

# City of Detroit

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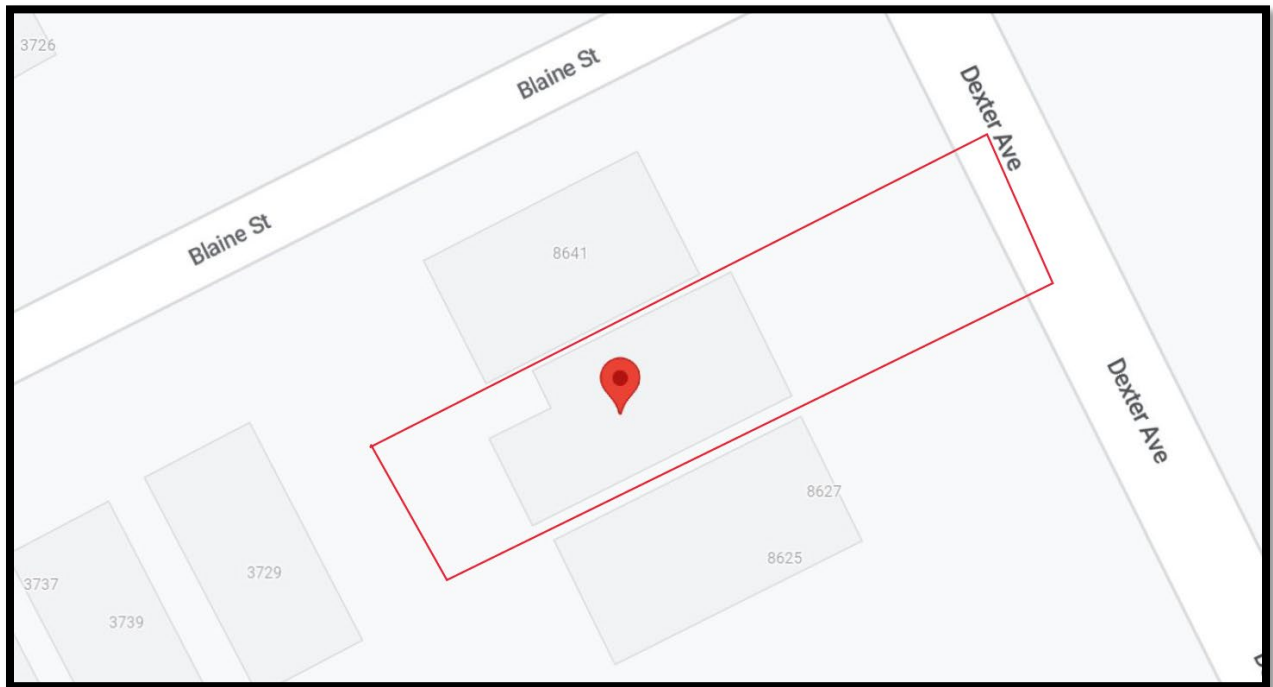
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## Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District Final Report



By a resolution dated March 28, 2023, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District in accordance with Chapter 21 of the 2019 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District is located approximately five miles north of downtown Detroit and consists of 0.105 acres, and one contributing resource. The boundaries are; the north property line for lot 30 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; on the east, the centerline of Dexter Avenue; on the south; the south property line for lot 30 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; on the west, the centerline of the alley at the west side of Dexter Avenue. The proposed local historic district includes one (1) structure.



  
Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District  
Historic District boundary map  
8633 Dexter Avenue  
Detroit, Wayne County

[Legal description: On the north, the northern line, as extended east and west, the property line for lot 96 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; Liber 30, Plat 32, Wayne County Records; on the east, the centerline of Dexter Avenue; on the south; the south property line for lot 96 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; Liber 30, Plat 32, Wayne County Records; and on the west, the centerline of the alley at the west side of Dexter Avenue. Commonly known as 8633-8635 Dexter Avenue.]

## **BOUNDARIES**

The boundaries of the proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District, outlined with red on the attached map, are as follows:

Beginning at a point, that point being:

On the north, the northern line, as extended east and west, the property line for lot 96 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; Liber 30, Plat 32, Wayne County Records;

On the east, the centerline of Dexter Avenue;

On the south; the south property line for lot 96 of the Dexter Blvd. Subdivision; Liber 30, Plat 32, Wayne County Records;

and

On the west, the centerline of the alley at the west side of Dexter Avenue to the point of beginning.

### Boundary Justification

The boundaries described above delineate the parcel presently and historically occupied by the Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House and contains the entire footprint of the building.

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House 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 also significant under National Register **Criteria A** at the local level, for its role in Community Planning and Development, Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Social History.

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District is significant under Historic Designation Advisory Board **Criteria Number Two**: “sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state, or national history.” The proposed district is significant under National

Register **Criteria B** at the local level for its relationship with Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson and her development as the first female pediatric cardiologist in Detroit's African American medical history.

