

STAFF REPORT: 10/08/2025 MEETING

PREPARED BY: J. ROSS

ADDRESS: 264 WATSON

APPLICATION NO: HDC2025-00592

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BRUSH PARK

APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: JOHN BIGGAR/STUDIOZONE DETROIT

OWNER: ELIZABETH SOMMERS AND PETER BASILE

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 9/22/2025

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 9/15/2025

SCOPE: ERECT PORCH AT FRONT AND SIDE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The house located at 264 Watson was erected ca. 1880 as a single-family, Queen Anne style dwelling. The house features a central 2 ½-story high, hipped-roof mass with a 2 ½-story high, projecting gabled roof wing at the front. A two-story, flat-roof rear addition had been constructed by 1887. Exterior walls are primarily clad with brick that has been painted red, however wood appears in the front gable end. The building has wood, vinyl, and aluminum windows. Despite the replacement of some of the building's wood windows, the original wood brickmould appears intact throughout. A partial width wood porch, added in 2021, is located at the building's front façade. A second, historic-age, wood porch with decorative jigsawn details and turned wood posts, is located at the east side wall. A non-historic, flat-roof wood porch with a concrete block deck/floor is located at the building's rear.



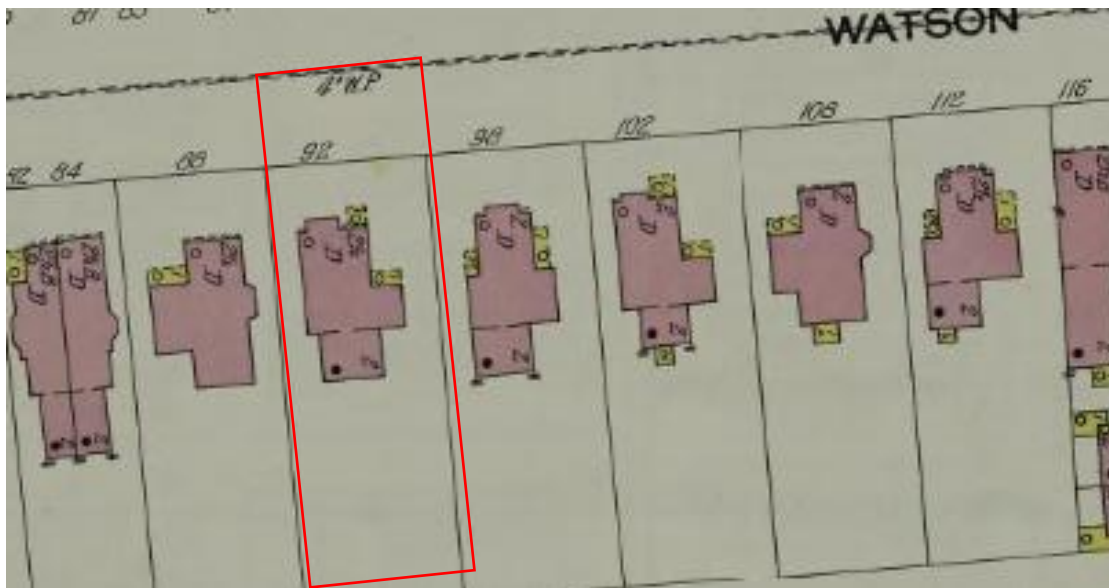
264 Watson, current conditions. Photo by staff taken 9/22/2025



