

City of Detroit CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

218 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center, Detroit, Michigan 48226

Phone: 313. 224.3487 Fax: 313. 224.4336

e-mail: historic@detroitmi.gov



Final Report

Proposed James H. Cole Home for Funerals Historic District 2624 West Grand Boulevard

Charge: By a resolution dated February 28, 2012, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed James H. Cole Home for Funerals Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed James H. Cole Home for Funerals Historic District is comprised of one building located west of the John C. Lodge Freeway on the southeast corner of West Grand Boulevard and Holden Avenue. The proposed district is located just west of Detroit's New Center area and south of Henry Ford Hospital's main campus. The historic Motown Museum is located just east of the proposed district. The building at 2624 West Grand Boulevard was originally built as a masonry office building in 1957 (permit # 91710). The site has been owned and occupied by James H. Cole Home for Funerals since 1982 when the building was purchased from Frisbee Insurance Agency.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed James H. Cole Historic District are outlined in heavy black on the attached map and are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of West Grand Boulevard;

On the west, the center line of Holden Avenue;

On the south, the centerline of the alley running between Holden Avenue and Sterling Street;

On the east, the line of Lot 5 of Lothrop & Duffield Land Company Ltd.'s subdivision, Liber 23, Page 38, Wayne County Records.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundaries that are above outline the parcel that currently and has historically been associated with James H. Cole Home for Funerals. The proposed district is bounded on the south by a public alley, on the west by Holden Avenue, on the north by Grand Boulevard, and on the east by residential lots immediately adjacent to the funeral home property.

HISTORY

Throughout early 19th century American history, African Americans had few opportunities to advance in society. As they searched to find their place in an environment that was unreceptive, they found few breaks. These unfair practices usually extended even unto death. For this reason, many blacks decided to make their own way. They established businesses to cater to the needs of their own people who were victims of discrimination. This gave rise to the huge success of African American funeral homes. These funeral homes made way for blacks to give dignified “homegoings” to their loved ones, while at the same time providing employment opportunity for the community.

During the 1920’s, there was an unprecedented move of African Americans in the United States from the south, into northern states. This mass relocation became known as, “The Great Migration.” This mass movement of blacks was the result of the racially tense climate and hardship that they faced in the south. The countless lynchings of African Americans and discriminatory Jim Crow laws were a strong motivating force in the transition of blacks from the south to the north. In the north, blacks could find better employment, men could vote, and families could also find better schools for their children.

One place that many black southerners sought opportunity was in Detroit, Michigan. Thousands of people flooded into the city of Detroit as the automotive industry flourished. Automotive manufacturers drew numerous people north with promises of a new life, vast opportunities, and no hindrance of racism or segregation. Overtime, blacks began to realize that they would encounter many of the same biased conditions they dealt with in southern states.

African Americans were met with many unfair housing practices forcing them to live in certain areas of the city. Detroit's oldest African American neighborhood was located on the city's lower eastside and was known as "Black Bottom." Before the downward spiral of the Black Bottom, the area had already become increasingly overpopulated. Blacks had begun to leave the eastside and move westward in the city to areas which included Tireman Avenue, West Eight Mile Road, and Conant Gardens. The Tireman neighborhood is a part of an interconnected community, bounded by Grandriver Avenue on the east; Buchanan Avenue on the south; and Epworth Boulevard on the west. In the 1920s through the 1950s, this part of the city became a preferred place to live for those African Americans who could afford it.

The neighborhood was a mix of up-kept single and multi-family houses with strong commercial districts. By 1950 there was a large amount of black-owned businesses located in the Tireman Avenue community that thrived by providing the services that were denied African Americans by white business owners. These businesses included drug stores, restaurants, barber shops, appliance stores, grocery stores, gas stations, and a number of other establishments. This atmosphere prompted blacks to move to the Westside neighborhoods of Detroit.

One occupation in particular, which was undertaking, proved to be a highly advantageous avenue for blacks during this period. At a time of very high racial prejudice and discrimination, black owned funeral homes were essential to the African American community. White funeral homes were so bold, as to refuse to take in the bodies of deceased blacks for proper burial, simply on the basis of skin color. As in the case of numerous industries, blacks often had to rely solely on business owners of their own ethnic group to provide them with the most essential services. African American funeral homes played a central role in the community as places where African Americans not only buried the dead, but held elaborate parties and marriage ceremonies as well. It was a hub in the black community that bonded people together.

Funeral directors always maintained economic independence from the mainstream power structure allowing them to become very affluent entrepreneurs. Their self-sufficiency is a reason that many of them went on to become pastors, activists, politicians, and community leaders. These African American funeral directors took advantage of the segregation that caused their success and ironically used the prosperity to lead the charge against the same racial segregation. Their impact on the Civil Rights movement was profound.