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House 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." It is also significant under National Register **Criteria C** at the local level as a residential two-family building.

#### Period of Significance

The period of significance of the Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House Historic District is defined as **1916 to 1965**, beginning when the house was constructed in 1916, to 1965 when Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson passed away. This period reflects many of the physical changes that have taken place reflecting significant social, medical, and African American history in Detroit.

## Significance Developmental and Planning History

Evidence of the earliest human activity in the vicinity of Detroit dates to the Late Woodland period (500-1000 CE). This native culture of hunters and gatherers lived in small villages near the Detroit River. The proposed district, five miles from the Detroit River, did not have an immediate aquatic resource and is less likely to have archaeological evidence of Native Americans. The land near 8633 Dexter Avenue is part of the traditional territory of the *Confederacy of Three Fires*, comprised of the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi) Nations and referred to as *Waawiyatanong*, or “where the water goes around,” in the Anishinaabemowin language of the Anishinaabe indigenous community. The region’s original inhabitants, including Anishinaabe as well as Wyandot, Iroquois, Fox, Miami, and Sauk tribes, are known to have traveled throughout the area surrounding 8633 Dexter Avenue by using multiple trail systems including the Shiawassee Trail that now roughly corresponds to today’s Grand River Avenue.<sup>1</sup>

Detroit was incorporated as a town in 1802, and the Michigan Territory was organized that same year with Detroit as its territorial capital. Judge Augustus B. Woodward designed a new plan for Detroit in 1805, and the city sprawled outward from the Detroit River as the population grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the major streets or “spokes” of Woodward’s plan for Detroit was Grand River Avenue. The development of the area northwest of the early Detroit boundary began with the establishment of Greenfield Township northwest of the city of Detroit in 1827.

The area now known as the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood was once a rural part of Greenfield Township, north of Grand River Avenue. Between 1916 and 1926, the city annexed ninety square miles of land from the surrounding rural townships as people left the older Detroit residential areas and crossed West Grand Boulevard to live in one of the many fashionable new suburban neighborhoods still within the city limits. The development of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood grew from the north to south; the southern part of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood was annexed in 1907 and the northern half of the neighborhood was annexed in 1912. The explosive physical growth of the city of Detroit, particularly its growth northwesterly from the city center to the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood occurred approximately five miles from downtown Detroit. New homeowners knew that once the city of Detroit annexed an area, they would receive Detroit services such as fire and police protection, Detroit public high school privileges, sewers, and water connections. Developers were quick to advertise their lots once they knew that annexation was imminent. Early residential suburbs such as these fostered an emerging American aspiration for life in a semi-rural environment, apart from the noise, pollution, and activity of a crowded city, but close enough to the city for commuting daily to work.<sup>2</sup>

Residential growth for the area was planned as early as 1887 when the plat for the Ravenswood subdivision, north of Joy Road, was filed with the city. Several years later, in 1913, William L. Reed submitted a plat for a subdivision centered on Grand River Avenue and Reed Avenue (now

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhardt, Jennifer, City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, Final Report, *The Blue Bird Inn*, October, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ames, David L. and L. F. McClelland, *National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs, Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 65.

Beverly Court). Other subdivisions in the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood were named the Stormfeltz Loveley Co. subdivision, the Martindale subdivision, and the Lambrecht Kelley Company subdivision. The Dr. Lula Belle Robinson house is in the Dexter Boulevard subdivision, which ran east from Quincy Street to Linwood Boulevard.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1920s more than 230,000 people lived in the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

This residential growth coincided with tremendous commercial growth. The destination commercial district of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood was on West Grand River Avenue. Commercial growth of what was then the northwest end of the city began in earnest in 1925 with the construction of the Grand Riviera theater (9222 Grand River Ave.), “one of the most beautiful neighborhood theaters in the world” at that time.<sup>5</sup> The Grand Riviera theater cost more than one million dollars to construct and its auditorium could seat over three thousand people. The theater attracted a “great number”<sup>6</sup> of people to the neighborhood, and its success necessitated a second theater, the Riviera Annex Theatre (8990 Grand River Ave.), nearby. The Annex theater was constructed in 1927, both the Grand Riviera and the Riviera Annex were designed by noted theater architect John Ebersson. Along with the streetcar that ran on Grand River Avenue, the new commercial buildings ushered in an era of tremendous growth in the neighborhood. Just west of the Riviera Annex theater was the Mirror Ballroom was constructed in 1927. The ballroom provided a venue for more active recreation, and together with the two theaters accounted for more than two million dollars in entertainment facilities within a two-block area.<sup>7</sup>

