

DRAFT

Proposed Distel Building Historic District

Final Report

By a resolution dated October 31, 2003, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed **Detroit-Toledo Stagecoach Inn Historic District** (proposed Distel Building Historic District) in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.



The Distel Building Historic District is the single building located at 9324-9326 West Fort Street in Southwest Detroit, approximately 4.5 miles from downtown and close to the border of Dearborn. Its location, on the north side of West Fort Street, is in the first block immediately east of Woodmere Cemetery. Across West Fort Street to its south is Trinity-St. Marks United Church of Christ.

BOUNDARIES: The boundaries of the proposed Distel Building Historic District, which encompass the real property containing the contributing resource, are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of the east-west alley north of and adjoining lots 1-5 of Distel's Subdivision of Lots 1,2, and west . of Lot 3 of Wesson's Sub of Lot 6 of the Shipyard Tract (L 11, P 96);

on the east, a line drawn parallel to and four (4) feet east of the east lot line of Lot 3 of Distel's Subdivision of Lots 1,2, and west . of Lot 3 of Wesson's Sub of Lot 6 of the Shipyard Tract (L 11, P 96);

on the south, the centerline of West Fort Street; and

on the west, the east line of Lot 2 of Distel's Subdivision (L11, P 96).

History:

The Distel Building Historic District is significant as a rare, apparently unique, survivor of a substantial building of c.1870 built outside the city and now located within it. Its continued presence and usage reflected the industrial development and physical expansion of the city of Detroit, particularly of Southwest Detroit. The building is closely associated with the Distel family, which settled in Detroit just after 1800 and played a role in the development of Springwells Township, the Distel Subdivision, and Woodmere properties, all incorporated into the City of Detroit in the early 1900s.

On April 12, 1827, the area known as Spring Hill officially became Springwells Township by an act of the state legislature. Besides the natural springs located near the present site of Fort Wayne, Springwells Township's earliest development centered around the construction of ships. The Shipyard Tract is a tract of land located on the Rouge River and Baby Creek near West Fort Street. After Detroit's conflagration of 1805, the United States Congress authorized a Land Commission for survey of the area. According to the commission's survey, the inlet was called the Ship Yard Tract. During the Revolutionary War, ships were built by occupying British forces on the inlet at the present day Woodmere Cemetery (established 1869). Ships continued to be built and fitted out there during the occupation by the British, and then under American rule by the United States Army in the War of 1812. Between 1849 and 1916, portions of Springwells Township were annexed to Detroit on six different occasions. In 1906, Detroit annexed the little villages of Woodmere and Delray.

The Distel Building is situated on a piece of land that was part of the Shipyard Tract, platted in 1853. Wesson's Subdivision of Lot 6 of the Shipyard Tract was platted in 1866 by Frederick Betts, and he sold a portion of it to Christian Distel in 1870. Finally, Distel's Subdivision was platted in 1888 by Wilhelmina (Minnie) and Christian Distel. Christian Distel died on December 24, 1893; the land passed to Ernest F. Distel and other heirs. Ernest died in 1910. The building is identified in the 1884 *City Directory* as the saloon of Christian Distel. By 1887, Ernest (E.F.M.) Distel ran the saloon and lived in the family home across from the cemetery on Woodmere Avenue just north of West Fort Street. In 1889, Orson B. Burns was the proprietor. Called the Distel House in 1897, William W. Waltz was the proprietor; Quiring & Son were its proprietors in 1902. By 1907, Edward DesGranchamp ran the saloon and lived in the building, probably upstairs.

The Distel family settled in Detroit just after 1800 and played a role in the development of Springwells Township, the Distel Subdivision, and Woodmere properties, according to the obituary

of Anna W.C. Distel, a fourth generation Distel who died in 1973. Henry Distel was a clerk at the Antisdel House on Michigan and Washington in downtown Detroit and boarded there in the early 1870s and 80s. By the late 1890s, he was living on the northwest corner of Distel Avenue and West Fort St, addressed as 2472 West Fort (address prior to 1921). By 1909 he is listed in the city directory as being in the real estate business, and 2478 West Fort Street (address prior to 1921), the Distel Building, was vacant. In 1911 and 1912, ■Public Library•(Woodmere Branch) occupied 2478 West Fort, according to city directories, but only for a brief period of time, for by 1914, a laborer named Joseph Lenthie was residing at the Distel Building address. About that time, it became a double residence.

The appearance of the streetscape changed in the 1920s as Fort Street became less residential and more commercial in character, reflecting a pattern seen along major arteries in the burgeoning industrial city. The street address of the Distel Building changed to 9324-26 West Fort in 1920-21, and the building then housed several people. Eugene W. Harmes, a driller, resided in the east half and James C. Rogers, a blacksmith, resided in the western half. Although Ella Vader, a Distel heir, lived in the house at the corner of West Fort and Distel, the rest of the street was filling up with commercial activity such as a Kroger store, physicians office and Woodmere Pharmacy Company. In 1934, Clarence G. Taylor lived and worked as a barber out of the east half of the Distel Building, and Ernest Brady, a machinist, lived in the west half. George Klimas, also a machinist, occupied the rear. A filling station replaced Ella Vader's house on the northwest corner of W. Fort and Distel.

The original use of the Distel Building is known only through oral tradition, which says that it was a stagecoach inn. Because transportation by stage ceased shortly after it was built, it could not have had a long history servicing stagecoach passengers (c. 1868-1873). As modes of transportation changed, it came to serve several other functions● saloon, a hall, a public library and multiple dwelling. While its original function is suggested only by oral tradition, it is interesting to speculate as to what other use such a structure might have had in that time and place. It was under the ownership of Distel heirs from c.1868, when it was built, to 1979. It was purchased by the Southwest Detroit Historical Society in 1998 to save it from demolition and sold to its present owner in 2001, with the intention that it be rehabilitated and reused.

