
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 01-04

Hilleary T. Burrows House

4520 River Road, NW

Square 1573, Lot 810

DECISION

The Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a public hearing on August 23, 2001 on the application for historic designation of the property known as the Hilleary T. Burrows House, 4520 River Road, NW (Square 1573, Lot 810), hereby designates the property a historic landmark in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites.

History and Description

The residence at 4520 River Road was constructed in the summer of 1897 as a single-family residence for Hilleary T. Burrows, a former clerk, attorney, and merchant. Burrows was of a large extended family prominent in Tenleytown. The house appears to have been, at most, the seventh erected in the brand new suburban subdivision known as “American University Park.”

By 1897, real estate speculators in the former Washington County were reassured of the possibility of the orderly development of the area by the passage and implementation of the 1893 Highway Act, settling the routes of the extended L’Enfant avenues through the rural districts. In addition, the great depression of the mid 1890s finally showed signs of abating. Subdivisions were springing up all over the metropolitan area, usually along the radial train or streetcar lines, and as often as not, christened with a moniker that ended in “Park.” Established on 70 acres of land, roughly bounded by River Road, Massachusetts Avenue, 45th Street and the Maryland boundary, the A.U. Park tract was located not far from Tenleytown and was formerly the property of Samuel Burrows, farmer. The “syndicate” which purchased the property in April 1897 set to work immediately, taking out permits on several houses, including that of Hilleary Burrows. These first homes were meant as much for promotion as profit, as the developers sought to encourage others to purchase lots and construct there their own homes. The Burrows house is depicted twice—as a home still under construction—in the 1897 promotional booklet *The American University Park, Washington, D.C.* In this pamphlet, the developers assured buyers of the security of an investment in their community. “It is safe to say that no subdivision in Washington can show better sanitary conditions... We hope soon to have a car line running through the Park.” The firm vetted the early buyers, choosing only “good, honest, temperate men to buy and build,” forbidding the sale of alcohol in the little community, and requiring an investment of \$2,000 in the construction of each home. Population pressures and common dissatisfaction with urban living gave the speculators every reason to believe that their

subdivision would soon be filled with respectable upper-middle-class (white) folk, but it was not to be.

Likely because the site was a little too distant from downtown and because it never received its “car line” (the nearest streetcar was at Wisconsin Avenue), the development failed to flourish. Perhaps another half-dozen homes were erected by the end of 1902, and fewer than twenty by the end of World War I. By any measure, the enterprise was a failure, although such exurban living may have suited some buyers who prized the remoteness of the site. At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, the developers were turning to the construction of the newly fashionable bungalow, a smaller building form which would become more characteristic of A.U. Park than the Queen Anne “cottages” and more representative of and attainable by the common man. Gone were any pretensions of hand-picking buyers. The original group of builders gradually realigned and fell apart, but various members of the families involved—Stone, Croissant, Tait and Burrows—maintained both a financial interest and residences in the community. Hilleary Burrows was one of these.

Burrows’s life is not known in detail. He seems to have been acquainted with the vagaries of fortune, as the Washington city directories trace the trajectory of a career from a clerkship through a partnership in a law firm, to a job in “claims,” then employment as a well digger, a produce dealer and a laborer. Strangely, this apparent fall does not correspond with the nation’s economic cycles. By 1895, Burrows was a “teamster”; this date may correspond to his purchase of the livery stables in Tenleytown and would suggest a reversal of fortune. Like his successor as proprietor of the Tenleytown stables, Burrows may have rented out horses for roadwork and used them himself for the purpose. By 1896, he was described as a contractor, and before 1902, he was a principal in the Tait-Burrows Contracting Company of A.U. Park, perhaps grading streets and lots or perhaps even erecting buildings. His partner, Galen Tait, became a downtown builder who continued to construct homes in A.U. Park for at least the next decade.

With family ties and business interests in the area, it is no wonder that Burrows bought a home and remained in the A.U. Park community until 1914—presumably, the time of his death. Any buyer in the A.U. Park of 1897 would have had his choice of scores of lots. Burrows’s choice of a home site is therefore suggestive. Whether or not he was interested in Civil War history, he managed to acquire property only yards away from one of the fortifications which defended Washington during the war. More important was the site’s prominence along River Road, almost at the Maryland border. In 1897, “Massachusetts Avenue extended” was still just a paper street. River Road, on the other hand, was the principal route from Washington to Great Falls throughout the nineteenth century. It was, therefore, the most traveled road through the A.U. Park community, and Burrows’s house would be the first building seen by travelers entering the District from Montgomery County, as it is today. This makes the home a landmark in the truest sense. It has been a familiar fixture of the A.U. Park community for more than a century and serves as an unofficial boundary marker. It signals to the passer-by the age and original character of the neighborhood.

