

STAFF REPORT 02-08-2023 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8206

ADDRESS: 415 WEST GRAND BOULEVARD

HISTORIC DISTRICT: HUBBARD FARMS

APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER: MARCELA MARTINEZ-MCNALLY

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 12-21-2022

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 01-24-2023

SCOPE: ALTER FRONT AND REAR PORCH, REPLACE WALKWAYS (WORK COMPLETED WITHOUT APPROVAL), INSTALL FENCE



View of 415 West Grand Boulevard, looking southwest. Staff photo, January 24, 2023.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

This is a 2½ story frame house located on the west side of West Grand Boulevard between Bagley and Shady Lane. The house is of relatively simple form, but exhibits asymmetric and idiosyncratic design features rooted in late Victorian or Queen Anne styles. Prominent elements include a steeply pitched hip roof with a distinctive eyebrow dormer, original windows of different types/sizes arranged asymmetrically, and a projecting gable-ended wooden porch roof and entablature resting on original square columns oriented at the right side of the front façade. The home's entrance, flanked by sidelights, is itself off-center within the historic porch roof/columns. A new brick and concrete porch deck, subject of this application, extends the full width of the front of the house. New concrete steps have been added in line with the entrance (but offset with respect to the roof).

The house, originally finished in clapboard and/or wood shake, is currently clad with incompatible aluminum-siding which likely dates prior to the district's designation. It is unclear if original materials still exist below.



Detail view of porch area. Note the variegated brick pattern and addition of substantial new paving. Staff photo, January 24, 2023



Subject site outlined in yellow. North is up. Detroit Parcel Viewer.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes the following work items, per the submitted documents:

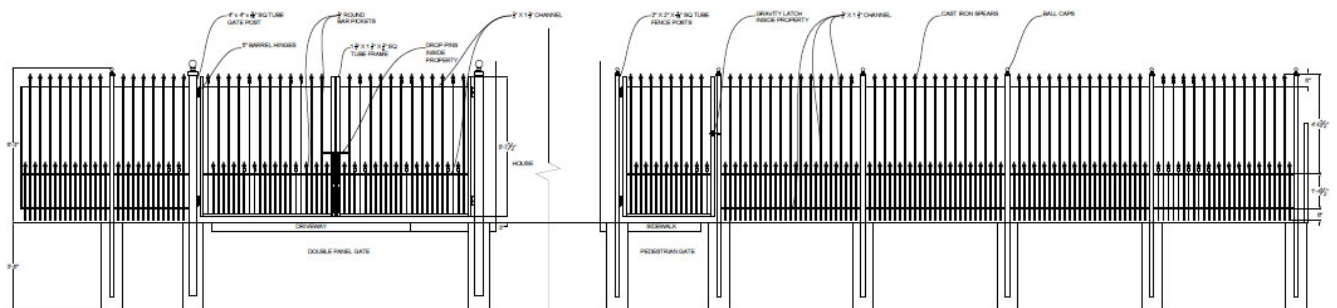
- Alterations to front & back porches
- Repair front porch columns, trim and address any issues of structural weakness
- Remove covered back porch wooden steps and replace with concrete steps
- Install new wrought iron railing to back porch (matches front porch railings)
- New side lot fencing & gate, in a historic wrought-iron style
- New paved areas/walkways



FRONT (GRAND BLVD.) ELEVATION

SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"

Front elevation and fence fabrication details from the applicant's submitted materials, above and below.



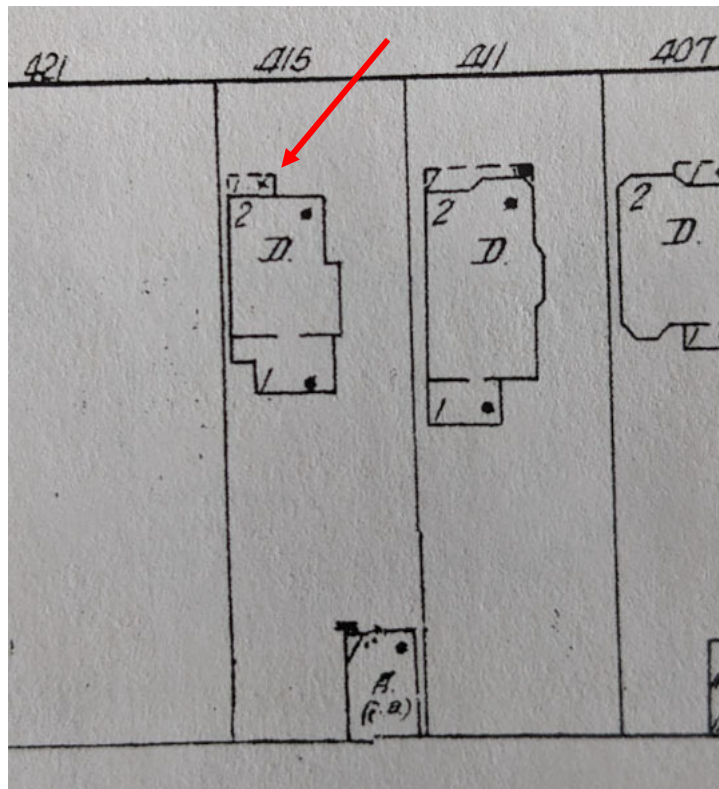
B ELEVATION VIEW
SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"

