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Washtenaw-Hill Historic District, Phase III

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Historic District Study Committee

Final Report

February 2003

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B. Map of proposed Phase III
C. Detailed description of each property
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- B. Map of proposed Phase III
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Washtenaw-Hill Historic District, Phase III

Introduction

The proposed Phase III of the Washtenaw-Hill Historic District is an outgrowth of two earlier processes that culminated in the designation of the current Washtenaw-Hill Historic District. Phases I and II were passed by City Council in 1980 and 1986. Justification and designation of historic districts in Ann Arbor has become an important facet of the city's cultural heritage. The Ann Arbor Historic District Commission was established by City Council in 1971, following the adoption in 1970 of Michigan Public Act 169. This act is the state's enabling legislation providing for the establishment of historic district commissions by local governments. The Ann Arbor Historic District Commission's duties and responsibilities are defined in Chapter 103 of the City Code. As described in this code, the purpose of historic preservation in Ann Arbor is to: "safeguard the heritage of the city by preserving historic districts as well as individual buildings, structures, sites and objects within the districts of the city which reflect elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political or architectural history." The Ann Arbor Historic District Commission is the tool by which these are achieved.

In 1999, the Study Committee was revived and additional members were appointed. This committee reviewed the study area as last outlined and again revised the potential boundaries of the study area to more clearly focus on the important Washtenaw and Hill corridors. The proposed boundaries of Phase III now encompasses 167 structures and nine vacant lots, for a total of 176 parcels.—The proposed district now stretches along Hill Street from Oakland to Berkshire; Washtenaw from South University to Devonshire; Olivia and Lincoln from Hill to Cambridge; and Cambridge from Wellington Court to Hill (approximately; see map in appendix B). The desire to focus on the entry corridors determined the proposed boundaries.

The area encompassed in Phase III reflects a crucial era in the growth of the city, and its importance to the city's heritage should be recognized. This area, south and east of the University of Michigan's Central Campus, is linked to the university by providing a primary residential zone for university students, faculty and staff. The history and character of this area is reflected in the structures themselves. Most of the sororities and fraternities associated with the university are housed in architecturally significant structures located in this district. The area is also significant for the number of houses associated with university faculty and administrators. These dwellings reflect the surge in growth of the university in the early part of the twentieth century. They also reflect the widespread use of popular early-twentieth-century architectural styles, including Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, and Craftsman.

All these factors make Washtenaw-Hill unique among Ann Arbor's historic districts, and afford the area an important place in the city's heritage.

The members of the Washtenaw/Hill Historic District, Phase III, Study Committee are as follows: (For a complete description of each member's credentials, please see Appendix F.)

Susan Contratto
Jan Fisher
H. Mark Hildebrandt
Carol Mull
Peter K. Pleitner
Emily Hopp Salvette
Jean Wilkins

Karen Coulter
L. Walter Helmreich
James Jensen
Louisa Pieper
Ellen Ramsburgh, Chair
Julie Truettner

General Description

Phase III of the Washtenaw-Hill Historic District proposes to expand the current boundaries of the district primarily to the east, west, and southeast (map: appendix B). This area includes fraternity and sorority houses, single-family and multi-family dwellings, and churches. It is unique among Ann Arbor's fourteen historic districts in that it is primarily an area of twentieth-century development. This is quite unlike the other districts, which reflect Ann Arbor's earlier history, both in terms of residential settlement and commercial growth. Although there are nineteenth-century elements in the Washtenaw-Hill area, it is not this early history that is represented in the current landscape. Rather, this district is a product of the explosion of growth in residential development experienced by the city between 1890-1930. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Washtenaw-Hill area reflects early twentieth-century building practices that define much of America today.

Washtenaw Avenue provides the axis for the proposed district as the primary entry corridor into Ann Arbor. Beginning at the intersection of Devonshire and Washtenaw, the streetscape is characterized by imposing single-family homes, churches, and Greek chapter houses on large, wooded lots. Setbacks are generally deep with mature trees and plantings. The topography is generally flat except for a long slope as Washtenaw approaches its intersection with Hill. The proposed district ends with the grand fraternity houses at South University Street where the beginning of a commercial area and university buildings begin to alter the character of the streetscape.

