

**STAFF REPORT 09-22-2021 SPECIAL MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: 21-7479**

**ADDRESS: 1801 WABASH**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: CORKTOWN**

**APPLICANT: BART RUE & ALEX McHUGH/MAJIC WINDOW COMPANY**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 08-24-2021**

**DATES OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 03-29-2021, 09-17-2021**

**SCOPE: REPLACE SIDING (WORK STARTED WITHOUT PERMIT)**

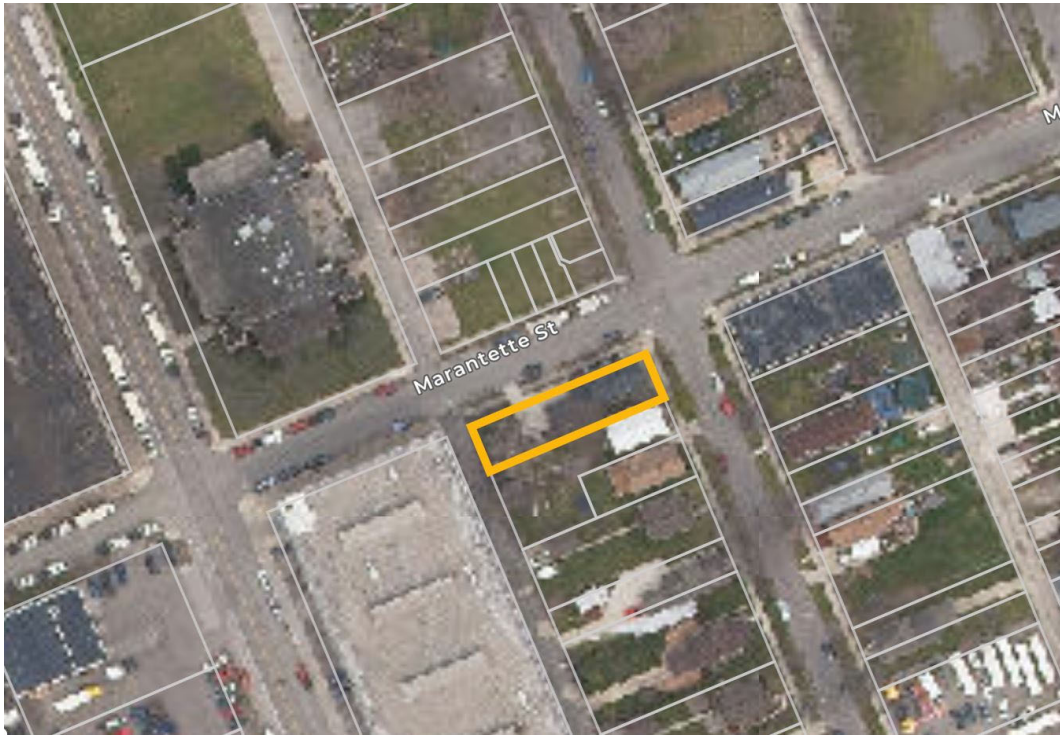
### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

This modest workers cottage at the corner of Marantette and Wabash Streets was erected in the late nineteenth century. It is a frame building, originally clad in wood siding. The original clapboard siding was successively overlaid during the twentieth century, first with a brown-toned asphalt/asbestos siding, and then with a wide profile aluminum siding. The overall condition of the original clapboard is unknown, although staff experience in similar scenarios suggest a large portion may be serviceable. The property has a garage to the west, which was built later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and at some unknown time attached to the house through additional frame construction.

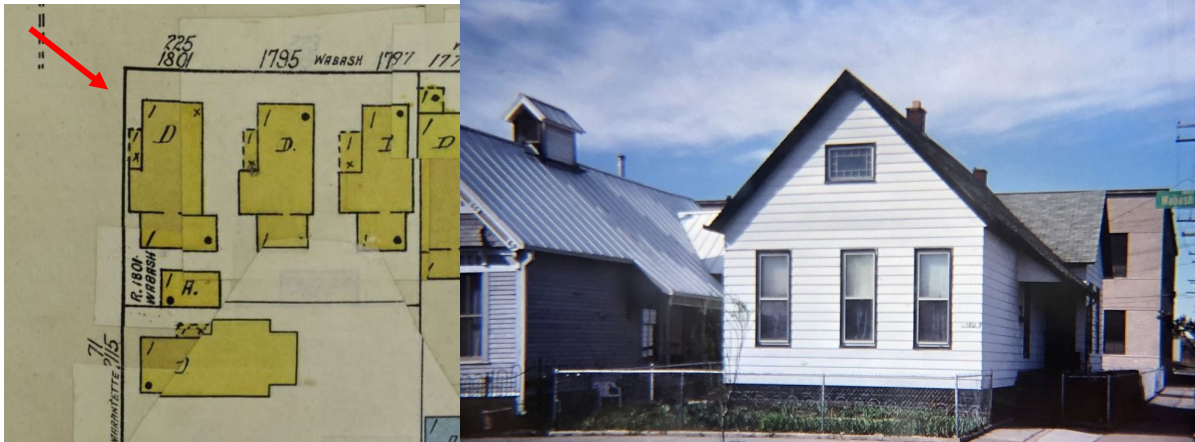


*View of existing conditions at 1801 Wabash, view to the southwest. Staff photo, September 17, 2021.*

Per the designation slide shown on the next page, the building was sheathed in aluminum siding prior to district designation. Earlier this year, work without permit was undertaken at the house, including the removal of all of the aluminum siding and some porch elements. Building wrap was applied over the older asphalt siding, and cementitious “hardieboard” siding in a wide profile and wood imprint design began to be installed. The new siding covers all of the south elevation, most of the north (Wabash) elevation, and about half of the garage. Upon application to the Commission after BSEED enforcement, this body denied the partially completed work.



