

## **Building Blocks of Historic Districts, “Contributing and Noncontributing Resources”**

By Frances Alexander, Architectural Historian, Oct., 2007

In recent months, there has been a lot of discussion at the monthly DCDA meetings about contributing structures in the Dilworth Historic District. What are they? What does the term mean legally? The issue has come up because there seems to be some confusion about whether we can lose contributing resources, either through demolition or alterations, and still keep the historic district.

In simple terms, contributing and noncontributing resources are the building blocks of historic districts. When an area is being reviewed for historic district designation, each building is examined to determine whether the property contributes to the significance of the historic district. In other words, does that individual property help to tell the story of the area being designated. Historic districts are a way of designating collections of related properties where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not necessary for each building in a district to be significant in and of itself. In fact, the relationship of individual properties to each other is often a more important feature of historic districts. The overall scale, size, and massing of the buildings, the height and setback of the streetscape, the uniformity or variety of the architectural styles, and the types of properties (schools, houses, stores, etc.) are all essential elements of historic districts.

Conversely, noncontributing properties are those that do not tell the story of the neighborhood's historic development. Often, noncontributing resources are either modern infill or heavily remodeled properties. Even important properties must have much of their original or historic design and materials remaining intact to be considered contributing resources. Contributing resources cannot be reconstructions or new buildings that mimic historic designs.

Even though historic districts are broken down into these constituent parts, it is important to understand that contributing resources are not individual landmarks. Properties that do not have the historical or architectural importance to be individually designated may and often do contribute to the significance of a historic district. Finally, it should be remembered that historic districts must have more contributing than noncontributing resources. If too many contributing resources are lost through demolition or heavy remodeling, federal or state authorities may remove historic district status.

###