

Docket Item #4
BAR CASE# 2004-0030

BAR Meeting
May 19, 2004

ISSUE: Permit to Demolish
APPLICANT: Basheer & Edgemoore
LOCATION: 915 South Washington Street
ZONE: RCX/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends **denial** of the Permit to Demolish.

NOTE: Under the terms of the Board’s by-laws, this docket item requires a roll call vote.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish the Gunston Hall apartments, an eight building multi-family apartment complex located at 901-915 South Washington Street to construct condominiums and townhouses as discussed in the concept plan Staff report.

II. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The complex occupies the entire city block bounded by South Washington, Green, Columbus and Church streets. It consists of two “C” shaped groupings, each with four two story red brick structures, surrounding a landscaped quadrangle all in a strong Colonial Revival design vocabulary. The buildings are set back 50 feet from the street. The basement level is exposed on the Church Street (south) and Columbus Street (rear or west) sides. The buildings facing Washington Street have truncated gable roofs clad in slate and punctuated by wood dormers. The end walls of the front buildings have lunette windows between double chimneys. All the buildings have brick quoins at the corners, a stringcourse with dentils and wood multi-pane windows. The buildings on the side and rear have parapets concealing flat roofs. The entrances face onto the courtyard and are accented by a variety of Colonial Revival architectural forms, including porticos, doorways with multi-light sidelights and transoms and palladian windows. The courtyard retains a number of mature trees and a system of walkways linking the buildings. Large holly bushes mark the front entrance to the courtyard. Low brick walls at the front and back of the courtyard enclose the space. The site drops off significantly at the rear (west) of the property where it is terraced to accommodate the change in topography. A set of brick steps through an ironwork gateway gives access to the courtyard from the rear.

The complex houses 56 apartments in the first and second stories and service areas in the basement level.



Figure 1 Gunston Hall Apartments, 900 block South Washington Street, 1939. Constructed around a central courtyard with walkways connecting the buildings and generous street setbacks and landscaping.

II. BACKGROUND & HISTORY:

The Gunston Hall apartments at 901-915 South Washington Street are an eight building multi-family garden apartment complex constructed in 1939. The architect for the Gunston Hall apartments was Harvey H. Warwick, one of the most important architects for apartments in the Washington metropolitan area in the 1930s and 1940s. An Appendix to this report provides additional information about Warwick and his architectural contributions in the Washington, D.C. area.

Siting

When originally constructed, the complex was located in a largely undeveloped rural area of the City. Washington Street had been extended over adjacent Hunting Creek to the south in 1932 with the construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway as part of the commemorations of the bicentennial of Washington's birth. Prior to that the street had ended in a dirt path at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery in the 1000 block of South Washington Street.

South Washington Street as it passes through Alexandria is the George Washington Memorial Parkway, an individually listed property on the National Register of Historic Places and a unit of the National Park Service. As a condition of routing the parkway through Alexandria, the City

agreed to preserve and maintain the memorial character of the parkway. Construction started in 1929, and in 1932, the bicentennial year, the parkway was completed between the Arlington Memorial Bridge and Mount Vernon. The roadway followed the varied natural and physical features of the landscape. As it intersected Alexandria, its four miles showcased some of the City's vast numbers of historic resources.

In the 1930s and 1940s, prior to the establishment of the Old and Historic District and Board of Architectural Review, plans for all of the properties that fronted on Washington Street were evaluated by the Federal government, acting through the National Capital Park and Planning Commission and, later, the National Park Service to ensure that they contributed to the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Thus, all buildings on Washington Street from this period are significant for having undergone federal design review and having been approved as “in keeping with the dignity, purpose and memorial character” of the highway.

At the time they were built, the Gunston Hall Apartments were well sited. The buildings have a generous set back from Washington Street on a high point of ground which in 1939 overlooked the Potomac River to the east and Hunting Creek and farmland in Fairfax County to the south. This bucolic setting helped to provide a transition from the more urbanized Washington Street section of the George Washington Memorial Parkway to the undulating, limited access parkway passing through the rolling hills adjacent to the Potomac River on its way to Mount Vernon.

