

Docket Item # 12
BAR CASE #2005-0287

BAR Meeting
March 1, 2006

ISSUE: Permit to Demolish

APPLICANT: Robert S. Brandt, Inc.

LOCATION: 900 North Washington and 901 North Columbus Streets

ZONE: OCM/Office Commercial

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends:

- A. Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, 901 North Columbus Street
Approval of the Permit to Demolish with the following conditions:
 - a. Large scale 4" x 5" negative black and white record photographs to Historic American Engineering Record Standards be made of the facades as well as the structural system of the former Smoot Planing Mill. Two sets of these photographs together with one set of negatives are deposited at both the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a building permit;
 - b. 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;
 - c. Preparation of a history of the building be prepared by a historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to the issuance of a building permit; and,
- B. 900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station
Approval of the Permit to Demolish.
- C. The applicant shall work with Staff to develop other mitigation measures such as developing an on-site interpretation element that provides a history of the site and its association with the Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, which may include a plaque consisting of a historical narrative and any historic images of the Smoot Lumber Planing Mill and should be accessible by the public. The interpretative element must be submitted to the Planning and Zoning Department for Staff review and approval prior to the issuance of a demolition permit.

NOTE: This docket item requires a roll call vote.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish the existing buildings on the site of 900 North Washington Street in order to allow the construction of a new residential condominium development. There are two buildings on the site: 901 North Columbus Street, the former Smoot Lumber Planing Mill and 900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station.

II. HISTORY:

Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, 901 North Columbus Street

901 North Columbus Street is a one story brick, concrete and frame building bounded roughly by North Columbus, Montgomery and Powhatan Streets extending eastward toward North Washington Street.



Figure 1 View from Powhatan St

It was originally constructed in 1912 for W.A. Smoot & Co., Inc. as a planing mill for rough lumber and millwork (Alexandria City Building Permit, #94, 1/31/1912). It was designed by H.A.

Riggs, a local Alexandria architect. The original owners, the Smoot family, have been dealers in lumber in Alexandria since the early nineteenth century. This mill replaced their earlier plant on the waterfront which was destroyed by fire in 1909.



Figure 2 View looking north on North Columbus St

According to the 1912 building permit, the original overall dimensions of the planing mill were approximately 60' x 60' x 60'. Subsequently, the 1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps depicts the overall footprint of the building as enlarged to approximately 160' in length along North Columbus Street and 120' along Montgomery Street. The original part of the plant has a concrete floor with concrete and brick walls and the roof is supported by large 12" x 12" chamfered wood posts with two paired struts at 20' on center. The planing mill was constructed using a common framing technique for industrial construction – slow burning construction. Popularized in the mid-19th century and utilized well into the 20th century for industrial buildings, slow burning construction utilizes heavy timber framing, usually chamfered, spaced at generous intervals as a means of reducing fire danger. The heavy timber framing was difficult to ignite and would be slow burning, enabling fire fighting to be carried out before a structure was completely lost. (see, for example, Sara Werneil, *The Fireproof Building: Technology and Public Safety in the Nineteenth Century American City*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, in association with the Hagley Museum and Library. 2000). It is not difficult to understand why the Smoot company had opted for a structural framing system that was fire resistant for this new mill to replace the mill on the waterfront which had burned. With the type of construction used in the new mill, the only part of the building that was readily susceptible to fire was the roof decking. The structural system was slow burning construction and the exterior walls were fireproof being constructed of brick and concrete

The plant was steam powered and was served by a spur of the R.F. & P railroad which ran along the center of Washington Road, now Powhatan Street.

The planing mill closed in the late 1920s, and the property was then used as a grocery, a bakery,

and for the assembly of truck bodies. The building was then purchased by a 90-store mid-Atlantic grocery chain and became one of Alexandria's first modern supermarkets. With the spacious floor area of the former mill, the "Food Lane Supermarket" could boast an "Ultra-modern layout...spacious wide aisles...Clean, Pleasant Surroundings...Modern Conveniences...[and] Easy ONE-STOP Shopping for all your Food Needs," when it opened in June 1946. As elsewhere in the nation, such supermarkets were replacing Old Town's many corner groceries and specialty stores. This particular store lasted only four years, however, affected by competition and continuing suburbanization north and west of the city. [*Alexandria Gazette*, 6/4/1946]. The report by Richard Bierce for Robert S. Brandt, Inc. notes that there is an "interesting anomaly" in "the use of a tin ceiling in some areas, with a kind of sunburst pattern." This tin ceiling undoubtedly dates from the use of the building as a supermarket.

In the late 1950s the building housed Alexandria's entrant into the early Cold War aerospace industry. Atlantic Research Corporation, a chemical and electronics company, began specializing in rockets and missiles at that time. The former mill structure briefly served as their offices while they operated a laboratory at 812 North Fairfax Street.

