



Community & Economic Development Department
3900 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92522 | Phone: (951) 826-5371 | RiversideCA.gov

Planning Division

CULTURAL HERITAGE BOARD MEETING DATE: JANUARY 15, 2025
AGENDA ITEM NO.: 8

PROPOSED PROJECT

Case Numbers	DP-2024-01600(Historic Designation)	
Request	To consider a Historic Designation request to designate Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13 as a City Landmark	
Applicant	Riverside Housing Development Corporation on behalf of Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13	<p>The map shows a street grid with an 'ALLEY' running diagonally from the top-left to the bottom-right. 'PARK AVE' is shown at the bottom right. A green dashed rectangle highlights the 'Project Site' within the grid. A legend in the bottom-left corner identifies the green dashed line as 'Project Site' and a solid black line as 'Parcels'. A north arrow is in the bottom-right corner.</p>
Project Location	2933 Twelfth Street, on the north side of Twelfth Street between Howard and Park Avenues	
APN	211203015	
Ward	1	
Neighborhood	Eastside	
Historic District	Not Applicable	
Historic Designation	Not Applicable	
Staff Planner	Scott Watson, Historic Preservation Officer 951-826-5507 swatson@riversideca.gov	

RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff recommends that the Cultural Heritage Board recommend that the City Council:

1. **DETERMINE** that Planning Case DP-2024-01600 (Historic Designation) for the designation of the Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13 as a City Landmark is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Sections 15061 (b)(3) (Common Sense Rule) and 15308 (Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment), as the proposal will have no significant effect on the environment, identifies the structure as a cultural resource, and preserves the historic character of a cultural resource; and
2. **APPROVE** Planning Case DP-2024-01600 (Historic Designation), based on the facts of findings, and designate the Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13 as a City Landmark.

BACKGROUND

City of Riverside African American Civil Rights Movement Historic Context statement (1870-1976)

In 2022, the City of Riverside African American Civil Rights Movement Historic Context Statement (HCS) was completed by IS Architecture for the Community & Economic Development Department – Planning Division. The National Park Service grant funded context statement outlines the foundation for identifying historic significance associated with Riverside's African American Community. The context uses the National Park Service's framework for identifying significant sites related to Civil Rights in America, which provides six broad historical phases of development:

- African American Civil Rights in the Nineteenth Century (1870-1900)
- Rekindling Civil Rights (1900-1941)
- Birth of Civil Rights (1941-1954)
- Modern Civil Rights (1954-1964)
- Second Revolution (1964-1976)
- Civil Rights Today (1976-Today)

Within these broader phases of development, the HCS identifies four local themes designed to cover a variety of related topics and associated property types, including:

- Local Theme #1: Education – “The Struggle for Desegregation”
- Local Theme #2: Employment + Entrepreneurship in Riverside
- Local Theme #3: Social Groups, Organizations + Formalized Resistance
- Local Theme #4: Public Accommodation + Housing – “The Fight for Access + Equality”

As part of the HCS development, nineteen buildings, including Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13, were identified and evaluated for National and California Register eligibility. California Department of Parks and Recreation Form 523A (DPR Form) were prepared for each of the structures, identifying the structure's historic significance related to the HCS themes.

The Stokes Family

The following excerpts from the HCS provides background information on the Stokes Family:

In 1900, out of the nearly 8,000 residents in the City of Riverside, only a few hundred were African American. Although Riverside offered better economic opportunities and improved social conditions than places in the South, discrimination by employers did limit occupation and wealth building opportunities throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. The earliest African American “pioneers” in Riverside would become role models for the following African American community, owning land, opening businesses, and building a tight-knit community. While there is little information on the majority of the nineteenth century African Americans in the city of Riverside, a few pioneers of the era are remembered by historians and local citizens. These include Nicey Tibbets, Robert Stokes, and the Decatur, Dumas, Streeter, Carter, and Williams families.

As the first town-lot addition was being developed in Riverside, these pioneering African American settlers were also establishing themselves. Robert Stokes, who arrived with a Caucasian family from Georgia, and Nicey Tibbets, who accompanied Eliza Tibbets, both came to Riverside in the 1870s... the Stokes family raised hogs prior to Robert Stokes becoming the first black policeman in 1889.

...

As with the pioneer era, there were still a small number of entrepreneurs within the African American community, focused in the Eastside neighborhood. As African American and Latino entrepreneurs opened up stores, a small concentration of businesses along Park Avenue and University Avenue emerged in the 1930s.

