

**Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood
Detroit, Michigan**

Survey Report

Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan

Prepared for

**The City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board
Final Report March 2022**

Prepared by

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Section One

Acknowledgements/Funding Credit

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Executive Summary

This survey was commissioned by the City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB). The purpose was to provide an intensive-level architectural and historical survey of the Eight Mile – Wyoming neighborhood in Detroit in order to identify and evaluate the National Register of Historic Places eligibility of properties within the survey boundaries. The deliverables for this project included a historic context statement of the Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan, intensive-level inventory forms for 1229 sites identified during the survey, and maps and photographs. A community engagement component included several virtual meetings to inform residents about the project, ask them for stories and photographs, and share the results of the project. Key community historians were invited to collaborate on the project, and oral histories were recorded.

This survey has determined that the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district under Criterion A and Criterion C.

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PART II

Part II A: Intensive Level Inventory Forms
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Preparation of this report was supported by Eight Mile-Wyoming community members, past and present, who generously shared memories, documents, photographs, and other information. Special recognition goes to community historians Hazel Fludd, Shirley Harris-Slaughter, Dwight Smith, and Teresa Moon, without whose assistance this project would not have been possible.

Project Objectives and Proposed Methodology

This survey was commissioned by the City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) to document and evaluate the Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood of Detroit and identify the eligibility of individual properties and districts for the National Register of Historic Places. HDAB was awarded an Underrepresented Community Grant from the Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the National Park Service. This project builds on the previously completed “Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in Detroit, Michigan” Survey Report, completed by Quinn Evans and the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office in April 2021 to identify and document 20th Century African American Civil Rights sites in the City of Detroit. Several sites within the Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood were documented at the reconnaissance and intensive level, and the Birwood Wall was listed in the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance as an outcome of the project. That report recommended further study of the Eight Mile-Wyoming Neighborhood.

Project Area

The Scope of Services for this project identified a preliminary survey boundary from the centerline of Eight Mile Boulevard on the north to the properties fronting Santa Barbara Drive on the east to the properties fronting Pembroke Avenue on the south to the properties fronting Mendota Street on the west. This project area includes approximately 1,500 mostly residential lots covering approximately 288 acres. The boundaries were selected because they are generally accepted as the historic edges of this neighborhood. The west boundary along Mendota Street is defined by the Birwood Wall, a segregation wall built in 1941 to physically divide the majority Black Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood from a proposed white subdivision to the west (the properties on the east side of Mendota were also surveyed). Pembroke Avenue and Santa Barbara Drive were de facto segregation lines recognized within the community. Eight Mile Road is the northern boundary of the City of Detroit.

Because this survey report was commissioned by the City of Detroit, no properties were inventoried north of Eight Mile Road. However, this area (in present-day Royal Oak Charter Township) was historically part of the greater Eight Mile-Wyoming Community; for this reason, the research and historic context statement includes information about the neighborhood north of Eight Mile Road.

Community Engagement

The Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood dates to as early as the 1920s; it is an active and engaged community composed of current and past residents with a deep knowledge of the neighborhood’s history and importance. This project centered community voices, drawing on their knowledge both of general neighborhood history as well as information on specific historic resources within the survey area. This is particularly important as Black history is underrepresented in traditional historical sources and where it is represented, is often biased or incomplete.

The City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board held several community engagement events prior to being awarded the contract for this survey report and developed a preliminary list of stakeholders. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings, most of the subsequent community events were held virtually. The first official community engagement event took place virtually on November 19, 2020. A virtual community history day took place on October 27, 2021. Oral histories were also conducted by virtual conference call.

Survey Methodology

Building inventory was conducted concurrently with historic research. Base maps were prepared using GIS pre-loaded with survey fields from the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office's intensive-level survey forms. GIS fields include information from City of Detroit data and were augmented by data gathered from the field survey and historic research. Survey inventory forms were created with form fields linked to the GIS, with data exported in a merge format so data would match in both formats.

Research Methods

Historic research drew from a variety of sources including archival repositories, online collections and, most importantly, the community itself. Sources included:

- Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
 - Records of the Detroit Urban League, which had a satellite office in the neighborhood.
- Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
 - Online databases, including the *Michigan Chronicle*, *Detroit Tribune*, and *Detroit Free Press* as well as digitized photographs
 - Papers of Eight Mile-Wyoming historian Burniece Avery (partially collected during a previous research project)
 - Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and then damage caused by flooding, the Burton Collection was closed during the preparation of this report which limited planned on-site research.
- City of Detroit and Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board. The HDAB provided some research materials and previous local historic district nominations were consulted. Quinn Evans used the construction permit cards in the city's Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED) to identify construction and alteration dates for the years covered (circa 1920s-1970s).
- Other sources include materials and other information provided by Eight Mile-Wyoming residents, former residents, organizations, and community historians; books and articles; census records; city directories; Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps; historic aerial photographs; subdivision plats, etc.

Data Location

Major repositories containing relevant collections of materials related to the Eight Mile - Wyoming Neighborhood include:

- Bentley Historical Library
- Burton Historical Collection
- City of Detroit

Copies of the full set of survey materials, photographs, and copies of the report will be deposited with the Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board at the completion of this project.

Evaluation Results Summary

Based on the results of historic research, property inventory, and input from stakeholders, this report finds that the survey area is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district. The district is significant under Criterion A, association with historic events, for the development of an autonomous Black community beginning in the 1920s. The Eight Mile-Wyoming community provided a unique opportunity for working-class African Americans to purchase land and build their own homes as an alternative to densely segregated housing

elsewhere in the city. Over time, the neighborhood developed into a thriving community composed of working and middle-class families who used community cohesion and institutions to protect their neighborhood in the face of pressure from encroaching white development that threatened to remove them from their homes. Along with residences, the people of the neighborhood also built institutions including churches, schools, businesses, and recreational facilities to complete the community. Beginning in the 1950s, the community challenged the segregation boundaries that had hemmed them in, moving beyond physical barriers like the Birwood Wall and virtual barriers like the color lines of Pembroke and Greenlawn streets.

The proposed district is also eligible under Criterion C, as it represents an intact and cohesive residential neighborhood, including community institutions and a business district, with a high degree of integrity from the 1920s through the 1960s.

Because the inventory boundary was limited to the Detroit city limits and the streets of Eight Mile Road, Santa Barbara Drive, Pembroke Avenue, and Mendota Street, the recommended boundary encompasses that area. Further study may be needed to determine if the historic district should have different boundaries. For example, Royal Oak Township and portions of Ferndale were historically part of the greater Eight Mile Road community and could be included in a future historic district with further study.

The recommended period of significance is 1920 to 1978. Most histories of the community document that the first Black residents settled the area around 1920. While the neighborhood continued to develop and thrive after the 1970s, the completion of the Johnson Recreation Center in 1978 was the last major alteration to the building fabric of the community. Most of the residences and institutional buildings date from before that period. Extending the period of significance beyond 1978 would also require documenting exceptional significance under National Register Criteria Consideration G for properties less than 50 years old.

Several properties are likely individually eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, including Higginbotham School, the Johnson Recreation Center, Oak Grove AME and Our Lady of Victory churches, the Detroit Urban League Northwest Branch building on Northlawn Street, and potentially others. The Birwood Wall was listed in the National Register in 2020.

Planning Needs and Recommendations

The City of Detroit administers various programs through the Housing and Revitalization Department to support repair and rehabilitation of residential properties. These include:

- 0% Interest Home Repair Loans. Launched in 2015, this program provides 10-year, interest-free loans from \$5,000 to \$25,000 to low-to-moderate income homeowners in HUD-designated areas who have lived in their homes for at least six months.
- Making Detroit Lead Safe program, which includes homes investigations and abatement, rental inspections, and health services and lead education.
- Senior Emergency Home Repair Program, for low-income homeowners over the age of 62 (or over the age of 55 and receiving Social Security Disability) to complete emergency repairs up to \$15,000.

The City of Detroit's Planning and Development Department expects to issue a Request for Proposal for the reuse of the Higginbotham School in the future. In the past decade, the city has developed neighborhood planning frameworks for approximately twenty areas in the city. This report recommends that the city prepare a framework plan for the greater Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood to support the continued preservation and development of the area.

The Eight Mile Boulevard Association is a non-profit organization established in 1993 to facilitate collaboration between public and private stakeholders toward the revitalization of Eight Mile Road. It offers assistance through façade improvements and other programs designed to improve the appearance and economic viability of the corridor.

Due to the probability that below-ground resources associated with the early development of this neighborhood may still exist, this report recommends the preparation of archeological surveys, for example at the Higginbotham School/Joe Louis Playfield, where temporary war worker/veteran housing was located in the 1940s, or along the Birwood Wall.

Preservation Issues and Threats

There are no immediate threats to the study area from residential or commercial development. In the long term, there may be a low-level threat to the neighborhood's stability if newer generations leave the area to reside elsewhere. Some residential buildings may also face long-term maintenance threats due to vacancy or lack of financial means on the part of homeowners. There are also no immediate threats of large-scale change or development along the Eight Mile Road commercial corridor. The most significant threat to properties along the commercial corridor is lack of maintenance and investment of individual properties, leading to demolition and subsequent use of the resulting vacant land for parking or storing vehicles. The Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield has been acquired by the University of Detroit Jesuit High School. While there is no anticipated threat to the Center, there is the potential for future development of a parking lot on portions of the current green space.

Section Two

Historical Overview

The City of Detroit was established in 1701 when a French colony led by Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac constructed Fort Pontchartrain du Detroit on the north side of the strait between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie. Black people have been citizens of Detroit from its early settlement. In the eighteenth century, French and British settlers brought enslaved people to the city, until the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawed slavery in the territory. A small community of free Black citizens developed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, augmented by formerly enslaved people escaping from the South who reached Detroit, then an important crossing point on the Underground Railroad, and chose to stay in the city rather than continue to Canada. Many of these citizens were active in the movement to abolish slavery prior to the Civil War, including members of Second Baptist Church, the oldest Black congregation in Michigan. From the Civil War through the end of the nineteenth century, Detroit's Black population remained proportionally tiny in comparison to its growing white population, comprising just over one percent of the total city population by 1910. Aside from a few successful Black entrepreneurs, most of the city's Black residents were restricted to employment in relatively low-paid service jobs.

Beginning around 1915, many Black Southerners began moving to northern cities seeking economic opportunity and freedom from the restrictions of Jim Crow laws and discrimination in the South. Called the Great Migration, one of the movement's major destinations was the city of Detroit. Although most Black people who entered the city in the 1910s and 1920s were segregated into the neighboring lower east side neighborhoods of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, a few groups established Black enclaves in outlying areas of the city. One of these was Eight Mile-Wyoming.

The greater Eight Mile-Wyoming community was established in the late 1910s in what was then unincorporated Greenfield (Wayne County) and Royal Oak (Oakland County) townships. Eight Mile Road was the border between Wayne and Oakland Counties, but the new community developed on both sides of the boundary, centered around what would become Wyoming Avenue. Although the city of Detroit was growing rapidly during the early twentieth century, the Eight Mile-Wyoming area was still largely rural and agricultural in character. However, as the City of Detroit grew it began annexing its unincorporated neighbors at a rapid rate. This prompted many landowners in outlying areas to plat subdivisions on former farmland, in anticipation of eventual annexation and settlement (Figure 1). Most of the area of Eight Mile-Wyoming was platted from 1913 to 1925. Because it was private, unincorporated land, the lot sizes and frontages varied greatly from subdivision to subdivision, and they rarely included space for infrastructure and parks. This variation can still be seen today in the lot sizes and layouts of Eight Mile-Wyoming.¹

¹ Michigan Planning Commission, "A Study of Subdivision Development in the Detroit Metropolitan Area," Lansing, Michigan, June 1939.

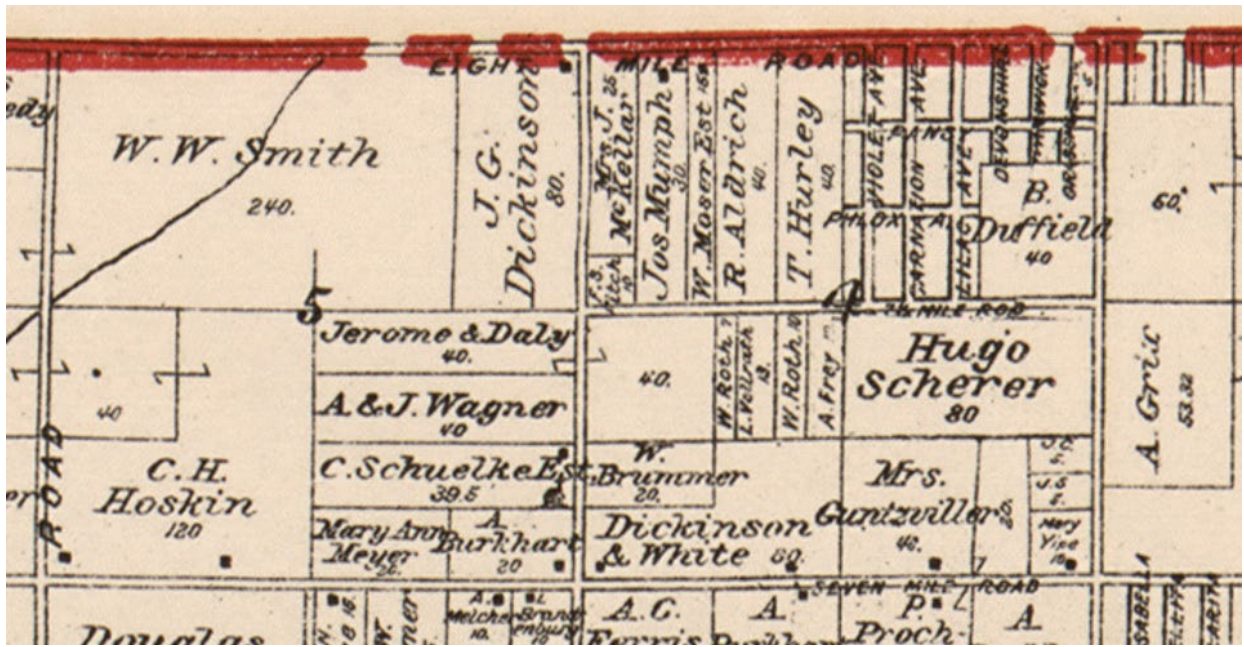


Figure 1: 1915 William Sauer Plat Map showing future Eight Mile-Wyoming Area (Library of Congress)

The Eight Mile-Wyoming survey area within the City of Detroit is composed of seven subdivision plats (Figure 2). The oldest area is the Garden Homes subdivision, platted in 1913 by Sarah, Mary, and Ella Davis. This area included the streets of Woodingham, Santa Barbara, and San Juan (then called Violet, Carnation, and Lily) between Eight Mile Road and Pembroke (from about 1923-1932, Woodingham was called Crudder Street and Santa Barbara was called Turner Street). In 1916, Joseph and Emily Mumph platted the Detroyal Gardens Subdivision, including Ohio, Wisconsin, and the east side of Indiana streets (then called Aurora, Lockport, and Elmira). The following year (1917), George Weatherbee platted the Weatherbee Oak Grove subdivision, including the east side of Wyoming, Kentucky (Oswego), and the west side of Indiana (Elmira). Three subdivisions were platted in 1920. Detroyal Gardens No. 1 was platted by the Directors Land Company and included Cherrylawn and Northlawn Streets. Hugo Miller/Hugo Scherer Land Company platted the Grand Park Subdivision. The plat for this area shows Mendota, Birwood, Griggs, Washburn, and the west side of Wyoming. However, Mendota Street is now part of Blackstone Park No. 6, and the plat does not show present-day Ilene Street. It appears that either the plat was incorrect, or at some point the streets were shifted west, so that this subdivision now includes Birwood, Griggs, Ilene, and Washburn. The Hurley Land Company platted Askew Park Subdivision, including Roselawn and Greenlawn streets. Confusingly, the plat names these streets as Cloverlawn and Roselawn. There is a Cloverlawn Street that begins about two miles south of the neighborhood, but because the street grid shifts slightly, Cloverlawn does not extend north of Puritan. At some point, the Askew Park Streets were renamed, with Cloverlawn becoming present-day Roselawn and Roselawn becoming present-day Greenlawn. The final plat took place in 1925, when Tad and Lida Preston created the Wyoming Grove subdivision, on Kentucky and Indiana south of Weatherbee Oak Grove subdivision.

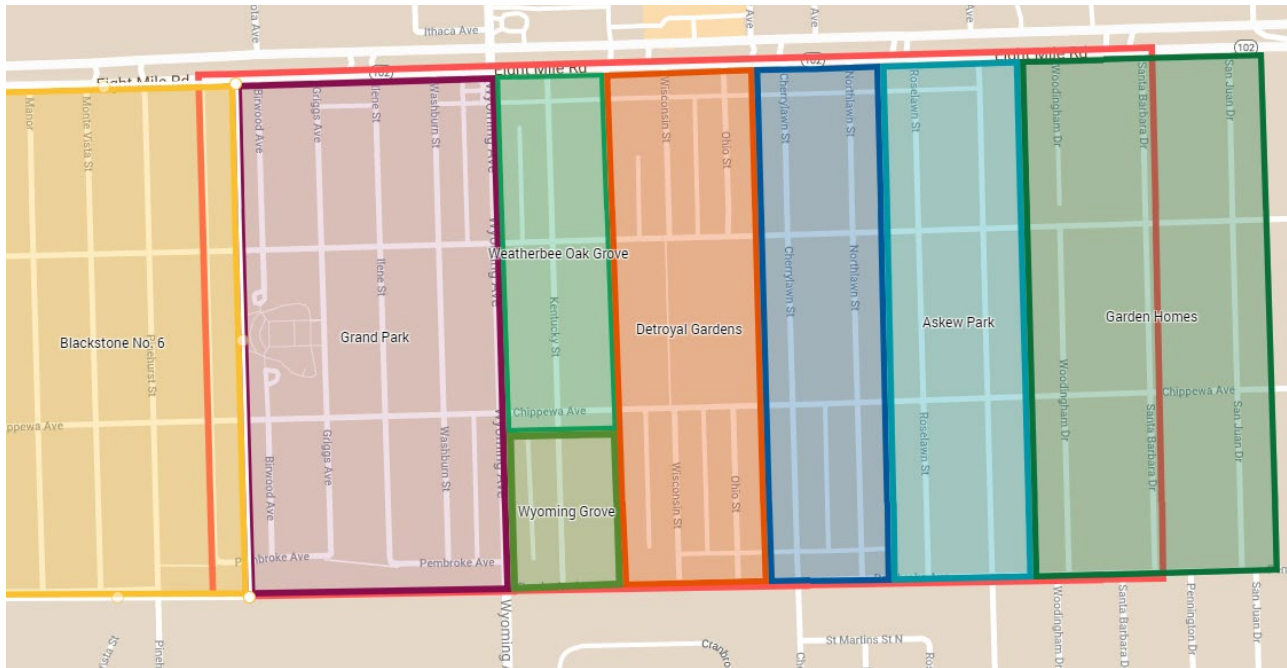


Figure 2: Eight Mile-Wyoming subdivisions: from L-R: Blackstone Park No. 6, Grand Park, Weatherbee Oak Grove (top) and Wyoming Grove (bottom), Detroyal Gardens, Detroyal Gardens No. 1, Askew Park, and Garden Homes. The red box is the survey area boundary. (Quinn Evans annotations on Google Maps)

During this subdivision period, the first Black settlers arrived in the future Eight Mile-Wyoming area. It is unclear exactly what year this occurred. In 1950 the Detroit Urban League, in a brief history of the area, noted that settlement began prior to World War I (which the United States entered in 1917).² Some members of the community later cited 1918 as the founding year, such as James H. Smith, who in 1956 wrote that the community was founded “out of prejudice and disagreement between White and Colored Real Estate Brokers.”³ A recent history of the community also cites the same date, noting that Cornelia Davis and the Gillem family (siblings James, Luke, and Mary, Mary’s fiancé Antonio Rosa) arrived in Detroit that year, bypassing the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods to settle directly in the area.⁴ Census records available online for both Greenfield Township (Wayne County) and Royal Oak Township (Oakland County) in 1920 do not document any substantive presence of Black people in the area. However, it is very possible that they were omitted through racial prejudice or ignorance. Some accounts of the area also state that white philanthropist Henry Stevens, president of the Detroit Urban League, purchased land in the area and then re-sold it to Black purchasers at the urging of DUL executive director John Dancy. This reportedly included land both north and south of Eight Mile Road, which was sold in lots to prospective Black residents.⁵ It is unclear, however, if Stevens already owned some of this land (his name was not among the platters of any of the subdivisions) or if he acquired it for this purpose to circumvent lot owners or real estate agents who may have been reluctant to sell to Black buyers.

