

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

204 City-County Building
Detroit, Michigan 48226

(313) 224-3487

PROPOSED PHILETUS W. NORRIS HOUSE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

CHARGE: The proposed Philetus W. Norris House Historic District consists of the one building with additions and outbuildings at 17815 Mount Elliott Avenue. It is located on two lots at the northwest corner of Mount Elliott and Iowa in northeast Detroit in an area zoned for commercial and manufacturing uses. The house was built by Philetus W. Norris, the founder of the Village of Norris which became known as North Detroit before it was annexed to the City of Detroit in 1924. The area is represented by the Nortown Community Development Corporation.

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

On the east, the centerline of Mt. Elliott;

On the south, the centerline of Iowa;

On the west, the centerline of the alley running north-south between Mt. Elliott and St. Louis; and

On the north, the south line of lot 8, Block 1 of the Plat of the Village of Norris (L.3, P.30).

History: The Norris House is significant for its association with its builder and original owner, Philetus W. Norris, during the years of his tenure as the second superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1877 to 1881. He played a vital role in the exploration and early development of Yellowstone, the nation's first National Park, and contributed significantly to the ethnographical and archaeological collections of the Smithsonian Institution from Yellowstone and the Mississippi Valley between 1877 until his death in 1885. Captain Norris also played a role in the development of the City of Detroit as it is constituted today by establishing the Village of Norris, which later became part of northeast Detroit. The Norris House is the oldest extant dwelling in this section of Detroit and one of the few reminders of the Village of Norris.

P.W. Norris, the explorer, union spy, cavalry man, land developer, sanitation expert, politician, poet, lover of freedom, and amateur archaeologist, was born in Palmyra, New York, on August 17, 1821. He was the son of John Norris Jr., a builder of pioneer mills, and a Welsh mother. Although he had no formal education, it was from accompanying his father throughout the mountains of New York and Pennsylvania that young Philetus received his knowledge and appreciation of the wilderness and it was from his mother that he learned of poetry and writing. At the age of eight, Philetus's first job was providing guided tours of the Genesee River falls in Western New York.

John Norris Jr. moved his family to western Wayne County in Michigan in 1832, the same year he contracted cholera. His son, Philetus, turned to trapping in the wilds of Michigan, adjacent states and Canada to help feed the family. His father recovered, and lived until the age of eighty-one (died 1871). Together with his brother-in-law, Philetus cleared a field and built a home for a gentleman in Madison Township in the northwest corner of Ohio. He resided in a shanty on the property, from which he could court his future wife, Jane. While there, he began studying, reading and writing poetry. It was about this time that he began hearing rumors of geysers out west and set his heart on seeing them someday. He and Jane were wed in Fayette, Ohio; Edward A., the first of three sons, was born in 1848.

With a family to support, Norris turned into an enterprising businessman. He acquired property and acted as agent to absentee land owners. Other activities prior to the Civil War were an exploration of New Hampshire, platting of some of his own land in Ohio in 1853, investing in a local store, and building a double grist and saw mill in the community. According to the census, he prospered greatly during this time; in 1850 he had \$3000 in real estate; in 1860 his real estate was worth \$24,000 and he had \$3000 in personal property.

In 1861, Norris responded to the call of the Civil War. He was a scout in the 14th Ohio volunteer Infantry, and a Union spy in West Virginia. After a shoulder and spinal injury, he returned home and ran successfully for the Ohio legislature as a representative from the counties of Williams, Defiance and Paulding, Ohio in 1862.

Afterwards, he was commissioned captain of a company of Hoffman's Battalion of the Ohio infantry, which guarded Confederate prisoners on Johnson's Island in Sandusky Bay. He returned to the Ohio Assembly where he continued to champion the Union cause. In 1863, after a stint in the Williams County militia, he lost a campaign for election to the Ohio Senate by a narrow margin. Active in the United States Army Medical Department, a forerunner of the Red Cross and U.S.O., Norris served at the front of a bloody Spotsylvania campaign in 1864,

caring the casualties. After a presidential appointment did not materialize after the war, Norris accepted the trusteeship for the estates and heirs of a group of prominent officers killed in the War.

Among the holdings of his clients was a large tract of swamp land in Hamtramck Township, Michigan. Norris had fond memories of this area; he camped upon the Prairie Mound thirty years prior, and enjoyed hunting and herding ponies on the land. Norris purchased this property from the estate of Arthur Bronson in December 1865, and proceeded to building a log cabin on it. He also contracted to invest heavily in this land and to drain and develop it. Norris moved his family, now with four children, to Detroit in 1867 and lived at 231 Cass Ave. Together with his oldest son, Edward, and Mason A. Perkins, Norris operated the real estate firm of Norris, Perkins & Co.

