

Docket Item #7
BAR CASE #2004-0078

BAR Meeting
May 19, 2004

ISSUE: Third story addition
APPLICANT: Mr. and Mrs. Alan Frey
LOCATION: 411 South Fairfax Street
ZONE: RM/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the third story addition. In the alternative, should the Board determine to approve the addition, Staff recommends that the application be deferred for restudy for a design that reduces the visibility of the addition and provides visual differentiation between the old and new construction.

NOTE: Docket item #6 must be approved before this docket item can be considered.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for a “3rd floor addition of 2 bedrooms & bath by extending internal stair to add 526 sf of useable space.” The gross square footage of the addition is 574 square feet. The addition will cover the entire main block and original rear ell. It will take the form of two intersecting gable roof forms.

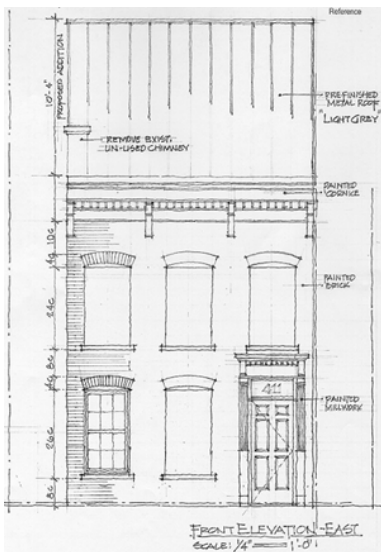


Figure 1 - Proposed Front (east) Elevation

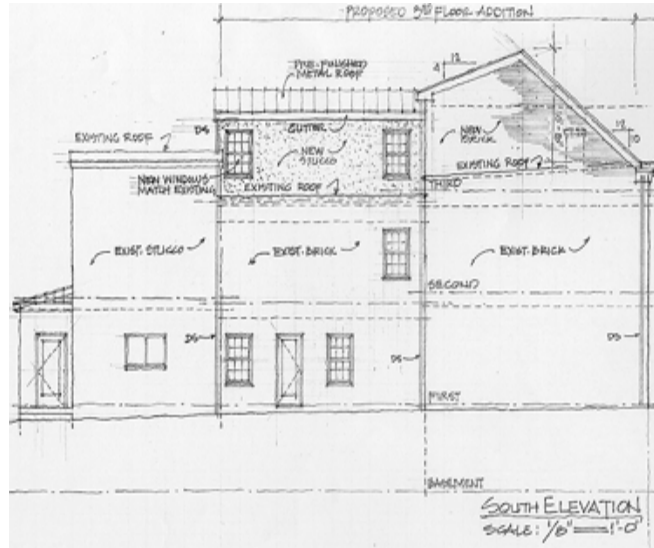


Figure 2 - Proposed South Elevation

The addition over the main block will take the form of an unequally pitched gable roof set parallel to South Fairfax Street. The plane of the gable facing Fairfax Street will be steeper, with a 12/10 pitch and extending back approximately 14' from the face of the building. The plane of the gable facing the rear of the property will be gentler, with a 12/4 pitch and extending back approximately 10'. The ridgeline of the proposed new roof will be 10'4" above the front cornice. The existing house is 21'6" high at the top of the cornice. The addition over the rear ell will have a gable roof set perpendicular to the gable over the main block. This gable roof will have equal sides, each having a 12/4 pitch. Both new roofs will be clad in prefinished standing seam metal. The roof over the main block will have a built-in gutter behind the cornice at the front and a prefinished aluminum gutter at the rear. The roof over the rear ell will have a built-in gutter on the north side and prefinished aluminum gutter on the south side. The north and south walls of the addition over the main block will be clad in brick and will be blind. The one window in this

section of the addition will face the rear of the property on the west wall. The addition over the ell will have stucco finish on the north, south and west walls. The south elevation of this section will have a window located at the east and west ends. According to the drawings, the windows will be six-over-six and will match the existing. The north elevation will be blind. The west elevation is not provided but the floor plan indicates that it will have one window on the south side.

The proposal does not include any alterations to the existing building, other than the third story addition.

The front and portions of the side elevations of the house at 411 South Fairfax Street are visible from Fairfax Street and along the horse alleys on the north and south sides of the house. The alley behind 411 South Fairfax Street is private and thus the rear (west) elevation will not be visible from a public right-of-way.

