

Michigan Historical Commission Meeting Minutes

November 19, 2020

Michigan History Center

Commissioners in attendance (all by Zoom): Laura Ashlee, Joe Calvaruso, Timothy Chester, Brian James Egen, Delia Fernandez, Eric Hemenway, Robin Terry, Tom Truscott and Larry Wagenaar.

Staff (all by Zoom): Sandra Clark, Michelle Davis, and Troy Masserant.

Guests (by Zoom): Carleton Gholz, former Detroit resident and founder of the Detroit Sound Conservancy (DSC), and Samantha Ellens, Preservation Detroit.

President Egen called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

Clark welcomed Troy Masserant, the new Eastern Michigan University (EMU) graduate assistant. Working from home, Troy has eagerly jumped in and started his new role. The center is excited to have him onboard. Brief introductions were provided by each commissioner and staff member in attendance.

Masserant noted that he received his undergraduate degree in history from EMU with a minor in creative writing. He is grateful and excited to be a part of the Michigan Historical Marker Program.

Approval of Agenda: Wagenaar moved to approve the agenda as presented; the motion was seconded by Ashlee and was unanimously approved on a roll call vote.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Ashlee moved to approve the September 3, 2020, meeting minutes as amended; the motion was seconded by Chester and was unanimously adopted on a roll call vote.

Public Comment on Items Not related to an Existing Agenda Item: Carleton Gholz shared a presentation with the commission on the United Sound Systems Recording Studios located at 5840 Second Avenue, Detroit. He noted that a Michigan historical marker was erected in 2017 on this site. In 2019 the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) purchased the property for planned expansion of I-94. At that time, MDOT indicated that it would move the structure to an adjacent parking lot. Gholz expressed concern that the structure could be damaged in the move, and its history could be lost. He believes the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has signed off on this structure and noted that the house could be demolished. On behalf of the DSC, he asked the commission to reach out to the Governor's office and make it clear that the state owns this historical site, and it is important to both black history and Michigan history.

Ashlee asked what SHPO's determination was on the site's eligibility for the National Register. Gholz noted it was deemed eligible for the National Register. Gholz noted that Preservation Detroit has endorsed the DSC's letter of support. The commission asked Clark to reach out to her

contacts at MDOT and SHPO to see where things are at in the process. Clark will report back to the commission once she has more information.

Marker Project –Davis has trained Commissioners Ashlee, Chester and Wagenaar, as well as staff members Hillary Pine and Troy Henderson on how to use the collector application. This app captures key information needed for the marker audit. Henderson has completed a physical audit for each of the Delta County markers. Hillary Pine is doing the physical audit for the Crawford County markers. Wagenaar and Chester are working on Kent County. Ashlee is taking the lead for the physical audit of the Lansing area markers.

At the September commission meeting, commissioners agreed to review the marker texts in each of the four areas for content. Davis has entered the marker text in Basecamp and this will allow individual comments to be captured in one central area. Ashlee noted she was able to use Basecamp and completed the review of the marker texts for each of the four areas. The commission agreed to complete the physical audits and review the marker text prior to January 8, 2021.

Chester stated that funding for the marker audit project needs to be discussed soon to avoid missing out on a couple of time sensitive opportunities. Clark noted that federal grants are done through the DNR/MHC while foundation grants are normally handled by the Michigan History Foundation. Terry recommended that if there is a list of possible funding opportunities for this type of project, now seems like the appropriate time to start conversations with those sources. This would help the commission determine the level of interest from each of the funding sources and to be prepared for next steps once the funding numbers become more accurate. Clark agreed to coordinate discussions with a few possible funding sources and will include Chester, Egen, Terry and the Michigan History Foundation.

Marker Program

- **Ring Lardner, Berrien County, Niles, Site No. S339** – This marker was recently damaged by a storm and the current homeowner contacted the center asking who was responsible for covering the cost to have it repaired and reinstalled. The marker file revealed that this marker was erected across the street from the Ring Lardner home on property owned by the city of Niles. Davis will contact the city about costs related to the repair and reinstallation.
Clark asked whether the commission wants to consider reviewing all marker text for content prior to ordering a replacement (or refinishing) marker. After discussion, the commission agreed that staff should evaluate texts and recommend asking for changes to the commission if it seems appropriate.
The commission recommended that a new text be recommended in this particular case.
- **Covington School, Baraga County, Covington, Site No. L2327** – The commission approved this as a wall-mounted marker, but the sponsor erected it on two wooden post in the yard of the school. After discussion, Ashlee moved to ask the sponsor to shorten the post at the top and paint the wooden posts silver to match the outer rail of the marker; the motion was seconded by Terry. After discussion. Ashlee revised her motion to include that the top of the post should be chamfered; the revision was accepted by Terry. After additional discussion, Ashlee withdrew her motion with Terry's approval. Ashlee then

moved to instruct them to shorten the post at the top, reattach the caps and paint the post silver to match the outer rail of the marker; the motion was seconded by Calvaruso and was passed on a roll call vote of 8-1.

