

Agenda Report

December 11, 2017

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council
FROM: Planning & Community Development Department
SUBJECT: DESIGNATION OF THE HOUSE AT 545 WESTGATE STREET AS A LANDMARK

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the City Council:

1. Find that the designation of a historic resource is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA Guidelines §15308: Class 8 - Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment);
2. Find that the house at 545 Westgate Street meets landmark designation Criteria B and C in Pasadena Municipal Code (P.M.C) Section 17.62.040(C)(2)(c) because it associated with the lives of persons who are significant in the history of the City and embodies the distinctive characteristics of a locally significant property type, architectural style and period. It is a locally significant example of a Folk Victorian house associated with the productive life of civil rights activist Ruby McKnight Williams;
3. Adopt the attached resolution approving a Declaration of Landmark Designation for 545 Westgate Street, Pasadena, California;
4. Authorize the Mayor to execute the attached Declaration of Landmark Designation for 545 Westgate Street, Pasadena, California; and
5. Direct the City Clerk to record the declaration with the Los Angeles County Recorder.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION:

At its regular meeting of November 7, 2017, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended that the City Council approve the designation of 545 Westgate Street as a landmark under Criteria B & C of PMC §17.62.040.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The house at 545 Westgate Street is a distinctive example of a Folk Victorian house and retains most of its significant character-defining features. The house is also associated with the life of Ruby McKnight Williams, locally significant figure in the Civil Rights Movement in Pasadena, who lived in the house from ca. 1954 to 1999, during the most productive years of her activity. Therefore, the property at 545 Westgate Street qualifies for designation as a landmark under Criteria “B” and “C” as a locally significant example of a Folk Victorian house associated with the productive life of civil rights advocate Ruby McKnight Williams.

BACKGROUND:

On May 1, 2017, property owners Aishwarya Nukala & Andrew Lewellen submitted an application for landmark designation of the property at 545 Westgate Street. City staff evaluated the property according to the criteria in Title 17 of the P.M.C. and determined that the house qualifies for designation as a landmark.

Property Data

- Address: 545 Westgate Street, Pasadena, 91103
- Location: North side of Westgate Street, between Forest and Lincoln Avenues
- Original Location: 85 N. Euclid Avenue per 1925 Building Description Blank (may be 81 N. Euclid Avenue based on Sanborn Maps)
- Date of Construction Completion: 1892 (source: 1925 Building Description Blank)
- Original Owner: Unknown; Thomas Taylor was the owner when the house was relocated (source: 1925 Building Permit & Building Description Blank)
- Original Architect: Unknown
- Original Builder: Unknown
- Original / Present Use: Single-family residence
- Property size: 8,764 square feet (source: County Assessor)
- Building size: 1,896 square feet (source: County Assessor)

The Site

The site is an 8,764-square-foot rectangular lot in a flat single-family-residential neighborhood setting in northwestern Pasadena. The house is sited at the southern end of the lot, set back approximately 30 feet from the street. A low concrete-block retaining wall is at the street edge. The property is accessed via a concrete driveway from Westgate Street at the eastern edge of the property, to a detached garage at the northeast corner of the site. The remainder of the site is landscaped.

Exterior Features of the Building

This one-and-one-half story Folk Victorian style house has a roughly rectangular plan and a steeply sloping front-facing gable-on-hip roof with shallow, boxed eaves. The large, street-facing gable has fish-scale shingles, a pair of double-hung windows and a louvered attic vent in the gable-end and the roof edge is decorated with a cut-out-wood barge board. The house has a full-width projecting front porch that wraps to a portion of the west elevation, supported by turned wood posts and decorated with a non-original medallioned frieze and row of restored original spindlework at the porch roof edge. The porch has a simple wood railing and turned-wood newel posts at the wood steps leading up to the porch. The house is clad in wood clapboard siding (tongue-and-groove rather than overlapping) and has vertical tongue-and-groove wood skirting at the base. Windows are wood fixed and double-hung, with some paired with large wood mullions between, in pedimented and framed openings with projecting sills. The front door is a wide, paneled-wood door with a large rectangular light within a pedimented and framed opening.