STAFF OBSERVATIONS

- The Hubbard Farms Historic District was established in 1993. Staff does not have designation photos for this district. We have reached out to the Historic Designation Advisory Board.
- Commission records show no previous approvals for work at this property. According to available real estate records, the house was sold to a new owner in December 2021.
- Wood frame houses of this type often have wood frame porches; when brick appears it is most often an extension of the foundation. Historic-age roofs over wood porches in our climate, with rare exceptions, *cover the entire wooden floor* to slow deterioration. Looking carefully at the “before” photographs submitted by the applicant, staff observes that the portion of the porch to the right of the steps, below the concrete slab (see red arrow) appears to show original conditions in the form of a rectilinear lattice pattern. Note the juxtaposition with the lattice on the opposite (south) side, which shows X-shaped lattice, a modern product widely available in home centers and often incorrectly applied to historic porches.



- A review of the historic Sanborn maps for this property show that the original porch, per the extant roof and columns, was situated only at the *right* side of the front elevation, and did not extend the full width of the house. See arrow below.



- The Hubbard Farms Historic District is notable among Detroit’s historic districts in that it features a

very rich array of residential porches in every conceivable configuration. This eclecticism of geometry, materials, and styles is fundamental to the district. The Elements of Design for this district offer the following (excerpted) relevant points concerning porches:

- **Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections:** *Placement of entrance and porch projections vary from building to building, usually depending on type, size, and style. In general, a great variety of porches and entrances characterize Hubbard Farms. In those examples of Classical inspiration, entrances and porches tend to be centered on the front façade or balance each other if there are more than one as on terrace buildings and duplexes. Other examples display more freedom in entrance and porch placement. Secondary entrances are common; Italianate houses and small Queen Anne cottages frequently have small side porches. Porches on houses built around the turn of the 20th Century tend to be large, sometimes stretching along most of the first story, while English and Arts and Crafts influenced buildings tend to have de-emphasized entrances. Where similar houses line a block, a rhythmic progression of porches is created. Most of the houses in the district have rear porches.*
- **Element 7, Relationship of materials:** *Brick and wood are the primary building materials originally used. Brick buildings may have pressed brick front façades with common brick sides and rears. Many wood frame buildings are clad in clapboard. While most buildings have brick foundations, some foundations are of stone. Buildings originally built on wood piers originally had wooden skirting. A few buildings were built of concrete block..Wood trim is most commonly used for window, porch, and functional elements as well as decorative trim.*
- **Element 8, Relationship of textures:** *A variety of rich textural relationships exist in the district—those created by the juxtaposition of various materials, such as brick, stone, stucco, and/or wood, and those created by the repetition of the materials themselves, such as clapboard, wood fish scale shingles or decorative brick...*
- **Element 10, Relationship of architectural details:** *Architectural details generally relate to style. Colonial Revival buildings display classical details, often in wood. Porches are commonly treated and usually have columns of a classical order. Buildings of Victorian substyles also tend to have details of wood located around the entrance, porch, windows, bays, towers, and dormers. Lathe-turned and jigsaw cut wooden elements and details are common. Prairie, and Arts and Crafts, style buildings tend to be simply stated, with architectural interest derived from the arrangement of elements and quality of design. In general, the Hubbard Farms District is extremely rich in architectural detail.*
- Based on the analysis described above, it is the opinion of staff that the construction (or reconstruction) of a full-width porch, *in any material*, is not appropriate for this building's style, as it imposes a rigid symmetry on what was originally a balanced asymmetrical composition. The porch deck should only exist below the original off-center historic porch roof, and would be most appropriately designed and built fully in wood, to include wood railings, balustrade, floor, and steps. Metal railings would not be historically appropriate on such a wood porch.
- The as-built design of the new porch detracts greatly from the balance of the historic composition, giving much more visual massing to the new porch than the historic house, which competes with it for attention. A brick porch may perhaps be acceptable in this case given the lack of material integrity present at this property, but only in the historic footprint.
- The brick chosen for the new work, while somewhat similar to the "orange [common] brick" used in the historic foundation and chimney, is a mix of lighter and darker units, which is a modern formulation that unfortunately creates another distracting design element.
- Because the porch may have been expanded to its current width prior to historic designation in 1993 (and correspondingly may have had its flooring bolstered or replaced with a concrete lid to protect it from the weather), there is a possibility that the previous wood and concrete full-width porch (prior to its recent rebuilding in brick/concrete) may have been a pre-existing condition. However, as in other cases with pre-existing conditions (e.g., incompatible siding or windows) that the Commission reviews, the existence of an earlier incompatible alteration (even if legal, which is unclear in this instance) does not pre-determine approval for its complete reconstruction or replacement, only maintenance of that pre-existing condition.
- It is staff's opinion, based on the historic offset between the front entrance and the gabled porch roof

