



City of Detroit
City Council
Historic Designation Advisory
Board

FINAL REPORT

**PROPOSED DETROIT TOWERS
HISTORIC DISTRICT**

By a resolution dated May 25, 2006, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Detroit Towers Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Detroit Towers Historic District consists of a single resource, the contributing eighteen-story building which occupies the eastern end of a large riverfront property located at 8162 East Jefferson Avenue amidst a row of riverfront apartment structures of varying ages. The property has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Boundaries:

The boundaries of the proposed Detroit Towers Historic District are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

The northeast and southwest boundaries are co-determinate with the northeast and southwest boundaries, extended northwest and southeast, of the parcel described as: Wayne County Condominium Sub Plan No 46 AKA Detroit Towers Condo L18017 PGS 182-222 DEEDS, W C R.

The southeast boundary is the harbor line.

The northwest boundary is the centerline of East Jefferson Avenue.

History:

The Detroit Towers, an eighteen-story red brick and cast stone tower overlooking the Detroit River, was erected in 1925 and designed by prominent Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager. The building originated as a luxury cooperative apartment house with thirty-four large units; most of the units still retain their original internal appearance. Built for luxurious living at an estimated cost of \$1.6 million, the building contained spacious apartments of about 2,400-2,800 square feet apiece, two per floor, which had built-in wood-burning fireplaces, nine rooms including servants quarters,

and three baths. The amenities provided for the tenants, in addition to the river view, were tennis courts, a putting green, and a sunken garden. When built, the co-op apartment shares cost \$18,000 each. In 1955, the building was converted to rental with monthly rates from \$750-\$3,000 per month. Around 1970 the Detroit Towers were updated and converted to condominiums.

The Detroit Towers occupies the former site of a double mansion built in 1894 for the McGraw family, which was the first house built as part of the residential development of the southern portion of the Cook Farm, more familiarly known as Indian Village.

City of Detroit building permit # 65710 was issued by on May 29, 1925, to Walbridge-Aldinger for a reinforced concrete multiple dwelling with thirty-four units. Unusually, a previous permit for the footings, issued April 13, 1925, was given the number 16514A, indicating an alteration, although this was the first permit issued for the building. The permits show the owner as the Building Securities Corporation with offices in the Penobscot Building and showed an estimated cost of \$700,000 for a structure 64' x 105' and 210' tall. As George B. Walbridge is shown in the *Detroit City Directory* for 1925-26 to be a vice-president of Walbridge-Aldinger and the president of Building Securities Corporation, there is apparently a connection between the original owner and the contractor. This may reflect a necessity for temporary ownership prior to the time that the property could be transferred to the cooperative association.

Walter W. Ahlschlager was a Chicago architect who joined his father's firm, John Ahlschlager and Son in 1914. The firm specialized in industrial bakery facilities and designed Detroit's Wagner Baking Company, now the Motor City Casino. The company name was changed to Walter W. Ahlschlager, Inc. following the father's death in 1915 and the concentration on bakeries abandoned. Walter Ahlschlager was nationally known for designing Motion Picture Palaces, among them the largest in the Roxy chain (1927, demolished 1961) in New York City. In the late 1920's, Ahlschlager built many skyscrapers, including a number in Chicago and the Carew Tower and Netherlands Plaza Hotel complex in Cincinnati (1929-31, now a National Historic Landmark). Unfortunately, the Great Depression virtually ended Ahlschlager's career; after the nation's recovery the new age of modernism arrived, thus limiting the taste for his exuberant designs. He did manage to secure a few commissions in Dallas, Texas after 1940; he relocated there in the early 40s and died in 1965.

It appears that Ahlschlager set up a Detroit office to expand his business into the Detroit market in the early 1920's. He was listed in the 1922-23 Detroit City Directory as having an office in the Federal Bond and Mortgage Building here. Other buildings in Detroit known to be designed by his firm were a three story apartment building at 8620 Epworth near Linsdale called the Bonair Court Apartments (1922), and revision of plans by the Detroit African American Carl Stokes for Greater Shiloh Baptist Church.

