

City of Detroit CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

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The Nacirema Club Historic District Final Report



Charge: By a resolution dated October 1, 2008 the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the Nacirema Club Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Acts.

The Nacirema Club Historic District consists of a single family house at 6118 30th Street. The building is located in a residential neighborhood at the southeast corner of 30th Street and Milford Avenue. The Nacirema Club is located in the West Warren-Tireman Avenues area along the Grand River corridor in the neighborhood known as the "Old Westside." The district is located approximately six miles from downtown Detroit.

Boundaries: The boundaries of the district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:
On the west, the centerline of 30th Street;

On the north, the centerline of Milford Street;

On the east, the centerline of the south-north alley lying between Milford Street and Cobb Place;
and

On the south, the south line extended east and west of Lot 79 of the Butterfield and Howlands Subdivision, Liber 16 Page 23.

History

The Great Migration: One of the largest redistributions of the American population took place from 1910 to the mid-1920s when hundreds of thousands African Americans moved from the country's southern region to its northern cities. African Americans began arriving in Detroit in large numbers at the start of World War I, when the federal government put a halt to the steady influx of European immigration. During this time no other city grew as fast as Detroit. Industrialists sought out new workers to meet the demands for the increase in military defense

contracts. Manufacturers advertised in Southern newspapers that jobs were plentiful for anyone willing to work hard, "with or without skills and regardless of color." Thousands of African Americans packed trains and buses and headed north in search of a better life. Believing they were coming to the "Promised Land" Southern blacks migrated to Detroit in hopes of an improved lifestyle but, unfortunately found the city to be less than promising.

The city was ill prepared for such a large migration of new African Americans residents. Issues of segregation and racism further complicated social conditions such as housing and education. The Detroit Urban League and the Detroit Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were founded in part to address the social and economic needs of the thousands of African Americans who had migrated to the city. In the 1920s Detroit's African American population primarily resided in the three square miles north of East Jefferson Avenue and east of Woodward Avenue, in the area known as "Black Bottom." Faced with a critical housing shortage African Americans found themselves crowded in substandard housing. Detroit found itself entrenched in the social and political concerns which had become a problem in mainstream America. As the black population continued to grow, the reaction of many in the white community was of heightened racial hostility. This manifested itself in a hardening of patterns of social and residential segregation and occasional outbreaks of racial violence. It was during this time that whites began to form organizations determined to prevent blacks from integrating all -white neighborhoods. Restrictive covenants, home improvement associations and real estate codes were all used to prevent blacks from finding decent housing anywhere in the city.

The influx of migrants from the South to Detroit was so great that the neighborhood known as "Black Bottom," was no longer adequate for the city's black population. This led to the movement of blacks out of the eastside ghetto into other areas of the city, including Tireman Avenue, West Eight Mile Road and Conant Gardens. The Tireman Avenue neighborhood is a part of an interconnected community bounded by Grand River Avenue on the east; Buchanan Avenue on the south; and Epworth Boulevard on the north. Known as a black enclave from the 1920s through the 1950s, the area became a desirable place to live for African Americans who could afford to live there. The neighborhood was a mix of well maintained single- and multi-family houses with strong commercial districts along the major thoroughfares of Tireman and Grand River Avenues. Just as racism prevented African Americans from living in certain areas of the city, it also blocked them from patronizing many white-owned businesses. This resulted in the establishment of a plethora of black-owned businesses that provided the services to address the needs of the neighborhood. By 1950 there were over 300 black-owned businesses located in the Tireman Avenue community that included such establishments as restaurants, beauty and barber shops, dry cleaners, gas stations, appliance stores, drug stores and several distributing companies. Most of these establishments were family-owned businesses and employed people from the neighborhood. Other residents either worked in one of the manufacturing plants located in the area such as Kesley-Hayes and the Lincoln Livernois Plant or for the United States Postal Service.

Nacirema Club

A Club of Their Own: The Nacirema Club was once the cornerstone of one of the country's most progressive neighborhoods of African American families. Its history is intertwined with the economic and cultural events of the time and, most importantly, integral to the history of the Detroit westside neighborhood. The Nacirema Club was founded in the era when gentlemen's social clubs were the place for men of a certain economic means to network and relax. The Club members were inspired by the camaraderie they saw at the Detroit Athletic Club (DAC) and the Detroit Club (DC) and wanted to emulate that type of ambience in a club of their own. According to Horace Rodgers, whose father Julian Rodgers was the early director of the Nacirema Club, "the Nacirema Club took on the DAC attributes. The primary function of the club was to provide an environment where all men could live as brothers and have respect for one another. It was always a classy club, with the aim being to appeal to the fine and noble character of men."

