

Final Historic District Study Committee Report
Proposed Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District
1201 Gardner Ave.
Ann Arbor, Michigan



July 26, 2022

Charge of the Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee

The Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee was established by the Ann Arbor City Council on August 2, 2021, to examine the roughly 0.01 acre parcel containing the Robert and Erma Hayden House (with the final area determined by the committee and described below) in accordance with Chapter 3, Section 8:408 of the Ann Arbor Code of Ordinances and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act. On September 20, 2021, the City Council appointed members to the committee, who are to report their findings to the City Council no later than August 2, 2022. A list of members follows.

Study Committee Members

Patrick Patillo

Mr. Patillo is the owner of the Robert and Erma Hayden House and a member of the Hayden family: he married Maia Hayden in 1988. Like the Haydens, Patillo is also a musician (he plays tenor saxophone), and a writer. He has a B.A. degree in English from the University of Michigan and a M.A. in history from Eastern Michigan University. He lives in Ann Arbor.

Jennifer Ross

Ms. Ross is a professional historic preservation planner who lives in Ann Arbor's Lower Burns Park neighborhood and works for the the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department. She has a M.S. degree in architecture from Texas Tech University. Ms. Ross is a member of the Ann Arbor Historic District Commission.

Beverly Willis

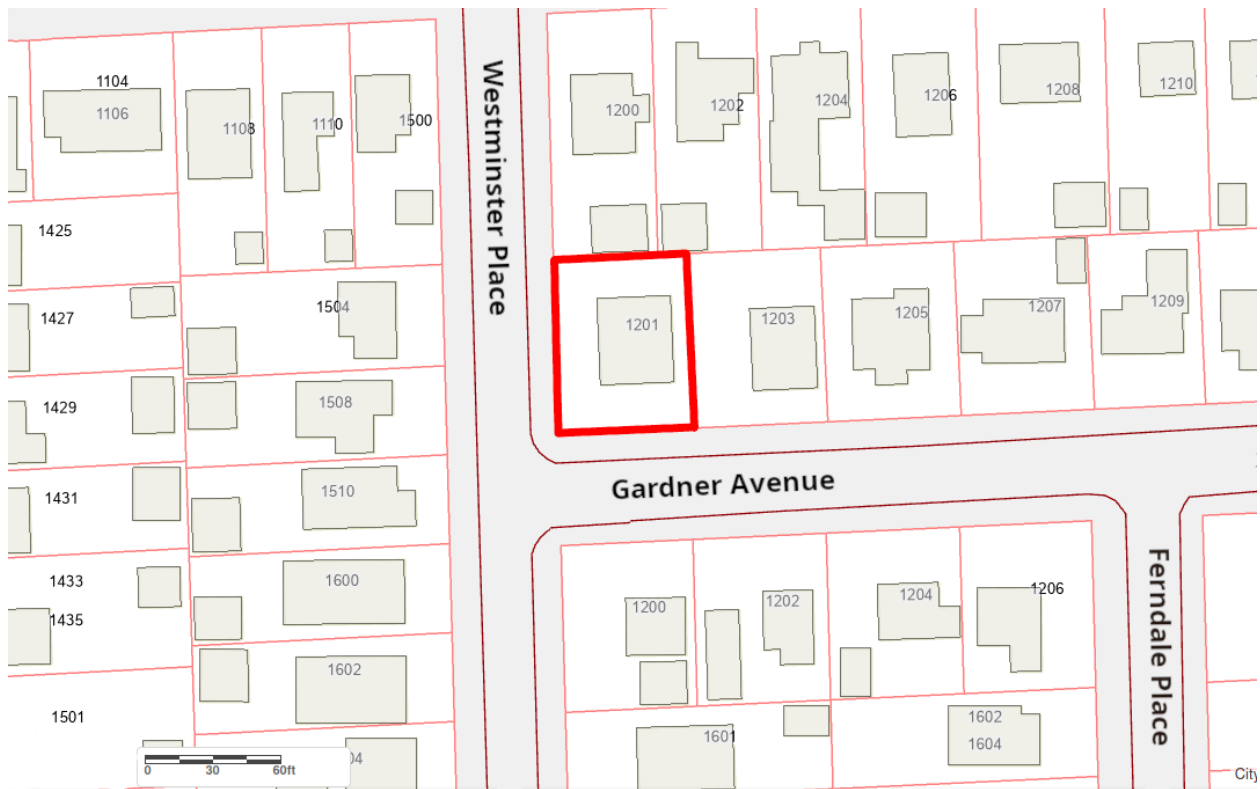
Ms. Willis is the administrator of the Washtenaw County Historical Society and the Museum on Main Street, and serves on the board of the African American Cultural and Historical Museum of Washtenaw County and is a trustee for the Ann Arbor Historical Foundation. She attended Howard University and graduated from the University of Michigan School of Art. Ms. Willis is also a member of the Ann Arbor Historic District Commission.

Staff Support

The study committee was assisted in its work by Jill Thacher, AICP, City Planner/Historic Preservation Coordinator with the City of Ann Arbor and Timothy Boscarino, AICP, and Michael F. Webb, PhD, of Twosixfour LLC.

Description

The Robert and Erma Hayden House is a one-and-one-half story, Cape Cod-style house on Gardner Avenue in Ann Arbor's Lower Burns Park neighborhood, built in 1936. It remains largely unaltered since its period of significance of 1969–1980.



Proposed historic district boundaries.

Lower Burns Park

Located about a mile south of downtown Ann Arbor, the city’s Burns Park neighborhood was developed largely in the 1910s through the 1940s. It contains mostly single-family homes, with a few small apartment buildings and retail stores. It is bounded by Hill Street on the north, Washtenaw Avenue on the east, East Stadium Boulevard on the south, and State Street on the west.¹ It takes its name from Burns Park and the Burns Park Elementary School, located on land formerly used as the Washtenaw County fairgrounds (rows of trees and a human-made hill date from this era), which are in turn named after George P. Burns, a University of Michigan botany professor who played a role in founding the Ann Arbor Parks Commission.² Packard Avenue serves as a roughly east-west dividing line separating the more affluent Upper Burns Park from Lower Burns Park—colloquially, they are often referred to as the “tenured side” and the “untenured side,” respectively, of an otherwise cohesive neighborhood.³

In addition to the economic divide mentioned above, racial segregation also played a role in the neighborhood’s development. Although a small minority of African American households would have resided in Lower Burns Park from the time of its early development,⁴ the

¹ Alexander Satola, “Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan: A Geography.” *The Michigan Daily*. September 8, 2020.

² Localwiki, “Burns Park,” https://localwiki.org/ann-arbor/Burns_Park.

³ Shelley Daily, “Burns Park Divide: Pondering the Packard Split,” *Ann Arbor Observer*, April 26, 2010.

⁴ Beverly Willis, personal interview, April 18, 2022.

neighborhood has been largely White. As one Black resident recalls from moving into the area in the early 1960s, “we moved into a White neighborhood, and we found out later on that the people who were renting to us took a poll of all the neighbors to see if it was alright that we moved in to that neighborhood.”⁵ (Kerrytown and Water Hill, directly north of downtown Ann Arbor, were the city’s traditionally African American neighborhoods.)

