

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

### PROPOSED LEE BURT HOUSE HISTORIC DISTRICT

#### Final Report

The proposed Lee Burt House Historic District under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a single residence. The building is presently owned by the United Rubber Workers Recreation Association and is located at 420 Concord. The proposed district is north of the old Uniroyal plant on East Jefferson Avenue.

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

*Part of Lots 82 and 83 of Mill's Subdivision of the L. Chapoton Farm, Private Claim 573, described as: Beginning at the intersection of N. Line of East Jefferson 120 feet wide and E. Line of Concord 66 feet wide, thence along the E. Line of Concord on a course N. 26° 00' W. 149.45 feet distant to a point said point being the extreme N.W. corner and place of beginning; thence N. 64° 22' E. along S. boundary line of land in D1387, P247, 107.64' distant to a point on W. Line of public alley 19 feet wide; thence along said W. alley line and said W. Line extended in a direct line S. and on a course S. 26° 00' E. 57.00 feet distant to a point on N. Line of private alley said private alley having an average width of 11.60 feet; thence along said N. alley line on a course S. 63° 50' W. 107.64 feet to a point on the E. Line of Concord Avenue; thence along the E. line of Concord Avenue on a course N. 26° 00' W. 58 feet to a place of beginning (L5507/P417, C435668); also including that part of Concord 33' wide being the east half of Concord adjacent to the above described property.*

**HISTORY:** The property known as 420 Concord was in the Walker and Cooper Subdivision of part of Private Claim 573 known as the L. Chapoton Farm. The grant to Louis Chapoton by the U.S. government was confirmed on December 28, 1808. Then part of Hamtramck Township, Lots 12, 13 and 14 were sold to Lee Burt on October 16, 1867, by Charles I. Walker, George B. Russel, et.al. for \$3,300.

Lee Burt's home was constructed on the northeast corner of Jefferson in the first years of the 1870's. Across the street, on the south side of Jefferson, was the large frame house of Horace E. Burt, a

lawyer, and Austin Burt. Lee Burt, then superintendent of the Union Iron Works, became secretary-treasurer of the Burt Manufacturing Company in 1874. The Burt Manufacturing Company was organized in April, 1868, to manufacture car wheels and Burt (iron) mineral paint. Located at the foot of Concord on Jefferson, the officers of the company were Austin Burt, president, Horace E. Burt, secretary, and Lee Burt, superintendent. The Burt family was also involved with the organization of the Peninsular Iron Works Company, manufacturers of Lake Superior Charcoal Pig Iron, also just above the marine hospital near the Burt Manufacturing Company. Officers of Peninsular Iron Company were John Burt, president, Austin Burt, secretary, and Solon Burt, managing agent.

In 1872, the Burt Manufacturing Company bought out S.B. Hill and Company, an architectural iron works manufacturer, and began producing patterned architectural iron work, iron fronts, castings, machine works, and the Eureka pump under its own name.

By 1880 Lee Burt was manager of the Detroit Iron Furnace Company, with John S. Newberry as president and James McMillan as vice president and treasurer, while his other relatives were officers of the Detroit Malleable Iron Works, on the corner of Jefferson and Concord. Both companies can be seen as the successors to the Burt Manufacturing Company and the Peninsular Iron Works. The Detroit Furnace Company was sold to the U.S. Rubber Company, predecessor of Uniroyal, in March of 1920.

Lee Burt resided in the house on the northeast corner of Jefferson and Concord until he and his wife, Abie, sold it to Solon Burt on October 10, 1883. Solon transferred the property to his wife, Flora, in 1884. After Flora died in 1903, Solon Burt transferred the property to his only heir, his son, McKinstry Burt, in 1906; and McKinstry sold Lots 13 and 14 to the West Side Brewery in January 1913. West Side Brewery underwent a name change to Mandus Products Company, Ltd. in 1919. One year later, Mandus Products sold the property to Clarence Booth who immediately sold it to the U.S. Rubber Company.