² “Annual Report, 1950,” Northwest Branch, Detroit Urban League, Folder A8-8, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

³ “West Eight Mile Notes,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 26, 1956, 13.

⁴ Gerald Van Dusen, *Detroit’s Birwood Wall: Hatred and Healing in the West Eight Mile Community* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2019), Introduction. Ruth Rosa Green, daughter of Mary Gillem and Antonio Rosa, later stated that the family came to Detroit in 1920. Ruth Rosa Green, “Neighborhood Was a Melting Pot,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 10, 1988, 16A.

⁵ Detroit Urban League, “Housing Survey,” Manuscript dated January 1952, Folder A7-12, Box 43, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

In 1922 a portion of Greenfield Township was annexed into Detroit. This section was bordered by Livernois Avenue on the east, Fenkell Avenue on the south, and Eight Mile Road on the north. Although most of the west boundary ran along Wyoming Avenue, at the northern end it made a curious notch, turning east along Pembroke Avenue to Greenlawn (then called Roselawn), where it turned north again to meet Eight Mile Road (Figure 3 and Figure 4). The following year, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that when Detroit made this annexation, “it carefully excluded a little district about half a mile square and populated largely by newcomers from the Sunny South,” meaning that racial prejudice against African Americans was the cause of the omission.⁶ The remaining portion of Greenfield Township south of Eight Mile Road, comprising the bulk of today’s Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood, was annexed into the city in 1925. Following the annexation, city services were extended to the community, and it became part of the Detroit Public Schools district (see the Education section below).

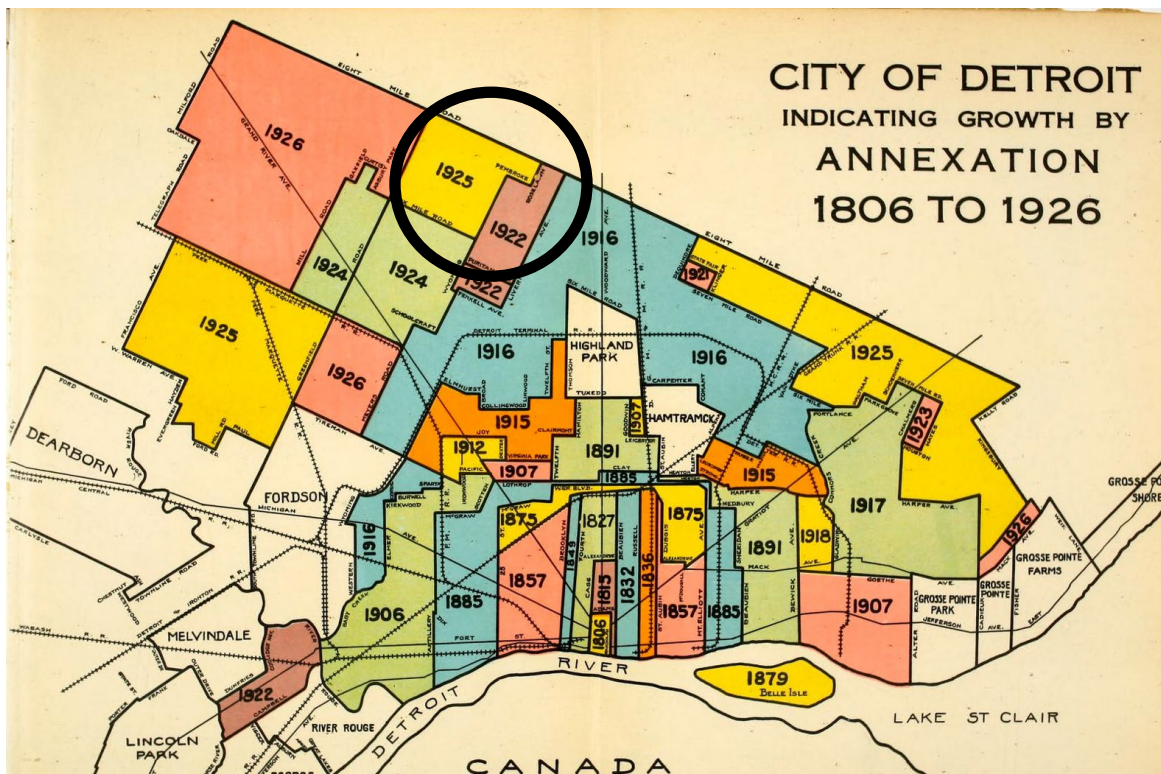


Figure 3: Map of Annexations to the City of Detroit (Manual, County of Wayne, Michigan, 1926)⁷

⁶ “B. of E. Refuses No. 11’s Appeal,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 12, 1923, 2.

⁷ Note that this map shows the dividing line between the 1922 and 1925 annexations as Roselawn Street; however, as noted above Greenlawn Street was originally called Roselawn Street.

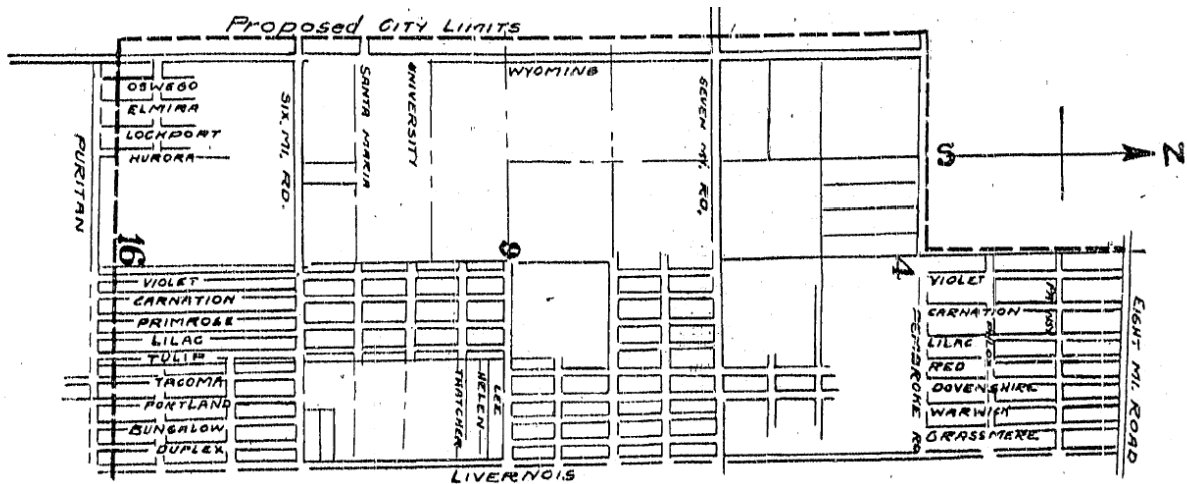


Figure 4: Proposed City Limits, 1922; Present-day Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is in the area occupied on this map by the north-south arrow and the west boundary runs between present day Woodingham (Violet) and Greenlawn streets (“Part of City or Not? Voters Must Decide,” *Detroit News*, October 22, 1922, 23).

By the 1930 census, over 1600 Black people were recorded as living on the south side of Eight Mile Road in this district. Although they came from many different areas of the country, large numbers were listed as natives of Southern states, including many from Georgia, as well as Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland, and Virginia. However, there were also migrants from Northern states such as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and New York, as well as Michigan natives. By far the vast majority of residents in 1930 were listed as laborers, either in factories (particularly auto factories) or in service industries (maids and chauffeurs). There was a scattering of professional workers, including teachers, plumbers, and bookkeepers, as well as a few business owners (gas station, restaurants).

The 1940 census, the most recent to be fully available for research,⁸ recorded just under 2,000 Black residents in the Detroit section of Eight Mile-Wyoming. Black Detroiters lived from Birwood to Greenlawn between Pembroke and Eight Mile Road. Mendota Street did not yet have any residents, and Woodingham and Santa Barbara Streets were exclusively occupied by white people. As with the 1930 census, many Eight Mile-Wyoming residents were natives of Southern states, including large numbers from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, although all Southern states were represented. By this time, a larger proportion had been born in Michigan, as well as other Northern states. Residents of the neighborhood were still mostly employed as laborers, many in the auto factories and service industries, but also as construction workers, truck drivers, and one as a mail carrier. A growing proportion of residents were working in professions such as teaching, medical positions including nurses and pharmacists, clerical work, mechanics, and sales. Several people owned their own businesses, including restaurants and bars, house painting and decoration, and other small businesses. Several clergymen lived in the neighborhood as well. The 1940 census documented that the majority of families in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood owned their own homes: approximately 275 owners as opposed to about 160 renters.

⁸ The 1950 census will be released in April 2022.



Figure 5: Aerial Photograph of Eight Mile-Wyoming community in Detroit and Royal Oak Township, 1940, study area outlined in red, Royal Oak Township immediately to the north (Oakland County GIS).

The community north of Eight Mile Road remained within unincorporated Royal Oak Township. As cities broke off from the township, the unincorporated area gradually diminished in size, leaving two non-contiguous areas, one adjacent to Eight Mile Road (a Black neighborhood) and one adjacent to Ten Mile Road (primarily composed of Jewish families during the early to mid-twentieth century). Like the area to the south of Eight Mile Road, the Black neighborhood in Royal Oak Township increased in population as waves of migrants from the south arrived in the area. From the late 1930s until 1946, there were periodic proposals to incorporate the Eight Mile Road section as its own fourth or fifth class city.⁹ Incorporation would have created a

⁹ Fourth class cities were authorized under an act of 1895 for populations between 3,000 and 10,000 people. Fifth class cities – 750 to 2,000 people with a density of 500 per square mile – were enabled under the Home Rule Cities Act of 1909.

majority Black city with approximately 3,000 people on the northern border of the City of Detroit, but residents were divided. During meetings held at the Grant School in 1939, supporters argued that the community was being taxed for improvements in adjacent communities, even though they received no benefit. In response to detractors who objected to creating what would constitute a segregated city, they pointed out that the area was in effect already segregated without the benefits of incorporation.¹⁰ In supporting the measure, associate editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, William L. Sherrill, noted “The race is measured by what its members do collectively not by what they do as individuals...Individuals among us may own expensive cars, beautiful homes and fine clothes but the rating of the Negro as a group will never be higher than its group achievement.” He also argued that taxpayers would benefit directly from the taxes they paid, have a voice in government, and be able to apply for projects sponsored by federal government. According to Sherrill, taxpayers paid approximately \$3,000 per year to the township which did not pay for streets (county maintained), only one police officer, four streetlights, and inadequate fire protection.¹¹

In the mid-1940s a plan by the City of Detroit to build an airport in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area revived the incorporation issue. Residents believed this was another attempt by the city to remove Black residents from the area, using condemnation for the airport as an excuse. In 1945 the Ferndale city manager was quoted as saying it was the airport or a “black belt” and inferred his preference for an airport; the *Chronicle* suggested that the presence of Black people in the area was being used informally to garner support among white voters.¹² The NAACP opposed incorporation during this period, considering that it constituted self-segregation, and believing that the community did not have the tax or industry base to fund city services.¹³ After ballot proposals for incorporation were defeated in 1944 and 1946 (the latter 849-692), the effort was eventually dropped.¹⁴ Royal Oak incorporated as a chartered township in 1972. In 2004, the northern discontinuous portion was annexed to Oak Park, leaving the historic Eight Mile Road Community as the only remaining section of Royal Oak Township.

For much of its history, the Eight Mile-Wyoming Avenue neighborhood within the city of Detroit had firm boundaries defined by the color line – invisible (and sometimes visible) borders that separated Black and white residents and were, often violently, enforced by whites. In the community’s early years, from its founding in the late 1910s until the late 1920s, the neighborhood was relatively isolated from adjoining development and the plentiful land both north and south of Eight Mile Road kept the community within a small area. By the late 1920s and 1930s, however, the boundaries had solidified. Pembroke Avenue to the south was often cited by residents as a hard boundary, and as development grew nearer, a “no man’s land” of vacant land was maintained south of Pembroke. To the west, the Blackstone Park No. 6 subdivision instituted racially restrictive covenants, and the construction of the Birwood Wall in 1941 further clarified the boundary. To the east, Greenlawn was the dividing line, and attempts by Black residents to move beyond that street were often met with intimidation and violence. Following the United States Supreme Court’s 1948 *Shelley v. Kramer* decision, which made racial covenants unenforceable, Black residents challenged the color lines, eventually moving

Michigan Compiled Laws, 81-113. “The Fourth Class City Act.” Act 215 of 1895.
[http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(fnt3egrx30ryfhz0iifwsu55\)\)/documents/mcl/pdf/mcl-chapters-81-113.pdf](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(fnt3egrx30ryfhz0iifwsu55))/documents/mcl/pdf/mcl-chapters-81-113.pdf); Michigan Municipal League, “Organization of City and Village Government in Michigan,” January 2016.
<https://www.mml.org/pdf/mr/mr-organization-city-village-gvt.pdf>.

¹⁰ “Endorse Plan to Incorporate West Eight Mile Road City,” *Detroit Tribune*, January 20, 1940, 1-2.

¹¹ “Launches Drive to Create Negro City Here: Sherrill Urges Group to Create Own City,” *Michigan Chronicle*, December 16, 1939, 1-2.

¹² “Airport Site Hit by Negroes,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 16, 1945, 1, 4.

¹³ “NAACP Warns Ferndale on Segregation,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 20, 1945, 1.

¹⁴ “Joe Brown Survives GOP Sweep,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 9, 1946, 1.

into Blackstone Park No. 6 to the west, south of Pembroke, and east of Greenlawn, although not without racial tension and intimidation by whites resisting such moves. Throughout the community's history, the northern border of Eight Mile Road has been fluid; despite living in different municipalities, residents on either side of Eight Mile considered themselves members of one community, which was reflected in their social institutions which spanned the border and the fluidity with which people moved back and forth.

Descriptive Overview

Site Context and Landscape Character

The Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is located within the City of Detroit, Michigan. It is in the northwest quarter of the city, approximately two miles west of Woodward Avenue, two miles east of M-10 (the John C. Lodge Freeway) and directly south of Eight Mile Road (M-102), the city's northern boundary. To the north of Eight Mile Road is Royal Oak Township, portions of which were historically part of the greater Eight Mile-Wyoming community.

The survey area extends approximately one mile east-west and a half mile north-south. It is bounded by Eight Mile Road to the north, Santa Barbara to the east, Pembroke Avenue to the south, and Mendota Avenue to the west. Eight Mile Road is a major divided-lane highway, while Santa Barbara, Pembroke, and Mendota are residential streets, although Santa Barbara is a wider north-south thoroughfare. The neighborhood is generally laid out on a standard ordinal city grid, with some variations. Blocks are typically longer north-south than east-west. The grid is broken in several areas:

- At the northeast corner, the northernmost segment of Woodingham Drive dead ends at a cul-de-sac that separates it from Norfolk Avenue and the remainder of Woodingham Drive on the south; this is to separate an industrial area along Woodingham from the residential neighborhood.
- In the center of the neighborhood is an open space three blocks wide by one block long. This contains the William Higginbotham School, the Johnson Recreation Center, and the Joe Louis Playfield (park)
- The Alfonso Wells Memorial Playground is located on the west side of the neighborhood along Birwood Avenue between Norfolk and Chippewa Avenues. Birwood Avenue is broken at the park and dead ends into cul-de-sacs at either end.
- At the southwest corner of the neighborhood, Van Antwerp Park and the Bates Academy (formerly Beaubien Junior High School) interrupt the east-west alignment of Pembroke Avenue in this area. Portions of Pembroke run along the north edge of the park/school grounds, but the street is broken between Ilene Street and Griggs Avenue, preventing through-traffic.

Although Pembroke Avenue was an important boundary to the neighborhood until the 1950s, there is a small enclave south of Pembroke that became associated with the neighborhood in the 1960s. An area bounded by Pembroke, Cherrylawn, Greenlawn, and West Outer Drive was cleared through urban renewal and redeveloped as the "Eight Mile-Wyoming Urban Renewal Area" including single family homes surrounding a one-block St. Martin's Park. It was also known informally in the community as "The Peninsula." However, this area is not included in the building inventory for this report, with the exception of Oak Grove Church at the southwest corner of Pembroke and Cherrylawn.

The streets of the survey are from east to west:

Santa Barbara Drive (west side)
Woodingham Drive
Greenlawn Street
Roselawn Street
Northlawn Street
Cherrylawn Street
Ohio Street
Wisconsin Street
Indiana Avenue
Kentucky Street
Wyoming Avenue
Washburn Street
Ilene Street
Griggs Avenue
Birwood Avenue
Mendota Street (east side)

And from north to south:

Eight Mile Road (south side)
Norfolk Avenue
Chippewa Avenue
Pembroke Avenue (north side)

Spatially, the neighborhood is generally divided into residential parcels that are rectangular in footprint with their narrow ends facing the north-south streets. Parcel widths vary which is a reflection of idiosyncrasies in the original subdivision plats. For example, the Garden Homes Subdivision lots on Woodingham and Santa Barbara are deeper and slightly wider than those on other streets in the survey area and historically did not have alleys; residents used the long backyards for vegetable gardens and recreational space. Exceptions to the residential parcels include the aforementioned parks (Alfonso Wells Memorial Park and Joe Louis Playfield), the industrial zone along the northern portion of Woodingham, and several larger parcels containing religious buildings throughout the neighborhood. Along the south side of Eight Mile Road are rectangular commercial parcels with their short ends facing Eight Mile Road; a service alley with parking bays runs east-west behind the commercial buildings. The parcels fronting on Pembroke Avenue are also oriented toward that street rather than the north-south streets. Historically the residential blocks had center alleys along the rear parcel lines; most of the alleys were vacated during the 1950s and 1960s, but remnants remain on some blocks, for example between Northlawn and Roselawn Streets. The streets are lined with concrete sidewalks on both sides.

