

Docket Item #11
BAR CASE# 2005-0011

BAR Meeting
February 2, 2005

ISSUE: Demolition

APPLICANT: Commerce Bank, by George Gordon

LOCATION: 119 South Washington Street

ZONE: CD/Commercial

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish in order to remove four existing windows and portions of the east wall facing Washington Street and a single window and a portion of the south wall facing Prince Street. The proposed demolition is on the ground level at the south and north ends of the Washington Street facade and east end of the Prince Street facade. The demolition would allow the two sets of paired windows on Washington Street and the single window on Prince Street to become three large show windows, nearly the same height as the windows flanking the entrance. The total area impacted would be approximately 321 square feet (107 square foot per window).

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 1 Imports (BAR Case #99-78, 6/27/1988 and 4/5/1989). Pier 1 Imports has been the primary tenant from 1988 to today. The exterior of the building has a high level of integrity. With the exception of the elevator tower at the back, it appears largely unaltered from the original elevation drawings. The two large show windows on either side of the front entrance appear to have been replaced with modern metal windows in the same size nearly the same configuration as the original windows.

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].

The Board previously denied a similar request for demolition at 119 South Washington Street. In 1988, in anticipation of the use of the ground floor of the building by Pier 1 Imports, a request was made to enlarge the ground floor corner windows on Washington Street by combining the two paired windows into single large display windows (BAR Case #88-78, 6/1/1988). The request was opposed by Staff and the Art Deco Society of Washington.

III. ANALYSIS:

In considering a Permit to Demolish/Capsulate, the Board must consider the following criteria set forth in the Zoning Ordinance, §10-105(B):

- (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?
- (2) Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into a 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?
- (4) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve the memorial character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway?
- (5) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?
- (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?

In the opinion of Staff, criteria 1,3,4 &5 are met. This prominently located building is significant architecturally as Alexandria’s best developed example of the Art Deco style. It is cited in Richard Guy Wilson, *Buildings of Virginia: Tidewater and Piedmont* (Society of Architectural Historians, Buildings of the United States series, 2003) for its architectural significance. It is the city’s only known example of the work of Frank B. Chase, a prominent early 20th century architect. The building possesses an unusually high level of integrity. The areas proposed for demolition are in visually prominent locations on the Washington and Prince Street facades. The resulting alteration would substantially change the composition of the overall building.

According to the *Design Guidelines*, “there must be a compelling reason for the demolition,

either in whole or in part, of a significant structure in the historic districts” (Demolition of Existing Structures - Page 3). Staff does not believe there is a compelling reason for the proposed demolition and notes that Pier 1 Imports, a retail business, operated in the building with the existing windows for 17 years. The building already has more window area than many contemporary or historic office buildings. The existing large display windows will afford passers-by with excellent views of the banking floor and activity within the bank. The additional window area afforded by the proposed demolition does not appear to achieve much more visibility for the bank and, in fact harms the unique and well composed design of the building that, if sensitively treated, should serve as the bank’s most effective calling card. Staff has discussed several alternative designs for enlarging these windows with the applicant and is unable to support any of the proposed alternatives. Staff believes the ground level openings on both the Washington and Prince Street facades must remain unaltered in size.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

For the above reasons, Staff recommends denial of the application.

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.”