

Michigan Historical Commission Meeting Minutes

August 24, 2023

Mackinac Island State Parks

Post Hospital Room

Commissioners in attendance: Laura Ashlee, Tim Chester (via Zoom Grand Rapids – medical), Brian James Egen, Delia Fernandez-Jones, and Tom Truscott

Excused Absence: Joe Calvaruso, Eric Hemenway, Robin Terry and Larry Wagenaar

Staff: Sandra Clark, Michelle Davis (via Zoom, Middleton), Andrew Oswald and Dan Spiegel

Public: James McConnell (via Zoom, Livonia), member of the public; Tom Ulrich (via Zoom, Empire), Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore; Barbara Bull (via Zoom, Shelby) and Sarah Bentley (via Zoom, Mears).

Steve Brisson, Director of the Mackinac State Historic Parks, welcomed everyone to Mackinac Island and was thanked for his hospitality.

At 9:32 a.m. President Egen called the meeting to order.

Egen thanked Clark, Davis and other center staff for making the arrangements for this meeting. Ashlee and Fernandez-Jones also shared their appreciation to those involved in making this happen.

Approval of Agenda: Ashlee moved to approve the agenda as presented; the motion was seconded by Fernandez-Jones and was unanimously approved.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Fernandez-Jones moved to approve the June 15, 2023, meeting minutes; the motion was seconded by Ashlee and was unanimously adopted.

Heritage Trails – Dan Spiegel, Heritage Trail coordinator for the center, distributed a brief overview of the Heritage Trail Program prior to the meeting. Spiegel indicated that a next step might be to create a comprehensive Heritage Trail designation. Spiegel stated that since the program started in 2015, he has worked with a few dozen trail groups around the state, with varying levels of involvement, to help identify and share the history that exists along their trails. Nine of those involved comprehensive, multi-year projects. The goal of the program is to enhance the trail experience by strengthening the connection between people and place. Creating a heritage trail with a unified, accurate, inclusive and well researched story takes a great deal of time and work. The public process provides an opportunity for everyone to have a voice. A Heritage Trail designation would validate all of this work and provide potential users an idea of what they can expect to find on a heritage trail.

In the discussion that followed, Spiegel said that the Heritage Trails program utilizes trails that already exist and helps create new ones. Some are linear state parks and others are local trails. For example, he worked with Wayne County Parks on the Hines Park Corridor and the Huron River Watershed Council on the Huron River National Water Trail interpretative plan. Spiegel noted that each trail has its own unique signage reflecting its character, place and identity. There

is not a specific process for the center to become involved; however, this is something to consider going forward.

Egen asked what commission involvement might look like. Clark and Spigel explained the need for a process for statewide heritage trail recognition. The process would likely involve establishing some criteria and creating a logo. The commission could be involved by reviewing the trails to determine if they meet the criteria for this type of designation. It would not involve reading/reviewing all of the interpretive signs for each trail.

Responding to a question about legislation, Clark expressed hesitation about a full new law, but said an amendment might be added to current legislation.

Spigel stated that Michigan is the first state to recognize the value of heritage trails and put resources behind them. He found that there are no other states that have this level of a program to assist communities with identifying and sharing their history along the trails.

Chester moved to investigate creating a program to validate, brand and designate heritage trails in Michigan; the motion was seconded by Truscott and was unanimously approved.

Commissioners also asked about water trails, which were explored under the former Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Spigel will email the commission the interpretative plan that he did for the lower region of the Huron River Natural Water Trail.

Ashlee complimented Spigel on his ability to speak enthusiastically and effectively to a group.

Marker Program

- **Public Comments on Marker Topics** – Tom Ulrich, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, addressed the commission regarding the Lakeshore's support of the Genevieve Gillette historical marker. Gillette was pivotal in getting the section of the park by the Platte River added to the National Lakeshore and it is literally enjoyed by millions of people.
- **Approval of Marker Applications** – Written background information was provided for one new marker application. (Appendix A)
 - ◆ **Bentley High School, Livonia, Wayne County**
Ashlee noted that her sense of reading this marker application is that the real significance of the story is that it represented the growth of population and the City of Livonia. Ashlee stated that she would like to see this put into a broader context. She noted the information provided was interesting, but it did not explain the significance. She asked why Livonia was booming and what it represented, and suggested the context of school consolidation statewide.

Fernandez-Jones wondered if a broader context could include the formation of other suburbs. This would help give it broader history and significance.

Chester noted that something that might be of local historical interest, does not necessarily rise to the level of important state history. He asked if this marker

could be enlarged so that it speaks to some larger trends that would amplify how statewide education decisions changed or how population growth in the metro Detroit area changed. This could provide the relevance of this story to statewide history and how people can learn from it.

