

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

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## Wayne County Community College District/ Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District Final Report



*Wayne County Community College District – Administration Building – 801 West Fort Street (1981)*



*Wayne County Community College District - Downtown Campus Building - 1001 West Fort St. (1979)*

By a resolution dated April 6, 2021, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB), a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District in accordance with Chapter 21 of the 2019 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District consists of two contributing buildings and a plaza: The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery District Office and Administration Building at 801 West Fort Street (1981), and the WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus Building at 1001 West Fort Street (1979) and the Fort Street Plaza. There is one non-contributing building in the district: the Curtis L. Ivery Central Educational Complex and Health & Wellness Education Center at 1021 West Fort Street (2019). The district encompasses approximately 8.92 acres of land and is located approximately three blocks north of the Detroit River, the city's southern boundary.


The proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District is oriented to the northeast facing West Fort Street. The buildings are currently in active use as a community college. The historic district is in an area surrounded by surface parking lots, scattered institutional, religious, and commercial buildings, as well as large-scale multiple-dwelling residential buildings. The Fort Street Plaza spans the overpass constructed above the John C. Lodge Freeway (U. S. M-10). The proposed district is approximately a half-mile southwest of the Point of Origin at Campus Martius Park in downtown Detroit.

## **BOUNDARIES**

(This report simplifies directional descriptions to cardinal directions.) The boundaries of the proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District, outlined in heavy black on the attached map, are as follows:

Beginning at a point, that point being the intersection of the centerlines of Sixth and West Fort Streets; thence south along said centerline of vacated Sixth Street to its intersection with the centerline of the vacated West Congress Street; thence east along said line extended to the center line of Third Street; thence north along the centerline of said Third Street to the centerline of West Fort Street; thence west along the centerline of said West Fort Street to the point of beginning.




  
 Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District boundary map  
 Detroit, Wayne County

**Legal description:** S FORT W 1 THRU 14 AND VAC ALLEY ADJ AND N 1/2 VAC CONGRESS ST ADJ AND VAC FOURTH ST ADJ BLK 15 WESTERN ADDITION SUB L7 P164 CITY RECORDS, W C R 4/3; 1 THRU 12 AND VAC ALLEY ADJ AND N 1/2 VAC CONGRESS ST ADJ AND VAC FIFTH ST ADJ BLK 16 P C 247 L44 P1 DEEDS, W C R 4/2; 11 & 12 AND VAC ALLEY ADJ AND N 1/2 VAC CONGRESS ST ADJ BLK 11 P C 247 L44 P1 DEEDS, W C R 6/10; 2 THRU 7 AND VAC ALLEY ADJ PT OF 8 THRU 11 LYG N & ADJ VAC CONGRESS ST AND N 1/2 VAC CONGRESS ST ADJ BLK 17 FORSYTHE FARM L14 P136 DEEDS, W C R 6/9; DESC AS FOLS BEG AT THE CENTERLINE OF W FORT ST, 100 FT WD, AND THIRD AVE, 60 FT WD; TH S 30D 02M 09S E 376.39 FT TO THE CENTER LINE OF 3RD ST AND VACATED CONGRESS ST, 70 FT WIDE; TH S 59D 50M 22S W 830.52 FT; TH S 63D 45M 36S W 304.76 FT TO THE CENTERLINE OF CONGRESS ST AND VACATED 6TH STREET, 50 FT WIDE; TH N 23D 44M 48S W 195.84 FT; TH N 30D 09M 33S W 160.93 FT TO THE CENTERLINE OF W FORT ST AND VACATED 6TH ST; TH N 59D 50M 22S E 1113.38 FT TO THE POINT OF BEGINNING.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundaries described above include the parcels historically associated with both the Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) downtown properties and the Underground Railroad (UGRR) site on that property. The district includes parcels owned by WCCCD that are

campus buildings, surface parking lots, and a plaza that is on the overpass constructed above the John C. Lodge Freeway (U.S. M-10).

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

The proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District is significant under Historic Designation Advisory Board **Criteria Number One**: “sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political, or architectural history of the community, city, state, or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified.” The proposed district is significant for its role in the influence and development of the Underground Railroad in Detroit. Later, the creation of the WCCCD’s downtown campus reflects the innovation in education occurring in the late 20th century in Detroit. The Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District is a representative example of the educational buildings constructed in Detroit in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District also meets Historic Designation Advisory Board **Criteria Number Three**: “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.”

The district is also significant under National Register of Historic Places **Criteria Consideration G** for properties that have achieved significance in Detroit within the past fifty years. In the context of the Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District, the contributing buildings are an expression of the district’s growth and expansion. The Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District reflects a perpetuation of modern design in educational buildings in Detroit and Wayne County and are of exceptional significance.

## **Periods of Significance**

There are two periods of significance for the proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District. *The first period of significance, 1846-1865*, reflects the period of Underground Railroad (UGRR) and abolitionist activity when the Michigan Central Railroad was established near the proposed district through the time when the Emancipation Proclamation was ratified by the states in 1865.

The ten-block area surrounding the Michigan Central Railroad was a center of abolitionist activity from West Fort Street to the river. The railroad industry expanded through the downtown area in the late nineteenth century, and settled on the west side of downtown at the Detroit River, running west from Third Street. By the 1970s, the decline of the railroad industry left the Michigan Central Railroad land and buildings at Third Street unused. As the popularity of community colleges grew in the late twentieth century, the establishment of Wayne County Community College was initiated.

*The second period of significance, 1964-1981*, reflects the establishment and development of Wayne County Community College District and three of its resources on the site. Today, the nearby UGRR site is close to three Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD)

downtown campus buildings, a plaza, and surface parking lots; now named the Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus. The WCCCD site has a significant connection to the UGRR Movement.

According to the *National Register of Historic Places Guidelines* (Bulletin 16), a **site** is the location of a significant event...or activity, or a building or structure, whether standing, ruined, or vanished, where the location itself possesses historic, or cultural value regardless of the value of any existing structure.

The National Park Service defines “Stations on the Underground Railroad” as buildings, structures, or sites where fugitives were harbored and their use as such has been documented.<sup>1</sup>

## **HISTORY**

*The contents of this section of the report are largely taken from the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Application by Dr. Carolyn Carter, Chief Development Officer, Wayne County Community College District.*

The Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District is significant as a center of Underground Railroad activities in Detroit. The proposed district was an epicenter of Detroit’s abolitionist activity because of its proximity to the Detroit River at a time when Detroit was known by abolitionists as a city where freedom seekers traveled using the Michigan Central Railroad (MCRR). The proposed historic district is adjacent to many of the locations of documented stories of escape. The members of historic Fort Street Presbyterian Church (631 West Fort Street) and MCRR owners John Murray Forbes and James F. Joy were actively involved in funding the legal defense for former slaves. Others who were actively involved in abolitionist activity included Detroit mayor and Senator Zachariah Chandler (1813-1879) as well as MCRR employees. The home of G. J. Reynolds was a hiding place located west of the MCRR. The Johnson Hotel, located across Third Street, east of the MCRR at Woodbridge Street, was significant because the hotel owner, Hiram Johnson, employed freedom seekers.