In August, 1873 Norris platted part of his holdings in Hamtramck Township as the suburb of Norris, where he resided for the remainder of his years. Norris built the house now addressed as 17815 Mt. Elliott at the corner of Mount Elliott and Prairie, which was later renamed Iowa, in 1873 as his family and his principal residence while he continued to explore the wilderness and collect archaeological and Indian artifacts.

The Village of Norris, in Hamtramck Township, was 6 1/2 miles from the Detroit City Hall. Its boundaries were generally Seven Mile Road on the north, Mound on the west, Van Dyke on the east and Six Mile Road on the south. Laid out on the cardinal points of the compass, it was located about 30' above the forks of the Connor's Creek, "on gently undulating ground; the soil is dry and sandy, but very fertile." Prairie Mound was in full view, and good well water was abundant. Norris laid all streets out to be 70' wide, with the exception of one, which was 100' wide and extended to Woodward Ave. In 1872 Norris donated the right-of-way to the Detroit and Bay City Rail Road (Michigan Central Grand Trunk Line) which provided a significant link to Detroit, Warren, and other points north. In fact, Nevada St. was initially named Rail Road Avenue, and the rail road depot became a center of activity. The Norris Streetcar Line was built as a real estate promotion; it was not physically connected with any other rail line when it was build. Its cars were called "orphans" for that reason. Its two cars were scheduled to meet the Michigan Central's trains from Bay City. Eventually the line became part of the Detroit system.

Colonel Norris had big plans for his small village; he advertised its potential in "Detroit Real Estate & Banking Journal." Initially, the town prospered; the intersection of Mt. Elliott and Nevada was its center. It had a hotel, wagon shop, blacksmith shop, Lutheran deaf and dumb asylum, sawmill, saloon, several homes, and a rail road station. Norris and

sons owned several tenements in the village. Most of the early residents were German Lutheran market gardeners. At its peak, the Village had a population of 250. Shortly after 1890, the Village became known as North Detroit.

President U.S. Grant signed the legislation creating Yellowstone National Park on March 1, 1872. Yellowstone was the first national park in the world created "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Nathaniel Pitt Langford, a Montana pioneer, explored the area of the park, referred to as the "geyser land" in 1870 with the Washburn-Doane party and was the first to publicize it. He was rewarded with the five year appointment as the first park superintendent. Because the position was without pay, Mr. Langford served his term in absentia. Norris had hoped to be amongst the Washburn team but his timing was off; he explored some of the area around what became the park but failed to reach the geysers. He did, however, make a successful exploration in 1875 to, among other things, collect specimens for the Smithsonian. After that visit, Norris wrote to the Secretary of Interior, echoing other complaints regarding vandalism and slaughter of wildlife in the Park. His offer of assistance led to his appointment as the second superintendent on April 19, 1877.

As such, he was the first to spend time in residence at Yellowstone; he spent his summers there. He was also the first to induce Congress to appropriate funds for its support. In 1878, the \$10,000 appropriation was earmarked for the protection, preservation and improvement of the park; that was increased to \$15,000 in 1881. The superintendent's salary was \$1,500 a year. In 1879, after hostilities with the Indians has lessened, Norris completed a headquarters building on "Capitol Hill", which was later joined by a block house, barn, and blacksmith. He was also the first to open the park up to the public by making road building and trail blazing top priorities. The Norris Road, a wagon road connecting Mammoth Hot Springs with the geysers basins and the military road built by General Howard's troops the previous summer, was his first road project. When he took over as superintendent, there were 32 miles of road and 108 miles of trails within the boundaries of the Park; five years later there were 153 miles of road with 204 miles of trails, however crudely constructed. Norris also installed wooden sign boards at important intersections and gave names to features, frequently after himself (Norris Pass, Norris Cutoff, Norris Mount, etc.).

Norris published the first tour guide to Yellowstone, although it was an appendix to a book of poetry he had written, entitled The Calumet of the Coteau (1878). This book of sentimental poetry was dedicated to the wilderness and its pioneers, but supplemented the first practical tourist guide to Yellowstone National Park.

While much of Norris' exploration during his superintendency was done for finding suitable routes of travel within the Park, some served for the purpose of satisfying his scientific curiosity. He observed and recorded a total eclipse of the sun in 1878, kept meteorological records throughout his residency, and recorded geyser eruptions and the occurrence of earthquake tremors, while he continued to collect for the Smithsonian.

Very early in his tenure, Norris attempted to address the problem of vandalism in the park and initiated the first wildlife management program. In his first report to the Secretary of Interior (1877), he made a recommendation for game management which became the first game management plan on federal land. His proposal to save deer, elk, antelope, and big horn sheep from slaughter was to turn the northeast corner of the Park into a game preserve. The government went along with Norris' suggestions in a limited way and in 1880 hired only one of the four or so games keepers Norris identified as necessary to do the job. Consequently, the plan did not work because, as the one games keeper wrote after he resigned after one season, the task was too large for one man.