The Nacirema Club is the oldest African American men's social club in Michigan. Organized in 1922 by a group of civic-minded business and professional men who wanted a place to meet and socialize, the 21 charter members represented a wide spectrum of professions in Detroit's African American community. The founders of the historic Nacirema Club included doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, postal workers and factory workers. Founded by Raymond H. Maynard and Julian Archer they are credited with suggesting the club's name, which is "American" spelled backward, it was the club members way of saying to the country, "I Too Am America." The Nacirema club's community activities were rooted in American beliefs and values, and opened to all. Members were told to check their egos at the door because everyone was equal. The organization officially incorporated a year later in 1923 with twenty-one charter members. The Nacirema Club's early membership roster included such names as: Hubert Bland, Lennard Brown, Fred Calvert, George Carmichael, Charles Covington, Hamilton Dickins, Thomas Dodson, Joseph Ellis, Edward Johnson, George Moore, Arnie Moore, William Newman, Issacstein Osborne, Charles Rawlings, Richard Scott, Alphonso Houston and Edgar Houston, who also served as the club's first president. Other notable members included Dr. Ossian Sweet, who addressed the issue of "de facto" segregation in housing; Clyde Cleveland, former Detroit City Council member; and Cornelius L. Henderson, who is best known as the structural steel designer for the Ambassador Bridge.

Permit # 381 was issued January 21, 1920 to Medard Libbrecht, a local contractor, to build a two-story brick house located at 6118 30th Street for the cost of \$15,000. Three years later, the building was purchased by members of the Nacirema Club who converted it into their club house. The club house underwent several small alterations in 1937, 1942 and 1949 when a one-story addition was erected. The club received a \$20,000 loan from the Michigan Interfaith Trust Fund for new roofing and heating in December 2003.

From its beginnings until the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Nacirema Club was one of a limited number of Detroit social clubs opened to African Americans. The others included the Urban League and the Association of Women's Clubs. In its glory days the Nacirema was a gem in the heart of the westside neighborhood. The Nacirema Club was the place to go in the African American community for wedding receptions, proms, anniversary

parties and all social events that make up life in the city. The Nacirema Club boasted a ballroom, dining room, roaring fireplace, well stocked bar and spacious lobby furnished in plush leather sofas. Members and their guests met and mingled and enjoyed dinner and late night dancing. The highlight of the year was 'Nacirema Week.' During this special time the club hosted a Sunday church service, racetrack party, dinner dance, picnic, card party and a moonlight boat ride. Although the wives of the Nacirema Club members supported the Club by sponsoring card parties, fashion shows and other fundraisers, women were not afforded membership until 1998.

Not being a political club they allowed all groups to hold meetings in the clubhouse. The facility was available to churches, block clubs and other groups for meetings and special events. In addition to bridal showers, class reunions, and graduation parties the club featured a number of special programs including children's activities, senior citizens' outings and their "Saturday Afternoon Forum." These forums featured speakers representing various professions whose various topics included: health, education and ways to improve the living conditions of people in the community. The clubhouse became a scheduled stop for numerous local and state political candidates as a means of getting their views out in the black community.

Although the Club's membership has dwindled and the neighborhood has fallen on hard times with the decline in population and economic conditions, the Nacirema Club continues to exist. According to George Gaines, one of the most recent presidents', "members of the Nacirema Club have vowed to join with other community groups in improving the neighborhood and reinvigorating a once vital organization while at the same time working to restore some of the Nacirema Club's former luster with the vision to convert the facility to a non-profit community center."

Architectural Description

The building at the southeast corner of 30th Street and Milford addressed as 6118 30th Street and known as the Nacirema Club is a typical, reddish-brown, textured brick-veneer, four-square Prairie-style residential structure that sits on a high basement. The Nacirema Club is the most substantial and only brick house on its block-face. Its slightly graded, fairly shallow front lawn is divided by a straight concrete walk leading up the two steps from the public sidewalk to the steep steps of the front porch. Its block of Thirtieth Street features a wide tree-lawn. Across the street from the Nacirema Club are vacant lots and modest frame houses.

True to the vernacular Prairie-style, the design of the house emphasizes the horizontal. Its fairly shallow overhanging hipped roof, now covered with pinkish asphalt shingles, has projecting battered dormers, similarly roofed, on its four slopes. The front dormer features a row of five windows. The shallow hipped roof shape repeats itself over the front porch, which is supported on square brick piers with concrete pads resting on the wing walls on the southernmost one-third of the front facade. A single doorway leads into the house.