The Gunston Hall Apartments are among a number of garden apartment complexes fronting directly onto the George Washington Memorial Parkway which bear historic names: for example, the Mount Vernon Gardens apartments in the 700 block of South Washington Street (1939) and the Williamsburg apartments in the 900 block of South Washington Street (1941). The Gunston Hall Apartments are named for the home of George Mason, father of the Bill of Rights, located several miles to the south of Mount Vernon on Mason Neck. The historical names of the new apartment complexes served to reinforce the patriotic associations of Alexandria with the Revolutionary War and early National eras and to foster a sense of pilgrimage for those motoring from Washington, DC toward Mount Vernon.



Figure 2 Gunston Hall, home of George Mason, Mason Neck, Virginia. Constructed 1755-60.



Figure 3 Gunston Hall Apartments, designed in a conscious Colonial Revival style in 1939, employs many of the same design elements as the original Gunston Hall plantation building including brick construction, slate covered gable roof with dormers, double chimneys, pedimented door surrounds quoining and circular windows.

Historical Context: Response to Housing Needs

The Gunston Hall apartments were built in response to a severe housing shortage that gripped the metropolitan Washington area in the mid- to late-1930s with the growth of the New Deal agencies and continued through the defense build-up for World War II. From 1939 to 1943, the number of federal government workers nearly doubled. The 1940 City directory claimed that, “Alexandria’s rapid development in the past few years has made it the fastest-growing city in the state.” (1940 Directory, Introduction, 15). In this period the Naval Torpedo Station, Gravelly Point Air-city (National Airport), Potomac Yards and the Pentagon, all in the immediate vicinity of Alexandria, employed many thousands of workers. As a result, a severe housing shortage developed, particularly for modest income rental units. The apartment vacancy rate in the Washington area dropped from 12.5 percent in mid-1933 to 0.5 percent in late 1934 (Goode, James M., *Best Addresses*, page 332). Alexandria’s housing woes were such that the City commissioned a survey of all dwelling units in the City (approximately 9000 at the time) and a study of housing conditions. The report was presented to the City Council in June 1939 (“Speakers on U.S. Housing Here Tonight,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 4/19/1939, 1 and “Social Unit Gets Housing Plan Report,” *Alexandria Gazette*, 6/17/1939, 1).

In response, from 1939 through 1941, significant numbers of garden apartment complexes were constructed at the south end of the City where zoning enacted in 1931 allowed higher density development along Washington Street. According to the 1998 draft Historic Resources Report for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Improvement Study, the 700, 800 and 900 blocks of South Washington comprise a significant architectural grouping:

Collectively, the large concentration of multi-unit, speculative housing ... south of Franklin Street makes a major, and unique, contribution to the N[ational] R[egister] District as a whole, and its period of significance which extends through 1945. (Page 5-22)

The Gunston Hall Apartments, along with the Mount Vernon Gardens Apartments in the 700 block, appear to be the first of the garden apartment complexes to be completed on South Washington Street. The project was undertaken by the Mount Vernon Development Corporation, owner, and Stone and Warwick Construction Company, builder. Begun in late summer or early fall of 1939, the Gunston Hall Apartments were completed and had 34 apartments filled by the time the 1940 City Directory was published.

Architectural Context: Garden Apartment Style

Alexandria had no tradition of purpose-built apartment buildings. Prior to the apartment boom at the end of the 1930s, renters rented entire houses, flats carved out of larger and generally older houses, or boarded. There were no multi-story apartment buildings as were built in Washington from the 1880s onward. Instead, Alexandria's apartment history begins with the garden apartments constructed in 1939. Nationally, the first garden-style apartments were constructed in 1920s. By the 1930s, this type of multi-family housing had become popular in metropolitan areas all over the country. According to James Goode, in the period between 1935 and 1940, over 300 garden-style apartments complexes were built in and around the nation's capitol, making the area one of the most significant resources for this type of architecture (Goode, Page 184). Garden style apartments are typified by groupings of low (two to three story) buildings without lobbies or elevators arrayed in a landscaped setting, often featuring a central or interior courtyard. The typical site plan preserved much of the land as open space and placed the buildings well back from the street. The advantages to the tenant included increased light, air and privacy and a restful setting. The domestic appearance of the relatively small buildings in their landscaped settings made this type of apartment more palatable to the middle class, which had generally been resistant to high rise multi-family dwellings. The style proved an economical and aesthetically pleasing housing solution for Alexandria in the period of intense growth at the end of the 1930s and beginning of the 1940s.

