

Docket Item #14
BAR CASE #2005-0024

BAR Meeting
March 2, 2005

ISSUE: Demolish existing building

APPLICANT: John Sheridan by Stephanie Dimond

LOCATION: 634 South Pitt Street

ZONE: RM/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application as submitted.

NOTE: This docket item requires a roll call vote.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish to demolish the existing two story, detached, frame house at 634 South Pitt Street. The house is 14.6' wide, 40.5' long and approximately 20' high. It sits 9.3' back from the front property line and somewhat below the sidewalk grade on a 32' wide and 74' long lot. It is irregularly sited on the lot: 4.1' from the north side property line, 12.6' from the south property line and 24.2' from the rear property line. There is a metal fence with brick piers at the front of the property and a cement block wall at the rear. The property backs up to the Yates Garden Development on Royal Street and has no alley access to the rear. The front and sides of the house are visible from Pitt Street and the rear from the public alley entered off of Royal Street.

The house has a single story front porch and flat roof. The exterior walls are clad in what appears to be asbestos shingle siding. The windows are wood, two-over-two windows. The front elevation has a wood panel door with four lights and a transom above on the left side and window on the right on the first story and two windows on the second story. There is a simple molded wood cornice at the roofline. The south side elevation has six relatively regularly spaced windows, three in each story. The rear elevation has a door on the first level, window on the second and exterior brick chimney to the left. The north side elevation has an 1.7' wide overhanging section on the second story at the rear. There are only two windows in this elevation: one in the overhanging section and one below it in the first story.



Figure 1 West (front) elevation

The applicant purchased the property on April 20, 2004. Prior to the purchase, the house had been in the possession of the Lucas family since 1937. According to the applicant, the building is in extremely poor condition. Staff was provided a copy of a termite report (date illegible) noting the presence of live termites and extensive past termite damage. In addition, a letter report from a Tadjer-Cohen Edelson Associates, Inc. Consulting Structural Engineers, dated June 9, 2004, outlines structural problems with the framing and foundation and the actions that would be required to restore the structural integrity of the house. The applicant argues that the required work is so extensive that there would be little of the historic structure remaining once completed. Staff has examined the exterior of the house but declined the applicant's offer to

inspect the interior, believing the information provided in the reports to be sufficient. Staff does not dispute that the house is in poor condition and will require extensive work to preserve and restore. However, Staff believes the question rightly before the Board at this time is whether the demolition criteria are met and whether the house has sufficient value to the historic district to be preserved.

The applicant has not provided plans for the new structure at this time.

II. HISTORY:

According to an October 4, 2004 research report prepared for the applicant by Ruth Lincoln Kaye and provided to Staff, the house was constructed circa 1920. According to research conducted by Staff, the building was raised to two full stories in 1920 and may still have at its core a considerably earlier structure. The discrepancy appears to arise from differing interpretations of the Sanborn maps and Ms. Kaye's lack of the 1920 permit, which Staff obtained from the local history division at the Barrett Branch library.

The 1877 Hopkins Atlas shows numerous small buildings on the blockface. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the present house is represented on the map as no addresses or lot lines are shown. However, beginning in 1891, when the Sanborn maps first show the 600 block of South Pitt Street, Staff believes it depicts a dwelling in the location of the present house. In 1891 and 1896, it is shown as a two story frame structure with a single story rear addition and addressed as 636 South Pitt Street. In 1902, it is shown as a one story structure and there is a small one story store on the same lot immediately to the south of the house. The house is then addressed as 634 South Pitt Street and the store as 636 South Pitt Street. A 1911 building permit issued to Mrs. C. M. Holliday to "repair sill and base boards & weatherboards," describes the number of stories of the house as "1 plus" (Permit #83, August 10, 1911). Staff believes the house was 1 story plus loft or 1 ½ story at this time. This type of house was once considerably more common throughout the historic districts. Most have been demolished or raised to two stories. The 1902 Sanborn map appears to be significantly more precise than the prior Sanborns in a number of respects, including that property lines are shown for the first time and building locations and footprints are more accurately depicted. In addition, the building heights of many houses are changed at this time. A number of houses in the 600 block of South Pitt Street that were designated 2 story in 1896 are shown as 1 ½ story in 1902. The small house at 634 South Pitt Street appears to have been reclassified from two story to one story at this time.

In 1920, the house was raised to a full two stories. The 1920 building permit was issued to Annie Holliday to "build on second story two rooms on the present one story" (Permit #583, October 7, 1920). The permit describes the existing house as a 1 story building, 14' by 28', with a flat roof. In addition to the two rooms with a 7'6" height added to the second story, the application requests permission for a 5' by 14' front porch. The use of the property is described as "tenament [sic]." The 1921 Sanborn map shows a two story house on the same footprint as the previous, but with a new single story front porch. In 1921, the small store on the south side of the house is shown as a dwelling. This structure appears to have been removed between 1938 and 1941. In the 1930s, a new owner, Elizabeth Watkins, was issued permits to repair the floor and install a new roof (Permit #1443, November 5, 1935 and #1497, no date).

