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Josh Wilcox, Principal
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Re: 619 and 621 North Lake Street

Dear Josh:

The purpose of this letter is to provide additional information on the Langdon Street neighborhood and the buildings located at 619 and 621 North Lake Street in Madison, Wisconsin. The two properties are turn of the century fraternity houses located at the corner of North Lake Street and Mendota Court in the Langdon Street neighborhood along Lake Mendota. Presently, the buildings are owned and occupied by the Alpha Chi Sigma fraternity, a non-profit organization that wishes to redevelop the site as a larger apartment building.

Langdon Street Neighborhood

The neighborhood along Langdon Street, located on four blocks just east of the University of Wisconsin campus adjacent to Lake Mendota, consists of dense multi-unit housing built from the early twentieth century to the present. The area was first developed in the 1850s and 1860s as a collection of single-family homes on large lots. One of the two most prestigious neighborhoods in Madison during the nineteenth century, it was home to prominent political, business, and academic leaders and was referred to as Big Bug Hill and later Mansion Hill.¹ Some of this historic fabric still exists further to the northeast, but nearly all this character is gone from the western end of Langdon Street. During the 1890s, the neighborhood underwent a dramatic change as the large lots were subdivided and infill housing was constructed. This was especially the case between Langdon Street at the lakeshore as additional streets were inserted to increase the buildable land available for an increase in density.



621 and 619 N. Lake Street

By the early twentieth century, older homes were frequently demolished or renovated for student housing, especially Greek letter societies, which become increasingly popular during these decades as the social fulcrum at the university. The first fraternity house was purpose-built in 1892, and by 1922 fraternities occupied over twenty homes in the area. Greek societies partly grew in response to a lack of student housing in dormitories, and by the early twentieth century a large segment of the male student population was in fraternities.² Most of the

¹ Mollenhoff, David V. *Madison A History of the Formative Years*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982; and "Mansion Hill." Pamphlet. Madison Landmarks Commission, March 1981.

² Rankin, Katherine, and Carol Cartwright. *Langdon Street Historic District, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form*. May 1986.

fraternities did not own the buildings they occupied but rented them as rooming housing instead. Public complaints about overcrowding from residents were common during the 1900s and 1910s, especially in the Langdon neighborhood. The area underwent rapid change, appearing completely different from 1900 to 1920. Not only was there significant pressure for redevelopment from a growing student body, but the homeowners of the neighborhood also sought out new suburban homes on the west side of the city, accessible and convenient due to the expansion of streetcar lines and city services. Nearly all of the nineteenth-century homes are gone. Replaced by a denser mix of multi-unit fraternities and apartments in an urban renewal of the early twentieth century spurred by a demand for greater density.³



Aerial neighborhood context facing north. The scale of the western end of the Langdon Street neighborhood is no longer that of two-story fraternity houses.

In the 1930s, one-third of the buildings in the neighborhood were occupied by Greek letter societies and continue to be to the present. Over one-half of the buildings in the area have housed a fraternity or sorority at some point in their history. The remainder of the properties were constructed as large apartment buildings or converted houses. Fraternities ceased being the dominant social force at the university during the 1930s and 1940s due to the Great Depression, World War II, and the rapidly growing and diversifying student body which corresponds with the end of the period of significance for the Langdon Street Historic District. The neighborhood along Langdon began to see the development of apartment buildings unrelated to Greek letter societies, though the fraternities and sororities continued in the area.⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s, the area saw a large amount of redevelopment as the neighboring university grew, constructing new office and apartment buildings, which

³ Rankin, Katherine, and Carol Cartwright. *Langdon Street Historic District*; and Curti, Merle, and Vernon Carstensen. *The University of Wisconsin A History 1848-1925. Vol. I and II*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949; and Plat Maps for Madison, WI, 1855, 1872, 1890, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁴ *Wisconsin State Journal Centennial Edition*, September 24, 1939.

introduced a dichotomy of scale. The neighborhood lacks continuity in height, with one-third of the properties being two stories, another forty percent being three stories, and the remaining quarter being significantly taller. The area closest to the university to the west has experienced the greatest change, with a majority of the lots redeveloped since the 1960s.⁵ Development has continued to the present, and some areas of the neighborhood, especially at its western edge, lack historic fabric. The process of subdividing lots that spurred growth at the turn of the century has been reversed and much of the newer development has combined lots, albeit for the same reason – to increase density in the neighborhood. Presently, nearly all the properties in the Langdon Street neighborhood are apartments which are owned and operated by off-site management.

