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The Parker-Gray District: Examining a Local Historic District a Generation Later

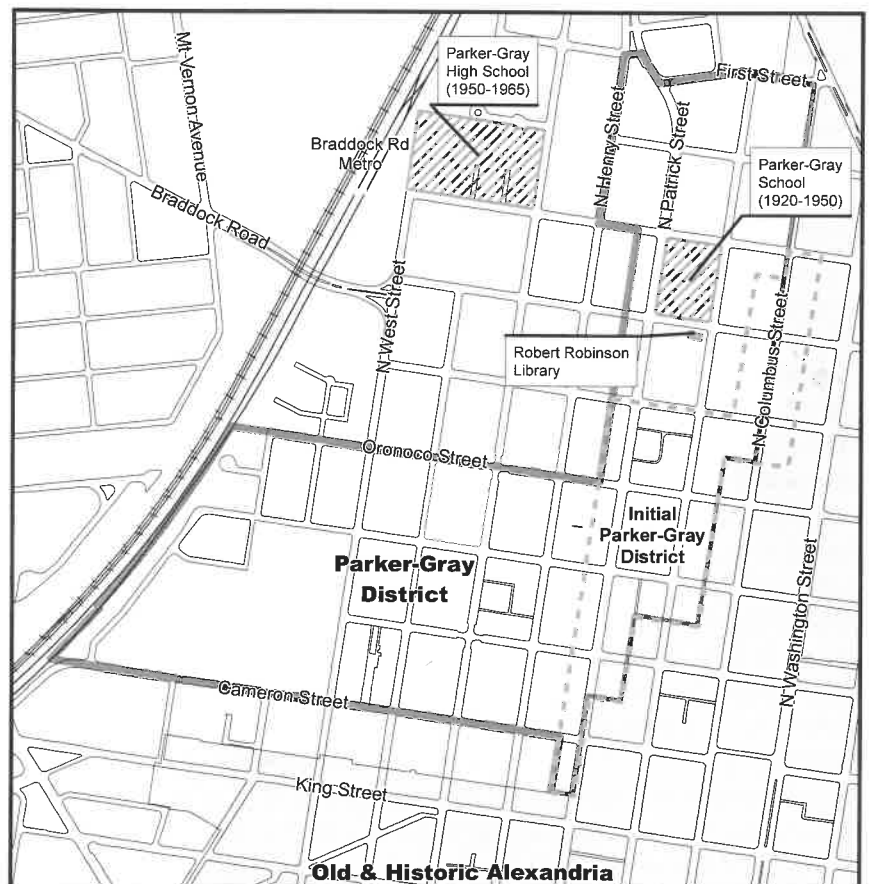
By Catherine K. Miliaras

The creation of an historic district is a slow, bureaucratic and often contentious process, typically the result of several years of effort with input from a range of stakeholders, including residents, developers and city officials.

The establishment of the Parker-Gray District was no different. The Parker-Gray District was established in 1984. Those advocating for the district aimed to control growth, maintain affordable housing, retain a residential scale and preserve historic buildings. Those in opposition wanted to conserve low and middle-income housing stock at a time when the neighborhood experienced pressures from the economic development and ongoing gentrification of Old Town and the arrival of two Metro stations on the edges of the neighborhood. Those involved in the creation of the Parker-Gray District often engaged in heated debate both in the neighborhood and in front of City Council members in an attempt to protect an area predominantly occupied by working-class African Americans from external development pressures. As cities across the country have faced and may continue to experience similar challenges finding the balance between revitalization and neighborhood conservation, the story of the formation of the Parker-Gray District provides relevant perspectives and insights.

Parker-Gray, first known as Uptown and later also referred to as Alexandria's 16th Census Tract, has a rich African American history as part of the northwest quadrant

of Old Town. Historically it was considered the "mecca of the African American community" for much of the twentieth century, according to Ferdinand T. Day, a life-long Alexandria resident.¹ While much of Parker-Gray was established with the 1796 street grid of Alexandria, the area remained sparsely settled until the 1860s. The *G.M. Hopkins City Atlas of Alexandria* from 1877



Map of the Parker-Gray District showing initial and existing boundaries and historic Parker-Gray school sites.

shows the area bounded by First Street to the north, Princess to the south, North Patrick Street to the east and North West Street to the west, with only a handful of buildings, though some were substantial, and two rail lines travelled along North Henry and North Fayette streets. While the blocks south of Princess Street had more buildings, the blocks were not nearly as densely populated as the area south of Cameron Street and east of North Henry streets.



19th century brick townhouses on North Columbus Street.

However, by 1902 many of the blocks in Parker-Gray had been improved with row houses and associated outbuildings as well as corner stores and other commercial buildings, according to Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. Parker-Gray showed a density and urban form similar to the rest of Old Town.

To understand the history of this particular neighborhood as well as how the Parker-Gray District came to be, we must view it in the context of African American history in Alexandria. First, the name “Parker-Gray” derived from the two Parker-Gray Schools located in the general area that served the African American community from 1920 to 1965. The first Parker-Gray school was located on Wythe Street (1920-1950) and the second Parker-Gray school (1950-1965), located on Madison Street, became the first and only high school for African Americans in Alexandria at that time.² Both schools were named for two earlier African American principals in the city: Sarah Gray, principal of the Hallowell School, located in the 400 block of North Alfred Street, and John Parker, principal of the Snowden School (also known as the Seaton School) in the 600 block of South Pitt Street. Although the two schools carried the Parker-Gray name, the neighborhood as a whole only came to be known as “Parker-Gray” around the time of historic district designation.³ Adopting a new name to commemorate the African American history of the area began the story of the new historic dis-

trict because as an entity “Parker-Gray” was much more than a school. A 1976 article keenly observed that a Parker-Gray reunion represented “pride in the history of black education in Alexandria, an effort to preserve memories of a place that was at the heart of the black community, an institution that some of the black alumni say is one of the last points of identity they have left in Alexandria.”⁴

