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## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic District Case No. 23-01

### **United States Naval Observatory Historic District**

3450 Massachusetts Avenue, NW

Meeting Date: May 25, 2023  
Applicant: United States Navy  
Affected ANC: 3C

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The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board forward documentation on the U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places so the district can be listed under National Register of Historic Places Criteria A, C and D at the national level of significance for history, architecture, and landscape architecture, and at the local level of significance for archaeology. The period of significance identified in the nomination is 1887 to 1972 but the end date should be revised to 1973 so it extends fifty years into the past to recognize the on-going scientific contributions that continue to be made at the Observatory. HPO will also work with the applicant to make a few minor refinements such as updating photographs to capture recently completed rehabilitation work and clarifying a few details about archaeological sites.

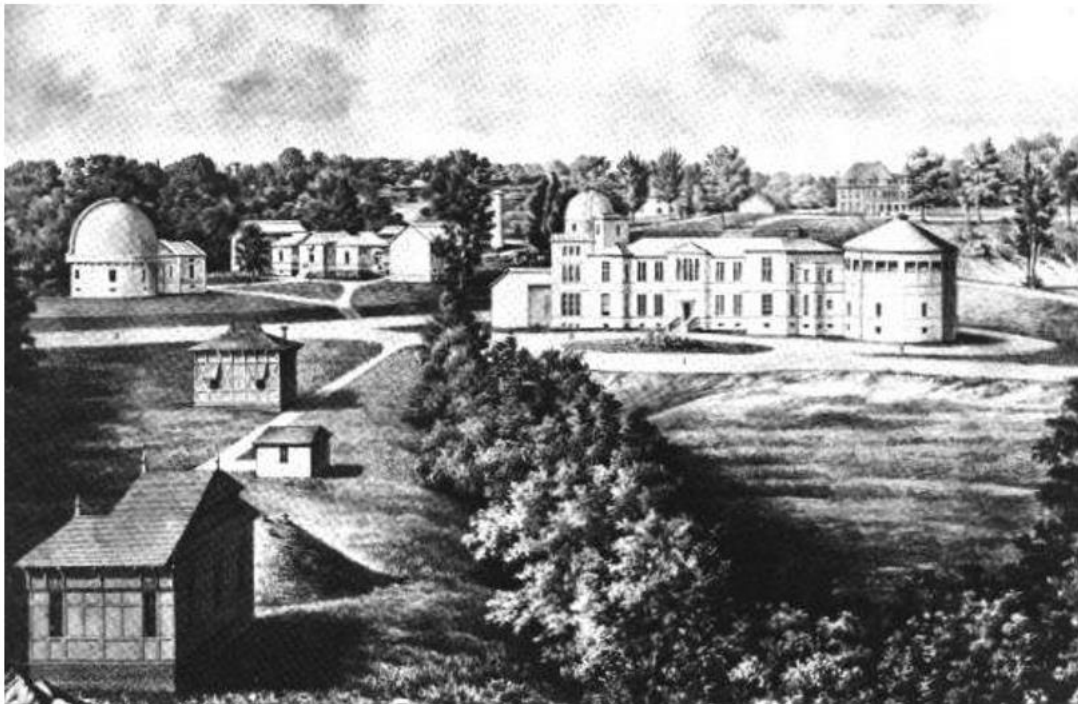
#### **Background**

The U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District (USNO) is being nominated to the National Register as a result of the Section 106 review of a proposal to construct a new Master Clocks Facility on the site and to mitigate the “adverse effects” that resulted from that project. The nomination was prepared for and is being sponsored by the United States Navy (Navy). The document provides a thoroughly researched and well-written account of the history and architecture of the historic district and its 73.685-acre site extending from the earliest dates of construction in 1887 through 1973, which is fifty years prior to the current year. This timeframe defines the historic district’s period of significance with an end date based upon the on-going significant contributions the USNO continues to make in the fields of positional astronomy and precise timekeeping.

#### **History, Architecture, and Landscape**

Prior to being established in its current location, the U.S. Naval Observatory and its predecessor institutions were housed in various facilities throughout the city, most notably at the intersection of 24<sup>th</sup> and E Streets, NW in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood. As the name implies, the hazy conditions at that early complex, which dates to 1844, proved less than ideal for astronomical observations so a more suitable location was needed. In 1880, Congress passed an act that resulted in the purchase of the USNO’s current site one year later, the former Barber Estate on a high, secluded hill in upper northwest. Preeminent architect Richard Morris Hunt was selected to design the facility and construction of the USNO began in 1887.

