

**STAFF REPORT: NOVEMBER 8, 2023 MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: A. DYE**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2023-00097**

**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: OCTOBER 16, 2023**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: OCTOBER 25, 2023**

**SCOPE: ERECT SECOND FLOOR AND FIRST FLOOR PORCH PERIMETER RAILING AND PORCH STAIRS**

### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

Erected in 1916, the house at 2905 Garland is located at the northwest corner of Garland and Charlevoix Street. 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.



*East elevation. Staff photo, October 25, 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.



*South elevation that faces Charlevoix. Staff photo, October 25, 2023*

A small backyard extends west from the house; gravel covers the area where the concrete pad for the garage had been located. A concrete walkway adjacent to the concrete pad bisects the rear yard at a southeast angle towards the first story rear entrances.



*Rear-west elevation. Staff photo, October 25, 2023.*

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.



*Rear elevation elevation, looking north. Staff photo, October 25, 2023.*

The rear elevation's raised porch is in the process of being rebuilt and will be accessed by a set of wood stairs to the south. An at-grade exposed rear door to the right of the porch will open inward.

### **PROPOSAL**

- Erect wood perimeter railing at second and first story rear porch.
- Erect wood stairs and railing at south end of first story porch.

### **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.
- 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.
- In 2019 the original alley-facing garage was destroyed by fire and demolished, but the concrete foundation was left in place. During a recent site visit, staff noticed that the concrete pad was gone, and gravel was laid in its place. Staff determined the pad was removed without HDC approval between February and September 2023. The contracting company who is facilitating the rehabilitation of the house, and is the current applicant, informed staff that the Ossian Sweet Foundation removed the garage foundation. The organization's founder, Daniel Baxter, is the owner of the property. The removal of the foundation destroyed the remaining physical evidence of the historic garage which played an important role in the events of September 9, 1925. Staff will reach out to Mr. Baxter to ask if he would like to add the removal of the garage foundation to this application,

as well as notify the current applicant of the potential inclusion of the additional scope of work.

- The area in the close-up photos shown below is the wall surface that was uncovered when the porch knee wall was removed.