Chester moved to table the application and continue the dialog on it to see if there is a larger narrative that establishes some state historical relevance; Ashlee seconded, and it passed unanimously.

Jim McConnell responded to the issue later in the meeting, having had difficulty with his computer microphone when the application was discussed. He agreed with Ashlee's comments about the broader context of the marker. He said he initially became involved because he felt this marker is critical to the future of the Livonia Historical Society. He sees the Bentley marker as a symbol of community unity that tells the story of the consolidation of these local districts into a community district, Livonia. He said it is the story of a school that represents what happened to suburbs around Detroit. He noted community support for the marker.

Ashlee asked if McConnell was not in favor of talking about the decline of the Livonia population? McConnell said that issue requires something broader than a marker text for Bentley High School. The consolidation of the districts are very appropriate. He would not see an issue with talking about the changing demographics of the greater Detroit area and putting it into a larger context about the decline of those suburbs and enrollment.

Fernandez-Jones asked McConnell if part of the narrative that the community and Jim feel are important is that the consolidation is not necessarily just the movement of these schools into one, but how it helped to build the fabric of Livonia's community. McConnell agreed.

Chester agreed to rescinding his motion as long as staff believed there was enough documentation in hand to take a lead role in reframing and telling the larger story.

McConnell said he will do whatever he can to help find any additional information that is missing.

Clark stated that the application did not include documentation of the consolidation's importance.

McConnell noted that he did not include information on graduates from the school because most are still living.

Chester moved to rescind his previous motion regarding the Bentley High School marker application with the understanding that the capacity to quickly pull

together the primary documentation that can place the story in a larger context can be accomplished. Ashlee seconded and it passed unanimously.

Ashlee moved to give conditional approval to move forward with the Bentley High School marker application with the understanding that the marker text will put Bentley High School into the broader context and there will be documentation to support that. Truscott supported and the motion passed unanimously.

➤ **Approval of Marker Texts** – Draft marker texts were provided for the following four markers:

- ◆ **Genevieve Gillette, Empire, Leelanau County**
- ◆ **Bonga Tavern, Mackinac Island, Mackinac County**
- ◆ **St. Paul Lutheran Church, Royal Oak, Oakland County**
- ◆ **Blackberry Ridge, Shelby, Oceana County**

Fernandez-Jones moved to approve the Genevieve Gillette marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Chester and was unanimously approved.

Fernandez-Jones moved to approve the Bonga Tavern marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Truscott and was unanimously approved.

Truscott moved to approve the St. Paul Lutheran Church marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Fernandez-Jones and was unanimously approved.

Fernandez-Jones moved to approve the Blackberry Ridge marker text as amended; the motion was seconded by Ashlee and was unanimously approved.

➤ **Comments on Revised Marker Application**

Ashlee stated the importance of adding a statement to the sponsors agreement that clearly states that a sponsor is donating money to the Michigan History Center so that the state can purchase a historical marker and that the marker is property of the State of Michigan.

➤ **Discuss Marker Fund Cost Increase** – Clark shared that Sewah Studios recently negotiated a marker price increase. The increase is due to the continued rise in cost for supplies, employee wages, and shipping. Several years ago, the commission created a marker fund to help sponsors cover the cost to have a marker refinished, replaced, or repaired. The fund is supported by adding a percentage to the sponsor's final cost to purchase a marker. Clark asked the commission if it would like to continue with the current percentage, or lower it to help offset the increase. After discussion, Fernandez-Jones moved to approve allowing center staff to determine a lower percentage that allows the marker fund to continue receiving an amount close to what it has been receiving; the motion was seconded by Truscott and was unanimously approved.

➤ **Delisting of State Historic Sites**

- ◆ **Oscoda County/Oscoda County Courthouse, Mio, Oscoda County, Site No. L135**

Ashlee moved to approve delisting the Oscoda County/Oscoda County Courthouse; the motion was seconded by Fernandez-Jones and was unanimously approved.

➤ **Relocation of State Historic Markers**

◆ **Hamtramck Stadium, Hamtramck, Wayne County, Site No. S731**

Fernandez-Jones moved to approve the relocation of the Hamtramck Stadium historical marker. The marker will remain in Veterans Park but will be moved less than .2 miles to be closer to the stadium where people are more likely to read it; the motion was seconded by Truscott and was unanimously approved.

➤ **Reports**

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

Egen noted the importance of having a commissioner present at marker dedications. He asked that all commissioners try to participate in making this happen.

Recessed for lunch at 11:30 a.m. and the meeting resumed at 1:05 p.m.