The building next served as a government warehouse and until recently housed a 7-Eleven Store, a printing shop, and a locksmith.

In addition to the Smoot planing mill, H.A. Riggs also designed the two story brick building at 1210 Queen Street which was built in 1909-1910. The building originally served as a warehouse for William Peck, a prominent businessman in early 20th century Alexandria. When originally constructed it was among the most impressive structures in the Parker Gray neighborhood. The building is currently undergoing adaptive reuse as residential condominiums and was approved in 2005 by the Parker-Gray Board of Architectural Review (BAR Case #2005-2005, 5/25/2005). Riggs subsequently moved to Ohio where he died in the 1930s.

Riggs' design of these two buildings displays skill and a working knowledge of industrial architectural practices of the early 20th century.

Current Condition

The exterior of the building, though penetrated with various utilitarian openings over time retains its integrity. The exterior brick work of the building is painted as a means of unifying the structure and disguising the various penetrations of the walls that have taken place over time as the uses of the building have changed. The interior structural system remains almost completely intact.

900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station

This is a one story, brick gasoline service station. The current iteration of the gasoline service station on the site was re-constructed in 1969 (Building Permit, 8/29/1969, Thomen & Cromar Architects) in a high style Colonial Revival design vocabulary. It is a freestanding building that



Figure 3 View from N Washington

was constructed on land that was originally part of the Smoot planing mill complex. The current design iteration is the third gasoline service station on the site.

The current design of the gasoline service station is constructed of brick with a center projecting bay with service bays on the south side of the front elevation as well as on the north elevation. The building has gable roofs with slate tiles, a triangular pedimented cornice and oriel window on the north elevation, brick quoining on the north and south sides of a one story center projecting bay with a projecting bay window with standing seam copper roof. Its exterior form is little changed from its original appearance.

The original gasoline service station on the site was a brick structure in a Colonial Revival style constructed in the late 1930s. This station was “modernized” in 1952 and a bay added. The building was sheathed with porcelain panels and plate glass show windows were installed (Building Permit #10273, 5/9/1952).

The service station is located directly fronting Washington Street which is part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway constructed in 1932 as part of the commemorations of the bicentennial of George Washington’s birth.

The architectural style of the gasoline service station uses a consciously residential Colonial design vocabulary for two important reasons. First, the Colonial revival style is an attempt to associate the building with the architectural styles of extant buildings of the 18th and 19th century in Alexandria and second, to associate the building with the respectful (even reverential) experience of the pilgrimage to Mt. Vernon along the Memorial Parkway. Nearly as important was the economic impact of tourism for Alexandria that was expected from all the tourists traveling the Parkway. Gasoline service stations were one of new the building types that catered to the motoring public. As the alignment of the Parkway was being finalized, the *Alexandria Gazette* enthused on the front page, “...the selection of the present route will mean that the vast majority of the visitors en route to Mount Vernon over the boulevard will stop over in Alexandria and visit the points of historical interest.” (*Alexandria Gazette*, 1/22/1929, p.1).

This gasoline service station was exceptionally well sited at the northern gateway to the historic section of Alexandria on a triangular site that was extremely visible and easily accessed from the Parkway. The service station was also well sited among the tourist infrastructure that was developing in Alexandria in the late 1930s and early 1940s along the Parkway. It was directly across the street from Beck’s Polar Bear Frozen Custard Stand, a Hot Shoppes (both now demolished) and diagonally across from a Howard Johnson’s Restaurant (currently a Wendy’s Old Fashioned Hamburgers) as well as less than a block north of a site of the local chain, Little Tavern (currently Merry’s) and in the midst of what was by the late 1940s a number of motels catering to the tourists in Alexandria.

III. ANALYSIS:

With respect to demolition, the *Design Guidelines* note that “[t]he Boards are extremely conscious of the need to preserve the existing building resources of the historic districts,” but go

on to explain that “the Boards are also sympathetic to the needs of building owners to make contemporary 20th century use of a property.” Recognizing this balance, the Guidelines conclude that “[i]t is the policy of the Boards that the absolute minimum of demolition of an existing structure should take place” (Demolition of Existing Structures - Page 1).

Staff is always reluctant to recommend demolition of a building that has historic or architectural interest, however, several factors mitigate against adaptive use of this building. They are: the existing large industrial interior configuration of space, the fact that the inherent value of the building is the interior of the building away from public view, and the requirements for residential underground parking.

From a practical perspective, the large interior space and structural beams which are the character defining features of the building would not respond to any other large scale adaptive use except industrial or commercial uses. The architectural value of the large space and volume of the interior would be lost if it were divided up into smaller spaces, which would be required for residential units.

