

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL
HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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Detroit, Michigan 48226

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Proposed Moses W. Field House Historic District Final Report

By a resolution dated July 8, 1998, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Moses Field House Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Moses W. Field House Historic District consists of Lot 61 and Lot 62 of the Frontenac Subdivision, including the residence addressed as 2541 Field Avenue and the side yard to its south addressed as 2533 Field Avenue. The proposed district is located approximately three miles northeast of downtown Detroit, just one block east of East Grand Boulevard. It is on the west side of Field Avenue between Charlevoix and East Vernor, in the middle of an intact early twentieth century residential block within the Islandview community.

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

On the north, the north line of Lot 61 of Frontenac Sub (L. 24/P. 31), extended east and west;
On the east, the centerline of Field Avenue;
On the south, the south line of Lot 62 of Frontenac Sub (L.24/P. 31), extended east and west; and
On the west, the centerline of the north-south alley between Field Avenue and East Grand Boulevard.

HISTORY: The Moses W. Field House at 2541 Field Avenue is significant as one of Detroit's few surviving farmhouses from the mid-nineteenth century. It is a piece of early Detroit that encapsulates the history of French strip farms, Hamtramck Township, the development and expansion of Detroit, and, of course, the Moses W. Field family. It stands as a testament to Moses Wheelock Field, a merchant, landowner, and politician, and his wife, Mary Kercheval, the daughter of Major Benjamin B. Kercheval, an early French settler and officer in the War of 1812.

Moses Wheelock Field (1828-1889) was born in Watertown, New York on February 10, 1828, the second son of William and Rebecca (Wheelock) Field. The Fields were of modest means. Moses attended public schools and Victor Academy in upstate New York before arriving in Detroit in 1844 on his sixteenth birthday.

Mr. Field's early history in Detroit is a little unclear. Some sources state that he first settled in Oakland County and worked as a shoemaker's apprentice. However, it can be gleaned that, upon his arrival in Detroit, Mr. Field was first employed as a clerk in the large mercantile business of F. Moore & Company and then, in 1852, became a partner in the firm of Stephens & Field, wholesale ship chandlers & grocers. Waiving the cash that would normally be required to buy into a partnership, Mr. Stephens thought that Field's knowledge of business and familiarity with the retailers would be "an ample equivalent." That business, located in two stores on the corner of Woodward Avenue and Atwater Street, lasted for about ten years before the partnership dissolved. After that, Mr. Field organized a business in his own name in four stores he built on Woodbridge Street adjoining the old Detroit Free Press Company building. To accommodate its growth, Mr. Field subsequently built a large warehouse with a wharf and shipping accommodations at the foot of Griswold Avenue. Moses W. Field & Company's wholesale grocery on Woodward near the dock at the foot of Griswold became the most successful grocery business of its kind in Detroit. Field carried on his business until about 1880, when he retired but continued to engage in manufacturing and real estate.

Although his fortune was made in the mercantile business, Field invested in other endeavors. He built and operated the Detroit Glass Works until it was destroyed by fire in 1872 and was president of the Detroit Hoop Manufacturing Company. From time to time, Mr. Field engaged in buying and selling of real estate. In fact, in his wisdom, he purchased large tracts of land east of Detroit in Hamtramck Township and west of Detroit in Springwells Township, both of which were later incorporated into the city of Detroit. By 1874, Mr. Field had accumulated a vast quantity of real estate said to be worth more than half a million dollars. In 1886, Field purchased the exclusive patent rights from Alexander Mitscherlich for the manufacturer of wood pulp (cellulose) from pine, spruce and other timber and became one of the leaders in that industry, which became essential for the production of paper.

In the meantime, Moses Wheelock Field married Mary Kercheval (1835-1910) on February 2, 1858. On April 6, 1868, Moses and his wife, Mary, purchased part of a strip of land located between Lincoln and Baldwin Avenues from East Jefferson to Gratiot, amounting to about 240 acres. The Field House was built soon after in what was then beyond the eastern outskirts of Detroit, in Hamtramck Township, and the Field family moved into it in 1869. In his book, I Remember Detroit, John C. Lodge wrote that, in conversation with his (Lodge's) mother, Mrs. Kercheval (Moses Field's mother-in-law) said, "she thought it was a mistake for her son-in-law to build his home away out in the country, on what is known as Field Avenue." In an article appearing in 1876 in the Detroit Evening News during his campaign for Congress, Mr. Field's home is described as "... a comfortable brick edifice nestling in among the trees of his Hamtramck farm, where his wife (a refined and cultivated lady, a member of the Kercheval family, one of the oldest and most respectable in Detroit) with five or six healthy, ruddy and pretty children, can be found year round." It was also described as a large farm just outside the eastern edge of the city limits which Mr. Field lives and cultivates. The Fields resided in the house for approximately ten years, and then moved closer to town at 685 E. Jefferson Avenue near St. Aubin. In all, their children totaled ten.

