

**Department of Community Development
Planning and Preservation Division**

**Proposed Union Hill Old and Historic District
Staff Report**

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Draft 11-15-2008

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Introduction

In July of 2007 CAR staff met with representatives of the Union Hill Historic District Initiative (UHHDI) to discuss the possibility of an Old and Historic District being established in the Union Hill neighborhood. The UHHDI was considering the best way to preserve the neighborhood and staff discussed the impacts of Old and Historic designation and the particulars of the designation process. Afterward UHHDI canvassed neighborhood property owners and residents about preservation of the neighborhood in general and Old and Historic District designation in particular. The UHHDI kept CAR staff apprised of their process. In the spring of 2008 the neighborhood felt that a neighborhood meeting on Old and Historic designation would be appropriate prior to requesting the meeting.

In June of 2008 neighborhood property owners were notified by mail and fliers distributed throughout the neighborhood regarding a July public meeting. On July 25, 2008 the UHHDI hosted a meeting for

Union Hill residents and property owners. At the meeting the UHDI made a presentation on the preservation of the neighborhood and the impact of Old and Historic Designation. CAR staff were present to answer dozens of questions about Old and Historic Designation from those in attendance. At the end of the meeting it was the consensus of the majority in attendance that Old and Historic District designation process proceed.

The UHHDA submitted a letter requesting that the designation process begin on August 19, 2008, with letters of support from the Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods and Historic Richmond Foundation. CAR staff distributed this to the Commission at for the August 26, 2008, Commission meeting. Staff made a brief presentation at the September 23, 2008, CAR meeting. The preparation of this staff report begins the CAR Review of the property. The Next Steps section of this report will spell out the particulars of this process.

District Context

The Union Hill neighborhood and the proposed Union Hill Old and Historic District both encompass the area bounded by Mosby Street on the west, Carrington and O Streets on the north, North 25th Street on the east, and East Marshall Street and Jefferson Avenue on the South. From this point forward the proposed Old and Historic District shall be referred to as "Union Hill" unless otherwise noted.

Union Hill is situated on a plateau above Shockoe Valley, demarcated by two ravines that rise at an angle from the floor of the valley. The nine acre Jefferson Park forms the southernmost tip of Union Hill. The walkways and topography of the park slope down to Jefferson Avenue and the floor of Shockoe Valley. The streets of the neighborhood have generally been placed at a uniform grade with the slope running from east to west. The lots alleys of the neighborhood are often situated at a substantially higher grade.

Union Hill is laid out on an irregular grid that differs considerably from the regular grid of the historic neighborhoods. The angles of Jefferson Avenue on the south and Venable and Carrington Streets with 23rd, 24th, and 25th Streets created the trapezoid shape of the neighborhood. The streets in the western and northern portions of the neighborhood are laid out at right angles along Venable Street. Those in eastern section of the neighborhood follow the grid of the streets south of Jefferson Avenue and east of 25th Street. These diverging street axes give Union Hill the irregular intersections and block shapes that make it different from the adjoining neighborhoods.

The blocks of Union Hill generally consist of rows of narrow lots and are intersected by alleys. The lots and buildings in the neighborhood are situated on the broadest front of a block. Since the blocks of the neighborhood are so irregular, roughly half of the buildings in the

neighborhood face the streets running in an easterly/westerly direction and the remainder of the building face streets running in a northerly and southerly direction.

There are a total of 656 properties in the neighborhood. Of these, over a little over two thirds of the properties (423) are deemed by staff to be contributing. Generally each property corresponds to a distinct building and address. An inventory of historic buildings is included in the appendix from the National Register nomination. It should be noted that in the preparation of nominations to the National Register of Historic Places attached buildings are counted as one building. The history and architecture of the neighborhood are discussed in greater detail in another section of this report.

The architecture of the neighborhood consists primarily of attached and detached residential buildings of brick and wood frame construction. The majority of buildings in the neighborhood date from the nineteenth century. Commercial architecture is concentrated primarily along Mosby Street and Jefferson Avenue, though commercial buildings can be found throughout the entire neighborhood. There is one large former industrial building in the neighborhood. The district has several institutional and religious buildings that constitute neighborhood landmarks.

The neighborhood contains a number of intact streetscapes of historic buildings. Property owners have rehabilitated a considerable amount of the building inventory in recent years. The National Register of Historic Places designation has resulted in a number of historic rehabilitation tax credit projects. A number of these rehabilitated buildings were once vacant buildings.