African Americans in Alexandria

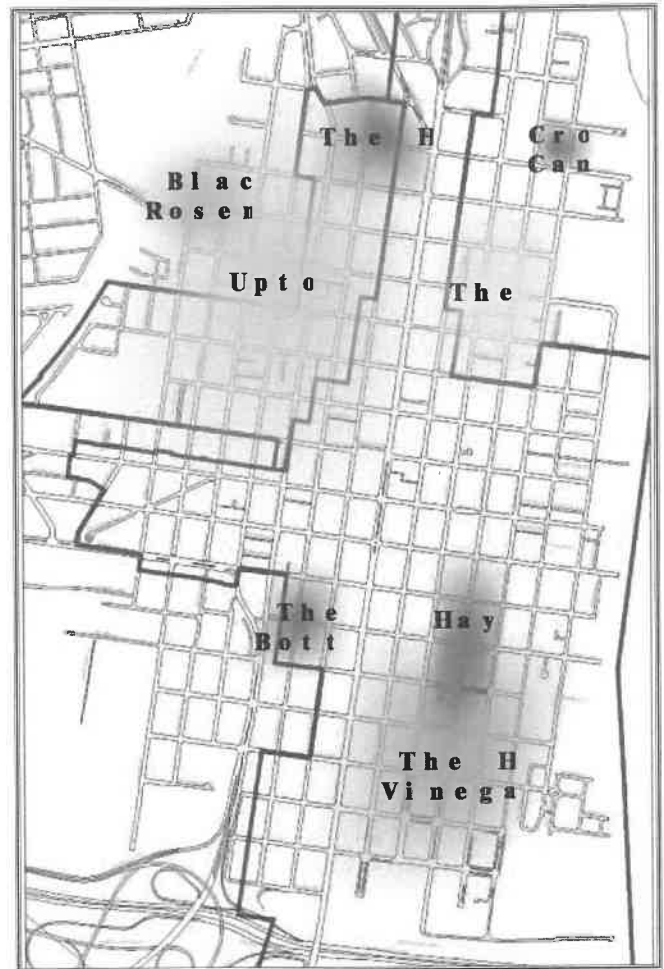
While Parker-Gray was considered a center for the African American community in the twentieth century, African Americans have lived throughout the four quadrants of Old Town since the late eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, as the population of Alexandria grew, African American enclaves and settlements were found in every quadrant of the city. As Elsa Rosenthal writes in her history of Alexandria’s slave and free black community, prior to the Civil War “free Blacks and slaves lived on almost every block in the city, either in houses with White families or in separate buildings on their master’s or employer’s property.”⁵ The oldest African American neighborhood in the northwest quadrant was known as “Uptown.” It covered a large area and included other smaller neighborhoods, including “The Hump” and “Black Rosemont”.⁶ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and City Directories specifically identified African American churches, social organizations and businesses in all four quadrants of Old

Town through at least 1950.⁷

By 1939, when a Real Property Survey map was prepared by the Works Progress Administration, the majority of blocks in Parker-Gray were predominantly African American: 23 blocks in the general 38 block northwest quadrant were identified as having over 70% of “households of a race other than white” while an additional ten blocks were 100% “of a race other than white.” Smaller pockets of African Americans continued to reside in other areas of Old Town; however there was a growing concentration in Parker-Gray by the middle of the twentieth century. These blocks had some of the lowest average rents in the city. In the 1950s and early 1960s, much of the city’s new public housing projects were constructed in historically African American neighborhoods, including “The Berg” in the northeast quadrant and Parker-Gray where the James Bland Homes, a five-block project, was built in 1954 and 1959.

By the mid-twentieth century, through policy and practice, Parker-Gray became the only neighborhood in Alexandria where African Americans could purchase property.⁸ As a result, the Parker-Gray neighborhood was home to the majority of African American businesses, centered along Queen and North Henry streets, and included the offices of lawyers and doctors as well as small businesses such as a men’s store, beauty parlors and a Chinese restaurant.⁹ The 1100 block of Queen Street, where many African American businesses were concentrated, was referred to as “The Block” according to long-time Alexandria resident, James Henson.¹⁰ By the 1960s and 1970s, concurrent with desegregation, practices eased and policies were adopted, including the adoption of a voluntary open housing resolution by City Council in 1967, permitting African Americans to rent and purchase property throughout the City.¹¹ Those who could often moved west of Old Town. However, by the time Alexandria’s housing became accessible to African Americans, many professional African Americans had already moved to other more open parts of northern Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Census information from 1960 through 2010 provides insight into not only the character of the greater Parker-Gray area (in census terms, the 16th Census Tract) but also shifting African American housing patterns throughout Alexandria. The African American population in Alexandria increased from 1960 to 1980 from 11% of the total population to 22% as well as in absolute numbers. In Parker-Gray the population was 80% African American in 1960 before peaking to above 90% in 1970 and 1980. At the same time the overall number of residents in the 16th Census Tract declined by 37% from 1970 (5221) to 1980 (3849) and continued to de-



African American Settlement Areas in Alexandria, Virginia, based on information from the African American Historic Sites Database sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

cline before increasing again around 2000. The city-wide increase in the African American population occurred predominantly west of Quaker Lane, where traditional mid-to-late twentieth century suburban development patterns took shape. Further, the census data showed that the growing African American population in the western part of the city was more prosperous and better educated than those living in Old Town. By 1980, the 16th Census Tract, in comparison to Old Town and the city as a whole, had one of the highest poverty rates (16th Census = 32% / Old Town = 16% / the city = 9%) as well as one of the lowest median family incomes (\$10,000 / \$24,100 / \$25,500) and larger than average household size (3.07 / 2.03 / 2.07).¹² The average African American family income was the second lowest in Old Town, with the highest average incomes for African American families being in the more suburban, western parts of the city.¹³ At the time of designation of the Parker-Gray District in the early 1980s, the total population in this neighborhood, which was poorer and less educated than other African American residents in the city, was also declining in number.



