



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

MCPB
Item # 3
1/30/03

January 23, 2003

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Jeff Zyontz, Chief
County Wide Planning Division

FROM: Gwen Wright, Historic Preservation Supervisor
County Wide Planning Division

SUBJECT: Nomination of Former Blair Station Post Office to the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and/or the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Do not add the original building of the former Blair Station Post Office to the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and/or the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

HPC REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATION

On January 22, 2003, the HPC held a public hearing and worksession on this nomination. After presentation of a staff report and after hearing testimony from a number of witnesses, the Commission voted to support the staff recommendation and to not recommend to the Planning Board that the former Blair Station Post Office be added to the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and/or the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. There were five HPC Commissioners in attendance at the January 22nd meeting – three voted to support the staff recommendation, one was opposed, and one abstained.

BACKGROUND

The original building of the former Blair Station Post Office has been nominated by the Silver Spring Historical Society for designation on the *Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites* and/or the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. A copy of their December 27th nomination is attached. In addition, a development plan for the property – which would include demolition of

a very modest public “face”; and it was clearly not the main post office for Silver Spring (the main post office was the structure at 8412 Georgia Avenue.)

Staff feels that there is an argument for the concept that the former Blair Station Post Office is historically important as a post-World War II civic building. But, staff also feels that argument is weakened by the building’s lack of architectural and siting prominence. It may have been a publicly-owned building, but it did not strongly represent the civic activity and community center of post-World War II Silver Spring.

Importance of the TRANSORMA in relation to the Former Blair Station Post Office

The history of the TRANSORMA is extremely interesting and important in understanding how the U.S. Postal system became automated. Its testing at the Blair Station Post Office was an important step in the mechanization and modernization of the postal system.

However, there are several aspects of the TRANSORMA’s connection to the former Blair Station Post Office that staff finds troubling from a historic perspective:

- the TRANSORMA was located in the 1954 section of the Blair Station postal complex, not in lobby at 8051 Newell Street (which is the specific portion of the building noted in the nomination letter for addition to the *Locational Atlas*);
- the TRANSORMA was not the machine which was ultimately used throughout the country for automated mail sorting – the MHT form states that the machine that ultimately became the backbone of letter-sorting throughout the U.S. was made by Burroughs Corp. and was tested in Detroit; and
- the 1957 TRANSORMA was only one a part of the overall effort to automate the postal system. As noted in the MHT form, an earlier version of the TRANSORMA had been tested in New York during 1939 and an American-made parcel sorting machine was used in Baltimore in 1956. It is not clear how long the TRANSORMA was used at the Blair Station Post Office and when it was removed/replaced.

Architecture of the Former Blair Station Post Office

Subsequent to the December 27th nomination letter, staff has received a number of additional letters and emails about the architect of the Blair Station Post Office, Clifton White. All information which staff has received is attached to this report.

After looking through the materials provided and speaking with Michael Cohalan, an architect who apprenticed with Mr. White in the early 1960s, staff is not convinced that Mr. White can be considered a “master” as noted in designation criteria 24A-3(2)b (“Represents the work of a master.”) Mr. White appears to have been a good local architect. However, staff has not been able to find any information to show that his projects were published in architectural journals of the period or that he won any architectural awards. Based on my conversation with Mr. Cohalan, he seems to have specialized in churches and remained very committed to designing in the

Colonial Revival style even in the early 1960s when many architects were designing in a more Modern style.

The architecture of the former Blair Station Post Office was not identified as significant in either the MHT form prepared by the consultant or in the December 27th nomination letter from the Silver Spring Historical Society. The additional information provided about the building's architect has not convinced staff that this structure has notable architectural or design significance.

CONCLUSION

Staff feels that the former Blair Station Post Office has some historic significance as a post-World War II civic building and as the site of the testing of the TRANSORMA. Staff does not feel, based on current information, that the building has architectural or design significance.

The Silver Spring Historical Society has requested that the original building (the lobby) be added to the *Locational Atlas*. From a historic perspective, this is the least significant portion of the building and does not, in staff's judgment have architectural or design significance. Thus, staff can not support the nomination.

Staff feels that other ways should be explored to interpret and explain the importance of the TRANSORMA and its testing in Silver Spring

day-to-day basis. By serving a public use for half a century, the building became a familiar feature of the neighborhood.

The former Blair Station has been listed on the inventory of historically significant 20th-century buildings in the Silver Spring CBD, completed last week. It is one of the inventory buildings considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. To our knowledge, it is the first building on the inventory for which protection is being asked of the Commission via listing on the Locational Atlas.

Please let me know when the hearing to consider the nomination will be held, because our organization would like to send a representative to testify.

I can be reached by email at judy@ojp.usdoj.gov, or by phone during the day at 202-514-6284.

Thank you for your interest and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Judy A. Reardon".

Judy Reardon
Vice President

cc: Wayne M. Goldstein, President - Montgomery Preservation, Inc.