In spite of the success of rehabilitation Union Hill has had a persistent problem with large numbers of vacant buildings, but these numbers are slowly being reduced. According to the 2008 vacant building registration there are about 75 vacant buildings in the neighborhood. This is about half the number of such buildings in the neighborhood in 2005. There have been around 15 demolitions in the neighborhood since National Register designation in 2002. This number suggests that rehabilitation is the primary factor in reducing the number of vacant buildings.

The City of Richmond has made considerable progress in reversing the blighted condition of many buildings in Union Hill through systematic Code Enforcement. However a number of the buildings have owners who cannot be identified or that are out of state and beyond the reach of the code enforcement process, making it difficult to resolve the 75 vacant buildings that remain.

As a result of the blighted conditions and vacant buildings Union Hill possesses a considerable amount of vacant land or parking lots,

particularly along the northern end of the district and in the center of the neighborhood. The result has been the destruction of these buildings through arson, collapse, code enforcement demolition, and to provide parking. At the present time Union Hill has 194 parcels that are vacant or used as parking lots, so approximately a third of the district has potential for infill construction. It should be noted that all of the buildings that have been demolished since 2002 have been denoted in the inventory.

The inventory of vacant land in Union Hill has made it attractive for new construction. A handful of buildings in the neighborhood - mostly apartment buildings - were constructed in Union Hill between 1940 and 2000. Most of the infill construction in Union Hill dates to after 2000. Some of this infill underwent historic preservation review during the Section 106 process as a part of the Neighborhoods in Bloom program. Other infill buildings in the neighborhood have been constructed without any review of design elements than the building and zoning code requirements.

The Department of Community Development is presently working on rezoning the Union Hill neighborhood. In August of 2006, the City Planning Commission identified the neighborhoods of Church Hill and Union Hill as priority areas for rezoning studies. This decision was due to inconsistencies between the land use vision set forth in the City Master Plan and the existing zoning districts throughout the study area. Field work was conducted throughout the summer of 2007 and confirmed inconsistencies between the existing land uses and the zoning districts in place. Most of the neighborhood is zoned R-53 and the Master Plan calls for lower density residential. Public meetings began in November of 2007 and have continued on a regular basis to the present. The most recent meeting specific to the Union Hill neighborhood was a visioning exercise in the form of a charrette to examine the current Master Plan goals and discuss the possibility of updating the document. It was clear at that time that the current residents of the neighborhood embrace the elements of a traditional city and the other foundations of the recently drafted Downtown Master Plan. The rezoning efforts would be proceeding concurrently with Old and Historic Designation. An Old and Historic District is an overlay of the underlying zoning can proceed regardless of what the underlying zoning is.

Union Hill is surrounded by historic neighborhoods on three sides. To the south of the District is the Shockoe Valley Historic District, which is both a National Register and City Old and Historic District, although the boundaries between the two districts vary. To the east of Jefferson Avenue and 25th Street is the Church Hill North Historic District. This

entire district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The portion of Church Hill North that is south of Cedar Street is designated as an Old and Historic District . The Fairmount Historic District, listed on the National Register, lies to the north of Carrington Street. Non-historic multifamily architecture bounds the District north of O Street and west of Mosby Street.

History and Architecture

The following history is excerpted and condensed from the National Register nomination for Union Hill prepared by Kimberly Merkel Chen in 2001 with funding from the City of Richmond and Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

The Union Hill neighborhood is a part of the larger topographical feature known as Richmond or Church Hill. Church Hill is a large plateau flanked by Shockoe Valley, the James River Valley, and Gillie's Creek Valley. Ravines that feed into the larger valleys define the edge of valleys. Union Hill is situated on the eastern edge of Shockoe Valley.

The origins of the Union Hill neighborhood date to the early nineteenth century. One of the earliest roads in the neighborhood was Venable Street, built up one of the ravines as a coach road from Nine Mile Road. In 1805 property owners along the road laid out lots along Venable, the first subdivision in the neighborhood. The 1805 plan created an irregular grid that conformed to contours of the hills and is contrary to the regular pattern of right-angled streets and blocks used to lay out most of Richmond. At the southern end of Union Hill during this period, a deep ravine extended from what is now Broad and 20th Streets to N and 24th Streets. A number of smaller ravines also dissected the area. These ravines determined the location of many of the streets. The elimination of these many ravines consolidated the smaller sections of plateau into a larger entity that came to be known as Union Hill.

In spite of the early subdivision of Union Hill, the relative isolation of the area and the small size of Richmond proper meant that little in the way of development occurred in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The Mettert and Doing families pioneered residential development in Union Hill. Both families enjoyed living country-like environment of Union Hill, a short commute by horse or foot from the employment, services, and amenities of of Richmond. Portions of the neighborhood were even farmed during this era. The Metterts, Doings, and a few other families controlled most of the land in Union Hill.