Real Property Survey, 1939. Map prepared by the Work Projects Administration. Monthly rental rates from highest to lowest with approximate numbers: green (8), yellow (53), orange (47), red (58) and blue (18). Source: National Archives, College Park, MD.

More Than an Historic District

From the beginning, the idea of a Parker-Gray District, separate from the existing Old and Historic Alexandria District (OHAD), was about much more than a collection of historic buildings. It included several blocks of recently-constructed modern buildings, including garden apartment-style public housing, a 1970 elementary school and modern row houses west of North West Street. Their inclusion was intended to limit the type of change that could occur and to limit speculative development as well as to preserve the existing building stock, whether or not it was “historic.”

One result of the district’s creation has been the preservation of many mid-twentieth century commercial buildings. Although not “historic” at the time of designation, since they were not at least 50 years old, several notable buildings in Parker-Gray today date from the mid-twentieth century. These commercial buildings were centered on “The Block” and included the Capitol Theatre at 1101 Queen Street (1939), the Carver Theater

and adjacent shops at 1120 Queen Street (1947-48), and the Royal Meat Market/Hargrave Collins Education Building at 301 North Patrick Street (1940-41).¹⁴ The 2010 Uptown/Parker-Gray Historic District National Register nomination identified many of the mid-twentieth-century buildings as contributing to the overall significance of the National Register district, recognizing them as part of the evolution of the neighborhood.¹⁵ However, to understand the import of the district today, one must examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding its designation.

Studies and Initiatives Prior to 1984 Designation

Fifteen years before the Parker-Gray District was designated, several studies and initiatives were conducted that related to the “preservation” of Parker-Gray in the broadest sense of the word and considered how historic preservation in general in Alexandria was pursued. In the case of Parker-Gray, preservation meant retaining affordable and low-income housing, neighborhood history and a residential character and scale. A few common themes emerged from the early studies and initiatives.

First, while citizens may have disagreed about the details and regulations necessary to create a district, there was general consensus that the Parker-Gray area was culturally distinct from the OHAD and, therefore, expansion of the OHAD further into the northwest quadrant was not appropriate. Second, existing residents sought some form of protection, whether in the form of historic district regulations or additional funding, to maintain the existing housing stock for long-time residents. However, one local resident and member of the neighborhood group known as the 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee, Roger C. Anderson, stated that the group was worried that an expanded district “would push up property values and taxes and would ultimately force longtime residents to leave their homes.”¹⁶ There was consensus that the area should remain low-scale residential, in contrast to the commercial and mixed-use developments proposed closer to the two nearby Metro stations.

When the OHAD was established in 1946, the proposed boundaries initially extended to West Street, encompassing nearly the entire 1796 town plan and much of the area now in the Parker-Gray District. However, the adopted 1946 OHAD boundaries limited the initial historic district to the area east of Alfred Street, five blocks to the east of West Street, leaving the majority of the northwest and southwest quadrants out of the OHAD. The start of the process to expand the existing OHAD can be traced to 1968 when City Council passed a resolution to inventory all the structures in Old Town



The former Carver Theater and adjacent shops (on the left) at the corner of Queen and North Fayette Street (1120 Queen Street).

and to establish criteria for evaluating buildings. Historic preservation consultant Russell Wright completed a survey of the entire Old Town area between the railroad tracks (now CSX railroad tracks and the Metro Right of Way) and the Potomac River, identifying different categories of buildings based on a ranking system called the Composite Rating Index. Among Wright's recommendations, he noted that "...no complete analysis of Historic Importance, except that attached to the architectural importance of a property, has been made of the Historic District. This work should begin at once, as it is the single most important input to the knowledge of the importance of the individual properties that is lacking. At the same time, a detailed Architectural Inventory should be completed..."¹⁷ Thus, looking only superficially at the architectural styles of the early building stock and with no research into the original or present cultural uses, Wright recommended expanding the historic district to include most of the properties he had surveyed, some of which were located within what would become the Parker-Gray District. He noted that many buildings in the northwest quadrant fell into a category that "contribute[s] to the overall character of the area and reinforce[s] the aesthetic and visual quality of Old Town."¹⁸ Furthermore, supporters noted that an expanded OHAD "would enlarge the area of interest to our visitors during the bicentennial years and make more attractive some of the major entranceways."¹⁹

