” The Architectural League called it “the finest building erected during the past year.” In 1931 it was voted the fifth most beautiful building in the world by a group of members of the Association of American Architects. The Commission of Fine Arts publication *Sixteenth Street Architecture Volume 1* includes a generously illustrated 33-page discussion of the temple, its construction history, and its character-defining features. It acknowledges the construction of the temple as the site’s singular

² The Joint Committee mapped the locations of landmarks, but without individual boundaries. Although the Joint Committee hoped that raising awareness of the properties would prepare the way for preservation legislation.

major event and attribute. The present application provides parallel information and cites that work.

The landmark is already designated, so the Board does not have to grapple with the criteria of significance beyond applying the significance of the landmark to questions of boundary and period of significance. This application was prepared as an amendment to a designation that has no written nomination associated with it, so it conscientiously considers the criteria.

The application, in National Register format, cites National Register Criterion C, which applies to properties “that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.” It also cites the equivalent local designation criterion D (architecture and urbanism), for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction, or are expressions of landscape architecture, engineering, or urban planning, siting, or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation,” plus Criterion F, as an excellent work of renowned architect John Russell Pope (with Elliott Woods advising), and Criterion E, as the building exhibits considerable artistry.

The excellence of the architecture, addressed in the application, is well-established and hardly requires further discussion. The building extends to the entry steps that stretch to the public space across its entire front. The same design excellence has never extended to the landscape beyond. The temple was sited here because there was a large parcel available (**Figure 2**; *the other illustrations appear in numerical and chronological order at the end of this report*) on a central street that had become fashionable largely through the efforts of Mary Foote Henderson.³ Once complete, the temple had strips of lawn to the north and the south of the building, somewhat important to its setting, but unremarkable in itself. These strips have had trees upon them, fewer as time has passed. Several feet from the apse of the temple stood a blacksmith shop until the 1950s (**Figures 4 and 5**), when the land in that vicinity was paved for a parking lot and a driveway (**Figures 6 and 16**). An area north of the parking lot and east of the driveway was fenced when the building was designated in 1964. It contained lawn and a tree. The grassy area was extended as the Masons acquired more lots and demolished the older rowhouses thereon.

The Masons eventually acquired all the lots on the northern half of the square and closed the alleys. This process was not complete until 2011, a century after the temple construction began. Through the 1980s, the site remained at least partially occupied by rowhouses, accessory buildings, and alley paving. As a condition of an alley closing, the southeastern section of the lot hosted a community garden from 1990 to 2011, before being uprooted and graveled for still more parking (**Figure 13**).

³ “This lot contains... about forty-six thousand square feet of ground and is one of the most eligible, appropriate and beautiful sites for the Temple in this splendid Capital. The frontage is on 16th Street, which is one of the most desirable of all the avenues, or boulevards, of the city. It runs north from the front door of the White House. It has been proposed to change the name to the Avenue of the Presidents.” Sovereign Grand Commander James D. Richardson in “Transactions of the Supreme Council of the 33d Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States Sitting at the City of Washington, in October, 1911,” page 122. Only a single, modest house needed to be razed to make way for the new construction.

The creation of a back yard to the temple provided an *opportunity* to design an impressive landscape, but had it been of high quality, it would have been a feature too recent to designate as historic under National Register guidelines or D.C. regulations. A generic iron fence was extended around the Masons' holdings, a few trees and bushes were added, plus a couple of flower circles, one, nearer the temple, containing a bust of George Washington on a pedestal (**Figure 14**). This is the most notable feature of the landscape, a copy of a 1975 bust created by Avard Fairbanks for the nation's bicentennial, whose early casting in bronze was installed in the Salt Lake City airport in 1976 and later moved to the George Washington University. More recently, copies have been placed at the Mount Vernon visitor center; Sulgrave Manor, Northamptonshire, England; the city of Peoria, Illinois; the Richmond American University, London (this one is presently being auctioned); the Scottish Rite Temple; and perhaps elsewhere.

The Board has twice found, in HPA No. 19-06, that the landscape east of the building does not add to the significance or understanding of the Scottish Rite Temple under the local or National Register criteria for designation. The open space was never notable as a natural, designed, or cultural landscape, and neither the rear yard nor the parking lot has been a character-defining feature of the landmark. The property's significance is in the design and construction of Pope's temple, completed in 1915. Neither the uses nor design qualities of the landscape at the rear of the property define or augment the significance of the landmark.

Although the complex of stables/garages on the site, the first dating to 1883, is historically significant, they are unrelated to the temple, having served some of the surrounding rowhouses. They were not acquired by the Masons until five years after the temple had been designated a landmark. They are considered to be structures contributing to the character of the Sixteenth Street Historic District, although they could as easily have ended up within the Fourteenth Street Historic District but for an accident of history (see boundary discussion below).

The property has not been evaluated under D.C. Criterion G (or National Register Criterion D) for archaeology. It is possible that the temple's site may yet yield information significant to an understanding of historic or prehistoric events of the District of Columbia. However, the map and permit evidence indicate that only one small house stood on the temple parcel before its construction, and it was twenty years old at the time of its demolition. We would need some sense of such resources being extant and of their significance to designate them. Remnants of the demolished rowhouses and accessory buildings, the earliest of which appear to have been completed in 1878, predate the temple. They would lie within land that was not originally associated with the temple and most of which was not acquired by the Masons until decades after its construction. They are properly seen as part and parcel of the Fourteenth Street or Sixteenth Street neighborhood historic districts in which they are located. Their relationship to the Scottish Rite Temple was mere proximity.

Consistent with the Joint Committee designation for aesthetic significance, with the present application, and with the Board's findings for a previous application, the Scottish Rite Temple meets D.C. Designation Criteria D (architecture and urbanism), E (artistry), and F (creative masters) and the equivalent National Register Criteria A and C.