Between 1820 and 1860 the population of Richmond tripled and the growth made its way to Union Hill. Union Hill became an attractive walking suburb for workers in the center of the City between 1840 and 1860. 25th Street and Venable Street provided reasonably easy access into town. The residents drawn to the neighborhood during this period of growth included white artisans and free blacks.

Architecture from the late antebellum period in Union Hill is characterized by modest Greek revival, side-hall, three-bay buildings that are usually two stories tall. These houses are typically detached or semi-detached structures and examples of these buildings can be seen throughout the neighborhood in both frame and brick construction. Union Hill stood outside the City limits during this period and as a result received little in the way of public improvements. Many of the late antebellum buildings are situated on the original neighborhood grade. When later regrading took place, it created the raised lots on which many of these buildings are situated.

As the neighborhood grew during this period commercial buildings appeared in the neighborhood. The Elijah Baker house of 1850 is an important surviving example of this building type. Several church congregations established themselves in Union Hill neighborhood during this time. The only surviving building from this period is located at 812 N. 25th Street.

The Civil War briefly disrupted the development of the neighborhood, but the growth of Richmond after the Civil War resulted in a construction boom in Union Hill that lasted until World War I. The Italianate style became the predominate style in the neighborhood from around 1870 to around 1890. The bracketed cornices and hipped-roof porches became hallmarks of the style, and bay windows can be found on some examples. Examples of the style vary from the simple to extremely ornate. Wood frame and brick Italianate buildings can be found in detached, semi-detached, and rowhouses. The style was also used on a number of commercial buildings in the neighborhood. The construction of Italianate style buildings in the neighborhood was so prolific it is perhaps the most common architectural style in Union Hill.

Several religious buildings in the neighborhood date from this period. The Cedar Street Baptist Church (originally the Union Station Methodist Church) is an outstanding 1893 example of the Romanesque. Great Hope Baptist Church (originally Venable Street Baptist) is another example of the Romanesque style. The Temple of Judah (Originally Christ Episcopal Church) of 1884 merges Romanesque and Gothic elements. The House of Happiness, a community mission house of 1926 is a reflection of the continuous religious presence in the community extending into the twentieth century.

Around 1890 public improvements began to have a substantial impact on the neighborhood. The Church Hill Parkway project, now Jefferson Avenue, filled in the large ravine at the base of the hill. The result was a convenient route of ascent to the neighborhood from Shockoe Valley. In conjunction with that the City of Richmond acquired the Doing House, which enjoyed a commanding site overlooking Shockoe Valley. The City, under the leadership of Wilfred Emory Cutshaw, converted the property to a 9 acre terraced park. The park provided convenient

pedestrian connections from neighborhood to Shockoe Valley. It included a fountain, a park keeper's house (now demolished) and many benches for enjoying the view.

Princess Anne Street developed along the edge of the park, and as a result of the park improvements large houses appeared in this neighborhood. Princess Anne Street developed with Queen Anne and Georgian revival residences, the most sizeable residential buildings in the neighborhood, between 1890 and 1920. More modest examples of these styles can be found elsewhere in the neighborhood.

A number of modest two-story brick commercial buildings were constructed in the neighborhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are substantial concentrations of commercial buildings on Jefferson Avenue near 25th Street and Venable Street. Other examples can be seen at scattered corners throughout the neighborhood.

In the late nineteenth century Richmond became one of the largest tobacco manufacturing centers in the world, with large factories in Shockoe Valley and along the James River. Around 1890 the tobacco industry spilled over into Union Hill with the construction of the Hasker Marcuse factory. This large tobacco tin factory is one of the few industrial buildings constructed in the larger Church Hill area.

By World War I development had filled out the neighborhood. Little in the way of development occurred for much of the rest of the century. In the second half of the twentieth century the neighborhood began to deteriorate. The abandonment of the neighborhood resulted in buildings collapsing, burning down, and being torn down for public safety. The current status of the neighborhood is discussed in the neighborhood context section above.

