

# Agenda Report

November 19, 2018

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council  
**FROM:** Planning & Community Development Department  
**SUBJECT: DESIGNATION OF THE HOUSE AT 200 FERN DRIVE AS A HISTORIC MONUMENT**

**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) pursuant to Section 15308 Class 8 of the CEQA Guidelines pertaining to Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment and there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class and, therefore, there are no unusual circumstances;
2. Find that the house and accessory structures at 200 Fern Drive meet Historic Monument designation Criteria B and C in Pasadena Municipal Code (P.M.C.) Section 17.62.040(B)(1)(b) and (c) because they are exceptional examples of a custom-designed, Mediterranean Revival Style estate designed by regionally significant architect Paul R. Williams and was resided in and owned by nationally significant doctor and pharmaceutical entrepreneur V. Mott Pierce during his period of significance;
3. Adopt the attached resolution approving a Declaration of Landmark Designation for 200 Fern Drive, Pasadena, California;
4. Authorize the Mayor to execute the attached Declaration of Landmark Designation for 200 Fern Drive, 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 September 4, 2018, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended that the City Council approve the designation of the house and accessory structures at 200 Fern Drive as a Historic Monument under Criteria B and C in P.M.C. Section 17.62.040(B)(1)(b) and (c).

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The house and accessory structures at 200 Fern Drive qualify for designation as a Landmark under Criterion “C” because they embody the distinctive characteristics of a locally significant property type, architectural style and period. The house and accessory structures are exceptional examples of a custom-designed, Mediterranean Revival Style estate designed by regionally significant architect Paul R. Williams and was resided in and owned by nationally significant doctor and pharmaceutical entrepreneur V. Mott Pierce during his period of significance.

## **BACKGROUND:**

On May 5, 2018 Andrew Goodrich, on behalf of property owners Clayton and Mihaela Varga, submitted an application for Historic Monument designation of the property at 200 Fern Drive. City staff evaluated the property according to the criteria in Title 17 of the P.M.C. and determined that the building qualifies for designation as a landmark.

In 2012, the City of Pasadena commissioned a Historic Context Report and Multiple Property Documentation listing entitled “Historic Designed Gardens in Pasadena, 1873-1975.” Through that process, the Alta San Rafael neighborhood was identified as a National Register-eligible historic district, as a planned residential subdivision that was designed by influential landscape architects the Olmsted Brothers. As a result of this study, the property at 200 Fern Drive was deemed eligible for the National Register as a contributor to a National Register eligible district through survey evaluation. This evaluation pertained only to the grounds of the property; the house was not evaluated.

## **Property Data**

- Address: 200 Fern Drive, Pasadena
- Location: Northeast side of Fern Drive, between Los Altos Drive and Linda Vista Avenue, north of State Route 134.
- Date of Construction Completion: 1928 (source: Original Building Permit)
- Original Architect: Paul R. Williams (source: Original Building Permit)
- Original Builder: Shephard and Shephard
- Original / Present Use: Single-family residence
- Property size: 32,000 square feet (source: County Assessor)
- Building size: 15,280 square feet (source: County Assessor)
- Building Size: 5,045 square feet (source: County Assessor)

### Site Features

The Alta San Rafael neighborhood is a small, secluded hillside enclave that is notable as one of the first planned communities in the greater Pasadena area. Within this neighborhood, the house occupies a large, trapezoidal shaped lot that abuts the edge of a hillside and slopes downward toward the north. The footprint of the house is moderate in size in comparison to the entirety of the lot and occupies only a portion of the lot, near the southern edge, adjacent to the street. A majority of the property consists of mature trees, foliage and other landscape features. Fern Drive is a narrow private street with restricted access that charts a curvilinear course along the crest of a hill. Along the street, Arroyo stone is applied to gutters, curbs, and other tract features, providing the area with a sense of aesthetic cohesion and a palpable connection to the natural environment. The neighborhood is developed with large single-family houses on sizable lots, almost all of which were built between its initial period of development in the 1920s and the 1960s.