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of area garden apartment complexes threatened with redevelopment instead successfully converted to condominium or co-op ownership. A number of local garden apartment developments of the same period as the Gunston Hall Apartments are listed on the National Register of Historic Places:

- Arlington Village Historic District, Arlington, VA
- Colonial Village Apartment Complex, Arlington, VA
- Walter Reed Gardens, Arlington, VA
- Fairlington Historic District, Arlington, VA
- Buckingham Historic District, Arlington, VA
- Parkfairfax, Alexandria, VA



Figure 4 Gunston Hall apartment looking south from Green Street.

IV. APPLICANT’S REASON FOR DEMOLITION

The applicants wish to demolish Gunston Hall Apartments, 56 units, to facilitate redevelopment of 60 dwelling units, 48 in two new condominium buildings on Washington Street and 12 in new townhouses on South Columbus Street and a Certificate of Appropriateness for the same.

The applicant says that the existing buildings have seriously deteriorated and that renovation of the buildings would require compliance with the off-street parking requirements. The property currently does not have off-street parking. The need to meet current parking requirements is triggered when the cost of improvements is 33 1/3 % or more of the market value of the building. The applicant says to create off-street parking would require removing all the trees and open space. The other alternative would be to apply for a parking reduction Special Use Permit, which the applicant says the City might not approve.

V. FINDINGS

In considering a Permit to Demolish, the Board shall consider any or all of the following criteria set forth in the Zoning Ordinance, §10-105(B) in determining whether or not to grant a permit to demolish. The staff has provided a response to each criterion.

(1) Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?

Response: Yes. The Gunston Hall Apartment complex is part of the architectural heritage that accompanied the development of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The complex is an

excellent example of the garden apartment style tailored to the more intimate Alexandria setting. It is the work of an architect who figured prominently in the development of apartments in the Washington area in the mid-20th century. It represents a significant period in Alexandria's history and growth.

(2) Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into a historic house?

Response: No. By definition, these multi-family buildings are not an historic house.

(3) Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?

Response: No. These buildings were built in the mid-20th century using materials and techniques readily available at the time. These same materials and construction methods are readily available today.

(4) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?

Response: Yes. The buildings were designed in direct response to the construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and are included as part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway National Register of Historic Places listing. The appropriateness and significance of the garden apartments on the southern end of Washington Street is mentioned in the Washington Street Design Guidelines (page 8). The setback of the buildings, the feeling of openness, and the scale of the buildings provides a fitting and appropriate southern Parkway entrance to the City's urban area.

In fact, the applicant recognizes "that these buildings were built during the post WWII boom in residential construction in our area and their architectural character of red brick finish with punched windows is an important design concept for the memorial charter of the Parkway, and the garden apartments in this area are specifically listed as a part of the historic register."

(5) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?

Response: Yes. These building were created as part of the historic place of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and are contributing resources in the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

(6) Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining and increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions, attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and

study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage, and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?

Response: Yes. The Gunston Hall garden apartment complex consciously evokes the design approaches of the early National period and seeks to foster a patriotic connection to George Mason, the father of the Bill of Rights. Its open feeling, low scale, and attractive design set the stage for making this southern entryway to the City's urban area an attractive and desirable place to live.

(7) In the instance of a building or structure owned by the city or the redevelopment and housing authority, such building or structure having been acquired pursuant to a duly approved urban renewal (redevelopment) plan, would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare in view of needs of the city for an urban renewal (redevelopment) project?

Response: This is not applicable to Gunston Hall.