The Michigan Central Railroad was one of the first railways constructed in Detroit and the closest to the Detroit River, which borders the international boundaries of the United States and Canada. Located three blocks south of the historic district, the Michigan Central Railroad’s Third Street station played an essential role in the Underground Railroad movement, as Detroit was an important destination for freedom in Canada. The MCRR also played an important role in transporting abolitionists John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Adam Crosswhite and his family, and others to freedom in Canada. Fugitives would travel by train and then by MCRR steamboat across the Detroit River to Canada. Detroit was well known by UGRR operatives as a city where freedom seekers could find safe refuge because of its strong and active abolitionist community.

The Wayne County Community College District Dr. Curtis L. Ivery Educational Complex is adjacent to the land where these significant Underground Railroad movement escapes occurred. The land that WCCCD currently occupies once housed the MCRR’s foundry, 1890’s-era rail lines, and the Fort Street Union Depot (1893).

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<sup>1</sup> McGraw, Marie Tyler, and Kira R. Badamo, U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service National Register, History and Education, Underground Railroad Resources in the United States, Theme Study, National Historic Landmarks Survey, September, 2000.

## The Underground Railroad Movement

Beginning in the 17th century and continuing through the mid-19th century in the United States, enslaved African Americans sought to gain their freedom through self-emancipation. The individuals who sought this freedom from enslavement, known as freedom seekers, and those who assisted along the way, united together to create what is known as the Underground Railroad.<sup>2</sup> In the sixty years before the outbreak of the Civil War, the Northern states became traversed by numerous secret pathways leading from Southern bondage to Canadian liberty.<sup>3</sup> Detroit was one of the largest terminals of the Underground Railroad and Detroit's Underground Railroad code name was "Midnight." Black and White people on both sides of the Detroit River cooperated to assist freedom-seekers to get to Canada. Forged of blood, friendship, faith, and common cause, these links would be maintained for generations, greatly facilitating the establishment of formal Underground Railroad networks. By the mid-1830s, the Detroit River would be the busiest transit point for freedom-seekers along the entire Canada-U. S. border.<sup>4</sup>

## West Fort and Third Street Neighborhood

From the 1840s-1870s, Detroit's West Fort and Third Street neighborhood was bustling with Underground Railroad activity from the Detroit River to West Fort Street and beyond. Several of the area's residents and business owners were involved in UGRR activities. One of the most prominent abolitionists in the neighborhood was Zachariah T. Chandler (1813-1879) who was an American businessman, politician and one of the founders of the Republican Party. Chandler had been mayor of Detroit (1851-52), a four-term United States Senator (1857-1875), and Secretary of the Interior (1875-1877) under President Ulysses S. Grant. Zachariah Chandler financially supported the Underground Railroad's efforts to free slaves on numerous occasions. Chandler lived a block east of the district in a stately home at 580 West Fort Street, now the location of the Detroit News building. Fort Street Presbyterian Church (631 West Fort Street) counted Chandler and Detroit's most prominent abolitionists as its members.



Zachariah Chandler home  
580 West Fort Street



Zachariah Chandler  
Photo by Matthew Brady



Fort Street Presbyterian Church  
Photo by Historic Detroit

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<sup>2</sup> National Park Service - <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/index.htm> accessed on March 29, 2021.

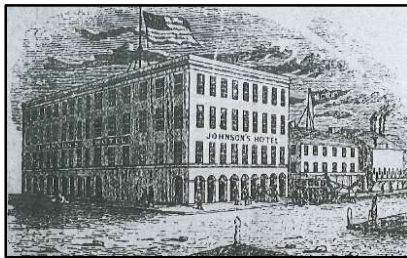
<sup>3</sup> Siebert, Wilbur H., *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Frost, Karolyn Smardz and Veta Smith Tucker, *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 2016, p. 11.

Another Detroit abolitionist was one of the MCRR principals, John Murray Forbes (1813-1898), a West Fort Street resident, and Fort Street Presbyterian Church member. Forbes supplied money and weapons to New Englanders sent to fight slavery in Kansas and in 1859 he met with abolitionist John Brown. Forbes lobbied President Lincoln for an immediate emancipation proclamation, and following the Civil War, he financially supported the Tuskegee and Hampton Normal Schools in Virginia and Alabama.<sup>5</sup>



*John M. Forbes*



*Johnson Hotel - Third St.*

The Johnson Hotel (also known as Johnson's House) was located directly east of the MCRR depot at the southeast corner of Third Avenue and Woodbridge Street, three blocks south of the proposed historic district. The Johnson Hotel opened in 1848, the proprietor, Hiram R. Johnson, employed freedom seekers and it was known that freedom seekers used the Johnson Hotel as a stop before they made their way to Canada. The buildings of the West Fort Street and Third Avenue neighborhood comprised Detroit's key Underground Railroad stations and passage to Canada.

## **The Michigan Central Railroad and the Third Street Station**

The Michigan Central Railroad (MCRR) was established on September 26, 1846, and the railroad's Third Street Station (also called the Michigan Central Railroad Depot) was a transportation hub in Detroit. The Michigan Central Railroad Depot (1848) was located on the west side of Third Street, at Woodbridge Street, and north of the Detroit River. By the late 1840s, the Third Street MCRR Station, freight-house, and railyard was a large railroad facility adjacent to ferryboat landings, stagecoach stops, and several nearby hotels. The MCRR was a hub for freedom seekers who were moving to Canada during the period from 1848 until the Civil War had concluded. The Michigan Railroad Depot's Third Street Station was where freedom seekers from all areas of the country would have disembarked. Its location was an important transportation route because of its proximity to the Canadian border. The MCRR yards and buildings were where those seeking freedom from slavery and oppression stopped and took that final step by boat, ferry, or steamer into the welcoming arms of Canada as their final journey to freedom. The MCRR was the mainline railroad that moved Black or White people across state lines and into Detroit. Once over the border from the southern states, enslaved people were found travelling on rail lines using the MCRR station as its destination hub.