Vegetation patterns are typical for a residential neighborhood and consist of maintained grass lawns, ornamental vegetation, and trees. The streets are lined with deciduous street trees, although this pattern varies greatly from street to street; some are heavily vegetated while others have virtually no street trees remaining. Many residential lots also have trees in their rear yards and along the alleys/parcel lines.

Building Types and Character

Commercial/Industrial

Commercial and industrial buildings are mostly located along the south side of Eight Mile Road and on the northernmost section of Woodingham Avenue. In general, commercial buildings are rectangular with their primary, short elevations facing Eight Mile Road. Older commercial buildings are built out to the lot lines and directly adjoin neighboring buildings and the sidewalks, with parking areas to the rear. Newer commercial buildings tend to be freestanding with parking to either side, or in some cases are surrounded by parking lots. There are some vacant lots along Eight Mile Road, which have either been left to grow grass, or have been converted to parking areas. The buildings along Eight Mile Road are almost uniformly one story, masonry (brick or concrete block) buildings with flat roofs although there are a few two-story buildings. Many have been partially or fully re-sided over the years with metal, exterior insulation finishing systems (EIFS), and other materials, while windows have been replaced with new units, glass block or been boarded up, and doors have been replaced. Businesses housed in the buildings include vehicle sales and maintenance, restaurants, groceries and party stores, and other small business.

A notable building located at the southwest corner of Eight Mile and Birwood is a metal Quonset hut. A number of Quonset huts were erected in the neighborhood as World War II worker/veteran housing. This building may have been moved from elsewhere in the neighborhood, although it does not appear to have been on this site prior to 1990 according to aerial photographs.

Historic commercial buildings with relatively high degrees of integrity include 8133, 8251, 8425, 8541, 8621, 10027, and 10125-10129 West Eight Mile Road.

An industrial area is located on either side of Woodingham Drive between Eight Mile Road and Norfolk. This consists of a large one-story concrete block building complex on the east side, and two sets of smaller one-story masonry (brick or concrete block) industrial buildings on the west side separated by vacant lots.

Institutional

Institutional buildings are scattered throughout the neighborhood and consist of the William Higginbotham School, Johnson Recreation Center, and a number of churches. The Higginbotham School is a U-shaped two-story brick building featuring Mission-style detailing. The Johnson Recreation Center is a roughly rectangular steel-framed building finished in exterior masonry with one and two-story sections.

At the southwest corner of Eight Mile Road and Washburn Street is the historic Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church, now the Church of the Living God, a rectangular red brick, front gabled building with a spire. At the southwest corner of Eight Mile Road and Wisconsin Street is another church, St. Paul's United Methodist Church, a Modernist, asymmetrical design featuring offset gabled roofs revealing a clerestory at the west roof elevation.

On either side of Wyoming Avenue just south of Eight Mile Road are two rectangular one-story brick churches with asphalt gabled roofs. On the east side is Pure in Heart Church of Deliverance, while on the west side is Open Door Bible Fellowship. On the west side of Indiana Avenue just south of Eight Mile Road is the rectangular, one-story brick Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ. On the west side of Ohio Street south of Eight Mile Road

is the one-story, rectangular, gable-roofed Steadfast Baptist church, covered in aluminum siding.

The L-shaped Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ occupies one third of the block between Wyoming Avenue and Washburn Street at Chippewa Avenue. The one-story, gable roofed building is faced with brick and has a steeple at the northeast corner. The building is surrounded by parking on the north side and southwest corner.

At the northwest corner of Kentucky and Pembroke is the Christian Gospel Center Church. The rectangular building has a hip/gambrel roof and a two-story brick tower on the southeast corner. A parking lot is located on the west side.

Oak Grove AME Church is located on the southwest corner of Pembroke and Cherrylawn. The Modernist church, designed by architect Nathan Johnson, is faced in brick and has additions to the north and south. It has a large parking lot on the south side. Diagonal to Oak Grove AME is the one-story brick Berean Chapel. The building is rectangular and has a gable on hip roof, with parking to the east.

At the southeast corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Chippewa is Wisconsin Avenue Church of God-Second, a one-story, gable-roofed brick building; at the northwest corner of the building is a rectangular brick addition with a flat roof. Two blocks east, and the southeast corner of Cherrylawn and Chippewa, is Mt. Beulah Baptist Church, a rectangular, one-story brick building with a brick tower on the west (front) elevation and a rectangular brick addition on the north side.

Residential

Eight Mile-Wyoming is a largely residential neighborhood; many of the residential buildings date from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. They are mostly modest one-story to two-story vernacular brick and frame residences that represent the working- and middle-class character of the neighborhood during its period of development. Typical typologies from this period include:

- Rectangular, one to one-and-one-half-story minimal traditional. These are typically side gabled with front cross gables, faced in wood or in brick with wood or vinyl/aluminum trim. Most have partial-width porches under extended roofs or awnings.
- Rectangular, one-story gable-front, sided in brick with wood or vinyl trim. Some have single gables, while others have an additional gable over the living room window. Other varieties are gable-on-hip, hipped with a smaller front gable, or side-gabled. Porches were originally simple stoops or door-width covered entries, although some houses have been modified with larger porches or front decks. A few two-story buildings are included within this typology.
- One-story rectangular ranch. These are typically faced with brick, have hipped roofs, and many, especially later examples, have attached garages.

Scattered throughout the neighborhood are houses representing the earliest development of the neighborhood from the 1920s and 1930s. Among these are one-and-one-half story bungalows with full-width porches and projecting dormers; two-story cross-gable cottages with wood siding and partial width porches, and two-story American four-square houses with hipped roofs and dormers, sided in brick or wood. Several excellent examples of Tudor

Revival houses exist, with brick siding and exaggerated gables. Most of these are located on the east half of the neighborhood, since many 1920s and 1930s houses were cleared from the west half (Birwood, Griggs, Ilene, and Washburn) for construction of temporary war worker housing in the 1940s. A few exceptions exist, such as 20170 Birwood; this house is also canted slightly off the north/south grid of the other houses, also indicating its earlier origin. Another example from this area is a two-story American Foursquare house at 20121 Griggs, built in 1928.

In some cases, building permits document that these 1920s and 1930s houses were moved from elsewhere in the city or in Oakland County, typically during the 1940s and 1950s. Examples include 20507 Indiana, moved from somewhere in Oakland County in 1944, 19978 Northlawn, moved from 5507 Vinewood in 1948, and 19957 Washburn, moved from 1561 W. Davison in 1955. At least one house was moved within the neighborhood – 20484 Greenlawn was originally located at 20255 Cherrylawn and was moved in 1952 when the city was acquiring land for the Joe Louis Playfield.

At the other end of the spectrum are more recent houses from 1960s and later, including split levels in brick or wood, and more modern ranch houses. However, these are also scattered throughout the neighborhood and do not detract from the general character of a 1920s-1960s neighborhood. Some examples include a 1971 ranch at 20255 Greenlawn and a series of early 1970s two-story houses on the west side of Wyoming between Norfolk and Eight Mile Road.

Narrative Themes

Creating a Community

Eight Mile-Wyoming was founded by Black Detroiters who sought to create an independent residential neighborhood away from the overcrowding and substandard housing in the city's Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods, where most Black citizens were involuntarily segregated. Eight Mile-Wyoming joined several other early twentieth century Black enclaves such as Conant Gardens, a primarily middle-class residential neighborhood on the northeast side; and the Old West Side, which included both residences and a thriving commercial district with Black-owned businesses and social institutions. Black citizens who wanted to move away from the segregated Black Bottom and Paradise Valley areas had to find vacant areas away from already developed white neighborhoods, where no restrictive covenants were in place and white landholders were willing to sell to Black people.

Although Conant Gardens and the Old West Side provided for middle-class African Americans who could afford to build or rent their own homes, there were much fewer opportunities for working class Black residents. At the same time, conditions in the densely populated Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods were rapidly deteriorating as waves of Black Southerners moved to the north seeking economic opportunity and an escape from the crushing environment of the Jim Crow South, a movement called by historians the Great Migration. In 1910, there were 5,741 Black residents in the city; by 1920 it had risen to 40,838 and 120,000 by 1930. While the city's white population was also growing exponentially, white immigrants, many of them from Europe, did not face the same housing restrictions as African Americans. As these immigrant groups formed their own neighborhoods in other areas of the city, working-class Black residents had little opportunity to move out of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. At the beginning of World War I, the *Detroit Free Press* noted the impact of discrimination that faced these new residents in finding adequate housing:

Detroit is facing a wartime problem...Negroes are not welcome in every neighborhood. A European, be he ever so ignorant, can find localities where it is possible for him to rent or buy a home on easy terms. In the same district, a Negro would be turned away, however worthy he might be.¹⁵

In this context, the story of the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is an extraordinary one that exemplifies the power of African Americans to challenge racial oppression and discrimination and to, in an oft cited phrase, "make a way out of no way." Descendants of these early residents called their ancestors "pioneers," and to many it was an apt description of their experience settling what was essentially recently vacated farmland miles away from the developed areas of the city. The land on which they settled was nominally surveyed and platted but lacked nearly any infrastructure or amenities. Many Detroit neighborhoods founded for whites during this period were platted by developers who laid out roads and sidewalks, installed sewers and water lines, and even built houses. These subdivisions were often located along existing or recently extended transportation routes (i.e. bus and streetcar lines) and utility corridors.

In contrast, Eight Mile-Wyoming was not within the boundaries of the city of Detroit when the first residents purchased lots there, desiring "a place to live unencumbered by the congested

¹⁵ Len G. Shaw, "Detroit's New Housing Problem," *Detroit Free Press*. June 3, 1917.

conditions of the downtown slum.”¹⁶ Accounts of early residents generally agree in describing conditions during those early years. Most used what little savings they had to purchase the land. Because banks refused to loan money to Black people, homes were built “inch by inch and from payday to payday”¹⁷ as they could afford to purchase materials or using recycled and found materials. Early resident Burniece Avery noted that “it was not unusual to hear the ringing of hammers late at night, putting down the flooring, or nailing on the beaver board walls by flickering lamp light...tar paper siding was the fashion—rooms were added as the family grew.” Residents looked forward to the day they could build permanent houses “with running water instead of the old pump, and modern sanitation to take the place of outside toilets and the tin tub to bathe in.”¹⁸ Earlier homes were often temporary buildings constructed on the back ends of lots, with the intention that a more permanent home would be constructed later. Although the neighborhood would later gain the reputation among some as a “shacktown” because of this character, longtime community leader Shelton Johnson later wrote that “It was the desire of these pioneers to create a respectable community of decent homes.”¹⁹

Ruth Rosa Green, who arrived with her parents, Antonio Rosa and Mary Gillem, and sister Marjorie in 1920, later recalled that the neighborhood “was very sparsely populated. It had few finished homes, some tar-papered houses, tents, farms, and lean-to dwellings scattered among trees, muddy roads, ditches, and paths. There were a few stores and restaurants on both sides of Eight Mile Road and throughout the community.” However, Green also noted that the appearance of the neighborhood belied the strong sense of community that was developing:

Here we found an ethnic melting pot of people. Peace, harmony, respect, and co-operation prevailed. Everyone was a real neighbor – helping each other build homes, caring for the sick, giving comfort in sorrow, providing food and clothing when needed, pushing for good education, providing wholesome recreation and religious activities for children and adults. Even in the winter, the shoveling of snow was a team effort, clearing a path from one house to the next and to the main road.²⁰

The area lacked nearly any of the amenities common to urban neighborhoods; even getting to and from the neighborhood was arduous. The closest public transit stop was at Woodward Avenue two miles east, which was later supplemented by a privately-operated bus line that sometimes broke down. Before buses ran on Eight Mile, recalled Green, families walked or hitched rides on farm wagons to Woodward Avenue. Avery later recalled that on reaching the neighborhood, “(o)ne pushed aside giant ferns to travel the path that wound diagonally through the neighborhood. Here and there, small spaces were cleared for gardens, otherwise, the undergrowth was broken only by towering trees, until one reached the house and lot of a distant neighbor.”²¹ People had to carry lanterns at night because there were no street lights.²² However, the sparse character of the settlement also provided residents with space to engage in subsistence farming and even keep small animals; for newly arrived Southerners

¹⁶ Detroit Urban League, “Housing Survey,” Manuscript dated January 1952, Folder A7-12, Box 43, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

¹⁷ W. J. Johnson, “8 Mile Road Community Grows into Modern, Progressive Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 21, 1951, 5.

¹⁸ Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952,” Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 5.

¹⁹ W. J. Johnson, “8 Mile Road Community Grows into Modern, Progressive Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 21, 1951, 5.

²⁰ Ruth Rosa Green, “Neighborhood Was a Melting Pot,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 10, 1988, 16A.

²¹ Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952,” Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 1.

²² “West Eight Mile Notes,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 26, 1956, 13.

used to living on rural farms, this would have been an important means of support.²³ Annexation in 1922 and 1925 gradually brought some improvements to the area, including paved streets and sidewalks, sewers, and street lights, while institutions necessary to the life of the community, including churches, a school, and businesses developed.



Figure 6: Mr. Mitchel and Mrs. Essie Campbell at 19928 Wisconsin, 1929 (Detroit Public Library Digital Collections).

²³ Gerald Van Dusen, *Detroit's Birwood Wall: Hatred and Healing in the West Eight Mile Community* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2019), Introduction.

In 1929, the city's explosive growth came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Great Depression. While widespread unemployment affected middle and working class Americans across the country, Black citizens, often already living on thin economic margins, were disproportionately impacted, and many members of the Eight Mile-Wyoming community were wiped out. Residents recalled that during the Depression, the Detroit Fire Department set up a makeshift soup kitchen at Roselawn and Eight Mile, using copper wash boilers full of soup given out three times per day.²⁴ In the early years of the Depression, homeowners across the country defaulted on mortgages, banks went out of business as payments dried up, and the construction industry virtually ceased operation.²⁵ When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, he instituted a series of public welfare programs to provide employment and other means of relief to stabilize the country's economy. Among these were the creation of two federal agencies intended to assist existing and prospective homeowners. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) purchased existing mortgages that were under threat of foreclosure, lowered interest rates, and provided longer repayment schedules. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insured bank-provided mortgages for first time homebuyers.

Both programs instituted practices that, for the first time, would establish *de jure* segregation as federal policy. To assist in evaluating the safety of mortgages, the HOLC engaged local real estate agents to conduct appraisals of neighborhoods and assign them to risk categories on maps, from safest (green or blue) to riskiest (yellow or red). While the maps were supposed to consider objective factors such as the condition of housing stock and the demand for houses, in practice Black neighborhoods, whatever their conditions, were coded as red, and prospective Black homeowners excluded from mortgage relief. The practice of systematically excluding minorities from mortgage eligibility thus came to be known as "redlining."²⁶ Black neighborhoods across Detroit, even relatively wealthy middle-class neighborhoods such as Conant Gardens and the West Side, were classified red on the HOLC's 1939 map, while adjoining neighborhoods were colored yellow due to their proximity to Black and Jewish people. Unsurprisingly, then, Eight Mile-Wyoming was classified as "D-Hazardous" and colored red. The area description for the map noted its "Negro concentration" and described the characteristics of the area as "35% improved. Unpaved and poorly graded streets. Gas, light, water, sewers. Stores on 8 Mile Road."²⁷

Segregation by neighborhood was also the official policy of the FHA, which defined the close proximity of Black and white neighborhoods to be an "adverse influence." The agency's 1936 underwriting manual supported racial deed restrictions as "apt to prove more effective than a zoning ordinance in providing protection from adverse influences."²⁸ To protect neighborhoods from adverse influences, including "infiltration of...inharmonious racial groups," the FHA recommended "...natural or artificially established barriers."²⁹

²⁴ "West Eight Mile Notes," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 26, 1956, 13.

²⁵ C. Lowell Harriss, *History and Policies of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation*, (New York: H. Wolff Book Manufacturing Co., Inc., 1951),7-9.

²⁶ The term is often attributed to John McKnight, who described the practice in Chicago during the 1960s, when he was the Director of the Midwestern Branch of the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

²⁷ "Mapping Inequality," (Online collection of HOLC Residential Security Maps, at <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>).

²⁸ Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act With Revisions to April 1, 1936* (Washington, D.C.), Part II, Section 2, Rating of Location, sections 228-229 and 284.

²⁹ Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act With Revisions to April 1, 1936* (Washington, D.C.), Part II, Section 2, Rating of Location, sections 228-229 and 284.

By the late 1930s, Eight Mile-Wyoming was no longer an isolated enclave on the outskirts of the city. White neighborhoods were gradually surrounding and moving closer to the area, creating pressure on the existing Black neighborhood. As Burniece Avery later wrote, “the real estate interests awoke one bright morning to the realization that Detroit was growing in the North Western direction, and that out west of Palmer Woods was a beautiful site far away from the smoke of factories, unmarred by rail roads, high and dry with no hint of flooded basements, a wonderful place—the fly in the ointment—Negroes had control of it.”³⁰ Many whites wanted the community cleared of its Black residents and a white neighborhood put in its place. This plan was supported by a report sponsored by a city entity, the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, in 1940. The Council sent a white sociologist to survey the neighborhood who concluded that it was a slum and should be converted to a white neighborhood, while its existing residents would be moved to a “comparable area...close to the industrial center of employment [i.e. closer to existing Black neighborhoods]” where “small cottages” could be built for the displaced residents, who would be “given the privilege of buying one of these modern, sanitary convenient houses” through a credit on the appraised value of the resident’s existing property.³¹ While it was true that Eight Mile-Wyoming residents were among the city’s poorest and many of the houses were below standard due to their piecemeal construction, a real property survey in 1938 documented that over ninety percent of residents lived in single-family detached homes, and two-thirds of them were owner-occupied—higher than the overall city average. Almost half owned their land free of mortgage or land contract.³²

The community also instituted several measures to improve their neighborhood conditions. In 1937, the Detroit Urban League (DUL) opened its Northwest Branch at 20435 Northlawn Avenue (extant). The building sat on two lots donated by philanthropist and businessman Fred Butzel, and construction was supported by a \$10,000 grant from the McGregor Fund (Figure 7). The building was used for a variety of community meetings, children’s and teen’s games and activities, church meetings, lecture, and private events, while there was a playground outside. The dedication ceremony was attended by boxer Joe Louis.³³ Among the earliest programs of the DUL’s Northwest Branch was a demonstration project in the community to improve lawns, homes, and gardens, including a lawn and kitchen contest in which 500 residents competed.³⁴ The following year, the Eight Mile Road Community Club was founded to provide programs and advocacy on multiple fronts. In its first year, the organization worked to install sewers, water, and lighting, secure a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project to repair streets, advise property owners on how to pay delinquent taxes, and advocated for Black employment on WPA projects.³⁵

³⁰ Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952,” Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 5-6.

³¹ Marvel Daines, “Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum,” Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of Detroit, March 1940, 49-50.

³² Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40.

³³ Van Dusen, *Detroit’s Birwood Wall*, Ch. 7.

³⁴ “An Urban League Project,” *Detroit Tribune*, October 2, 1937, 5.

³⁵ “Eight Mile Group Reviews Activities,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 4, 1939, 3.