The history of 420 Concord mirrored the rise and fall of the rubber industry. The rubber industry boomed in 1914 and 1915 on the heels of the automobile industry; rubber manufacturers needed "cheap docile heavy-muscled labor at the precise moment when the usual European source of supply was being blown to eternity." (Roberts, Harold S. The Rubber Workers)

As many newly arrived workers from the South came to Detroit, 420 Concord became a boarding house for the men working in the rubber factory; while one shift worked the other slept. The house also served as a place where workers could relax, and later became a place where union members met.

Post-World War I decline affected the rubber industry as well as other industries which had expanded to meet the needs of foreign markets. The post-war depression was short-lived on the whole and the 1920's saw a rapid increase in production which might well have created a prosperous industry. But the Depression hit the industry with a terrific impact. Cost of the war and decline of the automobile industry coupled with price fluctuation and over capitalization all served to make the rubber industry one of low rate profit.

During the Depression, 420 Concord was used by the rubber workers as a support agency to aid and assist those workers who had nowhere else to turn. The Rubber Workers Recreation Association purchased 420 Concord in 1935 to serve as their local headquarters. Throughout the years 420 Concord served not only as local headquarters for the United Rubber Workers Union, but also became the place where their international met when in Detroit. Unlike the UAW, the United Rubber Workers Union's stronghold was not in Detroit but in Dayton, Ohio.

By the close of the Depression the rubber industry began to bounce back. Between 1939-1942 the industry reached its peak employing 150,000 workers. In Detroit production peaked in 1940 when about 7,000 workers built about 60,000 auto tires each day.

Production level stayed above 30,000 tires each day in Detroit until the early 1970's. However, the reduction in the American automobile industry along with the introduction of the radial tire to American roads spelled the beginning of the end for workers. This was intensified as large amounts of cheap crude rubber were introduced on the American market from abroad.

The U.S. Rubber Workers realized the curtailment of the automobile production would mean curtailment of jobs in the industry. By 1980 the Uniroyal plant on East Jefferson employed only 500 workers. Once again, 420 Concord became a clearinghouse for the dissemination of information concerning severance pay, pensions, and unemployment benefits. Relocation counseling and job training programs were also available. The early 1980's spelled the demise of the International Rubber Workers Union. As a result the local chapter of the Rubber Workers Recreation Association found itself facing the possibility of losing 420 Concord. But with the help of the Ladies Auxiliary the local was able to purchase the building in 1984.

The Ladies Auxiliary of Chapter 101 of the United Rubber Workers thrived under the leadership of Elmira Henderson. Everywhere you went in the life of the United Rubber Workers she was there, lending her active support to the betterment of the institution. Mrs. Henderson was a strong supporter of the URW and labor unions in general. Her work for a better union and community included walking picket lines, organizing strike kitchens to feed workers and their families, and making sure union workers and their families were registered to vote. It was Mrs. Henderson who spearheaded the way in the local chapter's struggle to keep 420 Concord.

*ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:* The exterior of the Lee Burt House is intact, except that the cupola is missing and several windows have been bricked in. Today, it is a well-designed two-story brick Italianate dwelling, but when it was built in the early 1870's, the Burt House was a wood-frame building. It was covered in brick between 1885 and 1888, at the same time the eastern portion of the building was added. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunate for its current state of preservation), the front facade of the building, originally facing Jefferson Avenue, is now hidden behind a commercial row of 1920's to 1960's buildings constructed after the widening of Jefferson Avenue.

The building's south, or front, elevation is composed of a recessed western third and a projecting eastern two-thirds. The orientation of the entrance porch has been changed to face Concord instead of East Jefferson. Above the porch projection are two round arched windows sharing a single stone sill. All of the tall windows on the front and side elevations display raised brick voussoirs with ornamental stone keystones and impost blocks. Stick-like brackets support the five-sided wooden bay window resting above the paired windows on the first story in the central section of the front facade. The easternmost section has paired windows on both the first and second stories.

