

Proposed Whittier Historic District 415 Burns Drive, Detroit

Final Report

By a resolution dated June 30, 2009 the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Whittier Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.



The Whittier is located on a gently sloping eight-acre parcel fronting on the extension of Burns Avenue between East Jefferson Avenue and the Detroit River, approximately three miles east of downtown Detroit. The building consists of three interconnected towers; the two northern eight-story towers, completed in 1923, are identical and are connected to the southern fifteen-story tower, completed in 1926, by a one story promenade. Erma Henderson Park, a large city park, is located across Burns Drive to the east, and John Owen Park is located beyond the River Plaza Apartments to the west.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Whittier Historic District include the three residential structures and the grounds associated with them. The boundaries are outlined in heavy black lines on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of East Jefferson Avenue;

On the east, the centerline of Burns Drive;

On the south, the Detroit Harbor line; and

On the west, a line drawn 280 feet west of and parallel to the easterly line of Private Claim 27.

Credit: This report was prepared by Kristine Kidorf, Kidorf Preservation Consulting, Detroit.

HISTORY

The Whittier is significant to Detroit's history for its architecture and for providing upscale apartment hotel accommodations to Detroit's upper class residents and visitors. It is one of Detroit architect Charles N. Agree's earliest large commissions. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the East Jefferson Avenue Residential Thematic Nomination.

The Whittier was developed in two phases by the Elles Company. It was designed by Detroit architect Charles N. Agree and constructed by Lakeshore Engineering of Chicago. The first phase was completed in February, 1923 and consisted of two eight-story buildings connected at the base. Each tower had an open courtyard containing gardens in the center. A luxurious apartment hotel, it complemented the large single-family homes constructed to the north in Indian Village. The Whittier promoted its park setting, "The location is unrivaled in scenic beauty by any other apartment hotel in the world," and "...the residents of the new Whittier have all the delights of suburban life without any of its drawbacks in the matter of accessibility."¹

Lavish landscaping was designed and installed by Pontiac Nurseries located on Parsons Street in Detroit. Formal Italian gardens with fountains were constructed between the building and East Jefferson Avenue. In addition to the grounds residents of the building could take advantage of a commissary, maid service, a restaurant, ballroom, and various lounges.

In 1926 the second phase was completed, bringing the total number of rooms to 800. The new fifteen-story tower was constructed to the southeast of the original two towers, preserving the original building's views of the riverfront and surrounding parks. Initially called "The Greater Whittier," the two phases were connected by a lavishly decorated promenade featuring views of the Italian gardens through the large arched windows. The new phase continued the promotion of the suburban setting in the city and its location between two city parks and views of Belle Isle.

Detroit experienced unprecedented growth and expansion in the early 1900s due to its continued emergence as an industrial city. After the population rose 113 percent from 1910 to 1920, it increased another sixty-three percent between 1920 and 1930 according to the United States census figures. This caused a considerable demand for living space, particularly residential hotels and apartment buildings. The apartment-hotel concept was growing in popularity in

¹ "Detroit Has Finest Apartment Hotel in U.S. in New Whittier," *Detroit Free Press*, February, 18, 1923, p. 3.

Detroit in the 1920s. It offered luxurious accommodations for out-of-town visitors, and for permanent residents it could provide an upscale living environment without the need for property upkeep or domestic help. The apartment hotel served the housing needs of both transient residents such as travelers and salesmen, who required dining and cleaning services, and permanent residents and families who wished to take advantage of hotel services and still have a large enough unit to live in as their residence.

In 1925, the Detroit Convention and Tourists Bureau bragged that twenty hotels had been constructed within the past eighteen months. A "Hotels of Detroit" brochure published c. 1926 by the bureau lists eight hotels under construction. At least three other high end apartment hotels were completed in 1926; the Chateau Frontenac, on East Jefferson (NR listed), which has since been demolished, the Wardell on Woodward at East Kirby (NR listed) and the Belcrest (NR listed), also designed by Agree and located in the Cultural Center area on Cass Avenue.