One such entrepreneur was David Stokes. David, Robert Stokes' nephew, came to Riverside after hearing from his uncle that Riverside offered better opportunities than he could find in the South. In 1905, he and associates built the Colored American Mercantile Hall at 2931 12th Street in Riverside. According to The Colored Citizen newspaper, "This was the biggest enterprise undertaken by the colored people of Riverside." It served as a multipurpose building for the Eastside African- and Mexican American communities. It housed businesses and was home to the Black fraternal orders. David was treasurer of the Second Baptist Church and a member of the Orange Valley Lodge No. 13 Masons. David's son, Oscar Stokes helped his father, David Stokes, plant the first Washington navel orange trees in 1917, on the grounds of University of California, Riverside Citrus Experiment Station. In an oral history transcript, he is recorded as saying, "the ground was so hard we had to blast holes in it."

Mercantile Hall

As discussed in the 2022 DPR form:

The two-story wood-frame Mercantile Hall was built by David Stokes along with other black investors and opened in 1905. David Stokes was treasurer of the Second Baptist Church and a member of the Orange Valley Masons Lodge No. 13. David Stokes and Aaron Wiley ran the Stokes and Wiley Grocery Store on the first floor along with an ice cream/sweet shop run by Will Goodwin, and the second floor was used for a multi- purpose gathering space. According to The Colored Citizen newspaper, "This was the biggest enterprise undertaken by the colored people of Riverside." Places such as Mercantile Hall promoted both the establishment and patronage of Riverside's African American-owned businesses. By the 1950s its primary use was the Orange Valley Masonic Lodge. It served as a multipurpose building for the Eastside African- and Mexican American communities. It housed businesses and was home to African American fraternal orders. In 1931, the African American community met at Mercantile Hall to raise funds for the defense of the Scottsboro boys. It was the site of meetings, strike planning, and arrests. It also became a "Freedom School" along with churches and homes in 1965 during the boycott of de facto segregation in Eastside public schools (Lowell, Irving, and Casa Blanca) after the burning of Lowell School.

ANALYSIS

The applicant is requesting approval of a Historic Designation to designate the Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13 as a Historic Landmark.

The applicant has provided an architectural description, statement of significance, photographs documenting the architecture and building setting, and copies of primary and secondary sources as summarized below.

Architectural Description

The following architectural description was included in the 2022 DPR form:

This two-story, wood-frame structure was built on a square plan with a flat roof. Circa 1912, the building had a false front parapet, clad in wood siding with glass storefronts and transoms on the first floor and two rectangular windows on the second floor. By the 1950s, the false front parapet had been removed and wide horizontal coping had been added between the first and second floor. The coping and the first floor were clad in stucco with a brick veneer wainscot below multi-lite windows, and the second floor was clad in vertical siding and three porthole windows had been added by that time. In 1993 the building was entirely re-stuccoed, the four columns and the brick wainscot were clad in stone veneer,

and the first-floor windows were removed, which achieved the building's current Commercial Vernacular style. The second story front façade includes a solid door to access the coping roof and three porthole windows.

A full-width/full-height mural on the front elevation features the profiles of Cesar Chavez and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the second floor. The masonic symbol is painted on the center of the front elevation at the first floor. "Orange Valley Lodge #13 is painted on the front of the coping, and an internally-lit cabinet sign projects from the building and rests on the top of the coping at the east end. There are no windows on the first floor; three solid doors provide access to the building, each raised above the public sidewalk by a set of two or three concrete steps. The west side elevation features a full-width/full-height mural painted by Juan Navarro, Maryam Crogman and Willis Salomon that celebrates Eastside Riverside history and personages and includes a representation of the Stokes & Wiley store. The upper level of this elevation features a double hung window near the rear corner, and two louvred vents below the roofline that has one step along its edge. The east side elevation exhibits a long, horizontal rectangular frame along the upper level that contains one double-hung window near the rear corner. The coping with the stone veneer cladding below it wraps the front corner of this elevation by about six feet. The roofline has the same step as the west elevation.

Statement of Significance

Mercantile Hall is historically significant as a place of continuous work in economic nationalism, labor issues, and civil planning over decades before, through, and after the Civil Rights Movement. The social hall is also historically significant for its association with David Stokes and Aaron Wiley, prominent members of the Riverside's African American community. Therefore, the building is eligible for City Landmark designation under criterions 1 and 2.

