

Docket Item #9
BAR CASE# 2004-0261

BAR Meeting
December 15, 2004

ISSUE: Signs and alterations
APPLICANT: George Gordon
LOCATION: 119 South Washington Street
ZONE: CD/Commercial

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends deferral of the application for restudy.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the installation of signage and alterations to the building located at the northwest corner of Prince and South Washington Streets. The long-time tenant, Pier I imports, will be replaced by Commerce Bank.

Signage

The applicant proposes to remove the blue canvas awnings which served as signage for Pier I on the Washington Street side of the building and replace them with internally illuminated signboards mounted above and extending over the large show windows flanking the entrance. The signs measure approximately 5 ½' high by 7 ½' long (41.25 square feet). The signboard, assumed to be plastic, will be in a stainless steel frame with a blue field and will have white lettering reading "Commerce Bank" and "Open 7 Days." The Commerce Bank logo, a stylized red letter "C" will also be located on the sign. The "Open 7 Days" will be on a separate narrow section that appears appended to the main signboard.

In addition, the applicant proposes to replace the pin mounted Pier I sign on the Prince Street facade with a similar sign in the same general location, between the first and second stories near the Washington Street corner. The channel letter sign will consist of black letters spelling Commerce Bank and a red "C" logo. It will be approximately 8' long and 3.5' high, measured at the highest and lowest point (28 square feet). The sign will be internally illuminated. The existing 6 square foot rectangular bronze plaque beside the door on Prince Street will be replaced with a bronze plaque at the same size reading "Commerce Bank" and carrying the "C" logo.

Alterations to building

Washington Street entrance - The applicant proposes to refurbish the metal and glass entrance surround on Washington Street. The internal lighting will be replaced and the frosted glass surfaces will be repainted white. The existing wood and glass double door with brass handles will be replaced with new doors with red "C" door pulls. The door type is not specified, but it is assumed to be a modern storefront glass door with metal at the top and bottom.

Washington Street show windows - The applicant proposes to replace the existing glass windows with new 3/4" glass in the existing frames. As drawn, the windows will have no vertical or horizontal divisions.

Prince Street entrance - The applicant proposes to replace the existing wood and glass double doors with brass handles with new doors with red "C" door pulls. Again, the door type is not specified, but is assumed to be a modern storefront glass door with metal at the top and bottom.

II. HISTORY:

The three story masonry building at the northwest corner of the prominent Prince and South Washington Street intersection was built in 1930 for the Virginia Public Service Company. It is Alexandria's grandest Art Deco office building, exhibiting many characteristics of the style such

as the contrast between smooth planar expanses with areas of concentrated ornamentation. The Prince and Washington Street facades have a polished granite base with limestone above. The windows are steel. Ornamentation includes a carved stone frieze panel, an ornate metal and glass entrance on Washington Street and metal panels with relief and filigree designs. The main entrance is on Washington Street and is given special emphasis through its concentration of ornamentation and vertical orientation, which contrasts with the overall horizontal form of the building. The ornamentation of the central bay begins with the elaborate door surround with half round glass and metal lighted columns and terminates with the rooftop flagpole. Large metal framed plate glass show windows flank the prominent Washington Street entrance.

The building was begun in May 1929 and completed in September 1930. It was greeted with both praise for its modernity and criticism for its brash non-traditional design. In addition to the Virginia Public Service Company, it housed offices for Seaboard Public Service Company and for the Utility Securities Company. The Virginia Public Service Company was succeeded by the Virginia Electric Power Company, which retained ownership of the building until 1950. For several decades after, it housed a variety of federal government offices. In 1988, the building underwent extensive interior renovations and the first and second floors were transformed into retail space. In 1988 and 1989, the Board approved signage and awnings for Pier I Imports (BAR Case #99-78, 6/27/1988 and 4/5/1989). Pier I has been the primary tenant from 1988 to today. The exterior of the building has a high level of integrity. It appears largely unaltered from the original elevation drawings.

Frank D. Chase (1877-1937), a Chicago-based architect, designed the building. Chase founded Frank D. Chase & Company in 1913 and was known for his design of factory and administrative building for industrial firms. Most of his buildings were located in the Chicago area. Interestingly, at one time Mr. Chase was president of the Western Electric Company. This may explain why he was chosen by the Virginia Public Service Company to design their flagship building in Alexandria. [*Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc. 1970; facsimile of 1956 edition), p. 119; Helen P. Ross, "The Last Word in Modern Office Buildings: The Virginia Public Service Building in Alexandria, Virginia," George Washington University, unpublished mss., Board of Architectural Review Staff files; Planning and Zoning Staff, Alexandria Virginia, "Twentieth Century Architectural Resources in the National Historic Landmark, Alexandria Historic District, Alexandria, Virginia," Preliminary Draft, January 30, 1997].

III. ANALYSIS:

Section 9-202(B) of the zoning ordinance states all signs displayed below 20 feet height on any building wall which faces a street, alley or parking area shall not exceed 1 square foot for each foot of building frontage. The proposed signage complies with this section of the zoning ordinance.