Staff is cognizant that the Board’s review authority is confined to those parts of a building that are visible from a public right-of-way, with the exception of requests for permits to demolish. The report of the consultant to the developer as well as a Staff inspection of the interior of the building indicated that the interior structural system is an integral component of the overall architectural importance of the building. However, these internal character-defining features, such as the large volume of space and the support rafters, are not visible to the public. And, thus, their architectural merit is not visibly appreciated from the exterior.

Through the years, the building has had a variety of owners and tenants. Few, if any of the users or public, were aware of the historic or architectural value of the interior, because it could not be seen from the exterior. Even, under the different uses that occupied the space over the years, the larger space was divided into smaller, more usable spaces. Staff feels that the best way to preserve this history and architecture so that it is accessible to the public is to carefully document the history and condition of the building in accordance with standards recommended in the *Design Guidelines* and to require an on-site interpretive element reflecting the history of the building.

Because of the need to construct underground parking for the condominium development, considerable disruption to the site will occur. It is unlikely, that the building could be retained on the site for adaptive use with the construction of underground parking as a part of the overall redevelopment scheme.

Staff also notes that industrial uses in this area are no longer predominant and are being replaced by residential and office uses. The project site, as well as its adjacent context along North Washington Street, continues this transition. In recent years, the current site has been the focus of citizen concern because of its blighted condition and high crime rate.

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 shrine?
- (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?

Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, 901 North Columbus Street

Staff believes Criteria #'s 1, 3, & 6 are applicable in this instance. Its large size and brick construction made the building an important structure in the neighborhood when it was constructed. In the early 20th century, the City was once ringed by industrial and commercial enterprises that employed many of its residents. Today, however, industrial uses are being replaced by residential and commercial uses.

Criteria #1 Is the building of such architectural or historical interest that razing it would be a detriment to the public?

The architectural or historic context lies in the interior of the building, which has been modified over time for a variety of tenants. Although it is one of the few remaining industrial buildings in the Old and Historic Alexandria District, its value is not seen or enjoyed by the public.

Criteria #3 Is the building of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?

The former Smoot planing mill appears to be the only surviving example of the type of industrial construction known as slow burning that exists in Alexandria. Again, because the value is in the interior of the building, staff feels that its value for public educational purposes can best be met by a careful recording of its history and architecture and to require an on-site interpretive element.

Criteria #6 Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by... 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?

The Smoot planing mill represents an existing link to Alexandria's past that can provide educational benefits to the citizens of Alexandria through a display of the past industrial architecture of the city. Staff believes the best way to achieve the public education benefit is through a recording of the history and architecture of the building.

Because of the importance of the building's past, Staff recommends that the building be recorded to the standards of the Historic American Engineering Record as recommended in the *Design Guidelines*.

Therefore, Staff recommends the following conditions for approval of the demolition:

1. Large scale 4" x 5" negative black and white record photographs to Historic American Engineering Record Standards be made of the facades as well as the structural system of the former Smoot Planing Mill. Two sets of these photographs together with one set of negatives are deposited at both the Special Collections, Alexandria Library as well as the Alexandria Archives and Record Center prior to the issuance of a building permit;
2. 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;
3. Preparation of a history of the building be prepared by a historian meeting the Secretary of the Interior's qualifications and approved by Staff prior to the issuance of a building permit; and,
4. The applicant shall work with Staff to develop other mitigation measures such as developing an on-site interpretation element that provides a history of the site and its association with the Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, which may include a plaque consisting of a historical narrative and any historic images of the Smoot Lumber Planing Mill and should be accessible by the public. The interpretative element must be submitted to the Planning and Zoning Department for Staff review and approval prior to the issuance of a demolition permit.

900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station

Staff does not believe that any of the criteria are applicable to the existing building on the site because the current iteration of a gasoline service station on this site dates from the late 20th century.

Further, Staff does not recommend that recording efforts be undertaken if this building is demolished. The drawings for the building permit for this building from 1969 are available in the City Archives and Record Center. Any recording efforts would be redundant.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends:

A. Smoot Lumber Planing Mill, 901 North Columbus Street

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B. 900 North Washington Street, the former Alexandria Shell Gasoline Service Station
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CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

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

Code Enforcement:

