

Benjamin Buckley

From: Paul Mack <paulhudsonmack@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, December 12, 2022 11:04 PM
To: Jeff Cowin
Cc: Historic District Commission (Staff); Jim Hamilton; Devan Anderson; David Bell; SUSAN MOSEY; Jody Wise; Francesco Esposito; Garrick Landsberg; Donna McGrady
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Please don't demolish this substantial and sound home in Virginia Park Historic District Re: 873 Virginia Park

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Hi. I'm the owner of 909 Virginia Park Street - two houses down from 873 Virginia Park. I bought my home (which was then in far far worse condition than 873 Virginia Park) in 2011 and have since fixed it up and am loving living here with my family and raising my two young daughters as proud Detroit's in a beautiful historic home.

I would like to also voice my clear and strong opposition to this demolition permit. I would instead demand the HDC fine John Brown, the owner of 873 Virginia Park, the largest amount possible for gross negligence and intentional destruction of historic property.

The rest of this email details my experiences that lead me to make this request of the HDC. My apologies that I cannot join to share this information in person - I have an event with my daughters that conflicts with this HDC meeting.

I have complained several times over the years to the HDC about the state of 873 Virginia Park - the property has been dreadfully neglected - I can also provide validation of having observed all of the same problems and awful behaviors that Jeff shared in his email below.

When I purchased and moved into my home, a man named Alando lived in 873 Virginia Park. Alando was a delightful neighbor - he and his fantastic children and beautiful German Shepherd (along with Tom that Jeff mentions below) were all huge reasons we bought the home (we met them when we came to see the house). While Alando was in 873 Virginia Park the house was entirely weathertight and habitable - and overall in decent shape inside in out (while beginning to need typical maintenance like painting, plaster repair, and a new roof).

None of these kinds of repairs/maintenance have ever been done to the exterior of the home - even basic care of the landscaping is rarely done.

When Alando moved out, we stopped several break-in attempts and let John Brown know about them. No action was taken to protect the home. It was sadly eventually broken into and stripped of the boiler, radiators, and walls ripped open to strip piping for both heating and plumbing systems. Significant exterior damage was also done to the home in these break-ins.

The only action I've ever seen to care for 873 Virginia Park were after it was tagged for Nuisance Abatement Program - and then it was only the bare minimum required to avoid having the home foreclosed on.

In addition to the purchase offers Jeff mentions below, I can vouch that several other friends of mine that walked through the home and put in a reasonable market-rate offer on the home, and were rejected and counter-offered multiple times their offer (e.g., many years ago, a \$50k purchase offer countered with \$200k).

Because of John Brown's gross negligence of this beautiful historic home I have lived for years next to a tragic eyesore - where there could very easily be a neighbor investing in, living in, fixing up, and sake-keeping it as a beautifully restored \$500-750k historic home.

Because of John Brown's workers direct actions to damage the property (as Jeff outlines below), the property has instead been further lowered in historic character and market value.

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On Dec 12, 2022, at 08:08, Jeffrey S Cowin <jeffreyscowin@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear HDC Staff, HDC Commissioners, BSEED Director Bell, Group Executive Rencher and fellow community leaders,

For over a decade, residents of Virginia Park Street have been sporadically threatened by John Brown, a property speculator from Southfield. (It appears that Brown purchased 873 Virginia Park in 2009, for \$30k.)

As a block club and individually, we've communicated with every District 5 manager about this vacant house, starting with Vince Keenan and ending with Brian Fisher. Vince had 873 and several other vacant homes tagged for Nuisance Abatement. There has been no explanation for 873.

Oddly, a BSEED supervisor told me in August 2022 that our community is to blame for this homes demolition permit.

I've overheard speculation from BSEED staff that John Brown has some connection in the administration and is getting special treatment at our neighborhood's expense.

The Detroit Free Press, ten years ago, wrote about our neighborhood revitalization efforts, including the successful historic preservation that year of several homes that were in worse shape.

In that news story, the press interviewed our neighbor Tom Dickinson who had been living next-door at 899 Virginia Park since 1983.

Something had recently happened on the front lawn of Tom's home that "in that instant" determined he would relocate his family out of here.

The CCS graduate and career DIA art conservator, who meticulously restored his historic home on Virginia Park Street during 29 years here, had gotten married and was enjoying gardening in the yard with his wife Michelle one day.

Until that moment, they had never seen or heard of this man. John Brown showed up and pulled into the driveway of 873, right next to them.

Brown gets out of his white conversion van and within seconds he's yelling, he's let a dog out of the van, and he's firing a gun.

