

2417 I St. NW
Washington DC 20037
FLeoneDC@gmail.com

May 20, 2021

Thomas J. LeBlanc
President,
The George Washington University
1918 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20052

Re: Open Letter re Preservation of the Waggaman Row House, 837 22nd St. NW

Dear President LeBlanc:

For 135 years, a white Victorian Row House has stood at the corner of 22nd and I Streets NW. It has seen the development of the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, its decline, the arrival and exponential growth of George Washington (GW) University, and the revival of Foggy Bottom. As one of eleven row houses built by DC developer Thos. E. Waggaman in 1886, it once shared its block with over 50 rowhouses. Over time, GW expanded to own nearly all of the block except the House, which it purchased in 2000.

In January 2021, GW applied for a permit to demolish the Waggaman Row House, which is expected to be issued in mid-June. GW's announced plan is to add the 918 square feet currently occupied by the House to an existing small park as interim "green space."¹ At an undetermined time in the future, however, GW intends to construct dense development along 22nd St, pursuant to the 2007 Campus Plan.² The Foggy Bottom Association understands that the western portion of Square 77 has been slated for development and that the House has not been marked for historic preservation. We do **not** seek to alter the GW Campus Plan or limit the ultimate development of the Square.

We believe, however, that the House stands as a uniquely situated and irreplaceable reminder of Foggy Bottom's history and is worth preserving. It contributes to the park area and has greater value than the small patch of grass intended to replace it. Moreover, preservation of the House allows it to be considered for incorporation in future construction or relocated. GW has taken

¹ Abigail Osborne, "University to demolish Nashman Center building, move offices to Hillel building," The GW Hatchet, February 18, 2021, <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2021/02/17/university-to-demolish-nashman-center-building-move-offices-to-hillel-building/>.

² The George Washington University, Foggy Bottom Campus Plan: 2006-2025 (July 13, 2006) at 2. In the summer of 2020, GW presented its Strategic Facilities and Campus Master Plan, which anticipates new construction that will replace the House, the existing park, and the nearby Academic Center (built 1982). We understand that GW has not yet determined a schedule for that new construction.

the position that the House lacks preservation significance because it is a “remnant”—the last remaining of its kind in a several block intensely redeveloped area. But we think this sentinel status makes it all the more worth preserving. The House provides a delightful reminder of the historic character of the neighborhood, even as it is surrounded by much newer buildings. Its “contemporary uniqueness” as the “last surviving example” in that area of GW has value.³ We therefore ask GW to consider its preservation. *See* attached photographs.

The Waggaman Row House Is a Special Building.

The Waggaman Row House was built in 1886 and served as a private residence until GW purchased it in 2000. At the time of its construction, middle-class row houses were being built in the Foggy Bottom area east of 23rd St., while worker housing was being constructed to the west of 23rd St. In 1886, newly elected President Grover Cleveland married Ms. Francis Folsom in the White House, the completed Washington Monument was a year old, and four earthquakes rocked Washington.

The “Reconnaissance-Level Architectural Survey of Properties in Foggy Bottom, Washington D.C.” (Dec. 1999), prepared for The George Washington University (1999 GW Survey), contained the following description of the House:

This solitary residence is all that remains of a former row of houses along 22nd Street. The structure is brick with many decorative elements. Molded brick with raised dots adorn the arches over the windows and door. An off-center projecting bay is decorated with chamfered comers. A metal fence, possibly historic, surrounds the property.⁴

An EHT-Traceries Report, which GW also commissioned, described the house as follows:

Once part of a row of eleven well-designed houses by Waggaman and Kerr, 837 22nd Street [is] now the only surviving example of a single family dwelling on Square 77. Typical of Washington middle class row houses, the brick house is two bays wide, three stories high and on a raised basement. Stained glass transoms grace the first floor windows and each house has a steep false gable on the front. Molded brick and corbelled corniced articulate the pressed brick facades.⁵

A 1982 Foggy Bottom/West End Survey characterized the House as “well designed” and “typical of Washington middle-class row houses.” The “1993 Resurvey of Historic Resources in Foggy Bottom/West End,” which Lois Snyderman prepared for the FBA, noted that the House

³ See James Marston Fitch, Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World. Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1990 at p. 83.

⁴ 1999 GW Survey, https://archive.org/details/rg0063_s10_c001_f02_i001/page/n125/mode/2up, at p. 126.

⁵ EHT Traceries Report Excerpt.

was the last of what was originally a row of eleven 19th century row houses, and recommended its nomination as a historic landmark as a “High Priority.”⁶

The 1999 GW Survey noted generally that:

The urban vernacular architecture of the row house is well represented throughout the residential neighborhood, on the George Washington University campus, and through a smattering of small private businesses. These share a common vocabulary of form, style, materials, scale, and decoration. Their presence throughout the area creates a cohesiveness that links the Foggy Bottom and University districts with their common past.