Environment and Setting

The setting surrounding 1201 Gardner Avenue consists of an irregular network of mostly rectangular blocks, with streets oriented north-south and east-west. It is developed with single-family, one-and-one-half-story houses of similar scale and a variety of architectural styles, built in the 1930s and 1940s. Healthy, mature street trees of a variety of deciduous species are common.

Exterior

The Hayden House sits on a corner lot, facing south onto Gardner Avenue, with Westminster Place to the west. Its approximately square parcel is 4,782 square feet in area (60.04 feet of frontage on the Gardner Avenue side and 78.65 feet on the Westminster Place side). The house is set about twenty feet back from the public sidewalk on both sides, with a small back yard to the north and a narrow side yard to the east. An off-center, poured concrete walkway leads from the sidewalk to the front porch steps; a concrete driveway on the west side of the building accesses an attached one-car garage and carport. The yard is defined by shrubbery: waist-high yews (*taxus baccata*) run along the Gardner Avenue and Westminster Place sidewalks, with higher yews planted along the foundation of the house. Northern white cedars (*thuja occidentalis*), taller than the house itself, are planted at the southeast and southwest corners. A large black walnut tree (*juglans nigra*) is located in the back yard. Two black maples (*acer nigrum*) sit in the grassy strip between sidewalk and curb along Westminster Place, and one silver maple (*acer sacharinnium*) sits along the Gardner Avenue side. The yews, oaks, and cedars were planted by Mr. Hayden during the period of significance (a fourth maple tree along Gardner Avenue has since been removed).⁶

The house sits on a poured concrete foundation with a full basement. The three-bay, side gabled house is symmetrical in plan, with east and west bays containing one opening on each floor on the south (front) facade, rising to terminate in gabled, wall dormers. The building is entered through a projecting, single-story, front-gabled entrance bay. On the east and west faces, the house contains two window openings on each floor as well, with a projecting, shed-roofed bay window serving a dining room on the building's east side. The north (rear) facade also bears two gable-front, wall dormers, but they are not symmetrically placed. Rear window and door openings are irregular in placement and size.

⁵ Audrey Lucas, as quoted in Lauren Slagter, “Old Neighborhood Residents Recall Life in Ann Arbor in the ‘50s and ‘60s,” *Mlive Michigan*, September 12, 2018.

⁶ Patrick Patillo, personal interview, April 26, 2022.

On the south facade, the main entrance to the building is through a steel door; the north (rear) entrance door is wood. On the east bay of the south (front) facade, a single multilight glazed wood door provides access from the dining room to a poured concrete patio with a metal railing. All door openings also have more recent, glazed, aluminum storm doors. Windows are a mix of original six-over-one and eight-over-one sash windows and vinyl replacement windows. Semicircular, fanlight windows on each gable end illuminate the attic.

Rows of large (approximately 16 inches in height) wood shingles clad the building on all sides. A common feature of Cape Cod residential architecture, these appear to be original. The roof is clad in asphalt shingles and is topped with a centered, brick, ridge chimney. The house is painted white. Narrow vergeboards, the garage door, and muntins on the front patio entrance are painted a light blue. The front door is bright red. The paint colors have been changed since the period of significance—a photo provided by Patrick Patillo shows a reddish-brown paint color on the siding and a tan-colored front door. Decorative shutters that once flanked the windows were removed in the 2010s.

An attached garage projects northwards from the rear of the house, its gable roof oriented perpendicular to that of the core building. A single, tilt-up garage door opens facing west onto Westminster Place, and is sheltered by a flat-roofed carport. The carport was added in 1957, according to building permits.

Interior

On the interior, the Hayden House opens to a central stairway. To the west (left) is a large living room which also serves as a library and music room, containing Erma Hayden's grand piano. To the east (right) is the dining room, which leads to a kitchen. Upstairs are three bedrooms, one of which served as Robert Hayden's study, where he wrote much of his poetry and other works during the years 1969–1980.

Integrity

The National Register of Historic Places defines *integrity* as “the ability of a property to convey its significance” through its physical features. It is described in terms of seven aspects: location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and



Undated family photo showing paint color scheme from the period of significance.



Mr. Hayden's typewriter in upstairs office.

association.⁷ Other than several replacement windows, a change in paint color, and missing shutters, the Hayden House, along with its site, landscaping, and neighborhood context, appear to be unaltered since its period of significance. Thus, integrity remains largely intact. “When walking by that house as a historic district, one can pause and imagine the poet, Robert Hayden, at work inside.”⁸

Resource List and Count of Historic and Non-historic Resources

The Proposed Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District comprises two contributing (historic) resources, as follows. There are no noncontributing (non-historic) resources.

Robert and Erma Hayden House

The Hayden House, including its attached garage and carport, is a contributing resource.

Landscaping

The site landscaping, taken together, due to its connection to the Haydens and the period of significance, is a contributing resource.

Location

Boundary Description

Lot 14 of the Krapf Addition to the City of Ann Arbor.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries comprise the entire parcel presently and historically containing the Robert and Erma Hayden House.

UTM Coordinates

17 T 274436 4682607

History

The house located at 1201 Gardner Avenue is significant as the home of educators Robert (born August 4, 1913) and Erma (February 15, 1911) Hayden, who first took up residence there in 1969. Ann Arbor residents in the 1940s, they returned to Michigan after two decades in Nashville, Tennessee. Robert Hayden served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a position now known as Poet Laureate of the United States) from 1976 to 1978, at the peak of a

⁷ *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Washington: National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 1995), 44.

⁸ Willis, personal interview, April 18, 2022.

long and influential career as a poet and professor of English literature. He was the first African American writer to hold the Consultant in Poetry position, the highest honor the United States can bestow upon a poet. His work often explored themes of Black history in connection with broader American and human identity.⁹ Erma (Morris) Hayden was an accomplished music teacher and concert pianist, who also taught dance. Both individuals continued to live, practice their crafts, and meet with students and colleagues at the residence until their deaths in 1980 and 1994, respectively.

Robert Hayden's Early Life

Robert Earl Hayden was born August 4, 1913, in Detroit. He was given the name of Robert by his adoptive parents, Sue Ellen Westerfield and William Hayden (his birth name, Asa Bundy Sheffey, had never been legally changed—a detail he would not learn until many years later when applying for a passport to attend an event in Bulgaria in his role with the Library of Congress).¹⁰ The Haydens were next-door neighbors of his birth mother, Ruth Sheffey, who left Detroit for Buffalo, New York, only a few weeks after Robert was born (Robert Hayden would maintain a relationship with Sheffey through correspondence and an occasional visit; this relationship would become closer later in Sheffey's life, with Sheffey known as "Grandma Kitty" to the Hayden's daughter, Maia).¹¹

They lived on Beacon Street in Paradise Valley, a multiethnic neighborhood that, at the time, was home to a large European immigrant population. By the end of the decade, the neighborhood had become the center of Detroit's growing African American community as World War I brought European immigration to a standstill and the Great Migration brought large numbers of African American migrants from the South to Detroit seeking economic opportunity and a better way of life.¹² This community was centered around St. Antoine Street, a Black-owned business district where Robert would spend much of his free time during his childhood and adolescence.¹³

Robert Hayden was raised in a working-class, Baptist household. He had an ambivalent relationship with his adoptive parents, especially his father, who was supportive of his aspirations—especially his desire to seek a college education and, later, to find employment as a writer—but struggled to understand Robert's devotion to literature, theater, radio programs, and movies, interests which he developed at a young age. He was provided with emotional support in these pursuits, if remotely, through letters from Sheffey. The "emotionally tumultuous" nature of Hayden's childhood was compounded by his nearsightedness and propensity for migraines, which interfered with his ability to enjoy sports and other childhood activities. Hayden nonetheless maintained an active social life throughout his childhood with an ethnically diverse

⁹ Christopher Buck and Derik Smith, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), "Robert Hayden."