Buildings on Grand River Avenue were mainly constructed in the building boom of the late 1920s, and one of the most significant buildings was the Grande Ballroom (8952 Grand River Avenue at Beverly Court). The Grande Ballroom was built in 1928, and was designed by Detroit architect Charles N. Agree to house small retailers on the first floor, and the second floor was entirely occupied by a dance floor, concession seating, and cloak rooms. The Grande Ballroom was later well known for its six years (1966-1972) as the foremost live rock-and-roll venue in Detroit that booked bands such as Led Zeppelin, Ted Nugent, The Who, and the MC5. The Grande Ballroom is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it has been vacant for many decades and is currently offered for sale by the owner, a church called Chapel Hill Ministries. In addition to recreation, local and national chains such as Grinnell Bros., D. J. Healy, Cunningham Drugs, Burns Shoes, Sanders, S. S. Kresge, and F. W. Woolworth, as well as several banks, established branches of their operations in this fast-growing district. Still more independent retailers and chain stores followed.<sup>8</sup>

By 1928 the area was “probably the fastest-growing shopping center in the city of Detroit,”<sup>9</sup> and so congested with traffic that the parking lanes in front of the stores along Grand River Avenue

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<sup>3</sup> Baist, G.Wm., *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Detroit, Michigan*, Volume 2, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> “Detroit’s Third Burns Store Opening Today.” *Detroit Free Press*. October 19, 1928.

<sup>5</sup> “Rapid Progress of Section Cited.” *Detroit Free Press*. April 24, 1927.

<sup>6</sup> “Rise of the West Area Recalled.” *Detroit Free Press*. December 15, 1929.

<sup>7</sup> “Rapid Progress of Section Cited.” *Detroit Free Press*. April 24, 1927.

<sup>8</sup> Walsh, Todd, *Grande Ballroom*, National Register of Historic Places nomination, National Park Service, Department Interior, August 10, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> “Joy Road Zone Spreads Fast.” *Detroit Free Press*. October 19, 1928.

were used for additional driving lanes during rush hour.<sup>10</sup> Traffic counts suggested that more than thirty-four thousand cars passed by the intersection of Grand River Ave. and Joy Road every day,<sup>11</sup> not including those that traveled by streetcar.<sup>12</sup>

In 1917, the occupations of the early residents of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood were a mixture of working class people and professionals; they included John Czarnik, a grocer, Joseph Branka a laborer, and William Zetkowsky a laborer, and Theodore Follbaum, a carpenter. By 1922 the area residents were comprised of Zachariah Nairin, a physician, Mathias Look, a public notary, and Wray Bailey, a bank manager. The neighborhood's very large Roman Catholic church, St. Theresa of Avila (8666 Quincy St.), founded in 1915, drew many Irish Americans to the neighborhood where their children could attend the Catholic elementary and high schools. Calvary Presbyterian church, at 19125 Grand River Ave. and Vicksburg Street was a large church (1918) whose parishioners were from a white Anglo-Saxon background that moved into in the area beginning in 1918.

### **Detroit's African American Neighborhoods**

*The contents of this section of the report are largely taken from the Twentieth Century Civil Rights Sites In the City of Detroit - Survey Report by Quinn Evans Architects prepared for the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office and the City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board.*

In 1820, the African American population in Detroit was recorded at just 67 residents. Detroit's Black population remained relatively small until the turn of the twentieth century. Its upper and middle class African American residents were integrated into the city overall, while working class Blacks clustered on the East side along with White working-class immigrants. It was the explosion of Detroit's automobile industry after 1907 and Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line and the five-dollar workday in 1914 that brought the first large population of African Americans to Detroit.

The new immigration created a change in African American housing patterns within the city. In the decade between 1910 and 1920 Detroit's Black population increased over 14%; between 1920 and 1930 it rose to over 49.6%. As African Americans moved in large numbers into the city, White residents interpreted this as a threat, and reacted to establish and maintain racial homogeneity. Blacks who attempted to move into White neighborhoods in the 1910s and 1920s faced increasing resistance, from White property owners refusing to sell or rent to Blacks, to the establishment of racial covenants, to actual violence against African Americans who attempted to break the color line. While segregation was not the city's official policy at the time, the White police force and city officials either passively supported or actively enforced *de facto* segregation. As a result, most of Detroit's African American residents were involuntarily segregated into a few small areas of the city on the city's East side known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. As more and more people were packed into relatively small areas, houses and apartments were subdivided in an

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<sup>10</sup> "Grand River Avenue Traffic Delays Prove Need of Rush Hour Parking Ban." *Detroit Free Press*. September 23, 1928.

<sup>11</sup> "Detroit's Third Burns Store Opening Today." *Detroit Free Press*. October 19, 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Walsh, Todd, *Grande Ballroom*, National Register of Historic Places nomination, National Park Service, Department Interior, August 10, 2018.

attempt to expand living space well beyond its capacity. Extremely overcrowded conditions and lack of maintenance by landlords reduced the housing in these areas to what were termed slums, though the neighborhoods themselves retained a vibrant sense of community.