Thomas E. Waggaman, the builder of the House, was a prominent Washington real estate developer active at the turn of the 20th century. He was primarily known for his work in developing “suburban” areas, including Cleveland Park, Woodley Park, and what is now Adams-Morgan. Waggaman’s collection of art was renowned, and he is reported to have been the first person in the United States to collect works by the important French artists Millet and Corot.⁷ He was a founder of Catholic University and served as its treasurer. Later accused of embezzlement, he declared bankruptcy and died in 1906.

We have not been able to access DC Archives or other non-digital resources to identify information on the earliest residents of the House, but we know that rooms were let at the house in the 1920s, including to GW students. From 1965 to 1998, V. Arlene Williams lived at the house – she worked for approximately forty years as a linotype operator for the Washington Post. She apparently resisted GW’s interest in the House and her son sold it to GW after her death.

GW’s Women’s Studies Program occupied the House after GW acquired it in 2000. Recently, it housed the GW Nashman Center for Community Engagement, but GW apparently has moved that office to the new Hillel building at 23rd and G streets NW.⁸ GW has indicated that it has no current use for the house, but given GW’s needs for space, it seems unlikely that no University,

⁶ 1993 Resurvey of Historic Resources in Foggy Bottom/West End.

⁷ See EHT, Architects Directory, Clarke Waggaman, <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Architects%20Bios%20T%20through%20Z.pdf> (Clarke Waggaman, a noted DC architect, was Thomas E. Waggaman’s son.).

⁸ GW Press Release (2/21/2021), New Home for Nashman Center, GW to Expand Green Space,” <https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/new-home-nashman-center-gw-expand-green-space>.

student organization, or potential retail uses exist. Note that during at least the late 1960s, the Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority occupied a house at 829 22nd St, which was part of the original row.⁹

The Waggaman Row House Is a Valuable Reminder of the History of the Neighborhood.

GW has taken the position that the House, while indisputably very old, does not meet statutory preservation criteria under the District of Columbia or Federal Historic Preservation laws. One primary reason the House lacks preservation significance is that it is a “remnant” – the last remaining of its kind in a several block intensely redeveloped area. But as noted above, we think its sentinel position provides value.

Old buildings matter, even if they may not meet statutory preservation criteria. “Old buildings are reminders of a city’s culture and complexity. By seeing historic buildings—whether related to something famous or recognizably dramatic—tourists and longtime residents are able to witness the aesthetic and cultural history of an area. Just as banks prefer to build stately, old-fashioned facades, even when located in commercial malls, a city needs old buildings to maintain a sense of permanency and heritage.”¹⁰ Noted architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch has described “our growing realization that *all* old buildings have a certain value - - economically, scenographically, sentimentally – and not merely those whose historicity or artistic value is already established.”¹¹

Moreover, the House, well-built and well proportioned, is an authentic and beautiful structure. Beauty does not mandate preservation, but there is no reason aesthetics cannot be considered. As the US Special Committee on Historic Preservation noted in 1966: “Those who treasure a building for its pleasing appearance or local sentiment do not find it less important because it lacks ‘proper’ historic credentials.”¹² “There is a romance in stylish old buildings, or even unstylish ones with distinctive character, especially as they stand in contrast to more modern structures. They diversify the environment.”¹³

⁹ See GWU Gelman Library Special Collections, 1968 University Guide, <https://gwu.app.box.com/s/iov9gdoaxk2koalyi3c35o9ioqq01gf/file/540502244293>; 1969 Campus Map,

<https://gwu.app.box.com/s/iov9gdoaxk2koalyi3c35o9ioqq01gf/file/540502240693>.

¹⁰ Julia Rocchi, National Trust for Historic Preservation website, “Six Reasons to Save Old Buildings,” Nov. 10, 2015, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/six-reasons-save-old-buildings>.

¹¹ Fitch, Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World at 169; see Mayes at 114 (“If places are important to people because they provide a sense of community, memory, belong, and identify, we may be failing to recognize countless other places that are not architecturally, or historically significant, but that are also vitally important for peoples psychological and social wellbeing.”).

¹² Albert Rains and Laurance G. Henderson, With Heritage So Rich: a Report of a Special Committee on Historic Preservation. New York: Random House, 1966.

¹³ David E. Kyvig et al., Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You, American Association for State and Local History Series, Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019 at 164.

The Waggaman Row House Is of Greater Value than a Small Patch of “Green Space.”

