

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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Final Report

PROPOSED MAHERAS PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT

By a resolution dated April 11, 1997, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Maheras Park Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Maheras Park Historic District is located on the Detroit River in the Jefferson-Chalmers community in Southeast Detroit. It is located at the foot of Connor, approximately five miles from Detroit's Central Business District. The proposed district consists of the fifty-three acre public park and improvements, including the community center, pool, play fields, recreational equipment and roadways. It is the largest of four parks that extend along the Detroit River from Conner east to Alter Road.

Boundary Description: The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:

On the west, the westerly line of Private Claim No. 388;

On the north, an irregular line beginning at the intersection of the westerly line of P.C. 388 with the centerline of Clairpointe Avenue, as extended south and east; thence southeasterly along the centerline of Clairpointe as extended to its intersection with the north-south roadway located within Maheras Memorial Playfield; thence northeasterly along the centerline of a roadway, which connects the end of extended Clairpointe and the road within Maheras Playfield to Connor Avenue, to its point of intersection with the centerline of vacated Avondale Avenue; thence easterly along vacated Avondale Avenue to its intersection with the centerline of Port Drive;

On the east, the centerline of Port Drive, extended southerly; and

On the south, the United States Harbor Line.

History:

Maheras Playfield and Recreation Center are testaments to the minority community's determination to gain equality of treatment and recreational services from the City of Detroit and the single-minded dedication to the community's youth of Bronson Gentry, who has fought to maintain and improve the park for almost forty years. To many, the community's effort depicts

the single-minded dedication to the community's youth of Bronson Gentry, who has fought to maintain and improve the park for almost forty years. To many, the community's effort depicts the civil rights struggles prominent in Detroit during the 1960s, while the seemingly never-ending struggle to preserve open space for recreational purposes continues today.

The City of Detroit began acquiring land for the park then named Algonquin Park in 1928 and, with W.P.A. assistance, further developed it in the 1930s. Major portions were added in 1943, 1954 and 1957. Maheras Park (Playfield) was renamed posthumously for Army Private Peter Maheras, who, on January 14, 1943, gave his life to save others in connection with military operations during World War II, for which he was awarded the Silver Star. Peter Maheras, born of Greek parents on August 2, 1918, was a native of Detroit's southeast side, having attended Keating Elementary School, Fock Intermediate, and Southeastern High School. He lived with his family on Tennessee and grew up in the neighborhood that surrounds what was then Algonquin Park.

Algonquin Park was largely unimproved during its first thirty years, except for a small shelter and scattered play fields. The community then surrounding Algonquin Park had been developed in the two decades prior to 1930 as a middle-class urban neighborhood of houses which was mixed across racial and ethnic lines. In the 1940s and 50s, the City installed dirt basketball courts. Programming by the Recreation Department began in the 1950s; prior to that, the park was just an unattended play field with a small, 696 square foot building constructed in 1933 that was heated on cold days by a cast iron coal-fed stove. Neighborhood associations were formed in the 1950s, and they collectively sought improvements to the playfield.

Bronson Gentry, a father of four children who resided at 744 Tennessee, was a community activist who served as president of the Riverview Community Council, the Keating School PTA, Jefferson-Chalmers Neighborhood Improvement Association, and Jefferson Chalmers Citizens District Council. Gentry became active in Maheras park issues in the 1950's. He headed a seventeen member committee known as the Jefferson-Chalmers Conservation Council. The focus of the Council's efforts was to bring a recreational facility into the neighborhood and locate it at Maheras Park. Gentry worked along side others, like William Keenan, president of the Jefferson Chalmers Community Council, Mary Kirshner, and countless others. Bronson Gentry received the national Lane Bryant Award in 1969 for community service.

The construction of a new community center at Maheras was promised to the community as early as 1959 to replace the small outdated facility. For over five years, the riverfront community stood by as surrounding areas developed recreational facilities. In 1960, modern play lot equipment was installed and seven tennis courts were resurfaced. While the construction of a recreation center at Maheras Playfield was identified as a high priority by the City of Detroit Recreation Department, the community was informed that funds were not available.

Allegations were made that racially homogeneous, white areas of the city were given preferential treatment while the racially mixed area around Maheras Park had to wait. Funds were available to improve Heilmann Recreation Center, located in a far northeastern neighborhood populated by

predominantly white influential middle-class residents with considerable more political influence. Heilmann, an already well-equipped park, was earmarked to have its swimming pool enclosed for year-round use, while Maheras had no community recreation center or swimming pool to begin with. The Recreation Department reported that the improvements to Heilmann had been proposed several years earlier, but that did not placate the community around Maheras. On behalf of the working class, racially diverse residents living around Maheras Playfield, the Riverview Community Council demanded that the City fulfill its promise. In 1964, plans for a new structure were presented to the community but were not comparable to other centers in other areas of the city; the facility depicted in construction plans was just a warming station rather than a modern recreation facility. The community, rallying behind the leadership efforts of the Riverview Community Council, rejected those plans outright. Instead, it simply demanded equal treatment to that provided Heilmann area residents.