¹⁰ John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984), 27.

¹¹ Patillo, personal interview.

¹² Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 23–24. This no-longer extant neighborhood would remain the center of Detroit's African American community until it was razed during the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal era for the I-375 expressway, Lafayette Park, and adjacent developments, dispersing the heart of the Black community into other areas of the city. Robert Hayden's childhood home, thus, no longer stands.

¹³ Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 7.

group of Black Bottom friends—a “positive force” during those years.¹⁴ Decades later, Hayden would reflect on these times in much of his work, including his famous poem, “Those Winter Sundays,” as well as “The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield.” Beginning in childhood and continuing throughout his life he would experience episodes of depression and self-doubt that he would term “dark nights of the soul.”¹⁵

He attended Miller High School, transferring to Northern High School in order to study Spanish. He graduated in 1930 and published his first poem, “Africa,” in *Abbot’s Monthly* in 1931. Hayden was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance writers who were active during this era. After having discovered Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* at the age of sixteen.¹⁶ In 1932 Hayden enrolled at Detroit City College (renamed Wayne University while Hayden was a student there, now Wayne State University), with a scholarship along with support of his parents. Majoring in Spanish with plans of becoming a teacher, he studied poetry mostly in his free time.¹⁷

While a student, Hayden was also involved in theater, and this provided him an opportunity to meet Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright. Hayden was acting in a play written by Hughes, and Hughes was in Detroit to attend the production. Hayden asked the director, a personal friend of his, to arrange for the two of them to meet during a lunch at the Lucy Thurmon YWCA in Detroit. There, Hayden shared his poetry and received pointed criticism. He was profoundly inspired: “My meeting with Hughes is one of my pleasantest recollections, for he was the first recognized poet I’d met, the first to spend time talking to me about my own poems.”¹⁸ Hughes steered Hayden away from emulating other poets too closely and encouraged him to develop his own unique voice.¹⁹

One credit short of a degree, Hayden left Wayne University in 1936 to begin a job with the Federal Writers Project, an initiative of the federal Works Progress Administration, where he worked until 1938. He was politically active during this time, attending antiwar rallies and organized labor activities, becoming acquainted with radical activists. Hayden developed an interest in African American history during this period, as well as a heightened sense of identification with the struggle of the Black community against discrimination and violence. This was partly a result of meeting so many people from other parts of the United States, and befriending other writers, during his WPA years. Nonetheless, Hayden eschewed labels. According to John Hatcher, a personal friend who would later author a biography of Hayden, “his strong religious convictions would not allow him to believe that any purely economic or political cause would be a sufficient force to cure the ills of mankind.”²⁰

Two significant relationships Hayden developed during these years were with the Detroit-based poet Dudley Randall and Louis O. Martin, editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*. Randall, founder of the Broadside Press (which focused on publishing African American authors), became close friends with Hayden, and they shared and critiqued each others’ work.²¹

14 Ibid.

15 Robert Hayden and Michael Harper, “Robert Hayden and Michael Harper: A Literary Friendship,” *Callaloo* 17, no. 4 (1994): 980–1016.

16 Christopher Buck and Derik Smith, “Robert Hayden.”

17 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 9.

18 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 14.

19 Robert Hayden, *Collected Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 96.

20 Ibid., 14.

21 Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), chap. 3, esp. 48–49.

Martin hired Hayden as a music and theater critic for the *Chronicle*, an African American weekly newspaper, published in Detroit. He also served as a patron of his work, establishing the Falcon Press to publish Hayden's first book of poetry (originally typed by Randall for submission to a poetry contest): the 1940 volume *Heart-shape in the Dust*.

Outside of his professional work, Hayden continued to be involved in local theater, directing the Paul Robeson Players in Detroit. It was also through his theater work that he met Erma Inez Morris, a pianist and composer, and the two bonded over their mutual love of theater and the arts. They were married in 1940.²²

University of Michigan Student

Seeking to further develop his talent, Mr. Hayden applied to the University of Michigan as a graduate student and was accepted in 1938, despite not having completed his bachelor's degree at Wayne University.²³ After their marriage, he and Mrs. Hayden decided that he would enroll. Mr. Hayden began as a full-time as a graduate student in 1941, and the couple moved to Ann Arbor, living at 326 Beakes Street in the Kerrytown neighborhood.²⁴

His literary style soon shifted remarkably. Prior to *Heart-shape in the Dust* he closely emulated the style of the Harlem Renaissance poets, displaying the influence of not only Langston Hughes but also Claude McKay, Melvin B. Tolson, and Richard Wright, often writing in dialect about topics such as slavery, lynchings, economic inequality, and war. Afterwards, he developed a more uniquely personal voice, influenced by the school of New Criticism. The creative shift was significant and purposeful enough to Hayden that he would later discourage anthologists from publishing any of his work from *Heart-shape in the Dust* or earlier.²⁵

Another key influence in this shift was W.H. Auden, a British-American poet who taught at the University of Michigan in 1941 and 1942. Hayden later summarized Auden's opinion of his work:

There were some [of my poems] that he liked very much, and some he didn't like at all. The ones he liked he said were poems that were like algebra, in which you were solving for X ... whereas there were other poems that were like arithmetic: you add them up and get the sum and that's all there is to it. In the other kind of poetry you have to work; you have to try to find the unknown, you have to work for it and so on. I have remembered that ever since he said it.²⁶

Auden was an important teacher and mentor to Hayden, and in some ways Auden's shift from Marxism to Christian existentialism mirrored Hayden's own experiences with his faith (Hayden's relationship with the Bahá'í Faith, another influence on his work during these years, is discussed below).²⁷ Auden urged him "to move from arithmetic to algebra," to become more

²² Ibid.

²³ Beck, "Robert Hayden."

²⁴ Willis, personal interview, April 18, 2022.

²⁵ Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 15–17.

²⁶ Hayden, *Collected Prose*, 99–100. Hayden described Auden as "my third poet." The first two, presumably, being Langston Hughes, followed by Countee Cullen, to whom Erma Hayden had introduced him in New York.

