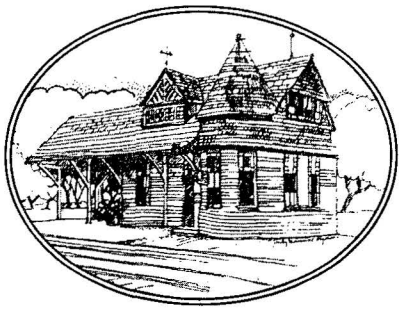


Historic Takoma, Inc.

"Preserving the Heritage of Takoma Park-MD and Takoma-DC"

Statement for the Board of Zoning Adjustment, District of Columbia
Hearing on BZA Application #16676 of the Hebrew Congregation of Washington
Proposed Development of Property on Missouri Road NW
June 26, 2001

By Loretta Neumann, Vice President,
Historic Takoma, Inc.

Madam Chairman and members of the Board, I am Loretta Neumann, vice president of Historic Takoma, Inc. (HTI) and co-chair of HTI's Takoma DC Historic Preservation Committee. HTI is a nonprofit organization representing the historic preservation interests of citizens of both Takoma DC and Takoma Park, Md. I am a DC resident and reside at 7124 Piney Branch Road, NW.

Historic Takoma urges you to deny this application. We oppose the development of townhouses on what is now vacant land on Missouri Avenue, NW, between 13th and 14th Street. This area is of extreme importance to the African-American Community in Washington DC as well as to adjacent neighborhoods (including Takoma). It is also of great significance in the military history of the United States.

Historical Overview

The proposed townhouse site sits between two significant, historic buildings -- the old Military Road School, which educated African-American students from the mid 1800s to 1953 -- and a classic Victorian home owned by the Lightfoot family. In between is land that the National Park Service owns, which leads to Fort Stevens, site of a battle of the Civil War in 1864 that prevented the Confederates from entering Washington DC. The battle of Fort Stevens was also the only time a sitting president (Lincoln) came under fire.

Brightwood, the present day neighborhood around Missouri Road and 13th Street, was one of the centers of a large Negro slave and freemen community in the District of Columbia during the mid 1800's. Several historians and African-American history scholars investigating this property believe the undeveloped lots may be one of the most important African-American historical/archeological sites in the region.

Military Road School, built in 1911, replaced smaller structures used to educate freed slaves during and after the Civil War. The school is a designated D.C. landmark, and the DC Historic Preservation Division is currently preparing documentation on the site for the National Register of Historic Places. The Victorian house, owned by a Howard University "founder," the late Professor George M. Lightfoot, has associations with many important Black leaders, including Carter G. Woodson, founder of Black History; Dr. Alaine Locke educator, writer, philosopher and a leader of the Harlem Renaissance; and W. E. B. Du Bois, professor, sociologist and author. The road behind it, Rock Creek Ford Road, is also historic.

A Member of the United Way of the National Capital Area
BZA
Case No. 16676
Exhibit No. 49
Agency Code 8361

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16676
EXHIBIT NO.49

Concerns About the Proposed Townhouse Development

The Hebrew Congregation of Washington's application for a 13-unit townhouse development in this area has raised many concerns. We greatly appreciated the thoughtful questions you raised about the proposal at your first hearing, held on March 13, 2001. The answers revealed that the developers were planning basement apartments in each townhouse, for a total of 26 units. Other problems, such as access for fire trucks, were uncovered. You continued the case until June 26 and asked the contract developer, Poretsky Builders, to clear up the problems before proceeding.

We note that Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4A has voted against the proposal **twice**, in March when it opposed the original proposal, and again in early June when it voted against a modified proposal for 12 townhouses on the site. I attended the recent ANC 4A meeting, where the developers had only a sketchy outline of the new proposal. It was clear, despite the reduced density, that any development would be inappropriate and would **foreclose other options for protecting and interpreting the significant resources on and around this property.**

Potential Military Road School/Fort Stevens Heritage Area

The Military Road School Alumni Association is working toward the restoration of the school building and is raising money for a series of interactive programs there. It is a complicated and expensive undertaking. But it could be the centerpiece for a full complex involving the school, Fort Stevens, the nearby Battleground National Cemetery, the Hebrew Congregation's property and the Lightfoot house.

A growing group of concerned citizens and historians would like to see all of the land protected and maintained and its important history interpreted as part of a Military Road School/Fort Stevens Heritage Area. Together, we are working to form a public-private partnership that would include the National Park Service, DC Government, and private organizations.

Key to achieving this goal would be for the Hebrew Congregation Property to be acquired by an entity interested in preserving it. To help manage this heritage area, a cooperative agreement would be forged among the National Park Service, District government, and private organizations, such as the Military Road School Alumni Association and the new City Museum. The combined sites would offer outstanding opportunities to improve understanding and interpretation of the Battle of Fort Stevens and bring to life, for the first time, the rich African-American history of the area – both to the residents who live there now and to thousands of visitors in the future.

In summary, we believe that the proposed development of this property would do enormous damage to these significant resources. We believe strongly that the community, working with the National Park Service and other national and local organizations, can save this important property for present and future generations to learn from and enjoy. We are working hard to accomplish this goal. **Again, we urge you to deny the application.**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.