*Third Street Station Depot*

People that are documented having disembarked from the Michigan Central Railroad on their flight from enslavement included Adam Crosswhite and his wife Sarah (1847), John Reed and his family (1853), and Richard Daly and his family (1857). Larger groups of people fled from the MCRR

<sup>5</sup> Abbott, Richard. *Cotton & Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform, 1854-1868*. University of Massachusetts Press. 1991 (33)

station to Canada as well. The “Escape of the 28” is one of the most documented stories of the network to freedom and one which details the interracial collaboration of the Underground Railroad in 1853.<sup>6</sup>

John Brown (1800-1859), the nation’s fiercest abolitionist, went through Detroit and his significant story is related to the Michigan Central Railroad. In March 1859 John Brown escorted a band of twelve freedom seekers from Missouri into Illinois and eventually to Detroit. After arriving in Detroit at the Third Street Station on March 12, 1859, Frederick Douglass and John Brown met at the home of William Webb, with an audience of some Detroit abolitionists, they discussed how to end slavery.<sup>7</sup> John Brown, fiery antislavery leader, ardently advocated insurrectionary plans, and eight months later became a martyr to the cause. Frederick Douglass (c. 1817-1895), ex-slave and internationally-recognized antislavery orator and writer, sought a solution through political means. A State of Michigan historic marker is at the site of the meeting in Detroit.

The MCRR’s Third Street Station employees used their homes and businesses as Underground Railroad stops for freedom seekers, one such stop was at the home of G.J. Reynolds. Abolitionist and founder of the Colored Vigilant Committee William Lambert (1817-1890), described how they hid freedom seekers in the home of G.J. Reynolds around 1860. “When we had received the people...took them to the rendezvous, which was the house of G.J. Reynolds, an employee of the company then constructing the Michigan Central railway.”<sup>8</sup> Reynolds’ home was near the western boundary of the historic district. He lived on Eighth Street at the foot of the MCRR grain elevator; a location where freedom seekers boarded trains undetected.<sup>9</sup> Reynolds was very active in the UGRR movement and his employment at the railroad provided a means of escape.

## **MCRR and Support for the Underground Railroad**

Railroad lines between Detroit and Illinois, and the west corridor of the MCRR passed through towns, small villages, and surrounding countryside with deeply rooted associations to the Underground Railroad and anti-slavery activities. In April 1861, the *Detroit Daily Advertiser* reported that 300 fugitive slaves had passed through Detroit on their way to Canada in the few days before, 190 of them in one day alone.<sup>10</sup> Freedom seekers traveled the MCRR trains from as far as Niles, Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Ann Arbor, and Ypsilanti Michigan. Many abolitionists who were associated with the Underground Railroad worked for and lived near the MCRR, using the railroad to assist freedom seekers. Many freedom seekers received assistance from MCRR owners and employees, as well as anti-slavery sympathizers supportive of the UGRR network. The railroad’s founders John Murray Forbes and attorney James F. Joy (1810-1896) were known abolitionists and provided many resources to the freedom seekers. Joy was a railroad magnate, and was also significant for his close relationship with President Abraham Lincoln, beginning when Lincoln

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton Avenue Road to Freedom. *Escape of the 28*, Retrieved June 30, 2015 from <http://hamiltonavenueroadtofreedom.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/12/Escape-of-the-28-final.pdf> (7).

<sup>7</sup> Bragg, Amy. “Best of the Night Train Frederick Douglass, John Brown and George DeBaptiste.” retrieved August 15, 2015 from <http://nightraindetroit.com/2010/06/08/frederick-douglass-john-brown-and-george-debaptiste/> (paragraph 4).

<sup>8</sup> Mull, Carol. *The Underground Railroad in Michigan*. 2010. McFarland Press. (89).

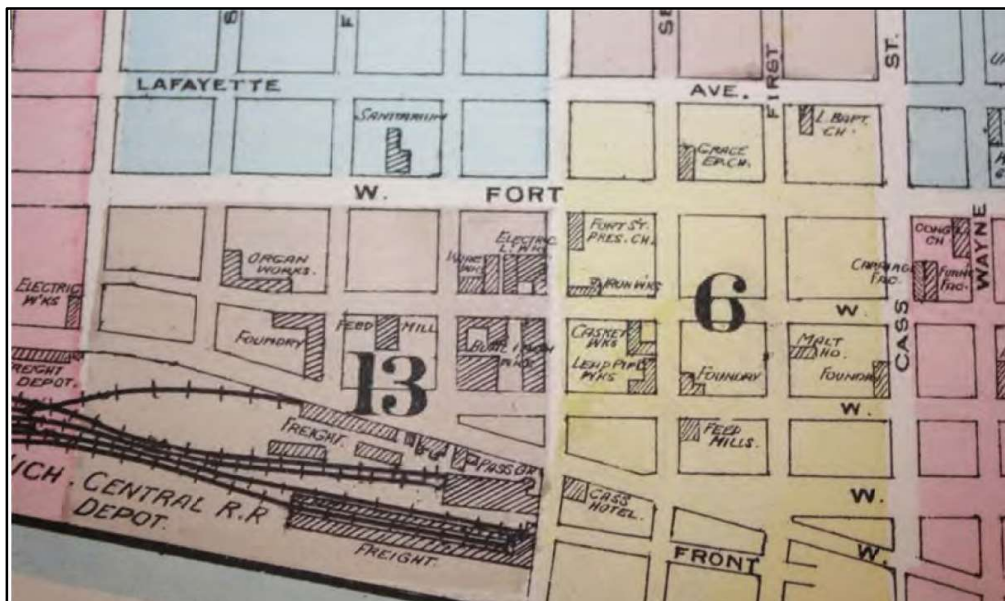
<sup>9</sup> Leasher, Evelyn. “William Lambert, An African American Leader of Detroit’s Anti-Slavery Movement.” Clark Historical Library 2003, retrieved May 2015 from <https://www.cmich.edu/library/clarke/AccessMaterials/Bibliographies/UndergroundRailroad/Pages/default.aspx> (para. 22).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



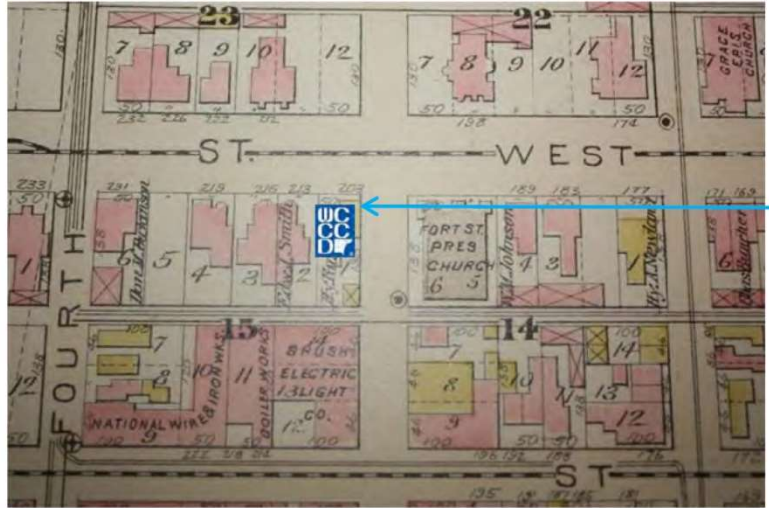
served as Joy's law clerk in Illinois. <sup>11</sup>

