

Docket Item #20
BAR CASE# 2004-0135

BAR Meeting
June 16, 2004

ISSUE: After-the-fact approval of fence

APPLICANT: Robert L. Whittle

LOCATION: 711 Princess Street

ZONE: CD/Commercial

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends the following:

1. approval of a replacement fence which replicates the historic fence; and,
2. that the replicated fence be installed within six months of the date of this hearing.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting after-the-fact approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for a replacement fence on either side of the front of the two and one-half story building at 711 Princess Street. In late March, Staff was notified by a citizen that the fence at 711 Princess Street had been replaced. The applicant maintains that the old fence was in poor condition and that the new fence was intended to be as similar as possible to the old. The previous fence was a wood fence painted dark green with monument style pickets. The posts were carved with Eastlake style ornamentation. The top of the pickets formed a straight line between the posts. A baseboard ran along the bottom of the fence. The replacement fence is somewhat similar to the original. However, the pickets of the new fence are arranged in a swag between the posts and the posts are topped with a plain pyramidal wood cap rather than carving. The applicant has stated that he will paint the fence dark green as soon as the pressure treated wood has cured.

The replacement fence is approximately 45.5" to 48" high at the low point of the swags. The posts range from 51" to 55" high. The dimensions of the previous fence are unknown, but appear to be roughly the same, based on photographs. The fence is highly visible at the front of a prominent historic building and immediately adjacent to the sidewalk.

II. HISTORY:

According to Ethelyn Cox in Historic Alexandria: Street by Street, the house at 711 Princess Street dates to 1797-1799 and was built by John F. Smith. In 1853, it was bought by Captain William Boothe, an Alexandria business leader, who doubled the size of the house. Gardner L. Boothe and his wife "restored" the house in 1913-1914, enhancing its symmetry and federal appearance. Their son, Armistead Boothe, a prominent lawyer and state senator had his law offices in the building for many years. For at least the last 10 years, the building has been occupied by the Williams Whittle marketing agency.

The former fence probably was erected in the 1870s or 1880s, as suggested by its Eastlake inspired carved details. An early twentieth century photograph, found on page 182 of A Seaport Saga shows the same fence on the south end of the west side of the 400 block of Washington Street as the Boothe property associated with the house at 711 Princess Street once extended east to Washington Street. Later photographs, dated 1939 and 1954, in the collection of the Alexandria Library show the house at 711 Princess Street with the fence extending east toward the corner of Washington Street. Thus the fence apparently enclosed a large rectangular lot facing both Princess and Washington Streets which belonged to the Boothe family from the mid-19th century through to circa 1960, when the portion of the property fronting on Washington Street was sold and the large brick office building at 400 North Washington Street was constructed. The fence was then reduced to a small run on either side of the house, which

remained in place until March of this year.

The records of the Board of Architectural Review indicate that the Board reviewed alterations at 711 Princess Street in 1960 and again in 1985 (BAR Case #85-231, 11/20/1985).

III. ANALYSIS

Section 7-202(A)(1) of the zoning ordinance permits in any required yard open fences which do not exceed 3.5' in height. Section 7-200(C) of the zoning ordinance permits the BAR to modify or waive the fence requirements if the Board finds that a proposed fence will be architecturally appropriate and consistent with the character of the district. As the existing fence is over 3.5', Board approval is required. Staff has no objection to the height of the fence. It is appropriate in relation to the house and appears to be similar to the height of the historic fence.

In the opinion of Staff, the loss of the historic fence is extremely unfortunate. The fence embodied a great deal of craftsmanship, was unusual in its design and was long associated with a property long belonging to a significant Alexandria family. The character and authenticity of the historic districts is composed of many fine details such as window and door trim, paving materials, hardware and fences. The replacement of any of these with similar, but off-the-shelf elements diminishes the uniqueness of the place. Staff believe the high level of significance of the property and the craftsmanship and age of the fence call for the historic fence to be replicated. Fortunately, photo documentation and the survival of one of the posts make replication possible.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Therefore, Staff recommends that the historic fence be replicated and that the replicated fence be installed within six months from the date of this hearing

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement:

“No comments.”

Office of Historic Alexandria:

“No comment.”