Period of significance

According to National Register Bulletin 16A, "[p]eriod of significance is the length of time when a property was associated with important events, activities, or persons, or attained the

characteristics which qualify it for National Register listing.” The concept is employed for local purposes, too, partly because historic district nominations must be forwarded to the National Register. Practically, period of significance provides a cutoff date for features considered historic, versus those that may be extraneous. Thus, the concept is useful for guiding the [subsequent treatment of a property in terms of compatibility with the features that existed during that most important time. The Scottish Rite Temple is largely intact to its date of completion, making treatment a fairly straightforward matter.

The application proposes the year 1915, the date of completion of construction, as the period of significance for the Scottish Rite Temple. Referring again to National Register guidance, “[f]or architecturally significant properties, the period of significance is the date of construction and/or the dates of any significant alterations or additions.” “For the site of an important event,” which here would be the organizational effort to create the temple, “the period of significance is the time when the event occurred.” The temple’s period of significance could alternatively be stated as 1911 to 1915, covering the entire construction phase, but it is a distinction without a difference, because it is the resource in its finished state with which we must concern ourselves. For comparison, the National Historic Landmark designation of Alexandria’s George Washington Masonic National Memorial states its period of significance as *its* period of construction, 1922-1932, but the construction of that larger building was protracted because of financial difficulties. Its period of significance recognizes milestones of completion of parts of the originally designed components of the building and site plan.

The Masons’ gradual acquisition of property and demolition of buildings would not rise to landmark significance themselves, nor would they be a reason why the temple is important in the first place. The property was designated in 1964, recognizing a history that was established well before then.

Proposed boundary

The District’s historic preservation law grants to the Historic Preservation Review Board the exclusive authority to make designations, including setting landmark and historic district boundaries and adopting appropriate procedures for the purpose (D.C. Code § 6-1103(c)). An application for designation or for the amendment of a designation is the instrument for raising the question and arguments, and it becomes a central part of the record, but for local designation purposes, it is the Board’s decision that determines boundaries (10C DCMR § 218).

The Board may accept applications, including their boundaries, as proposed, or, finding them unsuitable, may deny them outright, defer consideration, or reduce the boundaries, as appropriate. The Board may not designate *more* land than is contained within the area that has been noticed to the public as being affected by the application. For that, a new or revised application would be required (10C DCMR § 218).

The law does not empower other actors to create or expand a landmark designation, including by the acquisition of adjacent land, even if the original parcel is actually combined with that land as a lot of record.

The boundary now proposed for the landmark is coterminous with the boundary of former assessment and taxation Lot 800 in Square 192, which overlay the lots of record 86 through 100, the lots upon which the temple was constructed in 1911-1915 (**Figures 3 and 4**) and upon which

it still stood when designated a landmark in 1964 (**Figure 7**). Such a boundary is the least arbitrary and the most consistent with the usual standards. It has the virtue of a historical basis and an economy, in encompassing the only resource, the temple itself, that has been found to have landmark-level significance.

With the exception of a fixed minimum age for designated properties, the Board applies to designation evaluations the guidelines of the National Register of Historic Places, because they are coherent and broadly accepted, and because most District of Columbia landmarks and all historic districts are forwarded to the Register for listing.⁴ The National Register Bulletin *Defining Boundaries for National Register Properties* advises that boundaries should “encompass an appropriate setting” but should exclude “peripheral areas that do not directly contribute to the property’s significance.” The boundary proposed captures all the original features of the temple itself and any other site features extant from its time of construction. It excludes areas subsequently added to the Masons’ landholdings that contained landscape features, such as a parking lot and a lawn, of little historic or design importance and often of little age.

Although the parking lot served the temple, it possessed very little historic or design value and postdated the building by decades. On the other hand, the extant cluster of stables and garages predates the temple, was related instead to surrounding rowhouses, and was not purchased by the Masons until well after the temple was designated. It could not have formed the basis for designation then, nor should it now. The Joint Committee assigned *the temple itself* to its lowest category of significance. The garages are properly considered to contribute to the character of the historic district in which they are located. The land beyond the original property boundary meets the definition of “peripheral areas that do not directly contribute to the property’s significance.” They are simply not integral to the landmark.

Boundary alternatives

Again, while considering a boundary, the Board cannot extend it beyond the affected area noticed to the public—in this case, record Lot 110, comprising A&T Lot 800 plus a small section of former alley—but it need not limit its inquiry to that lot to illuminate the matter. The Board has the option to adopt the present application or to deny it or defer it for revision if it finds it unsuitable.

Lot 110: An available, reasonable variation on the proposal is to designate the entire present Lot 110, which would be convenient and mostly follow the historic boundary but eliminate the jog in the rear lot line. But the original parcel boundary is what is proposed, and it simply has the stronger historical claim.

Lot 820: Based on an order of the Superior Court, the current boundary corresponds to assessment and taxation Lot 820 (**Figure 10**). A&T Lot 820 was created in 1976, a result of the Masons requesting a tax abatement from the Council of the District of Columbia. The A&T lot

⁴The District of Columbia historic preservation regulations formally align the local and national designation processes in a few ways, not only prescribing the National Register form or its substantive equivalent for local designations. The Historic Preservation Review Board may adopt an existing National Register nomination for local designation purposes. Properties designated National Historic Landmarks are automatically considered to meet the criteria for listing in the D.C. Inventory.

overlay numerous lots of record, as did the later A&T Lot 834 (**Figure 12**).⁵ The question posed by this application is whether the boundary should be reduced from A&T Lot 820 to A&T Lot 800. Because the larger area encompassed by A&T Lot 820 does not meet—and has never met—the criteria for landmark designation, reduction of the boundary to correspond to A&T Lot 800 is justified.

While not as expansive as the past proposal rejected by the Board to encompass the entire block, leaving the boundary at A&T Lot 820 would be inappropriate for the same reasons—gathering within itself both unrelated resources (garages) and insignificant resources (back yard, parking lot). In that respect, it is better than the maximal boundary, but only as a matter of degree.