Criteria for Designation

Section 114-930.4 (4) of the Richmond City Code lists the following 10 criteria for use in evaluating potential Old and Historic Districts:

- a. It has significant character, interest or value as a part of the historic development of the City of Richmond;
- b. It is the site of an historic event which had a significant impact on the history of the City of Richmond;
- c. It exemplifies the architectural, cultural, economic, social, political, artistic, or religious history of the City of Richmond;
- d. It portrays the architectural character of a particular era in the history of the City of Richmond;

- e. It is a rare example of: a building built for a particular purpose, a type or form of building, a particular architectural style, or a form of engineering;
- f. It is the work of a designer or craftsman whose individual work has significantly impacted the City of Richmond, the Commonwealth of Virginia, or the United States of America;
- g. It contains elements of design, detail, material or craftsmanship that represent a significant innovation for its time period;
- h. It is related to a park, street configuration, open space, hill, body of water, or landscaped grounds of significance in the areas of urban planning or landscape architecture;
- i. It constitutes a landmark of the City of Richmond, owing to its unique location or unusual physical characteristics;
- j. It is contiguous with a neighborhood, district, building, structure, or site that meets one or more of the foregoing criteria, and changes to it could impact the neighborhood, district, building, structure or site that meet the foregoing criteria.

The Commission may recommend a neighborhood, district, building, structure or site for designation as an Old and Historic District if it meets one or more specific criteria; however, satisfying more than one criterion has been required by the Commission in the past.

After reviewing the Union Hill National Register nomination for the neighborhood and making numerous site visits, it is the assessment of staff that the following criteria are met for the following reasons:

- a. Union Hill is a singular residential neighborhood that reflects the steady growth of Richmond after 1840. The neighborhood reflects the development of the neighborhood from a rural enclave early in the century to a dense urban neighborhood by the early twentieth. The district reflects the evolution of nineteenth-century building styles, and has good examples of residential, religious, commercial and architecture.
- c. The Union Hill neighborhood as whole is a significant historical artifact. Its plan reflects planning and topographical changes in Richmond's history. Jefferson Park represents the development of the Richmond park system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The residential, commercial, and religious architecture represent the architecture of a changing nineteenth century neighborhood. The well documented history of

many of the surviving buildings reflects the long social history of the neighborhood.

- d. The long architectural evolution Union Hill is a document of architectural changes in Richmond from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.
- f. The district contains Jefferson Park, planned to the designs of City Engineer Wilfred Emory Cutshaw.
- h. The Union Hill neighborhood is a singular example of urban planning in Richmond. It is one of the few Richmond examples of an urban grid that was laid out to conform to the natural topography. The district is part of a series of visually connected hill top parks in Richmond, of which Taylor's Hill, Libby Hill, and Chimborazo are already designated as Old and Historic Districts. This planned system of urban parks is historic.
- i. Union Hill has a number of landmark aspects that make it eligible under i. The unique planning of the neighborhood make it a landmark of urban form. The hilltop setting of the neighborhood and prominent bluff in Jefferson Park make it a topographical landmark. Finally, the district contains religious, institutional, and industrial buildings that constitute landmarks in the community.
- j. Within the well-defined boundaries of the historically and architecturally significant Union Hill neighborhood, nearly one third of the property is vacant land. What happens on these properties is of great importance to the historic character of the Union Hill neighborhood.

The Purpose of Old and Historic District Designation

Section 114-930.2 of the Richmond City Code states that the purpose of creating old and historic districts is "to provide a means by which the city council may recognize and protect the historic, architectural, cultural, and artistic heritage of the city. This process of historic preservation is a part of the promotion of the general welfare and the protection of community health and public safety of the city through the identification, preservation and enhancement of buildings, structures, landscapes, settings, neighborhoods, sites and features with special historic, cultural, artistic, and architectural significance. To achieve this general purpose, the city seeks to pursue the following specific purposes:

- (1) The identification, designation, and protection of historic resources throughout the city.

(2) The promotion of harmony of style, form, color, proportion, texture and material between buildings of historic design and those of more modern design.

(3) The recognition and protection of appropriate settings and environments for historic districts, buildings, structures and sites.

(4) The enhancement of the quality of life for residents and the providing of attractions to visitors by preserving the historic resources of the city.

(5) The education of residents and visitors about the city's historic resources.

(6) The incorporation of historic preservation into the permit review process of the city.”

The National Register designation of Union Hill has admirably identified historic resources and assisted with the education of residents and visitors of the neighborhood pertaining to purposes 1 and 5. Old and Historic designation would provide a measure of protection for the Union Hill neighborhood's unique architectural and historic character by requiring all exterior alterations to properties within the district that are visible from a public right-of-way to obtain a *Certificate of Appropriateness* from the City's Commission of Architectural Review.

In spite of the great success of historic preservation in the neighborhood to date there are challenges that will be posed by the many vacant and/or deteriorated buildings. The considerable vacant land in the district currently and in the future will pose challenges to assuring compatible infill. The need for Old and Historic District designation is consistent with purposes 1, 2, 3, and 6. Old and Historic District designation can help assure the success of preservation in the neighborhood by over time creating a well designed and well preserved historic environment, thereby enhancing the quality of life as per purpose 4.

