

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED EAST KIRBY AVENUE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed East Kirby Avenue Historic District is comprised of four residential buildings, three two-family flats and a 30-unit apartment building, located on the north side of East Kirby between Brush and Beaubien streets. The proposed district is approximately two miles north of downtown east of Detroit's Cultural Center and Wayne State University Campus. The proposed district is also located between two other historic districts: the East Frederick Historic District, designated in 1984, is one block southeast; and the East Ferry Avenue Historic District designated in 1981, is immediately adjacent on the north.

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

On the north, the centerline the east-west alley lying between East Kirby and East Ferry Avenues.

On the east, the centerline of Beaubien Street.

On the south, the centerline of East Kirby Avenue.

On the west, the centerline of Brush Street.

HISTORY: The proposed East Kirby Avenue Historic District is made up of a portion of the D.M. Ferry Subdivision. Platted in 1886, the subdivision was named for Dexter M. Ferry, president and founder of the D.M. Ferry Seed Company, wealthy landowner and developer. Although Ferry was instrumental in the development of the street which bears his name this was not the case with Kirby Avenue, named for George Kirby, a wealthy Detroit store merchant who specialized in leather goods.

At the turn of the century, Woodward Avenue was the finest residential thoroughfare in Detroit. It was lined with the imposing mansions of the city's merchant and manufacturing elite, including the homes of David Whitney, D.M. Ferry, and Frank J. Hecker. Because of its proximity to those elaborate residences, the area near Woodward was considered a fashionable place to live for many of the city's prosperous upper middle-class professionals and businessmen. They included persons such as Frederick Farnsworth, cashier of the Union National Bank; Murray

W. Sales, President of Sales & Broad, plumbing supplies; William A. Pungs, vice-president of Michigan Railroad Supply Company; and John Owen, Jr., land developer and secretary-treasurer of the Cook Farm Company. By 1910 this area began to decline as a desirable place to live for the city's prospering upper middle-class who were now moving further north to areas such as Boston-Edison and Arden Park-East Boston.

In the mid-1910s and early 1920s the population in the area became predominately Jewish; furriers, bankers, lawyers, realtors, and merchants were among those who populated the area. These included Charles W. Warren, co-founder of Charles W. Warren Jewelers; Hyman C. Schussel, attorney; and Herman Cohen, owner of the Michigan Waste and Bag Company. Three synagogues were in the immediate vicinity and the B'nai B'rith Community House was located on East Ferry. East Kirby was reflective of this shift in population, and many of the homes on Kirby east of Woodward were built for Jews. Just prior to the start of World War I, as the area lost its popularity as a preferred residential quarter, many double houses, apartment buildings, and institutional facilities were erected. World War I accelerated this process by encouraging thousands of blacks to move to Detroit to work in the war industries. By 1917, Detroit's black population had increased to 30,000 and housing for them became a very serious problem.

The early twentieth century was a period of rampant growth and strict racial segregation in the United States. This racial separatism extended into all aspects of life. As a result, health institutions, businesses, clubs and educational facilities were established by blacks primarily for use by blacks. By the mid-1930's and early 1940's the area around East Kirby had again experienced a population shift, this time toward blacks. Dunbar Hospital, established in 1919, opened its doors on Frederick Street as Detroit first black hospital. That was followed by other institutions such as the Bertha Hansbury School of Music, also located on Frederick Street; the Slade-Gragg Academy of Practical Arts, Bailey Hospital, Fairview Sanitarium, the Lewis Business School, and the Household Art Guild Employment Agency. The area became a desirable place for blacks to live as black business and professional persons began to make their impact on the community.

Because blacks were unable to secure loans from local banks or other mainstream lending agencies, a group of black men banded together to form the Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company, "to assist blacks in financing homes and fostering business, and helping to relax credit restrictions placed on blacks." Founded in 1928 with 250 policyholders and capital amounting to \$10,000, Great Lakes was organized under the leadership of Colbert Sobrian, a prominent black attorney. The executive committee consisted of some the city's most prominent black citizens including: Charles H. Mahoney, attorney and the first black man to serve as a full delegate to the United Nations; Moses L.

Walker, president of the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP, and chairman of the Ossian Sweet Case Defense Fund; Robert Greenidge, founder of Parkside Hospital, Fairview Sanatorium, Victory Loan and Investment Company, and Eastside Medical Laboratory; William Osby, chief engineer of the Madison-Lenox Hotel, and founder of the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP; and Louis Blount, president of the National Negro Insurance Association, and vice-president of the National Negro Business League.

Twenty short months after Great Lakes opened its doors for business, the stock market crashed. Banks and lending agencies unable to meet their financial obligation to the public closed their doors. Rising to the challenge, the company officers at Great Lakes used their personal monies to meet expenses and paid all claims. During the depression the company continued to write policies. By 1934 business had improved and the company was able to move to larger facilities; they purchased the building at 301 East Warren. That same year Great Lakes joined the National Negro Insurance Association. By year's end Great Lakes had expanded and created two new companies: The Great Lakes Agency Company, which founded the Great Lakes Country Club in Holly, Michigan, for recreational use by blacks; and The Great Lakes Land and Investment Company, which purchased investment properties including the apartment building located at 457 East Kirby and known then as the Kirby Manor.