VI. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The Staff finds that the Gunston Hall apartments are part of the district's historical heritage and, under the above criteria, are worth preserving. The complex is an example of the garden apartment style tailored to the scale of the City in this area adjacent to the George Washington Memorial Parkway. It has a scale, setback, and openness that present a soft southern entrance to the urban area of the City and the historic district. Retention of the apartments is consistent with the agreement that the City made with the National Park Service to preserve and maintain the memorial character of the parkway.

The Staff is also concerned that demolition of Gunston Hall could set a precedent in this area of the City, leading to other demolition requests that could change the character of the area and be inconsistent with the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

On the other hand, the buildings themselves are typical of other garden apartments found on South Washington Street.

The Staff also acknowledges the applicant's concern about whether the existing buildings can be economically renovated and its uncertainty about whether the City would grant a parking reduction Special Use Permit that a renovation might necessitate. These concerns need to be addressed more directly with a realistic assessment of the costs of renovation given the existing rental market for these units before Staff can comment on their validity or relevance.

Based on the findings and analysis of the site, the staff recommends that the Permit to Demolish be denied.

In the alternative, if the Board determines to approve the Permit to Demolish, staff recommends the following conditions be added to the approval:

1. No demolition permit shall be issued until the B.A.R. has approved the design of a new building and a building permit for a new building has been issued;
2. A report addressing the design and history of the complex shall be prepared by an historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to issuance of a building permit;
3. Large scale 4" x 5" negative black and white record photographs to Historic American Building Survey Standards shall be made of the exterior elevations of the buildings. Two sets of these photographs together with the one set of negatives shall be deposited at both the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a building permit;
4. Physical design detail elements, to be determined at the discretion of the Director of the Lyceum, are to be removed and deposited in the collections of the Lyceum in consultation with Staff of the Department of Planning & Zoning;
5. Alexandria Archaeology must be called immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, etc.) or concentrations of artifacts are discovered during development. Work must cease in the area of the discovery until a City archaeologist comes to the site and records the finds; and,
6. These conditions must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.

Appendix

Architect: Harvey Warwick (1893-1972)

Harvey Warwick, born in 1893, designed two of the most significant apartment building complexes in Washington, D.C.: the Westchester on Cathedral Avenue, N.W. and Colonial Village complex in Arlington, the first large-scale Federal Housing Administration apartment complex. Little is known of Warwick's early life and schooling, but his initial designs influenced the development of the apartment building type in Washington, D.C. Harvey Warwick's first apartment building designs were the prosaic compositions of the seven building C-A-F-R-I-T-Z Row (1922) on Spring Road, N.W. The unusual massing seen at the Randall Mansions (1923) at 1900 Lamont Street, N.W. reveals a more distinct talent. The Chalfonte (1925) at 1601 Argonne Place, N.W. presents a Mediterranean facade, distinctly influenced by contemporary Los Angeles apartment buildings. His skill with Gothic Revival, expressed in the 1930s as Gothic Moderne, is seen in the decidedly transitional design for Hilltop Manor (1926, now the Cavalier) at 3500 14th Street, N.W., the Miramar (1929) also on 14th Street, and his triumph, the design for the Westchester (1930) for Gustave Ring and Morris Cafritz.

In 1930, Morris Cafritz joined in partnership with Gustave Ring to conceive the apartment complex to be known as the Westchester of Cathedral Avenue. Retaining architect Warwick to execute their idea, the men intended the Westchester to be a 28-acre project with four, eight story connecting buildings. Employing the Tudor Revival style, Warwick prepared a design that fully articulated every elevation of the buildings. Only three of the four buildings were completed as the Great Depression reduced developer Gustave Ring's financial ability to complete his plans.

Working with Ring in 1936, Warwick designed Colonial Village in Arlington County, Virginia. This pioneering garden apartment development was the first large scale Federal Housing Administration apartment development in the country. Warwick produced carefully conceived apartment building designs within park-like settings. Colonial Village was the area's first garden apartment complex designed as a planned community and developed by Ring. The complex featured open landscaped courts and sidewalks, adjacent shopping, and meticulous attention to amenities and the comforts of renters. Warwick teamed with Ring once again in 1939 to design Arlington Village, their second FHA-insured garden apartment complex in Arlington County.



Figure 5 Gunston Hall courtyard entrance.