Norris made several other suggestions to this end that fell on deaf ears, such as licensing guides and developing and licensing concessions. Some of his suggestions led to his demise as superintendent, for monopolistic groups, like the railroads and hotel interests, had their own self interest in mind. Some of his critics accused him of being the biggest looter of artifacts from Yellowstone because of his work with the Smithsonian, and some charged him with showing favoritism of one town over the other over railroad, road, and mail routes. Norris was replaced by Patrick Henry Conger, the brother of the senator from Michigan, on March 31, 1882. His last visit to the land he loved was in 1883.

Philetus W. Norris died in Rocky Hill, Kentucky on January 14, 1885 at the age of 65 while engaged in an investigation of the mound builders of the Mississippi Valley for the Smithsonian Institution. He was buried in Woodmere Cemetery on May 2, 1886 after an initial interment in Mt. Elliott Cemetery. Norris' wife, Jane transferred the Norris House to Edward A. Norris in 1893.

In 1915, the population of the village was 300; in 1924, North Detroit became part of the City of Detroit. No Norris' appear in the 1915 Gazetter in North Detroit. When Edward and Art Norris moved west, their subdivision reverted largely to acreage. In fact, the family homestead was sold to William Lynch in 1916, although he had lived there since 1914. Lynch, a teamster, had been a highway commissioner of the Township of Hamtramck. He may also have been related to John Lynch, a farmer who had a house on the corner of Lynch Road and Centerline, for there were several Lynchs listed in the City Directories in North Detroit. Lynch sold the house in 1925,

after which it was converted to a three-family dwelling. In 1962 it was converted back into a single-family dwelling.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: The Philetus W. Norris House is the oldest house standing in what was once the Village of Norris, now part of the City of Detroit. The property is situated on the northwest corner of Mt. Elliott and Iowa in the northeast section of the city. The Norris House is a vernacular Victorian detached dwelling that is two stories tall on a brick basement. It has a front-facing gable roof with a cross-gable towards its west end. It is now clad in asphalt siding, replacing or obscuring most of the original detailing.

The main entrance of the Norris House faces eastward to Mt. Elliott. Now boarded, the original main entrance is on the north half of the front facade. It was likely composed of a set of wooden double doors with a transom above. To its south is a three-sided bay with elongated windows. Above the entrance is a half-round arched double-hung sash window with decorative molded window hood. Above the first story bay is a pair of double hung sash windows. Although the panes are missing, they originally contained four-over-four pane sashes. A rectangular louvered vent punctuates the gable. The roof is a shallow front-facing gable. At the apex of the gable beneath the molded cornice is a wooden pendent with wood-sawn gingerbread ornamentation.

The secondary entrance is located on the south elevation facing Iowa; its porch has been altered. A transverse gable roof intersects the roof towards the rear, and the gables created bear the pendent with gingerbread similar to the front facade. Two chimneys project from the ridge of the main roof. Windows, where sash exists on the side elevations, are of the four-over-four variety.

A one-story shed addition extends along the entire rear elevation, and extends beyond the original house to the building line on Iowa. This addition is also covered with asphalt siding and is fenestrated with four-over-four double-hung sash windows. Two other non-contributing ancillary buildings exist on the property, one being a garage facing Iowa.

In plan, the Norris House is rectangular with shallow arms created beneath the cross gable towards the rear. A shed addition extends the building towards the rear; an addition to that extends the shed to the south, creating the foot of an "L".

Upon entering the house through the main entrance facing Mt. Elliott, the most prominent feature of the foyer is the winding staircase, with its stair-brackets decorated with sawn-wood ornamentation. From the side of the foyer is the entrance into the front parlor, the room with the bay window. The upper

sashes of the windows in the parlor are slightly arched. A rear parlor and dining area extend back from the front parlor. Off to the north of the rear parlor are two very small rooms; to the rear of the house was the kitchen. Further to the rear, in the shed additions, are smaller, simpler rooms of undetermined use.

Upstairs, the front sleeping room has been combined with the room behind it to form one large room, and there are several other sleeping rooms. To the rear, at the top of the back stairs, are the servants quarters.

Although the Norris House is in a deteriorated condition, it retains its structural integrity. Most of the original baseboard woodwork and door framing still exists throughout the house, and the original floor plan is mostly intact.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board finds that the proposed Philetus W. Norris House Historic District meets at least one of the criteria for historic designation, in that it is identified with an historic personage in the community, city, state or national history. The Board therefore recommends that the City Council establish the Philetus W. Norris Historic District with the design treatment level of conservation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for consideration by City Council.

Proposed
 Philetus W. Norris House Historic District
 Proposed boundary shown in heavy black

DETROIT
 ST LOUIS

ADA AV. E. NEVADA AVE.

