

May 13, 2021

TO: The Honorable Mayor Justin Wilson and Members of City Council

FROM: Neighbors of the Hampshire Fractious House

SUBJECT: Docket Item #19 -- Historic Preservation of 506 North Overlook Drive

You have before you an opportunity to preserve an important piece of local history. We ask that you reverse the Planning Commission's decision to approve the requested subdivision of 506 N. Overlook Drive. Our reasoning is explained below.

The Hampshire Fractious House tells an important story in Alexandria history

Thanks to the efforts of the Office of Historic Alexandria and many private citizens, we have learned much about the history of the 143-year-old house at 506 N. Overlook Drive. While it has been a symbol of North Ridge's history for many decades, we find that it may not have been built before the Civil War (as cited in City property records). Instead, it was likely built by Hampshire Fractious, a free African-American who bought the property in 1876 in what was known as the Jefferson Township before it was incorporated into Alexandria. Fractious was employed as a plasterer and worked in DC. He appears with his family in the neighborhood in the US Censuses of 1870 and 1880. Since they don't show up in the Census prior to 1870, he and other family members were likely enslaved prior to the Civil War.

According to tax and other records, Hampshire Fractious owned several properties in Alexandria. This must have been a special challenge for him, as he purchased the property and built the house at the end of Reconstruction – just when the Federal government was pulling back its support for the political and civil rights of Black Americans living in the South.

It is a significant part of the black history of Alexandria, given the unique situation of Hampshire Fractious in Alexandria (City/County) post-civil war. Consider the irony of a black man being the first owner of a house in this neighborhood, where some years later racial covenants excluding black/minority ownership were included in the deeds of sale used by the developer in Beverley Hills. Although any remaining covenants are unenforceable now, an acknowledgment that this first house was owned by a black man, perhaps even an ex-slave, makes the history of this house an important story in Alexandria's history.

The house and property deserve protection under the 100-Year-Old-Building list

We respectfully disagree with the opinion of the Department of Planning and Zoning that the house does not meet at least two of the criteria of Section 10-303 of the Zoning Ordinance.

Criterion D requires that the house be “associated with persons ... (and) events of ... local significance”. As the only documented structure in Alexandria built by a free African American in that period, the Hampshire Fractious House clearly meets that criterion.

It also clearly “fosters civic pride in the city’s past”, thus meeting item G of the criteria for designation as a One-Hundred-Year-Old Building. Witness the 104 signatures from 77 nearby households on the petition to preserve the house, and the 1045 signatures on the online petition in March. In addition, property owners of 30 adjacent properties, including the Beverley Hills Community United Methodist Church, joined this appeal in April. A photo and story about the house were featured prominently in the original 1981 edition of North Ridge Lore, and again in the 2000 edition. It has been an important local landmark referenced on the history page of the North Ridge Citizens’ Association website for many years.

By virtue of meeting the two criteria above, the house qualifies for protection under the One-Hundred-Year-Old Building provision in Section 10-303 of the Zoning Ordinance.

The house first appears on the 1878 map by G.M. Hopkins labeled as the Hampshire Fractious house. It continues to show up as the H. Fractious house on subsequent maps from 1900 on. In 1992, the house was listed as a “Documented Historic Site” on Page 61 of the North Ridge Small Area Plan for Historic Preservation. It shows 506 Overlook Drive (1878) under the name of H. Fractious Estate.¹ Thus, the house is at least 143 years old.

Also of more recent historical interest, this house served as headquarters for the development of Beverley Hills in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s.

We ask that the house and property be protected.

The Council should nominate this property for inclusion on the 100-Year-Old-Building List.

The Council should recommend that the owner enter into negotiations with entities such as the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust to explore ways to preserve this site.

The City should authorize the use of municipal funds to preserve as much of this historic house as possible and to tell its story for future generations.

At a minimum, we request a plaque be installed near the street (perhaps on the boundary with church property) that summarizes the Hampshire Fractious story and offers links to

¹ https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/planning/info/masterplan/masterplan_historic_preservation.pdf

where more info can be found. Perhaps the Black History Museum or the Duncan Library could be the official repository for this information.

Alexandria should revise its criteria for protecting historical structures

One by one, Alexandria is losing key structures that represent its unique history. Properties like this one make Alexandria what it is – a unique historic community. Current codes and ordinances are insufficient to the task. For example, the subdivision ordinance does not allow for consideration of historic structures that might be destroyed by re-subdivision of a property.

Further research is needed

The threat of demolition and development of this historic property has spurred a spate of research activity by multiple residents and city staff. Within a short amount of time a lot has been documented about the life of the person responsible for building this house and the history of the surrounding neighborhood, including an African American community nearby. No doubt there is much more to be learned about the history of this part of our City.

On behalf of the petitioners, we thank you for consideration of this important piece of Alexandria's African American history.

Sincerely,


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