

Washtenaw County Historic District Commission
SPECIAL STAFF REPORT – LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS
October 9, 2008

Purpose of Report:

As established by the Washtenaw County Historic Preservation Ordinance of 1974, as amended in 2000, it is the charge and duty of the Washtenaw County Historic District Commission (WCHDC) to oversee and protect the designated local historic districts of Washtenaw County. The WCHDC has carried out this mission since the creation of the first local historic district in 1978. In 2006, it reaffirmed its purpose by adopting a new mission statement: "To protect the historic buildings, sites, objects, and landscapes, of Washtenaw County and to promote a culture of historic preservation."

As an outgrowth of conversation in the WCHDC and with County staff members, it was determined by consensus that the work of the WCHDC would be enhanced through periodic staff-lead check-ins with local historic district property owners.

Site Visit Format:

All site visits took place in August and September 2008, and were conducted by County staff member Melissa Milton-Pung, assisted by Anthony Timek, Historic Preservation Intern. Property owners were first contacted via formal letter to the tax assessment address, followed up by phone calls or emails to arrange a site visit time convenient to the owner(s). Staff performed standard site inspections regarding general maintenance of each site, provided advice and referral as necessary, inquired regarding past and planned work, extensively photographed each site. The Certificate of Appropriateness process was discussed, as well as the difference between ordinary maintenance and "work" as defined by the ordinance.

Property owners received a packet of information containing the following items:

- **Washtenaw County Local Historic Districts Poster**, containing FAQ's and contact information for WCHDC/WC Staff
- **Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation**, the criteria by which all work must done
- Brochure on **Michigan Rehabilitation Tax Credits (RTCs)** for Local Historic Districts
- Complete Set of the **Washtenaw County Heritage Tours**
- **Historic Resource Council Directory**, a publication from the Michigan Historic Preservation Network containing listings for trades people skilled in the care of historic buildings
- **Resource CD**, containing many other resources normally used by staff during public presentations

Local Historic District Visits:

Geer School

9981 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township • Designated 1989

From 1880 to 1982, this one-room, red brick school represented an important era in Michigan education and was a center for community life. Named for William Geer, the first school director, and built by Joseph Warner of Ypsilanti, the school featured side-by-side entrances for boys and girls, a slate blackboard, a woodshed, and two outdoor privies. Water was carried in a bucket from across the road.

Staff visited this site on August 20, 2008, and was met by Bruce Haarala, of Buildings/Grounds Operations for Plymouth-Canton Community Schools (property owner). This one-room school is used numerous times throughout the year for area school programs. It is in excellent state of repair. The only area of maintenance is investigation regarding why the bell pull has ceased to function.



Geer School

Popkins School Local Historic District

2385 Old Earhart Road, Ann Arbor Township • Designated 1981

Named for the first superintendent of School District No. 7, Popkins School was constructed in the Italianate style in 1870. It is one of four remaining one-room schoolhouses along the Plymouth Road corridor and the closest to the City of Ann Arbor. Fire and years of neglect adversely impacted this resource. In a successful preservation endeavor, the schoolhouse was stabilized and given a new roof structure in 2001.

Staff visited this site on August 21, 2008, and was met by Kim Sulek of Grubb & Ellis Property Management, as contracted by the property owners, Earhart Development Associates, LLC. The property is presently mothballed, due to fire damage sustained several years ago. The interior remains dry and enclosed, although Grubb & Ellis expressed intention to cap the open chimney with chicken wire to deter wildlife infestation.



Popkins School

Esek Pray House Local Historic District

8755 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township • Designated 2000

Replacing an earlier log house, this 1839 two-story brick Greek Revival Residence was part of a large farm purchased by Esek and Sally Hammond Pray. A member of the "Frostbitten Convention" of December 14, 1836, Pray participated in the First Michigan State Legislature and held the office of Justice of the Peace of Superior Township for 24 years. The diaries of son George, a member of the first graduating class of the University of Michigan in 1845, are housed in the Bentley Historical Library and give a vivid picture nineteenth century life.

Staff visited this site on September 11, 2008, and was met by property owner Jane VanBolt. The house, outbuildings, and grounds



Esek Pray House

are overall in good condition. Particular attention was given to the interior spalling and powdering occurring in the brick foundation, which is quite visible in the basement. Staff has connected Mrs. VanBolt to appropriate resources to address this issue.

Milton & Kittie Geer House

8605 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township • Designated 2001

This brick Italianate home was built about 1884 for Milton and Kittie Kimmel Geer. The exterior detailing features cast iron cresting, carved wooden brackets, sawtoothed moldings and matching rectangular one-story bays. The original floor plan and interior walnut woodwork are remarkably intact.

Staff visited this site on August 20, 2008, and was met by property owner Glenn Miller. He and his family are finishing the final touches on an outstanding rehabilitation for this entire house. A rear kitchen ell addition is being planned for 2009; staff will be working with Mr. Miller to complete the Certificate of Appropriateness review process.