In 1986, much of the neighborhood was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Langdon Street Historic District. The district includes 113 properties, 89 of which contribute to the history of the area with a period of significance spanning from 1870 to 1930. The 24 non-contributing resources were constructed after 1930. The district was initially identified for both its architectural integrity demonstrating high-style Period Revival style buildings and for its historical significance as a prestigious residential neighborhood at first, and then the chapters of social Greek letter societies. Both the buildings at 619 and 621 North Lake Street are contributing resources in the historic district.⁶

National Register Bulletin NRB16A outlines that the boundaries of a historic district should consider the following factors: visual barriers, visual change, and clearly differentiated patterns of development. Arguably, the portion of the Langdon Street district west of Frances Street has such visual barriers, has undergone visual change, and has a clearly differentiated pattern of development. Mirroring the initial redevelopment of the neighborhood during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when older homes were replaced by numerous multi-unit buildings for fraternities and rental properties to meet the demand for increased density, recent redevelopment has continued this trend by replacing these buildings with high rise apartments and office space. Much of this has occurred since the 1980s when the district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Presently, the block where 619 and 621 North Lake Street are located is dominated by high-rise buildings dwarfing the few remaining two- and three-story houses.



N. Lake Street and Langdon Street, facing northeast. 619 and 621 North Lake Street can be seen on the far-left side of the picture.



N. Frances Street and Langdon Street, facing northwest. Note the scale and style of the buildings in the neighborhood.



N. Lake Street at Lake Mendota., facing southeast. Note the alterations to surrounding historic buildings.

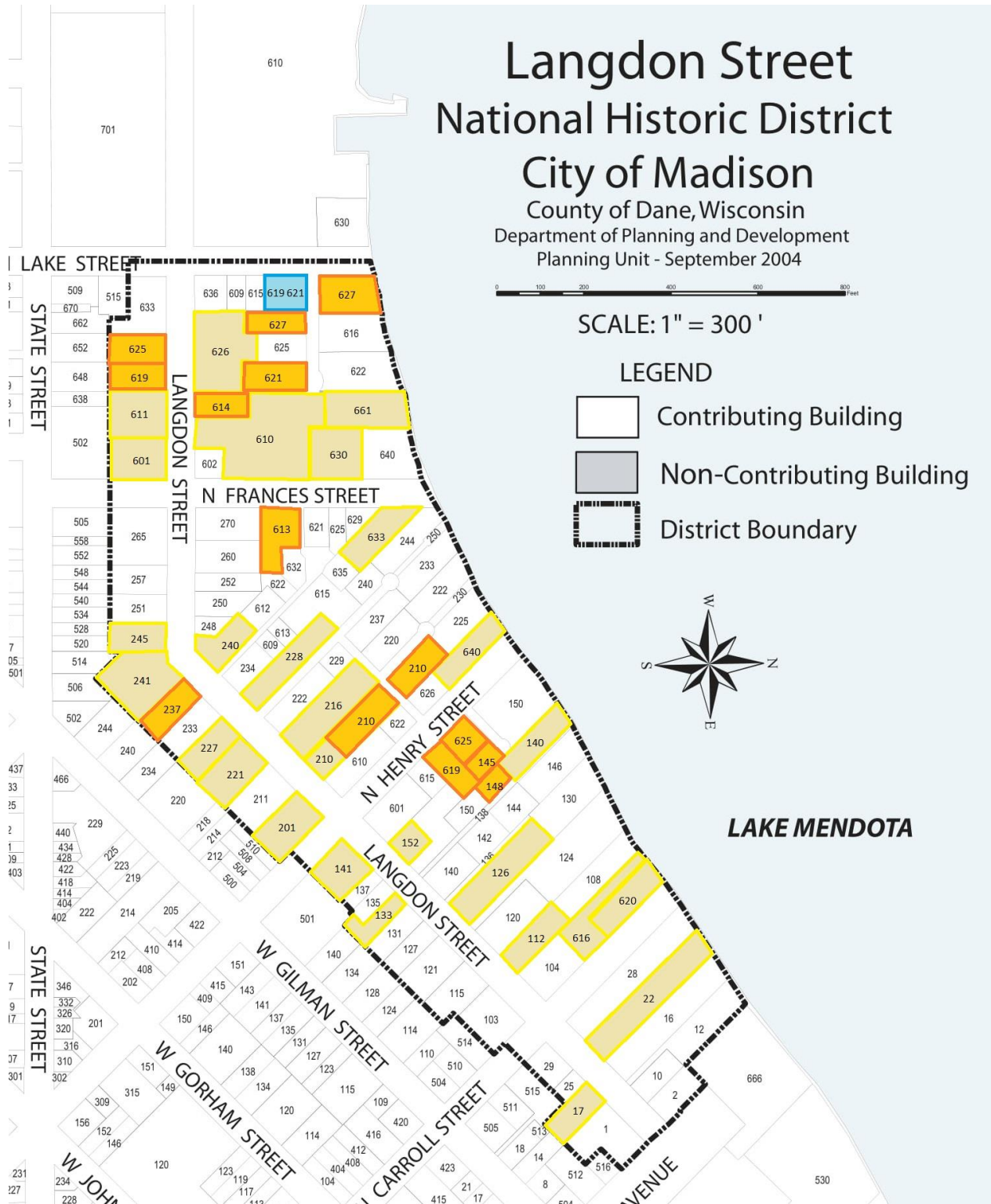
⁵ Preserve, LLC. *Langdon Neighborhood Character Study, Madison, Wisconsin*. Survey Report. November 2018.