According to the 1934 City of Detroit Directory, less than one-third of the apartments in the building were occupied. Within a year the building was given a new name, Great Lakes Manor, and was fully occupied. Great Lakes Manor soon became home to some of Detroit's most notable black citizens. This included Stuart W. Toodle, partner and brother of Dr. Aaron C. Toodle, Detroit's first black pharmacist, who owned drugstores on Beaubien and Warren; Common Pleas Judge Jessie Slaton, the first woman to serve as referee in Detroit's Traffic Court, also noted for administering the oath of office to Governor William Milliken, Lt. Governor James Brickley, and Attorney General Frank Kelly in January, 1979; and John W. Roxborough, manager of Joe Louis' early career, and a member of the board of directors of the Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company. Although Joe Louis never rented an apartment in Great Lakes Manor, he did live there for a brief periods of time with Roxborough, his manager.

By the mid-1950s Great Lakes Insurance Company had become the largest black-owned business in Michigan. According to its business records, it was a five million dollar institution with 106,000 customers and 275 employees. 457 East Kirby remained an investment property for the Great Lakes Land and Investment Company until it was sold in the late 1970s. The building is now undergoing extensive rehabilitation.

BUILDING DESCRIPTIONS: The four buildings in the proposed district are described below:

425 E. Kirby, W.S. Joy & Co., architects, 1916: The permit for 425 East Kirby was taken out by Catherine Hurley in 1916. Upon its completion the house was immediately sold to Louis Robinson, secretary-treasurer of the Robinson-Cohen Dry Goods Company. Robinson resided at this address for ten years, renting the upstairs flat to several different tenants during his ownership. They included Isidor Rosenberg, co-owner of Ettlenger Milliner, an apparel shop; and Harry Jacobson, secretary-treasurer of the I.M. Jacobson and Sons Company. Other residents of 425 East Kirby included Mrs. Mary Rutzen who lived there from 1930-1935; and Charles Harris and Harry Thomas, laborers, who resided there from 1935-1937. In the fall of 1937 the house was sold to John W. Roxborough, who is probably most noted for his association with Joe Louis; Roxborough is credited with shaping the early career of the world heavy-weight boxing champion. Roxborough discovered Louis at the Brewster Athletic Club in 1930, and served as his manager for the next ten years. Roxborough and Louis remained friends even after they severed their business relationship in the early 1940s. In 1946 when Roxborough was paroled from Jackson State Prison after conviction on gambling conspiracy charges, Louis flew from New York to Detroit to welcome his former manager home. In later years John Roxborough founded and served as president of the Superior Life Insurance Company.

The 2-1/2 story brown brick building at 425 E. Kirby contains two flats. It is 39' wide by 55' long by 18' high. Its estimated cost of construction when it was built in 1916 was \$10,000. Its architectural style is vernacular Prairie; characteristic features include the emphasis on the horizontal. Ribbons or bands of windows, continuous window sills, horizontal stucco panels, and the shed roofed dormer interrupting the slope of the hipped roof contribute to this horizontal effect.

The center section of the house projects outward, forming a two story square bay. It is fenestrated with three windows facing front and one on each side of the bay. A horizontal stuccoed panel separates the first and second stories of this bay. The entrance on the eastern portion of the front facade has been altered for the installation of a single door. Above the entrance, at second story level, is a squarish window with a round arched transom outlined in light stone. In general, the exterior of this two-family home has been very well maintained over the years.

433 E. Kirby, George V. Pottle, architect, 1918: This two-family house designed by George V. Pottle, a prominent Detroit architect, was built in 1918. The original owner, Jacob B. Lasky, founder of Lasky Furniture Company, shared this residence with his son-in-law, Hyman B. Gittleman. Lasky was a pioneer in the Zionist Movement in the city, and is credited with having organized the Gemilut Hasadim. The Hebrew Free Loan Society, as it became known, is an institution which assisted people who had financial emergencies by providing them with interest free loans.

457 E. Kirby, Great Lakes Manor, Pelavin Brothers, builders, 1925: This 30-unit apartment on the corner of East Kirby and Beaubien Street was originally named the Kirby Manor Apartments. Many of the early residents of Kirby Manor were in the service industry. They included persons such as Morris Leibowitz, carpenter; Glen Jones, salesman; William Stoller, employee of a dry cleaner; and Philp Shapiro, laundryman. According to the 1929-30 City of Detroit Directory only half of the apartments in Kirby Manor were occupied. Four years later the building was sold to Great Lakes Land and Investment Company.

This four-story building originally contained 34 units and a store. It measures approximately 52' wide by 141' long by 52' high. In plan, it has two light wells created by the recessions and projections on its east elevation, or Beaubien side.

Interrupting the brick of the building is a stone watertable, a stone course between the third and fourth stories, and a band of stone between the fourth story and the parapet. The entrance bay is centered on the front facade and is recessed. Two doric columns support the segmentally arched broken pediment that bears a pinecone, the symbol of hospitality, in its center. The doorway is surrounded by sidelights and a transom.

The front facade is heavily fenestrated, with groupings of three windows in the face of the two projecting pavilions. Openings are varied on the east side elevation; the front portion displays blind arched openings with keystones and rectangular windows inset. Great Lakes manor is a very handsome building that is presently undergoing rehabilitation.

Recommendation: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the East Kirby Avenue 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 EAST KIRBY AVENUE HISTORIC DISTRICT
 (Boundaries outlined in heavy black)

