

STAFF REPORT 12-9-2020 MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 20-6983

ADDRESS: 447 HENRY (AKA WILLIAM B. RALSTON GARAGE)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: CASS-HENRY

APPLICANT: KRAEMER DESIGN GROUP, LLC

OWNER: CASS VILLAGE APARTMENTS, LLC/OLYMPIA DEVELOPMENT OF MICHIGAN, LLC

ARCHITECT: NEUMANN/SMITH ARCHITECTURE

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 11-20-20

DATE OF STAFF VISIT: 11-24-20

SCOPE: REHABILITATE COMMERCIAL STOREFRONT/GARAGE BUILDING



View of 447 Henry, view to the south. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The only building of its type in the district, and the only single-story structure, the William B. Ralston Garage (447 Henry) was erected in 1922 or 1923, replacing a wood-framed dwelling on the site. The building is closely integrated between the taller Bretton Hall apartments to the east, and the Claridge apartments to the west, and projects significantly further towards the sidewalk. Per the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) 2018 designation report, it served as an auto repair facility owned by William B. Ralston into the 1940s, and was converted into a bowling alley by the 1950s. The building has the largest “footprint” in the district, despite being the lowest in height; per the historic Sanborn map, it appears to be a zero lot line building at its entire perimeter. It features Neo-Georgian details, including English cross-bond brickwork, and a parapet supporting ornamental, ball-topped stone piers, with a triangular, central pediment. The building is identified as a contributing resource to the district.

The storefronts at Henry Street have been altered over the years, although original historic-age features appear to remain. Based on existing conditions, and the extent of the historic-age stone base, there appear to have been accommodations for two separate concerns; a store at the left (eastern) two bays, accessible through a single (black-painted) historic-age commercial wood door in the eastern bay, and a separate recessed entrance at the west storefront bay, featuring a matched pair of double wood doors, also apparently of historic age, matching the single door in design. The western storefront bay is crowned with a straightforward denticulated entablature and what appears to be a signage band, of historic age. It is not clear if the area of the “signage band” or transom across all the storefronts might obscure leaded glass transoms commonly hidden during the later 20th century. The windows at this bay appear to be low quality late-20th century aluminum replacements. A decorative (non-historic) wrought-iron style security screen is erected across the span of the storefront, with gates at the recessed entrance. The other two bays appear to have been shorn of most architectural character, excepting the aforementioned door/stone base, although views from the interior (or removal of the boards) would help clarify the existing conditions. At least one vertical wooden mullion of the easternmost storefront may be a historic-age component. A small portion of the brick pier between the easternmost storefronts has been painted black.

Except for the north end of the building at Henry, the majority of the building extending south to the alley changes architectural character, in that it becomes a utilitarian structure with period-appropriate concrete block walls and steel truss construction which is easily “read” from the rear alley. The east elevation, minimally visible and about 10’ from the steep cliff of Bretton Hall, shows a series of large, horizontally-oriented window openings that have been infilled with modern CMU (concrete masonry units). The west elevation is separated from the Claridge by an even narrower space, and has fewer openings. The south (public alley) elevation is unornamented common brick, and is dominated by a large vehicle-sized opening currently closed by a non-historic coiling door. Pedestrian door openings flank this larger opening, also with non-historic elements. Black paint has been applied to all the rear doors, and to the brick up to about six feet in height outboard of the doors. Despite these alterations, the building retains its architectural integrity, particularly via its brick, stonework, and overall form.

Per the architect, and as confirmed by HDC staff to the extent feasible from the public right-of-way, the brick and stone areas of the building are in fair to good condition, with some locations of cracking, mortar loss, puncture holes and some staining on the stone base. Of the four original stone globe finials atop the brick piers, two are in largely deteriorated condition (or missing). The balance of the stone accents are in good condition. There is no signage at present. The building has a membrane roof in fair to poor condition.



