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THE FUTURE OF THE PAST IN FERNDALE

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Honoring the past has a short history in Ferndale. In 1970 the State of Michigan authorized Public Act No. 169, which established a Historic District Commission system throughout the state to recognize and preserve historically significant local structures and areas. Only then did Ferndale residents and city government officials contemplate the importance of local history preservation. The how, when and why this interest in the past subsequently developed offers a revealing perspective on the role of history in the city's future.

Ferndale officials in 1973 created a local Historical Study Commission to determine what aspect of Ferndale history might warrant attention and possible historic designation. Long-time residents James Avery, Maurice Cole, June Kotlarek, Vincent Lupo, and Thomas O'Donoghue, each with first-hand knowledge of Ferndale's development from village to city, were appointed to this Study Commission. Buildings and homes that had classic lines with architectural features of a certain period, and homes of famous people, were the first focus of this Commission. Examples: the Ferndale Post Office, the Pioneer Building, Pinecrest Circle, the Ferndale Center Building, and a home owned by the George Peppard family (parents of popular movie actor George Peppard). No subsequent action was taken by the Ferndale City Council to formally establish a Ferndale Historical Commission under Public Act 169, meaning that no structures or sites recommended by a local study commission, present or future, were officially eligible for historical designation and possible state support. Reason cited for this inaction: historic designations would interfere with Ferndale's business and housing development.

In 1977 the Ferndale Historical Society was formally founded by a group of 28 local residents who had informally met for several years with "the intent on saving Ferndale history for future generations." Included were Maurice Cole, who in 1971 had written the city's first history book *Ferndale of Yesteryear*, and Ruth Elmers,

June Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick, who, in 1987, would cooperatively author *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, a collection of local pioneers' memories, the second book on Ferndale history. Establishing a "home" (museum), identifying, researching, and preserving items, sites, and information reflecting local development, were the primary objectives of this new Historical Society—with the ongoing cooperation of the local study commission.

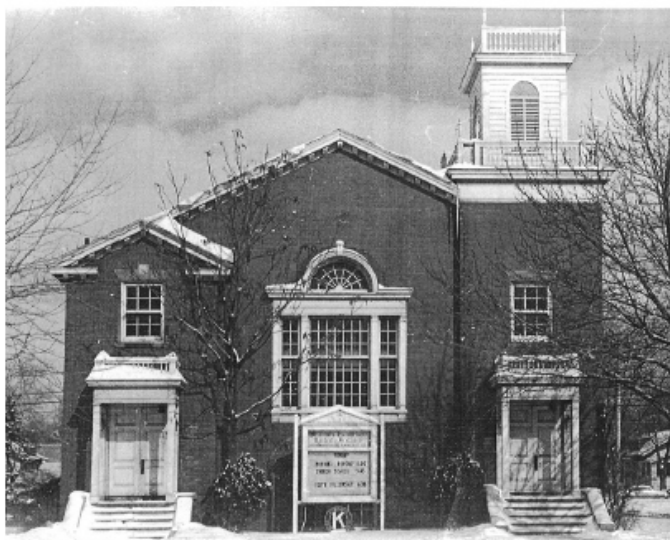


First choice for a museum was the ca.1890s Welcome Campbell House, 2327 Hilton (now Campbell Rd.); demolished in 1973. (Photo: Museum Archives)

The Campbell House, home of the pioneer Campbell family of the late 1800s (on present Hilton Rd.) was the first choice for a museum, but prohibitive rehabilitation costs meant that the building was not a suitable site. Next, a small space in the Board of Education building (Nine Mile/Woodward) was considered but rejected. Then a room at the iconic St. Paul's Methodist Church, and the building (used as a City garage) next to the church, were both possible prime museum locations because of the close proximity to the city's civic center,

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Iconic St. Paul's United Methodist Church was built in 1920, on the site of Ferndale's first church, the Tabernacle, which had been erected at the NW corner Nine Mile/Bermuda, ca. 1900. St. Paul's demolished in 2014. (Photo: Museum Archives)

were investigated—unsuccessfully. (The church was demolished in 2014; the property is now a vacant lot.) In 1980 the Royal Canadian Legion offered its building on Livernois to the city for “the good of the people of Ferndale.” City officials approved this location for use as the Ferndale Historical Society and Town Center. The Historical Society first used the building as a meeting place, and temporarily became inactive until the Legion in 1983 donated the building to the Society for use as a museum—approved by the city. A local fund drive for renovating and preparing the museum for visitors raised a total of \$7,000 from private individuals. No taxpayer funds were used.