⁶ Rankin, Katherine, and Carol Cartwright. *Langdon Street Historic District*.

Langdon Street National Historic District

City of Madison

County of Dane, Wisconsin
 Department of Planning and Development
 Planning Unit - September 2004



619 and 621 are outlined in blue on the map above of the Langdon Street National Historic District, designated in 1986. Properties that were initially determined as non-contributing in 1986 are shaded in yellow. Resources that have been subsequently demolished or unsympathetically altered with non-historic additions are shaded in orange. Note how the non-contributing properties at the western end of the district (up on the map) engulfing the smaller historic properties. A similar conclusion was drawn in the 2018 Langdon Neighborhood Character Study. Base Map courtesy of the City of Madison Department of Planning and Development, 2004.

In the listed National Register district, the block west of North Frances Street includes twenty-three properties, six of which were non-contributing due primarily to their age when the district was listed in 1986.⁷ The character of this section of the district is distinctly different from the rest of the neighborhood along Langdon Street and produces a wall of properties that are not historic due to their age or lack of architectural integrity. While some of the properties on the same block as 619 and 621 North Lake Street were constructed during the same era and reflect the history discussed in the National Register nomination, many neighboring buildings were not. Six modern high-rises were constructed from 1950 to 1969 including Lowell Hall, the Surfside Apartments, the Roundhouse Apartments, and the additions to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity. In more recent years, from the 1990s to the present, five more high-rise contemporary apartment buildings have been constructed on the block. The 2018 Langdon Neighborhood Character Study recommends that another six of the properties within this area be changed to a non-contributing status because of their lack of architectural integrity.⁸ This change would leave the ratio of non-contributing properties to contributing properties in this block of the district at twelve to eleven. More properties at the western end of the district would be non-contributing than contributing upon further assessment. This serious lack of integrity calls into question the continuation of protections in the name of historic preservation west of North Frances Street.

While much of the historic district maintains its integrity, the western end, along North Lake Street and North Frances Street, does not as a majority of the properties in the area have lost their integrity and would no longer be considered contributing to a historic district. The scale of this block, consisting of high-rise buildings, is distinctly different from the rest of the area, which consists of smaller buildings. Proximity to the University of Wisconsin campus and the downtown area of Madison puts pressure on the neighborhood along Langdon to be high-density and has done so since the turn of the century. It reflects a history to rebuild as an increasingly denser residential neighborhood. Indeed, the history of the neighborhood that is highlighted in the National Register nomination highlights this process of increasing density that is consistent with more recent trends of the construction of larger apartment buildings and Greek societies expanding and rebuilding to accommodate a greater number of students.

⁷ Ibid.