The mostly residential district of Black Bottom was located south of Gratiot Avenue between Brush Street and the Grand Trunk Railroad Tracks, eventually extending all the way to the Detroit River on the south. The commercial counterpart to Black Bottom was Paradise Valley, extending a few blocks to either side of the main commercial corridors of Hastings and St. Antoine Streets from Gratiot to Mack, and eventually expanding north toward Forest Avenue. Although historically Black Bottom was considered a residential area and Paradise Valley a commercial one, in practice there were businesses located throughout Black Bottom and Blacks lived in homes, boarding houses, and apartments on the side streets of Paradise Valley. Most of the historically Black churches, businesses, and social and political organizations founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were located in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

By the 1920s there were several small middle-class enclaves developing outside of the lower east side. Like their White counterparts, Black Detroiters aspired to home ownership, but due to restrictive racial covenants and racial prejudice, there were few areas open to them. Black residents looking to purchase homes had to search for areas well away from established White neighborhoods. The largest of these was the “Black West Side,” a community bounded by Tireman Avenue, Epworth Street, Warren Avenue, and Grand River Avenue. The “Black West Side” was only a mile from the Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson house, and as the Black population moved north of Tireman Avenue in the 1960s, the racial makeup of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood changed. As described in the book *Grand River and Joy*, the neighborhood was a mix of Black, Jewish, and White Catholic families<sup>13</sup> in the late 1960s, but it in later years would evolve to become a Black neighborhood.

### **Dr. Lula Belle Teresa Stewart**

Lula Belle Teresa Stewart (1920-1965) was born in Jackson, Mississippi to Walter and Mable Stewart in 1920; she was one of five children. Stewart received her early education in the Jackson city schools, and after graduating from public school she attended Alcorn College in Mississippi where she graduated Cum Laude in 1941. Alcorn College, (founded in 1871, now Alcorn State University) is recognized as a Historically Black College and University or HBCU, by the United States Department of Education. Lula Belle Stewart’s medical training was obtained at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, also an HBCU, from which she received her Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) degree in 1944. At that time Dr. Stewart became a member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority. Following an internship at Flint Goodridge Hospital at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, Dr. Stewart practiced medicine in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. After three years of practice, she returned to Meharry Medical College to specialize in pediatric medicine where she received a certification in pediatric cardiology in 1947. Receiving a fellowship from the National Foundation on Infantile Paralysis near the end of her training, Dr. Stewart took the

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<sup>13</sup> Messer, Susan, *Grand River and Joy*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2010.



opportunity to further her training in pediatrics and pediatric cardiology at Cook County Children's Hospital in Chicago. After a year at Cook County Children's Hospital, Dr. Stewart returned to Mississippi to work for the Mississippi Board of Health. Dr. Stewart was assigned to the Delta area of Mississippi where malaria, venereal disease, malnutrition, and birth defects brought widespread cataclysmic illness to the African American children in the rural Mississippi farmlands and plantations. Much of Dr. Stewart's time between 1945-49 was spent in the struggle for the human dignity of African Americans living in Mississippi. To this end, she organized the first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) youth organization in the state of Mississippi.

In 1950, Dr. Stewart received a renewal of the National Foundation of Infantile Paralysis fellowship grant which enabled her to attend the University of Pennsylvania's graduate study program in pediatrics. She graduated in 1952 and was one of only two women in her class; also significant, Dr. Stewart was the only African American woman in her class. In 1953 she successfully passed the certifying examination to the American Board of Pediatrics. Dr. Stewart is purported to be the first African American female certified in pediatric cardiology in Detroit and the state of Michigan. She was a member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority and a lifetime member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In 1953, Lula Belle Stewart married Phil Clayton Robinson and the couple moved to Detroit at the house at 8633-8635 Dexter Avenue in 1955. The Robinsons had three children, Maria, now an accomplished attorney, Phil Jr., a business executive, and Michael, an IT specialist. In 1960, Phil and Lula Belle made the decision to support and sponsor a young man from Jackson, Mississippi, Lula Belle's hometown. He was an aspiring artist named Robin Harper and after moving to Detroit, attended the Center for Creative Studies College of Art and Design (now the College for Creative Studies) and received a Fine Arts Degree in 1964. In 1980 he officially changed his name to Kwesi Asanti and his work has become internationally known, including a large mural for the City of Detroit's downtown library Skillman Branch, among many others.

