

STAFF REPORT: MARCH 8, 2023 MEETING

PREPARED BY: A. DYE

APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8237

ADDRESS: 2905 GARLAND (AKA THE OSSIAN SWEET HOUSE)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: OSSIAN SWEET HOUSE

APPLICANT: ALEXANDER GRABOWSKI, BLUE GATE MI LLC

PROPERTY OWNER: DANIEL BAXTER

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: FEBRUARY 13, 2023

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: FEBRUARY 21, 2023, MARCH 6, 2023

SCOPE: REPLACE REAR SECOND STORY PORCH* (WORK STARTED WITHOUT APPROVAL), INSTALL GLASS BLOCK WINDOWS

**This staff report was revised on 3/8/2023, based on the applicant's revised scope of work (submitted 3/7/2023).*

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Erected in 1916, the house at 2905 Garland is located at the northwest corner of Garland and Charlevoix Street, and is approximately four miles east of downtown Detroit and four blocks north of East Jefferson Avenue. The house is oriented toward Garland, with a secondary orientation toward Charlevoix. Per the Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board's Final Report:

One and one-half stories tall, the Ossian Sweet House is a typical craftsmen style, mid-1910s bungalow built for middle-class occupancy. Aloes DeCruydt, a local contractor, built this house at a cost of \$3,500 in 1916. Its first story is brick veneered; its half-story attic is clad in wood shingles. The main roof is a steeply sloping, side-facing gable roof, its front surface extended to cover the full-width front porch. A large gabled-roof dormer projects up out of the frontal slope, and square brick piers support its outward overhang. Porch walls and stair walls are also brick, with cast concrete coping.

The centrally placed main entrance contains a single door that is now covered with a security door. A picture window is located to the left, or south, of the door, and a single small square window is located to its right, or north. The opening in the roof dormer contains three-double hung sash windows separated by mullions.



Staff photo, February 21, 2023

The large side-facing gabled ends of the roof have raking verge boards. The south side elevation, facing Charlevoix, features a secondary entrance and a box bay. A pair of small, horizontally rectangular leaded glass windows, quite typical of bungalows, punctures the wall eastward of the box bay, though they appear to be later replacements. Similarly sized and shaped basement windows circle the perimeter. The box bay is covered by a shallow hipped roof. Its depth is one elongated double hung sash window; its width contains four similar windows sharing a common sill.



Staff photos, February 21, 2023



Concrete pad of original garage.

The house is situated close to the north lot line; grass turf covers the front and south yards which is graded about one foot above the public sidewalk (evidenced by two sets of two-step stairs at the side and rear yards as seen in the top photo). A small backyard extends west from the house and a concrete pad remains at the southwest corner of the rear lot, giving evidence to the location of the original alley-facing garage (consumed by fire and removed in 2019). A concrete walkway adjacent to the concrete pad bisects the rear yard at a southeast angle towards the first story rear entrances.

The massing of the rear elevation is similar to the front elevation. A centrally placed gabled dormer protrudes from the steeply sloped roof, and is faced with wood shake shingles that matches the walls of the front dormer and side gable walls. The dormer wall is filled with two mullied double-hung windows and a single wood/glass door which led to an upper porch. The windows and door were placed to the far right and left end of the wall, respectively, to allow an area for a porch railing to tie into the house. The valley, the exposed sloping roof extending from the left wall of the dormer, was installed to accommodate the construction of one of the walls for the non-historic porch enclosure; it will be removed when the upper porch is rebuilt. Historic shake and evidence of original roofing exists below this later construction.

The rear elevation’s raised porch is enclosed with non-historic aluminum panels leading to another rear door and milk delivery/ice box . The porch is accessed by a small set of concrete stairs to the south. An at-grade exposed rear door opens onto a concrete pad.



All brick areas seen here are original construction. The sloped roof and first story aluminum enclosure are later additions. The area enclosed by aluminum was once an open porch and retains its wood floor and beadboard ceiling.

Staff photos, February 21, 2023



On the north elevation, the window openings at the first floor are more utilitarian in placement (likely due to the close adjacency of the neighboring property-now demolished); the more visible window openings at the second floor gable wall echo the openings (placement and operation) of those on the south elevation. The western rectangular window (at right in above photo) is currently covered with shingles as this opening is now located in the bathroom and is covered

on the interior wall. A louvered attic vent is located near the peak of the gable.

