

**Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society
before the DC Preservation Review Board on January 25, 2018
326 A Street, SE HPA 17-591**

My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. We reviewed the revised concept plans for the project dated December 27, 2017 and January 8, 2018. The project consists of several components; restoring much of the remaining original frame house, and building a side-addition which faces the street on the double-width lot. The house is currently vacant and the owner has followed HPO's suggestion to mothball the house to protect the structure. The rear ell which was deteriorated beyond repair, was demolished in August 2017. Our comments follow:

History of the House:

This contributing two-story vernacular frame house was built between 1854 and 1857.¹ Through studying the floor plans, building permits, newspaper articles, and the building itself we can trace the evolution of this house. It originally had low-pitched gable-end roof and was clad in weatherboard.² Elements of the Greek Revival style are evident in the simple square Doric porch columns, a wide band of trim along each of the two-story full-width porches, and simple entablature with transom above the front entrance. The floor plan further exemplifies the style with a symmetrical façade – the front entrance is through the five-bay front porch and windows flank a central door on both stories; inside is a center-passage, one-room deep plan.³ Likely, the current south (street) elevation was altered later to its current Italianate façade with evenly spaced brackets, modillions and wide frieze with applied detail.

In 1900, a “For Rent” ad in *The Evening Star* praises the large side yard and “side porches on both floors.”⁴ In 1901, the owner submitted a building permit application to repair the side bay and replace the weatherboarding.⁵ In 1902, the owner applied to rebuild the retaining wall.⁶ In 1922, the owner’s request to “erect new 1-story front porch in front of house (on private

¹ The 1854 real property tax assessment shows the owner as Gillies Groenfeldt and others, Dutch bankers who were creditors of the speculator James Greenleaf, and who would not have constructed improvements. The house must have been constructed by a later owner and is seen, with a rear addition, in the 1857 Boschke Map, so it must have been built between 1854 and 1857. Bob Arnebeck, *Through A Fiery Trial: Building Washington 1790-1800* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books; 1991).

² The owner and architect explained that the original low-pitched gable-end roof is still in the attic and was covered over with the shed roof that we see now. From the demolition to the north elevation, the outline of a low-pitched gabled roof and a separate shed roof covering the two-story porch is visible.

³ In center-passage plans, the stair passage connects all the rooms in the main building. Often the second floor mirrors the first. By the 1840s this plan was common throughout the mid-Atlantic. Greek Revival building often have symmetrical facades and center or side passages. Gabrielle M. Lanier & Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; 1997). 28 and 139.

⁴ *Evening Star* (Published as THE EVENING STAR.) - April 4, 1900.

⁵ Building Permit #365 (27Aug. 1901) Square 787, lot 2. Owner: Smithsonian Institute. House is 28 x 35. “Step at side door to be made new. Side bay to be repaired (replace weatherboarding); Wood shed to be repaired.”

⁶ Building Permit #1548 7/8 (11 Apr. 1902) Square 787, lot 2. Owner: Smithsonian Institute. “Rebuild retaining wall: 13 inches thick, 8 ft high reinforced by brick piers 9x18 inches, 6 feet apart.”

property)” was approved.⁷ The existence of three porches was confirmed by a 1930 advertisement for the sale of the house, “Splendid 7-room, 2-bath modern house, semi-detached, 3 porches; large lawn.”⁸ The street-facing porch supports this with more recent construction details than the two-story east-facing porch, with its exposed rafter ends, simpler chamfered porch columns, and narrow bead board on the ceiling.

Character-Defining Features:

326 A Street SE is perched on top of a hill and set back from the street. It has its principal entrance facing east to the side yard, not south to the street; an unusual feature for a Capitol Hill house. As described in the newspaper advertisements, the side yard and the two-story porches have been significant selling features throughout the life of the house. The berm on this property tells the history of the house – it was built before streets were graded and natural topography was a part of siting the building.⁹ The relationship of the front entrance of this house elevated on the hill above the pedestrian on the street is a character defining feature.

At its October 26, 2017 hearing, the Board:

... voted to support the staff report [investigate feasibility of bracing the house in place vs. demolition, detailed site-line showing the third floor at the rear addition needed to document visibility from A Street] with the following findings: that if the applicant wishes to propose demolition of the house they complete a thorough conditions report detailing the existing conditions at the property and a document detailing plans to dismantle, salvage, relocate, and reconstruct the original house should be developed and that as much original historic fabric be retained and re-used as possible; that the entrance at the house’s east elevation be retained; and the further refinements be made to the design at the side addition.

The historic house is moving in a good direction; the applicant has responded to the Board's order and now proposes to retain and restore the historic house, will retain the side entrance, and no longer plans to expand the basement, and it appears that the berm will be maintained. However, while the applicant plans to retain the east side porch, we are concerned that the front entrance on the east side is not being retained. The current east elevation is three-bays with a central door and it appears they are altering it to either a four bay with no door or a four bay with end door at the far end.

The revised plans and the project architect's email respond to questions we raised: The front yard's grading, retaining wall, and steps will be maintained. The rear yard grading will also be maintained, with the addition of a ramp for accessible access from the alley. The patio will be 4 feet wide, at grade level and an extension of the existing sidewalk.

While we strongly prefer that the east elevation front entrance be maintained, we believe that the plans for the existing house are compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District.

⁷ Building Permit # 8351 (10 May 1922). Owner: Christian Herald; used as a residence, frame, 2-story. “Repair present side porch. Erect new 1-story front porch in front of house (on private property).”

⁸ *Evening Star* (Published as THE EVENING STAR.) - July 9, 1930

⁹ See HPO, *Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts*, p. 6, noting that retaining walls significantly contribute to the character of a property and its neighborhood.

Proposed Side Addition:

This property is unique in that there is a large side yard within the interior of a block. The proposal to build a new addition in this space is understandable. HPO states that side additions should be clearly distinct so that they do not look older than the original building and have corresponding scale and massing. The new side addition is designed in the Second Empire style and is set back behind a retaining wall and features cement fiberboard siding, and a Mansard roof with dormers. The Mansard roof looks top heavy over the double French doors. It would also be the only Second Empire house on the block, and does not fit in. We suggest replacing the Second Empire design with a more compatible and more modest design.

The proposed addition, while reduced in size is approximately twice the square feet of the historic (pre-August 2017 demolition) house, and is not subordinate to the historic house, and overwhelms the historic house. While the design concept of making the two houses look separate respects the importance of the historic structure, the size, style, and massing of the proposed formal high-style addition makes the modest vernacular historic structure appear even more subordinate.

We believe that the addition is not compatible with the Capitol Hill Historic District, but with further study, the addition could become compatible.

Thank you for considering our comments.