*Parcel view of vicinity, subject parcel outlined in yellow.*



*Sanborn map of vicinity, c. 1950, and HDAB designation slide, c. 1976.*

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The current proposal is a modified proposal to follow up on the original (violating) scope of work which was denied by the Commission at the April 2021 Regular Meeting. Per the submitted materials, the applicant is now proposing to remove all of the wide-exposure material installed without approval, and proposes to re clad all portions of the exterior, including the garage, with narrower 4" exposure (i.e., 5 1/4") HardieBoard cementitious siding, with a 5/16" profile depth. Soffit and fascia areas, only where necessary to be repaired at the back and porch, will be repaired and rebuilt in wood. At the garage, soffit and fascia will be executed in wood, in a simple design.



*View of existing conditions at rear of 1801 Wabash, view to the east from Marantette. Staff photo, September 17, 2021.*

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Corktown Historic District was established in 1976.
- Staff finds that the proposed fiber cement siding (5/4" width, with a 4" exposure and 5/16" depth profile) is inappropriate because previously approved applications (pre-2019) for low-profile cementitious siding on historic buildings resulted in unsatisfactory "flat" results which detracted from the historic character of districts. Staff recommends that the critical proportions (exposure and depth) be maintained. The unavailability of such a properly proportioned substitute is not a reason to allow a less perfect match, but instead should then indicate the use of true wood as the remaining appropriate option. An exposure of a mere 5/16" in a lap siding product (barely more than a quarter inch), no matter the material, gives a flat expression devoid of texture and shadow lines, and is not compatible with a historic building, in the same way that a flat, modern brick wall is not an appropriate replacement for rough-cut brick juxtaposed with deeply raked mortar joints. The shadow and depth found in a proper 1/2" or 5/8" depth lap siding installation is an integral part of the character-defining historic expression and should be found significant by the Commission.
- In their narrative, the applicant raises the idea of adding scalloped ornamentation to the front gable, similar to historic conditions found nearby on other similar houses. Unfortunately, under the Standards and NPS Guidelines, speculative re-creation of historic conditions is not permitted, as they may be interpreted as falsely historical, failing Standard 3:

*(3) Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.*

Unless evidence or documentation of such ornamentation on this particular house is provided, horizontal siding should be used. The original configuration or ornamentation in the gable area may still be evident (via surviving paint/weathering patterns, nailing holes) below the existing layers of later siding, even if the shingles themselves are gone.

- The applicant states that the original clapboard siding may be deteriorated in large areas (leaving only 20-25% remaining), and additionally require infill and reframing of previously closed openings. No direct evidence is given for the percentage number, and staff would be surprised if it was as low as 25%, given the durability of this old-growth siding and substantial previous experience in removing later layers on similar late-19<sup>th</sup> century clapboard houses in Detroit.
- The applicant further notes that any amount remaining "would still be preserved" under the proposed new layers of siding. This is true, and does remove staff concern about the destruction of historic materials per Standard 5. The original exterior siding would be covered by the proposed work, but still exists, and should be preserved.
- Given the current situation, staff continues to recommend that the best (and possibly easier than expected) approach is removal of the asphalt siding; cleaning and repair of the original wood siding and trim; and repainting in a historically appropriate color scheme. Should large areas of original cladding be missing as claimed, they should be renewed with appropriately cut wood siding and wood trim. This treatment will yield an authentic, historically appropriate exterior with proven durability.
- However, since the historic clapboard siding is hidden and not a part of the current exterior appearance, there is room within the Standards and Guidelines to consider a historically appropriate (new) siding, given the important qualification that the hidden siding at this house will continue to be preserved. The new siding, however, should exactly match the same qualities as historic siding; that being the correct type (lapped), exposure (4"), depth (1/2"-5/8"), and a compatible finish. This can be accomplished with true wood, or a product specifically designed for use in historic settings.
- For the secondary elevations, being less important to the historic character and appearance from the public right-of-way, the low-depth profile product could be considered.
- Staff observes that a fence of modern design is partially constructed, along with a row of CMU blocks extending toward the corner. We have received no application for this work, nor issued any approvals. The fence may pre-date the current property owner.

## ISSUES

- The proposed cladding product, especially at the primary elevations along Wabash and Marantette, detracts from the historic character of the property and district as it does not exhibit the required depth

profile to convincingly replicate a historic texture and expression. An appropriate cladding for this house would be true wood clapboard and dimensional lumber trim, which is a reasonable and feasible treatment in that there is already at least some in place. Another option, since the remaining historic siding will remain preserved underneath, would be a synthetic or cementitious lap siding that is a true facsimile of historic clapboard siding, in depth and exposure, with properly sized trim. This would give a correct appearance, including robust shadow lines, while preserving the ability for a future homeowner to properly repair and restore the original exterior finish.



*Detail view of porch along Marantette, showing new pressure-treated post and an evident area of original wood siding intact below the asphalt cladding. The siding is dirty with soot, and can likely be cleaned and painted.  
Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

The proposed installation of low-profile (5/16" depth) cementitious siding is not compatible with the architectural features of the home nor does it conform to the district's relevant Elements of Design for a house of this type and age.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission deny the proposal, as it fails to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Corktown Historic District's Elements of Design, especially Standard 9:

(9) New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.