- **Dearborn Town Hall Complex/Orville L. Hubbard, Wayne County, Dearborn, Site No. L1152** – The family of Orville Hubbard has removed a statue of Hubbard, an avowed segregationist, from the Dearborn Town Hall Complex. The property owner, Will Law, removed the marker after the death of George Floyd, citing tenant concerns. Local historian David Good has asked the commission to consider a new marker text for the town hall and the Orville Hubbard statue. After discussion, the commission determined that the Hubbard statue would not be an appropriate subject of a historical marker. A marker about the town hall would be appropriate. The original marker should be returned to the center, but the site should remain listed in the State Register of Historic Sites.
- **Delisting of State Historic Site** - Clark presented one site to be delisted from the State Register of Historic Sites. Chester moved to approve delisting the site from the State Register of Historic Sites as presented; Calvaruso seconded the motion and on a roll call vote it was unanimously adopted: (Appendix A)
 - ◆ **Lansing City Marker, Lansing, Ingham County, L1517**
- **Approval of Marker Applications** – Written background information was provided for three new marker applications. (Appendix B)
 - ◆ **Birwood Wall, Detroit, Wayne County**
 - ◆ **Green Hill Farm, Oakland Township, Oakland County**
 - ◆ **Sojourner Truth Home, Detroit, Wayne County**

Wagenaar moved to approve the Birwood Wall marker application as presented; the motion was seconded by Ashlee and on a roll call vote was unanimously approved.

After discussion, Ashlee moved to approve the Green Hill Farm marker application pending written confirmation from Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority that they intend to retain the stone walls and steps as tangible evidence of the farm; the motion was seconded by Chester and on a roll call vote it was unanimously approved.

Wagenaar moved to approve the Sojourner Truth marker application as presented; the motion was seconded by Calvaruso and on a roll call vote it was unanimously approved.

➤ **Implementation of Marker Repair Program**

After discussion, the commission made the following decisions regarding the implementation of the marker repair program:

- The condition of the marker will be evaluated by center staff prior to approving funding.
- The marker website should include the availability of help for sponsors who are having a difficult time raising funds for the repair work, and the application should be accessible on the site as well.
- Sponsors will be given 90 days from the date their application is approved to submit their 40% cost-share portion of the repair work, and the marker repair work will not begin until those funds are received.

If the funds are not received within the 90 days, the approved amount will be placed back into the repair program fund and will become available for other applicants.

- The repair fund application should ask what resources have been exhausted prior to seeking funding from the commission.

Clark and Ashlee agreed to prepare a draft policy for the marker repair program to be approved by the commission.

➤ **Reports**

- ◆ The Marker Status report was distributed prior to the meeting.
- ◆ The Marker Fund report was distributed prior to the meeting.

Staff Reports

- Director's Report – Clark reported that the Center is focused on digital programs and resources, which reach a broader audience than the in-person visits that are not currently possible. The Center did not see any General Fund budget cuts for fiscal year 2021; however, it is drawing down its rainy-day fund due to the loss of museum store and admissions income. Center staff members continue to focus on diversity, equity, accessibility, inclusion, and justice and are working on an action plan.
- The Grant House has been put back together after being split for the move. Currently the house is shrink-wrapped as a short-term preservation step while the center and the foundation work to raise the necessary funds for Rehabilitation and reuse.

Local Historic District Study Committee Reports

The commission was provided two reports by Local Historic District Study Committees:

- **Eastern Market, Wayne County, Detroit**
- **First Baptist Church Building, Kalamazoo County, Kalamazoo**

Ashlee moved to accept the reports as written; the motion was seconded by Truscott and on a roll call vote was unanimously approved.

Business Updates

- Phil Porter – Retirement Resolution – Chester moved to approve the Phil Porter retirement resolution as presented; the motion was seconded by Fernandez and on a roll call vote was unanimously approved.
- 2021 Meeting Dates/Location – Davis will resend the information to commissioners asking for a prompt response with any conflicts.

