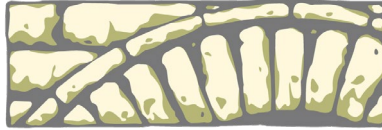


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy News

April 2022

Demolition proposed for 114 N. Blount St.

Contributing building to East Dayton Street National Historic District

A Big Issue That Reflects an Even Bigger Need: Can This Be an Opportunity Clothed as a Problem?

If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to read an [important article by Dean Mosman found in the March 16th issue of the Wisconsin State Journal](#). It provides helpful background regarding a proposal to demolish one of three buildings in the tiny National Register Historic District in Madison's Downtown that represents the only remaining cluster of buildings associated with Madison's first Black community.

The buildings are some of the oldest that remain in the city. Their stories reflect the severe economic and social forces that faced Madison's early Black residents. As might be expected given both local and national history, this community did not develop in an area of prime real estate. It had been a cattail marsh until fill was added. The buildings that remain are cast-offs constructed in the 1850s that had been moved in the early 1900s from elsewhere in the city.

Greg Werth, a hands-on restorer of vintage properties, purchased the small home at 114 N. Blount St. in December of 2021 without being able to inspect its interior. After exposing nearly all the building's structural members, he has determined that his original plan to restore the home is not feasible due to longstanding structural issues. At the end of March, he filed a formal application to demolish the structure.¹ The demolition request will be sent on to the Plan Commission. The Commission's analysis will

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¹ Website prepared by [the current owner in support of his application for demolition of 114 North Blount Street](#).

To view better photographs, see [PDF prepared by the current owner](#) – this is not a Madison Trust document.

include consideration of the recommendation by the Landmarks Commission that found the building had historic value “based on its status as a contributing structure in a National Register Historic District and its significant role in the African-American settlement of Madison and Wisconsin.”

A synopsis of the history relating to the East Dayton Street National Register Historic District is found in the [Underrepresented Communities Historic Resource Survey Report](#), 2020.

African Americans living in Madison throughout the nineteenth century were not geographically concentrated in any distinct area of the city However, things changed in the early twentieth century, and this small group formed a distinct community centered around a couple of institutions: the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church [631 E. Dayton St., lost by fire in 1963] and the Douglass Beneficial Society [649 E. Dayton St., extant], located on East Dayton Street not far from the Capitol Square and downtown Madison in a neighborhood often known as the Old Market. Both were established by John and Martha Turner, who had moved from Kentucky to Madison in 1898 [specifically to the house they bought at 118 N. Blount St., subsequently demolished.] The non-extant church, which was located at 631 East Dayton Street, provided economic and social support to other African Americans who moved to the growing city. [footnotes omitted]

A few houses and other buildings, such as the Hill Grocery [now 649 E. Dayton St.], the Weaver Grocery, and the homes of the Miller [now 647 E. Dayton St.], Butts, Carmichael [now 114 N. Blount St.], Shepard, Bates, and Henderson families, were purchased and moved to their locations in the Old Market neighborhood as the first African American community grew. The small area along East Dayton Street became a predominately Black neighborhood during the first two decades of the twentieth century. . . . This small community was actively welcoming to other African Americans who moved to Madison during the period because hotels and most landlords would not house Black people. . . . The community along East Dayton Street persisted up to the 1960s. In the 1910 census, Madison’s African American population is listed as 143, 0.5% of the city’s total and twice what it was ten years earlier. Nearly all lived along or near East Dayton Street and most were employed in the service industry.

The enclave near the corner of East Dayton and North Blount has long been recognized for its historical significance. In 1978, the [Miller House at 649 E. Dayton St. was designated as a local landmark](#). In 1987, Madison’s Preservation Planner, Kitty Rankin,

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prepared the [National Register Historic District nomination](#) for four frame buildings (including two that had been combined into one) on 0.4 acres of land at the corner of East Dayton Street and North Blount Street, representing the “last remaining cluster of buildings associated with Madison’s first black community.” (The frame building that is referenced as on North Blount Street was the Ida Carmichael home at #114.) And in 1991, the [Hill Grocery and Residence](#), (which originated as two 1850s buildings moved to 649 E. Dayton St. in 1901 and to 653 E. Dayton St. in 1912 that were later connected to form one building) was designated as a local landmark. This last nomination was filed on behalf of the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation.