On his eastern "suburban" land, Mr. Field began planning Linden Park, ultimately a fifty acre park located a half-mile north of the Detroit River between Lincoln (Field) and Baldwin Avenues. He donated the park to the city in 1875 with the condition of the donation being that the City appropriate \$4,500 to improve the grounds. Linden Park, in Hamtramck Township, was three miles from the Detroit City Hall and three quarters of a mile beyond the city's eastern limit in 1890. It was felt that the land was too far out from the city and the gift was a means to increase the value of Field's land surrounding the park, so the city never took advantage of the gift. It was reclaimed by his heirs in 1897 when the city refused to improve the land for a park.

About the same time he purchased the Hamtramck property, Field purchased an even larger tract running up from the Detroit River to West Vernor Avenue and from Solvay to the mouth of the Rouge River, amounting to 294 acres. He mapped plans for a Springwells Township park and organized his property into lots. In 1869, when Woodmere Cemetery was established near his property, Moses Field became a director, along with other early Springwells property owners, including Bela Hubbard, Daniel Scotten, G.W. Lloyd and John J. Bagley. In 1881, Mr. Field donated a parcel of his land to the Methodist Episcopal Church of Delray for the construction of its church.

Moses W. Field was involved in public affairs and active in Detroit's civic life. He held public office, first as an alderman (1865-66) and then as a Representative in Congress (1873-75). Formerly a Whig, he supported Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and became a Republican. In pre-election publicity during his congressional run, Field was described as being from "humble origin, extreme poverty, lack of early education" and he was touted as the candidate for the working man. He encouraged active participation of black Detroiters in the political process. An ardent member of the greenback party, Field promoted legal tender circulating treasury bills as a sound paper money system. During the 1870's, Field published and circulated numerous pamphlets extolling his views and promoted financial reform efforts. Envisioning the growing production capacity of the nation, Field advanced his belief in tariff protection.

Moses Field's civic activities included the erection of the first public drinking fountain in Detroit. He was one of the organizers of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1865, served as its first president, and is, in fact, credited for the passage of most of the state laws relating to humane treatment of animals. He served as a trustee of the Pontiac State Hospital from 1883 until 1889 and was elected to the office of Regent of the University of Michigan, serving from 1885 through the time of his death in 1889.

In a biography by Silas Farmer published in 1889, Moses Field was described as "... a member of the Swedenborgian church, and is tolerant of all honest differences, believing that a worthy thought needs not apology. He is simple and unostentatious in his mode of living, liberal in his dealings, kind and polite; has given much attention to literary pursuits,..." The Swedenborgian church was established in Detroit in 1848 with Rev. George Field as the first Swedenborgian pastor in Michigan (his relationship to the subject of this report, Moses Field, if any, has not been established). The New Jerusalem Church on southwest corner of High Street and Cass Avenue was its permanent house of worship after existing in several temporary quarters.

Moses Field died at age 62 on March 14, 1889. Funeral services were held at his residence on E. Jefferson Avenue, with a private burial at Woodmere Cemetery. In his will, Mr. Field left his fortune of approximately one million dollars to his widow and, when she passed, his children. On October 3, 1905 the Frontenac Subdivision of Part of the Eastern Part of Private Claim 678 North of Waterloo Street was filed. This subdivision opened up the area around the Field House to residential development on fifty foot lots.

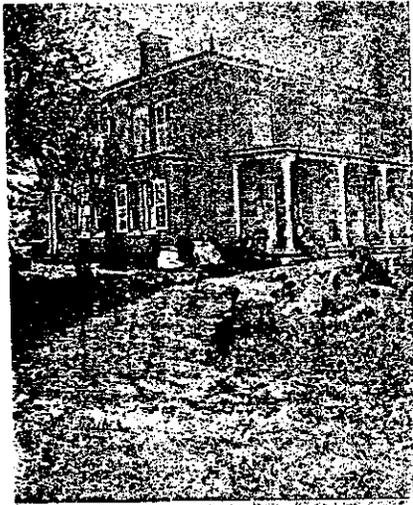
The Field House may have been rented to tenants after the growing family moved to E. Jefferson in the late 1870's; the Field's eldest son, Vincent, resided in the house by the 1890's. Mary Field, as heir to her husband's estate, transferred it to Vincent Field and his wife, Florence, in 1903 and they resided there until their deaths in 1927. Vincent Field managed the estate of his father and is reported to have spent most of the family fortune after the time of his mother's death on July 1, 1910 and his own.