The ten-block area surrounding the MCRR was a center of abolitionist activity from West Fort Street to the river. Nicholas Marsh, author and relative of ancestors who worked for the MCRR wrote in his book *The Michigan Central Railroad: History of the Main Line 1846-1904*; "The MCRR's role in what was often called the secret service began when the company formed in 1846. The MCRR's role in transporting slaves was a secret known by Underground Railroad conductors." Detroit's Underground Railroad activities were reported in many newspapers at the time including the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Detroit Tribune*, and the *Detroit Daily Post*, to name a few. The WCCCD campus at West Fort Street and Third Street was adjacent to the Underground Railroad activity and likely, although not definitively, used by freedom seekers.



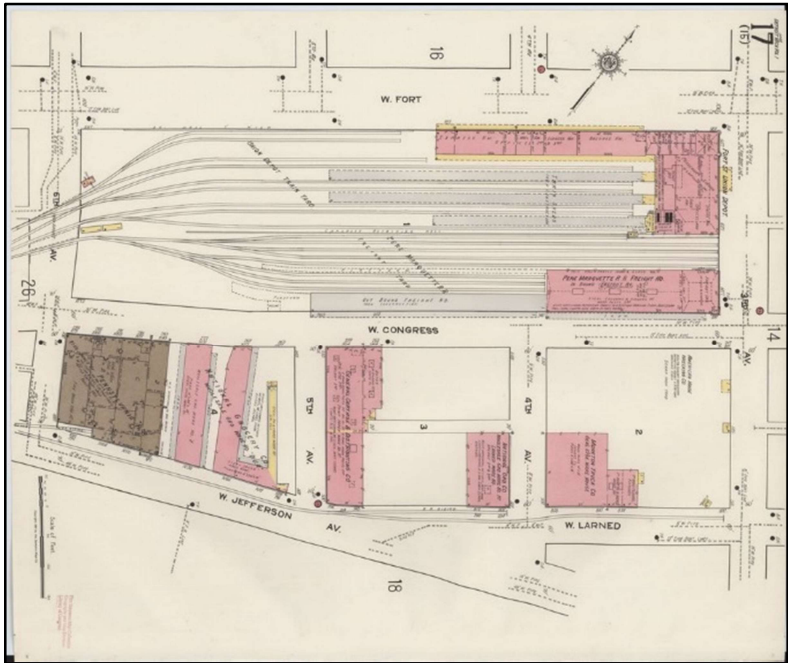
1889 Sanborn Map

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln, Abraham, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume 2, letter to James F. Joy, December 2, 1853.



Corner where WCCCD now sits

1897 Sanborn Map of Detroit, shows several residents living on Fort Street between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> street. Photo Courtesy of Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection.



1921 Sanborn Map

**Twentieth Century Changes**

In the mid-1940s, the City administration began planning to eliminate the congestion on surface streets leading to downtown Detroit’s business district. Construction for the new John C. Lodge Expressway (U.S. M-10) was initiated at its dedication on November 7, 1957. While it was under construction in the late 1950s, the Lodge Freeway was completed in sections. The section of the Lodge Freeway closest to downtown was at Third Street and West Fort Street, leading to the section underneath the Cobo Hall Convention Center (now the TCF Center) and connecting the expressway

to West Jefferson Avenue below grade level. This section was completed on November 3, 1959.

The Michigan Central Railroad was a successful Detroit-based business through the early twentieth century. In the mid-twentieth century era, travel modes shifted from train travel to automobile and air as train ridership declined. As cars and planes made passenger trains obsolete, rail companies and train stations closed one by one through the state of Michigan. The Third Street Union Depot's final train departed on April 30, 1971.<sup>12</sup> The building stood empty for several years while scrappers and vandals removed the metal plumbing, copper flashings, and severely damaged the building. In January 1974, the railway company hired a demolition firm to begin clearing the site. By the mid-1970s, no trace of the railyard, freight houses, or depots remained at West Fort and Third Street.

### **Wayne County Community College District**

Detroit's most significant connection to the UGRR is just south of the site where WCCCD now sits; in the 1800s, the nearby Michigan Central Railroad provided rail passage to freedom seekers as they traveled to Detroit and then embarked to Canada. The railroad land was redeveloped as Detroit's transportation modes changed, and a late twentieth-century landscape was created.

In the early 1960s, community colleges were a new initiative in Michigan that provided a two-year fully accredited educational program for high school graduates interested in continuing their education for a technical certificate or associate degree.<sup>13</sup> The benefits of a community college were their comparatively low tuition, no boarding costs, and the ability to complete the necessary work in two years for immediate employment, or to earn credits that could be transferred to a four-year university. In that era, there were twenty-eight community colleges that were established in Michigan. The Detroit suburbs of Livonia, Plymouth-Canton, and Garden City approved a millage to establish Schoolcraft Community College in 1961, which proved to be immediately successful. Community colleges opened in Dearborn, Highland Park, Oakland County, and Macomb County throughout the early 1960s. These community colleges would take students from any location, and many Detroiters commuted to the suburbs to attend classes at these community colleges. A survey estimated that 31,000 to 46,000 students were likely to attend a community college that was near Wayne County.<sup>14</sup> This demonstrated the pent-up demand for a Wayne County Community College (WCCC).

In 1964 a citizens advisory council of ninety people was formed called the "Committee for Community College in Wayne County" to advocate and campaign for the initiative. Detroit leaders, as well as residents of Wayne County on the committee worked to establish Wayne County Community College. Chairman of the Sponsoring Committee for WCCC was United Auto Workers labor leader Leonard Woodcock, who met with labor, business, community, and parent groups as he campaigned for WCCC. Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh stated "We are failing in our duty, I believe, if a single high school graduate in our county fails to go on to higher education merely because he can't afford it."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Historic Detroit. [www.historicdetroit.org](http://www.historicdetroit.org); retrieved April 26, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Michigan Constitution, Article IX, Section 6.

