
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-02

Lincoln Playground Field House

555 L Street SE

Square 853N, Part of Lots 807 and 811

Meeting Date: February 25, 2016
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture
Affected ANC: 6D
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Lincoln Playground Field House, 555 L Street SE, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that it request the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1934.

The property meets National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for embodying the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and a building type that is an expression of urban planning significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Specifically, it is one of only a handful of 1930s park fieldhouses designed to resemble a Tidewater colonial hall-and-parlor house, the only one of which was constructed for a segregated African-American playground, and the only one whose primary structural material is load-bearing brick. Thus, it is one of the earliest purpose-built public recreation facilities remaining in a District of Columbia park.

Background and evaluation

The District’s earliest public playgrounds were outgrowths of school uses, and playgrounds and schools are still frequently co-located, even if often administered separately. The Victorian schools were not sited or designed with play space in mind, but school lots were later expended and adapted to recreation uses; one of the earliest public-school playgrounds was created at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) before the turn of the twentieth century.

During the first decades of the 1900s, public recreation space was often makeshift or informal. The Progressive Era brought a greater interest in exercise in the form of play, as an antidote for the enervating effects of industrialized cities. Play was seen as an opportunity to cultivate the physical and moral nature of children, and playgrounds themselves constituted “breathing spots” in the city. The provision of active play space in Washington received a boost from the 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that recommended that elementary schools be programmed with playgrounds, assuming available space.

Like other facilities, early playgrounds were racially segregated. In 1921, a United Citizens Playground Committee completed a study and recommended that the District Commissioners adopt a system of equitable distribution of playgrounds around the city, urging the immediate provision of three facilities for white children, at least two more for African Americans—and preferably a third in Southeast.

As with Washington schools, the construction of playgrounds lagged behind population growth and urban development. By the 1930s, when another population surge began, the situation was critical. But with Depression-era spending, the District began to catch up.

Federal Reservations 15 and 16 in Southeast had been used as informal ballfields since at least 1927. As its uses grew, the parcel was commonly known as the Sixth and L Street Playground and then the Lincoln Playground. But it was not until the end of 1933 that a formal facility was planned, as a result of newly available federal Civil Works Administration funds. In fact, the CWA offered the city nine wading pools and three fieldhouses, although only two pools and one fieldhouse total for black playgrounds, one of each for Lincoln.

The fieldhouses were intended to provide storage for outdoor recreation equipment as well as offices for park managers, restrooms for the public, and space for indoor recreation and classes. Municipal Architect Albert Harris designed a prototype structure for Mitchell Park in 1931. Of frame construction, a story and a half tall with a full-width porch, it was based on the eighteenth-century Tidewater hall-and-parlor house. Six such structures would eventually be erected, five of which are extant. As public works, the designs had to be reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which favored the Colonial Revival style as suitably domestic for government facilities in residential neighborhoods. This specific flavor of the style was indeed domestic, and clearly shows the powerful contemporary influence of the Colonial Williamsburg restoration on the region's architects.

Two of the fieldhouses—the fourth and fifth of the series and the last while Harris still lived—were built nearly simultaneously by the CWA during 1934, one at Twin Oaks Playground (4025 14th Street NW) and one at Lincoln. Lincoln was unique among these in that it was the only one to be built of brick masonry instead of frame¹, a nod to durability and probably to variety, although also likely an effort to be compatible with the predominantly brick architecture of the urban neighborhood. A 2014 survey of D.C. Parks and Recreation facilities found this category of fieldhouse to be a historically significant type, and the Historic Preservation Office subsequently classified the Lincoln fieldhouse as eligible for designation. One other example of the 1930s fieldhouse has already been designated.² Lincoln was also unique in that it was the only one of the 1930s model fieldhouses to be placed in a playground for African Americans, a worthy example of efforts to provide separate-but-equal facilities, yet in a manner that was typically too little, too late and, in this case, only accomplished with outside funds.

Lincoln got its wading pool in 1935, but only seven years later, during the Second World War, the playground's ballfields were sacrificed to the storage of construction or war materiel. The

¹ The later Palisades Recreation Center fieldhouse, although mostly brick, is a elaboration and expansion on the theme and plan of the Colonial Revival “house” model employed at the other playgrounds in years prior.

² Park View Playground and Field House in 2013.

smaller portion of the parcel, Reservation 16, held little more than a now-overcrowded pool and fieldhouse, with many activities relocated to Randall Playground in Southwest.

In later years, the facilities were expanded, and the playground was renamed the Joy Evans Early Childhood Center. A wading pool remains, with a more recent pool house, plus a larger, brick-faced block recreation center and miscellaneous fixed play equipment. Thus, the alterations of the fieldhouse's setting that began with the war intensified later. The original fieldhouse faces the front of the rec center across a broad walk and strips of lawn. A driveway apron and the fieldhouse's north side yard are now being used for parking and for automobile circulation from L Street to the adjacent Van Ness Elementary School parking lot. Therefore, the boundary proposed for designation of the fieldhouse takes in little more than the fieldhouse itself (roughly the presently fenced enclosure), plus its north side yard, to retain the views from L Street. The building and its site actually straddle the present assessment and taxation lots 807 and 811.

The nomination treads lightly on the issue of condition of the building, but that has clearly been neglected in recent years. As is apparent in the accompanying photographs, much of the rear slope of the gabled roof is open, with sheathing rotted and rafters damaged by exposure. This suggests that the interior must also be suffering considerable moisture damage. The southeast corner of the building has structural cracks from settlement, and the northeast corner of the porch slab is sinking as well. All exposed wood surfaces require repainting. Yet, these are less issues of historic integrity than compelling cause for repair. The building's historic fabric has been overwhelmingly retained, and its overall appearance is closer to the original than are some others in this class of fieldhouse. Exterior alterations have been limited to the (reversible) boarding and filling in of a handful of door and window openings, presumably for security reasons.

In recognition of the provision of the fieldhouse and its design significance, the nomination proposes a period of significance of 1934, its construction date, which seems appropriate.