In 1935 the Whittier was placed in trusteeship and in 1938 the Whittier Corporation took over ownership. The corporation gained some notoriety when a stockholders meeting in 1949 lasted fifteen hours through the night, resulting in a failed takeover by George J. Kolowich. The board of directors as elected at the end of the meeting were Emanuel J. Harris (related to the Guardian Building), Harry W. Jones, Frank W. Blair, George Kolowich, Ben O. Shephard, and John A. Hamilton.

In 1959 the Whittier Corporation sold the property to a New York real estate firm, Stahl Real Estate Company. However, by 1963 the company was losing \$25,000 a month on the hotel and went into voluntary reorganization. In August of 1963 local industrialist Ivar T. Quarnstrom purchased the property.

Quarnstrom and his wife were residents of the Whittier. Quarnstrom was known as a Detroit plastics pioneer; he founded the Detroit Mold Engineering Corporation. Quarnstrom was also the developer of a summer resort in Charlevoix called Water's Edge, and he planned to link the property to the Whittier through air service. He invested approximately two million dollars into the neglected property, bringing a number of changes. Working with local architect Victor J. Basso, AIA, the hotel was modernized by replacing the coal fired heating system with oil or gas, replacing the windows with thermo-pane aluminum, installing air conditioning, and automatic elevators. However the largest changes were the addition of a glass enclosed nightclub on top of the fifteen-story tower and enclosing both courtyards of the eight-story buildings. One was enclosed for the addition of an indoor swimming pool, sauna and health club called the Fountain Room, and the other was enclosed for a ballroom called the Crystal Room. In a 1965 article about Quarnstrom and the Whittier he stated that the corridors were being "de-gingerbreaded" and that he envisioned period guest rooms, either early American, provincial, or contemporary. He also changed the grounds, adding a serpentine brick wall around the expanded parking lot accommodating 250 cars. Quarnstrom's improvements increased business by one-hundred percent, with half of the guests being permanent.

Quarnstrom died unexpectedly in an airplane crash in 1966. It appears that his son ran the property for a couple of years, promoting the hotel through one brochure that lists assets such as the rock gardens, a nine-hole putting green, bocce and croquet courts, fishing docks and boat wells at the property. A meeting space named in memory of Quarnstrom was available with the other banquet and meeting rooms.

Because of the transient nature of the residents the Polk City Directories do not list residents of the Whittier. However, according to a March 18, 2001 article in the *Detroit News* by Pete Waldmeir, the Whittier was “built as a home and refuge for Detroit’s rich and famous... nobody who was anybody stayed anywhere else when visiting Detroit if they could help it.” He goes on to list the following guests as having stayed there, “Movie star Mae West, author Cornelia Otis Skinner, writer Damon Runyon, playboy Horace Dodge Jr. and his movie star wife Gregg Sherwood. When the Beatles and Rolling Stones first visited the city in the early 1960s, they chose the Whittier. The hotel also serviced as headquarters for world renowned powerboat races like the Gold Cup and Silver Cup.” In fact, it had an in-house restaurant called *The Gold Cup Room* for many years.

In 1969 the property was sold to the Michigan Baptist Homes and Development Corporation for conversion to housing for senior citizens. Units were “purchased” by residents by paying a one time fee to purchase a share and then paying a monthly service charge for food and services. However, the city revoked the property tax exempt status of the property, and by 1978 the Baptists faced bankruptcy on the property. Donations from the larger Michigan and American Baptist churches kept the property going until 1985 when it was sold to a retirement home corporation. The corporation closed the home in 2001 and in 2003 it was purchased by the current owner who is rehabilitating the property.

Detroit architect Charles N. Agree (1897 – 1982) designed the Whittier when he was in his twenties; it was one of his first major commissions. By the time of the opening of the second phase of the Whittier, Agree was known for his apartment hotel designs which he began to study and specialize in shortly after opening his own firm in 1919. In addition to the Whittier he designed the Wilshire apartment hotels in Detroit. The theaters in Detroit that he designed include the Beverly, Hollywood, Palmer Park, and Royal. He also designed the Grande and Vanity Ballrooms.