Figure 7: Detroit Urban League Northwest Branch, undated (Box 87, Detroit Urban League Archives, Bentley Historical Library)

In 1941, the most visible symbol of codified segregation appeared on the western edge of the community. The land to the west of Mendota Street had remained undeveloped before the Depression, but by 1939 a white developer, James T. McMillan, under the Nottingham Land Company was planning a new subdivision, Blackstone Park, in the area. The deeds to Blackstone Park included a restriction stating that “No part of said property shall be used or occupied in whole or in part by any persons not of pure, unmixed, white Caucasian race” with the exception of domestic servants,³⁶ but the subdivision was apparently too close to the Black Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood for prospective homeowners to qualify for FHA-backed loans without some further barrier between the areas. While FHA requirements were usually achieved through space – wide streets, parks, or even disconnections in the street grid – the border between the two subdivisions was only an alley. To satisfy the FHA, in 1941 McMillan built a concrete wall, six feet high, one foot thick, and half a mile long (Figure 8). While the wall was discontinuous at each cross street (Norfolk, Chippewa, and Pembroke), its intention was clear to the neighborhood. As Burniece Avery wrote, “Another type of pressure took the form of a 6ft concrete wall at the alley behind Birwood, separating the neighborhood from Blackstone Park. Unlike Pembroke, this was a visible line over which ‘thou shalt not pass.’”³⁷ One of Detroit’s Black newspapers, the *Michigan Chronicle*, also clearly stated the message,

Indeed, the invisible walls of racial prejudice confront us daily in this democracy and the

³⁶ “Restrictions, Blackstone Park Subdivision No. 6, November 1, 1939, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YqLxkvBL9l2t0OH40JBrtA0J0MzL87R1/view>.

³⁷ Burniece Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952,” Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 6.

appearance of an actual wall of concrete represents the measure of this racial bigotry. It may represent too the mad folly of the dominant group who, like the ostrich, dare not face reality and stick their heads in the sand. The whole housing problem in Detroit, for whites as well as Negroes, has been handled with the same blind stupidity.³⁸

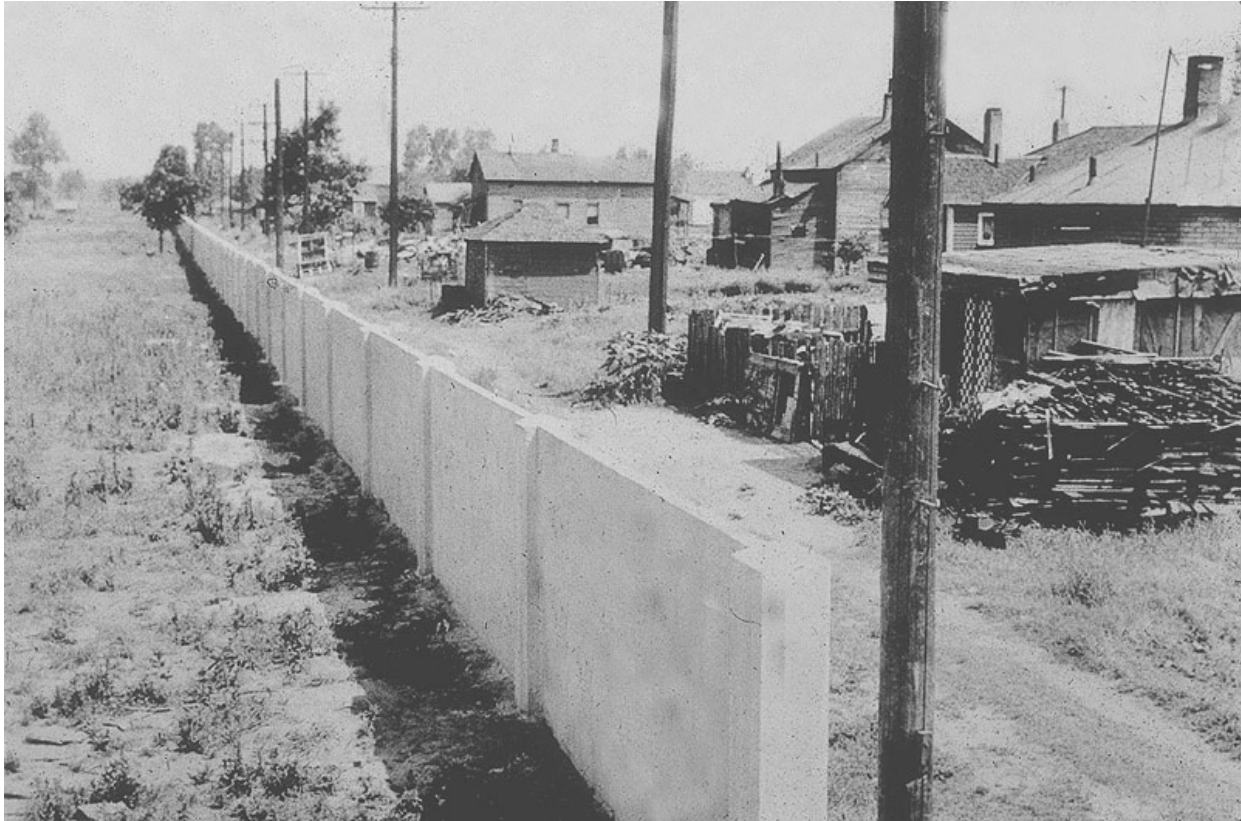


Figure 8: Eight Mile-Wyoming residences backing on the Birwood Wall, 1940s (Library of Congress)

White homeowners of Blackstone Park were now able to secure FHA backed mortgages, but no such funding was made available to the residents of Eight Mile-Wyoming. As the neighborhood was increasingly hemmed in by unfriendly neighbors, tensions rose. The western border was now fixed by a physical wall (commonly known as the Birwood Wall), and for approximately ten years after its construction most of Mendota Street, just beyond the wall, remained undeveloped as a further barrier. Pembroke Street continued as the southern “color line.” The portions of the community north of Eight Mile Road, in Royal Oak Township, were isolated by neighboring incorporated cities and non-housing development. At the eastern edge of the neighborhood, white neighbors reacted with intimidation and violence to Black people who attempted to cross what was then the eastern color line, Greenlawn Street. The same year that the wall was built, Mina Johnson purchased and attempted to occupy 8005 Chippewa, at the corner of Woodingham. Whites from the Livernois neighborhood to the east threatened to burn the home if Johnson did not leave, and her son, Chester Johnson, reported being beaten by the police after he was stopped on a vehicle technicality. The *Detroit Tribune*, another Black-operated newspaper, reported that in the aftermath of the wall’s construction, whites on the other side of the neighborhood wanted to drive Black residents out of the area.³⁹

³⁸ “Oppose Plan to Establish Negro Ghetto,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 5, 1941, 1.

³⁹ “Threat Made to Burn Home of Colored Woman,” *Detroit Tribune*, August 2, 1941, 1, 6.

As the United States entered World War II, housing remained a substantial issue for the neighborhood, especially because many lots were vacant or occupied by starter homes. As another wave of Black Southerners moved north to work in the city's defense industry, the city looked for areas to build temporary housing close to established Black neighborhoods. The City Plan Commission proposed building 1,500 units of temporary war worker housing in the form of barracks and Quonset huts, chiefly in the six blocks east of the Birwood Wall.⁴⁰ The plan caused division among the residents. Some, like Burniece Avery, saw it as yet another attempt to remove the entire community, observing that "(t)he thought behind this action... was 'When the war is over, we will declare the whole area a slum, and move in with a Master Plan under the authority of the Urban Redevelopment Plan; clear the land, and resubdivide the lots, making them 50 ft instead of the present 40 ft.' There was something familiar about that re-subdividing angle that made us remember Shacktown [Daines' report], and we renewed our fight against it."⁴¹ The city's NAACP chapter, backed by the *Michigan Chronicle* and *Detroit Tribune*, supported the general idea of publicly-funded housing, but opposed segregated developments, noting that it set a dangerous precedent. Some residents, however, supported the temporary housing on the grounds that any increase in housing was positive. The Reverend Horace A. White, pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church and the first Black man on the city's Housing Commission, stated that the project had been accepted as a war project without reference to race, and believed, in contrast to Avery, that it would support the community and, by increasing the size and prosperity of the community, make it more difficult for white people to buy out and relocate Black residents.⁴²

The residents of Eight Mile-Wyoming used this opportunity to convince the federal government to finally provide FHA funding for mortgages in a Black neighborhood. Two community groups, the Carver Progressive Association and the Eight Mile Road Civic Improvement Association, formed to lead the community effort. They contacted Raymond Foley, Director of the FHA in Michigan, who agreed to meet with the community. The whole neighborhood turned out to polish up the area the night before Foley visited.⁴³ As a result of their efforts, the city and the FHA agreed to subsidize construction of single-family homes, while the community agreed to siting six hundred units of temporary war housing (Figure 9). Historian Thomas Sugrue noted that "It was a partial victory for Black community groups, a showpiece for the FHA, which could claim that it worked for the benefit of Black Detroiters, and an acceptable result for public housing officials, who hastily constructed temporary structures in the Eight Mile Road area." As a result, "the neighborhood became a bastion of Black homeownership, 'one of the very few areas in Detroit where Negroes can buy land, build, and own their own home.'" Over the next ten years, over one thousand five hundred single-family homes were built in the neighborhood.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 64, 68-70.

⁴¹ Burniece Avery, "The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952," Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 7.

⁴² John Wood, "Whites Fear Integration," *Michigan Chronicle*, February 20, 1943, 1-2; "Freedom of Speech," *Detroit Tribune*, February 20, 1943; Horace A. White, "Confusion on Project Issue," *Detroit Tribune*, March 6, 1943, 1, 11.

⁴³ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 66-67; Burniece Avery, "The Eight Mile Road...Its Growth from 1920...1952," Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, 10.

⁴⁴ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 71.



Figure 9: Temporary war worker/veteran housing in Eight Mile-Wyoming, 1949 (study area outlined in red) (DTE Aerial Photograph Collection).

Meanwhile, north of Eight Mile Road, the federal government succeeded in creating another temporary wartime housing community. Oakdale Gardens, opened in 1945, covered approximately one square mile of Royal Oak Township (Figure 10 and Figure 11) At first open only to war workers, it was later expanded to include veterans and by 1946 accommodated nearly 1500 families. The development consisted of 141 one-story buildings constructed on site, and 257 one- to two-story buildings which were brought from Midland, Willow Run, Bay City, and Windham, Ohio, then reassembled on site. Permanent support buildings included a community center, fire, and police station and a school.⁴⁵



Figure 10: Oakdale Temporary Housing, Royal Oak Township, 1945 (Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University)

⁴⁵ Charles Wartman, "One Year of Growth at Oakdale Gardens," *Michigan Chronicle*, January 19, 1946, 2.



Figure 11: Temporary war worker/veteran housing in Royal Oak Township, 1949 (north of study area, outlined in red) (DTE Aerial Photography Collection)

More permanent housing was planned for the neighborhood in the 1940s through the efforts of Wayne County Better Homes (WCBH), a corporation founded by the city's Black professional and business leaders under the leadership of businessman and State Senator Charles Diggs, Sr. to build new homes for Black Detroiters. With FHA mortgages now available for Black home construction, WCBH purchased land near Conant Gardens and began building single-family homes. In 1944 the group announced plans for the development of 475 homes on Cherrylawn, Northlawn, Greenlawn, and adjacent streets between Eight Mile Road and Pembroke Street, designed by WCBH's head architect, Donald F. White, Michigan's first licensed Black architect. Also included in the plan were parks, businesses, churches, and schools. In April of that year, the city's Common Council delayed transferring state-owned lots under their control, arguing that the city would have no guarantee that the houses would be built to government standards.⁴⁶ However, WCBH moved forward with some houses, including eleven on Northlawn and fourteen on Cherrylawn (Figure 12 and Figure 13). By July, five of the houses on Northlawn were completed, and the Cherrylawn houses were finished the following (the addresses of the houses built by WCBH could not be confirmed, as building permits for Northlawn and Cherrylawn do not cite Wayne County Better Homes. However, permits for five houses between 19928 and 19962 on the east side of Northlawn were all pulled in early 1944 so these may be the WCBH houses).⁴⁷ However, WCBH eventually encountered financial difficulties, and the project was not completed before the collaborative dissolved in 1951.⁴⁸



Figure 12: WCBH houses completed on either Northlawn and Roselawn, *Detroit Tribune*, July 22, 1944.

⁴⁶ "Construction Moving Fast on New Homes," *Michigan Chronicle*, December 4, 1943, 20; "Building Company Seeks to Buy Lots on Eight-Mile Road," *Detroit Tribune*, January 15, 1944, 6; "Eight Mile Road Housing Still Undecided by City," *Michigan Chronicle*, April 1, 1944, 1.

⁴⁷ "Building Firm Completes Homes on 8-Mile Road," *Detroit Tribune*, July 22, 1944, 7.

⁴⁸ "Negro Home Builders' Group Finally Ended," *Michigan Chronicle*, June 16, 1951, 1.

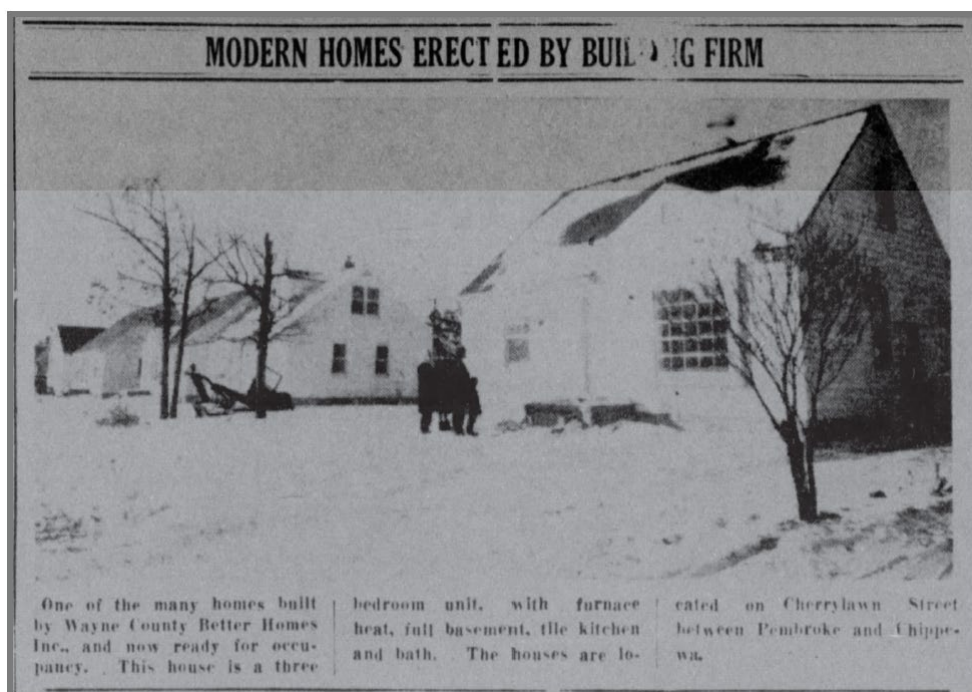


Figure 13: WCBH houses completed on Cherrylawn, *Detroit Tribune*, February 3, 1945, 3.

The issue of temporary housing was revived following the end of World War II, when the placement of 49 Quonset huts for temporary veteran housing was approved in the area bounded by Eight Mile, Northlawn, Pembroke, and Birwood.⁴⁹ Some residents again objected, reluctant to accept temporary rather than permanent housing, and divisions developed between the “old settlers” and the “new comers,” especially those in temporary housing.⁵⁰ A housing study prepared by the Detroit Urban League in 1952 noted the varying character of the neighborhood at this time. Approximately 72% of the land was still vacant, and of the 698 permanent dwellings in the neighborhood, 60% dated from before 1924. Nearly 60% (417) of the permanent homes were up to standard, while 18% (126) needed repairs and 22% (155) should be demolished. The best rated homes were located from Greenlawn to Indiana between Norfolk and Pembroke, as well as some on Mendota (which were newly constructed). The report acknowledged that the 801 temporary housing units were automatically classified as substandard, which distorted the overall picture of the neighborhood’s housing stock, and noted that residents had fought against the temporary units and for their removal since World War II.⁵¹

⁴⁹ “Veterans Housing Given Go Sign,” *Detroit Tribune*, September 28, 1946, 3.

⁵⁰ “Annual Report, 1950,” Northwest Branch, Detroit Urban League, Folder A8-8, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

⁵¹ “Housing Study, 1952,” Northwest Branch, Detroit Urban League, Folder A7-12, Box 43, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.



Figure 14: 1924 Wisconsin Street, ca. 1947 (Detroit Public Library Digital Collections)

Although restrictive covenants had been struck down as unenforceable by the United States' Supreme Court's 1948 decision in *Shelley v. Kramer*, community residents found it remained difficult to break past the color line in Eight Mile-Wyoming. In the wake of the decision, many white neighborhoods formed neighborhood or homeowners' associations to block integration of their neighborhoods. On the west side of the neighborhood, the Birwood Wall barrier was breached in 1949 by a development of one hundred homes on Mendota Street. Jewish businessman Sam DeRoven released these lots to the Alex Dean Construction Company. Alex Dean, who was Black, had started building affordable houses around 1947 on Goddard Street in the Conant Gardens/Grixdale area. The *Michigan Chronicle* noted the importance of the development, stating that "A high restraining wall, erected 10 years ago by prejudiced whites, who did not want Negro residents to move into a lily-white area, saw its usefulness torn asunder this week when homes for Negro residents were started on the 'white' side of it."⁵² Building permits were approved for nearly all of the houses on the east side of Mendota in March 1950, at a cost of around \$7,500 each. It is unclear if Alex Dean completed the construction, however. The *Chronicle* reported that his building and real estate licenses were revoked in April 1950 after he was charged with larceny in connection with work not performed for building clients; Dean was sentenced to prison the following year. An advertisement for the development in late April 1950 cited the builders as "Mendota Building

⁵² "Wall Remains, but Negroes are Going Around It," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 26, 1949, 4; "Alert Alex Dean Sets Pace on Local Building Scene," *Michigan Chronicle*, October 15, 1949, 24.

Company” (Figure 15). Dean later regained his building license and continued building houses in the city through the 1980s.⁵³ Although Blackstone Park had a homeowners’ association in the early 1950s, no specific incidents of intimidation were noted, although the Detroit Urban League reported in 1950 that the organization had discouraged use of a park at Norfolk and Cheyenne by Black children.⁵⁴

G.I.'s! **\$100⁰⁰**
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THESE GREAT FEATURES

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 In 8 Mile-Wyoming Section.

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2 Blocks South of West 8 Mile

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Figure 15: Advertisement for New Development on Mendota Street, Michigan Chronicle, April 29, 1950, 19.

⁵³ “Pioneer Black Contractor,” *Michigan Chronicle*, April 11, 1981, D15.

