

Docket Item #6
BAR CASE #2005-0080

BAR Meeting
June 1, 2005

ISSUE: Permit to Demolish
APPLICANT: Stevens Switch LLC
LOCATION: 632 South Fairfax Street
ZONE: CL/Commercial

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application as submitted. However, if the Board approves demolition Staff recommends the following conditions:

1. A report addressing the design and history of the building shall be prepared by an historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to issuance of a demolition permit;
2. Large scale 4" x 5" negative black and white record photographs to Historic American Building Survey Standards shall be made of the exterior elevations of the buildings. Two sets of these photographs together with the one set of negatives shall be deposited at both the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a demolition permit; and,
3. Physical design detail elements, to be determined at the discretion of the Director of the Lyceum, are to be removed and deposited in the collections of the Lyceum in consultation with Staff of the Department of Planning & Zoning.

NOTE: This docket item requires a roll call vote.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish the existing one story structures on the lot located on the northeast corner of South Fairfax and Franklin streets (632 & 634 Fairfax Street and 213 Franklin Street). What were once several independent structures now appear to be two connected groupings: a commercial block facing Fairfax Street and a residential block facing Franklin Street. The commercial block is currently separated into two separate businesses. It has a shed roof which slopes down from its highest point on the Fairfax Street facade to the rear (east). There is what appears to be a false mansard roof at the front. A canted entrance with double doors is located on the southwest corner of the building, facing the intersection of Fairfax and Franklin streets. Another entrance is located to the north on Fairfax Street. In addition to the two doors, there are three windows on the Fairfax Street facade. The Franklin Street facade of the commercial structure has a single window. The building is clad in rough coat stucco and has wood trim. A one story frame connecting piece that is set back from the commercial and residential blocks on either side appears to serve both sections. The one story frame residential section at 213 Franklin Street projects out to line up with the commercial section to the west. It has a shed roof sloping from south to north. It is clad in rough wood clapboards and has a door flanked by six over six double hung windows.

The building currently houses a dry cleaner and delicatessen. The residential portion is used for storage. The lot is 3195 square feet in size is highly visible due to its location on a corner and on a high point in the terrain.



Figure 1 - 634 S. Fairfax Street



Figure 2 - 634 S. Fairfax Street on left and 213 Franklin Street on right side of photo

According to the application:

Stevens Switch, LLC, a Virginia limited liability company, (the “Applicant”) is the owner of the one story commercial structure located on the northeast corner of South Fairfax and Franklin Streets in the Old and Historic Alexandria District. The members of the Applicant are Paul S. Stevens and Judy Stevens, the owners and occupants of the property located at 630 South Fairfax Street. The Stevens acquired the property in 2003 with the intention of ultimately consolidating the lot with their adjacent lot and enclosing the lot with an appropriately designed and BAR approved fence. Future use of the property may include the construction of a guest house and other permitted accessory structures. The Stevens have no immediate plans to construct improvements other than perimeter fencing.

Stevens Switch, LLC recently applied for a vacation of a strip of public right-of-way located between the subject property and Franklin Street and amounting to 819 square feet (VAC#2005-0002). That case has not yet been heard.

II. HISTORY:

The 1921 Sanborn map shows the lot on the northeast corner of Fairfax and Franklin Streets to be vacant except for a two story dwelling at the rear. (The dwelling, located at 211 Franklin Street, was separated from the subject lot in 2003 [SUB#2002-0005, October 1, 2002]). However, by 1931, the Sanborn map shows five separate small structures on the lot, including a one story frame store, two single story auto garages, a one story shed and, at the rear of the lot, the two story dwelling.

The 1941 Sanborn map shows further evolution of the collection of structures on the subject lot into a more cohesive grouping that closely resembles the current footprint. In 1941 the northernmost portion of the structure facing Fairfax Street was a dwelling while the southern portion, adjacent to the corner with Franklin Street, was a store. The blocks on Franklin Street were used as a dwelling and auto garage. At some point in the 1950s, both sides of the structure facing Fairfax Street were used as a store.

A cursory review of records in the Alexandria City Library by Staff found that the address at 634 S. Fairfax Street (the southernmost section of the commercial portion) was first listed in the 1929 Telephone Directory. At that time, it was known as Nalls Confectionary Store and was owned by George Nalls who had a grocery store and residence in 635 South Fairfax Street, the substantial brick building directly across the street.

Thus, Staff believes portions of the current structure were constructed between 1921 and 1931 and the present appearance was probably attained by 1941. From the inception, the property hosted a variety of uses and the present structure reflects that in its appearance.

The Board recently approved signs for Riverside Cleaners at 632 South Fairfax Street and Fairfax Deli & Carryout at 634 South Fairfax Street (BAR Case #s2004-00188, 9/23/2004 and 2004-00179, 9/1/2004). In the 1990s the Board approved other minor alterations for these buildings and denied an application for vinyl siding at 632 South Fairfax Street. The building at 213 Franklin Street was renovated in 1988 (BAR Case #88-89, June 1, 1988). At that time asbestos siding was removed to reveal the original wood siding.