Black funeral directors held meetings to plan protests and marches at their funeral homes, led civil rights campaigns, sheltered activists in their homes, and used their wealth to bail civil rights activists out of jail. Some were even known to risk their safety and livelihoods by using hearses to smuggle activists out of the most dangerous and racially hostile situations. The black funeral home of that era was not only a place where the dead were brought, but it was also an institution that had influence on the political, social, and spiritual dynamics of those living.

Unbeknownst to many, numerous funeral customs that have now become the standard in mainstream America, originated from African American funeral practices. Some of the traditions include the use of terms like “home going” or “celebration of life” to indicate the liberation of the deceased from this world into the afterlife. This tradition focuses on celebrating the life and passage of the person, more than the mourning. Obituary programs containing not only the obituary, but pictorial pages of the individual’s life is another custom of black funerals. Another tradition of African American funerals is the long length of services to commemorate the deceased with homage from loved ones.

The African American community has a longstanding interest in the undertaking business in Detroit, with roughly ten black-owned funeral homes in the city. O’Neil D. Swanson of Swanson Funeral Home, is a part of the heritage of the funeral home business. His business is only two generations removed from the oldest African American funeral home in the United States, with 54 years of service in the Detroit area. Other notable funeral personages in Detroit history include the Rev. Gleo Wade (Stinson Funeral Home) and Raymond Cantrell who is recognized as one of the oldest funeral directors in Detroit.

JAMES H. COLE HOME FOR FUNERALS

During the early 19th century, African American business owners were very prosperous in Detroit for the fact that they offered services which were denied the African American community by whites. James H. Cole, Sr (III) launched a funeral home business in the year 1919 on the lower east side of Detroit on St. Aubin within the Black Bottom boundaries.

James H. Cole Sr. (III), was the grandson of former slave, James H. Cole, who was born in 1838 on a plantation in Yazoo, Mississippi to a slave mistress and her wealthy white master who owned over 100 slaves and thousands of acres of land. Cole’s white father promised his mistress that once Cole was old enough, he would free him. In preparation for his freedom the slave owner trained Cole to handle horses. This training later proved to be a source of Cole’s success once he was freed.

After gaining his freedom at the age of 15, Cole travelled north, likely utilizing the Mississippi River Route, the Underground Railroad, and station agents to aid him. The Fugitive Slave Laws of 1850 coupled with cruel slave owners and bounty hunters made it

necessary, even for a freed black man, to be very cautious travelling through southern states. He could possibly be returned to slavery if he came upon the wrong person.

On his journey, the newly liberated Cole met a farmer that allowed him to work for bed and board. At the time, James Cole only went by his slave name of “Jim.” When Cole had earned enough to continue his passage, the farmer suggested that the former slave take his last name of “Cole.” The farmer took him to the local courthouse to legally document this new name and thus the former slave was now known as “James H. Cole.”

James H. Cole eventually made it to the city of Detroit in 1856 where large farms, saw mills, and various other industrial centers of business flourished. Cole lacked education, but used his intense work ethic to build his success. He was not content with being uneducated, so he reportedly went to Oakland County to find a farmer whom would, “exchange a winter’s schooling for a summer’s work.”

In 1863 Cole worked his way into the business community by taking on business ventures in the real estate market and also in wide-ranging horse stables. He bought and owned eight to 10 rental properties, offered open barns where farmers could have their horses tended to while they were out of town, and also helped service the First Calvary and Artillery for the U.S. Army during the Civil War. During his rise to be the “wealthiest black man in Detroit,” Cole started a family with his beloved wife Mary Belle in 1863. They became known for their faithful membership at Second Baptist Church and the social organizations that they started through the church. By 1885 Cole’s “real estate and extensive livery stable” as the Detroit Evening Journal referred to it in its article “Well off in the World,” further confirmed his achievements.

James H. Cole was said to be, by the Detroit News, “One of the most successful and highly respected Negroes in Detroit, amassing nearly \$260,000.” In April 1901, The Detroit News-Tribune article entitled, “Detroit’s Most Exclusive Social Clique, the Cultured Colored 40,” included none other than James H. Cole and his son, James H. Cole (II). James H. Cole died some time after, on May 24, 1907 after a long battle with an unknown illness, leaving behind James (II), Thomas, William, and George.

His business operations were taken up by his son James H. Cole, Sr. (II), who primarily managed real estate from his office at 395 St. Antoine until his time of death and was survived by his four children of whom included James (III), Irene, Charles, and Walter. The Cole legacy was continued by James H. Cole (III) and his brothers Charles and Walter who briefly took up the real estate business, but eventually decided to step into an entirely uncharted realm of business.

In 1919, James H. Cole III and his brothers unveiled their new plan to step into the undertaking business in the Black Bottom area of the lower Eastside of Detroit. They opened the doors for the first time to the James H. Cole Home for Funerals to receive a warm welcome from the lower eastside community. From the Black Bottom area the funeral home moved to 446 E. Warren due to the substantial amount of growth in the business.