Ten of Hunt's designs were constructed according to his plans and these buildings constitute the entirety of his work within the District of Columbia. Most of Hunt's grand buildings are clad in granite and marble while some of the more technical structures that house scientific equipment are clad in corrugated metal. The buildings range in size from the imposing Administration Building (Building 1) to the somewhat smaller Great Equatorial Building (Building 2) but most are excellent examples of Greek and Classical Revival architecture skillfully adapted for specific scientific purposes. Thus, the historic district is characterized, in part, by a unique and interesting juxtaposition of functional features like observatory domes with classically inspired temple forms and detailing. Even Hunt's more utilitarian structures, some of which were demolished by the Navy, exhibit well-designed proportions that complement the more traditional buildings despite their contrasting materials, forms and features.



A rendering of the USNO after initial construction depicting the Administration Building, attached South Transit House, Great Equatorial Building, Clock House, East and West Transit Houses, Prime Vertical House and Superintendent's Residence are all visible in the background. The smaller buildings in the foreground are no longer extant. (USNO Archives)

In addition to Hunt's work, the USNO historic district boasts an array of other noteworthy buildings designed by other architects. Among the most well-known buildings is the Queen Anne-style residence of the Vice President of the United States (Quarters A) which was designed by local DC architect Leon Dessez and constructed in 1893. The Simon Newcomb Laboratory (Building 78) is also notable because the original 1932 portion incorporates Art Deco detailing while the later, 1961 addition features complimentary Moderne elements. The historic district also includes examples of Colonial Revival, International and Modern style architecture as well.

Like their design, the arrangement of buildings at the USNO was influenced by the site's rolling topography but was often driven primarily by function and other scientific considerations such as orientation to cardinal directions. At the very center of the facility is the Greek Revival-style, aptly named Clock House (Building 3, currently known as the Observers Electronic Laboratory)

which contained the original master clock. The essential functions carried out in this building required a buffer with a 1,000-foot radius to protect the clock from vibrations and this buffer established the historic district's unique circular boundaries. Within these boundaries, the spatial relationships among the buildings impart another layer of significance to the historic district – that which derives from its historic landscape.

Included among the USNO's earliest landscape features are old curvilinear roadways from the Barber Estate that were retained and incorporated into the Observatory's circulation network. These roads are complimented by viewsheds which were kept clear due to the use of telescopes, concrete walking paths that connected the various buildings, and large, sweeping lawns bordered by tall stands of trees that provide a naturalistic setting for the grand buildings of the USNO. Scattered throughout the landscape, objects such as a flagpole and naval anchors from WWI vessels add character and serve as focal points within the landscape.

### **Archaeology**

A total of four archaeological sites have been identified within the USNO historic district but since some are associated with prehistoric events, they fall outside the period of significance and are considered non-contributing to the historic district.

The one contributing archaeological resource, 51NW0279, is associated with the Barber Mansion and was assigned a unique DC trinomial in May 2021. Complete documentation of the site and subsequent construction monitoring by the Navy is still pending but this site has multiple loci, including the mansion foundation, the smokehouse, and bricking walkway/ paving features which were identified in 2021. The smokehouse was apparently demolished by the Navy during construction activities and documentation is pending.

### **Evaluation**

The U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District meets DC Designation Criteria A and B (Events and History) and National Register Criterion A at the national level of significance. As the United States' leading authority for astronomical and timing data required for such purposes as navigation on sea, on land and in space; determining the position and motions of the earth and other celestial objects; and determining precise time, the scientific achievements of the USNO are unparalleled.

The U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District also meets DC Designation Criteria D, E and F (Architecture and Urbanism, Artistry and Creative Masters) and National Register Criterion C at the national level of significance. The exemplary designs of preeminent architect Richard Morris Hunt and the collection of noteworthy scientific and residential buildings from all other periods of the Observatory's development combined with the spatial and physical features of the historic landscape create a historic district that is unique in purpose and implementation.

Finally, the U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District meets DC Designation Criteria G (Archaeology) and National Register Criterion D at the local level of significance. Contributing archaeological resources at the USNO possess data relating to the earlier Barber Estate Mansion that pre-dates the Observatory.

The period of significance for the USNO Historic District extends from 1877, when the first of the institution's buildings were constructed through 1973, a year fifty years from the present which recognizes the on-going scientific contributions that continue to be made at the Observatory. Note that the nomination was drafted in 2022 so it identifies the end date as 1972.

### Boundaries

The circular boundaries of the U.S. Naval Observatory Historic District on Square/Lot 1299 1037 are defined by the 1,000-foot radius buffer around the historic Clock House Building (Building 3) at the precise center of the district. The historic district is further bounded by Massachusetts Avenue, NW on portions of the north, east and south; by Observatory Circle, NW on portions of the north and south; and by publicly and privately owned properties on the west and portions of the south as illustrated in the map below.

