

EATON RAPIDS HISTORIC STUDY
COMMISSION REPORT



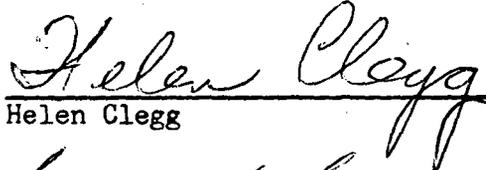
Jean Blood

TRANSMITTAL

We the undersigned, duly appointed to the Eaton Rapids Historic Study Committee by city council action of 1973, do hereby certify this report to contain our recommendations to the Council and Planning Commission of Eaton Rapids having arrived at such determinations through twelve months of research, discussion and deliberation. We appreciate the opportunity to have produced this report. Further we are pleased and proud that our work has been at no expense to the city.

APRIL 1974


John C. Calhoun II, Chairman

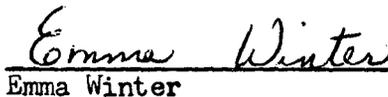

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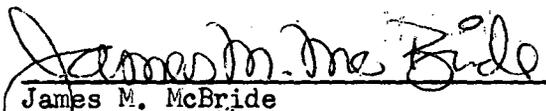

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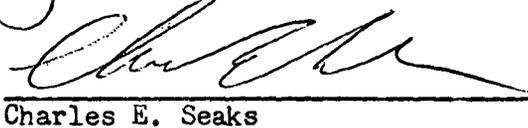

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INTRODUCTION

While progress is an essential criterion in the American life style, each era has its own special interpretation of this phenomenon. Progress has long been interpreted as, and synonymous with, economic, industrial and geographic expansion. Although this kind of expansion was a necessary outgrowth of our development, we are now beginning to realize its toll on our resources, environment, and human tranquility. As we approach our nation's 200th anniversary, a new mood or era is emerging which interprets progress with an emphasis on human values and on the preservation of natural and cultural characteristics which are an integral part of a satisfying environment. "Busier, faster, bigger, newer" are no longer necessarily more desirable than "smaller, slower, older". Whether it be a product, a building, or a vacant parcel of land, we are beginning to question whether destroying the existing and constructing the new is always preferable.

Too often we have witnessed the demolition of a site which, although in disrepair, was structurally, architecturally and aesthetically sound, a unique and meaningful part of a community, and seen it, within a week, replaced with a parking lot and a building identical to hundreds of others throughout the country. We have watched quiet out-of-the-way neighborhoods within our towns and cities, which reflect the easy closeness of an earlier time, become merely houses on either side of a busy thoroughfare. We, as a nation, are realizing that these actions cause irreparable damage. Plunging haphazardly ahead with no consideration for where we've been is not producing the humanly satisfying environment we desire. We will progress but we are realizing that it must be with an eye toward preserving some of the quality of our past.

The evolving trend is that much of the older, the historic, or just the already existing, because each is part of our heritage, are satisfying and worthy of preservation. This change in attitude is evident in the residential areas of our cities and towns. Many communities are admitting the value of historic buildings or areas and neighborhoods because they offer a sense of the past. These neighborhoods may lack any one historically significant structure but because of their overall age, tone, or period influence may have a general character or continuity which lends to a pleasing environment.

In response to a growing concern for the preservation of these historic buildings and districts two acts have recently been enacted. On the National level the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 allows for the expansion of the "National Register of Historical Places". Once placed on this register, a site is eligible for certain Federal funds and is protected from being destroyed by any project financed in whole or part by Federal funds. On the State level Public Act 169, passed in 1970 provides for the acquisition of land and structures for historic purposes, the preservation of historic sites and structures, the establishment of historic districts and historic district commissions.