Detroit Marker Review Project

➤ **Completion and evaluation of Grant-Funded Work**

Prior to the meeting, Clark distributed a document that shared preliminary thoughts on the Michigan Historical Marker Review Project in Detroit. Clark stated the community involvement portion brought community members with diverse experiences together to share their heritage. However, going forward, community involvement should focus on completing the marker application and not the text. The center will need to find one or two individuals to write the marker texts. Clark stated that most of the newly proposed Detroit markers had volunteers to help move them forward and complete the applications. The markers related to Native American topics stalled out and will need some extra work to see them through. The next big step will be to find someone to assist with writing the text. Overall, it was a successful pilot project that helped us learn what worked well and what needs to be changed going forward.

Fernandez-Jones noted that last year she formed an unofficial committee with Nora Salas, director of Grand Valley's Kutsche Office of Local History, and two community members from the Latino Community Coalition in Grand Rapids. The coalition already has experience with making community centered historical memory projects and has developed some helpful practices. By combining efforts, the committee intends to make sure projects have accountability with community members. The committee is engaging with individuals in the Grand Rapids community to create three Latino markers. It received a Michigan Humanities Council Grant to host a series of meetings to gather community input and compensate panelists for sharing their narratives. The first meeting will discuss one of the proposed marker topics, the St. Joseph the Worker church. It is a Latino parish that was moved to the suburbs, causing a rift in the community. Panelists will talk about the space, its history, and their memories. Fernandez-Jones is also

working with Synia Jordan, community advocate for the Grandville Avenue Corridor and local business owner in Grand Rapids.

Clark reported that the William G. Pomeroy Foundation has awarded the center \$91,000 over two years to fund the Detroit markers. It will also fund a few of the ones that were started several years ago.

➤ **Where to go from here**

Clark stated we need to finish what was started in Detroit, but also asked the commission to discuss where do we go from here.

Fernandez-Jones stated that taking this to a local level is important and not just looking at regional areas.

Clark noted that the assessment portion of the project needs to focus on very specific things that may be missing or incorrect on existing markers, not preferred grammar, or organization.

Clark and Fernandez-Jones agreed that community foundations may be a place to start to find potential partners. The Council of Michigan Foundations may be helpful.

Chester noted that pilot projects have been started for Mackinac Island, Detroit, and Grand Rapids. He asked how many more pilot projects are needed to develop a system or multiple systems that will cover the rest of the state and get this done? Determining the best path or a hybrid of multiple paths is needed to move the project forward.

Clark said she sees this as a full-time, five-year job to complete this project throughout Michigan. It could be piecemealed over the next fifteen years, but that does not seem like the best plan. Community outreach to build trust and relationships, and finding a consistent plan are a must to make this happen in the most efficient and effective way. Clark acknowledged that finding funds is essential to its success; this can't be done well with the director of the center taking on most of the work.

Chester suggested revisiting the plan at a future meeting to flush it out and make it into a development plan. Funding is key and implementation will be difficult without it. Egen agreed.

Director's Report – The report was distributed prior to the meeting.

- International Coalition of Sites of Conscience - Clark stated the center is one of ten museums participating in an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant awarded to the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. This three-year grant project involves identifying a community partner that the center has not worked with closely in the past, developing a relationship with that partner, and identifying and executing a project that involves working together to meet mutual needs. The center is working with Michigan State University's Chicano-Latino Studies and will work alongside Fernandez-Jones to facilitate conversation/relationships with Latino

communities throughout Michigan. The intent is to build trust and decolonize the relationship that museums have with marginalized groups.

➤ **Making State History Programs Visible and Viable**

Clark acknowledged Commissioner Ashlee and Dean Anderson, retired State Archaeologist, for their role in a legislature-originated budget increase to fund the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) archaeology program which is managed by the center. The fiscal year 2024 budget includes a one-time \$1 million appropriation for cultural resource management and \$1 million in continuing funds.

Clark reported that Executive Order 2023-6 will transfer the Archives of Michigan to the Department of Management and Budget (DTMB) effective December 1, 2023. This was not expected. DNR and DTMB are developing a memorandum of agreement that will allow the center and the archives to continue working together on their shared programs, projects, and resources.

Clark stated that the Mellon Foundation has invited the center to submit a proposal for its November board meeting. If awarded, it will provide funding to the Heart of the Great Turtle Island project and start on December 1.

