

Testimony of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society before the Historic Preservation Review Board on October 26, 2017

HPA 17-591 326 A Street, SE

My name is Beth Purcell and I am testifying on behalf of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society. Our primary concerns with this project are demolition, changes to character-defining features of a history house, replacement of a historic house, and construction of an extremely large, non-subordinate addition.

History of the house

This contributing two-story vernacular frame house was built between 1854 and 1857, probably by John H. Kidwell, a carpenter.¹ 326 A Street, SE is perched on top of a hill and set back from the street.² It has its principal entrance facing east to the side yard, not south to the street; an unusual feature for a Capitol Hill house.³ It has Greek Revival elements - a 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 entrance is on the side through the five-bay porch. Inside is a center-passage, one-room deep plan.⁴ On the street-facing (south) elevation, a porch was added in 1922. As far as we can determine, the side entrance has always been the main entrance and there was never an entrance through the street-facing porch.⁵

¹ The 1854 real property tax assessment shows the owner as Gillies Groenveldt and others, Dutch bankers who were creditors of the speculator James Greenleaf, and who would not have constructed improvements. Bob Arnebeck, *Through A Fiery Trial: Building Washington 1790-1800* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books; 1991). 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. The 1854 real estate tax assessment indicates that sometime after the assessment, "E. Kidwell," owned lot 2, the site of the house. The 1858 *City Directory* shows John H. Kidwell, carpenter, living at 122 A Street, SE (later known as 326 A Street). So it appears that John H. Kidwell likely built the house sometime between 1854 and 1857.

² See HPO, *Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts*, pages 6 and 9, noting that retaining walls significantly contribute to the character of a property and its neighborhood and should be maintained, repaired, or replaced in-kind. Judith M. Capen, AIA, *Capitol Hill Historic District Guidelines* "Entrance-When a Door is More than a Door" (Washington, D.C.: Capitol Hill Restoration Society). 2.

³ 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.

⁴ Furthermore, Capitol Hill has a small amount of pre-Civil War frame houses with original wood porches remaining as well as a history of adding porches across the front of houses in the early 20th century. This house tells the history of both of these eras which are within the period of significance for the Capitol Hill Historic District. The new proposal which recommends demolition and replacement of the historic structure, entirely or in significant part, is inconsistent with the *Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978* in so far as it fails to retain and enhance a contributing historic property in the Capitol Hill Historic District. 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 buildings 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).

⁵ In 1900, a "For Rent" ad in *The Evening Star* praises the large side yard and "side porches on both floors." In 1901, the owner submitted a building permit application to repair the side bay and replace the weatherboarding.⁵ In

Demolition

The proposal recommends demolition of the historic structure, entirely or in significant part, although the engineer's report indicates that demolition is not structurally necessary. The Board ruled against demolition in a 2014 case, where the owner of the shotgun house, 1229 E Street, SE, sought a permit to raze the building, based on his engineer's report that the building had deteriorated to the point that demolition was the only option. HPA 14-435, September 18, 2014. Before the hearing, HPO and DCRA staff inspected the building and determined that it remained salvageable. For this reason, the Board denied the raze permit. The key here is that HPO's experts need to check the opinion of an applicant's engineer, and we agree strongly with the staff on this point. (As the staff report points out, in 2016, the shotgun house's new owner received permission from the Board to move the shotgun house four feet to the west, and in this context the Board allowed the house to be dismantled and reconstructed.) HPA 16-379.

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.⁶ The relationship of the front entrance of this house elevated on the hill above the pedestrian on the street is a character defining feature.

It is commendable that the applicant will restore much of this historic house. However, CHRS is concerned that the proposed plans modify character-defining features by eliminating the original front entrance, enclosing the first-floor porch with row of continuous casement windows, and reducing the five-bay two-story porch to four bays. As recommended in the *Capitol Hill Historic District Guidelines*, it is important to preserve the existing relationship of the first-floor entrance of the house to grade.⁷ Without maintaining the original location of the front entrance, the house becomes estranged from the landscape around it. Furthermore, Capitol

1902, the owner applied to rebuild the retaining wall.⁵ In 1922, the owner's request to "erect new 1-story front porch in front of house (on private property)" was approved. 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." The street-facing one-story porch (which we believe was never an entrance) supports this later date 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. *Evening Star* (Published as THE EVENING STAR.) - April 4, 1900. Building Permit #365 (27 Aug. 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." 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." 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)." *Evening Star* (Published as THE EVENING STAR.) - July 9, 1930.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Judith M. Capen, AIA. *Capitol Hill Historic District Guidelines* "Entrance-When a Door is More than a Door" (Washington, D.C.: Capitol Hill Restoration Society). 2.

Hill has a small amount of pre-Civil War wood frame houses with original wood porches remaining as well as a history of adding porches across the front of houses in the early 20th century.⁸ This house tells the history of both of these eras which are within the period of significance for the Capitol Hill Historic District.

The applicant proposes some rough treatment for the existing or reconstructed historic house -- by eliminating the historic primary entrance, enclosing the first-story entry porch with a row of continuous casement windows, and reducing the five-bay two-story porch to four bays, altering primary features of the house. Contrary to the applicant's reassurances, this is not a reproduction or replica of the historic house; it is important to preserve the existing relationship of the first-floor entrance of the house to grade and its connection to the landscape around it.⁹

Proposed Side Addition:

This property is unique in that there is a large side yard within the interior of a block. The new side addition is designed in the Second Empire style and is set back behind a retaining wall could be compatible, but at this point, the proposed addition is not subordinate to the historic house. The historic house as it stands now, including the basement and areas of both porches, is 1,619 square feet. If we exclude the original open porch on the first floor and the basement, the area is even smaller. The proposed addition is clearly much larger than the historic house, with a total of 5,393 square feet and would loom over the historic house.

Making the two houses look separate respects the importance of the historic structure. However, the size, style, and massing of the proposed formal high-style addition makes the modest vernacular historic structure appear even more diminished. A subordinate two-story Second Empire addition could complement the historic vernacular house.

We agree with number 1, 2, and 4 of the staff's recommendations.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Testimony prepared by Alison Ross and Beth Purcell

⁸ Judith M. Capen, AIA. *Capitol Hill Historic District Guidelines* "Entrance-When a Door is More than a Door" (Washington, D.C.: Capitol Hill Restoration Society). 7.

⁹ See HPO, *Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances and Windows*, 4. Judith M. Capen, AIA. *Capitol Hill Historic District Guidelines* "Entrance-When a Door is More than a Door" (Washington, D.C.: Capitol Hill Restoration Society). 7.