Travel on horseback was the only way to travel long distances in the early days of Detroit settlement. Low, two- wheeled French carts were used for short distances from the days of Cadillac until about 1830. Carriage use was very limited, and then only by people with some means. The roads were generally very bad. The first public stage traveled from Detroit to Mt. Clemens, transporting steamboat passengers in 1822. By 1832, several stages were leaving from Detroit, including the Sandusky Line, passing through Monroe and Maumee (now Toledo).

With the opening up of the ■West• by the Erie Canal in 1825, settlers took advantage of improved access to water routes in the Northwest. The canal altered American trading routes by shifting trade away from the New England territories to western New York and the Great Lakes. After the Erie Canal opened, Michigan's population increased, necessitating implementation of public transportation plans by local governments as well as private entities. In 1827, stagecoaches began to run between Detroit and Toledo, Ohio along the former military road, Fort Street. Two years later, a line of post coaches ran from Detroit to Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, and Tecumseh. By the time the first railroad was incorporated in Michigan in the early 1830s, stage lines were already established between Detroit, Marshall and Pontiac as well as Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids. Although

stagecoaches continued to serve the public during the construction of the railroads, the horse drawn coaches were no match for the high-speed power of rail. Stagecoach lines were discontinued in the region by 1873. Later, interurban lines served the places between rail stations (1900-1928) that were once served by stage. The Detroit, Monroe & Toledo Short Line Rail Way obtained the right-of-way for its interurban line in 1903. The Detroit, Monroe and Toledo Interurban Terminal was located at Fort and Dearborn Avenue in 1922.

Local traffic was served by streetcar, or trolley; in the early 1860s the horse-drawn streetcar was introduced, and not long after, the horse-drawn omnibus. The Fort Street-Elmwood Railway, was established in 1869, after a petition to Common Council by E. B. Ward, for the benefit of a large and growing working class population. Florists and greenhouses did a thriving business along West Fort Street. Christoph Engels Greenhouse on Woodmere and Smoke Brothers Florists on the south side of West Fort Street are still in business today. Brick making was a major industry in Springwells Township as well. Heavy industry was booming; Southwest Detroit was home to the Michigan Car Company, which moved to the junction of the Grand Truck and Michigan Central railroads in 1874, as well as other industrial concerns owned by James McMillan and John S. Newberry. The chemical industry - salt, soda ash, iron, steel - made a presence in Southwest Detroit in the latter part of the 19th century and the automobile industry followed at the dawn of the 20th century.

The Distel Building, located at 9324 West Fort Street, by oral tradition may be the only structure in Detroit associated with the stagecoach era. Later stagecoach inns generally located at the ends of local transportation links. Trains provided direct service from Detroit to Toledo, as the rail link between Detroit and Toledo was established in 1855. Local traffic was then carried by horse-drawn street car or trolley to the city limits. The stagecoach served points between Detroit and Toledo, and inns provided respite and refreshment for weary travelers and, perhaps, horses. Woodmere Station, serving the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad, was near the entrance to Woodmere Cemetery, according to Silas Farmer, and thus not far from the Distel Building.

Physical Description:

The Distel Building Historic District contains just the one contributing resource, the two-story brick building in common bond, painted red. The main body of the building is approximately square in plan; a single story brick addition is attached to its rear. The front, or south, facade is composed of six equally spaced, shallow arched openings twice as tall as wide on the second story and six shallow arched openings, two of which are entrances, on the first. Each opening is framed in slightly raised brick. The window openings have stone sills and a decorative inscribed keystone. Double-hung wooden sash windows originally had four-over-four lights, the upper sash slightly arched to fit in the opening. A frieze of about 5 courses of only slightly raised brick extends to the denticulated cornice. The first floor openings are similar to the second but the second and fifth openings are entrances with transoms, the one to the northeast being wider than all the other openings, indicating that it was the original entrance. It was originally filled with a single door and sidelights beneath the slightly arched transom window. The entrance opening on the southwest half of the front facade has only a single door in an opening enlarged from a window.

The Distel Building originally had a porch; the original was replaced by one spanning the front of the building, extending across the length of all of the windows. Brick porch walls with simple

Tuscan columns were added then, perhaps around the time that the building was converted into residences sometime in the early 20th century. The asphalt shingled roof is now a steep hip bearing a rather large dormer with two windows, now boarded, with a pedimental roof and fan light in its gable. Its triangular pediment is framed by a cornice with dentils. Chimneys project from the sides and rear elevations.

The side elevations have four openings per floor with shallow arched of brick voussoirs. Double hung rectangular sashes were inset. A one-story gabled addition was attached to the rear of the main building, and appears severely fire damaged with its roof caved in. Today, the historic Distel Building stands vacant in a changed setting.

Sometime around 1980, a Distel heir visited the offices of the Historic Designation Advisory Board and showed the Director, William M. Worden, a 19th century photograph of the Distel Building. The visitor was unwilling to loan the photo for the purpose of copying. Mr. Worden remembers very clearly that the photo showed a horse-drawn beer delivery wagon in front of the building; that there was a bracketed Italianate one-story front porch; and that the roof was low-sloped hip roof of the type typical for an Italianate building of about 1870. Thus, the existing roof and the front porch shown in more recent photos are alterations; the character of both the later roof and the porch would suggest an early 20th century date. It was this same gentleman, among others, who stated that the building had been a stagecoach stop.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets the first and third criteria contained in section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; and (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board: The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Edward Francis, Lucile Cruz Gajec, Marie M. Gardner, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

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.

Distel Building Historic District

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