Detail view showing conditions at the westernmost storefront. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



View to the southeast, with Claridge Apartments (459 Henry) just beyond. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



View of the concrete block east elevation, immediately adjacent to Bretton Hall. Note the large, blocked-in window openings. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



Detail view of brick/stonework and existing light fixtures at front facade. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



View to the east, showing Bretton Hall, The Henry, and the Atlanta beyond. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



South (rear) elevation at alley. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.

EXISTING CONDITIONS (DISTRICT)

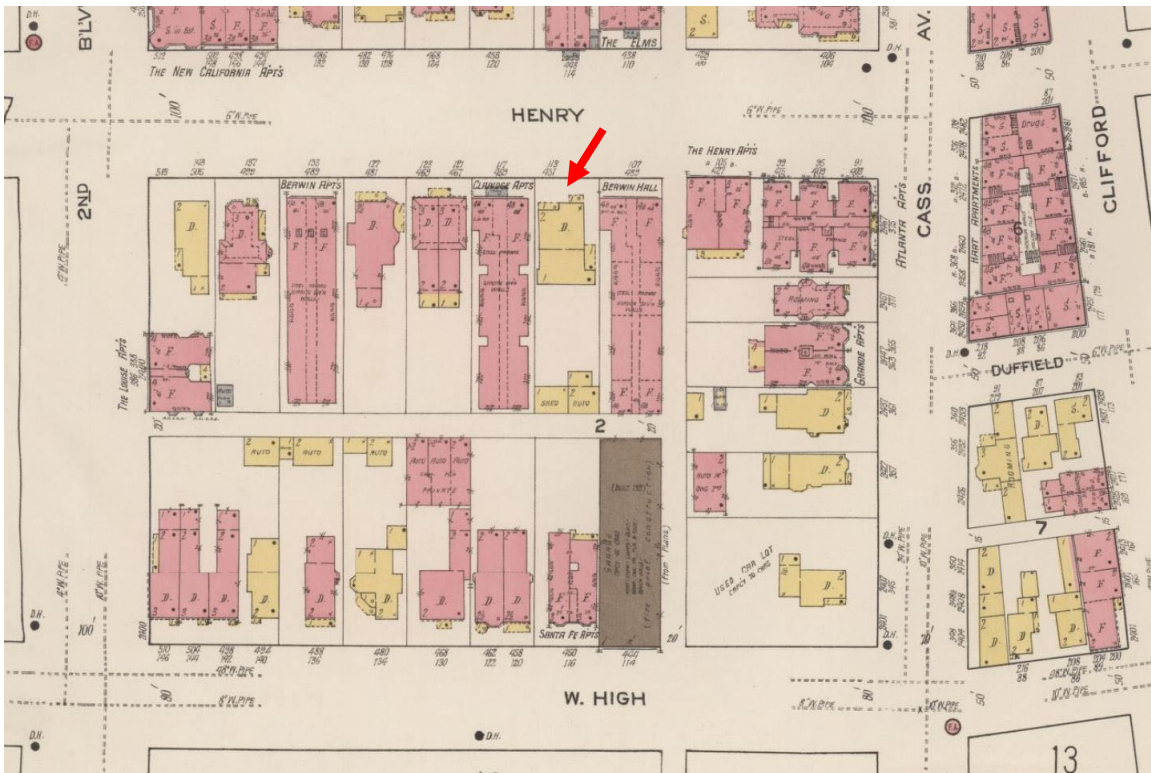


447 Henry, highlighted in blue, in its current district context. Image from Motor City Mapping.

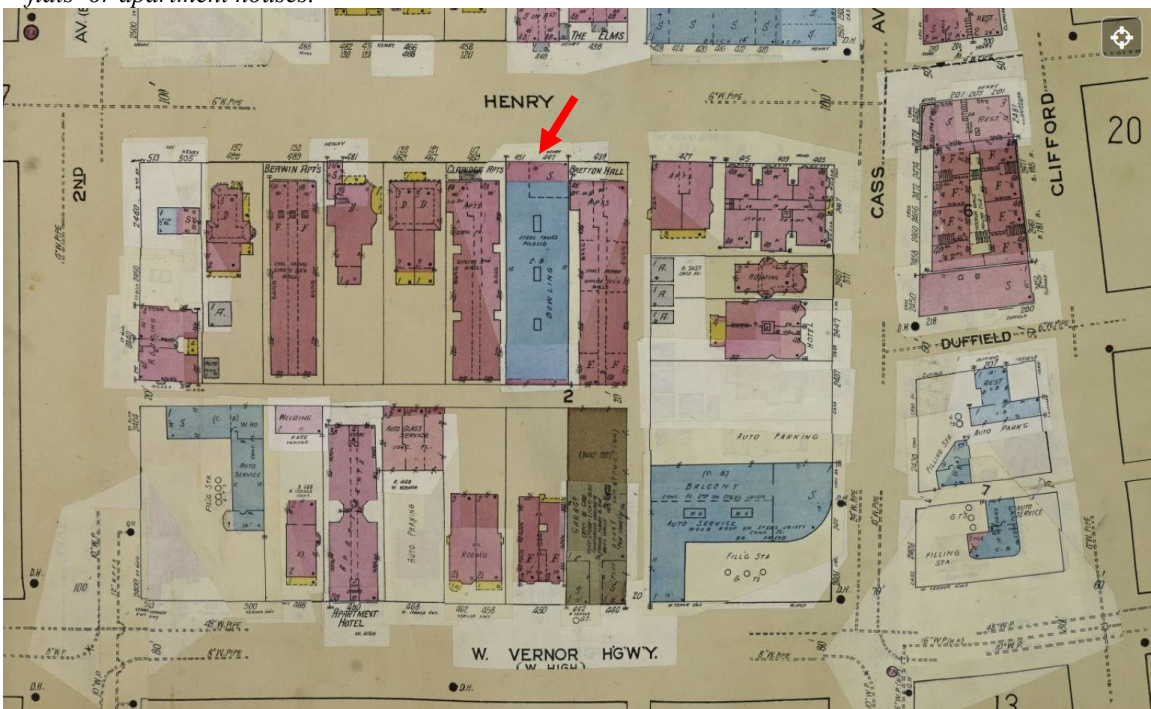
The William B. Ralston Garage building (447 Henry) is one of seven contributing resources to the Cass-Henry Historic District. The district is significant as the “best remaining depiction of the form, scale, and density that once predominated throughout the area,” per the HDAB report. Excepting only this building, all of the other buildings in the district are flats or apartment houses, built during a period of significance from 1900 to 1923. Currently only Bretton Hall (439 Henry) and the Berwin Apartments (489 Henry) are occupied. HDAB writes that:

During the period of significance the block covered a greater area than it does today, being bounded by Henry Street, Cass Avenue, High Street, and Second Avenue. However, the footprint of the Fisher Freeway, built through the city in the 1960s, eliminated High Street and the southern half of the block. Late-twentieth century demolitions eliminated apartment buildings at 2457 Cass Avenue, 467-469 Henry Street, and 481 Henry Street (now noncontributing open spaces)...Alterations to the buildings since the period of significance have been minor, consisting of some window replacements and the removal of at least one cornice. Character-defining features of the district primarily include the buildings themselves, though a few mature street trees remain, along with sidewalks and concrete walkways and steps approaching each building. Even where buildings have been razed, walkways, landscaping, and mature street trees remain, helping the district to retain much of its historic residential feeling.

Current district conditions are a mix of well-secured vacant structures juxtaposed with apparently well-maintained, occupied buildings.



Cass-Henry vicinity, 1921 Sanborn map showing original urban density near the end of the Period of Significance. Arrow points to 447 Cass, which was still a wood-framed house at this time. Note preponderance of brick (red) buildings, versus frame (yellow) structures. “D” indicates a single-family “dwelling,” while “F” indicates rental “flats” or apartment houses.