In the fall of 1973, despite the identification of numerous historic buildings, City Council rejected a proposal to expand OHAD by 39 blocks (now roughly the Parker-Gray District) due to "vigorous opposition on the part of long-term Alexandria, low- and moderate-in-

come black residents ... [of the Parker-Gray area] and other Alexandrians. This opposition was founded on the belief that OH[A]D expansion would result in expensive restoration and/or property appreciation in the added area."²⁰ Instead, on January 8, 1974, City Council passed Resolution #276 stating that city policy would be to "...preserve and improve the residential character of the area" and that the city "...will seek to preserve the opportunity for homeowners of all income levels to continue residing in the 16th Census Tract and to find effective ways to protect residents from the threat of rising land values and taxes resulting from speculation and development pressures."²¹ Pressures on moderate and low-income housing for African Americans were mounting as a result of earlier policies and initiatives, including a substantial loss of housing through urban renewal clearance and city health code

enforcement action in the 1960s and early 1970s.²²

In 1974, the city received a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant to study neighborhood conservation planning where the majority of downtown Alexandria's low and moderate-income African Americans lived.²³ By the mid-1970s, many of those residing in the Parker-Gray area lived there because they were financially unable to move out.²⁴ A primary objective of the NEA study was "to determine feasible policies and programs that might facilitate the conservation and physical upgrading of the NEA study area without resulting in substantial change in the area's social and historic character." However, in the process of studying this area it was soon determined that "the preservation issue at hand looms not only as a purely local issue but also as a national forerunner case in historical preservation and neighborhood space allocation."²⁵ The NEA study clearly articulated the strain between preservation of existing housing stock for current residents and preservation of historic resources. The city faced the question of how to reconcile the two.

In 1977, the city undertook an initiative to utilize federal funding in the form of a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for the Potomac East Conservation District, roughly defined as the northwest quadrant of Old Town, for homeowners to get loans and grants to repair their houses to specified standards. As part of this initiative, the city was required to conduct an environmental assessment and to work with the state historic preservation office to determine whether or not the project area was eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. In initial correspondence with



Late 19th century Queen Anne row houses on North Alfred Street.

the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, Douglas Harman, then City Manager, posited that the area was not eligible for inclusion because of a “lack of concentration of older structures within the project area” with “no structures of major historic significance” and because “commercial and industrial uses form a substantial part of the project area.”²⁶ However, Robert Swisher, then the Environmental Officer for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, initially responded that the area may be eligible for listing on the National Register and advised that the City proceed with the program as if it were eligible, noting that an historic survey of Alexandria was under way. However, following a visit to Alexandria, Tucker Hill, Executive Director of the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, later wrote a determination that “the area does not meet the eligibility criteria for inclusion on the National Register and that he would not recommend that the area be nominated to the National Register.”²⁷

Lack of support from the state historic preservation office did not, however, deter the local drive for the preservation of this area. One of the greatest forces behind the creation of the district was the opening of two Metro stations to the west of the neighborhood. While construction for the Metro system broke ground in 1969, the Braddock Road and King Street Metro stations did not open until December 1983 although the city had approved a number of high-density projects in advance of the opening. The increased potential for incompatible changes outside of the adjacent OHAD were already raising concerns.

Becoming a Historic District

In May 1983, with growing redevelopment pressure

and the recognition that the four quadrants were all considered Old Town Alexandria, an expansion of the OHAD into this quadrant was again proposed. In a memo to Council, Douglas Harman, City Manager, wrote: “considerable effort is going into housing improvement but some of these efforts unfortunately lack compatibility with the surrounding areas. Given the enormous investment in Old Town, it is important that the boundaries be more reasonable than they are currently.” He continued by observing “the fact is that redevelopment is occurring regardless of the precise boundaries.”²⁸ A tax assessment analysis noted that in Old Town “tremendous gains in assessment occurred between 1973 and 1978, regardless of location inside or outside the Old and Historic Alexandria District.”²⁹ Creation of the Parker-Gray District would also buffer the established OHAD from incompatible development precipitated by the new Metro stations.

A draft proposal dated February 2, 1984 identified five areas adjacent to the OHAD to consider for the expansion. The Planning Commission recommended approval of the expansion of the OHAD into three of the adjacent areas but recommended denial of the expansion to the area that would become the Parker-Gray District as well as a waterfront area comprised almost entirely of 1970s townhouses.³⁰ At the same time, the Planning Commission initiated the creation of a separate district and requested “an ordinance creating an Old and Historic Parker Gray District.” On June 26, 1984, Council approved the OHAD extension recommended by Planning Commission which did not include the Parker-Gray area. Instead, Council passed Ordinance No. 2960 establishing the Parker-Gray District with the following provision: “That if ordinance standards are not adopted

by November 2, 1984, the district would not be established because the ordinance would be of no force and effect. If council does not act by November 1, 1984, in establishing said guidelines and standards, the Parker-Gray District will automatically expire."³¹ Council also established an ad hoc committee to consider the new district's boundaries and standards. The initial Parker-Gray Preservation District was significantly smaller than what exists today at approximately 13 blocks.

Letters both in support and opposition to an expanded district were submitted to Council. Eudora Lyles, activist, long-time resident, founder and President of the Inner City Civic Association, Inc., submitted a letter in opposition to the proposed expansion and described "a major concern of the group of the upgrading of the area without displacing its citizens."³² Another adjacent civic group, the Northwest Old Town Citizens Association, submitted a letter of support. Individual property owners also submitted letters of support for the extension of the district to preserve the historic and residential character. Owners on North Alfred Street were "anxious to see the boundaries extended" and felt "that Old Town can be a home to people from all economic stratas [sic]," acknowledging the economic differences in the changing population.³³

Over the summer of 1984, the Parker-Gray Preservation Ad Hoc Committee met to discuss several issues. The Committee ultimately advocated that the Parker-Gray District be expanded beyond the original 13 blocks. The Committee agreed that a 50 foot height should be adopted; that the existing standards in the Zoning Ordinance for the OHAD should be applied to the new district but with a greater focus on compatibility with historic buildings over a requirement for specific styles; and, that a seven-member sub-committee of the BAR be created to specifically review Parker-Gray.³⁴ While similar, the new district neither directly copied the existing regulations for the OHAD nor incorporated elements of the nationally-accepted Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