Dr. Stewart-Robinson was eager to give the best possible medical care, and she was always in search of knowledge in her field, so she trained for two additional years in pediatric cardiology at Children's Hospital of Michigan. Dr. Stewart-Robinson opened her private pediatric practice office on the house on Dexter Avenue in Detroit in 1955. There she saw many local children and was especially busy at the start of the school year when vaccinations were required. The Journal of the National Medical Association reported that Dr. Stewart-Robinson quit her private practice in order to run the Cardiology Department for Children at Harper and Children's Hospitals in 1963.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Stewart-Robinson began a third year of training in preparation to direct the cardio-vascular laboratory at both Children's and Grace Hospitals in Detroit. In the mid-1960s, Dr. Stewart-Robinson was on staff at Children's Hospital, Harper Hospital, Grace Hospital, Crittenton Maternity Hospital, and Detroit Memorial Hospital in addition to being a clinical instructor at Wayne (State) University. At Children's Hospital of Michigan, she became the Director of the cardio-vascular laboratory. Later Dr. Stewart-Robinson's life, in 1965, she and her husband Phil Robinson and children moved to 1367 Joliet Place in Detroit's Lafayette Park neighborhood. The Robinson family attended Plymouth Congregational Church in Detroit.

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<sup>14</sup> Thompson, W. Arthur M. D., and Robert Greenidge, M.D., "The Negro in Medicine in Detroit," *Journal of the National Medical Association*, November, 1963, p. 480.

Dr. Stewart-Robinson had a special connection with music history. Aretha Franklin first became pregnant at the age of 12 and gave birth to a son in 1955. It was Dr. Stewart-Robinson who delivered Aretha Franklin's first child, Clarence Franklin, likely because of her work as a pediatrician and her office's close location to the Franklin's home in LaSalle Gardens. The National Geographic television series, *Genius: Aretha: Respect* chronicled two periods of Aretha Franklin's life and mentioned Dr. Stewart's name.<sup>15</sup>

In a *Detroit Free Press* February 8, 1965, article Dr. Stewart-Robinson was quoted as saying that her philosophy has been "to be to the patients what mothers would be if they were there." Her office door was never closed to patients who could not pay. Dr. Stewart-Robinson stated, "I feel that medicine when sincerely practiced is the greatest humanitarian contribution one can make."<sup>16</sup> Dr. Stewart-Robinson was purported to be the first African American female pediatric cardiologist in Detroit and Michigan.

Dr. Stewart-Robinson's accolades were many. In 1963, Alcorn College honored Dr. Stewart Robinson as "Alcornite of the Year." The book *Who's Who in American Women* listed her under the field of medicine, and in June 1964, the Detroit Medical Society chose her as the "Doctor of the Year" in an event held at the David Whitney House.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Stewart-Robinson came to national prominence as a result of her discovery of a rare heart disease found in four children of the same family. This discovery led to her being elected a fellow of the American College of Cardiology in 1965. In 1964, Dr. Stewart-Robinson received an award from the Detroit Medical Society as "physician of the year" from Detroit City Councilmember Reverend Nicholas Hood. On February 5, 1965, Dr. Stewart-Robinson was honored by Lambda Kappa Mu sorority as part of their annual recognition event at the Latin Quarter. Just nine days later, Dr. Stewart-Robinson received the "Carter G. Woodson Merit Award" for her educational, scientific, and humanitarian work from the Detroit branch of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in an event at the Park Shelton Hotel on February 14, 1965.<sup>18</sup>

On November 5th, 1965, Dr. Stewart-Robinson died from leukemia at the age of forty-five, leaving a legacy of devoted medical care to African American children. Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson was a medical pioneer, civil rights, and healthcare equity activist. She was a humanitarian and mother who demonstrated a selfless commitment to service.

### **Phil Clayton Robinson**

Phil Robinson (1920-2006) was born in Richwood, Louisiana and after his early education he used a state scholarship to enroll in Southern University, Baton Rouge. Later in life, Phil earned a master's degree from Michigan State University, and he received a doctorate in Curriculum and Administration from Walden University in Naples, Florida, in 1972. Phil began his career in

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<sup>15</sup> *Aretha: Respect*, Season 3, Episode 1, written by Suzan-Lori Parks, Phillip Howze, Natalie McKearin, *Genius* series, National Geographic, aired March 21, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Sterling, Pauline, "2 Negro Women Will Be Honored Feb. 14," *Detroit Free Press*, February 8, 1965, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "Award Ceremonies Climax 40<sup>th</sup> Negro History Week," *Detroit Free Press*, February 15, 1965, p. 12.

education teaching at Detroit Public Schools, and then went on to teach at the River Rouge School District. For over thirty years (1968-1998) Phil was principal of Northrup/Sabbath Elementary School in River Rouge, Michigan. Phil was one of Michigan's first African American principals tenured in his position. Phil was very accomplished and published many articles and books regarding standardized testing and school administration. He was elected the International President of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in 1985 and was the first Detroitite inducted into the Michigan Education Hall of Fame in 1988. Phil was part of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, and he was awarded their Distinguished Educator award, and he was named a "National Distinguished Principal" by the United States Office of Education. Phil served on the National Advisory Board of his alma mater, Walden University, for many years. In 1976 Phil remarried to Phyllis E. Smith, an education consultant. Included in Phil Robinson's accomplishments was the fact that he and Phyllis self-published his autobiography in 2006, titled *Dare to be Different*. Phil's scholarly papers were donated to the National Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans.