²⁷ Robert Chrisman, "Robert Hayden: Modernism and the Afro-American Epic Mission" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1999), 355–56.

evocative and less didactic, in his work.²⁸ Hayden also recalled how Auden had told his class that “You can’t fight political battles with poetry.”²⁹ Hayden began to deviate from the more direct messaging of his earlier works to a more symbolic style that required a degree of interpretation on the part of the reader.³⁰ Influenced by Auden and other modernists, he explored the stylistic and thematic spaces of modernists like Auden, but from an African American perspective, hereto ignored.³¹

As a student, Hayden won the Avery Hopwood and Jule Hopwood Major Award for Poetry twice, in 1938 for *Heart-shape in the Dust*, and in 1942 for *The Black Spear, With Additional Poems*.³² The award was bequeathed by Michigan alumnus Avery Hopwood to support “the new, the unusual, and the radical” among creative writing students.³³ *The Black Spear* was a not-yet-complete (Hayden wanted to include his forthcoming “Middle Passage,” but it was not able to finish it in time) collection of works focusing on themes of African American history. It included such titles as “The Ballad of Nat Turner” and “Frederick Douglass.” These poems would, over the following years, earn him more wide-ranging recognition through broader publication. He published “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home” (from *The Black Spear*) in *Poetry*, one of the leading English-language poetry magazines, and “Frederick Douglass” in *Atlantic Monthly*.³⁴ Derik Smith, a leading scholar of Hayden, highlights Auden’s influence and describes Hayden’s work from this period as “transitional,” as Hayden produced “heritage poems [that] use Black history to produce confident narratives of moral and political ascent laced with strong Black nationalist sentiments.”³⁵

Hayden earned his Master of Arts degree from the University of Michigan in 1944,³⁶ along with his Bachelor of Arts degree from Wayne University (the institution granted the degree without the missing credit). He first worked in the University of Michigan library system in a position that Auden helped him to obtain.³⁷ Then, he worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Michigan for the 1945–1946 academic year. During this time the Haydens lived in a “rustic cabin” in Brooklyn, Michigan, thirty miles southwest of Ann Arbor.³⁸

It was at this time that the Haydens joined the Bahá’í Faith community, which would become a powerful influence on the artistic development and careers of both individuals. Erma was introduced to the religion in 1942; Robert joined the following year. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Robert and Erma’s daughter, Maia Beth Hayden, was born October 5, 1942. It was a joyous occasion and also a serious one, as the responsibility of caring for Maia would shape Mr. and Mrs. Hayden’s choices for the next two decades.³⁹

28 Ibid., 46–47, and 308.

29 Jeff Sorensen, “W. H. Auden at the ‘U,’” *Michigan Daily*, November 4, 1973, 5.

30 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 15–17.

31 Chrisman, “Robert Hayden,” 306–7, and 379.

32 University of Michigan Department of English Language and Literature, “Alumni and Winners,” <https://lsa.umich.edu/hopwood/alumni---winners-.html>

33 Ibid., “About Hopwood,” <https://lsa.umich.edu/hopwood/about-us.html>

34 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

35 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse*, 121.

36 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 19. The exact year when he finished his coursework is not clear. According to Hayden, “I had been a student with advance standing for, oh, two or three years and so I piled up a lot of hours. But it only took me about a year to finish up everything.” *Collected Prose*, 101.

37 Hayden, *Collected Prose*, 101.

38 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 24. It is unclear why the Haydens chose this location, an hour-long commute from Ann Arbor. They may have had friends there, or may have preferred the quiet, rural environment. Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

39 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

Bahá'í Faith

During 1942 (Robert Hayden's final year as a student at the University of Michigan), Erma Hayden, "the spiritual backbone of the family,"⁴⁰ became involved with a small Bahá'í Faith community on the University of Michigan campus. She was immediately moved by the Bahá'í teachings regarding universal brotherhood and the unity of all religions, and by the end of the year, after reading the Bahá'í Writings, had chosen to become a member of the Bahá'í Faith herself. Though she was eager to share her enthusiasm with Mr. Hayden, Robert was, at first, not interested. After some time, Mr. Hayden had acquainted himself with the Bahá'í Writings and developed a relationship with a local Bahá'í teacher. As he later recalled, neither he nor Erma had, at the time, been actively seeking a new faith; however, upon encountering the Bahá'í Teachings, they simply realized that they believed and, thus, felt compelled to follow. Mr. Hayden formally joined the faith in 1943.

Over time, the Bahá'í Teachings would come to influence Mr. Hayden's literary work. As he later recalled:

I saw very little influence on my work for the first several years. . . . But now it has given me a base, a focus. . . . I have learned from it that the work of the artist, the scientist, the philosopher, all sincere effort in any discipline has spiritual value and is both a form of service and a form of worship. This thought sustains me when the dark times come.⁴¹

The Bahá'í Faith had its genesis in 1844, when a merchant known as the Báb began to preach in Persia (present-day Iran) that a new prophet would come. Later, a follower, Bahá'u'lláh, claimed to be that prophet and spread the faith's teachings.⁴² One of the tenets of the faith is the "oneness" of humanity: racial distinctions are meaningless. This was a consistent theme behind Robert Hayden and his work, and his refusal (described below), to see himself as a "Black poet."⁴³ On his faith, Hayden noted: "I'm not a joiner. . . . The Bahá'í Faith is about the only organized body I can stand. I cherish my individuality and I don't want to be a conformist except (paradoxically) on my own terms."⁴⁴ Biographer Derik Smith identifies Mr. Hayden's conversion to the faith as emblematic of an ongoing desire to set himself apart from both Western traditionalism and modern secularism.⁴⁵

Fisk University

Robert Hayden received a job offer from Fisk University in 1946, teaching freshman English, American literature, and creative writing. Fisk, a historically Black university, is located in Nashville, Tennessee. For the sake of Mr. Hayden's career, the Haydens could not pass the opportunity up—it was a major improvement over his teaching assistantship at Michigan. However, the Haydens never wished to live in the South, and Mr. Hayden accepted the position

40 Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

41 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

42 For an overview of the religion, see Robert H. Stockman, ed., *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* (London: Routledge, 2021).

43 Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

44 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*.

45 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 10.

only reluctantly.

For the Haydens, who loved theater, music, and movies, the thought of living under Jim Crow segregation was unbearable. Going into a venue as a Black family meant entering through an alley and sitting in a balcony. “I never went to the movies in Nashville,” Mr. Hayden later lamented. Further, coming from urban Detroit and educated Ann Arbor, Nashville would have seemed a small, provincial town, with far fewer cultural opportunities than they were accustomed to enjoying.⁴⁶

The demands of Mr. Hayden’s teaching job were also stifling. His department at Fisk had little interest in his talent and continued development as a writer, only wanting him to teach. He was given a heavy load of courses. Still, he cared for his students and devoted himself wholeheartedly to their success, even at the expense of his own career and his work as a poet. Midnight to 3 a.m. were the hours he set aside for his own writing. Julius Lester, a student of Hayden’s who later became an accomplished novelist and writer of children’s books, reflected “no one at Fisk had the vaguest notion of what a poet’s function was. . . . Yet somehow, Hayden continued to believe, though no one except his wife and a few students and friends in New York ever cared.”⁴⁷

In 1948, when Maia was six years old, the Haydens made a difficult choice—Erma and Maia would move to New York so that Maia could attend an integrated public school system. Robert would visit them when his schedule allowed. Mr. Hayden had almost quit his job the year before over a pay cut, but several supportive colleagues and students managed to convince his department to restore his former salary.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Hayden continued to develop his poetic voice during these years. With several other poets he published *The Lion and the Archer*, a compilation containing several of Hayden’s works including his “Ballad of Remembrance,” which would become one of his most important works. Significantly, the volume included, as a preface, a manifesto:

“As writers who belong to a so-called minority, we are violently opposed to having our work viewed, as the custom is, entirely in the light of sociology and politics. . . . We believe in the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace and unity.”⁴⁸

Hayden—in keeping with his long-held beliefs about avoiding labels and his and Erma’s Bahá’í views on the unity of humankind—joined his co-contributors in refusing to be categorized as “Negro poets.” This volume also marked the peak of Hayden’s use of symbolism, with an imagery and vocabulary that rendered the works more challenging for a casual reader. Hayden would later term this his “Baroque period.”⁴⁹

In 1950 the Hayden family received some good news: Robert was granted a leave of absence from Fisk University and was able to join Erma and Maia in Brooklyn. He cared for Maia while Mrs. Hayden held a challenging job, with a lengthy commute, teaching music and dance in Manhattan. Ultimately, however, the long hours for Mrs. Hayden combined with the loss of Mr. Hayden’s income proved to be too much, and the family returned to Nashville.

