

## **Final Report:**

### **Proposed B.E. Taylor's Subdivision House Historic District 15378 Lamphere, Brightmoor**

By a resolution dated October 28, 2008 the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed B.E. Taylor's Subdivision House Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The B.E. Taylor Subdivision House is located in the Brightmoor community of northwest Detroit, approximately eleven miles from downtown. The community is generally bounded on the south by Fullerton Road; on the east by Evergreen Road, on the west by Telegraph Road; and on the north by Puritan Avenue. The single house at 15378 Lamphere and the associated vacant lot to its south are situated on the southeast corner of Lamphere and Keeler. This modest house is representative of countless others built for newly arrived workers in Detroit's flourishing automotive industry in the 1920s.

Two buildings occupy the B.E. Taylor Subdivision House parcel – the house and a noncontributing garage.



#### **BOUNDARIES:**

The boundaries of the proposed B.E. Taylor's Subdivision House Historic District are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of Keeler;

On the south, the south line of Lot 534 of B.E. Taylor's Brightmoor – John Subdivision (L45 P1 PLATS, W C R);

On the east, the centerline of the alley running north-south between Lamphere and DaCosta; and

On the west, the centerline of Lamphere Avenue.

## **HISTORY**

B.E. Taylor Subdivision House is a typical residential structure built for the expanding working class population in Detroit in the early 1920s. It is representative of countless others built for thousands of autoworkers and their families as a planned community on the outskirts of Detroit. The house is an intact example of one of the most common house designs that B.E. Taylor marketed for his development of Brightmoor. Because so few extant Taylor houses are in such an unaltered condition, the house at 15378 Lamphere is an excellent example for telling the story of the hopes and aspirations of newly arrived workers with jobs in Detroit's automobile plants and their desire for homeownership. It is also, unfortunately, representative of shattered dreams.

The development of the Brightmoor community is a product of the enormous demand for housing in Detroit corresponding to the growth of the automobile industry. It is one of the first of its kind in the country, beginning as a business investment by an innovative real estate developer, B. E. Taylor, who understood the powerful desire for home ownership. Taylor depended on the economic conditions of Detroit, creative marketing strategies, and an aesthetically pleasing design. Most importantly, the success of Taylor's Brightmoor subdivisions as desirable places to live depended on the cooperation of its residents in building and maintaining a community. However, because of unsanitary living conditions and the unanticipated economic collapse in the 1930s, Brightmoor did not live up to Taylor's vision.

Detroit's population grew from 450,000 in 1910 to 990,000 in 1920. Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line for the mass production of automobiles in 1910 and his revolutionary \$5.00 a day wage in 1914 led to the explosion of population in the City of Detroit and also its area. The daily flood of automobile workers into the city created a major housing shortage; affordable housing for the working class was a rarity. Although many families hoped to purchase their own homes, they had no other option but to rent. Taylor provided an alternative to white factory workers when he developed Brightmoor.

Burt Eddy Taylor came to Detroit during the First World War to build middle-class housing, particularly out along the Grand River Avenue Corridor. He saw the opportunity to build for a new market – the legions of auto workers laboring for the new

and burgeoning auto industry. His new project would rely on economies of scale to produce simple homes with low prices. His new project was located beyond Detroit's boundaries in Redford Township. Taylor purchased several large farms and subdivided them into several subdivisions comprising the Brightmoor community. Before he placed the development on the real estate market, he paved sidewalks, provided lighting and intended to build a water tower. He also designed boulevards with trees, flowers and shrubbery. Once Taylor had aesthetically "brightened up" the area, he named it "Brightmoor." The name "Brightmoor" came from Taylor's love of all things British, as did many of the street names. B. E. Taylor's intended "paradise for the workingman" was officially established in January of 1922; the first family moved into the area on March 27, 1922. His primary pools of customers were those recruited from the southern states to fill the need for factory labor.

However, the area lacked access to electricity, running water and sewers. Taylor expected that the city of Detroit would quickly annex the area and provide those services. However, Detroit's administration halted annexation during 1924 to investigate its policies, forcing Taylor to provide an increased level of services.