Figure 6 Colonial Village courtyard entrance.

Warwick designed 44 apartment buildings in Washington, D.C. from 1922-1945. He was a close associate throughout his career of Morris Cafritz and fellow Washington developer Gustave Ring. Warwick's apartment building designs include several large garden apartment complexes in northeast and southeast Washington such as the Skyland Apartments and Suburban Gardens. Colonial Village in Arlington is perhaps one of Warwick's best apartment complex designs. Historian James Goode has determined that "because of its excellence in design and construction Colonial Village became a prototype for dozens of other large garden apartment complexes in other states."

Warwick, who employed a variety of architectural styles, produced designs for buildings ranging from the early interpretations of the Art Deco to the Colonial Revival styles. According to Striner and Wirz: "The Commonwealth reveals how his [Warwick's] style, like that of so many Washington architects of this period, developed from the highly ornate and eclectic look of the later 1920s to a style rather neatly poised between Art Deco and the International style by the early 1940s." Clearly, Warwick's prominence as an architect is associated with his designs for apartment buildings.

[from: National Register of Historic Places nomination form for Arlington Village Historic District, Arlington County, VA (000-0024)]

Harvey Warwick's affinity for the garden apartment style may in part be due to his own love of landscape design and gardening. A founding member and director of the National Capital Daylily Club (NCDC), Warwick's skills as exhibited on his own "estate" are admirably remembered by a fellow member:

Harvey Warwick, Bethesda, MD started his estate plantings in the early to mid-thirties with large mature specimen trees and shrubs. I believe that it was once the most magnificent garden in the whole middle Atlantic area. (from NCDC website)

Warwick's involvement in the Gunston Hall Apartments may have included the design of the landscape. In addition, he may have had a financial interest in the project, as he had earlier in the Westchester Apartments. Further research should reveal whether he had a connection to the construction firm of Stone and Warwick which built the Gunston Hall Apartments.

Warwick's work is featured in two important studies of Washington area architecture: James Goode's Best Addresses: A Century of Washington's Distinguished Apartment Houses (1988) and Hans Wirz and Richard Striner's Washington Deco: Art Deco Design in the Nation's Capital (1984). As previously noted, two of Warwick's projects are included on the National Register of Historic Places: Colonial Village Apartment Complex and Arlington Village Historic District. In addition, Trinity Towers, an apartment building located at 3032 14th Street, NW, is included on the landmarks list for Washington, DC.

By the time Warwick designed the Gunston Hall complex he was a well known mature designer of apartment buildings. His design for the Gunston Hall apartments owes much to his earlier

work design at the Colonial Village complex in Arlington County (1935-1937). That complex was designed by Warwick approximately four years prior to the Gunston Hall project. Like Colonial Village, the Gunston Hall complex is designed in a restrained Colonial Revival vocabulary. The buildings are two stories in height, constructed of brick with punched window openings and have similar detailing, such as brick quoining. The garden style setting of the Gunston Hall complex also benefitted from Warwick's experiences at Colonial Village. At Gunston Hall the buildings ring a central courtyard with landscaped walkways serving each building as do many of the buildings at Colonial Village. While the Gunston Hall complex did not have imbedded retail as did the Colonial Village, the residents of Gunston Hall were within one block of the shopping center at the corner of Franklin and South Washington Street that had been built in conjunction with the Yates Garden subdivision.

Thus, Gunston Hall is a continuation of and refinement of the work of Harvey Warwick as embodied in the prototypical Colonial Village development.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F- finding

Code Enforcement:

C-1 Prior to the issuance of a demolition permit or land disturbance permit, a rodent abatement plan shall be submitted to Code Enforcement that will outline the steps that will taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

Alexandria Archaeology:

F-1 This property was the site of a 19th-century brickyard. An archaeological investigation was completed on this lot. Although the work did not result in the recovery of significant archaeological resources relating to the brickyard, there is a possibility that some evidence of the brickyard activities may be discovered during development.

R-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, etc.) or concentrations of artifacts are discovered during development. Work must cease in the area of the discovery until a City archaeologist comes to the site and records the finds.

R-2 The above statement (in R-1) must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.