Public Comments – There were no public comments during this portion of the meeting

Commissioner Comments

- Truscott stated that he attended a historical marker dedication in early November for the Abolitionist in Jackson.

Egen thanked everyone for being patient during the meeting and wished everyone a safe and happy holiday season. Egen thanked Davis for the behind-the-scenes work she does for the commission.

Truscott moved to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Calvaruso and the meeting adjourned at 12:48 p.m.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sandra S. Clark". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Sandra S. Clark, Executive Secretary

Delisting Items from the State Register of Historic Sites

The Michigan Historical Commission is charged with maintaining the State Register of Historic Sites. When a historic structure is destroyed or so altered as to remove its historic significance, we require, by law, that the marker be removed. In most cases, the State Register listing should also be removed at that time.

At this time, we propose that the following site(s) be delisted from the State Register of Historic Sites:

Site No.	Date Listed	Name	Location	Reason for Delisting
L1517	1988	Lansing Municipal Market	Lansing, Ingham County	Structure demolished; marker needs to be salvaged and site needs to be delisted

Michigan Historical Marker Application Synopses

Michigan Historical Commission

November 19, 2020

Birwood Wall

Applicant: Amy Arnold, State Historic Preservation Office

Location Address: Between Birwood Avenue and Mendota Street from Eight Mile to Pembroke Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48221

Requested Marker Type: Large, different text on either side

In the late 1910s, middle-class African Americans began creating the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood northwest of Detroit. It was one of the poorest neighborhoods in the Detroit area, but home and land ownership were high. In 1925 the entire neighborhood was annexed into Detroit. White neighborhoods were gradually built around it.

James T. McMillan began constructing Blackstone Park, a white subdivision bordering Eight Mile-Wyoming, in 1940. He sought Federal Housing Administration (FHA) underwriting for the project. The 1936 FHA manual stated that to be eligible for federal housing loan programs, “inharmonious racial groups” must be segregated, and that “natural or artificially constructed barriers” were “effective in protecting a neighborhood and the locations within from adverse influences.”

Construction of Birwood Wall began in 1941 to separate the Blackstone Park subdivision from the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood. Horace B. White, the first Black member of the Detroit Housing Commission, denounced the construction of the wall, but it was finished that same year. The six-foot high concrete wall extends 2,200 feet south from Eight Mile Road to Pembroke Avenue and demonstrates the *de jure*, institutionalized segregation practices of the FHA. By 1965, Black families lived on both sides of the barrier. Birwood Wall stands largely unaltered to this day, an embodiment of the “redlining” of Black and ethnic minority groups.

Recommendation: Approval

Proposed Marker Location:





Birwood Wall,
1941.



Birwood Wall, 2020.

Green Hill Farm

Applicant: Anthony Kowalchick, Oakland Township Historical Society

Location Address: 5631 Sheldon Road, between Snell Rd. and Mead Rd., Stony Creek Metro Park, Oakland Township, MI 48306

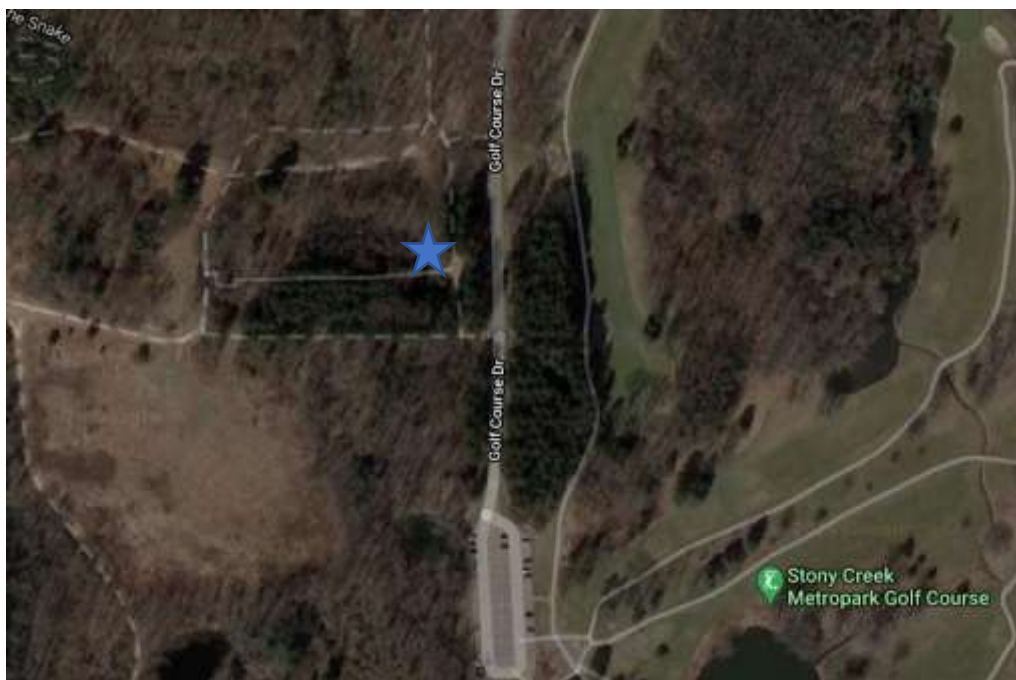
Requested Marker Type: Large, different text on either side