During the years between 1922 and 1925, eighteen Brightmoor subdivisions were opened. The marketing strategy of the B.E. Taylor Real Estate Company was an unparalleled success. The appeal of affordable homes for the working class drew in crowds of potential buyers. Along with the promise to build houses within a week, Taylor offered lots with houses for sale at an average price of \$3,500. As an alternative, Brightmoor residents had the option to rent-to-own for \$35.00 a month with a small down payment. Since Taylor doubted that enough people already in Detroit would fill all the houses he would build, the company hired sales people all across America to sell Brightmoor lots. Greyhound buses, six to ten a week, would bring people from Ohio, Kentucky, and out-state Michigan to view Brightmoor. Another marketing tool Taylor utilized was his promotion of Brightmoor as being only a short distance from and easily accessible to Ford's Highland Park plant and the River Rouge plant. Since streetcars did not run this far out, Taylor provided his own bus service, the first in the city of Detroit, called the Brightmoor Transit Company.

Once the sale of a Brightmoor lot was completed, construction of the house began. Often, impatient Brightmoor home buyers lived in tents on their lots while their houses were being completed. For the price of \$3,500, home buyers received a house with two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen, each room equipped with one light with a pull cord. For an extra \$35.00, an outhouse with a chemical toilet was provided. Other residents who could not afford the entire house at once lived in one-room structures and added rooms as their incomes and family size increased.

Taylor homes were built to a set of standard plans referred to by numbers. Locally hired day laborers would haul the materials to the building sites. Homeowners would often purchase two lots, one for their house and one for the future to build a more substantial home as their employment opportunities grew.

Instead of purchasing a Taylor home, many of the lot buyers acted on the option of building their own homes. Since Brightmoor did not have building or zoning restrictions, except against “colored” residents, housing designs and materials varied. The typical Taylor home consisted of a one-story frame, Michigan bungalow-type Folk house without any adornment. They sat on cedar posts and had no insulation. Often houses that were not designed by Taylor resembled garage homes and tar paper shacks. Although Brightmoor homes may have varied in design and plan, they shared a utilitarian appearance.

In the Brightmoor development, police and fire protection, schools, parks, a baby clinic, and community center were provided. For the first four years, Taylor funded police and fire protection and Redford Township provided the schools. Taylor built the parks, baby clinic and community center from his company’s profits. The lack of sewers and running water were major obstacles until Taylor constructed outhouses and created a daily water delivery system. The population increased from eight residents and six houses in 1922 to 11,319 residents and 3,958 houses by 1925. Almost 4,000 small frame houses were built without plumbing, without utilities, and only limited electricity. The inability of Redford Township to handle the influx of people and the services they needed influenced the decision for annexation by the City of Detroit in 1926.

Although the annexation brought with it city services, including transportation, running water, and ultimately, a sewage system in 1929, the population began to decline. The Great Depression of the 1930s and illness caused by the early inadequacies of Brightmoor’s waste disposal affected the growth of the neighborhood. Many residents were unable to maintain their homes. Unemployed workers, unable to continue to make house payments, abandoned their homes altogether. The rate of foreclosures in Brightmoor financially crippled Taylor, forcing him to rent the properties to the federal government. Soon after, welfare recipients began occupying the homes. Many government officials started labeling the housing development a ‘shacktown.’ After 1929, Brightmoor saw little to no further development until the end of World War II. In 1935, leaders within the community applied for government assistance to improve living conditions. The Federal Housing Administration refused to grant loans for most of the area on the grounds that Brightmoor was a potential ‘slum.’

The Brightmoor community fought that derogatory description by focusing upon its central location for residential activity. When Taylor built the three buildings on Burt Road and Fenkell for use by the community, he specified that they be operated by the Red Cross. Together with the Red Cross, the residents created programs within the community center for the improvement of life in Brightmoor. Programs such as the Red Cross Well Baby Clinic, Brightmoor Improvement Association, Women’s Club, domestic science classes, weekly Saturday night dances, Girls’ and Boys’ clubs, and an oral hygiene and dental clinic nourished the community spirit. After six years of constant demand for recognition by the Federal Housing Administration, government loans were finally granted in 1941. Brightmoor residents recognized the need for a new community center and decided to use some of the federal funds for that purpose. The community center found a new home in 1958 at Burt Road and Lyndon, only a few blocks away from

the original buildings. By that time, the community center had become a self-sufficient service organized by Brightmoor residents.