⁵⁴ George D. Brock, “Monthly Report, June 1950,” Northwest Branch, Detroit Urban League, Folder A8-8, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

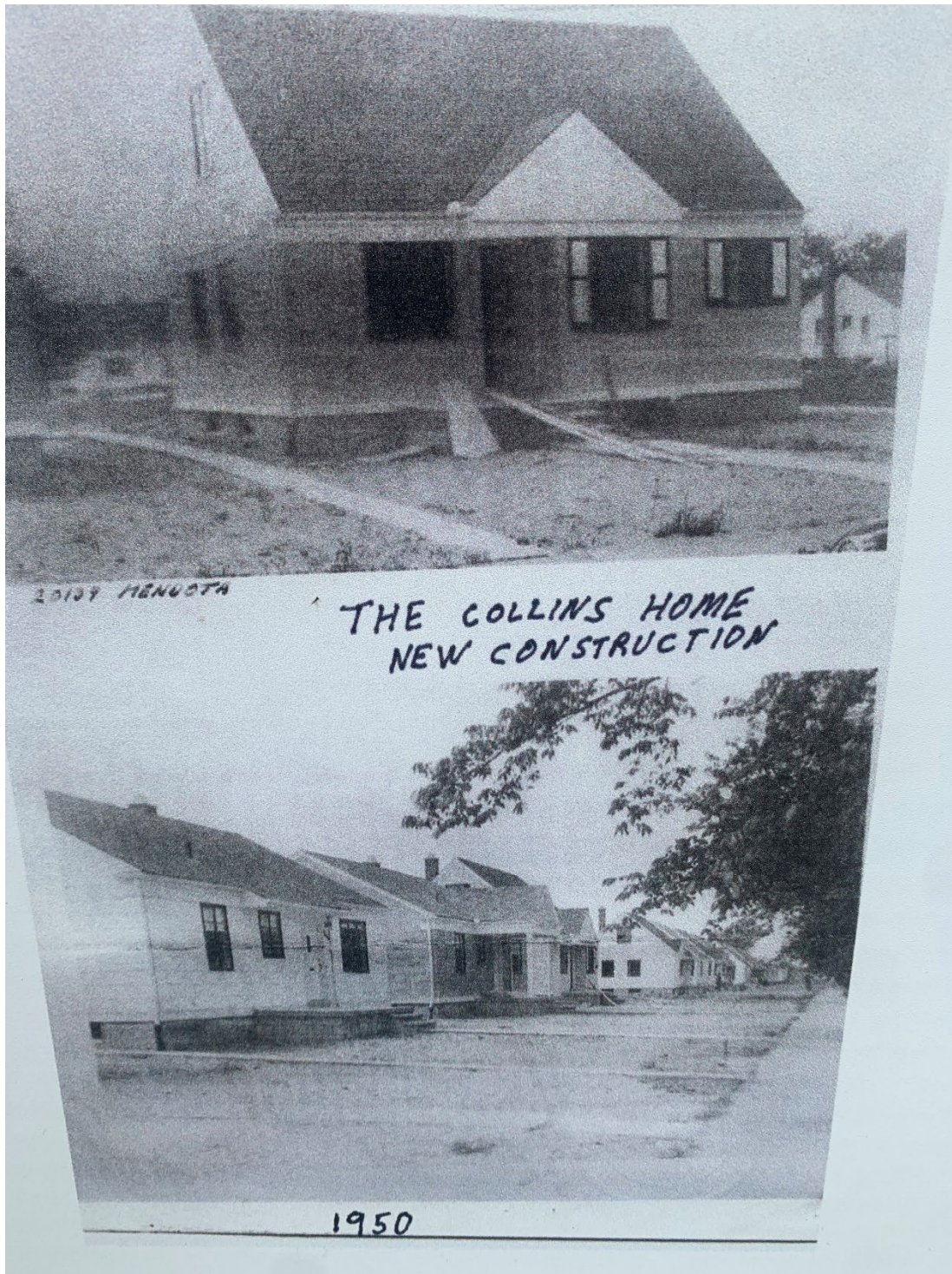


Figure 16: Houses under construction on Mendota Street, 1950 (photograph displayed at Eight Mile Old Timers Club picnic)

In 1953 Harry Slatkin and another builder began developing homes beyond the “vast undeveloped area” south of Pembroke that had served as “no man’s land” for decades. At some point, Slatkin built what one writer in the *Michigan Chronicle* characterized as an “insulting, unnecessary, and provocative fence” along the Pembroke side of the

development.⁵⁵ When members of the community contacted Slatkin to ask him to remove the fence, he reportedly refused, saying “East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet...at least not in our day.” The fence remained in place as of 1977 even though Black residents had breached Pembroke as the color line beginning in the late 1950s.⁵⁶

A more disturbing incident happened, also in 1953, when Arthur and Julia Rowe purchased a lot at the corner of Pembroke and Woodingham beyond the Greenlawn color line. The Rowes were approached by members of the Livernois Improvement Association (the neighborhood to the east) who informed them that there was a “gentleman’s agreement” that Black people would not live east of Greenlawn and that their compliance in selling the property was expected. After the Livernois Improvement Association balked at the Rowes’ \$15,000 asking price, the couple refused any more demands to sell, and gained the support of the Detroit Urban League, who referred the incident to the city’s Commission on Community Relations. The Rowes were eventually able to finish and occupy their house (8020 Chippewa, extant) (Figure 17).⁵⁷

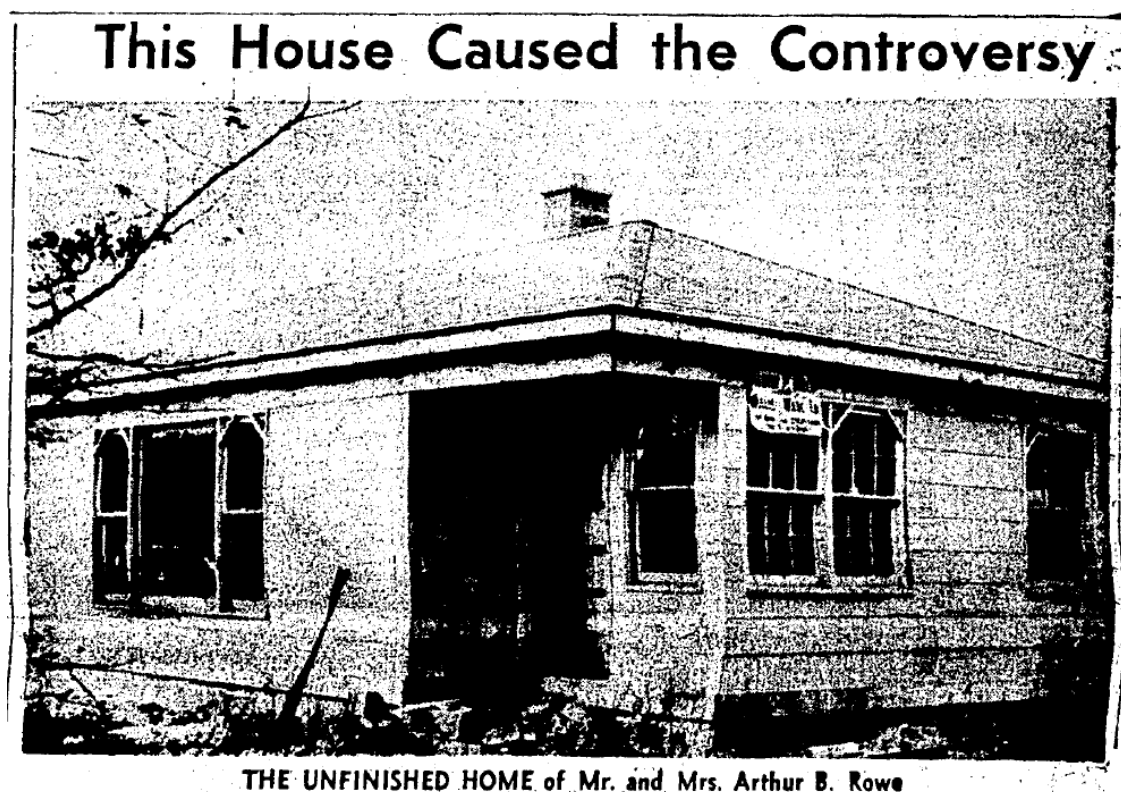


Figure 17: Rowe House, Pembroke and Woodingham (*Michigan Chronicle*, March 28, 1953, 1.)

In the mid-1950s, the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood was among the target areas for a new type of urban renewal program, called “neighborhood conservation,” and was approved by the federal government for Title 1 funds. Rather than the wholesale clearance and reconstruction of areas that was standard for urban renewal, the neighborhood conservation

⁵⁵ Charles J. Wartman, “The Spectator,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 24, 1953, 24; Charles J. Wartman, “The Spectator,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 9, 1954, 22.

⁵⁶ Avery, 169.

⁵⁷ “Monthly Report, April 1953,” in Folder A8-11, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library; “Livernois Group Bars Negro Family from New Premises,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 28, 1953, 1.

plan targeted middle-aged neighborhoods judged to not require complete removal, but where supportive programs could improve the character of the neighborhood. The Detroit Urban League was represented on the Detroit Committee for Neighborhood Conservation and Improved Housing (NCIH) during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Eight Mile-Wyoming was among 46 areas selected for initial study and analysis, it was not one of the pilot program areas developed in the 1950s. In the meantime, aerial photographs show that the temporary war and veteran housing in the area was removed between 1952 and 1956. By 1960, the NCIH had developed plans for the neighborhood that included a mix of demolishing approximately 300 dilapidated residential and commercial structures, modernizing others, blocking Indiana, Cherrylawn, and Greenlawn Streets at Eight Mile Road to reduce through traffic, creating three new playgrounds connected by landscaped walkways, and installing new paving and street lighting. In addition, an area south of Pembroke Street between Cherrylawn and Roselawn was to be completely cleared and redeveloped.

The Carver Progressive Club filed suit to block the plan, characterizing it as “Negro removal” and claiming that many of the homes targeted for demolition were relatively new. There was also significant concern that provision for rehousing the elderly people displaced by the plan was inadequate.⁵⁸ That suit was denied in 1961, but Carver Progressive Club was joined by the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL) in 1963 on a new suit against the city, Housing Commission, and Home Finance Agency to bar the use of federal funds for the project. The Club’s president at the time was Alfonso Wells, who also served on GOAL’s Executive Council along with attorney Milton R. Henry.⁵⁹ However, this suit was also unsuccessful, and by the end of 1963 the city had approved the plans for the Eight Mile-Wyoming Conservation Area, with some changes to the plans including provisions for relocation of families affected by land purchases, eliminating the landscaped walkways, and dropping plans to block off streets from Eight Mile Road.⁶⁰ Work began that year and continued into 1964. Many of the structures that were removed were the temporary houses that had been built at the rear of lots in the 1920s.⁶¹

The federal government had better success north of Eight Mile Road, where in 1954 the Housing and Home Finance Agency allocated money to assist Royal Oak Township in replacing the temporary housing units in Oakdale Gardens with permanent homes.⁶² The following year, Oakdale Gardens residents organized to form a cooperative to assume control of the 590-unit permanent housing development, which included one- to four-bedroom units.⁶³ Notwithstanding the Carver Progressive Club’s opposition, and the generally poor results of the conservation program in Detroit overall, historian June Manning Thomas has judged the program a relative success in Eight Mile-Wyoming, because she notes, the neighborhood was already fairly stable.⁶⁴ It also avoided the large-scale clearance of entire neighborhoods associated with earlier urban renewal projects such as Lafayette Park and the Medical Center. While about twenty-five percent of the homes in the area were demolished, the program also invested in the rehabilitation of another twenty-five percent through low-interest loans to

⁵⁸ “W. Eight Mile Group Sues to Halt New Plan,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 7, 1960, 2; Anthony Ripley, “8 Mile-Wyoming Project gets Complaints, Praise,” *Detroit News*, June 28, 1962, 18A.

⁵⁹ “Groups Merge in Fight Against ‘Negro Removal’,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 8, 1963, 5.

⁶⁰ “City Approves Eight Mile Road Development,” *Michigan Chronicle*, December 21, 1963, C12.

⁶¹ “8 Mile-Wyoming Gets New Look,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 12, 1963, 12; “Detroit Committee for Neighborhood Conservation and Improvement, General Committee Meeting Minutes, June 12, 1964,” in Folder A18-1, Box 54, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

⁶² “Slum Clearance Set for Eight Mile Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, February 27, 1954, 1.

⁶³ “Public Invited to Oakdale Gardens Housing Project,” *Michigan Chronicle*, April 16, 1955, 8.

⁶⁴ June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 91-92, 98.

homeowners. Rather than displacing the Black residents, many were accommodated in homes rebuilt on the cleared lots, or in older homes that the Detroit Housing Commission purchased and remodeled.⁶⁵ Still, there remained pockets of resistance to the program. In 1967, approximately 40 court cases were filed to fight acquisition. One case was filed by Margaret Franklin, 20523 Ilene Street (no longer extant), a 74-year-old widow who had been among the first to move to the area in the 1920s. In speaking against the plan, Mrs. Franklin noted that “Negroes were let in this area by mistake back in the 20s...We were never wanted. We slaved to get this land so some of our people could have a decent place to live.” She also pointed to the absurdity that, if forced to accept an offer for her house, she could be charged rent to continue living in a house she had owned free and clear for decades. She believed that there was no demand for her lot, and that she should be allotted a rehabilitation grant instead. Several months later, she was granted a court order permitting her to retain the house.⁶⁶

As a result of increased opportunities for mortgages and the increasing prosperity of the neighborhood, existing and new residents were able to afford to build their own homes in Eight Mile-Wyoming during the 1950s and 1960s, with many homes dating from this era. Most were built by private individuals to their own tastes, but there were several developers who built multiple homes in the area, including American Custom Homes, Rosemont Building Company, and Holtzman and Silverman. American Custom Homes was founded in 1957 by Morris Margulies, son of Russian Jewish immigrants. American Custom Homes built houses throughout Detroit, Southfield, and southeast Michigan, but was particularly known for building homes in historically Black neighborhoods including Eight Mile-Wyoming, Royal Oak Township, and Conant Gardens. In some cases, the company built speculatively, purchasing lots, building homes, and then selling them one by one. Other times, they worked with individual purchasers to adapt designs to their particular requirements. Home movies taken by members of the Margulies family show the groundbreaking for a development at Ithaca and Cloverdale Streets in Royal Oak Township in 1962, as well as various homes the company built on Wyoming, Kentucky, and Pembroke in Eight Mile-Wyoming (Figure 18).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Dorothy Weddell, “Happy Ending to Urban Renewal,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 25, 1970, 8.

⁶⁶ “She Can’t Understand Why,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 22, 1967, 1; “Invalid Widow, 74, May Remain in Ilene Home, Chronicle Given Credit,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 4, 1967, C1.

⁶⁷ Rochelle Grier, “Love and Laughter” (obituary of Morris E. Margulies), *Detroit Jewish News*, November 30, 2017, 63, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/djnews/djn.2017.11.30.001/62.edu>; “American Custom Homes Opens Models,” *Michigan Chronicle*, August 5, 1961, 7; “Morris Home Movies, 1962,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWHkW67f7Xk>



Figure 18: Screenshot from “Morris Home Movies” showing (l-r) 20136, 20128, and 20120 Wyoming Avenue.

By 1970, Detroit Mayor Roman Gribbs stated of the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood that “Most of this area has been transformed into one of the most pleasant and attractive neighborhoods in the city. It is a cooperative effort which clearly demonstrates the deep sense of pride and accomplishment of the people who live in the area.” The neighborhood’s population had increased to over 2000 families living in new and renovated housing, with a refurbished street system, construction of a junior high, and development of business frontage.⁶⁸ The following year, Gribbs opened a mini-city hall at 8903 West Eight Mile Road at Kentucky, with the goal to provide devolved city services to the neighborhood.⁶⁹

The Emergence of Black-owned Businesses

Black-owned business grew out of need due to the strict racial segregation of urban neighborhoods. In addition to providing services to Black residents who were denied accommodations in white business establishments, Black-owned businesses offered their owners and employees one of the few opportunities available for economic advancement in a highly segregated city. Due to the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood’s distance from other developed areas, particularly during its early years, Black-owned businesses were vital to the community’s development, and provided services such as restaurants and groceries, personal services, funeral services, and later banking, insurance, and newspapers.

Although Black residents of Detroit owned and ran businesses throughout the nineteenth century, prospective business owners in the city and nationwide received a boost from the

⁶⁸ “U. S. Redevelopment Grant for 8 Mile-Wyoming Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, December 12, 1970, 14.

⁶⁹ “Northwest Area City Hall Opened by Mayor Gribbs,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 13, 1971, 7. The neighborhood city hall moved to Seven Mile Road and Pinehurst in 1975.

founding of the National Negro Business League (NNBL) in 1900 by Booker T. Washington. The NNBL supported Black entrepreneurs through city-based chapters and helped establish training schools to improve workers' opportunities for advancement in employment. The Detroit Branch of the NNBL was founded in 1926 by Reverend William Peck of Bethel AME church, and in 1930 Peck's wife Fannie B. Peck founded the Housewives League of Detroit to encourage the Black community to patronize Black businesses. Another organization that supported the development of Black businesses was Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded in 1916. A chapter was established in Detroit in 1920. By 1940 it was headed by *Michigan Chronicle* associate editor William A. Sherrill who strongly supported the city's business community.

Eight Mile-Wyoming's business district developed chiefly along Eight Mile Road. Prior to the widening of the road in the 1930s, it served as a commercial corridor tying together the two halves of the community, north and south. As the road, designated M-102 in 1928, developed into an eight-lane boulevard highway, it transitioned to something of a barrier to communication between the two areas, although social ties remained strong.

During the early development of the commercial district in the 1920s, there was a mix of businesses and private residences along Eight Mile Road. Many of the private residences remained into the 1950s; some were adapted for businesses, while others remained residences. Early purpose-built businesses were small one-story frame or brick buildings that business owners added on to and adapted over time as the business expanded or there was a change in use. Many of the residential and business buildings present in the 1920s-1940s were removed in the 1950s and 1960s, either to make way for new buildings, or as a result of urban renewal activities in the neighborhood.

By the late 1920s, the commercial strip on the south side of Eight Mile Road had about 18 businesses between Greenlawn and Mendota including secondhand goods stores, restaurants, grocers, shoe repair, an undertaker, and automobile service stations. Many of these were Black-owned and operated and provided needed services to the greater Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood in those early years. Fred Small operated a shoe repair business at several locations on Eight Mile Road from the 1920s to the 1940s. Sally Worthy owned a grocery store at 8233 West Eight Mile Road in the 1920s and 1930s. William and Annie Felton, long-time residents of the neighborhood, were in the restaurant business for decades, from William Felton's first restaurant between Ohio and Wisconsin streets in the 1920s to the soda bar and restaurant operated by Annie Mae Felton at 8417 in the 1950s. Another longtime neighborhood business founded in the 1920s was Nellie Howard's tavern at 8523. By the 1950s Howard's Tavern had become a popular establishment for food and drink in the area. Farther west, between Indiana and Kentucky, Elizabeth and Arthur Symes opened one of the earliest automobile service stations in the area around 1927.

During the 1920s-1940s, a few businesses also opened on Wyoming Avenue south of Eight Mile Road. John McCanley opened a store at 20409 Wyoming in 1928. In 1949, Steve Johnson, who owned the Kilroy Shoe Shine Parlor and Confectionary on Eight Mile Road, opened a grocery store in the building, and it remained a business into the 1960s.⁷⁰ Other businesses on Wyoming during the 1940s-1960s included a restaurant, car sales lot, and beauty school.

On the Royal Oak Township/Ferndale side of the neighborhood, an Eight Mile-Wyoming institution opened in the early 1930s. "Doc" Washington, a native of Kingston, Jamaica, opened

⁷⁰ "Northend Socials," *Michigan Chronicle*, January 29, 1949, 20.