Among other notable children born to Moses W. and Mary K. Field who remained in Detroit were Alice Field, who married Francis Woodbridge, a member of another esteemed Detroit pioneer family who served as an officer in the United States Army, and Mary Field, a leader in the National Child Labor Movement in Michigan who was married to Humphry John Maxwell Grylls, architect with Smith, Hinchman, & Grylls. Both are interred at Woodmere cemetery with their families.

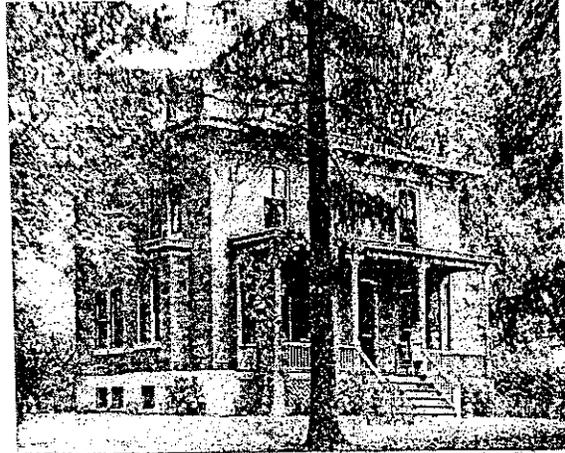
Edward K. Field, son of Vincent and Florence and their legal heir, and his wife Mildred transferred the property out of the Field family when they sold it by warranty deed to Katherine Campau and Phyllis C. Kettenhofen, an investigator with the City of Detroit's Department Of Public Welfare, as joint tenants, in 1935. Katherine Campau was the spouse of Henry L. Campau, with Campau Insurance Company, and Phyllis C. Kettenhofen was married to Robert J. Kettenhofen, a customer's man with Goodbody & Co., a stockbroker. They divided the house into a two-family dwelling. Kettenhoffen and Campau sold the Field House to Robert T. Hughes and Gwladis, his wife, in 1950, who sold it to George E. Bradshaw and Ann E., his wife, the current owner, in 1978.

In addition to "the house away out in the country," Moses W. Field left his legacy in several street names in Detroit. He named an east-west street running through his east side property Kercheval Avenue after the maiden name of Mrs. Moses W. Field, his wife. The old address of the Field House was 585 Lincoln, the street having been named in honor of Abraham Lincoln by Moses Field in 1871, later to be changed to Field in 1883. Field School, a Detroit public school at the corner of Field and Agnes, was named after Moses W. Field as well.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: The Moses W. Field House is set back from the other houses on its built-up, well-kept residential street and, with its abundance of foliage, is easy to miss. Upon second glance, however, you know it is something of special significance.



Moses W. Field House, c. 1875
Photo: Burton Historical Collection



Moses W. Field House, c. 1910
Photo: Burton Historical Collection

The Moses W. Field House is a mid-19th century farmhouse with allusions to the Italian Villa style. It was likely built in 1868. The substantial brick house, since painted gray, is square in plan, with a box bay containing a pair of windows jutting out on the southern elevation and a large addition off the rear. It sits on high brick foundations, covered in stucco with incised mortar joints to resemble blocks of stone circa 1905. Originally, the home appeared to sit closer to the ground, and early photographs show a semi-circular dirt drive in front. The relationship of the building to the land around it had changed, either through its raising or regrading, once the subdivision had been established in 1905.

The front facade of the Field House is divided into three bays, with one opening each per floor per bay. The entrance bay projects slightly from the body of the house on the first floor. Openings for windows and doors are segmentally arched, with two-over-two double-hung sash windows that begin at floor level as front parlor windows. The single door is set within a segmentally arched lintel.

The existing front porch is only a portion of the original. The house was built with a porch that extended almost all the way across the front, with slender chamfered columns at the corners and railing ends. Simple brackets supported the porch roof. The porch as now present has been narrowed to shelter only the entrance bay, but the old columns with chamfered tops and brackets still remain. The window shutters and applied fluted pilasters framing the entrance were added sometime later, perhaps when the porch was reduced in size.