The 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee, comprised of a group of concerned, long-time residents, advocated for a special "district" but not an "old and historic district." Ongoing tension about creating a special district to serve as a neighborhood conservation district rather than solely a historic district marked the debate. This Committee, chaired by Eudora Lyles, also met with Planning staff and submitted recommendations to Council.³⁵ The boundaries proposed by this group were essentially the entire northwest quadrant and included many recently constructed buildings. An exchange between Robert L. Crabill, Division Chief, Special Projects, Planning and Community Development, and Lyles

illustrated the conflicting viewpoints. One letter from Lyles in June 1984 proposed the "creation of a Parker-Gray District in order to 'promote the general welfare through the preservation and protection of the area'" and a subsequent letter from her stated that the Committee "neither wish to have a preservation or an old and historic district'...However, the Committee does want a district 'that will retain the environment and homes for the present citizens of the community.'"³⁶ A *Washington Post* article summarized the sentiment of many local residents by observing: "The black community is the opposite of the Old Town that tourists know: There are no fashionable shops, quaint Gadsby lamps, red brick sidewalks and classy restaurants where waiters speak in various foreign accents."³⁷ In November 1984, Lionel Hope, the only African American City Council member at the time, observed that "there are blacks on both sides of the issue" and he "reluctantly voted...because the designation was one of the only tools the city had to keep Parker-Gray from becoming a high-density commercial district like other areas near Metro stations."³⁸

The City responded that beyond a conservation district, previously created for this area, there was no other type of district that could be created without new authority from the General Assembly, as Virginia is a Dillon Rule state.³⁹ Racial tensions mounted as one letter to the mayor from Lyles attributed "the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee, as...a tactic designed to split the Black community."⁴⁰ A member of the Ad Hoc Committee later contradicted Lyles and wrote that "several prominent members of the black community and of the 16th Census Tract group worked actively on the Ad Hoc Committee over the summer...to come up with a proposal which would achieve our common goal of neighborhood preservation."⁴¹

In September 1984, the Planning Commission considered and deferred expansion of boundaries of the Old and Historic Parker-Gray District and extension of the 50' height limit. The staff report recommended support and approval for the creation of an Old and Historic Parker Gray District with some exceptions. Staff recommended that the Parker-Gray District not include the areas west of West Street that included a contemporary elementary school, modern public pool and several blocks with contemporary townhouses.⁴²

On October 2, 1984, the Planning Commission again passed a motion to defer the Parker-Gray District for four months due to continuing disagreement in the community.⁴³ Despite the recommendation for deferral, City Council passed an ordinance (#2986) establishing the Parker-Gray District on November 17, 1984. This ordinance established expanded boundaries for the Parker-



An example of typical mid-20th century brick townhouses.

Gray District and the regulations and jurisdiction of the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) within the District. The adopted boundaries did not include staff's recommendations to exclude both city-owned property and contemporary rowhouses west of West Street. Entire blocks of the newly-created district and the recently expanded OHAD had few or no "historic" buildings, challenging the conventional notion of what a historic district was.

After creation of the district, it was confirmed that the city charter at that time only permitted one Board of Architectural Review (BAR). Therefore, initially there was one BAR with two seven-member panels, one for the Old and Historic Alexandria District and one for the Parker-Gray District until 1985 when the Virginia General Assembly approved an amendment to the city's charter to allow multiple Boards of Architectural Review.⁴⁴ In January 1986, seven appointments were made for the Parker-Gray Panel of the BAR and the first official meeting of the panel was held on February 26, 1986. In 1986 a letter sent to all property owners and residents in the newly-created Parker-Gray District apprising them of the new designation "to preserve its residential character."⁴⁵

Initially, the standards and regulations used for the OHAD were applied to the Parker-Gray District while new standards could be vetted that would address the uniqueness of that District.⁴⁶ The Zoning Ordinance Standards for Parker-Gray maintained the same themes from the OHAD's Standards but with some important

distinctions, including a provision to allow Parker-Gray residents to continue to use an inappropriate or incompatible condition or treatment if "the cost of the work would be materially increased by the use of another material." Additionally, the Parker-Gray Standards emphasized "compatibility with other buildings or structures on the same block face, the block face across the public street, or the immediate surrounding area within the district."⁴⁷ The Standards also placed emphasis on the preservation and protection of the neighborhood as a whole.

Continuing Challenges to the District

After creation of the Parker-Gray District and its BAR, there remained opposition to the district. In the investigative report *16th Census Tract Crisis Committee v. City of Alexandria*, residents of the Parker-Gray neighborhood, organized as the 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee, filed an administrative complaint with HUD alleging that "the city's designation of the predominantly black Parker-Gray neighborhood as a historical district discriminated against black families, as did the expansion of Rte. 1, the opening of the Braddock Road Metro station and the closing of the Parker-Gray Middle School."⁴⁸ Regarding the historic district designation, residents feared displacement due to increased property taxes and maintenance requirements. Initially, HUD "found no merit to the discrimination charges filed by the 16th Census group in 1985. But in late 1986 they reversed that decision" based on unspecified "new

information.⁴⁹ As part of the investigation, “HUD’s Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity found that the city’s gentrification-inducing ordinance, which designated a historic district in a low-income African American community, violated the Equal Protection Clause.”⁵⁰ The final report found that the establishment of the Parker-Gray District “was specifically intended to displace low and moderate-income blacks” and HUD participated in an effort to reach out to the residents and City officials.⁵¹ Despite the finding and an attempt to bring together City officials and representatives of the Crisis Committee, after seven months HUD was “administratively closing the case...as an unsuccessful conciliation.”