Green Hill Farm was the seasonal home of Allan and Elizabeth Shelden. Allan (1891-1935) and Elizabeth (1895- 1981) married in 1915. They purchased the farm in 1926, hiring James and Mary Wilcox, a pair of Scottish immigrants, as caretakers. By 1958 the Sheldens expanded the estate to 846 acres. Here they enjoyed horseback riding, tennis, hunting and other outdoor activities. Allan died of pneumonia in 1935 at the age of forty-five, leaving the estate to Elizabeth. In 1958, Elizabeth donated 178 acres to the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA) to be incorporated into Stony Creek Metro Park. She sold an additional 222 acres to HCMA in 1959. The remaining 445 acres of the estate were to be turned over to HCMA after her or the caretaker's death. The transfer occurred in 1981 after James's death. The structures on the estate were demolished by the HCMA. Only the stone walls and steps leading to the main house and the tennis courts remain. The sale and donation of the Green Hill Farm helped expand Stony Creek Metro Park to its current size of 4461 acres.

Elizabeth and Allan Shelden formed a legacy of philanthropy and service to the Detroit community. Allan served as a First Lieutenant in the Navy during World War I, was President of Shelden Sons, and Vice President of Shelden Land Co. Elizabeth, an enthusiast and collector of fine arts, served as a board member of both the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Detroit Institute of Arts. Her frequent donations to the Institute included \$1 million for the Elizabeth and Allan Shelden Outdoor Sculpture Garden in 1978. The Elizabeth, Allan, and Warren Shelden grant fund continues to support the Detroit community.

Recommendation: Approval

Proposed Marker Location:





Sojourner Truth Homes

Applicant: Amy Arnold, State Historic Preservation Office

Location Address: 4801 E. Nevada, Detroit, Michigan 48234

Requested Marker Type: Large, different text on either side

The Lanham Act of 1940 allocated approximately \$35 million for The Sojourner Truth Homes public housing complex, which received approval for construction in December 1941. Located at the corner of Nevada and Fenelon Streets, the complex was to house two hundred African American families. The project sparked protest in June 1941 from the white residents of the surrounding neighborhood, represented by the Seven Mile Fenelon Improvement Association. White residents claimed, “the presence of Negroes in the housing project would depreciate the value of their property in the locality.”

The association appealed to Representative Randolph Tenerowicz in December to change Sojourner Truth Homes to white occupancy. The change was announced on January 15, 1942, with Black families to be moved to another proposed site at Dequindre and Modern Streets. The Black community, led by the Reverend Charles A. Hill, demonstrated at Detroit City Hall and the Detroit Housing Commission that week, supported by the NAACP and the CIO and AFL labor unions. On February 5 the Defense Housing Coordinator, Charles F. Palmer, rescinded the order that barred Black families from Sojourner Truth Homes.

Occupation of Sojourner Truth Homes was to begin February 28. The Ku Klux Klan was part of an organizing effort the night before that resulted in seven hundred white protesters blocking the entrance of twenty-four Black families. The two groups clashed with clubs and stones. Police fired tear gas and dispersed crowds of Black protesters, and Mayor Jeffries postponed occupancy of Sojourner Truth Homes.

The dispute over Sojourner Truth Homes gained international attention. Radio operators detected the Axis powers using the violence of February 28 as war propaganda. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent Howard Acton to the Black community to ask them to give up occupancy of the site out of “patriotism.” This solution was rejected, and Sojourner Truth remained unoccupied through March and into April. The African American community threatened to march on Washington and conducted massive demonstrations in mid-April. On April 29 the first Black families moved into Sojourner Truth Homes under guard of approximately two thousand national guardsmen and state and local police.

Recommendation: Approval

Proposed Marker Location:



Sojourner Truth Homes, 1942.



Sojourner Truth Homes, 2018