The property is extensively landscaped and many of the site and landscape features contribute to the significance of the house. Generally, landscaping within the areas directly around the perimeter of the house are manicured, while the rest of the property is naturalistic with native trees, shrubs, and undergrowth. Peripheral areas of the property are accessed by a network of earthen and stone paver footpaths. The landscaping and site features that contribute to the designation are generally associated with the use of Arroyo Stone. The use of this native material evokes a strong sense of rusticity and enhances the aesthetic connection between site and nature. Arroyo stone is used for planters, curbs, and retaining walls. It is also used to line two stream beds that carry water into shallow ponds: one of the stream beds is located to the north of the house, and the second is located to the south. Both follow the contours of the land and are activated by pump systems that recirculate water, although their operability and condition are currently unknown. To the north of the house is an Arroyo stone ancillary building that anchors a small amphitheater. This ancillary building is capped by a clay tile shed roof and features a stone chimney.

There are three other ancillary buildings on the property that do not contribute to the significance of the property. The first is used as a pool house and is located adjacent to the pool terrace; the second is a small storage shed located to the north of the house; and the third is a larger storage structure located to the south and west of the house. These structures have similar but much simpler architectural details to the house, including low-pitched clay tile roofs, paneled wood doors, and multi-light windows. Other notable site features include an in ground swimming pool (added 1959) and an earthen bocce ball court. Both the pool and the court occupy terraces that sit at lower grades than that of the house. These terraces are accessed by quarry tile steps and wrought iron gates, and are enclosed by concrete terrace walls that are capped by a layer of quarry tile.



### Exterior Features of the House:

The house has a generally “L” shaped floor plan that follows the natural contours of the hillside lot. Due to the steep terrain of the property, most of the house, aside from the garage, is not visible from Fern Drive. The house has three principal volumes that comprise the overall massing. The first volume contains the main living area of the house and is located downslope, the second includes the attached garage and is at the street level. A third volume is a connecting volume that attaches the garage to the house and contains an exterior stairwell, elevator shaft, storage room and guest house. The house sits atop a poured concrete foundation and is constructed of conventional wood framing; concrete walls that frame a partially exposed basement level are visible on some secondary elevations. Capping the house is a low-pitched clay tile roof that includes a combination of hipped, shed, and pent volumes. Most volumes of the roof feature open eaves and decorative wood brackets. Multiple stucco chimneys with decorative caps project from the roof. Exterior walls are clad with hand-troweled stucco.

A more detailed description of the exterior features of the house is include Attachment A, which includes a historic resource evaluation prepared by Architectural Resources Group.

### Interior Features of the House:

The interior of this building is exceptionally detailed and serves as a testament to the skill and talent of Paul R. Williams and the wealth of the original owner, V. Mott Pierce. Notable interior spaces and features are generally located in semi-public areas of the house and include the foyer, living room, dining room, a dining niche, a study, and a basement-level den. As this nomination is for Historic Monument status, portions of the interior are included in the designation and would be subject to the protections that this designation would convey. Those portions of the interior that are included in the designation are described below, with more detailed descriptions of these areas included in Attachment A.

- *Foyer*

This space comprises a long corridor that is replete with Classical details and motifs, and provides a dramatic entrance to the house. Notable architectural features within the foyer include marble floors and steps, a vaulted ceiling with hand-stenciled details, engaged Corinthian columns, metal light fixtures, and a staircase with a wrought iron balustrade.

- *Living Room*

Located on the opposite (east) side of the foyer, the living room is an open, voluminous space that is also replete with Classical ornament. The room is capped by a coffered wood ceiling with denticulated crown molding and hand stenciling within each coffer. Other notable features in the living room include a

fireplace with an elaborately detailed surround and mantle, a small arched niche adjacent to the fireplace, and a colonnade that delineates the living room from the dining room. The colonnade is composed of three arches, each of which is supported by a pair of slender Corinthian columns. An elaborate wrought iron balustrade and stair rail system is incorporated into the colonnade.