Milton & Kittie Geer House

Gordon Hall Local Historic District

8341 Island Lake Road, Scio and Webster Townships • Designated 2001

Judge Samuel W. Dexter commissioned Calvin Fillmore, brother of President Millard Fillmore, to construct this impressive Greek Revival house (1841-1843). The six Doric columns of the temple-like portico look out over 67 gently rolling acres of farmland, all that remain of the original 1700-acre estate. Two one-story wings extend beyond the main core of the house and are connected in the rear by a one-story colonnaded piazza. The original house featured 22 rooms, nine fireplaces and 55 windows with interior shutters. The first judge of Washtenaw County, Judge Dexter was renowned for his efforts in bringing settlers to Michigan, including founding the village of Dexter, serving as postmaster, developing the railroad, and publishing the *Western Emigrant* newspaper. A staunch abolitionist, Dexter was a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. There is substantial evidence that fugitive slaves on the path to freedom in Canada used Gordon Hall as a “station.”



Gordon Hall's New Front Porch Decking

Staff visited this site on August 15, 2008, and was met by Gil Campbell, President of the Dexter Area Historical Society & Museum (property owner). Several major repairs and improvements are underway or in the planning stages for this property. Staff had worked with Mr. Campbell earlier in 2008 to approve a replacement in kind for the front porch decking. It had been completed to a high standard of quality in time for staff's visit. The Historical Society is presently in the planning stage for a roof replacement, chimney re-pointing, and other repairs. They will proceed with clear understanding on the distinction between general maintenance and “work” requiring a Certificate of Appropriateness. Staff also viewed the rest of the site during the visit, and confirmed that the Cedars of Dexter development appears to be in conformance to the site plan approved by the WCHDC in 2006.

Additionally, it should be noted that Scio Township and Webster Township have executed conservation easements on the Gordon Hall property, including all acreage outside of the Cedars of Dexter development. These actions are to be commended, as they are additional layers of protection for this rural district, and work hand-and-glove with the local historic district designation. Staff is in the process of obtaining copies of these easements from public sources, for WCHDC files.

William and Jane McCormick Farm

9105 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township • Designated 2004

William and Jane McCormick purchased their 160-acre farm in 1831. This farmstead, now 13.65 acres, consists of an 1838 brick residence, raised barn, apple barn, apple mash house, milk house, machine shed, concrete watering trough, chicken coop, outhouse and silo. Its rural setting evokes Michigan farm life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Staff visited this site on August 13, 2008, and was met by property owners Kay and Karl Williams. The site is in a good state of repair, with no major issues to address. Mr. and Mrs. Williams expressed an interest in historic road designation for the Ann Arbor-Plymouth Road corridor, as well as a sustained concern for other area historic buildings and sites.



William and Jane McCormick Farm

Old Zion Parsonage Local Historic District

2905 South Fletcher Road, Freedom Township • Designated 2003

The vernacular Gothic revival-style parsonage played an important role in the German settlement patterns, and religious and social history of the county. The parsonage and church formed the center of the hamlet, Rogers Corners, with the minister a leader of far more than just religious activities. With the Old Zion church, schoolhouse ruins, English barn, and parsonage, one can still imagine the 19th-century ethos of Rogers Corners.

Staff visited this site on September 5, 2008, and was met by property owners Jack and Angelicka Lewis. This site is also in a good state of repair, with no major issues to address. One of the historic landscape elements identified in the study committee report's site plan, an ancient pear tree, has split nearly to the root and will likely not survive another winter. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis expressed concern about pending power line tree trimming by DTE along the property frontage, expected to take place in the fall.



Old Zion Parsonage

McMahon Springs Local Historic District

2426 Whitmore Lake Road, Ann Arbor Township • Designated 2004

This property sits on a small rise facing west, and consists of a farmhouse and a garage converted from a Dairy Barn on 1.4 acres of land. The long driveway leads past the Italianate residence on the north and a meadow and a vegetable garden to the south. Other landscape features include three springs and a trout pond.

Staff visited this site on August 13, 2008, and was met by property owner Linda Etter and her school-age daughter, Natalia. The site is overall in a good state of repair, although Mrs. Etter mentioned plans in the near future to repaint the exterior in the same color scheme. Seven lightning rods were installed on the roof in 2007,



McMahon Springs

without a Certificate of Appropriateness. Staff noted that they are of a complementary style to the house, and not inappropriate, but encouraged Mrs. Etter to follow the necessary Certificate of Appropriate process for future work.

Merriman Farm Local Historic District

15490 Buss Road, Manchester Township • Designated 2004

A 78-acre historic farm, including a farmhouse, two barns, an outhouse, and a pig house in a setting of rolling acreage. Wetlands and woodlands are included in the district as well as large open fields. The 19th century farmhouse is situated on a rise on a treed lane of mature sugar maples. The views from the farmhouse encompass farmland to the south and east. In 2006, this local historic district was also honored by a historic marker from the WCHDC.