To this day, Tom and Michelle tell the story. I know that we lost great neighbors because of that carelessness. They moved away and eventually listed their home at 899vp for sale.

Not long after 899vp was listed on the market, Brown sent a crew to 873vp, and the men erected scaffolding all the way around the house. Next, they demolished the beautiful coved stucco soffit, disfiguring an otherwise beautiful home and leaving debris everywhere.

There had been nothing wrong with that soffit. It was made of stucco over steel mesh lathe. It was 98+% perfect. Nothing wrong that some basic maintenance and repainting wouldn't handle. What the house ached for them was new shingles and gutters.. still the case.

Our block club leaders and neighbors reported this destruction to HDC staff using the Improve Detroit App. We emailed photos to then District 5 Manager Melia Howard asking for help.

I spoke to Mayor Duggan at the charter mandated District 5 meeting in 2021, described what I could, and I recall the mayor asking staff if we still do nuisance abatement.

Staff did not follow up with me about 873, but I continued emailing and calling the district manager. If the administration did address any of this internally, we haven't been informed of it.

873 is a large home and stretches farther back toward the alley than the others. Please look at the view from Tom's back yard in the attached photo. Imagine trying to sell your home next to that mess. Note the existence of the west facing roof dormer in the photo. Brown destroyed that next.

But not before 899 Virginia Park sold to a new owner occupant. Welcome to the neighborhood, it's raining bricks next-door.

Brown sent a man who climbed the scaffolding with a hammer and spent all day destroying a large brick and stucco roof dormer that faced toward 899 Virginia Park.

While this demolition work is happening, chunks of wood and masonry are slamming into the driveway below. The debris was everywhere and there was no care on the part of Brown's worker for our neighbor's safety or property.

On August 31, 2022, I phoned BSEED to talk about this damage, which I could see from my home as well. I was connected to Supervisor Flemmings who told me a demolition permit had been in effect since August 1. He explicitly told me that HDC approval wasn't necessary and that demolition equipment could be showing up anytime. Flemmings blamed us, the neighbors, saying our complaints necessitated this demolition permit.

John Brown has refused fair market purchase offers from multiple unsolicited buyers over the years. Brown actually solicited an offer from me in May 2020, through a middleman. 873 was opened for me on two separate dates, so that my tradespeople could help estimate renovation costs. We have photos of the interior and notes covering all the systems. I emailed over a written offer which was rejected.

People want to move here, but there isn't enough quality housing. This vacant historic home is an opportunity to create quality housing faster and with less resource consumption than new construction.

Please deny Brown's demolition permit.

It's completely unnecessary to demolish 873. Plus, to do so would pollute our environment and squander the quality materials and design that make 873 a beautiful home and major contributing element in our historic district.

It's not in that bad a shape, but Brown has added at least \$50k to someone's future project cost with his crazy and unnecessary demolition of the soffit and dormer. Just a waste!

873 Virginia Park Street was added to the federal registry in 1982, along with the other historic structures and streetscape elements that we are doing our best to maintain for future generations.

For convenience, I've attached a pdf of Virginia Park Historic District's accepted application to the National registry.

I'm grateful for your hard work and expertise, HDC Commissioners and Staff!

I'm grateful for the important work carried out everyday at BSEED and for your leadership Director Bell, keeping our city growing and helping keep Detroiters safe! Thank you!

Why doesn't Brown just sell the house if he doesn't want it? I know that he has at least one purchase offer on the table right now.

I plan to attend the HDC meeting Wednesday.

Have a good day!

Jeff

Jeffrey S. Cowin
Resident 866 Virginia Park Street
President, Virginia Park Historic District

313-354-1868

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On Dec 11, 2022, at 1:43 PM, James Hamilton <james.hamilton@wayne.edu> wrote:

Greetings Mr. Cowin,

I write to you as the President of the Virginia Park Block Club regarding 873 Virginia Park, which is on the HDC agenda for the meeting Wednesday, December 13. The staff report reveals that the neighborhood is aware of unapproved work done on the home.

I want to be sure that you also are aware of the pending application to demolish the house and garage. If you wish to make a statement of support for or opposition to this application, you should submit it to HDC staff as soon as possible at HDC@detroitmi.gov. Also, you may appear at the meeting to make a statement in person, either on the Zoom meeting or in person at CAYMC 13th floor.

In my experience, when the HDC has as much information as possible, we make better decisions. For that reason, I encourage the neighborhood to share their view of this application.

Access to the Zoom meeting, and the application for 873 Virginia Park are on the HDC website:

<https://detroitmi.gov/events/regular-historic-district-commission-hdc-meeting-12142022>

Respectfully,

James Hamilton
Commissioner, HDC