The intersection of Washtenaw Avenue and Hill Street may be considered the center or heart of the proposed district. The wooded triangular lot at the northwest corner, referred to as J. D. Baldwin's Picnic Grove, defines the intersection. An island at the tip of this triangle forms George Washington Park, which houses a local landmark, "The Rock," a huge boulder (continuously covered with graffiti) that commemorates the 200th birthday of George Washington. From this point the district spreads north and south along Washtenaw Avenue and east and west along Hill Street, including the adjacent streets of Cambridge, Oxford, Baldwin, Lincoln, and Olivia.

The northwestern boundary of the proposed district is defined by the University of Michigan Central Campus along Hill Street, the east-west corridor that separates the campus area from a large residential area. Fraternity and sorority houses and churches provide a dramatic streetscape along Hill. Many houses have been converted into student apartments, though they began as single-family dwellings. As Hill Street continues east of Washtenaw, it curves and rises to its peak at Berkshire, where the proposed district ends. The Hill Street streetscape east of Washtenaw is also comprised of Greek chapter houses mixed with substantial single-family homes.

South of Hill Street, the proposed district follows Olivia Street to Cambridge, turning east and continuing along Cambridge, parallel to Hill Street, as it curves and crosses Washtenaw. The terrain is generally flat and the streets follow a grid pattern, except for Cambridge, which follows the course of an old creek bed. This area was platted in 1891 as Olivia B. Hall's Addition. The area features single-family dwellings that complement each other in massing, style, and materials, as well as several large fraternity houses. Included in this area are the 900 blocks of Olivia, Lincoln, and Baldwin streets. At the intersection of Cambridge and Washtenaw, Douglas Park forms a large, grassy triangle bounded by Cambridge, Baldwin, and Washtenaw.

As Cambridge crosses Washtenaw Avenue, the area becomes hilly, and the street curves east and north to end at Hill Street. This section of the area contains large single-family dwellings on substantial wooded lots. Oxford Road is included in the curve of Cambridge and features imposing fraternity houses along its streetscape. Several original plats are contained in this area, Millen's Second Addition of 1871, Hall's Subdivision of 1891, and Hall's Second Addition of 1896.

Washtenaw-Hill, Phase III contains 167 primary structures, including those in the previously designated district, most of which are either single-family dwellings or multiple residential units. The latter includes fraternities, sororities and cooperative houses, as well as apartment buildings. More than 110 (65%) of the structures were built between 1900 and 1930, 83 (48%) of which fall between 1910-1930. (Appendix A shows a complete list of the Washtenaw-Hill buildings by address, with date of construction, architectural style, category of significance, name and occupation of first occupant.) There are also nine vacant lots and two city parks included.

For study purposes only, all structures in the Washtenaw-Hill area were studied and divided into three categories, defined as follows:

- 1) Significant - a structure which contributes to the unique character of the district; which retains basic architectural design, materials, and workmanship; and/or which is associated with important persons or events, or is the work of a noted architect.
- 2) Complementary - structures which contribute to the overall historic character of the district by providing the essential appropriate setting. Individually these structures may not be significant, but they are consistent and harmonious with others in their streetscape in terms of age, materials, scale, mass and repetition of architectural details.

- 3) Non-contributing - structures which contain a much lesser degree of architecturally defining features, or have been altered so that their historic architectural integrity has been lessened or lost; structures which do not contribute to the district in any way.

Most significant buildings have been classified as such due to architectural merit. These structures are generally easy to recognize by their size, style, shape, and use of materials. There are 105 (62%) such examples in Washtenaw-Hill. These include the large fraternities and sororities on Washtenaw Avenue and Hill Street, as well as noteworthy homes along Cambridge, Hill, and Washtenaw. Although these architecturally significant buildings are more noticeable, the importance of the complementary buildings cannot be understated. These often smaller, vernacular buildings help define the era of the neighborhood and provide the cohesive binding. Some areas are defined primarily by this type of structure, which when paired with significant properties, gives the neighborhood its unique and charming character. Together, the significant and complementary structures are classified as the contributing resources in the district.

