

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

FINAL REPORT

Proposed Ossian Sweet House Historic District



By a resolution dated September 14, 2005 the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Ossian Sweet House Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Ossian Sweet House Historic District consists of a single-family house at 2905 Garland Avenue. The building is located in a residential neighborhood and at the northwest corner of Garland and Charlevoix Avenues. The Sweet House is approximately four miles east of downtown Detroit, and four blocks north of East Jefferson Avenue, a major east-west thoroughfare. The Julia Ward Howe Elementary School and campus is diagonally across the intersection of Garland and Charlevoix.

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

on the north, a line drawn 17 feet north of the north lot line of lot 468, extended east and west of Bewick Sub L23 P14.

on the east, the centerline of Garland Avenue;

on the south, the centerline of Charlevoix Avenue: and

on the west, the centerline of the north-south alley running between Garland Avenue and Bewick Street.

History:

Ossian Sweet's fight against Jim Crow in a segregated Detroit neighborhood resulted in the shot that was heard around the world. The aphorism, "a man's home is his castle," was profoundly tested on the evening of September 9, 1925.

In 1850 there were only 2,583 African Americans living in the state of Michigan, with only 587

or 23.7 percent living in Detroit. Thirty years later, in 1880, that number had only modestly increased statewide to 2,821, with most of the newcomers settling in Detroit. Detroit's relatively tiny black population clustered along the Detroit riverfront south of Jefferson Avenue and east of Woodward Avenue. By the early 1900s black families began to move eastward and northward toward Gratiot Avenue in the area originally known as the St. Antoine Street District. This neighborhood was home to many of the city's Italian, Greek, and Russian Jewish residents, and was referred to as the port of entry for many of Detroit's foreign-born immigrants. Fueled by the vast outpouring of southern arrivals, Detroit's black population exploded after 1910 and by 1925, the number of blacks in the city rising from 5,741 to 40,838, an increase of 611.3 percent. It was this great migration which laid the foundation for the development of large black populations in many northern American cities.

By 1920, Detroit had become the fastest growing city in the country, ranked the fourth largest city in America. This was due in part to the role Detroit played in America's automobile revolution. By the mid-1920s Detroit was home to three thousand manufacturing plants, thirty-seven automobile manufacturing plants and two hundred and fifty automobile accessory manufacturing plants. Like the majority of Detroit newcomers, blacks migrated to the city in search of jobs and opportunity. But compared to other immigrants to the city, the treatment of newly arrived blacks was far worse. Jobs were restricted and housing was limited.

The rapid growth of Detroit's black population gave rise to many new social problems, with housing being the greatest challenge. Unfortunately, housing demand did not keep up with Detroit's growing population. By the late 1920s the term "Black Bottom", which originally referred to rich soil, was now used in reference to the southernmost blocks of a district consisting of a three-square mile portion of the eastside which had become home to 313,600 of Detroit's African American people. This overwhelming Southern influx of migrants to Detroit resulted in the movement of blacks out of the eastside ghetto and into other areas of the city, including Tireman Avenue, West Eight Mile Road and Conant Gardens. Faced with a critical shortage of housing in the African American community, Detroit found itself entrenched in the social and political issues which had become a problem in mainstream America. As the black population continued to grow, the reaction of many in the white community was of heightened racial hostility. This manifested itself in a hardening of patterns of social and residential segregation, and occasional outbreaks of racial violence. In the early twentieth century whites began to form organizations determined to prevent blacks from integrating all-white neighborhoods. They used restrictive covenants, home improvement associations and real state codes to prevent most blacks from finding decent housing anywhere in the city.

Ossian Sweet

Born in 1894, Ossian was the eldest of three children born to Henry and Dora Sweet. The Sweet family lived in Bartow, a black middle class enclave in south central Florida. A self made man, Henry Sweet held a variety of jobs to support his family, including woodcutter, human bulldozer, and independent contractor in the sulfur phosphate industry. Henry Sweet was determined to

instill a sense of pride and dignity into Ossian and his siblings. He thought by raising them in a

protective community he could protect them from America's ills. Unfortunately, this factor did not shield the family from the racism that existed in the segregated south. Ossian Sweet witnessed his first lynching at the early age of seven.