Documented Changes to the Property

Records indicate that the house was moved to the site in 1925; the original location indicated in the relocation record is 85 N. Euclid Avenue, which is within the site of City Hall, construction of which was completed in 1927. Review of Sanborn Maps calls this original location into question as the footprint of the building at 85 N. Euclid Avenue is substantially different from that of 545 Westgate Street; however, the footprint shown for 81 N. Euclid Avenue is very similar to that of 545 Westgate Street (see Attachment C). A permit was issued in 1963 to stucco the side of the house and add stone trim. Currently, the north (rear) elevation of the house and the northern portion of the west side elevation are coated in stucco and stone is applied at the base of the west side elevation and a small portion of the wall is covered in stone from the ground to the first floor ceiling line. A small wall area on the east side elevation is treated similarly with stone trim. A garage and carport were built on the property in the 1920's; however these were demolished and the existing garage built in 2005. In 1930, new roofing was laid over former wood shingles. A small patio cover was permitted in 1970, presumably the existing cover at the northeast corner of the house. See Attachment B for permit documentation.

Circa 2000, the house was rehabilitated to return it to its original appearance, including removal of stone and stucco on the front and portions of the side elevations to reveal original wood siding, repositioning of the front door back to its original location, installation of more appropriate windows and restoration of front porch spindlework that was discovered upon removal of the stone. Photo-documentation of this work is in Attachment A. Medallions and cut-out-wood fasciae appear to be non-original, conjectural features added as part of this rehabilitation project.

Current Condition, Use, and Proposed Plans

The exterior of the house is currently in good condition with minor alterations to the rear and side elevations as noted above. The owner has also submitted a concurrent application for the Historic Property Contract (Mills Act) program. The house will continue to be used as a single-family residence.

Historical Overview

Late 19th Century Development/Folk Victorian Style

Pasadena began to transition from an agricultural community to a town in the mid-to-late 1880's when the City was incorporated and several institutions were founded (mainly churches and schools). A building boom was spurred by the extension of railroad service to the City in 1885 and many large hotels were built, which resulted in a significant influx of tourists. Significant commercial development occurred near the intersection of Colorado Boulevard and Fair Oaks Avenue, with residential development occurring nearby. Between 1880 and 1890 the population increased from 391 to 4,882 and, during this time, a number of lumber yards, brick-making companies and planing mills were established in the City to provide building materials to nearby construction sites, a large number for a relatively small town. In terms of residential development during this period, the single-family residence was the most common type constructed and included both vernacular and high-style building types. Vernacular buildings were utilitarian in character and typically owner-constructed; high-style buildings were designed by trained architects or builders. The design of buildings, including vernacular examples, was influenced by many innovations during this period including framing techniques, mass production of building materials (nails, lumber, windows, doors, siding, decorative details), and heating and electrical systems. The proliferation of pattern books also contributed to the design of buildings during this period.

The Folk Victorian style was common in the United States during the late nineteenth century. The City's historic context report "Late 19th and Early 20th Century Development and Architecture in Pasadena" describes the style and its character-defining features as follows: "Examples of the Folk Victorian style in Pasadena show influences of the high-style Italianate, Queen Anne, and Eastlake architecture but are marked by their less elaborate massing and ornamentation. These houses were constructed throughout Pasadena, but today they are more frequently seen on the north side of town.

- One to two stories
- Rectangular or L-shaped plans
- Wood clapboard siding, sometimes with fish scale shingles in gable ends
- Gabled roofs with shallow overhanging boxed eaves
- Porches with turned wood posts, spindlework, and decorative millwork detailing
- Narrowly proportioned double-hung windows

- Ornamentation often rendered by cut-out patterns, drilled holes, and thin, layered wood with sharp edges”

Ruby McKnight Williams (ca. 1895 – 1999)

Ruby McKnight Williams was born in Topeka, Kansas ca. 1895 and moved to Pasadena ca. 1930 to attempt to continue her career as a Kindergarten teacher; however, at that time, she was unable to be hired as a teacher in Pasadena because she was African American. In an oral history interview submitted with the application, Williams indicated that African Americans could only find menial jobs at that time in Pasadena, which was more segregated than she had previously experienced in Kansas. She was soon hired to run the “colored women’s department” of the Pasadena Employment Service, and she states that this was the highest office held by an African American at that time. In this position, she walked the business districts of Pasadena and, according to her 1999 obituary in the Pasadena Star-News (PSN), “hounded managers and owners...into eventually hiring black women.” Williams devoted much of her life to the cause of employment equality for African Americans.