City officials formally dedicated the Ferndale Historical Museum after the city's 64th Memorial Day services in 1983. Paul Behrendt, Chairman of the Ferndale Historical Society/Museum extended thanks to Mayor Bernie



Canadian Legion Hall, 1651 Livernois, built in 1949. The Canadian Legion donated the building to the City in 1980 for Society meetings; by 1983 it was approved for museum use. (Photo, 2000: Museum Archives)

Lennon, the City Council, City Manager Jess Soltess, and others for their dedication to Ferndale history preservation. Visitors on that day were awed by the renovations of the building. Needed electrical, plumbing, heating, painting, and roof repairs had been donated by trade unions and private donors. Two display cases, gifts from Mildred Garbutt (the mayor's wife and a founder of the museum), contained historical artifacts gathered by village/city residents of earlier days. But most Ferndale history items on exhibit were vintage photographs (badly in need of frames). The large Abraham Lincoln figure, that for years had overseen countless students in the main hallway of Lincoln High School, presided over these displays.

Ferndale's local historical study commission was formally dissolved in 1984. In 2008, this decision was reconsidered, unsuccessfully, by the City Council, meaning that local sites, business structures, and homes of historical significance remain ineligible for preservation under Public Act No. 169. Yet the Ferndale Historical Museum has now prevailed for some 35 years, run by the Ferndale Historical Society volunteer staff (varying from a maximum of 10 volunteers to as few as two), overseen by its Board of Directors, and open some 20 hours per week. Archives include information on all topics relating to Ferndale history, most dating from its first days in the 1800s and forward. Such files are consistently monitored and routinely updated. A detailed Housing Resource Collection, a ten-year project completed by volunteer Diane O'Neill who spent months/years reviewing city records, documents all structures in Ferndale, and is kept up-to-date weekly by volunteer staff. Extensive military information is on file as local residents and businesses played major roles in war times. High School yearbooks dating from the 1920s forward, up-to-date biography/obituary files, police/fire information, newspaper files, various information on local businesses, and obscure stories about local events are among the most-used files in the museum.

To assist in various projects to preserve the past, museum staff sometimes apply and receive small grants from city or community organizations. Example: in 2008 the city's Downtown Development Authority and the Historical Society cooperatively got a \$120,000 grant from a National Preserve America Project (administered by the National Park Service) to erect plaques on Ferndale's most famous historical structures. The museum building itself endures because of support from the city: the Society pays one dollar per-year rent on the building and is eligible for basic building maintenance. Other financial assistance comes from Society members and private donors

and, as a 501(c)(3) organization, sales from books on Ferndale history, house plaques, and various local history souvenirs. Inquiries about Ferndale history arrive at the museum almost every day by phone, mail, or in-person visitors. City officials, library staff, and other city personnel who are often asked “historical” questions from the public are also key museum users. World-wide queries are becoming common. Ferndale history, therefore, continues to generate interest locally and beyond.



Willis Hough Estate, 1910, NW Nine/Pinecrest corner. Landmark somewhat altered from original building, but still stands. (Photo: Courtesy of Earle Hough, Museum Archives)

The creation of an official Historical Commission in Ferndale has never been approved which means that local government designations of historic property or districts, which can aid in protections and maintenance (including tax breaks), are not yet possible. Some major historic structures marking the city’s development have been destroyed or some altered beyond recognitions. Examples: The exterior of the classic architectural landmark, the Detroit Bank and Trust building (Nine/Woodward), has been completely covered over and is now the Orchid nightclub; the unique American State Bank (Woodward/Vester) is now hidden by layers of sheathing and home of

The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future.

—Theodore Roosevelt

the Elks Club; and the Radio City Theater (Woodward/Withington), recalled by generations, is gone as are a number of other once-familiar landmarks.