Merriman Farm

Staff visited this site on August 11, 2008, and was met by property owner Betty Jean Murray. The property is in an excellent state of repair. In late 2007, Mrs. Murray executed a conservation easement with the Washtenaw Land Trust. This easement covers the entire local historic district area, as well as additional acreage owned by Mrs. Murray. It directly references the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Merriman Farm Local Historic District Ordinance. As with other local historic districts, this additional layer of property protection is an excellent move on the part of the property owner to insure perpetual safeguard of rural spaces. Washtenaw Land Trust has provided a copy of this easement for WCHDC files.

Sites Not Visited:

Twelve designated local historic districts are under the auspices of this Commission, nine of which were visited as part of this exercise. The remaining three sites include:

USS Washtenaw County Memorabilia Local Historic District

220 N. Main Street, Ann Arbor • Designated 1978

Launched in 1952, the *USS Washtenaw County* (LST-1166) was a tank landing ship of the Atlantic Fleet based at Little Creek, Virginia. Having served in the Atlantic as well as the Pacific, including Vietnam, the *Washtenaw County* was deactivated in August 1973 after earning 16 Battle Stars and two Presidential Unit Citations for Vietnam War service. The memorabilia include a model and photograph, the ship's bell, wheel, service ribbons and commendations, identification plate and a log of its service.

This local historic district is unusual, as it is in fact a collection of artifacts. It is presently in deep storage in Washtenaw County Facilities. Staff is working internally to seek retrieval of these artifacts, and to work with veterans to return this collection to display for public enjoyment.

East Delhi Bridge Local Historic District

East Delhi Road, Scio Township • Designated 2007

The East Delhi Bridge is a single-span, Pratt through truss wrought iron bridge. It spans the Huron River just south of Huron River Drive as an extension of East Delhi Road in Scio Township. Due to confusion surrounding its reconstruction after a tornado in 1917, this bridge's date of construction is subject to debate among local experts. The bridge connects Huron River Drive to the unincorporated village of Delhi Mills, founded in the 1830s, and the site of several mills in the late nineteenth century. Notably, the East Delhi Bridge is the only bridge in Michigan to receive local historic designation.

Staff has visited this site on several occasions throughout the year, and retains a dialogue with its owners, the

Washtenaw County Road Commission. Work is presently underway, in accordance with the Certificate of Appropriateness issued by the WCHDC in 2008, to rehabilitate the bridge and place it back into service. This project is thanks to the dogged efforts of the Delhi Conservancy, Washtenaw County Road Commission, and Scio Township. In June 2008, Kelly Jones and Roy Townsend (WC Road Commission), and Rich Cook (Delhi Conservancy) were honored by the Historical Society of Michigan with their annual Swainson Award for outstanding efforts in history by government employees, with regard to their work on the East Delhi Bridge. Congrats to this group! Of further commendation, Rich Cook successfully nominated the East Delhi Bridge to the National Register of Historic Places this year.

**Conant Farm Local Historic District
5673 and 5681 Napier Road, Salem Township • Designated 2008**

This rural farmstead consists of two early nineteenth century farmhouses and over a dozen agricultural outbuildings/objects. It is representative of the mid-twentieth century truck farm as it evolved from an early nineteenth century homestead to an early to mid-twentieth century dairy farm. The pastoral setting evokes the rural landscape and serves as a significant backdrop to the agricultural heritage portrayed by historic resources on the farmstead. The farm's history mirrors that of many family-owned farms that operated in the rural areas surrounding the growing population of southeast Michigan. In addition, it also portrays aspects of the early settlement era (1830s) when small, one-and-one half story timber frame homes were built in the Greek Revival style; and of the 1940s period when the development of the Willow Run Bomber Plant to the south necessitated the removal of the some of the farm structures to the current site.

Staff visited this site and spoke with several Conant family members during the local historic district designation process, leading up to its designation in September 2008. Since designation, some exterior routine maintenance painting has occurred on the exterior. These property owners have also executed a conservation easement on their rural property, which exists within the urban service district of Salem Township. This conservation easement, which is held by the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, also works seamlessly with local historic designation. Staff is in the process of obtaining a copy of the easement for WCHDC files. The Conant family is to be commended on their banner year of historic property and open space stewardship. It was a wise final act by the family matriarch, Mrs. Olive Conant, prior to her passing on September 28, 2008. The staff and members of the WCHDC extend their condolences to the Conant family.

Conclusion:

Overall, this exercise has been an excellent use of staff time. Nearly every Washtenaw County Local Historic District has been reviews, the HDC's somewhat lacking photographic files have been updated, and staff has developed a more thorough knowledge of the local historic districts. By far, the most valuable aspect of these site visits has been the strengthening or cultivation of relationships with the LHD property owners. It is a staff goal to annualize these site visits, to maintain a fresh and active dialogue with property owners and to provide them with continued support from the WCHDC in historic resource stewardship.

Respectfully Submitted,

**Melissa Milton-Pung, Principal Preservation Planner
Washtenaw County Department of Planning and Environment**