In Phil Clayton Robinson's autobiography *Dare to be Different*, he wrote that in 1960, he and Lula Belle decided that it would "be a good idea to set up a 'one-stop' facility where Detroit families could access a broad spectrum of medical services...It was at this juncture that we learned a true lesson about how racial prejudice can alter your economic base...We recognized that we would have to own the land on which our dream medical center would be located. We had to have property in order to qualify for the loan. We scouted out a Detroit building that we liked on Linwood and Glendale, and paid for it. To our dismay, none of the major banks or financial institutions would approve us for a renovation loan."<sup>18</sup> Through a friend's connection with a banker, the Robinsons received a construction loan for \$25,000 to renovate the 1920s building at 12815 Linwood Avenue to become the Linwood Medical Center. Dr. Stewart-Robinson saw patients at the Linwood Medical Center, and African American architect Nathan Johnson was hired to design the interior renovations in 1963. Although her practice was thriving, Dr. Stewart-Robinson had symptoms of fatigue and low energy, ultimately leading to her passing away in 1965. The Robinsons' vision for the Linwood Medical Center serving the African American community of Petoskey-Otsego had to continue with the other medical professionals leasing medical offices.

Phil Robinson was motivated to memorialize Lula Belle by establishing a lasting commemorative honor. The Robinsons were longtime supporters of the arts and members of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) Founders Society and later, Mr. Robinson became a founding member of the DIA subcommittee, the Friends of African Art. To commemorate Lula Belle, Phil Robinson donated funds for the Detroit Institute of Arts Founders Society's African Art Fund to acquire Romare Bearden's (1911-1988) collage, "Black Mother and Child" in 1970. The Romare Bearden collage was the first work of art by an African American to be on permanent display at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Later Phil Robinson established the Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson Memorial Fund in order to disseminate donated funds for the museum's acquisition of a gold dust container from the West African Guinea Coast's Asante region. The Detroit Dance Theater performed at the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium on October 6, 1967, at a benefit to honor Dr. Stewart-Robinson's Memorial Fund. Proceeds from the dance went toward a Stewart memorial in the African gallery; the memorial fund had raised over \$1,100 at that time.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Memorial Fund Receives Boost from Dance Group," *The Chronicle*, October 7, 1967, p. A6.

Another significant memorial to Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson that Phil Robinson championed was at Children's Hospital of Michigan (3901 Beaubien Blvd., Detroit) where she worked for many years. The African American physicians of Detroit donated to rename the intake room in her honor as "The Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson Suite" with a bronze plaque affixed to the wall. A benefit fashion revue was held at the Detroit Institute of Arts in June 1966, raising almost \$2,000 for the Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson Suite and by 1967, contributions exceeded \$5,200. Children's Hospital of Michigan became the first major Detroit area hospital to memorialize an African American in this way.

### **Lula Belle Stewart Center**

Dr. Lula Belle Stewart's husband Phil Robinson worked tirelessly to establish a social agency to address the needs of single parents in the African American community in Detroit to honor Dr. Stewart's memory and legacy. He and colleagues in the field of social work founded the Lula Belle Stewart Center (LBSC) in 1972. The center was a social services agency dedicated to serving teen mothers with a full range of comprehensive services. The agency successfully served the community for over 35 years (1972-2007). The LBSC served the metropolitan Detroit community as a premier Detroit-area social services agency to address the needs of young parenting teens from Detroit and surrounding communities. Specifically, the LBSC counseled expectant young women under the age of 21, the fathers of their babies, and their families. The LBSC program's design included a full array of services: academic and career development, parenting classes, management of social and economic skills, and basic preventative health care.

The original LBSC site grew to four different locations in Detroit in separate geographic areas. Emily Palmer-Garland was the agency's founding executive director. According to the *New York Times*, the LBSC assisted over 500 clients and their families each year and had an annual budget of approximately one million dollars, mainly funded from the United Foundation, the State of Michigan, and private grant funding.<sup>20</sup> A *Detroit Free Press* article stated that the LBSC served 2,563 clients in 1990.<sup>21</sup> The LBSC held a fundraising awards dinner for many years where it had a keynote address from prominent African Americans such as Dr. Henry Foster Jr., a former U. S. Surgeon General nominee.<sup>22</sup> Phil Robinson served on the board of directors of the LBSC until he passed away in 2006. Other prominent board members included African American doctors such as Dr. Richard Smith, FACOG, and Dr. Herman Grey, MBA, FAAP.