The Board has twice reviewed and denied a proposed boundary based upon highly speculative arguments and taking in much area of little significance and only recent relationship to the temple. The historic and visual qualities of the parking lot and green space in this area, always expanding and changing, but never arriving at anything substantially related to the qualities of the temple, was never such that it could be classified as a significant historic or cultural landscape. Keeping the boundary at A&T Lot 820 where the Superior Court declared it to have been set is not warranted for the same reasons the Board declined to expand the boundary to include all of former Lot 108, namely:

There is no basis for concluding that this open space has any relationship to the L’Enfant Plan or would help restore the designer’s vision for the city;

There is no basis for the conjectural argument that the open space reinforces architect John Russell Pope’s purported desire for unhampered views of the rear of the temple;

The sequence of physical changes to the open area, including demolition of rowhouses on the site, was not shown to be significant to the temple or the creation of the 14th Street historic district, where it is located;

The open space at the rear is neither a notable cultural landscape nor character-defining feature of the landmark and does not contribute to what makes the Temple historically significant; and

The Scottish Rite Temple, completed in 1915 on Lot 800, meets Criteria D, E and F, as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a building type and style; is an expression of architecture and urban planning; possesses high artistic value; and is the work of a master architect.

(See the attached Board Decision in HPA 19-06).

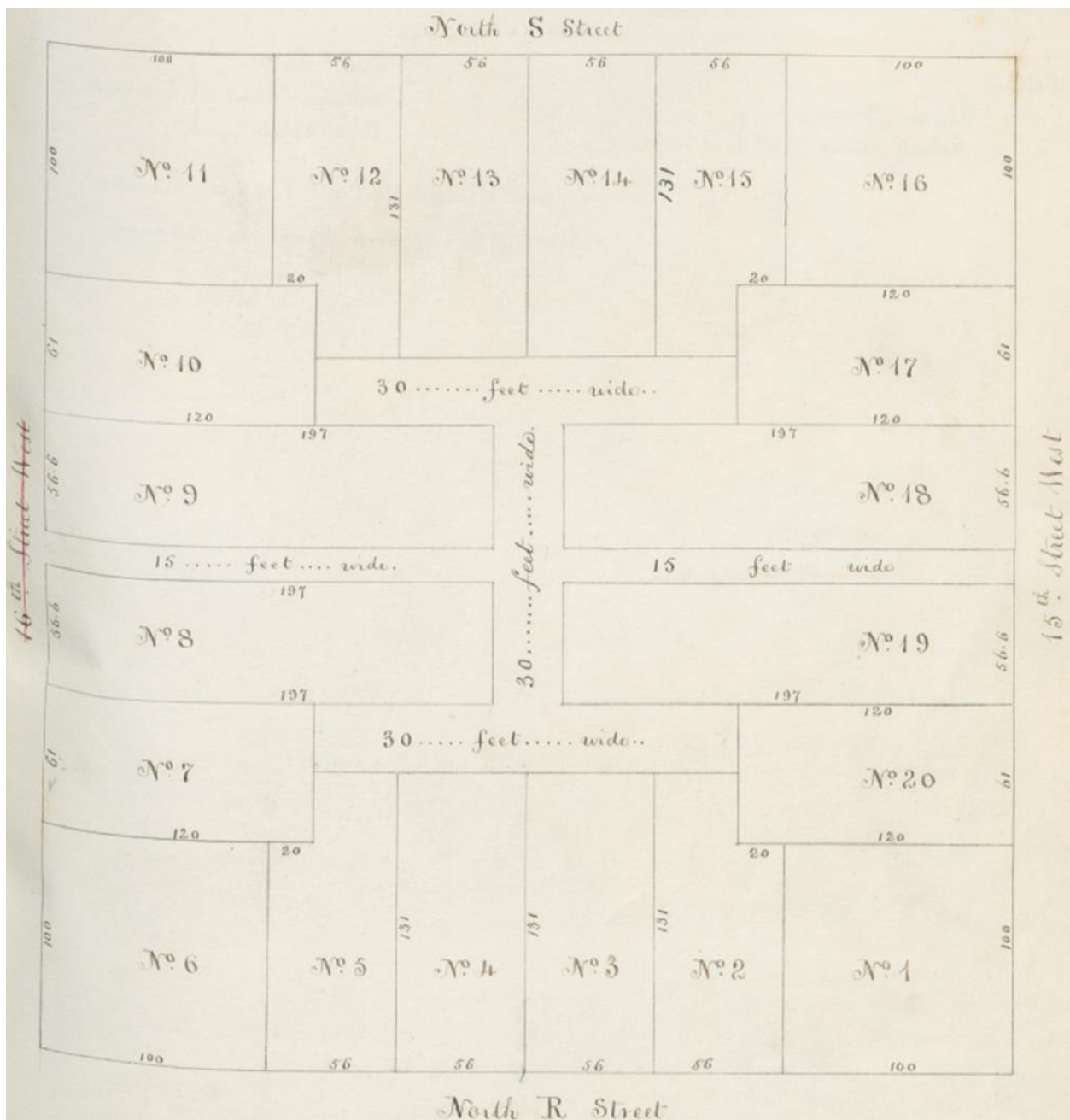
A year after the creation of A&T Lot 820, the Joint Committee designated the Sixteenth Street Historic District, a project that had been in progress for some time prior. It is a linear district encompassing much of the 16th Street corridor, and its boundaries were drawn with the same method employed for historic districts today: at the desired edges, whole lots *as depicted on the*

⁵ So, why not A&T Lot 834? Because it shares the arbitrary and ephemeral qualities of A&T Lot 820 while being even later, more expansive and unrelated to the significance of the temple.

city base map are included within the boundaries, for the convenience of the owners, for the convenience of reviewers of projects within the districts and, most of all, for the convenience of delineating the boundaries plainly and easily in the first place. For the Sixteenth Street Historic District, the mapped lots that more or less abutted 16th Street were included, and those that backed up to them were not. There is supporting evidence of this within the file retained from the time of the historic district designation. A working map apparently prepared by staff and used for presentation (the staff took the trouble to affix a label) depicts a boundary drawn closely behind the temple (**Figure 9**). But the final map, from 1977, shows the boundary running along the east line of assessment and taxation Lot 820 (**Figure 11**). What had changed in a year? Not the landmark designation or the setting, not even the extent of the Masons' landholdings, but only the base map, now depicting A&T Lot 820 just created by them for their tax abatement.