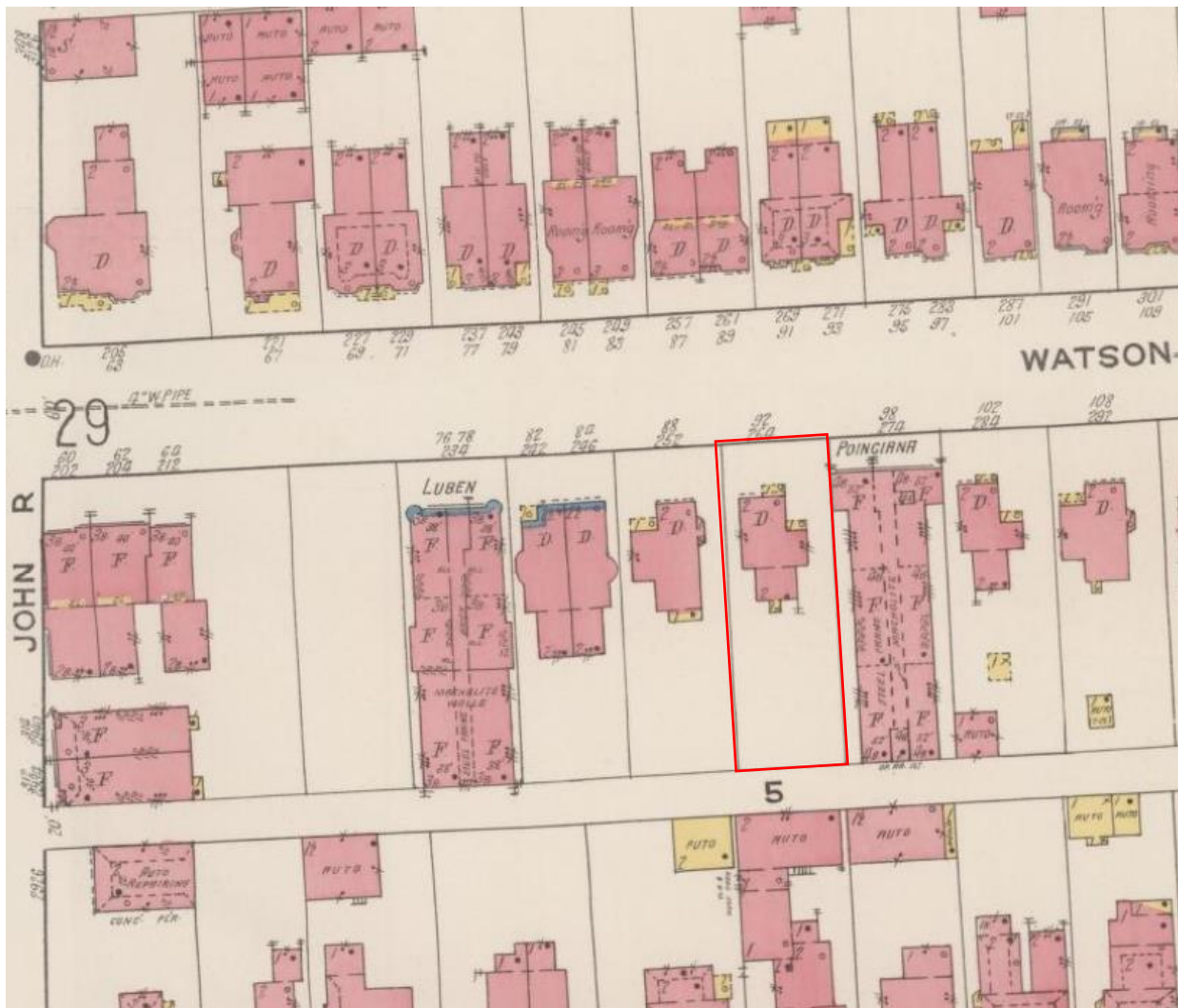
264 Watson, current conditions. Showing non-historic front porch (red arrow) and historic east side porch (yellow arrow). Photo by staff taken 9/22/2025



264 Watson, outlined in yellow. Detroit Parcel Viewer



Sanborn Insurance Fire Map, 264 Watson, 1887. Note that the building is addressed as 92 Watson at this time



Sanborn Insurance Fire Map, 264 Watson, 192



Sanborn Insurance Fire Map. 264 Watson, 1950

PROPOSAL

Per the submission, the applicant is seeking the Commission's approval to erect a new porch at the property. Specifically, the project includes the following:

- Demolish the existing non-historic front porch
- Erect a new front porch which wraps around the side of the building and connects with the existing historic side porch