“Uncle Tom’s Plantation,” a nightclub at 8200 West Eight Mile Road. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was a legendary “black and tan” establishment that catered to an integrated clientele and hosted some of the greatest names in entertainment. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, it became a pioneer in the Black Drag scene, hosting female impersonator revues often featuring headliner Priscilla Dean. Doc Washington was also an important community supporter, helping fellow Black business owners by lending them money or providing space in one of the buildings he owned to get their business started. He reportedly donated the land for Our Lady of Victory Church on Eight Mile Road.⁷¹

In segregated communities like Eight Mile-Wyoming, funeral homes were an essential neighborhood service. There were several funeral homes in this community, with one of the longest-running being the Cockfield Funeral Home. Ernest W. Cockfield, a native of Canada, operated the Cockfield Funeral Home at 8149 West Eight Mile Road for over 50 years beginning around 1939. In 1964, he was honored by the Michigan Selected Morticians Association for his services. When Cockfield died in 1980, at the age of 99, he was celebrated as the oldest known funeral director in the city.⁷²

The Great Depression and World War II restricted development of the Eight Mile Road business corridor during the 1930s and early 1940s, but by the late 1940s many new businesses were being developed, although vacant lots and residential dwellings remained interspersed. The community added a significant amenity with the construction of the Duke Theater in 1947 (10060 Eight Mile Road, no longer extant) on the Royal Oak Township side. Designed by noted theater architect Charles Agree, the \$300,000, 1500-seat theater, named for jazz legend Duke Ellington, was managed and staffed by Black workers (Figure 19). Although the theater was open for just 11 years, many residents fondly remembered watching movies there.⁷³

⁷¹ “From Prosperity to Popsicles and Back Again – That’s Doc Washington’s Story,” *Michigan Chronicle*, January 28, 1950, 21; “Mourn Death of Club Plantation Nightclub Owner,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 4, 1972, A8.

⁷² “Morticians Group Honors Cockfield,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 7, 1964, A12; “E. W. Cockfield, Mortician,” *Michigan Chronicle*, August 30, 1980, C5.

⁷³ “Duke Theater to Highlight Oakdale Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 10, 1947, 16;

<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3928> https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC3233P_mch-the-duke-theatre.



Figure 19: Duke Theater Rendering, Royal Oak Township,, ca. 1945 (Detroit Public Library Digital Collections)

In 1949, pharmacist Elizabeth Greene opened a small prescription drug store at 8421 West Eight Mile Road. Greene, who had graduated from Wayne (State) University, began working at the Cunningham Drug Store at Eight Mile and Wyoming, but then decided to open her own business. In 1948 she made a down payment on a small storefront on Eight Mile Road and began fixing it up. However, the owner of the building attempted to raise her rent, and Greene had to discontinue her renovation at that building. Later, Greene was assisted by Doc Washington, who found her a temporary place in a building he owned. This enabled her to get the business started and the following year purchase the building at 8241 (extant). Physicians Drug Center thrived, and by 1956 Greene was operating three stores, including the Eight Mile Road business, employing seventeen people including seven pharmacists. A fourth location opened in 1971.⁷⁴

City and community efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to improve the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood included the business district. The Detroit Urban League's Business and Professional Association reported a number of "awful looking" businesses on Eight Mile Road and proposed a cleanup and fixup campaign. The neighborhood conservation programs initiated in the early 1960s included measures to improve and support businesses along Eight Mile Road. Among these were funds for façade and infrastructure upgrades, widening the alley behind the businesses and installing parking bays, and screening the business areas from the adjacent residential areas. The industrial development on Woodingham Street was also separated by a landscape barrier and the street was closed off at Norfolk Street to prevent

⁷⁴ "Woman's World," *Michigan Chronicle*, March 7, 1953, 21; "From GI to Pharmacy," *Michigan Chronicle*, February 20, 1954, 9; "Physicians Center No. 4's Formal Opening May 23," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 22, 1971, A12; "Her Road to Success a Rocky One," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 11, 1972, 11.

through traffic.⁷⁵ More than 200 parking spaces were created behind Eight Mile Road businesses in 1968.⁷⁶ It was also during this period that the few commercial businesses present on Wyoming Avenue south of Eight Mile Road were removed and replaced with private residences.



Figure 20: Oakdale Shopping Mall, north side of Eight Mile Road, Royal Oak Township, undated (Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University).

The community improvement projects in the 1950s and 1960s removed many of the business buildings from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. A few remain from this period, including 8903, built in 1928 by William J. Simpson and which over time served as a grocery store and church, and briefly as a “neighborhood city hall” in the early 1970s,⁷⁷ and 8621, a brick store built in 1929 by Joseph Finkel which also housed a dry cleaning business and then Goldberg’s Grocery in 1956. The building that housed Elizabeth Greene’s Physicians Drug Center at 8421 still exists, as does the 1925 building at 8545 which hosted several grocery stores over the years, including James Olds Grocery and Thompson’s market. Over time, more buildings from that era and from the 1950s and 60s have been demolished and a few new ones built.

⁷⁵ “City Approves Eight Mile Road Development,” *Michigan Chronicle*, December 21, 1963, C12.

⁷⁶ “Eight Mile, Wyoming Paving Approved,” *Michigan Chronicle*, January 27, 1968, 11.

⁷⁷ Detroit Mayor Roman Gribbs initiated the neighborhood city hall program in 1971, which was intended to provide common city services within neighborhoods so residents would not have to travel downtown.

Religious Foundations in the Community

The importance of the church in Black spiritual, social, and political life can hardly be overstated. Churches were and are central to Black community life in Detroit, from the eighteenth century to the present day. Churches provided spiritual communion and comfort and offered social and educational programs, particularly during a time when Black Detroiters were discriminated against within, or shut out altogether from, white institutions. Members of Detroit's Black religious institutions were leaders in the civil rights movement both within the city and nationwide. The legacy of religious institutions in the Eight Mile-Wyoming community is no exception to this pattern.

Churches were among the first institutions founded in the neighborhood, and among the most enduring. Almost as soon as people began settling in the area, they met in spiritual congregations in various homes and community buildings. The first congregation was Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, which in 1920 began holding Sunday School classes in the home of Cornelia Helen Davis (the church was originally called St. Luke but changed to Oak Grove, for the subdivision in which it was located, due to another nearby congregation with the same name).⁷⁸ Wisconsin Avenue Church of God was founded in 1922 by three neighborhood women: Rev. Anna B. Smith, Annie Evans, and Viola Smith, while Mt. Beulah Baptist was also founded the same year. Two more churches were established in 1923, Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ and St. Paul Methodist Episcopal.⁷⁹ The following year, a breakaway group from Mount Beulah Baptist formed Mount Lebanon Church, which later changed its name to First Baptist Church.⁸⁰

As the congregations grew, they needed larger meeting places than private homes. Some met at the Lockport School, one of the only permanent institutional buildings in the area, including Mt. Beulah Baptist, Indiana Avenue Church of God, St. Paul Methodist, and Oak Grove AME (during the winter). Religious meetings were also held outdoors in large tents during warmer weather; both Oak Grove AME and Berean Chapel, founded in 1936 in Royal Oak Township, worshipped in tents in their early years. Traveling evangelical ministers were still common in the early decades of the twentieth century, and several came to preach in big tents in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area; these meetings sometimes inspired the formation of churches in the preacher's denomination.

Within a few years of their founding, many Eight Mile-Wyoming churches began to build permanent places to worship. Oak Grove AME built a frame church at the corner of Kentucky and Chippewa in 1921, designed by master carpenter and Oak Grove member Nelson Smoot (Figure 21). After the original building burned around 1924-1926, the congregation used funds from the insurance policy to build a new brick church in 1928. In 1924 Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ received a donation of land at 20475 Indiana. Over the following year, members of the congregation pitched in to build the church using pledged money, donated materials, and much of their own labor. The new building was dedicated in 1925.⁸¹ The women who founded Wisconsin Avenue Church of God purchased a small lot near the present location of Higginbotham School at the northwest corner of Wisconsin and Chippewa and built a frame church. Around 1927, the building was moved across the street to the southeast corner of

⁷⁸ "Church at 8 Mile Marks 28th Year," *Detroit Tribune*, February 14, 1948, 11; "Oak Grove AME Church Pacesetter in Northwest Detroit Area," *Michigan Chronicle*, February 20, 1971, B12.

⁷⁹ "A Brief History of Saint Paul United Methodist Church," St. Paul United Methodist Church 90th Anniversary Pamphlet, exhibited at Eight Mile-Wyoming Reunion 2021.

⁸⁰ "Our History," New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, <https://www.newnprmbcunity.org/about--np/our-history.html>.

⁸¹ "Church History," Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ, <https://iacogic.org/Church-History>.

Wisconsin and Chippewa.⁸² Mt. Beulah Baptist Church applied for a permit to build a frame church building at Cherrylawn and Chippewa in 1927, but progress on the building was delayed, likely by the subsequent Depression; by 1932 it consisted of a temporary roof over a brick basement, although the building was eventually completed.⁸³ After church member Minnie Wills made a down payment on a lot at 20499 Ohio Street for St. Paul Methodist, the congregation held services in a small one-room building at the back of the property until a larger building could be built.⁸⁴ By 1929, First Baptist Church was worshipping in a frame building at 20470 Wisconsin, and St. Augustine Episcopal Church, founded the same year, had a church and rectory on Eight Mile between Kentucky and Wyoming.



Figure 21: Congregation members in front of the first Oak Grove Church, undated (Oak Grove AME Church)

Over the following decades, several new religious institutions were founded in the community. A significant addition was the establishment of Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church in 1943. The fourth of five Black Catholic missions established in Detroit in the twentieth century and the first all-Black Catholic Church on the west side of the city, Our Lady of Victory was attributed in large part to the advocacy of Anna Bates, who petitioned the Catholic Church to provide services to Black Catholics in northwestern Detroit who were prevented from attending white churches. The congregation quickly outgrew the storefront on Eight Mile and Cherrylawn in which it began. Although the parish intended to build in Royal Oak Township, acquisition of a

⁸² 20056 Wisconsin, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department.

⁸³ 20056 Cherrylawn, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department.

⁸⁴ "A Brief History of Saint Paul United Methodist Church," St. Paul United Methodist Church 90th Anniversary Pamphlet, exhibited at Eight Mile-Wyoming Reunion 2021.

site was prevented by rising land prices. Instead, Thomas “Doc” Washington, who was Protestant but a strong supporter of the development of the Eight Mile-Wyoming community, donated two plots of land on Eight Mile Road for the new parish buildings. Rather than build new, the church was able to acquire a frame church building that had originally served the parish of St. Juliana on the corner of Chalmers and Longview on the city’s east side. The frame building was moved in pieces to the new site at Eight Mile and Washburn in April 1946. At some point after it was moved, the building was refaced with brick (Figure 22). In September 1948, four Oblate Sisters of Providence arrived in the parish; they were the first Black nuns to work in the Archdiocese of Detroit. The sisters lived in a house at 20500 Ilene Street.⁸⁵



Figure 22: *Our Lady of Victory Church, ca. 1950s* (Provided by Shirley Slaughter, “*Our Lady of Victory: The Saga of an African-American Catholic Community*”).

Another religious institution established during the middle decades of the twentieth century was New Providence Baptist Church, founded in 1950. After worshipping in temporary quarters at 8817 Eight Mile Road, the organization moved to a newly built brick church at 19901 Kentucky

⁸⁵ Nancy M. Davis, “Finding Voice: Revisiting Race and American Catholicism in Detroit,” *American Catholic Studies*, Fall 2003, Vol. 114, No. 3, 45-46; “Our Lady of Victory Church,” Intensive Level Survey Form, 20th Century African American Civil Rights in Detroit, 2018; Shirley Harris-Slaughter, *Our Lady of Victory: The Saga of an African American Catholic Community* (Lincoln, NE: iUniversity, 2004).

Street in 1954.⁸⁶ In 1966, Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ, which had been founded in 1962 from Ford Avenue Church of Christ in Highland Park, dedicated their new home, a sprawling, \$179,000 church with large off-street parking lot at the northwest corner of Wyoming and Chippewa.⁸⁷

While new churches were being added to the neighborhood, other well-established congregations experienced organizational changes and either moved or remodeled their original buildings during the same period. As with many buildings in the neighborhood during this period, some of the 1920s and 1930s frame buildings were demolished and new facilities built. A significant exception was Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ, which is possibly the oldest church building extant in the survey area. In 1937, the congregation had remodeled its frame church building in 1937, adding brick veneer to the exterior; it remains at 20475 Indiana Avenue. First Baptist Church's original frame building at 20470 Wisconsin may also have been altered with brick veneer, as an addition in 1937 noted it was a brick church. By 1949 the church, which renamed itself New Prospect Baptist in 1945, was cited as the largest congregation in the area. In 1952-53 it temporarily moved services to the Duke Theater in Royal Oak Township while the church underwent a major remodeling. However, the congregation did not remain there long; in 1960 it moved to even larger quarters at Pembroke and Livernois.⁸⁸

In 1948 St. Augustine's Episcopal Church moved not only its congregation but an entire building to two adjoining lots at 20516 Wyoming. A 49'x25' brick building (the central portion of the current building) was moved from an unspecified location outside the Detroit city limits to this lot.⁸⁹ The construction history of St. Paul's United Methodist Church (currently Steadfast Baptist Church) at 20499 Ohio is a little less clear. The frame building appears to have been extant in 1940, when St. Paul's United Methodist Church moved there; city building permits record the construction of a cement block basement and a new vestibule and rear addition that year, which could indicate that the church was either moved here or was an older building that was remodeled.⁹⁰

Other churches were building entirely new buildings. Wisconsin Avenue Church of God had made periodic alterations to its frame church at Wisconsin and Chippewa in the 1930s and 1940s, but built a new brick veneer church in 1955-56 at a cost of \$81,000.⁹¹ Berean Chapel relocated to 8422 Pembroke in 1960. Berean had broken away from First Baptist Church in 1936 and had been at several locations in Royal Oak Township before deciding to build a new brick church on Pembroke between Cherrylawn and Northlawn.⁹²

⁸⁶ 19901 Kentucky, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "Issue 448 Permits Here," *Detroit News*, September 26, 1952, 24; "We're Going Home This Day," *Michigan Chronicle*, September 4, 1954, 24.

⁸⁷ 20131 Wyoming, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "Who We Are," Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ, <http://www.wyomingcoc.org/about>.

⁸⁸ "New Prospect Baptist Leads 8-Mile Road Churches," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 5, 1949, 28; "Our History," New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, <https://www.newnpmbcunity.org/about--np/our-history.html>.

⁸⁹ 20516 Wyoming, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "St. Augustine Episcopal Lives Anew Under the Rev. R. T. Brown's Leadership," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 26, 1949, 5

⁹⁰ 20499 Ohio, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "Northwest Detroit," *Detroit Tribune*, December 28, 1940, 11.

⁹¹ 20056 Wisconsin, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "Permits Top 2 ½ Million for Week," *Detroit News*, November 4, 1955, 32.

⁹² 4822 Pembroke, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; "The Berean Chapel Story," Berean Chapel, <http://www.bereanchapel.org/about-berean-chapel/berean-chapel-history/>.

In the late 1950s, Oak Grove AME was also looking for new, larger quarters. It had purchased land along Pembroke west of Wyoming for a new church building, but when the Detroit Board of Education identified the parcel as the future site of Beaubien Junior High, the church sold the land to the school board. Instead, it selected a site several blocks away at the southwest corner of Cherrylawn and Pembroke. This was within the Eight Mile-Wyoming Conservation Area urban renewal project (see “Creating an Autonomous Community” above) and represented the first major construction project in that area. To design the new church, the congregation engaged Black architect Nathan Johnson. Johnson had worked for the pioneering Black-owned architectural firm White and Griffin before opening his own practice in 1956. By the time he received the Oak Grove commission, Johnson was well known for his church designs, including the adaptation of a former theater into the new home of New Bethel Baptist Church in 1963, and after completing Oak Grove AME would go on to design other significant church buildings in Detroit including an addition to Second Baptist Church in 1968 and the relocated Bethel AME Church in 1974. The new building, built by general contractor L. F. Largess, broke ground in 1967 and was completed the following year. It featured sanctuary seating for 500, a day care center, and a central courtyard and sunken garden, while the site was large enough for future expansion.⁹³

In 1969, Mt. Beulah Baptist Church also announced plans to move to land in the Conservation Area on Pembroke between Greenlawn and Northlawn streets, purchased from the Detroit Housing Commission. The congregation, which had over 500 members, commissioned a “modern-design” building to cost \$300,000, and even held a ground-breaking ceremony in May 1969. However, the project was apparently dropped, as Mt. Beulah Baptist is still located at 20056 Cherrylawn, and there is no church building on either side of Pembroke between Greenlawn and Northlawn streets.⁹⁴

The final major church addition to the neighborhood was the relocation of St. Paul’s United Methodist Church to 8701 West Eight Mile Road. By the 1960s, this congregation had also outgrown its little church building on Ohio Street and organized a building fund campaign. The building permit for a \$150,000, 68’x90’ Modernist-designed church was approved in 1974, and the congregation moved into the new building in June 1975.⁹⁵ Its former location at 20499 Ohio Street is now the home of Steadfast Baptist Church.

The religious institutions of the Eight Mile-Wyoming community not only provided for the spiritual needs of their parishioners but supported its social and educational needs. This was particularly evident during the Great Depression, which began in 1929 and extended through the 1930s. In addition to offering spiritual support, community churches organized food, clothing, and shelter for struggling families in the neighborhood. Louise Blakely, secretary of Oak Grove AME, helped the church to organize donations of food and clothing which were distributed from the church. On the Royal Oak Township side of the community, Berean Chapel also ministered to families, passing out food and other necessities. These are just two examples of the many churches who were helping their own parishioners and others in the community during this time.⁹⁶

⁹³ “Oak Grove AME Moves on Urban Renewal Land,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 4, 1967, 9; “Oak Grove AME Church Pacesetter in Northwest Detroit Area,” *Michigan Chronicle*, February 20, 1971, B12; “Oak Grove Church One of Nation’s Outstanding,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 20, 1968.

⁹⁴ “Begin Construction on 2nd Conservation Church,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 10, 1969, B7.

⁹⁵ 8701 Eight Mile Road, City of Detroit Building Permits, Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department; “A Brief History of Saint Paul United Methodist Church,” St. Paul United Methodist Church 90th Anniversary Pamphlet, exhibited at Eight Mile-Wyoming Reunion 2021.

⁹⁶ Biography of Louise Blakely submitted by petitioners in 1954, Detroit Recreation Department files, provided by Detroit

Youth education and outreach was another significant way that churches worked within the community. Most churches had some kind of youth program. Berean Chapel held youth meetings as early as the 1930s, and also sponsored summer camps for young people to get them away from the city to experience nature. The Birdhurst Youth Council of the NAACP sponsored history programs and held youth debates at Mt. Beulah Baptist in the 1930s as well. In the early 1950s, Our Lady of Victory acquired land south of their church on Eight Mile Road and built a Catholic school for children of the district, which opened in 1954 (Figure 23). Our Lady of Victory also sponsored a Catholic Youth Organization and a teen club in the late 1950s, while New Prospect Baptist Church was also providing youth programs. Oak Grove AME held a discussion forum for teens in the early 1950s. In later decades, churches often provided day care services, such as Oak Grove AME which built a day care center in its new building in 1967-68 and Berean Chapel which opened a center in 1972; or after-school programs for children, such as Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ which had a latch-key program in its basement.