- *Formal Dining Room & Niche*

Located on the opposite side of the colonnade, the dining room features crown molding, a large arched picture window and an octagonal dining niche, which is located between the dining room and kitchen and features an elaborate, carved wood ceiling and an arched recess with hand-stenciled details.

- *Study*

The study is located next to the dining room and features paneled wood walls, crown molding, engaged fluted pilasters, and a wood-and-marble fireplace.

- *Basement level*

Underneath the study is a den with nautical detailing. Notable features include a coffered wood ceiling with wood-and-rope crown molding, wood wall panels, a wood fireplace with embossed metal panels, and a bar that is hidden behind a wall panel. Also located on the basement level, adjacent to the den, is a room that is currently occupied by a Polynesian-themed bar. The renovation of this room is not reflected in the permit record for the property, so it is not known for what this space was originally used. However, Polynesian décor is believed to date to the 1950 or 1960s, when interest in Polynesian culture was extremely strong. This room post-dates the period of significance of the association of V. Mott Pierce to the house (1928-1942) and is not included in the nomination.

#### Documented Changes to the Property:

The property has undergone few major exterior changes since it was originally built in 1928. In 1929, a new concrete retaining wall (location on property unknown) was built. In 1934, a storeroom was created beneath the house; this involved the addition of a wooden floor and the carving of six window holes in an existing concrete wall. The permit does not specify where the storeroom is located, though it appears to describe a crawlspace that is adjacent to the garage. In 1939, a new electrical-powered elevator was installed at the entrance vestibule and, in 1959, a swimming pool and retaining wall were constructed. In addition, several other minor alterations were made, although the dates are unclear as to when these changes occurred. A few original windows on secondary elevations that face the Ventura Freeway/SR 134 were replaced with visually compatible, dual-paned vinyl windows with faux divided lights to mitigate freeway noise. The original garage doors were also replaced with compatible, roll-up doors.

### Current Conditions, Use, and Proposed Plans:

The exterior of the building is currently in good condition and it continues to be used a single-family residence. No significant changes to the property are proposed at this time.

### Historical Overview

#### *Period Revival Architecture in Pasadena*

According to the City of Pasadena Historic Context Report entitled, "Residential Period Revival Architecture and Development in Pasadena from 1915-1942," Pasadena was solidly established in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a national center of residential architectural design in the Arts and Crafts genre, and continued to be in the innovative forefront of architectural design during the period 1915-1942. In this era of Period Revival design, an affluent population, rapid growth and the presence of highly trained and skilled architects ensured that Pasadena would be a place where trends in California architecture were happening. In Pasadena, these architects produced designs that interpreted both national and regional precedents. The Arts and Crafts philosophy of design idealized the Colonial past. After 1915, it became a desire for a literal translation of classical architectural elements within the confines of the philosophy of not copying classical design but creating new designs based on the older elements to meet contemporary needs. New England and Southern Colonial and English vernacular residential designs were a major influence in residential architecture in Pasadena during the early part of the period (1915 through the early 1920s). Beginning in the mid 1920's, the revivals were predominantly influenced by Italian, Spanish and California Colonial styles.

Because of the influences of designers during the Arts and Crafts period, architects, mostly classically educated, chose to practice in Pasadena in existing firms, such as Greene and Greene, Reginald Johnson, Myron Hunt and Sylvanus Marston; or established their own offices and partnerships. By 1915, talented architects designing residences to house the growing population of the city included Cyril Bennett, Gordon Kaufmann, Paul Williams, Edgar Maybury and Garrett Van Pelt, among others. Period Revival houses appeared in residential neighborhoods in existing annexed tracts in the second decade of the twentieth century where, in some cases, houses replaced orange orchards, or in others, filled a vacant parcel in an established neighborhood of Arts and Crafts period houses. Development of newly annexed lands along transit lines expanded the city's boundaries to include new tracts of land west of the original city. This pattern continued with additional annexations, beginning in the 1920's, to the east and northeast. By 1929, most of the current city, except sections of the northeastern part, had been annexed.