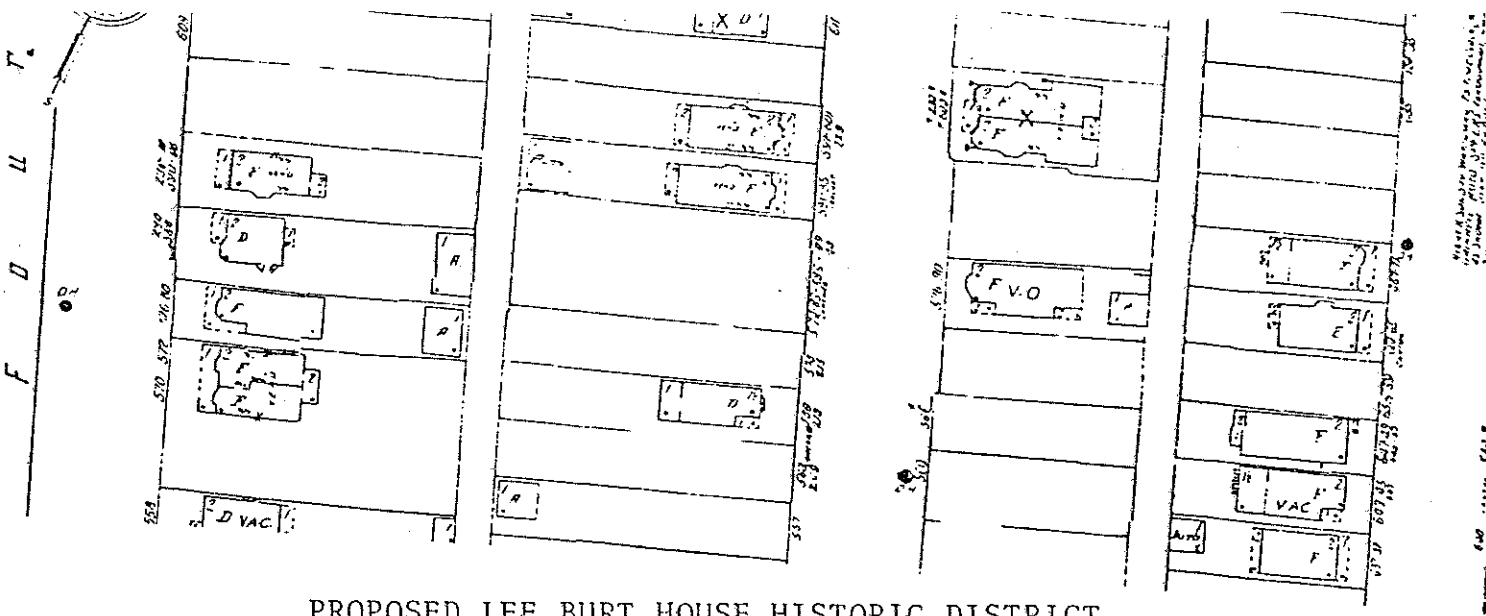
The dominant elevation today is the west elevation. It contains a chimney and window treatments similar to that of the front facade. The north, or rear, elevation is the utilitarian side; it contains a chimney, and the windows are not arched or ornamented. The small rectangular attic story windows are a holdover from the earlier Greek Revival style. A modern entrance vestibule has been added to the western side of the first story of this elevation.

The cornice, the most embellished part of the Burt House, is composed of a bed molding encircling the entire building at attic level. The eaves of the shallow hipped roof are supported by large ornate brackets placed at regular intervals with smaller brackets in between.

The interior of the building has been modernized to accommodate offices and meeting rooms. The rooms have been extensively paneled and the ceilings dropped. However, the plaster ceilings, wooden doorframes, and doorknobs are intact. The front room has its original marble mantel with an iron grate. The servants quarters and the stairway leading up to them are quite austere. A pantry with built-in cabinets still exists on the first level, and the banister to the second level is intact.

The Lee Burt House at 420 Concord is one of the oldest houses left on East Jefferson Avenue, a formerly residential street known as "the Queen of Thoroughfares" because in the late nineteenth century it was lined with fine substantial residences. It survives today because of its long-term association with the United Rubber Workers Recreation Association.

*RECOMMENDATION:* The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the Lee Burt House Historic District with the design treatment level of conservation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for the consideration of City Council.



**PROPOSED LEE BURT HOUSE HISTORIC DISTRICT**  
 (Boundaries outlined in heavy black)

