

Docket Item #8
BAR CASE #2006-0052

BAR Meeting
May 17, 2006

ISSUE: Demolition and capsulation

APPLICANT: St. Paul's Episcopal Church

LOCATION: 228 S. Pitt Street

ZONE: RM/Residential

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends:

1. Approval of the proposed demolition/capsulation for Damascus House and portions of Wilmer Hall; and,
2. Restudy of the proposed demolition on the second and third stories of the Duke Street elevation of Wilmer Hall.

(Insert sketch here)

NOTE: This docket item requires a roll call vote.

I. ISSUE:

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish and Capsulate portions of two buildings belonging to St. Paul's Episcopal Church: Wilmer Hall (an education building located to the south of the sanctuary on Pitt Street) and Damascus House (a former residence now used for meeting space located at 413 Duke Street). The work is part of a major renovation of those two facilities intended to improve functioning and gain handicapped accessibility. The proposed work is described in greater detail below:



Figure 1 Wilmer Hall & Damascus House as seen from Duke Street

Wilmer Hall - A new three story elevator and stair tower will be constructed in the private alleyway between Wilmer Hall and Damascus House. The new addition will capsulate a section of the east (rear) wall of Wilmer Hall measuring 31' long and three stories high. This section of wall is of the same brick type and pattern as the other facades but has no significant architectural embellishments. It does have three windows per floor. The south wall, which faces Duke Street, will also be subject to demolition. The easternmost bay will be extensively reworked on all three stories. The existing door and window on the first floor will be replaced by a single large opening. The existing windows on the second and third stories will be replaced by a large two story projecting bay window. A new handicapped ramp will encapsulate a portion of the base of the south wall on the east end. Lastly, an existing window opening in the first story of the westernmost bay on the Duke Street facade (south wall) will be enlarged to become a door.

Damascus House - The new three story elevator and stair tower addition will capsulate a section of the west side wall of the main block of the house measuring 31' long and three stories high. This side of the house is generally without architectural embellishment but does have two windows at the back on the first and second stories and two windows in the mansard. The wall is common brick and the mansard is clad in patterned shingles.

II. HISTORY:

St. Paul's Church was founded in 1809. The church building at 228 South Pitt Street was constructed in 1817-1818 according to plans by Benjamin Latrobe. It has been described by Talbot Hamlin as the first Gothic Revival structure in the United States. The sanctuary was renovated in the late 1990s with Richard Bierce as the architect. The exterior portions of the renovation including the resurfacing of the wall treatment and the accessibility modifications were approved by the Board in 1997 (BAR Case #97-0121, 6/18/1997).

Norton Hall, located to the north of the sanctuary, was built in 1899 and expanded and renovated in 1955 and again in 1986. Wilmer Hall was constructed at the corner of South Pitt and Duke Streets in 1955 according to plans by Delos H. Smith. The 1950s saw the construction of new education buildings for most of Alexandria's most prominent churches in the Old and Historic District. These Christian education buildings were built in direct response to the large increase of school age children following the end of World War II. As such, this building type is a readily defined architectural response to the Baby Boom generation. In addition to St. Paul's, other churches in the historic district that built education buildings or wings in this mid-1950s period include the Old Presbyterian Meeting House on South Royal Street, Christ Church and the Washington Street Methodist Church, both on South Washington Street. In the historic district, the Christian education building of the 1950s is a distinctly finite resource that can be quickly lost without sensitive stewardship.

Delos Hamilton Smith (1884-1963) was one of a group of architects, many of them formerly associated with the early restoration efforts at Colonial Williamsburg, who worked in Alexandria on the restoration of its historic buildings and who designed new buildings, often in the Colonial Revival style. A partner with Thomas Tileston Waterman in the 1940s (1900-1951), Smith worked on the restoration of Gadsby's Tavern, was a charter member of Historic Alexandria Foundation, and served on the Old and Historic Alexandria Board of Architectural Review from 1946 to 1953. Smith also served as assistant director of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). He was among the first generation of historic preservationists that were responsible for setting the tone and direction of the national historic preservation program that became embodied in the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

The collection of individuals living and working in Alexandria in the 1950s and early 1960s that