roof, that the original front steps would have been centered on the historic porch, and would not have been aligned with only the front door as it is in the as-built condition.

- The new front yard paving is more extensive than the previous condition, and offers less room for foundation plantings that were removed without approval.
- In staff's opinion, the combination of the additional paving, the concrete slab porch, and the additional brick massing of the full-width porch adds considerable "hardness" to the front of the property, and detracts from the historic character of the frame house.
- The proposed fence is a high-quality custom architectural product designed and manufactured locally. Though described by the applicant as wrought iron, materials are not specified on the fabricator's drawings (excepting the cast iron spear caps). Staff assumes the fence will actually be steel, executed in a wrought-iron style. In either case, the fence's design and site placement is appropriate.



Other incompatibly altered porches exist in the historic district, here directly across from the subject house on West Grand Boulevard. Note that the example in the foreground, at 416 West Grand Boulevard, is limited to the footprint established by the historic roof, despite the incompatible ironwork and concrete block. It is unclear if the alteration at 414 West Grand Boulevard (blue Queen Anne house) was approved. Staff photo, January 24, 2023

ISSUES

- A full-width porch under a historic porch roof extending only half of the width is a historically inappropriate design for this particular house, which shows that the porch existed only at the right side of the elevation, consistent with its asymmetric expression and original architectural style. A new porch deck should not exceed the historic footprint established by the existing historic porch roof.
- The legal status of the recently replaced full-width wood/concrete porch remains unclear, and may predate the district's designation.
- Should the Commission approve all or part of the new brick porch for retention, staff recommends that the modern brick should be painted to mask or de-emphasize the distracting variation in the brick mix, and that this paint should be merged into the painted foundation treatment. Combined with wood steps and other wooden porch elements consistent with the existing wooden porch roof and columns, this may reduce the stark impact of the current design, and integrate it more successfully into the historic massing.
- New foundation plantings at the front should be proposed by the applicant, which would balance the impact of the additional paved areas, or the paving should be reduced to its pre-existing extents.



Another view of the subject property. Staff photo, January 24, 2023

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Recommendation #1: Denial, Front porch alterations

Staff finds that the proposal for alteration at the front porch at 415 West Grand Boulevard does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Woodbridge Farm Historic District's Elements of Design for the following reasons;

- The porch, based on the existing historic porch roof and the asymmetrical composition of the house, would have existed historically only below that roof, oriented to the right (north) side of the façade.
- The porch, including its steps, should be primarily constructed of wood elements; not brick, concrete, or steel

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the front porch replacement, as it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically Standards 2, 6, and 9:

(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.

(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.

(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.

And Hubbard Farms Historic District Elements of Design 6, 7, and 10, as codified in Section 21-2-157 of the 2019 Detroit City Code.

Recommendation #2: Certificate of Appropriateness, remaining scope of work (Rear porch, paving, fence)

Staff recommends that the remaining work items should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as they meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Hubbard Farms Historic District's Elements of Design, with the condition that:

- A landscaping plan for foundation plantings be submitted prior to final approval of the new front yard paving, subject to staff review.