Paired double-hung sash windows having subdivided upper sashes and a common concrete sill are situated directly beneath the roof eaves. The fenestration of the first floor of the front facade

has been altered; the double windows have been combined into one to form picture windows, and one window opening in the center has been bricked-in. The positioning of the windows on the southwest side of the front facade and the south elevation follow the stairwell and landing up through the second story; at the top of the stairwell on the front facade is a small rectangular window.

The north elevation of the original house along Milford Avenue features a battered chimney flanked by small rectangular window openings on the first floor, a pair of double-hung windows towards the east at both first and second floor levels, and, in the side elevation of the flat-roofed, one-story rear porch, three paired windows regularly spaced. Basement windows are filled in.

A large brick and concrete block addition extends back from the side elevations to the rear alley, occupying the entire rear yard. Wider than the house, this tall, single story addition on the north side of the house has steel double doors flanked by two rows of glass block. The front (west), and north elevations of the addition are brick-faced, while the south and rear elevations are concrete block. The south elevation of the house features a fire escape from the ground floor to the roof of the rear, concrete block addition at second story level.

Criteria: The historic district meets criterion B as provided in the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act and in local ordinance. That criterion refers to sites, buildings structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in the community, city, state or nation.

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: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson, and Dora 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 Development Department.

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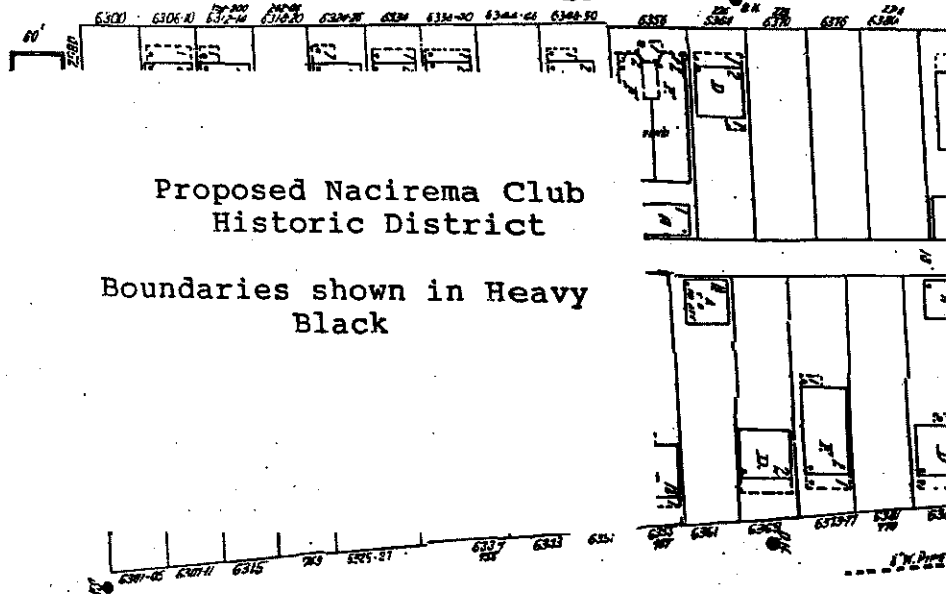
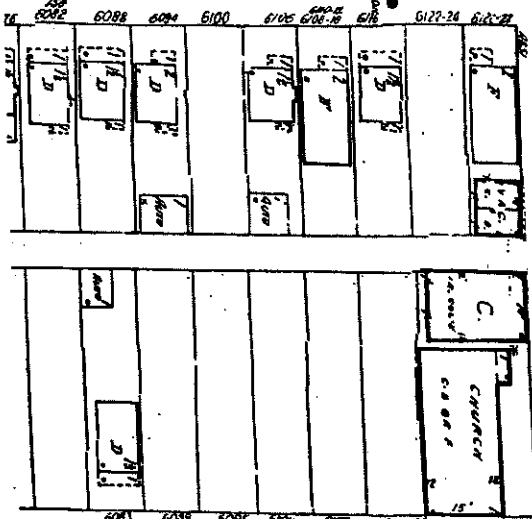
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BEECHWOOD

AV.