McKnight was active in the local chapter of the NAACP beginning in 1943, including serving as its President for a total of 15 years over two terms (1958 – 1959 and 1969-1983), and was at the forefront of the most significant integration battles of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly desegregation of the City’s public schools, housing and City facilities. She was also involved in providing educational opportunities to minority populations in order to promote racial equality. A 1990 Los Angeles Times article indicates that at that time Williams had received over 19 commendations from local organizations, including one issued in 1983 for 50 years of service to the NAACP. A 1983 PSN article outlines Williams’ efforts to quell unrest in Pasadena during the Watts riots by promoting pacifism over violence. A 1966 PSN article outlines Williams’ efforts to beautify her neighborhood, which garnered awards from the Pasadena Beautiful Association. Williams’ other notable achievements include serving as the first African American member of the board of directors for the local chapter of the American Red Cross, a member of the Recreation and Parks Commission, president of the International Women’s Club, and being active in the League of Women Voters. Attachment D includes several articles written about McKnight, as well as the preface to her installment in the Pasadena Heritage Oral History Project. It should also be noted that in 1989 a small open space area at the corner of Westgate Street and N. Arroyo Boulevard was dedicated in her honor, including installation of a plaque commemorating her at that location.

The records regarding Williams’ residency at 545 Westgate Street are somewhat unclear in the City Directories. Staff reviewed the directories in the City’s archives beginning in 1931 and found listings for Ruby McKnight at 1162 Forest Avenue from 1931-1936, 560 McDonald Street from 1937-1938 and 258 N. Vernon Avenue (street later eliminated by freeway) from 1939 – 1943. Directories from 1943 – 1946 are missing from the archives. Directories from 1947 – 1951 have conflicting information in

different sections: Ruby Williams or Melvin & Ruby Williams are listed as residents of 545 Westgate Street in the portion of the directories that list residents by name; however, in the sections that list residents by property, William R. Butler is shown as the resident of 545 Westgate Street (without a symbol used to indicate ownership). Directories from 1952 and 1953 are missing. From 1954 on, Melvin & Ruby Williams are listed in both sections of the directories. As such, it appears that Williams lived in the house from at least 1954, possibly earlier, to her death in 1999, a period encompassing the vast majority of her productive life as a civil rights advocate.

ANALYSIS:

The house at 545 Westgate Street is eligible for designation as a landmark under Criteria B and C of PMC Section 17.62.040.C.2, which state:

Criterion B:

[The property] is associated with the lives of persons who are significant in the history of the City, region, or State.

Criterion C:

[The property] embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, architectural style, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is of significance to the City or, to the region or possesses artistic values of significance to the City or to the region.

Under Criterion B, 545 Westgate Street is significant because it was owned and occupied by Ruby McKnight Williams, a locally significant figure in the Civil Rights Movement in Pasadena, who lived in the house from ca. 1954 to 1999, during the most productive years of her activity.

Under Criterion C, the house at 545 Westgate Street is significant because it is a locally significant, intact example of a Folk Victorian house. The registration requirements for single-family residences in the City's 2010 Late 19th and Early 20th Century Development and Architecture in Pasadena Historic Context Report state:

To be eligible for listing under Criterion C, single-family residences must be rare or notable examples of a master architect or builder, or rare or notable examples of one of the subtypes described [in the report]. They must possess architectural integrity and the essential character-defining features of the style or type. In particular, the retention of the original roof form, wall materials, fenestration patterns, and their component parts is required. Houses that illustrate more than one style are eligible if they achieve a harmonious design. The historic design, workmanship, feeling, and materials must be strongly present in the evaluation of integrity.

