

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

### D.M. Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House Historic District 612 East Ferry Avenue

#### Final Report

The proposed D.M. Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House Historic District is composed of the residential structure at 612 E. Ferry and its surrounding yard. It is located in the second block east of the E. Ferry Ave. Historic District which extends from Woodward Ave. to Beaubien and is in the first block west of the Chrysler Service Drive, formerly Hastings St. Directly across the street to the north is Balch School. 612 E. Ferry Ave. is located within the Arts Center Citizens District Council.

**BOUNDARIES:** The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:

On the east, the east lot line of Lot 4, Block 38 of Ferry and Lyster's Subdivision of the A. Beaubien Farm (L.12/P.42);

On the north, the centerline of E. Ferry Ave.;

On the west, a line drawn 20 feet west of the west Lot line of Lot 3, Block 38 of Ferry and Lyster's Subdivision of the A. Beaubien Farm (L.12/P.42)

On the south, the centerline of the alley running east-west between St. Antoine and the Walter P. Chrysler Service Drive.

**HISTORY:** The building at 612 E. Ferry is significant as a vestige of D.M. Ferry & Co., frequently referred to in contemporary accounts as D.M. Ferry Seed Co., the largest producer and distributor of vegetable and flower seeds in the world for over forty years. The house at 612 E. Ferry is closely related to the experimental seed research pioneered by D.M. Ferry & Company.

Dexter Mason Ferry was born in Lowville, New York on Aug. 8, 1833. He grew up around farms after moving to Monroe County, N.Y. when he was three years old. Monroe County and the environs of Rochester, New York were developing a reputation for horticultural progress, so after working summers on neighboring farms, Ferry sought work near Rochester when he was 16 years old. It was an exciting time to be in the agricultural and horticultural industries; new markets were opened up by rail and farm machinery was being rapidly developed.

Ferry arrived in Detroit in 1852 and worked in the book and stationary store of S.D. Elwood and Co. as an errand boy, then a salesman, and finally a bookkeeper. Then, in 1856, he entered what would prove to be his lifelong vocation when he joined with M.T. Gardner of Rochester, N.Y. and Church to form the firm of M.T. Gardner & Co., seedmen. Ferry was a junior partner. After Gardner's death in 1865, his estate's interest was purchased, and Ferry became the head of the new firm, which became Ferry, Church & Co. C.C. Bowen and H.K. White joined the firm as partners. Two years later, Church sold his shares and the title of the firm became D.M. Ferry & Co., a name it held until 1930. Also in 1867, Ferry married Miss Addie E. Miller of Unadilla, New York. They had four children (one died as a child); Addie died in 1906 and Dexter M. Ferry died in 1907.

The growth and prosperity of Ferry's seed company in the 1860's was, in a large way, due to inflation during the Civil War. In 1879, a merger of the D.M. Ferry & Co. and the Detroit Seed Co. took place. The Detroit Seed Co., represented by John S. Newberry, Charles W. Robinson, and James and Hugh McMillan, went into joint operation under the name of D.M. Ferry & Co. in July, 1880. D.M. Ferry & Co. relocated to a new block long building between Lafayette and Monroe on the Brush Farm (burned in 1886) from its old Woodward quarters after the merger took place. The block-long building on Monroe between Brush and Beaubien, its oldest parts designed by Gordon W. Lloyd as a Ferry Seed Co. warehouse, is presently being converted into the International Marketplace.

On January 25, 1930, D.M. Ferry & Co., the world's largest producers and distributors of vegetable and flower seeds, and C.C. Morse & Co., the leading seed merchants of the Pacific coast, were merged. At that time, D.M. Ferry & Co. had seed farms on four continents, five warehouses in downtown Detroit, and land in Michigan. Dexter M. Ferry Jr., president of his father's company since 1925, became head of the merged corporation. 1300 of the Ferry-Morse Seed Co.'s 2000 employees were to remain in Detroit. In March, 1959, Ferry-Morse moved its operations south to Fulton, Kentucky but kept its headquarters and offices at 328 Monroe. In November of that same year, the offices moved to California, eliminating the last working presence of the old Ferry Seed Co. in Detroit.

The house at 612 E. Ferry was built in 1885 by Patrick Dee, a mason, at an estimated cost of \$6000 on land owned by Dexter Mason Ferry immediately across the street from the D.M. Ferry Seed Company's seed farm and garden. When this seed farm and garden was established in the late 1860's, it was one-quarter mile from the city limits. By 1885, when the Superintendent's House was built, it was well within the city limits but still considered to be on the outskirts of town. 612 E. Ferry (old number 238 E. Ferry) was built by the D.M. Ferry & Co. to house the superintendent of the seed farm and garden. The seed farm

and garden served as a testing grounds where new varieties of seeds were grown; consequently, the superintendent job seemed to require a person of some scientific knowledge and intelligence. The importance of the position can be seen by the qualifications of the first occupant of 612 E. Ferry, William W. Tracy.