I was provided an opportunity to view the interior of 114 N. Blount St. in mid-March. While neither a building inspector nor a contractor, I observed a number of conditions that appear to raise significant structural issues.



The north corner of the building is not fully vertical. Photo by Kurt Stege.

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An addition on the southeast side of the home is cantilevered rather than placed directly over the foundation. Photo by Kurt Stege.



A key horizontal supporting beam for the first floor that should be resting on the foundation was never connected to the foundation and has suffered extensive rot. Photo by Kurt Stege.

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What happens next?

As referenced above, the owner of 114 N. Blount St. has filed an application to demolish the building. The resulting file, which includes supporting information, is [Legistar 70727](#). The application is scheduled to be heard by the [Plan Commission at its meeting on Monday, May 9, 2022](#). The meeting begins at 5:30.

Conditions next door

If the condition of 114 N. Blount St. isn't already sufficiently concerning, it isn't the only building in the historic district needing extensive yet careful rehabilitation. Guests on the Trust's Old Marketplace walking tour last year traversed the corner of North Blount and East Dayton Streets and were able to observe the condition of the Hill Grocery at the west end of the conjoined Hill Grocery and Residence, 649-653 E. Dayton St.

I haven't examined the building carefully but know that even five years ago the roofline of the grocery had a significant sag. The overall condition caused me to wonder whether water might be entering the grocery and whether wildlife had taken up residence in the attic.



The Hill Grocery as it appeared in January 2018. After this 1850s building was moved to its current site on East Dayton Street in 1901 by John Turner, a former slave from Kentucky, it became the meeting hall for the Douglass Beneficial Society, a self-help organization based on the teachings of Frederick Douglass.

Photo by Kurt Stege

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For the last 100 years, members of the Hill family have lived on the corner of Blount and East Dayton Streets. Freddie Mae Hill, a granddaughter of John Hill who operated the grocery from 1917 until the 1980s, acknowledges the family lacks the necessary resources to renovate their property.²

Prospects for the East Dayton Street Historic District

Preservation Planner Heather Bailey offers a hopeful observation regarding how the future of 114 N. Blount St. might impact the rest of the historic district:

In terms of there being a “preservation win” for this situation, I would love for there to be more visibility for the deep roots of Madison’s African-American history. I want more people to know how important the East Dayton neighborhood was and how the people who lived there made a difference to our city.³

I recently had conversations with both Jason Ilstrup, President of Downtown Madison, Inc., and Ellie Westman Chin, President & CEO of Destination Madison, regarding the interest those two organizations have in Madison’s cultural history. I wanted to make sure they were aware how their interest might coincide with the Madison Trust’s knowledge and strengths. Local residents and visitors to Madison have good reason to become aware of how historically underrepresented groups have fared here, and of the conditions of hostility and prejudice that have faced them.

The lives of early members of Madison’s Black community offer lessons for all of us. There are few tangible representations of their history and the few that remain are all the more deserving of careful stewardship. There’s hope that an effort to offer up the history of Black residents within the Old Market Neighborhood will generate interest that can translate to financial support for maintaining what remains of the East Dayton Street Historic District.

Update on proposed project for 400 block of State Street

The Madison Trust’s Board of Trustees voted to oppose this proposal, which calls for the demolition of three buildings in the block and the construction of one building in their

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² Mosman article of March 16.

³ Quote is from Dean Mosman’s March 16, 2022, article in the Wisconsin State Journal.

place. The project was the subject of the March 1st Advocacy News submission. The Mansion Hill Steering Committee has met four times but a final report still has to be completed. The very tentative schedule is to place the proposed development before the Urban Design Commission (UDC) at their April 13 meeting, but the developer is still working on significant changes to the design of the proposed structure, so my guess is that the matter won't make it onto an agenda until at least April 27. UDC's consideration is primarily limited to the exterior design of the proposed building and does not extend to demolition application. Demolition and zoning-related issues will be addressed in a meeting of the Plan Commission (PC), no earlier than on April 25. The easiest way to track the agendas for upcoming UDC and PC meetings is probably via the Madison City Committee [meeting calendar](#).