Recommendation

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the amendment to the Scottish Rite Temple designation be adopted as submitted, with a boundary coterminous with that of former assessment and taxation Lot 800 in Square 192, and a period of significance of 1915, the completion date of the temple. It is further recommended that a nomination be prepared for forwarding to the National Register of Historic Places.



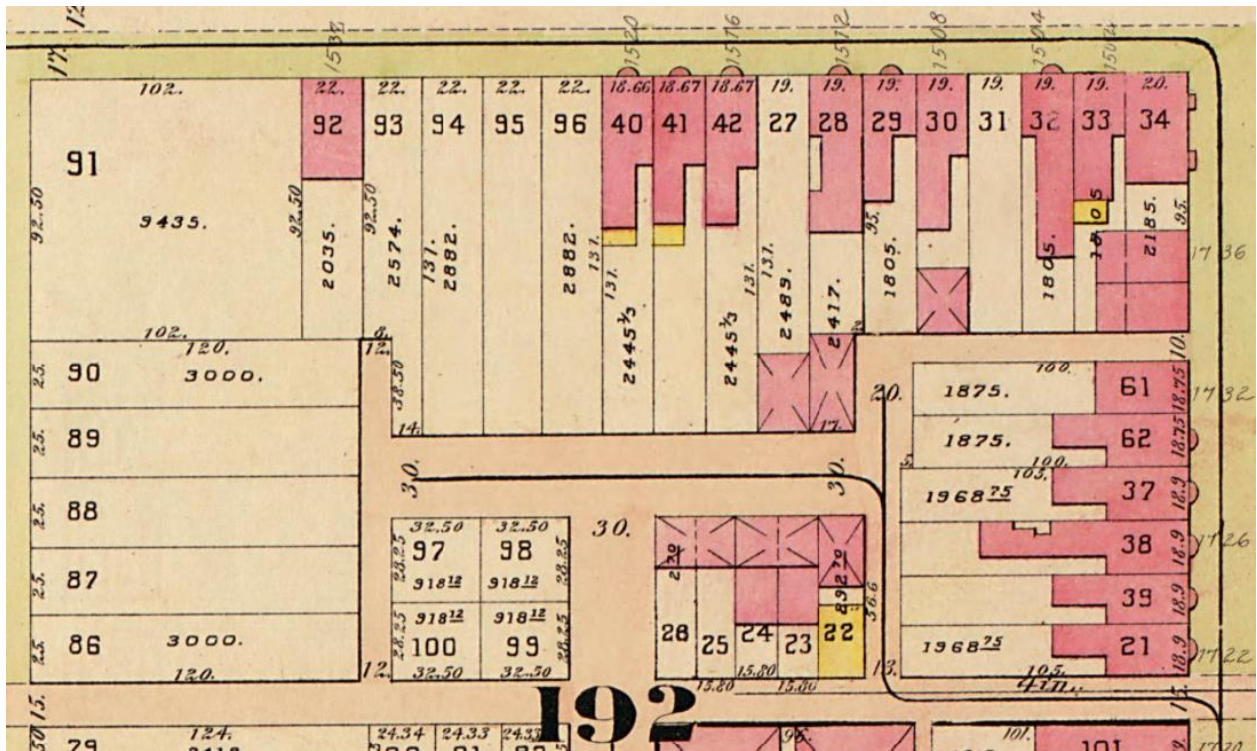


Figure 2: A detail of Plate 19 of Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, District of Columbia, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: G. William Baist, 1909).

Form 500 E. D.-2M-8-10-10

No. Brick Required 5 000 M. Permit No. 1527

FILL OUT APPLICATION IN COPYING INK

APPLICATION FOR PERMIT TO BUILD

Washington, D. C., July 10 1911

To the INSPECTOR OF BUILDINGS:

The undersigned owner hereby applies for a permit to build according to the following specifications:

- What is the owner's name? Supreme Council Scottish Rite Masons Southern Jurisdiction of the U. S.
- What is the architect's name? John Russell Pope - New York, N.Y.
- What is the builder's name? Amos Bros. Building Address Albany Bldg. Washington, D. C. Street 16th N.W. & S.
- What is the house number? 192 Avenue N.W.
- Has a plat been obtained from the Surveyor's office and building been located thereon as required by Sec. 26 Yes.
- What is the number of lot? 86 to 97-100 front block of 98-99-100 alleys, 192 subdivision N.W.
- State how many buildings to be erected One
- Number of stories in height Three Material stone and brick
- If of frame, will the proposed structure be within 24 feet of any brick building?
- Size of lot: Front 217'-6"; rear 217'-6"; depth 212'-0"
- Size of main building: Width of front 149'-8"; No. of feet deep 181'-2"

Handwritten note on left margin: 16th & N.W. 192

Figure 3: The building permit application for the construction of the Scottish Rite Temple. Permit No. 1527, issued September 21, 1911.