Concern for historic preservation in Eaton Rapids was expressed on several recent occasions. In the fall of 1971, the Horner house was threatened with demolition. Simultaneously, the empty lot across from the Horner house, which provides the town with one of the more lovely views of the river, was threatened with site construction. The response of residents was immediate, strong, and showed great concern for a historic site and a treasured natural feature as well as a specific neighborhood's effort to protect its identity. Of equal interest to residents

is the possible effect of construction on highway M-99 and its effects on the small town, tree lined character of our main street. Residents realized the need to act now before our character is obliterated by unchanneled growth. Much of the identity of Eaton Rapids, the Island City, is dependent on the Grand River, Spring Brook, the mill race, Island Park, and the bridges traversing these waterways. One of the most picturesque of these features, Island Park, is constantly threatened by a weakening foundation. These and other similar incidents were the impetus for the formation of a privately organized group of residents, one of whose expressed purposes is to work toward the preservation of the natural and historical beauty of Eaton Rapids.

The City Council reacted promptly to this local concern. Working within the framework of Public Act 169, the council appointed a Historic Study Committee to gather information on structures, sites, and neighborhoods within the town which residents felt to be of value and worthy of preservation. The committee was quick to realize that numerous other towns about the country have faced similar problems and have also taken action. The number of studies and reports of this type is abundant. The Eaton Rapids Historic Study Committee was able to profit greatly from the review of these documents. It should also be noted that, while many cities have secured government and private funds to research and prepare study reports, the committee consisted of, and the report was entirely prepared through volunteer efforts.

HISTORY (From whence we have come)

The character of any neighborhood or town is dependent upon the era in which it was built and upon the spirit, ideas and purposes of its inhabitants. For Eaton Rapids that era began in the late 1830's and early 1840's. Even this early natural features played an important role in the choice of "Forest City" as a settlement. The hills and plains around us offered rich, easily cleared farm lands and an abundant source of water power. The junction of Spring Brook and the Grand River formed a hub for sawmill, gristmill, and the few slab-board homes which became the village. The crossing of several Indian trails at Eaton Rapids, one of which later became M-50, also played a part in helping to establish the settlement as a permanent community. Although little remains of this early era, it was a time of power from water and trade from travel.

Water and travel, although in quite different forms, were innately important in later periods of Eaton Rapids' history. The 1870's and 1880's were a time of great health spas. Here the ill found cures and the well found pleasure. Social life at these spas was luxurious, elegant and gay. Travel to and from the spas was often as much a means of amusement and entertainment as the spa itself, for this was also the great railroad era.

In 1869, E. B. Frost drilled his historic well. Rumors spread and grand ideas were born. Within a few years fourteen other "mineral springs" were drilled. Two railroads built depots here allowing for easy transportation to and from town, and the mineral spa fever thrived. Eaton Rapids' mineral waters and baths were proclaimed a cure for every ailment known and some unknown to man. Bath houses flourished. Luxurious hotels with ballrooms, dining rooms, parlors and commodious sample rooms were built. Mc Auliff Island Park was "the" place to be seen on Sunday afternoon. Many a miss donned her best bustle for a stroll on its one and a quarter mile promenade. Stores and shops of every sort and description were needed to accommodate and tempt the influx of tourists.

This happy, if sentimental and frivolous time, with its athletic field-fairgrounds, paddle-wheel steamer, summer Chautauqua, arbored dancing platform and band concerts, soon waned to a more serious age. But for local industry a city built on so slender a foundation could have been lost. It could be said that wool and ice cream were the city's redeemer. An old carding mill which utilized power from the sawmill race, was purchased by Samuel Horner. From this beginning grew an industry which became the city's largest employer. Later other woolen mills were founded and for many years Eaton Rapids was a wool town. Another industrious chap, Dennis Miller, decided a good thing should be spread around and in 1896 began manufacturing ice cream. These early hand cranked freezers were soon modernized to produce more ice cream than any other manufacturer in central Michigan.