In 1965, \$250,000 was budgeted for the expansion of the Maheras Playfield. That amount, added to the \$125,000 provided in the previous year, resulted in the eventual construction of the long fought for community/recreation facility. The new facility was dedicated on September 9, 1966. Two years after the community center opened, Maheras received an "ultra-modern and spacious swimming pool and bath house..." City Council approved the \$458,800 cost, and June 1, 1968 was the target date for its completion. The L-shaped pool was 42' x 72' and 35' by 45', with depth ranging from three to nine feet. The contractor was Matthew Lalewicz, Inc. of Detroit and Center Line.

For a period during the Cold War, a Nike missile-related site was located in Maheras, as the park served as the radar station for the missiles that were stationed at Belle Isle. Over the years, Maheras Park has withstood several threats to take its riverfront land for other uses as well, including the erection of a river front drive along the lines of Chicago's Lakeshore Drive that would have hit the black community around Maheras very hard (1965), a proposal to take fifteen acres for the construction of a launch terminal for boats to run between Detroit and Peche Island (1968), a proposal to make the park into a boat marina (1972) and the latest proposal, to build luxury housing on the northern half of the park.(1997).

Architectural Description:

Maheras Park is located at the foot of Connor Avenue in the southeastern part of the City of Detroit. Its southern boundary is the Detroit River. It is one of four riverfront parks in the Jefferson-Chalmers community.

Connor Avenue leads into a paved parking lot and drive in front of the community center, which is located in the northwestern corner of the park. The community center is a red brick-faced rectangular one story building of typically 1960s modern design. A portion of its roof is supported on metal posts and beams, allowing for light to enter from the glass between the top of the wall surface and the roof. An L-shaped addition to its west built as the bath house contains the front entrance to the entire facility through a modern portico. Added in 1968, it is also brick faced, with long blank brick walls on its north and west elevations. Roofs on both sections of the

facility are flat. An outdoor pool is located to the rear of the bath house, and is fenced with a high cyclone fence.

The primary characteristic of Maheras Park is its open space. It has baseball fields and some play equipment, but the area along the river is open green space. A high grassy mound in the southwest section of the park provides a stunning view of the river. A paved road from the community center passes by the play fields and mound and then parallels the riverfront.

Contributing Structures: The community center with its adjoining pool is a contributing structure in the historic district. The community center is substantially less than fifty years old, and the Historic Designation Advisory Board must "be guided" by the National Register standard that structures less than fifty years old are not eligible for designation. The building's strong significance in the history of community relations in Detroit provides grounds for an exception to the "fifty-year rule."

The Community Center is the only building in the park. Other structures in the park, such as those associated with the baseball diamond, appear to have no associations with the important history of the park and community center, and thus do not contribute.

As the resource proposed for historic designation is a park, the open space is itself a significant and contributing resource.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets at least one of the criteria of Section 25-2-2 namely:

Criteria 1, which reads: "Sites, 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."

Recommendation: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that Maheras Park be designated a historic district with the design treatment level of conservation.

Bibliography - Maheras Park

U.S. Army, Medical Dept., Private Peter Maheras, 6 Jun 1945 (record of Silver Star).

Misc. correspondence to Bronson Gentry from City of Detroit Dept. Of Parks & Recreation, Commission on Children and Youth, Mel Ravitz, Detroit City Council, compiled by Creekside Community Development Corporation, now in the files of the Historic Designation Advisory Board.

Ensign, Tom, Interview with Bronson Gentry, 1996 (transcript)

"Approve \$458,8000 Pool for Maheras Rec Center," East Side Shopper, July 12-18, 1967

"Urge Council to Enlarge Maheras Field," East Side Shopper, 2/9/66.

"Peach Isle Promoter Asks Docks," Detroit News, 9/27/68

"Grayhaven Lots Asked for Park," Detroit Free Press, 2/9/66.

Gareau, Lawrence, "E.Side Area Described as Waiting on City's Plans" Detroit News, 3/11/65

McElroy, Jane, "New Maheras Field House a Step Nearer," East Side Newspapers, n.d.

Other articles in file of HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD.

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Boundaries shown in heavy black lines.

Exact location of U.S. harbor Line may differ.