Please note that the submitted drawings depict a number of additional exterior work items which are associated with the planned rehabilitation of the house. Most of the items were approved by the Commission via a COA that was issued on 12/11/2024, while other items are approvable at a staff level. The applicant has recently submitted a permit set of drawings to the building department for the work items that were approved by the Commission in 2024 in addition to the staff approval scope. Staff therefore reiterates that the ***current scope of work which has been submitted to the Commission for review at the 10/08/2025 meeting only includes the above-listed items related to the front and side porches as it was not covered under the 12/11/2024 COA and cannot be staff approved.***

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

December 11, 2024 Porch Replacement Proposal (HDC2024-00666)

- Please note that the applicant presented a proposal to rehabilitate the property to the Commission for review at their 12/11/2024 regular meeting. See the following link to the application webpage from the December 2024 HDC meeting which includes the information the applicant submitted to the Commission in support of their application [264 Watson \(12/11/2024\) | City of Detroit](#). One scope item for which the applicant was seeking the Commission's approval was the installation of a new front and side porch, which included the demolition of the existing, historic-age east side porch. The Commission issued a **Denial** for the demolition of the existing historic-age east side porch at the 12/11/2024 HDC meeting for the following reasons:
 - The east side porch proposed for removal was a distinctive, character-defining feature of the property because it appears to date from the building's original date of construction and displays significant ornamental features which are illustrative of the building's vintage/period of construction and Queen Anne style
 - The application did not provide documentation that shows that the distinctive character-defining east side porch is deteriorated beyond repair. Also, if the porch was shown to be deteriorated beyond repair the new porch the Standards require an exact replication. While the new porch appears to borrow design cues from the historic, it does not exactly replicate the existing

However, the Commission issued a **Certificate of Appropriateness** for the demolition of the **existing non-historic front porch** and the erection of a new front porch *with the condition that the new front porch*.

- After their receipt of the Commission's notices of decision, the applicant filed an appeal with the State's Attorney General's Office with respect to the Commission's Denial of the proposed demolition of the historic east façade porch.
- The applicant attended the 2/12/2025 Historic District Commission regular meeting to present additional information with respect to the historic side porch's condition [264 Watson \(02/12/2025\) | City of Detroit](#). However, the Commission affirmed their previous decision for the Denial of the demolition of the historic east side porch [Microsoft Word - 264 Watson - HDC Affirmation of Denial](#)
- On 9/25/2025, the Michigan State Historic Preservation Review Board upheld the Commission's Denial of the proposed demolition of the east façade, historic porch.