A constant source of frustration for the researcher of historic buildings is the lack of documentation of design inspiration when an architect is not explicitly associated with the project by means of a building permit or correspondence. D.C. builders undoubtedly emulated their peers, copied examples of buildings they had observed, and availed themselves of published

images. The A.U. Park promoters made available to land purchasers building plans, estimates, and architects' and builders' referrals—anything to encourage development. According to the building permit for the Burrows House, its design was taken from the *circa* 1895 book *A few of the many Suburban and City Dwellings that have been erected by H. Galloway Ten Eyck, Architect*, published by the Newark, New Jersey architect himself. Ten Eyck's work, actually in its second edition, was one of a long line of architectural pattern books available to Americans, dating back to the eighteenth-century British folios by Langley, Gibbs and Adam, and the native Federal- and Greek Revival-period works by Asher Benjamin and Minard Lafever. These early books often provided American carpenter-builders ideas about overall massing and proportions and served as catalogs of fashionable details. Early Victorian works such as Alexander Jackson Davis's *Rural Residences* and Andrew Jackson Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses* provided examples of revivalist yet thoroughly American buildings, both imagined and realized. Pattern books grew only more influential through the Victorian era, as the demand for housing increased and building elements began to be mass-produced. Such books were largely superseded at the beginning of the twentieth century by both magazine-published plans and the catalogs of companies such as Sears, who went beyond design, to the supply all of the parts.

Ubiquitous and influential as pattern books were, there are few if any buildings in Washington that can be documented as originating from a pattern book. The Dodge House in Georgetown was published by Downing, but only after it was designed and built. There are several homes in Georgetown and elsewhere that are suggestive of pattern book origins, but to the knowledge of the staff, none have been definitively attributed.

H. Galloway Ten Eyck had practiced in Newark from the early 1870s. He could produce homes in all of the fashionable modes of the 1890s, including Romanesque, Queen Anne, Shingle Style and Colonial. A list of commissions suggests that he was responsible for at least 180 houses, spread through New Jersey, New England, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, and as far as Iowa and New Brunswick. The two editions of his book suggest that he had produced at least 100 unique house designs. He also produced some commercial buildings and at least one factory. Clearly, Ten Eyck lent his talents to the developers of America's burgeoning suburbs; he produced designs for several homes each in subdivisions such as Forest Hill, Belleville, Columbia Heights, and Franklin, New Jersey, and North Adams, Massachusetts.

In massing and plan, the Burrows House matches "Design No. 81" in Ten Eyck's second edition, right down to the diminished kitchen wing with its shed-roofed pantry. Like the Joseph Webber House of Columbian Heights, New Jersey (see attached photo), the Burrows house exhibits a balloon frame vernacular Queen Anne structure with a cruciform plan and high-pitched cross gables influenced by the earlier Gothic Revival. In proper Queen Anne fashion, flat wall planes are avoided through the use of overhanging gables and eaves, projecting hexagonal bays and, originally, a mixture of wood weatherboard siding and shingles. The Burrows House emulates its prototype closely in plan and massing, but lacks such details of its predecessor as the false half-timbering and decorative bargeboard of the front gable and the *porte-cochère* extension of the porch. The Burrows House is not without its own character and flair; the Stick-Style-influenced wraparound front porch—consisting of arched spandrels supported by chamfered and tapering posts with disk-shaped ornament—is remarkable and remarkably well preserved for its age and intricacy. Indeed, while the house's condition has certainly deteriorated by the neglect

of recent years, it is nonetheless very well preserved. The original two-over-two windows and window surrounds are intact. The removal of some of the mid-twentieth-century siding has exposed original siding beneath. Similarly, the original wood shingle roofing appears to remain under later asbestos shingles. While some of the first A.U. Park houses have suffered from the subdivision of their original lots, the Burrows lot remains intact, showing the house to its best advantage.

Archaeological Potential

According to historic Baist property maps, the Hilleary Burrows property lies perhaps forty feet from the southeast bastion of Fort Bayard, one of the Civil War defenses of Washington. While these forts were dismantled after the war, the earthworks and a wealth of period artifacts tended to remain, unless extensive regrading occurred. In the experience of the staff, a great deal of artifactual evidence has been recovered outside the Washington forts, particularly behind the defenses. In addition, a rifle trench connecting Fort Bayard with Fort Reno, the nearest fortification to the east, would have run very close to where the Burrows house stands.

Evaluation

The Hilleary T. Burrows House is an exemplar of the type of upper middle class residence erected in the new metropolitan Washington suburbs of the mid 1890s. It is one of seven structures erected during the first few months of the existence of the American University Park subdivision and one of the few erected by the promoters, as opposed to lot purchasers. It was featured twice in a promotional brochure for the development and was home to one of the suburb's builders. As one of the few homes in A.U. Park built before 1900 (or even 1920), it illustrates the earliest days of the community and is one of the best preserved and the most visible and familiar of the early homes. It is the more rare as a survivor of a failed suburban development. (Historic Preservation Review Board Historic Landmark Designation Criteria A1 and A2)

The Hilleary T. Burrows House is a worthy example of a two-story frame Queen Anne-style home—in the 1890s considered to be especially suitable to suburbs—and is distinguished by its unusual and remarkably well preserved porch and by the fact that the original lot is intact, unsubdivided. It is perhaps the only documented example of a pattern book house in Washington, D.C., with its plan and massing devised by H. Galloway Ten Eyck, a prominent architect who published two editions of his residential designs and designed scores of suburban dwellings for a number of developments in the eastern United States. (HPRB Criteria A2, A3 and A4)

The house possesses high integrity of massing, detail and site, sufficient to convey an understanding of its original design, construction, character and use. (HPRB Criterion B)

One hundred and four years have passed since the construction of the house, sufficient time to permit professional evaluation of it in its historical context. (HPRB Criterion C)

Tersh Boasberg, Chairman

Date

Historic Preservation Review Board