Executive Director Emily Palmer-Garland authored the following article that described the LBSC:

"Named in honor of the late great, Dr. Lula Belle Stewart, the Lula Belle Stewart Center became operational in 1972. It grew out of a broad community-based effort spearheaded by United Community Services in Detroit to address the increasing numbers and needs of pregnant and parenting teens in Metropolitan Detroit. The mission of the new agency was

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<sup>20</sup> Gaiter, Dorothy, "Forums to Focus on Black Family," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1984, Section 1, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ball, Zachare, "Lula Belle Stewart Center gives young mothers goals," *Detroit Free Press*, September 20, 1991, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> "Lula Belle Stewart Center benefit," *Detroit Free Press*, December 7, 1995.

to provide comprehensive community-based services to pregnant and parenting young single parents and their families that would enable them to develop to their fullest potential.

A volunteer board of directors was installed to develop policy and provide governance for the new agency. The program model was developed and grew under the leadership of the first executive director focused on community outreach and home-based services. Heretofore, services were limited to the pregnant girls in a maternity home setting. The model developed by Lula Belle Stewart Center was embraced and publicized by the Child Welfare League of America. It was replicated internationally. Programs were expanded over the years to include Day Care for infants and children of the teen parents; foster care and adoption; transitional housing for mother and child and pregnancy prevention.



Emily Palmer-Garland,  
1984 photo courtesy of  
the Detroit Free Press

The agency began with one source of funding and expanded over the years to include multiple funding streams from all levels of government and from private foundations. United Way, Skillman Foundation and W.K. Kellogg provided substantial support. Thousands of teen parents were served by LBSC during its thirty-seven years of operation. Many completed educational programs that enabled them to become independent, productive members of society and excellent parents. Their children are continuing the legacy started by the LBSC. The LBSC was recognized by the Reagan Administration as one of the most effective programs in America for ending the cycle of dependency.

Emily Palmer-Garland served as executive director of the LBSC for twenty-five years. She served on national boards to promote programs and advocate for funding for teen pregnancy programs. Her testimony before the U.S. Congress was instrumental in developing the first federal funding for teen pregnancy programs.”<sup>23</sup>

Locations for the Lula Belle Stewart Center were: 1534 Webb Avenue (headquarters and the original location), 3302 Monterey, 11000 West McNichols, and 9641 Harper.

### **House at 8633 Dexter**

The Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood is named for two of the northern residential streets in the area: Petoskey Avenue, and Otsego Street. The Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood is triangular in shape. The border streets of the neighborhood are Joy Road, Dexter Avenue, and interstate I-96 (also known as the Jeffries Freeway). Dexter Avenue is the eastern border street of the neighborhood; Joy Road is the northern street and I-96 is the southern border street. In the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood, Dexter Avenue is a residential street, three lanes wide, including the center turn lane. There is a lane adjacent to the southern curb that was recently converted to become a bicycle lane. The Nardin Park neighborhood is located to the north of the Petoskey-Otsego district. To the south of the district is Grand River Avenue (also known as Michigan Highway 5 or M-5) and

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<sup>23</sup> Lula Belle Stewart Center Inc., LBSC commitment document.

located adjacent to that section of Grand River Avenue at Petoskey-Otsego is the interstate I-96 expressway, and its service drives. East of the Petoskey-Otsego district are the Jamison and Wildemere Park neighborhoods, and the Dexter-Linwood neighborhood is to the northwest. These neighborhoods are mainly comprised of residential streets. A large parkland known as the McShane Playground is in the center of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood, Maycie Park is at West Euclid, Holmur, and Virginia Park Streets, and a smaller greenspace known as the Quincy Parkway is at Quincy, Blaine, and Radford Streets. The Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson house sits at the north side of the Dexter Avenue border of the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood.

The permit for the house at 8633 Dexter Boulevard (original address 349 Dexter) was issued to the general contractor, A. Cerezka according to City of Detroit Building Department (permit #11697). The house's construction contract was listed in *The American Contractor*, which stated that Cerezka was contracted to build two houses on Dexter Boulevard; both two-family flats.<sup>24</sup> for the owner J. White. The building at 8633 Dexter Blvd. is 25 feet and six inches wide by 46 feet long. The 1917 *Detroit City Directory* lists the resident at 349 Dexter Avenue as Dr. Robert R. Fox, a physician. Dr. Fox was still listed in the City Directory as occupying the house in 1921. In 1955 City of Detroit building permit #48612 was issued to "convert from two apartments to one apartment and doctor's office." In other words, to convert the building from having two dwelling units, to having one dwelling unit and a doctor's office. A permit was filed when the renovation was completed in 1960. Today, there is no exterior evidence of the building's use as a doctor's office. However, the interior is still an intact doctor's office on the northwest side of the building with the doctor's office in a former bedroom, and two patient rooms, a former bedroom divided into two, north of the hallway. The house remains in the Stewart-Robinson family today.

