

The Moorings Mansion (aka Jesup Blair House), Nationally Significant Historic Site

Potential Venue for the Arts in an Increasingly Urbanized Silver Spring

Centerpiece of Downtown Silver Spring's Key Green Public Amenity, Jesup Blair Park

Vacant for over a decade due to lack of funding for repairs and renovations
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What's Needed: Funding for Montgomery County Parks Department
to complete final stage of interior renovation for building to be lease-ready



JESUP BLAIR PARK & THE MOORINGS MANSION: AN OVERVIEW

LONG TERM VISION // PAST HISTORY // PRESENT DAY STASIS

I. FUTURE VISION: A CULTURAL & GREEN OASIS, SILVER SPRING'S OWN CENTRAL PARK

Jesup Blair Park is a tremendously important site: *the* most significant historical and natural resource within downtown Silver Spring, with key significance in Maryland and national history. Consisting of 14.5 acres of grassy meadows and ancient trees surrounding an historic 1850 mansion, the park's prominent Georgia Avenue location at the District Line serves as a highly visible green gateway to the state of Maryland – the official and symbolic entryway from Washington DC to Montgomery County's Silver Spring and beyond. But this is not the entirety of Jesup Blair Park's significance or civic and cultural potential. As Silver Spring continues to urbanize, and high rise buildings surround the park's c.15 acres in decades to come, Jesup Blair Park will be prized as an irreplaceable green oasis for Silver Spring residents, *our* Central Park.

The Park's centerpiece, the mansion called The Moorings, is the most important historic building in downtown Silver Spring, its roots tied to Silver Spring's founders and U.S. history. The Moorings is Silver Spring's historic heart, and it can also be the pulse of its future if utilized as a much-needed hub for arts non-profits, a venue for cultural activities for Silver Spring's diverse, multi-generational, multicultural and culturally inquisitive population. A wide array of arts

and humanities organizations housed or operating within The Moorings – ranging from historical archives to theatre, dance, and visual arts, and avant musics from jazz and electronic to experimental and beyond – would animate not only The Moorings but, by presenting outdoor events, all of Jesup Blair Park. With The Moorings transformed into a creative hub, Jesup Blair Park transforms into a green *cultural* oasis.

But for Jesup Blair Park to fulfill this potential and contribute to Silver Spring's uniqueness and future urban success, its heart -The Moorings - needs to first be prepared for occupancy. The Moorings Mansion is at a crucial tipping point. Exterior repairs that stretched on for years are now complete. But while the interior is primed for complete renovation and readiness to be leased, lack of funding has caused construction to stall yet again. The once grand mansion now stands as an empty shell, waiting for revival. The longer it's left in this suspended state, the more likely it is that The Moorings will again deteriorate. Time is of the essence to complete interior renovations on The Moorings and make it ready to be leased – a new, 21st Century lease on life.

II. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUP BLAIR PARK & THE MOORINGS MANSION

What's shocking about The Moorings' disrepair, and Jesup Blair Park's chronic underfunding, is this site's extraordinary historical significance. The mansion was built in 1850 by Francis Preston Blair for his son, James, a Navy admiral who named it "The Moorings" – a word meaning anchorage or harbor, safe haven or port. Frances was Editor of *The Globe*, the publication that became the *Congressional Record*, and owned a city house – Blair House – in DC on Lafayette Square that was preserved and now serves as the White House's official guest house. He also owned a country home near son James's, named "Silver Spring." Jesup Blair Park is the last extant of three country estates built in Silver Spring by the Blair family, founders of Silver Spring and key figures in national politics during the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. Donated by James's daughter and Jesup Blair's sister, Violet Blair Janin, to the State of Maryland as a public park in perpetuity, what is now Jesup Blair Park is the only Blair family property donated to the Silver Spring public, and the only Blair family property that remains in Silver Spring; the other two were demolished, redeveloped by their heirs for commercial and mid-density residential properties including Falkland Apartments. Violet's generous gift intended "The Moorings" to remain a haven for the people of Silver Spring, for posterity.

During the 19th Century, "The Moorings" served as the stage for national history. Due to the Blair family's prominence in politics, "The Moorings" hosted visits by various national dignitaries. It also played a notable role in Black History, including links in the 1850s to the Underground Railroad. The Blairs, unlike many other Marylanders, were Union sympathizers, and during the Civil War, its grounds welcomed encampments of Union soldiers to protect the DC borderlands from Confederate intrusions. When a Confederate force led by Jubal Early launched a raid on Washington in 1864, what is now Jesup Blair Park was the site of skirmishes, a battleground. And after Confederate soldiers torched "Falkland" Mansion during Early's raid, its owner, James's brother Montgomery Blair, who had served as Dred Scott's defense counsel for the enslaved Scott's 1857 case at the Supreme Court, and who was President Lincoln's Postmaster General during the Civil War, moved into "The Moorings" while "Falkland" was rebuilt.

During the 20th Century, after Jesup Blair Park's donation by Violet to the State of Maryland, "The Moorings" played a key role in Silver Spring's history. It served as Silver Spring's first public Library and Community house for over 20 years, with renovations made in the 1930s by architect Howard Wright Cutler, renowned for designing public buildings in Washington DC and Maryland. The mansion housed other functions until Montgomery County Housing

Opportunities Commission remodeled its interior c.1990 into apartments for single parent housing. In 2008, the Housing Department vacated the Mansion. Insufficient funds were available to bring the vacated mansion, then in a state of extensive interior and exterior disrepair, back to its former state.