The updated 1951 Sanborn map shows conditions just prior to construction of Fisher Freeway through High Street/West Vernor. The large footprint of 447 Henry, built of concrete block (blue color) with a brick front, has appeared. All frame structures have been removed.

PROPOSAL

The proposed scope of work required to rehabilitate the exterior of the building is depicted in the attached schematic drawings* for this Body's review and, per the applicant, specifically includes:

Brick and stone

- ***Inspected for damage***
- ***Black paint to be removed*** [process not provided]
- ***Masonry cleaned with a light duty detergent and low pressure water rinse***
- ***Brick and stone will be repointed, and loose or displaced units will be reset***
- ***Repointed mortar will match the color, texture, compressive strength, joint width, and joint profile of the existing historic mortar***
- ***Damaged brick and stone will be repaired as necessary***
- ***Any units too badly deteriorated to repair will be replaced, with salvaged brick to be reused where replacements are needed before new units are used***
- ***If new units are necessary, they will be selected to match the existing in size, profile, color, and finish***

Main entrance and doors

- ***A new aluminum storefront system will be installed in the existing storefront openings, painted a historically appropriate color (TBD – “dark anodized” per drawings)***
- ***Current design depicts the eastern-most bay as maintaining its current configuration but with the possibility of adding or relocating door openings once a tenant is secured***
- ***Western-most storefront bay will be reconfigured to include two sets of double doors, one recessed and the second (westernmost) not. The installation of the new double-door would require cutting through the stone base***
- ***The center bay will incorporate a new entry door, cutting through the stone base*** [per 3A401 but not 3A401.1 or the floor plan, 3A101]
- ***All three bays will restore the glass transoms***
- ***At east elevation, two new doors will be added to provide access to the “alley” which runs along the building. This “alley” will be paved.*** [paving material not provided; note also that this space appears to be part of the parcel on which Bretton Hall is built, not this building]
- ***At the rear (public alley) elevation, the central metal coiling door will be replaced with a new insulated overhead door to match the existing in size and appearance.*** [material not provided]
Pedestrian doors will be replaced with solid hollow metal doors and frames.

Windows

- ***At the east and west elevations, the existing windows*** [no existing windows are apparent, openings are blocked with CMU] ***will be replaced with new aluminum clad wood fixed windows***

Lighting

- ***Exterior building lighting will be provided and designed to highlight building features***
- ***Lighting locations may include up-lights in the east alley courtyard and wall-mounted fixtures on the front facade***

Signage

- ***Future signage is proposed to be reinstated in the storefront signage band(s).***
- ***Final signage drawings (including size, color, and design) will be submitted for staff approval before installation***

Roof, rooftop mechanicals, and penthouses

- ***Current poor condition membrane roof to be removed and replaced with a new EPDM roof***
- ***Rooftop condensers surrounded by an approximately 5’ tall metal screen will be located on the roof toward the rear of the building so as to not be visible from the sidewalk. Metal screen will be a “Dove Grey” color.***

Landscaping/Site

- ***Proposed landscaping and site interventions for all buildings and areas will be incorporated into the staff reports for the site parcels (i.e., 2457 Cass and 467-469, 481 Henry Street), and formally reviewed as part of those applications***

*specifically, drawings 3A101, 3A102 (floor/roof plans) and 3A401, 3A401.1 (elevations)

Additional photographs, renderings, presentation materials, and narrative provided by the applicant in support of this application is appended to this report and posted on the public website for the meeting.



