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The City of Seattle

LPB-112/82

## Landmarks Preservation Board

400 Yesler Building Seattle, Washington 98104 • (206) 625-4501

### REPORT ON DESIGNATION

NAME OF PROPERTY: Black/Esoterian House and Gardens

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: Comstock Supl. Addn.  
Block 26, Lots 1 through 10.

At the Public Hearing held on June 16, 1982, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Black/Esoterian House and Gardens as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following criteria of the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance #106348:

*Section 3.01 (4) It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction.*

#### (a) House

Although the house has overtones of European design, in basic concept, form, proportions and plan - it represented an early attempt to develop a truly American residential form. It closely resembles in that form and character other houses of similar stature designed by Bebb and Mendel in Seattle. The specific location on the site was the result of careful collaboration between architect and client.

#### (b) Grounds

The grounds, including basic concept, layout, structural elements and continuum, represent salient aspects of Olmstedian design philosophy (enclosure, making maximum use of views, carefully relating grounds to house); today this is more readily found in such Olmsted public projects as Central Park in New York, or Volunteer and Seward Parks in Seattle, especially the former.

*Section 3.01 (5) It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder.*

The grounds or gardens are an outstanding example of an extant Olmsted residential garden in this region.

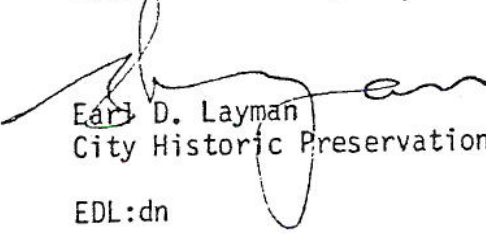
*Section 3.01 (6) Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the city.*

The property geographically is located high on the southwest corner of Queen Anne Hill, and the determined decision of both owner and designer to retain the "plateau" by the erection of the high retaining wall has amplified for today's urban scene the visual importance of this high plateau/oasis, combined with sensitive treatment (plantings) of the walls necessary to retain the plateau.

Features of the Landmark to be preserved include:

Total site (to curb lines on all four sides) and exteriors of the house and all other structures.

Issued: June 18, 1982

  
Earl D. Layman  
City Historic Preservation Officer

EDL:dn

cc: Rev. Dr. Madisen Sherwood  
Don Miles



RECEIVED  
JUL 17 1981  
CITY OF SEATTLE  
OFFICE OF URBAN CONSERVATION

City of Seattle  
Department of Community Development/Office of Urban Conservation

# Landmark Nomination Form

Name C.H. Black House and grounds Year Built 1909  
(Common, present or historic)

Street and Number 615 West Lee Street

Assessor's File No. 173280 1125

Legal Description Plat Name Comstock Block 31 Lot 1 through 10  
Supl. Add.

Present Owner Esoteric Society Present Use Residence  
William G. Bellm, President

Address 615 West Lee Street, Seattle, Washington 98119

Original Owner Charles H. Black, Original Use Residence

Architect Bebb & Mendel Builder unknown

**Description:** Present and original (if known) physical appearance and characteristics

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### The Residence

The Black House on the south slope of Queen Anne Hill was built in 1909 for Seattle Hardware Company founder Charles H. Black. Located on 1.7 acres, 425 feet above sea level, the home is an outstanding example of eclectic Tudor or English Arts and Craft architecture. The house was designed by the prominent Seattle firm of Bebb and Mendel and the grounds were landscaped by the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts. The 33 room house with 11,600 square feet of living area, consists of two full stories, a finished attic and partially finished basement.

The exterior form of the house is square with a gently pitched roof, broad gables and projecting gabled bays. Bargeboards with decoratively cut ends grace the gables. The first floor exposed basement walls and the chimney are constructed of locally quarried heavy gray granite masonry. The second story and attic level are pseudo half timber design with stucco-faced infill.

The north side of the residence, which serves as the vehicular main entrance, is approached through large wrought iron gates and an oval driveway. The entryway is framed by stained glass sidelights. A wooden trellis is located on a porch on the northeast corner of the house. A bay window west of the main entrance incorporates a secondary entrance and a balcony is formed above this bay. The eastern and western facades are simpler in form and decoration. Both have a single gabled bay projecting from the second floor.

On the south facade is a low pitch roofed porch with symmetrical granite masonry pillars and an off-set stairway. A curving walkway connects the house with a belvedere at the southeast entrance. The porch also connects with an open terrace built over the basement. A three-sided bay window projects onto this terrace forming a second story balcony. A gabled bay and dormer project from the second and third stories and a rectangular half-timbered banding pattern ties the bays to the balcony. The windows throughout the house are either double hung sash variety or multi-pane casement windows.

The interior of the residence has been preserved in its vintage condition. Paneling, tile, and distinctive fireplaces are original. A Henry Broderick brief composed around 1932 describes the three floors as they were then. "The first floor's reception room was 27 x 27 with oak paneled wainscoting and oak beamed ceilings. A six foot high fireplace, twelve feet wide, glowed with scenes worked out on colored tile. Oak paneling dominated the den as well, while the dining room and drawing room were richly set in Honduras mahogany. The two fireplaces differed with the drawing room's black Italian marble hearth lending a sharp contrast to the colored art tiled hearth in the dining area. The breakfast room featured paneled walls with hand painted scenes. All rooms were a uniform 11 feet high with 7/8" tongue and grooved white oak flooring, except the ladies' dressing room, kitchen and pantry.

