

Staff Report – 10/4/23

Washington College Armory Demolition Application

The SFC John H. Newnam Armory, also known as the Chestertown Armory, was built in 1931 and was used for seven decades by the 115th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Division of the Maryland National Guard, which later became the 175th Regiment. The 115th Regiment was part of D-Day operations on June 6, 1944, and in 1999, the Armory was named after a Chestertown resident who landed on Omaha Beach. During its heyday, the Armory was used for many events including Washington College basketball games, the Christmas Bazaar, and even a performance by Little Richard in the late 1950's.

The Armory was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, at which time its condition was listed as Fair. The Criteria given for inclusion in the National Register were criteria A: Event, the 115th Infantry's involvement in WWII; and criteria C: Design/Construction, which refers to the architecture of the building. Its architecture was described as embodying "the distinctive characteristics of its type," i.e., a façade modeled on a medieval fortification with a T-shaped plan. The Statement of Significance lists "its association with the reorganization and expansion of the National Guard system in the twentieth century."

The Armory was declared surplus in 2005. State-owned facilities are typically first offered to the municipality in which they are located, and this was done about five years later, leading eventually to the transfer of the Armory to the Town on December 13, 2012. The Town had no resources to develop the property and the College had expressed an interest in acquiring it as part of their planned waterfront campus, to which the Town agreed. On September 5, 2012, Washington College organized a 3:30 p.m. site visit to the Armory for the Historic District Commission to preview the College's application for demolition of the rear additions to the building, which at that point were already severely deteriorated. At the regular meeting a half hour later, the HDC unanimously approved demolition of the two additions, the creation of window openings in the rear of the main building to allow for water views, and a deck which at some point in the future could become an addition. That same month, the Town enacted Ordinance 5-2012 expanding the Historic District to include the Armory, which became effective on September 9, 2012. On December 17, 2012, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Washington College and the Historic District Commission that described the HDC's September vote to allow demolition, which was a precondition for the College's purchase of the Armory. On May 3, 2013, the deed conveying the Armory to Washington College was signed.

Although the College had originally planned to renovate the Armory into new facilities for the Center for Environment & Society, those plans, along with other ideas for the building, fell through for a variety of reasons, including the mold issue that is in today's application. On October 5, 2022, the College applied for demolition of the Armory, citing mold and other issues. The HDC voted unanimously to approve the demolition, but at the following meeting rescinded the approval with a vote of 3-2 due to procedural issues that had come to light. The College was invited to reappear at the December 2022 meeting but withdrew its application to have more time to gather additional information, which is how they came to be here today.