DESCRIPTION

The Whittier is located on a gently sloping eight-acre parcel fronting on the extension of Burns Avenue between East Jefferson Avenue and the Detroit River, approximately three miles east of downtown Detroit on a stretch of riverfront land referred to as the *Gold Coast*. There is a large city park across Burns to the east, and a large asphalt paved parking lot between the north end of building and East Jefferson Avenue that has a serpentine wall on two sides. The area between the building and the river is an overgrown lawn area. To the west is a 1940s apartment complex, River Plaza.

The building consists of three interconnected towers, sometimes described as three separate buildings. The two northern eight-story towers are identical and are connected to the southern fifteen-story tower by a one story promenade.

The two northern towers are Neo-Classical in style and have a tripartite form with an I-shaped footprint and a light well in the center of each tower. The towers are connected at the bottom two floors. The front façade faces east and has a central entrance in the two-story rusticated limestone base. The entrance is comprised of three tall arches filled with double doors and windows. The arches are separated by Corinthian pilasters that support an entablature that is just

below a projecting limestone beltcourse that runs around the entire building. Nine bays of six-over-six, double-hung windows are spaced equally across the front of each tower. The first floor windows have segmental arch tops. The end bays on floors two and above have a pair of double hung windows. The end bays of both towers are faced with limestone; the centers, sides and rear have red brick walls. The third floor windows, just above the beltcourse, are trimmed in limestone. The top floor rests on a limestone trim course that runs across the façade and around the sides of the end bays. Above the windows there is a projecting limestone entablature with dentil molding. A short, brick parapet wall with limestone cap rises above the entablature. The sides of the towers have limestone facing on each of the 3-bay wide ends. The center section of the building is red-brick. Six-over-six double-hung windows are paired in the end sections, and are equally spaced across the entire façade. The limestone beltcourse above the second floor and the stone entablature at the top of the building run across the entire façade.

The fifteen-story south tower is connected to the north towers by a one-and-a-half-story, stone-faced promenade with a low-pitched hip roof. Equally spaced, tall arched windows run across the front and rear elevations. The south tower has T-shaped footprint with the top of the T facing south toward the river. It has a two-story, hip-roof base wrapped around the east and south sides. The smooth limestone walls have equally spaced, tall arched windows. The central entrance to the building projects slightly, and is flanked by fluted Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature with a broken pediment with an urn in the center above the doorway. “Whittier” is carved into the frieze. On both sides of the entrance there are tall windows flanked by fluted Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature. Carved stone urns sit on top of the entablature above the end pilasters.

The center seven bays of the south side of the base have a short parapet wall, fluted Corinthian pilasters separating the bays, and arched doorways in the two end bays. The door bays repeat the broken pediment and carved urns at the main building entrance. The center section has a window with a carved medallion above in each bay. The remainder of the base on the east and south sides has large arched window openings in each bay, and the end bays are flanked by pilasters supporting a carved urn relief.

The upper stories of the tower are buff-colored brick with limestone trim. Above the entrance the central bay is faced with limestone colored terra cotta at the third and fourth floors in the central bay. The thirteenth and fourteenth floors have sections faced with limestone colored terra cotta on the south and east sides. The decoration projects slightly, has brackets at the base which support panels made to appear as a balcony below the thirteenth floor windows. There is a decorative entablature supporting central broken pediments with urns above the fourteenth floor windows.

The window openings throughout the building are regularly spaced and contain non-original aluminum windows and transoms in a variety of configurations.

The interior of the north towers has a formal lobby on the east side which has fluted Corinthian pillars and a beamed ceiling. Directly south of the main lobby is the “Fountain Room” which formerly contained the indoor swimming pool that was added in the 1960s. The south wall of the space retains the stone fountain on the brick wall. The second tower contains a secondary lobby space with arched windows on the north wall. The lobby leads to the former “Crystal

Ballroom”, which was created in the 1960s by enclosing the courtyard. The interior of the promenade and the south fifteen-story tower were not accessible.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets the first and third criteria contained in Section 25-2-2 of the 1984 Detroit City Code: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the Detroit City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the Whittier Historic District. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council’s consideration.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board: The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three *ex-officio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, De Witt Dykes, Zene’ Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The *ex-officio* members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

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