## Description

The Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson house, located approximately five miles northwest of the Detroit River, was constructed in 1916, as part of a subdivision developed in the early twentieth century as a streetcar and automobile suburb. Situated northeast of Grand River Avenue, the house is located in the Petoskey-Otsego neighborhood. Placed on generally flat terrain, Dexter Avenue is twenty-four to twenty-six feet wide and oriented in a north-west direction. Sidewalks line each side of Dexter Avenue and the houses on Dexter Avenue are set back from the road by a tree-lined median.

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<sup>24</sup> *The American Contractor*, Volume 38, p. 81, January 6, 1917.



Two-Family House – 8633 Dexter Avenue (1916)

Initial resident: Dr. Robert Fox

Significant resident: Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson

This two-and-one-half story two-family flat dwelling was built in 1916 according to City of Detroit permit #11697. A. Cerezka was contracted to build two structures on Dexter Avenue; both two-family flats<sup>25</sup> for the owner J. White. The building at 8633 Dexter Blvd. is 25 feet and six inches wide by 46 feet long.

With its walls of brick, this example of a two-family house is in keeping with the Craftsman precepts of unaltered natural materials and uncomplicated design. Dwellings of this type lacked excessive ornamentation and relied on the strength and honesty of their materials for aesthetic appeal. The house at 8633 Dexter Avenue's front facade is faced with dark yellow, gold and tan-colored striated brick laid in running bond. The unit entrances are at the north side of the principal facade and the triple window adjacent is facing a wide concrete porch. The triple windows at the first-story front facade are each original double-hung wood five-over-one windows. A concrete sill beneath the windows is painted white. Security bars are on the inside of the windows. The unit entrance doors have identical aluminum screen doors and metal black security gates over white entrance doors. A white mailbox is underneath each of the address numbers for the units. A single porch light is between the entry doors.

A second-story porch is over the entrance doors, supported by two substantial beige brick columns. The porch fascia appears to be wood beams, painted yellow, and the first story porch roof is yellow tongue and groove. The second story porch soffits are finished with beige aluminum siding. White

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<sup>25</sup> *The American Contractor*, Volume 38, p. 81, January 6, 1917.

aluminum gutters surround the porch. There is a black wrought-iron railing that surrounds three sides of the porch. The porch is accessed by an original wood screen door, and original wood door with three vertical lights. To the north of the porch door is a short, original wood window with a three-over-two configuration. A concrete sill is beneath the window. South of the porch, on the second story, is a three-part wood window with a concrete sill. The two end window units have an aluminum storm window but appear to be the original wood windows underneath. The center window is a double-hung five-over-one unit. A wood fascia beam is at the roofline of the second story.

The low-pitched hipped, maroon-colored asphalt shingled roof with wide overhanging eaves supports a wide hipped roof dormer containing three five-over-one windows. The dormer is faced with yellow painted wood siding. The front porch is supported by yellow and beige brick, and two yellow and beige brick piers flank each side of the wide concrete entry steps. The porch's brick railing is capped with concrete coping, painted white. A metal scupper is in the center of the porch brick support wall. The southern porch pier is capped with a white concrete flower pot cemented in place.

A return of the dark yellow, gold, and tan-colored striated brick covers a short portion on each side façade. At the south façade the chimney is faced with the same-colored brick. A coal chute door is at the east side of the south façade, next to the chimney. The three secondary facades are faced with common brick, laid in running bond. Various double-hung wood windows are on the north, south, and west facades. Each window has a concrete sill.

At the west façade (the rear façade), the house has a projecting bay at the northern half, accommodating the kitchens for both the upper and lower units. On the first and second story, there are wide double horizontal units on the south façade of the extension bay. There is a small dormer that projects from the roofline at the south façade, painted yellow with wood siding. There is a basement entry door at the south façade, and a small wood porch accommodates both the upper and lower stories. There are basement level windows on the north, south, and west facades. A wooden shed is attached to the northeast corner of the house. The rear of the property is adjacent to a paved alley, there is a chain link aluminum fence at the rear property line.

A concrete walk leads up to the front porch and a concrete driveway is at the south side of the property. The front lawn of the property extends to a sidewalk, and a berm is at the street. There is a large tree at the west side of the property's front berm.

## **Criteria**

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson historic district appears to meet Criteria Numbers One, Two, and Three adopted by the Historic Designation Advisory Board,

- (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.



- (2) Sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state, or national history.
- (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.

### **List of Contributing and Noncontributing Resources**

The proposed Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson House historic district consists of a single contributing building resource.

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

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, who are residents of Detroit, and two ex-officio members. The appointed members are Melanie A. Bazil, Carolyn C. Carter, Louis Fisher, Theresa Holder-Hagood, Calvin Jackson, Sharon Sexton, William Worden, Osvaldo Rivera, and Nubia Wardford Polk. 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. The ad hoc member for this study is Michael Robinson, resident of the property, and descendant of Dr. Lula Belle Stewart-Robinson.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Local historic designation report prepared by:  
Rebecca Savage, Lead Architectural Historian

Michael Robinson, contributing research, historic photographs

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