Evolution of the District

In 1990, as part of a required Section 106 review, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources researched and evaluated the Parker-Gray area and concluded that much of it was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places though it acknowledged there were no plans to seek a formal designation.⁵²

Three years later, both the OHAD and Parker-Gray District BARs adopted common Design Guidelines, as required by the Zoning Ordinance. Where the Standards and Zoning Ordinance regulations require the BARs to establish policies, the Guidelines explained the implementation and application of the policies. The Guidelines are still in place today with recent revisions, particularly for the Parker-Gray District, as “the Boards have specifically declared their intention to update the guidelines as preservation philosophies in Alexandria change.”⁵³

In 2006, more than 20 years after the creation of the local Parker-Gray District and at the request of local residents, the city hired preservation consultant Terry Necciai of John Milner Associates to survey and prepare an inventory and National Register Historic District nomination for the area. The Uptown/Parker-Gray Historic District was listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register in 2008 and on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. The boundaries of the National Register Historic District encompass a greater area than the local district. Many of the buildings not considered “historic” at the time of the local district designation were now designated as contributing resources to the National Register district.

Very few of the residents who lived in the area in 1984 live there now. In 2010, the population of Alexandria was 139,966 of whom 30,491 (22%) were African American. Five percent of those African Americans lived in Tract #16 (compared to 43% in 1960 and 15% in 1980). Between 1980 and 2010 the white population

in Tract #16 increased from 9% to 55%. In addition, although the education and income levels increased for African Americans living in Tract #16, the poverty rate was significantly higher. Still, the proximity to Metro and desirability of this area has resulted in an average home value of \$550,000 in 2010.⁵⁴

Yet people in the district continue to seek to preserve both the built environment and a cultural history that becomes less visible with each passing year. The Alexandria Black History Museum is located in the district and incorporates the Robert H. Robinson Library, constructed in 1940 after a sit-in at the segregated Alexandria library. While several African American churches remain in the area, few members of the congregations continue to live in the neighborhood. Visitors today see Old Town Alexandria, not two distinct historic districts. In the D.C. metropolitan area, people frequently move in and out of the area. Newer residents, drawn to the proximity of services and Metro, do not always understand why a 1950s row house may have cultural significance and be subject to architectural review. In 2012, in response to concerns expressed to both the BAR and City Council by some residents of the historic district regarding the use of modern materials, the demolition of chain link fences, and what was perceived as excessive BAR fees and overreaching BAR regulation, the Parker-Gray BAR and the Parker-Gray Ad Hoc Design Guidelines Work Group completed a year-long evaluation of the existing guidelines, policies and review process. The new guidelines and policies represent significant procedural changes and reduced regulations for owners of residential properties within the Parker-Gray District. At the same time they preserve the historic architectural features valued by the community that provide cultural and economic value for the city. Specifically, Parker-Gray has a defined local period of architectural significance, hierarchy of building elevations and hierarchy of review requirements.

Conclusion

The establishment of the Parker-Gray District was a complex and contentious process as historic preservation became tangled with greater neighborhood changes. The story of not only the creation but also the evolution of the district can inform other communities that may contemplate a new district or reconsider an existing district’s regulations or boundaries. Examining the circumstances surrounding the creation of a local historic district like Parker-Gray provides insight into the intended and unintended consequences of creating a locally regulated historic district and the ongoing challenges of preserving both architectural and cultural significance. Gentrification undoubtedly occurred in

Parker-Gray as well as many urban neighborhoods throughout the Washington, D.C. metro area, but it was not exclusively the result of the historic district designation. A local historic district cannot be the only tool for conserving a neighborhood and a community and neither can a historic district alone maintain affordable housing, a critical planning issue in many metropolitan areas. However, a district can successfully maintain a residential scale and character, as is particularly noticeable in Parker-Gray, where multi-story new construction abuts parts of the district. Further, by regulating all properties to some degree, it can be argued that more thoughtful and contextual changes occur for all properties, whether they meet a definition of "historic" or not. This can particularly aid in the broader preservation of buildings of the recent past as well as buildings that may be culturally significant to a community. The most recent regulatory changes in Parker-Gray underscore that a historic district should periodically be re-evaluated to ensure that the original intentions are being honored, or appropriately re-framed, and to communicate the district's purpose and meaning to future generations.

About the Author

Catherine Kahl Miliaras is an architectural historian and urban planner who has worked as a preservation planner for the City of Alexandria, Virginia, for the past seven years. She previously worked as a preservation consultant in Washington, D.C., and as a county planner in rural Virginia. Ms. Miliaras graduated from Dartmouth College and earned a dual Masters Degree in Architectural History and Urban Planning from the University of Virginia. She lives in Alexandria with her husband and two sons.

Ms. Miliaras wishes to sincerely thank Campbell Gibson, Ph.D., retired U. S. Census Bureau Senior Demographer, for his research and assistance in compiling and interpreting Alexandria's census data. Dr. Gibson helped her understand and sort through decades of demographic changes in Alexandria. Ms. Miliaras also thanks Ferdinand Day, James Henson and Melvin Miller for taking the time to speak about their experiences related to Parker-Gray and Alexandria's African American history.

End Notes

¹Ferdinand T. Day, interview by Catherine K. Miliaras, July 25, 2013.

² After integration in 1965, the Parker-Gray High School served as a middle school until it closed in 1979.

³ The first use of "Parker-Gray" to describe this area of Old Town appears to have come about during the study period of the district creation, according to notes and letters in City

files.