Dr. William W. Tracy, first occupant of 612 E. Ferry, was a seedman and superintendent for D.M. Ferry & Co. He resided at that address until 1899. He was the plant expert on staff, becoming a professor of horticulture at Michigan Agricultural College. With the company, he pioneered seed research; he was one of the first to apply the theory of live breeding of plants.

Philip R. Wells, clerk with the American Harrow Co., resided with Dr. Tracy for a time in the early 1890's. The house was close to his place of employment, at the northeast corner of Milwaukee and Hastings. The American Harrow Company was established in 1882 by Dexter M. Ferry to produce farm equipment. In 1891, it was touted as the "only manufacturer of agricultural machinery in Detroit, and the largest representatives of their class of that industry on the continent... (Detroit in History and Commerce, 1891, p. 137)." They manufactured spring tooth harrows, cultivators, seeders, and stalk cutters, and had a branch in Windsor.

In 1894, William L. Hulbert appears in the city directories as living in the house, and remains through 1901, presumably sharing the building with Dr. Tracy through 1899. Mr. Hulbert, an accountant by profession, does not appear to be related to the D.M. Ferry & Co. by the city directories, but may have served as its accountant briefly. In 1896, he is listed as working for Samuel F. Hodge & Co., founders and machinists.

Ernest R. Des Roches (b.1863) resided at 612 E. Ferry from 1902 until the time of his death in 1936. The son of Reverend R.B. Des Roches, founder of the First French Baptist Church, Ernest Des Roches entered the employ of D.M. Ferry & Co. in 1879 as an office boy. After a promotion to clerk, he became superintendent in 1898, a position that he held until his retirement in 1936.

Although the land was platted on Dec. 15, 1887, D.M. Ferry & Co. did not sell any of the lots on the north or south side of E. Ferry between St. Antoine and Hastings until 1914. By 1907, the seed company had moved its seed testing and growing operations near Rochester, Michigan while winding down its testing and growing on the north side of E. Ferry. In 1914, Ernest R. Des Roches purchased lots 1-4 of Ferry and Lyster's Sub of Block 38, from the southwest corner of Ferry and St. Antoine eastward, from D.M. Ferry & Co. The house, including the four lots, remained in the Des Roches family until 1953, bringing its 51 year association with the house to a close.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

D.M. Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House can best be described as an extremely handsome Queen Anne house with an Eastlake decorative style. The Eastlake style was named for Charles Locke Eastlake (1833-1906), an English architect and interior designer. He was the author of the book, Hints on Household Taste, published in 1868. Upon the book's appearance in Boston in 1872 it was an immediate success. Eastlake inadvertently popularized a style of interior design and furniture design that he later called "extravagant and bizarre" as it was applied to architecture. However, Americans seemed to love its robust decorative appeal, and the Eastlake decorative style became very popular as applied to other period architectural styles between the years 1875-1890. The architectural version of Eastlake's interior designs were characterized by architectural elements turned on mechanical lathes, giving the appearance of heavy-legged furniture. Stylized structural elements, such as brackets and porch posts, were common.

Characteristic of the Queen Anne style and Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House is the use of a variety of building materials of different colors and textures. The foundations supporting the two and one-half story house at 612 E. Ferry are rough-faced coursed limestone. The first story walls are orange common brick; the second story is primarily clad with octagonal shingles.

612 E. Ferry exhibits multi-planed roof shapes, its main roof being a steep hip roof. A gabled dormer intersects the main roof on the front slope, and the main roof extends down through the second story to provide shelter for a shallow side porch on the west elevation. An unusual feature at the base of the chimney stack projecting from the west slope of the roof is the wooden decorative gable element. The hip roof is pierced with skylights on a couple of its slopes.

Irregular massing and fenestration are obvious features of the residence at 612 E. Ferry. A boxy bay of windows turns at a 45 degree angle on the first story of the northwest corner of the front facade. The long face contains two elongated double-hung sash windows; the sides of the bay contain one similar window each. Between this bay and the entrance porch on the east side of the front facade is a short, segmentally arched window with stone impost blocks. The porch itself has a gable roof supported on chair leg-like Eastlake posts. The entrance contains a pair of wooden double doors.