Despite the slow but steady growth of Eaton Rapids during these industrial years, it was during the mineral spring era Eaton Rapids really burgeoned from a village into a small city. Much of today's central business district was constructed during these boom years. Fortunately, much of this construction as well as the visual spirit of the time still exists. A discerning glance past picture windows and contemporary facades recalls a time when high button shoes, harnesses, and cracker barrels were the going fare in these shops. The flavor of the time carried over into the residential building too. Greek and Gothic Revival, Italianate, and Victorian Gingerbread were popular architectural styles of this period; many fine examples of each adorn city streets.

More important than preserving any one site, building, or home, is the preservation of the visual continuity of the growth of this era. The secure well-being of this period was reflected in the stately tree lined streets, in the numerous double lots with lovely backyards, in the concentration of shopping facilities within a specific area, and in the pride residents and merchants took in their property. Much credit belongs to the heirs of these early builders who have valued and preserved these qualities. Much responsibility belongs to the present heirs to see that this effort is perpetuated.

PERSPECTIVE

At a time when urban America is developing with frightening sameness, preservation of a town's individual character is all important. As large metropolitan areas grow and are subjected to urban sprawl, congestion, traffic problems and too often deterioration, people exit. These people want a quieter, less hectic way of life. They search for a small town with an unmistakable and pleasant identity. People have a right to choose such an environment. And yet all too often exodus from metropolis to the small town insidiously destroys the small town by giving it the very characteristics people hoped to escape. Fortunately Eaton Rapids has not yet lost its individuality. Today it is still a quiet, peaceful community with many scenic river views, fine older homes, and an unadulterated main street and downtown area.

The popularity and ability of Home Tours to raise money for charity is proof of the popularity of older homes. Another proof is the frequency with which these older homes are sought out by younger families who proceed to rejuvenate and restore them to their original beauty. Well maintained older homes add a sense of uniqueness, originality and character to a town. Eaton Rapids is blessed

with an abundance of these fine older homes. Early architects here were free with beautiful stone, wood, glass and fixtures that on today's market are irreplaceable. The variety of architectural styles chosen by builders also gives a real sense of individuality to these homes. Early occupants, often with expanded families, prized large yards and planted them with an abundance of trees, shrubs, and flowers. These same older plantings still grow on many of these original lots. The gnarled maples, lacy spirea and fragrant lilacs do much to preserve the original charm of these spacious, open lots.

We are now beginning to admit the scientific importance of trees in our environment. Early residents needed no such proof. They planted with gay abandon and even paid trees homage on Arbor day. The rewards of their work are for us to enjoy. Many of our neighborhoods and main streets attain a peaceful dignity, a coolness in summer and a special beauty in autumn because of these stately old trees.

Without forethought and careful planning, central business districts and older established neighborhoods are the first to become rundown, abandoned and eventually slums. As proven by the Heritage Hill District in Grand Rapids, this process is not unavoidable. Heritage Hills contains many fine older homes, among the most prized a home designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The area had been slowly deteriorating and was finally threatened with destruction and urban renewal. Residents were able to create a historic district from the area before any actual razing took place. Through efforts of concerned residents, interest was generated in the upkeep of the area, restoration began and eventually the area became a source of pride to its residents and to the city.

Historic districts need not be on a grand scale or even presently historic. The goal is more the preservation of a unique living environment--one which is typical of the past. The Old West Side district in Ann Arbor is an area of unpretentious houses built for common laborers in the early twentieth century. The houses are, for the most part, similar and unassuming. Its overall attractiveness is its modest scale, its visual continuity, and the example it provides of a past way of life. In making it a historic district, Ann Arbor residents displayed a sense of value for a fast vanishing way of life.

Largely through the efforts of historical preservation these and other districts in the country have discouraged deterioration and attracted private capital needed to rehabilitate and preserve areas for future generations. Often large older buildings, although structurally, architecturally and aesthetically sound, seem to be economically unfeasible today. However with careful planning and adaptive use these buildings can be more economical than purchase of and construction on a new site. Second and third stories of downtown blocks can be renovated to attract professional and managerial office space as well as additional commercial ventures. Ground floors of large older homes can become sales offices or shops, leaving top floors for residential use. A structure does not always have to retain its original use to retain its original identity. Historic preservation is concerned with maintenance of external facades, existing density and natural features. Adaptive use of a structure or area is often necessary to preserve it.