II. HISTORY:

As discussed in docket item #6 the two story, freestanding brick residence at 411 South Fairfax Street dates to circa 1870 and exhibits Italianate detailing. The house is located within a row of early- to mid-19th century houses. In 1996, the Board approved the reconstruction of an existing stucco addition at the rear of the house and a new small “vestibule” addition at the rear of the stucco section (BAR Case #'s 96-245 & 246, 11/6/1996).

III. ANALYSIS:

The proposed third floor addition at 411 South Fairfax Street complies with the zoning ordinance requirements.

The Board has approved demolition/capsulation to allow for the construction of third story additions in the past. However, in the most relevant recent case before the Board, that of 610 South St. Asaph Street, the Board denied the Permit to Demolish and thus did not hear the application for the third story addition (BAR Case #2002-0078 & 79, 5/1/02). The design for addition was subsequently revised to eliminate the third story. Staff notes that the original proposal in this case which was denied was less obtrusive than the current proposal for 411 South Fairfax Street. The house at 610 South St. Asaph Street already had a gable roof and the proposed third story addition began behind the front plane of the gable. In addition the third story addition would have been less visible from either side as it practically adjoins the substantially larger neighbor on the north side and has a narrow horse alley on the south side.

Staff believes the proposed third story addition at 411 South Fairfax Street is unacceptable as it substantially alters the basic form of the house and overwhelms the existing structure. According to the Design Guidelines, residential additions “should not overwhelm the existing structure or neighboring buildings” and [t]he existing form of a residential building should generally be retained in the expression of the addition.” (Residential Additions - Page 6). Moreover, the Guidelines state that the Board prefers additions which “are respectful of the existing structure and which seek to be background statements or which echo the design elements of the existing structure.” (Residential additions - Page 5).

Roof form and building height are essential components of the architectural character of any

building. The proposed third story addition changes the simple two story flat roofed house to a three story gable roofed house with a more complex roofline. The addition of the third story adds significant bulk to the relatively small mass of the house. The addition of this bulk to the top of the house will alter the blockface, which is predominantly composed of two and two-and-one-half story, early- to mid- 19th century houses with gable roofs and later 19th century two story houses with flat roofs.

Even if Staff was to accept as desirable the addition of a gable-roofed third story to the front of an historic flat roofed building, Staff believes the design of the proposed addition is problematic. The height of the gable over the main block appears disproportionately tall for the existing two story house.

The unequal gable proposed for the main block, while not totally unprecedented in Alexandria, is odd in appearance. Preservation philosophy recommends that new construction be distinguished from the historic building. The north and south walls of the addition over the main block are to be clad in brick and the roof in standing seam metal. Consequently, Staff is concerned that the casual observer will be unable to discern that the third story is a modern addition. The three story ell is also an unusual form for Alexandria. Typically ells are no higher than two stories, even when the main block of the house is three stories. In this case, with a relatively small main block, the three story ell seems particularly inappropriate.

Lastly, Staff believes the proposed third story addition simply adds unwanted mass to the district, contributing to “densification” of the historic district. Staff notes that the property currently has significantly less than the minimum required open space of 658 square feet (35% of the 1880 square foot lot). Based on the site plan provided, the open space is approximately 340 square feet. Staff fears that, if approved, the third story addition will set an undesirable precedent, leading to more requests to expand historic buildings upward when lack of open space prevents expansion of the footprint on the ground. Over time the result could be a significant change in the character of the district.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Therefore, Staff recommends denial of the third story addition. However, should the Board determine to approve a third story addition, Staff recommends that the application be deferred for restudy for a design that reduces the visibility of the addition and provides visual differentiation between the old and new construction.

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.
- C-2 Roof drainage systems must be installed so as neither to impact upon, nor cause erosion/damage to adjacent property.
- C-3 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-4 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-5 Construction permits are required for this project. Plans shall accompany the permit application that fully detail the construction as well as layouts and schematics of the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems.
- C-6 Permission from adjacent property owners is required if access to the adjacent properties is required to complete the proposed construction. Otherwise, a plan shall be submitted to demonstrate the construction techniques utilized to keep construction solely on the referenced property.

Historic Alexandria:

How old is the unused chimney? If original to the building, not a good idea to just remove it. The plan in my opinion changes the look of the streetscape and needs further discussion and study.