Business Updates

- Awards Committee – The current awards application was updated and will now include a separate application for each award. Clark will work on sending out a press release once the information is on the web site.
- Nominating Committee – The committee recommended nominating Tim Chester to continue serving as vice-president. All supported the recommendation.
- Online Attendance for the Public – At a previous commission meeting, a member of the public, Diana Paiz, suggested that the center publicly share all virtual meeting information on its website. This would allow individuals to attend virtually without the need to ask someone for those details. Davis reported that per the DNR Legislative and Legal Affairs Division, the Open Meetings Act does not require having a virtual option. The DNR is encouraging each unit/division/office/section to handle this in a way that works well for both staff and the commission/committee they are serving. After discussion, the commission agreed that the current process is working well, and decided it should remain the same. The commission welcomes public attendance and encourages individuals to let the center know if they wish to speak.
- Next Meeting – The November 9, 2023, meeting will be a regular commission meeting in the morning and then a joint commission and Michigan History Foundation luncheon/meeting after the regular business meeting is conducted. Clark suggested having staff do a few presentations during the joint portion of the meeting. Chester recommended having staff present on topics that directly relate to current projects the Foundation is fundraising for.

Public Comment – No public comments were given at this time.

Commissioner Comments:

- Fernandez-Jones congratulated Egen on being selected for the 2023 Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Alumni Achievement Award. Egen will be recognized for this achievement at an event hosted by EMU on October 6, 2023.
- Egen shared that the Regional Deputy Director of the National Parks Services came to Monroe to visit the River Raisin National Battlefield. He was quite impressed with his time spent at the battlefield.

Clark thanked the commissioners for their time and shared her appreciation for their continued support of the center.

Clark mentioned that the Nature Conservancy has purchased a large amount of land in the Upper Peninsula some of which will be sold to the DNR. This has led to conversations about establishing a copper country national heritage area.

Ashlee moved to adjourn the meeting; the motion was seconded by Fernandez-Jones; and the meeting adjourned at 3:03 p.m.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sandra S. Clark", written in dark ink. The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent. It is positioned above a horizontal line.

Sandra S. Clark, Executive Secretary

Michigan Historical Marker Application Synopses
Michigan Historical Commission
August 24, 2023

Bentley High School

Applicant: James A. McConnell

Location Address: 15100 Hubbard St. Livonia, 48154. Wayne County.

Historic Resource(s): Historic Site

Requested Marker Type: Large marker with different text on each side.

Historical Summary:

The Livonia School District formed in 1944 as the consolidation of seven smaller local districts. The influx of residents in the suburbs of Livonia led to continued discussion of the construction of a new high school throughout 1944 and 1945. Voters approved a five-million dollar proposal to construct the new school on a property at the corner of Five Mile and Hubbard Road on July 30, 1945.

A groundbreaking ceremony for the school was held on November 8, 1946. The bands from Redford Union High School and Plymouth High School provided music for the event. Eberle M. Smith Associates, an architectural firm out of Detroit, was chosen to design the structure. The new school was named George N. Bentley High School in honor of the President of the Board of Education. The first classes were held on September 15, 1947, despite ongoing construction. The school's first graduation ceremony was held on June 15, 1950; 95 students graduated.

The school was expanded multiple times throughout the 1950s and 1960s as the area's population continued to grow. Additions included a cafeteria, gymnasium, an east wing with new science labs, a wood shop, auto shop, swimming pool, band and orchestra rooms, offices, a library, and additional classrooms. Lights were installed for the athletic field in memory of George N. Bentley, following his passing on February 15, 1955.

Further increases in student enrollment led to the construction of Franklin High School, which opened in 1962. More than 600 sophomores split their school days between Bentley and Franklin during the 1961-62 school year, while Franklin High was being completed. Bentley High School's enrollment peaked at 2,540 students in the 1961-62 school year. Adlai E. Stevenson High School (1965) and Winston Churchill High School (1969) were constructed as Livonia's population continued to grow throughout the 1960s. Livonia's population peaked at 110,109 in 1970. Livonia's growth reflects the shift of population from Detroit to its surrounding suburbs throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Livonia's population began to steadily decline in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving the city with an abundance of high schools and fewer students to attend them. These losses of student enrollment led to the closure of Bentley High following graduation ceremonies in June 1985, where 405 students graduated. There were 1,554 students at Bentley High during the 1984-85 school year. Renamed the Bentley Center after the school's closing, the building was used for a

variety of programs by the local community. The rising cost of maintaining the site led to its final closure and demolition beginning in 1999. The Livonia Community Recreation Center was opened on the site in 2003. The center was renamed the Jack E. Kirksey Recreation Center in 2015 in honor of the former educator, state representative, and mayor of Livonia.

Historic Integrity:

Bentley High School was demolished prior to the 2003 construction of the Livonia Community Recreation Center. A portion of the school's gymnasium floor was salvaged and is on display inside the Jack E. Kirksey Center. The school's track and field were preserved and were temporarily used by Madonna University, but currently sit idle.

Recommendation: Approval

Proposed Marker Location: Adjacent to the parking lot off of Five Mile



-The former Bentley High School