An attractive business district, stately older homes, tree lined streets, lack of congestion and urban sprawl, all combine to give Eaton Rapids its small town charm. The value of this to residents and visitors is incalculable. With population growth and families departing from large urban areas, we cannot feasibly

stay the size we now are. But with an awareness of what gives us our identity, a concern for carefully planned future growth, and the cooperative effort of residents, we can preserve our small town flavor if not our small town size.

In gathering information for this report the study committee was dependent on state, county and local tax records, the state and local library files of old preserved newspapers, and on many local persons who willingly spent time reminiscing and explaining about "the old days". We also owe special thanks to our library for arranging a trust in which any material accumulated in the preparation of this report may be maintained.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

It is unrealistic to think of keeping Eaton Rapids "the way it is" even a short period of time into the future. There must be change and growth. But we must control the change and direct the growth. However, the several existing historic areas with their valuable architecture and pleasant living environment can and should be saved. When buildings within these areas are determined unworthy of preservation, it is necessary that replacements be in a manner compatible with the existing environment. The pride and community identity of Eaton Rapids residents feel toward their town needs to be encouraged. Erosion and decay need not and should not be an outcome of growth.

These are the basic premises under which the Historic Study Committee worked. The criteria for evaluating various areas in the search for historic districts were based on a list of environmental evaluation elements devised by the consultant team working with the Marshall preservation project and are as follows:

- . general maintenance connoting a pleasant, well-kept quality
- . building mass and setback, consistent with an occasional contrast suggesting low-scaled, small town feeling
- . overhead tree canopy as a roof lending charm and intimacy to the streetscape
- . consistent landscaping including lawn and use of plant materials of the late 1800's and early 1900's, deciduous (spirea, mock orange, lilac) as opposed to evergreen popular today
- . occasional views into back lots containing carriage houses and out buildings
- . occasional long views characterizing a more rural environment
- . occasional contrast of a pretentious building mixed with those less pretentious suggesting neighborhood mixes of the past
- . consistency of building materials and colors suggesting a pleasant uniformity
- . street lighting with a small town, old-time flavor

Working within this framework the committee recommends that the following four areas be designated as historic districts with the privileges and limitations encompassed therein.

SOUTH MAIN STREET DISTRICT An area defined as structures fronting both east and west sides of South Main Street beginning on the north with the channel adjacent to the State Street dam and ending on the south with South Street. Contiguous to and included within this district shall be the Basing house at 107 King Street.

To many people passing through town on M-50 or M-99 this area is Eaton Rapids. Even to residents who know the rest of the town this area serves as an entrance and thus is viewed constantly. Even with all this passing the area retains a quiet dignity. The houses and adjoining buildings are generally in a very good state of repair. Within the district are fine examples of Italianate, Queen Ann, Second Empire, and Carpenter Gothic. Early building in this area began in the 1850's, however, most of the structures date from the 1880's. There is a spontaneous mixture of large and smaller homes. Even though South Main is a major thoroughfare, the night is unbroken by neon glare. Lights are soft, inconspicuous and create a small town atmosphere. The street and sidewalks are shaded by large, beautiful old maples. Houses are often spaced on double or large lots lending a spacious feeling. Views of back lots reveal lovely lawns and landscaping often characteristic of an earlier period. Combined with the several views of the river this abundance of greenery lends an almost rural setting. Few cities, towns, or villages have such a pleasant, unique or well preserved main street.

The committee recommends preservation of the structures and natural features within this area. Whenever possible, restoration of buildings to their original appearance should be encouraged. Demolitions, moving or building permits should be carefully reviewed. It is the committee's intent that all three should be discouraged. Contemplated changes in the exterior of any buildings should be carefully reviewed and approved only when in keeping with the visual continuity of the area. The present residential zoning should be kept as long as is feasible. If at some point in time adaptive use of the structures becomes necessary, for their preservation, careful attention must be given to retaining not only the visual integrity of structures, but the existing natural features. The trees, lawns, and many shrubs should be maintained in their present state if the charm of this neighborhood is to survive.

