

Preservation Va. wants school site saved

Former American Legion post building is part of Alexandria's Parker-Gray historic district

BY CHRISTY GOODMAN

The former nursery school and American Legion site on North Fayette Street in Alexandria is one of the most endangered historic buildings in the commonwealth, according to Preservation Virginia.

"The point of the list is to bring attention to properties that are historically significant to the community and are facing some kind of threat, in this case demolition," Louis Malon, the organization's director of preservation services, said of the recently named sites.

The shuttered post, named for William Thomas, the first African American from Alexandria killed in World War I, is the subject of a lawsuit between preservationists and the city.

The City Council voted in July to uphold a demolition permit for the site. Preservationists say the rules for demolition of a historic site were not followed.

The case also says the city violated residents' civil rights by not preserving the property, which is part of the Parker-Gray historic district, and other African American institutions.

The building was constructed in 1944 as the Carver Nursery School, to care and educate children of black families during World War II. It was turned into an American Legion post and served as a gathering place for the surrounding African American community, said Louis Hicks, director of the Alexandria Black History Museum.

"There are not any standing African American institutions left in the city. Not many, if any," Hicks said. "African American schools are demolished [nationally] and not really considered worthy of saving. It is not a pretty building, but it does carry a legacy of educating African American children."

Chesapeake's Cornland School and Powhatan County's St. Francis De Sales School, which served African American children, made Preservation Virginia's list. Schools tend to become obsolete but are generally built on desirable land in population centers, Malon said.



PHOTOS BY CHRISTY GOODMAN/THE WASHINGTON POST
The former Carver Nursery School had educated African American children before it became an American Legion post and served as a neighborhood gathering spot.



William Cromley wants it to be a companion to his Queen Street building.

"It is difficult to see reuse possibilities just because of the way they are laid out," he said.

The demolition permit was granted to the building's owner, William Cromley,

who tried to give the building back to the city after he bought it. The city declined for financial reasons, and Cromley requested a permit to demolish it.

He "didn't think the building rose to the level of historic preservation that is defined in the [Alexandria] code" and would require much more money to restore than the property was worth, Cromley said.

"For me, the question is... 'What represents the neighborhood's story?'" Cromley said. "I can pick many more buildings [in the historic district] that are

LEGION CONTINUED ON 19

Site named to list of most endangered

LEGION FROM 18

both historically significant and architecturally significant to tell that story."

The developer had planned to build an environmentally friendly companion building to eight lofts he had built around the corner on Queen Street.

The endangered-building and other lists "are great to draw awareness," Cromley said. But they also "enflame passions and shame legitimate businesspeople."

Cromley said he is "anxiously waiting to see the people who want to preserve it come up with a plan."

The lawsuit's trial is scheduled in November.

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