Wide, rectangular basement windows are located on the side and rear elevations. The north and south side openings are original/historic wood framed inswing hopper units (each sash has two clear glass panels equally divided by one wide wood vertical muntin bar), with the exception of one missing unit on the south/Charlevoix elevation. The basement openings at the rear/west elevation are filled with patterned glass block. The sills are cast stone.



Staff photos, February 21, 2023
Above: south street-facing elevation
Right: north elevation
Below: rear elevation



PROPOSAL

- Removal of rear elevation enclosed upper porch (completed without HDC review); install membrane roof and perimeter iron railing.
- Remove aluminum framing from first floor rear porch; install new wood deck, concrete stairs, and iron deck/stair railing. (listed on 2/16/23 applicant email, see attachments)
- ~~Remove all basement wood framed hopper units; install glass block.~~
- Replace existing glass block windows with carpenter built hopper style windows that match existing sash in

north/south elevation basement window openings.

- Repair masonry in north/south elevation basement window openings; replace rotted wood elements with matching materials in existing sash; reinstall sash upon completion of all repairs.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Ossian Sweet Historic District was established in 2006. This district is a single resource and was designated due to events that took place on this site. Therefore, staff considers each elevation of the structure and the yard to be historically significant.
- As noted previously, the second story portion of the rear porch was removed without HDC approval. The windows, wall structure and roof sat upon a low wall that ran the outer perimeter of the upper porch. This wall was faced with beadboard; decorative trim had been applied to create a panel-like effect. It is staff's opinion the wall may have been in place in 1925, based on the review of photos and a recent site visit.



2020 applicant photo provided with gutter replacement application.

- In 2018, the National Park Service Historic Preservation Fund African American Civil Rights Program awarded a \$500,000 grant to the City of Detroit to repair the Sweet house.
- The period of significance determined by the NPS for the grant is 1925, due to the events that took place on September 9, 1925.
- A 2021 Historic Structures Report (HSR), submitted to the Housing and Revitalization Department (HRD) by Kraemer Design Group, includes a summary of the historic events and succeeding court cases, as well as a structural assessment report facilitated by Silman. A copy of this report is posted on the property page.

- In September 2022, staff issued an administrative approval for work at the building’s exterior, including:
 - cleaning, repairing, and repointing exterior masonry;
 - repairing, replacing, repainting wood trim and shingles;
 - rehabilitating historic windows and replacing non-historic windows with historically appropriate units;
 - replacing the non-historic exterior doors with historically appropriate units;
 - rehabilitating exterior stairs and adding hand railings; and
 - removing the rubble stone retaining wall.
- The HSR included two recommended scenarios for the treatment of the rear second story porch: 1) retain and repair the porch, and 2) remove and demolish the porch enclosure and install a new metal railing in its place.
 - The proposed removal/replacement scenario was based upon the HSR’s assessment that the porch was erected after the property’s 1925 period of significance/date of the events at the Sweet house.
 - Per a discussion with the HSR’s author, the assumption that the second story porch was installed after 1925 was based upon their review of the trial transcript.
- Because the second story was dismantled, staff was not able to make a conclusive determination concerning original historic materials which may have dated to the property’s significant events.
 - Director Landsberg emailed the applicant in which he requested detailed photos taken prior or during the upper porch demolition that might provide additional visual clues as to the age, condition, and interconnections between the various elements. He explained that staff has ascertained, based on trial testimony, that an uncovered rear porch was in fact the historic condition during the property’s significant events, but are concerned that the lower portion of the upper porch may have been a knee-height enclosing wall which served as a railing, or perhaps as a base for a railing, and that the windows/roof were added later on top.
 - The applicant replied: The floor structure, decking and attachment points were severely compromised by years of incorrect drainage, water leaks and improper renovations, including an interior grade hardwood floor, that added additional load. This combination of factors also resulted in interior water intrusion that impacted the kitchen framing below.
The low wall of the porch was ~2ft high. The windows were a combination of wood and aluminum common in 1950’s construction. The somewhat new roof valley that butted against the former wall to the side of the door remains as does all of the historic material on the dormer. There is temporary sheathing covering the joists pending HDC direction.
The dormer is completely intact and once the valley is removed the dormer’s cedar shake, corbels and porch entry door can be restored along with the original rear roofline.. No other materials remain.
- Staff located an electronic copy of the transcript of the prosecution’s portion of the trial “The People vs. Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet et. al”; which took place in Detroit Recorder’s Court that began in November 1925 (http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/1st_Sweet_Trial_Combined.pdf).
- Many of the police officers stationed at and around the Sweet house on September 9th were witnesses for the prosecution and were cross-examined by the defense’s attorneys. A number of officers relayed their opinions on what occurred that evening, which at times included descriptions of the house as well as possible sightings of members of the Sweet party prior, during, and after the evening’s events. In the course of our research, we note the following testimony, which may shed some light on the property’s configuration during these historic events. Staff acknowledges that testimony from the police involved in this incident may be self-serving and subject to debate.

