



## **MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Historic Preservation Commission

**From:** John Liebertz, Cultural Resource Planner III, Countywide Planning and Policy Division, Montgomery Planning

**Date:** May 1, 2024

**Re:** Romeo and Elsie Horad House, 2118 University Boulevard West, Listing in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and Designation in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*

### **Staff Recommendation:**

That the HPC recommends that the Planning Board lists the Romeo and Elsie Horad House in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and recommends that the County Council designates the property on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

### **Background:**

Montgomery Planning's Equity Agenda for Planning is an ongoing commitment to systemically dismantle the institutional and structural racism that exists in and has long influenced planning and zoning processes and to prevent that influence in the future. We are committed to confronting the legacy of racism and its ongoing effects and to using this equity lens in all our plans, policies, practices, and other work. The Historic Preservation Office has committed to further exploring stories related to underrepresented groups within the county's history.

Dr. David Rotenstein called attention to the Romeo and Elsie Horad House and conducted a series of interviews with descendants of the Webster-Sewell-Horad family in 2017. Montgomery Planning highlighted the property as part of its "Remarkable Montgomery: Untold Stories," an ongoing project to install historic markers around the county that highlight underrepresented topics in local history. The historic marker will be unveiled at the Wheaton Veterans Park in May 2024.

The Romeo and Elsie Horad House is located within the boundary of the University Boulevard Corridor (UBC) Plan. The UBC Plan focuses on a three-mile stretch of University Boulevard (MD 193), with the aim to understand community needs in relation to traffic safety, regional connectivity, environmental sustainability, economic development, and historic preservation. The plan explores opportunities for new development, bikeways, and bus rapid transit (BRT), as well as the creation of a complete street with wider sidewalks, comfortable public transportation stops, and safe access. As part of this plan, staff recommends the designation of the Romeo and Elsie Horad House in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.

### **Designation Criteria:**

As noted in Section I of the Designation Report, staff finds that the subject property satisfies three designation criteria (1.A, 1.C, and 1.D) listed in §24A-3 of the Montgomery County Code.

**1.A Historical and cultural significance. The historic resource has character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the county, state or nation.**

The Romeo and Elsie Horad House is representative of the development of the African American community in Wheaton. Black residents Henry Gaither, Jerry Gaither, and Henry Walker first acquired a single acre at present-day 11005 Dayton Street to establish the Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1873. The church held the first segregated Black elementary school before the Board of Education acquired a one-acre parcel for a new school at the turn of the twentieth century. The burgeoning community (including a densely populated block known as Chestnut Ridge on Wheaton Lane) expanded as residents acquired property. This included purchase of part of the subject property by Charles and Jane Webster—the grandparents of Elsie Horad—in 1894. By the mid-twentieth century, the African American community at Wheaton consisted of at least 21 owners, 11 renters, and a population of 147 persons. Romeo and Elsie Horad constructed the subject Colonial Revival house on property owned by Elsie’s family in 1938. Most of the resources associated with the Wheaton African American community including Chestnut Ridge, the segregated Black elementary school, and Allen Chapel AME Church are no longer extant or are highly altered. Therefore, the Horad House is a singular and critical resource that represents the lost African American heritage in this section of the county.

**1.C Historic and cultural significance. Is identified with a person or group of persons who influenced society.**

The Romeo and Elsie Horad House is significant for its connection to the Webster-Sewell family and, more importantly, its association with the life of the Horads. The Horad House represents the cumulative efforts of three generations of the family to improve the lives of African Americans in Montgomery County and the surrounding region.

Charles Webster, the grandfather of Elsie Horad, was a leader of the African American community in Wheaton and Montgomery County in the early 1900s. He participated in the local Republican conventions and lobbied support for candidates who supported the improvement of conditions for Black residents. In addition, Webster strove to improve school conditions for Black students as trustee of the segregated Black Wheaton elementary school. Elsie Horad’s brother, Webster Sewell, M.D., played a critical role in the health and welfare of the African American community in Wheaton and Montgomery County. After graduating from Howard University’s School of Medicine in 1930, he returned to Wheaton where he practiced medicine before opening a clinic in Norbeck. The Montgomery County Medical Society named the “Access to Care Award” in his name which recognizes organizations committed to increasing access to health care for people in the National Capital Region. While the Webster House (formerly adjacent to this property) is no longer standing, the Horad House aptly reflects the legacy and influence of the family.