Two brick chimneys project from the shallow hip roof that covers the building. Its broad overhang is supported by simple Italianate brackets. The finial originally at the apex of the hip roof is no longer there.

To the rear of the house, beyond the kitchen addition, is a detached garage. To the south is a

large unimproved side yard that features some very old trees, including an old pear tree from the early days when "... pear, apple and cherry trees were," according to Silas Farmer, "prominent features in the scenery of Detroit." (History of Detroit and Wayne County and Early Michigan, 1890, p. 13). Seeds or young trees were likely brought from France, and every farmer, according to Farmer, had at least one pear tree. Two crab apple trees, one on either side of the walk to the front stairs of the house, still exist out of the six that once lined the walk.

On the interior, the Field House originally consisted of twelve rooms. It features a central hallway with stairs leading up to the second floor; to the right and left are the parlors. The entrances into the parlors had been changed, probably in the 1930's, to open up the spaces with large arches. The southern parlor has a carved marble mantelpiece with an arched opening, identical to the one in the dining room directly behind it. The mantelpiece in the parlor to the right has been removed. The room behind the second parlor, a pantry/kitchen, was altered to add a bathroom. Oak flooring replaced the original wide plank pine flooring throughout, except in the second floor master bedroom, where the pine floor can be seen. There are two wooden mantelpieces upstairs. The Field house was converted into two flats in 1935, and a kitchen and bathroom were added to accommodate the upstairs residents.

A large kitchen was added to the back of the house, probably when the building was put on new foundations. Standing in the kitchen facing the main house, one can still see the segmental arches of the rear-facing window openings on the former back of the house. A more recent porch was added to the rear of the kitchen. A trip to the basement shows its foundations to be of brick under the main part of the house and concrete block in the rear.

While remodeling of the interior of the house has taken place to bring it up to modern day standards, much of the simple woodwork, such as the newel post and the molding around the openings, still remains intact. Other features, like the fireplaces and the ceiling heights, are also distinctive period characteristics of the house. It is the exterior, though, with its siting, landscaping and almost pristine appearance, that distinguishes the Field House as an uncommon architectural expression of Detroit's past.

Criteria: The proposed historic district would appear to meet the following criteria of Section 25-2-2, namely: Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district, with the design treatment level of "rehabilitation." A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