The architectural styles in which the Washtenaw-Hill structures are expressed also reflect, in dramatic visual fashion, the time period in which they were constructed. Over 125 (75%) of these structures were built in styles whose popularity peaked between 1900-1930. These include the Colonial Revivals (both Dutch and Georgian), Classical Revival, Spanish Mission, Prairie, Craftsman, and the wildly popular Tudor Revival. An important characteristic of Washtenaw-Hill is that its valued resources are not limited to the built environment. The landscape and vegetation also possess and add intrinsic value to the district that requires that they be noted, described and protected. One of the richest resources in Washtenaw-Hill is its abundance of old growth trees. Always an important part of Ann Arbor, trees have become crucial defining elements for most of the neighborhoods in Washtenaw-Hill. Indeed, there is hardly a block in Washtenaw-Hill in which natural vegetation, particularly old growth trees, is not a marked part of its character. Other natural elements along Washtenaw Avenue are the two manmade parks-- George Washington Park, a small triangle at the northeast corner of Hill and Washtenaw, and Douglas Park, situated on a larger triangle of open space at the convergence of Washtenaw, Cambridge and Baldwin. These parks provide a strong visual reference along the Washtenaw corridor.

Methodology

In 1978 a study committee appointed by the mayor and City Council began to survey and document the historic and architectural significance of properties in the Washtenaw-Hill area. Phases I and II of the Washtenaw-Hill Historic District are the result of this work (see Appendix D, Copy of Phase I/II reports. In 1995 Julie Truettner used the study committee's initial survey of this area as a basis of her thesis for a Master's Degree in Historic Preservation from Eastern Michigan University. Her extensive research of each property provided the present Washtenaw-Hill Study Committee with the foundation of this report (Appendix C, Detailed description of each structure).

Ms. Truettner began her research with a field survey of the properties in the area. She identified each building by address and made notes of its architectural characteristics. She then researched early city directories and other sources for first dates of properties, as well as first occupants and their occupations. In researching the University of Michigan connection to the growth of this area, Ms. Truettner used the *Michigan Alumnus*, and proceedings of the Board of Regents as sources. *Michigan Ensign*, the annual yearbook for students, was used for verification of fraternity and sorority houses. In addition to archival research, she sent survey forms to the owners of properties previously identified as significant with an accompanying letter explaining the nature of her project, to see what they might know regarding the history of their houses. Responses included phone calls, letters, and pamphlets in addition to the completed survey forms.

Slide photographs of all the properties in the proposed district have been made. In addition, black and white photographs were taken of a number of properties in 1987 and 1988, and color photographs were made in 1992 and 1995. The best available photograph was selected for use in Appendix C.

History and Significance

Chapter 103 of the City Code addresses the duties and purposes of the Historic District Commission, and is generally referred to as the *Ann Arbor Register of Historic Places*. The significance of structures in a proposed historic district, as well as the significance of that district to the history of the city, must be described in terms of the factors as set forth here. Ten different criteria for consideration of significance are outlined in Section 8:408(c) of Chapter 103. At least four of these criteria are embodied in the built environment of Washtenaw-Hill, and are described as follows:

- 1) Criterion A - Significant to the development of the community, its culture and heritage;
- 2) Criterion C - Identification with persons who significantly contributed to the development of the community;
- 3) Criterion D - Embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style valuable for the study of the period; and
- 4) Criterion E - Identification with the work of a master builder, designer or architect.

As required for historic designation, the significance of Washtenaw-Hill, Phase III, will be discussed in terms of these criteria. The growth of this area, as reflected by the nature of its structures, is primarily linked to the early twentieth century, as has been noted. However, some of the area's earlier history is still evident in many of the buildings. Although less than 5% of the houses existing today were built before 1890, and 20% were built 1890-1899, they nevertheless add to the understanding of the development of this area, and add a depth and richness to its fabric. The above criteria cannot alone provide the impetus necessary for designation. Rather, the process of designation requires that a property also maintain "sufficient integrity of location, design, materials, and workmanship to make [them] worthy of preservation and restoration." The pervasiveness of the architectural forms found in