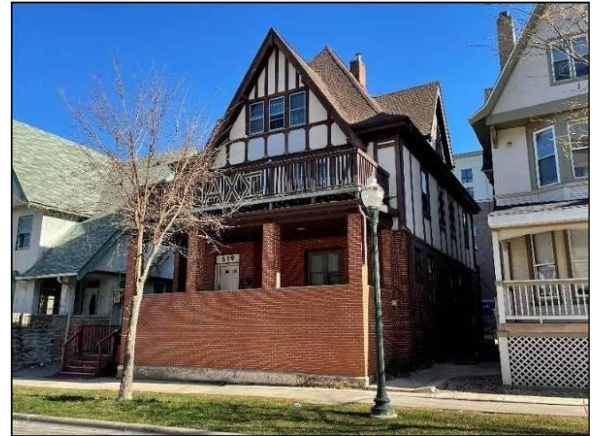
⁸ Preserve, LLC. *Langdon Neighborhood Character Study*.

619 North Lake Street

The house located at 619 North Lake Street was constructed in 1909 for the Alpha Sigma Chi fraternity by George Keachie. George Keachie owned the building and rented it to the fraternity. In 1915, Keachie constructed a large brick porch on the front of the building, which has since been replaced.⁹ Alpha Sigma Chi remained in the building until 1923, at which time it was occupied by the Sigma Pi fraternity. The Kappa Psi and Lambda Chi fraternities rented the property in the 1930s. The house was sold in 1941 and continued to be occupied by fraternities such as Theta Chi and then Phi Sigma Kappa until 1976 when the present owner and tenant, Alpha Chi Sigma purchased the building for \$35,000, having already occupied the building next door at 621 North Lake Street.¹⁰

Constructed in a Tudor Revival half-timber and brick style popular in Madison at the time, the building has undergone considerable alterations since the end of the period of significance of the historic district. Unusual for rented student housing, the building has a history of deferred maintenance going back to the 1930s. The building was briefly condemned and vacated in 1954 due to a lack of maintenance and has continued to have problems. Several windows have been replaced with vinyl ones, none of the original doors remain, and a roof deck was added at some point. The historic brick chimney was removed in 1949. New wood exterior steps, stoop, fire escape, and railings were added in 1985. Most damning for the building's architectural integrity, the historic 1915 porch was removed, and a large, brick porch was constructed across the entire front façade of the building in 1986. As this was the same year the property was listed in the National Register as a contributing resource to the historic district, it calls into question whether the nomination was written before the historic 1915 porch was removed or not and whether it should really should have been considered contributing due to this visually obtrusive addition.¹¹ The inconsistency in the architectural details imply plenty of alterations to the exterior over time, and the interior has been significantly altered as a rental building and very little of its historic fabric remains.

The lack of character defining features means that the building at 619 North Lake Street lacks architectural integrity, especially in comparison to the adjacent houses at 609 and 615 North Lake Street, designed by architects Claude and Starck, that are contemporary to its period and in much better condition.



619 N. Lake Street, facing northeast.



619 N. Lake Street, facing southeast.



619 N. Lake Street, facing northeast.

⁹ Preservation files. City of Madison Department of Planning, Community & Economic Development.

¹⁰ Madison City Directories, 1892-1985, Wisconsin Historical Society Library, Madison, WI; and Building Permits, 619 and 621 North Lake Street, City of Madison records.

¹¹ Building Permits, 619 and 621 North Lake Street; and Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps, 1902, 1908, 1939, 1942 updated, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