The Horad House represents the political and social significance of the African American couple at the local, state, and national levels in the mid-twentieth century. The Horads played a significant role advocating for the rights and well-being of Black Americans. Born and raised in Montgomery County, Elsie Horad participated with the local political organizations and

served as an educator in the District of Columbia school system for 37 years before joining the family's real estate business. Romeo Horad, a World War I veteran, graduated from Howard University School of Law in 1925. He then joined the District of Columbia's Office of the Recorder of Deeds where he revolutionized the land record system. Local and national papers recognized the achievements of the new system with headlines such as "New Recording System Far Cry from Slave Deals" in the *Afro-American* and "Negro Clerical Workers Install Indexing System" in the *Northwest Enterprise*.

After transitioning from government employment to the private real estate industry, the Horads moved their family to 2118 University Boulevard West in Wheaton. As a realtor, Romeo Horad employed a variety of approaches to combat racial restrictive covenants, spanning from persuasive oratory to directly confronting existing laws. He testified before congressional committees regarding the harmful impact of racial covenants and housing discrimination in the Washington metropolitan region on the African American community. Furthermore, he lamented and criticized the complete closure of Montgomery County and the surrounding suburbs to potential African Americans owners and renters. In the capital, he partnered with Italian American real estate brokers Raphael and Joseph Urciolo—and later Charles Houston Hamilton—to purchase white-owned houses with racial restrictive covenants and resell those properties to African Americans. Although Horad was not directly involved as a named party in the Supreme Court case *Hurd v. Hodge* that declared racial covenants unenforceable in Washington, D.C., his persistent efforts to circumvent these housing restrictions significantly contributed to the success of the civil rights movement.

Horad's political and social efforts aimed to enhance the lives of African American residents in Montgomery County. He led the Citizen's Council for Mutual Improvement and lobbied local representatives for new school facilities, transportation improvements, installation of sewage and water lines, removal of segregated facilities at the Rockville Court House, and appointment of Black police officers. Alongside other activists and organizations, Horad's efforts to improve public education directly led to the construction of four equalization schools. His civil rights activism culminated in candidacies for political office. In 1948, Horad entered the race for the Montgomery County Council. His unprecedented entry, platform of equity, and backing of African American organizations led to public profiles in local and national newspapers. Horad's actions occurred in an era of racial tensions and threats of violence against African Americans who championed civil rights. While he lost the race, his candidacy paved the way for African Americans to engage in local politics.

Romeo Horad labored on behalf of other political candidates and organizations on the local and state level. He lobbied (albeit unsuccessfully) Governor William Preston, Jr. to appoint Bessie Beaman—an African American seamstress from Takoma Park—to the Board of Education. Horad then served in a position of leadership in the state-wide State Allied Republican Club where he moved to register 100,000 African Americans voters prior to the state's primary elections. He continued to advocate for African American rights and lived at the subject house until his death in 1968.

**1.D Historic and cultural significance. Exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, political or historical heritage of the county and its communities.**

The Romeo and Elsie Horad House serves as a reminder of segregated life in the twentieth in Montgomery County. Romeo and Elsie Horad, like other prospective African American purchasers or renters, relied on the subdivision of ancestral land in Montgomery County due to the pervasive and widespread discriminatory housing practices against people of color. The Horad family championed the importance of home ownership and deemed it critical that their new house reflect the boundless abilities of African Americans when provided opportunities. Therefore, the couple built a traditional, brick-clad, Colonial (Georgian) Revival style house to demonstrate outwardly their professional, economic, and social prominence. The Horad House has character, interest, and value representing the life, endeavors, and achievements of the African American community in Montgomery County. Activists, such as Charles Webster, Romeo Horad, and Elsie Horad, tirelessly worked to improve the lives of African Americans who lived in Montgomery County. The Romeo and Elsie Horad House stands as a reminder of the African American community in Wheaton. Many resources have been lost due to the demolition of late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings. This includes numerous houses at Chestnut Ridge (near Wheaton Lane), the one-room segregated elementary school, and the former Allen Chapel AME Church substantially altered by a fire. The loss of these community pillars and the uniqueness of the subject property's history elevates the significance of the Horad House. Preservation would recognize a cultural asset that reflects generations of African American life and activism and offers a story of a family's resilience and advancement in Montgomery County.

**Conclusion:**

The subject property satisfies the designation criteria listed in §24A-3 of the County Code. The HPC should recommend that the Planning Board lists the Romeo and Elsie Horad House in the *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites* and that the County Council designates the property in the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*.