"On the second level, all floors had the same construction; every wall was canvased and oil painted. Besides the 17 x 37 master bedroom, there were five family bedrooms, two fireplaces, two dressing rooms, four baths and several linen closets. A large open porch branched off the master bedroom."

Description: Present and original (if known) physical appearance and characteristics

"The third floor, designed for servants' quarters, had five large bedrooms and two baths. The floors and woodwork were fir. All walls were calcimined."

"A spacious recreation room with fireplace dominates the basement. Off this room, a space was designed originally for a bowling alley but was used instead as a shooting gallery. A truck room, furnace room, laundry and drying rooms and bath complete the basement."<sup>1</sup>

The stable, which fronts on Sixth Avenue West has expansive, wooden sliding doors. The upper portions of the doors are divided into vertical openings and the lower part is decorated. The stable doors reflect the appearance of the heavy timbering of the house. This building is connected to the main house by a tunnel that runs under the laundry and service yards. The Olmsted plans show a greenhouse and potting shed above the stables but these were never built. These plans also show a tennis court (on the west lawn) and a playhouse (in the northeast corner of the property) that were never built.

The Grounds

The Olmsted Brothers, John Charles and Fredrick Law Jr., prepared drawings and plans for the Black residence between 1906 and 1908 (Job #3168). Grading and topographic maps were done first and these were followed by preliminary sketches for the grounds, elevations and sketches of the walls, stables and service yards. However, of the twenty-six drawings on file at the Olmsted Brothers office, only eight are still in existence. (See Appendix A for a description of the drawings and for prints of the original drawings which are available.) These remaining plans show grading, topography, wall sections, elevations, details and the preliminary landscape plan.

The landscape plans show many interesting features that were planned for the site. The property is approached from the north by way of an oval-shaped driveway. Laundry and service yards, located on the east side of the house, are shielded from view by vegetation and a series of walls.

The residence is surrounded by buttressed reinforced concrete retaining walls along all the street frontages. The walls were created as a bold unifying design feature to define the entrances and perimeter of the property. West Lee Street, Willard Avenue West and Sixth Avenue West, north of the stable are similar with a flush wall, stepped to reflect the changes in topography. West Comstock Street and Sixth Avenue West, south of the stable have the buttressed section of the wall facing the street and are stepped also. All the walls have a cap to define the top of the wall and have been designed to allow planting at the base.

The design of the walls responds sensitively to the topography, streetscape and the internal functioning of the grounds and house. Three features are incorporated into the design of the walls and these are the main gate, the stable and the belvedere. The residence is approached from a short driveway at an angle to the street where a view of the house is framed by an enormous wrought iron gate. This offset driveway and gate create an impression of approaching a country estate. The stable is located on Sixth Avenue West and flush with the retaining wall. A belvedere is located in the southeast corner of the site and serves as a pedestrian entrance and viewpoint.

Description: Present and original (if known) physical appearance and characteristics

It also acts as a visual landmark in the distance that accentuates the vastness of the property. The Olmsted Brothers elevation shows the belvedere was designed with a pyramid-shaped roof but it was constructed with heavy-timbered trellis work. Ornamental wrought iron gates are located at the base of the structure.

The grounds are extensively landscaped with many varieties of evergreen and deciduous plant material. Appearances indicate that most of the landscaping was planted at the time the house was built about 70 years ago. Trees were planted along the parking strip, elm trees along the West Lee Street and Sixth Avenue West sides and flowering hawthorns along West Comstock Street and Willard Avenue West. English Ivy covers all the retaining walls that surround the property. A large group of evergreen trees are located in the northeast corner of the property. These include Douglas Firs, Blue Atlas Cedars, Serbian Spruces and Cypresses as well as several elms and a very large Vine Maple. There is a Blue Atlas Cedar at the center of the oval drive and a wall of rhododendrons in the front of the house. A formal rose garden is located west of the entrance. A pond is located near the southwest corner of the house and is surrounded by Japanese Maples, heather and Mugho Pine.

Along the West Lee Street side of the property, the top of the wall is planted with several varieties of holly and cedar trees. A large Lace Leaf Birch stands at the corner. The shrubbery facing Willard Avenue West includes Privet, Laurel and Lilacs. Larger trees include Coast Redwoods, Serbian and Colorado Blue Spruces, several kinds of fruit trees and a Tulip Tree.

On West Comstock Street, laurel, Privet and hawthorn are planted along the top of the wall, along with larger trees, such as Black Pines, Copper Beeches, Vine Maples and Mountain Ash. This group of trees is dominated by a Giant Sequoia. The Sixth Avenue West side of the property has alternating Green and Gold Privet along the base of the wall and laurel and hawthorn interspersed along the top of the wall. Western Cedars, European White Birch and Vine Maples are also included. Wisteria vines cover the belvedere in the southeast corner of the site.

<sup>1</sup> "Proud Mansion was Dream Home to Many Occupants", Queen Anne News, May 20, 1970, by Jean Watchie.