III. A CRITICAL JUNCTURE: ONGOING RENOVATIONS AT THE MOORINGS MANSION ARE STALLED

In the 21st Century, the Silver Spring Historical Society, led by Jerry McCoy and assisted by its Preservation Committee, has been the main catalyst in keeping Jesup Blair Park and its history intact. The organization helped the Montgomery County Parks Department to create a series of historical panels installed in the park, which include panels on the history of slavery and resistance. Along with other Silver Spring residents and environmentalists, it fought off repeated attempts by outside development to encroach on both the mansion and its surrounding land and to convert areas of and structures within Jesup Blair Park - a gift to the people of Maryland - to private institutional use. And the Historical Society embarked on efforts to restore the severely neglected Moorings Mansion to its former glory and future public uses.

Since 2008 – for more than a decade - the SSHS Preservation Committee has worked tirelessly with equally hardworking staff at the Montgomery County Parks Department to save the severely neglected Moorings mansion. Because Montgomery County, like most post-Great Recession, 21st Century governments, has limited funding for parks and other public amenities, the work has proceeded at a snail's pace. Silver Spring is often in competition with other Montgomery County communities who also need funding for parks and their structures. Despite limited funds, the coalition of the Montgomery County Parks Department and the SSHS was able to stabilize The Moorings' exterior, a very major achievement.

But now, yet again, construction has ground to a halt. The interior of The Moorings – currently a hollow shell – needs to be finished. Without funding to finish interior renovations, the building will again sit empty through another winter. Montgomery County Parks Department states that \$900,000 is needed to finish interior renovations according to plans to enable the building to be lease ready.

When funding is obtained and renovations resume, the renovations should look towards the building's future. Since interior construction is proceeding from scratch it might be wise to include amenities to help The Moorings reach its full potential, instead of eliminating amenities to save money short term. Features like a large catering kitchen for events; a room for concerts and lectures; and a period room/reading room focused on Silver Spring history would attract a wide range of functions and help both tenants and Montgomery County Parks to generate future funds. While current architectural plans call for sealing an exterior stairwell entrance to the basement, where the Silver Spring Historical Society and its Archives and Collections will potentially be housed, it might be more useful, safe and visually attractive to enclose that stairwell within a modern, neon-lit, compact glass structure, keeping that entryway functional and secure. Such a futuristic design element would enhance The Moorings' historic exterior (as I.M. Pei's glass pyramid did for The Louvre) without altering it; literally brighten the grounds of Jesup Blair Park at night; and signal that the building embraced its 21st century lease on life.

[Note: Both Silver Spring Historical Society (Jerry McCoy sshistory@yahoo.com) and the Montgomery County Parks Department have in-depth information about the current state of interior renovations and other construction. I do not speak for the SSHS, although I'm an active SSHS member.]

IV. POTENTIAL TENANTS: A HUB FOR NON-PROFITS IN THE ARTS & HUMANITIES & PERFORMING ARTS

After construction and repairs are finished and The Moorings is again habitable, the focus shifts to who will inhabit it. There is strong sentiment in Silver Spring that The Moorings Mansion, donated to the public for perpetuity nearly a century, should be used by the public as opposed to private or institutional use.

In 2019, discussion began in the Montgomery County Parks Department about transforming The Moorings into a hub for non-profits in the arts and humanities. The Silver Spring Historical Society expressed interest in space to house its extensive archives and museum artifacts and enable researchers to access them, and also to present talks. While potentially housing non-profits in The Moorings remains a new and unpublicized idea, other organizations have also expressed interest thus far. Carpe Diem Arts, a multi-cultural, multi-generational Arts & Humanities, Performing & Teaching Arts non-profit community organization led by busygraham@gmail.com, visited and expressed interest in space to serve the community.

In addition, Maryland Youth Ballet [www.marylandyouthballet.org] looked at The Moorings' interior for possibilities, as did other Maryland-based organizations. Rhizome [www.rhizomede.org], a multi-media, avant-art and music non-profit based in Takoma, DC, [info@rhizomede.org] also looked at The Moorings. They were impressed by the possibilities its interior offered for music, theatre and art events and by the potential for outdoor concerts in Jesup Blair Park.

[Note: I do not speak in any capacity for the non-profits mentioned in this document. Nor have I discussed any leasing, space, or specifics with organizations expressing potential interest in The Moorings. This document is a Vision Statement presenting Potential Use.]

Ideally, arts non-profits serving culturally diverse, all-age audiences will one day occupy The Moorings, and transform this silent building into a hub of creative culture. Their activities will enliven the park with exhibitions and concerts, dances and theatrical performances. Housing non-profits ranging from historical societies to presenters of experimental sound art, The Moorings – the heart of Jesup Blair Park - would embrace the entirety of Silver Spring: its past, its present, and its future.

This vision can potentially be realized if the Montgomery County Parks Department can complete the interior renovations needed to make The Moorings lease ready. We look forward to the day that The Moorings can realize its full potential as a hub of arts and culture, a creative haven anchoring the green oasis in our priceless and essential Jesup Blair Park.

– Joyce Nalewajk 10/17/2020
Silver Spring resident & business owner,
music & arts publicist, music/arts/preservation advocate,
and founding member of SSHS, speaking independently

This Vision Statement is a personal presentation by a SS resident concerned about the status of Jesup Blair Park – a priceless historical resource and a diamond in the rough – and involved for more than 30 years in various ways to try and save it.