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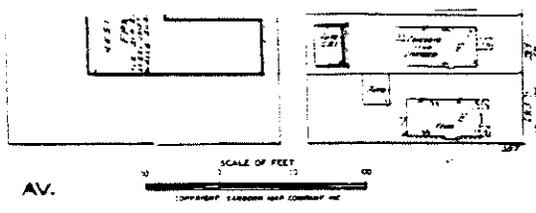
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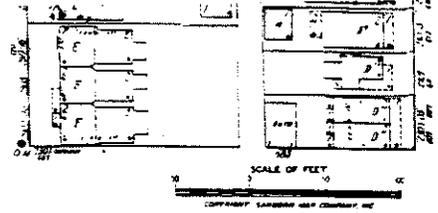
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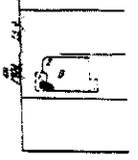
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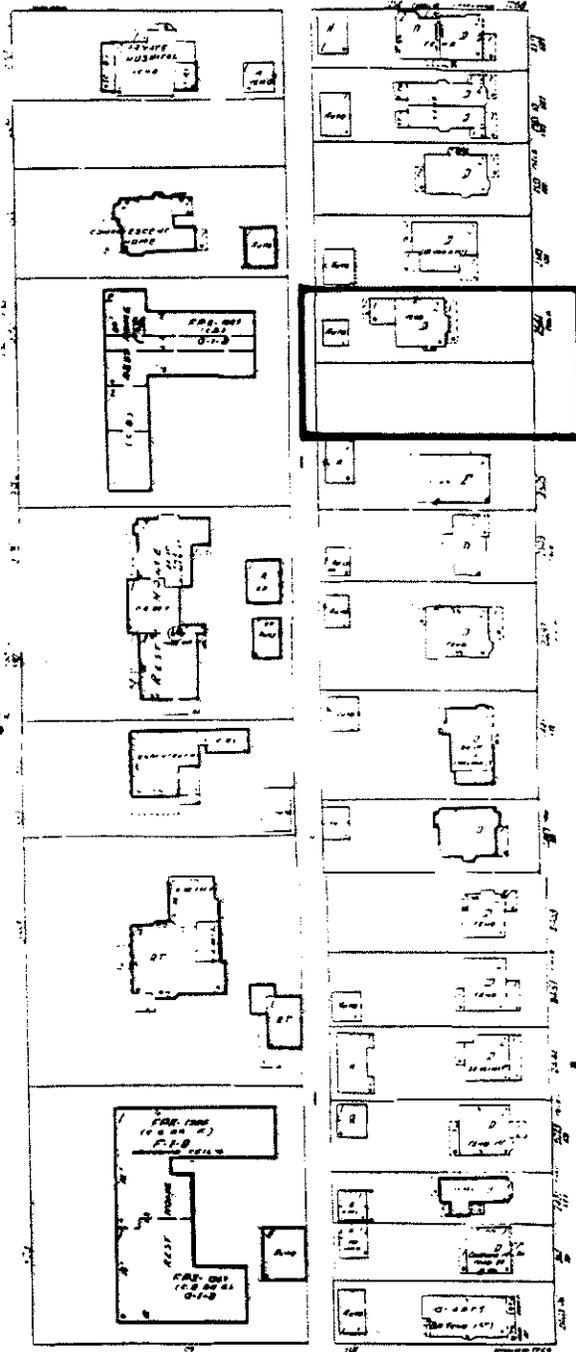
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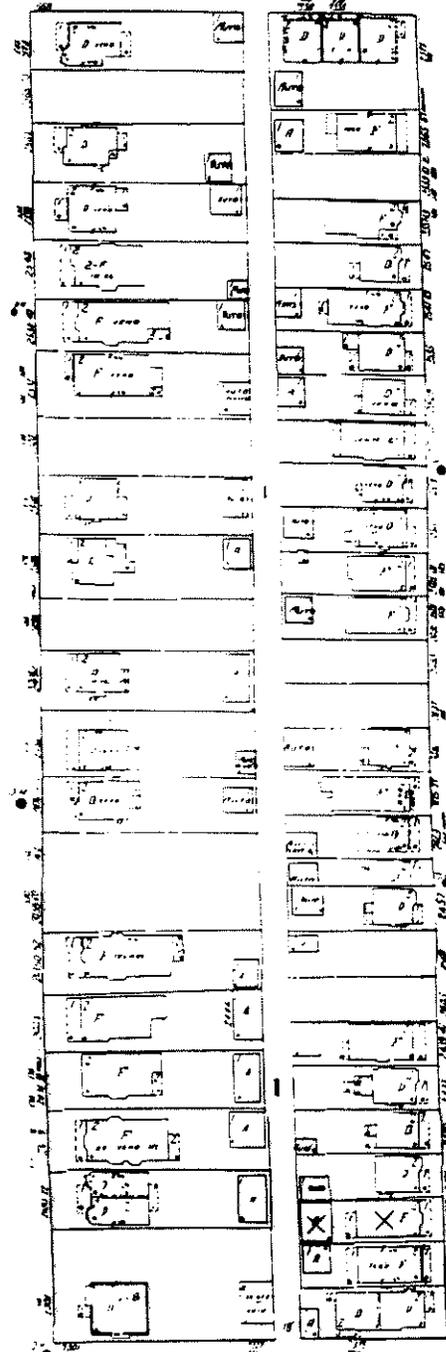
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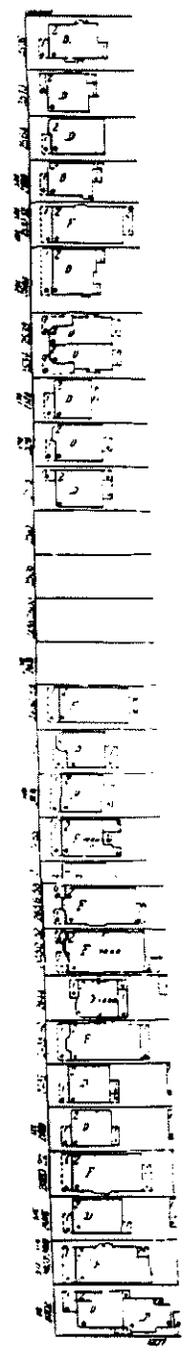
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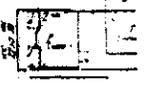
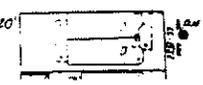
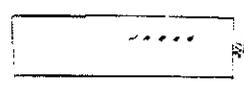
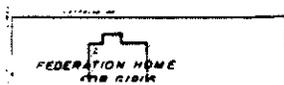
FIELD



SHERIDAN



E. VERNOR



Proposed Moses W. Field House Historic District
2541 Field Avenue
 (Boundaries shown in heavy black lines)