Section 9-202(B)(4) of the zoning ordinance states that a sign may be displayed flat against a building wall or at an angle ... so long as the sign does not project more than four feet from the building wall ... at least 8 feet above a sidewalk. The proposed signage complies with this section of the zoning ordinance.

Section 9-202(B)(3) of the zoning ordinance states that the maximum sign area allowed in any window shall not exceed 20 percent of the area of the window. Using the drawings provided by the applicant, Staff has determined that the proposed signs for the Washington Street facade do not comply with this zoning ordinance requirement. Staff calculates that the amount of sign covering the window is approximately 32.75 square feet. The windows are each 154 square feet, allowing a sign of 30.8 square feet in each.

First, the applicant should be commended for removing the existing awning/signs and for proposing to refurbish the columnar light fixtures on either side of the main entrance. However, Staff is concerned that, in general, the proposed signage and alterations are not particularly sympathetic to this significant Art Deco style building or to the memorial character of Washington Street.

The proposed signage does not conform to the *Design Guidelines* for the historic districts in several ways:

1. “Signs should be designed in styles, materials, type faces, colors and lettering that are appropriate and sympathetic to the historic style of the building” (Signs - Page 3)
The proposed Washington Street signs, which incorporate the typeface, logo and red, white and blue color scheme used by Commerce Bank elsewhere, do not relate well to the rather delicate Art Nouveau decorative motifs of the building, as seen in the foliated metal grills and panels and other features, or to the austere tan and black color scheme of the building..
2. [S]igns should not overwhelm or obscure the architecture and decorative features of historic buildings (Signs -Page 3). As placed, the Washington Street window signs will cover metal sunburst plaques which are shown in the original drawings at the top of the large show windows and which can be seen today underneath the Pier I awnings. Moreover, it is not clear how the proposed signs will relate to the metal hoods which are located above the these windows. Although not shown on the drawings provided by the applicant, these are shown in the original drawings and can be seen today above the Pier I awnings.
3. Staff notes that the *Design Guidelines* discourage the use of internally illuminated signs (Signs - page 5). The two signs facing Washington Street will be internally illuminated. The sign facing Prince Street will be back lit.
4. “Generally only one sign per business is appropriate” (Signs - page 3). In this case, however, Staff believes the strongly symmetrical nature and the length of the Washington Street facade (over 94 feet long) call for two equal sized signs on either side of the center axis. The fact that the building is located on a corner makes the additional signage on Prince Street acceptable. Staff does not believe the amount of signs proposed is excessive.
5. Finally, the *Guidelines* note that the “Boards are particularly concerned with the

maintenance of the memorial character of the George Washington Parkway which passes through Alexandria as Washington Street” and “signs on Washington Street must be compatible with the memorial nature of the Parkway” (Signs - page 4). Staff believes that smaller and more compatible signs on Washington Street and the elimination of the lighting from the signs on both Washington and Prince Streets will help to make the proposed signage more appropriate to the memorial character of the street.

Staff recommends deferral for restudy to improve the proposed signage, particularly that proposed for the Washington Street Facade. The revised design should be more compatible with the historic Art Deco building and with the memorial character of Washington Street. Staff concurs that the large show windows are probably the best location for the signs. As designed in 1929, the building was its own sign and thus there is no logical space for installing signage of the type requested by the applicant. As stated above, the symmetrical nature of the Washington Street facade calls for symmetrical placement of the signage. The signs must be installed in a location that does not obscure or obstruct any architectural elements. Staff believes window lettering consuming no more than 20 percent of the window area or a smaller signboard hung on the inside of the two show windows would be acceptable. Staff would also prefer a simpler color scheme, perhaps just using black and red, matching the sign proposed for the Prince Street facade, and elimination of the internal lighting.

Staff believes the channel sign proposed for Prince Street is acceptable in its location and design, but would prefer elimination of the lighting. Staff has no objection to the plaque sign proposed for the Prince Street doorway.

In the opinion of Staff, the proposed alterations to the building are unacceptable. Regarding the Washington Street show windows, Staff notes that they are an important feature of the primary facade on the pedestrian level and should retain their original appearance to the greatest extent possible. Staff believes the existing windows are modern replacements. However, they are fairly close to the configuration shown on the original drawings. On the other hand, the applicant’s drawings show a single pane of glass without any divisions. Staff does not object to the replacement of the windows, but recommends that they be replaced with windows that match the existing, at the very least, or, preferably, more closely match the original in configuration and width of the members.

Regarding the doors, Staff believes the existing wood doors with brass handles may be original to the building and should be retained if at all possible. If they must be replaced because of their condition or accessibility needs, they should be replaced with doors that are appropriate to the architectural character of the building. The red “C” handles are not appropriate. If the applicant wishes to proceed with requesting replacement doors, detailed drawings of the proposed doors must be provided.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

For the above reasons, Staff recommends deferral of the application for restudy.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement:

- C-1 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-2 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-3 Construction permits are required for this project.
- C-4 Required exits and accessibility within the building for persons with disabilities must comply with USBC Chapter 11.

Office of Historic Alexandria:

“No comment.”