<sup>14</sup> Weston, Mary Ann, "The Proposals: 2 Cents a Day for 5 Colleges," *Detroit Free Press*, May 8, 1966, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> "Cavanagh, Soapy Back School Plans," *Detroit Free Press*, May 9, 1966, p. 4-A.

In May of 1966, a millage proposition was included in a referendum for Wayne County to establish a community college with five campuses, a second proposition was included to finance its operation with a new 1.25 mil property tax, and a third proposition was for the election of a seven-member board. Former Governor G. Mennin Williams, State Senator Coleman A. Young, and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh endorsed the proposal. The Wayne County Community College proposal included thirty-seven cities including Detroit, Dearborn Heights, Redford, Hamtramck, Grosse Pointe, and Harper Woods (the cities of Dearborn, Livonia, Northville, Plymouth-Canton and Garden City were already taxed to support Henry Ford and Schoolcraft Community Colleges.) Highland Park Community College's board agreed to include HPCC in the new Wayne County Community College proposal. Unfortunately, voters turned down the proposal for the millage at that time; however, voters approved the concept of the college and elected a seven-member board of trustees for the district. It was noted that Detroit voters cast opposing votes, most likely because they were also voting for an additional public school millage in that election.<sup>16</sup>

On August 2, 1967, the Michigan State Legislature passed Senate bill number 630 (introduced by State Senator Arthur Cartwright of Detroit) to create the Wayne County Community College. On the same day, Governor George Romney signed the bill into law establishing Wayne County Community College.<sup>17</sup> Author Dr. Willie J. Greer Kimmons, past president of WCCC, stated that the passage of this unprecedented legislative action was due to three reasons: (1) the constant pressure of the Citizens Advisory Council citing a need for a community college in Wayne County; (2) the occurrence of the Detroit 1967 uprising which emphasized the serious racial, economic, and educational disparity between Black and White people, and (3) the presence of wide-spread political support for the establishment of a community college system within Wayne County.

A second referendum was held in November of 1968, asking Wayne County voters to approve a 2.5 mil property tax for five years. The levy would bring in \$20 million to finance Wayne County Community College. Unfortunately, this initiative also failed, likely due to other tax increases on the ballot such as a new state income tax, and increased federal and local taxes. With the state of Michigan's legislature approval, and the endorsement of the State Board of Education, WCCC announced it would open in September of 1968. The WCCC board gambled that it could provide classes for the first year of operation with limited funding. The first operating budget was derived from a \$1,000,000 grant from the State of Michigan, as well as a \$300,000 stipend from New Detroit, Inc., as well as the anticipated student tuition payments at that time. The cost for students was just \$9 a credit hour.

The new WCCC had no buildings or facilities of its own, but with the cooperation of local school boards, classrooms were made available throughout the County of Wayne. In the summer of 1968, the Board of Trustees directed the staff to set up classes for the first fall semester. Instructors were hired, curricula was designed and the College opened its doors for 8,500 students who had enrolled. Significant to the enrollment were the state and private colleges agreeing to accept credits from WCCC. In 1968, the first year of enrollment, the courses of WCCC were in twenty-six locations scattered throughout Wayne County, many in public school buildings. Most classes were held in

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<sup>16</sup> Weston, Mary Ann, "Detroit Wants In on Wayne College Plans," *Detroit Free Press*, January 11, 1967, p. 12-C.

<sup>17</sup> Kimmons, Dr. Willie J. Greer, *The Making of an Urban Community College in a Union and Political Environment: A Historical Perspective of Wayne County Community College District, Detroit, Michigan, 1964-2016*, Authorhouse, Bloomington, Indiana, 2016.

the evening, taught by business professionals, college professors from other institutions, or high school teachers. Eventually, WCCC acquired the Garfield Building at 4612 Woodward Avenue in Detroit to use the building as administrative office space.

By 1970, 10,000 students were registered for classes held in many scattered-site buildings. A wide range of courses were offered in accounting, English, biology, philosophy, photography, anthropology, art, French, physical science, physics, political science, German, economics, drafting, music, mathematics, data processing, speech, urban technology, Spanish, social science, humanities, business law, and chemistry. That year, WCCC received a federal planning grant of \$80,000 although major financial difficulties were encountered and state support was needed to keep the college afloat. Eighty full-time instructors were hired and an open door policy of admission with an emphasis on vocational and technical training was retained. The college was responsive to the Southwest Detroit community and several courses were taught in Spanish. Wayne County Community College eliminated failing grades and did not record courses that were not passed with a grade below a C.

For a third time, on August 4, 1970, Wayne County voters turned down a millage request to fund WCCC. In September 1971, the state legislature passed a \$5.5 million appropriation package that required the Wayne County Tax Allocation Board to divert some of the millage it controlled to WCCC (Public Act 139 of the Public Acts of 1971). The *Detroit News* reported on the demographics of students attending WCCC: the average age of students was 27 years and almost all of them were part-time students who had jobs requiring at least 20 hours a week, and nearly 40 percent of the students were Black people. In the fall semester of 1969, the first year of WCCC, it had the largest first year enrollment of any U. S. college or university at 8,500 students. One year and a half later, the enrollment was 9,500 in the spring semester of 1970. Studies had shown that the Detroit area was the largest metropolitan area in the nation without a public community college<sup>18</sup>, and the high enrollment at WCCC demonstrated the demand.



Union Station Depot (1893-1974) WCCCD Administration Building (1981)  
Source: Detroit Free Press archives photo by: Dan Austin

The land that Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) currently occupies once housed the MCRR's foundry, rail lines, the Fort Street Union Depot (1893), and the Pere Marquette Railroad Freight House. These railroad-related properties are at the corner of West Fort Street and Third Avenue running west to Cabacier Street. The WCCCD administration acquired 10.8 acres of land at Third Street and West Fort Street on

March 14, 1976 from the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company; the land was the former site of the Fort Street Union Depot, also called the Union Station Depot (1893-1974) and its rail yards. The purchase was significant to the creation of a new centralized campus location for WCCCD, since by 1976 there were seventeen different facilities used as classroom and office space. That year WCCC officials announced that construction would begin on the new campus at the site of the old Union Station and a conceptual plan of the campus by Sims Varner and Associates was published

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<sup>18</sup> Grant, William, "Like a Mushroom – Pop! A Big New College," *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit Magazine*, August 2, 1970, p. 20.

in the media.<sup>19</sup> Financing was from the sale of construction bonds. In 1978 demolition and clearance of the entire west Detroit riverfront area was underway for Joe Louis Arena (initially called the Riverfront Arena), new apartment buildings (now called the Riverfront Towers), a Detroit Free Press printing plant, and Wayne County Community College.

