

DC Preservation Advocate

The mission of the DC Preservation League is to preserve, protect, and enhance the historic and built environment of Washington, DC, through advocacy and education.

Playhouse Designation an H Street First

From Hupmobile showroom to soul food restaurant, over the past 74 years the one-story, eclectic “Neo-Romanesque” building located at 1365 H St., NE, has shown a remarkable resiliency. In April, the Historic Preservation Review Board accepted DCPL’s nomination of the building to the DC Inventory of Historic Places in recognition of its unusual architectural features and historically significant uses. The building, now known as the H Street Playhouse, is the only locally designated landmark on H St., NE.

When the building was constructed in 1927-28 by local developer William Oshinsky, local automobile dealers and distributors were expanding their show room locations beyond 14th St., NW, to meet unprecedented demand for the popular product. The H St., NE, corridor quickly became home to many new car showrooms, including the first Ourisman Chevrolet dealership, which started in the 600 block. To design his new showroom, Oshinsky hired the architectural firm of Upman and Adams, which was responsible for the design of many Washington buildings in the second quarter of the 20th century including US Post Offices, public school buildings, and hospitals for the Army and Navy Department. The first tenants were Moller Motors and Sam’s Garage, followed shortly thereafter by Mott Motors, Inc., a Hupmobile dealership, and Duke & Otey Motors, Inc.

When demand for auto showrooms declined, the building’s large open-span floor plan made it adaptable for other uses. In 1943, the Plymouth Theatre opened in the space, serving African Americans who were excluded from the whites-only Atlas Theater, constructed in 1938 in the same block. According to stories in the *Washington Afro American*, the Plymouth helped meet a long felt need for motion picture entertainment and allowed residents to obtain recreation without violating the World War II-era ban on pleasure driving. The Plymouth lacked air conditioning and modern rest room facilities, but, after the war restrictions were lifted, Ike Weiner took over the Plymouth and added restrooms, a heating and air-conditioning system, and a water fountain. The Plymouth closed in 1952, no doubt affected by the integration of the Atlas Theater in 1951.

During the 1950s, the building was used as a roller rink and a furniture store. Oshinsky sold the building in 1959 to Clements Printing, which escaped harm from the 1968 riots that devastated much of the street. In 1984, Clements sold to John French, a former Vice President with McDonald’s Corporation, who operated a southern soul food restaurant until 2001. The current owners, Adele and Bruce Robey, are restoring the building’s exterior and converting it back into a theater -- this one for live performances by area companies such as the Theater Alliance.



Left, facade of 1365 H. St., NE, prior to restoration. Above, detail of carved stone doorway.



Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

If you pay close attention to the banner at right, you may notice several new names. Since the last edition of the *DC Preservation Advocate*, the Board of Trustees has elected four new members and hired an additional staff person. Joining the board are Loretta Neumann, Bob Wittig, Francine Raizes, and Jim Abdo, each of whom brings a unique set of talents to our preservation efforts.

Loretta is currently a Vice President of Historic Takoma, Inc. and has extensive experience in government relations, communications and environmental policy, natural resources conservation, and historic preservation. Bob is Executive Director of the Academy of Hope, a DC organization that provides basic education and computer training to more than 600 low-income and homeless adults annually, and has significant experience in running a nonprofit organization. Francine, who played an active role in the planning of the League's 30th anniversary celebration last May, is co-owner of Karchem Properties Inc., a real estate development and project management company established in 1991. Francine brings a wealth of business planning and marketing experience with her to the board. Jim is President and CEO of Abdo Development, which concentrates on development of condominiums and luxury apartment buildings in the Dupont Circle and Logan Circle historic districts. Jim has over fifteen years experience in all aspects of design/build in both commercial and residential construction.

The other addition to our line up is Krista Schreiner, the League's new Program Manager. Krista has a Masters in Historic Preservation from the Savannah College of Art and Design and has several years experience administering preservation grants in Philadelphia.

I hope you soon will have the opportunity to meet Krista, Jim, Francine, Bob, and Loretta and join me in welcoming them to the League. I am confident that they will make great contributions to the League's work preserving and protecting Washington's historic places. If you would like to make a contribution of your own, please call Krista at the office to learn about volunteer opportunities. From newsletter production to event planning to landmark nominations, the League relies on the talents of many dedicated members to perform its work. There is a great deal to be done, and I encourage you to become involved. For more information, please contact the League office at 202-955-5616 or info@dcpreservation.org.

Take care,



P.S. September is "Row House Month." Stay tuned for information about special programs.



Mayor Anthony Williams and Council Chair Linda Cropp with David Bell and Joan Brierton at the DCPL Annual Meeting.



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Readers are encouraged to submit information and opinions.