Residential development in Pasadena during the 1915 to 1942 period has two distinct phases. Residential building activity in the first phase encompasses the time through World War I up to 1925. Architect and builder-designed houses alike from this ten-year

period reflect, almost exclusively, influences of residential styles of the American Colonial period, including the regions of New England, Mid-Atlantic, Southeastern, Southwestern and Monterrey, although the architecture of the 1915 California-Panama Exposition in San Diego is reflected in upper-class architect-designed houses of the late teens and early 1920's. In the second phase, the approximate fifteen years up to World War II, architects and designers were influenced more predominately by the European residential styles of England, Spain, Italy and France, although in the late 1930's there was a re-emergence of designs that reflected Colonial California that was a major force in the development of the California Ranch style. Residential architectural designs beginning in the late 20's also incorporated distinctly protomodernist elements and materials in new classical design interpretations.

### *Mediterranean Revival Style*

The Mediterranean Revival style was among the many Period Revival subtypes. The style is derived from various cultures around the Mediterranean region and often deemed as an appropriate choice because of the similarities between Southern California's temperate climate and that of the Mediterranean region. By the 1910's and 1920's the various architectural features distinguishing the Period Revival subtypes (Spanish Revival, Italian Renaissance Revival) were increasingly blended by architects who drew upon trends from across the Mediterranean region. The aesthetic that emerged was known as Mediterranean Revival. The style was interpreted in many ways, but, in general, Mediterranean Revival style buildings were known for their formality and elaborate composition, a popular choice for high style, single-family residences whose owners and occupants sought to project a sense of prominence and wealth.

Character-defining features of the Mediterranean Revival style include the following:

- Symmetrical primary facades
- Hipped, clay tile roofs with wide boxed or bracketed eaves
- Smooth stucco exterior walls
- Wood or steel casement windows with divided lights
- Elaborate entrances and door surrounds
- Arched door and window surrounds
- Accent windows, including large focal windows and the application of decorative glazing
- Decorative wood, wrought iron, or stucco grilles
- Colonnades, arcades, or loggias
- Balconies, patios, terraces, and stairs with decorative stone or wrought iron balustrades
- Decorative terra cotta or ceramic tile work
- Eclectic mix of stone or plaster decorative elements including architraves, stringcourses, cornices, etc.
- Pilasters, columns, and/or quoins



Character-defining features are those visual aspects and physical features or elements constructed during the property's period of significance that give the building its character. In general, a property that retains its character defining features continues to convey its significance and therefore retains integrity as an historic resource. Removal or alteration of just one character-defining feature does not necessarily alter the integrity of an historic resource. Impacts to historic integrity can result from a single major change or from many incremental changes over time.

*Paul R. Williams, FAIA (1894-1980)*

Paul Williams, the first African-American member and Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, was acknowledged as a leading architect of his day, receiving numerous commissions for public buildings, commercial buildings, churches, and elegant homes. He received his architectural training at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, took engineering courses at the University of Southern California, and apprenticed with the architectural firm of Wilbur D. Cook, Jr., Reginald D. Johnson, and John C. Austin from about 1914 to 1921. It was in the offices of Cook, Johnson, and Austin, respectively, where Williams first gained exposure to landscape design and town planning. After receiving his architecture license in 1921, he opened his own office, the foundation of which would become residential architecture. During a prolific career that extended to the 1970s, he designed more than 3,000 projects, including large homes for Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Tyrone Power, Zasu Pitts, and Lon Chaney; portions of the Beverly Hills and Ambassador Hotels; and Chasen's and Perino's restaurants. An early association with Senator Frank R. Flint, the developer of Flintridge, led to the commission of over twenty-five homes in this neighboring community to Pasadena. There are only a few known extant buildings by Williams in Pasadena, including 150 Fern Drive and 1151 Romney Drive.