KNIGHT AND RIVER STREET DISTRICT An area defined as structures fronting both the north and south sides of Knight Street from the bridge to East Street; structures fronting both the east and west sides of River Street from Knight on the north to State on the south; structures fronting both north and south sides of both Hamlin and Holmes Streets from River Street on the west to East Street on the east; contiguous to and included within this district shall be the Reynolds house at 123 N. East Street.

One of the most beautiful sections in all of Eaton Rapids, this neighborhood has much to merit its designation as a historic district. Here are found many of the town's finest older homes. Examples of Greek Revival, Italianate, and Queen Ann date from the 1860's and 1880's. Even the more modest homes in the area display a pleasing variety of architectural styles as well as a consistent use of building materials and colors which lend a pleasing uniformity to the neighborhood. Majestic trees form an overhead tree canopy on all streets. Several houses are set back from streets and walks, yards are spacious, well kept and often use older deciduous plants in landscaping. Views to these back

lots often disclose carriage houses and other outbuildings reminiscent of an earlier time. The town's loveliest views of the river and island are from these streets and sidewalks. Occasional street lighting and narrow streets add to the small town feeling and intimacy.

Architectural style and period development within this area is far from homogeneous. However the committee feels the value of the area cannot be over-estimated. The overall environmental beauty and community pride are perhaps the neighborhoods' most unifying features. Residential zoning must be maintained and population density, the number of families occupying the area, must remain at an immediate proximity of its present level. The neighborhood is presently in excellent repair and shows no sign of deterioration. Designation of the area as a historic district will help assure the area's future worth. Demolition and construction should be carefully reviewed and whenever possible prohibited. Plans for exterior modification and remodeling should also be reviewed and in keeping with the individual building's design.

CANAL STREET DISTRICT An area defined as structures fronting the east and west sides of Canal Street from the service station on the southwest to Michigan Street on the northeast.

This area is not only historically important but well might reap the most immediate benefit from being designated a historic district. Much of the building in the area was done in the 1880's and includes Italianate and Greek Revival architecture. Several of the houses are set majestically high above the road, are surrounded by spacious lots and some still boast carriage houses. While this section has many of the same characteristics as the other areas mentioned, large shading maples, lovely spacious lawns, singular street lighting, and beautiful architecture, the area is beginning to show signs of disrepair. A sense of community pride and available private capital resources are needed if this locale is to regain its former beauty; there is documented evidence that creation of historic districts fosters both.

Every effort must be made to encourage community identity and pride within the neighborhood with restoration and maintenance of structures and natural features a prime target. Adaptive use may provide ways of securing private capital needed to rehabilitate structures. As one of the major entrances to town, this area is viewed frequently by resident and visitor. Its flavor and visual aesthetics are thus of great importance. Any improvements or changes in the street or traffic pattern at this point must be accomplished with utmost care and planning so that the area's present downward trend does not become irreversible.

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT An area defined as structures facing the east and west sides of Main Street from Brook Street on the north to State Street on the south; included within this district is the Island Park.

The downtown area of Eaton Rapids is a well maintained, useful shopping center. It provides a pleasing, visual identity for visitor and resident alike. It adds to the overall attractiveness of the annual home tour. But most of all it provides residents with short range availability of many necessary goods and services. Many central business districts throughout the country are being

abandoned to blight and decay as shops and services move to the city's perimeter. This is an obvious waste of space and resources as well as a loss of property value and tax revenue. Haphazard development of shopping centers on the outskirts of Eaton Rapids would badly erode the town's market strength and commercial activity. If downtown stores, in an effort to compete, moved to an outside shopping center, present buildings would stand vacant. Unoccupied buildings soon become eyesores and detract from occupied and thriving businesses. An exodus of several stores can lead to panic and an abandonment of the downtown area. Every effort must be made to support merchants, to encourage adaptive use of empty space and to prevent such a disaster.