The creation of a 918 square foot patch of grass as interim “green space” does not provide any significant environmental value. The House itself adds to the visual impact of the existing park. It provides an anchor to the green area, and shields the park from the activities of I Street, Whole Foods, and the GW Ambulatory Care Center across I Street. The House’s removal would make the existing park much noisier, less secluded, and less appealing.

From an environmental perspective, demolishing an 135 year old building is not an environmentally positive action. “Keeping and using old places is one of the most environmentally sound things a person or community can do.”¹⁴ Destruction of the building wastes the “embodied energy,” the amount of labor and energy consumed its production, from the harvesting of natural resources to the fabrication and delivery of materials to the installation of these materials and products. Demolition also results in the expenditure of energy in destruction and generation of waste requiring disposal. “The greenest building is the one already built.”¹⁵ It is “greener” to let the House be, than to demolish it for a small temporary addition to a temporary park.

GW Should Preserve the House so it May Be Considered for Incorporation into New Construction.

We understand that GW has not yet prepared plans for the anticipated new construction along 22nd Street. Thus, it does not appear that there is a need to demolish the House now. Preserving the House keeps alive future re-use options, including incorporation into new construction or relocation.

As the National Trust for Historic Preservation has observed: “Regret goes only one way. The preservation of historic buildings is a one-way street. There is no chance to renovate or to save a historic site once it’s gone. And we can never be certain what will be valued in the future. This reality brings to light the importance of locating and saving buildings of historic significance — because once a piece of history is destroyed, it is lost forever.”¹⁶

If the House still stands at the time GW develops plans for its new 22nd St. building, it could be incorporated into the new construction (although we understand that GW does not currently anticipate doing so). Since its arrival in Foggy Bottom in 1912, GW has expanded from 2023 G St. to 20 blocks.¹⁷ During that time, GW has demolished many buildings, but also made efforts

¹⁴ Thompson M. Mayes, Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect our Identify and Well-Being, Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018 at 77.

¹⁵ Scott Silder, “The Greenest Building Is the One Already Built,” The Craftsman Blog, September 22, 2014, <https://thecraftsmanblog.com/greenest-building-is-the-one-already-built/> .

¹⁶ Rocchi, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/six-reasons-save-old-buildings>.

¹⁷ Laura Bergheim, The Washington Historical Atlas: Who did What When and Where in the Nation’s Capital, Rockville, Md: Woodbine House, 1992 at p. 140.

to preserve others.¹⁸ Good examples of GW incorporating historic structures into new development include trow house and new construction at 2013 H St. NW (1888 single rowhouse with 2011 addition) and 2021 H St. NW (1890 house with large 2001 addition). *See* Attached Photographs. Of course there are many other examples in DC and around the world of incorporation of existing historic structures in new architecture.¹⁹ “The juxtaposition of old and new buildings can often lead to exhilarating new passages in the cityscape.”²⁰

Such assimilation of existing historic buildings in new buildings that meet GW’s needs demonstrates the integration of GW with its community. Incorporating the House in a new structure links a reminder of the neighborhood’s past with GW’s future. It demonstrates GW’s respect for the neighborhood, especially during its 200th year celebration. As FBA President John George has noted: “Once you wipe it away, then people forget,” he said. “You could look it up in a book, but it will never be back. And so if you were to reincorporate it in some way, again recognizing feasibility of that, then you recognize what the campus was when it moved to Foggy Bottom in 1912.”²¹

We therefore ask that GW not proceed with the demolition of the Waggaman Row House at 827 22nd Street.

Sincerely Yours,

Frank Leone

Frank Leone

Cc: Kevin Days & Gabrielle Sosa, GW
John George, FBA
ANC 2A Commissioners
Kim Williams & Kim Elliot, DC Historic Preservation Office
Rebecca Miller, DC Preservation League

Att: Site Photographs

¹⁸ *Id.* at 141.

¹⁹ *See, e.g.*, Mt. Vernon Square, <https://ggwash.org/view/64546/this-new-building-includes-parts-of-three-old-buildings>.

²⁰ Fitch at p. 81. After all, as stated on GW’s Facebook page, “This is the George Washington University and what we make is history.” <https://www.facebook.com/georgewashingtonuniversity>.

²¹ Abigail Osborne, “Locals press ANC, University to consider preserving Nashman Center building,” *The GW Hatchet*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2021/03/29/locals-press-anc-university-to-consider-preserving-nashman-center-building/>.



Waggaman House at 837 22nd Street



North Side of Waggaman House, along I Street



Back of Waggaman and park area, looking west



South side of Waggaman House



Waggaman House and adjacent Park – looking toward intersection of I and 22nd Sts



Waggaman House and adjacent Park – looking toward intersection of I and 22nd Streets



2013 H Street with 1880 and 2011 construction



2021 H St. NW (1890 house with large 2001 addition)