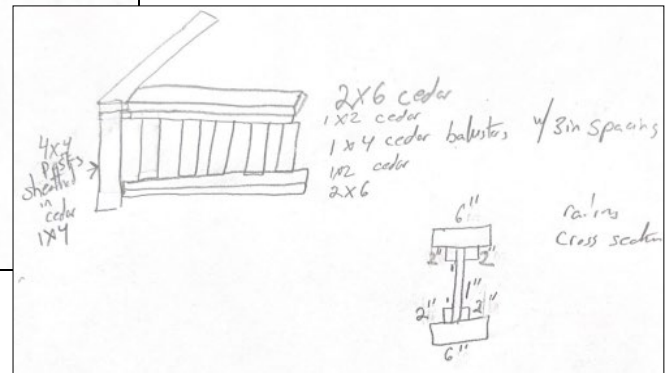
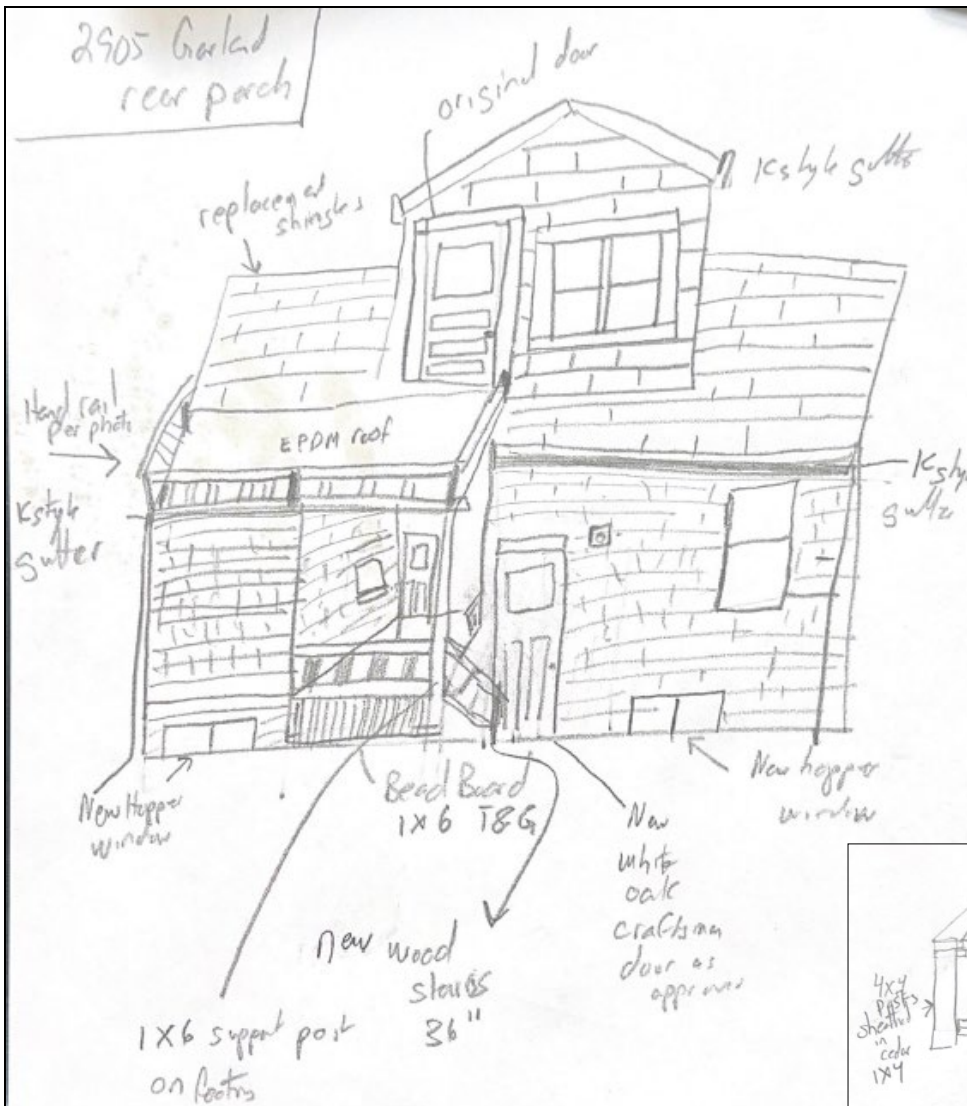
*Above: Undated applicant photo documenting demolition of the second floor rear porch. Note that the top of the knee wall is in line with the top of the first row of wood shingles.*

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

*Below: Recent applicant photo. The tape measure confirms an approximate 25-inch height of former railing/knee wall.*

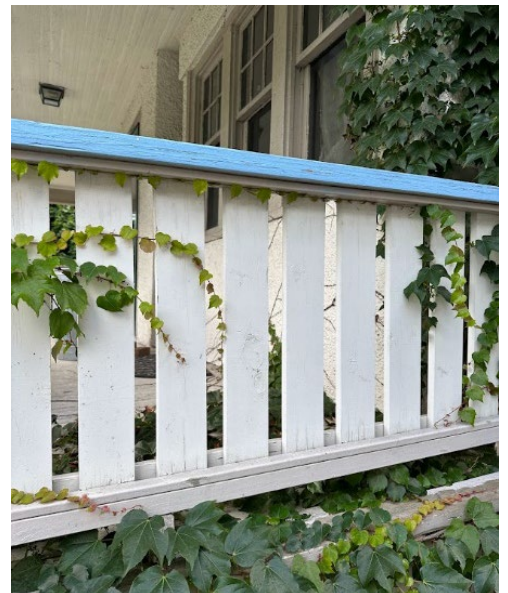


- The tape measure in the photo at left shows the height of the former deck enclosure was about 25-inches, and the step down to the deck is approximately 10-inches.



Applicant drawings and railing photo.

- The applicant proposes to erect a cedar perimeter railing at the first and second floor porch with a finish height of 40-inches. The submitted photo shows the suggested design. The corner and intermediary supports are proposed to be 4 x 4 posts sheathed in cedar and cut to match the finish height of the railing. The drawing shows the top rail will cover the spindles and support posts.
- A 1 x 6 wood support post has been erected as the corner support element for the first-floor porch.
- Wood stairs and wood railing will extend from the southern edge of the deck. Staff assumes the railing will have a similar baluster/end post that will be the same height as the spindles and covered by the top rail.
- Wood bead board will be installed between the first-floor deck and grade.
- All porch components will be painted.