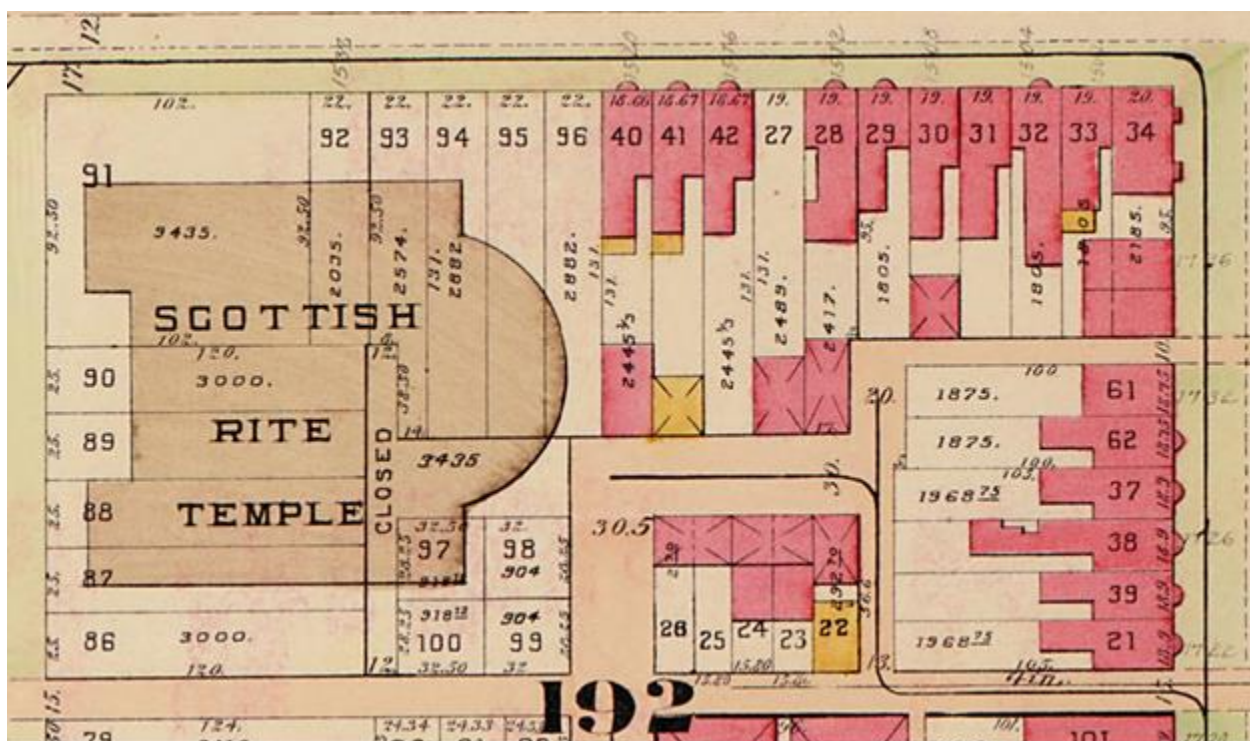




Figure 5: A 1951 aerial photograph of the rear of the temple. The apse is nearly touching a former blacksmith's shop, built in 1911, that had been associated with the rowhouse at 1520 S Street. By this time, the Masons had owned that lot (40) and accessory building for more than three decades. Had they found it imperative to remove any structures obscuring views of the rear of the temple, they could have razed it long before. The same goes for the cluster of stables and garages the Masons bought in 1969 and which still stand.



Figure 6: A 1964 aerial photograph of the rear of the temple. Now, a driveway from S Street crosses the rear of the temple, providing access to a surface parking lot and the alley system within the square. A fenced enclosure next to 1510 S Street appears to contain grass and a tree. Fifteenth Street is still solidly rowhouses, which continue around the corner onto S.

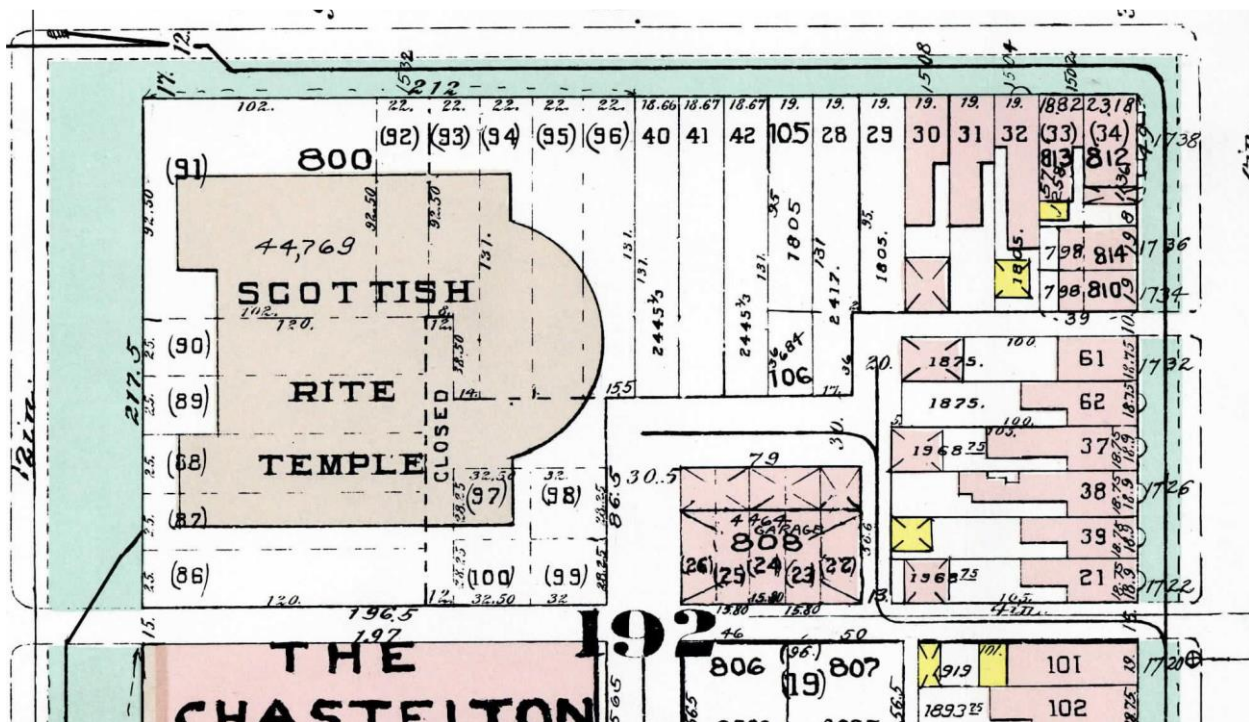


Figure 7: A detail of Plan 19 of Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, District of Columbia, Vol. 1 (Hathboro, Pennsylvania: R.H. Baist, 1965). It again depicts the temple standing upon assessment and taxation Lot 800, which overlays lots of record, indicated by their numbers in parentheses.