In a March 8, 2006 lecture, given by Hank Berry and Robert Lebos, representatives of the City of Huntington Woods Historic District, outlined many aspects of Ferndale that are especially unique and worth saving. They noted that many Ferndale churches are prime examples of classic building techniques in limestone, terra cotta, and brickwork done by craftsmen. Archways and steeples are especially unique as are exterior wall constructions. Many commercial buildings retain original facades, such as classic brickwork and limestone, complete with original details even though they have been converted to new businesses. Examples of classic residential buildings include those with Craftsman, Dutch Colonial, Tudor, and Prairies influences. Outstanding also is that the unique development of Detroit, Woodward Avenue, and Ferndale as a community along the Woodward corridor in response to Ford’s Highland Park plant, are all reflected in Ferndale architecture. Emphasized throughout the lecture: Architecture is an important record of social and cultural history.

Today the future of preserving Ferndale’s past appears to rest mostly on archives: photos, newspapers, manuscripts, books, and rescued artifacts, all stored in one place,

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Ferndale Police/Fire Department (next to St. Paul’s Church, Nine Mile/Bermuda), built 1920s. (Fire Department later moved to its own buildings erected on east and west side of city.) Original building demolished, early 1960s. (Photo: Museum Archives)



*American State Bank (original structure), 1923, SE Woodward/ Vester. Exterior redone now local Elks Club.
(Photo: Museum Archives)*

which means that the Ferndale Historical Museum has a real challenge. By 2003 even the Detroit Free Press (February 20) noted that the city's museum needed more space. Several ideas to expand the building upwards or sideways have been investigated by museum staff but proved unworkable, given finances and space. So the little museum on Livernois remains, complete with its accumulated history of the city and a small museum staff intent on preserving it and providing viable research assistance for visitors (via technology or in-person).



Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1924-2017, 2441 Pinecrest. Original chapel built in 1924; Addition completed 1958. Congregation moved to Berkley, 2017; Pinecrest building now up for sale. (Photo: Museum Archives)

Changing demographics of Ferndale—younger employed people, most single, many temporarily Ferndale residents, attracted to the city's increasing apartment/condo development and nightlife offerings—means that the family-oriented community of earlier days offers fewer residents who are available or interested in volunteering time to serve in a historical museum. Therefore, inadequate space, fewer staff (currently two regular volunteers), various nearby construction projects, and ongoing parking problems for museum visitors, means that a sustained future of honoring the past in Ferndale is awaiting remarkable creativity and cooperation between museum staff, city residents, and the City Council—all in the interests of “saving Ferndale history for future generations.”



Grand Trunk Railroad Station, Nine Mile near Hilton, 1930s–70s. Station deemed too dangerous to retain and was demolished in early 1970s. (Photo: Museum Archives)

Sources consulted: Berry, Hank and Robert Lebow (Huntington Woods Historic District representatives), “Historic District Experiences: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly,” Lecture given at the Ferndale Public Library, March 8, 2006 (notes taken by Jean Spang, Corresponding Secretary, Ferndale Historical Society). Degain, Vivian, “Ferndale Museum Outgrows Building,” Detroit Free Press, February 20, 2003 (in museum archives). DeMaagd, Ronald U. (City Manager, Ferndale), Letter to City Commission regarding Creation of Historic District Commission, Dec. 14, 1973 (in museum archives). Dyke, John, “Ferndale’s New Historical Museum Opens, Daily Tribune, June 4, 1983 (in museum archives). “Historic Leaders (of the Museum),” Daily Tribune, No. 4, 2001 (in archives). “Local Museums Keep Past Alive for the Future,” Detroit News, Jan. 11, 1987 (in archives). Minutes of Ferndale Historical Study Committee Meeting, (Evelyne Irwin, Sec.) March 13, 1978 (in archives). Snyder, Susan, “Ferndale’s Historical Society Asks Help from Residents,” Daily Tribune, March 2, 1977 (in archives). Spang, Jean “Failing to Protect Buildings (response to City Mayor’s views on historical preservation), Mirror, February 24, 2008 (in archives). Taylor, Garry, “The Little Building Near the Edge of Town,” Ferndale Friends, February 2012 (in archives).