

Historic Preservation & Zoning In Georgetown

First installment in a series about historic preservation in our community and the work of the CAG HPZ.

Each time I look out my windows or go for a walk, the historic architecture and setting of Georgetown never cease to delight me. I'll bet you share this admiration for its historic character, and it's probably one of the reasons that compelled you to live here.

But do you know that Georgetown, both architecture and setting, is a National Historic Landmark on the National Register of Historic Places? Nationally, there are relatively few historic districts that have qualified for this designation. It is "the highest level of recognition conferred by the US government on privately owned properties of significant historic value" which are associated with "events that have made significant contribution to the broad pattern of our Nation's history", and "the lives of persons significant in our past", and which "embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction". The span of time during which these significant events, activities, and construction occur is known as the "period of significance".

For Georgetown, this began in 1751, when what was then a 60-acre port town was established and was formally acknowledged in 1950 when Congress enacted the Old Georgetown Act to preserve and protect its unique history and architecture.

Although most people think of Georgetown in terms of a neighborhood in the "colonial style", only one hundred thirty-five buildings remain that date from 1751 to 1829. Houses from this period can be classified broadly as generous brick single-family dwellings in spacious settings, attached or free-standing narrow brick dwellings abutting streets, or, to a much lesser degree, wood-clad structures.

Georgetown's building stock expanded extensively in the Nineteenth Century in a variety of forms and styles. One hundred seventy-five buildings exist from 1830 to 1869, with their columns, pedimented door and window surrounds, Renaissance details, Gothic arches, towers and projecting bays. The end of the Civil War saw the erection of simple two-story brick alley dwellings to house the newly freed African Americans who joined the already independent African American community.

From 1870 to 1899 the City laid sewer, water, and gas lines, and streets and sidewalks were planted with trees. Residential streets were filled with rowhouses (dwellings characterized by identical footprints, and

front and back facades) and townhouses (attached buildings with individuated facades and footprints) clad in pressed brick with brick moldings and corbelling. The Romanesque Revival style, characterized by more elongated, narrower bricks, flourished. A total of 984 buildings survive from this period.

Almost as many buildings – 876 – date from 1900 to 1950, making the late Nineteenth to the early Twentieth Centuries the predominant building stock of Georgetown. Brick row houses and apartment buildings were constructed. Between 1935 and 1945, after the creation of Colonial Williamsburg, the Colonial Revival style became all the rage, and many of Georgetown's houses were modified to reflect this. Many African Americans were displaced through federal actions – including the construction of the West Heating Plant – destroying Georgetown's diversity.

As Georgetown grew denser, its open spaces – the yards and parks - were recognized as a significant characteristic & essential to the integrity of the historic district.

Georgetown's rich and varied architecture, in delicate balance with its hidden and visible open spaces, is what The Old Georgetown Act was enacted to preserve. To this end, federal law requires review of both concept and permit plans for all construction, alteration, reconstruction, and demolition of buildings within its boundaries, and regulates their scale, and design (appearance, volumes, details, color and texture of materials) that can be viewed from public pathways. So, while living in our National Landmark Historic District is a privilege and a pleasure, the protection the designation affords presents homeowners with challenges when they seek to undertake modifications to their properties.

The mission of CAG's HPZ is to preserve the historic character and aesthetic values of Georgetown with a particular eye toward protecting the interests of the neighborhood's residents and homeowners. We look forward to working with you.

Next time: The review process – when, who, what.

-Elsa Santoyo HPZ Chair