Early residents of the Detroit Towers included a cross-section of individuals prominent in the community. It should be noted that research on residents is hampered by a lack of documentation; in the years when the building was cooperative or rental, the Register of Deeds is useless for identifying residents. In addition, although residents are listed in the City Directory for 1925-26, the first year in which the building appears, the owners declined in some following years to provide

resident information to the publisher of the city directories. There is enough information published, however, to determine that by the latter 1930s there was substantial vacancy in the building. Among the first or early residents were:

William T. Skrzaycki
Detroit Towers Unit-4B

William Skrzaycki moved with his family to Detroit from Port Austin, Michigan in 1890. A baker by trade, his first shop was located at the corner of Chene and Hancock streets. Within a few years the bakery moved to a larger building on Michigan Avenue near Cicotte Street. By 1915 Skrzaycki Bakery had become the largest bakery in the city. William Skrzaycki opened the Skrzaycki Pie Company in 1920, an even larger facility located 5807 Russell Avenue. At this new building Skrzaycki Bakery was able to produce over 25,000 pies and fried cakes per day. In the mid-1920s Skrzaycki turned his attention to Detroit real estate market and established the Skrzaycki Land and Home Company ■builders of moderate homes. • William Skrzaycki and his wife Stella resided in unit 4B of the Detroit Towers from 1925 until 1939.

Montgomery Whaling
Detroit Towers Unit-5A

Montgomery Whaling came to Detroit in 1911 from Milwaukee. He learned about finance by working at number of jobs in the banking industry. In 1921 he formed the Whaling Company to handle steel and wire products for Detroit's expanding automotive industry. Whaling sold his company in 1925 and took a more profitable position with American Steel Company. He moved into the Detroit Towers that same year. In 1931 Whaling retired from the steel business and became chairman of the board for the Birmingham National Bank, by which time he was no longer a resident of the Detroit Towers.

Benjamin Gotfredson
Detroit Towers Unit-5B

Benjamin Gotfredson, president of American Automobile Trimming Company of Detroit, resided in Unit 5B of the Detroit Towers for five years from 1925 until 1930. During this time he operated the largest automobile trimming and painting company in the world with plants in Detroit, Cleveland and Walkerville, Ontario. Gotfredson moved to Detroit in 1905 and established the Gotfredson Horse Market. According to a 1906 city directory advertisement, his business ■specialized in the buying and selling of horses. • Like many of his contemporaries; Gotfredson saw the potential in the automotive industry and in 1918 established the Gotfredson Motor Truck Corporation. Gotfredson served as president of the Saxon Motor Car Company for a year before the company folded.

Charles E. Sorensen
Detroit Towers Unit-6A

Charles E. Sorensen, vice president and general manager of the Ford Motor Car Company, lived at the Detroit Towers from 1926 until 1945. Sorensen came to Detroit in 1901 from Buffalo, New York to work in the foundries of Detroit as a pattern maker. In 1904 he joined forces with Henry Ford at his newly-formed company. Sorensen supervised the construction of the Ford Piquette Plant providing the hands-on approach Ford demanded of his right-hand man. In 1908, after weeks of preparations, Sorensen with Charles Lewis, demonstrated a proto-assembly line to Henry Ford, C.H. Wills and Ed Martin. Sorensen's role at the company expanded as the company grew; and by 1940

he was appointed director of the firm at Ford Motor Company and put in charge of construction and production of the Willow Run plant. During World War II the plant was responsible for producing over 8,000 B-24 E- bombers. From May, 1942 until the spring of 1945, the plant at Willow Run production line turned out bombers at the rate of one an hour, twenty-four hours a day. Sorensen retired in 1944 after the takeover of the company by Henry Ford II and became president of Willys-Overland Motors of Toledo, Ohio. It has been suggested that Sorensen was one of the instigators of the construction of the Detroit Towers, but this has not been documented at the time of this report.

Tracy W. McGregor
Detroit Towers Unit 9B

Tracy W. McGregor and his wife Katherine Whitney, resided at the Detroit Towers from 1925 to 1930. Son of a Presbyterian minister who life's work was dedicated to helping the poor, McGregor's father established The McGregor Institute for Men in the late 1880s, located on Brush Street. The mission helped to feed and clothe the city's poor. After the father's death, the son became director of the McGregor Institute. It was through his charitable works that he met and married Katherine Whitney, daughter of David Whitney Jr. and together they devoted their lives to charitable endeavors.

McGregor served as president of Detroit Community Union, the predecessor of the United Foundation for ten years. At the start of World War I the governor appointed McGregor to direct Michigan Red Cross civilian relief efforts. In 1925 the McGregor Family established the McGregor Foundation with a \$250,000 endowment. The purpose of the foundation was to relieve the misfortunes and promote the well-being of mankind. By 1960 the fund had grown to over \$27,000,000. The foundation donations have included \$10,000 for the establishment of the McGregor Public Library located on Woodward Avenue in Highland Park. Other donations included the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, United Foundation and the Visiting Nurses Association. In 1960 the McGregor Foundation donated \$1,320,000 to Wayne State University for the construction of the McGregor Conference Center (designed by Minoru Yamasaki) to serve as a meeting place for both the university and community organizations.