Historic Integrity

The historic designation application prepared by Jen Mermilliod of JMRC, a Cultural Resources Consultant meeting the Secretary of the Interior Professional Standard, addresses the historic integrity of the building. JMRC finds that the social hall building's strong association with important events and people in the history of the African American community of Riverside allows for a lower threshold is properly applied to historic integrity. As stated by JMRC in the application, "Mercantile Hall retains integrity in those aspects most closely relate to its significance and an overall sufficiently high degree of integrity to reflect the full breadth of its time and place in the Eastside community, from 1905 to 1976, qualifying as a City of Riverside Landmark under Criterion 1: "Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, architectural, or natural history" and under Criterion 2: "Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history."

TITLE 20 EVALUATION

Under Title 20 (Cultural Resources), "Landmark" means: "Any improvement or natural feature that is an exceptional example of a historical, archaeological, cultural, architectural, community, aesthetic or artistic heritage of the City, that retains a high degree of integrity." Based on the applicable criteria from Chapter 20.50 of Title 20, Mercantile Hall – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13 qualifies for Landmark Designation as follows:

FINDING: Criterion 1: Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, architectural, or natural history;

FACTS: Mercantile Hall was established as an African American owned business in 1905 and served the African American and Latino Communities in Riverside's Eastside Neighborhood. As stated in the Colored Citizen newspaper, "This was the biggest enterprise undertaken by the colored people of Riverside." The structure provided a gathering place for the community and supported Black fraternal orders, social meetings and gatherings, community engagement and education, and local civil activism significant in the broader Civil Rights movement. Further, in 1965 the building served as a Freedom School during the boycott of de facto segregation in Eastside public schools.

The building continues to be home of the Orange Valley Mason Lodge #13, which was established in 1905. Restricted from Caucasian fraternal organizations and social clubs prior to World War II, the African American community established their own. By the 1950s, the building was owned by the Mason Lodge, who still retains ownership to date. Thus, the residence is eligible for Landmark designation under Criterion 1.

FINDING: Criterion 2: Is identified with persons or events significant in local, state or national history;

FACTS: The social hall was original constructed and operated by David Stokes, a member of an early African American family in Riverside. Joining his uncle Robert, David Stokes came to Riverside for better opportunities than were available in the South at the time. Stokes open Mercantile Hall in 1905 and operated the African American owned and operated Stokes & Wiley Grocery Store with Aaron Wiley. Stokes was an active and prominent member of the African American of the community, serving as the treasurer of the Second Baptist Church and was member of the Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13. Through his entrepreneurship and civic engagement, Stokes worked for the betterment of Riverside's early African American Community; therefore, the residence is eligible for Landmark designation under Criterion 2.

STRATEGIC PLAN

This item contributes to the Envision Riverside 2025 City Council Strategic Priority 2 – Community Well Being (Goal 2.3 – Strengthen neighborhood identities and improve community health and the physical environment through amenities and programs that foster an increased sense of community and enhanced feelings of pride and belonging citywide).

This item aligns with the following Cross-Cutting Threads:

1. Community Trust: This Landmark Designation request is being reviewed during a Public Hearing before the Cultural Heritage Board and the public is able to provide comments.
2. Equity: Historic property information associated with this designation will be added to the City's Historic Resources Inventory, which will be available to the public. This will allow information about the historic property to be available to all residents.
3. Fiscal Responsibility: No City General Funds are being allocated as part of this Landmark Designation.
4. Innovation: This Landmark Designation request made use of current research practices and looks at historic integrity based on best practices approaches.
5. Sustainability and Resiliency: This Landmark Designation will help to preserve the City's collective history for future generations.

PUBLIC NOTICE AND COMMENTS

A public hearing notice was mailed to property owners within 300 feet of the site. As of the writing of this report, no responses have been received by Staff regarding this proposal.

APPEAL INFORMATION

Actions by the Cultural Heritage Board, including any environmental finding, may be appealed to the City Council within ten calendar days after the decision. Appeal filing and processing information may be obtained from the Planning Division by calling 951-826-5800.

EXHIBITS LIST

1. Aerial/Location Map
2. Historic Designation Application
3. Letter of Consent – Orange Valley Masonic Lodge #13
4. Current & Historic Photos
5. City of Riverside African American Civil Rights Movement Historic Context Statement (1870-1976)

Prepared by: Scott Watson, Historic Preservation Officer

Approved by: Maribeth Tinio, City Planner