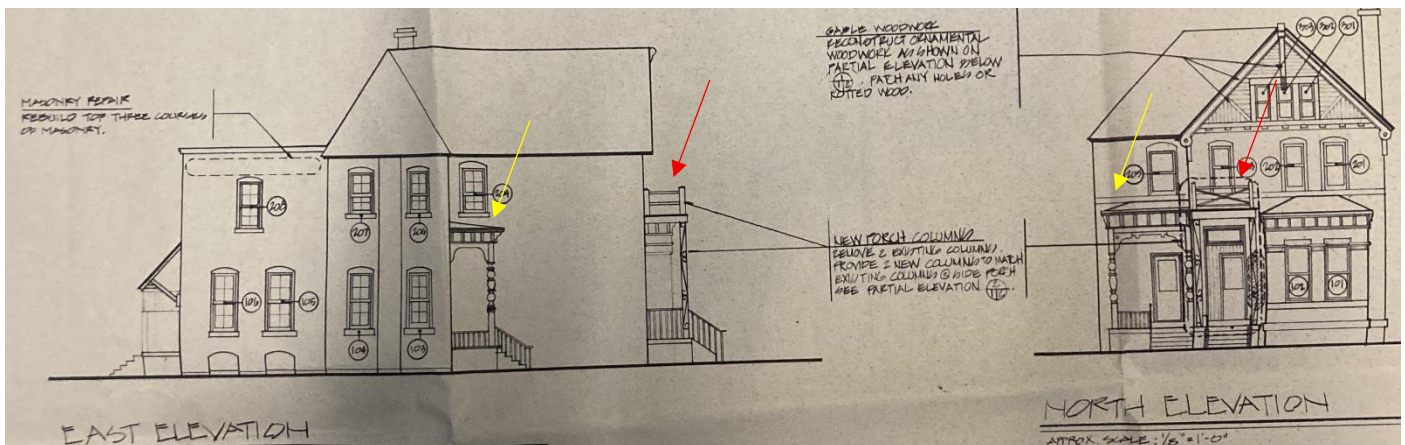
Current Porch Replacement Proposal

- **The Woodward East Historic District**, which included 264 Watson, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1975. The National Park Service determined that 264 Watson was a Contributing property to the NRHP-listed district. Staff notes that the NRHP nomination identified the property as Contributing because the designation report for the district did not provide a list of Contributing and Noncontributing buildings.
- **The Brush Park Historic District** was locally designated in 1980 but did not identify Contributing/Noncontributing status of the properties within the district, as noted above.
- See the below photo of the house, taken in 1980 at the time of the district's local designation to note the following:
 - The east side porch was present and appears to be of historic age/original to the date of the house's construction. Note that the side porch displays decorative detailing (outlined in red) which is consistent with the detailing at the front façade's bay (outlined in yellow)
 - The front porch is not of historic age

