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**DESIGNATION**  
Of the District of Columbia

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

In Historic Landmark Case 20-06

**Washington Yacht Club**

1500 M Street SE

Square 1080-S, parts of Lots 801 and 802/part of Reservation 343-D

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The Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a public hearing on April 30, 2020 on an application to designate the Washington Yacht Club at 1500 M Street SE, designated the property a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and requested that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance. The building was constructed in 1915 and was moved to its present site in 1925.

The WYC is significant under District of Columbia designation criterion D and National Register criterion C for architecture. The clubhouse and its support facilities embody the characteristics of the boat club as a building type. The vernacular edifice is elevated and faces the river with a wide front porch. It includes the representative features of a meeting/dining space, locker room, galley, flagpole and piers/docks. Although modified through additions and applied finishes, the Washington Yacht Club retains its integrity. Its original gable roof form is evident and many of its original materials remain beneath the current ones. The building retains its integrity and clearly conveys its historic use, character, and significance.

The Washington Yacht Club clubhouse meets District of Columbia criterion B and National Register Criterion A for history. The building represents a very early example of a boat club devoted to the sport of motorized boating, which took off in the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In an era when motorboating was largely the sport of the wealthy, the WYC was, and remains, dedicated to making motorboating affordable. It is historically associated with the Anacostia River, for which it has been a steward over its 110-year history. Like the Anacostia, the club has faced challenges connected to infrastructure, racial segregation, the dichotomy of federal-city relations, and the newer threats of development and gentrification.

The WYC meets National Register criteria consideration B for relocated properties. Marine resources, including boat clubs and boathouses, have a long history of being moved, often as a result of natural or human-caused modifications to the shoreline, like the reclamation of the Anacostia Flats. Rather than detracting from its significance or integrity, the WYC's several moves add to the story of the Anacostia River's continued use for recreational boating and the WYC's commitment to remain on it.

**Setting**

The WYC sits within Anacostia Park, which is jointly administered by the District of Columbia Department of Parks and Recreation and the National Park Service. The club has a license to

occupy its third-of-an-acre parcel, which is bordered by M Street SE to the north and the river to the south, accessible from both. To the east and west are its fellow historic boat clubs, the Eastern Power Boat Club (founded 1903), the District Yacht Club (c. 1955), and the Seafarers Yacht Club (1945), along with the non-historic Anacostia Community Boathouse, which together comprise what is known as Boathouse Row or the Anacostia Boathouses.

The Washington Yacht Club property includes the clubhouse, constructed in 1915, a 1955 workshop, a 1920s electrical shed, and a portion of the Anacostia seawall, all of which contribute to its significance, as well as a non-contributing shed and piers.

### **History of the WYC**

The Washington Yacht Club was founded April 27, 1910 by a group of white District of Columbia boaters looking to establish affordable facilities along the Anacostia River in proximity to their homes on the east side of the river. Unlike some extant clubs, members of the WYC were solely devoted to motorized boating, rather than sailing or rowing, which were immensely popular at the time. At a time when motorboating was a pastime of the wealthy, the founders and subsequent members of the Washington Yacht Club were proudly working class. Early members included mechanics, clerks, a carpenter, and a boat livery operator. Club members built their own boats by hand and constructed all their own facilities, rarely if ever contracting out work. They have maintained this tradition, contributing to the upkeep of buildings and grounds through mandatory work parties.

The club's first location was at the foot of Naylor Road SE, where members leased a site for docks from the District in 1910 through 1915. Due to the ongoing reclamation of the Anacostia Flats, the club was forced to relocate to about 100 feet west of the Pennsylvania Avenue bridge pier. It was here that the members built their clubhouse, a 20- by 30-foot frame building, which forms the center portion of today's WYC clubhouse. In 1925, the club was again required to relocate, this time to its current site on the west bank of the Anacostia. The WYC towed the clubhouse across the river on a scow and immediately set about constructing piers to provide a water approach to their club. The clubhouse was expanded to the rear in 1929 to provide a room for a steward and in 1930 with restrooms and a galley.

The WYC has remained committed to its place on the Anacostia despite the city's near abandonment of the river. Over the twentieth century, the Anacostia became one of the most polluted rivers in the nation. At the same time, it became a symbol of the city's racial and economic divide. The exodus of African American residents to the east side of the river, necessitated through planning decisions, urban renewal, race restrictive covenants, and other policies, rendered the Anacostia a physical boundary between blacks and whites, rich and poor. These changes left the Washington Yacht Club on the borderline of the District's division, where it exemplified the issues of a segregated city.

The WYC admitted its first member of color in the 1970s, after which membership at the club dropped precipitously. White members who did not wish to be associated with African Americans or the suffering Anacostia River left to join other clubs. Turnover in membership to predominantly African Americans only reinforced the racial and economic divide symbolized by the Anacostia. Despite periodic drops in membership, difficult times during several wars, an energy crisis that severely impacted the boating community, and a river burdened with environmental and social issues, the WYC remains on Boathouse Row, serving as a steward of

the Anacostia, and proudly welcoming all.