Gustavus Debrill Pope
Detroit Towers Unit-15B

Gustavus Pope resided at the Detroit Towers for ten years from 1925 during which time he served as president of the Digestive Ferments Company of Chicago and Detroit. (The company survives today as the Difco division of Becton, Dickinson and Company.) It appears that the Detroit Towers apartment was a city *pied a terre* for Pope, as he had a large house in Pontiac (Bloomfield Hills?) and is listed in some sources as living there during the same years he occupied an apartment at Detroit Towers.

From the start of his early professional career, Pope's business interests had been wide and varied. Beginning with his short employment as a manager with the Macon, Dublin and Savannah Railroad at Macon, Georgia; to working as an engineer with the Canadian Bridge Company at Walkerville, Ontario. Later Pope was employed at Ray Chemical Company of Detroit before it merged with the Digestive Ferments of Chicago. Over the course of his career Pope had served as director of First

State Bank of Detroit, president of Detroit Motorbus Company and the Metal Manufacture Company of Detroit.

In 1914 Pope resigned from his position as president of his company to serve as director of Detroit Red Cross and Detroit Patriotic Fund. He later served as a director on the board of the National Red Cross. In 1921 Pope was appointed executive director for Detroit Department of Health. During his tenure the city purchased the 600 acres from the city of Northville for the erection of Detroit's Tuberculosis Sanatorium.



Robert C. Graham
Detroit Towers Unit-16B

Robert C. Graham along with his brothers Ray and Joseph were the founders of Graham Brothers Truck Company of Illinois. The brothers moved to Detroit in 1916 with the expansion of the company into Michigan and Canada. under the name Graham Brothers, Inc. That company had a close association with the Dodge Brothers and in 1925, after the Dodge family sold their interest in the car company, Graham Brothers Inc. became a part of Dodge, the brothers briefly serving as top executives of Dodge Brothers, Inc. A year later in 1926, the Graham brothers left Dodge and pursued other interests, including a major ownership interest in Libbey-Owens Sheet Glass and the merger which created Libbey-Owens-Ford. With a continuing interest in automobile manufacturing, the brothers bought the Paige-Detroit Motor Car Company and renamed it the Graham-Paige Motors Corporation. Robert Graham served as vice-president until 1940 when the company abandoned the manufacture of automobiles. It is said to continue its corporate existence today as the Madison Square Garden Corporation. Robert Graham lived at the Detroit Towers for ten years, from 1926 until 1936.

Dr. Harold K. Shawn
Detroit Tower Unit-7A

Dr. Harold Shawn was the first resident in Unit-7A of the Detroit Towers. Dr. Shawn was a Captain with the U.S. Army Medical Corp during World War I. After the war he became a professor of surgery at Wayne State University before accepting a position on staff at Grace Hospital.

Albert Knowlson
Detroit Tower Unit 12A

Albert Knowlson, a native of Ontario, was president and founder of the A.T. Knowlson Company dealing in wholesale electric supplies. Knowlson came to Detroit in 1890 after spending several years in oil fields of Pennsylvania and Ohio. He is credited with being the first to introduce the Welsbach incandescent gas lamp in Detroit. Manufactured in New Jersey, the Welsbach gas system provided a superior light compared to the old gas jet system and sales soared. Eight years later Knowlson became the exclusive distributor of Welsbach products for the state of Michigan and portions of Indiana. This marked the beginning of Knowlson's wholesale business. In 1906 he incorporated

under the name of A.T. Knowlson Company and electrical supplies were added. By 1913 gas



lighting had become obsolete and was eliminated from the company's product line. A.T. Knowlson the largest wholesaler dealer of electric supplies in the mid-west during the nineteen twenties and thirties.

Albert Knowlson and his wife Rose along with their children Elm Thexton and Lois Virginia (the latter one of the five wives of Horace E. Dodge Jr.) moved into the Detroit Towers in 1925.

James Scripps Booth Detroit Tower Unit-15A

James S. Booth and his wife Jean Alice moved into the Detroit Tower in 1925. He was the eldest son of George Gough Booth, the director and president of the Detroit News; and Ellen Scripps Booth; the parents were patron of the arts, including the establishment of the Detroit Museum of Arts (now the Detroit Institute of Arts) and the art community at Cranbrook. Known as an engineer and artist, the younger Booth never completed the tenth grade. In 1904 Booth dismantled and rebuilt the family car to learn about engineering. Four years later he designed the ■Bi-autogo;• this vehicle was designed to seat three and travel on two wheels. The one example is today in the collections of the Detroit Historical Museum.