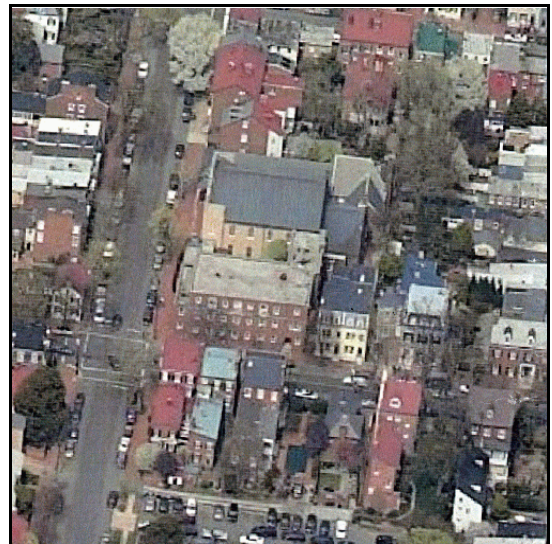


Figure 2 Aerial view of St. Paul's Church looking north

were responsible for charting the early course of the national preservation movement was impressive. Waterman who lived at 517 Cameron Street served as the first assistant director of HABS under Charles Peterson and has been described by Wilton Corkern as being personally involved in almost every significant historic restoration project prior to 1950 and responsible for the development of the Winterthur Museum. Fred Rath lived at 923 South St. Asaph Street and became the first Executive Director of the National Council of Historic Site, the predecessor organization to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Milton Grigg, an Alexandria native with an office on Prince Street, established the profession of historical architecture according to a recent article. Smith's service on Alexandria's Board of Architectural Review informed a national audience of the responsibilities and duties of a local review body as well as showcasing appropriate architectural responses for changes to historic buildings.

The three story, brick faced, education building mixes liturgical symbolism and Colonial Revival details with a more modern aesthetic. For example, Smith embellished the easternmost bay of the building with a separated tripartite Palladian style window. This window style, which is found nowhere else on St. Paul's, references not only the Holy Trinity but can be read as a homage to Christ Church which had also built a new education building only a few years earlier. That building had been designed by Milton Grigg. Smith's Palladian window not only makes a literal reference to the window on the east elevation of Christ Church, but references his former partner Thomas Waterman's proposed design for a new education building at that church which had been done only a few months prior to his untimely death in late 1950 as well as serving as a reminder of the early 19th century schism between Christ Church and St. Paul's and the subsequent unification of the disparate elements of the denomination. The Palladian style window of the education building is a clear reference to Colonial architecture of the 18th century found throughout the Alexandria Historic District as embodied at Christ Church and its Batty Langley pattern book origins and subsequent transference to the dining room elevation at Mt. Vernon. In the education building, Smith was employing a vocabulary of architectural elements such as the Palladian style window and brick quoining that, has in the early 21st century, become a cipher for anyone trying to suggest associations with Colonial architecture.

Smith's impact on the St. Paul's campus is not just confined to the addition of the education building at the south of the site. At the same time, Smith also renovated Norton Hall to the north, extensively altering its exterior appearance in the process, and designed the pavilions on either side of the church and the arcade linking the church and the new education building. This work brings the disparate pieces and styles of the St. Paul's campus together into a cohesive ensemble and attests to Smith's confidence that he possessed sufficient skills to alter the composition of Latrobe's landmark,

Damascus House, located at 413 Duke Street, is a two story brick building with a third story in the mansard. It is a pair with 411 Duke Street. Based on Sanborn maps, its present appearance dates to between 1902 and 1907 when a pair of small, two story, frame houses at 411 and 413

Duke Street were expanded, encapsulated in brick construction and extended upward with the addition of a mansard roof.

On February 10, 1955, the Board of Architectural Review approved the demolition of an unnamed building and the old rectory at 417 Duke Street to allow for the construction of Wilmer Hall and approved the design for the new educational building. Past reviews by the Board for the St. Paul's property concern signs and a fence (sign, 3/20/1974; sign, BAR Case #89-137, 8/9/1989; fence, BAR Case #86-197, 11/19/1986). More recently, in 1996 as part of a major renovation, the Board approved a request for a fence and access ramp for the parish hall and sanctuary (BAR Case #96-0163, 9/18/1996). This ramp was not constructed and an alternative ramp was approved by the Board in 1997 (BAR Case #97-0121, 6/18/1997). Alterations to the transom above the main entry doors to the sanctuary were also approved in 1996 (BAR Case #96-0223, 10/02/1996).

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).

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?

In the opinion of Staff, both buildings are significant. Damascus Hall, the formerly residential

building at 413 Duke Street, is a representative of the Second Empire style as commonly applied to the townhouse form in Alexandria. If indeed, as indicated by the Sanborn mapping, the three story brick house incorporates the remnants of an earlier frame house, it is an interesting example of the practice of updating and expanding the housing stock on the framework of earlier construction, which was fairly common in the Old and Historic Alexandria District during periods of economic expansion. Wilmer Hall, the circa 1955 education building, is a good example of the work of Delos Smith and the Colonial Revival style as applied to a public buildings in the mid-20th century. In addition, Wilmer Hall is significant as one of a collection of Colonial Revival church education buildings designed by prominent local architects and constructed with a few years of each other in the mid-20th century.