⁴ Laura Kiernan, "Alumni of Parker-Gray Recall School's History," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 1976: C1.

⁵ Elsa S. Rosenthal, "1790 Names – 1970 Faces: A Short History of Alexandria's Slave and Free Black Community," *A Composite History of Alexandria*, Volume I (1975): 82.

⁶ African American Historic Sites Database, Virginia African American Heritage Program, retrieved August 23, 2012, http://www.aaheritageva.org/search/sites.php?site_id=466.

⁷ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps notated churches as "colored" through 1931. Hill's Alexandria City Directories also identified businesses, churches, pastors, and social/fraternal organizations by race through the early 1950s.

⁸ Day interview and A. Melvin Miller, interview by Catherine K. Miliaras, August 6, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Henson, interview by Catherine K. Miliaras, August 23, 2013.

¹¹ Jerry Kline, "Voluntary Open Housing Approved in Alexandria," *The Washington Star*, October 25, 1967: A1.

¹² List of Tables Showing Census Tract Data for Old Town Alexandria: 1960-2010, prepared by Campbell Gibson, retired Senior Demographer, U.S. Census Bureau.

¹³ City of Alexandria Staff, "Black Alexandrians: A Profile Based on the 1970 & 1980 U.S. Censuses," (Report, Alexandria Department of Planning and Community Development, 1983).

¹⁴ The National Park Service generally considers that only buildings more than fifty years old can be considered historic for purposes of the National Register of Historic Places, with some exceptions for the recent past.

¹⁵ National Register of Historic Places, Uptown/Parker-Gray Historic District, Alexandria, Virginia, VDHR File Number: 100-0133. The nomination was listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register in 2008 and on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010.

¹⁶ Michael Martinez, "Residents Submit Preservation Plan: Old Town Expansion Alternative," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 1984: B1, via email.

¹⁷ Russell Wright, "Report of Survey by Russell Wright including Composite Rating Index" (report, Alexandria, Virginia, March 1970), p. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jean Keith, Chairman, Alexandria Tourist Council, to Edward Braswell, Jr., Chairman, Alexandria Planning Commission, November 30, 1973.

²⁰ Hammer, Siler, George Associates, "Final NEA Study Report to the City of Alexandria, Virginia" (report, National Endowment for the Arts Architecture and Environment Program, Washington, D.C., March 26, 1976), p. 2.

²¹ Alexandria City Council, "Resolution No. 276" (Council Resolution, Alexandria, Virginia, January 8, 1974).

²² Hammer, Siler, George Associates, p. 13.

²³ Hammer, Siler, George Associates, p. Introduction.

²⁴ Miller.

²⁵ Hammer, Siler, George Associates, p. 3.

²⁶ Douglas Harman, Letter to Dr. Junius R. Fishburne, Jr., Executive Director, Virginia Landmarks Commission, (Alexandria, Virginia, May 16, 1977).

²⁷ Tucker Hill, Executive Director of Virginia Landmarks Commission, Letter to Douglas Harman, City Manager, 1977.

²⁸ Douglas Harman, City Manager, Letter to Mayor and City Council, May 6, 1983.

²⁹ Terry M. Rixse, Senior Planner, Memo to Robert L. Crabill, Chief, Special Projects Division, October 11, 1983.

³⁰ Alexandria Planning Staff, Staff Report to Planning Commission on Text Amendment 84-13 (Alexandria, Virginia, September 26, 1984).

³¹ Cyril D. Calley, Opinion from City Attorney to Mayor and City Council, October 9, 1984.

³² Eudora N. Lyles, President of Inner City Civic Association, Letter to Mayor and City Council, May 19, 1983.

³³ Gayle Perkins, Letter to Douglas Harman, City Manager, August 4, 1983.

³⁴ The City Attorney had determined that a second Board of Architectural Review could not be formed as the City's charter only allowed for one such board. Therefore, it was proposed that the existing Board of Architectural Review be expanded to 12 or 14 members divided into two subcommittees, one for each district. The charter was later amended to allow for two separate Boards of Architectural Review.

³⁵ Eudora Lyles has been identified as an important African-American citizen in Alexandria's history. Details about her life and civic activism can be found in *African Americans of Alexandria, Virginia: Beacons of Light in the Twentieth Century*.

³⁶ Robert L. Crabill, Division Chief, Special Projects, Planning & Community Development, Letter to Eudora Lyles, Chairperson of the 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee, September 4, 1984.

³⁷ Michael Martinez, "Growing Alexandria Old Town Could Uproot Black Community," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 1983: C3.

³⁸ Mary Jordan, "Alexandria Threatening Black Area, Residents Say," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1986: D1, via email.

³⁹ Dillon's Rule construes grants of power to localities very narrowly. If there is a question about a local government's power or authority, then the local government does NOT receive the benefit of the doubt. Under Dillon's Rule, one must assume the local government does NOT have the power in question. Retrieved from: <http://www.patobannon.com/frequently-asked-questions/what-is-the-dillon-rule> on February 2, 2015.

⁴⁰ Eudora N. Lyles, Letter on behalf of 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee to Mayor Charles E. Beatley, September 9, 1984.

⁴¹ Barbara Walker, Letter to Ed Braswell, Chairman, Planning Commission, September 30, 1984.

⁴² Alexandria Planning Staff, Staff Report to Planning Commission on Text Amendment 84-13. Specifically, staff recommended approval of the district with the following comments:

1. Extend the district south of Cameron Street to meet the boundary of the Old and Historic Alexandria District. This would put all of the land along Cameron Street in the district and would assure that development along the sliver of land would be compatible with

nearby development.