Upon completing ninth grade, Ossian was encouraged to leave Bartow, to attend Wilberforce Academy High School located in Xenia, Ohio. By the age of twenty-five he had earned his bachelor of science degree from Wilberforce University and his medical degree from Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, the jewel in the crown of black colleges. In 1921, Dr. Ossian Sweet arrived in Detroit and within only four years he had built a thriving practice, married Gladys Mitchell, and continued his medical studies in Vienna and Paris.

In June of 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet and his wife purchased a two-story brick house located at 2905 Garland Avenue for \$18,500. During 1925, several incidents of violence occurred as black businessmen and professionals unsuccessfully attempted to move into homes in northwest neighborhoods in the city. In every case these individuals were stopped by the local Klansmen claiming to be Detroit police officers. The Ku Klux Klan had gained a stronghold in Detroit and in 1924 a Klan-backed mayor was almost elected. When the Sweets moved in three months later they had received threats on their lives. Dr. Sweet moved into his new home, deciding to defend it against violence at all costs. His arrival was greeted the following night by a mob. Rocks were thrown and several persons in the mob charged the house. Shots were fired from inside the house. The police who were called responded with shots on the outside. One of the bullets killed Leon Breiner, a neighbor and member of the mob. Everyone in the Sweet home was arrested and charged with murder, including his wife, Gladys Sweet. At the time of her arrest Detroit had no cell block for women prisoners; yet when offered selective exemption from the conspiracy charges; she objected saying "If these men go to jail I want to go too."

Dr. Ossian Sweet's resistance to mob violence led to one of the two landmark housing cases heard in Detroit. This case was of such importance that several officers from the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), including James Weldon Johnson and Walter White, personally called on Clarence Darrow, the most prominent attorney in America at that time, and asked him to take the case. Frank Murphy, the presiding judge, later served as mayor of Detroit, governor of Michigan, U.S. attorney-general, and a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Clarence Darrow's decision to take the case brought international appeal, with press from around the world coming to Detroit to cover the trial. Darrow decided to minimize the question of race, because as he put it, "the prosecution failed to meet the burden of proving conspiracy or murder beyond a reasonable doubt." Arthur Garfield Hays (press referred to him as the attorney from New York) argued "Every condition in the house was consistent with a lawful purpose. There were no lights because the people in the house feared they would be killed from the outside. There was no furniture because they had not moved into the house. There was food cooking on the kitchen stove because every man must eat, and because none of them could have gone outside

the house to obtain food. This whole case stands or falls with the proof or failure to prove a conspiracy to commit murder. Hays summed it up: It's the old principle of a man's right to protect his home as his castle (Vine, p209-10). In the trials that ensued, Attorney Darrow's summation to the jury was considered one of the most memorable in the annals of great speeches. In the end all eleven defendants were found not guilty.

Architectural Description:

The Ossian Sweet House is a classic bungalow. The word bungalow can likely be traced to India from the word, Bengla, which meant literally, from Bengal. It was used by the British in the 19th century to designate a house type that was one story high and had large, encircling porches. These structures were built by the British as rest houses for foreign travelers, and were well suited to the hot climate of India, with their broad shady verandas and overhanging eaves. When the British civil servants retired back to England, they brought back with them the term bungalow to describe any modest, low slung residence with picturesque lines.

The American forerunner of the bungalow was the small-scale, one-story Queen Anne style cottage of the 1880s and 1890s. Stripped of the bric-a-brak gingerbread ornament and more functional in plan, this simple cottage evolved into the bungalow of the early 20th century. In fact, the term bungalow came to be used instead of the word cottage for a type of early 20th century dwelling. The bungalow style first took in California, where it suited the mild climate. However, it spread quickly throughout the United States with the help of the publications like Gustav Stickley's The Craftsman (1901 - 1916), which sang its praises and reprinted house plans. For five dollars, anyone could order house plans from several magazines of the day. Sears, Roebuck Company offered several models in its mail-order catalogs. Precut lumber, nails, doors, and the like were shipped to the site.