*Dr. Valentine Mott (V. Mott) Pierce (1865 – 1942)*

The applicants have extensively studied the life of the original owner and occupant of 200 Fern Drive, and this biography is included in Attachment A. As described below, Dr. Valentine Mott (V. Mott) Pierce lived here well within his productive period, and the house is associated with his life, career, and contributions to the field of alternative medicine. He lived at the property after completion of the house in 1928 until his death in 1942.

Pierce was a physician and entrepreneur of national repute who made notable contributions to the field of alternative medicine by presiding over one of the nation's largest and most iconic brands of proprietary drugs. He and his wife, Matilda, divided their time between this house and their residence in Buffalo until 1940, at which point they moved to Pasadena full-time. This was typical of Pasadena's early luminaries, many of whom maintained a residence on the East Coast but spent much of their time wintering out west where the climactic conditions were far more favorable. Pierce resided in the house until his death in 1942; Matilda continued to live in the house until the early 1950s.



Born in 1865, V. Mott Pierce was the son of Dr. Ray Vaughn (R.V.) Pierce, a physician and druggist who operated a medical manufacturing business in Buffalo, New York. The elder Pierce, a medical doctor, amassed a fortune by compounding and patenting a variety of over-the-counter elixirs, pills, and other pseudo-medical remedies that were aggressively advertised (typically falsely, and without evidence) as medical panaceas that could alleviate virtually any ailment known to man. The nostrum for which he became best known was a bitter, anise-flavored tonic called Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery. This tonic was marketed as a natural remedy for a bevy of complaints – one advertisement said that it gave men “an appetite like a cow-boy's and the digestion of an ostrich” – but in reality the nostrum included a potent concoction of quinine, opium, and alcohol.

Pierce matriculated at Harvard University (A.B. 1888) and subsequently earned a medical degree from the University of Buffalo (1891). In 1893 he was appointed manager of the World's Dispensary Medical Association, in which capacity he presided over its daily operations. By the late nineteenth century, the company had grown into one of the largest, most influential purveyors of proprietary drugs and had become a household name. The Pierces' nostrums, as well as other brands of proprietary remedies, thrived on the shortcomings of nineteenth century medicine and a dearth of government regulations related to over-the-counter drugs.

Both Drs. Pierce were trained as medical doctors and presented themselves as such, but their most significant achievement was their ability to market their products “more successfully than almost any other physician at a time when availability of home remedies and nostrum cures were at their height.” By the turn-of-the-twentieth century, a coordinated effort was spearheaded to regulate what had long been a freewheeling industry largely devoid of oversight or government intervention. This effort was fueled by a combination of factors including the Temperance movement, a mounting desire to rid society of graft and corruption, and reports of addiction and death that were attributed to over-the-counter drugs – which were not required to disclose their ingredients, and were often laden with ingredients such as alcohol, opium, morphine, cocaine, and other addictive substances.

V. Mott Pierce was a vocal opponent of any effort to regulate over-the-counter remedies. He and his father successfully sued the Ladies Home Journal for libel after the magazine published an exposé accusing the company of infusing their products with nefarious additives including opium, digitalis, and alcohol. V.M. Pierce inherited the family business following the death of his father in 1914. He continued to preside over the company and steer it in the direction of profitability and success, even amid increased scrutiny and regulations related to the advertising and labeling of proprietary drugs. In 1940 he rebranded the company as Pierce Proprietaries and continuously served as its president until his death in 1942. In addition to heading a nationally reputed dispensary business, Pierce was involved in various other professional and civic endeavors. He was a member of multiple professional medical societies, was twice elected president of the National Proprietary Medical Association, and founded a number of other enterprises including the Pierce Coal and Lumber Company; the Pierce

Glass Company, which manufactured glass bottles; and the Pierce Natural Gas Company. He was an active member of multiple civic groups including the Masons, the Universalist church, and the Annandale Golf Club in Pasadena.