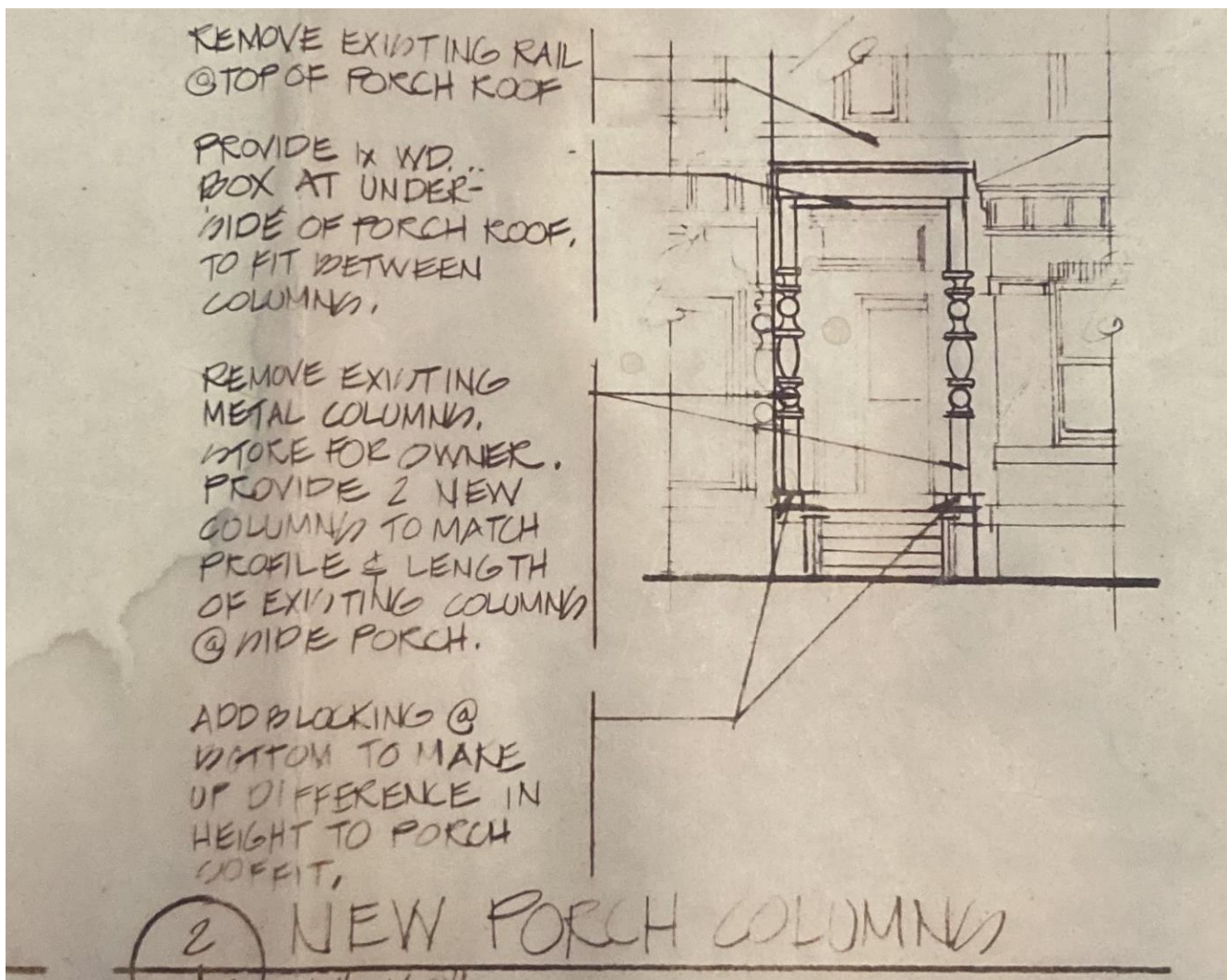


264 Watson, designation slide dating from 1980. Note that the side porch displays decorative detailing (outlined in red) which is consistent with the detailing at the front façade's bay (outlined in yellow)

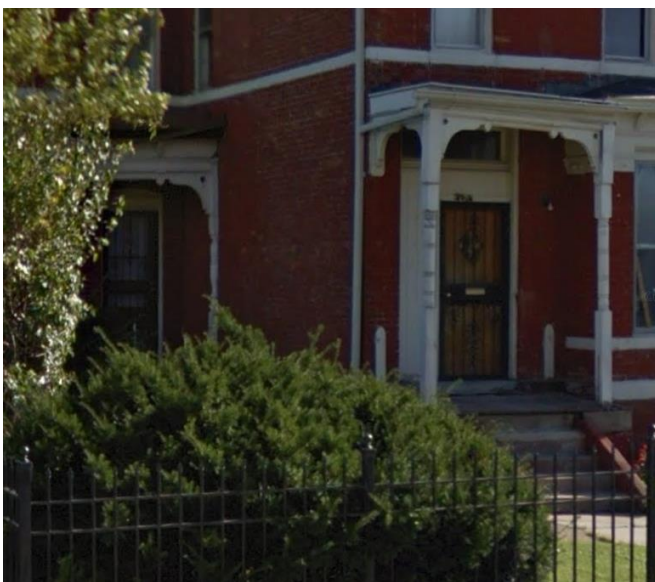
- The above Sanborn Maps indicate that the building had a distinct east side and a front porch as early as 1887. This condition continues to the current day.
- With respect to the current front porch, a review of HDC records revealed that the house was rehabilitated in 1981 under a City-funded, home repair program. Exterior work items included the installation of a new asphalt shingle roof, the addition of the current ornamental woodwork/vergeboard at the front facades gable end, the addition of new columns at the front porch to match those present at the historic east side porch, and the removal of the rooftop rail at the front porch (see the below).



Rehab drawings from 1981 showing the front (yellow arrow) and side porch (red arrow) conditions at that time. The project proposes to replace the non-historic front porch with a new porch which takes design cues from the historic east side porch. Note that the side porch was not proposed for repair, likely because it was in good condition and retained elements that were consistent with the building's historic character.



Rehab drawings from 1981, showing the proposed design of the new porch, which takes cues from the historic east side porch.

