
Regarding: 633 East Gorham Street – Robert White House Landmark
Nomination review
(Legistar #26540)

Date: July 30, 2012
Prepared By: Amy Scanlon, Preservation Planner

General Information:

The property owners have requested that this property be designated as a City of Madison Landmark. On June 11, 2012 the Landmarks Commission determined that the application was complete. The question before the Landmarks Commission now is to determine if the attached Landmarks Nomination for 633 East Gorham Street should be recommended to the Common Council for designation.

Landmarks Ordinance:

33.19(4) Landmarks and Landmark Sites Designation Criteria.

- (a) For purposes of this ordinance, a landmark or landmark site designation may be placed on any site, natural or improved, including any building, improvement or structure located thereon, or any area of particular historic, architectural or cultural significance to the City of Madison, such as historic structures or sites which:
1. Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state or community; or
 2. Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state or local history; or
 3. Embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship or
 4. Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual genius influences his age.
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Staff Comments and Recommendations:

During the request for comments from other divisions, agencies and commissions, the nomination received favorable comments from the Plan Commission (attached), an email of support from the Parks Commission (attached), and no comments from the Engineering Division, the Fire Department, the Police Department, the Health Division, the Building Inspection Division, Public Works or the Alderperson.

In the preparation of this report, Staff has reviewed this nomination in a number of ways. The result of the review is a discussion of theory when evaluating “vernacular” architecture and whether the building at 633 East Gorham is “vernacular” or “common”. This discussion is necessary as buildings of this ilk will likely continue to come before the Landmarks Commission for evaluation. Staff suggests that the Landmarks Commission consider the following:

When discussing architecture, staff believes “vernacular” means a functional building, not designed by an architect, influenced by materials, climate, and culture familiar to a particular place.

Architects of the 19th century and earlier were not educated as architects are today. Those not receiving formal architectural training at a school were trained by carpenters, builders, and cabinet makers. In Europe and later in North America, pattern books were written by architects of the day to influence people who would otherwise be constructing vernacular buildings (functional buildings influenced by materials, climate and culture common to a particular place) of the fashionable architectural styles of the elite. The styles influenced the work of carpenters and builders in later years as the trend moved from the large cities to the smaller towns and rural areas.

The nomination notes the work of Andrew Jackson Downing, an American landscape designer and horticulturalist who was self taught in the field of architecture. His books popularized the use of Gothic and Italianate styles.

According to the nomination, Robert White, a carpenter and builder, constructed the residence at 633 East Gorham for himself in 1857. White was obviously influenced by the architectural trends made fashionable by Downing as the residence exhibits significant aspects of Italianate detailing and proportion. This stylistic influence suggests that the building is not “vernacular”, but should instead be considered “common”. The building is a common building type constructed of common local materials for a common middle class person or family. The massing, form, proportion, and detailing are combined with equal importance to create the Italianate Style of this residence. While the Italianate Style is common, the specific treatment of the details and form make this residence unique in the neighborhood and in Madison.

Staff recommends that the Landmarks Commission have a discussion of “vernacular” vs. “common” to clarify that issue for this and future nominations. Regardless, Staff supports the designation of the Robert White House located at 633 East Gorham Street as a local landmark under criteria 1 and 3 of the Landmarks Ordinance as referenced above.

If the Landmarks Commission feels it has enough information to make a decision, a recommendation should be made to the Common Council supporting or not supporting the designation of the property and the reasons for the decision. If the decision is made to support the nomination, Staff recommends that the nomination be revised if necessary to reflect the Commission’s discussion on issues described in this report.