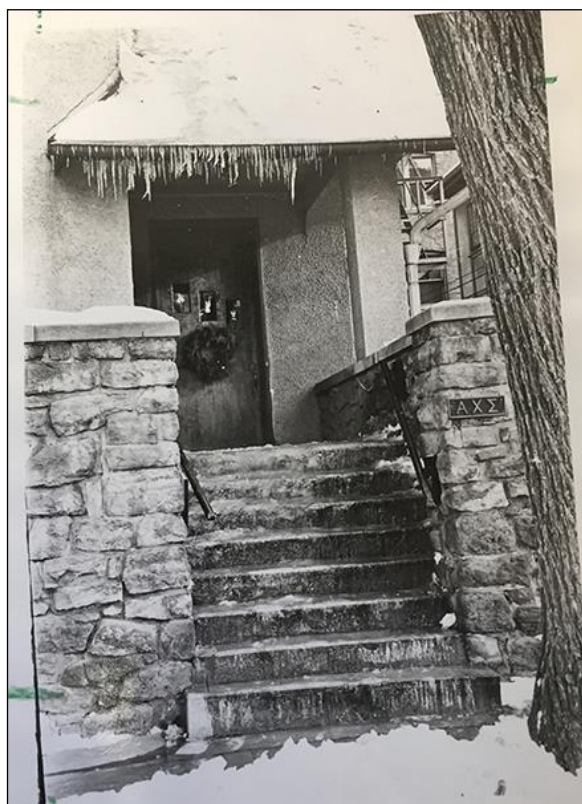
621 North Lake Street

The house located at 621 North Lake Street was constructed between 1894 and 1898 for the Kappa Sigma fraternity. According to Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the massing of the house was somewhat different, and the map dated to 1908 indicates a dissimilar one-and-one-half story house. In 1909, the same year the adjacent house at 619 North Lake Street was constructed, the entire house was remodeled with a stucco exterior. A massive stone porch was also added before the late 1930s.¹² Kappa Sigma remained in the house until 1923, and Alpha Chi Sigma purchased the house for \$25,000. Alpha Chi Sigma has remained in the building to the present.¹³ The fraternity is a small one, with only sixty-six chapters across the country, and is known for an emphasis on supporting chemistry students, having produced twenty Nobel Laureate Prize winners in its history. The Alpha Chi Sigma chapter began on the University of Wisconsin campus in 1902.¹⁴ From 1976 to 1980, an organization called Students International Meditation Society, a common student organization on campuses across the country during the 1970s, also occupied the building.

The late Queen Anne or Shingle style house has experienced many changes to its architectural integrity. The change in siding and the substantial stone porch are the most obvious alterations; however, both took place early in the building's history and can be considered historic elements. Perhaps at the same time as the addition of stucco, it appears that the building's gables were extended, brackets added, and the appearance of the house was made more progressive or Period Revival, in keeping with the stylistic tastes of the era. After the period of significance, building permit records show that the exterior and porches were repaired in 1949, a recreation room addition was completed in 1951, the interior was remodeled in 1964, much of the roof was rebuilt in 1970, and series of windows were replaced, a fire escape added, and the steps rebuilt in 1988.¹⁵ Many of the original wood windows remain, though the doors are not historic. Like its neighbor, records indicate a significant amount of deferred maintenance on the building dating back to the 1930s.¹⁶ The stucco exterior has significant cracking, and the original wood siding is visible underneath. Cement repairs are evident in the stone porch, and the rubble foundation has loose mortar and cracking. The basement wall on the north façade is noticeably moving and



621 N. Lake Street, Alpha Sigma Chi Fraternity original appearance, c. 1909. University of Wisconsin Archives.



621 N. Lake Street, Alpha Sigma Chi Fraternity front steps, c. 1930.

¹² Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps, 1902, 1908, 1939, 1942 updated; and Preservation files.

¹³ Madison City Directories, 1892-1985.

¹⁴ Robson, John, Ed. *Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities, 17th Edition*. Menasha, WI: The Collegiate Press, 1963.

¹⁵ Building Permits, 619 and 621 North Lake Street.

¹⁶ Photography Files for Fraternities and Sororities, University of Wisconsin Archives, Madison, WI.

causing structural instability in the rest of the building. The interior wood framing and plaster are also in poor condition with localized failures throughout. The interior has been significantly altered except for the main entry and stairs.

While the present appearance of 621 North Lake Street is nothing like what was originally constructed, many of the changes were completed during the property's historically significant period. While the defining architectural character of the house is still present, the building does have considerable structural and maintenance issues. Neither house is highlighted in the Langdon Street Historic District Walking Tour brochure or the text of the National Register historic district nomination.

The properties at 619 and 621 North Lake Street share a common history in relation to the development of fraternities near the University of Wisconsin campus along Langdon Street during the early decades of the twentieth century, similar to other buildings in the neighborhood. However, there is no local designation for this neighborhood, and the area on the west side of it has been heavily compromised with numerous high-rise developments and a general change in scale and density since the 1960s that diminishes the building's relationship to other similar fraternity and sorority houses further to the east. Individually, the houses are in poor to fair condition and lack architectural integrity to a degree that would disqualify them as historically significant examples of their style.

Sincerely,

Legacy Architecture, Inc.

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621 N. Lake Street, facing northeast.



621 N. Lake Street, facing southeast.