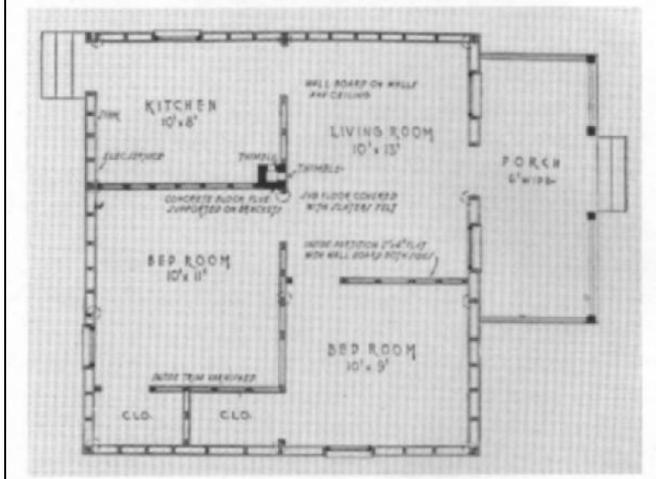
In conclusion, the Brightmoor development represents a community committed to preserving neighborhood pride. The main purpose of the development had been home ownership for a white working class population, and the original design and intent of the developer contributed to resident participation. In the past, Brightmoor struggled to gain recognition as an empowered community. Today, while Brightmoor shares many problems with other areas of Detroit, such as housing abandonment, poverty and crime, it continues to hold a self-determined and cooperative attitude in the commitment for a better future. The Brightmoor Alliance, a coalition of 43 organization dedicated to serving northwest Detroit's Brightmoor community, was established in the year 2000. Brightmoor was selected as a participant in the Next Detroit Neighborhood Initiative by the City of Detroit in 2007 to employ a five-year strategy for revitalization.

Leland Missionary Baptist Church at 22420 Fenkell (at the corner of Lamphere) is the owner of the Taylor's Subdivision House at 15378 Lamphere, as well as its associated vacant lot and all of the property on the east side of Lamphere, including Saint Christine Roman Catholic Church facing Fenkell and its school building on Lamphere. Leland Missionary Baptist Church relocated to its present site on the northwest corner of Fenkell at Lamphere in 1980. Dr. Cecil A. Poe was installed as Leland's fifth pastor on Sunday, June 25, 2000. Leland Missionary Baptist Church purchased the house for the expressed purpose of creating an historic educational resource center.

## ARCHITECTURE

The house addressed as 15378 Lamphere was built according to Taylor's House Design No. 514. It had only two owners since it was built in 1923, and has undergone little alteration to its original plan and design. Its footprint is twenty feet long by twenty-two feet wide. Sitting on cedar posts, the exterior walls of the house are skirted with wood and metal siding. Instead of sheeting on the exterior, tar paper was substituted with asbestos shingles for siding.

House design No. 514 was one of the most common designs built in Brightmoor. An addition for more kitchen space was frequently done either before or after the original



construction, thus the name, “Kitchentown.” No. 514 was slightly wider than tall, with the front porch occupying the right two-thirds of the front façade. The single door opening flanked by a double-hung sash window on each side are the only openings on the front façade.

The front door entered directly into the 10’ x 13’ living room; the kitchen was situated behind the living room as per plan. The front and rear bedrooms, both on the left side of the house, were accessed from one corner of the living room. Each has a closet and one window. No bathroom was indicated on the plan.

The small house was covered by a pitched roof with simple eaves supporting the slight overhang and a slightly sloped shed roof covering the porch displaying simple porch rails. The 10’x 8’ shed kitchen has a rear door at its outside corner. A modest chimney projects upward from the interior corner of the kitchen.

Modest in form, the “kitchen” houses of Brightmoor from the 1920s represent an ideal of homeownership for families that came to Detroit for good jobs and expectations of upward mobility. Poor housing quality, dismal economic conditions, and the social issues that both of those factors brought forth resulted in the deterioration and demolition of the housing stock on a block-by-block basis throughout the Brightmoor community. However, the trees that were part of B.E. Taylor’s vision are still present to provide canopies of foliage over the narrow streets even today.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Daley, Matthew, *Working-class Home, Working-class Life: 15378 Lamphere, Brightmoor Neighborhood, Detroit, Michigan, August 2006.*

Historic Designation Advisory Board, *Brightmoor Sec. 106 Review, Detroit, Michigan, 2000.*

**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; (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: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Zene’ Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. 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 B.E. Taylor Subdivision House Historic District. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.