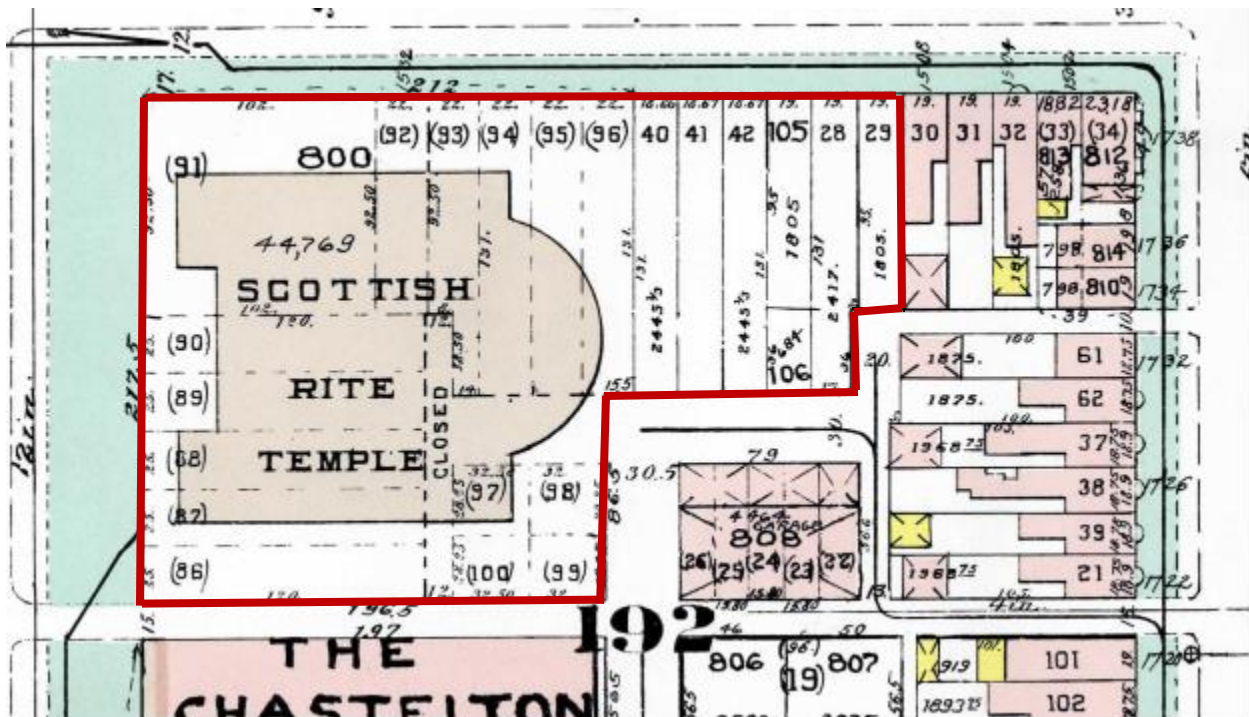


Figure 8: The same detail of the 1965 Baist's atlas with a superimposed red boundary encompassing all of the Supreme Council's lots within the square as of 1964.