Witness: Detroit Police Inspector Norton Schuknecht, starting on page 33.

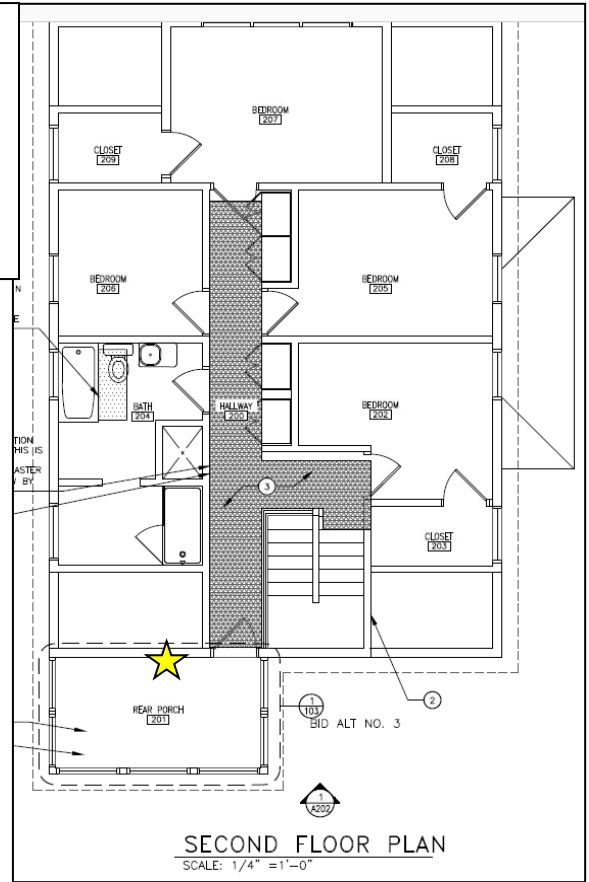
- Prosecutor Toms: *Did you go out onto the porch at the end of the upstairs hall?*
- Inspector Schuknecht: *Yes.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *That is the uncovered porch, is it?*
- Inspector Schuknecht: *It is.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *No roof on it?*
- Inspector Schuknecht: *No.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *There are two white posts at the outer corners of the porch?*

- Inspector Schuknecht: *Yes, one on each corner.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *And you got onto that porch through a doorway at the end of the second floor hall?*
- Inspector Schuknecht: *Yes, sir.*



Left: Staff photo, February 21, 2023; entire upper porch removed.

Right: Historic Structure Report



Witness: Detroit Police Officer Frank Lee Gill, starting on page 291. He was stationed at the alley near the rear of the Sweet house.

- Prosecutor Toms: *Did you see or hear the shooting?*
- Officer Gill: *Yes, sir.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *What did you see or hear?*
- Officer Gill: *I had been around the alley for just a few minutes, so I heard a lot of shooting start.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Where did the shooting come from?*
- Officer Gill: *It was coming from the Sweet home.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Now is there a garage at the end of the lot, a large garage?*
- Officer Gill: *Yes, sir.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Is there a space or yard in the alley?*
- Officer Gill: *...there is a large space there...on the north side...*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Now, when your attention was attracted to shooting from the Sweet house, did you see any of the occupants from the house?*
- Officer Gill: *I saw two fellows on the back porch, on the roof of the house.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *You saw two men on the roof of the back porch?*
- Officer Gill: *Yes, sir.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Now did you tell us you saw or heard the shooting?*
- Officer Gill: *I heard it and saw it too.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Can you tell us how many shots, if any, were fired from the back porch by those two men that were on the back porch?*

- Officer Gill: *Well, about six to eight shots back there.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Did you determine the direction in which they were fired?*
- Officer Gill: *Some of them were fired from the north side of the porch, fired down in the direction of the street, between the two houses.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Which street, please?*
- Officer Gill: *Garland Avenue.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Going from the rear of the porch, towards Garland Avenue, and between the Sweet house, and the house adjoining it to the north?*
- Officer Gill: *It would.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Were other shots fired in other directions?*
- Officer Gill: *Yes, there were...In the direction of the alley, across Charlevoix, southwest from the Sweet home.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Now what did you do at the time of the shooting?*
- Officer Gill: *I fired one shot.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Where were you at the time?*
- Officer Gill: *Standing beside the garage on the north side.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *In which direction did you fire the shot?*
- Officer Gill: *At the fellow on the porch that was firing.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Whereabouts on the porch was this particular man at whom you fired?*
- Officer Gill: *He was right in front of the door.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *What happened then?*
- Officer Gill: *They ducked and disappeared.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Where did they duck?*
- Officer Gill: *They ducked down below the banister that goes around.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Where you later on that back porch?*
- Officer Gill: *I was several days later.*
- Prosecutor Toms: *Did you see any bullet mark? Where was it?*
- Officer Gill: *Right over the door leading out to the back porch. In about the first row of shingles.*



Enclosed second story rear porch at 2905 Garland prior to its demolition in 2023.

The neighboring house to the north, which was mentioned in Officer Gill's testimony, was demolished following a fire.

2912 – 2914 Garland - Location of where the two men were shot.

2017 drone photo, NPS Civil Rights Grant, PDD

The contractor did not notify HDC staff prior to the upper porch's demolition, so staff didn't have the opportunity to assess the physical condition and historic age of the upper porch's low wall enclosure. The applicant recently supplied the following photos that documented the demolition.





The inside walls were faced with beadboard that matched the exterior wall condition, offering evidence that this knee-wall was originally an exterior component of the porch.

Photo at left and the below close-up are the exterior and interior walls at the north elevation.

Beadboard of identical design was noted by staff to be present at four other locations on the house, all of which appeared to be original construction.



The electrical box installed on the outer wall confirms that electricity was not originally supplied to the porch; this box was likely added when the upper walls and windows were constructed.