Maia’s transition back to Tennessee was eased by a caring teacher in the Nashville school

46 Ibid., 19–20.

47 Ibid., 21.

48 Robert Hayden and Myron O’Higgins, eds., *The Lion and the Archer* (Nashville: Counterpoise, 1948).

49 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 22.

system, and Mr. Hayden again devoted himself to his students. Mr. Hayden's hard work paid off in 1954 when he received a Ford Foundation grant to travel and write in Mexico. Having majored in Spanish at Wayne University, he was delighted to have an opportunity to live in a Spanish-speaking country; his Bahá'í connections enabled him to easily make friends and find traveling companions while he was abroad. He loved Mexico while simultaneously feeling like an outsider: "No place is home for me; therefore, every place is home," he wrote.⁵⁰ Returning to Nashville after his time in Mexico, Mr. Hayden was rewarded with a promotion to Associate Professor.

Robert Hayden and the Black Arts Movement

In the wake of over two decades of hard work for both Mr. and Mrs. Hayden with minimal recognition, the 1960s, and the years 1966 through 1969 in particular, were marked by a series of back-to-back accomplishments for Mr. Hayden that remarkably increased his stature as a major American poet. But these years were not without their challenges as well—one of them, in particular, would serve as a illustrative (though perhaps not defining) moment of Mr. Hayden's literary career.

As he continued his literary work at Fisk University, Hayden would develop a nuanced relationship with the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an African American literary, theater, and fine arts movement that emerged in the mid-1960s. BAM developed as the integrationist strategies of the Civil Rights Movement began to stall and Black Nationalism increased in prominence as an alternative. The aim of BAM was to create art connected to the needs and hopes of African Americans; it was an aesthetic correlation to the Black Power ideology.⁵¹ The writer Amiri Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones, has been called the movement's father, and his founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem served as an example for other cultural organizations across the United States.⁵² Poets associated with BAM tended to advocate the usage of a vernacular that reflected the experiences of Black Americans.⁵³ It was a nationalistic movement, however, and went beyond artistic style and structure by insisting on a direct relationship between poetry and politics.⁵⁴ Poetry served a



Arna Bontemps, Melvin B. Tolson, Jacob Redick, Owen Dodson, Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Langston Hughes at Jackson State College in 1952. Photo: New York Public Library Digital Collections.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 22–23.

⁵¹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 28.

⁵² Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black power Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), ix and 63–68.

⁵³ Chrisman, "Robert Hayden," 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30; and Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 28–29.

revolutionary purpose, one that created a Black identity opposed to a euro-centric worldview, and therefore could not be valued on its aesthetic qualities alone.

A host of influential BAM figures arrived at Fisk University in late April of 1966 for the annual Black Writers' Conference. At the event, organized by John O. Killens, a writer in residence at the school, to address the role of contemporary Black writers, BAM's ideals were at the forefront of discussion.⁵⁵ Hatcher and Smith provide varied interpretations of Hayden's experience at the conference.

BAM's strong connection between poetry and political aims was one that Hayden disagreed with, and he faced criticism by BAM adherents.⁵⁶ Both members of the audience and other session panelists critiqued Hayden's defense of an apolitical poetry that could be defined, in his words, as "the beauty of perception given form . . . the art of saying the impossible."⁵⁷ His identification primarily as a poet in a general sense—not specifically a "Negro poet," was also criticized. Some of the disagreement was certainly amicable: Arna Bontemps, a writer and librarian at Fisk, critiqued Hayden's position but clearly understood it and respected him.⁵⁸ From the same generation as Hayden, the poet Melvin B. Tolson was more adamant.⁵⁹ A third panelist, Chicago Black Renaissance poet Margaret Walker, also criticized Hayden's views, and students and other attendees joined in as well.

In Hatcher's view, Hayden was "severely attacked" to the point of "humiliation," but stood his ground in a manner that "required infinitely more courage . . . than compliance would have." Hatcher cites the June 1966 issue of *Negro Digest*, which quotes Hayden's words at the conference. "I have said this until I almost think I'll choke and fall over backwards," Hayden stated as he insisted on his identification as "a poet who happens to be a Negro." He read a work from William Butler Yeats, stating, "I didn't have to be Irish to love those lines. . . . Let's quit saying we're Black writers writing to Black folks. It has been given importance it should not have." Hayden later responded with frustration that he was tired of the attacks he faced here and "at every writers conference."⁶⁰

Smith, however, provides a counterpoint to the above, which he sees as an oversimplified, "folkloric" narrative. Referring to the relationship as "symbiotic, rather than antagonistic," Smith deems Hayden to be "a dissenting *participant* in the Black Arts Movement" rather than being in opposition to it.



Undated photo of Robert Hayden. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

⁵⁵ Killens noted: "Our literature should have social relevance to the world struggle, and especially to the struggle of black Americans." David Llorens, "Writers Converge at Fisk University," *Negro Digest* 15, no. 8 (1966): 57.

⁵⁶ Chrisman, "Robert Hayden," 31–32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸ "One gets the idea Hayden doesn't want to be labeled a Negro poet, doesn't exactly like that Negro thing," added Bontemps, but in his comment there was a touch of compassion, and a world of understanding. Obviously he was speaking of a man he respected." Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹ "A man has his biology, his sociology, and his psychology—and then he becomes a poet. . . . I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident." Ibid., 62–63.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64. Hatcher's interpretation appears to be based on unpublished correspondence between Hayden and Pool to which Hatcher had access.