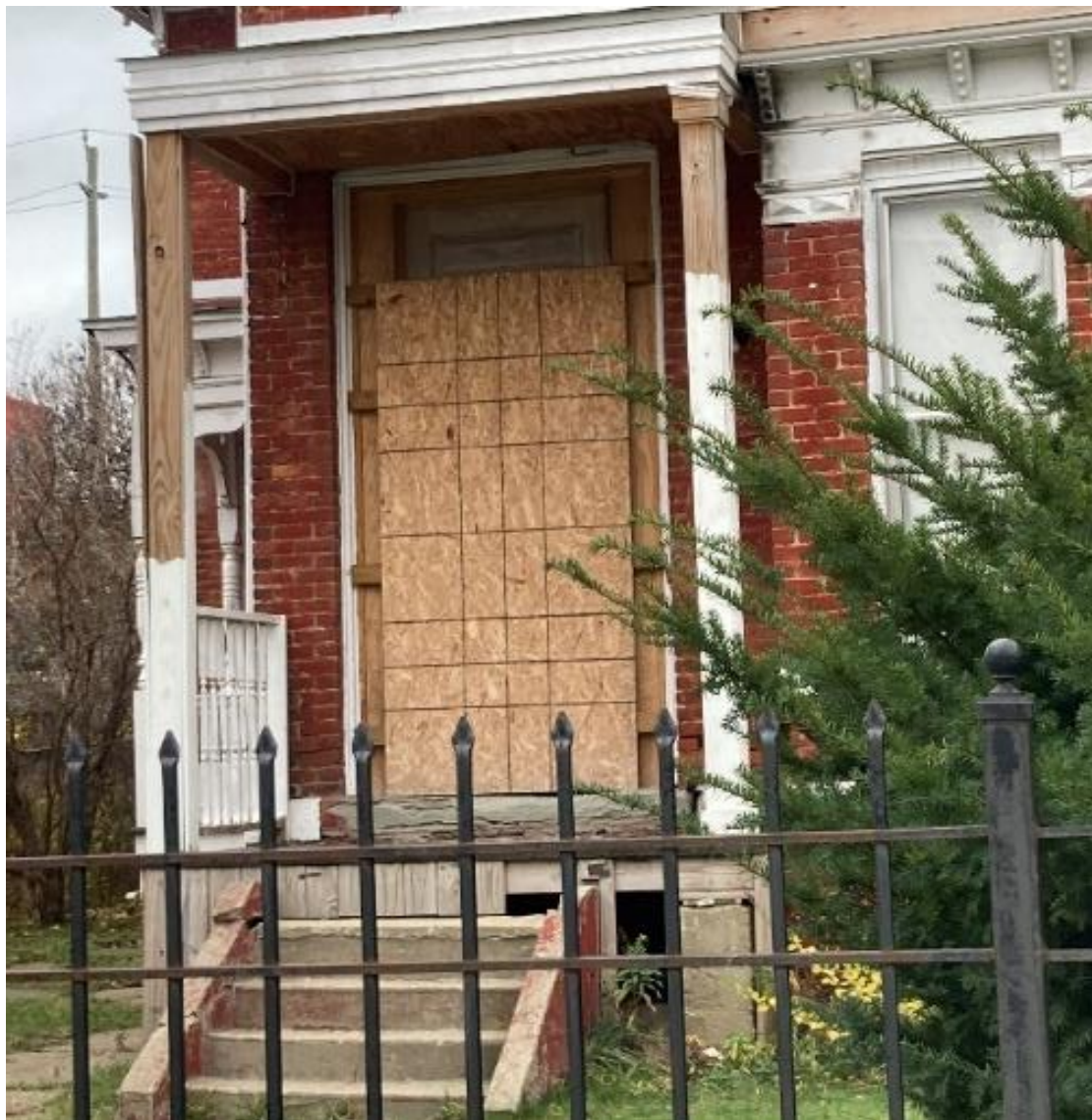


Google Streetview image, 2011. Showing the front porch which was added in 1981



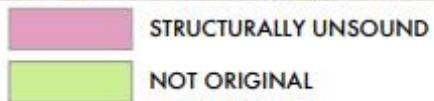
Front porch in 1980, at time of local designation, prior to the 1981 rehab

- Google Streetview images indicate that the later, non-historic front porch which was added in 1981 was removed sometime between 2011 and 2013 without HDC approval, leaving the masonry steps. The current front porch columns, roof, and railings were installed in 2021 without HDC approval (see below). Staff supports the proposed removal of the current front porch as it is not of historic age and does not contribute to the property's historic character.