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Most Endangered Updates

Carter G. Woodson House: Not Out of the Woods Yet

By Alexander M. Padro, Chair, Carter G. Woodson House Task Force, DCPL

Despite the fact that the home and office of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, father of African American History, is on both the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2001 list of the 11 Most Endangered Places in America and the DC Preservation League's 2001 list of the 10 Most Endangered Places in Washington, little progress has been made in ensuring the late 19th century row house's survival.

From 1922 until his death in 1950, the house at 1538 9th St., NW, in Shaw, was both Woodson's residence and the offices of the organization he founded, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, as well as Associated Publishers, the company he established when other publishers refused to publish Black History textbooks. For a few months in 1925, poet Langston Hughes worked as Woodson's assistant in the house. The Woodson House is listed on both the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Sites. But these distinctions have not protected the building from the ravages of 12 years of abandonment, including a leaky roof. And while the Woodson House's plight has drawn the attention of a number of parties interested in supporting its stabilization and restoration, a new threat may make all such efforts moot.

The National Park Service will shortly be submitting to Congress the special resources study it has been preparing on the Woodson House. The report will detail a number of options Congress may consider, including having the Woodson House become a unit of the National Park Service,

granting it NPS affiliate status, or doing nothing. At present, the Bush administration is refusing to consider adding any new units to the NPS system until billions of dollars in deferred maintenance on current sites can be completed. However, DC Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, one of the Woodson House's champions, believes that she can muster the votes needed to pass a bill compelling the National Park Service to acquire the Woodson House and establish it as an NPS-managed national historic site.

Clark Construction, one of the firms building the new Washington Convention Center three blocks south of the Woodson House, recently arranged for the house to receive a temporary roof to control the deterioration being caused by rain infiltration. Further work will be needed, however, as water was still dripping inside during a recent visit.

The owners of the house, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, do not have the wherewithal to raise the necessary funding to restore its former headquarters. However, Shiloh Community and Economic Development Corporation, which owns most of the other buildings on the block where the Woodson House is located, has proposed incorporating the row houses to the south of 1538 9th St. into a senior citizen housing complex, and is exploring whether it would be possible to assist in the restoration of Woodson's former home as a house museum, as part of the block's redevelopment. But

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Webster School Gets New Owners

By Edwin Fountain

The Webster School, at 940 H St., NW, was built in 1881-82 as a free-standing, three-story, 12-room public school. Although it was used as a public school only until the first decade of the 20th century, it served as an "Americanization School" offering citizenship classes to immigrants from 1925 to 1949. After that it served various uses for the DC Public Schools until the 1990s. Since that time it has stood vacant and has fallen into disrepair, and was ultimately sold to the National Treasury Employees Union. DCPL applied to have the Webster School designated a landmark in December 1998, and the application was ultimately granted by the Historic Preservation Review Board in April 2000. In the meantime, NTEU had applied for a demolition permit, which DCPL opposed before the HPRB and the Mayor's Agent. The Mayor's Agent denied the application in February 2001, rejecting NTEU's claims of special merit. NTEU appealed both the landmark designation by the HPRB and the denial of the demolition permit application by the Mayor's Agent. While

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Webster School

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these plans are contingent on acquiring funding, as well as zoning and historic preservation relief, making it unlikely that this project will develop quickly.

In the meantime, the University of the District of Columbia's Architectural Research Institute has volunteered to prepare architectural plans for the stabilization and restoration of the Woodson House. Work began in February, with students taking measurements and inventorying the historic fabric remaining inside. According to Clarence Pearson, ARI's director, the damage to the building's rear wing is due to the compromised condition of a ground floor door frame, resulting in the bricks above the door shifting downward. Pearson estimated that \$10,000 in materials and labor would be sufficient to repair the damage and stabilize the wing. Lou Phillips, of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, is working to identify contractors and suppliers willing to assist in this effort.

But all these good intentions could



Woodson House

go for naught, as perhaps the gravest threat the house has ever faced could soon result in its becoming a smoldering pile of bricks. As a result of ASALH's failure to properly secure the house, homeless men and women are squatting inside the birthplace of African American history. Prostitution and drug activities are taking place in the same rooms where Woodson researched, wrote about, and championed Black History. Since utilities were cut off long ago, candles and fires are being lit for light and heat, posing the significant risk of fire engulfing the building.

A few hundred feet away from the Woodson House, a small park at the intersection of 9th and Q Streets and Rhode Island Avenue, NW, was recently named in Woodson's honor by the Council of the District of Columbia. But unless action is taken swiftly, if the Woodson House is to become a national historic site, it will have to be in the form of a replica of the building, not a restoration of the original.

HELP WANTED!