### **ANALYSIS:**

The property at 200 Fern Drive is eligible for historic monument designation under Criterion B, (PMC Section 17.62.040(B)(1)(b) which states:

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

The property is also eligible for historic monument designation under Criterion C (PMC Section 17.62.040(B)(1)(c)), which states:

[The property] is exceptional in the embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a historic resource property type, period, architectural style, or method of construction, or that is an exceptional representation of the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is significant to the region, State, or nation, or that possesses high artistic values that are of regional, State-wide or national significance.

Under Criteria B and C, the V. Mott Pierce Residence is significant because it is associated with V. Mott Pierce, a nationally significant doctor and pharmaceutical entrepreneur, and it is an exceptional example of a custom-designed Mediterranean Revival single-family residence designed by regionally significant architect Paul R. Williams. The property retains historical integrity as follows:

- **Location:** The building and other site features are in their original locations.
- **Design:** The house continues to appear almost exactly as it did when it was built in 1928. The building retains the majority of its form, plan, space, structure, and style, Exterior alterations are limited to the replacement of original garage doors and some original windows with visually compatible replacements, and the addition of a swimming pool, wet bar, and elevator. None of these alterations have substantively changed the house's appearance, and none aside from the garage doors are readily visible.
- **Setting:** The neighborhood has retained its rustic, natural setting and character. Thus, the integrity of setting is intact.
- **Materials:** The building retains a majority of its original exterior materials.
- **Workmanship:** The distinguishing characteristics that provide the house with its architectural character, and architectural details that express the skill and virtuosity underpinning its design, remain entirely intact. Thus, the house retains integrity of workmanship.
- **Feeling:** The property clearly expresses the characteristics of the Mediterranean revival architectural style and evokes the feeling of high style design that was originally intended.

- Association: The property at 200 Fern Drive retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling since its original construction in 1928, and appears almost exactly as it was during the period that V. Mott Pierce resided in it. Therefore, it continues to convey its association with both V. Mott Pierce and the Mediterranean Revival designs of Paul R. Williams.

The house at 200 Fern Drive is an excellent example of the Mediterranean Revival style and exhibits all of these character defining features in a dramatic and exceptional manner. However, this house also exhibits additional features and an unprecedented level of articulation, especially within the interior, that render it an exceptional embodiment of the style. Features including the marble-clad, vaulted foyer; interior colonnades and engaged Corinthian columns; coffered ceilings with denticulated molding; and hand stenciling all reinforce the strong connection between the house and the eclectic architecture of the Mediterranean region. This level of detail is not typically seen in the design of an individual dwelling, making the house exceptionally important to an understanding of Mediterranean Revival architecture.

Based on the above, the property retains high levels of integrity and qualifies for designation as a Historic Monument under Criteria B and C. The building retains integrity of association with V. Mott Pierce during his period of significance, and the building retains all of its original character-defining features, and all alterations to the building, including new garage doors, several window replacements and the addition of a pool and elevator are compatible with the original structure.

Contributing exterior features to this designation include the main building, garage, elevator, Arroyo stone curbs, retaining walls two stream beds and shallow ponds an Arroyo stone ancillary building and small amphitheater. Contributing interior features to this designation include the foyer, living room, dining room, a dining niche, a study, and a basement-level den.

#### **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.”

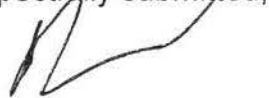
#### **ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

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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DAVID M. REYES  
Director of Planning & Community  
Development Department

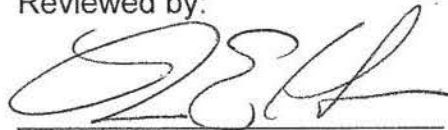
Prepared by:



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Amanda Landry, AICP  
Planner

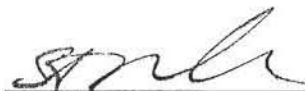
Reviewed by:



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Leon E. White  
Principal Planner

Approved by:



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STEVE MERMELL  
City Manager

Attachments: (4)

- A. Vicinity Map
- B. Application & Historical Documentation (Report prepared by Architectural Resources Group)
- C. Current Photographs
- D. Effects of Historic Designation