Front porch, current conditions. Photo by staff, 11/25/2024

- With respect to the historic east side porch, staff notes that it currently appears much as it did at the time of local designation/when the building was identified as Contributing to the historic district. It is staff's opinion that the side porch is a distinctive character-defining feature of the building as it displays historic-age details which are associated with the Queen Anne style and are reflective of decorative detailing elsewhere on the building. A review of Sanborn maps (provided above) indicates that the porch has been extant since 1887. Also, note that the Commission determined that the east side porch was a distinctive, character-defining feature of the property at their 12/11/2025 regular meeting. The Commission upheld this position at their 02/12/2025 meeting. The porch also appears to remain in relatively good condition and therefore should be kept and, where deteriorated, repaired using in-kind materials. The below indicates the the areas/elements of the porch that are in poor condition and the elements that do not date from the building's original construction as noted by the applicant.



Existing historic side porch. Diagram by applicant

- The below photos outline the current conditions of the porch.



Appearance of east side porch in 1980, at time of local designation. Photo provided by HDAB



East side porch. Current appearance. Photo provided by applicant



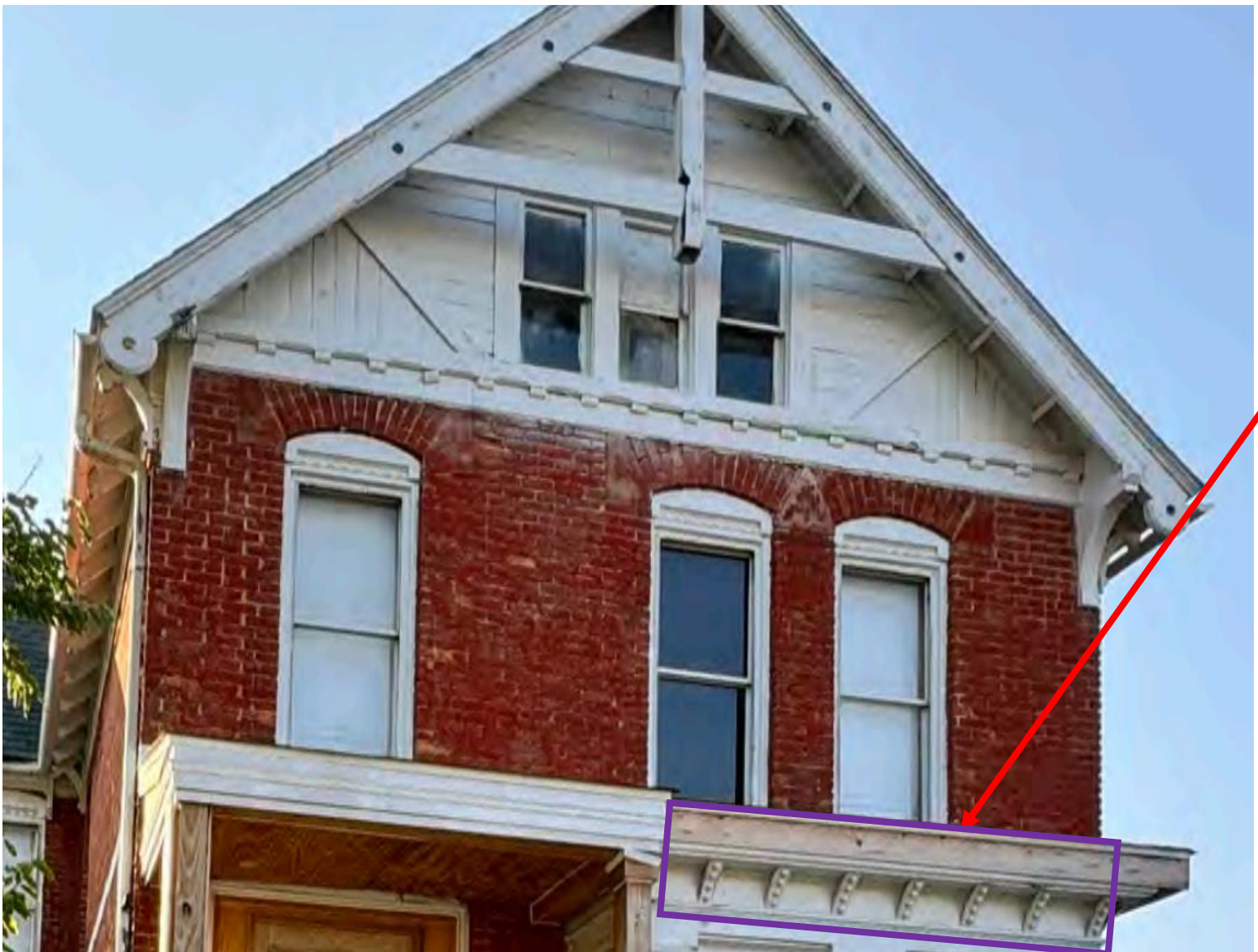
East side porch. Current appearance. Photo provided by applicant