### **Boat Club Architecture**

While boat clubs exhibit a wide variety of architectural styles, depending upon age and location, the building type invariably exhibits certain character-defining features, including the following:

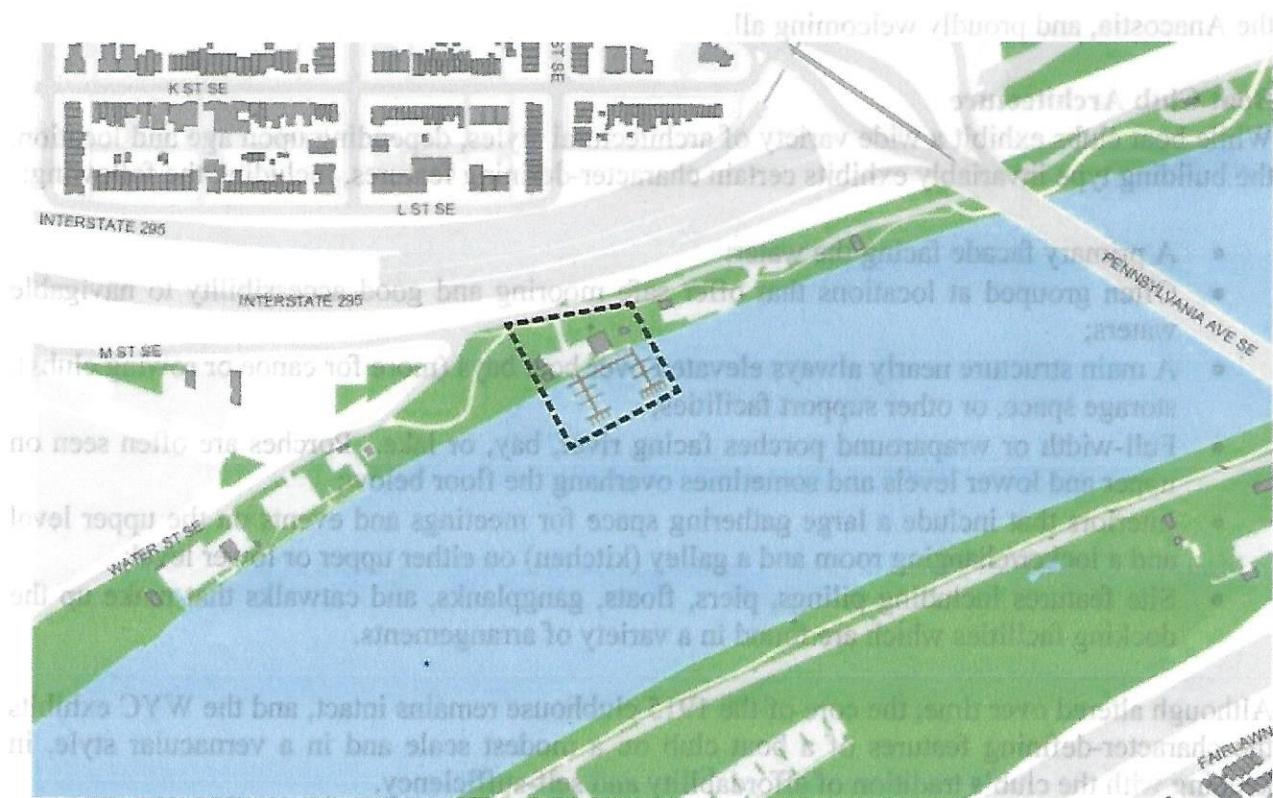
- A primary facade facing the water;
- Often grouped at locations that offer safe mooring and good accessibility to navigable waters;
- A main structure nearly always elevated over boat bays (more for canoe or rowing clubs), storage space, or other support facilities;
- Full-width or wraparound porches facing river, bay, or lake. Porches are often seen on upper and lower levels and sometimes overhang the floor below;
- Interiors that include a large gathering space for meetings and events on the upper level and a locker/changing room and a galley (kitchen) on either upper or lower level;
- Site features including pilings, piers, floats, gangplanks, and catwalks that make up the docking facilities which are found in a variety of arrangements.

Although altered over time, the core of the 1915 clubhouse remains intact, and the WYC exhibits the character-defining features of a boat club on a modest scale and in a vernacular style, in keeping with the club's tradition of affordability and self-sufficiency.

Another commonality among clubhouses and other marine-related resources is the frequency with which they are moved. Whether for real estate purposes, government decisions, a changing shoreline, or for other reasons, there is a distinct history of these resources being moved. The WYC relocated three times due to the reclamation work along the banks of the Anacostia, taking along its 1915 clubhouse on its last move. The fact that these resource types are moved does not diminish their significance but contributes to their story of survival in maritime settings.



Marnique Heath, Chairman  
Historic Preservation Review Board



**Washington Yacht Club landmark boundary**

Highly Preserved Residential Neighborhood  
Washington Yacht Club Landmark Boundary