## ISSUES

- 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. Therefore, it is staff's opinion that this porch should retain an appearance as to what could have been in place in 1925.
- The applicant mentioned in a recent email that residential code for a guard rail is 36-inches, yet a 40-inch finish height that exceeds current building code is requested.
  - Using the measuring tape as a guide, the exposure of the wood shingles is 4-1/2 inches.
  - Starting at the historic 25-inch railing height, which ends at the top of the first row of visible shingles, adding just under three rows of shingles (15 inches) would bring the top of the railing to the requested 40-inch height. Staff added vertical lines to the middle photo to denote the difference in the historic and requested height. The below photos offer an idea of the impact a tall railing would have at this location.
  - As noted previously, the second story portion of the rear porch was removed without HDC approval. 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 that the proposed railing height was not typical for bungalow houses in 1925; it is too tall for this historic setting and location and would alter the features and spaces that are vital in telling Ossian and Gladys Sweet's story.



*Applicant photo. The exposure of one row of shingles is 4-1/2 inches.*



*Staff photo, October 25, 2023. The red line identifies the height of the historic knee wall. The yellow line identifies the height of the proposed wood railing.*



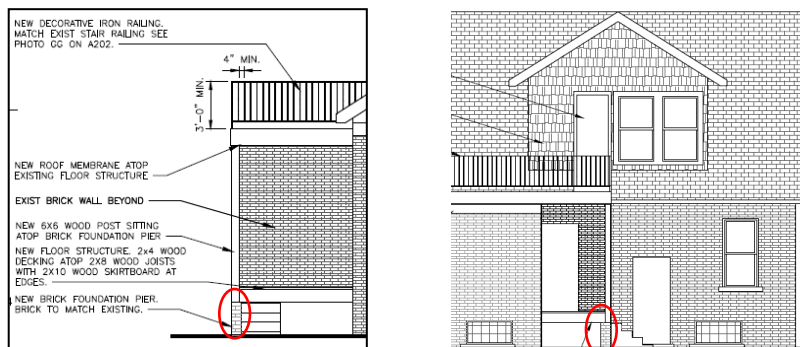
*Applicant photo. The proposed height is measured against the wall and is similar to the staff mock-up at center.*

- Staff questions the use of a 1 x 6 wood support post to grade to support the outer corner of the first floor porch deck. The previously existing condition had a brick pier supporting the deck, which matched the condition at the side and front entrances.



Staff photos, February 21, 2023.

A brick pier was proposed in the drawings that accompanied the Historic Structure Report. At the May 2023 meeting, the rear porch proposal only discussed the wood perimeter railings and the stair/railing leading to the first-story porch. Therefore, the use of a wood post as supporting unit has not been approved and it is staff's opinion the wood post is not appropriate in this location.



Above: Historic Structure Report drawings



Staff photos, October 2023. The rear elevation is historically significant to the events of September 9, 1925 and the massing of the rear elevation is similar to the front elevation. The erection of a pier under the lower porch would re-establish a continuous architectural pattern of masonry supporting elements as seen on the front and side elevations.

## RECOMMENDATION

Staff finds that the proposal does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the following reasons:

- 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.
- Trial testimony confirmed the Sweet party used the upper rear porch in their efforts to defend the property, therefore, it is staff's opinion that this porch should retain an appearance as to what could have been in place in 1925.
- The second story portion of the rear porch was removed without HDC approval. 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 that the proposed railing height was not typical for bungalow houses in 1925. It is too tall for this historic setting and location and would alter the features and spaces that are vital in telling Ossian and Gladys Sweet's story.
- The previously approved drawings of the first-floor porch identified that a new brick pier would be erected to match the existing condition. The massing of the rear elevation is similar to the front elevation, and the erection of a pier under the lower porch will re-establish a continuous architectural pattern of masonry supporting elements as seen on the front and side. The use of a wood post as a supporting unit was not approved and is not appropriate to this location.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the work as proposed, as it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically Standards 1, 2, 5, and 6:

- 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.*