

**SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS**

20 May 2022

Mayor Levar Stoney
Honorable City Council Members
900 E. Broad Street
Suite 201
Richmond, VA 23219

Re: Support for the Preservation of Second Baptist Church, 13 W. Franklin Street, Richmond, Va.

Dear Mayor Stoney and members of Council:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) strongly supports efforts to preserve Second Baptist Church, and strongly opposes recent efforts by Historic Hotels of America to seek its demolition. Historic Hotels of America also owns the adjacent Jefferson Hotel, first opened in 1895 and a participant since 1989 in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Historic Hotels of America program.

Designed by the Richmond-based architecture firm Noland & Baskervill and constructed 1902-06, Second Baptist Church is one of the most accomplished classical buildings in Richmond, a city well-known for its traditional and classical architecture. Noland & Baskervill modeled the design of the church on Thomas Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol, itself modeled on the Maison Carée in Nimes, France. This close attention to the Virginia State Capitol and the Maison Carée is no mere coincidence: at the same time that Noland & Baskervill were designing Second Baptist, they were also involved in designing the renovation and expansion of the Virginia State Capitol itself, in preparation for the Commonwealth's Tercentennial.

To our great surprise and disappointment, the City of Richmond announced on Friday, 18 February 2022, that the owners of Second Baptist could demolish it, based on a permit issued in 1993, nearly 30 years ago.

As citizens, one of the most important things that can expect from our government is equal treatment before the law. Equity and transparency are important aspects of justice. Similarly, when the City devises rules and regulations, it is important that they apply equally to all citizens. Thirty years is a long time – nearly half of the citizens of Richmond were not yet born in 1993. It does not seem likely that an ordinary citizen of Richmond could produce a building permit older than a significant portion of the city's population, and expect to begin construction.

On the issue of the proposed demolition of second Baptist Church, however, the City administration has announced that city processes will not be applied equally. Second Baptist Church is located in a City Old and Historic District (established in 1972) and is a contributing resource to that district. As such, any exterior alteration or demolition should come before the Commission of Architectural Review for a Certificate of Appropriateness before the project can commence.

The owner did just that – in 1992. In that year, the owner applied for a permit to demolish Second Baptist. The Commission denied that application. City Council, in a 1993 Resolution (R223 Res. 92-R174-223), subsequently overturned that decision, stating that the Commission had erred (though Council did not state what that error might have been), and allowed the demolition to commence.

But the church was not demolished; only the Sunday school building was removed. As well, the February 8, 1993 Ordinance (25 Ord. No. 93-011-25_ that allowed demolition also contained a 180-day extinguishment clause (Section 3B) stating that the “building permit shall expire by limitation and become null and void if construction is not commenced within one hundred eighty days from the date of the building permit, or if construction is suspended or abandoned for a period of one hundred eighty days at any time after work is commenced,” a standard condition of City building and demolition permits. The owner made no attempts to extend the permit. Therefore, even if the claim that one could credibly produce a 30-year-old permit and begin construction were valid, that permit expired long ago.

Further evidence of that is the fact that the owner submitted new special use permits in 1999 (102 Ord. No. 99-109-102) and 2012 (166 Ord. No. 2012-169-166), for an addition to expand the adjacent hotel’s dining facilities. Neither of those two permits asserted that they were renewals or extensions of the 1993 special use permit, even though their very existence acknowledges that the 1993 permit had expired. In fact, in the 2012 permit, the 24-month extinguishment clause was struck out, further evidence that the owner knew that they had previously allowed permits to expire and did not wish to make the same mistake again. Finally, whether or not the striking out of the extinguishment clause in the 2012 is even legal or appropriate, that permit and its drawings contained neither drawings of, nor written references to, the demolition of Second Baptist Church.

We ask the City of Richmond and City Council to make sure that all citizens are treated equally before the law, and that everyone follow the same processes and procedures. We ask that Council recognize that the 1993 permit expired long ago, and to require Historic Hotels of America to submit the project to the Commission of Architectural Review, as would any other citizen of Richmond. There are long-standing processes in place to protect Richmond’s historic resources, and CAR is one of the most important. Allowing the project to bypass the appropriate City review is inappropriate and dismissive of citizens’ concerns. If allowed to continue, the loss of Second Baptist will be an irreversible loss to the city, and a further loss of its citizens’ trust in the promise of a municipal government that treats its citizens with equal respect, whether or not they own a large and profitable center-city hotel.

We write in support of the preservation of Second Baptist Church, and to oppose any efforts to demolish it. Second Baptist is an important architectural resource, and an irreplaceable part of Richmond’s historic Franklin Avenue streetscape. We encourage the adaptive reuse of the structure, not just the retention of a façade. Richmond is replete with examples of successful adaptive reuse projects, rehabilitations that not only extend the life of historic structures but convert them into economically vital and culturally rich institutions. One need look no further than the adaptive reuse of such buildings as the former Miller and Rhoads department store (now a Hilton hotel), the former Central National Bank (now Deco at CNB apartments), the former J.B. Mosby and Co. dry good store (now the Quirk Hotel), and the former Richmond Locomotive Company (now Movieland at Boulevard Square, a 14-screen cinema). All of these historic buildings now house vital, active new uses that enrich the life of the city.

Second Baptist is essential to an understanding of the development of classical architecture in Richmond and, through its direct links to the Virginia State Capitol and beyond, the Maison Carée. It speaks to the ways in which the lessons of architecture refract and reverberate, across continents, and through time. Its preservation will enhance Richmond’s reputation as one of the most historic cities in America. Its demolition will signal that Richmond is intent on becoming just another forgettable town.

Sincerely,



Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Ms. Mary B. Brush, FAIA; Mr. James Buckley, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Ms. Priya Jain, AIA; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Ms. Victoria Young, Ph.D.; Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee.