

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

### HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

204 City-County Building  
Detroit, Michigan 48226

(313) 224-3487

## PROPOSED ART CENTER MUSIC SCHOOL HISTORIC DISTRICT

### Final Report

By a resolution dated July 29, 1992, the Detroit City Council has charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Art Center Music School Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act. The proposed district consists of the two connected buildings now addressed as 3975 Cass Avenue, located approximately 2 miles north of the Detroit River. It is within the University Cultural Center Association and Concerned Citizens of the Cass Corridor (4-C's) area of interest.

**BOUNDARIES:** The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of Alexandrine;

On the east, the centerline of Cass;

On the south, the lot line between lot 7 and lot 6 of Block 93 of Sub of Part of Cass Farm, L.1, P.75 (Also P. 176-7 Plats);

On the west, the centerline of the north-south alley between Alexandrine and Selden.

**HISTORY:** Art Center Music School, Detroit's oldest ongoing school of music, now occupies the former location of the William R. Hamilton Funeral Home, a well-established Detroit business over 100 years old. The residential component on the corner of Cass and Alexandrine, originally the Robert H. Brown House, was the work of one of Detroit's leading residential architects of the late 19th century; the adjoining structure on Cass is an excellent example from the second wave of Egyptian Revival popularized during the Art Deco period.

The house on the southwest corner of Cass and Alexandrine was constructed for Robert H. Brown and Jennie, his wife. Building permit #507 was issued to A.C. Varney on April 2, 1891, for the construction of this dwelling at an estimated construction cost of \$7,000. The Browns purchased the lot in February of that year for \$7,500. Robert Brown was in the cigar manufacturing business as vice president of Brown Brothers Company. After Robert's

death in 1908, Jennie continued to reside in the house until she sold the property to N. Frank Hamilton and William Otter of the William Hamilton Corporation in 1916.

Almon Clothier Varney, the architect of the Brown House, was probably the most prolific residential architect in Detroit in the last two decades of the 19th century. Born in Luzerne, New York on March 28, 1849, he married Lizzie C. Skidmore of Saratoga, New York in 1872. He began the study of architecture in 1876 while in the office of Darius Norcross of Glen Falls, New York, and then under E.M. Borden of Boston. Varney began practicing architecture in Detroit under his own name in 1879. Freeman N. Varney, his brother, studied under him in the early years; the practice became A.C. Varney & Co. when Freeman Varney and Alphonso Van Duesen became associated with him. He was later associated with his son, Freeman Orla Varney, in the firm of Varney and Varney, and, from 1910 until his retirement, was in partnership with Frederick Winter in the firm of A.C. Varney and Winter. A.C. Varney died at his winter home in Florida in 1930.

Varney was one of the authors of Our Homes and their Adornments, first published in 1882. The subtitle of the book was "How to Build, Furnish and Adorn a Home; A Complete Household Cyclopedic Designed to Make Happy \* Homes \* for \* Happy \* People." In addition to Varney's sections on planning, erecting and finishing homes, it contained sections on interior decoration, landscape gardening, and knitting and crocheting.

The second occupant of the Brown House, the William R. Hamilton Company, was, by the time it located there in 1916, already a long established Detroit mortuary business. Wm. R. Hamilton, born in 1842, came to Detroit in 1869 and became superintendent of Elmwood cemetery. In 1878 he became a partner of George W. Latimer, funeral director, under the firm name of Latimer and Hamilton, located on Lafayette. He later bought out his partner and formed the firm of William R. Hamilton Co.

William Robertson Hamilton died at his home in Algonac in 1928. The second, third, and fourth generation Hamiltons carried on the business over the years; one of his sons, N. Frank Hamilton, succeeded his father in the business.

In 1925, the lot adjoining the former Brown House was purchased by N. Frank Hamilton and William J. Otter, his partner, in anticipation of expanding the mortuary facilities. On Oct. 16, 1930, building permit #75218 was issued to Gallagher-Flemming Co., general contractor, for the construction of a 2-story mortuary at an estimated cost of \$55,000. Mechanics liens were placed on the building by W.C. Weideman of Weideman Iron Works and John E. Smith Cut Stone Co. in 1931, a probable indication that money was tight even for the well established funeral home operators during the Depression.

The officers of the company in 1931, at the time of the opening of the new building, were N. Frank Hamilton, President; Clarence E. Otter, Vice President and Treasurer; and William R. Hamilton, II, Secretary. Wm. R. Hamilton, II, grandson of the founder, earned a mortuary degree from the University of Michigan and joined the family firm in 1927. He later headed the firm, which, under his leadership, opened other funeral homes in Birmingham in 1951 and in Mount Clemens in 1972. He passed away in 1981.

The Cass Avenue funeral home was sold in 1979 to the Synanon Foundation, a California-based drug rehabilitation group, for its Michigan operations. Neighborhood opposition prevented Synanon from attaining proper zoning to utilize the property, and it was put up for sale again.

In 1981, the property was sold to Dr. Nellie Huger Ebersole, head of the Art Center Music School. Dr. Ebersole was born in New Hudson, Michigan in 1898 and earned degrees from Michigan State Normal College, Chicago Training School, a Methodist School for Deaconesses and Home Missionaries, and the Union Theological Seminary in New York City before receiving a PhD. from the Detroit Institute of Musical Arts. In 1922, she became a licensed minister and was appointed to the position of director of the St. Peter's community in Hamtramck; as such, she oversaw all Methodist missionary work in metro Detroit. She left Michigan in 1925 to become minister of music at Bethlehem Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and, two years later, the minister of music at Broadway Temple in N.Y.C. In 1928, she returned to Michigan due to her father's ill health and subsequent death.

In 1929, Dr. Ebersole became minister of music at the Highland Park Congregational Church. During the Depression she joined the W.P.A. in establishing music projects in 65 institutions in Metro Detroit. She founded Waldenwood Summer School of Sacred Music in Hartland, Michigan, whose program is currently offered by Michigan State University. After 1938, Dr. Ebersole settled into a position teaching voice at the Detroit Institute of Musical Art until 1952, when she and her husband purchased the Art Center Music School. On December 28, 1945, Nellie Beatrice Huger and Amos S. Ebersole were married at Trinity Methodist Church in Highland Park. Amos Strite Ebersole, a noted conductor, was formerly the head of the voice department at Heidelberg College in Ohio.

Dr. Ebersole was music director for the Detroit Council of Churches for 25 years. As such, she established a radio and then television music ministry, serving as musical director for the weekly program, "Church at the Crossroads" on WWJ-AM Radio and Channel 4. In 1951, Dr. Ebersole directed the 3000 voice choir that sang in Briggs Stadium to celebrate Detroit's Golden Jubilee. Among her many achievements, she was rated as the leading authority on church music in Michigan, in 1951 she was named one of the 250 "Outstanding Women of Detroit," and, in

1954, she was named one of Detroit's Women of the Year. Among her many activities was her involvement in the Round Table of Catholics, Jews and Protestants.

The Ebersoles purchased the Art Center Music School in 1952 from Edward Bredshall, a pianist who appeared with the Detroit Symphony. The school was established in 1922 and is presently Detroit's oldest ongoing school of music. Its mission was and is to provide quality music instruction to low and moderate income families at affordable rates. Before occupying the Cass property, the Art Center Music School was first located at 441 W. Hancock, then in Orchestra Hall (1977), and later in a building at E. Ferry and John R. that was owned by Center for Creative Studies and before that, Lewis School of Business. Each move was forced by urban redevelopment, making the purchase of the present building in 1981 as a permanent home to the school all the more significant.

Over the years, the Ebersole's fostered the careers of many outstanding black artists, among them Joseph Cole, baritone, Estelle Andrews, soprano, Constance Hardy, coloratura soprano, and George Shirley, the first black tenor to perform with the New York Metropolitan Opera. Hugh Downs, host of 20/20, was a pupil of Dr. Ebersole.

Amos Ebersole, a member of the faculty of voice teachers at Wayne State University, died in 1963. Dr. Nellie Ebersole, who led the school for 5 decades, retired in 1990. She died in 1991 at the age of 93. The school continues to follow its mission to provide quality musical education to Detroiters today.

#### **PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:**

Each of the two buildings comprising the Art Center Music School is architecturally significant in itself. The Brown House, built as a single-family dwelling in 1891, is a substantial two and one-half story brick building with rock-faced sandstone foundations, architectural elements and trim. Queen Anne in style, the building exhibits the characteristic multiplicity of roof shapes, wall planes, textures, fenestration and detailing. The total building is presently painted light gray.

The front facade of the Brown House is divided compositionally into three vertical sections: the octagonal tower on the south, the three-sided, two story bay on the north, and the recessed entrance section in between. The stubby brownstone columns of the porch are incised with spiraling lines, resulting in a twisted impression. The corinthian capitals support the coffered porch ceiling and brownstone frieze and second story railing. The third stage of the tower on the southern end is open; it is covered by an octagonal roof. At second story level above the central and northern sections of the facade at attic level is a large hexagonal slate-shingled gable with overhanging eaves containing a Palladian window flanked by fan windows with

keystones, and a small Palladian window in the upper rectangular slate-shingled section.

Continuing around to the Alexandrine elevation, a transverse gable projects outward over a shallow three-sided two-story section. To the east is a projecting first floor entry section, now accessed through modern aluminum double doors with the same decorative brownstone railing above, supported on brownstone pilasters with the same corinthian columns as the front porch. To the west of the transverse section towards the rear of the house is a large wood framed sunroom with a bowed window at the second story level. The large two-story garage between an old one story garage and the house was added in 1917.

On the interior, the Brown House was joined to the chapel building when the latter was constructed in 1930. However, the internal arrangement of rooms was generally not negatively affected. Although the original Cass Avenue entrance is no longer used, it led into a wood paneled foyer with a paneled ceiling, a side facing staircase, and a mantelpiece in the corner near the staircase. The staircase has two landings, ornately carved newel posts, and wood panels above the balusters bearing a stylized sunray pattern. Various rooms are adorned with decorative plaster cornices and wooden moldings.

After the mortuary chapel to the south was built in 1930, the National Funeral Director magazine referred to it as "One of the most artistic funeral chapels and mortuaries in the country." It is a 2-story squarish building of coursed smooth ashlar in the Egyptian Revival style, a style that became popular for a second time in the 1920's and 30's as a chance to experiment with the decorative potential of concrete and then as part of the Art Deco exotica craze.

The building is entered through a pair of decorative bronze doors off Cass Avenue; bundles of stalks tied together form the center of their modernistic composition. The front facade of the building, while its parapet wall is a stylized representation of a gorge and roll cornice common to Egyptian temples, is funerary in detail, with swags and draped motifs beneath the zigzagged cornice. Three large openings occupy the first floor, the central one containing the entrance. Above the spandrels between these arched openings are four rondels with ancient male profiles - a Sumerian (?), Egyptian, Greek and a Roman, with inscriptions apparently relating to death in the respective symbols and language. Three deeply set multi-paned casement windows occupy the second story.

The entire foyer, as well as the chapel, is of "Classical architecture, bordering on Modernistic design," according to the National Funeral Director. Inside the front doors is a bronze vestibule. Imported marble furnishings and flooring and railings and grill work of solid bronze further adorn the foyer. The chapel is entered through a pair of rosette paneled wooden doors

with rosettes. Inside the chapel, the woodwork is of grained white oak. It originally seated over 300 people in church pews. The original family room, organ/choir room, minister's room, rest rooms, and flower room serving the funeral home were adjacent to the chapel. Above the chapel were the general offices of the mortuary, "slumber rooms" and preparation rooms. The efficient and skillful interior arrangement of the two buildings together enabled three funeral services to be conducted at one time independant of one another. An elevator connected the floors.

A large garage to the rear of the mortuary allowed funeral cars to come and go without disrupting any business. A side drive at the south side of the property allowed people to be dropped off to enter the side without being seen, a service appreciated during prominent funerals.

Art Center Music School is only the second resident owner of the chapel building and the third of the Brown House. It was fortunate in that the buildings were very much intact, even with the adaptations necessary to join the residence with the mortuary in 1930. In adapting the funeral home to a music school, no major alterations have yet been made. The chapel has become a recital hall, with folding chairs replacing the pews; the residential rooms upstairs in the Brown house have become offices and practice rooms, and the parlors downstairs have become meeting rooms. The board of the Art Center Music School wishes to maintain the historic character of its buildings.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the Art Center Music School Historic District, with the design treatment level of conservation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for consideration by City Council.

**MEMBERSHIP:**

The membership of the Historic Designation Advisory Board for this historic district study follows; ex officio members often assign staff persons to represent them:

Ms. Florence (Peggy) LaRose,  
Chairperson

Mr. Calvin Jackson,  
Vice-Chairperson

Mr. Gordon Bugbee,  
Secretary/Treasurer

Mrs. Helen N. Brown

Beulah Croxford

Mr. De Witt Dykes

Dr. Marie M. Gardner

Mr. Norman Rebert

Mr. Henry Hagood,  
ex officio

Mr. Ron Hewitt,  
ex officio

Ms. Marsha Bruhn,  
ex officio

Ms. Maud Lyons,  
ex officio

Mrs. Juanita Hammond  
ad hoc

Ms. Bonnie Hatchett  
ad hoc

Art Center Music School - Bibliography

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Varney, Almon Clother, Our Homes and Their Adornments, Detroit, J.C. Chilton & Co., 1882,1883,1884.

"William R. Hamilton Company --- the Result of Sixty-nine Years of Continuous Progress," National Funeral Director, Dec., 1931.

"W.R. Hamilton Dies at Home," Detroit Free Press, June 25, 1928.

"William R. Hamilton II dies; chairman of funeral home," Detroit Free Press, Jan. 14, 1981, p. 3A.

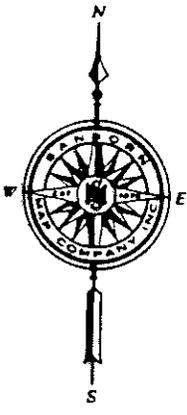
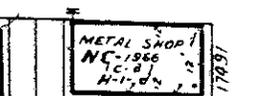
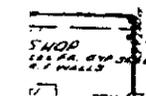
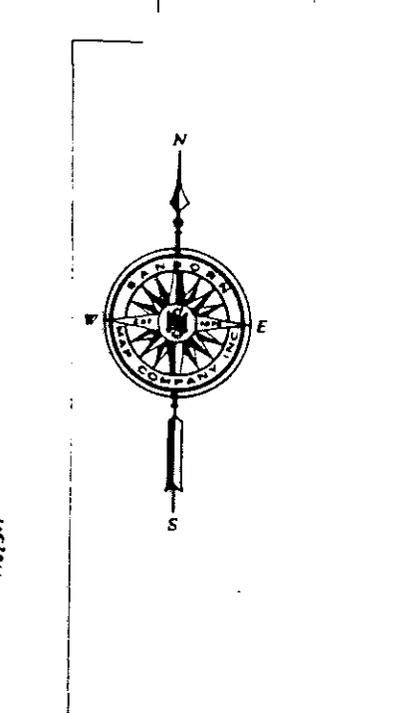
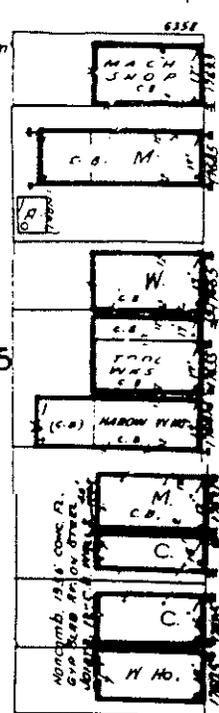
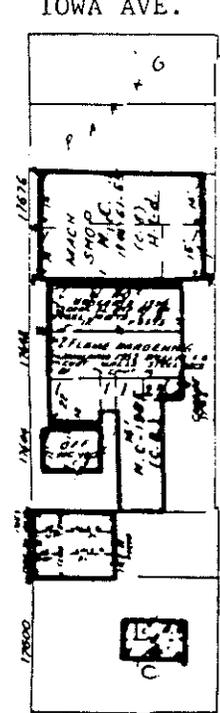
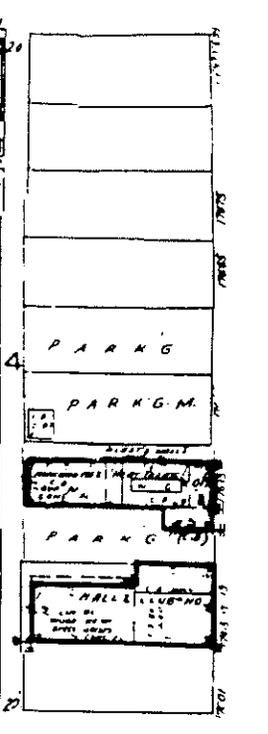
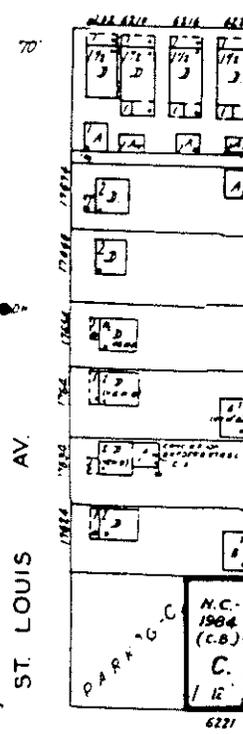
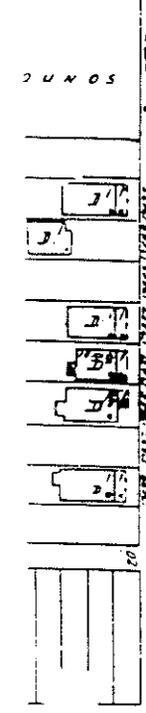
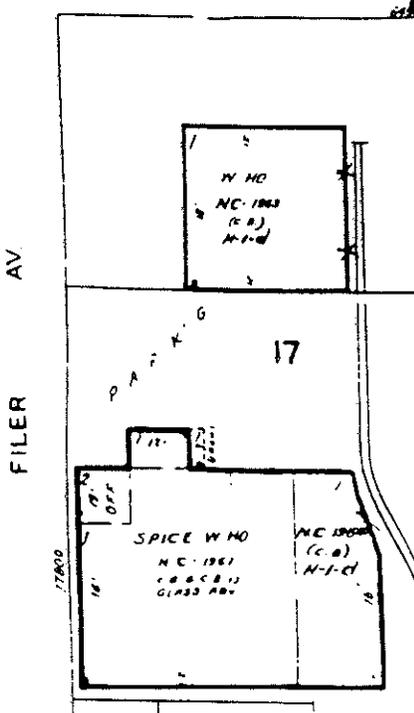
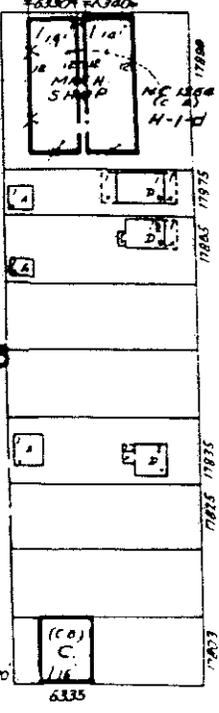
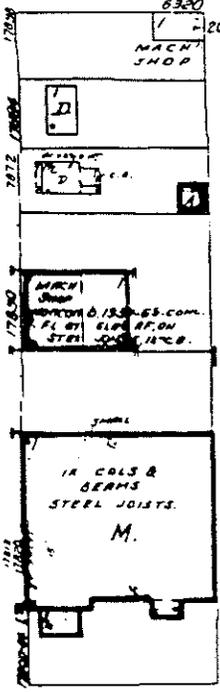
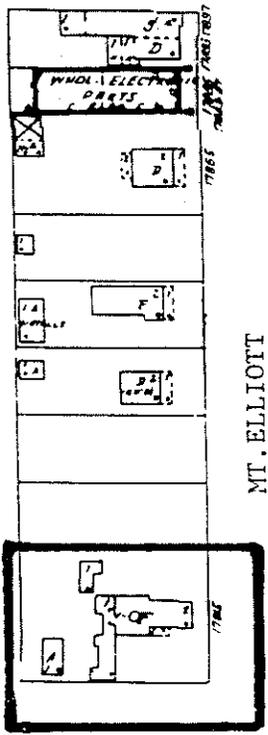
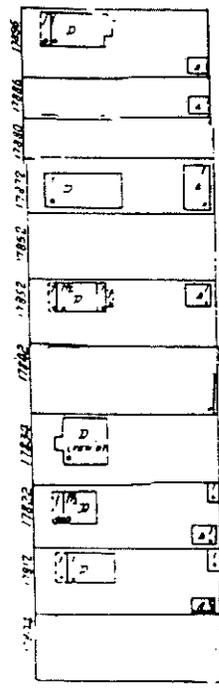
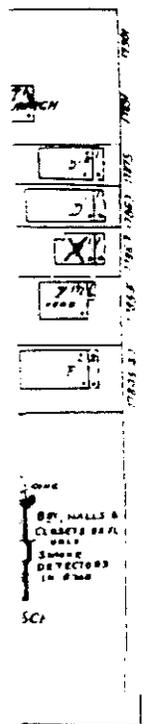
Proposed  
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