

Letter from Tim Dennee, architectural historian with the DC Historic Preservation Office
Subject: Update on 1329 Wisconsin Ave, NW

Bonnie,

Thanks for your inquiry regarding 1329 Wisconsin Avenue, NW. That has been one of the most frustrating cases I can recall in Georgetown. The worst part was probably that the damage was done by the building tenant at the outset. How does someone turn some minor interior work and roof replacement into the demolition of nearly an entire building? As I understand it, by bringing a tar machine onto the roof of a fragile 1850s building. After a collapse that apparently resulted in no serious injuries, the tenant then took it upon himself to remove the damaged parts.

Unfortunately, there was probably little of the building left after many years of alteration. The rear was a concrete-block addition, for instance, and it was clear that the front wall was severely deteriorated quite apart from the recent damage. Of course, that was about all that was left of the original construction after the roof went, assuming the roof framing had not been replaced previously; the tenant had removed whatever was left of the side walls when we stopped him.

Our inspectors or DCRA placed a stop-work order and fined the tenant and notified the owner. As you know, assembling the plans for reconstruction took many months, as both DCRA and we were unsatisfied with the quality of the drawings initially. Because of the unusual nature of the situation, we took the matter to the Historic Preservation Review Board in order to get a denial of a raze and direction to rebuild the building. In addition, of course, the case went through the Commission of Fine Arts a number of times, in fact, probably as much or more than any case I can recall. Both the initial applicant, the tenant who had caused the damage, and the subsequent purchaser of the property were directed to rebuild the building substantially as it had stood.

The second applicant had a good Georgetown architectural firm working on the design. With the assistance of historic photographs, they were going to make some alterations to the openings, but generally retaining the original rhythm of the fenestration (if not, in fact, restoring somewhat to what had been, with some accommodation for storefronts). Because it was really all that was left, this façade was the main subject of conversation (although I made sure that any construction behind the façade would not obscure the ghost sign on the building immediately to the south). Unfortunately, what was left was a pretty rotted true two-by-four, two-foot-on-center frame wall, visible from the rear (interior) over which similarly decayed strip sheathing and the tin panels were nailed. All along I had told these architects that, whatever they did, they should keep the façade in place and sister in new framing as necessary to support it. The primary reason was that I wanted to save whatever fabric was left and never wanted a single moment at which this building was completely gone. Unfortunately, it became clear that with the reconstruction of the building with proper foundations, proper new framing and sheathing, and the replacement of the historic (1910s?) tin siding, that even what was left of this wall would not be able to remain. Reluctantly, at an Old Georgetown Board hearing, I agreed with the Board that it would just have to be rebuilt, although I recognized that it was inevitable that it would cause upset in the community when it occurred.

Tim D.