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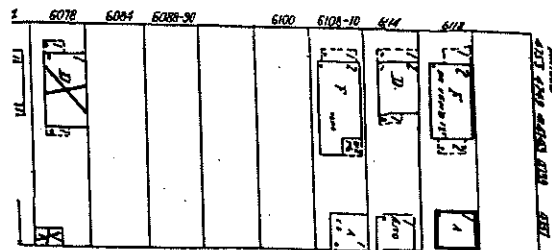


Proposed Nacirema Club
Historic District

Boundaries shown in Heavy
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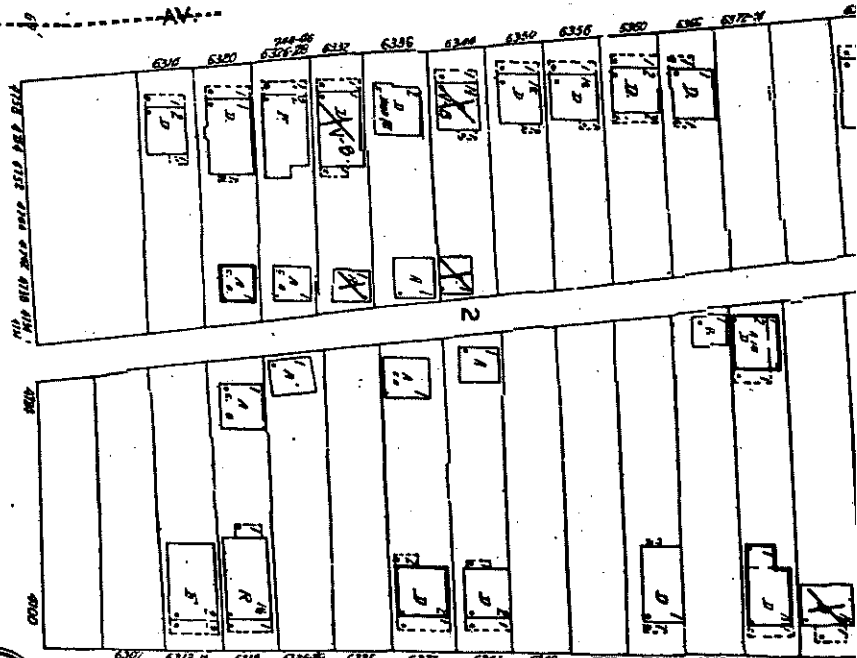
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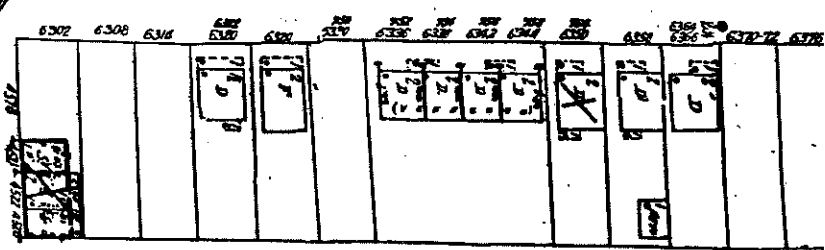
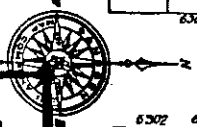
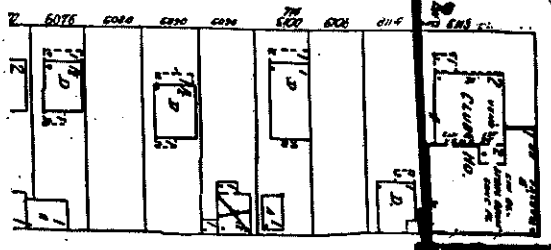
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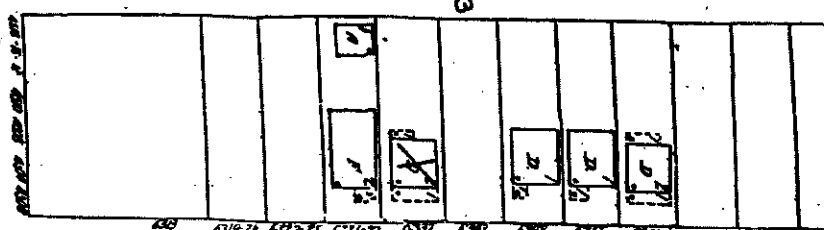
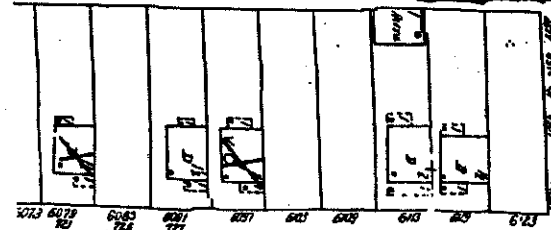
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