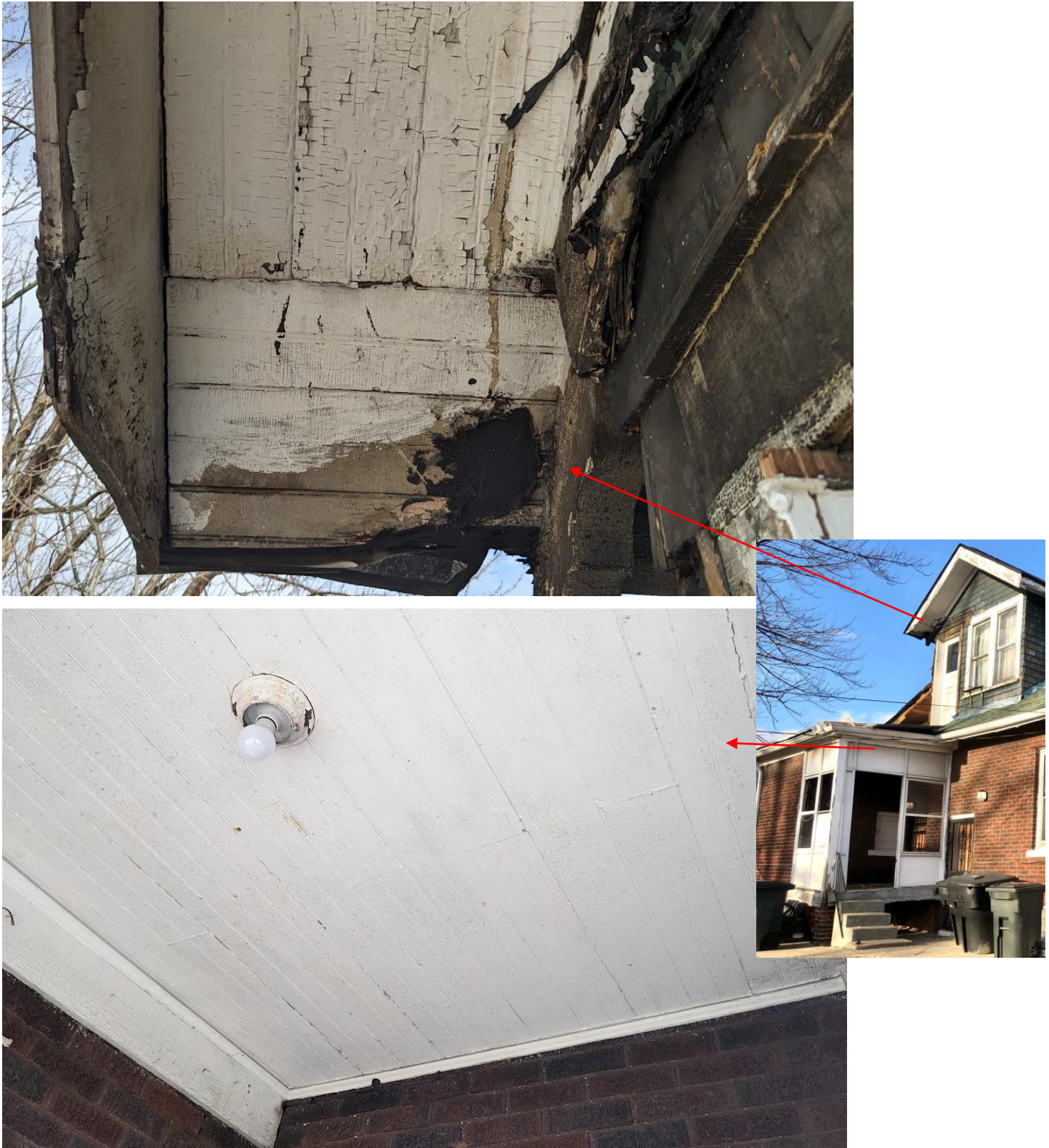
Staff can't tell from the photos if the vertical members are continuous posts, or if the upper 4 x 4 lumber was attached when the porch was enclosed. The additional framing at the corner post and possible cut line at the interior post may suggest the latter.





Staff photo, March 6, 2023. Some visual evidence of the upper porch railing is evident.

- HDC staff visited the site on Monday, March 6, 2023 with members of Kraemer Design Group, HRD staff and the project contractor/HDC applicant. Staff documented multiple areas of the house in which matching beadboard was utilized. This offers possible support that the upper porch walls dated from the house's construction.



Staff photos, March 6, 2023. View of raised porch ceiling. Note the period pendant fixture.

Beadboard - basement walls



Staff photos, March 6, 2023

Beadboard – front porch



These are thinner types of beadboard.

Staff photo, March 6, 2023 - interior of gable wall supporting the shed roof.

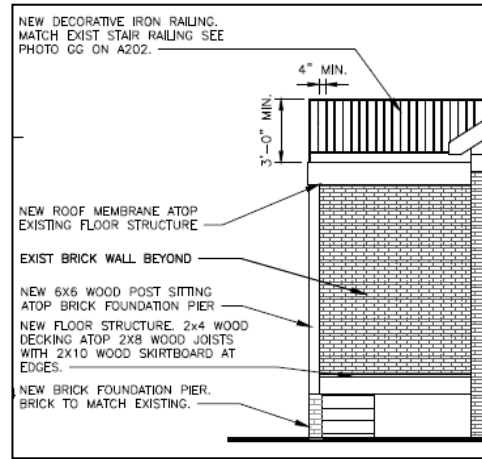
ISSUES

PORCH

- Trial testimony confirmed the Sweet party used the upper rear porch in their efforts to defend the property, so an open porch is a significant character-defining feature strongly associated with the property’s historic significance. Even though staff believes it is possible the demolished upper porch base wall could have been original to the house, the only conclusive evidence, since the physical material was removed, would be a dated photograph of the rear elevation. After extensive archival research, staff wasn’t able to locate the trial photo exhibits that showed the design of the rear porch. Staff can’t say with 100% certitude the lower wall was extant at the time of the historic events, however had it not been demolished, it is likely HDC staff would have not recommended its demolition as the low wall is historic age and staff doesn’t have

documentation that a different railing was in place in 1925.

- It is staff's opinion the proposed iron railing was not a typical railing material for bungalow houses, and a 36" height is too tall for this historic setting and location. A traditionally and minimally designed painted wood railing with defined corner posts and balusters that are installed within a top and bottom rail, is a reasonable solution for this location (until the time a historic photograph is located and can be used as a guide to reconstruct the historic condition).



Above: Historic Structure Report drawings
Right: Staff photo

- The applicant stated in a 2/16/23 email to HDC staff that a perimeter railing will be required by code at the raised porch, as will a wider/level concrete stair.
- Staff retains the opinion that an iron railing is not architecturally appropriate at this location. Rather, to reiterate, if the HDC does approve the installation of a perimeter railing at this location, staff recommends that it should be a simple wood railing with square balusters, in keeping with the stated 1925 period of significance.
- Though staff has no documentation, wood stairs and railings were common at rear porches for houses of this type.
- Staff questions the installation of a 36" wide stair at the current location as it would interfere with the use of the at-grade rear door. If reviewed under the Rehab Code, flexibility of the stair's width might be possible.



BASEMENT WINDOWS

Wood framed glass awning or hopper windows (with or without a central wood muntin bar) were commonly used in basement openings in the first half of the 20th century. As the period of significance for this property is 1925, and as a small property with major historic significance, the existing units should remain in place and the openings and sash be repaired. Even if the glass block is recessed within the opening and covered with a mesh screen, the busy patterning and exceptionally contemporary appearance of the glass block would still be visible and detract from the historic appearance of the house. Every effort should be made to retain and preserve authentic materials and detailing at this property.



Above: Staff photo, February 28, 2023
Right: Historic Structure Report photo



Fig 12: Typical original basement window



Above: Staff photo, February 28, 2023
Right: Staff photo – close-up, February 21, 2023





Staff photos, March 6, 2023

Example of intact wood frame hopper units at north and south elevations.



Example of window (one of two) at the front elevation (below front porch). These openings and sash will be retained.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation One: Denial—Glass Block Windows

Applicant removed this scope of work from application.

~~It is staff's opinion the removal of historic wood hopper windows and the installation of glass block windows within the basement window openings on the north, south and west elevations would interject highly visible contemporary materials which were not used in 1925 bungalow houses. Therefore, this window change would significantly alter the features and spaces that characterize the property. Staff therefore recommends the Commission deny a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed because it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation and the Elements of Design for the district, specifically Standards:~~

~~1—A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.~~

~~2—The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.~~

~~5—Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved.~~

~~6—Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.~~

Recommendation Two: COA—Railings and Steps at Rear Porch, Installation of Wood sash in west elevation basement window openings

Section 21-2-78, Determination of Historic District Commission

~~It is staff's opinion the proposed scope of work removal of non-historic materials at the rear second story porch and the re-opening of first and second story rear porches with the installation of period and architecturally appropriate railings will not alter the features and spaces that characterize the property. Staff therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed because it meets the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation and the Elements of Design for the district.~~

Staff recommends the Certificate of Appropriateness be issued with the following conditions:

- The applicant will propose a period and architecturally appropriate painted wood railing for the upper porch as well as the lower porch and stairs. An alternate option for the upper porch would be to rebuild the knee-wall that is heavily documented in pre-demolition photographs.
- The applicant will modify the previously submitted rear elevation drawings to show the location, dimensions, design, materials, and finish of the porch railings and concrete steps; the drawings will be submitted for staff review. Painted wood steps, in lieu of concrete, shall also be appropriate.
- ~~The retention and repair of the existing basement windows on the north and south elevations, the removal of glass block and installation of wood hopper windows (matching existing) at the west elevation, with paint color for sash listed, will be noted on the architectural drawings submitted for permit.~~