The next significant alteration to the house occurred in 1938. Soon after his wife Cora acquired the property in 1937, after having rented it for at least 13 years, Mr. Raymond Lucas was issued a permit to build a 2 story addition at the rear of the house (Permit #2825, November 15, 1938). The first story, measuring 13' by 14', was to be a kitchen. The second story, measuring 13' by 15', was for a bedroom and bathroom. The frame addition was to have a concrete foundation. The sketch accompanying the drawing shows two-over-two windows. Staff believes the existing house is much as it was following the completion of the 1938 addition. Permits dating from the 1940s through the 1980s are limited to minor repair work to sills, foundation, porch and roof (Permit #4401, February 28, 1942, Permit #7561, March 18, 1947, Permit #10973, July 8, 1953, Permit #18595, August 1, 1962, Permit #38076, July 15, 1982). In 1967, the Board of Architectural Review approved alterations to windows and siding at 634 South Pitt Street (Item #11, July 12, 1967). The minutes from the hearing refer to unspecified alterations to the side elevations and replacing the wrought iron posts of the porch with wood posts. As the porch alteration clearly never occurred and there is no building permit of a corresponding date, it appears that the work approved by the Board in 1967 was not undertaken or was only partially completed. There are no other records of Board review for this property.

In the 19th century and well into the 20th century, the area surrounding 634 South Pitt Street was a predominantly African American neighborhood known as “the Hill” or “Vinegar Hill.” According to the brochure, “A remarkable and Courageous Journey: A Guide to Alexandria’s African American History,” published by Alexandria Convention & Visitors Center and Ramsay House Visitors Center, the area was settled by African Americans in the years during and after the Civil War. Located at the southern edge of town, the area was not far from woods, swamps and farmland. However it grew to include churches, saloons, groceries and black schools, as well as houses, most of them modest, frame structures. Using city directories, Staff was able to identify residents for the property as far back as 1900, when the small 1 ½ story house was occupied by Frederick Watkins, an African American laborer. Other sources reveal that Watkins was born in 1876, had previously lived at 623 South Pitt Street, was a member of Roberts M.E. Chapel, registered to vote in 1902 and, when he died in 1939, was buried in Arlington Cemetery. Beginning with the purchase of the property by Candace “Annie” and C.M. Holliday, in 1911, the house at 634 South Pitt Street was owned by African Americans. A study of the 600 block of South Pitt Street in city directories indicates that the block was almost entirely African American and that there were familial connections between the owners and inhabitants of the house at 634 South Pitt and other residents on the block. In addition, although the house was a “tenement,” or rental property, for a period, it appears to have been inhabited primarily by family members and acquaintances.

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?

Staff believes that Criteria 1 and 5 are met. The small frame house is significant for the social history it embodies. It is a remnant of the predominantly African American community known as “the Hill.” It is representative of the housing available to and constructed by working class African Americans in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century. Few of the modest frame houses which once dotted both sides of the 600 block of South Pitt Street remain. Many, including the houses to the north and south of the subject property, have been replaced by significantly larger masonry structures. The loosely built streetscape of the 19th and earlier 20th century, marked by open lots, unbuilt upon side yards and irregularly sited houses has been replaced by a more uniform, dense, urban streetscape. Architecturally, the house at 634 South Pitt Street is interesting as an example of the extreme architectural conservatism of Alexandria’s vernacular builders. This conservatism, no doubt driven by economic concerns, extended to the reuse of what may well have been a 60 year old structure. Staff believes the first story of the house dates to at least 1891 and may even have been extent from the founding of “the Hill” in the 1860s. When it was raised to two stories in 1920, the house differed little in appearance from the flat front, flat roofed two and three bay houses built throughout the city in large numbers beginning in the 1870s. In place of the bracketed Italianate cornice used in the last quarter of the 19th century, it uses a simple molded cornice. Well after one-over-one windows are readily available, it uses the two-over-two windows more commonly associated with Victorian period buildings. While the condition of the building is admittedly poor, many buildings in the district, particularly those of frame construction, now preserved and treasured were once in extremely poor condition. Staff believes the criteria and not condition should guide the Board in its determination.

To conclude, Staff believes the house contributes to the history and architecture of the Old and Historic District, illustrating the variety of experience and architectural expression present in Alexandria’s history, and should be retained. Staff would, however, be willing to accept the demolition of the rear section, added in 1938, due to its later date and lesser visibility.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application as submitted.

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 be taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

C-2 Construction permits are required for this project.

Historic Alexandria:

“Before demolition, I need significant information regarding condition, age, and history of the building.”

Alexandria Archeology:

F-1 The G.M. Hopkins insurance map indicates that structures were present on this block by 1877. The property therefore has the potential to yield archaeological resources that could provide insight into domestic activities in 19th-century Alexandria.

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 must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.