The DCPL Row House Task Force seeks creative, committed volunteers to raise public awareness about these historic resources and work with neighborhood residents to prevent their demolition. If you are interested in preserving the District's row houses, please call Task Force Chair Kate Farnham at
301-263-2884 or
e-mail kfarnham@msn.com.

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the appeal was pending, in January 2002 the General Services Administration exercised eminent domain over the building on behalf of the Secret Service, whose headquarters buildings is adjacent to the School. GSA has indicated that it will not pursue either the appeal or the demolition permit application, and that the Secret Service plans to adapt the Webster School for office use and to preserve the historic nature of the building. DCPL was represented before the HPRB by Andrea Ferster, and before the Mayor's Agent and the DC Court of Appeals by Ferster and by Edwin Fountain, Dan Bromberg and Peggy Ward of Jones Day Reavis & Pogue on a pro bono basis.

Gales School Designated

By Krista Schreiner

At its May 23 hearing, the Historic Preservation Review Board unanimously voted in favor of DCPL's nomination to designate the Joseph Gales, Jr. School as a local landmark. The school was erected in 1881, designed by noted Architect of the Capitol, Edward Clark, and named in honor of the eighth mayor of Washington City, Joseph Gales, Jr. It is a three-story, red brick, restrained Romanesque Revival-style school, resembling another Clark-designed school, the Webster School at 10th and H Streets, NW.

The Gales School closed in 1944 and during World War II, the War Hospitality Committee used the building as temporary lodging for servicemen in transit. The classrooms accommodated approximately 300 cots. Later, the building was used as an eye clinic of the DC Health Department, offices of the Rent Control Board and the Transportation Systems Administration of the DC Department of Public Works.

Membership Meets at Historic Wilson Building

By Joan Brierton

Wednesday, January 16, 2002, the DC Preservation League hosted its 2001 Annual Membership Meeting at the historic and recently renovated John A. Wilson Building at 1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. More than 150 members, volunteers, government officials and private citizens gathered in the impressive marble-lined Main Hall and received a warm welcome from DC Council Chair, Linda Cropp. Mayor Anthony Williams joined the crowd and delivered the evening's keynote address. The first such event of its kind to be held in the Main Hall since the building's reopening, the DCPL owes a great debt of gratitude to Secretary of the DC Council, Phyllis Jones, for making this space available. For many, it was the first peek inside the local landmark since it closed for renovation years ago.

Chairman Cropp recognized Mayor Williams, key Council members, DCPL, members of the DC Historic Preservation Review Board and others for their dogged pursuits to maintain the key historic elements and character of this building and to work with city and federal representatives to ensure that the Council and other

local government officials would once again reside in their rightful home. Council members in attendance included Phil Mendelson, Jack Evans, Jim Graham, and Vincent Orange. Ward 3 Council member, Kathy Patterson, acted on behalf of the Council as the official sponsor of this event. Other key participants and supporters of the effort to restore the Wilson Building on hand included WAMU's Mark Plotkin, former DCPL President, Sally Berk, Acting Director of the DC Historic Preservation Division, David Maloney, and former President of the Committee of 100 and current Chair of the DC Historic Preservation Review Board, Tersh Boasberg.

The John A. Wilson Building, formerly the District Building, was constructed between 1904-1908 to house the government of the District of Columbia. The white marble building was designed by prominent Philadelphia architects Cope & Stewardson in keeping with the classical lines and look of the Federal Triangle, standing as a strong and dignified symbol of municipal government. The recently rehabilitated landmark building was officially renamed in honor of Council member John A.

Wilson in 1999. Representatives of the restoration project team, Mary Oehrlein, Oehrlein and Associates, and Shalom Baranes, Shalom Baranes Architects, briefed the audience on their collective efforts to not only restore the building but enhance it through modern improvements and additions.

After the evening's official program, attendees had the opportunity to tour through some of the building's more prominent and recently restored spaces, as well as venture into new additions. Tours were led by architect Patrick Burkhardt of Shalom Baranes Architects and Event Chair Joan Brierton. Tours included visits to one of the original corner offices, currently occupied by Chairman Cropp, the historic and beautifully appointed ceremonial Council chambers, the new Council chambers along the south side of the building, and walks through the soaring, light-filled contemporary atrium space.

The event was made possible through the generous support of Oehrlein & Associates, Shalom Baranes & Associates, Abdo Development, and ABC Printing.



Left, members enjoy tour of Wilson Building. Right, l to r, James Speight, Council Member Phil Mendelson, and Jerry Maronek.

Preserve a Landmark

Yes!

I want to join the DC Preservation League and help preserve, protect, and enhance Washington's unique architectural and cultural heritage.

- L'Enfant Society \$500 Family/Dual \$60
- Donor \$250 Individual \$45
- Friend/Organization \$100 Student/Senior \$20

I'm interested in volunteer opportunities:

- Landmarking Event Planning
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