In 1911 Booth traveled to Paris and attended the famous Ecole des Beaux Arts. While in France Booth also studied pastel drawing, which would later become his preferred medium. Booth returned to Detroit in 1912 where he successfully designed and build small vehicles with his uncle William E. Scripps. A year later they formed the Scripps-Booth Cyclecar Company. The Cyclecar was belt driven and offered a more compact less expensive and more gas-efficient automobile. By 1916 the company became a division of Chevrolet and was absorbed into General Motors. Its last production year was 1922. Booth continue to design automobiles into the mid-1930s; most noted was the ■da Vinci.•

In 1930 Booth built an art and design studio in Detroit's Indian Village area where he reworked many of his earlier pastels with brighter colors. During World War II his art studio became ac

classroom for a Red Cross course training women as auto mechanics. Booth served as a trustee for the Cranbrook Foundation and the Detroit Institute of Arts and made numerous donations to the Detroit Historical Museum and the National Automobile History Collection at the Detroit Public Library.



C. Howard Crane Detroit Towers Unit 12B

C. Howard Crane was the first tenant to live in unit 12B of the Detroit Towers. According to city directories he lived there for nine years from 1925 to 1934. In 1908 Crane moved to Detroit from Hartford, Connecticut and set up an architectural practice. His skills in the design of theaters were in such high demand that over the course of his lifetime he designed over fifty theaters in Detroit alone. C. Howard Crane's genius for theater design took

him to cities around the world. His most notable commissions in Detroit included the Lafayette Building, Fox Theater, Detroit Opera House (formerly the Capital Theater)

Madison Theater and the acoustically perfect Orchestra Hall as well as many neighborhood theaters.

The Detroit Towers remains today a desirable address for figures prominent in the arts, industry, politics, and entertainment.

Description: The Detroit Towers is a tall, slender structure, its narrow character emphasized by a clever footprint which offsets the two rectangular floor plans on each floor in order to provide views for each. This results in an overall plan somewhat resembling a rectangular figure-eight, and from many angles, the building seems less substantial than it is. Extending northwest from the Jefferson Avenue side of the building is a low garage structure, partly underground and mostly hidden from view by placement and plantings.

The most recognizable feature is the gilded conical witch's hat roof located on the west side of the building; this crowns a multi-story multi-windowed rounded bay which forms the end walls of the living rooms in the B units which are located generally on the Jefferson Avenue side of the building. These bays provide those units with views toward the river and downtown. This rounded-tower feature also marks the intersection of the two rectangular A and B floor plans on this side of the building. The slightly larger A units, located on the river side of the structure, open to the river through broad angled bay windows, likewise rising through all floors and capped at the top with a sort of rounded pediment feature in cast stone set into the parapet.

At the intersection of the A and B units floor plans, facing north, the building has a wall set at a forty-five degree angle, rising through all floors. At ground level this contains the main entrance, which faces a parking area terminating the long driveway from East Jefferson.



The facade facing East Jefferson is now quite plain, with a sort of oriel window feature in brick for the top two stories of windows on the eastern portion of the facade, and a large chimney stack to the west. This oriel was once decorated with cast stone and was surmounted by a triangular parapet in imitation of a pediment. Decay of the cast stone used on the building required an extensive program of repair to the skin of the building, which took place about 1980 and included

extensive removal of failed cast stone ornament. This has resulted in the apparent plainness of the building, uncharacteristic of Ahlschlager's generally exuberant designs. Indeed, though the building has been characterized as ■Modern Gothic,• and some sources refer to ■Romanesque elements,• the removal of much of the decorative cast stone has made stylistic characterization somewhat difficult.

Criteria: Detroit Towers is significant for its association with Walter W. Aschlager, Jr., a Chicago-based architect nationally known for his design of hotel and theater buildings including the Sheridan Plaza, Chicago; Roxy Theaters, New York; Peabody Hotel, Memphis; and the Carew-Netherlends Complex in Cincinnati, a designated National Historic Landmark. The Detroit Towers is an excellent example of a high-class apartment building of the mid ■Roaring Twenties.• In addition, a number of its occupants were significant figures in their respective areas of endeavor, and generally lived in the building at the height of their careers. The proposed historic district meets two of the criteria provided by reference in the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act and in local ordinance. These criteria refer to resources:

B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or

C. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

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