On November 18, 1976, groundbreaking ceremonies were held for the new Wayne County Community College downtown center campus including speakers: Detroit Mayor Coleman A. Young, Detroit City Council Members Carl Levin, Irma Henderson, and others. In 1979, the first building in the downtown campus complex opened; a cast concrete Brutalist style building that originally housed the library, bookstore, childcare center, offices, classrooms, atrium, and instructional laboratories in 180,000 square feet. Today it is known as the Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus Building, designed by Detroit architects Sims, Varner & Associates and Giffels Associates. Photos from the 1979 era depict a grassy lawn and honey-locust trees planted on the plaza (now the Fort Street Plaza) that is on the overpass of the John C. Lodge (M-10) expressway.

The silver-grey aluminum-faced structure at 801 West Fort Street is the Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building and District Office, constructed at a cost of \$17 million in 1981. It is a landmark six-story building at the southwest corner of West Fort Street and Third Avenue, on the site of the former 1893 Union Station Depot. The Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building was designed by Albert Kahn Inc., and its modern design was controversial and criticized when it was presented to the Detroit City Council.

Wayne County Community College District has completed over fifty years of uninterrupted operation and development of comprehensive educational services. Both directly and indirectly, the over 70,000 students and the 2.3 million people living within the College's service district of Wayne County have enjoyed the benefits of its instructional programs and community services. In 1992, WCCCD passed its first voter-approved property tax levy of 1 mil, which was approved as a permanent millage in 1998. In 2000, voters approved an additional levy and the total millage was raised to 2.50 mils, although later the millage was reduced to 2.25 mils. In 1998, the term "District" was added to WCCC's name to reflect the college's multi-campus organization.

Wayne County Community College District's downtown campus has grown providing educational training and leadership for the metropolitan region. The new Curtis L. Ivery Health and Wellness Education Center opened in 2020 on the downtown campus at a cost of \$25,000,000. The Curtis L. Ivery Health and Wellness Education Center was designed in 2018 by Hannah-Neumann/Smith Detroit, architects, and constructed by the Tooles Contracting Group LLC of Detroit. The new building opened in 2020 and houses the WCCCD Wildcat basketball team's court along with other athletic-related facilities and classrooms. The WCCCD Health Sciences department will offer associate degree programs for fields such as fitness training, sports management, kinesiology, physical therapy, and sports conditioning.

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<sup>19</sup> Grant, William, "Union Station Will Be Site," *Detroit Free Press*, May 25, 1976, p. 2A.



*Health & Wellness Education Center*

In 2020, the downtown campus was renamed the Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus in recognition of Chancellor Dr. Ivery’s leadership that expanded the community college for twenty-five years, beginning in 1995. Today, WCCCD has six campus locations serving more than 60,000 credit and non-credit students annually across 36 cities and townships in Wayne County. The six WCCCD campus locations today are:

- Eastern Campus (5901 Conner, Detroit)
- Downtown Campus (801 West Fort Street, Detroit)
- Downriver Campus (21000 Northline Road, Taylor)
- Northwest Campus (8200 West Outer Drive, Detroit)
- The Ted Scott Campus, formerly the Western Campus, (9555 Haggerty Road, Belleville)
- The Mary Ellen Stempfle University Center, (19305 Vernier Road, Harper Woods)

***Sims Varner & Associates Inc. – designed the Downtown Campus Building (1979)***

Sims Varner & Associates is significant as the architectural firm of record for Wayne County Community College at the time of its development and conceptual design in 1976. Founded by Howard F. Sims, FAIA, Sims Varner Associates has been headquartered in the city of Detroit since 1968 and is Detroit’s most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Black architectural firm. The firm has been responsible for the design of many of Detroit’s prominent buildings including the Robert Millender Center (1985), the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (1997), the addition to Cobo Hall, and the Golightly Career and Technical Center (1982).

Howard Sims (1933-2016) first joined the Navy as a draftsman to get experience as an architect since racial prejudice at the time did not allow for architecture internship opportunities to African American students. Stationed in Morocco during the Korean War, Sims helped to design naval facilities. Following his discharge, Sims received his Bachelor of Science in Architecture in 1963, and a Master of Architecture degree in 1966, both from the esteemed College of Architecture at the University of Michigan. In 1964, he started Howard Sims and Associates in Ann Arbor and then Detroit, and the firm is considered the oldest Black-owned architectural business in Michigan.

Architect Harold R. Varner (1936-2013) joined the firm in 1973, where he became a partner and eventually the executive vice president. Harold Richard Varner was a native of Detroit. He received his architectural education from the Cass Tech and Lawrence Technological University and became a licensed architect in 1967. For fifteen years, Varner served on the Michigan Board of Architects. In 1981, he was elected to the American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows.<sup>20</sup>

When Sims founded the firm, African Americans had limited opportunities to design buildings in Michigan. “Certainly, it’s true that at one time, Black architects had only one major client: churches

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<sup>20</sup> Docomomo US website. <https://docomomo-us.org/designer/sims-varner-associates> Retrieved April 1, 2021.

and maybe funeral homes,” Sims told the Detroit Free Press in 1982. “It wasn’t until the mid to late 1960s that Black people entered the decision-making process so far as what might be built and where, and how it should look.”<sup>21</sup> At the time of the planning and design of the WCCC campus in 1976, Sims-Varner Associates was one of only three Black-owned architectural firms in Detroit, and the design for the WCCC campus was one of their first large commissions.

Both Sims and Varner were very much active in their community. Sims’ advocated to provide both effective and exceptional design to all, that was expressed in his designs for the award winning McMichael Middle School in Detroit, and the Redford Branch Library. Sims’ dedication to the Detroit community was further demonstrated by his strong philanthropic and mentorship activities such as with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Sims and his wife Judith established scholarships at multiple universities, including the University of Michigan School of Architecture and Wayne State University. In 1969, both Sims and Varner were part of a coalition of Black business leaders known as the Harambee (meaning “all pull together” in Swahili) of Oakland County. The group received an interest-free loan of \$1.1 million from General Motors to help the rehabilitation of Pontiac, Michigan’s impoverished areas.