The compassion and spirit of excellence that the Cole family business displayed is what fueled their success. The family business operated on East Warren for about 3 years. Later on, the business operations were affected by the nationwide Great Depression of the 1930's, so the business was moved, serving from several locations through the 1930's and 40's and settled at 275 E. Warren until 1962.

In 1962, the Cole family business, now led by James Cole Jr. (IV) made another move to 2640 West Grand Blvd, but then ultimately moved next door, into its present day central location at 2624 West Grand Blvd. Throughout the 1970's, Cole Home for Funerals Inc. grew steadily. In 2010 the company expanded its operation by taking on a second chapel on the northwest side of the city, at Puritan and Schafer.

James H. Cole Home for Funerals is one of the most reputable businesses in the city of Detroit, with decades of rich family history and service to the community. The business is now spearheaded by Karla M. Cole Green, a graduate from Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, and the daughter of James H. Cole Jr. (IV). Also continuing the family legacy are her two sons, Brice and Antonio Green who have both studied mortuary science.

The family business has been recognized numerous times for their superiority and service to the community, receiving many awards; some of which include the NAACP "Lifetime Member Award," The Golden Year Award, Business of the Year Award, the Spirit of Detroit Appreciation Award, and many others. In 2009, Cole's celebrated 90 years of outstanding service to the community of Detroit. Cole's is the oldest black owned funeral home in the city, having four generations in the family business. This establishes James H. Cole Home for Funerals as a prevailing force in the history as well as future of the city of Detroit.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The James H. Cole historic district, which consists of one building on the northwest corner of Holden and West Grand Boulevard addressed as 2624 W. Grand Blvd, is a modern style beige brick two-story building with a flat roof. The district consists of one building facing north on West Grand Boulevard. The surrounding area is residential in nature. A majority of the surrounding lots are zoned for single-family, two-family, and general business uses. The building is considerably wider than tall on the front façade (north elevation) and also on the east and west elevation of Holden and the Lot line of Lot 5 of Lothrop & Duffield Land Company Ltd.'s subdivision, Liber 23, Page 38, Wayne County Records. The rear elevation of the building is contiguous to the boundary of the alley running east and west between Holden Avenue and Sterling Street and is taller than the majority part of the building.

The façade contains common bond brickwork and an entryway that has a storefront window system framed by a marble face. Above the front entryway (north elevation) on the marble surface is a sign that consists of metal letters which are mounted to the marble

surface of the building and reads: “James H. Cole Home for Funerals Inc.” The sign is at the center of the north elevation and lies between the first and second story ribbon window systems.

Above the entryway, the second floor displays a row of ribbon windows. The building has approximately forty percent (40%) openings in its front façade (north elevation). The façade contains two rows of ribbon windows, which comprise a large portion of the frontage. Each window in this system is surrounded by sandstone, steel framed, and encloses a pane of structural glass. The home has some front landscaping which includes a full line of trees between the building and the public sidewalk. There is also minor landscaping alongside the drop-off zone which includes a line of low lying shrubs.

The sign on the west elevation of the single-building historic district features a skeleton clock dial. There is a graphic illuminated wall mounted sign which reads: “JAMES H. COLE HOME FOR FUNERALS” with the graphics of a dove holding an olive branch, a cross, and a Bible between the signage lettering. On the rear (south elevation) traces of the original residential dwelling coincide with the newer portions of the façade. The east elevation reaches into the parking lot and features a vehicle portico that is supported by four pairs of unadorned cylindrical columns.

The property was originally a masonry office building. A portion of the exterior of the original two-story structure comprised of center block and aluminum paneling is still intact. There is a stairway leading from the second floor rear door to the concrete landing. The beige stairway that proceeds from the second-story of the rear (south elevation) is made of steel and descends to the ground level of the building parking lot. The second-story entrance door that the stairwell leads to is made of steel and surrounded by a brick façade.

There are also double doors and glass block windows on the rear of the first floor. The structure was expanded upon, stretching to the east and west areas of the parcel. All building elevations in the district feature minimal setbacks, coming within three feet of public sidewalks and also the parking lot that exists at the east and southern portions of the building.

The original section rear (south elevation) of the building has a clipped gabled roof with dormers. The building has a low pitched form and also has patterned roof shingles with dormers and a wide-eave open overhang. The portico on the east elevation displays a standing seamed roof supported by four pairs of columns, all having brick bases.

The parking lot connected to the property contains approximately 56 spaces.

CRITERIA

The proposed historic district meets the first and second criteria contained in Section 25-2-2:1(1) Sites, buildings, buildings structures or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political, or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified.; (2) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history.

COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio-members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Malanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, Keith A. Dye, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Frances, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The ex officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and the Development Department.

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