Smith begins with the anecdote that in meeting Haki Madhubuti, one of Hayden's critics from the 1960s, he was surprised when Madhubuti confided, "Hayden is one of my heroes."⁶¹ Danner, another critic from the conference, maintained a personal friendship with Hayden, as did Dudley Randall.⁶² Bontemps also remained close friends with the Haydens, in addition to their relationship as professional colleagues.⁶³ Indeed, Hayden continued to debate and on the final day of the conference he gave powerful readings of his work.⁶⁴ Randall, who wrote of his experience at the conference, recounted: "Everybody was moved, even those who had attacked him. The whole audience spontaneously gave him a standing ovation."⁶⁵ Smith argues that histories and anthologies of BAM are remiss if they fail to include Hayden as one of its leading voices. Smith points out that, rather than ostracizing Hayden from BAM, the Black Writers' Conference actually resulted in Hayden's inclusion in *For Malcolm* (1969), a central BAM anthology.⁶⁶

The 1960s: Continued Success

A number of positive developments in the 1960s cemented Robert Hayden's status as an influential American poet. Around 1960, Hayden was contacted by Rosey Pool, a Dutch scholar of African American poetry (who had developed this interest while learning African American spirituals during her internment in a concentration camp): she wished to publish a volume of Hayden's work. He prepared a collection of his favorites from works he had already written, which Pool arranged to have published in London in 1962 as *A Ballad of Remembrance*. He later rearranged the collection for publication in the United States in September of 1966 as *Selected Poems*, his first commercial success and an accomplishment that Hayden considered to be a turning point in his career.

Hayden's greatest honor thus far came on April 7, 1966, when he won the Prize for Anglophone Poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. The pan-diaspora festival was attended by over ten thousand people, making this honor "comparable to an Olympic gold medal."⁶⁷ Pool, invited to serve on a selection committee, had nominated *Ballad of Remembrance*; Langston Hughes served as chairman of the jury. Hayden was not involved with the event and may not have been aware that his work has been entered for consideration; he received news of the award by telegram from Rosey Pool a few days later (less than two weeks prior to the Black Writers' Conference described above). He was overjoyed; the award was a vindication of his years of struggle to continue his creative pursuit despite the challenges of his teaching position at Fisk.⁶⁸ Hayden was recognized as Senegal's poet laureate and met the nation's president Sedar Senghor the following year.⁶⁹

Robert Hayden was greatly successful in the final years of the 1960s. In 1967 alone he was promoted to full professor at Fisk University, served as poet-in-residence at Indiana State University, recorded his work for the Library of Congress, was reviewed in *Poetry*, and

61 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse*, 4–5.

62 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 38–39.

63 Patillo, personal interview, April 26, 2022.

64 Llorens, "Writers Converge at Fisk University," 65–66.

65 Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse*, 127.

66 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse*, 6–9.

67 Beck, "Robert Hayden."

68 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 31–36.

69 Beck, "Robert Hayden."

published *Kaleidoscope*, an anthology of African American poetry. The following year he returned to the University of Michigan as a visiting professor of English. In 1969 he was Bingham Professor at the University of Louisville, and then visiting poet at the University of Washington in Seattle. Finally, and also in 1969, he was offered a position as a professor at the University of Michigan—a position he gladly accepted. In the words of Hatcher: “he entered his fifth decade in 1963 thinking himself a failure. . . . Seven years later he had achieved almost every goal he had set for himself.”⁷⁰

University of Michigan Professor and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress

When Robert Hayden took the position at the University of Michigan—offered despite his lack of a PhD and his relatively short list of scholarly publications—it was a critical accomplishment and a significant transition for both he and Erma Hayden. According to Hatcher, “he had returned, after twenty-three years of seeming exile, to his beloved Ann Arbor.” He was the first African American faculty member in the English department.⁷¹ In the words of Hatcher, “he took the position at Michigan and the growing recognition as confirmation of his greatest hopes for his work, and as a confirmation that he should proceed with even greater intensity. . . . A prominent university . . . had hired him in recognition of his talent.”⁷² The Haydens had sought to make such a move for a long time. Mr. Hayden reflected in a 1977 interview:

In the forties or fifties it was very difficult for an Afro-American to move from one of the schools in the South to a school like Michigan or Harvard or Yale. It’s much easier now, but at the time it was very, very difficult. I was at one point in my life considered for a teaching position at the University of Chicago. But it didn’t happen. . . . Jobs were hard to come by.

June Manning Thomas, a University of Michigan urban planning professor who later came to know the Haydens, suggested that the university sought Mr. Hayden for his accomplishments and skill as a writer, in the same way a university might hire a practicing architect: “he had reached the apex of poetry . . . they were interested in getting people in the apex of their career.”⁷³

The Haydens’ return to Michigan, and Mr. Hayden’s continued career at the University of Michigan, was not without challenge, especially at first. When searching for a house in Ann Arbor, the Haydens found limited options. Housing discrimination against African Americans was widespread, if illegal (pressured by the University of Michigan administration and local advocacy organizations, Ann Arbor had become the first city in Michigan and the sixteenth in the United States to adopt a fair housing ordinance, in 1963, five years before the federal Fair Housing Act).⁷⁴ Another faculty member helped Erma and Robert find the Gardner Avenue house in Lower Burns Park,⁷⁵ which they purchased in 1969. Upon their arrival, they were

70 Ibid., 40.

71 Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

72 Ibid.

73 June Manning Thomas, personal interview, May 27, 2022.

74 Sidney Fine, “Michigan and Housing Discrimination, 1949–1968,” *Michigan Historical Review* 23, no. 2 (1997): 81–114.

75 Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

largely welcomed into the neighborhood.⁷⁶

Mr. Hayden was soon disappointed to have to turn down the highest honor that the United States can bestow upon a poet, one he had hoped for: Consultant in Poetry to Library of Congress, a position now known as Poet Laureate of the United States. Receiving the invitation in 1969, shortly after beginning his position at the university, the problem was one of timing—the chair of the English department discouraged him from accepting, as it would have required an immediate leave of absence from his duties as a professor.

Nonetheless, Hayden continued to work, producing both poetry and prose, by typewriter in the upstairs study at his Gardner Avenue residence. He published *Words in the Mourning Time* in 1970, a collection of works focusing on the Long Hot Summer of 1967, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy, and the Vietnam War. The collection contrasted these sorrowful events with a hopeful vision of transcendence for the future of humankind that he derived from his Bahá'í principles. *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1973) also expounded on these themes. At the time, he referred to the latter collection as “my favorite book up to now.” During this time he also authored several textbook chapters focusing on modern American poetry. In 1975 he published *Angle of Ascent*, a selection of poems from throughout his career, with W.W. Norton. Contracting with this large publisher allowed him a form of popular success he had not previously known, as his work would now be available in major commercial bookstores.⁷⁷

A few months later, Hayden was once again offered the Library of Congress position. This time, he accepted. He served from 1976 to 1977 and was reappointed for another year, into 1978. This position kept him to a busy schedule with media interviews, correspondence, speaking engagements, curating the library's poetry collections, and other responsibilities of the position. It was “a burdensome honor, but an honor which he, in his customary fashion, handled with a serious regard for quality.”⁷⁸

The Consultant in Poetry position—appointed by the Librarian of Congress—was created in 1937 and has evolved over the years, with each holder of the office shaping it according to his or her own interests. In its early years, the role was largely one of curation, as Consultants in Poetry focused on expanding the Library of Congress' poetry collections and were left ample time for the pursuit of their own creative work. By the 1980s, Poet Laureates typically were much more active in outreach and working to expand awareness of poetry among the American public, often creating national educational programs or competitions which outlived their tenure in the position.⁷⁹

Hayden, for his part, seems to have held the office during a transition period between both versions of the role. During his two years, he worked to expand the duties of the position, making audio recordings of poets, and hosting live readings where he brought together poets regardless of race or gender in a manner which was uncommon at the time.⁸⁰ During this time he also took on the role of poet-in-residence at Howard University, where he mentored student

⁷⁶ They did, however, face at least one instance of racial intimidation, which occurred many years after they moved in: “The Klan threw flyers [on the lawn and in the bushes]. But the neighborhood was filled with Jewish folks, they took care of that.” Ibid.