This small cluster of buildings is one of the last remnants of the corner store in the City. Corner stores were, during the late 19th and well into the 20th century, a central fixture in most urban areas. Alexandria was no exception. According to Ellen Beasley in a catalogue from a recent exhibition at the National Building Museum, "Prior to the advent of the refrigerator, and the automobile, groceries were bought on a day-to-day (even meal-to-meal) basis, making a trip to the corner store essential to the pattern of everyday urban life." (Ellen Beasley, *The Corner Store*, Washington, DC, National Building Museum, 1999, p.9) Remnants of corner stores are found in the Old and Historic Alexandria District, for example, at the southwest corner of Gibbon and South Pitt Streets, the southeast corner of Duke and South Fairfax Streets and the southeast

corner of Oronoco and North Columbus Streets as well as throughout the Parker-Gray District. In addition to the nearby residential population that was served by this corner store, it also served workers at the industrial facilities that were located in the surrounding blocks including a petroleum tank farm and the Ford Plant and its later uses. This corner store also has a doorway which is canted to the street at the corner. This is one of the hallmarks of corner stores that signaled its commercial use.

This corner store is slightly different than the typical corner store arrangement. Most corner stores are two stories in height with the owner living above the work space. In this example, as noted above, the owner of store lived across the street. Similar arrangements are not unheard of in Alexandria. For example, the owner of Webster's grocery at the corner of Madison and North Patrick Street, lived next door rather than over the store. Thus, the corner store at 632 South Fairfax Street embodies the typical functions of the corner store with some slight variations.

The next phase of grocery store retailing was larger stores that sought to capture a somewhat larger residential area. Such stores were often the next phase of the successful operation of a corner grocery store operator. An example is the Sunshine Market at the northeast corner of Pendleton and North Columbus Street which was opened by operator of the corner store directly across the street. These stores eventually gave way to Supermarkets and the modern store. (See Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, Chapter on Supermarkets, pp.117ff, NY, Little Brown & Co., 1985).

In the National Building Museum catalogue, Ellen Beasley points out that the preservation challenges facing corner stores today are formidable and that as a largely overlooked part of the urban fabric this resource largely lacks an advocate. Thus, while remnants of the forms of corner stores can be found throughout most urban areas and, indeed, in the Alexandria historic districts, the survival of its use has not been a concern in most urban areas.

III. ANALYSIS:

In considering a Permit to Demolish, 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 #5 and #6 are met and the demolition should be denied. Because the corner store was such an integral part of urban life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Staff believes that this building represents a physical link to the earlier characteristics of the lifestyle of the historic district. Although, not substantial in size or possessing high architectural merit, Staff believes these modest buildings are important to maintaining the historic character of the immediate area. The buildings hold a place in the streetscape and strengthen the corner. The buildings are representative of the small scale commercial buildings that were once more common in the historic district and are part of what was once a commercial corner.

At the present time, no use or structure is being proposed on the vacant land area that will be created once these buildings are removed. The area will be fenced and the applicant's accompanying text indicates that in the future a new building may be contemplated. Thus, the result will be that in the immediate future the land will remain vacant. As Ellen Beasley noted in the corner store catalogue, "An empty corner lot is a constant, highly visible reminder of a building" (p.43) that was once important to the community. While many corner stores throughout the historic districts have been successfully rehabilitated for a myriad of new uses, in this case no new use is contemplated. The vacant lot to be created will highlight a break in the urban street fabric.

Thus, Staff cannot recommend demolition. However, if the Board approves the demolition Staff believes that the building should be documented. Therefore, Staff recommends the following conditions if demolition is approved:

1. A report addressing the design and history of the building shall be prepared by an historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to issuance of a demolition permit;
2. Large scale 4" x 5" negative black and white record photographs to Historic American Building Survey Standards shall be made of the exterior elevations of the buildings. Two sets of these photographs together with the one set of negatives shall be deposited at both the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a demolition permit; and,
3. Physical design detail elements, to be determined at the discretion of the Director of the Lyceum, are to be removed and deposited in the collections of the Lyceum in consultation with Staff of the Department of Planning & Zoning.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends denial of the application as submitted. However, if the Board approves demolition Staff recommends the following conditions:

1. A report addressing the design and history of the building shall be prepared by an historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to issuance of a demolition permit;
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- the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a demolition permit; and,
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CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement:

C-1 A demolition permit is required for the proposed property.

Historic Alexandria:

This building is more than 100 years old. There is likely to be some history available and it should be reviewed and evaluated before a decision to demolish is made.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 Tax records from 1850 indicate the presence of a free African American household in the alley on this block, but the exact address is not known. During the late 1800s, the area was part of the African American neighborhood known as "Hayti." The property therefore has the potential to yield archaeological resources that could provide insight into life in this community during the 19th century.
- 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 demolition. 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.