Figure 23: First graduates of Our Lady of Victory School, ca. 1950s (Shirley Slaughter, "Our Lady of Victory: The Saga of an African-American Catholic Community")

As large institutional buildings within the community, churches also welcomed community gatherings, whether they were of a religious nature or not. In addition to weddings and funerals, churches also accommodated social events such as concerts and educational lectures. Oak Grove AME, one of the larger churches in the district, hosted meetings of community

Historic Designation Advisory Board; "The Berean Chapel Story," Berean Chapel, <http://www.bereanchapel.org/about-berean-chapel/berean-chapel-history/>.

organizations such as the Carver Progressive Club. In 1954 Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams was a featured speaker at the church. The church held a two-day exposition to support local Black-owned businesses in 1970, and in 1973 it was the site of a Legislative Awareness Institute which included workshops on consumer activism, city services, recreational programs, and education, and featured city and state speakers. The Royal Oak Township chapter of the National Council of Negro Women, a group of women leaders in the community, held meetings at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in the 1950s, while in 1959 St. Paul's Methodist Church held a Negro History Week program. Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ offered dance, language, and other programs, and Berean Chapel held ceramics classes in the 1970s.

Churches and religious leaders were also active and influential in the civil rights movement. In 1939, Rev. A. D. Flowers of Mt. Beulah Baptist Church presented a sermon on "The Progress of Negroes" which included a call for Black residents to support a Black-operated daily newspaper to serve as a voice for Black people.⁹⁷ Mt. Beulah also hosted a mass meeting in 1942 to protest recent lynchings in Mississippi.⁹⁸ Rev. Richard T.S. Brown of St. Augustine's Episcopal Church was cited as contributing to the intercultural and interracial life of the community in 1949 through his leadership in the Civil Rights Federation and NAACP.⁹⁹ Our Lady of Victory opened a credit union in the church basement in 1951 to assist people who could not obtain banking services at white-operated banks. Churches like Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ served as voter registration sites to encourage Black voting. Church leaders such as Rev. Robert Schley of Oak Grove AME served on the Mayor's Interdenominational Ministers Alliance in the 1950s and 1960s; while this group worked generally to improve conditions for Black residents of the city, it also took political action, such as organizing a boycott of white candidates in the 1965 city council election after no Black candidates were selected in the primary election.¹⁰⁰

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some of the community's long-time religious entities moved away, closed, or merged with other organizations. St. Augustine's Episcopal merged with St. Timothy's in 1968 and eventually turned over the building at 20520 Wyoming to other denominations; the building is currently home to Pure in Heart Church of Deliverance. The merged St. Augustine's/St. Timothy's closed in 2010. Our Lady of Victory closed its school in 1970 (the building was demolished in the 2000s). The Our Lady of Victory parish merged with Presentation parish in 1975. For a time, services were held at both churches, but in 1982 the church on Eight Mile Road closed and the parishioners moved to Presentation's campus at Meyers and Pembroke Avenue. In 1999 New Providence Baptist Church moved to a larger building at 18211 Plymouth Road at the Southfield Freeway; however, a new institution, Christian Gospel Center Church of God in Christ, founded in 1990, moved into the building at 19901 Kentucky, where it remains today. Wisconsin Avenue Church of God merged with Bryden Avenue Church of God in 2000, and that congregation relocated to a larger facility in 2004, although the Wisconsin Avenue building remains owned by an entity named Wisconsin Avenue Church of God.

However, many of the neighborhood's longest-serving churches remain and thrive in the community. Oak Grove AME has continued to grow, with several major additions to the church building at 19801 Cherrylawn, and continues to be a leader in the religious and social life of the community. Berean Chapel expanded with an addition and new sanctuary in 1972-73, while Mt.

⁹⁷ "Rev. Flowers Advocates a Negro Daily," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 14, 1939, 14.

⁹⁸ "Detroiters hold Big Mass Meeting in Protest of Mississippi Lynchings," *Detroit Tribune*, November 28, 1942, 1-2.

⁹⁹ "St. Augustine Episcopal Lives Anew Under the Rev. R. T. Brown's Leadership," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 26, 1949, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald E. Brown and Carolyn Hartfield, "The Black Church Culture and Politics in the City of Detroit," Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, Working Paper Series No. 5, October 2001, 6.

Beulah Baptist has also grown in place with additions and alterations in 1971 and 1983. Other historic congregations that remain are Indiana Avenue Church of God in Christ, still located in its 1925 building at 20475 Indiana, and St. Paul's United Methodist Church at Eight Mile and Wisconsin.

Integration vs. Segregation in Education

Schools were among the most important institutions in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood from its earliest years. Although segregation in schools had been outlawed in the State of Michigan in 1870, in practice many schools were *de facto* segregated through discriminatory housing practices and the setting of school catchment boundaries, and majority Black schools were often underfunded and overcrowded. Both of these practices were evident in Eight Mile-Wyoming schools for much of their history. Prior to the annexation of the neighborhood into the City of Detroit in 1922-25, Black children from the area attended a one-room school (some sources say this was a frame school, others call it brick) known as the Lockport School, located at the corner of Eight Mile Road and what is now Wisconsin Street (then called Lockport Street) (no longer extant).¹⁰¹

When the eastern portion of the current Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood was annexed by the city from Greenfield Township in 1922, the annexed portion excluded the area west of Greenlawn (then called Roselawn, see *Historical Overview*, above) and north of Pembroke because this was a Black community. The excluded area was also the only remaining portion of Greenfield Township's School District No. 11, which left the small, working-class community as the sole support for the school. Unable to pay the teacher fees, they had to close the school, and parents attempted to send their children to nearby Birdhurst School (20445 Woodingham Drive, no longer extant) which had been built by Greenfield Township in 1914¹⁰² in what was then a white area and had been annexed into the Detroit School System along with the rest of the area. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that "for economic and other reasons," the city's Board of Education objected to accommodating the outside students at Birdhurst. Although Detroit schools were nominally integrated, in reality the other reasons were almost certainly because white parents at Birdhurst objected to Black students in the school.¹⁰³ Burniece Avery in her history of the Eight Mile Road community noted that Black and white children attended Birdhurst School together for about two years before it was closed down to prevent integration and Black students were forced back to Lockport School.¹⁰⁴

Following annexation of the Eight Mile Road Community into Detroit in 1925, Detroit Public Schools was now responsible for education in the area. The Board of Education purchased a site south of Pembroke Avenue between Northlawn and Roselawn for a new school but, again according to Avery, had reckoned without white parents' objections to Black students crossing the *de facto* segregation line at Pembroke Avenue.¹⁰⁵ The board had to abandon the

¹⁰¹ "West Eight Mile Notes," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 26, 1956, 13.

¹⁰² "The Need of Recreation," Manuscript Report in Folder A8-9, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

¹⁰³ "B. of E. Refuses No. 11's Appeal," *Detroit Free Press*, June 12, 1923, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Burniece Avery, "The Eight Mile Road....Its Growth from 1920...1952," Manuscript in the Burniece Avery Papers, Box 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

¹⁰⁵ A draft historical background manuscript written by the Detroit Urban League in the early 1950s stated that this land had been acquired by Greenfield Township's Black school board in the early 1920s but construction was postponed by

site and purchase a new one at the corner of Wisconsin and Chippewa Avenue. There they built the Higginbotham School (extant) which opened in 1927 to students in kindergarten through eighth grade (Figure 24). According to the Local Historic District nomination for Higginbotham School, “the new school had an interracial staff and the building initially included fourteen classrooms, a conservatory, gymnasium, and power plant, providing the students with a modern curriculum in a clean, safe facility. The Higginbotham School playground was north of the school building extending from the school building to Norfolk Street.” A rectangular wing was added the following year.¹⁰⁶ Birdhurst School was then converted to a community recreation center (see below).¹⁰⁷

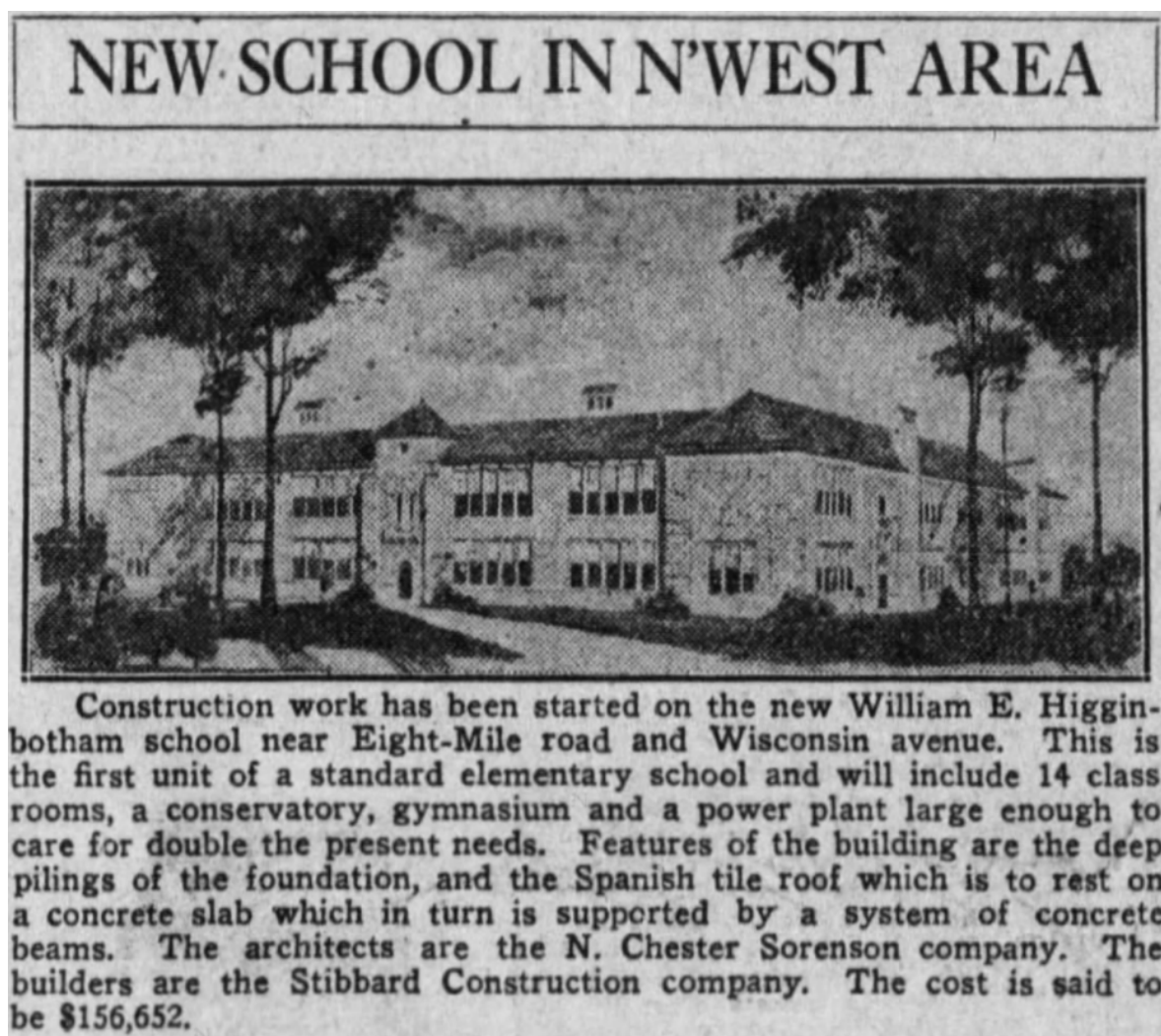


Figure 24: Announcement of Higginbotham School, 1927 (*Detroit Free Press*, July 17, 1927, 54).

annexation. It also stated that the land was later used by Wayne County Better Homes to construct FHA-backed homes. Detroit Urban League, “Housing Survey,” Manuscript dated January 1952, Folder A7-12, Box 43, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

¹⁰⁶ Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, “Proposed Higginbotham School Historic District,” Final Report, 2020, 5, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Avery, “The Eight Mile Road...”

Meanwhile Black children in the neighborhood north of Eight Mile Road, in Royal Oak Township, were divided between the Clinton School District and Ferndale Public Schools. Students in the Ferndale district initially attended desegregated schools at Ridgeway and Washington Schools, and then Jefferson Elementary School, which opened in 1925. However, by this time, there were reports of racial turmoil at Jefferson as the number of Black children increased. As a consequence, in 1926 the district built Ulysses S. Grant School (21131 Garden Lane, extant), abandoned its previous policy that allowed parents to choose which school their child could attend, and drew mandatory attendance zones to encompass the entire area occupied by Black residents of the township. Five Black teachers were hired to staff the school.¹⁰⁸

By the late 1930s, the schools available to Eight Mile-Wyoming residents were overcrowded. The Grant School in Ferndale, originally built for 160 students, had more than 300 attending in 1939, forcing some students to attend on half day schedules. Parents, supported by the West Eight Mile Road Committee, alleged that the Ferndale School District was giving them the run-around, and threatened to strike. After negotiations with the district failed, the committee worked with the state school board, with the result that the Ferndale Board of Education allocated funds to build an addition for four classrooms, an auditorium, and a kitchen. The addition was completed in 1942.¹⁰⁹ Older Black students attended the integrated Lincoln High School, which came with its own problems. In 1943, tension over the influx of Black war workers to the township spilled over into racial incidents at the school; one such incident reportedly led to a three-day reign of terror by the Ku Klux Klan in the area.¹¹⁰ To help alleviate the violence, in June the West Eight Mile Road Community Recreation Association and the Northwest Educational Association sponsored a bi-racial, patriotic program at the Lincoln High School, featuring track and field great Jesse Owens, then working at Ford Motor Company and living in Conant Gardens.¹¹¹

In the western part of the township, migration during World War II and the construction of the Oakdale Gardens temporary housing development also greatly increased the population of the Clinton School District. In 1945, the school district voted to divide into two districts, the Clinton and Carver districts. Due to the way the school district boundaries were drawn, these were essentially racially segregated districts, with the Carver district comprising all Black students. The district built George Washington Carver Elementary (21272 Mendota Avenue, extant) in 1945 (Figure 25). Because the district could not afford a high school, it arranged with the Detroit Public Schools to send upper grades to Northern High School, paying their tuition.

¹⁰⁸ United States v. School District of Ferndale, United States Court of Appeals, Third Circuit, April 4, 1980, <https://openjurist.org/616/f2d/895/united-states-v-school-district-of-city-of-ferndale-michigan>.

¹⁰⁹ “Northwest Detroiters Win Fight for School Addition,” *Detroit Tribune*, April 11, 1942, 2.

¹¹⁰ “Police Quell Disturbance in the District,” *Michigan Chronicle*, April 3, 1943, 1, 3.

¹¹¹ “Biracial Meet will be Held in Ferndale,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 19, 1943, 11.



Figure 25: George Washington Carver School, Royal Oak Township, undated (Wayne State University Digital Collections)

Higginbotham School was also experiencing overcrowding in the 1940s. Although the school's eighth grade students began attending Post Intermediate School (then largely white) (8200 Midland Street, extant) in 1934 (seventh grade students were later included), the construction of war worker housing on land near the school in the early 1940s again increased the student population.¹¹² An addition was completed to the school, which remained the chief neighborhood school, in 1945,¹¹³ and a temporary three-room annex was built to the north of the school. However, it was still unable to accommodate the student body. In 1947 objections by white parents at Post Intermediate resulted in Black seventh and eighth grade students being sent back to Higginbotham School. To address the overcrowding, the Detroit School Board planned to reopen the Birdhurst School, which had not been a school for over 20 years, to accommodate the overflow.¹¹⁴ Community parents, led by the Carver Progressive Club, immediately objected, citing the outdated conditions of the school as well as the fact that white children who lived within a block of Birdhurst were being sent to Post Intermediate or Pasteur Elementary while Black children as far six blocks away were assigned to Birdhurst. Burneice Avery, then the field agent of the Carver Progressive Club, testified that she had been a student at Birdhurst twenty years before when the school was ostensibly being closed because it was obsolete, yet the superintendent of schools, Arthur Dondineau, claimed that the building was in good condition.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, "Proposed Higginbotham School Historic District," Final Report, 2020, 5-7.

¹¹³ "Five New Schools and Additions Open in September," *Detroit Tribune*, August 25, 1945, 8.

¹¹⁴ Although the Birdhurst School had largely served as a recreation center since the 1920s, the Board of Education retained control over the school and had held some special education classes there in 1946. Untitled article, *Detroit Tribune*, March 23, 1946, 2.

¹¹⁵ James C. Appurson, "Dondineau Dunno About Democracy," *Michigan Chronicle*, September 13, 1947, 1; Avery, "The Eight Mile Road..."

Eight Mile-Wyoming area parents called a strike of the school in September and carried their protest to the Board of Education, supported by the local chapter of the NAACP and by the Carver Progressive Club (Figure 26 and Figure 27). The Board initially refused to compromise with residents or with the proposed mediation by the Mayor's Interracial Committee. Dondineau claimed at that time that all children regardless of color would attend Post School in the ninth grade, while all other Black students will go to Birdhurst and Higginbotham, and there were intimations that students would be forcibly sent back to school.¹¹⁶

After two weeks of picketing and protests, the school board relented in the plan to assign students to Birdhurst and pledged to improve Higginbotham. Birdhurst would continue to handle special classes and serve as a recreation center unless a committee of parents and city officials decide otherwise.¹¹⁷

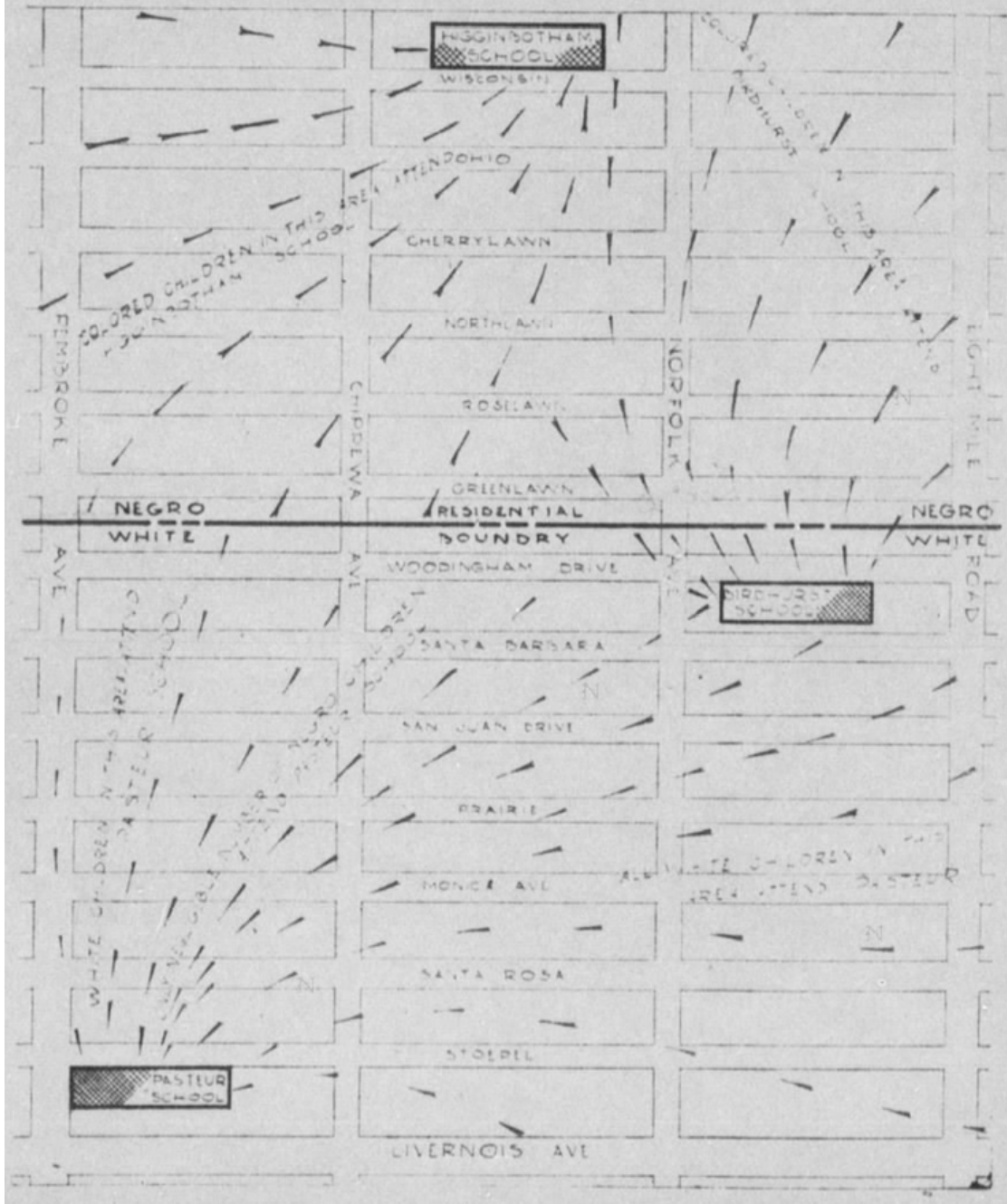


Figure 26: Parents protesting to the Board of Education, 1947 (Detroit Tribune, September 13, 1947, 3).