- F-1 Buildings are proposed to be under 50 feet in height. Should buildings exceed the 50 foot height limit, ladder truck access will be required.
- F-2 The structure will be required to be equipped with an automatic fire suppression system.
- F-3 Two fire department connections will be required.
- F-4 Submitted plans do not show one stair discharging directly to the exterior. Provide door access directly to the exterior of the structure from one egress stair.
- F-5 Show fire line and water lines.
- F-6 Identify ADA accessible route from surface parking to front lobby.
- R-1 Handicap parking spaces for apartment and condominium developments shall remain in the same location(s) as on the approved site plan. Handicap parking spaces shall be properly signed and identified as to their purpose in accordance with the USBC and the Code of Virginia. Ownership and / or control of any handicap parking spaces shall remain under common ownership of the apartment management or condominium association and shall not be sold or leased to any single individual. Parking within any space identified as a handicap parking space shall be limited to only those vehicles which are properly registered to a handicap individual and the vehicle displays the appropriate license plates or window tag as defined by the Code of Virginia for handicap vehicles. The relocation, reduction or increase of any handicap parking space shall only be approved through an amendment to the approved site plan.
- R-2 The applicant of any building or structure constructed in excess of 10,000 square feet; or any building or structure which constructs an addition in excess of 10,000 square feet shall contact the City of Alexandria Radio Communications Manager prior to submission of final site plan. The proposed project shall be reviewed for compliance with radio requirements of the City of Alexandria to the satisfaction of the City of Alexandria Radio Communications Manager prior to site plan approval. Such buildings and structures shall meet the following conditions:
 - a) The building or structure shall be designed to support a frequency range between 806 to 824 MHz and 850 to 869 MHz.
 - b) The building or structure design shall support a minimal signal transmission strength of -95 dBm within 90 percent of each floor area.
 - c) The building or structure design shall support a minimal signal reception strength of

-95 dBm received from the radio system when transmitted from within 90 percent of each floor area.

- d) The building or structure shall be tested annually for compliance with City radio communication requirements to the satisfaction of the Radio Communications Manager. A report shall be filed annually with the Radio Communications Manager which reports the test findings.

If the building or structure fails to meet the above criteria, the applicant shall install to the satisfaction of the Radio Communications Manager such acceptable amplification systems incorporated into the building design which can aid in meeting the above requirements. Examples of such equipment are either a radiating cable system or an FCC approved type bi-directional amplifier. Final testing and acceptance of amplification systems shall be reviewed and approved by the Radio Communications Manager.

- R-3 Based on a history of sound transmission complaints, it is recommended that all dwelling units have a STC rating of at least 60.
- C-1 A separate tap is required for the building fire service connection.
- C-2 Applicant must provide Emergency Vehicle Easement on front entrance of building.
- C-3 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-4 The developer shall provide a building code analysis with the following building code data on the plan: a) use group; b) number of stories; c) type of construction; d) floor area per floor ; e) fire protection plan.
- C-5 The developer shall provide a separate Fire Service Plan which illustrates: a) emergency ingress/egress routes to the site; b) two fire department connections (FDC) to the building, one on each side/end of the building; c) fire hydrants located within on hundred (100) feet of each FDC; d) on site fire hydrants spaced with a maximum distance of three hundred (300) feet between hydrants and the most remote point of vehicular access on site; e) emergency vehicle easements (EVE) around the building with a twenty-two (22) foot minimum width; f) all Fire Service Plan elements are subject to the approval of the Director of Code Enforcement.
- C-6 The final site plans shall show placement of fire easement signs.
- C-7 A soils report must be submitted with the building permit application.
- C-8 Prior to submission of the Final Site Plan #1, the developer shall provide a fire flow analysis by a certified licensed fire protection engineer to assure adequate water supply for the structure being considered.

- C-9 A Certificate of occupancy shall be obtained prior to any occupancy of the building or portion thereof, in accordance with USBC 119.0.
- C-10 The public parking garage (Use Group S-2) is required to be equipped with a sprinkler system (USBC 903.2.11).
- C-11 The public parking garage floor must comply with USBC 406.2.6 and drain through oil separators or traps to avoid accumulation of explosive vapors in building drains or sewers as provided for in the plumbing code (USBC 2901). This parking garage is classified as an S-2, Group 2, public garage.
- C-12 Enclosed parking garages must be ventilated in accordance with USBC 406.4.2. Show vent locations.
- C-13 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 taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 During the nineteenth century, the Alexandria Canal Company owned much of this property with the exception of a small strip along the southern edge parallel to Montgomery Street. In 1877, the Hopkins Insurance map shows belonging to Richard Burke in this southern strip. Buildings associated with the canal were situated on the property to the west of this lot, and Powhatan Street was the Alexandria and Washington Turnpike with a railroad track running down the west side. In the twentieth century, the property was part of the Smoot Planing Mill, and some of the mill structures were replaced by a service station. This twentieth-century development would probably have destroyed evidence of most of the nineteenth-century activity on the lot, but it may be possible that portions of some deep features, such as a well or privy, could remain intact.
- C-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, railroad tracks or ties, 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.
- C-2 The above statement must appear in the General Notes of the site plan so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.