East side porch. Current appearance. Photo provided by applicant



East side porch, current appearance. Note that the east side porch's decorative details match those at the front façade's bay window. Specifically, the brackets at the porch soffit/eave area match those at the front facade bay (outlined in yellow). Provided by applicant



Front façade, current appearance. Note that the east side porch's decorative details match those at the front bay window. Specifically, the brackets at the porch soffit/eave area match those at the front facade bay (outlined in purple). Provided by applicant

- With the current submission, the applicant is proposing to demolish the existing non-historic front porch and erect a new hipped roof-wood front porch. The new porch floor and balustrade will wrap around the east side wall to integrate into the existing historic side porch. Specifically, the existing porch floor, stairs, and handrails/balustrade at the side porch will be demolished and replaced with the new porch floor and balustrade which extends off the front porch. As a result, once separate front and side porches will appear as a single wrap around porch. Staff notes the following with respect to the appropriateness of the proposal:
 - As noted above, staff does not object to the removal of the existing front porch because it is not historic and is not compatible with the building's historic character
 - Staff does not object to the concept of a front porch that wraps around the side of the building in some manner
 - However, per the above Sanborn maps, the front and side porches have existed as separate elements since 1887/for the past 137 years. It is therefore staff's opinion that the proposed project does not meet the Standards because it introduces a new porch form/footprint that is incompatible with the building's historic appearance. The two porches should remain as distinct, separate elements in staff's opinion.
 - Also, with respect to the portion of the proposed new porch that lacks a roof, staff notes that historic-age wood porches/wood porches which were erected in the late 19th/early 20th century typically had roofs in order to protect the structure from weather. Installing a wood porch "connector" at the side wall without a roof as proposed in this application is incompatible with historic precedent. However, adding a roof to the proposed side porch deck would further contribute to the historically incompatible connection of the front and back porches, further diminishing the original character of the two porches as distinct, separate elements.

ISSUES

- The front and side porches have existed as separate elements since 1887. This is a distinctive and historic character-defining feature of the house. The proposed project does not meet the Standards because it introduces a new porch form/footprint that is incompatible with the building's historic appearance. The two porches should remain as distinct, separate elements.
- Historic-age wood porches/wood porches which were erected in the late 19th/early 20th century typically had roofs.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

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

Recommendation 1 of 1, Denial: Erect a new porch at the front and side facades

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be inappropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Brush Park Historic District's Elements of Design, specifically, Standards #:

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.*
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.*

For the following reasons:

- The front and side porches have existed as separate elements since 1887. This is a distinctive and historic character-defining feature of the house. The proposed project does not meet the Standards because it introduces a new porch form/footprint that is incompatible with the building's historic appearance. The two porches should remain as distinct, separate elements.
- Historic-age wood porches/wood porches which were erected in the late 19th/early 20th century typically had roofs. However, adding a roof to the proposed side porch deck would further contribute to the historically incompatible connection of the front and back porches, further diminishing the original character of the two porches as distinct, separate elements.