Separating the first and second stories is a cornice with stylized console brackets. Above the entrance section, the shingled second story projects and splays out, continuing around to the east elevation. Two double-hung sash windows on the

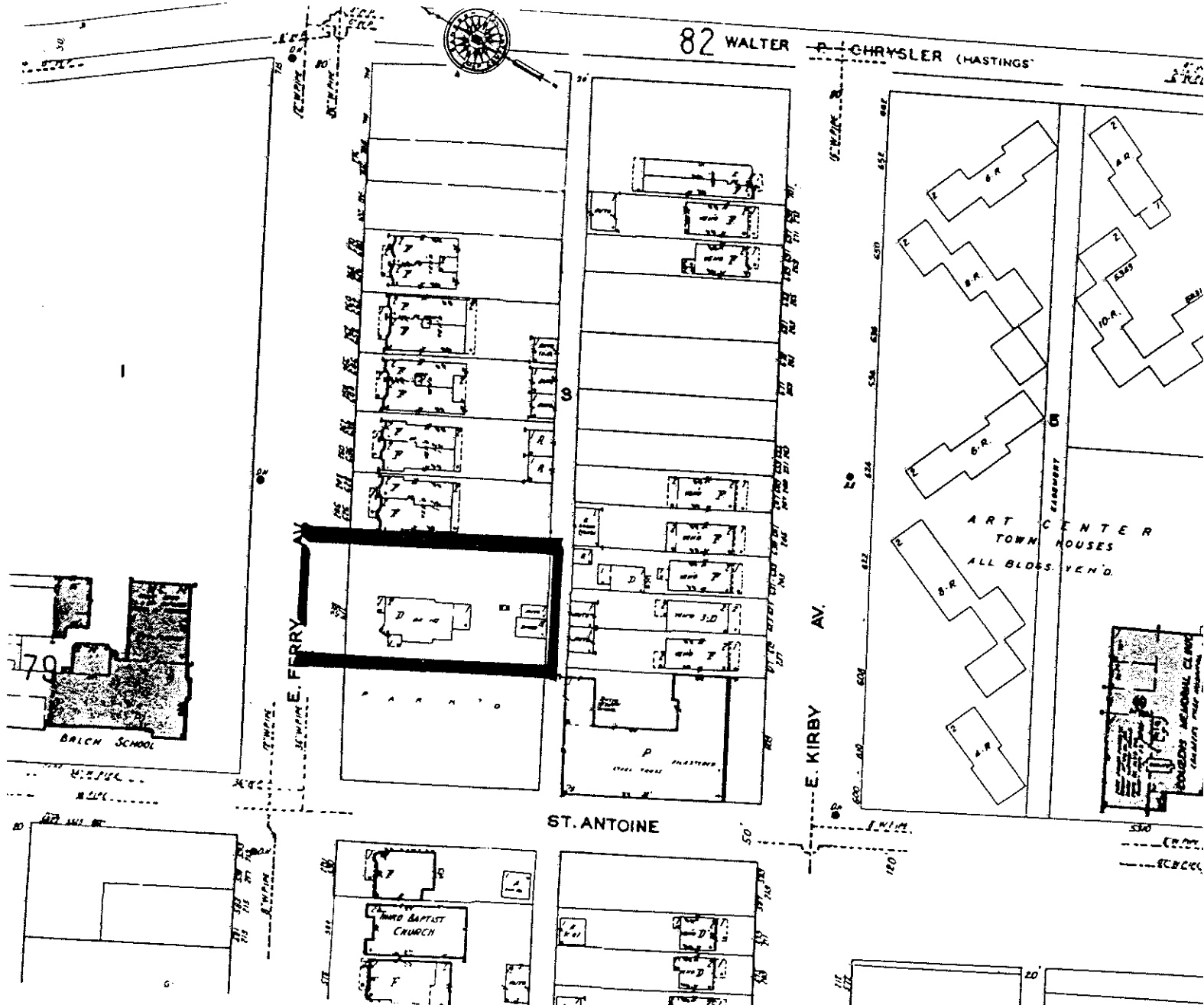
second story above the entrance flank an elaborately carved wooden panel. The gabled dormer over this section bears a carved verge board, and a fan window occupies its frontal gable.

An unusual feature of 612 E. Ferry is that detail is carried around to the side elevations of the building. This appears to be due to the fact that this building was the only building on the block until at least 1914, so the side elevations were meant to be exposed. Mr. Des Roches, Ferry & Co. superintendent, purchased four lots including the house lot so that the vacant land was part of the property until 1954. There is still ample vacant land to both sides of the property today, exposing the side elevations from the street as they were originally.

The side elevations contain interesting detail and fenestration. On both sides, there is an unusual window inset between the first and second stories. On the west elevation, 1st story windows are segmentally arched, and a three-sided bay projects from the second story. A greenhouse has been added to the rear, or south, of the building, and the property is enclosed by a decorative wrought iron fence.

Taken as a whole, the D.M. Ferry Superintendent's House at 612 E. Ferry Ave. is one of the finest Queen Anne-Eastlake style houses of a medium-to-large scale in the City of Detroit. It has been recently rehabilitated by its present owners.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the D.M. Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House Historic District with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for the consideration of City Council.



D.M. Ferry & Co. Superintendent's House Historic District

612 East Ferry Avenue  
 (Boundaries of district outlined in black)