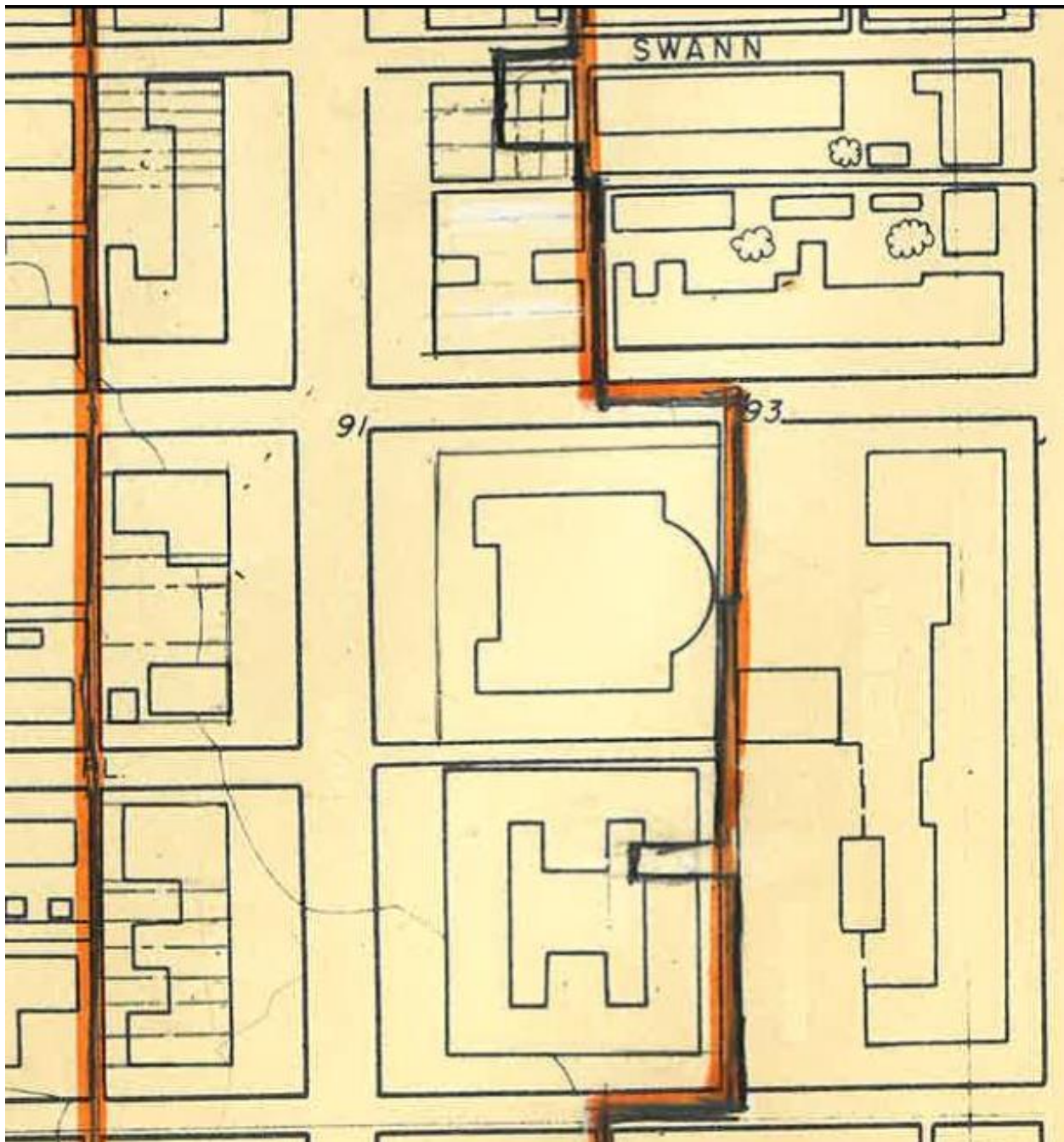


Figure 9: A detail of a working/presentation map of proposed Sixteenth Street Historic District boundaries, circa 1976. District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office historic district files. The boundary follows the alley-like driveway immediately behind the building.

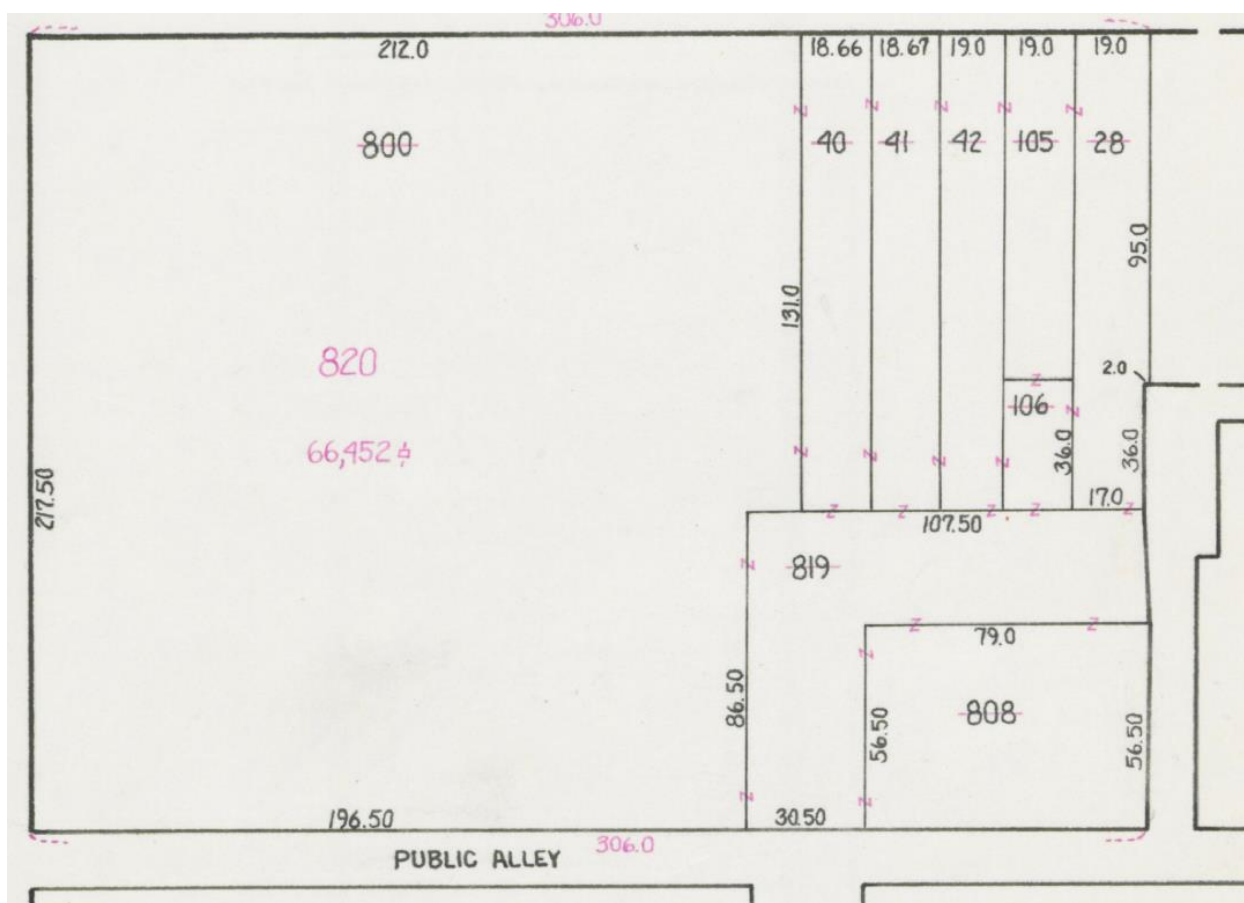


Figure 10: A&T Lot 820, from A&T Book 21, July 30, 1976.