Boundaries Proposed

The boundaries of the proposed Union Hill Old and Historic District are delineated in appendix A. These proposed boundaries coincide with the boundaries of the Union Hill neighborhood and vary slightly from the Union Hill National Register Historic District. These boundaries were chosen for the following reasons:

- The discrepancy between the National Register and neighborhood boundaries account for a one block area on the edge of the district that has no historic resources. Because of the potential impact of new construction staff has opted to include this in the nomination.

- Existing Old and Historic Districts, Shockoe Valley and Church Hill North, bound the neighborhood to the south and partially to the east making inclusion of the neighborhood in this area unnecessary.
- Separate National Register Historic Districts, Shockoe Valley, Fairmount, and Church Hill North bound the neighborhood on the south, east, and north. These distinct neighborhoods would be appropriate for separate consideration as Old and Historic Districts.
- The large non-historic apartment buildings to the west of Mosby and the public housing to the north and west provide a distinct edge to this side of the district. It would be extremely difficult to regulate these non-historic buildings as buffers.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff **recommends that the Commission accept this staff report and vote to continue the Old and Historic designation process for the Union Hill neighborhood.** The Commission needs to specifically **request that the Union Hill Historic District Initiative undertake a public information process** in accordance with Procedures for the Establishment of Richmond Old and Historic Districts.

After researching the history of the area, reading the corresponding Union Hill North National Register Nomination, touring the neighborhood, and taking documentary photographs, it is the opinion of Staff that the proposed area meets **criteria a, c, d, f, h** and **i** as outlined in the evaluation criteria above and, as such, is worthy of consideration for designation as a City Old and Historic District.

The preservation of the Union Hill neighborhood as a Old and Historic District is consistent with the purposes of Old and Historic District designation, as outlined in the purpose section above. Specifically it will guide the extensive amount of rehabilitation and new construction and stem further demolition in Union Hill. The National Register of Historic Places boundaries are appropriate ones for the district as outlined in the boundaries section above.

Next Steps

The next steps in the designation process are included in the legal requirements Section 114-930.4 of the City Code and the Commission's procedural requirements in *Procedures for the Establishment of Richmond Old and Historic District*. Assuming that the Commission accepts the staff recommendation on November 25, 2008, the immediate next step in Old and Historic Designation would be to have UHHDI to begin a public notification process.

CAR staff would work closely UHHDI to plan a mailing to neighborhood property owners. The mailing would be sent out the week of January

12, 2009, and would invite property owners within the district to a neighborhood information meeting tentatively set for February 12, 2009. Commission staff and members would be at the meeting to make a presentation on Old and Historic District designation and answer questions.

City staff will provide metered, self addressed (to CAR staff) post cards with a map reference number for UHHDI to distribute in the public information mailing. The postcards would allow the owner of each property to state whether they are in support of, oppose, or have no opinion on the proposed designation. The postcards would be due two weeks after the neighborhood public information meeting hosted by UHHDI. CAR staff would map the property owner responses parcel by parcel to gauge community support for the project.

The postcards would be due back to CAR staff on February 27. CAR staff should be able to report on the findings of the neighborhood meeting and the survey at the March CAR meeting. Typically, it is expected that approximately 70% of those responding to the survey by the stipulated deadline should vote for the designation in order for zoning overlay to be effective for the neighborhood.

If, following the survey and public meeting, the Commission believes that there is sufficient Community support for the project, the Commission would vote to authorize staff to proceed with the public hearing stage. All owners in the district and those with 150 feet of the district would receive notification about the establishment of the district, and two advertisements about the pending district would be posted. The public notification process should take about 30 days to complete, meaning that the CAR hearing would probably take place in April or May. At the public hearing on designation the Commission would vote to approve, modify, or deny the Old and Historic District.

If the districts is approved or modified by the Commission a paper is introduced to City Council and public hearings are scheduled for the Planning Commission and City Council. Notice of the Planning Commission and Council hearings would be published in the paper and mailed to the property owners in the district as well as those within 150 feet of the district. The Planning Commission and City Council can choose to amend, modify, confirm, or deny the Old and Historic District designation. Although the Commission of Architectural Review is responsible for determining eligibility and making recommendations, City Council has the final say in whether or not the City's Zoning Ordinance may be amended to add a new City Old and Historic District.

If the Union Hill Old and Historic District is approved all property owners would be notified of the fact. The City's central address system, GIS layers, and Old and Historic District Handbook would be updated to reflect this new Old and Historic District.