⁷⁷ Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 43–45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁹ Peter Armenti, “What Do Poets Laureate Do?” *From the Catbird Seat* (blog), February 9, 2022, <https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2012/02/what-do-poets-laureate-do/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 48.

poets.⁸¹

Almost as significantly, Hayden was elected a Fellow of the Academy of American Poets in 1977.⁸² In recognition of his accomplishments he began to receive a list of honorary doctorates: from Grand Valley State College (1975), Brown University (1976), Benedict College (1977), Wayne State University (1977), and Fisk University (1978). He met president Jimmy Carter and his daughter Amy Carter around the time of the president's inauguration in 1977.

Life and Career of Erma Hayden

Born in Philadelphia in 1911, Erma Morris was the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a father from Grenada and Honduras. They met at Howard University's medical school. Morris was raised in an Episcopalian household in Detroit by her aunt and uncle after the death of her parents. Morris was a concert pianist from a family where everybody played the piano.

It was a love of theater, poetry, and music that connected Morris with Robert Hayden when they met in Detroit in the 1930s. Morris (later Mrs. Hayden) worked for sometime as a teacher Detroit public schools.⁸³ After the Haydens married and were living in Nashville, Mrs. Hayden was supervisor of music for the Nashville public school system, the first African American to hold that position. A classical pianist also involved in theater, Hayden taught music in Nashville, New York, Ann Arbor, and around the world. "She not only made a living, she was great at it," her son-in-law Patrick Patillo remembers.

Erma was closely involved with the Bahá'í Faith leadership, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to its work. This was especially true later in her career while Mr. Hayden was occupied with his duties as Consultant in Poetry. Mrs. Hayden served on the organization's National Teaching Committee for many years.⁸⁴ She is remembered as having an "extraordinary personality ... always radiant" who "reached out to people and embraced them and always made [them] feel welcome."⁸⁵ After her husband's death, Hayden devoted herself to pioneering, a Bahá'í Faith of establishing spiritual assemblies in other communities away from one's home. This work brought Hayden to Ypsilanti Township, Michigan, and to Ethiopia.⁸⁶

Legacy

Not feeling well, suspecting cancer due to a family history, Mr. Hayden avoided a doctor visit until February of 1979. He was diagnosed with cancer. Hayden died a year later on February 25, 1980, the day after a tribute event that he was not feeling well enough to attend. Instead, some of the attendees had visited Robert, Erma, and Maia at the house. Erma Hayden also died in the home on December 22, 1994. The Haydens' daughter, Maia Patillo, also resided in the home later in life until her death on September 23, 2020. The home is currently owned by Maia's husband, Patrick Patillo.

Although Mr. Hayden certainly earned a wealth of accolades during his career—numerous publications, literary awards, and honorary degrees—his unassuming, humble manner

81 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 48.

82 Tad Richards, *Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2005), "Robert Hayden."

83 Robert Hayden, *Collected Prose*, 99.

84 John Hatcher, "Amazing Nashville Bahá'í Community in the 1960s," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, (2019).

85 June Manning Thomas, personal interview, May 27, 2022.

86 Ibid.

and lifestyle, along with a penchant for avoiding the confines of groups and labels, likely cost him a certain amount of praise and acclaim during his lifetime. Instead, through his devotion to his work, he earned what his biographer John Hatcher termed the “belated recognition” of a “greater readership from the vertical audience” of those who would discover and appreciate his work in the years after his passing.⁸⁷

Significance of the District

The Michigan Local Historic Districts Act requires local municipalities to evaluate proposed historic districts according to the same criteria used by the National Register of Historic Places.⁸⁸ Accordingly, the Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee finds that the proposed historic district Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District is significant under National Register of Historic Places *Criterion B* as it illustrates “the lives of persons significant in our past . . . within a local, state, or national historic context.”⁸⁹

National Register of Historic Places Criterion B

According to the National Park Service (the entity that manages the National Register of Historic Places program), properties are eligible under Criterion B if they are “associated with a person’s productive life, reflecting the time period when he or she achieved significance.” The National Park Service suggests that a comparative analysis is warranted: “ascertain the length and nature of his/her association with the property under study and identify the other properties associated with the individual.” Other properties associated with the productive life of the Haydens would be their 1946–1969 residence in Nashville, as well as Haven Hall at the University of Michigan, where Mr. Hayden had his seventh-floor office during his time as a professor. However, the Nashville residence no longer stands, and Haven Hall does not represent a location where Mr. Hayden produced his literary works (and it has no direct connection with Mrs. Hayden).⁹⁰ Other residences of the Haydens, such as the Beakes Street house in Ann Arbor, predate their “productive life.” Thus, the 1201 Gardner Avenue residence bears the strongest association with the “significant persons” of Robert and Erma Hayden.

Period of Significance

The period of significance is 1969 through 1980, reflecting the time period when both Mr. and Mrs. Hayden resided and practiced their respective crafts at the property.

Criteria Consideration G

According to *Consideration G*, a property with significance from fewer than 50 years ago must be shown to be of “exceptional importance.” The National Park Service suggests, as examples, homes of individuals nationally recognized in arts and literature as eligible under

⁸⁷ Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, xi.

⁸⁸ Public Act 169 of 1970, § 399.203(c).

⁸⁹ *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, 14.

⁹⁰ Maia Patillo later returned to Nashville and visited the location to find that the house had been demolished. Mr. Hayden produced the large share of his work in the second floor office of his home, not in his departmental office or elsewhere. Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

Consideration G.⁹¹ The study committee has determined the Hayden House to be of exceptional importance in the context of modern American poetry due to its association with Robert Hayden.

⁹¹ Residences of playwright Eugene O'Neill, author Rachel Carson, and musician Charlie "Bird" Parker are given as specific examples. See *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, 14; and *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, 13.

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Photographs



View from south.



View from southwest.



View from west.



View from northwest.