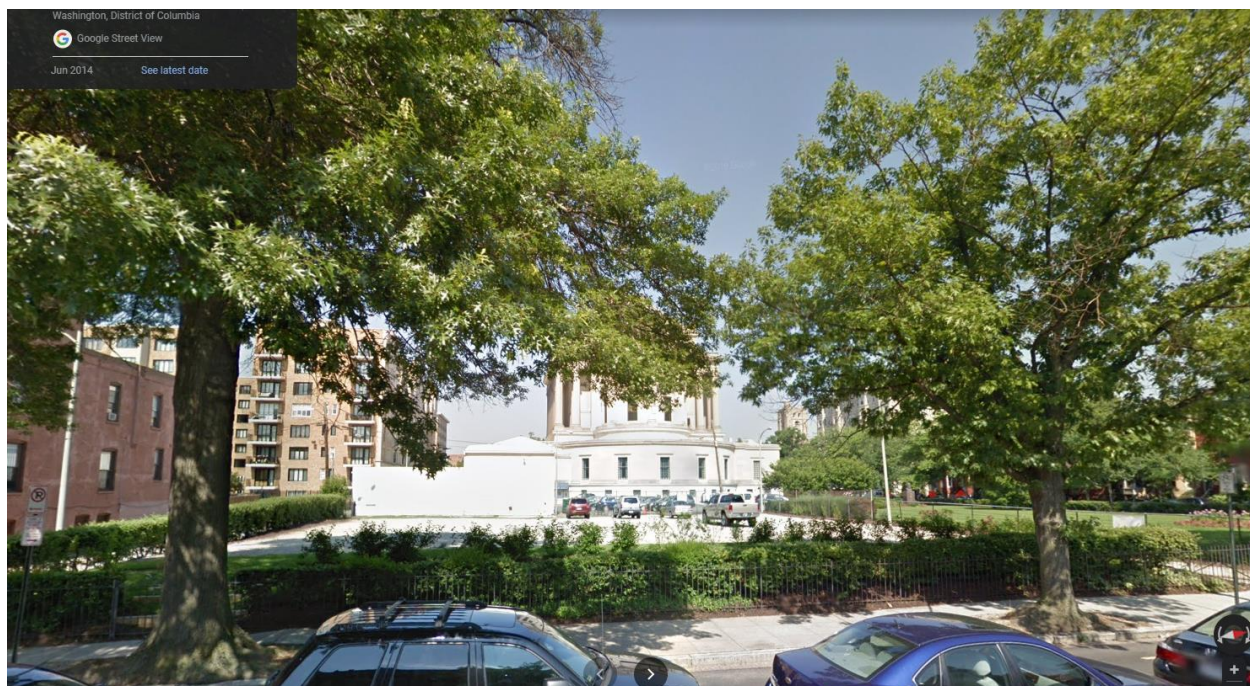
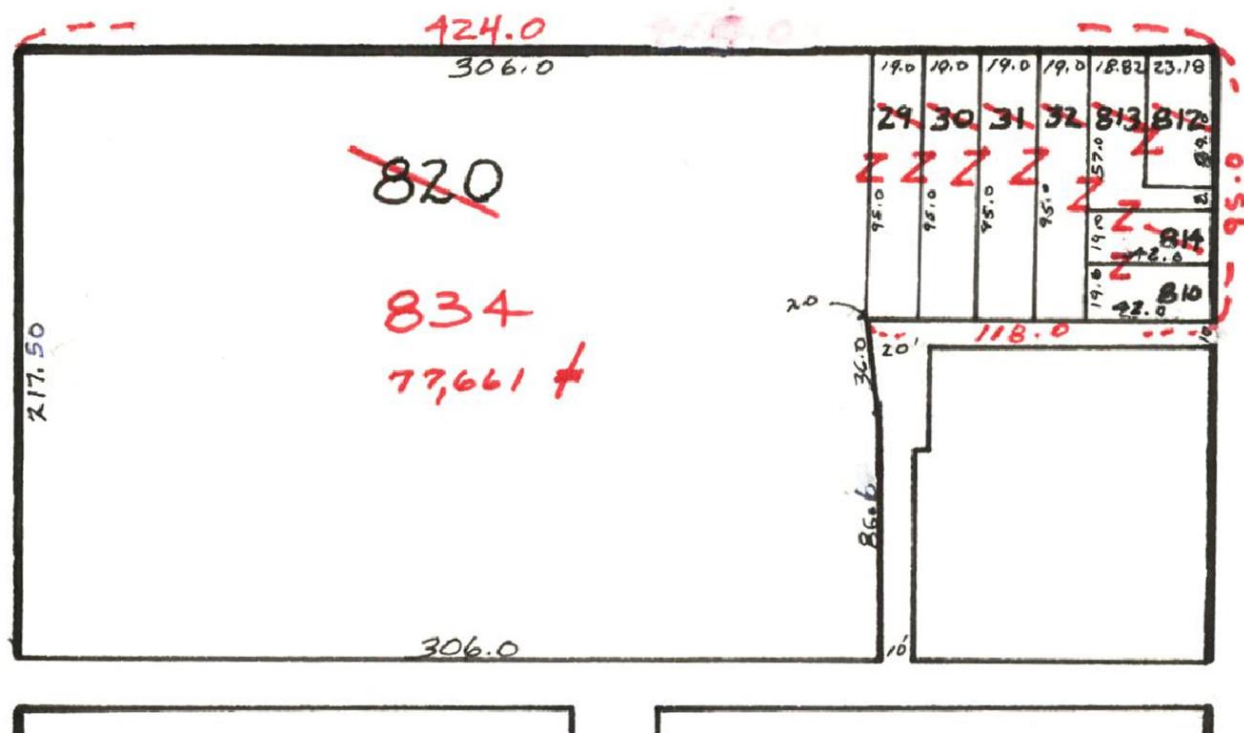




Figure 14: The bust of George Washington.. Photo courtesy of the House of the Temple webpage.



Figure 15: A photo of the northeast corner of the temple from the present nomination.



Figure 16: The parking lot near the rear of the temple. Photo from the present application