Sims’ firm was one of the first minority architecture firms in Michigan, and the first African American-owned architecture firm in Detroit. Sims’ gained experience and recognition outside of architecture as well, as an author of Michigan’s first building codes, and as a board member of institutions such as the Federal Reserve, and Detroit’s Comerica Bank and DTE Energy. In addition to the prominent buildings in Detroit listed above, other major works include the expansion of Cobo Hall, the University of Michigan School of Social Work, Detroit Wayne County Port Authority Terminal, the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources, Orleans East Apartments in Lafayette Park, Franklin Wright Village in Elmwood Park, and Martin Luther King Jr. High School. The firm currently operates as SDG Associates and is run by Howard Sims’ son, Wesley Sims, the Chief Financial and Operating Officer.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Albert Kahn Inc. – designed the Administration Building (1981)***

Detroit’s most significant architect of the twentieth century, Albert Kahn (1869-1942), founded the firm of Albert Kahn Inc. and was internationally known for his designs of American automobile factories. In his time he was considered the world’s foremost industrial architect and the “father of modern factory design.” Born into a poor German family that later immigrated to Detroit when he was 11 years old, at age 15, he began working at the firm of Mason & Rice, without pay. George D. Mason took an interest in Kahn, and taught him how to draft. Kahn soon won a scholarship to study abroad in Europe. Through his years of apprenticeships and partnerships with Detroit architects, Kahn transformed into the leading industrial architect in the area. Kahn began to design industrial plants using Truscon reinforced concrete, starting with the Packard Plant, and his firm innovated factory design with large windows that brought in light to the factory floor. It instantly created a new standard for industrial plants across the world. His plants were the inspiration for a European Modernism architectural style. Kahn founded Albert Kahn Associates in 1895, and the architectural/engineering firm designed 521 factories in the Soviet Union, and trained more than 1,000 engineers. Even though Kahn was most famous for industrial architecture, he had many other

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> SDG Architects + Planners, website. <https://sdg-assoc.com/> Retrieved April 1, 2021.



commissions such as clubs, hotels, commercial structures, and office buildings. His firm also designed many buildings for the University of Michigan. Kahn worked until his death in 1942, when he passed away at the age of 73.<sup>23</sup>

The firm has continued as Albert Kahn Inc. and through the late twentieth century to today, it has created the designs for many significant structures including Henry Ford Health Systems campuses, the Detroit Riverwalk, the Polk Penguin Center at the Detroit Zoo, and Ford Motor Company's Driving Dynamics Lab, just to name a few prominent commissions. The firm continues today designing industrial and automotive facilities, research and testing spaces, educational buildings, health care buildings, and corporate headquarters office buildings.

## **DESCRIPTION**

The contributing buildings and plaza in the proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District reflect a perpetuation of modern design in educational buildings in Detroit and Wayne County and are of exceptional significance.

### **Landscape**

Wayne County Community College District's downtown campus is located on West Fort Street, a major east-west thoroughfare. The campus structures are designed to accommodate the grade change and topography as the land slopes towards the Detroit River located just a few blocks to the south. The WCCCD buildings are sited along West Fort Street with their front facades oriented to the north towards the street. At the west side of the campus west of Sixth Street are two surface parking lots, outside of the historic district. There are two surface parking lots (lots four and five) that are south of the campus buildings, and one small surface parking lot is at the eastern edge of the accessed from Third Street, that within the historic district. The most eastern building, 801 West Fort Street, the WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building, is sited at the southwest corner of West Fort Street and Third Street. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building is set at the public sidewalk and has no setback. West of the WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building is the Fort Street Plaza, a concrete and red brick paver plaza adjacent to a green lawn that spans the area directly over the John C. Lodge Expressway (M-10). The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus Building at 1001 West Fort Street is set back from the West Fort Street public sidewalk behind a raised planting area containing ivy, crabapple trees, ewe shrubs and staircases.

The new Curtis L. Ivery Health & Wellness Education Center is set back from the public sidewalk at different sections, with the main entry doors the closest to the public street. There are four-foot tall raised planter boxes adjacent to the Health & Wellness building, set along the sidewalk, and grade-level planter boxes are near the curb of West Fort Street. There are parallel public parking spaces along West Fort Street. Street furniture includes signage for the public parking, the parking pay stations, benches, and light fixtures. Street trees were planted in tree pits at the sidewalks on each side of the Administration Building in 2016.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://historicdetroit.org/architects/albert-kahn> Retrieved April 16, 2021.

There are seven separate surface parking lots owned by Wayne County Community College District, but only three of these parking lots are inside of the historic district boundaries (lots Four, Five and a Third Street lot). Parking lots Two, Three, Six, and Seven, are outside the district; they were graded and paved in 2018. The parking lot (unknown name) at Third Street, south of the Administration Building is for staff only. A chain-link aluminum fence surrounds the lot at Third Street, south of the Administration Building. All of the parking lots are paved in asphalt. To the east of Lot Four is a black wrought iron fence surrounding utility control boxes.

Sixth Street, the western district boundary, intersects the WCCCD surface parking lots, running north-south. Outside of the historic district, west of Sixth Street are surface parking lots Two and Three. A driveway separates these two surface parking lots. On West Fort Street, a wide grass berm separates Parking Lot Two from the public sidewalk. Shade trees are planted in the grass berm along West Fort Street. At the southern section of Sixth Street, outside of the district, the grade level changes as Sixth Street crosses over West Jefferson Avenue to then connect to the driveway for the Riverfront Towers Apartments.

**WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus Building - 1001 West Fort Street (1977-79) - contributing.** The first building to open in the downtown complex was the Downtown Campus Building; a cast concrete Brutalist style building that originally housed the library, bookstore, childcare center, offices, classrooms, atrium, and instructional laboratories in 180,000 square feet. The Downtown Campus Building was designed by Detroit architects Sims, Varner & Associates in 1977 (permit #40122) at a cost of \$10.4 million. The building is on a raised platform six steps above the public sidewalk on West Fort Street. The Downtown Campus building is roughly “b” shaped in plan with a wider section at the south side of the property. There is an open-air atrium space that is finished in cast concrete and the atrium has benches, tables and concrete planters for trees and shrubs. The building is two-stories tall and is clad with both smooth and vertically textured concrete panels on each façade. Two covered concrete stair towers project from the West Fort Street façade. There is a full-length vertically divided window at the top of each staircase. There are full-length vertically divided windows at the West Fort Street façade (north façade) of the building. A two-level concrete Brutalist-style parking structure is attached the south of the Downtown Campus Building. The Downtown Campus Building was expanded to the west. An outdoor children’s playscape is at the rooftop of the western-most addition.

Brutalism is an architectural style characterized by a deliberate plainness and emphasis on materials, textures, and construction that can often be interpreted as austere and menacing. It emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and gained popularity in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Brutalist style is known for its use of functional reinforced concrete and steel, modular elements. It was primarily used for institutional buildings that are imposing and geometric.

**WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building and District Office - 801 West Fort Street (1981) - contributing.** The Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building and District Office was designed in the post-modern style by Albert Kahn Inc. in 1981. The Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building is a landmark at the southwest corner of West Fort Street and Third Street. It is a six-story, steel-framed building designed in a trapezoidal shaped plan. The chamfered edge of the building faces the street corner, looking onto the intersection. The building’s front entry door is on a raised platform approximately five steps above the public sidewalk at the corner of West Fort Street and

Third Street. The West Fort Street grade-level stairs were replaced in 2019. The sidewalks, trees, tree grates, and light poles were all installed in 2016.

The Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building has a concrete foundation and basement. The building's north, south, and west façades have a horizontal band of continuous windows that separates the facades into horizontal sections at the ground-floor level, second, third, fourth, and fifth floors. The windows were replaced in 2014. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Administration Building is faced with silver-grey aluminum panels set above a four-foot black granite base. The main entry to the building is at the northeast façade (the chamfered edge) which is covered by a tall porch roof. There is a continuous window wall (three over twelve) above the entry doors, recessed at forty-five degree angles into the northeast façade. Above the glass and aluminum entry doors on the porch roof fascia is signage including the WCCCD logo, and white lettering for "Curtis L. Ivery District Office." At the north façade (the West Fort Street façade) at the top of the building is the WCCCD logo and black lettering for the "Curtis L. Ivery Central Educational Complex." The roof is flat and the rooftop mechanical equipment is recessed so it does not project above the roofline. A trapezoid-shaped planter is at the Third Street side of the entry. Mechanical equipment is screened with a concrete wall outside of the southwestern corner of the building. Planting boxes and a twenty-six space surface parking lot are at the southwest side of the building adjacent to the John C. Lodge Freeway.

**Fort Street Plaza - contributing.** Fort Street Plaza is a concrete and red brick paver plaza adjacent to a green lawn that spans the area directly over the John C. Lodge Expressway (M-10) between the Administration Building and the Downtown Campus Building. The concrete walks between the buildings and the red brick pavers were replaced in 2016. A white landscape rock garden with black landscape rocks spelling "WCCCD" is centered in the lawn closest to West Fort Street. There are three flagpoles attached to a concrete four-foot wall at the rear of the landscape rock garden. Fort Street Plaza is accessible from West Fort Street, from the Downtown Campus Building and from the rear doors of the Administration Building. The south side of the plaza overlooks the John C. Lodge expressway. There are white square concrete planters on the plaza and bench seating on the steps of the plaza.

**Curtis L. Ivery Central Educational Complex and Health & Wellness Education Center (2019) – noncontributing.** The new WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Health and Wellness Education Center opened in 2020 on the downtown campus at the southeast corner of West Fort Street and Sixth Street. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Health & Wellness Education Center was designed in 2018 by Hannah-Neumann/Smith Detroit, architects, the building houses the college's Wildcat basketball court along with other athletic-related facilities and classrooms. The building is rectangular in plan and is two-and-a-half stories tall. The structure is faced with glass curtain wall windows and silver metal panels on the upper stories. Signage containing the "WCCCD" logo and the "Curtis L. Ivery Central Educational Complex" is on the east side of the front facade and signage for the "Curtis L. Ivery Health & Wellness Education Center" is on the west side of the front façade. A double entry door is at the west side of the structure on West Fort Street at grade level. The entry vestibule projects from the building façade, it is faced with dark grey narrow bricks and above the entry and on the west façade is a window wall. Another entry is at the eastern side of the building, at grade level with a glass and aluminum double doors, sidelights and transom windows above. Dark grey narrow brick faces the entry vestibule and the planters at each side of the entry. Four

concrete stairs lead to a porch, another eastern entry is at an offset side to the projecting section of the eastern end of the building. The eastern façade of the building has two double doors with side lights and transoms as well as surrounding dark grey brick. The west façade is finished in narrow grey brick as well as silver metal panels and royal blue panels. A ramp for wheelchair entry is at the east side of the building.

At the south façade (the rear façade) is white lettering for the “Curtis L. Ivery Health & Wellness Educational Center” and the WCCCD logo. The south façade is finished in grey brick and has a row of vertical fixed windows lighting the gymnasium space. There is a walkway between the rear of the building and the concrete wall at the surface parking lot to the south. Because of the grade change of the site, the surface parking lot is below the West Fort Street grade level.

## **CRITERIA**

The proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site historic district appears to meet Criteria Numbers One and Three adopted by the Historic Designation Advisory Board, and Criteria G of the National Register of Historic Places:

- (1) One: Sites, building, 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) Three: 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;
- (G) National Register of Historic Places criterion consideration G: for properties that have achieved significance of exceptional importance in Detroit within the past fifty years.

## **COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and two *ex-officio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Dr. Carolyn C. Carter, Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye, Louis Fisher, Nubia Wardford Polk, Theresa Holder-Hagood, Calvin Jackson, Naomi Beasley-Porter, and Joseph Rashid. The *Ex-Officio* members who may be represented by members of their staff, are the director of the City Planning Commission and the director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Priscilla Rodgers and Nanette Armstrong.

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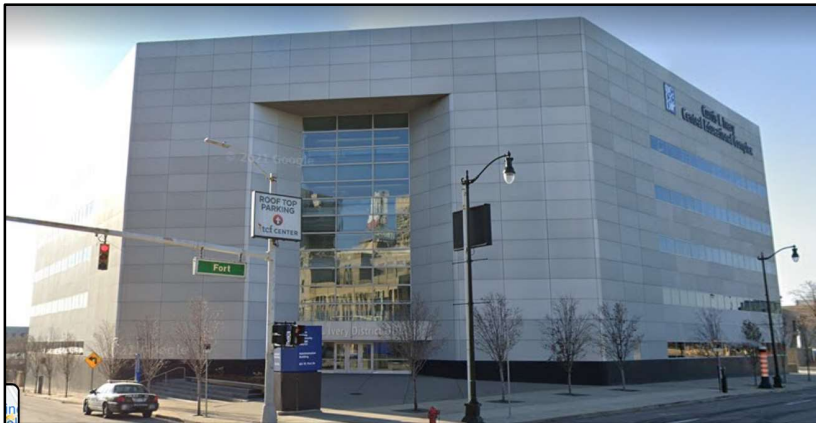


## LIST OF CONTRIBUTING AND NONCONTRIBUTING RESOURCES

The proposed Wayne County Community College District/Detroit Underground Railroad Site Historic District consists of three contributing resources and one non-contributing resource.

Contributing Resources:

1. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery District Office and Administration Building at 801 West Fort Street (1981),



2. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus Building at 1001 West Fort Street (1979),



3. The Fort Street Plaza west of the Administration Building at 801 West Fort Street



Non-contributing Resources:

4. The WCCCD Curtis L. Ivery Central Educational Complex and Health & Wellness Education Center (2019)