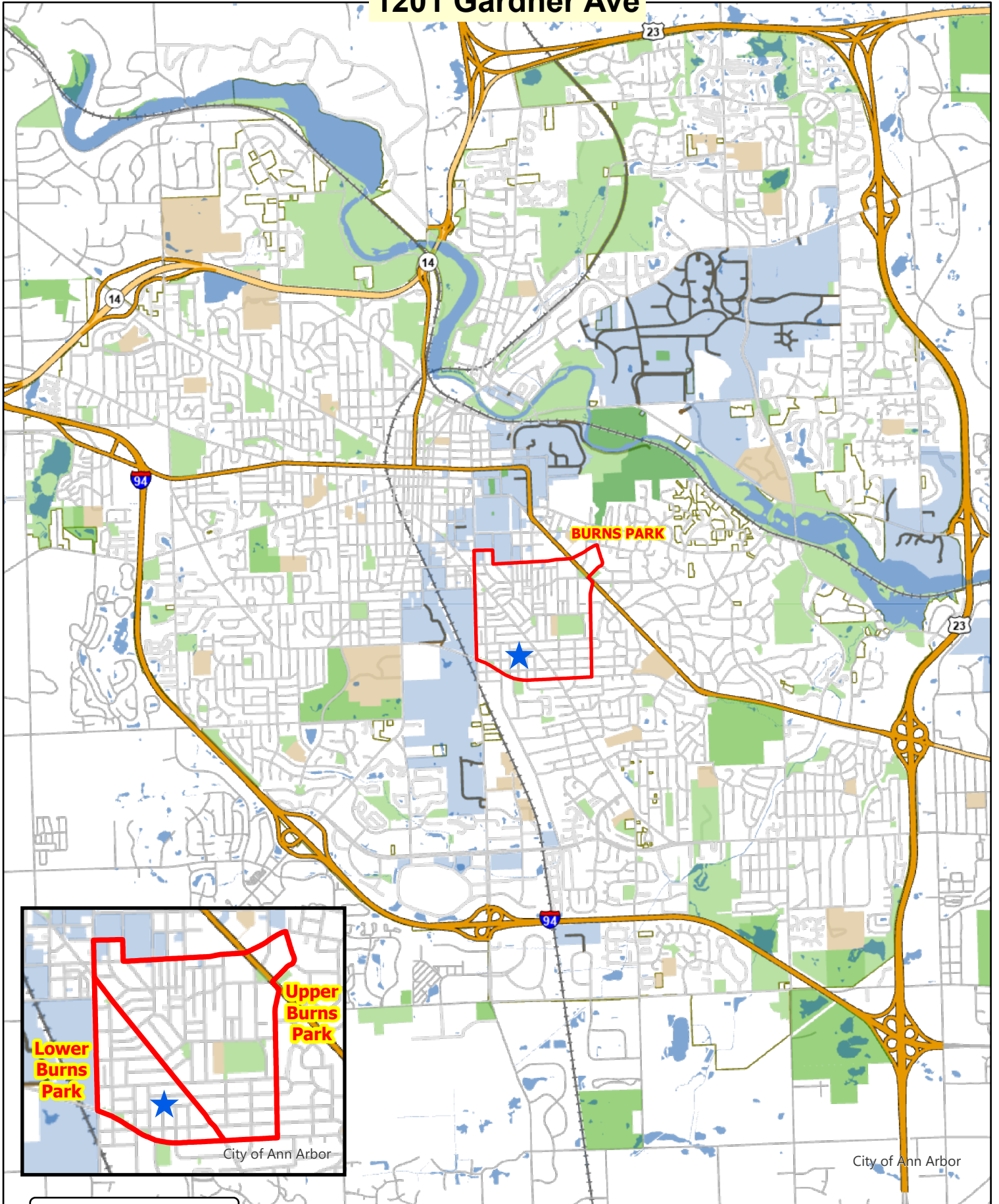
View from southeast.



View from Hayden House towards south side of Gardner Avenue.

Map and Site Plan

1201 Gardner Ave



BURNS PARK

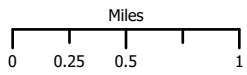
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Park**

**Upper
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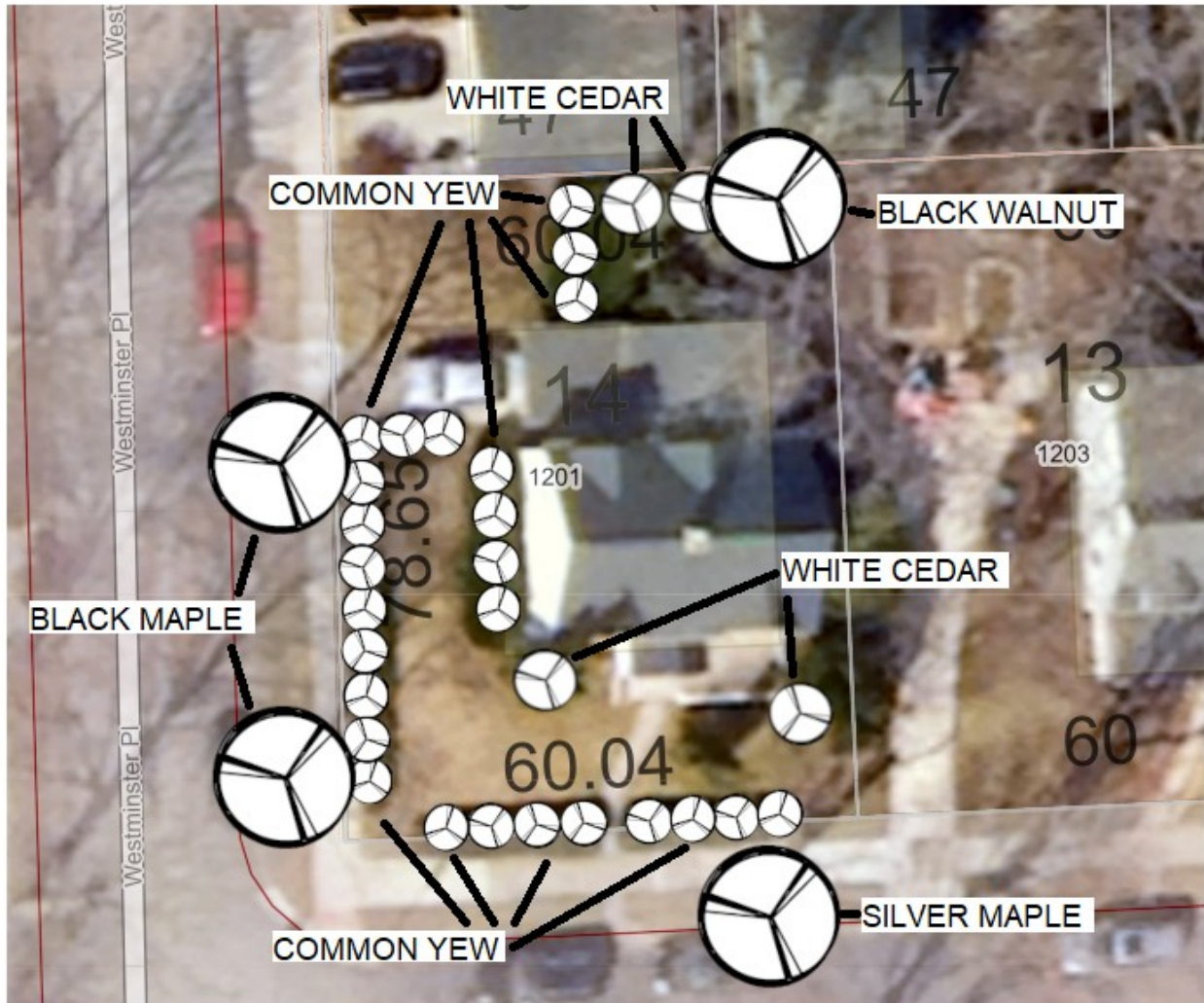
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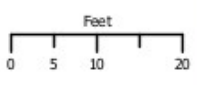
★ 1201 Gardner Ave
▭ Neighborhoods



Map date 7/27/2022
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Proposed Robert and Erma
 Hayden House Historic District
 Landscaping Plan
 July 2022



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