Craftsmen interiors also expressed simplicity and lack of pretension. Ceilings were often beamed; wall surfaces were frequently rough plastered, burlapped or paneled. Fireplaces were dominant features, as were built-in bookshelves and wall stenciling. Inconspicuous informality was the goal.

According to Gustav Stickley in 1909, a bungalow was a house reduced to its simplest form, one that never fails to harmonize with its surroundings, because of its low broad proportions and absolute lack of ornamentation give it a character so natural and unaffected that it seems to sing into the blend with any landscape. It was never expensive, as it was designed to meet simple needs in plan and lack of ornamentation, and could be built with local materials by local craftsmen. Stickley saw bungalows as ... the kind of houses that children will rejoice all of their lives to remember as home, and that give a sense of peace and comfort to the tired men who go back to them when the day's work is done. It was not so for the Sweet family.

One and one-half stories tall, the Ossian Sweet House is a typical craftsmen style, mid-1910s bungalow built for middle-class occupancy. Aloes DeCruydt, a local contractor, built this house at a cost of \$3,500 in 1916. Its first story is brick veneered; its half-story attic is clad in wood

shingles. The main roof is a steeply sloping, side-facing gable roof, its front surface extended to cover the full-width front porch. A large gabled-roof dormer projects up out of the frontal slope, and square brick piers support its outward overhang. Porch walls and stair walls are also brick, with cast concrete coping. The large side-facing gabled ends of the roof have raking verge boards.

The centrally placed main entrance contains a single door that is now covered with a security door. A picture window is located to the left, or south, of the door, and a single small square window is located to its right, or north. The opening in the roof dormer contains three-double hung sash windows separated by mullions.

The south side elevation, facing Charlevoix, features a secondary entrance and a box bay. A small, horizontally rectangular leaded glass window, quite typical of bungalows, punctures the wall eastward of the box bay. Similarly sized and shaped basement windows circle the perimeter. The box bay is covered by a shallow hipped roof. Its depth is one elongated double hung sash window; its width contains four similar windows sharing a common sill. To its left, or west, are the porch walls and steps leading to the side entrance.

The Sweet House is situated on a flat turf front lawn graded about a foot above the public sidewalk, surrounded by a cobblestone wall and enclosed with a two foot metal white picket fence at its street perimeters. This was not the original lawn treatment, since early photographs show the house with a lawn that slopes gradually down to where it meets the public sidewalk. A two-car, alley-facing garage at the back of the property mimics the design of the house in its materials and its side-facing gables with verge boards. A Michigan Historical Commission marker identifies this unpretentious house at the corner of Garland and Charlevoix as an historic site. Occupying the rest of the street are similarly unpretentious bungalows and four-squares, mostly sheathed in wood.

While the Sweet house itself is relatively unchanged, the setting has undergone enormous change since the events of 1925. When Charlevoix was converted into a through one-way street to handle increasing commuter traffic, it was necessary to create a curve to connect two sections of Charlevoix. In 1925 the Charlevoix right-of-way adjacent to the Sweet House ended at St. Clair; traffic was forced to turn left (north) on St. Clair for about fifty feet and then turn right on the continuation of Charlevoix. The new curbed connector required the demolition of a brick building containing storefronts and apartments directly across Garland from the Sweet House, and the removal of four buildings on the west side of St. Clair north of Charlevoix. Since that time, another house has been demolished on St. Clair, the brick apartment building across Charlevoix from the Sweet House has been demolished and recently Howe School was demolished and replaced. Thus, while the Sweet House itself has very considerable historic significance, its historic setting no longer exists.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets criterion B as provided in the Michigan

Local Historic Districts Act and in local ordinance. That criterion refers to sites, buildings structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history.

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. 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.