Business establishments which could and should be concentrated in the downtown area, should be denied zoning that would allow their location elsewhere. New shops and services wishing to locate within the Eaton Rapids area should be encouraged to locate downtown. There are several ways to make this an attractive possibility. Local persons could research possible uses of empty space, local sources of private and public capital available for restoration projects, develop methods for gaining additional parking within the immediate area, and identify ways of beautifying and enhancing use of public open space areas, especially Island Park.

Downtown merchants and building owners cannot be expected to immediately take steps toward extensive exterior changes to their structures. However as repairs and remodeling become necessary the contemplated changes could be aimed at an eventual reconstruction of the town's 1880-1900 era appearance. Again, local persons could research the visual aspects of this design. Old photographs could be collected and sketches and drawings made to give merchants and landlords a reference point. Often restoration of an old existing facade is more economical than complete remodeling. Financial benefits often follow the added charm and character gained by such a project, as in the French Quarter, New Orleans; Old Town, Chicago; Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia; Main Street, Saugatuck.

Included within this recommended district is Island Park, an important part of Eaton Rapids since the 1860's. Its value to resident and visitor is obvious and needs no justification. Despite this, funds have not been available for imperative repair of the retaining wall. The committee urges every possible effort to obtain local and federal funding for the necessary repairs.

In addition to the four proposed historic districts, the committee feel three structures especially worth of designation as Historic Sites.

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH The building of the Congregational church, built in 1878 remains much the same today as when completed. Typical of church architecture of the time, the structure has a unique feature. In the center of the windows is a red glass medallion enclosing white Old English letters. The stained glass work of Christ blessing the children is not only beautiful but possibly the only such design in the United States.

METHODIST CHURCH The First United Methodist church is also a town landmark. Built in 1880-1882 and later added to and remodeled, the building's architecture incorporates many beautiful stained glass windows and a very unusual slate-roofed belfry.

RED RIBBON HALL The present Masonic Temple has a unique place in the town's history. Built in the 1870's by some of the town's early founders, the hall represented the individual and combined efforts and dreams of a great many people. The red brick ribbon laid just below the building's mansard roof is symbolic of the Red Ribbon or Temperance movement which was very popular at the time. Although the original architecture was a combination of several styles and both the interior and exterior of the building have been substantially altered, the building still embodies much of the town's history. Used for many years as the movement's meeting hall, the structure was later used as an opera house, a roller skating rink, high school gymnasium, an army barracks, and an all-purpose meeting place for civic and religious clubs and organizations. Few of our local buildings surpass it in age or cultural significance.

The committee recommends letters to both churches and the Masonic Lodge, advising of the historical importance of their structures. Further, the committee requests initiatory action toward placing these sites on both Federal and State Register of Historic Places.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

If the suggestions within this study report are to become a reality, several actions are required of city government. The study committee recommends:

1. Passage of a historic district ordinance in consonance with the above detailed areas (South Main St., Knight-River St., Canal St. and the central business district.)
2. Requests to State and Federal governments for placement of such districts on State and Federal Registers of Historic Places.
3. Requests to State government for placement of historic markers in regard to Island Park, Red Ribbon Hall, Congregational and Methodist Churches, and the mineral water-mineral bath era.
4. Adoption of city policy whereby every effort is made to guard, maintain and replace trees as such are essential to our small town atmosphere and that special attention be given to the planting of flowering trees, bushes and shrubs.
5. Sustained maintenance efforts for preservation of the West Knight St. high-truss iron bridge.
6. Initiation of a small display center--museum to depict the unique history of Eaton Rapids.
7. Microfilming of Village and City proceedings--minutes for the purpose of preservation and accessibility.
8. Operation of a local area archive within the Eaton Rapids Public Library and responsible to the Library Board.
9. Citizen participation in and support of Bicentennial activities.