2. Leave out the City owned land at West and Cameron streets. This area contains a recreation center/swimming pool and school all of which are contemporary. Ownership by the City assures control over architecture.

3. Leave out the apartments at West and Princess and the townhouses along Buchanan Street, Boyle Street and Earl Street. These are fairly contemporary structures and do not have the age, history or architectural character that is normally considered for inclusion in a district.

⁴³ Calley, Opinion to Mayor and City Council. The Planning Commission told "city council that because of the continuing disagreement over the nature and extent of the controls needed to protect that area, further consultation...is necessary...about 1) The boundaries of the Parker-Gray District; 2) The objectives for which the district is established; and 3) The ways of achieving those objectives most effectively." Unfortunately, the Planning Commission minutes for 1984 are incomplete and there is no surviving record of the Planning Commission's discussion.

⁴⁴ Robert L. Crabill, Chief, Special Projects, Planning & Community Development, Memo to Terance Ross, Member, Parker-Gray Panel Board of Architectural Review, February 21, 1986.

⁴⁵ Sheldon Lynn, Director, Planning & Community Development, Letter to Parker-Gray Area Residents and Owners, November 7, 1986.

⁴⁶ Alexandria Planning Staff, "Staff Report to Planning Commission on Parker-Gray District" (Report, Alexandria, Virginia, October 1, 1985).

⁴⁷ City of Alexandria, "Section 10: Historic Districts and Buildings" (The Zoning Ordinance of the City of Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia, adopted June 24, 1992, with subsequent updates).

⁴⁸ Mary Jordan, "Alexandria Officials, Blacks Confer," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1987: A26.

⁴⁹ Carlyle Murphy, "Alexandria Dispute Unresolved: HUD Drops Effort to Settle Bias Fight," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 1988: D5; and Mary Jordan, "Alexandria Deciding on HUD Order," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 1987: D8.

⁵⁰ Jon C. Dubin, "From Junkyards to Gentrification: Explicating a Right to Protective Zoning in Low-Income Communities of Color," *Minnesota Law Review*, April 1993.

⁵¹ Office of Fair Housing & Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Final Investigative Report in 16th Census Tract Crisis Committee v. City of Alexandria 03-85-0350-1" (Report, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C., 1986).

⁵² H. Bryan Mitchell, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Letter to Beverley C. Steele, Director, Office of Housing, Alexandria, March 20, 1990.

⁵³ Alexandria Planning Staff, "Design Guidelines for the Old and Historic Alexandria District and the Parker-Gray District," (adopted 1993, with updates): Introduction, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Census information and analysis provided by Campbell Gibson, retired U.S. Census Bureau Senior Demographer, based on publicly available U.S. Census material for Alexandria, VA, 1960-2010.

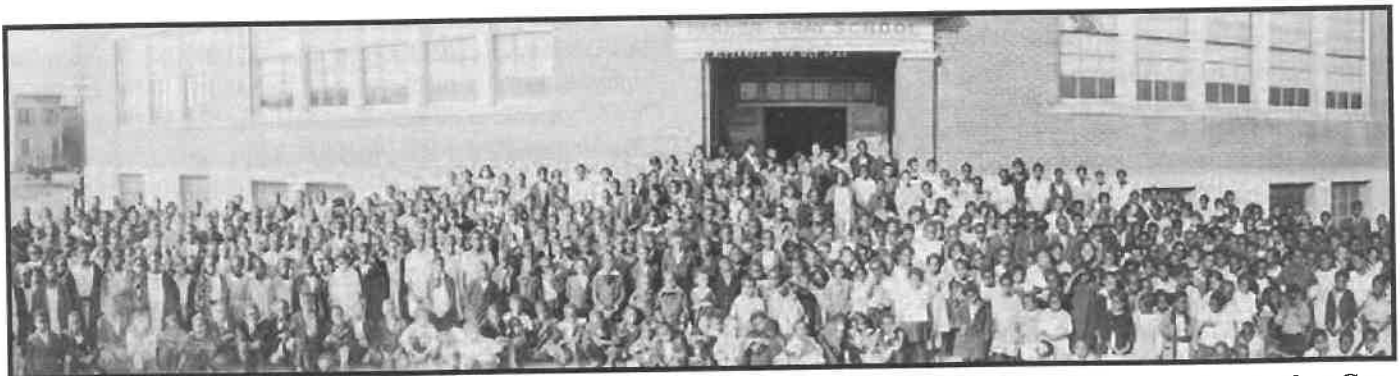
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Two Parker-Gray schools have been integral to the identity of the northwest quadrant of Old Town. The first Parker-Gray School (pictured) was located at 901 Wythe Street and operated from 1920-1950. The Charles Houston Recreation Center occupies this site today. The second, the Parker-Gray High School, opened in 1950 on Madison Street and was the African American high school in Alexandria until 1965. Photo courtesy of the Black History Museum.

In this issue of the *Chronicle* Catherine Miliaras explains the dynamics of the creation of the Parker-Gray Historic District in Old Town, Alexandria. The district was established in 1984 after many years of discussion and contention between residents, city officials and developers. Ms. Miliaras includes a history of African Americans in Alexandria.

In the *Chronicle*'s next issue Garrett Peck takes us back to the late 18th century when Andrew Wales set up his brewery in the Town Warehouse and became Virginia's first commercial brewer.

The mission of the **Alexandria Historical Society** is to promote an active interest in American history and particularly in the history of Alexandria and Virginia. For information about society lectures and awards presentations and for past issues of the *Alexandria Chronicle*, please visit the society's web site: www.alexandriahistorical.org. The *Chronicle* is published through the support of the J. Patten Abshire Memorial Fund.