The house possesses all of the character-defining features of the Folk Victorian style as outlined above. It has architectural integrity (its ability to demonstrate why it is significant) through its design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, as follows:

- Design: The building retains its form, plan, space, structure, and style, as described above. The design of the house embodies the defining characteristics of a distinct architectural movement, which is evident in design features such as its steeply pitched roof; simple plan; wrap-around front porch; narrow, vertical windows; and solid-to-void proportions.
- Setting: Although not in its original location, the single-family residential setting of the house is consistent with its original location on N. Euclid Avenue, which was a single-family residential neighborhood before it became the City's Civic Center after the house was relocated in 1925. Based on National Register Bulletin 15, "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation" and the registration requirements noted above, integrity of setting is not essential to establishing historic significance under criterion C.
- Materials: The house has most of the original exterior materials used in its construction except that new materials (stucco and stone wall cladding) remain on portions of its secondary side and rear elevations. This may be considered a reduction in the house's overall integrity of materials; however, because the front façade retains all of its original materials and the applied stone is limited in scope on the side elevations, retaining most of the original exterior materials on the majority of those facades, the house retains overall integrity of materials.
- Workmanship: The building exhibits workmanship through architectural details reflective of its period of construction such as turned wood posts, fish-scale shingles, spindlework and wood clapboard siding.
- Feeling: The property clearly expresses the characteristics of a late 19th century house in the Folk Victorian architectural style.
- Association: The property is the place where Ruby McKnight Williams lived for much of her active life and, although its appearance was largely restored to reflect the period before Williams' residency, primarily the removal of stone and stucco from much of the façade, these materials remain on the sides and rear as evidence of the house's appearance during Williams' residency.

The house does not retain integrity of location because it was relocated to a new site in 1925; however, as indicated above, integrity of location is not essential to establishing significance under Criterion C. The house does, however, retain integrity as the location of Ruby McKnight Williams' residence during the period when she became a historically significant figure in the history of the City. Based on the above, the property retains sufficient integrity to qualify for designation as a landmark under Criteria B and C.

It should also be noted that the property was determined eligible for landmark designation in conjunction with the City's 2009-2010 study of Late 19th and Early 20th Century Development and Architecture in Pasadena.

The house is the only contributing feature to this designation because there are no other features of the site that are associated with the Folk Victorian style of the house or the period of Ruby McKnight Williams' residency.

COUNCIL POLICY CONSIDERATION:

The General Plan Land Use Element – Guiding Principle 2: "Pasadena's historic resources will be preserved. Citywide, new development will be in harmony with and enhance Pasadena's unique character and sense of place. New construction that could affect the integrity of historic resources will be compatible with, and differentiated from, the existing resource;" and Goal 8: "Preservation and enhancement of Pasadena's cultural and historic buildings, landscapes, streets and districts as valued assets and important representations of its past and a source of community identity, and social, ecological, and economic vitality."

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

Class 8 exemptions consists of actions taken by regulatory agencies, as authorized by state or local ordinance, to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment where the regulatory process involves procedures for the protection of the environment.

FISCAL IMPACT:

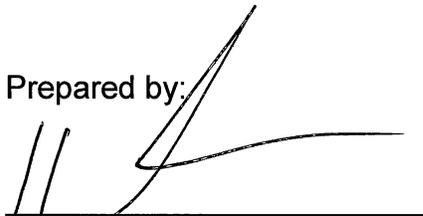
In some instances, owners of designated historic properties may apply to the City for a Historic Property Contract (Mills Act), which allows an alternative and often lower property tax assessment. The City Council reviewed the projected loss of property tax revenue from this program in 2002 when it adopted the local Mills Act ordinance. As a result of this program, the reduced property tax amount which comes out of the City's local share amount from the State, is a small fraction of the City's overall property tax revenue.

Respectfully submitted,



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Development Department

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Attachments: (6)

- Attachment A – Application Materials
- Attachment B – Vicinity Map & Permit Records
- Attachment C – Sanborn Maps
- Attachment D – Articles about Ruby McKnight Williams; Preface to Williams' Pasadena Heritage Oral History Project Interview (full interview documentation available upon request)
- Attachment E - Current Photographs
- Attachment F – Effects of Landmark Designation