

Josephine Black Pesaresi
13835 North 51st Street
Scottsdale, Arizona 85254

April 4, 2019

RE: Appeal no. 2018-0041 and 00411

Mayor and City Council, Alexandria, Virginia,

My name is Josephine Black Pesaresi. I am the daughter of Justice Hugo L. Black. Unfortunately, I am the only remaining child named on the easement created by my father regarding the property located at 619 South Lee Street in Alexandria, Virginia.

As the only living child of Justice Hugo L. Black, I have not received any notice that there was a request moving through the system to alter or demolish the yard, structures or any parts of the 619 South Lee Street property.

I moved into the house at age 4, when my father was appointed to the United States Supreme Court by President Roosevelt. My father was President Roosevelt's first appointment to the Court. When my family bought the house on Lee Street, it was in a bad shape of disrepair. My mother and father spent years pouring their love into making the house, gardens and tennis court a sanctuary for my father during turbulent times in American history, and more specifically, during rounds of Court decisions that changed the course of American lives, but made my father a target of vitriol and hate. 619 South Lee Street and the property so carefully designed, planned and built were his true love and sanctuary--my father's place for peaceful reflection.

Although my mother would have preferred a property on Seminary Hill, on my father's salary, they could only afford a house in the more affordable places, and my parents loved the Lee Street house immediately as it was a block from the water.

My father bought the corner lot also and tore down the house located there to make for the yard they dreamed of. Plans were made for the gardens, rose bushes, fig trees, a pond and a peaceful refuge for tranquil walk-about. My parents also tore down the slave quarters behind the house to make room for the clay tennis court that became so central to my father's everyday existence.

My father built a tennis court because he started playing tennis late in life, and he spent countless hours on the court. Justice Black was known as the one Justice to remain in Washington to work at the Supreme Court in the Summer. He would field any calls, inquiries, or petitions that required immediate attention. The house, patio and yard are where he handled most matters that arose during the summer months. The tennis court was an integral part of his commitment to remain at the Supreme

Court in the summer months, as he believed it was a year-round job. His law clerks spent many hours with him, hitting balls back and forth, working on the logic of cases before them.

My father was a man of strict routine. He played tennis on the clay court every morning and again every night. One specific memory is seared into my brain of a historic moment that occurred during one of our tennis matches. As my father and I were hitting balls competitively back and forth, because it was always competitive with my father, our maid came to tell us that someone was at the door for the Justice. I went to see who it was, and was surprised to find the attorneys representing the Rosenbergs standing on our front stoop. Desperate for my father to give their clients a reprieve from their death sentence, they begged for me to have him come to the door. I returned to my father, still standing on the clay court, and explained the situation. With tears running down his face, he said, "Tell them I am sorry, but I have done all I can do." It was a heart-wrenching moment for him. My father knew in his heart that their execution would be wrong.

My father watered, rolled and maintained the tennis court himself until his death. Tennis was the love of his life, aside from the law. Law clerks who worked with my father spent hour upon hour on the court, neighborhood friends would come play matches on the weekend, and Vice President Henry Wallace was a frequent tennis opponent on the clay court on Lee Street. My father also had the pleasure of playing against tennis great Pancho Gonzales, who my father won a set against, and my father believed he had won that set fair and square until the day he died.

A large part of my father's life was spent in his oasis of his yard, patio and clay court. It meant a lot to him. I don't know what he would have done without the escape of his yard to work out the mental issues necessary to lead the Supreme Court through complex legal issues weighing on his intellect, day in and day out. The yard he designed, walked in, pruned bushes in, played tennis in, allowed him a place to work out the logic which would someday become the backbone of our country's legal jurisprudence.

Where the house ends, my father cherished a patch of rhododendrons which he faithfully came out to water by hand in his old tennis clothes each night after work. He never missed a night of tending to his rhododendrons. My father enjoyed doing his own gardening and yardwork. He planted, by hand, small fig trees, which years later began to bloom and produced voluminous figs, much to his delight and our neighbors dismay (as the figs filled up the neighbors pool.)

When I married my husband, my father walked me down the old wooden staircase at 619 Lee Street, and we were married in the living room by a Unitarian minister who was killed in the racial riots a year later in Montgomery, Alabama. My wedding reception was held in the gardens of our home on Lee Street, with the Justices of the Supreme Court walking around the patio, gardens and pond. It is one of the fondest memories we have in the yard and having his Brethren present when his only daughter was married meant the world to my father. Having his Brethren in the inner sanctum of his backyard was magical to him.

Many of the most important decisions in American legal history were sprouts of thoughts that began in the yard or on the clay tennis court of 619 South Lee Street. And when my father lay dying, at Bethesda Naval Hospital, he refused to let go of life until his private notes were burned. The notes he had written privately, between his Brethren, as they discussed cases and points of law. My father felt these notes were sacrosanct and no one should ever lay eyes on them. My brother, Hugo Black Jr. built a large fire pit, in that same back yard where my father's brilliance hatched many of the fundamental arguments held within those notes, and tossed the private papers into the fire one by one. Gideon. Brown v. Board of Education. New York Times v. Sullivan. It all went up into ashes in the backyard of 619 Lee Street.

So the question becomes: Is my father's life and career important enough to immortalize by preserving his home? His home included his house, yard and tennis court. I believe Alexandria should keep his home intact as an historic site. Is Justice Hugo L. Black an important enough part of American history to want to preserve this piece of him? That is the question this Council must answer, for you are the keepers and protectors of history.

Sincerely,


Josephine Black Pesaresi