Moreover, Staff believes the Palladian window in the last bay of the Duke Street elevation of Wilmer Hall is significant. The applicant has maintained in representations to staff that Smith did not consciously mean the Palladian window to have inherent symbolism. Staff does not agree with this assertion. First, whether Smith consciously meant the symbolism implied by the Palladian window is not the relevant question. Architecture (as with any other art form) can carry deep symbolic meaning that is outside the conscious intention of the designer and in the consciousness of the observer or with architecture, more accurately, the experiencer. The fact that the Palladian window is an iconic cipher in the early 21st century is indisputable.

Robert Venturi, the influential architect and architectural theorist, has written in *Iconography and Electronics Upon A Generic Architecture, A View from the Drafting Room*, “Let us acknowledge the elemental quality of architecture as shelter and symbol – buildable and usable shelter that is also meaningful as a setting for living. Shelter and symbolism that are inevitable, admitted, and explicit elements of an architecture that embraces signs, reference, representation, iconography, scenography, and trompe-l’oeil as its valid dimensions; that makes manifest evocation.” (MIT Press, 1996). That Smith’s Palladian window embodies “reference, representation, [and] iconography” there can be no doubt. His design for the easternmost bay of Wilmer Hall is substantially different than the other bays of the building both in plane and visually. Not repeating the repetition of the other building bays at the end of Wilmer Hall is thus, without a doubt, a conscious decision, one that cannot be dismissed out of hand as an afterthought as has been represented to staff. The window “makes manifest [the] evocation” of the Colonial roots of Alexandria [as well as Smith’s personal interest in Colonial architecture].

Smith’s design speaks directly to the early 21st century as a symbol of the optimism of the immediate post war years and the hope of the parents of the avalanche of children that necessitated the construction of 1950s Christian education buildings. In Wilmer Hall Smith created the shelter for the “meaningful...living” of the church, to use Venturi’s phrase. To present the obliteration of the east bay of Wilmer Hall as necessary for increased light is dismissing the past for mere temporary convenience.

Staff believes that Criteria #s 1 and 6 could be considered to be applicable for both buildings. However, the extent of the proposed demolition/capsulation is relatively minor for both buildings and is confined to secondary elevations. Furthermore, the fact that the demolition/capsulation is in support of retrofitting the buildings to make them accessible may be considered a mitigating factor. While these considerations assist Staff coming to a positive recommendation for the demolition/capsulation associated with the elevator tower addition, the new accessible Duke Street entrance at the easternmost bay of Wilmer Hall and the extension of a window to door at the westernmost bay, Staff remains unconvinced of the necessity or advisability of the extensive demolition on the second and third stories of the Duke Street elevation to accommodate the proposed new two story bay window. Staff again notes that the *Design Guidelines* recommend, “that the absolute minimum of demolition of an existing structure should take place.” Unlike the other proposed revisions, which serve a practical need, the new bay window appears to be purely aesthetic. As discussed above, Staff believes the existing tripartite Palladian style window on the second story carries multiple levels of significance and should be retained.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Therefore, Staff recommends:

1. Approval of the proposed demolition/capsulation for Damascus House and portions of Wilmer Hall; and,
2. Restudy of the proposed demolition on the second and third stories of the Duke Street elevation of Wilmer Hall.

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 taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.
- C-2 Roof drainage systems must be installed so as neither to impact upon, nor cause erosion/damage to adjacent property.
- C-3 A soils report must be submitted with the building permit application.
- C-4 New construction must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-5 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-6 Construction permits are required for this project. Plans shall accompany the permit application that fully detail the construction as well as layouts and schematics of the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems.
- C-7 Required exits and facilities shall be accessible for persons with disabilities.

Historic Alexandria:

Alterations for the addition seem appropriate to an adjoining educational center for the church. Although the bayed windows are an interesting focal point of the overall design, they might be reduced in scale or modified slightly so as not to seem too prominent within the context of the street. If there was more of a prospect for the building, they would appear more proportional.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 Designed by architect Benjamin Latrobe, St. Paul's Church was constructed on this lot in 1817. During the Civil War, the property was used as a hospital by the Union army. The property contained a mess house, dead house, pump (well), two sinks (privies), a wood house, and the surgeon's quarters. The property therefore has the potential to yield archaeological resources that could provide insight into religious activities in 19th-century Alexandria and into military use during the war. However, the ground disturbance associated with this project is minimal, and there has been previous disturbance

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associated with expansions of the church. None of the known resources on the lot are located in the areas of the proposed ground disturbance.

- 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 Contact Alexandria Archaeology (703-838-4399) two weeks prior to any ground disturbing activity (such as coring, grading, filling, vegetation removal, undergrounding utilities, pile driving, landscaping and other excavations as defined in Section 2-151 of The Zoning Ordinance) on this property. City archaeologists will provide on-site inspections to record significant finds.
- R-3 The applicant should not allow any metal detection to be conducted on the property, unless authorized by Alexandria Archaeology.
- R-4 The above statements in R-1, R-2, and R-3 must appear in the General Notes of all site plans and on all site plan sheets that involve demolition or ground disturbance (including sheeting and shoring and grading) so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.