View to the northeast showing buildings along the brick-paved alley, including 447 Henry at center. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- After review, staff finds that the proposed scope of work is well-developed and generally proposes appropriate repairs and interventions to the building, and is sensitive to the preservation of its character-defining features.
- In the district's Elements of Design (#11, *Relationship of roof shapes*), this building, along with the apartment building at 2447 Cass (Hotel Ansonia) is highlighted for its parapet walls with finials, adding detail to their rooflines. This building is also mentioned in Element of Design #17, *Rhythm of building setbacks*, for its shallower setback, interrupting the regularity of setbacks otherwise established by the apartment buildings. This gives the building a substantial street prominence in the district, despite its limited height.
- The alterations to the existing storefronts will potentially affect some historic-age features. Staff would request better documentation of the current conditions, including photographs from the interior, before committing to a recommendation. Although the narrative submitted discusses signage bands, and at least one apparent signage band topped by a modest historic entablature is extant, the drawings appear to show this area replaced with a modern glass transom storefront system divided by multiple vertical mullions, to "match historic." It is unclear if the signage is intended to be mounted on the brick above, which would have to be carefully designed. It is also unclear to staff whether all or part of a leaded glass transom band might still exist under the apparent signage boards at any of the storefronts; such an alteration was very common in the mid- to late- twentieth century, and many original glass transoms survive or are rediscovered during construction.
- In addition to the potential removal of the westernmost storefront's sign band and entablature/cornice, the historic-age store doors will be removed, the recess will be altered, and some areas of stone base removed. Excepting the alterations to the "sign band" transom zone discussed above, staff finds that these changes to the doors, glass, and base are generally appropriate alterations reasonably consistent with the building's reuse. The stone base should be preserved and repaired in areas where its removal is not necessary.
- The windows within the openings at the utilitarian west and east elevations, given the building's original occupancy and architectural cues at the rear were likely originally industrial steel sash composed of multiple small vertically-oriented wireglass lights divided by steel muntins. An appropriate new window design for these locations, given that there are apparently no originals remaining in the blocked openings, would be a similar reproduction "industrial" or "shop" design rendered in modern materials, instead of the larger rectangular muntin-free openings proposed. Such designs are commonly available and used in many of Detroit's industrial/commercial buildings in utilitarian settings. Staff finds the introduction of additional doorways to be appropriate.
- Staff has reviewed the comprehensive roof equipment sightline studies submitted by the applicant, and finds the proposed new equipment to be sensitively placed and screened, consistent with the building and district's historic character

ISSUES

- Staff has identified a few issues of concern, but finds that the proposal as presented to the Commission has the potential to yield a high-quality rehabilitation consistent with historic standards and guidelines
- Staff recommends that the conditions around the existing storefront and proposed replacement be clarified via additional documentation, with staff authority to respond to the ultimate design or unexpected field conditions, on behalf of the Commission
- Staff recommends that the new windows chosen for the utilitarian east/west elevations be an industrial style window composed of multiple small lights, complementary to its historic context
- The retention of qualified historic preservation subcontractors and tradespeople, and the criteria they will use to make critical field decisions regarding repair versus replacement of historic character-defining elements, is always a concern in large and complex historic preservation projects. Standards and expectations concerning field assessment for repairs and replacement should be specified in the

ultimate contract documents, if not already depicted in the architect's construction drawings for review by staff. Normal evidence of wear and superficial damage should not warrant replacement, per NPS Guidelines and Standards.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-73, Certificate of Appropriateness

It is staff's opinion that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). Staff recommends that the Commission approve a COA for the proposed application, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Cass-Henry Historic District's Elements of Design, with the conditions that:

- Staff review of the submitted construction drawings will include the identification of specific standards concerning repair and/or replacement of deteriorated character-defining features, and related standards concerning the qualifications of historic preservation contractors retained to perform the work.
- Staff review of the submitted construction drawings to specifically include review of specifications/cut sheets for lighting, windows, doors, ADA lifts, signage, paint removal, color choices, and other exterior elements/selections not yet finalized, with staff authority to approve if per the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, the district's Elements of Design, and otherwise consistent with Commission intent and guidelines
- The design be modified to choose a different window type/configuration for the openings at the east and west elevations consistent with an industrial steel window style appropriate to the utilitarian historic context, subject to staff approval
- The design be modified to prioritize the retention of historic materials across all three bays as revealed by further field investigation, to include the denticulated entablature at the westernmost bay, and that staff be given authority to review/approve a revision to the storefront design.