¹¹⁶ "Parents Defy Board, Strike Will Continue," *Michigan Chronicle*, September 13, 1947, 1.

¹¹⁷ "Higginbotham School Strike Ends," *Michigan Chronicle*, September 20, 1947, 1.

IS THIS DISCRIMINATION OR CONVENIENCE?



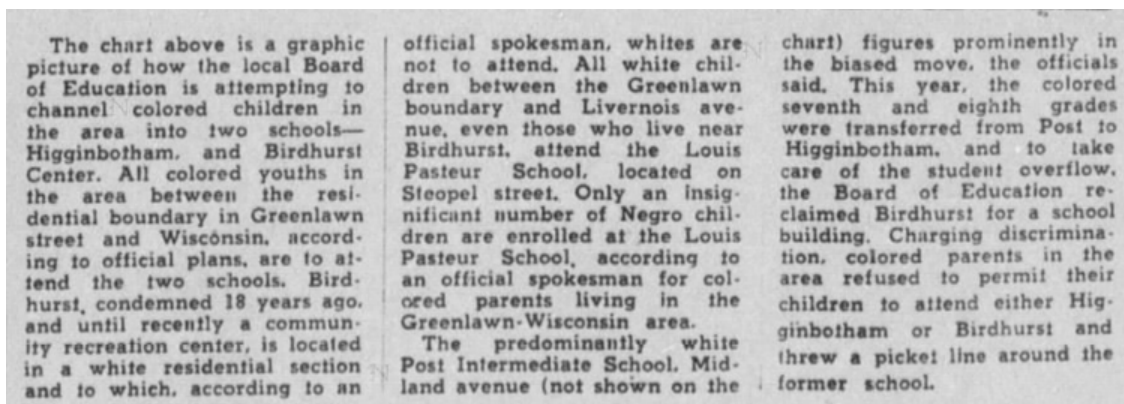


Figure 27: “Parents Defy School Board Order,” *Detroit Tribune*, September 13, 1947, 1.

As the wartime and post-war population influx ended and Detroit’s population began to decline from its peak in 1950, overcrowding at Eight Mile-Wyoming schools eased. The three-room annex at the north end of the Higginbotham school was closed in 1955. In 1961, Detroit Public Schools identified the vacant site south of Pembroke and west of Wyoming for the new Angelique Beaubien Junior High School, to serve middle grades drawing from Higginbotham, MacDowell, Shulze, Vandenberg and Vernor elementary schools.¹¹⁸

In Royal Oak Township, the residents of the Carver School District, suffering from a reduction in tax revenue, were unable to pay tuition to continue sending upper grade students to Northern High School. Neighboring majority white school districts Oak Park and Ferndale also refused the students, citing overcrowding in their own schools, although Black community leaders believed that racial bias was the real cause. In 1960, ninth grade students were temporarily accommodated in the Carver Elementary School. To resolve the impasse, Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams merged the Carver School District with the nearby Oak Park School District.¹¹⁹

The Grant School in the Ferndale School District remained *de facto* segregated into the 1970s. Overcrowding had continued in the 1950s, despite nearby white schools operating under capacity. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare attempted to desegregate the school, first voluntarily, and then by filing suit against the district to terminate its federal funding. When an open enrollment plan instituted in 1974-1975 also failed to produce results, the Justice Department filed a desegregation suit against Ferndale Schools. In 1980, the United States Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals held that Ferndale Schools had intentionally segregated Grant School.¹²⁰

As Detroit’s population declined in the closing decades of the twentieth century, many schools were closed and consolidated. Some reopened during the peak of the charter school era in the 2000s. Higginbotham School housed an adult education center, then was temporarily the location of the Detroit High School of Commerce and Business Administration in the mid-1990s before being converted to a charter school in 2006. That school closed in 2013 and the building remains vacant.¹²¹ Detroit Public Schools closed Beaubien Junior High in 2007, but the Bates Academy, a school for gifted and talented students, moved into the building and

¹¹⁸ “Plans for 3 New Schools Announced,” *Detroit Tribune*, August 5, 1961, 1, 5.

¹¹⁹ Damon Stetson, “A School in Sight for Unwanted 40,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1960, 40.

¹²⁰ United States v. School District of Ferndale, United States Court of Appeals, Third Circuit, April 4, 1980, <https://openjurist.org/616/f2d/895/united-states-v-school-district-of-city-of-ferndale-michigan>; William K. Stevens, “U. S. Pressing School Integration in a Detroit Suburb,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1975.

¹²¹ Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, “Proposed Higginbotham School Historic District,” Final Report, 2020, 9.

remains active today. The Carver School remained open until 1982 and was later reopened around 2000 by the Academy of Oak Park Charter School, but that school also closed in 2011. Grant School now houses the offices of Royal Oak Charter Township as well as the Tri-County Educational Center and the Royal Oak Township Library. Most students in the Eight Mile-Wyoming community now attend schools outside of the historic community boundaries.



Figure 28: Birdhurst Community Center, *Detroit Tribune*, September 13, 1947, p. 16.

Recreation and Community Centers

Recreational programs were among the earliest priorities for the developing community. Although the city provided some recreational facilities in the Eight Mile-Wyoming community, racial segregation, both official and *de facto*, was common until the 1960s, and often had to be supplemented with private programs due to inadequate funding. Following the closure of Birdhurst School and the transfer of Black students to Higginbotham School, the Birdhurst Recreation Center began operating, at first in the evenings (Figure 28). After 1932, the Department of Parks and Recreation took over the school as a full time recreation center. By 1945 the center, under the direction of Shelton Johnson, was open seven days a week and served between 500 and 600 people per day, supported by a staff of five full-time workers. Programs ranged from storytelling clubs to adult sewing classes to civic clubs, as well as opening the facility to community meetings and events. Birdhurst also operated the

Higginbotham School playground in the summer months.¹²² In 1939, the Birdhurst Center participated as the only Black group in Recreation Department demonstrations held at the Kronk Community Center.¹²³ When the Detroit Urban League Northwest Branch Community Center opened in 1937, it took over some of the community programs operated by Birdhurst, and also provided space for community activities and a playground for children. Both facilities were open to residents on either side of Eight Mile Road.



Figure 29: Neighborhood child in front of Birdhurst Center, undated photo (courtesy of Carolyn Davis).

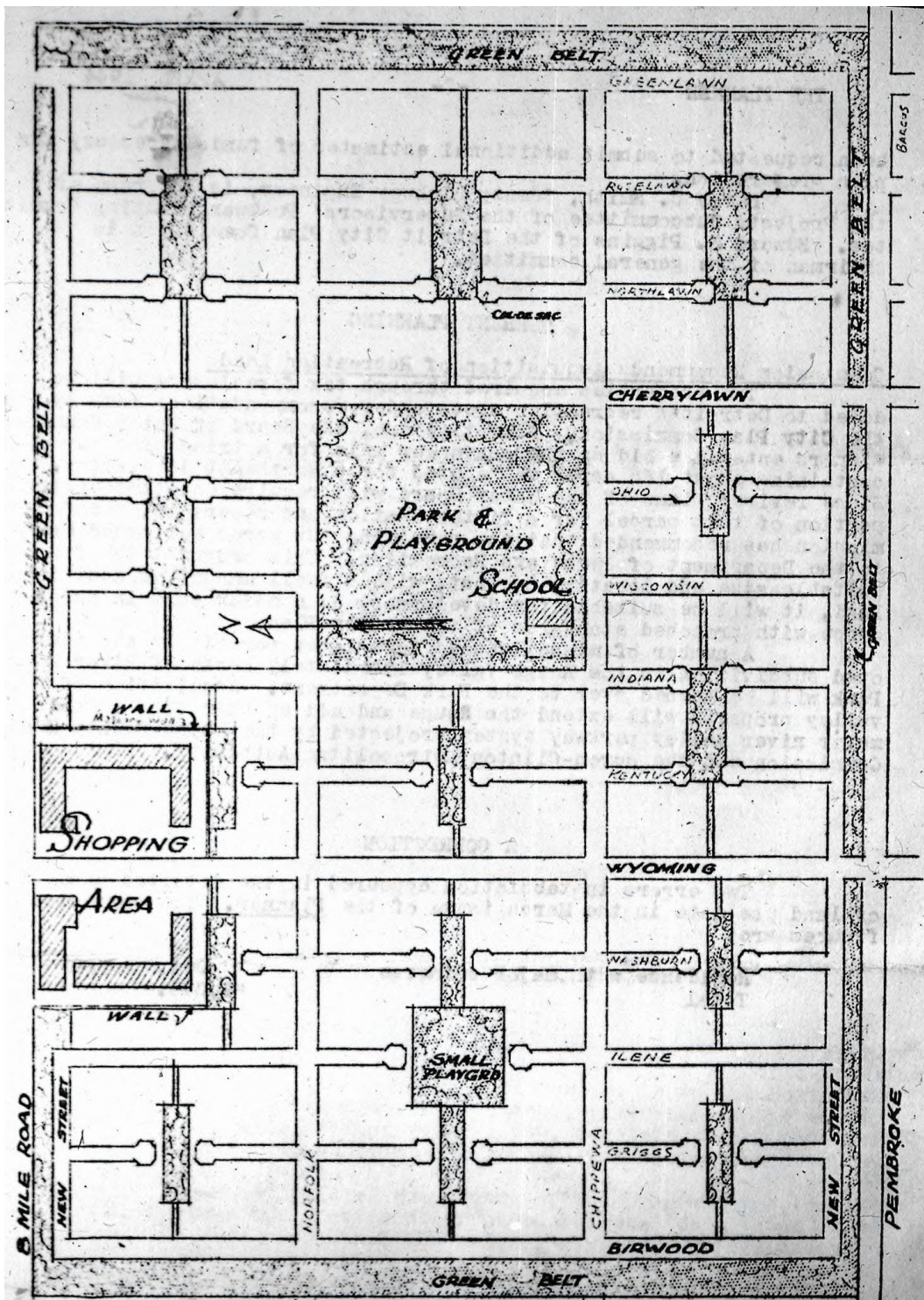
As the community expanded, so did the need for recreational facilities. Director Johnson advocated for larger facilities in the early 1940s. The Common Council allocated funds to the newly established (1940) Department of Recreation to purchase land for future expansion. Among the areas targeted for acquisition was the block bounded by Norfolk, Cherrylawn, Wisconsin, and Chippewa (current site of the Johnson Recreation Center/Joe Louis Playfield). The site was in a good location for the community, adjacent to the Higginbotham School and in the middle of the neighborhood. A drawing dated 1944, now in the collection of the University of Michigan Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library, suggested that the recreation park may have been the centerpiece of a neighborhood-wide plan to reduce through-traffic on residential streets and create landscaped walkways and a perimeter greenbelt (Figure 30). Although it is unclear who prepared the plan, or if it was ever publicized, it does appear that this plan, or a similar one, resurfaced in the Detroit Committee for Neighborhood Conservation and Improved Housing's 1960 neighborhood conservation plan (see previous discussion, above). Although community members recognized the need for larger facilities, some objected that condemnation of the site selected would displace community

members living there as well as require the vacation of portions of Ohio and Wisconsin Streets, and pointed to vacant land south of Pembroke or other undeveloped areas could be used instead. The Carver Progressive Club led opposition to the plan, submitting a petition to City Council requesting that the land instead be used for housing. The city rejected the petition and some community members supported the condemnation, noting that the community desperately needed the new facilities and that the acquisition could take time to allow existing residents to find new housing.¹²⁴

¹²² Charles J. Wartman, "The Chronicle Visits the Birdhurst Center," *Michigan Chronicle*, November 17, 1945, 12.

¹²³ "Birdhurst Center in Large Demonstration of West Side Groups," *Detroit Tribune*, March 4, 1939, 2.

¹²⁴ "Monthly Report, May 1952," in Folder A8-10, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library; "Protest Filed with Council Against Park," *Michigan Chronicle*, June 30, 1945, 1, 4; "Home Owners Win Stay," *Michigan Chronicle*, October 25, 1947, 3; "Jurors Hear Evidence for Need of Park," *Michigan Chronicle*, May 25, 1946, 2; "Eight Milers Split on Park Condemnation," *Michigan Chronicle*, June 1, 1946, 2; "Eight Mile Wyoming Community Split in Condemnation on Lots," *Detroit Tribune*, May 25, 1946, 1.



PROPOSED SITE PLAN FOR 8-MILE-WYOMING AREA

Figure 30: 1944 Site Plan showing proposed recreational areas in 8 Mile-Wyoming Area (University of Michigan Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library, Lantern Slide Collection)

The condemnation was approved in 1946, and acquisition of the tracts was underway by 1948.¹²⁵ However, construction of new facilities was delayed when the site was chosen for temporary veteran housing following World War II, comprising two-family Quonset huts. In 1951, the West Eight Mile Road Committee requested that the city demolish the temporary housing and complete their previously developed plans for recreational facilities on the site. The Detroit Housing Commission initially rejected the proposal, stating that it could not deprogram the housing units until it could demonstrate that there was no housing shortage in the city. The Detroit Urban League stepped in, contacting the federal Housing and Home Financing Agency. In late 1953, the Detroit Housing Commission began removing the facilities, freeing the land again for a recreation center. Meanwhile, the Department of Recreation outlined its plans for the facilities, which would include a swimming pool and field house. Construction of the Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield began in 1954 and was completed in 1955, including a field house called the Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center.

While the recreational center was under development, the community debated what to name the facilities. Some members of the community submitted petitions in favor of two prominent women in the community, Pearl Wright and Louise Blakely. Pearl Wright, a native of Indiana, moved to Detroit in 1923 and became a teacher at the Lockport School. In 1926, she moved to the newly opened Grant School on the Ferndale side of the community. In addition to her work as a leading educator in the community, Wright was a founding member of the Birdhurst Recreation Center Committee and a longtime member of the Advisory Board, organizing several youth groups associated with Grant School and Birdhurst before retiring in 1945. Louise Blakely also settled in the Eight Mile-Wyoming Community in 1923. During the Depression, Blakely organized welfare for the community including a soup kitchen and clothing drives. She was also a founding member of the Birdhurst Recreation Center, helping to secure the school as a recreation facility. Blakely died in 1943.¹²⁶

Citing “differences of opinion” in the neighborhood as to which woman the facility should be named after, the City Plan Commission set aside the petitions in May 1954. In 1955 another group of residents submitted a petition to name the playfield after world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, who grew up in the Black Bottom neighborhood of Detroit. This petition was successful, and in December 1955 the park was named the “Joe Louis Playfield”.¹²⁷

Included in the proposals for the neighborhood conservation area in the early 1960s were a number of recreational facilities, including improvements to the Joe Louis Playground, the creation of two “junior playgrounds” and landscaped walkways to connect the three areas. Although the latter proposal was dropped, the junior playgrounds were implemented, at what is now Alfonso Wells Memorial Playground and on St. Martin’s Avenue in the urban renewal area. At around the same time, the Parks and Recreation Department developed plans to expand or rebuild the field house. However, it was over ten years before the city secured funding to build the new recreation center, which it renamed the Johnson Recreation Center in honor of Shelton Johnson, the longtime director of the Birdhurst Recreation Center, who had passed away in 1965. Designed by the Detroit architectural firm of John Stevens Associates, Inc., the new building was completed in 1978 (Figure 31).¹²⁸

¹²⁵ City of Detroit Journal of the Common Council, July 20, 1948, 1892.

¹²⁶ Biographies of Pearl Wright and Louise Blakely submitted by petitioners in 1954, Detroit Recreation Department files, provided by Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board.

¹²⁷ Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, “Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Final Report,” 7-10; Untitled Proposal dated October 9, 1951, in Folder A8-9, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library; “Monthly Report, July/August 1952,” in Folder A8-10, Box 44, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library.

¹²⁸ Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, “Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Final Report,” 10-15.



Figure 31: Johnson Recreation Center, 1979 (Win Brunner Photographers, courtesy of City of Detroit General Services Department Archives).

Conclusion: Legacy of Eight Mile-Wyoming

The legacy of the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is remarkable. First settled by working-class African Americans seeking land ownership opportunities in an area that was at the time outside the Detroit city limits, the neighborhood developed over time into a thriving community of working and middle-class families on both sides of the Detroit border. Their unity and robust institutions enabled them to protect their neighborhood in the face of pressure from encroaching white development and to challenge segregation boundaries in the mid twentieth century.

Although the Eight Mile-Wyoming community is not as tightly defined by its boundaries as it was in the past, its resilience today is attributable to the strength and longevity of its people and institutions. The community is active and engaged and both current and past residents have a deep knowledge of the neighborhood's history and importance. That history is kept alive by the many residents who have lived and worked here for their entire lives, often spanning decades, and who pass on their memories to new generations. An "Old Timers Ball," inaugurated in the 1940s, later evolved into an annual picnic, originally held on Belle Isle, then brought back to the community in the 1990s. Still held every year at the Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield (Figure 32), the picnic brings together current and former residents, young and old, to reconnect and share stories and photographs. Organizations such as the Old Timers Club and the Garden Homes support the community through cleanup days and recreational activities. Religious institutions, both old and new, continue to minister to the spiritual and social needs of the community. Many neighborhood institutions and organizations offer youth development initiatives, recognizing that the community is kept strong by its young people, who will carry the over one-hundred-year legacy of this extraordinary place to future generations.



Figure 32: Community members attending the Eight Mile Old Timers Club picnic (Eight Mile Old Timers Club).

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Section Three

Index List of Surveyed Properties

Inventory Forms with Photographs

[See attachments]